

The Passing of a Legend

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Summary: Clark must say goodbye to his friend, his surrogate father and boss, Perry White.

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WHAM warning for character death.

Clark Kent nervously strode through the bland, sterile, white hallways of the Metropolis General Hospital, a frown on his face. He hated hospitals. They unnerved him. It didn't take much for him to become quickly overwhelmed by the astringent odors of various antiseptics, cleaners, blood, and the occasional whiff of stale urine. He tried to breathe only through his mouth, though he wasn't sure if that was worse. He could almost taste the various odors that way. The sounds that bombarded his ears were another thing altogether. Clark had to school his hearing down to the most normal, human levels that he could, otherwise the cacophony of sound threatened to deafen him. The beeps of monitors of every type imaginable. The innumerable heartbeats of patients and hospital workers, some weak and failing, others racing as their hearts pounded. The moans of pain being uttered from various rooms. The distraught wails of family members as their loved ones passed away. The screams of mothers in the throes of labor. The cries of babies as new life was brought into the world. And, somewhere down the Emergency Room wing, the alarm as a Code Blue was called.

He hadn't been in a hospital for just over eight years. At least, he hadn't been a *visitor* at one in that long. He had of course made frequent drop-offs at the hospital as Superman when he'd come across those in need of medical attention. In fact, he'd just made one such delivery not five minutes prior, after a particularly bad mugging that he had almost been too late in getting to. He shook his head, trying to dispel the lingering images of the young woman that he'd rescued. She'd been in bad shape, more dead than alive when he'd reached her and apprehended her assailants.

The last time he'd been here as a visitor, at least it had been a happy occasion. His daughter, Rebecca, had been born and Clark had become a father three times over. He hadn't minded the hospital atmosphere then. It had been one of the happiest days of Clark's life. In fact, each of his children's births had been some of the most amazing moments of Clark's life.

But not today. Today he was not here for any sort of happy occasion. Today he was in the hospital for one of the hardest things that he had ever done. He was here to say goodbye. Perry White, his boss for twenty some-odd years, lay within the walls of the building, dying. Clark shook his head again. Perry wasn't just his boss. He wasn't just "The Chief." Almost since the moment that Clark had begun working for The Daily Planet, Perry had become a friend and a surrogate father figure. Clark knew, without a doubt, that Perry looked at Lois, Jimmy, and himself as his adopted children. Even now, at nearly forty-six years old, the thought of being viewed as part of Perry's family made Clark feel warm and secure inside. It made him feel

special, to know that Perry had admitted him into that sacred inner-circle of his life. It humbled him too.

Clark reached the elevator bank after a series of turns. He jabbed the button with his forefinger and waited as the elevator car descended. He balled his fists and shoved them deep into his coat pockets. When the elevator reached the ground floor, the machine softly dinged and the doors slid open. Clark waited as several young doctors in scrubs disembarked, chatting quietly between themselves. They were interns, he realized, and they were testing each other with various questions in preparation for the last step of their medical licensing exams. He stepped into the machine after the last doctor cleared the doors. The doors shut behind him and Clark sighed softly. He pressed the button for the sixth floor, jammed his hand back into his pocket, and had to bite back tears as the car began to rise.

It still didn't feel real somehow. It had happened so fast. It had happened without warning.

One day, Perry had been healthy as a horse, shouting orders over the newsroom, and making the newest batch of interns jump in fear. Clark had smiled at that. Perry's bark was far worse than his bite. He'd learned that over the first few months of his employment. The Chief had never retired, though he had backed off somewhat on his duties after reconnecting with Alice. It had taken time, and it had been a rough road, but eventually the two of them had remarried. And remarkably, they had been very happy until Alice's passing five years prior.

As soon as they had remarried, Perry had begun to look for his eventual replacement. He had approached Lois and Clark first, but neither of them had been willing to take the job. They had gotten a brief taste of it for the week or so when Perry had taken a promotion and Lois had filled in as editor-in-chief. The stress of it had almost broken them and their marriage had suffered a crippling blow until Perry had taken his job back. Neither one wanted to ever experience that again. And Clark himself had had another, more private, reason for turning down Perry's offer. He knew that if he were to become the new editor, he'd never have the ability to leave the newsroom when Superman was needed. So Perry had begun to groom Jimmy for the job, a move that both Lois and Clark had thought wise. Jimmy had all the makings of a great editor.

Perry had noticed how hard Lois and Clark had been working in the last few months, and had jokingly asked if they ever took a vacation. He had made the off-handed remark that they should enjoy their children while they were still young, something that Perry had rarely done himself and had regretted ever since. Clark had thought that Perry had made a lot of sense, and so had taken a week-long vacation with his family. They had spent the week cruising the Caribbean. It had been one of the most relaxing weeks that Clark had had in a long time, though it had been a bit of a struggle for him to leave the Superman suit at home. For the entire vacation, they had been unreachable, as they did not carry international calling plans on their phones. When they had come home, they had been blindsided by the devastating news. Jimmy had been the one to tell them.

According to Jimmy, he'd been working late one night with Perry, going over the following day's edition of the paper. Perry had been complaining on and off about pain in his abdomen. It had finally gotten so intense that Jimmy had taken the Chief to the hospital, just to be on the safe side. Tests had been run, enough to make Jimmy's head spin. And the diagnosis had been a bombshell. Perry, who had always seemed as invulnerable as Superman himself, was dying.

Clark sighed as the elevator continued to rise. It stopped on each floor, and new people crowded into the car with him, or left again. He still couldn't believe that the Chief had cancer. And not just any cancer. It was in his pancreas. Clark had done his research on pancreatic cancer. It was called the "silent killer,"

because there were oftentimes no symptoms of the disease until it was too late. And by the time they had discovered it in Perry, it had indeed been too late.

Clark had learned all of these horrible things only the day before. In fact, he hadn't even been home yet an hour when Jimmy had called with the bad news. He and Lois hadn't even had time to unpack the luggage. They still, to this moment, hadn't had time yet to wrap their heads around all that had happened. They had wanted to go to the hospital that very night, but visiting hours had already been over and Perry had been too sick to receive visitors. They had been forced to wait it out until today.

The elevator came to a stop on the sixth floor. Clark was so wrapped in his thoughts that he almost missed it. Pulling himself out of his thoughts, he stepped out of the car and onto the floor. This time, the stark white walls were broken by a thick, mint green stripe that raced around the halls, parallel to the floor. Though he had a tight rein on his super hearing to block out all of the extraneous sounds of the hospital, he immediately picked up on his wife's heartbeat. It was pounding hard and Clark knew that she was crying. He knew, in intimate detail, what her heart sounded like in every one of her moods. Right now, he knew that her heart was breaking.

He followed the sound down to the small family room on the floor. He entered it quietly and slid onto the couch where Lois was sitting. She was alone in the room, curled with her knees to her chest, and sobbing into a cold cup of coffee. She didn't look up as Clark sat next to her. She made no sound other than her strangled cries. She didn't need to.

Clark draped his arm around her waist and pulled her to his body. She didn't resist. She seemed almost boneless as she slumped into his side. Her eyes were red and shiny with tears, though dead with her grief. They never left the thick paper cup in her hands. Clark began to rub her back in small, soothing circles. She finally looked up to meet his gaze. A silent plea was held in her dark eyes. Clark wished with all his heart that he could do something to take away the pain that he saw within them.

"I came as soon as I could," he said, his voice low. He kissed the top of her head.

Lois nodded. "Everything okay?"

Clark shook his head. "It was a mugging. A bad one. I think the girl will live, but it was a near thing. Where are the kids?"

"With Lucy."

Clark nodded. "How...how is he?" The words almost stuck in his throat as he referred to Perry.

"Not good," Lois said, taking a shaky breath. "Just...when you go in there...be prepared. He...he's in bad shape."

"What do the doctors say?"

"We're looking a day or two now. Maybe more, depending on how much he is able to fight. But they aren't hopeful for that."

Clark let out a controlled breath that was not quite a sigh. It sounded more like he'd been punched in the gut and the air had fled his lungs. Again, he had to bite back his tears. He wasn't ashamed of the torrent of emotions that was steadily building inside. But he *did* want to be composed when he saw his boss — quite possibly for the last time.

"Is...is he...lucid?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded. "He's on pain management medications, but he's all there. He just talked my ear off before you came." The tiniest of smiles crossed her lips.

"I'm sorry that I wasn't here when you went in," Clark apologized.

Lois shook her head. "You had things to do." She absently made the familiar flying gesture with her hand. "Besides, I'm kind of glad that I got some time alone with him. You should go in though. He was wide awake when I was in there, but I don't know how powerful the drugs are that he's on."

"Will you be okay alone?" Clark asked, concerned.

"I'll be okay," she reassured him. "Jimmy's down in the cafeteria getting us some fresh coffee and some donuts. He should be back any minute."

"All right," Clark agreed.

He kissed Lois' temple. Then he stood, shed the coat that he was wearing on that cold, early February day, and left the family room. He stepped out into the hall and went directly to the nurse's station. A friendly male nurse informed him that Perry was in room 6019, and pointed him in the general direction. Clark thanked the man and made his way down the hall. Each stepped closer to Perry's room made his heart feel even heavier. He found the room easily enough. The door stood open wide. Perry was not alone in the room, and his bed was propping him up somewhat. A short, thin blonde nurse was switching out the IV bag that hung on a pole by Perry's bedside with a fresh one filled with clear fluid.

"Kent!" Perry greeted him, mustering up a smile for him. His voice lacked its usual strength, but he did sound happy to see Clark.

"Hey, Chief," Clark said, making his voice as normal and upbeat as he could. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a damn pincushion," his boss complained, gesturing to the needles that were sticking out of his arms and the back of his hands. "I've lost count of how many times I've been poked and prodded since I got here. Frogs in high school biology classes get fewer things stuck in them."

The nurse completed her task, made sure that the IV was still working, then swept out of the room.

"Sorry to hear that, Chief."

"Ah, what are you going to do? Right? Well, Clark, don't just stand there. Come in. And shut the door behind you, will you?" Perry weakly beckoned him closer.

"Sure thing," Clark said.

He softly shut the door, took the briefest of moments to compose himself, then crossed the room to Perry's bedside.

"Pull up a chair, son."

Clark did as he was told. He sat in the guest chair and got his first good look at his boss. What he saw horrified him. In the week's time since Clark had last seen him, Perry seemed to have shrunk down into a sickly old man. His face was drawn and etched with more lines than Clark had ever noticed on it before. He was jaundiced and his breathing was slightly labored, despite the oxygen lines that had been placed into his nose. The great, unstoppable, bear of a man that Clark had come to respect and love had been stripped away, leaving a frail husk that the bed and pillows seemed to swallow up. The sight brought an unbearable stab of pain to Clark's heart.

"Are they treating you okay?" he said instead.

Perry nodded, a shallow bobbing of his head. "Well enough, I suppose. That nurse just now — she never says much, but she's got the gentlest touch of them all. Can't say much about the food though. I don't seem to have much of an appetite these days. And what I do eat tastes like road kill."

Clark chuckled a bit. "Do you want me to smuggle you in some food from the outside?" he asked in a mock conspiratorial voice.

Perry laughed, a deep rumbling sound that Clark knew so well.

"You're a good man, Clark. But no thanks. I just want to talk."

"All right."

Perry glanced at the door, as if making sure that it was closed. Satisfied, he turned back to meet Clark's eyes.

"Do you want to know something, Clark? Hiring you was one of the best moves that I ever made. And teaming you up with Lois? Well, that was a stroke of genius, if I may say so myself. In all the years that we've known each other, I have been proud to

call you my friend.”

“I feel the same way, Chief. I owe so much to you. If you hadn’t have given me a second chance interview, I never would have gotten to know Lois. I wouldn’t be the man that I am today.”

“Kent, you earned that second chance when you went out and got me that article on the demolition of that old theater house. When you did that, you earned my respect. I don’t give anyone a second chance who hasn’t deserved it. You know that.”

Clark nodded. “I do.”

“In any case, I’m sure that you and Lois would have met up anyway. How many times is it now that you’ve saved her life?”

Clark’s mouth opened a little in shock, though he tried to mask it as amusement. Perry chuckled. It ended in a dry cough that lasted for a long moment.

“Perry, what are you…” Clark tried to cover.

Perry cut him off. “You know darn well what I mean. I wasn’t editor-in-chief of one of the country’s most prestigious newspapers just because I can yodel, you know. I know that you and Superman are one and the same.” Perry’s voice had dropped to a whisper, in an effort to protect the secret that he was sharing.

“Perry…”

“Don’t lie to me, Kent. Please, not now.”

Clark regarded his boss for a moment, his face unreadable. But after a moment, his face softened. He gave Perry a tiny smile and nodded.

“You deserve to know the truth,” he said at last. “And you’re right. We are the same. And on second thought, I guess I’m not all that surprised that you figured it out. How long have you known?”

“I thought you’d ask how did I figure it out first.”

Clark chuckled. “Did you know that Lois said the exact same thing to me when she figured it out?”

Perry laughed. “She figured it out? You didn’t come out and tell her? Are you crazy?”

Clark grinned sheepishly. “You know, you aren’t the first to ask me that. Yeah. But in my defense, I tried to tell her… I really did. Things just sort of kept getting in the way.”

“So that’s why the two of you had such a falling out way back when,” Perry mused. “Lois had told me that you’d kept some huge secret from her.”

Clark nodded. “Yeah. But I had to know, Chief. I had to know who it was that she was choosing… him or me. So I asked her to marry me before I… came clean with her.”

Perry winced. Clark couldn’t be sure if it was in response to his admission, or if Perry had experienced a twinge of pain. He simply waited to see what the man would say.

“Not your brightest moment, huh?” Perry asked, his lips pulled into a knowing smile.

“That’s an understatement,” Clark agreed, shaking his head in amusement.

“So… how long have I known? And how did I make the connection?” Perry said, his eyes going distant as he recalled his memories. “A long time. I had my suspicions that there was more to you than meets the eye within the first few months that you worked for me. I knew that there had to be some reason why you were able to get Superman exclusive after Superman exclusive. I knew that you were supposedly good friends and all, but it seemed odd to me that you always happened to be in the right place at the right time. But, I couldn’t prove anything and I thought that I might be looking too hard at things. For all I knew, one of Superman’s powers could have been to forge a telepathic link with you, letting you know where he was.”

“Okay…”

“Then there was that huge falling out between you and Lois after she found out about your other job. Remember how Superman asked to speak with Lois in private?”

Clark nodded again. “That was right after we foiled the

Churches’ plans.”

“Well, there was so much pain in his… your… eyes that I became certain that I had been right that there was more to the friendship between you two as met the eye. That’s when it first hit me that maybe — just maybe — you and he were one and the same. Come to think if it… can I ask what you had to show her? I’ve always wondered.”

Clark grew quiet and solemn. He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his thighs. He looked Perry deep in the eyes. His right hand raked through his hair.

“I took her… up.” His eyes flickered to the ceiling briefly. “I showed her the space between Earth and the stars where I had always gone when I felt alone. I told her that I’d never felt like I fit in anywhere until I met her. I wanted her to understand how truly lost I would have been without her.” He paused. “So… is that when you put two and two together for certain?”

Perry shook his head slightly and coughed again. It took a moment for him to catch his breath, despite the clear tubes in his nostrils that were delivering a steady flow of oxygen to him. Clark could hear the almost imperceptible hiss of the gas as it whooshed through the tubes. And he could all too easily hear the wheeze deep within his boss’ lungs.

“No,” Perry said after a moment. “I still wasn’t sure, even then.”

“What gave me away then?” Clark asked, surprised.

“Superman left for New Krypton. And Clark Kent vanished from my newsroom.”

Clark blushed a deep crimson. He hadn’t considered that. He had known, of course, that Lois had been covering for him as best as she could. And he knew that he had gotten very lucky, in that the whole thing with battling Lord Nor and transferring over his right to rule to Zara and Ching hadn’t lasted all that long. He hadn’t needed to spend months — if not years — away from Earth to set New Krypton to rights. In the end, it had been only a few hellish days, perhaps a week, from the time he announced to the world his intention to leave Earth until the time he announced that he was back and staying for good. His absence from the Daily Planet had been minimal, as it had turned out.

Perry continued speaking. “I had asked Lois where you were and she gave me some flimsy cover story about how you were out getting the public’s reaction to Superman’s departure. I never did get that story. She moped about like Superman had died, even though I knew that she wasn’t in love with the superhero. I knew that she loved you, Clark, with all of her heart and soul. But she mourned Superman’s departure like she would have mourned the death of her soul mate. And then the Kryptonians just so happened to hold Smallville hostage. It, well, it didn’t take a genius to put the pieces together at that point. It suddenly all fit into place, along with all of the other little things that I had noticed over the years.”

“And yet, you never said anything. Why not?”

Perry attempted to shrug, but the motion was lost in a feeble movement. “I always figured that if you had wanted me to know, you’d tell me yourself.”

Clark shook his head slightly. “It’s not that I didn’t want you to know, Chief. And it’s not that I didn’t trust you. It’s just… a dangerous secret to know, that’s all. I don’t tell the people that I love about myself as a way of trying to protect them.”

“If word got out, we’d be a target,” Perry said, nodding. “I figured that was part of the reason too.”

Clark nodded. “Exactly. The only people who know are Lois, my parents, and our kids. And the kids only know because the boys are starting to exhibit the some of the same… unique talents… that I possess. Chief, I have never felt so… exposed… as I have when people have discovered my… extracurricular activities.”

“People?” Perry asked, a line of confusion furrowing his

deeply wrinkled brow. “You just said...”

“I know,” Clark cut in gently. “But others have found out, though various means. It’s never turned out well for them. Almost all of them are dead and the rest are in insane asylums with, thankfully, no proof. Like I said...it’s a dangerous secret to be in possession of.”

Perry nodded thoughtfully. “So...can I ask some personal questions?”

“Absolutely.”

“I guess the first question would be...why?”

“Why did I become Superman?”

Perry nodded. “Right.”

“I’ve always looked at my powers as a gift,” Clark explained in hushed tones. “I knew that I wanted to use them to help people. I just never knew how to do that and protect my true identity. When I met Lois, she suggested that I bring a change of clothes to work after I bailed on her to save some sewer workers and got a bit dirty. That’s when the idea of creating an alter ego with a disguise first entered my head.”

“So Lois created Superman?” Perry asked, surprised. “But...the tights? The cape?”

Clark laughed. “My mother designed the costume. She made it as flashy as she could to distract people from really looking beyond the fabric to the man within it.”

“But still...at your age?” Perry teased, cocking an eyebrow. For the briefest moment, his eyes truly twinkled like they had for all the years Clark had known the man.

Clark laughed again. “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it, I say. Besides, I’ve become rather fond of the suit.”

“Well, to each his own, I always say.”

The two men grew quiet. Silence blanketed the room. Clark fidgeted in his chair a little, unsure of what to say. For a while there, he’d almost been able to forget that Perry was in such a fragile state. For a few moments, he’d forgotten that the man was dying. But in the silence, it all came crashing back to Clark. The throb of sadness crept back into his heart as he gazed upon the aged and now gaunt face that lay nestled within the hospital pillows. After a few minutes, Perry spoke again.

“One last question...if you and Superman are one and the same...who was Ultra Woman?”

Clark grinned slyly. “Lois.”

Perry sputtered for a second. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.” Clark shook his head for emphasis.

“But she’s not, ah...”

“An alien?” Clark supplied.

“That’s not how I was going to phrase it.”

“It’s the truth,” Clark shrugged, not offended. “No, she’s all Earthling.”

“Then how...?”

Clark shrugged a second time. “Well, to make a long story short, we were both shot with a laser powered by a chunk of red Kryptonite. It seems to have a different effect on me every time I’m exposed to it. And that time, it transferred my powers to Lois until we were able to reverse the process and send them back to me. Superman couldn’t just drop off the radar, so for a few days, Ultra Woman made her appearance.”

“Never to be seen again,” Perry said, nodding.

Behind Clark, there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for a reply, a tall, thin, dark-skinned nurse swept into the room. She crossed the room with purposeful strides, a tray of food in her hands.

“How are you tonight, Mr. White?” she asked cheerfully as she deposited the tray on the wheeled bedside table.

“Better now that two of my good friends have visited. What did you bring me tonight, Brianne?”

The nurse quickly glanced at the tray. “Soup, bread, apple juice, strawberry ice cream, and some Jell-O. And I want to see it

all gone by the time I come back.” She winked playfully at him.

Perry glanced over to Clark. “She’s always pestering me to eat.”

“You need to keep up your strength,” Brianne lightly chided him. “I’ll be back in a while, Mr. White.”

Without another word, the young woman swept out of the room, closing the door behind her as she exited. Perry looked at the tray with disinterest. Clark arched his brows.

“She’s right, Perry. You should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Come on, Chief. You can’t just not eat.”

Perry considered. “I’ll take the ice cream. It’s the only thing around here that doesn’t taste like stale cardboard.” He reached weakly towards the tray, but lacked the energy needed. “Would you mind giving me a hand?” he asked sheepishly.

Clark smiled gently. “Of course.”

Clark reached to the tray and grabbed the small cup of ice cream. He peeled off the paper lid and set it down, then opened the plastic spoon from its sterile plastic sleeve. He dipped it into the light pink dessert and brought it up to Perry’s mouth. He could tell that Perry was a little embarrassed, but he could also clearly see that Perry didn’t have much strength left in his failing body. After an awkward pause, Perry relented and ate. For several long minutes, Clark quietly spoon fed his old friend, his heart quietly breaking within his chest. And despite his earlier protest of not being hungry, Perry finished the entire cup.

“I can go down to the nurses’ station and get you another one,” Clark offered as Perry sighed and sank back into his pillows.

“No, that’s fine. I can’t eat much these days. And thanks...for helping me.”

“It was the least that I could do,” Clark answered honestly.

“Perry...I know that you said earlier that you didn’t give me anything that I didn’t earn. But that’s not true. When you hired me, you made one of my greatest dreams come true. I’d always dreamed of writing for a paper as prestigious as the Daily Planet. You gave me a reason to be able to stay in Metropolis. And from the second that I saw Lois, I knew that I had to find a way to stay in town. You’ve always been more than just my boss. You’ve been a friend, a confidant, a sounding board for my frustrations, a mentor in my professional life and my personal life. You’ve been like a second father to me, and like a grandfather to my kids. And now, I find that you’ve been one heck of a good guardian of my secret.” Clark smiled wryly at him at that last statement. “I love you for all of that.”

A single tear slipped from Clark’s eye. He unashamedly pulled his glasses off and wiped the tear away as it began to wind its way down his cheek. He caught a second tear before it could follow its twin. Then he replaced his frames and gave Perry a wavering smile.

“Aw, well, don’t go crying on me just yet,” Perry lightly chided him. “You know that I love you too, like you were my own flesh and blood son. I’ve been proud to consider you as a part of my family. I’ve been proud to have you on my staff all of these years. You’re a good man, with or without your unique abilities. Although, I won’t lie. I can’t imagine a person better suited to fly around helping those in need. I’ve been honored to befriend you for the last twenty or so years since you found your way to my office to ask for a job. Thank you for that.”

Clark’s tears had started anew. Rarely had he ever heard Perry speak so directly from the heart. There had always been an Elvis story to accompany such speeches in the past, partly due to Perry’s unwavering love of the King, and partly as a way to avoid becoming overly emotional. And yet, Clark couldn’t help but to remember the happy tears he’d seen in Perry’s eyes each time the editor had come to the hospital to meet the newest member of the Kent household. He couldn’t help but to remember the obvious

delight that his boss' eyes had held when he and Lois had agreed to let Perry perform their "almost" wedding ceremony when the minister backed out at the last second. No, Perry hadn't always been a man of many emotion-laden speeches. But in thousand other silent ways, Perry had always been one of the most emotional men that Clark knew.

"Perry, I don't know what to say. I'm touched," Clark choked out, not bothering to wipe the steady stream of tears that were flowing now. "I just wish that I could do...something for you."

Perry weakly shook his head. "No one lives forever, Clark. Now, it just happens to be my time. I've made my peace with it."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't want to fight anymore. I'm tired. I hurt, or would, if I wasn't being pumped full of drugs. I miss Alice. I want to be with her again. It's been a long five years without her."

Perry grew silent as he fought to take in a deep breath. Clark listened to the sharp wheeze in his lungs. He listened to the faltering pattern of Perry's heart. And he knew. Perry did not have days left. He probably had hours. Clark's own heart sank. Perry's eyes were half closed. Clark knew that the various medications that were being delivered into his body via the various intravenous lines were likely the cause.

"Clark?"

"I'm right here, Perry."

"Do you know if my boys are here?"

"I'll check."

Clark tuned his hearing in. He filtered through the chaos of sound that dwelt within the walls of the hospital until he picked up Lois' voice and heartbeat. Then he widened out his pinpoint of hearing to Lois' immediate surroundings. He could hear her speaking with Jimmy and Perry's sons. He nodded.

"They're here, Perry. They're down the hall with Lois and Jimmy."

"Could you...send them in? I want to talk to them."

"Sure thing, Chief," he said as he rose from his chair.

Perry frowned. "Wait."

Clark sat back down. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I almost forgot something that I wanted to say to you."

"What's that?"

"Thanks for helping Jerry out way back when. If you hadn't helped him, I don't know what would have become of him. Superman vouched for him after his arrest after that whole disaster. Without that, I don't know if he would have had the heart to seriously turn his life around."

Clark was stunned. He'd never considered himself in any way instrumental in Jerry's success in turning his life around. He had, of course, spoken to the police and the judge on Jerry's behalf after the young man had been taken away to jail. Sure, Jerry had played a big part in Clark's powers going haywire, but in the end, he'd done the right thing. He'd chosen to close the case full of red Kryptonite to help Superman stop Mr. Gadget. So Clark had stepped up and spoken for him. But that had really been as far as it had gone. Once Jerry had served his time and been released, it had only been on rare occasions that Clark had seen Jerry again. Jerry had gotten a good job that kept him fairly busy, what with the extensive traveling that he had to do. But there had been times when he'd visited with Perry in Metropolis and had dined with Perry, Lois, Clark, and Jimmy.

"I didn't do anything," Clark protested. "Jerry did it on his own."

"No," Perry argued. "He told me once that the first step for him had come when I backed him up and offered to help. And the next step for him, the next reason for him to want to try to become a better man, was seeing that Superman believed in him too. Not just his father, but someone who had no blood ties to him. Someone that he'd wronged horribly. So thank you, for

helping me to get my son back."

Clark smiled softly. "Well, you're welcome. Even though I still don't feel like I deserve any credit for that. Do you want me to go get Keith and Jerry for you now?"

"Please."

Clark stood again. For a moment, he just stood there, looking down at the shrunken, frail man lying in the hospital bed. He wanted so much to be able to do something, anything to cure the horrible disease that was savaging Perry's body. He wished that he could simply fly off to the middle of the jungle and pick some rare flower that would restore Perry's health and vigor. He would have flown to the moon and back again if it could have helped. But there was nothing within even his extensive range of powers that he could do. He could only savor these last moments with a man he'd come to love like a member of his own family. Clark counted himself lucky for his flawless memory, for within it, Perry would always live on, untarnished and undimmed, healthy and full of vigor. He would forever be able to recall Perry's gruff, but often gentle, voice. He would forever remember the advice that Perry had so freely given. He would forever be able to bring to mind Perry's genuine smile and numerous colloquialisms.

Finally, Clark knew that it was time. He didn't want to rob Perry's sons of what precious little time remained to them to be with their father. For one more second, Clark hesitated. Then he bent down, and placed a reverent kiss on Perry's brow.

"I love you, Chief," he said in a quiet voice.

"I love you too, son," Perry replied, his own eyes shiny with a sheen of unshed tears. He took Clark's hand and squeezed it gently, as if to comfort the younger man.

Clark moved towards the door and opened it. As he stepped over the threshold, he cast one final look back. Perry's eyes had closed as he gathered his strength to speak with his children. Clark was certain in that moment that he was looking upon Perry for the last time in this life. Clark shook his head sadly and shuffled his way back to the family room to summon Perry's sons.

"Keith. Jerry," Clark greeted each of the men in turn. "He's asking for you."

"Thanks, Clark," Jerry said, shaking his hand.

Clark watched as both men turned and exited the room. He sighed to himself, then sank onto the couch, feeling more tired than he'd ever felt in his life. He enveloped Lois in his arms and accepted a cup of coffee when Jimmy handed it to him. No words were spoken. None needed to be. A sort of silent vigil fell over the room.

Two hours later, Perry was proclaimed to be in critical condition. Lois and Clark left only to make arrangements for Lucy to keep their children overnight, being unwilling to leave the hospital. Though Jimmy made a dinner run to the fast food place across the street from the hospital, no one ate very much. An hour after Perry slipped into a coma, Jerry and Keith invited the three into Perry's room to keep watch with them, knowing how much they had meant to their father. Perry never knew that they were there. He never reopened his eyes. He never reawakened. And just after two in the morning, he breathed his last and was suddenly, quietly gone.

Three days later, Clark stood by the sleek white coffin in the Metropolis Funeral Home. He couldn't even *begin* to imagine where they had found the Elvis-themed casket. But, he knew a more fitting one could not be found, given the occupant's devotion to the deceased rock-and-roll star. Nestled within, Perry's lifeless form lay in repose.

Clark thought, as he always did, that the body on display didn't much look like the person it had once been. Even with the skilled hand of a makeup artist, the skin was too pallid, too caked with foundation, too still. The stiffness in the limbs was

unnatural, and it was eerie to look upon a chest that did not rise and fall with breath. Clark would have given anything to hear a heartbeat within the stone-still chest. And yet, he couldn't deny that there was a peace in Perry's face that he'd rarely seen before.

The wake had been held the day before. It had been one of the roughest days of Clark's life. He'd been to funerals before. But never had he seen such a turnout. Perry had been a well-loved man, as well as widely admired. People had lined up in a double row around the block of the funeral home, waiting for the chance to pay their final respects to the man. Many had been other newspaper men and women from Metropolis. Some had been editors and reporters from neighboring states, who had come into Metropolis for the sole reason of saying goodbye to the Chief. A great many more had been average citizens of the city; people who had grown up reading the Daily Planet their whole lives. Every eye had shed tears. Every hand had clutched a crumpled, sodden tissue. It had been a humbling experience, to see the mountainous outpouring of love over the last couple of days.

Of course, Clark had needed to stop by the wake as Superman. It was well known that the superhero and the newspaper editor were friends. It simply would not have looked right if Superman hadn't paid his final respects to his old friend. So Clark had found a convenient moment to slip out of the room without being noticed. Ten minutes later, he had returned in the familiar red and blue suit, purposely leaving a gap of time in case it had occurred to anyone that Clark had just left the place. He had stuck around only ten or fifteen minutes while in the suit, then had flown off, only to return as Clark a few minutes later.

Jimmy had been a wreck at the wake. Since Perry's illness, he had fully taken on the responsibility of running the paper. He'd been well-prepared for the role, but with Perry gone, Clark had seen some of Jimmy's old insecurities coming to the surface. Jimmy had been grateful when Lois and Clark had given him their reassurances and their assistance. Together, the three had worked throughout the entire first day after Perry had passed to produce a special edition of the Daily Planet. The front page headline had read simply, "The Passing Of A Legend: Saying Goodbye To Perry White."

Clark glanced around the room as his thoughts turned to the present. There was hardly any room left free, even though it was the largest room in the funeral home. Flower displays of every shape, size, and variety stood in vases, in baskets, or on tripods in rows of at least three or four deep. Clark had read some of the cards the day before. Many of the flowers had been sent from newspapers, radio stations, and television news stations from as far away as California. Again, Clark had been touched by the gestures, and the Elvis-themed ones had even caused him to crack tiny smiles.

There were few people in the room right now. Earlier, the memorial service had been held, to a packed room that had overflowed and spilled out into the hallway. Now, only the family and closest of friends were allowed to remain, so that they might have one final chance for a quiet goodbye. Jerry and Keith had been generous in allowing Clark and his family, as well as Jimmy, to be present for such a private moment.

"Hey," Lois said, coming to his side.

"Hey," he returned in a rough whisper.

Lois slipped her arm into his, even as he had his hands shoved into his pockets. His head was hanging, his chin to his chest. But at her touch, he looked up to meet her gaze. She was wearing a simple, but elegant, black dress and plain black pumps. Clark recalled that she had worn the same outfit to one of the cruise ship's night clubs one night when he'd taken her dancing while the kids did their own thing with the kid and young teen camps. He'd been wearing the same black suit that he was now. That had only been a week before, but it seemed like a lifetime

ago. Lois gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. It was funny, he thought. She had known Perry longer than he had, but she was being the strong one now. She was trying to be the one to comfort him, when he felt like he should have been doing something to comfort her.

"He looks so peaceful," Lois commented.

"He does," Clark agreed. "It's weird seeing him so still. I keep half expecting him to start yelling about the mock-up for tomorrow's paper."

"I know what you mean."

Keith joined the Kents at the coffin.

"That was a beautiful eulogy," Clark said. "Perry would have been proud."

"You think so?" Jerry asked as he came up alongside his brother.

"I know so," Clark assured them both. "He was so proud of you both."

"Thank you," Jerry said. "I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to turn my life around. So much time was wasted where Dad and I didn't talk much. I'll never get those years back."

"Hey," Clark said softly, with a shake of his head. "Don't think like that. Your dad loved you, even when you guys hit those rough patches. And he was so proud of the fact that you *did* change, and of the man that you became."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Thanks, Clark."

The funeral director softly padded across the room to where they stood.

"It's time," he said softly.

Clark nodded. He and Jimmy were both pallbearers, along with Keith and Jerry. Their number was rounded out by four of Perry's nephews. Clark gave Lois' hand a squeeze, and then watched as she shepherded their children from the room. Clark took his place and waited as Perry's coffin was shut. Then, along with the others, Clark hefted the coffin and rested it on his right shoulder. The thought occurred to him that he would have been able to lift the casket with ease on his own. He'd lifted space shuttles that weighed several tons, and had done it all without breaking so much as a sweat. But today, his strength seemed to have fled him, bleeding out along with his tears. He thought that nothing in the world had ever felt so heavy as the coffin on his shoulder.

Single file, the men made their way to the waiting hearse. There they gently set down their burden. Then the somber line of cars followed the hearse to the cemetery where Perry's body was to be interred. Clark drove for a change; Lois was too upset to even attempt to drive. In the back seat, their kids were silent. They too, had loved the Chief.

The drive to the cemetery didn't last too long. A police escort ensured that they arrived in style and in safety. Clark found a spot to park alongside the slight curb where the grass began and the asphalt ended. Again, he took his place with the other pallbearers and helped to carry Perry to his final resting place. The minister led the gathered crowd in another series of prayers. Then everyone was handed a flower, either blue or white, in deference to Elvis' favorite colors. Each person approached the coffin, one at a time, and laid their flower on the lid. Then the ceremony was over and people began to drift away in small groups.

Clark lingered by the casket, completely alone. Lois was talking with Jimmy over by the cars. The kids were with her. Clark lightly rested his palm on the lid of the coffin.

"Goodbye, Chief," he whispered, fresh tears welling in his eyes. "And thank you, for everything. For giving me my dream job. For giving me the opening I so desperately needed to get to know Lois. For keeping certain knowledge a secret. Don't worry about the paper. Jimmy has it well in hand, and Lois and I will be

there to help him. You'd be so proud of how Jimmy handled his first couple of days as the sole editor. You picked the right man for the job. He loves the paper as much as you do. Say hi to Alice for me; I know you've been waiting a long time to be reunited with her." He paused for a moment and took a shaky breath. "I'll miss you, Chief."

Clark withdrew his hand, and turned. With long, sure strides, he rejoined his family. Today, he would grieve. And tomorrow, he would once again be the award-winning journalist that Perry had been so proud of. After all, he had every intention of carrying on Perry's legacy by helping the Daily Planet to remain the most prestigious paper in the country.

THE END