

Clark's Heart

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Rated: PG-13

Submitted: June 2014

Summary: The Man of Steel faces a health crisis unlike anything he's ever faced before, and it may just kill him.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman Franchise.

WHAM warning. One of my toys isn't going to make it back into the box.

Author's Note: For the purposes of this story, the mystery baby at the end of "The Family Hour" never happened. Many thanks to my beta, KenJ, for helping to make this story tighter and for catching all of my mistakes.

"Morning, honey," Clark said one bright June morning. He adjusted his tie as he crossed the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee from the coffee maker before they headed off to work.

"Morning," Lois said, a little smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. She came up behind him and kissed the back of his neck. "How'd you sleep?"

"Not great," he replied honestly.

"Busy night for Superman? I woke up a few times and you were gone."

"Two house fires and a car accident. Nothing that took too long. I just," he shrugged helplessly, "had a lot of trouble falling back to sleep each time."

"Well, we've both had a lot on our minds lately," Lois reminded him.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Is it...?" She gestured to her midsection.

"No...yes...I don't know," he waffled. "We've wanted and tried for a baby for so long. And now that we're going to have one...I couldn't be happier. But...I worry. Am I going to be a good enough father? I almost lost you, I don't know how many times, because of Superman, in those early days. Is my kid going to grow up hating the dad who disappears at a moment's notice? Am I going to miss the important moments — Little League games, graduations, prom night?"

"Clark, we've been over this before. You're going to be a *great* father. Any child will be lucky to have you for a dad."

"I know. But last night...I couldn't turn those thoughts off. I wound up finishing painting the nursery at five in the morning."

He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. Stretching, he yawned, then placed the frames back on his face. Lois gave his body a squeeze, as if the act could lend him some energy.

"How'd *you* sleep?" he asked, giving the small bump at the front of her work suit a meaningful glance.

"Okay. It's getting harder to find a comfortable position. But it's the getting up nine times a night to use the bathroom that's really killing me."

Clark reversed their positions and hugged her tightly, feeling her growing stomach solidly wedged between them. "I'm sorry, honey."

Again, she smiled. "I'm not. Every moment that this baby is

growing inside of me, I'm happy. If it means losing a little sleep at night, so what? It's all worth it." She patted her stomach as she pulled out of Clark's embrace in an effort to emphasize the point.

"Yeah," he agreed as a contented smile crossed his features.

"So, our doctor's appointment is at two, right?"

"Right."

"Are you sure you really want that cream color in the nursery? We could have waited to paint until after we find out the sex."

Lois shook her head, her now-longer hair swishing with the movement. "No. I like the cream. It's fresh and airy, don't you think?"

"I love it, you know that. I just thought you might want a light pink or blue instead."

"Ugh," she rolled her eyes as she made a face. "I grew up in a pink and white room as a kid. I felt like I was simultaneously living in Barbie's Dream House and drowning in Pepto-Bismol."

Clark chuckled, leaned over, and kissed Lois' head. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"You ready?" he asked.

Lois grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter and nodded. "All set."

"You want me to drive?" Clark offered.

"No. I'll drive. You try to take a cat-nap on the way to the office."

"Okay," he relented, knowing that she was right. He needed whatever sleep he could get.

While Lois navigated the streets of Metropolis, Clark dozed in the passenger seat. The day was wonderfully warm and sunny, the comforting rays imbuing him with the energy that he so desperately needed. He kept his eyes closed the entire trip, and woke to find Lois pulling into the underground parking garage beneath the Planet.

"Hey. Feeling better?" Lois asked as Clark stirred.

"Yeah. I needed that. Thanks."

Together, they headed into the building, ready to start the day's work. Jimmy met them at Lois' desk, where he was setting down a stack of research notes and photographs. He gave them a wave and a smile as they approached.

"Hey, Lois. Hey, CK. Today's the big day, right?"

Lois nodded in affirmation and patted her stomach. "Yep. The afternoon we'll find out how the baby's growing. And, if we're lucky and he or she is willing to share, we'll find out the sex."

"That's so cool," the photographer said with a grin. "My money's on a girl."

Clark chuckled. "A girl would be wonderful. So would a boy. What's all this?" He gestured to the items Jimmy had just set down.

"Oh, that's the research you asked for. Phone records, addresses, photos, the works. You really think Martin Livingstone is the serial killer?"

"That's what we're hoping to prove," Clark said. "Thanks, Jimmy."

"Any time. I better get going though. The Chief's got me running down to snap some shots of the opening of the new wing of the downtown library."

"Isn't that near that Italian bakery? The one with the Napoleons? Ugh, what's the name?" She fumbled for a moment. "Paolini...Puleo...Paduano...?"

"Pisano's," Clark corrected her.

"That's the place," Lois said, looking relieved that Clark had stepped in to fill the gap in her memory. "You think you could pick me up one?"

"A Napoleon? No problem," Jimmy said. "Anything for you, CK?"

"Sure, I'll take one," Clark said. "Thanks."

"Oh, and half a pound of those tri-color almond cookies," Lois added. "No, wait. Better make it a pound."

"A pound? Right," Jimmy said, raising an eyebrow.

"No judging," Lois said with a grin. "It's the baby who wants it."

Clark laughed as he pulled out his wallet and handed Jimmy a twenty dollar bill. "This should cover it. Let me know if it doesn't, okay?"

"Sure thing, CK."

"Great, thanks, Jimmy. I appreciate it."

"I'd better get going," Jimmy said, checking his watch.

"Catch you guys later."

With that, Jimmy breezed away, stopping only to grab a donut from Kevin as the other research assistant strolled by with an open box. Clark pulled out Lois' chair for her. She sat with a grateful sigh. Clark rubbed her shoulders briefly.

"You okay?" he asked.

She smiled. "I'm great. I know I'm only halfway through this pregnancy, but it still feels good to sit down."

"You are doing a great job," he assured her, putting his hand to her stomach. "I can't wait until I can feel this little guy or girl moving around."

"Oh, he or she is definitely moving," Lois said, her hand coming up to cover his. "It's weird. I know it's the baby, but it just feels like... muscle spasms. It's so faint, sometimes I half wonder if it's just my mind playing tricks on me."

He smiled at her for a moment before asking, "So... where do you want to start with this stuff?"

Lois looked at the stack of photos and papers. "Maybe you could give the photos a really thorough check?" she suggested.

Clark nodded. "As my lady wishes." He took the photos and crossed the aisle to his own desk.

At one o'clock, the two broke for a fast lunch on their way to the doctor's office. There, they sat with the genetic counselor. That was awkward for them. Not only did they not have a family history for Clark's side to look for possible indications of issues that could be passed to the baby, they had to carefully sidestep even the most basic ones that they otherwise could have answered. It simply would not do to give the impression that the baby was a mix of human and alien genes.

Finally, the torment of the meeting was over. Lois and Clark were led to another room, this one hosting an ultrasound machine. The doctor and technician were already there, waiting for them to arrive. They swiftly got Lois comfortable on the table and began the scan. Lois and Clark could see everything on a separate computer screen, while the doctor and technician watched on another.

"Here's the head," Dr. Bonny said, while the technician, Kendra, pointed it out with the arrow on screen. "See the face? The baby is looking straight at you."

"Those black spots... those are the eyes?" Lois asked, entranced.

"Mmm-hmm," the doctor hummed.

Kendra quickly marked places off on the image and did a calculation as she measured.

"It's a beautiful face," Clark said, his hand in Lois' as he sat in a chair next to the table. "Looks just like you," he joked.

"Funny," she retorted, dryly.

As the scan progressed, more measurements were taken. Each time, Dr. Bonny or Kendra would explain what they were looking at, take numerous measurements from as many angles as they could, and declare everything to be "good."

"Would you like to know the sex?" the doctor asked, as they grew ready to check that particular part of the baby's anatomy.

"Yes," Lois and Clark said, almost with one voice. "Please."

"Okay," the doctor said with a smile. Then, "See that, there?" She had Kendra move the arrow on screen. "You are having a

healthy little boy."

"A son?" Lois asked, blinking back tears. "Did you hear that, Clark? A boy."

"I did," he said, squeezing her hand in excitement. "A son."

"A little Clark," she said, smiling. "A perfect little boy."

Clark said nothing. He merely stood and kissed Lois' brow.

"Just a few more quick checks," the doctor said, as Kendra moved the ultrasound wand expertly over Lois' midsection. "Ah, there we go. The feet." She looked at the images for a few silent moments. "Everything looks just fine, Mr. and Mrs. Kent. Your son seems to be perfectly healthy. I see absolutely no reason to worry about anything. Kendra will print you off some pictures to take with you. It was very nice meeting you both."

"Thank you," Clark said, shaking the doctor's hand while Lois towed off the ultrasound gel from her stomach. "Thank you so much."

"You're quite welcome," Dr. Bonny said, smiling. "Take care now."

"Goodbye, Doctor. And thank you," Lois said.

"Here you go," Kendra said, as the last image printed. She handed them a strip of photos. "Best of luck to you both, and congratulations."

With that, she followed the doctor out of the room. Clark helped Lois off the table. He let her rearrange her shirt before wrapping her in a big, warm hug, which she eagerly returned. Then he was kissing her, over and over, his euphoria at finding out their child was healthy completely overwhelming him.

"Everything's okay," he said in wonder. "Our boy is perfect."

"I know. Before today... I was so afraid. I mean, this child... his origins... I was terrified that the mix of our genes might... you know." She gestured vaguely.

"I know," he said in a near whisper. "I feared the same thing. But everything's fine. Okay? Our son is fine."

Lois nodded. "Shall we? We still have plenty of work waiting for us, back at the Planet."

Clark grinned. "What do you say we stop and get some celebratory ice cream or something first?"

"Mmm," Lois said, eyes closed briefly. "Sounds wonderful."

"Come on," Clark said, putting his arm about her shoulders as they walked down the hallway, heading for the exit.

"Chocolate?"

"Is there any other flavor?"

Clark chuckled. "I guess not. At least, not when it comes to the great Lois Lane."

"Hey, how about we hit up that specialty chocolate shop on Schuster? I think they have those chocolate cigars that are wrapped in either pink or blue foil. Could be a cute idea to tell the bullpen."

"Yeah," Clark agreed with a grin. "I like that idea."

"Congratulations, you two," Perry exclaimed with a laugh in his voice. "I'm so happy for you, I can't even see straight."

"Thanks, Chief," Lois said.

Help! Somebody help! Please! Clark's attention to the conversation at hand snapped as the call for help exploded in his ears. Then, suddenly, a police scanner call interrupted the initial plea for help. *All units proceed to the Metropolis Bridge. Part of the structure has collapsed. Repeat. Part of the Metropolis Bridge has collapsed. Proceed with caution.*

"Clark? You okay there, son?" Perry asked, concern in his eyes.

Clark shook his head, trying to dispel thoughts of the bridge and focus on his immediate surroundings. "Huh? Uh, yeah, I'm fine. I just realized that I, uh..."

"Forgot," Lois added, stammering as she fumbled for an excuse.

"My credit card," Clark finished. "At the chocolate shop. I

better go get it.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lois said.

“What about the Savino trial piece?” Perry demanded to know.

“Oh, that? We’ll finish it when we get back,” Lois said hurriedly.

“Lois! Clark! Chief!” Jimmy called as he raced across the bullpen. “The Metropolis Bridge just collapsed. At least, a portion of it did.”

“We’re on it,” Lois called back. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Jimmy...”

“I’m on it too, Chief. I just need to grab my camera and bag. I’ll see you guys there, I guess,” Jimmy said, cutting Perry off and waving to Lois and Clark as they headed toward the elevators.

“So, let me guess, that’s what you were hearing,” Lois said matter-of-factly as the elevator door closed the two of them off from the newsroom.

“Yeah.”

“How did it sound?”

Clark shook his head. “Not good. It’s still a bit early for rush hour, but...” he trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

Lois nodded. “I suppose that’s true.”

The car came to a halt as they reached the underground garage. The door opened and the two strode purposefully through the concrete maze toward Lois’ car. When they reached it, Lois opened the passenger door. Turning to Clark, she kissed him.

“Be careful, okay?”

“I will,” he promised.

After carefully checking the area, he ducked out of sight behind the side of Lois’ Jeep and spun into the familiar red and blue of Superman’s costume. Then, before Lois could even blink, he was streaking from the parking garage and zooming toward the scene of the disaster. As soon as he was free of the garage, he sharply angled up, gaining altitude, until he was above the tallest skyscrapers. It was easier to maneuver up at that height, without needing to skirt around anything. All obstacles simply ceased to be a problem, if Clark stayed above them.

A sonic boom rang out in his passing, as he pushed himself to go ever faster. He was only too aware of how much every second counted. A second could prevent someone from being injured. A second could be the veil between life and death. And every second that he was not on the scene weighed heavily on his mind, made his heart beat wildly in his chest, made his fingertips twitch in anticipation of what was to come.

He covered the distance in less than a minute. As soon as the bridge came into view, he altered his angle once more to ease into a landing without having to slow his descent. He only slowed when he was mere feet from the ground, and only because he didn’t want to crack the pavement when he touched down.

“Superman! Thank God!” one of the police officers said as Clark landed in a flash of primary colors.

“Officer,” Clark said, inclining his head in respect.

“The bridge — what’s left of it — is too unstable for us to get to where we need to be,” the man said in a rush.

Clark looked at the man’s name tag. Reynolds, he could see. “Don’t worry, Officer Reynolds. I’ll get to them. Have your men get as close as they can while staying safe. I’ll bring the people and cars to you.”

“You heard the man,” Reynolds said to the surrounding men and women. “Move it! Let’s go!”

Clark was already on the move, his focus fixed on those he could help. With his enhanced vision, he easily located those who were in the most dire circumstances. He directed his efforts to those people first, pulling people from crashed vehicles and from the cold water of the Metropolis River below the bridge, though not many had survived the fall. Then he moved on to those who

were not in immediate danger, but who were stuck on the bridge, unable to move forward or backward in the absolute and utter chaos of the scene.

Clark never slowed. He didn’t know how long he had before more of the bridge might give way, or even if any more would. Once the people were cleared from the scene and safely away from the destroyed bridge, he turned his attention to the vehicles cluttering the roadway. Those he simply moved to the side, off of the bridge and to where the police could easily tow them from the scene. He allowed himself to finally slow as the last truck was removed from the road.

Then it was time to address the dead. Clark flew down into the ravine and river again and again, recovering as many bodies as he could. He respectfully laid each one down on the ground by the numerous ambulances that had arrived as he’d worked. He didn’t check for signs of life. He didn’t have to. While he’d been saving those he could, many of the bodies had gone cold and a bluish tint had crept into their lips and skin. Clark worked in silence, his heart quietly breaking as each new body was rescued from the river.

As he moved, he could see teams of first responders steadily making their way down the steep embankment to either side of the river. They, too, began the heart wrenching process of recovering the dead, though they focused more on the broken and splattered body parts that had hit the ground rather than the water. It was a gruesome sight, Clark had to admit, as he glanced around at the blood and gore.

At long last, he rose from the water with the last floating body he’d been able to find. He laid the woman down in a clear spot on the ground.

“That’s all I could find,” he said as he walked up to Officer Reynolds. “At least, on the surface. There may be more beneath the water. I could take a look, if you’d like,” he offered.

“Thanks, Superman,” Reynolds said, appreciatively. “But you’ve done plenty. We’ve got dive teams coming. They can take it from here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. We really appreciate the help though. And the offer.”

Clark nodded solemnly. “Okay then.”

He turned around to scan the surrounding area. He’d lost track of how much time he’d spent at the bridge collapse. But, he gauged, it must have been a while. The crowd had all but dispersed as he’d begun to lay out the corpses he’d managed to recover. He could see Jimmy tucking his camera in his bag as he hopped onto his motorcycle, no doubt in a rush to get the shots developed in time to get them into the evening edition of the paper. Lois, as he’d predicted, stood front and center, feverishly jotting down notes for the story they would write together. She saw him and waved him over.

“Superman!” she called, like any eager reporter and friend.

He waved in a friendly manner, but he was still too far off for her to hear him over the continuing din, so he said nothing. Instead, he turned to one of the female police officers as she approached him. She offered her hand and Clark shook it firmly.

“Superman, I just wanted to extend my personal thanks,” the woman said. Her badge identified her as Major. “I didn’t know it until just a few moments ago, but my sister was one of the people you pulled from the water. Thanks to you, she’s going to live.”

“I’m happy to hear that she’ll be okay,” Clark said sincerely. He gazed back at the scene for a quick second. “I wish I’d been able to do more, but I’m glad so many are safe.”

“Safe because of you. Anyway, I need to get back.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the cleanup that was going on. “Thanks again, Superman.”

She strode away, blonde ponytail swaying as she went. Clark turned back to the slowly dispersing crowd. He was about to

gesture to Lois that he would happily provide a Superman statement for their article, but as he stepped forward, everything went wrong.

Pain shot through his chest and arms. Nausea washed over him and he had to fight the urge to vomit. His knees buckled beneath him, sending him crashing to the asphalt, while weakness flooded him. His first thought was that someone nearby had Kryptonite, but after a few moments of agony, he realized that whatever it was that he was feeling, it was not the same as the sickness he usually experienced when exposed to the radioactive stone. His heart sped up and it felt difficult to draw a breath.

“Superman?!?!”

It seemed everyone in the area was calling his name. He tried to answer, tried to stand, but failed on both accounts. Someone rushed to his side. The policewoman, Major, he thought it was, but it was difficult to tell. It was as if his very thoughts were swimming through pain. He was, however, very aware when Lois dropped to her knees in front of him. Miraculously, no one was pushing her away. Perhaps that was because the friendship between Lois Lane, Clark Kent, and Superman was so well known, that none of the first responders paid any mind to her presence there.

“Superman?” she asked, sheer, naked terror in her voice.

It was enough to pull Clark back from the edge of the abyss.

“Superman?” she called again, cupping his chin with her hand and forcing him to make eye contact with her. “What’s wrong?”

Clark drew as deep a breath as he dared. It didn’t make sense him. He’d always believed that he was completely healthy. He didn’t understand how or why this was happening to him. But he knew the signs — knew it from a hundred or more rescues he’d made with people experiencing what he was currently feeling.

“I think,” he gasped out, his chest tightening further with the effort of speaking. “I think I’m having a heart attack.”

“You... what?” Lois asked, her face going stark white.

Clark could only moan softly against the pain.

“Excuse me, Lois,” Henderson said, pulling her a few steps back from where Clark was still on his hands and knees. “You need to back up. Let the paramedics do their job.”

“But...” she protested softly, careful not to sound like the terrified wife she was.

Clark wondered when Henderson had arrived on the scene. He’d been so busy, he hadn’t noticed before that moment that his friend was there. But the thought was there and gone in the blink of an eye. Instead, he tried to focus on the two paramedics who knelt by his side and began to check him over. He willingly submitted himself to whatever vital checks and tests they wanted to run, wanting only for the attack to end, for the pain to subside.

After what felt like decades but was, in actuality, less than five minutes, it finally did. Bit by bit, his pain lessened and then vanished. The weakness in his body fled. His head cleared and his chest no longer felt like it was being crushed in a Kryptonite vice. Shakily, he stood after gulping in some much needed air.

“Are you okay?” Major asked him.

“I... I think so,” Clark said, his voice wavering only the slightest bit.

He sounded brave and strong, but he knew he’d never fool Lois. Looking at her, he knew he was right about that. She was attempting to master her emotions, to appear to be no more than a concerned onlooker or scared friend. Clark had the thought that she was doing a pretty great job of it, all things considered. She did not look like a woman who’d just watched her husband go through such a terrifying ordeal.

“Are you sure, Superman?” Lois managed to ask in an even tone.

“As far as I can tell.”

“Superman,” one of the two paramedics, a skinny, bald black

man said. His uniform identified him as Washburn. “It does appear that you’ve had a heart attack. I’d like it if you allowed us to take you to the hospital for a more thorough check, just to be on the safe side.”

“I understand,” Clark said, nodding. “But there’s not much that can be done for me at the hospital. I promise, I’ll get checked, but I’d prefer to see my usual team of doctors.”

The man hesitated, but eventually nodded slowly. “All right. But, take it easy, please. I can’t guarantee that you are one hundred percent right now.”

“I promise,” Clark said, giving the man a smile.

“Can we give you a lift?” Washburn asked, gesturing to the ambulances.

Clark shook his head. “No, but thanks. There’re still a lot of people and things that need attention here. I’ll find another way to get where I need to go.”

“Lane. You’re a friend of Superman’s,” Henderson put in. “Give him a ride?”

“I’d be happy to,” Lois said.

“Great. It’s settled,” Clark said in the professional manner of the Superman persona.

He turned, his cape flaring out behind him a little in the warm breeze that had sprung up. It felt good, caressing his skin and drying the remaining sweat on his brow. He took a deep breath, immensely grateful to be able to breathe again, then began to walk. Lois matched him, stride for stride, keeping a respectful distance from him, though he could all but feel how much she ached to hold him. He felt the same way, felt that same urge to hold her to ensure himself that both he and Lois were okay.

“This way, Superman,” she said, taking the lead and pointing to where her Jeep was parked.

As soon as the door was unlocked, Clark clamored into the passenger seat and collapsed against the backrest. Despite the fact that he was feeling better, the whole afternoon had been draining. All his joy at finding out that his son was healthy had been shoved to the back burner in the wake of the accident and his heart attack. Now though, as he allowed Lois to drive him through the city, he clung to that joy in an effort to chase away his lingering sadness over the lives lost and his fear for himself.

“Clark,” Lois finally said, and he could hear the tears in her voice. “What happened back there?”

He shook his head, at a complete loss. “I’m not sure. I’ve never felt anything like that before. It was so different from Kryptonite sickness.”

“How can you have a heart attack? I thought your body was invulnerable in every way.”

“I thought so too,” he said, hanging his head and resting his chin on his chest. “I don’t understand it any more than you do, believe me.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been that scared for you,” Lois admitted in a near whisper as she pulled away from the curb.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I wish I could have spared you from seeing that.”

“Well,” she said, determination creeping back into her tone, “maybe Dr. Klein has some idea of why the healthiest man on the planet suddenly has a heart attack in the middle of the street.”

“I just don’t understand it,” Clark said, more to himself than to Lois. “I’ve done things that have required far more of a physical effort than what I did today. Not that today was the easiest rescue I’ve ever made. But still...” He allowed his voice to trail off helplessly.

“We’ll get to the bottom of it,” Lois assured him, reaching over to him to take his hand in her own as they hit a relatively unoccupied stretch of road.

“I hope so. I’ve got much more important things to worry about. Like building my son’s nursery furniture, picking out names with my wife, the works.” He looked over to Lois and

caught her smile, returning it with one of his own.

"First things first," Lois said, putting both hands back on the wheel as she rounded a tight corner. "Let's get you to S.T.A.R. Labs."

"Superman! Lois!" Dr. Klein said, standing up from his work bench and momentarily forgetting the chemicals he was mixing in glass beakers. "This is a surprise. What can I do for you?" He went to step forward, hit the desk, and nearly spilled a beaker filled with a light pink liquid.

"Dr. Klein," Clark said gravely. "I need your help."

Lois checked the hallway beyond the doctor's office and then shut the door softly, so as not to rouse suspicion. "There was an... incident."

"Incident?" Dr. Klein repeated. "What kind of incident?"

"The Metropolis Bridge collapsed," Clark said, by way of explanation.

"It did? I've been cooped up in here all day." He checked his watch. "Oh, geez, no wonder I'm so hungry. I should have eaten lunch six hours ago."

"Dr. Klein," Lois said stiffly, in an effort to jerk the man's attention back to the issue at hand.

"Huh? Oh. Sorry. Continue, please, Superman."

"Well, I did what I would normally do. Getting people off the bridge, saving those who'd fallen in the water, clearing the roadway and retrieving the dead." He gestured vaguely as he spoke. "When it was all over, I was going to fly off. But then... the strangest feeling came over me."

"Kryptonite?" Dr. Klein guessed.

"No," Clark replied, his tone serious but letting the doctor know he was not upset with the interruption. "I had a heart attack."

"What?"

"At least, I had all the symptoms. The chest tightness, shortness of breath, weakness, you name it. And the paramedics seemed to concur with that diagnosis."

"Oh, God," the man stammered, momentarily at a loss. "I mean..." he licked his lips nervously as he tried to think of something to say.

"It's okay, Doc," Clark said, crossing his arms before his chest as he leaned against the wall. "I feel fine now. Just a little shaken by what happened, that's all."

"Well, I'll run whatever tests I can," Dr. Klein assured him.

"Lois, why don't you head back to the Planet? I'm sure you need to get to work on the bridge collapse story. I'll be fine here."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"You'll be okay to fly back...to wherever it is you go?" she asked, catching herself in midsentence, though Clark guessed that Dr. Klein hadn't heard the near slip.

"I'll be fine. I appreciate you giving me a lift here. Go on. I'm sure Clark will be getting back to the Planet soon himself," he assured her.

"Okay. But if you do need me..." She left the invitation hanging in the air. "Thanks, Dr. Klein."

Clark watched her leave before turning his eyes back to his doctor. The man gestured for Clark to sit, so he grabbed the nearest stool and sat. Dr. Klein sat as well, and appeared to be deep in thought. When he didn't speak for several minutes, Clark grew too antsy to stay quiet.

"Dr. Klein?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh."

"I didn't want to say anything in front of Lois. I don't want to upset her. But I *am* worried about this. What can we do, as far as tests? I need to know if this was a fluke or not."

"Well," Dr. Klein said thoughtfully and fidgeting with a glass stirring stick. "There are a few simple things we can start with."

"Great. Let's get started then," Clark said, eager to get the whole episode behind him.

"The thing is, Superman, I can't guarantee results."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can run a CAT Scan and an echocardiogram. And I will. But I can't say with any degree of certainty that the machines will be able to return any images. Your molecular structure is so much denser than a normal human's. At best, I think we can expect imperfect images of your heart. At worst, we'll see nothing."

"Isn't there anything else we can do?" Clark asked, his alarm rising.

Dr. Klein shook his head. "A blood test, but that's about it."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad," Clark said.

"Just give me a couple of minutes to gather up what I need,"

Dr. Klein said, standing.

"Uh...Dr. Klein? I just want to make sure that this...whole thing...stays between the two of us for now."

"Absolutely."

"Thanks."

Clark waited with as much patience as he could muster while Dr. Klein was gone. Still, after about a minute, he took to pacing, needing an outlet for his nervous energy. He stopped when the doctor returned, a small lead box in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Superman," the man said, looking as miserable as Clark knew he was going to feel in another minute.

"Don't be," Clark said. "It's a necessary evil."

"I'm glad you understand."

"I do."

"Are you ready?" Dr. Klein asked.

Clark rolled his sleeve up as far as the unforgiving Spandex would allow. "Ready when you are."

Dr. Klein mutely nodded and tied a tourniquet around Clark's arm. He searched for a moment, looking for an accessible vein, then swabbed Clark's arm with an alcohol wipe. He let the area air-dry for a few seconds before flipping open the lid to the lead box. Clark immediately groaned as the small fragment of Kryptonite began its savage assault on his body. Weakness and nausea took him, forcing him to clamp his eyes shut against the unpleasant sensations he was experiencing.

"This won't take more than half a minute," the doctor promised him.

Clark felt the sharp jab as the slender needle punctured his flesh and slid into his vein. Dr. Klein filled a couple of tubes with Clark's blood, untying the tourniquet when he was close to finishing. Then he was done, removing the needle and shutting the lead box. Immediately, Clark felt the microscopic puncture close up, leaving no trace of the wound behind.

"I'll run this sample myself," Dr. Klein assured him. "No one else will know about it."

"I appreciate that. If word got out that I might not be up to snuff..." He shrugged. "The crime organizations would have a field day, for starters. I don't even want to think beyond that."

"I completely understand. Let me get this started now. I won't have results right away, but I'm sure we can figure out some way for me to get the results to you."

"You can always call Lois or Clark. They know how to contact me."

Again, the man nodded. "I thought as much."

For several long minutes, Dr. Klein worked with the tubes of blood, prepping them and getting them in machines that Clark didn't really understand. He didn't care, so long as his results came back quickly. Once the doctor was finished, he led Clark through the halls, to a secluded room to attempt an echocardiogram. Clark saw only one other doctor as he walked, an older man by the name of Ted Kensington. He was a good man and one who Clark trusted. He greeted Clark warmly

enough, but asked no questions about what the Man of Steel was doing at S.T.A.R. Labs, for which Clark was infinitely grateful.

"This room is about as private as it gets around here," Dr. Klein said as he closed the door to the tiny procedure room. "We'll begin with a simple echocardiogram," he explained as he gathered what he needed and switched on the ultrasound machine. "I'll need you to remove the top half of your uniform, please."

Clark did as he was asked. His earlier heart attack had spooked him severely, so he opted to unzip the Spandex and pull it down to dangle around his waist at normal, human speed. His cape he hung on the back of a chair, to prevent it from creasing. Then he lay on the table and allowed Dr. Klein to conduct the ultrasound.

Only a few hours ago, Lois was the one having this procedure done, he thought to himself with a mental sigh.

Clark watched the grainy images on the ultrasound machine's screen as Dr. Klein expertly moved the wand back and forth over his chest, checking the heart, lungs, and surrounding tissues. He didn't speak and Clark couldn't tell one blob on the screen from another. Instead, he lay silent but deeply worried over the man's silence.

"You can sit up and dress," Dr. Klein said after a while. He handed Clark a towel to wipe the ultrasound gel off with.

"So...?" Clark prodded, leaving the question open-ended, hopping the doctor would pick up the hint.

"It's hard to tell for sure," Dr. Klein said.

Clark could sense the unease in his voice as he spoke. Whatever he'd seen, Dr. Klein was in no rush to say. Clark knew that the man would attempt to stall for time as he tried to find a way to say what he needed to.

"Just...tell it to me straight," Clark encouraged him. "I can handle whatever it is."

"No. It's *literally* hard to tell," Dr. Klein said with a shake of his head. "The machine isn't powerful enough to penetrate all the way through. Your molecular mass is too dense, as I'd feared."

"Will the CAT Scan work?" Clark wondered.

"We can try."

"How soon can we do it?"

"Now, if you have the time," Dr. Klein said, shrugging. "As you know, we're one of the foremost research labs in the nation. We have one on the basement level."

Clark nodded. "Let's do it. I'd rather not wait on this."

"Nor I," Dr. Klein agreed.

When Clark was once more fully dressed, they travelled down the elevator together. The basement air was slightly chillier than the rest of the building, but Clark didn't mind. It felt refreshing somehow, like he could breathe a little easier. Perhaps it was because of the echoing isolation of the unpopulated floor that set Clark's nerves ever so slightly more at ease. He was still afraid that someone might see him there and deduce that Superman was not at his best.

"I'm sorry, Superman, but I need to inject a dye into your veins," the doctor said apologetically.

"I understand."

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

Dr. Klein whisked out the door, only to return five minutes later with the box containing the Kryptonite that he'd used earlier to take Clark's blood. Again, Clark felt the debilitating effects of the stone as the box's lid was open. Dr. Klein was mercifully brief with the injection, and before long, Clark was laying in the machine, the pain from the Kryptonite exposure already forgotten. He closed his eyes against the flashing lights and tried to focus his thoughts only on Lois and their unborn son, in an effort to block out the sounds the scan made as it took images of his heart.

A little over an hour later, Clark left S.T.A.R. Labs, unsure what to think. He found a secluded spot and changed back into his civilian clothing, then hailed a cab. The constant and obnoxiously loud steel drum music blasting from the radio grated on his nerves for the entire trip back to the Daily Planet, but he sat in silent reflection. When he finally reached the office and made it into the bullpen, he was in a daze. He found Lois easily enough. She was at her desk, leaving a heated message to some unknown party on the other end.

"Hi," she said, looking him over as if to assure herself that he was still in one piece. "How'd everything go with Dr. Klein?"

"Is the bridge collapse story filed yet?" he asked instead.

"Yeah. About ten minutes ago."

"Good. So we're free to go home?"

She nodded slowly, appraising him, concern in her eyes.

"Clark, what is going on? You're scaring me."

"I don't..." he glanced around and grew quiet until Ralph passed them, reeking of garlic and onions from whatever he'd eaten for dinner. "I'd rather not talk about it here." It was simple and the truth, but he also mentally winced at Lois' rising look of alarm.

"Okay," she said simply, and Clark was grateful that, for once, she wasn't arguing the point with him. "Let's go."

She grabbed her purse and dug out her keys as Clark followed her back to the elevators. He was silent, contemplative. He stayed that way, all the way down to the garage, and all the way back to their townhouse. Lois was quiet as well, but he could see that it was eating her alive to hold her tongue. He had to give her credit though, for managing not to pepper him with questions.

He waited until they were safely in their living room, the door shut and locked behind them for the night. He flopped wearily onto the couch, choosing to tuck himself into the corner of it, rather than command a section more toward the middle, as he normally would. Lois saw his body language and fearfully mimicked it.

"Clark..." she began when he didn't speak. "What did Dr. Klein say?"

He swallowed hard. "Nothing good," he said softly, unable to muster any strength into his voice.

"How...how bad is it?"

"Bad."

"Clark, please. I need more than one or two word answers here," she pleaded.

Clark removed his glasses and set them aside on the coffee table. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he thought. The whole way back to the Planet, and then back home, he'd tried to find the words he'd need to say, and failed.

"Remember last year?" he finally asked. "Remember how I had to...give up...some of my life-force to save Jimmy?"

"Of course. I was terrified, seeing that machine suck away... whatever it was...years of your life, your life-force, however you want to word it."

"And then, about a month later?"

"Deathstroke," she immediately replied.

He nodded in affirmation. "Deathstroke."

"What does...?"

He cut her off before she could ask the question. "Dr. Klein has a theory. He thinks that those two events, especially so close together, put a strain on my body. Well, *more* of a strain than he suspected at the time. That strain, he believes, weakened my heart."

"And that caused the heart attack?"

"Yes. Again, as far as we can tell."

"When you say 'weakened,' what, *exactly*, does that mean?" she asked, panic now dripping from her words.

Clark took a breath, steeling himself before he could deliver the news.

"It means," he finally said, "that my heart has been... compromised."

"You mean, damaged," she clarified, reading between the lines.

"Yes," he said, dropping his chin to his chest for a moment.

"How bad?"

"Unless I receive a heart transplant, I'll die."

"Die?" Lois asked, swallowing hard. "*Die?* What do you mean, die? How is that possible? Doesn't your body repair itself?"

"Normally, yes," Clark conceded. "But, Dr. Klein thinks the damage to my heart hasn't been able to repair itself for a few reasons. Chief among them...my super-activity. Every race to get to a rescue. Every bus I've lifted. Every fire I've blown out with nothing more than a burst of superbreath. Everything has put wear on the areas that the youth machine and Deathstroke destroyed, not giving the muscle a chance to heal. As it is, the heart attack I had this afternoon should have killed me, if I were a normal person."

"What about if you...took a vacation from being Superman? Would the rest allow you to heal up?" She reached for him, scooting a little closer and grabbing his hand, to both take and offer strength.

Clark ran his thumb over the back of her hand and shook his head. "I asked the same question. He said I could try, but that it was highly unlikely to make a difference. I need a transplant, and soon."

"How long...? I mean, you'll probably be bumped to the top of the list, right? With how many untold millions you've saved, I'm sure you'll get top preference, right? If it hadn't been for you, Nightfall would have knocked this planet into extinction. I know, I'll write to... whoever it is that handles these things." She started to rise, as if to make good on her promises right then and there.

"Lois...no," Clark said gently, stopping her in her tracks, not releasing her hand.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Writing to...even calling... anyone who handles the national transplant lists isn't going to help me. I'm different from everyone else, remember?"

"Yeah..." she said in a guarded manner.

"I'm not compatible with human donors."

"Dr. Klein has been wrong before," she said, a little defensively in her fear. She used her free hand to rub her growing belly to emphasize the point.

"This isn't the same," Clark said, biting back his own terror. "My blood isn't like yours, or anyone else's. The levels of iron are wrong, for example. My organs aren't the same either. Even if my body didn't outright reject a human heart, the first time I tried to fly, or use my super speed, or use my strength, the heart would explode. No human heart can withstand the stress that mine does on any given, normal day, to say nothing of the days when Superman is busy from sunup to sundown."

"He's..." She gulped. "He's certain about this?"

Clark nodded regretfully. "Yes."

"So..." A tear finally spilled from her eyes. "There's... what? No hope?"

Clark gently wiped away the tear with his finger. "Unless I can somehow get a Kryptonian heart..." He couldn't finish the statement.

What he'd managed to say hung in the air like blanket of invisible smoke, choking them both with its implications.

"Can't you try to...?"

She didn't need to finish. Clark shook his head.

"Contact someone? I've thought of that. I know that Kryptonians share a telepathic link. But across billions of miles of space?" He shook his head a second time. "It's not possible."

"You can't know that!"

"I do. When I was with Zara and Ching last year, heading back toward New Krypton, I asked them about it. I couldn't understand how or why they'd chosen not to try to contact me before they landed and concocted all those tests. They said they'd tried, but the distance had been too great."

"What do we do?" Lois asked, her voice small and lost sounding.

"I don't know," Clark said, letting her hand go. He sent the hand raking through his hair as he stood. "I've spent the afternoon wondering the same thing. I don't know if there's anything we *can* do." He started to pace the living room, looking at everything but seeing nothing.

"How long?" Lois asked after several minutes of watching him pace. "How long do we have to figure out a solution to this problem?"

Clark stopped his pacing to smile at his wife's determined face. How was it that she could be so strong, even when he knew that she, like him, was failing apart inside? And he knew, without a doubt, that her question hadn't been a false, but brave, show. She really meant every word, and would never give up until after Clark was dead and buried. He didn't doubt that either, that he would die before a solution could be found. His only chance at life lay billions of miles away, in the stars, completely beyond his reach. He had no space ship, and would only last twenty or so minutes in space if he tried to make it on his own. Even if he took a tank of oxygen with him, it would never last long enough for him to reach New Krypton, even if he had known the way to get there.

"What?" Lois asked, seeing his smile.

"Just...you. Your determination. Your fire. It never ceases to amaze me, even after all these years of knowing you." He stepped toward her, dropped to his knees, and cupped her cheek in his hand. "Thank you."

Lois' hand came up to cover his, and he took comfort and strength from that simple gesture. He turned his head and kissed her other hand as it came up to cup his own cheek.

"I'm not giving up without a fight," she vowed in a near-whisper.

"I know. And I'm glad. Because I *cannot* do this on my own."

"Every step of the way," she promised him again. "We *will* find a way to fix this."

"I wish I could share in that certainty," he admitted. "I'm trying though."

"So...how long did Dr. Klein say?"

Clark let his hand drop from Lois' soft cheek as he stood and resumed his spot on the couch. This time, however, he sat nearer to the middle. Encouraged by his body posture, Lois scooted closer to him, snuggling into his side. He put his arm around her waist and rested his hand against the side of her stomach.

"He's not sure. Months, weeks, days...he can't really tell. His guess is weeks, and that's if I stop most, if not all, of my super activity."

"And if you don't?" He could almost taste the dread in those words.

"Probably days, if I'm lucky," he said, dropping his eyes to the carpet while he spoke.

"Oh, God," Lois said, turning white.

"That's why I didn't fly back to the Planet," he said. "I'm going to do whatever it takes to stop using my powers, as difficult as that is going to be. I don't *want* to die, Lois." He couldn't stop the fear from tainting his words.

"You won't," Lois said with sudden decisiveness. "Just look at how much we've gone through, Clark. We always find a way to make it through the bad and come out the other side."

"This is different."

"Different, yes. But not impossible. There has to be something we can do. Can Dr. Klein repair the damage your heart

has already suffered?"

Clark couldn't bring himself to say so, but to his ears, Lois sounded more like she was trying to convince herself that there was hope than she was him.

"No," he said, hanging his head a bit. "He said he'd try to figure out an alternative to a transplant, but he's not hopeful. There's hope, in the medical community, about growing organs one day from stem cells, but we are a long, long way from that."

"What..." Lois said, thinking. "What about my father?"

"What about him?" Clark asked warily.

"Maybe we should talk to him about this. He's always been an out-of-the-box thinker. Remember how he saved your life when you had that Kryptonian virus? That wasn't exactly a normal, accepted treatment that he used. Besides, he's an accomplished doctor."

"I don't know, Lois," Clark said haltingly.

"Why not?"

"Well, for one, he'd have to be let back in on our secret," he said, standing and pacing to the windows, feeling the primal need to move, as though it could distance him from his problems.

"He knew it once, last year, when we wanted his expertise on our fertility concerns," she reminded him.

Clark leaned against the windowsill, half standing and half sitting. "Yeah, and when that memory gizmo...that Bummer-Be-Gone, I think it was called...took that memory from him, he was a much happier man. Do we really want to do that to him again? It's enough that Dr. Klein is going to have to be let in on things."

"You're going to tell him?" she asked looking slightly shocked.

He shrugged helplessly. "I don't see a choice. At some point, I'm probably going to be in the hospital. I can't go as Clark if he's expecting Superman. And if I go as Superman, I can't have Clark Kent's distraught wife at my bedside. He needs to know, so that we can work something out."

"Good point," she agreed, though Clark could tell from her facial expression that she wasn't thrilled with the idea. "I'll go with you, whenever you decide to tell him. But I still don't think it would be the worst thing in the world if we had my father collaborate with Dr. Klein."

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he considered. "I don't know..."

"He's a surgeon, Clark. If somehow he or Dr. Klein can figure out some...I don't know...some kind of machine or something to put inside of you to help your heart, isn't it better if the person who does the surgery is someone that you can trust, one hundred percent?"

Clark opened his mouth to argue, but found no argument on his tongue. "I guess it could have its benefits," he admitted. He threw his head back to stare at the ceiling. "God, this morning, all I wanted to know was that my baby was healthy. And now...I'm not even sure I'll get to see him take his first breath."

"Clark," Lois said, rising from the couch to stand by his side, but he shrugged away from her touch.

"I'm sorry, Lois," was all he could say. "I just...I think I need some time, to process this. As it is, Dr. Klein would prefer if I was under hospital supervision starting now, just to be certain that help is at hand, should I need it."

"So, what did you tell him?"

"That I needed to take care of some things first, before I could commit myself to any kind of hospital stay."

She nodded understandingly. "I guess there *are* quite a few things to get in order before we can even think about a hospital stay."

"If I go," Clark added.

"Clark!" she said in a warning tone.

"Lois, I don't want my last days spent in a hospital room," he replied, crossing the room again to gaze into her fish tank. A

bright pink tetra swam by, oblivious to the man standing less than a foot away. "I want to spend them here, with you."

"But, Clark, if something..."

"Were to happen?" he asked, cutting her off. "What can they do for me at the hospital?"

"They can keep you alive!" she argued, getting slightly heated.

"To what end? I *need* a transplant, Lois. But unless a miracle happens, there is no way that I can get one."

"We'll see about that," she replied, her tone indicating that she was done arguing the point. She crossed back to the small end table by the couch and picked up the phone.

"What are you doing?" Clark asked, straightening up from where he'd been bent over, leaning on the tank with a forearm.

"Calling my father," Lois answered.

"Lo-is!"

"No, Clark," she said stubbornly, shaking her head at the same time. "I'm calling him and he's going to help us, just like he did the last time you were sick. I can't lose you, Clark." She started to stab the numbers on the dial pad with her finger. "I may not be able to donate an organ or blood to you, but I can, at the very least, get you the very best care out there. And that includes my father, as well as Dr. Klein." Tears had since begun to leak out from the corners of her eyes. "Hi, Daddy?"

Clark felt miserable. He'd always done his best to shield Lois from all the hurts of the world. He'd sworn an oath to himself that, at the very least, he would never make her cry, unless they were tears of happiness. But now she stood there, just across the living room, speaking on the phone, wiping tears from her eyes as her voice cracked while she asked Sam Lane to come to Metropolis as soon as possible.

Heart aching with hurt for Lois, Clark went to her. He drew her into his arms and gently pulled her to the couch while she evaded the specifics of whatever Sam's questions were. Clark wasn't even trying to hear what Sam was saying. He didn't want to use any of his powers. But more importantly, Lois' phone call was bringing up some very important things for him to consider.

What would he tell Sam? How could he, for the second time, prove to his father-in-law that Superman was nothing more than an average Joe — Clark Kent, in a Spandex unitard and a cape? He didn't doubt Sam's ability to keep a secret. If he had, he never would have turned to the man back when he and Lois had thought themselves to be infertile.

What would he tell his own parents? How could he break their hearts by telling them that the son who'd fallen from the skies to mend their broken hearts so long ago was now dying? How could he rip apart the lives and hearts of two of the gentlest, most loving people on the planet? What words could he use, knowing none would lessen the blow?

And Dr. Klein? He'd been leading the man on for years that Clark Kent and Superman, two men the doctor had worked extraordinarily close with, were two separate people. Of course, Clark had deceived the entire world into believing the exact same thing, but he'd always felt badly about withholding the full truth from the man who was responsible for helping Clark maintain his health.

Then there was Jimmy and Perry, two of his closest friends in the world. What would he tell them? Sure, he could give them vague information about his condition, but they would want to visit him in the hospital, if it came down to that, and he didn't just die in the shower or something. How could he politely, but firmly, tell them that they could not come to visit? That he didn't want them to see him like that?

Clark's head was swimming and he felt sick to his stomach. He'd met a fellow traveler once, when he was in Nepal, whose view on life was that from the moment a person was born, they began to die, and that all of life was nothing more than borrowed

time. Clark had been appalled at the man's pessimism. But now the phrase "borrowed time" kept ringing in his head like a death knell. He could feel precious seconds slipping away from him, could feel Death peering over his shoulder, waiting to take him.

No! he thought violently. *I can't give up. I can't think this way. For Lois' sake, I can't think this way. I can't leave her last memories of and with me with me brooding over the inevitable. I know we've always lived our lives knowing that at any moment, my life could end — some criminal with a piece of Kryptonite or a rescue gone wrong that I can't get out of. But to wither away and die? I never thought it would come to this. I have to keep a brave face for Lois. She has enough to deal with right now, growing our son in her womb. I want her to have only happy memories of the two of us together, especially in our final days together. I want to believe her when she says that we'll find a way to save me, but even I, the one who can usually find the sunny side, can't even begin to imagine how that might come to pass.*

"Clark? Honey?"

"Huh?" Clark asked, snapping out of his thoughts.

"My father said he can get here in two days."

"Two days..." Clark mused.

"He broke a tooth and has to get it fixed tomorrow." She shrugged. "That's my family for you."

"It's okay, Lois," he said, trying to ease her annoyance with her father's priorities. "He doesn't know the reason why we're asking him to come. I can wait. Trust me."

She nuzzled herself into his chest even closer. "I'm scared, Clark."

He gently wrapped his arms around her even tighter than before. "I know. I am too."

"What are we going to do?" After her earlier bravado, it was almost comforting, in an odd way, that she was allowing herself to show her vulnerability.

"Whatever we can," he answered simply, because he had no other words to offer. "Whatever we can."

"Everyone, please, sit," Lois said as Jonathan poured drinks for himself and Martha.

Sam looked up from the cheese platter, a cube of sharp cheddar impaled by a toothpick between his fingers. A crease of concern rippled on his brow.

"What's going on?" he asked, gesturing for Ellen to take the chair before him while he seated himself on the edge of the coffee table.

Clark reflected, briefly, on how nice it was to see the two getting along. When he'd first met Lois, the word "war" hadn't been sufficient enough to describe their relationship. But ever since Superman had nearly died that one strange Christmas season, the Lanes had begun to mend the wounds they'd inflicted on each other, as well as the ones they'd caused their children.

Jonathan and Martha shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Clark and Lois had both spoken to them at length about letting Sam and Ellen in on the secret, the two of them having dropped everything to take a red-eye flight to Metropolis the day before, after Clark had told them about his health issues. Clark had wanted to fly them in himself, but Dr. Klein's warning about using his powers had rung in his ears and chilled him to his very soul. To use his powers, especially in some grand fashion, would put even more stress on his heart, which could very well be fatal.

"There are some things that we needed to talk to you about," Clark said, addressing Sam and Ellen from his place on the couch. He snaked his arm around Lois' waist for the support having her right next to him gave him.

"What kind of things?" Sam asked, sounding a bit concerned.

"Good and bad things," Lois said. "First...the good. We had our in-depth ultrasound the other day. Our son is completely

healthy."

"It's a boy?" Sam asked, eyes sparkling in delight. "That's wonderful news!"

"A girl would have been just as wonderful," Ellen put in, not bothering to hide the snark in her voice.

"I never said it wouldn't have been," Sam grumbled under his breath, but the exchange lacked the venom it had once carried, back when Clark had first met the divorced couple.

"A son! How fantastic, Clark," Jonathan said, beaming with pride for his grown boy. "Your mother and I are *thrilled*."

"Thank you," Clark said, dipping his head in acknowledgement.

"About time too," Ellen put it. "I always said you should have kids earlier, rather than later, while you still have the energy to keep up with them."

"Anyway," Lois said, steering the conversation back to where it needed to be, "we wanted you all to know. We're very excited."

"We're still working on names," Clark said, seeing the unspoken question on his mother's face. "But, once we figure it out, we'll let you know."

In the future, Clark thought to himself, his heart heavy in his chest. *A future I no longer have. Not without a miracle. And with this child — this half human, half Kryptonian miracle — on his way, I think I've used up my lifetime's quota of miracles.*

"And the bad news is..." Sam prompted as Clark brooded. "Are you high risk? Carrying multiples? What?"

"No," Lois said. "I'm fine. The baby is fine. And very much alone in there. But believe me, multiples would have been a blessing. Especially given...everything..." She gestured futilely. Neither Sam nor Ellen remembered that Clark's unique DNA had been a cause to fear that they would never have any children at all. Nor could had they ever known about the denial they'd been handed when they'd looked into adoption.

"It has nothing to do with our son," Clark said, covering for Lois when it appeared that she was at a loss for words. "It's...me." He dropped his gaze to the carpet. "I'm...I'm sick."

"Sick?" Ellen asked. "Sick how? You look well enough to me."

"Clark's..." Lois had to stop and take a deep breath before continuing.

"It's my heart," Clark said, stepping in when he saw his wife struggling. "It's basically destroyed. Without a transplant, I'll die."

Saying it so many times still hasn't made it any easier to get the words out, he mused.

"My God," Sam said, mouth agape. "Why...how...you're so young!" he stammered.

"It's a little complicated," Clark said, still not able to meet anyone's eyes.

"How complicated can it be?" Ellen asked. "My girlfriend Maribel's husband Joe had heart problems. He went on the transplant list and got a new heart. He's fine now. I think he's running a marathon this fall."

"There are...things...that make it more complicated for me," Clark repeated.

"You're young, you don't smoke or drink to excess, and you're a valued member of society," Sam cut in. "You should get on the list without any problems. Anybody like you would."

"Any *normal* person," Clark agreed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" his in-laws said almost completely in tandem.

"It means...that Clark and I have something to tell you," Lois said, putting a hand on Clark's back and rubbing soothing circles there. "Something big."

"Something...big?" Sam repeated, the furrow in his brow deepening by the second.

"Huge," Lois said.

"It's a dangerous secret," Jonathan put in. "Something that, if it got out, would destroy all of us, not just Clark."

"I see," Sam said, though it was clear that he didn't.

"It's something that *has* to stay just between us," Clark said, mentally pleading with his in-laws to understand the gravity of the situation.

"You can't even tell Lucy," Lois added. "She's not exactly the epitome of discretion, most of the time, at least."

"Well, for God's sake, spit it out!" Ellen encouraged, looking at her daughter.

"The thing is... I *can't* have a transplant," Clark said.

"Because my body... isn't compatible with that of a human being."

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Please, Mom, Dad, promise us, that no matter what, you'll never breathe a word of what Clark and I are about to tell you."

"Yes, yes," Ellen said dismissively waving her hand at the stipulations.

"I'm not compatible with humans," Clark repeated. "I can't get a transplant in the usual way. Because, the truth is, I've lied to you. Every day, I lie to the entire world. I'm *not* a human being. I'm from the planet Krypton. And, although I *am* Clark Kent, I masquerade as Superman. He's just... an extension of myself, a disguise I use in order to help people." He removed his glasses and set them aside, allowing them to — he hoped — see the familiar face of the alien superhero.

"That's not... it's..." Sam stammered.

"It *is*," Lois insisted. "*He is*."

"I can prove it," Clark said. He pointed to a candle in the middle of the coffee table. "Watch."

He'd known all along that he would have to prove his claim of being Superman. He'd thought long and hard about what he could safely do to show that he wasn't lying to them. He couldn't risk a spin change or flying, fearing that it would consume too much energy to do so, thereby putting unnecessary strain on his heart. Carefully, he sent a thin beam of his heat vision at the wick. For a moment, it smoked, then a bright flame burst into existence.

"That's ah..." Sam sputtered, seemingly unable to get anything else verbalized.

"I know," Clark said, nodding his head once in agreement.

"A parlor trick, no more than that," Ellen mumbled, as if trying to convince herself.

"And this?" Clark asked gently.

He picked up one of their steak knives, which he'd placed nearby in case Sam and Ellen had needed further persuasion. With a swift thrust, he brought the blade down on the bare flesh of his arm, point downward in an effort to stab himself. The sharpened steel struck his skin, buckled, bent, then finally snapped, leaving not so much as an indentation in his arm.

"That... is a little harder to explain," Ellen admitted. Clark could see that she knew the knife was very real. After all, it had come from the set Lois had owned before they'd gotten married and purchased a newer set of cutlery for themselves.

"Mom, it's true," Lois said in a gentle voice. "Clark wasn't born on Earth. He *is* Superman."

Ellen pinched the bridge of her nose, as if warding off a headache. "*Of course* you would marry an alien," she mumbled under her breath. Then, looking at Jonathan and Martha, she added, "Uh... no offense."

"Clark's DNA might not be human," Lois defended, "but he's more human than anyone else I've ever known."

"And you felt this wasn't something you should share with us?" Ellen accused, though wearily.

"Actually, you did know, once," Clark said. "Sam, you remember Misha?"

Sam nodded. "Sure. We haven't spoken in... I don't know... a year?"

"He had that Bummer-Be-Gone machine," Clark reminded him.

"Yeah..."

"Well, it worked. It hit all of you, when Lois and I were getting Dr. Mensa back under control. It took away your memory of knowing my... *our* secret."

"Uh... oh," Sam said, sounding as though he was struggling to bring that memory forward but failing.

"Trust us," Lois said, seeing his inner struggle.

"So... why now?" Ellen asked.

"Why are we telling you?" Lois asked. "Because we need your help."

"We need people we can trust," Clark added. "My doctors at S.T.A.R. Labs are working on trying to find an alternative to a transplant for me. I thought they might be able to use the help of another brilliant doctor as they work on saving my life. And, if they are able to figure something out, I need a surgeon that I can trust implicitly. An experienced nurse would be invaluable as well," he said, looking at Ellen.

"I'm not a cardiac surgeon though," Sam said gently.

"I know," Clark said, nodding. "But even so, I need people I can trust, if I ever make it into the operating room."

"Please," Martha said, pleadingly, "you saved my boy once. Please save him again."

Sam took a breath and exhaled it slowly, buying himself some time to think, Clark thought. "I'll do whatever I can," he finally said, his words an oath.

"Me too," Ellen put in.

Clark let out a breath he hadn't noticed he'd been holding inside. "Thank you. I'll get you in contact with Dr. Klein, first thing tomorrow."

As relieved as Clark was to hear that the two were on his side, it did nothing to uncoil the cold knot of fear that lay buried deep in his guts. And, judging from the way Lois was gripping his arm, he knew she felt the same way.

"Thank you," she said to her parents. "You don't know what this means to Clark... or to me."

"We're happy to help, Princess," Sam said, giving her an encouraging smile.

"So... I don't get it," Ellen said, sweeping her gaze back to Clark. "You're an alien. But you go around pretending to be a human."

"Perhaps it's best if Martha and I explain," Jonathan said, sitting forward in his seat a little.

Together, Clark's parents launched into the tale of how they'd found their miracle son, the answer to their prayers, late one warm May evening, out in a field when they'd seen what they'd thought was a meteor come crashing to the Earth. They spoke of how they'd raised him as their own, how they'd never questioned that he had been meant for them and them alone — a parentless child meant to mend the broken hearts of two childless farmers. Clark listened as they recounted how the three of them had come to terms with the fact that he was unlike anyone else, how his powers had manifested, and how he'd learned to control them. He added very little to the story, until it was time for him to reveal how he'd decided to take on the separate persona of Superman, in order to use his abilities to do some good, while protecting his privacy so that he could lead a normal life — something he'd desperately needed the moment he'd met and fallen in love with Lois.

For their part, Sam and Ellen were mostly quiet, asking only the occasional question to clarify what Clark and his parents were saying. When the tale was finally finished, the clock softly chimed. Lois' parents looked dumbstruck and even a little speechless. Ellen's mouth hung slack and Sam seemed to hardly

blink. Clark softly cleared his throat.

"I know it's a lot to process," he said as he steepled his fingers before him. "And I know that I probably came off as a liar... what with living two lives, deceiving the entire world."

"It makes sense," Sam said, sounding dazed but coming around slowly. "I can't say I would have done things differently. But the real question remains. What can we do to save you?"

Clark shook his head. "I wish I knew."

"Lois! Clark!" Dr. Klein greeted them both, in a tone that was a mixture of relief, terror, surprise, and exhaustion.

He stood clumsily and stumbled over to where they stood in the doorway of his office. He led them in and pulled two chairs over for them to sit on, before returning to his desk and dragging his stool around to sit before them.

"What brings you two in? Because I have to tell you, I'm up to my eyeballs here in research and testing. I'm not sure I can help you with whatever story you two are working on. But I'm sure Marty can."

"We know you're busy," Clark said.

"Marty?" Lois asked at the same time.

Dr. Klein nodded. "My nephew. He's fresh out of school. Just started here at the beginning of the month, but smart as a whip. Hang on a second. I'll call him for you."

"No!" Lois and Clark said with one voice.

Dr. Klein froze instantly, his hand outstretched toward his phone. He gave them a quizzical look. Clark stood, shut the door to the office, and sat down again.

"We need to talk," Lois said.

"I wish I could. Believe me. But I've been working day and night on... well, a project."

"For Superman," Clark filled in. "We know."

"Ah, I see he told you."

"Not exactly," Clark said, fidgeting.

"Not exactly? Look, I consider you guys friends, but I'm sure you're aware that Superman is counting on me to come up with something... some solution... to his situation as quickly as possible." The edge to the man's voice made him sound nearly hysterical from the stress Clark knew he must be feeling.

"We know all about his situation, and how dire it is," Lois said.

"That's why we've come," Clark said.

A timer buzzed. Dr. Klein held up one finger as he stood. Clark watched as he crossed the office and checked on something in a glass container, that Clark couldn't quite see from his angle. He was tempted to use his super abilities, but restrained himself. It was a constant struggle that he faced, to make the conscious decision *not* to use his powers. He was so used to using them on a whim — to heat his coffee, to blow out the cigarette of someone who insisted on lighting up in non-smoking areas, to read a file at super speed while at work. But most of all, he missed the sensation of flying, even just floating above the couch while watching television at night. That had always been his favorite ability, ever since it had manifested shortly after his eighteenth birthday.

"No. No, no, no, no, no," Dr. Klein muttered as he ran whatever test it was that he was doing. His body was in the way, preventing Clark from even being able to guess.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Dr. Klein huffed in annoyance before putting his back to the container. He sat heavily on his stool, pulled off his glasses, and rubbed his tired eyes.

"Another failure," he said, more for his own benefit than for Lois or Clark's.

"What happened?" Lois pressed. "Something you've been working on for Superman?"

"Unfortunately, yes," he admitted. "But so far, in the last

three days, nothing I've done has looked promising." He paused a moment, blinking. Then, as though he'd forgotten why they'd come to him, he spoke again. "I'm sorry. You were saying something? That you came for something?"

Clark nodded. "Anything I tell you is strictly confidential, isn't it?"

"Well, I'm not exactly your doctor or anything, but, sure. I'll keep anything you say in confidence."

"Good. Because, the truth is... there's something I haven't told you. Something that... is relevant, to the stuff you're working on for Superman."

"Oh?" he asked, perking up a little in sudden interest in the two reporters before him. "Does Superman know whatever this might be?"

Clark chuckled. "He does. Or, rather, *I* do."

He removed his glasses and undid the first few buttons on his dress shirt, just enough to pull the material apart to reveal the S shield and blue suit beneath. For a moment, no reaction registered on Dr. Klein's face, save for a look of utter confusion. Then, slowly, it seemed to dawn on the man. His demeanor changed. Confusion gave way to shock. Weariness melted away as his eyes widened and his mouth opened up into a small O.

"Are you telling me...?"

"I am, Dr. Klein. It's all true. He and I are one and the same."

For a long moment, Dr. Klein studied the face before him, saying nothing. Then, finally, "My, God. I mean, I always knew you were close... and it always felt like Lois was closer to Superman than a mere friend... but this..." His voice trailed off. He looked pointedly at Lois' belly after a moment. "But that would mean..."

Lois smiled warmly as her hand fluttered to her stomach. "That you were wrong."

"For the first time, I am thrilled to hear that," the doctor said, returning the smile.

"I'm sorry that I lied to you," Clark said, bring the conversation back on track. "But up until now, it was safer for you and me both for this secret to stay hidden." He put his glasses back on and began to button up his shirt once more. "It was never really relevant to the care you provided me either. Until now. If we're able to figure out some method of fixing my heart, we're going to need full disclosure with one another. I'll need to be checked into the hospital under my own name, or assume an alias, because it *cannot* be known that Superman is dying. Nor can Clark Kent's wife be allowed to be seen in Superman's room at random hours of the day, or waiting for word if Superman goes into surgery."

Dr. Klein nodded. "That would be bad."

"It would be *catastrophic*," Lois corrected him. "Not only for Clark, but for everyone he's close to. Even if the worst were to happen, if anyone made the connection that Clark is Superman, his loved ones would still be in peril. Especially his son."

Dr. Klein nodded and made a small grunt of agreement. "Good point. So... what do you need from me?"

"I'm glad you asked," Clark said, giving him a smile. "Here's what I'm thinking. You can tell me if what I've come up with isn't possible."

"Sounds fair."

"Well, assuming we find some way of repairing or replacing my heart, I'll need to check into the hospital as Clark. A team of nurses can be assigned to my room, whatever we need to do with that, depending on how long I'll need to be at the hospital. When it's time for the surgery, I've handpicked one of the doctors I'd like to be in the room, who can smuggle in Kryptonite, should we need it."

"And that is...?"

"My father-in-law. Doctor Sam Lane."

"The sports guy?" came the incredulous reply, looking at

Lois, rather than Clark. “He’s your father?”

Lois nodded. “He is. And he’s looking forward to working with you.”

“So do I. I mean, he’s a legend in the world of sports medicine. Even without the whole robotic replacement parts scandal from a few years back. Tell him to swing by tonight. I’ll gather all of Superman’s files together for him, so he can have a look at the history.”

“That sounds great,” Clark said, struck, still, by how calmly Dr. Klein had taken to the revelation that Clark and Superman were the same man. “So, can I ask? How are things looking so far? I realize, of course, that there hasn’t been too much time to test things.”

Dr. Klein shook his head, and all of his prior weariness seemed to settle back over him, like a thick black cloak. “Not well, I’m afraid. I’ve been testing — well, stressing — all of the usual fixes in what is a poor approximation of what your body undergoes any time you use your abilities. All have failed miserably within seconds. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. This isn’t your fault,” Clark assured him.

If it was possible, Dr. Klein’s mood darkened further. “I should have seen this coming,” he lamented.

“Hey,” Clark said, standing and touching the man on his shoulder. “No one could have known. I didn’t even suspect that anything was wrong, until the other day.”

“I’m your doctor,” Dr. Klein argued.

“And I am a complete biological anomaly,” Clark reminded him with a grin. “Normal isn’t normal for me. Even if we’d been looking for damage, chances are, we wouldn’t have found anything.”

“I suppose that’s true,” the doctor grudgingly agreed. “How are you feeling otherwise?”

“So far, since that one attack, I’ve been feeling okay. Like my usual self, to be honest. The worst part has been forcing myself to not use my powers.”

That, and the constant feeling like I have an axe hanging above my head, which could fall at any moment.

Days turned into weeks. Most of the time, Clark felt perfectly healthy. He went to work, he cooked meals, he made slow and careful love to Lois. But in the back of his mind, he was always aware of his situation. In the dead of the night, he would awaken, lay in bed, and think about his health. In those still, quiet hours, he could hear the sands of his life slipping between his fingers, knowing that all too soon, the last grain would fall.

This was one of those nights.

Clark lay in bed, the sheets around him cool as a night breeze blew in through the windows. He looked at the bedside clock — 4:09 am. Without warning, his sensitive hearing kicked into action. It was a police scanner. He listened for a moment, yearning to slip into his suit and dart out to help. A drive by shooting, he could hear. Four dead. Seven in critical condition. Several more with minor injuries.

He sighed. It sounded like the police and EMS had the situation completely under control. But he missed the action, the thrill of being there, in the thick of things, helping to save lives. He knew he should be trying to enjoy his time away from his superhero alter-ego. But he couldn’t. As much as he loved spending every waking moment with Lois, and being able to give her his undivided attention, he felt like an entire half of his soul was missing.

It wasn’t a vacation for him. It was torture.

After another moment, he gave a heavy sigh of regret and forced himself to sever the connection with the police scanner. Then he was getting up out of bed and throwing on a soft pair of sleep shorts and a sleeveless muscle t-shirt. Quiet as he could, he crept out of the bedroom and down the steps. He tried to watch

some television, but at that forsaken hour of the night, he found not much more than infomercials. He clicked the television off again and tossed the remote to the far side of the couch.

He stood and wandered the living room, committing the place to memory, though he already knew by heart every nook and cranny of the home he’d made with Lois. When he got to the desk, he grabbed a pad of paper and a pen, then headed out into their meager backyard, by way of the kitchen. His bare feet made only the barest slapping sounds on the kitchen’s freshly mopped tiles, and no sound at all on the closely cropped and bedewed grass. He sat down in one of the lawn chairs and looked up at the stars, though the lights of Metropolis made it difficult to see many of them.

He ached to be able to fly up into that void between the stars and Earth, to be away from the noise and confusion of the world. He yearned for the cold, silent space he’d always retreated to when he was feeling down, or overwhelmed, or wanted to physically be as alone as he felt. The stillness of that place had always been there, a reliable retreat which never failed helped him to order his thoughts or quiet his turbulent emotions.

With Lois in his life, he’d needed that refuge less and less. She was his rock, his shelter in the storm that was his life. In her arms, his fears and anxieties grew less. In her kisses, his aloneness disappeared. In her voice, his world grew still and ordered again.

But now, even Lois could not quell the terror within — that of facing his mortality.

He wondered, for a time, how Zara and Ching were faring back on New Krypton. Had their subjects taken well to the news that Ching, common born though he was, was their new ruler? Had the noble houses rebelled? When they had left Earth after Clark had defeated Nor, it had seemed like at least a portion of the nobility had come to accept and embrace that Clark had handed over his right to rule to Ching, and that Zara had been in love with the former lieutenant. And he wished, not for the first time, that he had a way to contact them, for he knew in his heart that his salvation lay with them. He had little to no hope that Sam and Dr. Klein could fabricate some Earthly fix for his heart.

After a time, he pulled his eyes from the night sky and stared blankly at the clean, unmarked sheet at the top of the pad. He picked up the pen, clicked it, then tapped the end against his jaw as he thought. Finally, with bold strokes, he began to write, the moonlight more than enough for his alien eyes to see by.

My Dear Son,

Let me start by saying that, though you are not yet born, I am already so proud of you, and I love you with my whole heart and soul. The day that I found out that you were on your way, I shed tears of happiness. It was, simply put, the greatest news I’d ever received in my entire life. One day, I hope you are able to understand just what a miracle you are — a child of two worlds, born of a love which has truly seemed to conquer all.

My greatest desire is to see you grow up — to watch you take your first breath, to hear your first laugh, to see your first smile. I want to see you learn to talk, to teach you how to read, to show you how to drive a car and see you off on your first date. I don’t know if that can or will happen, but I promise you, I will try. I can, at least, promise you that.

Even if I am still around as you grow older, I want to offer these words to you. I speak from experience. Trust me when I say that these are important things to remember.

Always be kind and helpful if you can. Even in small ways. You never know how much a person might need or appreciate the door that you hold open for them, or the listening ear that you lend. Even a smile can change a person’s day.

Do what makes you happy. Don’t become the CEO of a company just for the money if, in your heart, you’ll be happiest by being a school teacher. As cliché as it sounds, if you love what

you do, you'll never work a day in your life. And your passion will shine through, making whatever it is you've done be something of quality. I consider myself lucky, in that I have always enjoyed my work, especially at the Daily Planet.

Find the person who makes you happy. Don't ever settle for someone, just because they are there — you are worth far more than whatever you think you have to settle for. Find the one who completes your heart and soul, the person you can trust fully and be completely open and honest with. If you have any doubts about a person, chances are, they aren't right for you. You'll know when you find "the one."

Your family will always, always be there for you, no matter what. There may be times when you feel alone, that no one understands you, but your family will be there. Turn to them. Take strength from them. Know that they will always love you, fully and without reservation.

Remember, always, how very special you are. You are unique. Never let anyone make you feel inferior to them. But never forget that you are not superior to them either, regardless of what you may be able to do. If it turns out that you have inherited any of my abilities, please, stay humble. Powers do not make you better than anyone else. If anything, powers demand discipline and control, as well as a respect for those who live day to day without their benefit.

Be the kind of man who people respect, but who also feel comfortable to be around. Be friendly to everyone. You never know when you'll make a lifelong friend. Cherish those people and be there for them when they need you, even if they say they don't.

Have a love for life and learning. Nourish your inner child. Laugh deeply and often. Let the bad roll off your shoulders. Forgive people. Forgive yourself. Make mistakes and learn from them.

Most of all, know and remember that your mother and I love you. Before you were conceived, we wanted you and were willing to do anything to have you. As soon as we knew you were coming, we fell in love with you. For as long as we live, we will love you, we will be there for you, we will be proud of you. Greatness lies ahead of you. There is no doubt in my mind that you will attain it. You don't even need to don a disguise or a cape to do so. Just be the best man that you can be.

I love you, my son.

Dad

Clark finished the letter and read it over, satisfied with what he'd written. In his heart though, there was more that he wanted to say, but he was having a hard time verbalizing his emotions. It was difficult for him to envision his son growing up without him. He knew, of course, that the boy would have more love and support in his life than he would ever know what to do with. But a kid needed his father as much as he needed his mother and extended family. And Clark knew that it would be a miracle if his son ever got to know him, outside of stories and photographs.

Gently, he tore the paper from the pad and set it aside. Once again, he set his pen to the paper and crafted two more letters. The first he wrote to Perry, the second to Jimmy. It was his intention that they should never know that he was Superman, but, he also wanted to leave them with an explanation, in his own words, if they should ever stumble upon the truth somehow. Perry, at the very least, Clark could imagine putting the pieces together. In fact, there had been numerous occasions when the grizzled old editor had said something or given him some look which had suggested that he might suspect the truth. Of course, Clark had always feigned being completely oblivious to the man's cues, not wishing to blow his cover if Perry didn't actually suspect anything, and not wanting to confirm anything if the man did.

He set the letters aside, just as he had with the one he'd

written to his still nameless son. For a long while, he stared at the blank white paper of the pad, debating with himself. Then he began a fourth letter. In this one, he poured out his emotions to Lois, wanting to leave behind some tangible reminder of his love for her. Of the four letters, it was both the easiest and the hardest one for him to write. It was also the longest and most gut-wrenching for him. By the end, a few silver tears had raced down his cheeks, only for him to wipe them away before they could drip from his chin to stain the paper he was looking at.

Finished with his task and feeling emotionally drained, Clark left the backyard. Back through the house he went, stopping only to wipe his bare feet thoroughly before entering the house, then to rummage through the desk in the living room to find a few envelopes. He addressed them in his same neat printing, then sealed them tightly. He took them back into the bedroom and hid them in the back of his sock drawer, where he was certain Lois wouldn't find them until the time was right.

He stripped out of his sleep shorts and shirt, which had become damp from the night dew that had clung coolly to everything outside, then climbed back under the covers. Lois was curled in a nearly fetal position on her side of the bed. Clark couldn't help but to place a reverent kiss on her upturned and bare shoulder. She stirred sleepily and woke.

"Clark?" she asked in a sleep-fogged voice.

"Ssh. I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep," he whispered.

Lois forced herself to flip over so that she was now facing him. She yawned mightily and propped herself up on one elbow. Clark did the same, facing her, but he did not turn on any lights. Dawn would be lightening the sky soon enough, and the streetlights threw enough to see by in the otherwise dark room.

"Where have you been?" Lois asked.

"I couldn't sleep. I went downstairs for a while."

"I figured as much. Your skin feels cool though," she said, rubbing his muscular upper arm.

"I sat out back for a while. I just needed to be outside for a bit. It's a beautiful night," he explained, not wanting to get into the full details.

"You miss it — the late night patrols," Lois offered.

Clark nodded. "I do."

"I'm sorry. I know this is hard on you."

"It's just so frustrating," he confided. "I hear these cries for help and I can't answer them, even though I know I can be there in seconds and save lives."

"I know," she said, still rubbing his arm in an attempt to impart some comfort. "I know how it's tearing you apart. I would feel the same, in your shoes."

"I know. You're a lot like me, with your need to fix things, with your inability to be satisfied to sit on the sidelines. It's one of the many, *many* reasons why I love you."

"Funny, because it's one of the things that I love about *you*," she countered with a smile that morphed into a slight yawn.

"I just...I wonder. People are starting to talk. Superman hasn't been seen since the bridge collapse. There's been whispers...some people think he's abandoned us mere Earthlings. Like he did when he left for New Krypton. But at least then, he gave the world an explanation for his absence."

"So...you think he needs to make a public statement?" she asked, looking more alert now.

"I don't know," Clark admitted, shaking his head. "I've been thinking about it. But I'm not even sure what I could say, without it being a barefaced lie." He brushed a lock of her tousled hair back from her forehead.

Lois grabbed his hand before he could pull it back to his side of the bed. Gently, she kissed his open palm. Clark slid his eyes shut, savoring the sensation of her soft lips brushing across the sensitive skin of his hand. It was moments like these that allowed

him to forget, for a time, his troubles and all of the bad things in the world that he saw on a regular basis. Lois put his very soul at ease.

Too soon, the moment was over.

"You can't let people know you're sick," Lois said after a moment.

"No, I can't. Remember last time, when that virus hit me? The criminal underworld went ballistic. It took months before Superman and the police were able to get back up to speed and get everyone in jail where they belonged."

"I'd never seen you quite so driven before," Lois said, remembering. "It scared me, given how close you'd just been..." She looked unable to finish her statement.

"I know," he said gently. "The greater part of me says to remain silent on the issue, but I hate to leave people thinking that their hero has abandoned them."

He brushed his fingertips over the thin strap of the tank top Lois had fallen asleep in. Lois made no reply. He could see in her face that she had none to offer. Silence ruled the room, challenged and defied only by the night noises outside of their window — crickets, still chirping as the sky began to lighten into baby pinks and pale blues, a dog barking to be let back into his home, the squeal of tires as a couple of reckless drivers drag-raced somewhere in the far distance.

"Let me help you to relax," Lois said after a time, using Clark's own hand to slip the spaghetti strap over her shoulder and down over her arm as far as it would go.

"Mmm," was all Clark could reply, his thoughts about Superman's absence scattering like marbles.

A few more days passed. Clark felt fine each day when he awoke. Once, he dreamed that Dr. Klein had been mistaken in his prognosis. In that dream, the sense of relief he'd felt had been immeasurable. The crushing disappointment of reality when he'd awoken had been beyond words. He did his best to hide his continuing fears and sadness from Lois, and tried to focus only on those wonderful moments with her that he got to experience every day.

Each night he would check in with either Dr. Klein or Sam, hoping without any real hope that they might have some good news for him. Each time, he was told, in as gentle a manner as either man could muster, that every attempt so far to come up with a fix had failed. The only difference between failures was just how catastrophically it happened — two separate attempts had caused the pigs' hearts that the doctors were using in place of a human heart to literally explode.

Clark slipped beneath the bed sheets each night more discouraged than the previous night. The small sliver of optimism that he'd tried to hold on to and nourish vanished like a candle too suddenly snuffed out. And still, he nodded and played along whenever Lois talked about how her father must be getting close to finding a cure. He told himself that concealing his feelings was for the best. Lois had enough to deal with. She had the baby to worry about and he didn't want to put any undue stress on her — not while she was pregnant, not ever.

He reveled in his work, finding solace in the investigations which purged all other thoughts from his mind. And he celebrated — truly celebrated — when he and Lois finally brought to justice those who'd been responsible for the bridge collapse that had left so many dead and even more injured. His heart sang as he watched the men and women responsible led away in handcuffs, and he found it next to impossible to keep the grin off his face when the story broke in the evening edition of the Planet that same day.

At home, he enjoyed all of the little moments — the feel of settling down onto the couch to read a book, the way the blankets draped around him when he climbed into bed at night, the way

Lois' skin felt beneath his fingertips and lips, the taste of her kisses, the way that she smelled. When he thought Lois wasn't looking, he would pick up a picture frame and remember the events of that day it was taken. His favorites were of their wedding, but also the ones Jonathan and Martha had snapped of the two of them when they'd been together in Smallville the first time, when Jason Trask had been harassing Wayne Irig. That had been the first time Clark had ever seen Lois' guard quite that low, and when she'd allowed herself to cross the line between grudging work partner and true friend.

But always, the knowledge was there that at any moment, all of it could be yanked away by his faulty heart.

"Morning, CK," Jimmy said cheerfully as he rushed by with a box filled with bagels.

"Whoa! Slow down!" Clark said, standing from his desk. When his friend stopped, Clark grabbed two plain buttered bagels, one for himself and Lois.

"Those are for the meeting," Jimmy cautioned.

"So? We won't take any when the meeting starts," Clark said, grinning.

"Fine. Nice work on the bridge case, by the way. That's all I've been hearing about since the news broke yesterday. You and Lois are something else. I'm glad those people will be held responsible now."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

"So, you two pick any names for the baby yet?"

"Ah...not yet. We've...had a lot going on lately. Work and personal stuff."

"Everything's okay, right?" Jimmy asked worriedly.

"Yeah," Clark said, though it was mostly a lie. "We're okay. Just some family stuff that needs to be figured out, that's all."

"Where's Lois now?" Jimmy asked, casting a glance at her empty desk.

"Right here," Lois said, coming from the direction of the ladies' room. "My bladder is a trampoline today."

"Ah...oh," Jimmy said, blushing. For a moment, he looked lost, then decided that anywhere but between Lois and Clark's desks was a preferable alternative.

"I stole you a bagel. I thought our son might be hungry," Clark said, handing her one of the ones he'd taken.

"He is. Thanks." She bit into hers. "Oh, so good. He went to Little Manhattan, didn't he?"

Clark craned his neck to get a view of the box in Jimmy's hand as he weaved through the bullpen. "Yep."

"So...what's on our agenda for today?" Lois asked, sitting in her seat.

Clark shook his head. "Not sure. Perry hasn't assigned us anything. And all of our current stories are either waiting for print or on hold as we wait for interviews."

"Well, there's one we can try," Lois said after a few thoughtful minutes spent eating her bagel. She rummaged for one of the files. "Edward Silverton."

"The jewelry shop owner?"

Lois nodded. "Yeah, his shop was the one that was torched the other day."

"The arson, I remember," Clark said, nodding in turn. "Sounds better than sitting here, waiting for a story to fall out of the sky. You ready to go?"

"Yeah." She pushed herself out of her chair with a groan. Clark knew she'd had a rough night sleeping.

"You okay?" he asked, watching her as she collected her purse and made ready to go.

"I'm fine. Let's do this."

An hour later, they returned to the Planet, walking hand in hand together down the streets. It was a hot day, but not

blistering. If anything, the summer was one of the milder ones Clark had enjoyed since moving to the city. Clark stopped as they passed a street vendor selling snow cones, getting a blue raspberry one for Lois and a lemon-lime one for himself.

"Well, that was a bust," Lois said with a sigh as she dug into her ice with a plastic spoon.

"We'll try again tomorrow," Clark promised.

Help!

Clark heard the call even without his superior hearing.

Without thinking, he broke into a run, covering the last few feet to the corner of the sidewalk. That put him on the Daily Planet's block. And right in front of the building, he saw the cause for the cries for help. A school bus was laying on its side, T-boned by a tractor trailer. Inside the bus, Clark could hear the cries of pain and fear from the young kids inside. He guessed one of the local camps had been on some kind of field trip when the accident had happened.

He instinctually reached toward his necktie, his fingers brushing the silken knot before he remembered that he wasn't wearing the Superman disguise beneath his work clothes. He'd stopped wearing the blue after his initial heart attack, knowing that it would be easier to resist changing into the superhero if the costume wasn't easily accessible. Now, though, more than ever, he regretted not having it on his body. At that moment, his heart was a second thought — his real concern lay with the injured children in the bus.

He made the instantaneous decision to help.

Already, people had gathered around the crash site. Most were gawking at the wreckage. Some were on cell phones — Clark hoped they were speaking with 911. A select few were trying to help. Already, the driver of the tractor trailer had been pulled out of his vehicle, and someone had given him a rag of some kind to press to the wound on the side of his head. The rest of the helpers were trying to get the kids out of the bus, but the vehicle had landed on the door.

Leaving Lois behind, Clark quickened his pace — careful not to break into a flat out run. He reached the bus and went around to the back. The man who was trying to open the emergency exit stepped aside without Clark needing to say a word. Gambling on using a fraction of his strength, he forced the lever to move, getting the door to open. He used a little too much though, and the door separated from the vehicle to crash to the asphalt. No one even batted an eyelash, he noted with relief, let alone commented on the show of power.

Instead, people started clamoring into the bus, one by one, going in to aid those inside. Clark joined the effort, going inside. Blood, vomit, and other bodily secretions awaited. He ignored it all, finding the closest child he could aid. He found a wide-eyed and shaking little girl in the fourth row from the back. Softly, he called to her, but she was too much in shock to answer or even register that he was there. He picked her up and cradled her to his chest while he got her to safety. Then he was back into the thick of things on the bus, finding a slightly older boy with blood matting his sun bleached blonde hair. He, at least, went willingly with Clark.

By the time Clark was exiting the bus with a third child, a bespectacled and gangly pre-teen boy, the authorities had begun to arrive. Ambulances screeched to a stop, their sirens abruptly cutting off as the vehicles were thrown into park. Police cars started to flood the area as well, cops jumping out of the vehicles to cordon off the scene and appraise the situation almost before the squad cars stopped. More flocked to the bus, one tall Asian looking cop helping Clark dismount from the vehicle. Clark allowed the man to help, knowing that any normal man would.

"Sir, I have to ask you to step aside," the cop said, though not unkindly.

Clark nodded wordlessly and stepped away from the

accident. He quickly spied out where Lois was standing and went to join her. As he made his way to her, he glimpsed Jimmy jockeying for a better position as he continued to snap photos. Lois gave Clark an unreadable look when he reached her side.

"I *had* to," he whispered under his breath.

Lois sighed, her expression softening. "I know. Are you okay?"

"I feel fine," he reassured her.

It was true. He felt okay — he didn't feel like his heart was racing. If anything, he felt elated that, even without his powers, he'd been able to make a difference.

"Good," Lois said, taking his arm affectionately. "You did a good job, Clark."

"Thanks. I just wish I could have done more."

"You did more than anyone has the right to ask of you. Especially given your health."

Together, they watched the remainder of the rescue, with Clark only being satisfied once every adult and child had been helped out of the bus. Most appeared to have serious, but not life threatening, injuries. Some were treated on the spot for minor wounds, others were whisked immediately away by ambulance. When the last person was tended to, and the police began to tow away the vehicles to clear the street, Clark was finally content enough to leave.

"You write the story," he told Lois as they crossed the road and headed for the Daily Planet.

"Okay," she said, nodding, knowing he would never dare touch a story where he, Clark Kent, was involved. "You want to do a sidebar piece on the human interest aspect?"

Clark shook his head. "I wouldn't feel right about it."

Jimmy was already in the bullpen when they arrived. He didn't even stop to say hello as he ran past to drop his rolls of film off in the dark room. When he emerged later on, wiping his hands off on his gray plaid shirt, Lois had already finished her article. Clark sat across the way, working on a separate investigation.

"I'm going to run this by Perry," Lois announced as she stood up from her chair. She stretched her back awkwardly.

"Everything all right?" Clark asked, noting how she rubbed at her lower back as she stretched.

"I'm fine. I think your son is pressing on a nerve."

Clark nodded. Later that night, he promised himself that he would rub her back until any discomfort was a distant memory. He got up and went to check the fax machine, hoping that the police report he was waiting for had finally come in, only to find that it still hadn't.

"CK!" Jimmy said, as Clark watched Lois make her way through the newsroom.

"Hey, Jimmy. What's up?"

"I saw what you did at the accident. That was pretty incredible," he said in awe.

"Thanks," Clark said, giving his friend a smile.

"I'm serious! The way you pulled that door off. It was like...I dunno...like you were channeling Superman or something."

"It's crazy what the body can do in times of stress," Clark covered easily, shrugging. "I've heard it said that adrenaline can give you strength you never knew you had. Like a mother suddenly being able to lift a car to save her child."

"I've heard the same," Jimmy said, agreeing. "But to see it in action — that was something else. Anyway, I just wanted to say that I thought you did an incredible job. It does make me wonder though."

"Wonder?" Clark echoed, feeling a cold knot of dread begin to form in his stomach.

"About Superman. I mean, where is he? One day he's at every accident and emergency situation there is. Then, suddenly, *bam!* he's gone without a trace. I don't mean to be harsh. I

consider him a friend, and I know the two of you are close and all. But, the world could really use him.”

“Believe me, Jimmy, he’s got his reasons, I’m sure of that. And I know it’s got to be killing him to have to step back from his duties.”

“He’s coming back, right?” The slight anger in Jimmy’s voice turned to worry.

“He’s hoping he’ll be back in action as soon as possible,” Clark said with as much conviction as he could muster. He lightly clapped his friend on the shoulder.

Jimmy nodded, appeased. “Tell him that I hope whatever’s keeping him away clears up soon.”

“I will.”

“Oh, I, uh, had a question for you about the research you wanted me to run on...”

Clark didn’t hear the rest of what Jimmy was saying. His chest suddenly tightened and pain began to radiate in his arms. He went to sit down in his desk chair, missed the seat, and collapsed on the floor, his head smacking the tile with a heavy thud. Nausea rolled over him in a perfect copy of his first heart attack.

“CK? CK?” Jimmy called, panicked.

Clark tried to respond, but found himself unable.

“Lois!” Jimmy screamed when Clark didn’t respond.

“Someone! Help!”

Clark heard Lois come running, her heels clicking loudly against the floor as the newsroom came to an almost never before seen hush, like a movie placed on pause. She dropped to her knees and cradled his head against her, holding him when his pulse skyrocketed.

“Clark? Clark? Can you hear me?”

“I’ll call 911,” Jimmy said, finally coming around to rational thinking.

“No. I’ll drive him to the hospital,” Lois said, to Clark’s great relief. Neither one wanted paramedics to work on Clark and potentially discover his secret. “Call Dr. Klein. Tell him to meet me at Metropolis General.”

“Dr. Klein? But he’s not...” Jimmy began to argue.

“I know,” Lois snapped in fear and impatience. “Just do it, Jimmy.”

“Lois,” Clark called softly, as the pain began to recede by the slightest degree.

“Hey,” she said, soothing him, running a hand along his jaw line. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he said, still in pain, but now less so than a minute before. “We need to get to the hospital. *Now.*”

Dr. Klein’s face was grim as he stepped into the small hospital room where Clark had been ushered upon his arrival at Metropolis General. Clark was in the bed, dressed in nothing more than the hospital issued gowns he’d been handed by a particularly gruff nurse. The bed was at an incline, and flat, almost hard pillows cushioned Clark’s back and head. He was, at least, feeling better, now that his second heart attack was over.

On the ride to the hospital, he’d been in so much pain that his chest had felt ready to burst from the pressure. His pulse had skyrocketed and his vision had swum so badly that he hadn’t been able to bear keeping his eyes open. He’d thought, more than once, that the end had come for him — that his seriously damaged heart was finally going to give out on him and that Death would take him to whatever awaited in the great beyond.

Once at the hospital, he’d been whisked away, straight to Dr. Klein, who’d, thankfully, gotten there before Lois and Clark had arrived. By then, Clark’s pain had begun to lessen. But Dr. Klein hadn’t wasted a second. He’d summoned a nurse to get Clark a room and some gowns, then had run a battery of tests on him. Some, Clark had undergone before. Some were new. Again,

blood had needed to be drawn, so Clark had gritted his teeth and submitted himself to the ravaging effects of the small piece of Kryptonite that the doctor had smuggled out of the vaults at S.T.A.R. Labs. Already feeling ill, it had been all Clark could do to stay conscious. That blood draw had seemed to take a lifetime, as Dr. Klein filled several vials for the numerous tests he’d wanted to run.

The room Clark had been placed in had been specifically chosen for the amount of sunlight it would afford him, as well as the privacy it would give both Clark and his team of doctors. He’d been grateful for the doctor’s forethought on that. The warm, afternoon sunlight had done wonders for him as he’d been forced to lay in the uncomfortable hospital bed. The effects of the Kryptonite had faded soon after Lois had opened the blinds to their fullest.

Now, though, the results of his tests seemed to be in.

“How bad is it?” Clark asked as the man came in and shut the door behind them, to afford them some privacy.

Dr. Klein sat in the only empty chair in the room, which was next to the one Lois was in.

“It isn’t good, I’m afraid.”

“How bad?” Clark repeated.

Dr. Klein took a steadying breath. “Bad. That last attack did a number on what was left of the healthy heart tissue. I hate to say it, but, if you were a normal man, you wouldn’t be alive right now. I think your body is trying to heal the damage, but it can’t.”

“Oh, God,” Lois breathed.

“The good news,” Dr. Klein continued, as if any news could possibly alleviate the tension in the room, “is that none of your other organs seem to be affected. It appears that it’s only your heart.”

“You know,” Clark said weakly, still not feeling back to his normal self, “I could almost feel my body fighting back, both times.”

Dr. Klein nodded. “It’s possible that that is exactly what was happening. Your body is so completely unique. It’s possible that your powers — the part of you that normally is invulnerable — protected the rest of your body.”

“But why wouldn’t it protect his heart too?” Lois asked, and Clark had to give her credit for being as calm as she was.

Dr. Klein shook his head. “My guess — and that’s all I really have to go on, you understand — is that the damage to his heart somehow prevented that protection from being in place. Some permanent muscle death caused when he fought Deathstroke is the most likely scenario. Think of Clark’s body as a suit of armor with one spot of rust. Given enough time, that rust will weaken that one place until any sword or spear can break right through to wound the wearer.”

“And how bad is my ‘rust spot?’” Clark asked, dreading the answer, knowing it wasn’t good.

“Enough that I want you to stay in the hospital,” the doctor said, not meeting his eyes. “I think another one is coming. And if you aren’t here, I can’t be sure that you’ll survive it. At least if you’re here, we can do certain things to try to keep you alive while we continue to work on some fix for your heart.”

“And how close are you to that?” Lois asked, grabbing Clark’s hand and giving it a squeeze.

Dr. Klein bit his lower lip in nervousness. “No closer than we were weeks ago, I’m afraid. I’m trying to remain hopeful though.”

Lois’ face fell measurably. Clark squeezed her hand back.

“I’m sure something will come along,” Clark offered in as cheerful a voice as he could muster, though he really wasn’t hopeful at all.

“I have to get back and check on some of the tests I’ve been running. I want you to lay here and relax, got it?” the doctor told Clark. “No more...you know.” He gestured vaguely, unsure how

to express that he meant Clark's powers.

"I promise," Clark swore. "I'm too drained to do anything even if I wanted to."

"I'll be back later to check on you," the doctor promised. "If you need anything, just buzz. I've hand-selected your care team. All have worked with celebrity patients before, so they know the drill with keeping things as quiet as possible that you're here. Uh, the Clark you, I mean. I know you wanted that to stay private."

"I do," Clark confirmed. "The Dirt Digger or Inquisitor would have a field day if they knew. Just look at the coverage and dirt they tried to find during our wedding." He shook his head. "Thanks for the added secrecy, doc. I really appreciate it."

"Any time," Dr. Klein said with a genuine smile. He stood and touched Clark's shoulder in a comforting way. "I'll be back."

Then he was gone, leaving Lois and Clark alone in the sudden silence left in the wake of his departure.

"I'm so sorry, Lois," Clark finally said, after a couple of minutes spent looking out between the slats of his window shades. "I never meant for this to happen."

Lois shook her head. "No, Clark. I've already told you not to apologize. You helped save the lives of children today."

"And put my own life at risk."

"Which you've been doing time and again, ever since I met you."

"That's not the same," he argued. "I wasn't...in the position that I am now."

"No, but any time you flashed around in the cape, you never knew who might be around with a certain green rock," she stubbornly pointed out.

"That's different," he repeated, staunch in his viewpoint. "All of those times..." he gestured weakly, "I was taking a risk, sure. But I never had such an...almost guarantee...that I'd putting my life on the line. This time, I did. I knew the risks. I knew that there was a good chance that something like this would happen."

"And you did it anyway." It was a statement of fact, not a question.

"I did it anyway."

"Because you have a tender heart, Clark. Don't you see? I wouldn't have wanted you to do anything differently today. Because I know that if you hadn't lent your strength today, it would have eaten you alive, knowing that you could have helped and didn't."

Clark hung his head until his chin rested on his chest. "I know," he said in a near whisper. "But I should have put you and the baby first. I can't just blindly put my life on the line like I did. Not when it's a gamble that I'm almost guaranteed to lose. I didn't even stop to consider what would happen if I died in the rescue effort. I *should* have. That's what bothers me the most. What kind of man puts his own, selfish needs ahead of his family's?"

"A man with a heart as big as they come," Lois said soothingly. "A man who puts others...*all* others above himself. A man who will one day be a shining example to his son of what it means to be selfless, giving, and an asset to society."

"If I live that long."

"You will." Clark could hear all of her conviction in those two simple words.

"I hope."

"You will."

Clark smiled at his wife. "You never give up, do you?"

"Never."

"Good," he said with a grin. "Because that's just what I need right about now."

"How about something to drink?" Lois offered as she scanned the room for a cup.

She spied a pink plastic cup and matching pitcher. She stood, arched her back, retrieved the pitcher and cup, and brought it to

the bedside table. Clark nodded, so she slipped out the door, only to return minutes later with the pitcher full to the brim with ice chips and water. She poured out a little into the cup, stuck a straw in it, and held it up to Clark's lips. He drank deeply and gratefully. When he was finished, she refilled the cup. He shook his head, done for the moment, so Lois put it down.

"Thank you," he said in a low voice.

"You look exhausted," Lois observed. "Why don't you close your eyes for a little while?"

"What about you?"

"I'll call your parents and let them know what's going on. I've also got my stakeout bag in the trunk of the car, so I might go change into something more comfortable." She stood and wandered toward the door.

"Sounds good," Clark said. "But later, we need to talk about a couple of things, okay?"

"Things?" She stopped and turned back.

"Just some things I want you to know...just in case," Clark said, waving her off. "Go, get yourself comfortable. I'm not going anywhere right now."

"Okay," she relented after a moment of hanging out in the doorway, looking back at him.

When she was gone, the room seemed to shrink down on Clark like a lonely, oppressive cell.

Or maybe even a grave, he thought with a shudder.

He pulled the blankets up higher, in an effort to make himself feel more comfortable, now that the sunlight was fading as the afternoon wore away into evening. But everything was wrong. The bed was too stiff and unyielding — he missed the softness of the mattress he and Lois had picked out shortly before they'd been wed. The sounds were too hushed, too sterile — he missed the sounds of their townhouse — the various creaks as the house settled, the crickets in their small patch of lawn, the light chimes of the living room clock, Lois' soft breathing against his neck as they lay together in bed or snuggled on the couch. The smells were too astringent, stinging his sensitive nose, even without trying to employ his powers, and they made his eyes water from time to time — he missed the lavender and rose scents of his home in the various candles and air fresheners that were strewn throughout the place, the sharp and comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee coming from their kitchen, even the acrid smell of whatever Lois had managed to burn for dinner, despite his patient guidance and lessons from Martha whenever she was in town.

Once, long ago, Clark had reveled in silence, often fleeing to the space between the Earth and the stars in order to have some peace and quiet, as much as it had been a refuge for him, a place to get away from life in general and just contemplate how different he was from everyone else. He'd looked forward to those still, stolen moments, away from the hustle and bustle of the world, where even his super hearing couldn't pick up on the cries for help, the sirens of emergency vehicles, and the general chaos of the masses. But now, left alone in a quiet white room, Clark missed the pulse of the city, though he'd been in the hospital not even three full hours.

He dozed fitfully, sliding into sleep only to jerk back into wakefulness each time. He tried to stay awake, but found that impossible as well. It was only when Lois returned that Clark's racing mind finally calmed enough to grant him the rest that he so desperately needed. But in his dreams, he was once again at the scene of the accident. Only this time, when he tried to help, his strength failed him along with his heart, leaving him dying and the kids on the bus dead.

He awoke with a start, a scream in his throat that he had to swallow back down before it could emerge and roll off his lips. Lois was there immediately upon seeing his movement, her warm hand on his brow, pushing back his sweaty hair.

"Hey, it's okay," she whispered in his ear. "I'm here."

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Bad dream?" Lois asked.

He nodded, slowly, getting his bearings. Seeing the bland white walls and feeling the monitoring wires on his body brought reality crushing back to him.

"I'm okay," he said after a moment, licking his dry lips.

"More water?"

"Please."

Again, Lois held the cup to his mouth, allowing him to suck down as much water as he wished through the use of the straw. Clark gulped the liquid down, feeling like a man who'd been left out in the desert for too long. He finished the water in record time, then another full cup almost as quickly.

"I talked to your parents," Lois said as Clark drank. "They're working on getting a flight out. They're going to call me when they know more."

"Good," Clark said, leaning tiredly back into the pillows. He adjusted the angle of the bed with the controls on the side rails, sitting up further.

"Jimmy and Perry called to find out how you're doing. I told them you're feeling better than you were, but are being held for observation. It should buy us a little time before they start asking questions. Lucy is stuck in Florida at the moment. Her latest beau maxed out her credit cards and drained her checking account. She's trying to get it all sorted out, but it's going to take some time. She said she hopes you get better soon, and that she's sorry she can't be here now."

They had been forced to divulge a least part of Clark's condition to Lois' sister. Clark hadn't wanted Lois to be stuck trying to explain things to Lucy if and when things went badly. All she knew was that Clark needed a transplant, but they had kept it a secret how hopeless it was that he would receive one.

"Thanks," Clark said, nodding. "Did you talk to your dad too?"

Lois nodded. "He sounded half asleep on the phone. He's been working around the clock on this."

"I know. And I appreciate it. You'll tell him that for me, right? Just in case?"

"I will."

Clark closed his eyes for a moment before speaking again.

"Lois?"

"Yeah?"

"There are some things I wanted to discuss with you. Things I need you to know, just in case the worst happens. I want to believe that Dr. Klein and your father will find a way to save me, but I can't bank on it."

"Clark," Lois said, fear clinging to the edges of her words.

"Lois, we have to be realistic here. I need to make sure that everything is in order. Okay?"

"Okay." One simple word conveyed all of her trust in him.

He nodded in acknowledgement. "First, I guess, if the worst does happen, there are some letters in the back of my sock drawer. For you, for our son, for Perry and Jimmy. Give the envelope for our son to him when he's old enough to understand. Yours is for after I die, if that happens. The ones for Perry and Jimmy — they are an explanation, of everything. Of who I really am, of why I never told them. Don't give them the letters unless they make the connection between me and Superman though. I guess part of me doesn't want to shatter the illusion of the hero for them. But if they do start to make the connection, then give them the letters. I thought it might be best if the explanation came straight from me. That maybe, somehow, it might make them understand better."

"I promise not to give them the letters," Lois assured him.

"On my laptop, you'll find two sketched out articles, CKObit and SMObit. Clark Kent's obituary and Superman's. I didn't want you to have to worry about what to tell people."

"That's a little morbid, Clark," Lois said, trying to joke, trying to hide the fear in her voice.

Clark could hear it lurking there, however. "I didn't write them just for this," he confided. "I wrote them after that incident with the regenerated villains, when Clyde Barrow shot and 'killed' me in front of a roomful of witnesses and I had to play dead until I could find a way to have a miraculous resurrection. I knew that eventually some kind of similar scenario might creep up again, even if it was because my Kryptonian biology kept me alive longer than a normal person, and that I might have to fake my own death. All I did was recently update it to reflect more recent developments in my life, even if someone else needs to fill in the specific details."

He reached out toward Lois' stomach, but she was too far for him to be able to touch her without straining. She scooted closer to him, so that he could comfortably rest his palm above where his son was busy growing.

"And," he added with a smile, "one of those same recent developments needs a name."

Lois laughed, a sound more precious to Clark than any amount of gold, silver, or jewels.

"I guess that's true," she said as her laugh tapered off. "With everything that's been happening, I haven't really thought about it too much."

"But you *have* thought a little about it."

"Yes."

Clark grinned. "Good."

"I was thinking, even before all of this, about naming the baby Clark, after you."

He shook his head. "I'd rather not. Eventually this little boy *will* know about his dad's other job. That's going to be hard enough on him, wanting to measure up and all, I'm sure. Add to that a shared name, and this poor kid might have a complex of some sort." He said it in a joking way, though he was serious. He'd been thinking about it ever since they had first started to think about children and Lois had casually mentioned that the world needed another Clark Kent.

"I guess that's a good point," Lois said in a thoughtful manner. "What about Charles?"

"As in Charlie King? My alias at the Metro Club when the Toasters were terrorizing Metropolis?"

Lois shuddered, perhaps at the thought of Toni Taylor. "Michael?"

"I like it," Clark said. "How about Julian?"

Lois made a face.

"Not a fan, I see," Clark laughed. "John?"

"It's kind of plain. Ferguson?"

"God, no!" Clark laughed.

"It was my great uncle's middle name."

"It's nerdy," Clark scoffed.

And so the next few hours passed, as they both offered names. Some were shot down immediately, some wound up on a 'definite' list, some were jotted down on a 'revisit' list. Some names sounded good until they said it aloud a few times, and some had rather unfortunate initials. Throughout the discussion, Clark found that he was enjoying himself immensely, forgetting, for a time, his immediate troubles. And for just a moment, he found that he could almost picture a future in which he lived to see his son born.

They were still laughing over the last name that Lois had suggested when Dr. Klein returned, a newspaper tucked under his arm. Clark's laughter broke off once he realized that his friend was once again in the room.

"Sounds like you two have been having some fun," the doctor said with a smile of approval. "That's good. There's no medicine better than laughter."

"If only it was that easy," Clark said.

Dr. Klein nodded. "If only."

"Any news?" Lois prodded.

The doctor sighed. "Not yet. But we're getting a little closer. The last series of experiments lasted a few minutes instead of seconds when put under a fraction of the stress Clark's body usually experiences on a normal day. I just wish our success, and I use the term lightly, was moving along faster. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Clark said. He peered at the paper sticking out from beneath his friend's arm. "Is that the Planet?"

"It is. I thought you might be interested in it." He handed Clark the newspaper. "Check out the front page. But first, let me get a look at your vitals."

Clark nodded and allowed the man to check his heart, his lungs, the amount of urine in the bag attached to his catheter, and the printouts from the assortment of machines that had been monitoring him. Dr. Klein made some notes on the chart hanging from the foot of the bed, mumbling to himself, in such a way that Clark didn't even want to try to decipher the words. Then the man was off again, breezing back out of the room, leaving Lois and Clark both to marvel at his energy level.

It was only in the wake of Dr. Klein's absence that Clark unfolded the paper and shook his head in dismay as he read the headline.

**HERO REPORTER ASSISTS AT SCHOOL BUS CRASH;
SUPERMAN STILL MYSTERIOUSLY ABSENT**

And there, beneath the bold, black ink of the headline, pictures of Clark. In one, he was getting the emergency exit open — Clark knew it had been taken a heartbeat before the door had come off in his hands. In the next picture, Clark was emerging from the destroyed vehicle with a little girl cradled to his chest — the first of the children he'd gotten to safety. He groaned. He'd known, of course, that Jimmy had been at the scene, snapping away with his camera. But he hadn't wanted any kind of recognition for his efforts. Superman was the hero. Clark was the normal and completely unremarkable man.

"Oh boy," he said, handing the paper to Lois so that she too could see.

"I'm sorry, Clark. I should have thought to mention it to Perry that you wouldn't want any recognition for that. But you know, it's not a bad thing, letting people see a 'normal' man lending a hand. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need people to have good examples of their own potential to do good."

"I'm not against that," Clark said with a shrug. "I just never wanted it to be me that provided the example, that's all."

Lois had been sitting on Clark's bed before Dr. Klein had needed to check his vital signs. She had scooted over and out of the way to give the doctor the space he needed. Now, she reclaimed her spot, snuggling up to her husband as much as she could. Clark luxuriated in the closeness, as he always did. It calmed him, made him feel that, for the moment at least, everything was okay, despite the fact that he was in the hospital recovering from a second massive heart attack.

It almost made him forget that he was a ticking time bomb.

He wrapped her in his arms, as best he could with the wires that were attached to him. She put her head on his shoulder and snuggled even closer. He breathed deeply, inhaling the unique scent of her. He desperately wanted to listen to her heartbeat, but was too terrified to attempt even so small a power as his super hearing.

Together, they read the paper, Clark shaking his head at the article centering on the bus crash and the part he'd played in the rescue. Clark was tempted to fashion a response, but didn't quite feel up to it at the moment. Perhaps he would in the morning. They read the Op Ed piece, a plea to Superman to return to the citizens of Metropolis, and indeed, the entire world. That too, Clark felt might warrant a response from the man in blue, but he didn't want to tackle that either just yet. What could he say,

anyway?

Beyond the walls of the hospital, the night rolled on. A storm broke, a wild and wet mess of rain, lightning, and thunder so loud that it rattled the glass panes of his window. It barely registered in Clark's mind though. He was focused on his wife. That was all that mattered to him.

"You want to do the crossword puzzle?" he asked around midnight.

"You should be resting, honey," Lois said, running her hand through the front of his hair.

"I will," he said. "Just not yet. I'm finally feeling like I've got a little energy back."

Lois studied him for a long minute before nodding and flipping the pages to get to the crossword puzzle toward the back. Then she got up, rummaged around in her purse, and finally emerged with a pen, holding it aloft victoriously. She tested it on the corner of the page, making a purple scribble where she raked it across the paper. She looked at it in a funny way. Clark knew she must have accidentally picked the pen up somewhere. There was no way that professional reporter Lois Lane carried a pen with purple ink in her purse.

After that, she returned to his more than willing embrace. Clark let her take charge of holding the paper and pen. He wasn't in a great position to write down the answers.

"One down," he said as he began to skim the clues. "Reddish color. Six letters. Maroon."

"Making one across matrix," Lois added.

"Nice one," Clark commented, smiling over at her.

"Thanks. You too."

Together, they quickly filled in more answers, each of them acknowledging the other's correct answers with a verbal word of approval, a smile, or a kiss. They were nearing the end, with only seven clues that hadn't been solved, when Clark's next heart attack hit. Panicked, Lois hit the call button to summon help.

Dr. Klein must have been right in the vicinity. Like a ninja, he appeared seemingly out of thin air. He checked Clark's vitals and his face immediately fell. He reached out and smashed the palm of his hand against a small, square red button which was set into the wall, calling a code blue for cardiac arrest.

Lois sat alone in the room, processing everything that had happened. Next to her, on the bedside table, the paper and unfinished crossword puzzle lay forgotten. The pen had fallen to the floor and been kicked away by one of several rushing feet. Where it had gone after that, Lois wasn't sure. Perhaps it had spun away and come to rest under the baseboard heating. She didn't know and didn't care.

Looking back, everything had happened so fast. One moment, Clark had been fine. He'd been cuddling her close and laughing.

"Thirty-seven across," he'd announced proudly, kissing the back of her head. "Cantonese."

She'd filled in the squares in question and had been about to turn and place a kiss on his lips when Clark's entire demeanor had changed. She'd known, without a question, exactly what was happening. As Dr. Klein had predicted, Clark had been having another massive heart attack. But this time it was different. He'd lost the ability to speak. He'd been gasping for air, almost clawing at his neck before he'd become completely unresponsive in any way. But it wasn't until Dr. Klein had called a code on Clark that the icy feeling of dread had flooded her body and raced down her spine, chilling her to her very core.

Dazed, she'd tucked herself into the furthest corner of the room, knowing that even half a second where a nurse might have to guide her out of the way could make a difference in the outcome as they'd worked on Clark. Her desire to give Clark his best chance at survival had outshone her desire to be right there

next to him, holding his hand until the heart attack was over.

True panic had set in, however, when she heard the monitor that was tracking his heart rate become a steady *beeeeeep!* as Clark had flat-lined.

She vaguely remembered herself crying, tears washing over her mascara and leaving dirty black trails down over her cheeks. She thought she might have screamed. She was certain that a steady stream of “Clark, no! Come back to me,” had passed her lips. All she remembered clearly was the stark, paralyzing terror that had gripped her. She hadn't even been aware when Marty, Dr. Klein's nephew, had rushed into the room and gently guided her out into the waiting area, only to disappear once more, telling her that someone would come get her once they knew more about what was going on with Clark.

Dr. Klein had been the one to come to her, what felt like an eternity later. She could tell, just from one quick glance at him, that things were not good. He'd seemed stooped and defeated as he'd made his way to her, looking far older than she'd ever seen him look before. He'd taken the seat next to her in the waiting area but hadn't met her eyes the entire time they'd spoken.

By the end, Lois had had fresh mascara tracks running over her face.

Now she sat in silence, staring blankly across the room. *Numb*. That was the only word that could adequately describe how she felt. *Numb and hollow*.

“Lois?” Sam Lane called softly as he gently knocked on the doorframe.

“Huh?” The sound had pulled Lois out of her near trance. It had nearly startled her, but she refused to let that show. “Oh. Daddy.”

“And me,” Ellen said in a hushed voice as she peeked her head around Sam.

“Mom.”

“We came as soon as we heard,” Sam said, crossing to kneel at his daughter's side. “Are you okay?”

“I don't know,” Lois said honestly, with a resigned shake of her head. “It's like I'm in a nightmare. I keep waiting and wondering when I'll finally wake up to find Clark safe and sound next to me.”

“I wish it was,” Sam agreed, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to do now,” Lois confessed. “There's nothing I can do here. There's nothing for me at home.”

“First things first. You have to take care of yourself and your baby.”

“But Clark...”

“Can wait,” Ellen said softly, cutting Lois off. “There's nothing you can do for him.”

“There has to be *something*,” Lois insisted. “I can't just leave him here. Not the way he is. Not now.”

“Lois,” Sam said in a low, gentle tone.

“I *can't*,” she repeated. “I *won't*.”

“He would want you to take care of yourself and your son,” Ellen tried, in an obvious attempt to reason with her daughter.

“I know,” Lois sighed, feeling defeated. “But what I know and what I feel are two very different things right now.”

Sam nodded sympathetically. “You know that you'll need to make some decisions, and soon.”

“I know,” she said, barely nodding, still staring blankly ahead, feeling more dead than alive. “I just don't have the heart to do it tonight.”

“It's late,” Sam replied in a tone of agreement. “And you need to rest.”

“Dr. Klein said I can stay here. The armchair pulls out into a bed.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea?”

“It's the *only* idea,” Lois said forcefully, wanting the conversation to be over. “I'm not leaving my husband.”

Ellen sighed audibly. “You always were a stubborn child. Oh well. What can we do?”

“There's not much to be done. I've already called Clark's parents. They're still working on getting a flight to Metropolis. They said they might be able to get on one of the red-eyes if they fly stand-by.” She shook her head, as if it would clear her thoughts. “That was the hardest phone call I've ever had to make in my life. To call my husband's parents and tell them that their son is on life support. Please, Daddy, tell me that you're getting closer to a cure for Clark.”

Sam lowered his eyes to study the white and grey flecked tile floor. “I wish I could.”

Lois made a half strangled groan that reminded her of a dying cat.

“We're doing everything humanly possible,” he tried to reassure her, but to no avail.

“Daddy?” Lois asked suddenly, pulling her gaze from Clark, who lay silent in his bed.

“Yeah, Princess?”

“Do you think...if I talked to Clark...that he could hear me?”

“I like to think so,” Sam said, though his slight smile was sad. “I've always thought that patients in comas or on life support could still hear the voices of their friends and family. And I've always thought that it helps them fight, even return, sometimes.”

“Thanks,” Lois said, managing a half smile for her father.

“Anyway, I should get back to my research,” Sam said, straightening up and standing. He rubbed his knees once he was up, as if to work a kink out of them. “Promise me that you'll get some rest?”

“I will,” Lois promised.

“I can stay for a while, if you'd like,” Ellen offered.

But Lois shook her head. “Thanks, but, for now, I really just want to be alone with Clark.”

Ellen smiled sadly. “You always did have to handle things on your own. I guess that's mostly my fault.” To her credit, however, she rose from the chair she was sitting on and followed Sam out the door, leaving Lois once more alone.

“Oh, Clark,” she sighed.

Finally finding some strength, she pushed one of the hard wooden chairs right up to his bedside. For a long moment, all she did was silently look at him. He'd always been so strong, so imposing, so full of life, so passionate. Even when he'd first arrived at the Planet, and Lois had done everything in her power to get him to leave her alone, she'd noticed those features about him. He'd looked tall and well built — she had seen just *how* well built when she'd gone to pick him up at his shabby hotel room that first day they'd been on assignment together.

Now though, he seemed like a completely different man. Though he'd only been hooked up to the life support machines that were breathing for him and circulating his blood for him — bypassing his now completely useless heart muscles — for only an hour or two, he already appeared so small and frail to her eyes. His skin tone had become ashen — gone was the normal tanned and rosy glow that seemed to cling to him year round. He seemed shrunken into himself — a shell of the man he usually was. For all of his muscles and well-toned body, he appeared almost childishly small nestled in amongst pillows, blankets, tubing, and wiring.

Lois followed the various wires that led from the numerous contraptions that were strapped to her husband's body to the different machines that were keeping him alive. She already hated those machines, despite the fact that she loved them for keeping Clark with her. She watched the monitors that corresponded with each machine and each bodily function they were currently providing for Clark. Though Dr. Klein had shown her, briefly, what each of the lines and numbers meant, she could only remember a few of them. She felt lost, not knowing if the

numbers she was seeing now were good or bad.

No one has rushed in here and no alarms have sounded, she thought to herself. Therefore, everything must be okay. Clark is okay. Except he's not. He needs a miracle and there's nothing I can do to help ensure that he gets one.

"Clark," she said again in a hushed whisper of a voice. "Clark? Can you hear me? Honey, it's me. It's Lois. I'm right here, by your side, just like always."

She nervously touched his hand, afraid to cause damage, as though he were a fragile figurine made of the thinnest glass. The lack of response from him unnerved her. She was just so used to seeing him smile or feel him grab her hand in reply. To have him lay there, motionless and completely unresponsive to her gave her a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"You can fight this, Clark," she told him. "Every day, you fight for those who can't fight for themselves, no matter which suit you're wearing. For years, you fought for us...for me. Now I need you to fight for your life. I know you can. You're the strongest man I know, and I'm not talking about your ability to bench press a rocket. Please, Clark. We're all working as hard and as fast as we can. Give us the time that we need."

The only response was the steady, rhythmic beeping of the machines monitoring his heart and the whooshing of the one that was breathing for him. But that seemed somehow more uncomfortable than if the room had been dead silent. She began to talk again in an effort to fill the void, though she dearly could have used some sleep.

"You have to fight," she repeated. "If not for me, for your son. He needs you Clark. I need you. I can't do this alone. Please, don't leave me. I love you."

She knew Clark felt the same. He'd never even needed to say the words, though he always had. It had always shone through in the way he'd looked at her, the way he'd treated her, the special smile that he reserved only for her. But in that moment, Lois would have killed to hear him tell her that he loved her.

She continued to talk to him, stroking his hand or his cheek as she did so. For a time, she read to him from the newspaper Dr. Klein had left with them earlier. Then she moved on to sharing memories of their life together so far. Some even had her giggling softly as she recalled some of the more absurd things they'd done and seen. But eventually, she succumbed to the need for sleep.

She woke only a few short hours later, scrunched up in a little ball in the armchair where she'd relocated herself once the adrenaline rush had worn off and exhaustion had set in. She hadn't even bothered to pull the chair out into the bed it was capable of becoming. Waking, however, she regretted the decision. She felt stiff and achy in a way that her pregnancy only exacerbated. She felt grubby and in need of a shower and a fresh set of clothing. But to do that, she would need to go home.

"I need to leave for a bit," she told Clark, her stomach growling like a famished beast. "Keep fighting, okay? I love you."

She felt in desperate need of reminding him to keep fighting, and that she loved him, every time she spoke. Perhaps if he heard it enough, it would give him the strength that he so urgently needed. She leaned over his bed and kissed him gently on the forehead, careful to maneuver around and utterly avoid the wires that were attached to him.

"I have to tell Perry and Jimmy," she added in a quiet voice as she stroked his brow. "They need to know. I'll keep them away from the hospital. I know you wouldn't want them to see you like this. Especially if they ever find out the whole truth. I'll be back before you know it. I promise."

She had to leave then, before it became too painful and difficult to leave him. Once she left the room, it was almost as if her mind went to autopilot mode. She barely remembered the drive home, or showering, or dressing in clean clothing. She

drove to the Planet, oblivious to all of the normal things that usually angered her as a driver. Walking into the bullpen, she snapped out of her trance-like state just long enough to deliver the crushing news to Perry and Jimmy. She answered their questions as best she could, being as vague as she could about the more specific details, and staving off their offers to hold vigil with her in Clark's room, stating that, for now, the hospital was only permitting immediate family to visit. Then she was back at the hospital, having eaten something somewhere along the lines, though she couldn't remember what she'd had or when she'd eaten it.

"Clark, sweetie, I'm back," she told him as soon as she reentered his room.

She breezed over to his side and kissed his brow again, before immediately checking his vital signs as they appeared on the monitors. Everything looked much the same as before she'd left, only a couple of hours before. Satisfied, she sat down and sipped from her cup of coffee. That had been the hardest thing for her about being pregnant so far — having to cut severely back on the amount of caffeine she ingested every day. But now, she felt, she truly deserved the strong drink.

"I told Perry and Jimmy what's going on," she informed Clark's unconscious form. "They're really upset. Jimmy had tears in his eyes. And Perry...I've never seen him look quite that devastated before, even when we all thought you were dead from that shooting. At least, then, we all knew you'd given your life to save another. What's happening now...it's so much more unfair. Anyway, I managed to hold them off for now. They weren't happy about it, but I think they understand. Your folks should be flying in later today. They said that someone overheard them talking to one of the ticket sellers at the airport while they were waiting on standby. The couple offered to switch with them so that your parents can have a definite flight out, and the couple will wait on standby instead. You see, Clark? You're right. There is so much good in the world, and in all of us. It gives me hope for the future. For the world our baby is going to grow up in."

There was no reply save for the beeping of the life support machines.

"We *will* figure this out, you know," she continued. "I know we will. I just wish we were coming up with the answer right this second." She sighed and lapsed into a thoughtful silence, though her eyes never left Clark.

Days passed, dragging by in the most sluggish and hellish way that Lois had ever experienced in her life. Every hour was a torment for her, having to watch her husband slip further and further from her, while there was literally not a thing she could do about it. She tried to give him a firm handhold to life, talking to him, reading to him, even singing from time to time in a low voice — songs she knew or thought he would like. Much of the time, Jonathan and Martha sat vigil with her, and though she wanted to be alone, she could not deny that their presence gave her strength. It had been so difficult, however, being there when they had arrived at the hospital, coming straight from the airport, dragging their luggage with them. When Martha's tears had begun to flow, it was all Lois could do to hug the older woman and cry with her.

Whenever Ellen could spare a moment away from helping Sam, she would stop by as well, oftentimes bringing food, knowing that Lois would need the fuel, knowing that it pained her daughter deeply each time she had to leave Clark's room. For once, Lois could find no fault with her mother's presence, except for her refusal to bring coffee, even though Lois had assured her that no harm would come to her son from a small amount each day.

Sam, on the other hand, was a virtual ghost during those days and nights. He practically lived at S.T.A.R. Labs. Lois knew he

only ever left the building to sleep and shower, and that if the lab had had the facilities for him to do so there, he never would have left at all. He did stop by a couple of times before heading into the lab for the day, offering what halting words of comfort he could, but never able to bring any kind of good news to her. Lucy called each day, still stuck out of state while she tried to restore her bank accounts and testified against her latest ex-boyfriend. But Lois was thankful for each phone call. Though much of the talk centered on Clark, the rest of the conversations helped her forget for a moment her hellish reality.

"Honey, we really should talk about our options," Sam said late one afternoon after the newest experiment had failed.

"Options?" Lois had repeated, though she knew what he father meant.

"I think you know what I mean," he said.

Lois nodded her affirmation. "There's nothing to discuss."

"Lois, you know this is just a temporary fix," Sam said, stating fact, not asking any questions. "He can't stay on this forever." He gestured toward the life support machines.

"I know that," Lois said. "But I'm not giving up on him. He would never give up on me, if the situation were reversed."

"It's not the same, Lois," Sam replied in a kind voice. "His body is completely different than yours or mine. I can't be sure that these machines won't do more harm than good in the long run, even if I could come up with some way to save his life."

"At least they're giving him a chance," she argued.

"Do you really think that's a possibility?" Martha asked, alarmed.

Sam sighed and rubbed his bloodshot and drooping eyes. "I don't know for sure. But anything's possible. We have nothing to go on. No previous cases to help us base our treatment off of. So far, it looks like Clark's holding steady. But it's been three weeks."

"So?" Lois argued. "That's hardly any time at all. Don't people go months or years on these things?"

"Lois..."

"Please, Daddy. Give us more time."

"I'm not telling you to make a decision now. All I'm saying is that you all should probably start thinking about the future, and what you might want to do."

"I won't give up. He wouldn't want me to. I promised him I wouldn't."

"You also have to think about what he would want for *himself*, Lois. Would he really want to spend the rest of his life hooked up to machines? I'm not saying that I know the answer to that. You and his parents know him better than anyone."

"I *can't* make the decision to end my husband's life," Lois said, teary eyed.

"That's why you *all* need to discuss this," Sam said gently.

"In the meantime, I promise I'll keep working on a cure. But, the truth is, Bernie and I have already exhausted every option and out-of-the-box idea possible. And every in-the-box one. There simply isn't a box anymore, that's how extensive our experiments have been. I'm sorry. I wish I had better news."

"I know. And I appreciate it, Daddy."

She couldn't force herself to speak further until her father had left the room again. Even then, it was Jonathan who dared to broach the fragile silence of the room.

"I don't know what to do," he admitted, sounding miserable as he stared at his hands.

"We fight," Lois said.

"Normally, I'd agree," Jonathan replied. "But given the circumstances, I'm not sure this is a fight we can win."

"Lois is right. We can't give up now," Martha said, sounding surprisingly calm, as she often seemed to be during a crisis.

"No. Not now," Jonathan said. "But, if the worst comes, we need to know at what point we..." The words seemed stuck in his

throat. He cleared it quietly and tried again. "We let Clark pass with what dignity he has left."

"I never thought it would come to this," Martha lamented. "I always accepted the dangers Clark faced, ever since he decided to become Superman. But this? It still feels unreal."

Lois put her arm around her mother-in-law. "I know. Clark said something similar to me before things got really bad."

"He's always been so strong," Martha said, shaking her head.

"He still is," Jonathan put in. "He's still with us, right now."

"Right now," Lois agreed. "Right now we defend him like he's always done for everyone else. We give Daddy and Dr. Klein more time."

"Hi, Clark," Lois said as she came to his bedside. Two weeks had passed since Sam had tried talking to her about taking Clark off life support. Two weeks where she had wondered if she was doing the wrong thing and only prolonging Clark's suffering, but knowing that she couldn't give up on him. "I know, I know. It's early. I couldn't sleep. It's getting so hard to find a comfortable position in bed. And our son must have been throwing a rave last night. Plus, I just haven't slept all that well since you were admitted to the hospital. I miss having you in bed next to me." She smoothed his hair and kissed his forehead. "Your parents are here too. They haven't been sleeping well either. They're loading up on snacks and drinks for us downstairs in the cafeteria. Truth be told though, I'm worried about them, Clark. They're trying to stay strong and put on a brave face, but I can see how much they're hurting. Now I see where you got it from," she mused. "I mean, I think I always knew it, but lately, I can't help but to see just where you got a lot of your personality from."

"Lois?" Jonathan called softly.

"Yeah," she called back, in just as light of a voice. "That was fast."

"Not many people there at this hour," the older man replied, coming in and sitting down in a chair. "Here's your breakfast."

"Thanks."

Lois took the proffered bacon, egg, and cheese bagel and took a bite. She deemed it passable. Clearly Todd wasn't the one cooking today. She thought it might have been Doug, whose culinary skills ranked only slightly higher than her own.

This is sad, she thought to herself. I've spent so much time in this place, and eaten so many meals here, that I can figure out who's working today based on the way the food tastes.

The three remained silent, each one letting their own thoughts keep them company as they ate. Lois wondered how it was that she could even still taste her food. Nothing had seemed to be the same since Clark had been hooked up to the life support machines. Colors had seemed to be more muted. Smells weren't as strong. Food tasted blander in general. Even her enthusiasm for decorating the nursery and buying things for their son had lost its steam. Life itself had lost its appeal for her.

"Clark, honey, it's Mom," Martha said after a while, breaking the quiet of the room.

Even after all of this time, Lois could see how ill at ease Clark's parents were, talking to their completely unresponsive and barely alive son. She gave them immense credit, however, for doing it for hours on end every single day since they'd arrived in Metropolis. Mentally exhausted already, she sat back and allowed Martha to be the one to talk to Clark.

"I picked up that book you've been waiting for since Christmas," she informed him. "It's big. Twelve hundred pages, I think. I started reading it last night. I hope you don't mind. It seemed like it's pretty good so far. You'd like it."

"The farm is doing well this summer," Jonathan put in when Martha's voice trailed off. "The hired hands say they expect to see a harvest like we haven't seen in, oh, fifteen years or so. It certainly makes up for last year's harvest after all that drought."

"You'd like the strawberries," Martha added. "They've been so big and juicy this year. I'm not sure I've had better."

"Jimmy has a new girlfriend," Lois said when once more, silence blanketed the room in a suffocating way. "Kelly's her name. She's cute. Probably one of the more mature girls I've seen him date, even though she's fresh out of college. I think she could be good for him." She paused a moment. "He misses you, you know. He had an extra ticket for a baseball game the other night when Kelly was working and I could tell from the way he kept looking at your desk that he would have given anything to be able to bring you along."

For a long while, the three spoke to each other and to Clark, including him in their conversation as a silent fourth participant. Everything from gossip about old friends, the weather, and what was going on in the news was covered, but not once did Clark show any response.

Around four in the afternoon, Jonathan ducked out for a time, needing to check in with the hired help that was maintaining the farm for them while they'd been in Metropolis. Only once had they gone back home, and that was only because one of the pipes in the house had given out due to age and had needed to be repaired. The basement, where it had flooded, had needed to be cleaned and all of the items down there sorted through to see what had been damaged beyond saving and what could be salvaged.

He'd only been gone a few minutes when Lois started to feel odd. It was almost like her stomach was tightening up, then relaxing, only to randomly tighten again. Realization slowly dawned on her as she sat soundlessly. Martha saw that something was wrong and grabbed Lois' hands in her own.

"Lois? What's wrong?"

"I don't feel right," she'd managed to say. "I can't be sure, but I think...I might be having contractions. But it's too early. He can't be born yet. It's still too early." Fear leapt, unbidden, into her voice.

"It's okay," Martha had said, taking charge of the situation. "We're in the best possible place for you," she tried to joke, making light of things to put Lois at ease. "We're already at the hospital. We'll just get you over to the maternity ward and get you checked out. It's probably just false labor, but we'll have someone take a look at you just to be sure, okay?"

"Okay," Lois said, too afraid that it might be preterm labor to argue that she wanted to be with Clark.

Two hours later, Lois and her child were declared to be the very picture of health. Scans of the baby and Lois' uterus showed that everything was normal, and that her contractions were, indeed, just false labor. To be sure that the baby was not in any distress, the nurses had hooked Lois up to a fetal monitor and had watched the baby's heartbeat naturally rise and fall as he twisted and squirmed within her, or settled down for a moment to rest.

For close to an hour, Lois had been confined to a bed, all the while missing her husband. She was so sure that Clark would have loved to be at her side while their son was being checked. She could picture the fascination in his eyes as he would have watched the print-out from the machine, showing rises and dips in both her contractions and their son's heart rate. Martha had stayed by her side in Clark's place, and though Lois was grateful for the support, it hadn't been the same. Even Jonathan had come to show his support, though he'd been content to wait for the women in the waiting area and skim through a magazine.

At long last, however, Lois was free to go. As fast as she could, and despite the doctor's orders to take it easy, she'd rushed through Metropolis General, making a beeline for Clark's room. She arrived somewhat breathless and paused outside of his room, catching her breath.

It sure is hard to move fast these days, she mused, rubbing

her nearly seven months pregnant belly.

Then she plunged into Clark's room, only to stop short a second or two after she entered. Everything was exactly where she'd left things. Except for Clark.

Clark was missing.

"Clark?" Lois called out frantically. "*Clark?*"

"What's going on?" Jonathan asked, puffing slightly from trying to keep up with his determined and single-minded daughter-in-law.

"Clark's gone," Lois said, almost screaming and near hysterics.

"Gone?" Martha asked, trailing her husband by a step or two.

It was true. All traces of Clark had vanished from the room. His bed was empty, the pillow still creased from where his head had laid not two hours before, when Lois had last seen him. The machines that had been keeping him alive were gone — the room's silence without the various beeps and whooshes was deafeningly loud.

"Oh, God," Lois pleaded, tears flowing, her body shaking. "*Clark!* Where are you?"

"Perhaps I can answer that," came a new voice, unbelievably calm in the midst of Lois' panic.

Lois wheeled around, toward the source of the voice. At first, the person standing there didn't register in her mind. But when it did, all she could think was 'how?'

"Zara?" she stuttered after a moment of gaping, as the other woman came to her side and touched her shoulder.

Zara smiled in confirmation. "Hello, Lois."

"What's happened to Clark? Is he...he...he...?" She couldn't force herself to finish.

"He's in surgery," the ruler of New Krypton said, looking Lois in the eyes. "He's getting a new heart."

"How?" Lois asked. Then, catching herself, "Not that I'm ungrateful, mind you. But, *how?*"

Zara shook her head and looked around pointedly. "Not here, not if we value our privacy," she said in a hushed tone.

Lois nodded. She knew they wouldn't be able to wait things out in Clark's room. But the waiting room would offer them no privacy at all.

"Where to?" she asked.

Zara smiled conspiratorially, though Lois caught a hint of sadness behind it. "Come closer. All of you."

Lois waited while Jonathan and Martha stepped closer. When they are all within an arm's reach, Zara touched her right wrist with her left hand, where Lois knew a highly sophisticated control panel was located. She pressed a button and a white light engulfed the four of them. Lois had to close her eyes against the brightness, and when she was finally able to open them again, she found herself in a familiar setting.

"Your ship?" she asked.

Zara nodded. "I thought it would offer us the most comfortable and private location. There is so much to tell you, and I'm sure you have a hundred questions."

"More like a hundred thousand," Lois said.

"And I will do my best to answer them all. Please, sit," Zara offered, as four comfortable looking and plush chairs sprang into existence. "I'll be back in a moment."

Zara turned and left, disappearing through a doorway. Lois sat, and was surprised by how comfortable the chairs actually were. It almost felt as if it had been contoured specifically for her pregnant body. The aches in her lower back disappeared and a foot rest appeared out of thin air as she imagined how much more comfortable she'd be with her feet up.

"I never thought we'd see her again," Jonathan said in a low, wary voice.

Lois knew that Clark's parents bore no ill-will to Clark's former birth wife, but it had to be difficult for them to be on

Zara's ship. After all, the one time they'd been aboard a Kryptonian vessel, they'd been used as evidence by a deranged lunatic in his effort to have their son killed.

"Neither did I," Lois agreed.

Oddly, enough, it was comforting to see the woman. She'd never been able to hate Zara, even when the Kryptonian had been married to Clark. It hadn't been her fault, and Lois had known that Clark would stay true to his word to only be hers — one heart with her, regardless of the uncountable miles between Earth and New Krypton. Sure, Lois had felt bitterly jealous of Zara — after all, the woman *had* been married to the love of Lois' life and, as far as Lois knew at the time, she was never going to be able to see Clark again, let alone hug him, kiss him, make love to him.

"To be honest," Zara said, returning, holding a small bundle in her arms, "I never expected to see Earth or any of you again either."

It took Lois a moment before she realized that the bundle Zara was holding was a swaddled infant. A girl, if the pale pink blanket was any indication. Next to Zara's empty chair, a bassinet looking piece of furniture appeared, though it was unlike any Lois had ever seen. Zara placed the child down, smoothed the blanket she was swaddled in, and smiled before seating herself.

"Congratulations. She's beautiful," Lois said, peering over at the infant. Then, realizing as she looked around, "Where's Ching?"

"Thank you," Zara said, her eyes misting over. "This is Kala, named, in part for your husband because Ching was so indebted to him for finding a way for us to be together. Ching... is actually the reason why I came here, to Earth. But the story goes back further than that. It's easier if I explain it from the beginning."

Lois nodded. "Okay, but one more question first. You said Clark was in surgery. How? No one's been able to find a fix for his heart."

"He's getting the transplant that he needs," Zara said, a bit elusively. "A Kryptonian heart to keep him alive and well."

"A transplant?" Martha asked, incredulous.

Zara nodded.

"But that would mean..." Lois said slowly. "Who?"

"Someone worthy enough of living on, in part, through Kal-El."

Dread flooded Lois, along with understanding. "Ching?"
Again, Zara nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Lois felt tears well up in her eyes. At first, she had hated Ching with a passion, for all of the horrendous tests he'd put Clark through. But as she'd come to know the man and his motives, and even come to work with him once Clark had returned home to stop Lord Nor from his planned hostile takeover of Earth, she'd found herself coming to like the man and even respect him. His death was a powerful blow to her heart.

"I'm so sorry," the three said together, nearly with one voice. "What happened?" Lois added.

Zara sighed heavily. "It all started a couple of months ago, just after Kala was born. A ruthless race of beings called Zorteps set eyes on our struggling planet, just as we were starting to see some changes for the better — things Ching and I had seen here and tried to implement in our home world. The Zorteps hail from an even less inviting planet called Zaranthall, from a galaxy you here on Earth have not yet discovered. *We* barely even knew of it, and it was closer to us than it was to Earth."

"They wanted your home?" Lois guessed.

"Not quite. It turns out, New Krypton's core was rich in gasses that Zaranthall was running out of. Gasses the Zorteps needed to sustain life on their planet. They wanted our supply, but doing so..." She shrugged.

"It would have been Krypton all over again," Lois said, understanding. "It would have destroyed the planet's core."

"Causing the planet to explode," Jonathan finished for her.

"Exactly," Zara said, looking far older than Lois had ever known her to look. "They attacked us, in the middle of the night. There had been no warning signs, no threats, no attempts at negotiations. Just a precise, deadly, and completely unanticipated strike."

"That's horrible!" Martha exclaimed.

"A lot of people died that night. Good people. Families, for the most part. We mounted an immediate counterstrike, of course. And for a while, we held our own. But that initial attack was not much more than a scouting party, as we later found out. Their army arrived in full, out-manning us in every way. They had at least fifteen soldiers for every one of us. And I mean *every* one of us. Old men, pregnant women, children."

"I remember you saying that only a thousand or so people had escaped Krypton's demise," Lois said, a profound sadness washing over her as she saw where Zara's story was heading.

"We never stood a chance," Zara said, her tone of voice telling Lois that she knew Lois had already foreseen how the story would end. "Even if we'd been able to arm every single person, we never could have won."

"How many survived?" Lois asked.

"Three."

"Three?" Martha repeated, her face falling.

"When the ships arrived, bringing more of the enemy, we tried to evacuate. Ching and I waited until the last Kryptonian was safely loaded onto the floating palace. It was our duty to ensure the safety of our people. We watched the vessel lift off and cloak, hopeful that everyone would be okay. Our plan was to take our own ship and rendezvous with the palace once we were all out of imminent danger. The Elders had insisted that we take a separate ship, just in case something happened. The Zorteps must have had some kind of radar that could detect cloaked ships. As Ching, Kala, and myself lifted off in our own ship, we saw a massive explosion in the upper atmosphere."

"Are you sure it was the palace?" Martha asked, aghast.

Zara nodded sadly. "There was no mistaking the pieces of wreckage that we saw falling to the surface, the cloaking stripped away as the computers failed. Ching and I were lucky. The Zorteps must have thought they got us all in that one explosion. We escaped, our ship unscathed."

"I'm so sorry, Zara," Lois offered sincerely. But in the pit of her stomach, a cold fear grew, alongside the immense grief she felt over an entire race brought nearly to extinction in one fell swoop.

Clark could have been a part of that, she thought to herself. He could have been killed in a hostile takeover, even if he'd survived whatever Nor might have thrown at him on New Krypton.

"Thank you," Zara replied, choked up as she recalled the events.

"And Ching?" Jonathan prompted after a moment. "What happened to him?"

Zara's entire face fell as she recounted the events. "As you know, Ching was an accomplished military man. He was, by no means, our *most* talented warrior, but he ranked among the top fighters. I tried to talk him into leaving the fighting to the others. After all, Krypton needed a leader. He wouldn't hear of it. Knowing Kal... ah, Clark, even for such a short time as he did, changed my husband. He wouldn't heed my pleas. He said that any leader worth his salt would fight alongside his men, not hide while others risked their lives. He could not ask them to do what he himself was unwilling to."

"That *does* sound like something Clark would say," Jonathan said with a fond smile.

"The last time he went out into the battlefield, he took a plasma bolt in his abdomen. It was a serious wound, but he

refused to let it slow him down. He made certain that every last citizen of New Krypton was onboard the mother ship, then got Kala and me to our own ship.”

“It caught up with him, didn’t it?” Lois asked gently.

“As soon as we were in the clear, and that it was evident that no one was coming after us, he let me tend to his wound, but *only* then. We couldn’t stop the bleeding for a long time. I put us on course for Earth, hoping we’d get there on time, so that your yellow sun could heal him. But the plasma bolt that had hit him was different from anything I’ve ever seen. It didn’t just wound him. It continued to eat away at him rapidly, leaving him in agony. I did the best I could, pumping him full of painkillers, and it seemed to take away most of his pain. But that was all I could do. Traditional treatments would not work.” She paused and appeared to gather herself for the next part, swallowing hard before she could continue. “We arrived too late. Ching died of his wound before we could reach the light of your sun. I used the ship’s onboard medical supplies to freeze his body, in an effort to preserve it so that I could give him a proper funeral once I landed.”

Zara dabbed at her eyes and Lois rose from her chair. She went over to the grieving widow and new mother, putting her arms around her in a comforting hug, knowing that her gesture was woefully inadequate. She felt like she should have been able to do so much more for Zara.

“He was a great man,” she whispered sadly as she hugged the woman.

After a moment, Lois pulled back and returned to her seat. She settled into the cushioning, resting her body while her mind swirled with rampant thoughts.

What was happening to Clark now? Was the surgery going well? Would his body reject Ching’s heart? Would he have to hang up Superman’s cape for good? How had Zara known that Clark needed the heart in the first place?

“Zara, I want you to know how grateful I am — how grateful we all are — that Clark is receiving his transplant,” Lois said after a minute. “But...how did you know?”

Kala stirred sleepily in her bassinet. Before Zara answered Lois’ question, she stood and picked the child up and rocked her in her arms. She paced, bouncing the infant ever so softly as she spoke.

“I knew something was wrong when we attained the outer reaches of Earth’s atmosphere,” Zara said, her voice sounding even more hollow and distant than it had during her recollection of the last days of New Krypton’s existence. “I tried to connect to him, telepathically. But, I couldn’t locate him. Ching was gone, I had nowhere else to go. So, I cloaked the ship and brought it in closer, hovering once I was above Metropolis. It wasn’t easy, but I finally located the sound of your voice. How Kal-El does it without even trying is beyond me. Truly, there is a special bond between you two.”

Lois nodded. “He’s always said he could find me by the sound of my heartbeat alone.”

Zara smiled sadly and continued to pace. Kala had since stopped fussing, and had drifted back into a peaceful sleep.

“I finally found you in Kal’s...I mean, Clark’s room at the hospital. My apologies. After a lifetime of calling him Kal-El, my tongue seems slow to get used to his Earth name. But, by the time I could settle Kala down, you weren’t there. His medical chart, however, answered all of my questions. As I was looking it over, a Dr. Klein came into the room to check on Clark. He recognized me immediately as one of the ones who’d been with Superman when he’d said his goodbyes to the people of Earth. He then let me know that he knew of Clark’s...differences, once he seemed sure that I was also in the know.”

Jonathan automatically bristled at the compromise of Clark’s secret, but then seemed to think better of it. Lois couldn’t fault

him for it. It was simply a reflex, to want Clark’s secret to remain locked up as safe and secure as possible. But in this one, rare case, Lois was thankful that Dr. Klein had trusted the knowledge with Zara.

“He told me that Clark’s time was growing dangerously short. I said that I could provide a heart for a transplant, but that he needed to hurry. Ching had already been dead for five hours.”

“That explains why no one contacted us,” Lois said, knowing from her research that, for humans at least, five to six hours was the maximum time for maintaining the viability of a heart.

“Dr. Klein said that Clark had already filled out paperwork, granting him the ability to do a transplant, in case the worst should happen and he would be unable to sign for himself if a heart or procedure was suddenly found.”

Lois remembered the forms in question. Clark had filled them out shortly after he’d been admitted to the hospital that first day, hours before the heart attack that had left him on life support.

“I returned to my ship and sent Ching’s body to the operating room that Dr. Klein directed me to, and to feed Kala. I heard you in Clark’s room not long after,” she said, looking toward Lois, “and beamed back down to tell you everything.”

“It’s a miracle,” Martha said, tears in her eyes. “You appeared just when things looked bleakest. And then, to find that Clark and Ching were a match...” Her voice trailed off.

Zara stopped pacing and sat, still cradling her daughter. “Well, I will confess that it was never an issue of finding a matching donor. Kryptonian DNA is different from that of Earthlings. We don’t, for example, have differing blood types. Any one of the people on New Krypton could have been Clark’s donor.”

“I can’t tell you what this means to us all,” Martha said, shaking her head as if embarrassed by the inadequacy of her words.

Zara looked down at the baby in her arms before speaking. “I’m just glad that at least one good thing could come from my husband’s death. It helps ease some of the pain, knowing that his death wasn’t in vain.”

“He did what he thought was best for his people — your people,” Lois reminded her. “He was a hero. He always was. He always put everyone else before himself, even at the expense of his own happiness.”

“He was a good man,” Jonathan agreed. Though he and Martha had only briefly met Ching during the New Krypton Incident, as they had come to call it, Clark had spoken highly of the man to them.

For several long minutes, no one spoke. Everyone seemed to be weighing all they had learned, digesting the information, and mourning Ching’s passing. Lois felt so conflicted. On the one hand, she was devastated that the man had died, leaving Zara a widow and never having the chance to see his baby girl grow up. On the other, she was elated that Clark was getting a heart, the one thing he needed most in order to be able to see his son be born and grow up into a man. And that same elation made her feel so incredibly guilty, that she could take any relief and hope from a friend’s death — that she could dare to feel such happiness when Zara’s heart was so clearly breaking.

“You should return to the hospital,” Zara finally said. “I’m unfamiliar with surgical practices on Earth or how long they last. You may be needed to answer questions. Certainly someone will want to inform you of what’s going on.”

Lois nodded. “Come with us.”

Zara hesitated. “I should probably stay here.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone right now,” Lois said. “I think it’s better if you come with us. I know it won’t take your grief away, but it might help ease the pain. Besides, as far as I’m concerned, you’re family. I don’t let family suffer alone.”

Again, Zara hesitated, but slowly came to nod. "Thank you. I guess it *would* be nice to be around others."

Lois' stomach rumbled. "Come on. We'll even load up on... how did you put it? Nutritionally worthless snack foods?"

Lois glared at the clock on the wall in the waiting area as if she could will time to move faster just because she wanted it to. She got up and walked the length of the area, throwing her fourth bottle of water in as many hours away as she continued on to the ladies' room.

Everyone warned me about this, she thought as she squeezed into the narrow stall. I just never imagined how true their warnings were.

She finished, washed her hands, and dried them under the hand drier twice. When her hands still remained moist, she rolled her eyes and used her maternity shorts, wiping her hands on her hips. She eyed the hand drier disdainfully as she did so, as well as the sign above it, stating that, in an effort to be "greener" and eliminate paper waste, the hospital had done away with paper towels in the restrooms.

Thanks for your cooperation indeed, she thought scornfully.

She was still awaiting word from anyone on how Clark's surgery was going — the only update she'd received thus far had been from Sandy, one of Clark's regular nurses, who had been relieved to find Lois to let her know that Clark had been brought in for surgery. She had to assume that it was going well. She could not imagine it otherwise. She didn't know what she would do if the surgery failed. She couldn't lose Clark. She couldn't let Ching's death and Zara's sacrifice be in vain. But, regardless of what she wanted to believe, she still would have liked some status update on her husband.

She sat back in her seat in a huff. Jonathan and Martha were in the midst of a whispered discussion. Lois imagined it was likely nothing more than idle chat to keep their frayed nerves from snapping completely. Zara was singing softly to Kala as the baby sucked greedily at the bottle that was being offered to her. In the far corner, a teenage boy was absorbed completely into his handheld game, his brow creased in concentration while his father flipped through a hunting and fishing magazine. No one else was in the room at this hour, but earlier Lois had seen two other sets of families given news about their loved ones and sent to the recovery areas.

Her pager beeped. A quick glance told her it was Perry. She ignored it. She had called earlier to let him know that Clark was in surgery. That had been a mistake, she realized in hindsight. He'd beeped in twice already. She had ignored those as well. Now she turned the device off and tossed it to the bottom of her purse.

"She really is beautiful," Lois said as she peered over at Kala. "I see a lot of you in her."

"Thank you. She has her father's expressions, I think."

The baby scrunched up her face into a pout as she finished the bottle and Zara moved her to her shoulder to burp her. Lois couldn't help the small laugh that escaped her as she watched.

"She really does!" she said, still chuckling.

Zara laughed as well, just as the baby let out a huge burp. "She burps just like him too," she added wistfully. "Was that Perry again?"

Lois nodded. "Yeah."

"You should call him. He's probably going out of his mind with worry. I saw the way he looks at you and Clark. You're his children in all but blood."

Lois sighed. "I know. But I can't help feeling that as soon as I step away, news about Clark will come through that door."

"If it does, the doctor will wait," Zara assured her. "Go. Put his mind at ease."

"I guess," Lois grumbled.

Still, she pushed herself up out of her seat and walked to the hallway. She took her cell phone out of her purse as soon as she deemed it acceptable, not going far unless a doctor came out, but far enough that she wouldn't disturb the others in the waiting area. She quickly dialed Perry's home number. He sounded tired when he picked up, and Lois felt terrible that she could offer no real news, but promised she would call once she knew more. Then she was once again at Zara's side.

Another twenty minutes passed. Then, finally, the door leading to the operating rooms opened. A doctor stepped out and, for a moment, Lois' hopes flared.

"Mr. Davis?" the woman called, and the man on the far end of the room stood in answer.

Lois sighed again, nervously balling and flexing her fingers. Ten more minutes dragged slowly by. Out of the corner of her eye, Lois could see Mr. Davis and the doctor talking. She saw him collapse to his seat in relief. Even the boy with him put down his game as he gave his father a joyous hug.

The doctor led them away, smiling, to wherever their family member was. Lois could only hope and pray that her turn would come soon. Five minutes later, as if in response to her unvoiced thoughts, Sam Lane staggered through the door, looking a little worse for wear. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes and yawned.

Lois stood as soon as she saw him.

"Daddy?" she asked, her voice half a statement, half a pleading question.

"Lois," was all Sam said, his voice low and heavy from all the sleepless nights she knew he'd spent in trying to find a way to save Clark.

He hugged his daughter as soon as he was within her arm's reach. Lois felt his body sag a little as her arms closed around him. For a silent minute, she merely let him hug her, before she finally pulled away to look him in the eyes.

"Daddy? Is Clark...?"

"He's okay," Sam said with a tired smile. "He's okay.

Bernie's getting him moved back to his room now to recover. He figured it would be better in terms of privacy."

"Clark's okay? He's going to live?" Lois asked, needing her father to say it again, relief and disbelief dueling in her heart after so long a time harboring doubts where they were visible to neither Clark nor his parents.

"Yes!" Jonathan cried at the same time, gathering Martha into his arms.

"He's just fine. He's going to live a long, healthy, happy life, God willing," Sam said. "The transplant was a success. The heart started beating with almost no coaxing on our behalf — like it knew how important it was that Clark live. And, with the information your friend here," he nodded in Zara's direction, "gave us, we don't need to worry about the risk of rejection, though I'm sure Bernie will want to keep him under observation for a time."

"Thank you, Daddy," Lois whispered, burying her head in his shoulder as she hugged him again. This time, her tears were those of pure bliss and the release of all her pent-up fears.

"I don't know how to thank you, Sam," Jonathan said, clapping the doctor on the shoulder. "This is the second time that you've saved my boy's life. That's a debt I don't know I'll ever be able to repay."

"Clark already has," Sam said. "He's made my little girl the happiest I've ever seen her in my life. That's something I was never very good at — making either of my daughters all that happy."

"Can we see him?" Lois asked, barely letting Sam finish speaking.

"Soon. Let's give Dr. Klein some time to make sure Clark is settled into his room, okay? It shouldn't be much longer."

The extra wait should have annoyed Lois. She knew that

under normal circumstances, it would have. But not today. Today she was just so happy that she was going to be able to see Clark, and not in the morgue or in a casket, that ten minutes or even ten hours longer seemed the smallest price to pay for that privilege.

"How did the surgery go?" Martha wanted to know.

"Overall, better than I expected, all things considered. With Clark's... uniqueness... I mean. And then the harvest... I just anticipated that it would be more difficult. But that, ah, little bit of help that Bernie supplied..." Sam shrugged as he purposefully remained as vague as possible. The waiting room was now empty, but none of Clark's family could ever be trusting enough to speak of Kryptonite or anything else related to Superman aloud. "Well, it surpassed my expectations. It allowed the surgery to go smoothly. Not only the cutting and repair work, but it also allowed him to tolerate the extra machines and anesthesia, which, to be frank, I had been nervous about. Anyway, no one in the room knew that I had the, shall we say, good luck charm with me. Well, actually, with your mother. Bernie fashioned a pendant out of a small piece that she wore on a leather thong around her neck. He slipped it to her before the surgery, and she was just giving it back to him for safe keeping when I came to find you."

"You're *sure* no one noticed?" Lois asked, fearing for Clark's secret.

"Absolutely," he said, giving her a sly smile. "I kept checking the line of sight on it throughout the surgery. It was safely tucked away beneath her scrubs."

Lois breathed a sigh of relief. "Good."

"And what of my husband?" Zara asked in a quiet voice.

"Last I saw, he was being sewn back up. They'll take him to the morgue until you can decide exactly what you want to do with him. There's no rush, of course. You can take whatever time you need."

Zara nodded in response. "I'll have to think of an appropriate alternative to our usual customs."

"Is Clark awake yet?" Lois asked suddenly.

Sam shook his head. "Not yet, but it probably won't be too much longer until the anesthesia wears off. Actually," he looked up and squinted at the clock on the wall, "why don't you head to his room now? I'm sure he's got to be all settled in by now."

"Are you coming too?" Martha asked.

Again, Sam shook his head. "Later. This is your time. Go on. I'm going to go find Ellen and try to get a couple hours of sleep."

Lois smiled and hugged Sam again. "Okay. Thanks, Daddy."

Martha and Jonathan both took turns hugging and thanking Sam as well, before they all headed back to Clark's room, for the first time looking forward to seeing the sterile and all-too-familiar room. Had she been physically capable of it, Lois would have run the entire way to Clark. But her rapidly expanding waistline held her back, the baby within kicking wildly. Lois put her hand lovingly over the movement.

Soon, she thought. Soon you'll be able to feel your active little son, Clark. I can't wait. I was starting to become afraid this day would never come.

"Clark?" she called as she reached his room, before she could open the door fully, before she could even step foot over the threshold.

"He's still not awake," Rhonda, one of Clark's personal nursing staff said, as she scrawled notes on his chart. "But everything looks great, Mrs. Kent. Better than I can recall seeing for anyone just out of surgery."

"Thanks, Rhonda. Did Dr. Klein leave word?"

"Only that he would be by in the morning to check on things."

"Okay."

"I'll be around all night. If he starts to wake, hit the call button so I can remove his breathing tube. Okay?"

"Got it."

The nurse flashed a brilliant smile. "I'll see you soon then."

Lois took her customary seat after Jonathan pushed it as close to the head of Clark's bed as he could, wedging it between the bed and the windows. She kissed Clark's brow before she sat, mindful not to bump into his breathing tube. Then she smoothed the hair from his forehead, pushing it to one side, before taking his hand in her own.

"I'm here, Clark," she told him. "I'm here and you are going to be just fine. All you need to do is wake up. Please, Clark. Wake up and show me how well you've come through this ordeal."

But Clark slumbered on, and Lois had to wonder how much anesthesia he'd been administered to ensure that he would feel nothing during the transplant. Now, even in the dimness of the room — the shades drawn against the deepening night — Clark seemed to almost glow with life. His once ashen skin had begun to pink up with health as his new heart beat strongly in his chest. His breathing was steady and even, the work of the machines, but Lois imagined that it didn't look quite as labored as it had once appeared to her. He looked, for the first time since he'd arrived at the hospital some weeks before, to be peaceful.

Kala began to stir in Zara's arms. Lois held out her arms, offering Zara the chance to relax for a while. She felt bad for the new mother — alone with a young infant, on a planet that was still alien to her, regardless of the short time she'd spent living on Earth before trying to convince Clark to help New Krypton avoid war. Zara looked a little relieved at Lois' offer.

"Here," Lois said. "Let me." She smiled up at Zara as the other woman closed the distance and laid the baby in Lois' arms. "I need the practice."

Zara smiled for an instant as well. "Just hold her head," she cautioned, though Lois was already supporting Kala's tiny head and neck.

"I've got her," Lois cooed to the baby. "Who's a precious little angel? You are. Yes, you are. Kala's a precious little angel."

"You're good with her," Zara observed as the baby quieted down, looking about the room with wide, curious eyes.

"I hope so," Lois confessed. "I worry about how this little guy is going to take to his mom." She nodded downward at her stomach. "But you are giving me hope, little missy." She let the baby grab her finger and guide it to her mouth to suck on. In moments, the girl was asleep.

Suddenly, Clark's head moved, the way it always did when he woke from a deep sleep. Lois recognized the familiar and much missed movement immediately. She gently pulled her finger from Kala's mouth and slammed the digit into the "call" button on the rails to Clark's bed.

Rhonda came running.

"He's waking up!" Lois cried, happy tears racing from her eyes.

Rhonda was at Clark's side in the blink of an eye. She shushed him as his movements became more frantic. His eyes opened a slit and his hands reached for the tube in his throat.

"Relax, Mr. Kent," Rhonda said, grabbing his wrists to stop his movements. "I'm going to take the tube out for you, okay? Just breathe out when I tell you to."

Clark couldn't respond but he did stop struggling. Rhonda grabbed the end of the tube.

"Ready? And breathe out."

Clark did as he was told. The tube came up and out of his throat with a wet noise. Clark coughed and gasped as he got used to the sensation of not having the plastic tube down his throat, taking up his entire airway.

"Okay?" Rhonda asked.

Clark nodded. "I think so." His voice was raw and gravelly to Lois' ears. It appeared to hurt to talk and possibly even more to swallow, Lois observed as she watched him. "Am I dead?"

Lois reached for his hand. "No, sweetie. You're alive. You

got your heart. You're going to be just fine."

"My throat hurts," Clark rasped, wincing a little.

"Your throat will be a little sore for a day or so. It's from the tube. But it will be better before you know it," Rhonda said. "You can drink some water if you want, but sip, don't gulp."

"Can he have some tea?" Lois asked, knowing that her husband took great comfort from a hot cup of tea.

"Sure thing. Just no food until I clear it with his doctors."

"I'm not hungry anyway," Clark said.

"I'll get the tea," Jonathan offered. "It's good to see you awake, son."

"Thanks, Dad. It's good to *be* awake."

Jonathan followed Rhonda out of the room. Clark lolled his head to the side and smiled at Lois. Unable to stop herself, she leaned in and kissed his lips — those soft, inviting lips that she had missed so dearly while he'd been hooked to the ventilator.

"I missed you," she breathed when she pulled back.

"I missed you too. Wait. How long was I out?" he asked, catching sight, for the first real time, of the baby in her arms.

"Oh! A few weeks. And she's not ours."

"Whose then?" he rasped out.

"Mine," Zara said softly, stepping into his field of view.

"Zara? How?" he asked, confused. He'd never expected to see her again, Lois knew, though he'd admitted to her that he'd wished, more than once, that he could contact her, not just since his heart had begun to give out, but ever since she and Ching had returned to New Krypton. He'd wondered how they and the planet had been doing. "Is Ching here?"

"Kind of," Lois said gently.

"What do you mean?"

"He's the one... Clark... there's no easy way to say this.

Clark... the heart you received... it's Ching's," Lois said, breaking the news as gently as she could.

"What?" Clark's entire face fell.

"It's a long story," Lois said. "When you're feeling stronger..."

"I can handle it," Clark interrupted her. "Please."

Lois and Zara shared a look as Jonathan came back with a steaming cup of tea. Lois accepted the pink plastic mug and held it out to Clark, who sipped it gingerly through the straw. Lois knew his powers weren't restored yet — he'd need the sunlight for that, and that was still hours away. If he drank too deeply and too quickly, he would scald his mouth.

"Thanks, Dad," Clark said after taking a sip and closing his eyes in bliss. "Oolong, huh?"

"We've kept some in the room since the beginning, just in case," his father said with a smile.

"You guys are something else," Clark replied, with a mild shake of his head. "But, please. I need to know. What happened to Ching? And how did you know to come, Zara?"

"I didn't. Things just sort of... fell into place."

"Something tells me you aren't here on vacation. What happened on New Krypton?"

Zara lowered her eyes. "It's gone."

"Gone?"

"Destroyed by an alien race. It and everyone on it. Ching, Kala, and I were the only ones to escape, but Ching was injured and succumbed to his wounds before we could reach your yellow sun. I tried to contact you and eventually found that you were in critical condition. I did the only thing I could do — give you Ching's heart so that you could live."

"I can't even begin to thank you. Or imagine how difficult all of this has to have been for you," Clark said.

Lois caught the glimmer of a tear in his eye. That hurt her heart to see. It was rare indeed when Clark's emotions ran so high that he was moved to tears. She knew that Clark had considered Ching to be a brother of sorts, in a way that was different from

the brother-like relationship he shared with Jimmy. He had more in common with Jimmy, but with Ching, there had been a mutual respect that had gone beyond words.

"I'm glad that I could help," Zara assured him.

"You need to rest," Martha reminded Clark, as he sipped again from the straw.

"I've rested enough," Clark said dismissively. "I've missed so much."

"Not *that* much," Lois said giving him a tender smile. "And your mother is right."

"I know. But I'm not ready to sleep again. Not yet," he pleaded.

The four exchanged a look as Zara took Kala from Lois' arms. Lois took the opportunity to stand by Clark's head. She grabbed his hand and placed it on the spot where their son was doing what felt like a Riverdance routine. At first, Clark seemed confused as she positioned his palm, but after a moment his face lit up in sheer amazement and bliss.

"Incredible," he whispered hoarsely.

"I've been waiting for this moment," Lois confided with a grin. "I used to let you feel his kicks while you were asleep, but I could scarcely wait for the moment when you'd be completely aware of what was happening."

"Thank you, Lois," he said in wonderment. "This is the most amazing thing I've ever felt."

Lois gave him a mischievous smile. "Just wait until I put my stomach to your back and let him kick you all night long."

Clark smiled back, making Lois' heart skip a beat. She'd missed that brilliantly devastating smile *so* much. Every day, multiple times a day, she'd looked at pictures of him. But the camera could never do justice to his smile. Somehow, it always dulled the sparkle in his eyes and managed to lose some of the warmth of his smile. Still, the photographs had given her the strength she needed to face each dawning day and every sleepless night. When she'd actually slept, she'd dreamed about his smile, the way he'd often chuckle as he did so, waking with a residual happy feeling throughout her body until she'd remembered the reality of the situation, and the all-too-real fact that she might never see it again.

Now, however, that smile was back and her heart ached with joy to see it.

"If it means that I'll be home and able to share a bed with you again, I'll enjoy every sleepless moment this little boy will bring us," he said with complete sincerity. He closed his eyes for a moment while he snuggled back into his pillows a little deeper. "What else?"

"Well," Lois said slowly, thinking, "Ralph got fired from the Planet."

"What? How? I thought he was some bigwig's nephew, and that's why Perry hadn't fired him yet."

"Yeah, well, that's before he sold information about your condition to the Inquisitor. The Planet was a media circus for about a week. I wound up living here, in the hospital for several days because our house became an instant target for every newspaper and television station in New Troy. One of the downsides to being the hottest reporting team for a world renowned paper. Anyway, even Ralph's uncle didn't want him associated with the Planet after that."

"Yikes," Clark said, his voice heavy with the exhaustion that Lois knew had to be clinging to him.

"Perry wasn't all that sad to see him go," Lois said with a smirk. She and Clark had complained to one another numerous times about Ralph's complete ineptitude.

"I'll bet," Clark said with a chuckle. Raspy as it was, it was the greatest sound in the entire world to Lois' ears.

"Nothing else of note really happened," Lois said. "All of the other little details can wait until you've rested."

"She's right, son," Jonathan said, backing her up. "We love that you're awake and talking, but you need to allow yourself to start healing so we can get you home."

"Come on, let's give him some privacy, so that he can sleep," Martha offered. "Clark, we're so glad you're okay. That and the fact that Zara came when she did, offering the help you needed."

Clark nodded. "I know. Zara, I know saying thank you isn't enough. I swear to you though, I will do everything I can for you and your daughter. She'll never lack for anything, not if I can help it. Especially not a fatherly figure. I know I'm not her father, and I would never, ever try to take Ching's place. But I will take care of her as though she *was* my own."

"We both will," Lois swore.

"How are we feeling?" Dr. Klein asked as he entered the room, bright and early the next morning. He sounded happier than Lois could ever remember him sounding in the years they had known him.

Clark swallowed the sip of water he'd taken through a straw as Lois held the cup for him before answering. "Better than I thought I would be."

Lois could see the beginnings of a sparkle in Clark's eyes. It wasn't completely back, not yet, but it was still encouraging to see him starting to look like his old self. His throat was still raw and his voice scratchy, but the sleep he'd gotten had done wonders for him. He seemed clearer headed and his sense of humor had returned.

On the other hand, Lois had slept only sporadically. She'd refused to leave Clark's side. She'd sat up for a long while, just watching him sleep, in awe of the rising and falling of his chest without machines having to do it for him. It had been difficult to surrender herself to sleep. Now that she'd gotten Clark back, she didn't want to miss a second with him.

"I'm glad to hear it," Dr. Klein said as he approached the bedside. "Any nausea? Pain? Anything out of the ordinary?"

Clark shook his head. "Not really. I'm a little achy, but that's about it." He swept his hand an inch or two over his chest as he spoke.

"You're bound to be a little sore after the operation. I've got you on pain killers through your IV, but with your genetics..." He shrugged as his voice trailed off. "It wouldn't surprise me if it took a day or more before your powers kick in again and your body begins its normal accelerated healing. In the meantime, let me take a look at the incision, okay?"

"Go for it," Clark said with a grin.

Carefully, Dr. Klein removed the surgical tape and sterile gauze from where it had protected and hidden away his incision. As it came away, Lois saw the angry red and swollen skin first, then the line of sliced flesh held together with more stitches than she cared to count. Dr. Klein checked the wound thoroughly, then swapped the bloody gauze for fresh and clean bandages. Lois averted her eyes, away from the blood. Normally, blood didn't bother her much, but seeing Clark's always had. He was *Superman!* If he was bleeding, it was *never* a good sign.

"Stitches?" Lois asked as she watched Dr. Klein work.

He nodded absently. "Mmm hmm. Staples are the norm, but I was afraid his body might reject them as he heals. These stitches will absorb into his body, in case he heals too swiftly for us to get them out in time."

"Makes sense," Lois said, her eyes glued to the gash down Clark's chest.

"The wound looks good so far," Dr. Klein said cheerfully. He seemed almost ready to laugh in his relief over Clark's improving condition.

"It's hideous," Clark whispered, looking down. "Will it leave a scar?"

"Normally, yes," Dr. Klein admitted. "In your case, however,

I don't know. I would imagine that, once your body is able to heal itself, it probably won't leave any trace behind that it was ever there."

"Good," Clark said, his voice indicating that he would prefer not to have a reminder of how close he'd come to dying.

Lois sat silently. In her mind, at least, the incision was beautiful. It wasn't a reminder of Clark's dance with death. It was a symbol of his life, his will to live, and the ultimate sacrifice of a friend.

"Ready?" Lois asked Clark as they stood together in Perry's office.

"As I'll ever be," he replied, smiling.

"It feels like a lifetime ago since we were last in here like this, waiting for Superman to address the world."

"That was the worst day of my life," Clark agreed.

It still pained him deeply to think about the day he'd turned his back on Lois, his parents, and the world at large. True, he'd been doing what he'd felt was right. In his heart, he knew he could never just leave New Krypton to perish under war and leave Zara to be wed to a psychopath. But he'd done so at the expense of everyone he'd held dear — not knowing if he could ever return to them, not knowing if he'd ever hold Lois in his arms again.

Perry opened the door and poked his head in. "We're almost ready for you, Superman. LNN's having some microphone issues. It should be sorted out in a couple of minutes, they tell me."

"Thank you, Mr. White," Clark said, leaning against the Chief's plaid armchair.

"I'll be back when they're ready."

"Great."

"Oh? Lois?" Perry asked, almost as an afterthought. "How's Clark doing?"

Lois smiled. "He's doing really well, Chief. He's itching to get back."

"Well, you tell him to take his time. A man doesn't go through something like that and bounce right back into the swing of things. He's not Superman. Ah, no offense, Superman."

Clark chuckled. "None taken." Inwardly though, he had to once again ponder how much Perry actually knew or suspected about his dual identities.

"I'll tell him," Lois said, "but you know Clark. I'm surprised I've gotten him to stay put at home for as long as I have already."

Perry chuckled and shook his head. "Reminds me of someone else I know," he said with a wink.

Then he was gone, back into the media circus that had overtaken the bullpen, in anticipation of Superman's impending statement to the world. Clark sat carefully, not wanting to crease his cape. It was killing him inside to stay home while Lois went to work each day. But it had only been three weeks since his heart transplant. No normal man would be back to full speed that quickly. He couldn't be seen at work so shortly after his brush with death. But he longed for the sometimes mundane routine of normal life. He wanted to get up in the morning, put on his work suit, chase leads, and write stories.

As it was, he'd only just been cleared by Dr. Klein to resume his super activities. That, at least, had been a blessing. Being stuck in the hospital, then at home, with nothing but the television for company had been depressing. He'd felt worse than useless. Lois had offered to stay home with him, but after the first week, he'd told her to go back to work. After all, soon she would need to take her maternity leave, and he wanted her to have as much time as possible to use when their son was born. And his parents had needed to return to the farm. Clark knew how expensive it was to keep the extra hired hands on, so he had told them to go, with promises to visit them as soon as he was able to.

Even the Lanes had needed to resume their own, normal lives, though Lucy had stayed on for a few days to help out, after Sam and Ellen had gone.

But getting the green light from Dr. Klein had given him something that he could do. If he couldn't be Clark in public, he could at least be Superman. At first, he had been a little afraid of making any rescues. It had taken more than a week for his powers to return, once he'd woken up after his surgery. It had been a particularly stormy week, and the cloud coverage hadn't helped when the rain *had* actually let up. When the sun had finally peeked out from behind the clouds, it had taken time for Clark's body to absorb enough of the life giving and nourishing light for it to begin to repair itself. Slowly, one by one, his powers had returned to him.

Once he was fully back to normal, he'd kept his super activities to a bare minimum, testing himself to make sure that he felt completely comfortable. He'd kept picturing himself doubling over while performing a rescue while his new heart blew right out of his chest. But, slowly, his fears had left him. His leisurely flights took on speed. He revisited the void between the Earth and space to soak up as much sunlight as possible, reveling in the fact that he was alive and no longer earthbound. Finally, he'd trusted himself enough to start making rescues.

Of course, as soon as the first rescue was made — a child who'd fallen down a well on her family's farm — the rumor mill had begun. There was no doubt that Superman had returned. The media had captured him on film as he'd lowered himself into the constricting well and reemerged with the wet, shaking, hungry, and terrified three year old girl. But where had Superman been? Why had he been gone so long? Was he *really* back? Or would he play with the planet's emotions and disappear once again? And so, he'd decided that he would need to make a statement, to address all of those questions.

"Hey," Clark said after a couple of minutes of silence lapsed. "I've been doing some thinking."

"What about?"

Clark gave her a small smile. "Our baby."

"Oh, really?" she said, feigning surprise, her interest clearly up.

"Yeah. I know we've settled on Christopher for a first name. But I was thinking about the middle name." Lois nodded, urging him on. "You know how Ching's death has affected me."

Again, she nodded. "I don't know if I've ever seen you quite that upset before."

Clark nodded in turn. "I want to honor him in some way. I was thinking... maybe we could use David as our boy's middle name."

"David?" Lois asked.

"Remember when we first met Ching? He was using the cover..."

"Dave Miller," Lois said, filling in Clark's words before he could say them, smiling as she did so.

"Yeah. I've already spoken to Zara about it. I wanted to make sure she would be okay with it, if you said yes. She's taken Ching's death really hard."

"I know. I wish there was more we could do for her. I think David is the perfect middle name for our son. Christopher David Kent." She patted her stomach as she said the name and Clark could tell by the twinkle in her eye that she loved the name. Not only loved it, but knew already, somehow, that the name fit the tiny human it now belonged to.

Clark was thrilled that Lois loved the name as much as he did. It felt so natural, so right, to be honoring Ching in the way that they were. The man had been a brother to Clark, not by blood, but of the spirit. He had felt privileged to have forged a friendship and understanding with the Kryptonian lieutenant during the brief time they had found themselves on the same side

of the war Lord Nor had waged on Earth. When Clark had learned of Ching's death, it had been like a knife to his newly transplanted heart.

For a long time, and even now, as he sat waiting to address the world, he'd felt so conflicted about having Ching's heart beating within his chest. Of course, he was ecstatic to be alive. He'd been given an unexpected second chance. He would be there to witness his son's birth, his first steps, his first words. He would be there to dole out advice on everything from any powers the boy might inherit to asking girls out on dates. He would be around to dance with Lois at Christopher's wedding. But the price for that new life had been steep. Ching was dead. He would never see Kala's first steps or hear her little voice call him "dada." He would never see her go off to school, or find the person that she loved. He would never see his baby girl grow into the beautiful and confident woman Clark was sure she would become.

It felt, to Clark, like Ching's life had been traded for his own.

It was, of course, a ridiculous thought. Rationally, he knew the depths of how untrue that thought was. Ching hadn't been killed in order to save Clark. It had all been a matter of chance, a cosmic coincidence that had just so happened when Clark's need for a heart was at its most desperate. Still, the scar on his chest — faded now into a pale, barely there white line — constantly reminded him of what, exactly, the price of his life had been.

"Superman, we're ready for you out here," Perry said, knocking and opening the door in the same moment.

"Fantastic," Clark replied, standing. "Thank you."

Perry nodded and left just as quickly as he'd come in. When they were alone again, Lois gave Clark a chaste kiss on his lips, after checking for the hundredth time that the blinds to the office were tightly shut.

"Good luck," she whispered.

"I'll meet you at home," he promised.

With Swiss chocolate and French pastries, he silently added.

Now that he was once more confident in his ability to use his powers without endangering his life, he looked forward to making trips again to retrieve the treats Lois enjoyed. *And maybe some of that Chinese food you're so crazy for.*

"I can't wait," Lois said with a smile that spoke volumes to him. He'd not only been cleared to use his super powers, he'd been cleared to resume *all* of his normal activities.

Clark nodded, then adopted the neutral, unreadable mask of Superman. He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, then let it go as he opened the Chief's door and stepped out into the bullpen. How he missed the place! The smell of the coffeemaker across the room in the break area. The sweet sugary glaze of the donuts in the box next to the coffeemaker. The ticking of the clocks on the wall, showing the time zones across the globe, inaudible to anyone else's ears. The *chug, chug, chug* as the fax machine spat out a stream of papers. The sea of clutter on his friends' and coworkers' desks, now abandoned as everyone awaited his statement.

With confident strides, he walked down the aisle that had been kept clear for him. He nodded in a friendly enough manner at those he knew well. Jimmy was, of course, right in front, in the place Clark was sure the photographer had picked especially for the angles it would afford him while his camera snapped away. Jimmy gave him a thumbs up when he caught his eye. Clark allowed himself to aim a smile at his friend, though he kept it small and professional looking.

He reached the microphone and a hush fell over the crowd, without the need to ask. He took a moment to look out over everyone before beginning.

"Thank you all for coming today," he began. "I know there have been a lot of questions and rumors lately, about where I've been and why I seemed to have vanished. I want to set the record

straight. I have always striven to be as open and honest with the people of this planet as I possibly can. My recent disappearance was an unfortunate situation that I could not avoid. Things happened too quickly and beyond my control, so I was unable to issue a statement beforehand. But, I assure you, that situation has been handled and can no longer prevent me from my mission to protect the people of Earth. There have been rumors speculating that I am leaving this planet. I would like to take this opportunity to strike that rumor down. I have no intention of ever leaving. Earth is my home. There is nothing that can take me away from here.” He paused, taking a breath. “I will take any questions.”

“Superman!”

Clark had to fight not to grimace. It was Nelson Gingham, from the Dirt Digger.

“Yes?” he answered politely.

“You talk about this mysterious ‘situation.’ I think I can speak for us all when I say that that’s not really enough information.”

“Mr. Gingham, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I see you know who I am.”

Clark bit his tongue against the man’s arrogant, self-important attitude.

“I’m familiar with all of Metropolis’ reporters,” he said instead. “Mr. Gingham, while I appreciate the curiosity of the public, the situation I needed to tend to was not my own. Out of respect for those involved, I can only say that it was a matter of life and death, and that I am happy to say that life won out.”

“Oh, come on!” the man grumbled.

“I apologize, but that really is all that I am at liberty to say. It was an intensely personal event,” Clark said, as politely as he could, while making it clear, through the tone of his voice that the discussion over the specifics of the situation was now at a close. “Are there any other questions at this time?” he asked, nailing home the point that he would be giving no deeper information on the details of the event.

“Some people have speculated that there was a need for you to return to New Krypton. Is there any truth to that?” Linda Peters asked.

“I can assure you that I never left this planet,” Clark said.

“Nor have I ever stepped foot on New Krypton’s soil.”

“Superman! It’s Gary Katz, LNN. You are friends with Clark Kent, are you not?”

Clark nodded. “I am.”

“You know then, that he recently was in the hospital, awaiting a heart transplant.”

“I was aware of it,” Clark said, cautiously.

“It seems that he got a transplant pretty fast. Rumor has it that you used your influence to...shall we say...speed up the process. A sudden bump to the top of the list, perhaps. How do you respond?”

“By reminding everyone that rumors are usually baseless speculation. And that is *exactly* what that rumor is. I would never do anything to put one person’s needs above another’s, friend or not, nor could I, in this particular instance, have done anything to change Clark’s spot on the recipient list. Clark was just very lucky that a match could be found in time to save his life, that’s all. And, while I’m glad and relieved that one was found for him, I had nothing to do with it.”

As expected, there were several more questions. Most centered around his disappearance and reemergence. A few asked about projects that the Superman Foundation was working on, or the recent resurgence of what most speculated was Intergang activities. In all, the whole thing lasted less time than Clark had been dreading it would. It was a relief when he finally ended the press conference, thanked everyone for coming, then flew out the large window above the bullpen.

As he flew off, he had only one thought. It was good to be back.

“I’m going to eat you all up!” Clark declared in a dramatic, deeper than normal voice, while his nine month old son squealed with delight, wiggling on his back, tongue out and a smile from ear to ear.

The boy rolled out of the way as Clark hovered over him, ready to kiss the baby’s belly. Clark caught him and kissed him anyway, eliciting a steady stream of squeals, shrieks, and laughs. He continued for several long moments, until Christopher slapped playfully at the top of his head. Clark pulled back, looking down on the perfect little miracle he and Lois had created, stunned, as always, to know that his heart’s greatest desire had been fulfilled — to not only marry the woman of his dreams, but to raise a family with her as well.

Clark touched a hand to his chest, over his heart, over the place where he’d been cut open just over a year before. The scar had long since faded and had nearly vanished as his body had healed itself. But he didn’t need to see what was left of the scar in order to be reminded of what had occurred — his brush with death and the miracle that had brought him back to the world of the living. Nothing could ever make him forget how extremely lucky he was to be alive and able to watch his son grow up.

As always, the thought sent a wave of thankfulness through him, while simultaneously sending a stab of remorse through him. Ching hadn’t been so lucky. *Kala* hadn’t been so lucky. Christopher knew his father, gleefully pointing and crying out “dada!” whenever he saw him. Kala, on the other hand, would never know her father through anything more than the stories Zara would and did tell her.

“Eeee!” Kala demanded, hitting Clark’s back with her open palm.

Clark chuckled. “Okay, okay!”

He grabbed the little girl and held her up over his head, as if she was flying. Someday, she *would* be, he knew. And she would take to it well. He didn’t doubt that. She loved it when her Uncle Clark played the flying game with her. Then he swooped her down and laid her on her back, next to Christopher, and proceeded to rain kisses down on her belly, along with the occasional “bubble” blown onto her, which made her shriek with laughter.

Clark began to switch back and forth between the two kids, making first one laugh, then the other. He was having such a great time that he didn’t even notice when Lois walked in through the front door, set her purse down, and stepped into the living room.

“Careful, I might get jealous,” she quipped as Clark rolled onto his back, making Kala fly again.

“Oh, hi, honey,” Clark said, craning his neck back to look at her upside down, realizing for the first time that she was there. “Don’t worry, you’re the only woman I’ll ever *want* to fly with.”

Lois laughed. “I’d better be. Are you having a good time?”

“The best.”

“Where’s Zara?”

Clark rolled again, setting Kala down so that he could do the same thing to Christopher. “She had to run some errands. I told her that I was more than happy to watch the baby while she went out.”

“That was nice of you,” Lois replied with a smile. She knelt down on the carpet beside Clark and kissed him, then picked up Christopher.

“Aaaaamaaaa!” he cried out joyfully, slapping at her face with his palm.

Clark shrugged as he sat up. “I like watching the kids.”

“I know. I think it’s adorable.”

He gave her his best smile. “Thanks. So, how did the press conference go?”

Lois made a face, indicating how boring she’d found it.

“Same old same old from the mayor’s office. ‘We’re looking into the allegations but have no information at this time.’ Ugh!”

“Well, you didn’t *really* think they would come out and say ‘Yeah, you know what? The mayor *did* make advances toward his female interns,’ did you?” he asked sweetly.

“No,” Lois huffed, “but for *once* it would be nice if people could own up to their mistakes.”

“I agree. Which is why I’m going to own up to the wet spot on the carpet over there.” He pointed. “The kids and I were playing and our son thought the carpet needed a little redecorating. I cleaned it pretty well though. It doesn’t appear to have stained.”

Lois laughed. “Honestly, that’s probably the best news I’ve heard all day.”

“Actually,” Clark said, stopping Kala from attempting to eat the remote control for the television, “I have some great news for you.”

Lois’ whole body seemed to perk up. “Yeah?”

“Dr. Klein called with my test results from yesterday.”

“When?”

“About an hour ago.”

“And?” she prodded. “Don’t leave me in suspense! What’d he say?”

“Well, he started off by congratulating me, again, for my one year milestone.” He was deliberately drawing things out, enjoying the way Lois squirmed. But he couldn’t prolong it too long. He was almost bursting with the news. “Anyway, we went over all of the test results. Everything looks great. He sees no signs of this heart breaking down or otherwise not cooperating with my body. And what’s more, my super abilities haven’t caused any adverse side effects on it.”

“Clark! That’s great!”

He luxuriated in the warmth of her smile as she attempted to hug him. But two squirming children got in the way, leaving them able to only share a chaste kiss, given with stretched necks over the heads of the babies. True, it wasn’t exactly *new* news. Ever since the transplant, Dr. Klein had run the same battery of tests on Clark once a month, wanting to be extra cautious. There really was no precedent for how Kryptonians, particularly those using super powers on a daily basis, recovered after a heart transplant.

“There’s more,” Clark said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Oh?” He could see her curiosity was piqued even higher.

“Since everything has looked great for the whole year, he’s lightening up on the tests. I don’t need to go back for another three months, then if all looks well, every six months. But he’s extremely confident that, barring another run in with Deathstroke, I’ll be healthy for a long, long time.”

“Oh, Clark!” Lois cried, happy tears brimming in her eyes. “That’s fantastic! I’m so proud of you.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be proud of *me*, Lois. Zara’s the one who saved my life. I’m just lucky, that’s all.”

“Either way, I’m glad for you. I hated the idea that once a month, you had to deliberately expose yourself to Kryptonite so he could get a blood sample. Even if it was only for a minute or two.”

“I know. I didn’t like it either. But if that’s part of the price I need to pay to be alive for you and our son, I’ll gladly do so.”

Lois nodded. “I know. I just worry about you. Always have. Always will.”

“In a weird way, I love that you do. Before I met you, no one, other than my parents, ever cared enough to worry about me. When I realized that you did,” he shook his head, “there was this incredible feeling, to know I mattered enough to warrant concern.”

He would have said more, but a knock sounded on the door. Clark slipped his glasses down, x-rayed, then put them back on

his face properly. He set down Kala from his lap and went to answer it.

“Zara,” he explained to Lois over his shoulder. Then, throwing the door open, “Hey, Zara!”

“Hi, Clark. How was Kala?”

“Only the most well behaved little girl on the planet,” he said truthfully. “She ate a jar and a half of food too, plus a few of my French fries. She’s got quite a fantastic appetite.”

The baby was hardly any trouble at all, though he did wonder what it would be like once she started to develop her powers. One thing was certain, it would be interesting, especially if Christopher developed any powers of his own, being half Kryptonian.

“Good to hear,” Zara said as she crossed the room and picked up the infant who was crawling toward her, tiny mouth open wide in a smile. “Hi, baby! I heard you were a good girl for Uncle Clark.”

Kala shrieked and clapped in response.

“Thanks for taking her. It’s always so much easier to run errands without a nap-deprived child.”

“I know the feeling,” Lois said. “Did you want to stay for dinner?”

“Oh, no, thanks. I grabbed a slice of pizza before heading here. I appreciate the offer though.”

“Maybe some other night then,” Lois offered.

“I’d like that. Come on, Kala, we need to get home and get you into the bath before bed.” Zara shifted the baby on her hip and Clark handed her the diaper bag, which she shouldered without any effort.

“Goodnight, Kala,” Clark said in a sing-song voice. He kissed her on the head. “Love you, kiddo. Goodnight, Zara.” He gave the woman a peck on the cheek.

“Night, Clark. Night, Lois.”

“Night, Zara. Why don’t you come on over tomorrow night? We’ll let the kids play after work,” Lois said as she gave the woman a hug and cheek-to-cheek kiss.

“Sounds, great. What do you think, Kala?”

“Ayayabapfffft!” the baby agreed, her babble turning into a raspberry at the end.

After Zara left, Clark helped Lois to straighten up the living room. Then it was time for Christopher’s bath. Clark wound up soaked from head to toe as the boy splashed around in the plastic baby tub with a squeaky green alligator. He said his goodnights to the baby while Lois settled him into his crib after one more bottle. Clark was just pulling on a clean, dry t-shirt when Lois joined him in their bedroom.

“Zara’s done really well, adjusting to living here full time,” Lois observed. She went into the attached master bathroom and started taking her makeup off. “I mean, I know she lived here for a short time before she asked you to be New Krypton’s savior, but she always knew that, one way or another, she was going back to her home planet.”

“New Krypton wasn’t much of a home, the way I understand it,” Clark said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“True,” she conceded. “I’m glad we were able to help her get set up here. You know, it’s funny. I was so jealous of her when I first met her. After all, she was married to the love of my life. But now...” Clark could picture her shrugging at herself in the mirror.

“I know,” Clark replied, taking his glasses off and setting them on the nightstand. It was true that he didn’t need them when at home, but he wanted Christopher to only associate the man wearing glasses with “dada.” He rubbed his eyes for a moment. “She seems happy enough now, but the sadness is still there too. Sometimes, I wonder if she looks at me and wonders why I’m alive and Ching isn’t. Sometimes, the thought crosses *my own* mind when I look in the mirror.”

“Oh, Clark,” Lois said, emerging from the bathroom, now in

a soft pair of cotton pajamas with flamingos dancing all over the material. She came around the bed and held him close, squeezing him tightly. "You need to stop thinking like that."

"I've tried," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "I just...can't help it sometimes. I am *so* thankful to be alive, and to be able to spend my second chance at life with you and Christopher, don't get me wrong. I just wish something could have been done to save Ching too."

"I know you do," Lois said, kissing his cheek tenderly. "And I love you even more for it. It just proves to me, again, how truly gentle a soul you really are. And how lucky I am to have you for my husband."

"I think *I'm* the lucky one," he countered with a light kiss to her lips, allowing her to achieve her goal of distracting him. "I have you. I have our family."

"Speaking of," Lois said coyly, as she moved away to rest against the pillows on her side of the bed. She propped herself up on one elbow, facing him. "Christopher seems to love his play dates with Kala."

Clark followed Lois' lead, facing her on the bed. "He does," he agreed. "I'm glad he's got a playmate. Especially as they grow older. It'll be good for him to have someone his own age who will be like him. Assuming he inherits any super abilities, that is. And if not, at least they share a similar heritage."

"Well, there's always the possibility of siblings," Lois suggested.

"Maybe," Clark said, unconvinced.

He still considered Christopher's conception and birth to be a miracle that was highly unlikely to be repeated. Despite the easy and uneventful pregnancy Lois had enjoyed, Dr. Klein still maintained his theory that human and Kryptonian genes would rarely, if ever, be able to create a new life. Of course, Clark *hoped* for more children in the future, but he wasn't naive enough to expect that it would be easy, or even possible.

"You *do* want more children, right?" Lois asked.

"Of course I do. You know that. I just don't know if it's possible."

"Well," Lois said, drawing the word out as she dragged her finger over Clark's forearm, "I'm pretty confident that we can."

"Oh yeah?" Clark asked, raising an eyebrow. "Is that your way of saying that you want to try for another?"

"No," Lois said, again dragging the word out, but this time, not as long. "It's my way of saying that we already are."

That took a moment to sink in. When it did, Clark blinked. His mouth opened and moved, but no sound came forth. He shook his head slightly and tried again.

"You're pregnant?" he sputtered in disbelief.

Lois nodded. "We are."

"Really?"

"According to the test I took this morning while you were sleeping, yeah, we really are having another baby."

"Test? I didn't..."

He stopped in mid sentence. Of course he hadn't seen a test. It was garbage day. Lois would have taken the trash out before heading to the press conference, in an effort to hide the news so she could tell him herself.

"You're incredible," he said instead, wonderment in his voice.

He reached over to her and gathered her into his arms. His lips met hers in a passionate dance, as though their shared kiss was life itself. His heart beat wildly in his chest, as it always did when Lois was around, the result of the fierce intensity of his love for her. It was as if his entire body was too small to contain all of the love he had for Lois, the woman of his dreams, the mother of his children, the answer to all the prayers he'd ever prayed as a young man looking for his place in the world.

"I love you," he whispered to her as they parted for a breath.

"And I love you," she responded, before her lips crashed into his again, her hands already urgently tugging at his clothing.

Later, as they lay still cuddling with one another in bed, catching their breath from their lovemaking, Clark kissed Lois on the head. She had her eyes closed and seemed completely at peace as he held her. Clark listened to the steady beating of her heart and the gentle, even sounds of her breathing. Peace flooded his own body, the kind that only Lois' love could bring him.

"Clark?"

"Hmm?"

"I guess it's safe to assume that you're happy about the new baby?" she teased him.

Clark chuckled. "*Beyond* happy, Lois. For a long time, I wasn't sure I'd ever find love. How could I? I was too different. Too afraid to open up to anyone. Then, I found you. You fixed all the broken pieces in my life, made me feel safe, took away the fears that I had. Now, you've given me the home I'd always hoped for, but never dared to believe I could have. You've given me a *family*, Lois. You always have, ever since we met. Having children with you is the greatest miracle of my life. Even getting a new heart," he said as he shook his head, "can't compare to the miracles of Christopher and this new little baby."

"I'm just so happy that you *did* get your heart," Lois said, rolling over so that she could hug him and nuzzle into his side as they talked. "And I'm thrilled that I'm able to give you the family you've always wanted. Because, the truth is, you've given *me* a family and a home ever since we first met. That's part of why I was so scared to let you into my life and heart. Family had always been such a disappointment before. It was too painful to let anyone in when I was certain it was going to end in disappointment. I'm glad you forced your way behind my walls and didn't give up when I tried so hard to make you leave me alone."

"It was never an option for me. I fell in love with you the instant I saw you."

"It took me a little longer," she said, tracing random patterns on his chest with her finger, only to subconsciously drag her finger along the nearly invisible line of his transplant scar. "You just seemed too unreal, for a while, for me to be able to admit that you really were the perfect guy I'd been waiting for."

Clark smiled as Lois' finger kept on tracing his scar. "There isn't a day that goes by when I'm not thankful for my second chance at life, for the ability to see our son, and now this new little one, grow. Not a day goes by when I don't mourn Ching's death."

"I know," Lois said with a slight nod of her head. "I can always tell when that thought crosses your mind. You get quiet and sort of...contemplative."

"Sorry," Clark apologized. He'd never meant to make Lois feel uncomfortable.

"Don't be. It's part of who you are. Your kindness, compassion, and respect for others is part of why I love you. If you had no feelings at all toward Ching or the transplant, you wouldn't be the Clark that I know and love."

Clark smiled tenderly at her. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"I know," Lois said with mock arrogance, smiling and giving him a wink.

"No, really. You...keep me going. And you can always lift even the bleakest of my moods, bringing light into those dark moments — be it after a rescue gone wrong, or those moments where I feel so...unworthy...of this second chance. I love you for that."

"Well, that's funny," Lois said playfully. "It just so happens that you do the same for me."

Clark chuckled. "So...when do we get to meet this baby?" He pressed his hand to her midsection, knowing it was too early to

feel anything. But he'd always felt like he'd missed out on Lois' pregnancy with Christopher, though the reality was that he really hadn't missed anything more important than one or two monitoring ultrasounds.

"Well, if my math is correct, and I know that it is," Lois said, grinning from ear to ear, "about eight and a half more months."

"That long, huh?" Clark asked, feigning disappointment, complete with a pout.

"Gives us plenty of time to get the nursery ready," Lois said, shrugging. "Maybe we can paint this one together."

Clark blushed. "I'll try to restrain myself."

"It's a good thing we have four bedrooms," Lois commented.

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "Maybe one day, we'll have kids living in each of them."

Lois laughed. "Maybe!" Then, after a moment, "Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"For...everything. For our life together. Our children. For..." Her voice caught in her throat and she had to start again. "For fighting so hard, last year. For hanging on, even while machines were keeping you alive. I don't know how much you heard while you were...you know. But every day, I asked you to keep fighting and to come back to me. And you did."

"I don't remember anything between the time I had that last heart attack and when I awoke after my transplant. I knew, somehow, that time had passed. I don't mean an hour or a day. I knew it was longer than that, though I had no idea how long it had truly been. And I had this feeling...like..." He paused for a moment, grasping for words. "Like some...connection between us had kept me from slipping away. Something beyond our love and commitment to each other. I didn't have a name for the feeling back then. I still don't. It was almost like you'd willed me to live. I can't explain it any better than that."

"Whatever it was, I'm so grateful that it kept you with me. And, of course, for Zara's selflessness in giving up her husband's heart."

"Mmm," Clark hummed in agreement.

He kissed Lois, hoping to distract her from their conversation. He didn't want to dwell on the past, or what might have been. He wanted to enjoy the moment, holding his wife, wondering about his unborn child, imagining how much their life would be enriched by the addition of a new son or daughter — a little brother or sister for Christopher to love and play with. Still, the seeds of thought had been planted, and his mind *did* wander toward his heart.

He knew he was lucky. Every day, he thought about his second chance and of Ching. It was funny, in a way, he'd often thought to himself. When he'd first met Zara and Ching, they'd both seemed so...distant and cold. It was clear that they cared a great deal for the people of New Krypton, but love and passion seemed beyond their capability. Then, as he'd gotten to know them both, as he'd worked and fought alongside them in an effort to bring about peace, he'd been graced with the opportunity to see them both for who they truly were — for the very real and powerful love they had, not only for their people, but for one another. Though their society and customs had prevented them from outwardly showing their passions, Clark had come to grasp just how intense that passion truly was.

Yes, Ching, the stoic and hardened Kryptonian lieutenant, had loved — deeply and fiercely. Clark had seen it in the man's eyes, had heard it in the man's voice whenever Zara was near or the topic of discussion. And now, strange as it was, Ching's heart beat within the confines of Clark's chest. And it ached with joy and love every time he looked at Lois.

THE END