

All That Matters

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Rating: T

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I have a son

Superman was streaking across the sky with no destination or direction in mind whatsoever. He couldn't keep from smiling and his eyes were all but overflowing with unshed tears. *I have a son. Lois and I have a son. I'm not alone.* The thought kept going over and over in his mind.

Just then out of seeming nowhere a jet zoomed by much closer than he would have allowed had he been paying any attention. *Where did that come from?* He had been so preoccupied allowing his mind to play over and over every second of stored memory of the small boy, his son, Jason that he hadn't been watching where he was going. Coming back to reality he quickly zoomed up higher where he could allow for introspection and inattention without fear for the safety of others.

Was it really only moments ago that I cupped my son's face in my hand? That just a few moments ago I shared from memory the words my own father spoke to me?

He settled into place, the unfiltered sunlight felt so good on his still aching body. He had up and left the hospital sooner than he should have but that didn't matter. He was well enough. After all he had a son to see and acknowledge. After several seconds of healing rays he opened his eyes and focused far below where he floated. Somehow he had ended up almost back where he had started only high up unseen in the sky. He smiled as he watched Lois tuck *their* son back into bed. All was right with the world. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight of their son.

Lois smiled as she watched Superman fly off. Her heart felt lighter than it had since his return. *Has it really only been a few days? How can one's whole world change so fast?*

She sighed and headed back into the house. She went to her office and turned her laptop off. *No use trying to write anything tonight, it would be too sappy. Better put a little distance between myself and what just happened or I risk showing too much of my own heart to the world or just as importantly to the ones who matter most of all to me.*

Going into Jason's room she found the small boy just climbing back into his bed. "Mommy, Superman was here, he was here!" he whispered somehow understanding it was a secret between just the two of them. "He talked to me, I heard him as I was waking up but he was already gone when I opened my eyes."

"Did you hear what he said?"

He shook his head sadly, "Uhn ah, I think I was too much asleep to hear. Why did he leave Mommy? Did he talk to you, is he all better now?"

"I think maybe he is all better now." She smiled as she tucked him back in then brushed the hair out of his eyes. "We didn't really have time to talk but he did say that he'll be around so we'll see him soon, maybe even tomorrow. You need to close your eyes and go back to sleep now Munchkin." She leaned over kissing his forehead.

Standing she went over to close the window. Once it was closed she put her hand on the lock but hesitated looking out into the dark sky. After several seconds she turned the lock then stopped looking back over her shoulder at the son she now shared with a force stronger than nature. Realizing she couldn't keep them apart no matter how hard she tried, she quickly undid the lock. Truth be told she knew she no longer wanted them to be apart anyway.

Still Looking out the window she thought, *Yes, our world has fallen apart. Now the only question is how are the pieces ever going to fit back together?* She sighed and walked back to the bed and gave Jason one more kiss before heading out of the room.

Walking into the hallway she became melancholy once again and her mind couldn't help but wonder. *The picture has changed so radically, for Richard, for Jason for me and yes for Superman. How will all the pieces all fit back into one picture without leaving someone out?*

She headed for the bedroom she shared with Richard relieved to find that he was still asleep. She crawled into bed glad no decisions or explanations had to be made tonight. She was exhausted from the long trying day. Too much had happened, but thank God it turned out as it had. He was alright and after all that was all that really mattered.

Superman had watched from his vantage point holding his breath as Lois stood at the window. The smile turned to heartbreak and near despair as she closed the window and then turned the lock. He couldn't bare the thought of Lois locking Jason away from him even for a moment. Just as quickly his spirit turned back to jubilation as she stopped and undid the lock before leaving. Yes, everything was going to be alright. He had lost her, but he still had their son.

He was frozen in time and space as he watched his son sleep from that high altitude before finally coming back to reality and allowing duty to call him elsewhere.

Swooping down into the middle of a gunfight between two lone policemen and a gang of six thugs he quickly disarmed the gang slowing only long enough for the police to see what he had done so they would silence their own guns.

"Superman, A HA, AAAAAHAAAA! YOU ARE ALRIGHT!" One of the officers screamed joyously jumping around even as he rushed forward to confront the gang and start hand-cuffing them. His partner was also having a hard time containing his excitement at witnessing the hero back in action.

Superman waved as he continued on his way not stopping to answer or acknowledge their cheers feeling secure in the knowledge that there were two squad cars already screeching into the scene to help secure the gang. He had somewhere else he needed to go.

Arriving at the farm house he found it dark and empty. Going inside he found a note.

Clark,

*If you find this note **call** me on my cell.*

Ben was kind enough to take me to Metropolis to visit a very dear friend in the hospital. I'm not sure when we will be back.

I Love you so very much,

Mom

Smiling he took out his phone and dialed, it rang three times then he could hear some fumbling with the phone as she brought it to her ear. "Mom?"

"Clark, oh my lord, is that you?"

"Yeah Mom, I just found your note. I wanted you to know..."

"Oh Clark, are you really alright? You had me so scared."

"I'm fine Mom. Where are you? Are you alone or is Ben with you?"

"Ben's with me. We're just about to check into a hotel for the night. We're too tired to start the drive back home tonight. We were at the hospital almost all day. When I couldn't get hold of you after that, what are they calling it, a crystal quake I was afraid something had happened to you. We ended up with that crowd waiting to hear news of how Superman was doing most of the day."

"Superman is alright Mom."

"I wish you were here, I want to see for myself that you're alright."

"Mom, I'm alright. If you were there alone I would come bring you home, but since Ben's there with you..." his voice trailed off.

"There is no reason you can't come back here. I'm your mother and I need to see that you're alright. You had me really worried the last couple of days."

"Mom, I'm alright but I'm not completely well. I'm going to stay here and just rest tonight. I promise I'll call you again tomorrow and arrange to see you no matter where you are. Goodnight."

"Fine, but you better call me. Goodnight Clark."

Clark hung up the phone opened the refrigerator and pulled out the carton of milk frowning to see it was nonfat. He started to bring the carton to his mouth then smirking hearing his mother in his head admonishing him he grabbed a cup from the drainer nearby and filled it with the cold white liquid. Drinking the milk in one long gulp he washed the cup and replaced it in the drainer then slowly headed upstairs.

Pulling his suit off, he examined the hole and briefly thought of Luthor. Sighing laying the damaged suit over a chair he pulled a pair of PJ bottoms out of the nearby dresser feeling the crisp freshly washed material and soft scent he smiled again thinking of his mother. Could he ever measure up to the example his parents had set for him. He had started out so abysmally. He sighed with the magnitude of even the thought of what being a father meant.

Finally he lay down in the bed of his childhood looking around the room at how little had changed. His mind drifted back to the small boy that was now the center of his world. As he began to drift off to blissful sleep he was again thankful that Lois had not locked him out of their son's life. It didn't matter if he couldn't measure up all was right with the world. After all, Jason already had a good father and that was all that really mattered.

Pictures

Clark arrived at the office very early, on purpose the next morning. He had several reasons for doing so. As soon as the elevator doors closed he hovered up and opened the trap door allowing him to retrieve the clothes he had discarded two days earlier when he had left in search of Lois on that fateful day.

Entering the bullpen he disappeared into the storeroom to retrieve his suitcase and change out of the flannel shirt and jeans he was wearing and into one of his few remaining suits still suitable for the office. Once dressed for work he walked over to Lois' desk and without hesitation picked up two pictures the one with the frame he had accidentally broken and a second one with Jason's sweet face smiling up at him which sent shockwaves up and down his spine as soon as he looked at it.

Funny what a difference a few days made.

Clark smiled as he settled into his chair just short of two hours later having left his suit along with a few other things at a 24 hour cleaners but that was not what was causing the smile. No the smile was due to the picture in his hand. He had stopped at a drug store and made duplicate copies of both pictures and replaced the broken frame with a very similar one.

He looked over his shoulder to Lois' desk where he had returned the borrowed items. Satisfied everything was where it should be he pulled his phone out and called his mom knowing she would be up even at this still early hour.

"Mom, it's me."

"Clark, I'm so glad you called early, I hardly slept last night with worry about you. How are you feeling today?"

"Mom, I'm great. When are you heading back? Can we meet for breakfast?"

Just a short time later Clark entered the restaurant and saw his mother waving him over to where she sat with Ben. Before he was able to sit down she had risen and given him a hug kissing one cheek then the other in her enthusiasm.

"Mom. Mom, I told you last night I'm alright... really." Blushing he was finally allowed to take a seat as she pulled him down making room on her side of the booth. He gave an apologetic smile to the man sitting opposite him. "Good morning Ben. I know Mom appreciates you bringing her here but it really wasn't necessary. I'm not hurt."

"No problem. I enjoyed the ride and pleasant company plus it was rather interesting coming here and seeing that crowd yesterday. Good thing you weren't hurt you couldn't have gotten within a block of that hospital yesterday. That is unless you were Lois Lane." He chuckled.

Martha saw the hurt and embarrassed look on her son's face knowing he had most likely hated all the attention. Nonetheless, she felt she needed to keep the charade going to protect his cover. "Well, if you weren't hurt why didn't you answer my calls and let me know?"

Ben smirked then rubbed his nose feeling sorry for the boy who seemed to have gotten very uncomfortable.

Looking flabbergasted and hurt he replied, "Mom, I was just so busy...I... I didn't even realize you *had* called. I'm sorry. Now can we just order, I'm starving."

After they finished eating Martha excused herself leaving Ben and Clark alone. "You know son, your mother really worries about you a lot. I know your life must seem too busy to call home all the time but you really should call her more often. She thinks the world of you

and would do anything for you."

"I know. I..." he sighed frowning and looking away sadly, "I don't really deserve her. She never thinks of herself."

"I'm afraid that goes with the job of being a parent."

Nodding agreement, "Thanks again for being there for her when I wasn't. I'll do better in the future. I think I understand how she feels now." Finally looking back in the man's eyes he continued "And Ben, you must know she thinks the world of you too."

Ben shrugged and smiled looking down at his hands, now he seemed a little embarrassed at the attention.

"Ahem." he cleared his throat, "Just what *are* your intentions towards her?"

Ben thought for a few seconds before responding. "I asked her to marry me about a year ago. But she said she wasn't ready. I keep thinking she was waiting for you to get back to give her the O.K." he raised knowing eyebrows.

Clark chuckled softly, "Mom doesn't need my permission. If you love her don't let her get away while you worry about what someone else might say or think."

As Martha returned both men stood and Clark let her back into the booth. Ben cleared his throat. "Well, my turn I guess." He headed away leaving the mother and son a few moments in private.

Before Ben was even out of sight, Martha, having heard about the wound, surreptitiously put her hand on her son's lower back slowly moving it around as if comforting him. When she felt him flinch she stopped.

"Mom, please!" He squirmed away as far as he could on the seat.

"If you're alright then why did you flinch like that?"

"I told you I'm still a little sore but really I'm fine."

"I'll be home late tonight, *alone*. I want you to stop by so I can see for myself."

"I'll stop by but not for that reason, I have something to tell you that I can't tell you here." His eyes spoke volumes of someone holding a marvelous secret, "I *will* tell you it's something wonderful."

"Does it have a mop of wavy brown hair, the cutest dimples and big blue eyes?"

Clark's mouth fell open but he had to swallow his shock as Ben arrived back at the table.

"Well, Martha we had better start out if we want to make it home before nightfall. Clark, don't be such a stranger. Oh, and I already paid the check."

Martha looked over her shoulder at Clark who had gotten up to let her out and was following behind her as she and Ben made their way out of the restaurant. She couldn't help but be amused at his still bewildered expression. He might be a superman but he was still so naive about so many things.

Clark went back to find the office still empty. He quickly booted up his computer and started typing. Not more than fifteen minutes later he heard the elevator open and someone come up behind him.

"Kent, I hope you have something good to make up for your absence all day yesterday."

"Uh, Chief..." The man's eyes narrowed at him. "Um Sir, uh, I mean yes Sir. I was just putting the finishing touches on it and was about to send it to you."

The older man stood in place his expression guarded. Then relaxing somewhat he nodded. "Good. I would hate for you to let me down after I just re-hired you." He started to continue on to his office then he stopped and turned back. "Kent, next time at least check in. Jimmy

was worried that you were buried under a pile of rubble somewhere."

Clark relaxed and after sending Perry the file pulled up google to see if there had been any word or speculation of what had happened to Luthor. Finding none he pulled out his cell and contacted a source at the MPD. Still he found out nothing except what Lois had already reported in the Daily Planet the day before. He kept searching all the while thinking, *that man and his goons had to be somewhere. No doubt wherever they are, they're most likely bragging about beating up Superman. That video is going to show up somewhere on the net. Just how far could that helicopter have taken them?*

The office started to fill up. Lois and Richard entered just as Perry poked his head out of his office. "Kent, get in here now."

Clark took a deep breath and got up taking his pen and pad with him. He had to stop and let Lois pass before he entered the aisle. She barely gave him a look as she continued to her own desk. Entering the private office he smiled questioningly. "Chief, you wanted me?"

"How'd you get this? No one has seen him since he left the hospital except a few people at that gang shootout downtown just shortly after he disappeared from the hospital."

"Sir, I can't reveal my sources...."

"Clark, this isn't an unknown source, if it's real then the source has to be Superman."

"Um what I meant to say is I can't reveal how I managed contact with my source. Lois isn't the only one he contacts you know."

"That's right you did have several exclusives with him before he left. Alright, good job, it's going on the front page. What are you working on now?"

"I'm trying to trace down Luthor, so far nothing has turned up."

"Good keep at it. See if Lois has anything."

Clark had never been one to watch the clock. His life had always been so busy filled with trying to maintain two separate identities with two full time jobs that he didn't have time to worry about something as mundane as what time it was. Today was different starting around 10AM. Every few minutes he would look at the clock or check his watch. Time seemed to be crawling. At 2:31 he wondered, *What time did they usually bring Jason to the office after school anyway?* At 2:43 he surreptitiously looked through the wall to the street below thinking he heard a child's voice. Wrong child. 2:58 still no sign. Then just as he was checking the clock at 3:17 he heard a cry for help. *Darn, gotta go.*

As soon as the elevator doors opened Jason ran into the bullpen heading for the back of the office. Seeing the desk empty he looked around briefly hoping to find what he was looking for then looked up at the television monitors showing Superman arriving at the scene of a collapsed crane. Smiling he pulled something from his backpack and handed it to his mother who had just come up behind him. "Mommy, Mr. Clark's desk is too lonely. Could you put this picture I made on his bulletin board?"

"Are you sure, don't you want to give it to your Daddy he might like a new picture?" Looking at the picture she saw it was his new favorite subject, this time Superman carrying a small child in his arms. Maybe it was better he didn't want to give it to Richard.

"Uh huh" he shook his head. "Daddy has lots of pictures in his office. I made this one for Mr. Clark. He seems lonely and he only has that one picture." He said pointing at a picture of Clark smiling with an older woman with silver white hair.

Lois nodded "Well, I guess Clark might like some artwork on his bulletin board." She

stapled the picture to the board using Clark's stapler. "Okay, Munchkin can you go and entertain yourself for a little while in Daddy's office so Mommy can work?"

Jason nodded and padded to the office where Richard greeted him. Soon he was hard at work but every few minutes he looked around the office as if looking for something. Finally he looked up and grinned, Mr. Clark was back. The little boy watched the tall man notice the new artwork and smiled when he appeared to touch it with his fingertips as if making sure it was real. As the man turned around their eyes met and Jason wiggled his fingers in a tiny secretive wave.

"Daddy, is it alright if I go say hi to Mr. Clark?"

Richard didn't bother to look up from his work. "Sure Jason. Just come right back." He said half listening.

Jason jumped up and ran out of the office and raced over to Clark. "Do you like my picture? I made it special for you."

Clark stopped what he was doing and swiveled in his chair to give the small boy his full attention. "Yes, I like it a lot. Thank you."

"I can make you more if you want. I like to color and draw."

"I'd really like that."

Lois coming back from retrieving a new cup of coffee appeared at the boy's side. "Jason, are you bothering Clark. I'm sure he has a lot of work to do."

"Lois, no... no it's okay, he's not bothering me... really. I was just thanking him for the great picture he gave me."

"Well, your space *is* a little bare of personal effects. Hey, nice job on that article you turned in. Perry showed it to me."

"I hope you don't mind. You did say you didn't want Superman forced back in your life. When he contacted me I just thought..."

"He contacted YOU?" She shook her head in bewilderment then continued. "Clark, it's fine. I guess I did say that. It... it's just complicated." She frowned then shaking her head turned her attention to Jason brushing the hair out of his eyes. Clark nodded in understanding.

"Come on let's go see what your Daddy's doing." She smiled as she herded Jason in front of her then looked back at Clark, "You do know you're liable to have a wall full of artwork in the next few days don't you?"

Clark laughed, "I can live with that." he sighed under his breath and thought to himself, *I can definitely live with that.*

Clark went back to work but found he could hardly keep from checking on Jason every few minutes. As often as not the little boy was smiling back at him. He had to leave a couple of times to handle something as his alter ego and each time he noticed the little boy was observing his coming and going, funny that, no one else had ever paid him so much attention. He shrugged it off figuring Jason was just intrigued with him since he was new to the office.

After one such outing he returned to find Jason kneeling precariously on his desk trying to staple a new picture to his bulletin board next to the one already there. This one showed Superman flying high in the sky with a woman waving to him from the ground and a little boy hanging out a window. A third picture still on the desktop showed a man with big glasses sitting at a desk working on a computer.

"Here let me help you with that." Clark took the stapler from the small boy and helped him off the desktop as he looked around wondering where Lois and Richard were. He noticed that they were both in Perry's office deep in discussion about something and Richard's office

door was open. Obviously the little boy still feeling 'Daddies' office is boring' had taken advantage of his mother and father being busy with Uncle Perry to roam the office unattended. No one else seemed to have noticed.

Jason stood next to the tall man as he attached the new pictures with ease. The little boy's eyes traveled to the spot where Superman had been stabbed just a couple days earlier. He tentatively reached his hand out and ever so gently touched the spot with one finger and whispered. "Does it still hurt?"

Clark turned to face him and reacted aghast, "What.. what do you mean?"

Jason just smiled in answer, then once again in a serious but whispered tone. "I'm glad you are all better. If you visit me again tonight can you come *before* I go to sleep?"

Clark's mouth once again fell open. There was no doubt what he had meant now and he didn't have a clue how to answer.

Can't You See It Is Just Me?

Clark stood awestruck for several seconds before he found his voice and was able to respond coherently. After looking around nervously to make sure no one was watching he knelt down to be closer to eye level with the small boy. "No one has seen through my disguise before how did you?"

Jason just shrugged his shoulders as if it was nothing, "It was easy, you look just like him only with glasses and messed up hair." Before Clark had the presence of mind to stop him the little boy reached up and grabbed the glasses off his face and began putting them on. Holding them in place to keep the too big glasses from falling off he shrugged again. "See, can't you tell it's still just me?"

Clark gulped realizing just how thin his disguise really was. He nodded that of course he could. "Most grownups don't see the world of possibilities as clearly as they should or as clearly as a child does. They only see what they want to see or expect to see. No grownup would ever expect to find Superman hiding as someone like Clark Kent." He quickly retrieved the glasses and pushed them back in place. Looking around once again he was thankful that his desk was in a corner and felt certain that no one had noticed or heard what had just transpired.

Seeing the discomfort on the man still kneeling beside him the little boy tried to offer help. "Maybe you should wear a mask like Batman or Mr. Incredible, or even Spiderman. Nobody can tell who they are."

"Jason it's not that easy, I didn't want to wear a mask because I don't want people to be afraid of me." He whispered back.

"I'm not afraid of them." Jason shook his head decisively.

"Good, I'm glad, but Spiderman is just make believe and Mr. Incredible, I don't even know who that is."

"You've never heard of Mr. Incredible? He's in my favorite superhero movie, The Incredibles; you've never seen that movie?" He asked incredulous.

Clark shook his head sadly. "I haven't seen any movies for a very very long time, before you were born even."

Jason seemed saddened at that, he could hardly believe that everyone had not seen his favorite all time movie. Then putting his finger in his mouth thinking for a second his eyes twinkled as he excitedly exclaimed, "We have the DVD you could come over and watch it with me and Daddy." That seemed to remind him of something else entirely as his expression once again turned to a look of confusion and he reverted back to whispering. "I heard what Mommy whispered to you when you were hurt and sleeping at the hospital. What did she mean?"

Clark caught his breath, yet again taken off guard by the little charmer. Unsure just how to proceed he looked past Jason and sought out Lois finding her, Richard and Perry still in a heavy debate about something in Perry's office. He was curious what could have them so distracted that they had missed Jason wondering the office but at present he was too captivated by his son to focus elsewhere. He looked back at Jason once again giving him his full attention. "What did you hear her say?"

Once again the little boy shrugged, then leaned over and whispered in Clark's ear just as Lois had. "'Don't leave us again Jason is going to need his father'. That's what I heard..." Then looking even more confused with perhaps a bit of hope mixed in he asked "Are you my Daddy? Are we gonna spend weekends do-in stuff together?"

Clark sighed deeply clearly not ready for those questions. Again looking around the room

to assure himself that they were not being watched or overheard, he leaned in close to Jason. "You need to ask your mother to explain what she meant. It's not my place right now. Jason, your Mother doesn't know that I'm Superman. I need you to keep my secret at least until I can tell her. Can you do that?"

Jason looked pensive, "I'm not suppose'd to keep secrets from my Mommy and Daddy."

"I know Jason, and I really hate to ask you to keep this secret but your Mommy is going to be really mad at me when she finds out and it would be better if she finds out from me. Do you understand that?"

The little boy nodded sadly. "I don't want Mommy mad at you, I won't tell anybody."

"Good, I'll tell her as soon as I can but your Mommy should be the one to tell your Daddy. Okay?"

He nodded again then taking a big breath accepting everything as settled, "I'm hungry. Do you have anything in your desk for me to eat? My Daddy always has a snack for me."

Clark grinned then grimaced. "No I don't have anything in my desk... but wait, I could get you something out of the vending machines, what would you like?" He got up and the two headed for the kitchen hand in hand.

Jason smiled broadly looking up at the tall tall man. "Can you get me a candy bar... and a root beer?" he asked excitedly.

Clark smirked knowingly, "Jason, your Mommy would kill me if she found out I gave you a candy bar or root beer."

Jason stopped and pouting muttered, "I never get anything good."

Soon they were back at Clark's desk with Jason sitting on top of it with his feet dangling as they shared two apples and a banana that had been cut into neat bite size pieces.

Clark noticed Jason eyeing him peculiarly as he ate. "What's the matter?"

"How do you change to Superman?"

Clark laughed, "I have the other suit on under this one." He whispered back.

Jason frowned as he looked intently at Clark's neckline. "Even the cape?" Clark smiled and nodded raising his eyebrow.

"Mr Incredible doesn't have a cape cause Edna says capes are dangerous and could get caught in stuff. Has your cape ever got stuck?"

"Edna? No, no my cape is very useful to me and besides I kinda like it."

"Edna makes super hero suits. I guess she doesn't make yours since you have a cape? She wouldn't let Mr. Incredible have a cape even when he asked for one." Seeing Mr. Clark's expression he quickly added. "I know they're just pretend."

"Hmmm. I guess I really need to see this movie huh?" Jason nodded and took another bite of banana. Clark smiled and settled back in his chair savoring the prospect of watching a movie, any movie with his son.

Lois and Richard had been in Richard's office several minutes discussing the article Clark had written and the need for follow-up articles. Lois got up and paced back and forth in thought then purposefully went to the far window and peered into Richard's office to check up on Jason. She smiled seeing him deep in concentration with his tongue sticking out between his lips no doubt working on yet another masterpiece. Satisfied she went back to pacing and then sat in the chair next to Richard as they continued the long discussion with Perry.

About fifteen minutes later Lois stood up and craned her neck to peer into the adjoining office to check on her son. Not seeing him she walked over to the window for a better view.

He was no where to be seen. She turned her search to the bullpen and almost immediately saw the small boy perched on Clark's desk with the man himself seated close by. She watched for a few seconds almost transfixed as the two laughed and talked animatedly. She couldn't shake the feeling she got watching them that something about the two of them together was so natural, even expected. Coming out of her reverie she went out to retrieve her wayward son.

"Munchkin, what are you doing out here bothering Mr. Kent? You were supposed to stay in your dad's office, you know that."

Jason looked up innocently, "I just wanted to give Mr. Clark some more pictures and then I got hungry." He finished the piece of apple in his hand and grabbed two more pieces just in case his mother made him go back to his Daddy's boring office.

Clark had risen as Lois approached and took an almost apologetic stance. "He wasn't bothering me, I needed a break anyway and besides I find him quite entertaining."

Richard came up behind Lois having heard what was said. "Well my office can be a little confining for him. I guess no harm done." He ran his hand through the boy's hair sweeping it out of his eyes. "What are you eating?" Jason opened his hand and showed his remaining pieces of apple.

Clark spoke up, "I wasn't sure what he could eat, but figured apples and bananas would be on any restricted diet. I hope that was alright."

"Good choice, no doubt he tried for something filled with sugar?" Lois smiled at Jason and his reaction confirmed her suspicion. "Thanks Clark but we really don't expect you to baby-sit our child. I guess we were a little distracted."

"Really, I didn't mind. You... two have a very special little boy there."

"Yes, we do and thanks Clark we'll try and not make it a daily occurrence." Richard said as he picked Jason up and headed away either not noticing or ignoring the hesitation in his co-worker's voice. "Come on champ let's go back to my office and let your Mom and Mr. Kent get back to work or we'll be here all night."

Lois turned back to Clark after watching Richard walk away. She couldn't help noticing Jason's wave or Clark's happy response in kind. "Ahhh Clark, back to business, that article you wrote was good but sadly lacking in some of the detail and specific things that people really want to know."

"Huh? What do you mean lacking, aren't we suppose to leave them wanting more?"

Lois smiled not surprised in his answer, "Exactly, it leaves the door wide open for a follow-up and you know Perry. He is now demanding we co-write the follow-up articles. Richard and I tried to talk him out of it but he is insisting you and I work together. He wants the old Lane-Kent style back on the front page."

"I'm sorry... I know you don't want to cover Superman anymore, I just thought..."

Interrupting him she came in close to make sure they could speak privately. "Clark, I know I said that but I'm not sure I even mean it anymore. I can't stay mad at the guy forever you know. Besides this is about a lot more than just Superman."

Softly hitting his chest with the notepad in her hand she handed it over and smiled looking him in the eye. "Here's a list of questions the three of us came up with that we need to get answered. Check it out and add any more you think of. I'm going to start digging up some of the answers plus we need to set-up a meeting with Superman to fill in the gaps from him."

Looking down at the napkin still on Clark's desk she licked her lips, "Are you going to eat that last piece of apple?"

Clark just smiled as he shook his head. Lois snatched the apple up and walked over to her

desk munching it as she keyed in her password to wake her computer up from the screensaver. *I probably should change that password...someday.* She thought as she went back to work.

Watching her walk away and sit down at her desk to work he smiled thinking to himself as he watched her key the letters. *She doesn't hate me.* He sighed and finally sat down and began going over the notes trying not to laugh at the many spelling errors. Then on a whim looked at his computer screen and pulled up a search engine and keyed in Mr. Incredible. Choosing the WikipediA site from the listings he smiled as he read the article and laughed outright at the images.

Lois looked up from her work hearing Clark laugh and wondered just what he could be finding so funny. Shrugging she went back to work.

Closing the WikipediA window he pulled up the Planet classified ads and searched for nearby rentals making note of a couple listings that looked promising. Living out of a work storage room was getting old fast. Going back to work he added to the list and began his own research.

Some time later Jimmy came up behind him. "Mr. C. You're back. Man, I was so worried when you didn't show up yesterday. I guess you were working some lead, huh?"

"Sorry Jimmy, I guess I didn't stop to consider that anyone would be worried. I've just gotten use to doing my own thing the last few years. I guess I need to remember to report in if I'm out chasing an elusive lead for a long time."

"Yeah, I guess I know how that can be. The Chief had me out doing a photo spread of the damage around the city all day."

Lois came up behind Jimmy. "Speaking of elusive leads, have you tried to contact Superman yet?"

Clark looked incredulous shrugging his shoulders. "Me, I don't contact him, he contacts me. Don't you know how to contact him?"

Lois rolled her eyes and picked up her notepad from his desk then with her other hand grabbed his tie pulling him to his feet then practically dragged him to the elevator with her. "Come on Kent, I'll show you how it's done and you can play chaperon. That should keep both Richard and Perry happy."

"But, Lois," Clark objected. "I'm not ready. I haven't finished with my research yet, I want to be prepared."

"You really are a boy scout. Never mind, it doesn't matter we'll use what we already have. Sometimes you just have to make things happen."

"And sometimes you just have to go with the flow and let things happen as they happen?" Clark asked with dubious confidence.

"Now you got it. Me, I would much rather be on top and make things happen," Lois said firmly as she pushed the elevator button. "I'm tired of playing this game by his rules, I want some real answers and explanations and we're not coming back till I get them. You Clark Smallville Kent are going to help me get them."

As the elevator doors started to close Clark looked into the bullpen and saw Richard standing at his office door laughing at Lois' antics while Jason stood behind him watching with unmistakable anticipation in his bright eyes and winsome smile. Clark couldn't help but wonder and worry just how she would react to those real answers once she got them. But she was right, it was more than just about Superman and he had to keep focused on what really mattered and have faith that in the long run everything would work out as it should.

Revelations - Lois

Clark watched Lois quickly exit the elevator and immediately move to the far wall as she looked around the ornate roof. Was she disappointed that his alter ego wasn't there waiting for her? He stood transfixed in the doorway so conflicted that he did not even register consciously that he was keeping the doors from closing. He knew what he had to do he just wasn't sure if he had the strength or courage. What if he only made things worse?

Seeing Clark hesitating Lois prodded him. "Clark, what are you doing? Are you just going to hide in the elevator or come out here and help me watch for Superman to show himself?" Sighing she turned back to the darkening sky. "Come on Superman, you keep telling me that you're always around, so where are you?"

Clark stepped out onto the roof finally allowing the doors to close. He noticed the area around where the water tank had been was taped off then looked over his shoulder at the empty framework for the world famous Planet symbol. Finally coming to himself he spoke. "It seems so strange up here with the globe missing from its pedestal."

Lois turned back to face him as she leaned back against the far wall. "The Globe is still on the street behind the building." She said sarcastically then continued. "Even worse, what's left of that 747 is still in the ballpark how many days later?"

He slowly moved to within a few feet of where Lois was standing at the wall. "Well I guess Superman has been kinda busy. Besides maybe he's been more concerned with the living as opposed to mere property."

"Clark, sometimes it seems that what Superman does best is leaving things broken."

Was that hurt or anger in her voice he wondered? "Is that what you really think?" He took the final steps to her side and was almost too afraid to ask his next question? "Lois did he leave *you* broken?"

She strolled away and said under her breath barely a whisper for no one's ears. "No he left me pregnant and all alone in the dark."

What she wasn't counting on was that someone did hear. "Lois I'm sorry I left you."

She jerked back around at the sound of his voice. "You sound just like *him*." As she turned back to face him she was taken by the stark yet familiar look on his face but chose to ignore the chills running up and down her spine. "What, you think that maybe if you had stayed I would have settled for you instead of Richard? Is that it?"

"You settled?" Her statement had thrown him off balance and unsure of how to proceed.

"Clark, that is not what I meant. I thought I was in love with Superman but obviously that was a hopeless crush and besides it was a long time ago. I've gotten past it and now Richard and I are making a real life with *our* son."

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"I just want some answers from the man I once thought I loved. You've always been a good friend I hoped you could help me get those answers so I could put a close to that chapter of my life and finally move on."

"So you want me to help you move on?"

"Yes."

"That is going to be considerably more complicated than you think Lois."

"And just why is that, because you haven't gotten over your crush on me?"

"Hrumph, That is beside the point. It's because, believe it or not I know a few things that you don't."

"Oh, and just what is that?" Then something moved in her peripheral vision and she held

up her hand, "Wait I think I saw him?" Clark half laughed, seeing nothing she looked back at him.

"Everything, I know everything you ever wanted to know about Superman. I'm always around. Haven't you ever wondered just what that could possibly mean?"

Lois looked him in the eyes noticing his demeanor had changed but not sure at what point that had happened. "You've heard him say that too? So, you two are what, friends?"

"I wouldn't say we're friends." Lois looked around the horizon again unable to keep eye contact with this new version of Clark that she found unsettling but couldn't put her finger on just why that was so. "You won't find what you're looking for out there. He's not there, look closer."

Turning back, "Why are you acting like this? Just tell me what you are hinting at." Her breathing was almost forced.

"Your son can see the truth."

"What about Jason? What does he have to do with this?"

"It's one thing for me to keep secrets from you but I can't ask a child to keep secrets from a parent on my behalf."

"What secrets could you possibly have that Jason knows and I don't." she trembled as her eyes became moist unable to come to terms with just where this was leading.

"The secrets embody the very questions you said you wanted answered. The reason we are standing here together now. You knew the answers once, is it really so difficult to accept them now? Lois, I really am always around."

Lois swallowed hard and looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. It was all there, the color and texture of the hair, the dimples when he smiled, the height when he stood up straight, the voice usually different but now the same. The only holdout being the eyes that seemed bigger and a different color behind the glasses. She reached up and hesitantly removed the remaining barrier and was struck by the change. The eyes were really smaller without the distortion and that blue that matched Jason's so perfectly was now there for anyone to see.

She forgot to breath and then darkness.

Clark caught her with the easiest of movements and settled her in his arms never letting her touch the ground. His cheek brushed up against hers, that was all he allowed himself as her breathing normalized and her eyes began to flutter open.

Opening her eyes it seemed like the recurrence of a dream she had had for so many years. Her vision was filled with his face so close to hers she could have kissed him with the slightest of movements. His eyes were moist yet clear blue and there was no question of the love she saw there. From what seemed like a distance she heard his soft voice. "Are you alright? I never wanted to cause you pain, not then and certainly not now. Please forgive me." His hand caressed her face wiping away a stray tear trailing down her cheek.

"Wha...What happened?" she managed to say bringing her own hand up to wipe her eyes.

"You fainted."

She tried to pull away from his arms but realized she still needed support to remain steady on her feet. "You kissed me." She said breathless trying to put things in their proper order. What was real and what was but a dream.

"That was a long time ago."

"You almost died... I forgot you ... we had a son?" It seemed all scrambled in her head.

"It's all there Lois, it always was. The memories are all there just below the surface hidden away in your subconscious mind waiting for you to want to remember bad enough to

take the risk."

"But how... hidden... and why?"

"A hypnotic suggestion, I couldn't stand to see you in such turmoil you were falling apart in my arms. Forgive me. I didn't know what else to do. I'm not even completely sure how I did it only that I did. When you didn't find peace and regain your memories in a few days I was convinced it was permanent and that we were never meant to be together."

The pieces began to fall into place and Lois again wiped away her tears as everything started to make sense for the first time in years. "That is the real reason you left, you were as lost and alone as I was."

"Yes. Yes and I remained so till the second you whispered to me not to leave you again, that Jason needed his father."

She inhaled deeply, "Jason, you told Jason." The thought of Jason gave her strength and resolve.

"No, our son saw right through my disguise. Plus he heard what you whispered to me."

"But how?"

"How do you think? He is every bit our son? But young as he is he doesn't quite understand what you meant. He asked me if he was going to spend weekends doing stuff with me."

"What *did* you tell him? I would like to know just what your intentions are too. And don't give me that I'm always around." She was starting to feel more like herself.

"Sorry..."

Finally sure that she was steady enough to stand without his support she pulled back just slightly. "If you're truly sorry then quit the bull and just tell me. I'm not up to any more of this double talk right now."

Clark looked away momentarily distracted then seconds later Lois heard a siren in the distance. "Terrific, go, just go if you have to." She threw up her arms in surrender.

He frowned, "No, It's not necessary it's only a one alarm fire in an already partly demolished warehouse. They'll be fine without me."

"You were saying then?"

"I told Jason that you needed to explain to him what you meant, that it wasn't my place. As to my intentions, I want to be as much a part of my son's life as you and Richard will allow." Seeing Lois' reaction to that he added. "I also told Jason that you should be the one to tell Richard my secrets."

She seemed to be confused, "You *want* me to stay with Richard?"

"What I want doesn't really matter, I gave up that right years ago." He took a deep breath turning away slightly to regain his composure then turned back to face her again. "What matters is that above all you and Jason are happy and secure. You were right, Richard is a good man and if he is the man you love then yes you should to stay with him but if you do he needs and deserves to know the truth. There is no denying that he has been everything that I wasn't and should have been. All I do ask is that you let me be a part of my son's life and that you let me live up to my responsibilities as his father."

They both seemed to be spent. "There is nothing in this that can be printed but I..." She stopped "I..."

"Lois, I can take care of Perry. Just go home and take care of your family." The concern and empathy was apparent in his voice.

"Are you sure?"

He half smiled. "Go. You know I can. Just tell Jason how much I love him and give him a goodnight kiss for me." Lois turned and without looking back entered the elevator and disappeared from view as the doors closed.

"I love you too Lois. I always have and always will." He said to the wind. Seconds later he took to the sky seeking the healing comfort only the sun could give him to overcome the heartache he was now feeling full force. If he kept telling himself Jason was all that mattered perhaps he would be able to forget all he had lost... eventually.

Revelations - Jason and Richard

Lois entered the bullpen and Jason was almost immediately by her side looking past her to the empty elevator confused. "Where is Mr. Clark?" Then seeming to figure something out he looked at the monitor for confirmation but finding none he looked back up at her.

Lois ran her fingers through his hair smiling silently conveying to the little boy what he wanted to know. "I think Mr. Kent had to go run an errand" she winked at him and continued towards Richard's office.

Richard looked up smiling to see her then noticed she seemed subdued and not quite herself. "Lois, is something wrong?"

"I'm not feeling right. Can we just go home? Clark said he would handle things here and I trust his judgment."

"Just give me five minutes to clear off my desk. Jason put your crayons back in your backpack."

The ride home was quiet, Richard sensed something was fundamentally changed and knowing that she had gone to try and meet Superman with Clark had him dreading the prospect of finding out just what that change was.

Only Jason seemed happy singing to himself in the back seat. The only words spoken were deciding what to pick up for dinner and Lois seemed to care less as long as Jason was happy with the choice so of course they ended up with burritos.

When they arrived home Lois hesitated in the kitchen then poured Jason a glass of soy milk. Sitting it on the table she rubbed her brow as she spoke. "Richard will you please make sure Jason drinks his milk? I just need to lie down for a little while. I'll eat later if I start feeling better."

Jason looked up momentarily forgetting his burrito, "Are you sick Mommy?"

"I just have a headache honey. I'm sure I'll be fine if I lay down for a little while."

Richard got up and kissed her wanting to make sure she knew he was there for her no matter what was going on in her head. "Take all the time you need Honey. We'll have a boy's night." Somehow he understood from her demeanor that what she needed now was time, time alone. He had seen this side of her before and knew he had to be patient. Pushing her to open up before she was ready would only make things worse. He loved her enough to give her whatever she needed even if it meant he had to suffer in ignorance and silence his own concerns. She was more than worth it and so was their son. He could be as patient as she needed him to be.

Lois lay on the bed reviewing the last five years in her head with a new perspective in light of the lost memories now restored. How could she reconcile her love for Richard in light of her love for ...for, was it Superman or Clark or something in between where the two melded into one whole person. Her head was spinning, unable or unwilling to choose one man over the other. Suddenly she wished she had the Wisdom of Solomon.

She closed her eyes and soon she was floating in a sea of white, the strongest and warmest of arms encircling her making her feel safe and loved beyond reason. Opening them again she remembered the love and adoration she had felt the last few years. She remembered the man who had put her comfort and well being above all and accepted a son he knew was not his own with an open and loving heart.

She had never been one to absolve into tears but this night the tears flowed and she was powerless to control them. How could she once again let go of the man who touched her soul

and sent her heavenward now that she had found him again. But then how could she not stay with the man who had been her constant source of love and steadiness when she and Jason had needed it most.

Sleep had finally given her some relief. She was awakened a couple hours later to the sound of Jason padding away from her bed in his PJs. "Honey?"

"I'm sorry Mommy, I didn't mean to wake you I just wanted to kiss you goodnight."

"It's alright. Just let me wash my face and I'll be in to finish tucking you in bed."

When Lois entered the room Richard was just finishing a bedtime story. He leaned over giving the little boy a kiss. "Goodnight Champ I want a rematch this weekend." He winked and allowed Lois to take his place at the bedside.

"I'll be down in a couple minutes. Would you pour me a glass of red wine?"

Richard nodded then left the room. He hesitated just outside the doorway for a second then shook his head and headed downstairs telling himself, *just give her room, give her whatever she needs and pray it will be enough.*

"Are you mad at Mr. Clark, is that why you feel bad tonight?"

"No, honey I'm not really mad at him just a little confused. He told me you know his secret and that you heard what I whispered to him the other night."

Jason nodded, "Is he my weekend Daddy like the one Frankie Murphy has?"

"Well it's a little like that but different too."

"If he is like Frankie's other Daddy then how come he wasn't here before like Frankie's other Daddy was?"

"Remember Superman went away on a long long trip where there weren't any phones or any way to let him know you were born. He didn't know you were his son till I told him."

"Am I gonna grow up big and strong like Mr. Clark or like Daddy cause I'm confused now?"

"You are going to grow up big and strong like both of them, especially if you eat your vegetables." She smiled tickling his sides making him squirm.

"Yuck." He made a face. "Daddy doesn't know, about Mr. Clark, huh?"

"Daddy knew you had another daddy but no, he doesn't know who he is. I'm going to tell him tonight then we'll all know." She leaned down and kissed his cheek. "You are a very lucky little boy to have so many people who love you so very much." She started to get up then stopped and leaned back down and kissed his cheek again. "That was from your other daddy. He asked me to kiss you goodnight for him."

"He's not going to visit me tonight is he?" He pouted slightly looking over at the window as he spoke.

"No honey but he loves you very much and we'll see him tomorrow, now nighty night."

Lois closed the door and leaned against it for a second. Everything was going to be alright. The three of them would do anything to keep that little miracle safe and happy. She headed downstairs thankful Richard was so patient with her. Oh he did have his moments of jealousy but for the most part he was the poster child for *calm under pressure*. This was sure to be a test to just how calm he could be.

Revelations - Richard

Richard watched Lois slowly descend the stairs. He got up and handed her the chilled glass of wine she had asked for then offered her a small plate of cheese and crackers. She took it then nodded towards the patio. "Let's take this outside I could use some fresh air."

Richard followed her outside to the patio table and they took seats overlooking the water. He finally got up the nerve to ask, "Are we alright?"

"I hope we will be. But there are a few things I need to tell you."

"I'm listening."

"I don't feel up to beating around the bush so here goes. Jason's father is back and he wants to be part of his son's life." She took a deep breath and looked him square in the eyes continuing before she lost her resolve. "Richard, Clark is Jason's father."

"Clark?" He looked disbelieving. "But how?"

"We had a very brief affair and he left before I even knew I was pregnant."

Richard exhaled, the strain leaving his face. Jumping up he embraced her. "Thank god, I was scared to death that you were going to tell me you had lied and you had been involved with Superman." He laughed releasing the tension he had been holding onto, he could deal with Clark being the missing part of her past. "I was paranoid to think Jason could ever have resulted from such a union...that would have been impossible..." He stopped, feeling her tighten up in his arms. Pulling away he could see the pain in her eyes. "Lois?"

She started hesitantly, "Richard, remember when you jokingly compared Clark to Superman?"

Richard's eyes filled with dread...he felt like he had just been hit in the stomach.

"No...please say this isn't happening. Lois ...please...I can't bear to lose you, you two mean everything to me... how can I ever hope to compete with... him." He turned away unable to face her.

"Richard I'm not going anywhere, at least not now unless you want us to leave. I need you to believe me when I say I didn't even know, or at least remember the truth till this afternoon."

He turned back around but still looked utterly deflated.

"I love you and I need you to help me make sense of all of this. Jason needs you and the stability only you can help me give him."

"You still love him."

She took a deep breath and continued looking him in the eyes. "Yes, but not the way I love you. I'm not sure I can ever fully trust the love I feel for him. I think he understands and he wants us to be happy, most of all he wants Jason to be happy. All he is asking is to be allowed to be a part of Jason's life and be allowed to live up to his responsibilities."

"How could Superman be a father to Jason without endangering him? Look how your life has been threatened due to your association with him." His spirit was bolstered but he still felt concern.

"He can't as Superman but as Clark he can. Didn't you see how they connected today? Jason gravitated right to him. How can we deny him that connection that he felt so naturally for his father? Besides, Jason is smarter in some ways than all three of us and I doubt we could ever keep them apart in the long run."

"What, are you saying he knows?" Seeing her nod, "How?"

"He saw right through the disguise and evidently he heard me whisper to Superman that he was Jason's father when we visited him in the hospital."

"Wait, I thought you only found out tonight. I'm getting confused."

"No wonder, it's pretty complicated. Didn't you see the room with the demolished piano on Luthor's yacht?" Richard nodded frowning trying to make sense of everything. "Jason threw the piano at a thug who was about to kill me. He saved my life. That is when I knew for sure that Superman was his father. I was just confused as to how it was possible since I couldn't

remember ever being with him that way."

"Then just who did you think was Jason's father?" He was having a hard time following the multitude of revelations. He looked at his wine glass and set it aside still half full.

"Richard I honestly didn't know. I lost almost a week of my life at the very time Jason was conceived. It was during the time Zod and those other two Kryptonians were here. The news was all over *where was Superman*. The only plausible explanation I could come up with was that I had gotten upset and cried in my beer enough to get drunk, met someone at a bar and couldn't remember." She shrugged stopping to catch her breath.

"Wait... he threw that piano? Then Luthor knows about Jason?"

Lois nodded. "Oh no, I forgot to tell Clark about that. He needs to know. That maniac is still out there somewhere!"

The two continued talking well into the night. Lois told him everything making sure that she held nothing back. Maybe they would all be alright.

Picking Up the Pieces

Feeling replenished after lingering for several long minutes in the high stratosphere where the sun's beams were not blocked by the Earth's rotation Superman headed back to the alley behind the Daily Planet. Not stopping in his flight he swooped down picking up the iconic globe in one graceful movement and seemingly floated it back up to the roof like a weightless bauble. He placed it back within the framework and proceeded to make the necessary repairs insuring it would never fall away so easily in the future. Floating back he admired the once again brightly lit spinning globe back where it surely belonged, on top of the Daily Planet Building. So fitting his second home should be graced with a symbol representing the planet he so dearly loved.

Next he headed for the ballpark and sought out the head of the crew still investigating the crash. A short time later he was working his way under the fuselage testing the metal to make sure it would not now disintegrate if he lifted it up and attempted to carry it away. The investigators and a few curious sightseers and news reporters gave him room and cheered him on in the brightly lit ballpark. Taking a deep breath he lifted the ravaged airship into the air.

People watching couldn't help but wonder if he was straining slightly as the ship ascended and disappeared from view. After all, he had been mostly missing since he had lain near death in the hospital just the day before. Times had changed people now were worried about the wellbeing of their savior.

He continued working going where he was most needed until he decided his mother had had time to arrive home and get settled. Smiling he made good time and didn't slow down until his boots touched down on the old wooden porch. She was anxiously waiting for him and practically knocked the picture album she had been looking at off the table as she jumped up to greet him as soon as he walked in the door.

Embracing him tightly she almost cried. "Don't you ever do that to me again! What ever made you think you could lift that mountain of Kryptonite?"

Hugging her back feeling the comfort only a mother could provide, even a grown son he responded. "Mom, I'm sorry. I didn't have any choice. I had to do it. I was as much responsible for that disastrous mess as Luthor. I had to clean it up."

Martha shook her hand. "Clark, you are not responsible for what a madman does. He stole your property and he misused it. Enough said, I don't want to talk about that monster anymore tonight? Are you sure you're alright?"

"Mom, I told you already, I'm fine. Just a little sore, that's all."

She gave him one last inquiring look before giving up. "Well, I bet you're hungry. I can make you some dinner while we talk."

Clark smiled. "That would be nice. But first, how do you know about Jason?"

"All I had to do was use the two good eyes God gave me. It was like seeing you little all over again. A mother never forgets what her children look like especially the first time they see them." Seeing the look on his face she pointed to the still open book on the table. "These have always been my favorite pictures of you. Jonathon took them the day after we found you." She brushed her fingers lovingly over the images of a small boy sweetly smiling at the camera dressed in a blue t-shirt that dragged on the ground it was so big.

"These pictures are all that kept me sane those five long years you were gone. They are burned in my memory." Clark looked from the pictures back up to her face that seemed to be almost glowing with love. "How could I not have seen you in that sweet little boy Lois carried at the hospital?"

They continued to talk as they prepared the meal together and then ate. Clark filled her in on all that had happened, how Jason had come to be and where things currently stood. Afterwards they cleaned up the kitchen still talking until he finally insisted he needed to go. Just before he left she pulled one of the pictures out of the book and handed it to him. "Give this to Lois. I'm sure she would love to have it."

Smiling he answered, "I have a picture of Jason for you too. But I don't have it with me now. I'll bring it soon, promise." Then smiling even broader, "If things work out the way I hope they do, maybe I'll be able to bring him to meet his grandmother." He kissed her cheek and disappeared.

Martha placed her hand on her heart as she felt rather than saw him leave. "That would make all my dreams, wishes and prayers come true."

Superman spent most of the night doing what only he could, not stopping till he remembered he had to finish his other job before morning. Arriving at the office he worked alone in the dim bullpen. Quickly finishing what needed to be done and satisfied with the result he emailed a copy to Lois. At least keeping busy helped him keep his mind off her and if she and Richard were really going to allow him to continue to see his son now that they knew just who he was. He had faith that they would and determined to do whatever they asked to make it happen.

Taking his glasses off he wondered why he had even bothered with them in the solitude of the early morning hours. He pushed the keyboard away and settled his head in his arms finally surrendering to his exhaustion from the long day and night. Perhaps if he could just close his eyes for a few minutes he would be ready to start the new day fast approaching. Maybe even find an apartment. It felt so good to just close his eyes and let everything go... if only for a few minutes.

Perry White had always prided himself that even though he was the managing editor of a world renown newspaper he was always the first into the office and often the last to leave. He did not believe in 'phoning it in'. He pulled up his sleeves and tried to be the kind of manager people could respect and know worked as hard for the things he believed in as they did.

That was why for the second day in a row he was surprised to find he was not the only one in the office when the doors opened onto the bullpen. What did please him though was that he was the only one awake. He walked up behind the sleeping form, head cradled on arms resting on top of a cramped desktop. Smiling, he unceremoniously cleared his throat sure it would startle the poor guy awake.

"Kent, have you been here all night?"

"Ah... wha... Oh, Mr. White... no, uh I came in early to finish and I guess... I umm fell asleep." He had quickly come to his senses as he jerked his head up but made sure to squint his eyes then began rubbing them until he could retrieve his glasses.

"So what have you got?"

Acting like he was still half asleep he answered. "Well..uh... I need Lois' final input first but it is almost completely written."

"Good, I look forward to reading what you have. Now why don't you go get yourself some coffee. It looks like you could use some."

Over the next hour and a half reporters and staff workers filed in and soon the office was

bustling. Every other person was buzzing about how Superman had been everywhere the night before. He was in one news report after another. Several were excited noting that he had even put the Daily Planet Globe back in place on the roof.

Richard and Lois arrived having dropped off Jason at his school. They both headed straight for Clark's desk but found it empty. Lois looked around the room. "Jimmy, have you seen Clark?"

Jimmy looked up from his computer where he was cropping a picture he had just taken of the building that was sure to make it to the front page in the next edition. "What, he was just there a minute ago." He quickly looked around the office and then shrugged.

"That's alright, if you see him before we do, would you tell him we're looking for him?"

"Sure, no problem," he answered her then went back to work.

"By the way Jimmy, nice picture." Lois said as Richard nodded agreement.

Jimmy looked back at them and smiled acknowledgement.

The two parted, Richard going to his office and Lois her nearby desk. She took off her jacket as her computer booted up then keyed in her password. She hesitated over the change password button then clicked on the email icon instead. Immediately pulling up the email from Clark she couldn't help but notice it was sent at 3:52 AM. She read it quickly.

Lois,

I believe enough of the bases will be covered by this to keep everyone happy for a few days. Make any changes you want. Just let me check your spelling before you send it on to the Chief.

See attached

CK

Opening up the attachment she was immediately struck with the byline he had listed.

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Not only had he shared a byline with her on a story she had not even contributed to other than perhaps idea generation, but he had given her top billing. It took her a minute to get past that fact before she could move on to the article. She was impressed. It was flawless as far as she could tell it even had some of her trademark commentary. She was at a complete loss as to what it could possibly need added or changed.

Jimmy's voice cut her concentration. "Phssssssss, Lois, Clark just came back."

She immediately looked over and saw Clark just taking his seat. Their eyes met and she motioned him over. As he approached she leaned back in her chair and frowned appearing concerned. "You look tired." Motioning to the monitors with a never ending running commentary of Superman's activities during the last twelve hours she asked. "Were you up all night between that and writing this article? By the way, I never meant for you to rush out and try to 'fix' everything."

He sighed and shook his head smiling ever so slightly. "Lois, I'm fine, I didn't 'fix' everything and you know it. But so you won't worry about me, I did get a couple hours of sleep this morning." Frowning back at her he added. "You don't look that rested yourself. Are you alright?"

"Yes, Richard and I were up late...talking." She let out a deep breath, "I told him everything."

"Good." Feeling uncomfortable he changed the subject. "Perry is going to be demanding that article any minute. Do you think you'll be able to finish making your changes soon?"

"Heh, What changes? Since when did you gain the ability to write just like me?" He just

shrugged in answer. "Clark as far as I'm concerned it's fine just the way you wrote it. But why did you give me top billing. I would never ever have done that for anyone. Heck I would have buried your name in the credits somewhere in the bottom of the article."

"Lois a byline is just not that important to me but I understand why it is to you. All I care about is getting the important facts out there. Unbiased facts."

"Well, you shouldn't have done it. You need to stand up for yourself. I'll send this on to Perry right now. Then Richard and I need to speak to you privately so let's meet in the small conference room in five minutes. I'll get Richard."

Clark entered the conference room and closed the door behind him just as Lois and Richard were getting seated. He took a seat across from Richard. The two men looked at each other, each waiting for the other to speak first. Clark sighed and looked away dishearteningly when he noticed how closely Richard was scrutinizing him as if they had never met before. He hated the feeling of being different all of a sudden, or at least the idea of being treated different.

Lois cleared her throat knowing it was up to her to break the ice. Ignoring the body language both men were now displaying she went right to the point. "I think we all three agree that we want the best atmosphere for Jason to grow up. The family unit that Richard and I have created is the only thing he has ever known."

Clark fidgeted, concerned where she was heading and his face showed it. Lois raised her hand in a gesture to reassure him then Richard spoke up. "Clark we're not here to deny you the opportunity to take your rightful place in Jason's life. But it's not going to be easy for any of us."

"My life has never been particularly easy no matter what a lot of people think. One thing, no one else can know Superman is Jason's father, it's too dangerous. If you suddenly start treating me different, everybody is going to figure it out." He didn't like the looks Lois and Richard exchanged when he said that. "What, someone else knows?"

"Clark, it's really bad and that is why we didn't want to wait any longer to speak to you. I'm almost certain Luthor knows." She hated having to say it out loud knowing it was her fault for taking her trusting son into a dangerous situation in the first place.

"Luthor knows!" He jumped up knocking his chair over backwards "How?"

Lois' expression turned dark, "When he had us on that yacht he started gloating about his plans. Then he pulled out a big green cylinder. I'm sure it was kryptonite. Jason seemed to shirk back slightly in my arms. I think it was just from fear, but Luthor noticed and suddenly stopped his tirade and asked me who his father was. I told him Richard of course but he wasn't convinced. He held that damn thing right in Jason's face."

Clark seemed incensed pacing the room as he listened. "Clark, I don't think the Kryptonite actually hurt Jason but what child wouldn't be scared of that...that monster in their face. Anyway he seemed satisfied and left us with one of his goons and this is where it gets really bad. I noticed a fax machine next to where I was sitting. I asked Jason to play a grand piano on the other side of the room hoping to create a diversion. It worked but the goon caught me trying to send a fax message for help and I'm certain he was about to kill me. Jason somehow threw that enormous piano at him, he saved me."

Clark became very still as his face lost all color. Richard had been watching the man's every movement his own stomach lurching even though he had heard the story the night before. Nothing was said for several seconds then Clark quietly almost diffidently finished the

story for her. "Luthor knows about the piano."

She nodded halfheartedly. "His other thugs saw the aftermath and locked us in the pantry."

"Luthor said something to me as he was ..." He stopped. "He taunted me and began bragging about how he had tricked me. Then he said something about how amazing crystals were. How they inherited the traits of the minerals around them. Sort of like a son inheriting the traits of his father."

The three looked at each other in silence. Clark newly resolved continued. "I have to find him."

Richard spoke up. "He could be anywhere by now."

"It doesn't matter I'll turn over every rock on this planet till I find him. There is no place that man can hide that I can't find him if I set my mind to it."

"What are you going to do when you find him? I certainly know what I'd do." Lois narrowed her eyes in hate and disdain.

Completely ignoring that Richard was still in the room Clark focused only on Lois who was now standing right in front of him. "That's why you need to let me find him Lois. You have to let me take care of Luthor. You and Richard need to take care of Jason. He's not safe as long as Luthor is out there plotting to bring me down."

Still ignoring Richard he put his hands on her shoulders as if to make a point. "We both know he won't think twice about hurting a child to get to me. But Lois we can't let him take us down into his dark world or he will have won no matter the outcome."

Richard cleared his throat and came to join them. "I think we need to go get Jason from school right now but what then? How can we keep him safe from such a monster?" Clark lowered his arms and stepped back from Lois.

Addressing both of them Clark answered. "If you can both trust me, I know just the place."

"Where?" they both asked simultaneously.

"The farm where I grew up. Jason's grandmother would be thrilled and you both would be welcome as well, if you want to stay with him."

"Wait, you mean you really did grow up in Smallville, that picture on your desk is real?" Lois asked surprised.

Opening the door Clark responded. "We don't have time for this now. I can either give you the information on how to get to the farm or I can take you there."

He stood in the doorway waiting for an answer. Then suddenly remembering he took the picture out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Lois. "My mother asked me to give this to you when I saw her last night. She was in the crowd at the hospital and saw you with Jason. She knew with just that small glimpse that he was her grandchild."

Lois and Richard stood silent each staring at the picture that could have been one taken of Jason a couple years earlier then Richard answered. "Give us the directions and phone numbers, yours and your mother's."

A few minutes later the three headed for the elevator together. Clark handed them a paper with the information they had requested including a good landing spot on a lake near the farm for Richard's seaplane. As the elevator doors closed he looked from one to the other, "I'll meet you there, in the mean time I'll be watching to make sure you don't run into any trouble."

As the two watched he blurred out of sight as they felt a whoosh. Looking up they barely managed to see his boots before the escape hatch closed in the top of the elevator. They

looked at each other with disbelieving eyes and wide open mouths.

Richard laughed releasing part of his nervous tension. "Now we know how and where that guy disappears. Man, that was really cool!"

To Grandma's House We Go

The three arrived home and Lois told Jason to go pick out a few things he wanted to take on vacation to see his grandma Kent. As the little boy happily went to work filling up a little travel bag, Richard began preparing the plane and Lois started packing what he would need for several days away from home. Lois and Richard had decided to stay with Jason only until he was sufficiently settled and they were comfortable with leaving him, then they would head back home. Lois had been insistent that she needed to stay on the job to help track down Luthor. Richard had reluctantly agreed.

As Lois stuffed a suitcase with the clothes and medicines he would need for several days it had suddenly hit her full force. *I'm about to meet Superman's mom.* Somehow it felt more like she was about to meet an ex-mother-in-law that she had never met while married.

Richard came up behind her and mistook her body language for apprehension or fear. He immediately wrapped his arms around her in hope of reassuring her. "Honey everything is going to be alright."

Lois took a deep breath then responded to his surprise. "What is that woman going to think of me?"

Richard laughed relieved that was what was bothering her most right now. "Lois, she obviously accepted and loved an alien child. I would think if anything, she has an open mind."

"I guess you're right. I still have a hard time believing that he arrived when he was so young. Why didn't I know that before?"

She thought for a moment then continued. "It explains a lot of why he's so secretive. His parents must have been terrified he would be taken from them and God knows what would have happened to him if he had been discovered as a child or adolescent." She looked over at Jason as she spoke, chills running up and down her spine. Then she noticed he was attempting to stuff in his little bag half his room full of toys including several of his favorite videos and games.

"Whao, Jason, you are only going to be there for a couple days. You can only take what will fit in that little bag, no over stuffing."

"But Mommy. Then I can't take hardly nuthin."

Lois rolled her eyes. "It will all be here when you get back. Besides, there will be all sorts of things to do on a farm. Plus I bet your Daddy Clark will be there part of the time."

He took a deep breath pouting as he dumped the overflowing bag out and reluctantly started all over trying to pick out just what he could take.

Soon they were in the air heading to a small town none of them had ever been before. Jason was in his own happy little world. He didn't know why he was suddenly going to visit a grandmother he never even knew he had until a couple days ago, all he cared about was that he was. He grew more excited every minute and kept jumping around in his seat wanting to know every two minutes when they would get there. Not only was he going to grandma's house but grandma was Superman's mommy. How cool was that.

Even though they were concerned with the reasons for the visit Jason's excitement was spilling over onto Lois and especially Richard. He was growing more and more curious as to just how that bigger than life man had grown up and excited to be about to find out.

As the small town came into view Jason suddenly started squealing with delight bouncing up and down in his seat. Superman had just streaked up to within a few feet of his window and waved at him. Speeding up he flew past them then abruptly pulled up, stopping in mid air a short ways ahead of them. He just seemed to float in the sky suspended.

Richard's eyes bugged out, "How does he do that! That is just too cool for words!" He seemed every bit as excited as Jason turning in his seat to high five the youngster still squealing behind him.

Lois smiled but turned away from them trying to contain her own memories threatening to spill out into the daylight. She knew just what it felt like to be in that man's arms as he did those amazing moves. She had to keep those feelings and memories at bay repeating over and over to herself that they had no place in her current life, especially when she was awake.

Richard turned back to the controls and once again gave the unbelievable sight ahead of his plane his full attention. Superman was motioning down to a farmhouse just up ahead and then a small body of water nearby. Richard nodded and prepared to go in for a landing. He never even noticed that Lois was looking anywhere but at the hero flying just ahead of the plane. He was too busy with the controls and sharing the excitement of the day with Jason.

The plane landed easily and taxied over to a small dock. Superman touched down on the dock, grabbed a rope and then jumped onto one of the planes platoons in nearly seamless movements. Almost before he had the plane tied up Jason had pushed his way past Lois who had opened up the door and was jumping into his arms. "Take me flying, will you take me flying like that?"

Superman chuckled but then became more serious as he answered. "I would love to take you flying but we'll have to see what your mom says about it first."

He stepped onto the nearby dock and sat the little boy down then turned back to give Lois his hand to help her exit the plane. She hesitated so he pulled back to give her the room she needed to jump down onto the platoon without assistance. Then once again unassisted she stepped up onto the dock next to Jason who was still barely containing his excitement.

After waiting to make sure Lois was safely on the dock he turned back to the open door of the plane. Richard handed him a suitcase. "Anything else?"

"No, I can handle the other one." He grabbed the small bag Jason had packed and jumped out the door closing it. Soon they were all walking towards an ancient red pickup truck parked nearby. Richard stopped once again hardly believing his eyes. "This is your truck?"

Superman laughed, "Well actually it's my mom's. It kinda has history and she's refused over the years to get rid of it. But, don't worry, it is remarkably reliable." As he spoke he placed the suitcase in the back and opened the passenger door.

Richard raised his eyebrows shaking his head placing the smaller suitcase next to the other one as Superman continued. "The truck won't hold all of us so just follow this road to the bend and you'll see the post box labeled Kent. Turn onto that road and it will lead right to the farmhouse. Mom and I will be waiting to greet you."

"Can I ride in the back?" Jason said already trying to climb into the truck bed.

"NO!" All three voiced as one. Superman had the quickest reflexes and grabbed the little boy sitting him in the truck cab instead.

Lois looked up at Superman as he stepped back allowing her to climb in next to Jason. "Thanks." She smiled, "I just hope your mother can still keep up with a five year old."

Superman returned the smile, "She kept up with me, I'm sure she'll be fine." He closed the door. "See you in a few minutes." He took to the air as Richard climbed in and started the truck no doubt surprised when it actually turned over and hummed to life.

Landing on the porch he glided smoothly into the house. Hearing her upstairs he called out. "Ma, they'll be here in just a few minutes. Is there anything else you want me to do?"

Martha came out of one of the rooms and started to make her way down the stairs. "I

think I'm ready. I was just putting a few things out in your old bedroom. I thought that little grandson of mine would enjoy some of your old toys from the attic." She headed for the mirror near the door and checked her reflection adjusting her hair slightly.

Clark now in jeans and a flannel shirt smiled. "Mom, you look great and it smells wonderful in here. Are you baking some pies?"

"Well, I figured they didn't have time for lunch and well, I've never gotten to bake a pie for my little grandson before and if he is anything like his father, he is going to love pie."

Clark laughed, "You're probably right on both counts, but unfortunately Jason is not that much like me in some respects. I expect Lois has a long list of things ready to tell you about that Jason can't have."

"Oh posh, he can't be your son and be as delicate as you make him out to be."

"Mom, he seems to have a lot of allergies. I hate to think it but perhaps it's due to the incongruent mix of Human and Kryptonian genes." As he spoke his attention was diverted to the end of the driveway and the truck just turning in towards the house. "They're here." He smiled at his mother as he put his arm around her back to usher her out onto the porch to greet the company.

The vehicle pulled up and stopped. Clark stepped down from the porch and walked to the truck opening the door. Lois stepped out and before she could grab him Jason launched himself right into Clark's arms. Once again Clark's quick reflexes enabled him to react and catch the determined boy easily. A dog came running up sniffing at the little boy's feet, its tail wagging happily.

Lois backed up slightly into the still open truck door seeing the dog approach. Clark looked over at her reassuringly. "It's alright. Shelby wouldn't hurt a fly unless he was protecting someone from harm." He turned back towards the house still holding Jason comfortably in his arms, never getting enough.

Martha stood on the porch smiling, waiting, her heart pounding in her chest just watching her son hold his own precious son in his arms.

Richard came around the truck and joined Lois as she closed the truck door and the two of them slowly followed Clark to the porch. Lois felt the butterflies going crazy in her stomach. Why was she so afraid of an old woman, well older, she corrected to be politically correct in her own mind? *Get a grip Lane* she said to herself as she stepped up onto the porch.

"Mom, this is Lois Lane and her fiancé Richard White. Lois, Richard, this is my Mother, Martha Kent." He turned from his mother to Lois and Richard smiling with Jason still in his arms.

Lois extended her hand but Martha was having none of it. She reached in and pulled Lois into a full embrace. "Darling, handshaking is for strangers, you are the mother of my grandchild. That makes you and yours family." She looked over at Richard patting his shoulder, "That includes you. Welcome to my home."

Then she pulled away and turned to Clark who was smiling behind her with Jason still in his arms. "This is Jason, you're grandson."

She put her hand over her heart, "I would know this little one anywhere." She took his little hand kissing it then ran one of her hands in his hair to comb it out of his eyes. "You are so very like your father."

Jason looked up at his father then back at the silver haired lady. "You're my grandma? Do you like little boys even if they make a mess?" He remembered how he had constantly gotten into trouble visiting his other daddy's parents.

Martha laughed outright. "Honey, from what I remember that is what little boys do best." She smiled up at Clark who shrugged smiling sheepishly clearly admitting she had good cause for making the statement.

Lois couldn't help but smirk wondering just what it had been like raising a child with super abilities at the same time worried that she was soon to find out first hand.

"Please come on in, I have lunch ready, I figured you would all be hungry." Martha opened up the screen door motioning for Lois and Richard to enter. She followed them inside with Clark entering last with Jason.

Lois looked around sensing the love that abounded within the walls of the quaint farmhouse. Everywhere she looked there were pictures showing signs of a happy loving family over many long years. She noticed the piano and the warm comforting homey décor. The aromas coming from the kitchen made her mouth water.

Lois saw the older woman was once again doting on the little boy as Clark sat him down in the house. "Oh you shouldn't have gone to so much trouble, but I have to say, it smells marvelous. Can I help you finish getting anything ready?"

Soon they were all seated around the table. Jason was hungrily eating a chicken leg. "Did you get this from KFC? It's better'en the one by us." He bit off another bite as if in testament to the fact.

Richard smirked looking over at Lois. "I'm afraid we specialize in take-out at our house most nights." Lois blushed but clearly had no comeback. "But Jason is right, this is delicious. I think I envy his staying here for a few days."

Martha looked up. "Well all three of you are welcome if you want to change your mind and stay. Food is always better fresh grown and raised on a farm."

"It must be hard keeping a farm running all alone." Richard queried.

"Clark has always helped but while he was gone I wasn't able to keep much of the place up on my own. I did manage to keep up my little vegetable garden in the back. A neighbor, Ben Hubbard, is farming a good portion of our farmland adjoining his fields in return for helping me maintain the house and barn animals."

She looked over at Clark seeing his discomfort remembering all he had forsaken to go on his quest. Hoping to ease his mind if just a little she continued, "It seems Clark asked him to look after me before he left home that first time many years ago. I think perhaps Clark was a little surprised at just how well that worked out over these last long years."

"Mom..mm!"

Richard who had just taken a drink all but spit it out trying to control his reaction. Lois laughed outright saying, "I think I'm going to like you a lot Martha."

Clark sighed deeply then his attention was diverted as he turned his head hearing something urgent. "Sorry, I need to leave but this will give you some time to get better acquainted. I'll be back as soon as I can." With that he blurred and was gone.

They all looked to the door as it closed in the wake of his sudden departure. "Has he always done that?" Lois asked as she looked at the older woman.

Martha just laughed. "It started in his teens but even when he was younger he was always eager to help anyone or for that matter anything in need whenever he could." Martha got up from the table clearing a few plates off. "Now who would like some apple pie or peach cobbler, hmmm?"

Richard stood up helping her clear the remaining plates. "Do we have to choose?"

Martha laughed. "Not in my Kitchen you don't."

Jason chimed in, "Me too Grandma."

"After we finish, I'll show you all around. I know it must be disconcerting to leave your child with an old woman you've just met. I want you to be sure you're comfortable."

Lois smiled seeing where Clark had gotten so much of his graciousness and down home charm. "That would be nice. It is a little scary, but it's starting to feel better the more I get to know you."

After they finished Martha smiled at Jason. "Would you like to see your room? It's your father's old room."

Jason nodded excitedly running ahead racing up the stairs. Lois followed behind then the two waited to be directed to the right room. Martha following close behind Lois showed them the doorway and then entered behind them. Lois was surprised to see a room that looked very much like a young boy's from the bed linen to the toys scattered around neatly.

Noticing Lois' reaction and then Richard's as he too entered she laughed. "I went up into the attic this morning and brought down all of Clark's old things. I never gave up on a grandchild, just like I never gave up on having a child of my own. Did Clark tell you how we found him?" Lois shook her head.

"Jonathan and I were on our way home from trying to adopt a child. We were told that we were too old and not well off enough to support or take care of a child. Our old truck was run off the road by something that looked like a meteorite streaking down almost hitting us square on."

Lois and Richard exchanged glances. Jason had already made himself at home sitting on the rug pulling out and examining several of the toys. He immediately latched onto a toy tractor.

Martha continued. "That was the happiest day of my life. It turned out to be his tiny starship and he was the sweetest little thing I had ever seen until I saw this little one." She kneeled down and cupped Jason's chin in her hand. "Both gifts from God, I say." She had to blink back the tears as she stood back up. "Well, I'm sure you would like to see the rest of the place."

They were out in the barn with Martha showing Jason the loft area where Clark had loved to play when they heard his voice call out from below then he was in their midst before he'd finished half laughing. "Ma, you can't show them all my secrets."

"Well, I think you're safe there, I don't think even I know all your secrets."

Clark took a deep breath, "I don't really have any important secrets from any of you anymore."

They walked out of the barn and Clark walked over to the truck and easily picked up both the larger and small suitcase as they headed back into the house. "I'll just take these up to Jason's room." Clark said as they entered the house.

Lois stopped him, "Wait, I need to get something out of the big bag first." She pulled out a zipper bag filled with inhalers, medicine and various other bottles. She held the bag up and headed for Martha ready to explain everything. She even had it all typed up neatly with explicit instructions.

Clark's eyes caught on one large pink bottle. As Lois was just starting to explain the ones in her hand he interrupted her pulling the pink bottle out. "Lois, this is 55+ block sunscreen."

Lois looked up at him quizzically. "Yes, he's fair skinned, I don't want him to burn."

He looked at the bottle again reading it instantly then at Jason then back to Lois almost pained. "How often do you use this on him?"

"Everyday, why?"

Clark exchanged looks with his mother. "Do I look fair skinned to you?"

"Well yes, but I just figured that you don't tan, after all you told me you get your powers from the sun." Then it seemed to hit her. She looked closely at Clark then Jason sitting nearby playing with the toy tractor he had been carrying around since leaving the room upstairs earlier.

"Lois, I get a lot more than just my powers from the sun. It heals me and helps sustain my life. Kryptonians are a photosynthetic race, Melanin production in my skin cells or sunscreen topically applied would be a disadvantage to my survival and possibly Jason's as well."

Richard stood up joining the conversation. "Are you saying that may be why Jason's not healthy?" He was suddenly sick to his stomach with the realization that their overprotective ways might have been partly to blame for their son being so fragile.

Clark stared at his son looking deep into his structure examining him at the cellular level. "When did you last apply that stuff?"

"This morning before he got dressed," Lois answered. "Like always." She seemed disheartened. What had she done to her baby?

Clark grabbed him up, not bothering to ask permission he whisked him off. Lois, Richard and Martha only saw a red and blue flash by as the tractor dropped and bounced on the floor where the little boy had been.

Superman flew up straight into the sky. Jason was taken off guard by the swiftness but soon was screaming in delight. He was getting his flight after all. Superman stopped and floated in mid air facing the sun. He let the little boy's excitement calm down then slowly rotated around till he was almost in the full sun. Watching closely and looking deeply into Jason's eyes for any sign of discomfort he asked. "How do you feel?"

"I feel good Daddy, I feel real strong and warm, I like it." He closed his eyes and smiled contently.

"Me too." He smiled back. "The sun is making you strong and I think it may make you healthy."

The little boy opened his eyes and asked earnestly, "Is it going to make me as strong as you?"

Superman laughed, "Maybe when you're as big as me you'll be even stronger." After a few minutes he returned to the farm house where he found the others waiting on the porch.

He handed Jason off to Lois who examined the little rosy cheeked boy smiling at her happily and possibly healthier looking than she had ever seen him look before. She looked up at Superman. "I didn't know."

"How could you have ever known, Lois?"

Mother Knows Best

Jason wiggled in his mother's arms clearly wanting down. "Daddy Clark took me flying and we went high in the sky and saw the sun. I liked it Mommy, it made me feel all warm and really strong."

Lois brushed her hand over Jason's cheek feeling a familiar warmth. She looked back at Clark still standing nearby in the blue suit. "He has a fever."

Clark shook his head slightly, "No his natural temperature has changed, his cells are energized and restored to what they should be."

Lois swallowed and looked once again at her son still wiggling in her arms. She finally sat him down. "He really is your son isn't he?" She looked at Clark only seeing the hero wondering what her, no their child's life was going to be like this day forward. Then she looked over at Richard who was bending down to feel the youngster's cheek for himself.

Jason was having none of it pulling away he asked, "Can I go play now?"

Martha stepped in and opened the screen door, "Come on Jason. I think your little tractor is just where you dropped it a few minutes ago."

"Lois, Richard, nothing has changed except perhaps our son is going to be healthier. Please no more sunscreen and I can't help but wonder if he needs any of the other medications now that his immune system is not being compromised."

"I don't know what to say, except I pray you're right." Lois said thoughtfully.

Richard nodded and was struck for the first time with the body language between the two. He had never seen Lois afraid of anyone but she seemed to shrink away from the hero. He recalled the day's earlier interactions between them. *Lois wasn't afraid of him, no way,* Richard thought, *she was afraid of her feelings for him.* It was as clear as the day was long that *she wasn't over him by a long shot.*

Richard continued watching as Superman held the screen door open and she entered the house purposely keeping her distance from the other man. He also saw the resigned look on the hero's face as he accepted her avoidance but ever the gentleman was still determined to open her doors or offer his hand in support whenever the gesture was called for. Both seemed so caught up in their own form of pain that neither noticed him watching.

Lois joined Martha in the kitchen and once again held up the zipper bag of medicines then looked at Martha shaking her head dropping it back on the table. "I just don't know anymore. It would be wonderful if he doesn't need any of this now, but we can't be sure."

Martha put her arm around Lois. "Honey, I've lived a long time and I've raised one child with unknown needs. Sometimes you just have to go with your intuition or lack of that, follow your heart. We'll figure it out, don't worry we are all aware of the various possibilities so we'll be able to sort it all out."

Lois smiled and nodded, feeling oddly comforted by this remarkable woman. No wonder Clark had wanted her to be the one to keep Jason safe. She couldn't think of anyone more qualified. "I guess you know better than anyone. How did you ever manage with Clark?"

"Honey, nothing as important as this is, is ever easy. I would have to say that love and faith got Jonathan and I through all the difficulties in our lives. I'm sure it will serve us well through these difficulties as well."

"I don't know about that." Lois sighed. "I wish it was that easy."

Martha pulled out a chair for Lois at the table then went to the stove to start a pot of water to make tea, everything was better with tea. Then she took a seat herself as she placed her hand over Lois'. "Why don't you tell me what is really bothering you. It's obvious to me

that it's a lot more complicated than Jason's health or safety. You can tell me anything without worry that I'll repeat anything to Clark."

Lois looked past Martha into the living room motioning. "How can I be sure he won't hear me?"

Martha stood up and went to the door a big smile crossed her face seeing Clark clearly fully engaged interacting with his son. Lois joined her and was reassured by the scene that he was paying her no mind. The two women went back to the table and took their seats. Soon they were in a deep conversation, one Lois would have had with her own mother had she still been alive. Lois let it all spill out, occasionally standing up to make sure Clark and Richard were both still otherwise occupied. She confessed that she was in love with both men and felt literally torn in half not sure which way to turn but feeling frozen in place afraid to look too deeply in her heart or make any changes in her current life. She wanted to do what was best for Jason above all but after today she was more confused than ever.

Clark finally in his casual jeans, t-shirt and flannel shirt had come in from the porch with Richard and both had joined Jason in the living room and were watching him play with the little tractor.

Clark smiled seeing his son enjoying one of his favorite toys from years gone by, "I see you like my old tractor. Did you see the tiller?"

"Huh, what's a tiller?" The little boy looked up at him questioningly.

Clark disappeared but reappeared almost instantly smiling, "This is a tiller." He arched his eyebrows, "it fits on the back of the tractor and plows or digs a trench to make planting a crop easier. See it fits like this."

He kneeled down joining Jason at the coffee table attaching the tiller onto the back of the little tractor. Richard stood nearby with his hands in his pockets watching the two interact. A couple minutes later Clark again blurred only to return with a shoe box of similar toys and soon the two men were scrunched up sitting on their legs at the small table with the little boy. Clark was explaining what each miniature farm vehicle did and both Richard and Jason were listening intently. He blurred one final time and this time returned with a board covered with a rug with a farm setting that closely resembled the Kent farm on it complete with a farmhouse, barn, grain silo, little corn fields and an area ready for plowing. Richard and Jason hurriedly moved everything out of the way as Clark set the board on top of the coffee table.

"My Dad and I made this when I was just a couple years older than you are now." he said smiling at the little boy. "I will always cherish that time we spent together. That I can now share it with my own son makes it even more special to me."

Soon all three were busy adding the little toys to the setting and so intent on their play that they were completely oblivious to the two women in the nearby kitchen having a heart to heart talk about them and what the future might hold.

Martha listened quietly as the young woman spoke never interrupting or trying to interject any opinion or advice. Instead she just let her spill her heart out till she finally stopped nearly in tears. She reached for a nearby tissue box and placed it on the table. "Lois, you don't have to make any decision about this right now. Just concentrate on one problem at a time. Everything else will be apparent soon enough."

Lois reached for a tissue and wiped her eyes as the older woman smiled consolingly then continued, "You just have to listen to your heart in the quiet moments of the night when you

are all alone in your thoughts with no pressures and no timetables."

Lois nodded listening closely appreciating the older woman's advice. "The way I see it you have two men who would do anything for you and your son. It appears my son is trying to step back to give you and Richard all the time and room you need to make a good marriage."

Lois looked downcast then spoke up, "He has, but it's so hard just being near him. I can see the love in his eyes every time he looks at me."

Martha sighed clearly torn. "Don't worry about how it might affect him he'll be fine and perhaps a little wiser. Honey, Clark doesn't blame you for going on with your life he blames himself for leaving you when you needed him most."

Lois looked up at the older woman again wiping away a stray tear as she listened.

"Seeing Richard with you today it appears to me that he loves you every bit as much as Clark, but in the end this is your decision and you have to do what is best for you because that will also be what is best for that little boy out there. Children are quick to pick up on a parent's unhappiness or resentment from not following their hearts or their true calling in life."

Lois broke into a slow half smile, shaking her head in wonder. "How did you ever get to be so wise?"

Martha smiled back as she took Lois' right hand in her own. "Honey it took years and years and turned my hair from dark brown to white, although Clark will try to tell you it's silver. Anyway, I learned a long time ago that God truly does work in strange and wondrous ways. Just look how he has answered my prayers over the years. You just have to trust that all will be revealed in time. Give your heart time and you will know where it leads."

Placing her free hand over Martha's Lois smiled back, "I can see why such an amazing and special child was entrusted to your care. No way was it a random accident. I'm so glad you're going to be here to help me with my own amazing child."

"Nothing would be dearer to my heart nothing and your choices now or in the future will not change in any way how I feel about you and that precious little boy."

The two women sat for several seconds just holding hands quietly then Lois smiled warmly realizing a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, she didn't have to decide right now. Feeling so much better she looked again into the living room at the boys still playing with their toys. She couldn't help but laugh at the sight.

Martha turned to follow her gaze laughing too she pulled her bottom hand out of Lois' and patted the younger woman's hands as she stood up. "Watch this." She called out. "Clark, we saved you some peach cobbler. Would you like it now?"

Clark looked up at her answering excitedly, "What, you saved me some cobbler? Of course I want some."

Martha looked back at Lois winking. "Richard there's plenty if you would like another serving."

Richard patted his stomach, "Phew, I'm afraid that if I stayed here with Jason for even a couple days I would gain a ton." Then smiling mischievously he countered, "But since we're just here this afternoon, I would love some more."

Soon the adults were all seated around the table once again talking quietly about their plans for the next couple days. Jason continued playing happily in the living room with the miniature farm toys.

"Mom, this is even better than I remember."

"Well you know if you would just come home a little more often you wouldn't have to just remember how it tastes."

Clark smiled swallowing. "Maybe I will just have to visit a lot more often." They all laughed. "Seriously though, until I find Luthor I need to spend as much time as possible searching for him and his men. So far everything has just been a dead end. Even the connections with the Vanderworth properties and vast fortune he supposedly inherited have come up cold."

Lois nodded, "Yeah that was the first place I started looking too. You're positive they got off New Krypton?"

Clark sighed closing his eyes as he shook his head sadly, "Ugh, I *really* hate that name."

Richard looked up from his cobbler. "Well, you can thank Norm for that."

"In answer to your question, Lois, I heard the helicopter in the air somewhere nearby when I was lifting that mass but I was too focused on that task to pay them any mind whatsoever. I do believe they all got off though and I'm very concerned that they still have the rest of the crystals."

Lois inhaled deeply. "I completely forgot about the other crystals, he definitely had them on the yacht. You don't think...surely he wouldn't..."

Richard interrupted her, "We're talking about Luthor I wouldn't put *anything* past that man."

The four exchanged glances, "Neither would I, all the more reason why I have to find him before he has time to implement another plan."

Clark finished his desert then wiping his mouth with his napkin he got up from the table. "Mom, that was wonderful. I would love to stay longer but I need to get to work. Lois, Richard I'll see you at the office tomorrow. Mom, I'll try to make it back here before Jason goes to bed but I can't promise." He bent down to kiss her cheek.

Martha nodded in understanding then pulled his shirt to draw him back down so she could kiss his cheek in return. "Be careful remember that man may have more Kryptonite."

Hearing his Daddy Clark say he was leaving Jason grabbed something from his little bag still in the living room and came running into the kitchen. "I brought my Incredibles movie. You said you wanted to see it with me, aren't you gonna come back so we can watch it together?"

Martha seeing the DVD box looked worried. "Oh dear, I don't have a DVD player." Jason looked flabbergasted, he never heard of anyone not having a DVD player. He looked about ready to cry.

Clark stooped down and picked the little boy up. "I wouldn't miss it for the world Jason. I can rig my laptop to the TV and I bet even Grandma will enjoy seeing it with us."

Jason's face brightened immediately as he hugged his Daddy. "I love you Daddy."

"I love you too Jason." He said hugging the little boy back. Then remembering the others he smiled at Richard placing the little boy in his other daddy's lap. "We all love you. Now you be good for your grandma. I'll see you tonight." He then addressed all of them, "If any of you need me, all you have to do is call my name. I'll be listening."

The little boy quickly nodded then waved as his Daddy Clark disappeared. Turning around he changed his position so he could reach up to hug Richard like he had just hugged Clark. "Are you and Mommy leaving too Daddy? I don't want you to go too." His lips began quivering as he hugged tighter.

Lois got up placing her hand on her son's back to reassure him. "Honey we need to go back to work, this is your vacation remember? You're staying here with your Grandma for a couple days but you can call us as much as you want and just think, your Daddy Clark will be

here part of the time too."

Lois looked over at Martha. "We've never left him with anyone for more than a day before."

Martha nodded understanding, "You don't have to leave right away do you? It might be easier for him if you stay a couple more hours so you aren't all leaving him at once?"

Lois smiled and looked at Richard. Yes, she was really growing to love this woman.

Old Friends Matter Too

Clark entered the bullpen and sat down at his desk. He looked over at the rental listings he'd printed out the day before. Feeling he had more important things to worry about he tossed the printouts in the trash feeling they were most likely worthless by now anyway in the tight rental market. He opened a window to his email program hoping perhaps one of his many contacts had gotten back to him and smiled broadly when he saw among the multitude of junk mail items something of particular interest.

DarthVader777 Hey dude, 'bout time you showed your skinny butt.

He chuckled to himself and immediately opened it.

Dude, just when I think you can't get any stupider you go and do just that! What the _____ were you thinking just leaving like that? (Fill in the four letter word of your choice. No use offending you when I can't even enjoy seeing your reaction.)

That said, while you were getting your beauty sleep I was busy tracking down your little fiend. I have to give him credit he is clever at covering his tracks but guess what? I'm better at uncovering them.

Call me at the same old number. Maybe I'll even share.

Darth

Clark smiled as he deleted the mail noting it had been sent two hours earlier. As his screen went back to the inbox a new message from DarthVader777 popped up.

DarthVader777 Where are you?

He opened it and again chuckled.

Hey you.

What do you need an engraved invitation? BTW, how do you like my new email address? I made it just for you.

Clark again deleted the email then retrieved his cell phone opening it up he keyed in a number from memory. He quickly scanned the other emails then looked at the various papers that had been left on his desk wanting to make sure nothing else required his immediate attention. Finding nothing he focused on the call as a familiar voice answered.

"Gotham Exterminators, you got'em, we'll get'em."

"Heh, very funny. It's me and you know it. I just got your message."

"Well, can't be too careful. The back door will be open."

"I'm on my way."

Clark got up and started to make his exit when he saw Perry headed right for his desk with a determined expression on his face.

"Kent! Where did you three disappear to this morning? Just because you turned in a couple great articles the last couple of days doesn't allow you to just disappear for the better part of the day when we have so much going on here. Tell me you and Lois were following up on a lead, but just why did you need Richard too?"

"Sir, it's complicated. All I can tell you right now is that we're on Luthor's trail. We'll fill you in with more tomorrow. Right now I need to meet a source." He looked at his watch frowning to make his case as he walked away leaving Perry standing there with his hands on his hips.

"I expect more details tomorrow, from all three of you." The older man called after him shaking his head as he went back to his office.

Not more than a couple minutes later Superman was flying into the cave entrance and landing in a very familiar batcave. Little had changed in the cave atmosphere itself but there

did appear to be some major upgrades in the lab and control areas. Then his eye was caught by the batmobile and the other vehicles both land and air. He was impressed with the improvements and advances that had been made in his absence.

"It's about time you got here." A dark clad man said as he appeared in the room from one of the secret entrances connecting the lab area in the cave to the main house.

Superman turned around to face him. "You haven't changed a bit. I had hoped you would have mellowed out by now."

"You can't teach an old bat new tricks." Bruce lit one of the cigars in his hand blowing out the smoke. "You on the other hand surprise me Boy Scout. I didn't know you had it in you." He tossed a second cigar to Superman as he smirked.

Superman frowned not connecting his meaning. "You know I don't smoke." He offered the cigar back as he came within reach.

Bruce scoffed. "Keep it as a souvenir."

Still confused he looked at the cigar in his hand and understood. The cigar had a little blue band proclaiming *It's a Boy!* He looked up at his friend wondering, *how did he know?*

"What, you don't think I can count? When you put me in charge of your rather meager savings and asked me to watch over your mom I figured something was up but when you just up and disappeared without another word even I was surprised."

Bruce sat down at his control console still smoking his cigar once again smirking. "Here I suggest you use one of these next time." He tossed a small cellophane wrapped package on the desk in front of the man in blue.

Superman ignored the package knowing full well what it was. "That doesn't explain how you knew about Jason, I didn't even know till just the other day. Have you been spying on Lois or something?"

"No, not really, but I did keep an eye on her writing and something changed shortly after you left that concerned me so I looked deeper and figured it out. Cute kid, but like I said, I was more than a little surprised. It kinda goes against that wholesome boy scout persona."

Superman turned away uncomfortable with the other man's scrutiny. "I didn't come here for a lecture. You hinted that you found Luthor's tracks."

Bruce sat back in his chair blowing a smoke ring before replying sarcastically. "Well you know sometimes even in the anti-crime business it helps being known as a rich playboy." Sitting up he grabbed a file folder as he extinguished the cigar then opened the file taking out a printout.

"I found evidence he was in Grand Cayman sometime yesterday. It appears he may have had some offshore accounts there or perhaps what he stole from that old lady, Vanderworth. Surprise surprise. I know it's not much but it is a start. Me being the kinda guy I am I thought hey, you would want to know."

Taking the printout Superman looked it over. "Thanks, it's more than I had found and you're right it is a starting point. Is this your contact there?" He asked pointing to a name.

Bruce nodded, "What happened between you two? I mean you go all inter-galactic just before a kid shows up."

"It doesn't matter, it's over...and it's none of your business anyway. Is there any indication that Luthor is still on the island?"

"Hmmm, we seem a little touchy. You look tired too. I saw you all over the news last night. I know what that is like. Throw yourself into your work so you don't have to think about your own non-existent personal life."

"I told you it's none of your business. My personal life is fine." That thought seemed to relieve some tension allowing him to relax slightly almost smiling as he added. "I do have a personal life, I have a son but you wouldn't know what that feels like."

Seeing the change in his friend's demeanor he was struck with a realization, "You still love her. Wait that is where you were when those Kryptonians took over, it all makes sense now. You do still love her... you left thinking you couldn't have her."

Superman reacted by crossing his arms in his classic pose growing annoyed again. "Are you done now? You didn't answer my question. Do you have anything else concerning Luthor?"

Bruce shrugged and shook his head still watching his friend.

"Then I have more important things to do than stand here entertaining you." He started to leave then turned back. "Thanks, I owe you."

"Speaking of which, I have a favor to ask of you. It seems that one of the Wayne Enterprises satellites is malfunctioning. Do you think you might be able to take a look at it?"

"Sure"

"It gets easier you know... especially if you find a nice diversion. I suggest you take these though." He picked up the small package again offering it up.

Superman exhaled clearly exasperated. "I'm not you, and there will be no such diversions. As far as Jason goes, he makes everything else worth it."

Bruce looked at the other hero thoughtfully. "If you say so." Then he picked up another printout. "Here are the satellite specs. Tonight wouldn't be too soon."

"I'll be in touch."

Scary Nights Matter

"This has been great getting to know you Martha but I think Lois and I should head home. I don't really want to try and take off in an unfamiliar area in the dark."

Lois nodded getting up she added, "Besides Jason seems perfectly happy here. I've hardly seen him in the last twenty minutes since he found that litter of kittens in the barn."

Martha laughed. "I knew he was going to enjoy them, I'm just glad he hasn't shown any sign of being allergic to them. They are at the cutest stage right now. Their mother, Boots should be about to wean them any time now."

The threesome walked out of the house as Lois called out. "Munchkin, come kiss us goodbye. We're leaving now."

Jason came running out of the barn with one little black and white kitten in his arms and four others following at his heels trying to keep up with the little boy.

"Mommy, how come you never let me have a kitty or a puppy?"

"Honey, we couldn't take the chance that you were allergic, remember? Maybe we can look into it when you get back home, okay? Now give your daddy and me a big hug and I want lots of kisses." She kneeled down pulling him in making sure to not crush the kitten now climbing up his shirt to his shoulder.

Richard stood watching waiting his turn then worried the kitten was going to scratch either Lois or Jason he gathered it into his hands and put it on his chest as he petted it gently enjoying the feel of the soft little ball of fur. As Jason and Lois pulled apart he handed the kitten to Lois as he got his hug and kisses.

Lois handed the kitten back to Jason as the three adults exchanged hugs. Martha walked them to the truck as Jason began running around in front of the barn darting back and forth chasing the kittens.

"Just leave the truck where you found it this afternoon with the keys in the ignition. Clark will drive it back home later."

"Must be nice to not have to worry about someone stealing it?"

Martha laughed, "I doubt it's worth stealing. Please, call anytime you want to talk to Jason, but be assured we'll keep him safe and happy."

Lois had been just about to climb into the truck but instead gave one final hug to the older woman she had come to love in just a few hours. "We know you will. Enjoy your grandson and it goes two ways, you or Jason should call us if you need anything."

Lois looked over at her son happily playing as the truck started up. "Bye Mommy, Daddy" he called out waving then went back to play.

Evening came and Jason began to get antsy waiting for his other daddy to show up. They had finished dinner and he was on the floor behind Martha petting Shelby when he jumped up suddenly. "Daddy's here, daddy's here."

Superman entered the house carrying a box which he quickly sat on the table so he could hug Jason. "Hey buddy. Have you been having fun with your Grandma?"

Jason nodded, "Ah huh and with the toys here and Shelby and did you know there are five kittens in the barn?"

"Yes I did. Little black and white ones just like Boots." He began opening the box to reveal a brand new laptop computer. "Mom, I thought maybe you should come into the 21st century finally besides this will save me from having to bring mine back and forth."

"Clark what ever am I going to do with a computer I don't even know how to use?" She

came to look over his arm as he pulled the laptop out, excited about the prospect even though she refused to admit it.

"I can teach you, why I bet even Jason can help teach you." He ruffled the little boy's hair as he spoke winking at him then looking back at his mother. "It'll be great we can even send emails back and forth...but we will have to be careful. You have to always remember that someone else might see them."

Jason had nodded proudly then climbed into a chair to try and see inside the box. He practically fell off the chair with excitement when he spied a DVD player. "Oh goodie Daddy, you got Grandma a DVD player. Now we can watch my movies."

A short time later the three were enjoying *The Incredibles*. The little boy danced around the room during some parts of the movie explaining what was going on in the way only a young child can. At other times he was on the floor lying on his stomach watching intently then the next minute he would be climbing up next to his Daddy or Grandma making sure they were enjoying the movie as much as he was. In fact all three of them did enjoy the movie but mostly they enjoyed watching it together each reacting in turn to the others reactions.

The movie ended and Jason pleaded can we watch it again. Martha and Clark exchanged glances and she spoke up, "Your mom gave me strict instructions regarding your bedtime. You don't want me to go against her wishes do you?"

"Awwww, but I'm not sleepy yet." He pouted pleading his case in front of both of them.

"How about you go up and get ready for bed, I'll read you one of my favorite stories and then you can call your Mom and Dad to say goodnight." Clark said trying to reason with him.

Still pouting the little boy reluctantly made his way up the stairs looking back with pleading eyes hoping for a last minute reprieve from one of them.

Clark finally got his son to fall asleep after three stories, a call to his Mommy and other Daddy to say goodnight, a long drink of water, multiple goodnight hugs from both him and Martha, a second call to his Mommy since he had forgotten something important the first time and another drink of water closely followed by a trip to the bathroom.

Martha spent most of the time trying not to laugh instead fully enjoying Clark's first real induction into the science of, no the art of fatherhood. She was sure Lois would enjoy hearing all the details in the morning. Life can be so sweet.

When Clark finally made it downstairs sure Jason was at long last asleep she had him show her how to use the computer enough to use it like a typewriter with a memory. That at least she could understand. Shortly after that he left promising to return later to spend at least part of the night. She decided on a whim to practice on the computer by writing a journal of the new father and of her grandchild discovering life on a farm.

A few hours later Superman had just finished one of many rescues when he heard Jason's unmistakably terrified cry. "Mommy, Daddy!" He instantly streaked home and didn't slow down till he was at his son's bedside. The little boy was sitting up in bed sniffing back tears clearly terrified about something although nothing seemed to be wrong. Martha had followed him into the bedroom and they both stood looking around trying to figure out what could be upsetting the little boy.

Superman sat down on the bedside pulling his son close. "Jason, there is nothing to be afraid of we're right here, tell us what frightened you?"

The little boy pulled back just enough to see up into his Daddy's eyes. "I heard a werewolf out there." He pointed towards the window. "It's gonna come get me and make me a werewolf

too." He sniffed wiping his eyes then he inhaled as his eyes got big hearing the howl again. "Did you hear that? It's coming to get me." He tried to hide in his daddy's arms.

Clark hugged him tight then loosened his hold and pulled back. "Jason, you can hear that? It's just a wolf and its miles away. Remember the lake your daddy landed on this afternoon?" The little boy nodded still sniffling. "That wolf is way over on the other side of that lake. No way can it come all the way over here and get you."

Jason seemed to consider that. "You're sure it's not a werewolf? 'Cus they can go real far and they bite people and then they're werewolves too. I saw it in my other Daddy's movie."

"Jason, werewolves are just pretend. They're not real, wolves are just like wild dogs nothing more. Does your other Daddy let you watch scary movies like that?" He asked surprised.

"He just let me watch *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* a few weeks ago. Mommy won't let me watch Daddy's other scary movies." He wiped his eyes again. "You're sure that werewo... that wolf is not gonna get me?"

Superman straightened the bedclothes and helped Jason lay back down. "Nothing is going to 'get' you. Now you need to go back to sleep or you'll be really tired tomorrow. Goodnight" Both he and Martha gave him another good night kiss then started to leave the room.

Just as they got to the door and turned the light off Jason shot up in his bed, his eyes once again big with fear, "What's that?" Scratching noises could be heard outside somewhere in the yard followed by wings fluttering wildly and chicken shrieks.

Martha chuckled hearing what was frightening the youngster this time. Superman once again went to the bed and sat down. "That is a fox trying to get into the chicken coop." He gathered the boy in his arms and took him to the window. "See, there it is" he whispered. "I've watched foxes trying to break into that chicken house since I was smaller than you. But just like the little pig who built a brick house so the wolf couldn't blow it down, my dad built that chicken house to protect our chickens so no fox could get inside or break it down."

"And the fox can't get in here or in the barn either?" Jason asked worried about not only himself but the little kittens he had played with earlier.

"Everything is safe and sound. That fox will give up and leave in a few minutes, they always do."

Just as he was putting Jason back in bed another noise filled the air. Superman spoke up not waiting for Jason to ask. "That was just an owl." Martha chuckled and headed back to bed.

Jason nodded, "I knew that Daddy. Goodnight."

Clark decided to stay the rest of the night in the guest bedroom not wanting to be far away from his son who was sure to hear more sounds that could be frightful to a young child use to city living. Surprisingly he had slept soundly actually needing a rest and was not awakened until a rooster crowed just as dawn was about to break.

The little boy shot up next to him. "What was that?!"

Roosters and Gangsters Matter

Clark looked over at the little boy surprised to see him sitting up next to him. "Jason, how did you get in here, I thought you were asleep in my old bedroom?"

"I was, but I got scared again Daddy. Mommy and my other Daddy always let me sleep with them when I get scared at night."

"How come you didn't wake me up?"

Jason smiled broadly, "I tiptoed."

"Yes, I guess you did."

Just then the rooster crowed again causing Jason to hug himself to Clark's chest. "What is that Daddy? It sounds real close." He cringed as he buried his face.

Clark barely contained his amusement as he answered, "That is ole Robbie, our rooster. He's just welcoming in a new day. How 'bout we do the same?" He threw the covers aside and got up from the bed carrying the child with him to the window. "See there he is." He motioned to the rooster puffing up its chest getting ready to crow once again from atop the fence.

Jason watched and listened, "But why does he do that Daddy?"

"He's trying to impress the hens."

"Why?"

"Hmmm, I guess because he wants them to see how loud he can crow so they'll like him."

Jason seemed to consider this then asked, "Do hens like being woke up by roosters?"

Clark answered trying hard to remain serious and not break a grin, "Evidently."

"Mommy hates it when her alarm clock wakes her up. Are roosters the hens' alarm clock?"

"Roosters are like alarm clocks for an entire farm. He woke us up didn't he?" Jason nodded. Sitting the little boy down he asked, "Do you need any help getting dressed?"

Jason shook his head. "No I'm a big boy now, but can you tie my shoes when I'm ready?"

A short time later Clark was giving Jason a lesson on how to collect eggs without scaring the hens.

"Where do the eggs come from Daddy?"

"The hens lay them." Jason gave him a confused look. Clark was at a loss for just how to explain it further then remembered what his dad had once told him. "The Easter Bunny leaves them here when it's not Easter."

Just as he gave that explanation his mother came within hearing range. "Clark, where on earth did you hear that explanation?"

Clark looked at her shrugging innocently, "That's what Dad told me."

"Figures," she shook her head resigned but smiling at the memories the thought had brought to mind. "Do you have time for breakfast before heading to the office?"

He nodded smiling. "As long as I'm not needed elsewhere."

Lois woke early. Actually she had hardly slept at all between worrying about Jason and thinking about Superman or was it Clark. Then there was Richard.

They had arrived home the prior evening to what felt like an empty house with Jason not there. Richard had wanted to take advantage of the situation but she begged off proclaiming to have a raging headache from the day's activities and all the worry. She was thankful he hadn't pushed it but had allowed her to go straight to bed. She didn't deserve him, or was it that he

didn't deserve her lies. Whatever, he didn't deserve it. She had finally fallen asleep with a real headache trying to sort everything out in her head, so much for the quiet times in the night.

Richard had stayed up consoling himself with one of his favorite old classic horror movies and didn't hear her get up, dress and leave the bedroom. Going downstairs she wrote him a quick note while she waited for the water to heat for a cup of instant coffee.

Richard, I couldn't sleep so I decided to head on into the office and try to catch up from being gone all day yesterday.

See you there.

Love, Lois

Lois arrived at the empty office having stopped at the local coffee shop for a 'real' cup of coffee. She sat down at her desk and began looking at the various papers left in her absence while her computer booted up. Her eyes were drawn to Clark's desk and she found herself sitting in his chair feeling the desktop as if she could feel his presence. She looked up and smiled at the picture on the shelf of him and his mother from a few years ago. On a whim she picked it up and tried to open the frame wanting to borrow it and have a copy made. She should have a copy of her son's father and grandmother after all.

Breaking a nail she swore under her breath and started to rummage in his desk drawer for a letter opener. Her eyes were almost immediately caught by a picture of Jason carefully placed inside by the drawer wall. Shaking her head she smiled as she found the letter opener and used it to pry the picture frame open so she could remove the picture. Finally able to slip the picture out she was surprised to discover a picture of herself and Jason underneath the top picture. She immediately recognized that it was a copy of one of the pictures on her desk, but it had been enlarged and cropped cutting Richard out. She sat there momentarily forgetting what she had been about to do then jumped up remembering. Thankfully there was a 24 hour drug store on the corner. She wondered if that was where Clark had gone. Hopefully she could go and get back before he arrived for work. *If not he will obviously understand*, she smirked as that thought came to her.

Lois arrived back at the office a short time later and replaced the picture in the frame. Sitting it back in place she wondered, *Can he really control his vision well enough to see the picture of us underneath?* Going back to her desk she looked back at the picture of Clark and his mother then at the one in her hand. Where could she put her precious copy? She didn't have x-ray vision, darn it.

Just then she noticed she had left the drug store paper bag on Clark's desk. She quickly placed the picture of Clark and Martha in her drawer up against the wall just as Clark had placed the picture of Jason then went back to his desk to retrieve the bag. Once there she decided to just toss it in his trash. *No harm*, she thought. In doing so she noticed his trash had not been emptied and curious as ever she pulled the top papers out to see what he had been up to the day before.

She looked the printouts over. "Apartment rental ads, what does he need...oh!" She looked at the date then hearing the elevator ding behind her she threw the papers back into the trash can and ran to her own desk practically falling into place in her chair.

Perry entered the bullpen whistling only to find that once again he was not the first to arrive even though he was a full 20 minutes earlier than usual. He stopped whistling and cleared his throat as he went over to Lois. "Here kind of early aren't you? Yesterday I found Clark asleep at his desk now you're here all bright and early. Is there something going on I need to know about?"

"Oh no, uh...I just couldn't sleep and well I thought I should get here early to catch up."

"So, what did you three uncover yesterday?"

"Us three?...Uncover... yesterday?"

"Yeah, Clark said you three were following up on some leads about Luthor. Do you have anything print worthy yet?"

"Oh, um we're still digging but hopefully soon."

Just then the elevator dinged again and the doors opened. Clark stepped out and headed to his desk. Perry turned to face the tall reporter addressing him he asked, "How did your lead go, were you able to meet up with your source?"

Clark set his briefcase down at his desk and walked over to join Perry by Lois' desk. "I met up with my source but unfortunately the lead was already cold. Luthor was spotted in Grand Cayman clearing out a 'numbered' bank account the day before yesterday."

"The day before yesterday?" Lois confirmed.

Clark nodded sighing. "As I said the lead is already cold but it does give us a better starting point with one major hitch. Luthor is flush with cash so he could have bought his way to just about anywhere most likely in some discrete disguise. I can't help but think he retrieved all that money now because he's cooking up some new plan of attack."

Lois swallowed hard. "So we're basically still at square one?" Clark nodded. "How did you get this information? Can your contact help find him again?"

"I'm sure if he hears anything he'll let me know."

"I thought you three were working on this together?"

Lois and Clark exchanged glances. Lois answered. "We are just working from different angles so we can cover more ground. I don't really have anything concrete yet either."

Perry nodded satisfied. Speaking over his shoulder as he headed for his office, "Good work, keep at it and be sure to keep me informed."

As soon as Perry was out of earshot Lois whispered. "So who's your contact?"

"Lois, I can't tell you that! Surely you of all people know that I have to protect my sources."

"Even if the source was... you?" She said rather snobbishly.

"It wasn't," he answered softly.

"Then who was it. This involves keeping Jason safe therefore I have a right to know. What are we going to do if Luthor blabs what he knows about our son?"

"I don't think he will. I'm quite sure that he would want that information for himself. The real problem is his men and his girlfriend. If anyone is going to try and use the information for personal gain it would be one of them. Luthor would only get satisfaction by using it to hurt me."

"How can you be sure?"

"I've never been able to understand how his mind works. But I do know that he would do anything to hurt me and that he prefers to not only be the instigator but also the perpetrator of that pain."

"So what..., you're saying he's going to try and trap you again and you're just going to walk right into it hoping you can get the upper hand?"

Clark frowned, "I'm not just going to blindly walk into another of his traps. This time I'm going in with my eyes wide open with a counter trap of my own. I have a friend who is more than capable and willing to help."

Lois pulled back confused. "You have a friend who can help, how?" Then thinking she

added, "Is it your mysterious source?" She immediately got her answer from the surprised but impressed expression on his face. "Hmmm, now you have me really interested." She put her pen in her mouth thinking.

Clark rolled his eyes. "Lois, believe me, Jason couldn't be safer. My source is a trusted friend that I have worked with on several occasions in the past."

Clark turned away and headed back to his desk signaling an end to the conversation. Lois sat back in her chair still biting on her pen. Under her breath she whispered. "Clark's or ...". She raised her eyebrows expecting him to turn back to face her sure she could tell from his reaction.

He did turn back smiling as he walked back to her side bending down so he could whisper the answer in her ear. "Both." He straightened up still smiling with his raised eyebrows hidden under his hair. "That's all you get."

"Wait," Lois called after him, following him to his desk. "You didn't tell me how Jason is, did he sleep alright? I was worried about him all night."

"He's fine, he had a little trouble falling and staying asleep but he is perfectly fine. We had a wonderful time together." Lois noticed him smile as he glanced over at the picture on his desk as he spoke his eyes just slightly squinted. She no longer had any doubt he was able to see the hidden picture beneath the one of him and his mother.

She blurted out, "We should get a picture made for you Clark, you, your mother, Jason and me." It didn't even occur to her that she was leaving Richard out of the picture entirely.

"What..." he seemed confused and taken aback. "What about Richard?"

Lois blustered, realizing what she had just said. "Oh, of course, I just figured Richard would have to take the picture but I guess we could use a time delay or have someone take it for us." She recovered blushing.

"I guess I had better get back to work." She escaped back to her own desk setting down hard wondering what had made her say such a thing. Then she remembered the rental listing but decided it wasn't the best time to inquire about that. She already had one foot in her mouth, no use trying for two.

Lois had left Clark feeling confused and he had found it difficult to concentrate on anything but her or Jason. He stared at the picture of the two of them in a mood that was lost somewhere between content and melancholy. He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed the sirens in the distance. Coming out of his half trance he stood up and quickly made his way to the elevator to find Richard coming out of the elevator along with several others as the doors opened.

"Hey, just who I wanted to see, you got a minute?" Richard inquired.

"Sorry, not right now. I'm in a rush." He answered as he brushed past the other man pushing the close door button as soon as he was in the elevator alone.

Richard sighed then turned to look around the office to find Lois looking back. It appeared that she had been watching the two men interact from her desk. He walked over to her. "Lois, why didn't you just wake me up? You didn't need to take a cab. I would have gotten up and come in with you."

"I know, but I thought you would be tired after staying up so late. No use both of us tired all day just because I couldn't stay asleep."

She stood up as the two kissed. Pulling apart Richard asked. "Did Clark have anything new? I tried to ask him but he was rushing out. I guess to...."

Lois nodded understanding. "He has someone helping but he wouldn't tell me who it is."

She grimaced slightly. "He seemed a little too mysterious about it if you ask me. All he would say is that he was a trusted friend that he had worked with in the past."

"Clark's or ..." he raised his eyebrows at her then quickly looked around making sure no one was within range to overhear them.

Lois half laughed. "I asked him the same thing and he said 'both'." She raised her own eyebrows as if to punctuate the answer.

"HMMMM. What about Jason? Did he say anything about Jason?"

"Just that he's fine. Why don't we go into your office and call him? I really missed his cheery little smile and voice this morning."

Richard put his arm around her as the two headed to his office still talking.

Luthor sat in a nearly vacant luxury home. One of his men was busy changing the riders attached to the large FOR SALE sign in the front yard from SHORT SALE and MAKE OFFER to SHOWN BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. He had driven by the neighborhood just the day before looking for just such an opportunity. The signs along with the dead yard had told him a lot and taken with the faded flyers he knew the agent never bothered to check up on the listing.

He had called the agent immediately pretending to be interested in possibly buying the house. Once he confirmed the listing had several more months before the bank would foreclose he said he needed to talk it over with his wife. When the agent asked for his name and number Luthor smiled as he gave a name and number where he could best be reached. Not his information but the agent would never really know, would he? Surely people did that all the time. He smirked just thinking about how easy it had been.

The house was just what he needed. Gated and set back from the street he had privacy and lots of room on the large lot. No one would ever know what was going on behind those gates. No one ever knew their neighbors in areas like this. It was perfect. He laughed as another of his men entered closely followed by second man.

The man nodded at him, "It's a go for today. Do you have the down payment?"

Luthor reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out a thick envelope. "I think you will find this to your satisfaction." He watched the man closely for his reaction as he handed him the envelope.

The man took the envelope looking inside fanning the bills nervously smiling realizing it was even more than he had expected. He looked up as Luthor warned him. "I want him unharmed. Bring him to me directly. No funny business or it will be your last. Got it!"

The man swallowed and nodded. "Got it."

"You'll get the same amount upon delivery, but do not touch him. He's mine."

The man smiled still nervous. He had heard tales of this man and knew better than to even think of betraying him. This man had stood up to Superman and won. This man was his hero but he was also to be feared. "You more than bought my allegiance Mr. Luthor."

After the man left Luthor snorted, "Yeah, as if a punk like you even knows what the word allegiance means much less how to give it to someone."

Snooping Matters

Lois sat on the corner of Richard's desk as he stood behind it punching in the numbers Clark had given him the day before for the farmhouse. He hit the speaker button then the two waited as the phone rang several times before it was finally answered. They could hear Jason giggling almost non-stop in the background.

An amused voice answered almost singing the greeting, "Good morning."

"Martha? This is Richard and Lois. How are things going there?"

"Oh good morning indeed." Then not as loud as if she had turned her head from the phone, "Jason, it's your mom and dad." Back into the receiver she answered, "The two of us are having a wonderful time."

Lois spoke up, "I just hope he's not being too much bother."

"Oh posh, I'm finding being a grandmother absolutely delightful, I wouldn't trade it for the world. I suppose you really want to speak with that little boy of yours."

"Yes, would you mind putting him on?"

Again less loud as she turned from the phone, "Jason sweetie your mommy and daddy want to talk to you."

The giggling got louder as the little boy slowly came to stand by his grandmother. They could also hear rustling and movement as if he was struggling with something. "Hi Mommy, Daddy" he managed to get out between giggles.

"What's going on there? Are you being attacked by the giggle monster?" Richard asked curious barely containing his own chuckles.

Still giggling but managing to get the words out, "Grandma let me bring the kitties in and they're attacking me. It tickles. Munchkin keeps trying to climb up my leg. She's my favorite cause she's the bravest one."

"Munchkin?" Lois asked listening to his voice trying to hear if all the giggling was causing him any respiratory distress. If it was, it wasn't evident

"Ah huh. Grandma let me name them. I named the other ones Dash, Violet, Jack Jack and Nemo."

"Sounds like you're having fun. Do you miss us?" She was almost afraid to ask, torn between being glad he was having such a good time and disappointed that he didn't seem to be missing them much if at all.

"Grandma says she's keeping me busy so I won't have time to miss you so much Mommy." He almost dropped the phone wiggling around as Munchkin and Dash made a duo assault on his socking clad feet.

His giggling became more uncontrollable then calmed down as Martha picked him up and sat him on the kitchen countertop away from the kittens so he could talk without being attacked. They heard Martha tell him as his giggling finally subsided, "There, with you out of their reach it should make it easier to talk. The kitties will have to amuse themselves for a few minutes."

"So what have you been doing besides naming kittens? Did you sleep alright?"

"Me and Grandma are making gingerbread people. They're cooken right now then I get to make them special with decorations."

Richard smiled, "Oh really are we going to get any?"

"Ah huh, I'm going to make special ones for everybody. Daddy, did you know werewolves are just pretend?"

"Um, why would you ask that?" Richard looked a little nervously at Lois.

"Cause, I thought I heard a werewolf last night and it scared me. I was afraid it was gonna get me but Daddy Clark said werewolves were just pretend and that it was really just a wolf and they are just like big dogs."

"You heard a wolf last night and it scared you?"

"I was only a little scared, Daddy Clark said it was far away and couldn't get here. Besides he was here and wouldn't let it hurt me and Grandma's got a strong house and the wolf and fox couldn't get in anyway."

"Fox, there was a fox trying to get in the house? Wait, when did you hear about werewolves?" Lois asked concerned.

"Daddy let me watch one of his movies a couple weeks ago about a teenager werewolf."

Lois gave Richard a look that said we'll discuss this more later then to Jason she asked. "Well, I'm glad Clark was there and you weren't too scared. Have you had to use your inhaler?"

"Un ah. I feel good Mommy. My vacation isn't over yet is it, its fun here."

Just then the oven dinged and Jason's attention was diverted as Martha took the gingerbread people out of the oven. "Mmmmm, Grandma those smell good, can I have one now?"

Lois heard Martha tell him they had to cool a little first then she answered him. "No your vacation isn't over yet and I'm glad you're having fun." She relaxed and smiling she continued. "Well it sounds like you're pretty busy so we'll let you go. Love you munchkin. We'll talk again later."

"Save one of those for me Jason. Love you. Remember to call if you need anything."

"Bye Mommy, Daddy." Jason handed the phone back to his grandmother. She filled the two in on the foxes, wolves and roosters setting their minds at ease as Jason went back to play while waiting for the gingerbread people to cool enough for decorating.

Superman landed on the rooftop of the Daily Planet having just returned from providing aid to victims of a bridge collapse in the southeastern province of Hunan, China. Many had died almost instantly but at least he had been able to provide aid to those still alive and bring closure to the families of those who would otherwise have gone missing perhaps for days or even weeks.

Settled back at his desk he pulled up his search engine and started keying in search parameters for Jane Does. When he had spoken to the contacts in Grand Cayman no mention had been made of a woman in the group of people with Luthor. It made Clark wonder if she had outworn her usefulness; it wouldn't be the first time. One of the editions of the newspapers his mother had saved for him had reported that Miss Tessmacher had been found dead and barely recognizable in an out of the way alley near her mother's home in Hackensack, New Jersey just months after he'd left on his trip to Krypton. It also speculated that even from prison Luthor had somehow seemingly, though not provable, been able to put a hit on her.

His search included all the east coast and south coast areas as well as all the Caribbean Islands. Even so he was surprised to see such a long list of Jane Does over such a short period of time. Wasting no time he looked at each account quickly dismissing them until he found just what he had been looking for near the bottom of the list. There was no picture but the description and details were too close to be coincidental. The woman had been found by fishermen off the coast of Jamaica badly beaten and half dead from exposure just a few days earlier clinging to a small piece of driftwood. It had to be her. Getting up Clark started to leave

just as Gil called out.

"Clark Richard wanted to see you."

Getting up he pushed his glasses back in place as he headed towards Richard's office. Knocking then poking his head in the door he asked, "You wanted to see me?"

Looking up Richard nodded, "I was just wondering how Jason did last night. It was his first night away from home without us."

"He did fine. I was there most of the night. Being a city kid I think some of the sounds freighted him a little but he was a little champ."

"Actually, we already spoke to both him and Martha and he told us about the 'werewolf'. He's not really the real reason I wanted to speak with you. It's Lois, I'm afraid I'm losing her and I...well you and I haven't really had a chance to talk, alone that is. Just what are your intentions with Lois?"

Clark took a deep breath. "She...they're both better off with you" was all he said in answer.

"She still loves you."

Clark looked away from him over towards where Lois sat. Richard realized he was most likely seeing her behind the short cubical wall that usually hid her from his own view. Turning back to face Richard Clark answered. "No she just loves the hero and that can never work. She doesn't really even know me. Give her time, she's just confused."

"Don't you love her?"

"I love her enough to let her go." Richard didn't need to be able to hear the other man's heart to know he was speaking the truth, it was written all over his face.

"I need to go, I just found a possible lead to Luthor's girlfriend." Richard nodded and Clark backed out of the room and soon was miles away headed to a hospital in Jamaica.

A short time later Superman was speaking to the doctor in charge of the Jane Doe along with the small hospital's administrator. He had already determined it was indeed Katherine Kowolski by using his x-ray vision as soon as he knew where the Jane Doe was located in the hospital.

So far she had not regained full consciousness. Finally he was allowed to see her.

Her fine features were near ruined, eyes sunken with dark circles, her lips blistered and drawn. Her hair was a mess although he could tell the nurses had tried to tame it. That was not all, her left cheekbone appeared badly broken with dark burses and broken skin. Had Luthor done this to her and then just tossed her away to a slow death? He placed his hand on hers noticing how rough it felt. She seemed so vulnerable and broken. He grasped her hand and spoke softly. "Miss Kowolski, can you hear me? It's Superman."

She didn't respond. He stood there several minutes just watching her breath till finally speaking again. "If you can hear me focus on getting better, I'll be back soon." He turned to go but stopped as he heard her breathing and heartbeat change ever so slightly indicating she was regaining consciousness. Turning back he watched as she slowly opened her eyes trying to focus. He returned to her side once again taking one of her hands in his.

He could tell from her eyes that she knew he was there and just who he was. With the gentlest tone he asked, "Did Luthor do this to you?"

She moaned nodding ever so slightly. She tried to speak but her voice was just not there. Tears escaped from the corners of her eyes.

"I'm going to arrange to take you back to a hospital in the states where they can provide

you with more direct care." He saw her tense up and understood why. "It's alright, you'll be safe."

She somehow managed to rasp out, "Why?"

He looked at her and gave her a half smile understanding that what she was asking was why did he care about what happened to her. "Everyone deserves a second chance."

He wanted to ask her many more questions but that would have to wait. She needed to some time to recover first. His first priority was to get her someplace safe where she would have the care she needed and at the same time be protected from Luthor. He knew just who could help.

Lois noticed Clark leave and almost immediately went to his desk for a clue as to where he had disappeared, after all they were suppose to be working on this story together she justified. Was it that mysterious source? She smirked as she saw his computer was still running and the sleep mode had not yet closed access to the desktop. She clicked the icon to open up his mailbox but was stopped in her efforts, unfortunately his mailbox was password protected. She sat back in his chair and considered for a second. Then typed Loislane and hit enter. That wasn't it so she tried Jason surprised to find that still wasn't right.

The window was telling her she had only one more attempt before locking the program that would require a reset by the IT department. "Damn! What could it be?" Taking a minute she regrouped going over in her head what she knew. It had to be a new password no older than his re-hire date. Surely he didn't assign some long meaningless password that only some superhuman could remember. Did he?

She took a chance and keyed in Smallville then grimaced as the screen locked her out. "No!" Still not willing to give up she clicked on his still open web browser and checked the history of the last pages he'd viewed. Up popped the entry about a Jane Doe found in Jamaica. Lois quickly read the gist of the article and hit print realizing the woman's description fit that pretend hooker, the one who had been on Luthor's boat. He had found Luthor's girlfriend, or more likely his former girlfriend from the looks of her current condition.

She took the printout and went back to her desk to continue her on research.

Clark got back into the office and opened up his computer. Opening up his email window he was surprised to find he was locked out. He looked over at Lois knowing without a doubt she was the only one it could have been. Sure enough she had a very guilty expression on her face as she mouthed opps at him. Rolling his eyes he picked up his phone to call IT just as Lois came over.

"Sorry, but it is your own fault you know. If you would just tell me who your mysterious source is I wouldn't have to go snooping."

Clark shook his head in resignation as the call was answered. "Uh, this is Clark Kent, it seems I..un need to have my password reset.Yeah, thanks I'll be more careful in the future."

He hung up the phone and turned to look at her. "Lois, did it ever occur to you that if I wanted you to have access to my email I would have provided you the password or made it so obvious that you would have guessed it."

"I just figured you hadn't had time to give it to me yet. I bet you know mine."

"Lois, anyone that knows you could figure your password out. You really need to change it at least every five years or so."

"I don't like having to remember new passwords. What was yours anyway?"

"It doesn't matter. It wouldn't mean anything to you anyway. It was just a series of sixteen numbers and six letters converted to simple single digit numbers. I'll even tell you what they were 330925200032622200113."

Lois grabbed a notepad and pen but only got a few of the numbers at the end. "Wait, I didn't have time to write them all down. What was it again?"

"Well if I let you write them down I would just make up a new password rather than reusing that one."

"I thought you told me no more secrets. Besides I already know you found your hooker friend."

"She's not my hooker friend and you know that, Lois. She was Luthor's girlfriend but now she's just his latest victim. He tried to kill her."

Her voice softened. "Is she alright?"

"She will be. I've moved her under an assumed name to a hospital in the states. One Luthor would never think of checking just in case he was keeping an eye on her."

"Did she know anything that could help us?"

Clark sighed, "She's too weak, I didn't have the heart to try and question her in her present condition. She needs at least a day to recover."

"Um aren't you going to update your password and well, check you email?"

Clark sighed, "I already updated my password you just didn't see me do it. I'll check my mail when I know you aren't trying to read over my shoulder. We may share a child along with past and perhaps future bylines but we don't share a life and my emails have nothing to do with you or Jason. When and if they do, I'll be happy to share."

Lois stepped back hurt. He was obviously pushing her away, setting boundaries just as she had done the day before. "Fine, be that way. I'll be at my desk if you need to 'share anything'."

Clark hated having to treat Lois that way when what he really wanted to do was take her in his arms and fly off to someplace quiet to rekindle the love they'd lost. The numbers in the password may not have meant anything to Lois but they meant the world to him. Lois' initials converted to simple one digit numbers, the date of that perfect night when Jason was conceived, Jason's initials converted, Jason's birth date and finally his own initials converted. He wasn't ready to make up a new password but maybe he could help Lois move on. It was a step.

Kidnapping Matters

Lois had an appointment with her doctor just before lunch that she was determined to keep. She had already rescheduled twice when something more important had come up. She knew Richard had hoped it was because she had been having second thoughts about not wanting to have another baby and had said as much. She knew he loved Jason unconditionally but he had been an only child and didn't want the same for Jason so he kept trying to convince her that it would be better if they had another child before Jason got too much older. She had almost given in to his reasoning until...the love of her life came back...there she thought it. Now was certainly not the time to risk going unprotected.

She picked up her things and headed to Richard's office. "I'm leaving now. I'll see you this afternoon."

"Lois, are you sure you want to do this? Once you take that shot its three months..."

"Richard, we've talked about this already. You're going to make me late. I'll see you when I get back and don't wait lunch I may not come straight back." With that she was gone without even a kiss goodbye.

A few minutes later Richard got up and decided he might as well enjoy his lunch. He decided on a whim to go to this little greasy spoon that had the best Philly steak sandwiches in town. Lois hated the place. Maybe Jimmy would like to join him. He looked around but the only person he saw who had not already left for lunch was Clark.

Oh well, he thought, perhaps it would give them more time to chat and get to know one another. Know thy enemy. Somehow he just couldn't think of Clark or the hero as an enemy. "Clark, wanta go get lunch? I know this great deli a few blocks from here. We can walk there."

Clark looked up surprised. He looked around the office before answering and realized he was the only option Richard had. "Um, sure."

As they left the office Richard asked, "Do you mind if we stop by my ATM first since it's on the way? It'll save me a trip later."

"No problem. Lead the way."

As they approached the bank Richard moaned, "Darn the ATM is down. We'll have to go inside. It should only take a minute." They got in a short line and minutes later were just about to exit the bank when three masked men entered locking the door behind them.

"Nobody move and no one gets hurt." One of the men shouted. "Tellers back away from the silent alarms NOW!"

The three were standing side by side. One of the men came forward but before he got very far there was a rush of movement and all three men were tied together with their belts, huddled on the floor unable to move. Their guns were melting masses nearby and the door to the bank was swinging back and forth as if someone had just left unseen by human eyes.

Clark was standing next to Richard adjusting his glasses, appearing as bewildered as everyone else. Richard shook his head in disbelief thinking *and this is what I'm trying to compete with. Give me a break. Well at least Lois wasn't here.*

It didn't take too long with the police officers since no one had really seen much and it had all happened so fast there wasn't much to tell. Although Richard was sure a lot of the people would be talking about what they had or hadn't seen for years.

They finally made it to the deli and Richard insisted Clark had to try 'The Best Sandwich in Town' his treat. They had already called in the story with their first hand accounts to the Daily Planet to make sure it beat the deadline for the next edition and they also had reported it

to the affiliated live news channel.

Finally enjoying their sandwiches Richard relaxed and asked, "Have you ever seen that movie Phenomenon?"

"I don't really see too many movies. Plus I was gone a long time remember?"

"Oh right, well it was on just the other night and there was this part that made me wonder about you. I don't really want to give the plot away in case you decide to watch it but something is happening to the main character making it seem like he's some kind of a super genius or something. The government sends an agent to test him to see if he's faking or just how smart he really is. So anyway this agent asks him to name as many mammals as he can in sixty seconds and starts a stop watch." Richard paused for affect taking a drink before continuing. "The main character asks these questions saying the test wasn't precise like could he include extinct mammals or if he wanted them in a certain order before finally naming this long list of them in alphabetical order."

"Are you going somewhere with this?" Clark asked.

Richard nodded, "It gets even better the agent then asks how old a person is who was born in 1928 and once again starts the clock. The character again kills time asking seemingly stupid questions only to tie down the persons age down to the second based on where he was born and what time he was born."

"And...the point is?" Clark asked.

"After what happened in the bank a little while ago and reading some of the other stuff you've done I can't help but wonder, can you do stuff like that fictional character?"

Clark sat his sandwich down and looked him in the eye. "Would it make you uncomfortable if I could?"

The man sat in the parking lot of the private school in his stolen SUV. Magnetic signs proclaiming 'Joe's Plumbing' were attached to each side of the vehicle. How convenient of the owner to provide him with the idea for his perfect cover and a tool box to boot. He shifted slightly in anticipation as he saw a group of small kids finally come out onto the playground. The SUV was perfect, it had dark windows hiding his presence from any prying eyes allowing him to sit and watch the playground with small high powered binoculars. There was a fence but he had found a spot that allowed a good view and he was taking full advantage. Finally his patience was paying off.

He went over in his head the description of the kid. Light brown wavy longish hair that falls in his face, about three and a half inches tall, blue eyes and dimples. Luthor had given him a picture of the kid from a surveillance camera but it wasn't that good. Hopefully he would be able to pick the little brat out of the group now playing in the yard.

"Bingo, there he is!" he said to himself. "Now all I have to do is make the grab." He got out and opened up the back to retrieve 'his toolbox' with the newly added cartoon stickers all over it but first he put his work gloves back on. He might be leaving the toolbox behind and didn't want to leave any evidence with it. He had already spoken to the office and they thought he was there to fix several leaking bathroom fixtures. Supposedly he was on his 'lunch break' now. He laughed at how easy it had been. What facility like that didn't have leaking or malfunctioning bathroom fixtures?

It was just about time for the kids to go back to their classrooms. If he timed it just right he could grab the kid as he got a drink. That would put him close to the exit and make for a quick escape, if he could distract the kid for a minute to make him the last in the yard all the

better.

He walked in the gate and headed slowly towards the bathroom stopping near the drinking fountain to seemingly retie his shoe just as the bell rang. Several kids came up and formed a line at the fountain the target among them. He made sure to let a pen fall out of his pocket right next to the kid he wanted. *Bingo again*, he thought as the kid bit and got out of line picking the pen up to hand it back, even better he had noticed the stickers on the toolbox.

The man smiled at him. "My son put those on there. I don't even know who most of them are suppose to be. I bet you know though."

The little boy smiled as he pointed to each in turn, "That's Dora, and that's Shrek and that one's Sponge Bob." He continued naming several more of the stickers till the last of the kids finished getting a drink and ran inside. "Oh, I'm late." The little boy said then quickly went to the fountain and bent over to take a drink before going inside.

Taking advantage of the little boy turning his back he made his move grabbing him from behind holding a handkerchief filled with chloroform over his mouth as he simultaneously wrapped his jacket around him. Within seconds he was back in the SUV with the unconscious boy hidden under a blanket on the floor of the back seat.

He drove a couple blocks and parked for a minute to remove the signs then continued on to deliver the goods. He smiled thinking of the payoff to come.

The man carried the still unconscious child into the room where Luthor was waiting. He placed him on a couch and uncovered him then stepped back.

Luthor took one look and practically screamed, "You idiot. That's the wrong kid." He was so furious that he reached into his pocket pulled out a gun and shot the man dead before he had time to even react. "Let that be an example to the rest of you." He said to the other men now cowering in the room.

"It's impossible to get good help nowadays. Lucky for me thugs are a dime a dozen and this one was free," he said under his breath as he bent down retrieving the still stuffed envelope he had given the man earlier.

"Get him out of here." He screamed as he walked back to the child. He finally calmed down as he saw that the kid did look a lot like the little Lane brat. It might still work. Then he reconsidered, perhaps it would still work. He didn't have to worry about that kid causing problems like last time and Superman would still feel just as guilty, heck knowing that bleeding heart ideology of his perhaps this could work out even better. Yes he smiled this could definitely work to his advantage.

Almost before Richard or Clark could exit the elevator and enter the bullpen Jimmy came running up. "Did you hear? A five year old child was just kidnapped from Jason's school? They just put out a bulletin two minutes ago."

"What?" both Clark and Richard said simultaneously looking up to the monitors but the news had moved on to another topic.

"They think it was a man pretending to be a plumber but other than that they really aren't saying much. The kid looked a lot like Jason but they said his name was Ricky Johnson."

Both Clark and Richard reacted instantly by heading back to the elevator. Once inside Richard grabbed Clark's arm as the doors were about to close to keep him there for at least a couple seconds. "Clark, Ricky does look a lot like Jason and as Jason's father I might be able to get some answers from the authorities."

"Sorry, but as Superman I will most likely be able to get more. This is definitely Luthor's work. He probably knows it's not Jason by now but I highly doubt that it'll matter much to him. He surely knows I'll still come after him." He looked down at Richard's hand on his arm. "Let go, I need to leave."

"Be careful if you find him. He may have Kryptonite," Richard answered then released him.

There was a whoosh and Clark was gone.

Luthor always has Kryptonite

Superman flew up into the heavens with Richard's words ringing in his ears. "*Be careful if you find him. He may have Kryptonite.*"

As he took a few seconds bathing in the sun, his thoughts answered the warning his friend had just given him. *Luthor always has Kryptonite.*

Not wanting to waste any more time speculating Superman flew directly to the private school. As he approached he noticed the police barricades surrounding the area. Landing just inside the perimeter he analyzed the entire scene along with the various groups of people scattered around both inside and outside the police lines. Seeing Inspector Henderson Superman approached the man he had known fairly well in the past under both guises, a man he had respected and even trusted.

"Sir, I would like to offer my assistance."

Turning around annoyed the inspector was about to tell his men to keep the parents out of the cordoned off area before noticing just who had spoken. "Ahhhh, Superman. So glad to see you recovered so quickly. You had us all scared there for awhile young man." He grabbed Superman's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Thank you sir, I'm fine but to the matters at hand. I understand a small boy has been kidnapped. I have good reason to believe Lex Luthor was somehow involved."

"Yes the principle mentioned Richard White and Lois Lane had removed their son from the school yesterday morning fearing Luthor might try something because of the events that took place on his yacht. I don't think the school took the possibility of a threat serious. Evidently Miss Lane is considered a little too overprotective by some of the staff."

"That is beside the point, Luthor can never be taken too seriously."

"Agreed, but what riles me is that they allowed an unknown man presenting himself as a plumber full unattended access." The inspector shook his head. "Someone was not doing their job."

"What evidence do you have in connection to the abduction?"

"Very little other than this toolbox which has some good prints, unfortunately I doubt they match the kidnapper. A SUV with magnetic Joe's Plumbing signs and a similar toolbox inside were all reported stolen about the same time this was going down. The SUV hasn't been recovered yet and the owner says he had business cards just like the one given to the school office on the dashboard. The real Joe says he didn't have stickers on the box so we're hoping to get something off one of these stickers."

"Just after the first bulletin we had a call on the tip line. A woman about three blocks from here saw the SUV park just long enough for a man wearing a baseball cap to get out and remove the magnetic signs and jump back inside. She said he was headed north on Talbert."

The inspector motioned over to a bunch of about twenty kids huddled together watching Superman's every move. "Those are the last kids to see the Johnson boy. A couple of them noticed the man had on gloves and a Monarch's baseball cap but other than that they don't really remember anything about what he looked like. The parents are all clamoring to take them home so we're about to release them."

Motioning to a distraught couple being escorted away by several officers he continued. "That's the Johnson boy's parents over there. I'm sure they will be glad to hear you're on the case."

Another officer came running up. "Sir, a Mr. White is demanding to speak with you. He

insists his son was the intended target of the abduction."

The inspector sighed but Superman spoke up, "Let him in he may have some additional information. In the meantime would you mind if I try questioning the kids? Perhaps my presence will help them remember something. If nothing else it might make them feel a little less afraid."

Inspector Henderson nodded and the younger man headed over to the kids. As he approached a couple of the braver kids, a boy and girl jumped up and ran to stand right in front of him, looking up in awe.

The Inspector saw Richard White coming towards him and motioned for him to join him watching Superman with the kids. "That man has always had a way with kids. There is just something about him they instinctively trust and I guess even love. I can't say as I blame them though. He really is something special." The seasoned officer spoke with almost a paternal reverence for the young hero.

Richard sighed and nodded as he looked on watching as the children seemed to come alive and lose their fear around the charismatic hero.

"Hello, what are your names?" Superman smiled softly and knelt down on one knee to be closer to the children's level.

The little girl spoke up, "I'm Emily and this is Jacob. Are you here to help find Ricky? A bad man took him."

"Yes Emily, I'm here to help the police find Ricky. But all of you can help too. Do any of you remember anything that might help us identify the man who left that toolbox?"

The two kids shook their heads and looked back at their classmates. One little boy spoke haltingly. "I was in line for a drink and the man dropped his pen right next to Ricky. He had a Monarch's baseball cap but I already told the police that."

"Do you remember anything else about what he looked like?"

The little boy seemed about to cry, his lips quivering as he shook his head no. "I was in a hurry to get a drink. I don't remember anything else."

Superman held his arm out for the boy motioning for him to come forward. The little boy hesitantly joined the other two children still standing next to the hero. Speaking softly he put his arm around the child's shoulder. "It's alright. We'll find your friend."

"I left him all alone with that stranger. I should have waited for him. Maybe I..." He stopped as tears filled his eyes and his quivering increased.

"You had no way of knowing Ricky was in any danger. It wasn't your fault." He looked the little boy in the eye reassuring him that he was not to blame.

Just then another little girl spoke up, "I remember something Superman. The man had a pony tail and he wore it just like my uncle does."

Superman looked up at her motioning her to join the other kids close to him. "What do you mean like your uncle?"

"It was blond and the ponytail came out the back of his baseball cap."

"Do you remember anything else, like how tall or how big he was?"

"He was tall."

"Tall like me?"

The little girl grinned. "No not that tall!" She giggled, "Tall and big like them." She pointed to a teacher speaking to one of the officers nearby both average height and build.

Superman spoke with the children a few more minutes making sure he had spoken to each one wanting to be sure their fears had all been addressed. By the time he stood back up all the

children were grouped around him. "I'll be keeping a close eye on your school, so none of you need to be afraid. We'll have your friend back to you very soon."

He left them with the officers who had been standing nearby listening and making notes of the bits of new information and re-joined Inspector Henderson who was still standing nearby with Richard. With the officers overseeing the teachers finally began allowing the parents to start claiming their children one by one.

With a slight nod to acknowledge Richard's presence Superman spoke quietly as the three men walked away from the group of children and hovering parents. "The man who took the child doesn't match the description of any of the men who were with Luthor on New Krypton or the yacht but that doesn't mean he wasn't involved."

The inspector nodded and finally addressed Richard. "Mr. White has anyone tried to contact you or Miss Lane?"

"Uh, no not me but I don't know about my fiancé, I haven't been able to contact her and she hasn't called me either. She may not be aware of what's going on. She had a routine doctor's appointment and would have had to turn her phone off."

"We will need to tap all of your phone lines just in case the kidnapppers try and contact you. We're already in the process of tapping the Johnson's phones as I speak."

"Sure...whatever you need. Of course we'll cooperate. But won't Luthor know he doesn't have our son?" He asked the inspector.

Superman answered. "Luthor will know but it most likely won't matter. He may communicate with you or more likely Miss Lane because his main objective is surely to get my attention. More likely he'll use a method that will get my direct attention as he has so often in the past."

Confused Richard asked, "How has he communicated directly with you in the past?"

"A high frequency broadcast that is well above the range of human hearing seems to be one of his preferences. As soon as he feels his trap is sufficiently set he will no doubt want to spring it."

"You my boy had better clue us in when he does. We don't want you falling from the sky again."

"I'm working on a plan of my own, I have no intention of falling into another of Luthor's traps. Now, if you don't mind I need to get back to work." Looking at the inspector Superman added, "I'll keep you informed." With that he was gone.

Turning back to Richard, "I take it that your son is safe in some undisclosed location?"

"Correct. Jason is safe and will stay there until Luthor and his gang is behind bars where they belong. I'm sure the school showed you pictures of both boys?"

"Yes, I noticed the resemblance similar size and hair coloring. This just isn't Luthor's MO." He looked up into the sky momentarily hesitating before continuing, "But if Superman is convinced he's behind it, that's good enough for me."

Lois sat in the doctor's office fanning through a magazine she had absolutely no interest in reading. Looking at her watch she got up and approached the receptionist. "Excuse me, I've been waiting here for well over an hour can you please tell me how much longer I am expected to wait?"

"I'm sorry Miss Lane. The doctor was detained due to an emergency delivery. I'm sure he'll be arriving soon. Please just take a seat and we'll call you as soon as he arrives."

Clearing her throat to show her annoyance Lois asked. "Can't the nurse just give me the

darn shot like last time? What do I need to see the doctor for if all he's going to do instruct her to give the shot?"

The nurse came up behind the receptionist having heard what Lois just said. "Miss Lane, as we informed you at your last visit you are overdue for the doctor to examine you. We allowed you to talk us around that requirement last time but the doctor will not authorize further treatment without an examination. It's for your own protection. The doctor should be here any time now."

"Can't you just give me the shot and make an appointment for the exam in a few days?"

"That is what we did last time. Three months ago. So the answer is no. Please take a seat the doctor will be here shortly."

"Fine." She sighed taking a seat in the corner of the waiting room where she could fidget in relative private away from the growing number of waiting patients. A TV had just been switched on and was showing a popular soap opera on the other side of the room but like the magazine in her hands it held no interest for her. She took out her Blackberry and was about to turn it on when the receptionist tapped on the window and pointed to a nearby sign.

PLEASE KEEP ALL CELLS PHONES OFF

SENSITIVE EQUIPMENT IN USE

Rolling her eyes she dropped her phone back into her purse. Leaning back in the chair she once again began fanning through the well worn magazine. About ten minutes later she heard a familiar newscaster interrupt the soap opera with a special report.

"Ladies and Gentlemen we interrupt ... programming once again with additional information on the missing ... the following ... alert has been issued. The five year old boy pictured just been ... kidnapped from..."

Looking at the screen she recognized the little boy as one of Jason's schoolmates. Lois jumped up and ran to stand in front of the TV so she could see and hear the broadcast better in the crowded room. After listening for a few seconds more she ran back to grab her purse and was out the door with her phone already powering on.

Out in the hallway running to the building exit she looked at the small screen and saw the missed calls from Richard. Hitting return call she continued to run for her car parked a short distance away. The phone rang and Richard picked up quickly.

"Richard I just saw a newsbreak. What's happening, where are you?" She asked before he could even acknowledge the call.

"Lois, I'm on the way home with a couple of officers from Inspector Henderson's team. We should be there in about five minutes. We can talk there."

"Wait, what about Superman?"

"Lois he is already on the job. Everything will be fine. Just get home as fast as you can...safely that is."

"Yeah right, see you in a few."

Superman took off from the school yard and began scanning the city. He really didn't expect to see the SUV but it didn't hurt looking. He rose higher where he had the best view and clearest sounds from the city. He immediately honed in on Lois whose heart rate seemed agitated. Not wanting to take any chances he zoomed to her location and hovered overhead so he could watch and hear that she was in no danger. Smiling he saw she was just irritated with having to wait for service at a doctor's office.

Feeling relieved knowing where she was and that she was safe he flew back up to resume

his search of the city. After a couple minutes he retrieved his cell phone from the hidden pocket in his cape and as he continued to search the city he opened the phone quickly placing a call home.

"Mom, it's me. How are things going there?"

Sensing something was up she responded directly, "Everything is fine here. Jason is a little treasure. You sound like you're in the air. Is something wrong there?"

"A little boy was kidnapped from Jason's school. I'm sure it was Luthor's doing. Don't scare him but be careful. I'll be in touch. No doubt Lois and Richard will be calling too."

"Ben's here with us. We'll be fine. You be careful too. I don't want another scare like that last one."

He frowned, thinking of his mother worrying about him. "I'll be careful and I'll do my best to stop by soon. Bye Mom."

Keying in a different contact number he listened for the call to be answered. "It's me. How is she doing?"

"Not so well. She's been in and out of consciousness since you left. She evidently took several hits to her head. The doc had to relieve pressure from swelling of the brain. It's a good thing you brought her here."

"Does he have any idea when she'll be able to answer a few questions? The stakes have just gone up."

"What, how so?"

"One of Jason's classmates was just kidnapped, one who looks a lot like him."

"You think Luthor has kidnapped a child thinking he was... Jason?"

"Yes. That is exactly what I think."

"Come on by. The doc has assured me that she will be waking up shortly."

"I'm almost there now."

Seconds later Superman flew into the Batcave. Bruce smiled as he looked up from his console. "You never cease to amaze me with that darn speed of yours. Come on let's go see the doc."

As they walked to the elevator and entered Bruce asked. "So you really think Luthor has stooped so low as to resort to kidnapping?"

"This has his name all over it. It's just too much of a coincidence to think otherwise."

"Wait," Bruce pushed the stop button on the elevator. "What aren't you saying? Crap, he knows about Jason? That's it isn't it?" Bruce didn't need an answer, it was written all over his friend's face.

"Lois thinks he figured it out while they were trapped on the yacht."

"How? Did he have a reaction to Kryptonite or something?"

Superman looked back at him like a kid who had been caught breaking curfew. "I guess it would fit under the something category. From what I've been told he threw a grand piano to protect his mother from being violently attacked by one of Luthor's men."

Bruce leaned back against the elevator wall as he pressed the up button "Yeah that would do it." He patted his friend's shoulder secretly planting a bug seconds before the doors opened.

"It's this way." The billionaire motioned as the two exited the elevator.

They were met by a man in the hallway just outside the state of the art hospital equipped room. "Superman, this is my business manager and friend, Lucius Fox."

"Mr. Fox I'm pleased to meet you. How is Miss. Kowolski? Is the doctor in with her

now?"

Lucius looked at Bruce questioningly. "The doctor left a while ago saying she's likely to be out for some time. The nurse is looking after her with explicit instructions to call if there is any change."

"Did she say anything about Luthor or his plans while she was awake?"

Lucius shook his head. "No she's been pretty incoherent. I don't think she has said anything but to call out in fear a couple times. If you will excuse me, I was just on my way out."

Superman turned back to Bruce his understanding of the situation showing on his face. "That is not what you led me to believe, but then that was all a ruse to get me here. Why? Do you think I am so incapable of handling myself with Luthor that you feel a need to bug me to track my whereabouts?"

Bruce shrugged he hadn't thought he'd been caught. "I just wanted to make sure I had your back." The two headed back to the Batcave while they continued to speak.

"Next time just ask. Where Luthor is concerned it might not be such a bad idea to have backup. But just so you know in the future, I heard that bug the second you activated it while attaching it to my cape." He turned his head to look at his shoulder and picked the miniature electronic device off handing it back to Bruce. "Here, you might need this for something else."

"Sorry, I was told it was a silent model and completely undetectable. Next time I'll know better." Superman squinted his eyes at him as if in warning. Holding his hands up in surrender Bruce continued, "Alright, no next time."

When they arrived back in the cave Superman turned towards the dark expanse. "I need to get back in the air. Please, call me with any news."

"Wait, I have a new and improved state of the art satellite phone for you. It's much better and safer than that one you've been using."

"The one I have is just like the ones the CIA operatives are currently using. It is safe."

"This one is even better, trust me."

"Trust the guy that just tried to bug me?" He arched one eyebrow as he stared down his friend.

Bruce shrugged. Looking contrite he added "It's just a small thank you for that satellite you fixed for us. I must say that saved Wayne Enterprises a mint. It would have been a complete loss without your help, besides this phone will make our communications absolutely undetectable." Bruce handed him the phone. "Truce old friend?"

"I know you meant well but you don't need to bug me. I'll call you if I hear from Luthor.

Likewise please call me as soon as Miss Kowolski regains consciousness."

Smiling as Superman departed Bruce pulled up a screen and almost laughed looking back over his shoulder into the darkness where his friend had just disappeared. "Yep, the GPS on that phone will do just as well, perhaps even better."

Luthor contemplated just how things would go down. He twirled the ring on his finger with unabashed glee enjoying the green crystal so like the color of money, perhaps a little brighter but close enough. He wasn't sorry he had squandered that small bit of the rare crystal on a trinket for his finger. He already considered it a cherished souvenir.

Getting up he went over to the little boy. Soon, he would be waking up soon. He brushed the hair out of the boy's face as he smiled down at him anticipating the scene to come. His own eyes turned dark as he remembered how Superman had been able to escape against all odds

when they last met. That was not going to happen this time. Not this time. He wouldn't let that blasted alien out of this sight until he was positive he was long past dead, cold, green and forever dead. He had been cheated of that victory one to many times. Superman was going down and he was personally going to be the one to finish the job. All it would take was one well placed little green bullet and he had five left. He fingered the loaded gun in his pocket antsy to use it again this time for its intended purpose, to finally kill the alien.

Helping Friends Matter

Superman took a position high above Metropolis closing his eyes as he opened his senses to the city below him. He hovered there several minutes immobile except for the slight drifting of his cape billowing up gracefully behind him. He had told Lois that he could hear everything but now he wondered just why he had felt a need to embellish his abilities. Remembering that statement made him feel impotent and frustrated by his limitations for he could hear nothing of what he was seeking now.

Opening his eyes he turned watching an ambulance momentarily as it trailed towards Metropolis General. Then a loud crash of metal screeching as two cars collided caught his attention but failed to hold it. These were things the police and people trained for emergencies could easily handle. Dismissing the sirens and everyday crashes and screeches he listened and scanned elsewhere studying the city quadrant by quadrant determined to find what he was searching for.

"Can I eat one now? They smell so good." The little boy danced around circling the white haired woman as she pulled the cookie sheet out of the oven.

"Let's let them cool for a few minutes then you can have one along with a nice cold cup of milk. *Then* you can decorate the rest," she intoned with special emphasis.

"Did my Daddy help you make gingerbread people when he was little?"

Martha stopped halfway to setting the cookie sheet down on the hot pads laid out on the counter, memories flooding her mind. "Yes, he did" she smiled, "and if memory serves me he was not very good at giving them time to cool either. As a matter of fact, to this very day he has a very *bad* habit of not waiting for anything to cool."

Jason looked up at her as she finally set the cookie sheet down. "Daddy was bad?"

Martha chuckled, "Oh no honey. Your father was every bit as sweet and good as you. He just loved hot baked goods right out of the oven, that's all. I think perhaps he's tempted by the aromas even more than other people. Maybe he has supper smelling along with his other abilities." She laughed. "Anyway, he just never quite understood why he should have to wait for anything to cool."

"Grandma I think I have super smell too cause I really can't wait to taste the cookies they smell too good to wait. And....and I've never had gingerbread people cookies before."

"You are a little charmer just like your Daddy, how can I ever say no to such a sweet soul."

A short time later Jason was kneeling in a chair at the kitchen table his tongue sticking out his mouth as he concentrated on his work. "Grandma, do you think they'll like these?" The little boy looked up from his work, brown smudges and colored icing around his mouth and coating both hands.

"I'm sure they'll all be delighted." She looked over at the Gingerbread grandma he had already proudly presented to her.

Superman continued his surveillance of the city. His eyes fell on a white van meeting the description of the one the kidnapper had used. It was parked at a strip mall along with dozens of other cars. Using his x-ray vision he looked inside the van immediately seeing the Joe's plumbing signs in the back along with a tool box covered in stickers and nearby a blanket covered something on the floor. Looking deeper he saw a man's body.

Shooting down he landed right next to a police car which was just a couple blocks away

from where the van was parked. The officer was just about to write a ticket. "Officer a moment please."

Seeing Superman land and motion to him he closed his ticket book and spoke to the driver. "Today is your lucky day. I suggest you watch your speed in the future."

As the office approached the squad car he spoke, "Um eh...you want to speak to *me*?"

Wasting no time Superman answered directly. "Officer, I just spotted the white van that was used in a kidnapping at the Metropolis Learning Academy earlier today. It's parked in the back of Lafayette Square and there is a dead man matching the kidnapper's description inside under a blanket. I spotted the van and contents from the air but didn't want to risk contaminating the crime scene. I believe that Inspector Henderson is heading up the investigation."

"Sir, I'm on my way, I'll radio headquarters so they can alert Inspector Henderson."

"Thank you." Still not wanting to waste any time Superman shot back into the sky. The officer, understanding the importance of the information he had just been given, climbed into his car starting the engine as he grabbed his radio and then raced off towards the location he had just been given.

Superman took his place back in the heavens and once again scanned the van determined to find any evidence that might be there starting with the body. He was not willing to wait for the CSU to uncover any possible clues. He didn't recognize the man other than his fitting the description the kids had provided. Looking closer he determined from the entry wound that the killer had been at a close range. Looking even deeper still he caught his breath seeing the faint green glow emanating from the bullet fragments. He was right on all counts. It had been Luthor behind the kidnapping and he certainly did have kryptonite. He breathed deeply settling his anger telling himself to be forewarned was to be forearmed.

Pulling his vision out to a wider view he did a minute examination of the van and immediately noticed the many pieces of weeds, spores and dirt in the tire treads, wheel well and the undercarriage of the van.

Just as he was continuing his microscopic search of the van he saw the squad car pull up and the officer jump out. Then his attention was diverted by a strong sensation that he absolutely refused to ignore even though he wasn't sure what had caused it. Somehow he had sensed that far off in Smallville Jason had just screamed.

The officer looked up from the van hearing the familiar sonic boom glad the hero was back on the job and feeling a little giddy at having been singled out by him. Never mind he just happened to be at the right place at the right time. This was a story his wife and kids would thrill at hearing, how he had answered Superman's call.

Superman didn't slow up till he blurred into the kitchen. Sensing the scream from his son he had immediately thought the worse but the reality of the situation left him somewhat confused. Jason was standing near the table with his hands and mouth covered in icing and cookie decoration. Shelby was nearby wagging his tail and his mother was clearly amused at the whole situation especially it seemed that her son had just appeared out of nowhere looking bewildered.

"What happened, did you just scream?" was all he could say.

"Shelby ate Mr. Cookie Jimmy." Jason said with distress evident in his voice.

Superman looked even more baffled then noticed the cookies on the table decorated in

varying degrees some recognizable some not. His mother spoke up. "Jason accidentally knocked one of the cookies he had decorated off the table and well, you know Shelby."

Finally relaxing he blushed at the memories that suddenly flooded his mind, "Yes, I do know Shelby all too well. Jason, there are plenty more gingerbread cookies you can decorate. Shelby was just hungry too that's all. Besides if it fell on the floor you wouldn't have wanted to eat it anyway."

"But I was gonna ask you to take it to Mr. Jimmy for me."

"You can always make another one for Jimmy. Is this one for me?" He asked looking at the one with blue and red icing looking vaguely like Superman.

Jason smiled nodding happy and proud of his hard work. Superman picked up the cookie and promptly bit off the top much to Jason's horror. "Daddy, you're eating it!"

"Um...isn't that what I was suppose to do?" He was suddenly worried that he had hurt his son's feelings and wasn't sure what to do next. He looked to his mother for guidance but she just suppressed a laugh and shook her head in answer. He swallowed thinking to himself. *This father business was a lot harder than it looks.*

Jason answered in a small hurt voice. "I thought you would want to keep it. at least for a little while."

"I'm sorry it just looked and smelled so good I couldn't resist eating it right away." He looked down at the remaining cookie still in his hand still unsure of how to proceed. "Can you make *me* another one too?"

Jason sighed dramatically as if burdened, nodding his head as he climbed back up into the chair to get back to work.

Superman finished the cookie in his hand deciding he might as well since all that was remaining was the torso and legs and boots. Smiling down he watched as his son started working studiously on a new cookie with bright red hair. *Must be for Jimmy*, he thought. He noticed one with big glasses and a grey suit with the other decorated cookies. "Is that one for me too?"

"Ah huh." Jason smiled proudly. "That is Mr. Cookie Clark."

Superman picked it up very carefully and placed in on the plate next to the cookie Grandma he had noticed after making the mistake of eating the cookie Superman. "This one I want to be sure to save."

Superman flew back to Metropolis dropping down to hide a small package before once again taking a place hovering high in the air scanning the area. He gave one particular home and its inhabitant's special attention as he pulled out his phone. He hesitated momentarily then retrieved the cell phone Bruce had given him a couple hours earlier, debating which phone to use. Not wanting to take a chance with the unknown phone yet he started to put it back in his cape pocket but stopped and smiled as an idea crossed his mind. He put his own phone back in its place as he watched and listened in to the house just below him. Using the new phone he keyed in a number from memory.

An officer motioned to Lois, "Just like we went over. Let the phone ring at least three or four times before picking up. Just don't let it go to voicemail. Then if you think it's the kidnapper try to keep the caller on as long as possible."

Lois nodded then taking a deep breath opened her cell phone waiting as long as she thought she should. "Good Afternoon, this is Lois Lane, reporter for the Daily Planet may I help you."

"If you answer like that he'll know the phone line's tapped. Better to use your usual greeting Miss Lane."

Lois knew full well it was Superman but she wasn't sure he wanted her to divulge that to the officers in the room. But then surely he knew they were there, and that they were trying to trace the call didn't he? Not entirely sure what he was up to she played it safe. "Who is this?"

She knew who it was and he knew she knew and the absurdity lightened Superman's mood even more than their son had just a few minutes earlier at the farmhouse. "It's that guy you saddled with the name Superman." He barely contained his amusement seeing her expression at that comment coming from him.

He continued watching taking in the officer's reactions as they listened in on the call and realized who was on the line at almost the same time they came up cold on the call trace. Bruce was right. The phone appeared as '*untraceable*' on their sophisticated tracing system readout. Most likely the phone was using a Wayne Enterprises communications satellite and a highly advanced and top secret one at that. Perhaps almost as good as his own cell phone he had upgraded himself just before returning to Metropolis with his own special blend of Kryptonian technology modified to work with Earth equipment. Lois' response brought him out of his reverie.

"Superman? Um... you wanted to speak with me?" She continued to play it cool for the benefit of the officers listening in.

"I'm actually calling to speak with Inspector Henderson. I just located the van used in the kidnapping and want to give him some additional information."

"Um just a second, Superman, Inspector Henderson just went out the door in a hurry. Perhaps Richard can catch him." She motioned to Richard who nodded and headed out the door after the inspector who was just getting into his unmarked police car.

His test completed he replied. "Never mind, I'll come there and catch him myself. I need to speak with him privately."

"Wait, aren't you going to tell me...." The line went dead and Lois looked at the phone wondering just what that was all about? She didn't even have to pretend bewilderment or annoyance.

Superman dropped down right next to Inspector Henderson's car just as he was about to get inside. "Superman?" The older man seemed surprised. "I was just on my way to that crime scene you reported."

Superman quickly told the inspector what he had observed about the van and the victim inside including the fact that the man had been shot at close range in the chest with what appeared to be a hollow point bullet.

"You're still sure Luthor is behind the kidnapping?"

Superman nodded taking a deep breath before answering. "That is why I wanted to speak to you privately, I would rather this not get out. The bullet was tipped in kryptonite and fragmented upon impact."

"You saw the bullet, how?"

"I have X-ray and microscopic vision, remember?"

Inspector Henderson nodded and rubbed his chin in thought as the two continued to talk.

"I'm pretty sure Luthor is guiding me right to him. How many places around the city do you know that has overgrown plants and bushes that would have left so much evidence on that van? I'm thinking an abandoned house in one of the luxury areas."

"You're probably right but if Luthor has kryptonite bullets then you need to back off and

let us handle this. That monster will surely shoot you on sight if you appear anywhere in range."

"I just have to make sure he doesn't see me then, don't I. Luthor is not going to scare me away when that little boy's life may very well depend on my finding him. Besides, we both know it's me he really wants."

The inspector shook his head in resignation. "I'm not going to be able to dissuade you, am I?" The two eyed each other and the older man sighed, "Will you at least agree to notify us before going in on your own so we can provide backup?"

"I'll do my best. I don't have a death wish. I just feel responsible for this. Luthor needs to be put away where he can't harm anyone else ever again."

"Amen to that! Metropolis PD would like nothing more and we will certainly do our part, if you give us half a chance." He looked into the young hero's face seeing agreement.

"Between us we'll bring Luthor to justice. He has terrorized this city his last time. Well I had better get over to that crime scene. Keep in touch."

Superman floated up into the air as the inspector got back into his car and drove away. Then he watched as the two officers who had been setting up the surveillance equipment on the phones leave the house and slowly drive away. Floating back down he landed on the patio in the back of the house and tapped on the glass door. Richard appeared with Lois not far behind him peaking around his shoulder. Richard opened the glass door.

"I just left Jason at the farm a few minutes ago. He asked me to give you these." Superman had retrieved a small box loaded down with decorated and plain gingerbread cookies that he had hidden nearby just a few minutes earlier before taking the position hovering above the house.

Richard accepted the box opening it up to look inside at the assortment of gingerbread cookies as he motioned for Superman to come inside.

Stepping inside Superman added, "Oh, a word to the wise, only eat the plain ones."

"Huh?" Richard looked confused then looked past Superman to be sure they were not being observed by neighbors or anyone on the water before closing the door.

Superman answered half amused. "Jason was horrified when I bit the head off of um...*Cookie Superman*." Then he answered the unasked question, "it's alright, no one saw me land."

Lois smirked taking the box from Richard. "Awwww, they're cute. Hey are these for Jimmy and Perry?"

Superman nodded. "I thought you should be the ones to take them into the office."

Lois grabbed her cell phone and smiling started to call Jason. Both Richard and Superman voiced together "NO!"

The two men exchanged glances. Superman spoke up first as he once again retrieved the phone Bruce had given him handing it to Lois. "Use this one. It's untraceable, I just tested it."

Lois smiled figuring it out as she accepted the small cell phone. "You tested it? So... that's what that call was about?" She rolled her eyes shaking her head slightly looking over at Richard who had a similar expression on his face.

"Um...I don't have much time I need to get back in the air. Things are starting to break."

Lois stepped towards him her hand out, "Wait. Aren't you going to clue us in...and um what about your phone don't you need it back?"

"You can keep the phone. A friend just gave it to me but I don't need it. There's nothing wrong with the one I already had. As far as clueing you in, the van with the kidnapper's body

inside has been found. I think the evidence is going to lead me right to Luthor but I need to get back on the job for that to happen, now!" He headed for the door. "oh by the way, you should know, there is a GPS device on the phone and... um...Batman may be tracking it."

"What!" Richard and Lois both exclaimed but Superman was already gone. They stared down at the phone then looked at each other not sure what to think of that revelation.

Richard said somewhat incredulous, "Superman is friends with Batman...and Batman was tracking him? Is that what he just implied?" He wasn't sure which was more unbelievable.

Lois shrugged still somewhat skeptical. Then remembered the mysterious contact...*could it be?* She smiled. Then opened the phone and called the farm dying to talk to Jason even if she had to use a phone being tracked by Batman. *Hmmmm* she thought, *maybe I can get an interview with him.*

Alfred appeared as the elevator doors opened, silver tray in hand. Bruce looked up just as the tray was sat down near where he was working. "Alfred, how do you always know exactly when I'm starting to get hungry?"

"Master Wayne, it is what I live for. Will there be anything else sir?"

Looking at the tray of gourmet sandwiches and fruit arranged just so and the pot of tea he shook his head. "This looks just fine. Thank you as always. I don't know how I could ever get along without you."

"Nor do I sir." Alfred smiled bowing ever so lightly then turned to go.

Bruce grabbed one of the small sandwiches and went back to work. "Hmmmm lets see where Blueboy is right now." Just then his private line rang. He picked up the call, "Hello."

"It's me, on my own phone."

"Why are you using *that* phone? I told you the one I gave you was better, state of the art."

"Did you really think I didn't know about the added bonus to you? I told you not to bug me. When I want you to know where I am or what I may be doing I will inform you directly. I just wanted to let you know I gave the phone to Lois and Richard so they could safely contact Jason. I also told them about the GPS device. So you should find something better to occupy your time."

"Great. You do know I was just trying to help you. I still think you're in over your head with Luthor."

"Maybe they allow your heavy hand in Gotham but we do things differently here in Metropolis and I'm not sure how the authorities would react to your ways of doing things. I suggest you remember that. I do appreciate your concern but if I need your help I'll let you know."

"Zing, if you put it that way I'll back off. I just hope you don't die regretting brushing me off." Both men were quiet for a second then Bruce said. "Keep in touch." With that he closed his phone and then reduced the window that was displaying the GPS position of the phone he had given his friend.

Finishing the sandwich still in his hand he opened his phone again and hit a speed dial number. "Lucius, what's the status? ... We need to get that facility up and running ASAP. I have a bad feeling it's going to be needed very soon. We can't let what happened last time happen again. We might just lose him for good."

Closing his phone Bruce jumped up and quickly suited up. "I guess I'll have to do this the old fashioned way."

Superman was once again hovering in the air searching upscale areas that met the criteria looking specifically for overgrown yards. Unfortunately there were a lot of possibilities with all the foreclosed homes in the area.

Luthor paced the floor growing more and more impatient as time went on. The boy was finally starting to show signs of waking up from the mix of chloroform and drugs he had been given. As far as he was concerned it couldn't be too soon. Finally having enough he walked over to the boy laid out on the couch, one of the few pieces of furniture in the otherwise empty house. Shaking the boy to full wakefulness he almost hissed at the child holding the gun to his face, "Scream for help, now!"

"Mommy" the little boy whimpered.

"NO! Mommy can't help you now!" Luthor spat at the child trying to wiggle away from his grasp.

"Daddy..., Daddy help!" He cried out and Luthor tightened his grip.

The little boy began crying uncontrollably which made Luthor ever more enraged. He snarled at him, "Daddy can't help you either. Only Superman can help you now!" His eyes narrowed in hatred for the alien as he spoke the name.

"Superman...Superman help me!" The little boy screamed still trying desperately to escape the menacing madman.

Luthor let go and took a few steps towards the door, his gun ready, his breathing hard and his heart racing in anticipation.

Superman jerked his head hearing the scream. He shot to the location but hesitated when he saw Luthor standing watch with the loaded gun. He couldn't help the boy if Luthor took him out with Kryptonite bullets. Grabbing his cell phone he called inspector Henderson while he continued to observe Luthor.

The phone was answered right away, "Inspector Henderson."

"Sir, this is Superman. I've found him. He's hold up in a vacant home at 2422 Jasmine Lane. The boy appears to be unharmed but terrified."

"Hold your position. I can have squad cars there in minutes." He turned from the phone shouting the information to one of the other officers. "Help is on the way. You stay in the air and on the line with me." The inspector raced to his own car as he spoke motioning for another officer to drive so he could try and keep Superman at bay and on the line supplying updated information.

Superman shook his head in frustration knowing the inspector was right but at the same time not wanting to wait a second longer with the child in such danger. Speaking into his phone he shared what he was seeing. "There are three other men in the room. They seem to be keeping their distance from Luthor, most likely ready to flee at the first opportunity."

Suddenly Superman heard Luthor shouting. **"I know you're up there Superman! Show yourself or the kid dies. You have to the count of ten. One...two...three..."** Luthor turned halfway pointing the gun directly at the hysterical child.

The inspector heard Superman exclaim, "No!" Then the line went dead as the call was ended.

"Faster, we need to be there NOW! There's no time!" the inspector said to the officer driving. He braced himself as the car speeded up even faster the siren screaming as they raced

down the street.

Superman shot down towards the door wanting to make sure the officers would have easy entry. Luthor shot wildly towards the doorway as it shattered inward. The shots rang out in fast succession. BANG! BANG! BANG. Realizing he was missing his intended target he turned back towards the child and pulled the trigger once again. BANG! He smiled hearing the bullet finally hit its target. He thrilled hearing the moan and danced over closer as the alien became visible and obviously in great pain.

Superman moaned but continued to slump down in a protective cover over the hysterical child. Knowing that help was coming was his only hope now. He just had to hold out for a few minutes and the child would be safe. He heard Luthor approach and cringed.

Luthor stood just a couple feet away laughing. "This is what I have been living for. Today you die by my hand. This time there will be no reprieve, just a slow, painful death." He pulled the trigger again. BANG!

The first bullet had hit him in the side just below the ribcage, this one hit him in the mid-back perhaps puncturing a lung. His breathing became even more difficult but he remained defiant. He managed to turn his head and look Luthor in the eyes as he rasped out. "You may kill me but you'll never win in the end."

"Oh, but I have already won," Luthor almost sang. Then his expression changed as he heard sirens and then the front gate being demolished as several squad cars screeched into the driveway. No longer having the luxury of watching a slow death and wanting to at least make sure to kill the alien he once again pointed the gun. Even if he was caught he could live with the knowledge that he had indeed won the battle with the hated alien. That was all that matter to him. He squeezed the trigger, this time aiming pointblank for a lethal shot to the heart. BANG!

Urgent Matters

Three squad cars raced to the scene from different directions arriving almost simultaneously. The first car smashed through the flimsy gate screeching to a halt in the driveway with the second and third cars pulling up behind it. The car with Inspector Henderson raced up coming to a halt next to the first car in the oversized circular driveway. The officers piled out of their cars, their guns ready as they took positions at the demolished entryway to the home just as a shot rang out.

BANG!

The first two officers stormed the doorway not wanting to wait, knowing at least one hostage was inside. They entered ready to fire if necessary with three other officers and Inspector Henderson just behind them. The three men Superman had observed just moments earlier tried to flee towards the back of the house. "Hold it right there!" One of the officers shouted as he ran towards them pointing his gun, meaning business.

The rest of the officers flowed in, taking up positions around the large almost empty front room, some searching the rest of the house. Two of the officers approached a well dressed man who lay moaning on the floor face down, a gun still clutched lightly in his hand. They realized it had to be Lex Luthor. Both of the officers kept their guns trained on the man as one of them kicked the gun away then roughly turned him over with the same foot. It was definitely Lex Luthor and he had a gunshot wound in his temple with blood streaming out.

Inspector Henderson and the officer that had driven him raced to where Superman was sprawled over one end of the couch just a few feet away from Luthor. The feet of the small boy were barely visible sticking out from under the red cape. His hysterical screams echoed off the bare walls.

At their approach Superman managed to stand up but seemed stiff and unsteady, barely able to gain his feet. "Take... the boy out... of here," he managed to say between labored, rasping breaths.

The officer looked at Inspector Henderson who nodded, grabbing the boy he ran out putting the child into the unmarked car and he tried unsuccessfully to console him.

The boy was barely out of view before Superman collapsed, falling into the inspector's arms. A second officer joining him as the two gently lowered the failing hero back down on the couch.

Henderson looked back and forth at the two badly injured men. Both appeared to have been shot yet there was only the one gun.

Just then Luthor moaned and was barely audible saying, "Damn... forgot... only five... left..." He smiled looking at the officers standing over him drawing on the bitter remains of his strength to continue squinting treacherously as he said. "At least... I still win...." His last words were, "You can't save him."

Inspector Henderson looked away from the madman, hoping indeed he had breathed his last breaths and instead turned his full attention back to the young hero who was struggling to breath and had just lost consciousness. Worried as to how bad it was he began looking for wounds on the prone body of his friend.

Several more officers had joined them as word had spread quickly from the moment Superman had called reporting the location over the police radio of what was going down. The officer guarding the three men pointed his gun at a scrawny, nerdish looking man asking, "What happened here? What did Luthor mean 'only five left'?"

The man looked at his two comrades then started to answer until a second officer stopped

him.

"Wait!" He wanted to make sure they followed the letter of the law. These men were not going to get off on a technicality if he could help it. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you each understand these rights?"

The three men nodded. The nerdy man continued with what he had been about to say. "Luthor threatened to shoot the kid if Superman didn't show himself. He started counting to ten, the door came splintering in and Luthor took three shots then turned towards the kid and took a fourth. Superman was suddenly just... there... hit and shielding the boy."

The officers exchanged glances as they looked from the nerd to Superman, unconscious and being tended to by the inspector. The inspector leaned over his charge and speaking softly said, "Hang on, help is on the way." He had found the two entry wounds.

The nerd continued, "Luthor ran over closer to Superman and said something like he wanted him to die a slow and painful death. Then he shot him again in the back." The man shifted his eyes, suddenly scared, worried about what was going to happen to him for being a part of the shooting and probable death of Superman. "I swear I didn't know he was going to actually shoot Superman when I made those kryptonite bullets."

The officer closest to him gritted his teeth barely containing his urge to spit on the man. "Yeah, right! Just what *did* you expect him to do with them?"

Inspector Henderson spoke up. "That's enough, let him continue."

"We all heard the sirens and then the sound of the front gate crashing in. Luthor seemed incensed and pulled the trigger again. Only he forgot he'd used all the kryptonite bullets. There had only been enough kryptonite to make six and he had used one when he shot the kidnapper earlier."

There was another siren in the courtyard. The officers exchanged questioning glances. Inspector Henderson looked once again at Luthor's body understanding dawning on his face. Two EMTs came running into the house one stopping only for a second to look at Luthor's body then continuing on to Superman's side to join his comrade already taking over from the inspector, starting to assess the unconscious hero.

Inspector Henderson had moved away to allow the paramedics access to their patient. He looked down at Luthor an ironic smile briefly crossed his face. He finished the story for the nerd. "The two bullets that wounded Superman were tipped with kryptonite, but the final 'lead tipped' bullet ricocheted off and right back at Luthor."

The other two thugs looked away from the officers sorry they had ever hooked up with Luthor. He had been bad news from day one but they had been afraid to cross him, fearful for their own lives. They knew they were going to prison for a long time but at least Luthor was dead and would never be able to strike back at them if they cooperated with the police now.

Henderson continued to observe the EMTs working on his friend. They had managed to find the clasp and strip down the suit revealing his upper torso. Finding the two entry wounds they were surprised that there was almost no bleeding at either site. There should have been lots of blood. They looked up at the inspector seeing that he too was surprised.

One of the men radioed in to the doctor at the hospital communicating the vitals and identifying the patient as both men continued to work. The second man put an oxygen mask in place to aid Superman's increasingly labored breathing. At the direction of the doctor they made a futile attempt to insert an IV. The needle was rendered bent and unusable. The men

looked at each other, frustrated but continued readying their patient for transport, there was little else they could do.

Another siren was heard out near the street as the driveway was now full with police cars. Onlookers filled the street trying to figure out just what was happening several had heard the gunshots and the crowd was abuzz with speculation.

One of the paramedics offered an opinion to the officers all grouped around the fallen hero. "If he was shot with kryptonite, perhaps it cauterized the wounds. The entry sites look like burns." He looked up then said urgently. "We need to get him to the hospital. We can't do anything for him here but give him oxygen. At least he doesn't appear to be losing blood. That may be his only saving grace."

The other paramedic looked up worried but not wanting to voice his concerns. They both knew Superman could be bleeding internally and he couldn't help remembering all he'd heard about Superman's recent hospital experience. How the best doctors had been powerless to help him. It was still a big topic of conversation with all of his friends both at the firehouse and at the hospital. He didn't want to think about how this was likely to end.

Two ambulance attendants came running in with a gurney clanking loudly over the empty tile flooring. Soon the Man of Steel was loaded and being raced back out with the EMT's at each side. They had covered him with a blanket to help shield him from prying eyes now overhead as well as lining the street. As they loaded the gurney, a bit of red cape was visible for those crowding in trying and see what was happening. The officers tried to control the onlookers but word started to spread that it was once again Superman being rushed away in an ambulance.

Both EMTs stayed with their patient, monitoring his condition as the ambulance raced towards the hospital with several police cars clearing the way in front of them. Each car had lights flashing and sirens blaring as they tore the quickest path towards the hospital. Just two blocks from the destination a long black hearse pulled in front of the ambulance as it slowed down just about to turn a corner blocking it from continuing after the police cars. Three men got out of the hearse and without hesitating opened the back of the ambulance. The paramedics looked up, concerned then surprised, when they saw that one of the men was none other than Batman.

"You need to let us take Superman. They won't know how to help him at the hospital. You must trust us."

A second man added urgently, "We've prepared for this day and may be his only hope."

The two paramedics hesitated, torn, sharing quick glances one to the other. They understood the magnitude of their decision. Batman didn't wait for an answer, he grabbed the gurney his friend was on and started to pull it out of the ambulance. "Wait, we need to go with him," one of the men said.

The driver was turned around in his seat, his radio in his hand about to call for help. Batman looked at the driver cautioning him, "You need to continue on to the hospital. You need to let us go in secret."

Batman then addressed the EMT that had spoken. "You can't come with us but know that Superman is among friends and perhaps the only ones who can save him."

The EMTs nodded. They had both heard the stories from the recent incident when Superman had fallen from the sky. So as soon as Superman was unloaded they reluctantly closed the door and told the driver to continue to the hospital. They knew the police cars would be back if they got too far behind and they might not be as quick to let the hearse go on

its way.

Dr. Emil Hamilton assessed his patient as the hearse raced away in a different direction from the hospital. "Not good, two entry wounds, possible lung damage, if the bullets fragmented no telling how much other damage we'll find, and that is not even considering the poisonous affect on him."

Bracing the gurney watching the doctor work Batman called ahead, "Incoming, Code Green. This is not a drill. I repeat this is not a drill. ETA five minutes." He looked down at his unmoving friend. "I guess it was a good thing I high tailed it here from Gotham and monitored the emergency frequencies on the way. I just hope your theories are right and that we got to him in time."

The hearse continued finally turning onto a side street and pulling into a parking structure in Queensland Park Borough near Metropolis Harbor. The structure provided parking for S.T.A.R. Labs and was just one of the many S.T.A.R. Labs facilities located in various cities throughout the United States. This particular facility specialized in marine biology, at least that was what the visible and publicly known part specialized in. Only a very select few knew that beneath the parking structure and the S.T.A.R. Labs building was a secret lab and a very elite and specialized hospital facility. One fully funded by none other than Wayne Enterprises.

The hearse turned right, going down to a lower level of parking marked maintenance crew only. It continued, finally stopping near a place marked off as 'no parking'. The driver waited while Batman and Dr. Hamilton quickly exited the back, pulling the gurney out with the still unconscious Superman once again hidden from view by the blanket just in case anyone might see them in the dark basement like structure. They hurriedly pushed the gurney to the freight elevator close by and soon disappeared from view. The hearse returned the way it had come, back to some obscure parking place to remain on call and ready if needed at a moment's notice.

The ambulance arrived at the hospital. Several of the officers from the police escort ran to the ambulance opening the back door wide. They had all been worried when the ambulance had fallen behind, thinking it had stopped so some kind of urgent care could be administered to the patient, to Superman. The officers were shocked to find the gurney and Superman missing. The driver and both paramedics exited the vehicle, looking around pensively. They hesitantly explained what happened. The police were livid that the men had allowed Superman to be taken from their care.

Dozens of hospital personnel huddled around the emergency entrance. They had already been informed seconds earlier by the paramedics over the radio of what had just happened and they were stunned into silence, unable to move from the spot just in case they had been mis-informed.

News travels with lightening speed and news like this was no different. Perry looked stunned as the fast breaking news flashes began to scroll across the bottom of the screen.

...Superman Has Been Shot... Reportedly In Critical Condition... Being Transported To Metropolis General Hospital... Lex Luthor Dead.

Grabbing his phone, it was late but he called Lois. She was already watching the same reports, Richard by her side. She raced to the phone grabbing it instantly just as another update appeared and the station switched from the normal redundant programming to a hard news

anchor, obviously just taking his place to report what was happening live.

The newflash crawling at the bottom of the screen continued to be updated.

....*Superman Critical... Reportedly Abducted From Ambulance By Batman...*

Lois dropped the phone screaming, running to the other room she retrieved the phone that Superman had given her earlier. With shaking hands she opened the phone, remembering that she had seen a listing in the contact list that just might be of use. She desperately searched her memory but it seemed to be failing her along with her fingers as she fought back tears.

Richard took the phone from her shaking hands. "Let me. I think this is what you're looking for." He pulled up the contact for Darth Vader they had both laughed about just a short time ago while checking out the phone shortly after speaking to Jason and Martha Kent.

He hit the call button then handed her the phone.

A man answered saying only, "Not now... I'll call soon..."

Lois said urgently, "Wait! Please, don't hang up!" She had to fight to control her voice.

The man answered her plea, the tone much softer than before, "Be assured, he is being cared for by the only ones who have any possibility of helping." Then the line went dead.

Lois almost fell sobbing into Richard arms as she clutched the still open phone which seemed to be her only lifeline to knowing the fate of the man she knew she didn't want to live without.

Richard finally understood his place in the scheme of things and rocked her slowly, letting her cry. It was his privilege and duty to keep her safe as he always had till the other man could reclaim her as only and always his.

Richard slowly closed his hand over hers closing the phone in the process. They stood there together, unable or unwilling to move from the spot. He continued rocking her till her sobs quieted then they moved together back to the other room. He helped Lois take a seat on the sofa then retrieved Lois' cell phone from the floor where she had dropped it, placing it on the coffee table. He quietly called Martha with the 'Batman' phone letting her know what was happening and promising to keep her updated. He added that she should perhaps come to Metropolis and offered to fly her and Jason whenever she wanted. He felt a need to help her be closer to her son but he was also anxious to have Jason back home. Lois needed them both with her now.

Finished with that more urgent call, he returned his Uncle Perry's call, letting him know some of what was going on but not nearly all. Finally he rejoined Lois, gathering her to his side as they watched silently for any additional news that might be reported. They both knew the only one who could really provide what they needed had said he would call back, but when? Richard kept the phone in his hand ready to answer as soon as it rang.

Families Matter

Richard and Lois remained for some time sitting silently on the sofa. She was leaning into his strong arms, her head resting on his shoulder and feet pulled up tucked partway under her body. One of his arms was wrapped around her shoulders openly offering support and warmth while his other arm rested on the arm of the sofa. Even after what seemed like several hours he still clutched the phone praying it would ring soon and bring news. Lois had asked him to call again several times but he had resisted, each time telling her to give it just a little more time.

They half listened as the newscasters droned on and on repeating the same information over and over. Talking heads and so called experts offered opinions and speculation was rampant. Finally one of the doctor's who had attended Superman when he had been at Metropolis General was cornered next to his car by a particularly persistent reporter.

"Sir, in your opinion based on your firsthand knowledge while attending to Superman's recent injuries if he was in fact shot with kryptonite bullets what are his chances of survival?"

The doctor looked up, he obviously had tried to get away without answering but finally acquiesced, "Not good and even worse if the bullets fragmented as they did on the other known victim now in the morgue..." He stopped, closing his eyes not liking what he was remembering, that even as hurt as Superman had been, his invulnerability had remained intact. His body had healed itself only after they had been able to remove the small bit of kryptonite from his then open wound. "I fear the invulnerability that has protected him so many times in the past just might spell his doom this time. If they can't somehow remove that deadly poison from his body there may be no way to save him."

Lois jumped up having heard the comment and refusing to play the patiently waiting citizen any longer. "Richard I can't sit here just waiting for news. I have to do something...we have to figure out where they took him. I need to be there for him."

Richard stood up beside her. "Lois I understand how you feel but they could have taken him anywhere. Surely they'll call soon." He said looking down at the long silent phone in his hand.

"Give me that damn phone." When Richard frowned she added, "Please, I can't stand this waiting any longer for Batman to find time to call back." Lois grabbed the phone from his hand and didn't hesitate to punch in the now memorized speed dial number.

"The phone you are calling is either turned off or out of the area. Please try your call again later."

"NO!" Lois screamed and almost threw the offending phone before she realized she needed it.

Richard pulled her back into his embrace. "Lois, if he's at a hospital perhaps he is just following the rules."

Lois looked up into Richards face as she fought to control her emotions. "Since when did that vigilante ever follow any rules? We're talking about Batman, remember."

Richard stroked Lois' hair in an attempt to calm her. "He said he would call. Unless you can think of something else for us to do I suggest we wait. It's really only been a couple of hours."

Lois calmed just slightly, "It seems like forever. I can't stand this waiting, not knowing. I feel so helpless."

"I know." He said continuing to stroke her hair softly. "I know... we'll hear soon."

Batman watched the doctors and nurses moving below him in close unison in the specially

designed all-in-one hospital room from a small observation window. He could have watched on closed circuit TV from his private office down the hall but instead stood here alone watching, biting his lips as the doctors worked to keep his friend alive. He didn't have many real friends and hated the thought of losing this one in particular, especially when the friend had just so recently returned from what seemed like limbo.

Batman had been worried the theories wouldn't work. The doctor had said they would need to replicate some of Krypton's environmental conditions in order to overcome the invulnerability Superman retained even while near death. It seemed to be working, an IV had been inserted, x-rays taken and the doctors were preparing to operate. Even the universal donor blood was determined to be an acceptable match, but then he did have a half human son so perhaps that should have been a given.

Everything seemed to be going as Dr Hamilton had expected, except Superman's vital signs remained almost non-existent. Batman had watched anxiously as the doctor at first seemed worried and had tried to improve the patient's heart and respiration rates with drugs before starting the operation but soon realized after studying the brain activity that it was somehow normal...for him at least while in this dire condition.

The doctor speculated out loud, "His body has nearly shut down and is perhaps trying to repair itself but is unable due to the presence of the kryptonite and the radiation it generates." The doctor looked up sensing the unseen observer above, "We have no way of knowing if this coma like state is peculiar to his people when injured or to him in particular due to his long interstellar travels and life on Earth under a yellow sun." The doctor took a deep breath. "Let's proceed."

Batman watched as the first incision was made and blood streamed from the large opening needed to remove the many bullet fragments and repair the extensive damage done. He was no pansy but was finding it increasingly hard to watch as his once powerful friend lay so exposed and helpless. Finally having enough he turned and left the room. He had removed his cowl just before leaving the observation room and it dangled on his shoulders as he walked down the private hallway towards his office.

He sat at his desk silent, his mind going back to what he knew was happening below him in the operating room wondering just how much longer it was going to take. After a time, he booted up his laptop and pulled up the breaking news. He looked at the time and realized it had been over four hours since he had taken Superman and over two and a half since he had left the observation room. Waiting was hard but he decided that watching was even worse.

Looking at the phone he sighed. Picking up his desk phone he placed a call. After one ring he heard the woman's urgent voice from earlier. "Yes! Please tell me he's going to be okay."

"Miss Lane, he is still in surgery but we are cautiously optimistic."

"Please, I need to be there. He needs to know I'm there for him, and that I always will be there for him."

"Miss Lane..."

"Cut the Miss Lane crap, the name is Lois. Where did you take him and are you still there?"

"Miss Lane... Lois, I'm not sure that's such a good..."

"Everyone needs to know their loved ones are there for them... Superman is no different. He needs me there as much as I need to be there. Damn it, where is he!"

"I'll send a car. Expect it within the hour."

Lois had relayed the news to Richard and raced upstairs as soon as the call ended. She took just over five minutes to shower and change into something comfortable knowing she might be wearing it for an extended period. She raced back down the stairs to pace in front of the windows holding her breath each time a car came down the street.

Richard had called Martha while Lois showered then joined her upstairs, also showering and changing into something fresh and more comfortable. He now stood patiently watching her.

Finally a long white limo pulled into the driveway just shy of fifty-five minutes after the call. Lois ran to the limo, the driver opening it for her. Richard followed close behind. "So are you going to blindfold us now?" Lois asked the driver sarcastically as he settled behind the wheel.

The driver turned to face her and smiled, "That won't be necessary. Please buckle up though." He turned back around and the window between them closed.

Lois half snorted in response until she realized the windows were not just opaque from the outside but also from the inside, even the one between them and the driver. They had no way of knowing where they were going. She looked over at Richard and they shrugged and settled back. There was nothing for them to do but endure the trip. After about twenty-five minutes the limo seemed to pull into some kind of winding structure. Lois wondered if they had taken a direct route or had the driver been directed to make the trip seem longer. She had been wringing her hands the whole time but felt better than she had waiting at home. Finally the limo stopped and Batman himself opened the door in the dark basement-like area.

"This way," Batman said. He seemed all business. "They just finished the surgery moments ago and the doctor is prepared to speak with us." The three entered the open freight elevator and Batman pushed an unmarked button then keyed in a code on an electronic keypad that suddenly appeared.

"With us, including... you?" She asked looking at the masked man then over at Richard wondering if he thought that seemed as strange to him as it did to her.

"Yes, Miss Lane, to all three of us. It is unfortunate his mother is not here, but we will have to suffice as his loved ones for the moment. I'm just surprised you brought your fiancé."

Lois looked the man in the eyes wondering just what was underneath that mask he wore. "Touché, I just never knew the two of you were friends... and this has been one hell of a day."

Realizing that was as close to an apology as he was likely to get from the well known reporter, Batman bowed his head slightly just as the elevator came to a fast stop and the doors swooshed open. "We both want the same thing. Our friend's quick and complete recovery." Exiting the elevator he began walking briskly. "This way, the doctor will be meeting us in a private consultation room."

The threesome entered the room and took seats around a table. A couple of minutes later the doctor entered still in his scrubs. Lois stood up and spoke immediately. "Where is Superman, I need to see him, to know he's alright."

"Miss Lane, I'm Dr. Emil Hamilton. Superman is in what would be considered an ICU. He's still in recovery from the surgery and the hospital staff needs to watch him very closely for the time being. No visitors allowed."

"Please, I just need to see him. Just for a minute. I'll suit up if you're concerned with contamination."

Dr Hamilton looked at Batman and the two men seemed to make a decision between

them. "We can arrange for you to see him while I speak with you. This way please." Lois and Richard followed the two men down a hallway into a small room that they realized was some kind of observation room. Looking down they saw two nurses one just finishing up bandaging a patient's shoulder as the other added something to the IV drip and made sure it was adjusted right. The first pulled a warm looking blanket up to the patient's chin as if tucking him in for the night.

Lois inhaled deeply upon seeing the man's face as the nurse stepped out of the way. "He looks so pale, even more than before."

"Miss Lane, Superman lost a great deal of blood during the surgery. The bullets fragmented and we had to be absolutely sure we got every last bit of them along with some surrounding tissue which appeared contaminated from the prolonged direct exposure. We also had to repair his right lung which had collapsed and was punctured in two places. Overall the surgery went very well, all things considered."

Richard looked up, concerned. "All things considered?"

"Well, we were operating on an alien, so yes, I would say all things considered."

Lois couldn't take her eyes off the man in the room below them, "Why is the light so red. Don't you know he gets his powers and his healing ability from the sun? He needs to be in the sunlight."

"Miss Lane, the light you speak of is part of the artificial Kryptonian environment we created specifically for him. We need to keep him in that environment for a while longer. At least until we're sure we don't need to perform more surgery and he is well past the need for IV's or other invasive procedures. The environment was created in stages similar to putting a patient in a hyperbaric chamber and we can't risk not being able to provide him immediate attention if needed."

"That's how you operated on him." Looking at the nurses she noticed for the first time they seemed to be wearing warm clothing including hats that covered their ears.

"Yes."

After speaking with the doctor a while longer, Lois and Richard had been shown to a nearby waiting room and provided food and blankets. Batman told them it would be a long night so they should just make themselves comfortable. Lois found it impossible to sleep and had taken the short walk to check on Superman several times during the remainder of the night.

By early morning Superman had recovered to the point where the doctors decided to start slowly bringing him back towards the earth-norm environment. When Batman finally rejoined the two in the waiting room Richard offered, "I should go collect Martha and Jason."

"Why don't we go together? My jet-copter can fly much faster and land right on the property. Lois can remain here with Kal."

Richard answered wide eyed, "Ah, sure! Kal?"

Lois looked up answering Richard's question, "Kal-El, that's his Kryptonian name."

As the two men rode up in the elevator Richard wondered aloud, "How are we going to get to it? I mean surely you don't have the Bat-copter parked on a roof in Metropolis?"

"This one is a little more discrete." The two men exited onto the roof and sure enough an unmarked jet-copter was waiting.

Richard looked around at the view and was frozen in his tracks as he realized exactly where they were, the S.T.A.R. Labs located in Queensland Park Borough next to Metropolis Harbor.

He looked over at Batman who had also stopped and was staring right at him.

"If I even think you are about to tell a living soul any details about the place you just left, I will kill you."

Richard swallowed hard, "You don't really mean that... do you?"

"No, but it made you think. Come on, times-a-wasting. Martha is expecting us and I want to meet that kid."

Richard considered what Batman had just let slip, that he must have known about Jason's paternity. Then going over in his mind all that had transpired the last few hours, perhaps it wasn't a bad thing for him to know. He relaxed and allowed himself to feel the excitement of flying in a near state of the art jet-copter with Batman piloting, of all people.

Just shortly after the men left, Lois had finally been allowed into the room with Superman. His coloring had improved dramatically from the prior night. The nurses were still keeping him covered and every time they lowered the blanket to check his vitals or the various bandages he would start shivering. He showed no signs of consciousness. She looked up at the monitor remembering back to the time in that other hospital room so stark and lacking in equipment compared to this one. Here they had been able to actually do something yet the vitals being reported on the monitor were the same.

Dr. Hamilton entered the room. "I've noticed you looking at the monitor. We've decided those rates are very normal for him. They're steady and his condition is improving. It's my theory that he's in some kind of deep self imposed coma like state allowing his body to heal."

"You mean he just wills himself into a coma?"

"It's not exactly a coma, his mind is active but he appears unresponsive to outside stimuli. It could be a natural automatic response his body has. Either that or it's an ability he developed from being in stasis during those intergalactic trips. Whatever, it keeps him barely alive against all odds allowing his body time and energy to heal."

The doctor pulled the blanket down and slowly began removing one of the bandages. Lois watched and was amazed to see that the ugly incision seemed to look much better than it should have for a so recently completed surgery. The doctor smiled and replaced the bandage. Superman had already started shivering slightly so the doctor pulled the blanket back in place.

Lois stayed by his side and just a short time later he started to moan as he seemed to come to consciousness. Suddenly he opened his eyes and inhaled deeply, exclaiming "NO!"

Before Lois could respond he tried to sit up and escape the confines of the bed along with the many wires and monitors still attached to him. All he managed to do was practically fall head first out of the bed. Lois screamed and the two nurses came running in already having seen the radical changes to his vital signs on the monitor. The three women somehow managed to get the un-corporative Superman back fully into the bed. Several of the sticky monitoring patches become detached during his struggles.

Superman continued to resist the nurse's efforts to calm him. Lois' grabbed his right hand with both of hers as one of the nurses started to increase the flow of medications in his IV drip but the second nurse shook her head no, exclaiming "Wait, the IV is no longer in place." The nurse tried to reinsert the IV that had been attached to the top of his left hand but the needle just bent when she tried to insert it.

Dr. Hamilton came blasting in, having been alerted to the commotion from where he had been resting in another part of the hospital. He quickly assessed what was happening and began assisting the nurses as Superman finally began to settle down.

Lois, still gasping Superman's hand, had bent over the bed so she could whisper softly in his ear. Her voice seemed to soothe him as she told him over and over she was there and he was safe, to stay in bed and all would be well.

The monitor went from a racing heartbeat to what seemed like none at all, finally settling back to the previous steady but low rate of 40 BPM. Dr. Hamilton finally spoke. "As the environment became more earthlike the needle must have been slowly pushed up out of his skin. No doubt that is why he regained consciousness. He was no longer receiving any sedatives or medication."

The doctor shook his head and sighed looking at Lois. "It's good you're here, he doesn't know where he is but he obviously trusts you. He must have reached a level of consciousness now, without the drugs interfering, where he can, at least on a sub-conscious level, be aware of what is going on around him."

"Last time he left the hospital as soon as he regained consciousness." Lois intoned solemnly.

"Yes, I am aware of that, but his physical injuries were much graver this time. He needs to stay put for a little while to recover. His invulnerability is coming back but his other powers will take longer under this artificial sunlight."

Lois nodded and placed her head on the bed over where her hand clasped his limp hand under the covers.

When Martha first told him that his Daddy Richard and Batman were coming to take them both to Metropolis Jason was excited but when the jet landed and Richard got out and approached the porch followed closely by a dark scary man he stayed back hiding behind Martha's skirt.

Joining Martha and Jason on the porch, Richard immediately noticed his son's unease and stooped down to pick him up wanting to let the little boy know he was safe in his arms. He asked consolingly as he stood back up, "Hey, munchkin, you're not afraid of Batman are you?"

Jason shook his head no, but his expression and stiffness said otherwise.

Softening his usual Batman voice wanting to reassure the small boy the dark man spoke up, "I know I must look scary to you, but I only dress like this to scare the bad guys."

"Like that bad bald man that hurt... um Superman?" Jason asked in a small voice.

"Yes, I would have loved to scare that man, but he's never going to hurt anyone ever again."

"Is he really dead?"

Batman nodded. "Yes, and we're here to take you back home. Your mom is with Superman, watching over him. Are you ready to join her?"

Jason nodded, no longer fearful he openly began to look the dark hero over from head to foot. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, but I reserve the right not to answer."

"Huh?" Jason looked confused by that response and turned his head to look up at his dad who nodded for him to go ahead and ask. "Your cape is really long, does it ever get stuck?"

The men quickly loaded Jason and Martha's bags and soon the jet-copter was back in the air. It didn't take long for the excitement of takeoff to wear off leaving Jason, once again, unusually subdued. He knew his other daddy had been hurt and they were heading to the

hospital to see him. They arrived in the hospital and joined Lois at Superman's side. Lois let them know that he had briefly regained consciousness before falling back into the coma-like state.

The family continued their vigil. Lois barely left his side and Jason curled up in her lap finally falling asleep. Martha was grateful to be there and didn't even mind when she was introduced to the nurses and one of the other doctors as Richard and Lois' son's nanny. Dr. Hamilton, on the other hand, seemed to know or had guessed the true facts. Thankfully he only spoke candidly when the others were not present. Lois soon felt very comfortable in his presence and spoke freely to him asking a lot of questions.

Late in the afternoon Martha had taken Jason to get something for him to eat in the nearby waiting room. Batman returned to the hospital room and noticing the little boy was not there he spoke hoping to bring a little levity to the room. "Miss Lane, I seem to remember your reporting that the Man of Steel was '*faster than a speeding bullet*'. Was that all just hype? Personally I've never felt a need to resort to such outright propaganda."

Lois shot Batman daggers with her eyes just as the bedcovers rustled with movement. Superman had shifted slightly turning away from where Batman stood at the foot of the bed. As he moved he frowned and mumbled hoarsely, "I... heard... that."

As soon as he spoke the people gathered closer around him but he was already falling back in that unresponsive coma-like deep sleep, his head now slightly buried in the covers. Lois looked up from him, smiling at Batman then at Richard, assured in the knowledge that Superman was indeed coming back to them. Those three simple words spoke volumes to her and finally, after nearly twenty-four hours, she allowed herself to relax.

Admitting Love Matters

Jason had run back into the room wanting to share his treat with his mommy just in time to hear Batman say, "Miss Lane, I seem to remember your reporting that the Man of Steel was '*faster than a speeding bullet*'. Was that all just hype? Personally I've never felt a need to resort to such outright propaganda."

He saw the look his mother gave Batman then heard the bedcovers rustle as his daddy mumbled, "I... heard... that."

The other people moved closer to the bed but Jason stood in the doorway watching. His mother seemed happier but she hadn't liked what Batman had just said so even though he didn't quite understand he knew it must not have been a nice thing to say. Running up behind the big man he tugged hard on the black cape. When the man turned around he put his hands on his hips and said in the toughest voice he had, "You're mean, Da... Superman doesn't feel good. Didn't your mommy teach you that you should be nice to people when they don't feel good?"

Batman stared down at the little boy seeing his eyes get big with renewed fear yet the little boy stood his ground. "Whoa there, I didn't intend to be mean to your dad. We sometimes like to spar with words, that's all. I just meant it as a joke. Actually I thought it might just make your mom smile." He had been trying to make the little boy feel better but instead the child had pulled back and seemed especially alarmed as he once again looked towards his mother for support then back at Batman.

Speaking in a scared tone, Jason whispered, "I'm not spouse'd to tell anybody."

Lois scrutinized Batman's face. He had not been at all surprised at her son's omission, he had obviously already known. She looked at Richard, seeing a resigned look on his face and then at Martha who seemed only mildly surprised. She got up, gathering her son in her arms as Richard also joined her in a protective stance. She asked, "Who told you? That bit of information is not for public consumption."

Batman raised one eyebrow, not that anyone could see it as he answered, "I'm a detective, I figured it out on my own a while back. The Boy Scout is not too good at lying. He admitted it to me when I confronted him with it just a few days ago, when he asked me for help in tracking down Luthor."

"So, I was right, you were that mysterious source he was using."

"We help each other out from time to time. We each have our strong points." He looked at the little boy as they seemed to scrutinize each other. He couldn't help but wonder if the child had his dad's vision powers yet. While still looking at the boy he said, "You don't have to worry. My lips are sealed." Then to Lois, "I won't tell anyone what I know about Superman, just as he won't tell anyone what he knows about me."

Lois wasn't so sure he could be trusted and it showed in her sarcastic response, "You told Doctor Hamilton, didn't you?"

Batman shrugged it off, "Doctor Hamilton is a very smart man. I didn't tell him anything he hadn't already figured out on his own. He may be a doctor by trade but he is an astonishing scientist at heart. He was fascinated by Superman and has devoted a big part of his life for the last seven years learning everything he could. We both felt sure that Superman would return and he feared that someday his expertise would be needed. You, Miss Lane, should be thankful that the two of us started working together on this project."

Lois sighed, her expression softening as she realized he was right. "Of course I am. I... it's just that... if word ever got out..."

"Understood, no apology is necessary. Your son's safety is of the utmost importance to Superman and I tend to agree with him, on that at least."

As the evening wore on Richard suggested they head home, that they all needed rest. Jason was once again sleeping, this time in his lap and Martha seemed worn out as well. Batman had left earlier telling them the limo was at their service whenever needed it. Lois refused to leave, insisting she was going to stay where she was because Clark might wake up and try to leave again. The nurses would never be able to stop him without her there.

Richard reluctantly agreed and left with Jason and Martha. Martha had wanted to stay with Lois but was worried that it would give her real relationship to her son and the family away to the nurses. She did manage to give her son a quick kiss on the forehead and whispered to him that she would be back in the morning.

Batman returned and found Lois still at Kal's bedside. Satisfied he nodded, "I thought you might still be here. I brought you a late dinner if you care to follow me. We don't want to wake the Boy Scout, now do we?"

She looked up seeing him at the doorway shaking her head at the comment and wondered again about the strange friendship between the two men. Clark was sleeping peacefully so she nodded acceptance and got up and followed the dark hero hoping to clear up some of the mystery once and for all.

As she followed him out of the hospital room she noticed the nurse's station was dark. Seeing her questing look Batman responded, "Dr Hamilton sent everyone home. They're no longer needed. He's still here just in case you do need him for anything. I brought him food too but he was sound asleep in his office so it will just be the two of us."

She was surprised when he insisted that he'd already eaten but then realized it would have been hard for him to eat with that mask he seemed intent on keeping in place. She found it somewhat intimidating but didn't let it stop her from filling a plate full of food. She hadn't realized just how hungry she was till she smelled the array of food before her. Dr Hamilton didn't know what he was missing.

She ate in silence for a few minutes then as she looked up at the man opposite her at the table she asked, "Just how long have you known Clar...Kal? He has never mentioned knowing you, *ever*, as far as I'm aware."

Batman shrugged, "We've known each other for years. You could say that we're in the same business. We just go about it in different ways, that's all."

Lois stopped eating as she considered his statement nodding agreement, "I'll say. I don't think you could stay out of jail here in Metropolis with your method of doing things."

"It seems to work out in Gotham, but then Gotham is a much darker place."

Lois again nodded agreement as Batman continued, "Kal and I look at the world through different perspectives. If the two of us stood in a field together he would hear and see birds flying among the clouds, hear the squirrels prancing around collecting their nuts. Me, I would be too occupied with the rats scurrying about and the snakes slithering in the grass to see or hear anything else."

He looked up at Lois. "Kal is no dummy, but he can be very naive about some things. He seems unable or unwilling to see that some people are snakes to the core and that no amount of charming will ever change them."

"And you? You see the snakes for what they are?"

"Yes I see the dark side of people. I even see it in myself."

Lois shook her head. "You two are so different. How did you ever become such friends?"

"We are very different but in reality at the end of the day we both want the same things."

"And what might that be?"

"Most importantly we both want to make this world a better place. We just go about achieving that goal in very different ways. Our differences make us good allies. We compliment each other, what one lacks the other has in abundance. Do you understand what I mean Miss. Lane?"

"Yes, I think I do. Why *do* you think Kal let himself be shot by Luthor?"

"I was listening to the police radio when it was all going down. He knew the bullets contained kryptonite. Personally, I think when that snake threatened to shoot the boy he panicked. It was too close to home and he went in without considering his own safety. New fathers are like that you know."

Lois' mouth opened slightly in shock at his words, then nodded agreement as she realized just how good a detective he really was.

Lois sat at bedside with her head resting on her arms half asleep. Her left hand was once again clasped around one of Clark's hands now fully above the covers. He sighed pleasantly causing her to raise her head up to look at his face hoping that he was finally truly waking up, but he seemed to be just dreaming so she lay her head back down and closed her eyes hoping to follow him to dreamland. She wanted to be fresh for when he did finally wake up. Thank goodness he seemed to be having a good dream which was something to be marveled at after all the recent horrors he had lived through.

Their lips were but a whisper away, so close that he could feel her breath... another second and...she pulled away ...he opened his eyes to see her looking back at him.

He tightened his hand around Lois' and felt something cold and unyielding.

"...Richard's a good man. And you've been gone for a long time."

Suddenly breathing hard he pulled his hand away from hers and moved out of her reach to the edge of the small bed. Lois raised her head trying to once again take his hand but then noticed he was awake and looking at her warily. He seemed to be almost shrinking away avoiding her touch. Shaking his head slightly he said dejectedly, "Please don't, it hurts too much, even worst than the kryptonite."

Lois shook her head in confusion and opened her mouth to express her dismay when she noticed he seemed to be looking at her hand. She followed his gaze and inhaled deeply seeing the engagement ring and immediately understood. "I...um forgot I was even wearing...." She stopped mid sentence, twirling the ring on her finger nervously then without reservation took it off. "Richard's a good man, but he never really replaced you in my heart. I'm sorry that it took almost losing you for good for me to fully admit that to myself."

He shook his head, closing his eyes as he turned away forlornly not willing to look her in the eyes. "You're right Lois, Richard is a good man and you and Jason are better off with him. You're just confused from the anxiety you've been under lately and don't really know what you want."

"You're wrong. I do know exactly what I want and my place is here with you."

"I'm going to be fine, so you can stop worrying about me. I'll be leaving this hospital soon, so you can go back to your fiancé where you belong. I don't want to cause you any more trouble or put either of you in any more danger." He still refused to look at her directly.

"No one, not even you, tells Lois Lane where she belongs. As for trouble or danger, I seem to find that all by myself so quit trying to take all the credit, or is it all the blame?" She climbed fully up on the bed and reached to pull him closer, "I'm staying by your side here or wherever you go so you might as well get used to it."

He finally turned back to face her and was about to say something but her face was right there and their lips were but a whisper away, so close that he could feel her breath... another second and...she closed the distance, he caught his breath closing his eyes as her mouth nearly devoured his with pent up emotion. He opened his eyes to see her looking back at him after the long passionate kiss. her eyes still smoldering. He was speechless.

"Any more questions about who I want? And you Farmboy had better recover fast, because I am not waiting another five years for you to ask me to marry you."

His eyes were now wide in disbelief and wonder, all he was capable of was a near smile and a simple shake of the head 'no'.

Happy Ever After Matters

Clark stared at her in shock. Was she really saying she wanted him? He finally managed to stammer, "Lois... do you really mean that? You want me... Clark... not Richard?"

Lois smiled nodding.

"Not Superman... but plain old Clark?"

She nodded again and pulled him into another kiss which he fully returned for several seconds but when her hands managed to get under the covers and started roaming his chest he pulled back and was out of the bed almost instantaneously.

"No, not like this!" He stood by the bedside wearing only a pair of boxers, realizing his state of undress and seeing Lois propped up on the bed clearly appreciating the view he quickly looked around the room. Finding his suit, he super speeded into it much to Lois' dismay and she made no attempt to hide her feelings.

"You need to end it with Richard before there can ever be anything more between us."

"You're right of course. I do need to formally end it with Richard." She looked away coming back to reality and rose up on the bed only to settle back down, sitting on the back of her legs before looking back at him. "I'm sure he's already seen the writing on the wall, but I do need to be direct and honest with him, he certainly deserves that." Clark nodded and she asked, "Are you going to be alright now?"

He turned his head and she knew he was looking up through the building to the sky. "I'm going to be fine, the morning is dawning. I just need a little actual sunlight and I'll be as good as new." He looked back at her and smiled softly. "Lois."

"Yes."

"Thanks for being there when I needed you." He frowned, uncertainty and perhaps regret written all over his features. "Do you really think we stand a chance at happiness or will Superman always be in the way?"

"If we want it bad enough then anything is possible, you've taught me that if nothing else. I'm willing to share you with the whole world if that is the only way we can be together. And I promise to always be there for you as long as you promise to always come home to me."

Smiling once again, a feeling of security coming back, he answered, "Then we both want the same thing. In fact I've never wanted anything more. I promise with all my heart and soul that nothing short of death will ever keep us apart again." He closed the distance between them and pulled her up off the bed embracing her as they sealed their promises with a kiss filled with hope and desire for what the future would bring their way.

Superman and Lois headed to the elevator together, hand in hand kissing again in the enclosed space until the doors opened to the roof exit. She waited while he flew off for a few minutes to bask in the sun to restore his full powers then he returned to take her home to the house she had shared with Richard.

Richard had been unable to sleep and was standing at the window and saw Superman as he landed near the porch with Lois nestled contentedly in his arms. He sighed and walked away bracing himself for what he knew was coming next.

Superman had seen Richard and out of respect he merely nodded to Lois instead of kissing her as he very much wanted to do when he landed gently on the ground and reluctantly released his hold of her legs to set her down. "He's there waiting. If you need me, call."

Lois nodded but didn't release her arms from around his shoulders still needing or wanting his presence. "He's a good man. How else do you think I could have even considered him after

you? He'll be alright." She said it as a statement but her eyes showed doubt.

Superman smiled cradling Lois' chin trying to elicit a smile before he took off and wanting to allay her trepidation of having to end it with Richard he said jestingly. "Remember I'm not letting him off the hook, he *is* still Jason's father and college is going to be really expensive by the time he's old enough."

Smiling just thinking of their son, she answered choosing to ignore the joking part of the comment. "I know how much he loves Jason. He'll be relieved you're not going to push him aside."

"Lois, he's as much Jason's father as I am and I would never deny either of them that connection. I thank God every day Richard was there for Jason and see no reason why that should change." He started to leave then turned back. "Tell mom I'll see her later. I have a few things that need to be taken care of. Remember I'm only a whisper away." He gave her a super quick kiss then was gone.

She smiled, touching her lips having felt the unseen kiss and slowly headed inside.

Superman swooped down into the Batcave being careful as always not to disturb the large horde of tiny mammals attached in various locations, all sleeping, throughout the cave's dark interior. He landed in the Batcave's main chamber near the console where Bruce was working tirelessly as always.

Turning around in his chair, Bruce greeted his friend, "I figured you would show up when you got tired of playing sleeping beauty."

Responding to his friend's sarcastic comment Superman replied in kind, "I guess I had some catching up to do." Then turning more serious he continued "Thanks for whatever part you had in that whole S.T.A.R. Labs setup. So, I owe you yet again?"

Bruce nodded.

Shaking his head with a soft chuckle Superman replied, "No doubt you already have something in mind."

"Not really, but I'm sure something will come up, eventually."

"Lois told me you and Dr. Hamilton have been working together for a few years now. I still can't believe you would do all of that for me."

"Eh, what can I say? I'm an eccentric billionaire. I needed a pet project to spend some of my time and money on."

"Hmmm...Lucky me."

"You know, you have really got to start being a little less cavalier. People are likely to think you're just plain stupid or something and we both know that's not the case."

Superman turned away shaking his head in agreement. "When I saw Luthor threaten that little boy, all I could think of was that it could so easily have been Jason. I guess I lost my head and well..."

"Almost got yourself killed," Bruce finished for him. Superman turned back nodding reluctantly as he relaxed his stance somewhat. "Don't let it worry you too much. It's happened to the best of us, even me." Superman nodded surprised his friend would admit such a blunder. "Just take it as a hard learned lesson and remember in the future if you're killed there will be no one left to stop the likes of Luthor and whoever you are trying to protect would die with you."

Superman arched his eyebrows and shrugged dejectedly. "I guess he won't be causing any more havoc."

Bruce smirked. "Cheer up, that is the one good thing that came of your idiocy."

Superman looked up shocked that Bruce would be so outright glad a man was dead, "I never meant for it to end like that. I..."

"Face it Boy Scout, you got lucky. That beast is dead and ironically by his own hand. That is unless he can come back from the grave, but somehow I think that will be a little difficult being that they cremated his body already."

Superman looked away with a pained expression on his face. "It's just such a waste. That man could have been anything he wanted. I'll never understand why he would have wanted to squander his brilliance the way he did. What did his obsession with destroying things or killing me ever get him?"

"Look, I don't like seeing a man die any more than you do but fiends like him don't think the way we do. They only ever think of themselves. The cold hard fact is the world is a safer place with him gone. The sooner you accept that the better off you'll be. "

"Maybe I prefer to give people the benefit of a doubt. People can change, you see it everyday."

"Not all people, first they have to want to change." Knowing he would never convince his too rosy world friend Bruce changed the subject. "Miss Kowalski is awake. Perhaps there is hope yet for her."

Superman nodded and the two men headed upstairs. As the elevator doors opened Bruce motioned towards the hallway, "I'm sure you remember where the room is located. I'll just leave you two alone to chat."

Superman knocked softly. Hearing her answer "come in" he entered and found her propped up in a sitting position on the bed with big pillows behind her back. The burses on her face were showing signs of healing and her natural beauty, freed from all the makeup, was starting to return. She looked up from a magazine and smiled broadly when she saw who it was.

"I'm glad you're doing so much better. You had us worried there for a while," he said.

"Thank goodness I'm not the only one who has miraculously recovered." Setting her magazine aside she asked, "Is it true, Lex is really dead?"

Superman nodded. "Yes, he's dead."

"Good," she said resolutely, then apologetically, "I'm sorry for what he did to you, on that island thingy and ..."

"It's done. I don't blame you for what happened. I *am* trying to tie up some loose ends though. Do you know what happened to the other men who were on the... island?" he repeated her name for the place preferring it to New Krypton. "They weren't with him in Metropolis and no one has been able to find a trace of them anywhere."

She grimaced remembering. "They kinda got squished when one of those column things fell on them... when we all ran for the helicopter." Seeing his shocked reaction she asked, "Didn't you know?" He shook his head 'no' so she continued, "Sorry about your crystals."

"What about the crystals?"

"After what Lex did, almost destroying the world I dumped them out of the copter just before we took off. What he did was insane. I was afraid he'd try again." She stopped suddenly unsure, "It was the right thing to do, wasn't it?"

Superman nodded sadly. "Yes, What you did was right. Its better this way, they'll never fall into the wrong hands again."

"What's going to happen to me now?"

"Once you're ready, I need to take you back to Metropolis. I think if you turn state's evidence to clear up some of Luthor's crimes they'll go easy on you. There is nothing to be gained by imprisoning you. I'll testify on your behalf if needed. I can't speak for the DA but perhaps several years of community service will suffice."

"I was relieved to hear that Miss Lane and her little boy are alright. I was scared that Lex had Riley or Grant kill them before we left the yacht but I was too afraid to ask him." She looked away wiping a tear before continuing. "The bastard killed my little dog out of pure spite before he tore into me?"

"I'm sorry." He had watched and listened to her heart beat as she mentioned Lois and Jason and inwardly had heard what he needed to know. Luthor had not told her. The secret was safe.

Superman returned to the Batcave where he knew he would find Bruce once again working at the console. He stopped to speak to his friend once again before leaving, "By the way, I spoke to Inspector Henderson. They've agreed to drop the charges against you."

Bruce looked up smirking. "Oh, you mean the kidnapping charges? Nice since I did save your scrawny neck."

Superman smirked back suppressing a chuckle. "Yeah, those charges, next time you come to Metropolis just remember things are handled a bit different there and you'll be alright."

Bruce nodded and his friend turned away starting to leave. "Ah... that is one special kid you have there."

Turning back smiling Superman said, "I know... thanks."

Squinting his eyes in consternation Batman asked, "He doesn't have x-ray vision yet does he?"

"X-ray vision... no I doubt it. Why do you ask?"

Bruce shook his head, "Never mind...it's just that there seemed to be something strange in the way he looked at me, like he was seeing more than he should have, that's all."

Superman answered looking somewhat perplexed, "Relax I'm sure you were reading something more into his actions. My vision powers were among the last to develop. Besides, even if he does have some extra vision abilities, x-raying with that kind of precision would be far beyond his capability to control."

"Maybe, but it sure made me think he was seeing something."

"Even if he did, what would it matter? It's not like he has ever seen Bruce Wayne, so no big deal." He shrugged his shoulders.

"What about you and his mother? You too seemed pretty cozy when I left."

"Yes, I would say that." he smiled broadly just thinking about Lois. "Lois is breaking it off with Richard. We're making plans to finally be together. Plans we should have made a long time ago before we got so rudely interrupted."

"About time, you deserve some happiness. I finally understand what you see in her. Just don't lose your edge."

Superman nodded then said as he once again started to turn away. "Thanks, again. I'll see you soon. I guess..." He sighed, "Since I'm once again in your debt feel free to call me whenever you want me to 'pay up'."

Lois followed Clark to the supply closet knowing the office was almost empty for the night. They had finally finished up their articles detailing the downfall of all that was Luthor as

well as Superman's quick recovery from near mortal wounds. They were both finally free of other obligations and she had let Richard take Jason home with him for the night.

Lois shut the door behind her and leaned up against it in a seductive pose taking full advantage of the long slit in her skirt which allowed for a good view of her leg even without x-ray vision. "Why don't we go to your place?" she cooed.

Clark answered without turning around, already knowing she was there. "This *is* sort of my place Lois."

"Huh?" She asked confused, looking around the small cluttered room. Noticing for the first time his open suitcase, she somehow managed to maintain her pose.

Clark turned his head and seeing her smirked. He shut the suitcase and put it back in place, hidden from prying eyes. The room was close quarters so he only had to move a couple steps to where she was still leaning with her back against the door. He placed his hands flat against the door on either side of her, trapping her against the door, not that she seemed to mind at all.

Teasing her with his mere closeness he answered her with his lips milliseconds away from hers. "Well the Fortress of Solitude is cold and dead. As you already know, Luthor stole the crystals and they were what supplied the energy to heat and light the place. I haven't exactly had time to remedy that yet."

Lois looked up at him trapped but loving it with him so close, it allowed her the opportunity to rub her exposed leg up the inside of his pants leg. "How about Niagara Falls?"

Clark smiled back surprised. He answered mischievously, "Maybe we could get our old room back. We never did get to enjoy all the amenities it had to offer."

Lois answered with mock worry, "You don't think they redecorated do you? It has been a long time."

"Only one way to find out, but what are all of our co-workers going to say when we up and run off together. You just broke up with Richard what, two days ago?"

"I could care less what they say. I'm tired of waiting for you." Her leg brushed his again, even bolder than before.

"We never did give Perry that exposé did we?" He moved slightly, his lips brushed hers teasing her beyond her strength to resist.

Determined to break down his resistance for waiting, she arched up just enough to seal the kiss and managed to wrap her arms around his neck refusing to let go till she had to come up for air.

"Do you think Richard would mind keeping Jason for a few days?" he asked almost as breathless as she.

"Heck, if he won't, your mom would be thrilled to keep him till he's grown," she said still trying to catch her breath along with her irresistible man. He had her pinned but she was the one who went in for another long kiss.

Clark pulled back almost panting, his voice husky barely managing to breathe between the words, "Lois will you marry me... tonight?"

"It's about time" she breathed out, "you asked." She had to breathe again. "I was about to faint. Yes!"

Not Quite The End

Lois never did make it to see her doctor before that fateful trip back to Niagara Falls and barely nine months later the happy couple was blessed with a healthy baby girl, Laura Elaine Kent.

Richard White and his bride of three months Rebecca, Ben's headstrong niece, were named the god parents. Becca was almost as good a cook as Martha, her new stepmother, who had secretly played matchmaker with just a little help from Jason and Ben.

Needless to say everyone lived happily ever after, each finding love and fulfillment and in the end, that is *All That Matters*.

The End