

A Family Story

by Beatrice Otter

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Rating: T

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Betaed by: elf

AN: Alas, Brandon Routh did not see fit to fully utilize the differences between Clark Kent's voice and Superman's voice. (Much as I loved his portrayal, that's one thing Christopher Reeve did better.) Please to hear *this* version of BR's Superman/CK with greater difference between the two personas.

AN2: This has been sitting, half-finished, on my hard drive for three and a half years, since January 2007. I'm so incredibly glad to finally have it *finished*.

Had Jason had a nightmare? Richard paused, head tilted. Someone was talking in Jason's room. The dreams about Luthor's boat had been tapering off; Jason hadn't had one in a week. Shaking his head, he went down the hall to his son's room. They'd put him to bed three hours ago, and Lois was already in bed asleep. Opening the door, he stuck his head in. "Hey--"

Superman looked up from his seat by Jason's bed, eyes wide; his hand was curled around Jason's. The curtains behind him fluttered in the breeze. The kid was zonked, snuggled into his pillow. Any other time Richard would have smiled at how perfect his son looked.

"Mister White, I --"

"Did you know she was pregnant when you left?" The question that had been burning inside of him for weeks came out sharper than Richard had intended.

"I -- no, of course not," Superman said.

"Would you have left if you did?"

Superman straightened, his hand tightening around Jason's. "Never," he said.

No, of course not. This was Superman--Truth, Justice, and the American Way. The Big Blue Boy Scout himself. When did he ever *not* do the right thing? Jason made a soft noise in his sleep, and Richard studied him for a second. He jerked his head towards the door. Superman nodded, gently disentangling his hand, and rose silently. Richard realized he was floating a few inches above the floor; kind of showy, but he supposed it eliminated the possibility of squeaky floorboards, of which there was at least one in Jason's room. Richard had been meaning to get it fixed for a while.

Once Superman was out of the room, he settled to the floor. Richard closed the door as silently as he could, and the two men made their way downstairs. They entered the living room, but neither man took a seat, instead standing across the room from each other. Superman showed no curiosity at the room, never glanced at the photographs and knickknacks, keeping his attention focused on Richard. Had he been here before? How many times? How often did he watch through the walls with x-ray vision? Richard folded his arms, realizing only after he'd done so that he was copying one of Superman's trademark moves. But he couldn't drop them without looking awkward and unsure, and he couldn't do that. Not when

Jason's future was at stake.

"How much has Lois told you?" Superman asked.

Richard gritted his teeth. "Nothing. But I'm not *stupid*. Lois insists that there was never anything between you two. But when you were injured, she was beside herself, and she insisted on taking Jason with her to see you. Jason was born about eight and a half months after you left." He pushed back memories of that hectic, wonderful day, Jason blinking owlishly up at him before settling sleepily in for his first nap, Lois bathed in sweat and triumphant and more gorgeous than he'd ever seen her. Now was not the time for distraction. "My name's on the birth certificate, but Lois was pregnant when we started dating. And for a kid with as many allergies and other assorted medical conditions as Jason has, he's surprisingly tough. He never gets scraped knees or anything." Richard paused. "And Lois has always claimed she doesn't remember who the father is. Care to comment on that?"

To his surprise, Superman ...flinched, was the only word to describe it. That one hit home. Something ...eased inside him with the realization that Lois hadn't been lying to protect her alien ex-boyfriend. At least, not about that.

"I think that's something I should discuss with Lois herself," Superman said.

"You're probably right about that," Richard said with a slow nod. "You've been back on Earth for over two months now; were you planning on doing it any time soon?"

Superman fidgeted. "Yes," he said, "I just... haven't found the right time to do it, yet."

Richard stared at him. "You can find time to watch Jason in his sleep, but not talk to Lois about missing memories? I may be way out on a limb, here, but I'm assuming you had something to do with that. It's got to be a horrible thing, not being able to remember the conception of your only child." His voice had risen as he spoke, he realized, and he lowered it, abruptly conscious of the two sleeping upstairs. "I don't think there *is* a right time to talk about it."

"You're probably right." Superman wasn't meeting his eyes.

Richard studied him; Superman's body language and tone were so different from any recording of him Richard had ever seen, and those few minutes in the seaplane. He was timid, fidgeting, withdrawn. It reminded him of something, but the memory eluded him.

"Richard, what's going on down there?" Lois' voice floated down the hall.

"We have company," Richard called back.

"At this hour?" Lois was yawning as she came through the doorway, wrapped in the cherry-colored silk bathrobe he'd gotten her for the second anniversary of their engagement. They were now almost at the fourth. "Superman." Her eyes widened, darting between the two men as she drew her robe closer around her. She edged around the room, staying away from both of them. "What's going on?"

She'd positioned herself about equally far from both men, Richard noted. A triangle. How appropriate. "I heard voices in Jason's room and checked in. Imagine my surprise when I found someone besides Jason in there at almost a quarter to one."

"Why was he there?" Lois asked, not meeting his eyes. Just like she had the night he'd finally asked her if she'd been in love with Superman.

"Why do you think?" Richard answered.

Oddly, Lois seemed to relax. "So he told you."

"No." Richard shook his head, the words pouring from his mouth. "He didn't need to tell me. Lois, you'd never have stayed with me this long if I were stupid, and you certainly wouldn't have agreed to marry me. So why have you been treating me as if I were? I mean,

even the *tabloids* were smart enough to get it right." Well, sort of; Jason White-as-Superman's-son had been only one of many tabloid headlines resulting from the dramatic events of the return, New Krypton, and Lois and Jason's visit to Superman in the hospital afterwards. Almost as many had pegged him as Luthor's son.

Lois sagged. "I'm sorry, Richard. I truly didn't know until we were on Luthor's boat." She took a deep breath. "One of his goons caught me sending that fax, was going to kill me. Jason ... Jason threw a piano across the room. It killed him."

"My God," Richard breathed. "Jason killed a man?"

Lois closed her eyes. "I'm fairly sure Jason doesn't realize he killed him," she said slowly. "At least, that's the impression I've gotten when I've tried to talk with him about it. He seems to be coping, or I would have said something."

"Well, *that's* reassuring," Richard said, not really caring how pissy he sounded. "So nice to know I'm involved in my son's life. And he *is* my son, regardless of whose genes he's got."

"Um, you know, maybe I should go," Superman said, shifting uneasily.

"No, you don't," Richard said, swinging around to face him. "You're as involved in this mess as Lois and I. You don't get to sneak out just because you're uncomfortable." He put his hands on his hips, realizing too late (again) that he'd taken another of Superman's classic poses. His anger flared. "Speaking of which, while we're clearing the air, I'd say now's as good a time as any to discuss Lois' memory loss with her. Since we've just established that she really *doesn't* remember Jason's conception."

Superman shifted, and Richard blinked. A month before Superman's return, Jason had broken one of the Baccarat crystal figurines his mother had brought back for them from France. He knew he wasn't supposed to play with them, and had been trying to clean up the shards when Richard had come in from working in the yard. Jason had had the same look on his face that Superman had now, the same body language, when he had seen his father come in. In that second, Jason's biological ancestry became real and tangible, and Richard's stomach twisted.

"I don't have clear memories of the few days surrounding General Zod's attack on Earth." Lois' words brought him back to the present. She glanced between them. "He did take me prisoner. I had assumed I got hit on the head or something, and that's why I don't remember anything from Niagara Falls to being back in the Daily Planet the day after Superman took care of the invaders."

"Niagara Falls?" Richard asked, gut twisting at a whole new facet that she'd never mentioned to him. He breathed deeply; she might have left it out as unimportant, the few times the subject had come up.

"Clark and I were there on assignment, undercover for a puff piece on the scams they run on newlyweds." Lois shuddered. "That honeymoon suite had to be seen to be believed."

Richard blew out a breath. Clark Kent -- now, there was another puzzle. He and Lois had been partners for years before he left; Richard had just missed meeting him, coming to the Planet bare months after his departure. Lois had never once mentioned Clark's name that he knew of during the years the man was traveling the globe, and Richard hadn't thought it strange on first meeting him. After watching them work together the last few weeks, he did now. He dismissed the thought; this was about Superman, not Clark Kent.

"But I take it there's more to this story than a simple head injury?" Lois turned to Superman with the look that made corrupt political officials and unethical businessmen crumble. The one that had caught Richard's eye at first, that had convinced him there was

more to her than the Superman stories.

"You weren't hit in the head, Lois," Superman said quietly.

"Then what?" Her voice hardened. "Can you make people forget things, and just never mentioned it until now?"

"Sort of," Superman said uncomfortably. "It's not -- I never use it, really, and it only works on short term memories. We were... together when Zod and his henchmen arrived, that's why it took me so long to find out what had happened and come to stop them." He looked down in what looked like shame, though Richard had little personal experience interpreting alien expressions. Superman looked up again, giving Lois a painfully earnest look. "You were wonderful during that whole fight, and being kidnapped, and you took out Ursa after I'd neutralized their powers. But when we came back to Metropolis afterwards, you fell apart. You were having second thoughts about our relationship, and you were practically hysterical. I've never seen you like that, Lois." He looked down at his feet again. "I wanted you to be happy," he said. "I wanted to spare you the pain you were feeling."

"Did you ask, first?" Lois demanded.

"No."

"*You* wanted. And you never stopped to think what I might have wanted?" Her face twisted in betrayal, but Richard kept still. She would not thank him for interfering in her fight. "And you just took it from me," she continued. "Just like that, you played with my mind. I don't believe your arrogance. Who are you to decide what's *best* for me? It was pretty convenient for you, I guess. One weepy girlfriend starts to cling too much, and poof! She doesn't remember anything. Problem solved. What a *super* solution."

"Lois, I didn't mean it like that!" Superman said.

"Oh, I'm *sure* you didn't," Lois agreed sharply. "It never crossed your mind. Not once. But it's what happened. And then you left, without even saying good-bye. It would be too *hard* to say good-bye, right? And you come back five years later, and you're still hanging around even though I'm with someone else, still pining away for me when it's your own damn fault we're not together. God, do you have a martyr complex or what?"

She turned abruptly and began pacing. "And you'd been gone two months when I started getting sick, and I had no idea why. The doctor said I was pregnant, but I didn't remember ... anyone within the last several months. But I had that hole, in the middle of my head, during which I was apparently taken prisoner and no one still on Earth besides Lex Luthor himself had any idea what happened to me during that period, and it's not exactly like I could call him and ask him." She paused swallowing.

None of this was new to Richard, so he watched the other man. Superman ... Superman looked sick.

"I had dreams about you," Lois said, "but those could have been products of my own imagination. It's not like I'd never had them before." Lois hugged herself tighter. "I was terrified I'd been drugged and raped, and that was why I was pregnant. But after a few weeks of that, I realized that you'd stayed long enough for Luthor's trial, even if you hadn't been around me much, and I figured that it would have come out in your testimony. That was some comfort, I guess."

If they had been alone, Richard would have wrapped his arms around her as he had the first time he'd heard this story. He clenched his fists with the effort of keeping his arms at his side. It had taken Lois a long time to be able to accept comfort like that, and even now she didn't tolerate it in public. He supposed his ego should appreciate that he was Superman's

replacement, but the golden idol had lost its shine. The man of steel had feet of clay, and the shock of that realization made his abuse of Lois' trust seem even more heinous.

"Lois, I'm sorry," Superman said with painful sincerity. "If I'd known, I never would have done it. And I would never have left."

"Yeah, well that apology's about five years too late," Lois snapped back. She pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes. "Can you reverse it?"

"I don't know," Superman replied. "It's been so long, I might not be able to do much. I can try."

"Do it."

Superman nodded.

"What do you need?" Richard asked.

"Nothing special," Superman said. He walked over to Lois, taking hold of her arms gently. She flinched, and the misery that crossed Superman's face would have made Richard sorry for the guy, if he hadn't deserved it so thoroughly.

"Close your eyes," Superman said.

She did.

He leaned down slowly and kissed her. She tensed.

"Hey!" Richard said. But... it wasn't a passionate kiss, just the touch of lips. And after the initial tensing, Lois hadn't reacted at all, which was unlike her.

Superman broke the kiss and stepped back, watching her intently. Lois didn't move, standing still as if in a trance. After a few seconds her eyes popped open and she sank down onto the chair behind her. "Oh." She glared up at Superman. "You could have given a girl some warning."

"I'm sorry," Superman said. "I just wasn't thinking, I guess."

"Seems to be pretty common with you," Lois shot back.

"Do you remember, Lois?" Richard asked. Whatever he thought of Superman's methods, that was the important part.

Lois closed her eyes and leaned back. "Some. Images and emotions, all jumbled up. Crouching over Perry in the Daily Planet, with Zod and company standing over us. Flying into a great white crystal fortress. Superman coming in with tropical flowers. Luthor gloating." She frowned. "Did that bed really have silver satin sheets, or am I making it up?"

"It's not satin, it's a Kryptonian fabric," Superman said.

"But it *looks* like satin. Shiny, silver, satin."

"Yes."

"Classy," Richard said with a snort.

"I didn't design the place," Superman replied. He frowned, head cocking to one side, listening to something Richard couldn't hear. "There's a robbery. I have to go." He darted through the front door quicker than the eye could really follow.

His disappearance was surreal; with the evidence gone, Richard couldn't quite believe he'd really had Superman in his living room in the middle of the night. He sighed, joining Lois on the couch. He left a good six inches between them. Superman's lies of omission hadn't been the only ones exposed that night. "God, what a night."

"Tell me about it," Lois replied, making an abortive move to take his hand.

Richard dropped his head on the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling.

"Richard, I really am sorry about not telling you as soon as I knew," she said. "I just ... didn't know how."

"Yeah," Richard said, forcing himself to be fair. "I can see how that would kinda be a tough one to bring up in conversation." He glanced at the clock. "It's late. I think I'm going to turn in."

"Sounds good to me," Lois said, standing. "I'll see you in bed, okay?"

"Sure," Richard said. He watched as she left, then hauled himself up to follow her. He stopped at his son's door and put a hand on it, closing his eyes.

It had taken Richard almost five months from their first date to get any kind of an answer about who the father of her baby was. By that point, she was almost ready to pop; Jason would be coming any day. Lois avoided the question with a dogged determination.

Richard tried not to get frustrated, and gave up on the tactful approach. One night, as they were curled up on his couch after a long day at the Planet, Lois exhausted by the day's work, he rubbed his hands over the taught skin of Lois' pregnant belly. "So who was the father?"

"You are," Lois said. "Can be, any way." He could feel all her muscles tensing.

"Lois," Richard said, sighing, "you know what I mean."

"He's not in the picture, any more," she said. "We can put your name on the birth certificate."

Richard eyed the top of her head. "Lois, a birth certificate's a legal document."

"I know."

"And what happens if the biological father objects?"

"He'd have to be here to object."

Richard knew, from the final tone in Lois' voice, that the subject was closed.

Lois was drinking coffee in the kitchen and doing a Sudoku puzzle the next morning when Richard came in from walking Jason to the bus stop, as he did every morning. He picked up Jason's dishes and loaded them in the dishwasher. "So, what do we do now?" he asked. "I mean, he obviously wants contact, and he is the biological father. He's got a right to it, and we couldn't stop him even if we wanted to."

Lois shook her head. "This may sound cold, but ... I don't think I want him around Jason unsupervised. Not after what he confessed last night. I know he's Superman, but," she said, putting her head in her hands, "after that, I don't know how I could ever really trust him."

"The mind is what defines who we are," Richard said, relief washing through him. He pushed down the memory of sinking beneath the waves, Lois and Jason with him, *knowing* they were doomed until a pair of red boots hit the porthole window. Saving the world--and the Lane-White corner of it, specifically--didn't necessarily make Superman a saint. Or earn him a free pass on morality. "If he's willing to tamper with that behind your back, even with your best interests at heart, I'm not sure I'd want to trust him with Jason alone either. And here's another thing: how well do you know him?"

"Obviously not as well as I thought I did," Lois said dryly.

"I mean, really. You can rattle off all his vital statistics, and we all know he likes to fight crime and aid victims of natural disasters, but what makes him tick as a man?" Richard raised an eyebrow. "Did you ever spend much time with him, even when you were together?"

Lois winced. "Not really. I was swept off my feet -- literally. Aside from the initial interview? A half-hour here, ten minutes there. He'd find some excuse for dropping by my balcony, some tidbit for me to put in the papers, usually. He was always very sweet, with these

old-fashioned manners. I had a hell of a time getting him to call me 'Lois, ' it was always 'Miss Lane.' The conversation would segue into other things, we'd flirt a little, sometimes he'd take me flying for a little bit. Then he'd be needed somewhere, and off he'd go. Not that I really remember being a couple, or anything. That part's still a bit hazy."

"Right." Richard scratched the back of his head. "And I don't suppose you know much about Kryptonian culture or ethics?"

"Not really."

"Great," Richard said. "I'm fairly sure Superman would never do anything bad to Jason, but we have no idea how he defines 'bad.'"

"Well," Lois paused. "He says he stands for 'Truth, Justice, and the American Way.' He's never lied, that I know of; omission isn't *quite* the same thing. But the 'American Way' thing implies that his moral code is at least somewhat similar to ours." She snorted. "Listen to me. I'm *defending* him already. I don't believe this."

Richard shrugged. "Well, if you think about it, the American Way doesn't have much to say about memory suppression."

"Guess not."

"Sounds like the three of us have a lot to discuss. Do we just wait around for him to show up, or is there some way to get in touch with him?"

Lois looked up, as if staring through the ceiling. "He's always around."

"What?" Richard frowned.

"That's what he always says, when I ask when I'll see him again. 'I'm always around.' And he usually does show up pretty quickly when I need him."

"Wow. That's," Richard shook his head, "that's kind of creepy, actually. Does he stalk you?"

Lois sighed. "I don't think so. I think it's more that with his hearing and vision, he can't help but pick up a lot of things nobody else could *unless* they were stalking someone. He just doesn't respond to most of what he senses, unless it's me. I thought it was romantic, how he was always there when I needed or wanted him. Until he wasn't anymore."

Richard waited, to see if she'd say anything more. It was the most revealing thing she'd ever said about her relationship with Superman, but she'd stonewall him if he pressed too far. Lois had made her career on breaking through walls to reach the truth behind them. Richard's style was more subtle, though no less effective in the end.

Nothing was forthcoming at the moment. "Y'know, if we don't get going, we'll be late for work," Richard said at last.

Richard and Lois had only been dating seven months when he asked her to move in with him.

"What, you're volunteering to be the night nanny?" Lois had said, lifting her head from where it rested on the arm of the couch. Her eyes were bleary with fatigue, though it was only 9:00 at night. "I'm sorry, but I doubt I'd be up for much else."

"You put my name on the birth certificate," Richard said. "If Jason's going to be my son, that means he's partly my responsibility to take care of. Besides," he said, twisting a lock of her hair around his finger, "I want to help. I don't like seeing you so tired all the time."

Lois was silent for a while. "I've never lived with anyone before," she said.

"Neither have I," said Richard. "We can learn together."

When they got to the Planet, Richard went into his office and checked his messages. Running the International section meant he got a lot of calls outside of regular business hours, from contacts all over the world. It was all fairly routine stuff, which was good; he didn't think he could concentrate on something major, today. He handed out assignments to his department, checked progress on current articles being written, checked the AP wire to see what stories would be appropriate for the Daily Planet.

These days, that meant the daily Superman roundup: where was he in the last twenty-four hours, and what was he doing. Not all of them were credible--for example, he couldn't possibly have been stopping a burglar in Calcutta while putting out a fire in Berlin. With the Superman reports came a boost in the number of pages International got each day, a mixed blessing. Richard had managed to hold out for a good portion of non-Superman stories, but it had never been as large a section as it should have been and even with the enlargement, the sheer number of Superman stories meant there were fewer "normal" International pieces than there had been before his return. Much to Uncle Perry's dismay, Richard liked to mix the Superman stories and the non-Superman stories up all together, instead of putting the Superman stories in the front of the section and the rest in the back. Maybe that way people would read something of what was going on in the world besides Superman's heroism.

Was it petty to hope that soon Superman would become passé, a normal and expected part of life? To hope that his reporters could eventually go back to reporting stories not judged by the amount of Superman in them? Probably. It would also be good journalism. Richard couldn't bring himself to care which motivated him more.

He laid out a few pictures of Superman on his desk that had come in over the AP. If Uncle Perry came in, he could say he was picking one to go on the front page of the section. Because the last few weeks, the most important consideration for which story got the banner headline had been the quality of the Superman picture that went with it. But his eyes kept going to the picture of Jason on his desk, looking for traces of Superman in his son. There weren't many now, but would he grow into them? Would his jaw turn into the familiar square profile? Would his muscles grow hard-as-steel, would he learn to fly from another man?

Richard's fists clenched with the effort it took to keep from tearing the pictures to shreds.

Lois set down her shake with a clatter.

"Are you all right?" Richard asked, as she stared into space. "Lois?" The two were sharing lunch in their favorite diner, where they'd eaten together at least once a week since shortly after they met five years ago. It was always a relief to be able to eat without having to worry about Jason's allergies, without the tightrope of trying to shoehorn a nutritious diet into the few foods he could safely eat. And Richard treasured time alone with her; given both their busy schedules, it didn't happen often.

"Huh?" Lois blinked. "Oh." She glanced around, taking in the familiar dingy walls, as if seeing them for the first time. "Superman rescued a boy in Niagara Falls," she said, poking at her fries with a fork. "He was playing on the railing and fell off."

"It wasn't in today's papers," Richard said, confused. He took a bite of his burger. The boy's parents must be thanking God for Superman, right now, or maybe still caught up in the wonder of it all. Richard remembered the aftermath of the Gertrude, after Superman had pulled them from the sinking ship, and how hard he'd held Jason after they were back on land. If Superman hadn't been there, if he'd lost Lois and Jason ...

"What?" Lois looked up at him. "No, no, I meant when Clark and I were there

undercover." She made a vague gesture with her fork. "I didn't remember it until now."

"So, your memories are still coming back?"

"I guess. Who knows, I might get everything back in the end." She gave him a tight smile. "Doesn't make up for it, but I guess it's a start."

"I guess," Richard said, keeping his opinions to himself. Hearing him criticize Superman wasn't likely to help her get through this. It helped that, much as Lois might mystify him on occasion, and despite any feelings she might still be carrying for the other man, she was too strong and independent to go back to him knowing what she knew now. He watched the ring on her left hand.

Lois was toying with the few fries she had left. "I suppose this isn't really a good place to talk about it."

Richard glanced around at the other customers. "Not really. Want to go back to the Planet, talk in my office?"

"Your office has glass walls and I know at least three other reporters on staff that can read lips."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What, you thought gossip just materialized out of thin air?" Lois smirked. "Sorry to disappoint you. Not to mention the number of reporters who'd give their eyeteeth to scoop me. We go back and start talking in your office with the door closed, not on an assignment from Perry, and half the office is going to want to know why. We'd actually have better luck talking privately at my desk. Not that I'd discuss this either place, for obvious reasons."

Clark Kent was at his desk when they got to the Planet, and he seemed to be watching for their arrival. "Oh, um, hi, Richard, Lois," he said as they walked by.

Richard frowned. Clark was always a bit of a dork, but he seemed nervous about something today. "Hello, Clark," he said, taking off his overcoat. "How's it going?"

"Fine, fine," Clark said. "How's it going with the, uh, the two of you?" He turned to Lois and gave her an appraising look. Had he noticed something was wrong?

"Great," Lois said, dropping into her chair. "I'll see you later, Richard. Clark, I've been meaning to ask you if the figures Mankiewicz quoted at his press conference yesterday seemed a little odd, to you."

"Not his figures, specifically, but I can't figure out how his company got the contract with the city when Reliant..."

Richard walked back to his office, knowing neither of them noted his departure. It'd taken Clark a week or so to get back into the swing of things after being gone for five years, but by now watching them work together was a thing of beauty. They could tag-team an interviewee like he'd never seen before, they could find information no matter how deep it was buried, and their joint articles graced the front page even more often than Lois' solo pieces had while Kent had been gone. He could see why Uncle Perry had been so eager to pair the two of them up again; what he didn't see was why Lois had never mentioned her old partner in all the time he'd known her. But Kent wasn't the man he worried about.

"Seriously, Lois?" Richard held up a back issue of the newspaper. The two were working together on a three-year retrospective on Superman's disappearance, what it had meant locally, nationally, internationally. Going through the back archive of Superman stories had seemed the logical place to start.

Lois glowered at him. "The title was not my idea. I said it was too much like a tabloid, but your uncle didn't listen."

"I Spent the Night with Superman' by Lois Lane," Richard said with relish. "Must have been some interview."

"It was," Lois said. "But not like that." She snatched the paper from his hand and put it down on the table on top of the first Superman story, the one about how he saved an intrepid young reporter from falling to her death, handing him the next article in the stack.

"So, is that why you don't want to set a date?" Richard asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep his face straight. "You're just stringing me along until your hero can come back to save you and sweep you off your feet! Lois," he clutched his heart, and looked soulfully at her, "I'm hurt." Lois Lane, damsel in distress, waiting for her knight in shining armor--now, that was hysterically funny.

She glared at him. "I spent the next year trying to salvage my reputation as a credible reporter after that thing," she said. "I got called 'Superman's Girlfriend' and asked if everything about him was super-sized for the next six months."

"Sorry," Richard said.

Richard glanced up from his book at a tap on the sliding glass door that led out to the dock. Who would be coming to their *back* door? He got up and drew back the curtain; it was Superman. Richard raised an eyebrow and opened the door for him, shivering at the cold November air as the Man of Steel stepped into his den like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"I thought it would be less conspicuous this way," he explained.

"Than coming to the front door? I guess," Richard said as he closed the door and the curtains. "Thanks for the consideration; I'd prefer not to have the press camped outside." He looked the other man up and down--struck anew by the incongruity of skin-tight spandex in a normal suburban home. "Don't you have anything to wear besides that suit? That would be even less conspicuous, and then you could come to the front door." Without waiting for an answer, he crossed the room and opened the door to the hall. "Jason's already asleep."

"I know," Superman said, following him into the living room. "I don't know when or how you and Lois want to handle telling him, and I didn't want to cause problems with that or anything."

"Thanks," Richard said. He gestured to the arm chair. "Make yourself at home. Can I get you anything? Wine, beer, juice, water?"

"No, I'm good," Superman replied, settling gingerly into the chair.

"I'll go get Lois then," Richard said.

Lois was flipping through a stack of bills in her office when Richard poked his head in. "We have company," he said.

Lois glanced at her watch. "Superman?" She pulled off her reading glasses and began putting her things away.

"Yeah." He watched her tidy up her desk with a lot more thoroughness than she normally did. "You feeling up to this?" he asked.

She sighed. "Not really. You?"

Richard walked over and put his hands on her shoulders. "Not really." He gave her a squeeze. She stood up and his hands dropped away.

Jason looked so small in the tiny crib, wires and tubes attaching him to monitors. It was a familiar sight, and he wasn't even a year old. He looked younger. Lois had her finger in his fist, though his grip was weak. Richard had an arm around her, the other hand stroking his son's hair to soothe him as he fussed. He was glad the biological father wasn't in the picture. Lois and Jason both needed someone they could count on to be there, and the other man--whoever he was--obviously wouldn't have been much help if he couldn't even stick around long enough to find out about the pregnancy. Though Richard wished they had a medical history to give the doctors.

They looked up as the doctor entered the room.

"I have good news and bad news," the doctor said. "The good news is, we think we finally know what's wrong. The bad news is, there's no magic wand that will make it go away."

"Well, what is it?" Lois asked.

"Allergies," the doctor replied. "Lots of them. You use formula, right?"

"About half and half," Lois said. "It's just so much easier than nursing."

"I'd go back to nursing as much as possible, at least for now," the doctor said. "We think one of the things he's reacting to might be the formula. That's not supposed to happen, but it would explain a lot. We'll see if we can find something that doesn't bother him. Also, he's old enough to start on baby food, but I wouldn't chance the canned stuff, there's too much opportunity for cross-contamination in the factories. It's easy enough to make, a blender and the raw ingredients are really all you need--and sensitive as he is, I'd recommend going with organics as much as possible. We've got a really good pediatric nutritionist on staff, I'm sure she'll be able to help. If you're careful about what he eats, we may be able to stabilize him once and for all."

"Oh, thank God," Richard said, sagging. "Oh, thank God." Tears prickled at his eyes, and he didn't bother trying to hold them back. Jason was going to be okay.

Superman was perched on the edge of the armchair when they entered the living room. He was leaned over, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. It was an oddly informal look, though Richard supposed even aliens had to relax some time.

Lois paused in the doorway. "Can I get you something to drink, Superman?"

He gave a small smile. "No, I'm good, thanks."

"Oh." She took a seat on the couch across from Superman, fidgeting with a pencil she'd brought down from her office. If they'd been outside, she would have been lighting up a cigarette.

Richard joined her on the couch, taking her hand in his.

"So," she said after a few seconds, "I guess I should start by saying that I've had a few more memories come back today. Nothing major, but things are starting to fill in."

"That's... that's good, Lois," Superman said with a smile. "Do you want me to tell you everything that happened, or do you want to wait and see if they come back on their own?"

"Let's wait and see for now," Lois said. "I did an article on memory loss a few years back, and the ways old or suppressed memories could be altered or even manufactured if the subject was given too much prompting."

"I know the article."

Richard raised an eyebrow. "So, do you read the Daily Planet as a whole, or just Lois' articles?"

"The whole Planet," Superman said with a shrug.

Lois turned to Richard. "Your uncle would have a field day with that if he knew. I can see the ads now: Daily Planet, Superman's newspaper of choice."

"It'd be on every billboard in town." Richard glanced at Superman. "My uncle is--"

"Perry White, the chief editor of the Daily Planet," Superman finished. "I know. And I'd really prefer not to get used for merchandizing or ads." He grimaced. "At least not any more than I already do."

"I understand, Superman." Richard shook his head. "Superman can't be your real name, can it? Is there anything else I can call you?" There was just something about calling his fiancée's ex-boyfriend 'Superman' that annoyed him. Yes, he knew he was dramatically outclassed; there was no need to rub it in.

To his surprise, his rival blushed. "Oh, uh, no. On Krypton -- my parents named me Kal-El."

"Kahlil," Lois said. "Pronounced like Kahlil Gibran, the poet? Do you have a last name?"

"Kal-El," Superman corrected her. "Kryptonian names function a bit differently than in any human culture I've come across; for males, the house name -- the family name, I guess -- can't be separated from the personal name. 'El' is the name of my house."

"So why did you decide to call yourself 'Superman'?" Richard asked.

"I didn't," Kal-El said. "Lois came up with that one."

"Well, if you'd given me your name in the interview, I wouldn't have had to make something up!" Lois cocked her head. "Come to think of it, why didn't you?"

Superman blushed again, studying his boots as if they were the most interesting things in the universe. "I forgot."

"Forgot," Richard said blankly. "How do you forget to introduce yourself? Come to think of it, Lois, why wasn't that one of your questions?"

"It was my first time being interviewed," Kal-El said. "I had a whole list of things I wanted to say memorized; I was so worried about getting them out and projecting confidence and urbanity and Lois was flirting with me and I kind of just... forgot."

Richard raised an eyebrow at Lois.

"I was getting the first interview with an alien, ever," Lois said. "Perry called it 'the most important interview since God talked to Moses.' Superman -- Kal-El -- swept me off my feet, literally, and took me flying. Between that and all the unbelievable stuff he was telling me about his abilities, his name kind of slipped through the cracks." She glared at Kal-El. "And I was not flirting!"

"You *asked me what color underwear you were wearing*," Kal-El said, voice rising from its normal warm baritone.

"I was testing out your claim to have X-Ray vision!"

"And then you asked me *if I liked it!*"

"Let's keep it down. Jason is asleep just upstairs," Richard pointed out. If Lois had asked him if he liked her underwear on their first meeting, he thought he might've had trouble remembering his own name, too, but he wasn't stupid enough to say it. Lois knew where he slept, after all. "And fascinating as this discussion is, it's not exactly on topic. As Kal-El said when he got here, Jason's going to need to be told about all of this sooner or later. And there are custody and visitation rights to discuss, and a lot of other details that probably shouldn't be put off."

"You don't have to worry about custody," Kal-El said, looking at Richard earnestly. "I

know... I know just how deep the bond can be between an adoptive parent and child; I would never take him away from you." He dropped his eyes. "You're the one who's always been there for him, not me."

"Don't you want him?" Lois asked.

Kal-El jerked his head up. "Of course I *want* him! You have no idea how hard it is to say this! If I could go back in time five years--" His head dropped back down. "But I can't. I want what's best for Jason, and at this point," his voice cracked, "it's not me."

Kal-El pinched the bridge of his nose, and Richard recognized the standard American male maneuver to try and wipe away tears without anyone noticing. Either Kryptonian culture and American culture were surprisingly close in their ideals of masculinity, or Kal-El had assimilated into American culture to an astonishing degree.

"As for visitation," Kal-El's voice had dropped back down into its normal register, "I'd love to have as much time with Jason as I possibly can. On the other hand, I don't want to draw attention to the three of you."

"Yeah." Lois sighed. "The two weeks after Jason and I visited you in the hospital, the tabloids and paparazzi hounded us. Hell, even the legitimate journalists wouldn't leave us alone."

"That's part of it," Kal-El said grimly. "But not all. The press we could deal with. Lex Luthor's another story. He's still out there, somewhere; his sense of self-preservation is too strong to let himself get caught on his continent when I hurled it out into space. I don't want to give him --or anyone else who might want me out of the way -- a set of convenient hostages."

Lois' hand tightened around Richard's. "I think we can all agree that would be a bad thing. Do you have any suggestions?"

"A few," Kal-El replied. "I'm not sure how workable they'd be; there are... other factors to be considered. We should probably wait a few days before trying to decide anything."

"Will recovering more of my memories affect that?" Lois asked. "And if so, how?"

"The memories will definitely affect the solution I have in mind." Kal-El nodded. "But telling you how -- even if I could predict exactly how you're going to react, I couldn't tell you without telling you what you might remember. And you already said you don't want that."

"And what if she never remembers what you think she will?" Richard asked.

Kal-El shrugged. "If she doesn't remember, I'll tell her and we can go from there."

"Fair enough," Lois said. She leaned back against Richard, studying her former lover. "Visitation can be settled later, along with the question of what to tell Jason. But there are other things we need to talk about. Finding out that you erased my memories shattered a *lot* of my trust in you. Which was already weakened by the fact that you left me without saying good-bye and disappeared for five years. It pointed out just how little I know you, even though we have a child together. And I have to tell you, Superman or not, both Richard and I are uneasy at the thought of you and Jason alone together right now."

"We don't think you'd harm him," Richard added as Kal-El's face fell. "We're just not sure how you define 'harm.'"

"I guess I earned that," Kal-El said softly. "For the most part, I would define 'harm' just about like any other American parent. I want Jason to be healthy and happy and safe. Erasing memories is the only thing I can do to affect minds, I only did it once, and I'm *never* going to do it again. I just didn't stop to think."

Lois shook her head. "With your powers, you can't just act without stopping to think. You could seriously hurt someone without even meaning to. You *did* hurt me, even though you

were only trying to protect me."

"I know, Lois," Kal-El said seriously, looking her straight in the eyes for the first time in the conversation. "I know better than anyone just *exactly* how much damage I can do without even meaning to."

"You sound like you have painful experience with that," Richard said. The man could leave fingerprints in steel without blinking; humans must seem as fragile as china to him. An image floated before his eyes: Jason, sweeping up pieces of Baccarat. He felt a reluctant sympathy. How long had Kal-El practiced, before he could hold a human in his hand without crushing them to a paste unintentionally?

"I do," Kal-El replied. "I'll have to tell you about it some time, and how I and my parents handled it, so you can be prepared for the things Jason might go through. I doubt it will be exactly the same, given that he is only half-Kryptonian, and hopefully that will make it easier for him than it was for me."

"Do you not want to discuss it now because it has to do with my missing memories, or because visitation and such things are more immediate concerns?" Lois asked suspiciously.

"A little of both," Kal-El replied.

Lois' face scrunched up in disgust. "We've already established that you wiped out my memories of our relationship, and you keep insisting there are critical things I don't know about you. How many secrets do you have?!?"

"Just the one," Kal-El replied. "But it's a big one." He shrugged. "I'll tell you right now, if you don't want to see if you can remember it on your own."

"No, thanks," Lois shot back. "After all the mind-games, I want to be certain my mind is free from outside influences. Have you ever lied to me to protect this secret?"

Kal-El tilted his head. "Once or twice, years ago. Only when I absolutely had to; I hate having to lie to anyone, but especially to you. I've gotten to be very good at misdirecting people so that they draw the wrong conclusions. That way I don't actually have to lie. But I only do it to protect one particular secret, and it's a secret that affects more people than just myself. You figured it out on your own, though; you've always been a great investigative reporter. Not that you would ever have put it in an article."

"Why not?" Lois asked sharply.

"Because you understood," Kal-El replied. "Because it's private, and if it were ever to become public knowledge, I wouldn't be the only one hurt. While I'm sure people would be fascinated to read all about it, it's not something they need to know."

"That's not a decision you get to make about yourself," Lois shot back. "People don't get to choose whether or not they're newsworthy. They don't get to dictate what information the press can tell about them. If they did, we wouldn't have a free press."

"You're absolutely right, Lois," Kal-El said. "But reporters *do* get to make that decision. You know darn good and well that you don't print everything you know. You protect your sources, you weigh how many papers it'll sell, you judge how much harm a story will do versus how much good before you take it to your editor, and certainly before it gets written up and goes to print. And for the record, when you figured it out five years ago? There was never *any* suggestion that it be printed."

"Five years ago we were lovers," Lois replied. "I wasn't exactly impartial."

"That doesn't mean you were stupid or blinded," Kal-El said. "You've never been either. And now you're the mother of my son. I don't think your vested interest has gotten any smaller."

"You've both got some good points," Richard said, wondering how he'd gotten stuck playing the mediator. "But until we all know exactly what we're talking about, all we're doing here is spinning our wheels."

"What do you suggest?" Kal-El asked.

"Let's wait a couple of days to see how much of Lois' memory comes back. We've got a thing tomorrow night, so we couldn't talk then anyway. We're going to the charity gala at the Ritz; both Bruce Wayne and his CEO will be there, and Lois wants to get an interview before they head back to Gotham." He shrugged. "I don't know how Uncle Perry got tickets for us. The night after that, if Lois hasn't remembered your deep, dark secret--"

"It's hardly 'dark,'" Kal-El objected.

"If she hasn't remembered by then, maybe it'll be time to consider having you just tell us what it is, and we can go from there." Richard glanced over at Lois. "Does that sound fair?"

She shrugged. "All right."

"It sounds fair enough," Kal-El said.

"Then it's a plan."

Richard leaned against the wall, watching Lois put on her makeup for the gala. She'd commandeered his office because she claimed natural light was better, and he hadn't protested despite the fact that he'd been planning to tie up a few loose ends on the EU piece. Lois had been crabby all day, and he didn't want to set her off. Everyone had been tiptoeing around her, particularly poor Clark. She'd be that much more tenacious tonight, and hopefully would be in a better mood by the time they were home. Richard looked up at the sound of someone tapping on the glass. It was Clark, looking more uncomfortable than usual in his tux. Still, that awkwardness stood him in good stead, sometimes; a lot of people would let things slip to him that Lois would never have gotten.

"Come in, Clark," he said, grabbing his jacket.

"Hey," Clark said, this time managing to get through the door without a struggle. "Um, Perry wants to talk to us before we go, so..." He glanced at Lois. "Lois, are you all right?"

Richard turned to her. She was perfectly still, mascara forgotten in her hand, staring at Clark. Another memory coming back? "Lois?" He glanced at Clark, hoping Lois would snap out of it without giving the game away somehow. He was sure the guy could be trusted, but Superman was right about one thing. With Jason and Lois' safety possibly on the line, and the whole family's privacy, it was best not to take chances.

"I shot you," Lois said, lips compressing.

Clark froze, and then shut the door behind him carefully. "Yes," he said, taking off his glasses. "With a blank."

"Son of a bitch!" Lois threw her mascara back in her makeup kit and buried her face in her hands.

"Could we wait to discuss this until we have some privacy?" Clark asked, glancing back over his shoulder at the rest of the office.

"What's going on?" Richard asked, totally confused.

Clark straightened and brushed his hair back, looking Richard directly in the eye. It was amazing how much bigger he looked, just with the change in posture. "Lois has remembered, Richard," he said, his voice deepening.

Richard sank back against the bookcase behind him. "You're joking, right? This is all some elaborate practical joke?" Some kind of reporter he was, if he could work side by side

with Superman *every single damn day* and not even notice.

Lois snorted. "Oh, it's *no* joke, Richard."

"This should be discussed in private," Kal-El said.

Richard looked past him, noting that at least three people were watching. "Yeah." He pulled himself together with effort, wondering if they were talking about them. Kal-El would know. "I think you're right. You said Uncle Perry wants to see us before we leave?"

"Whatcha doing?"

Richard looked up from the plane. Lois was standing there, hands stuffed in the pockets of her jeans, watching him. "Jason down for his nap?"

"Finally," Lois said, rolling her eyes. "He was trying to insist he didn't need one even as his eyes closed."

"He's getting stubborn. Wonder where he gets it from," Richard said innocently.

"Ha, ha. I have no idea what you're talking about, Richard."

He shot her a look, which she returned with a grin, and he turned back to the engine he was working on.

"Seriously, what are you doing?"

"Tinkering," Richard said absently. "Basic maintenance. Checking oil levels and things like that. Why? You want to learn how to fly it?"

"Maybe," Lois said.

Richard looked up at her in surprise. "Really?" She was the first girlfriend he'd ever had who didn't think flying was one of the coolest dates he could take her on. She was pretty blasé about the whole thing, which was understandable. Under the circumstances.

"Yeah," Lois said. "I can learn to fly this thing. Be something more than just a passenger."

"Right," Richard said, perking up. The only person who could fly the way Superman had was Superman, but anyone with decent reflexes and a good mind--and Lois had both, in spades--could learn to fly a plane. "Well, I'm almost done here, and then I can go dig out the manual. That's the best way to start. Um, one of the biggest things with seaplanes is that they're never still, whether in the air or on the water. It makes taxiing, takeoffs, and landings a lot trickier than with regular planes. Maybe I should give Anita a call, take you up in her Cessna, let you learn the basics before adding in dealing with water..."

Any hopes Richard had for Lois getting things out of her system were long-gone by the end of the night. She stalked the room like a tiger, snarling at everyone impartially. Kal-El spent most of his time trying to propitiate her wrath, soften her approach, or apologize for her; Richard spent most of the night nursing a single drink -- he was driving, much as he might have liked to get plastered -- and marveling at how good Kal-El was at playing a stammering hick. He hoped Lois and her... partner were getting something tonight, because he was too fried to do more than go through the motions. Still, they stuck it out to the bitter end, not leaving until most of the guests had left.

"Let's blow this joint," Lois muttered to him as they retrieved their coats.

"Um, Richard? Lois?" Richard turned slowly to see Kal-El standing there, fully in 'Clark Kent' mode, fidgeting with his glasses. "Can I, uh, get a ride with you?"

Richard stared at him for a few seconds, and then raised his eyebrows at Lois. They shared an incredulous look for a few seconds before turning back to stare at Kal-El. Whose

fidgiting had increased, if anything.

"Or, you know, if it's too much trouble, I could just get a cab?" he said after a few more uncomfortable moments.

"No, *Clark*, that's fine," Lois said in a measured, even tone that Richard recognized as a storm warning. "Of course you can catch a ride with us."

"Great! That's great." Clark -- *Kal-El*, dammit -- gave her a pathetically grateful smile.

Richard shook his head at the surrealism of the whole thing, and led the way to the valet service.

Nobody said anything until they were safely in the car. "So, tell me, Superman, why do you need a lift?" Richard asked, glancing at his passenger in the rearview mirror.

"Well, I don't like to change back and forth into my costume too often when I don't have to, particularly in public," Kal-El said in a voice about half-way between the Superman baritone and office-weenie tenor. "Too much chance of somebody noticing. And also, what would I do with my suit? I can't just go flying around Metropolis in a tux, you know."

Richard nodded judiciously. What did happen to his everyday clothes when he had to change in an emergency? This probably wasn't the right time to ask.

"I can't believe you've been lying to me all these years, *Clark*," Lois hissed. "All those tales about that idyllic Kansas farm childhood. And that sob story about doomed Krypton. So tell me, which one is true?"

"Both," Kal-El said. "I never said I'd just arrived from Krypton when I arrived in Metropolis; I just let people draw their own conclusions. I was only three when my ship crash-landed in a cornfield in Kansas."

"Only three?" Richard shook his head, fighting the urge to glance back at the alien. "Do you have any memories of Krypton?"

"No," Kal-El said soberly. "I mean, the Fortress of Solitude was programmed to look like Krypton, and both of my birth parents made holograms of themselves along with the database of pretty much the sum total of Kryptonian science and culture, but it's not the same. And aside from the summer after college when I figured out how to grow it, I've never really spent all *that* much time there."

"Is that the place with silver sheets?" Richard asked, sliding a glance over to Lois.

"Yes. It's up north, hidden in the polar ice cap."

"And the Kansas childhood?" Lois asked.

"Jonathan and Martha Kent were driving by when my ship crashed in a field. They adopted me." Kal-El grinned. "We have the only farm in the world with a spaceship in the cellar."

"You obviously didn't have a birth certificate or anything," Lois said with a frown. "How did they--"

"Smallville's a close-knit community," Kal-El said with a shrug. "Most everyone's been there for generations; my great-great grandfather homesteaded the place back in the nineteenth century. They went down to the county clerk's office and told him that I was the child of Mom's cousin from North Dakota who'd just died, and that I didn't have a birth certificate because I'd been born at home without a doctor. He filled out the paperwork to get me a birth certificate and social security card and adoption papers and everything. And I was officially Clark Kent."

"And everyone just believed that?" Richard said, amazed.

"Yup. What would you find more believable, Richard? A cousin in North Dakota -- who did exist and who did die just shortly before I landed -- or a spaceship in the storm cellar?"

"How did they make sure you never told anyone?" Lois asked. "I mean, kids aren't exactly the best at keeping secrets."

"Oh, they didn't tell me I was an alien until I was fourteen," Kal-El said.

Richard whipped around to stare at him. "How the hell did they manage that?"

"The *road*, Richard!" Lois snapped.

Richard turned back just in time to keep the car from drifting out of the lane. Fortunately, the streets were dead this late at night.

"But he's right," Lois continued. For the first time that night, hostility was drowned out by simple curiosity. "How did they explain your powers?"

"They didn't," Kal-El said matter-of-factly. "Most of them weren't fully developed, and the more unusual ones like flight and x-ray vision and stuff didn't show up until around that time anyway. The ship had an old canvas tarp covering it all throughout my childhood. I knew I was stronger than most people, and I didn't get hurt easily, but the idea that I was an alien never crossed my mind. It was... quite a shock, when they sat me down and explained everything to me."

"No kidding," Lois said with a bemused head shake.

"So, honestly," Richard said, glancing in the rearview mirror, "if you grew up as Clark, do you prefer Clark or Kal-El?"

"Clark." The alien shrugged. "The only people who've ever called me 'Kal-El' are the holograms of my parents in the Fortress."

"The Fortress of Solitude, you called it?" Lois said. Richard thought she did an admirable job of ignoring how stupid that name sounded. It was the kind of thing a teenage geek would call the hideout where he kept his magazines and his telescope to look at the neighbor girls with. "You said it was grown with the same technology Luthor used to create his continent?"

"Yes." Clark's voice was flat, grim, lowering towards the Superman baritone. "The Fortress is what that technology is *supposed* to create, not the unbridled monstrosity that Luthor made."

"How'd he get ahold of it?" Richard asked. Superman had to know that Kryptonian technology was too dangerous to let it just lie around for Luthor to pick up.

"General Zod took him there when he kidnapped Lois, so he knew approximately where it was," Clark said. "Since it's part of the ice pack it shifts around a bit, but I guess it can be found with terrestrial technology if you know what you're looking for. Particularly since it's currently very near the edge of the ice pack. He probably took that boat of his up north looking for it, and then just walked on in. He was almost certainly able to access a tutorial before he stole all the control crystals--the Fortress was designed to teach, after all."

"Don't you have any security systems on it?" Lois asked.

"Isolation's been enough until this incident, but I do now," Clark replied. "It won't happen again."

Richard was stunned that Superman could be so naïve as to believe isolation was the only security he needed. Or had he thought about it at all? It was the kind of casual belief in his own invincibility that Richard had so disliked in the football players in high school. While it fit the Man of Steel, he had a hard time reconciling it with Clark Kent. "Is there anything else Luthor can exploit? Anything important you haven't bothered to think about protecting?"

"All Kryptonian technology -- anything Luthor could use -- is either at the Fortress or

safely disposed of in other ways," Clark said grimly. "The only things still vulnerable are people I care about, and there's not much I can do besides keep watch from a distance that won't interfere with their daily lives."

"If Luthor stole all the control crystals, what's left?" Richard asked, turning onto Riverside Drive. He wasn't sure he trusted Superman's answer, but he was willing to let it drop for now.

"He didn't get the father crystal -- the master, that is -- so I was able to re-grow them."

Richard chewed on his lip, trying to stay on topic and failing miserably. "Any chance we'll get to see this Fortress of Solitude?" he asked. Even if he could never print the story -- Superman's Fortress! He was surprised how much the possibility excited him; his feelings toward the man himself veered between ambivalence and profound mistrust.

"Sure," Clark said. "Jason needs to be told, first, obviously, but if nothing else I'd like to see if the Fortress can do anything to help his medical problems. I don't want to raise any hopes -- it's mostly just a database, and as far as I know Jason's the first human-Kryptonian hybrid, but it's worth a try."

Richard glanced at Lois, seeing the hope shining in her eyes. They'd learned to cope with Jason's fragilities, but it wasn't easy. "Yes, it certainly is."

The babysitter looked up from the television as they walked in the front door. "He did fine tonight, Ms. Lane," she said. "No problems with dinner, no allergy attacks, and he went to bed when he was supposed to."

"That's great, Jennifer," Lois replied, digging through her purse. "Thank you so much for doing this." She pulled out the check and handed it over.

"Need a ride home?" Richard asked. He'd hate to leave, but sitters who could handle Jason's problems were worth their weight in gold.

"Nah, I'm good," the girl said. "Just got my first car. See ya."

Richard hung his and Lois' coats up as she left. "Are you staying?" he asked Clark.

"If it wouldn't be too much of an imposition," he said. "It's getting late, but I'd love to at least look in on Jason."

"That's fine," Richard said. He hesitated. "Y'know, I've figured out how you've been planning to do this without exposing the Superman thing."

"How?" Lois asked. "Oh, of course. Clark as the biological father. That gives him the perfect excuse to have Jason visit or whatever. And it's even true." She eyed him up and down dubiously, as if judging the plausibility of her having slept with the clumsy mild-mannered reporter and finding it low.

Richard pursed his lips; anyone who'd paid close attention to how well they'd worked together lately wouldn't find it *that* hard to believe. "So, what's the story?"

"The truth," Clark said with a shrug. "Just not all of it. We were in Niagara Falls undercover as newlyweds, sharing a room, romantic dinners, et cetera, and things happened. The relationship crashed and burned horribly -- no need to go into details, just look uncomfortable and change the subject if it comes up -- and shortly thereafter, before you realized you were pregnant, I left. Let people fill in the details on their own."

Richard nodded. It fit their public personas, it hung together internally, and it was all true. Just not the *whole* truth.

"*You* may be able to get away with just looking uncomfortable and stammering, Clark, but *I* can't," Lois said with a snort.

Clark cocked his head and frowned, just like he did at the Planet when following a lead. "I suppose not," he said. "That would be out of character for you. But you do yell at people when they intrude on your private life." He read the ire on Lois' face. "Not that you do yell, really, Lois, it's more of a sarcastic comment at the right time or a rant about keeping out of your private life or how it's really none of their business or--"

"Clark!" Lois hissed. "We're alone now. You don't have to keep up that idiotic act."

"It's not an act!" Clark folded his arms, matching her glare for glare, looking more like Superman than he had all evening. Coming right after a stream of pure Clark babble, it was a bit freaky. "I really *am* a hick from Smallville, Lois, and we all know just how bad I am with women. I ham it up in public, sometimes a lot, but it's not something I made up just for a secret identity."

"So is Superman the made-up persona?" Lois asked.

"No," Clark replied. "It's just -- a lot easier to be cool if you have time to think your words through ahead of time. That's one of the reasons I went into print journalism instead of TV."

Richard frowned. They'd had a kid together and they were only figuring this stuff out now? Granted that Lois had memory issues, but it was obvious their physical intimacy hadn't been matched by mental or emotional intimacy. It made him feel slightly better, to know that for all she still sometimes mystified him (it was one of the things he enjoyed about their relationship), he and Lois were closer than she'd ever been with Superman.

"Also," Clark continued, "most of the stuff I do as Superman, all I have to do is wave at the cameras and everyone thinks I'm the greatest thing since sliced bread." He shook his head in bemusement. "That's one thing I hadn't anticipated, when I started putting on the cape -- that people would think I was so swell."

"You can fly and you're incredibly strong and you always save the day," Richard said. And he'd gotten the girl (even if not forever), and had a beautiful blue-eyed son (Richard's son). "Who wouldn't want to be you?"

"Maybe," Clark said, not looking convinced. "But I'd never been 'cool' before. And then there's the costume -- I mean, it *is* a traditional Kryptonian design, but come on. It looks like a spandex suit with underwear on the outside. And a cape. Really. It's *way* dorkier than anything I've ever worn as Clark Kent."

Richard was forced to nod, thinking back to his first sight of Superman. He'd thought it looked like something that would, well, be designed by the kind of kid whose hideout was named the Fortress of Solitude.

"Look, as fascinating as this is, can we get back on topic?" Lois pinched the bridge of her nose, and Richard, recognizing the look, sidled over closer to give her a neck rub. She leaned into it gratefully with a barely audible sigh.

Clark looked away uncomfortably. "What do you want to talk about?"

"How do we break the news?" Lois asked. "And when?"

"Well, I haven't told Mom about this, yet, but I was planning to do so as soon as we got things straightened out a bit more," Clark replied. "I can take care of the office, unless you guys want to make some kind of announcement?"

Richard shook his head.

"Okay, leave it to me. I think you guys can give the cover story to whatever family and friends you want to tell?"

"Right," Lois said. "We should probably let Richard tell his Uncle Perry before you start

spreading it around the office."

"Oh, yeah, that'd be good. And we should probably tell Jason so he gets it first hand and not third or fourth hand when the rumors start flying."

"I'd like to do that as soon as possible," Lois said. "I don't like waiting for the other shoe to drop." She surprised herself by yawning.

"Well, we have to wait until morning, at least," Clark said. "Look, it's late, it's been a stressful day, I should let you guys get to bed."

"You were going to look in on Jason?" Richard said.

"Yeah. But I can let myself out, if you guys want to go to bed. I'll be back in the morning to help you tell him."

Lois nodded. "Guess we'll see you in the morning, then."

Lois was in the office typing up her notes from the previous night's gala when Richard woke up. "Any sign of the little monster?" he asked, leaning on the doorjamb.

"Nope, not a sound," Lois said without pausing. "No sign of our friend in blue, either."

"How do you want to do this?" Richard asked.

Lois sighed and turned around. "I'm not sure," she said. "I mean, I want to emphasize that you love him and you're still his Dad even though you're not his biological father. And I don't want him to think he was an accident. Beyond that?" She shrugged. "I haven't even decided whether or not he should be told Clark is Superman. It's a big secret to ask of a little kid, and a part of me wonders if the Kents' solution isn't the way to go here."

"Yes, but when Clark was Jason's age he'd never thrown a piano across the room, either," Richard said. "We may not have a choice."

"I know. But we can cross that bridge when we come to it."

Richard glanced at the clock. "He's probably awake, by now." He held his hand out to Lois.

At least, Richard supposed, they wouldn't have to try to find Superman. He swung the door further open so that Lois could see inside, as well.

"Shhh!" Jason whispered loudly. "Mister Clark is sleeping!" He pointed to the superhero, still in his tux, sleeping in the chair by the bedside. His head was lolled back, in a position that would have had a human snoring loudly and complaining of a stiff neck in the morning.

"I can see that, honey," Lois replied, amused.

Clark started and jerked awake, falling out of the chair in the process. "Huh?" he said, blinking at them blearily. "Oh, uh, sorry about that," he said sheepishly as he straightened his glasses and climbed to his feet. Jason snickered good-naturedly at his clumsiness.

"Well," Richard said slowly, "I guess we know you sleep, now. Slow night?" Was the alien mugging for his son, or was he truly that clumsy?

"Yeah," Clark said. He glanced at Jason. "You wanna talk first, or just tell him?"

"Tell me what?" Jason asked.

"Hey, kiddo," Lois said, brushing past Richard to take a seat on the bed. Richard followed her, kneeling on the floor and twining his hand through hers. "We have something really big to tell you. You know how your friend Jeannie at school has two mommies?"

"Uh-huh," Jason said. "Her birth-mommy and her daddy don't like each other any more, so her daddy found her a new mommy."

"That's right," Lois said. "You're kind of like Jeannie, because you have two daddies."

Richard isn't your birth-daddy."

"But I am still your Dad, Jason," Richard said, reaching out to touch his son as Jason's eyes widened. "I love you. That won't ever change."

"You promise?" Jason said in a small voice.

"I promise," Richard said, taking him in his arms. "I promise." Jason clung to him, face buried in his chest, while Lois moved to put her arms around her boys. A quiet rustling sound brought Richard's head up, unwillingly, to look at the other man. Clark stood across the room, arms wrapped around his midsection, not looking at the White family.

"Why is Mister Clark here?" Jason asked, following his gaze. He gasped, and both Richard and Lois reached for the inhaler on the nightstand, but no wheezing followed. "Is *Superman* my birth-daddy?"

"Why do you think that, honey?" Lois asked, her eyes meeting Richard's in puzzlement.

"Why else would he be here?" Jason asked matter-of-factly.

Clark raised his eyebrows and glanced at Lois, as if looking for guidance.

Richard pulled back and stared down at his son. "How do you know Mister Clark is Superman?"

"They look 'zactly alike." Jason shrugged. He looked back at Clark. "How come people don't know you're Superman, Mister Clark?"

Clark smiled. "Well, a lot of times people don't really see what they think they do. Superman is big and confident and powerful and wears a funny suit. So if I wear normal clothes and act small and unsure and clumsy, people don't think I look like Superman even though my face doesn't change."

"Why don't you want people to know you're Superman?"

"If people knew I was Superman, they'd want to watch me all the time," Clark said. "I wouldn't be very happy if cameras followed me around everywhere I went, and my friends and family wouldn't be happy to be followed around, either. And people who want to do bad things would know all about you and your parents and my mom and my friends, and they might try to hurt one of you to make me do what they want. Which is why it's very important that you don't tell anyone that I'm Superman."

"Not even Brian and Kaley?" Jason said, frowning.

"Not even them," Lois said. "Not even if they promise not to tell. Don't talk about Mister Clark being Superman to *anyone* unless Mommy or Daddy or Clark tell you it's okay. Do you understand?"

"I guess," Jason said. "Will I be able to fly?"

"I don't know, Jason," Clark said, sitting down on the foot of the bed. "I can fly because I come from a planet called Krypton. But your mother is a Human, from Earth, and Humans can't fly. You are part Kryptonian and part Human, and there's no way to know exactly which of my powers you'll have until they start to appear."

"When will that be?"

"Well, mine came in when I was a teenager." Clark smiled. "I didn't fly until I was fifteen, almost sixteen."

"That's ten years from now!" Jason protested. "I don't wanna wait ten years!"

"It's not a question of what you want, kiddo," Lois said. "It's what your body can do. You might not ever be able to fly, and if you can it will be a very, *very* long time until you can. So let's try and forget about it for now, huh?"

Jason frowned and looked at Richard, who shrugged. Lois was right, but *he* sure a hell

wouldn't have been able to forget it and he doubted Jason could, either.

"Anyway," Lois went on, "it's time to get up and get dressed, for school, now."

"Aww," Jason said. He looked at Clark. "I guess you can't fly me to school if no one's supposed to know you're Superman." His shoulders drooped and he looked down and to the side, heaving a theatrical sigh. Richard smothered a smile, amused at his son's ham-handed attempts at manipulation, but it seemed Clark did not have enough experience with small children to recognize the signs of acting, and looked genuinely distressed.

"I know how hard it is to hide things like that, Jason," Clark said in a painfully earnest voice, coming to sit by him on the bed. "But it's very important to all of us. I can take you flying some other time. We can go see anything you like."

"Really?" Jason said with a huge grin. Richard forced down a surge of jealousy; flying had always been one of *his* father-son activities. After flying with Superman, how much interest would Jason have in taking the seaplane out?

"Sure," Clark said, returning his smile.

Richard checked his watch. "It really is time to get ready for school, kiddo. I'm sure you and Clark can talk a lot more this afternoon or evening." Clark and Jason looked up at him with identical expressions of dismay. This was their first real meeting as father and son. Was a day of school really that important? "Tomorrow's Saturday, remember?" he said. "You can have all day tomorrow and Sunday." Clark had work, anyway, and they had to tell Perry and everyone.

"I guess I'll see you later, Jason," Clark said. He hesitated, then bent over and kissed Jason's forehead.

Richard let out a breath. He was going to have to get used to that. Clark stood and walked slowly out, Richard following behind him, leaving Lois with Jason to get him ready for school. It was his turn, actually, but he wanted to talk to Clark before he left.

"I'll tell Uncle Perry first thing this morning," Richard said as soon as they walked down the stairs.

"I'll tell Jimmy," Clark said. "He'll make sure everyone knows."

Richard nodded. Jimmy was constitutionally incapable of keeping a secret; it was one of the reasons he was a photographer, not a reporter.

Clark checked his watch. "I think I have time to tell Mom before work; this is one conversation that needs to be had in person. If I leave my tux here, would you bring it to the office?"

"Sure," Richard said. It was seven o'clock; the Planet offices didn't open until 9:30. Ample time to get to Kansas and back, if you were Superman. "As long as *you're* sure no one will see you leaving our house as Superman."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Clark said, stripping off his tie and beginning to unbutton his shirt.

Richard watched him, averting his eyes when red and blue began to peek through. "If you're late, I'll cover with Perry," he said. "You can let yourself out." He turned and headed back up the stairs. It was his turn to get Jason ready for school.

Once at the Planet, Richard headed straight for Uncle Perry's office. Just like every other day, his uncle was already hard at work. "Can I talk to you for a second?" he asked, standing in the doorway.

"Sure," Uncle Perry said absently, not looking up from the article he was studying.

Richard came in and shut the door behind him, lowering and closing the blinds on the glass walls of Perry's office. As he'd expected, *that* caught his attention.

"What's this about, Richard?" Uncle Perry said, pushing the papers away and sitting back in his chair.

"Lois told me who Jason's biological father is," Richard said, sinking into the more comfortable of the chairs available for visitors.

Perry froze, his eyes getting that glint reserved for Superman. "Really?" he said, noncommittally. "Who is it?"

Richard stifled a groan. It seemed the tabloids weren't the only ones that thought Superman might be the father. "Clark Kent."

The Superman-gleam left his uncle's eyes. "Ah," he said, nodding slowly. "Niagara Falls, then?"

"Was I the only one who didn't see this coming?" Richard exploded.

"No," Perry said condescendingly. "I'm sure Jimmy doesn't suspect, either."

"Oh, well if *Jimmy* didn't suspect anything, it's all right." Richard forced himself to take a deep breath. He hadn't known either of them at the time it happened, so he'd been missing more pieces of the puzzle than his uncle. And the big secret, Clark-Kent-is-Superman, nobody suspected that one. Thank God.

"So they must have been quite a team, huh?" Richard said.

"You don't know the half of it," Uncle Perry said. "They still haven't quite hit their stride together, but it won't be long at the rate they're going. But they're the classic example of why office romances don't pay."

"How so?" Richard asked.

Uncle Perry shrugged. "It was obvious from the start that Kent had a thing for her. I thought it'd wear off -- guys from the sticks don't tend to go for girls as brash as Lois. Never did. And after a while, she -- it wasn't that she was flirting or anything. But she'd talk about fixing him up with some nice girl, tease him, push his buttons more than usual -- I swear if they'd been kids and he'd had pigtails, she woulda been pulling them. It was the damndest thing to watch." He snorted. "After a while, watching them circle one another got old. So I sent them on a puff-piece investigation to Niagara Falls, undercover as newlyweds. Figured if something happened that would stop the bickering, and if nothing happened I'd at least get some peace for a while and revenge for all the stuff they'd pulled.

"Except they came back tip-toeing around each other. I didn't notice at first, because of General Zod's arrival and the clean-up from it, but ...Lois spent most of her time ignoring Kent, and Kent spent most of his watching her from a distance, and not long after that, he left, and I lost the best reporting team I had. Lois was upset he didn't say good-bye, and then Superman disappeared too, and everyone forgot about Kent leaving. And then Lois announced she was pregnant. The rest you know."

Richard nodded, slowly. "Yeah," he said. He looked away. "It's just... I'm the only Dad Jason's ever known. And now Kent's back, and I don't know what's going to happen next. Hell, none of us know what's going to happen next."

"Mm." Uncle Perry sat back, fingers steepled. "Look, Richard, Lane and Kent crashed and burned horribly last time, and Lane's too sharp to repeat her mistakes. And you *are* the only father Jason's ever known, and much more interesting than Kent. Thing's'll settle down soon, and the three of you can sit down with lawyers and draw up a custody agreement. Everything will be fine," he said, tossing his words off with confidence. He sat forward,

reaching for one of the papers in his inbox. "Have you seen the latest from Somalia? We got word that Superman overflowed the negotiations site last night, found a bomb set to go off today when the Islamic Courts Union faction arrived. I want that to be the lead International piece in tomorrow's edition."

Richard exhaled. It wasn't, quite, a sigh. He was only more interesting than Kent to people who didn't know Kent's little secret -- and both Lois and Jason now did. Why he'd thought Uncle Perry might be a sympathetic ear, he didn't know. "Sure. I'll get right on it."

Richard spent the rest of the day doing his best to ignore Lois, Clark Kent, the new office gossip, and anything that might remind him of the whole mess. He'd been off his game lately, and while he thought he had every justification for it (even if you only counted the parts he could tell other people about) he didn't want to make a habit of it. Leads and stories were assigned, contacts were contacted, stories in progress were checked up on, foreign correspondents were checked in with, Superman stories kept to, if not a minimum, then the least he could get away with. He managed to almost forget about the tangled mess his personal life had become until Lois brought Jason back to the Planet from school, and instead of coming to Richard's office to give him a hug and a kiss and talk about his day, Jason went to Kal-El's desk and gave *him* a hug and a kiss.

Fortunately, the day was almost over. Richard didn't get much done after that. Even after Jason came in to say hello before going back out to the bullpen to sit between his mother and biological father.

Unfortunately, Richard had forgotten this morning that Jason was spending the night at a friend's house, and wouldn't be home, and Lois had been burying herself in work today just as he had but with Lois that meant working late. As Richard left he took care not to look over to where two dark heads bent together over a desk, as they had for most of the day.

"Hey, there, kiddo," Richard said, oofing a little as Jason launched himself into his arms. He wrapped the boy in a hug and lifted him up. "How were you for Mommy while I was away?"

"I was good," Jason said. "Mommy said so. I was very, very good at the office, so she took me to the zoo on Saturday!"

"The zoo, eh?" Richard kicked the front door shut behind him. "Sounds fun. What did you see there?"

"Penguins. But the signs had them all funny colors and patterns, and they were only black and white. Mommy said we should get our money back because they weren't polka-dotted like on the signs."

"Really?" Richard looked up at Lois with a smirk.

"Yeah. But we didn't do it."

"That's too bad. Maybe next time they'll have polka-dotted penguins." Richard stepped over to Lois, hugging her with his free arm and giving her a kiss. "How was your week, dear?"

"Mostly boring, puff pieces," Lois said. "The zoo was the highlight, believe it or not. But I have an editorial I'd like to write -- I know you just got home, but I think my hindbrain is finally done percolating about it."

"That health care piece?" Richard said. "No problem. I'm sure my man here and I can occupy ourselves, right, kid?" He poked Jason in the stomach.

"Right, Daddy! Did you get me anything in London?"

"Of course I did." Richard set his son down, and picked up his laptop case, pulling a book and a stuffed animal out of the pocket. "I got you Eeyore, and Winnie the Pooh books."

"That doesn't look like Eeyore," Jason said, taking the stuffed animal.

"That's because he looks like the original drawing, not the Disney cartoons," Richard said. "This is one of the original books. Want me to read it to you?"

"Yeah!" Jason said.

"All righty, then," Richard said, sitting down on the couch and pulling Jason onto his lap. He turned to the first page. "Chapter One. In which a house is built at Pooh Corner for Eeyore." Lois watched them for a few minutes with a smile before heading up to the home office.

The house was empty when Richard got home. He was tired, and not in the mood to do anything that required thought, so he turned on the television. It seemed to echo through the house and he couldn't stop thinking that if Lois and Jason went away with Superman, this was what his life would be like, alone in a house too big for one, a house that used to be a home. Richard turned off the TV and shook his head. That was stupid. No one had suggested that; no one had even hinted anything like it. He just needed something to keep busy, so he grabbed the manual for the seaplane and his toolbox and went out to tinker. But he'd taken it to the shop for a full overhaul after the escape from Luther's continent, and hadn't taken it up since, and there wasn't even a screw loose. He opened the hood and looked at the motor for a few minutes, trying to pretend to do something useful, before giving up and putting the tools and manual away.

He called Lois' cell, but she ignored it; she must be deep in whatever she was working on, and wouldn't be home for a while. He couldn't go to Jason's friend's house to check up on him, and how lame was it that he wanted to hold his son like a live security blanket? Which meant there was really only one other person in the world Richard could talk to. If he called the Daily Planet at this hour on a personal matter it would be hot gossip tomorrow, and Kent didn't have a cell phone. But if he called for Superman, Richard was pretty sure he would come. Feeling stupid, Richard took a deep breath. "Superman, I want to talk," he yelled.

Nothing happened. Richard let out a deep breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Had he thought Superman would just appear out of nowhere before the echo had died? He could be half-way around the world helping people or in some place not easy to leave without questions. He could just be ignoring Richard.

Richard was debating whether to call again or forget the whole thing when there was a quiet tapping at the dock door. He turned, to see Superman watching him. He walked over and opened the door for him.

"You wanted to see me?" Kal-El asked, stepping in and shutting the door behind him.

"I thought we should probably talk, just the two of us," Richard said. "As Jason's two fathers." He retreated back into the living room, Kal-El following behind him.

Richard took a seat, gesturing for him to do likewise. Kal-El moved to the chair he'd used before, adjusting his cape as he sat down. "I want to know what your intentions toward Lois and Jason are," he said, timing it so that he spoke just before the other man's butt touched the cushion.

Kal-El froze for a second, then settled himself in. "What do you mean?" It wasn't defensive; it was honestly curious.

Richard glanced down, wishing for a glass of wine or something to hold in his hands for this conversation. He always did better in this kind of thing with Lois when he had some excuse to look at something else when he needed it. "We're going to be dealing with a lot of issues, over the years it takes Jason to grow up and start making his own choices." He picked his words as carefully as he could. "I need to know, before we start, exactly what it is you want out of this. What are you going to be working towards? If you could arrange everything the way you wanted it, what would that look like?" It was the closest he could come to asking *are you going to try to take them away from me?*

Kal-El didn't respond at once; that was good. Richard wouldn't have trusted a glib answer, even from Superman. "I don't know what it would look like, exactly," he said. "I've been spending a lot of time thinking about it, but I just don't know. There's so much to consider. I know I want what's best for them." His shoulders straightened. "I want them to be happy, and safe. That's the most important thing."

At least they agreed about one thing. "And what about you," Richard pressed. "What do you want?"

Kal-El frowned slightly. "I'm not going to try and take them away from you, Richard," he said at last. Which didn't mean, of course, that his mere presence wouldn't make that happen anyway. "What do *you* want?"

"I want Lois and Jason safe and happy, too," Richard said. "And I want to keep my family together."

Kal-El nodded. "I understand," he said softly, looking down. He nodded and stood up. "I'd like to show you something. Would you come with me?"

Richard swallowed and stood, facing him. "Okay," he said, curiosity and excitement pushing his fears away. He followed Superman out to the back deck, and wondered how he was going to carry him. He half expected to be thrown over the other man's shoulder or invited to climb on his back like a child, but instead Superman came to stand beside him, slipping an arm around his back.

"I'm going to take us up pretty quickly to avoid being noticed," he said.

Richard nodded. Without warning, they were airborne, headed up and away from the house at an incredible rate. He bit back a yell; the feeling was closer to riding a roller-coaster than an airplane, except coasters never had such speed going up and had a much sturdier cage or car strapped around you, and usually a solid place to plant your feet. He trusted Superman not to drop him, but his hind-brain wasn't quite so sure.

Before long they were at a breath-taking altitude, far away from Metropolis. Richard knew he should feel cold; wind-chill alone, at this height, should be murder. But he felt fine.

"A lot of different people try to track me," Superman said. "Satellites are much harder to evade now than they were when I left. I have to do some intricate flying to throw them off track. I hope sudden maneuvers don't bother you."

"I'll be fine," Richard said, wondering what Superman would count as 'sudden maneuvers' if that takeoff hadn't counted.

"It'll be easier to do flying horizontal," Superman continued. "You'll probably be most comfortable if you hook your legs over mine to keep them from hanging down."

"Okay," Richard said, doing as the other man had suggested as they switched from horizontal to vertical. It wasn't the most comfortable position he'd ever been in, but it wasn't bad, and the view was breathtaking. Once Richard was settled in, they took off again, faster this time, and not in a straight line.

It only took a few minutes, but seemed like a lot longer. By the time they landed, Richard had no idea where they were and more adrenaline going through his system than he'd ever had in his life, except maybe the day Luthor had tried to kill Lois and Jason and finished off by trying to kill Superman. He took a few moments to breathe deeply and try to get his heart rate under control before looking around. This obviously wasn't the Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic with the silver sheets; anything less exciting could wait until it didn't feel like his heart would burst.

After a few seconds, when he was still jittery but felt more like himself, he raised his head and looked around.

Flat fields, with the late-fall stubble left over from harvest. The occasional silo or farmhouse in the distance. He turned around, and was face to face with a weathered farm-house and barn so neat and homey they could have come out of a Norman Rockwell illustration. Another barn or shed stood off a little ways, and beat-up farm equipment could be seen through its open doors. The faint smell of animals lingered in the cold air. Clark Kent matched the setting perfectly, in jeans and a t-shirt, with a plaid flannel long-sleeved work shirt over the top, hands stuffed in his pockets. No glasses. Richard wondered how he'd changed so quickly, then realized it was a stupid question.

"Kansas?"

"Yeah." Clark smiled. "This is my home. Wanna take a look around?"

"Sure," Richard said.

"Mom's not here, right now," Clark said. "I think she's out somewhere with Ben. They -- he's -- um --"

"Her boyfriend?" Richard suggested.

From the wince Clark couldn't quite hide, it was clear he didn't want to think of his mother having a boyfriend. "I guess," he said, dubiously. "Dad died over ten years ago, and Ben's a nice guy -- I've known him all my life -- and I want Mom to be happy ..." he trailed off. "That was the other big shock of coming home. Finding out that while I was gone, Mom got a... boyfriend." He shook his head. "Come on in." He turned and bounded up the porch steps.

Richard followed, slower, drinking in all of the details with a reporter's trained eye. He turned on the top step to look out over the bare fields, trying to imagine them in spring and summer, yellow sunshine and green growing things. No wonder Superman was so... wholesome. He turned and followed Clark into the house, not at all surprised at the homey atmosphere. Everything was neat and clean, but obviously lived in. Too much furniture crowded the room, making it look smaller than it was. There were books and magazines on a side table, a checkers set sitting out waiting to be used, pictures on the walls and sitting atop the piano.

What did surprise him was the air of poverty -- nothing was even close to new. The carpet was threadbare, particularly near the door between living room and kitchen, and a rug had been placed over it in the doorway -- the highest-traffic portion was probably worn through. The furniture was made with styles and fabrics that hadn't been current in at least thirty years -- probably longer. The television was old enough Richard had to wonder whether it was color or black and white. The china hutch squeezed behind the sofa had a nice piece or two, but most were simple souvenirs with no value but sentiment. Although everything looked to be well-cared for, years of wear could clearly be seen. Nothing had been replaced that could still be used. Richard had expected wholesome, which this place was, but not shabbiness.

"This is the first picture of me," Clark said, taking one down off the wall. He handed it

over to Richard.

It was a picture of a middle-aged couple holding a small boy between them, sitting on the front porch of the house. An old-fashioned squeeze-bulb shutter release could be seen half-hidden behind the man. The couple was smiling, but the boy seemed to be trying to squirm away. He was making a face and one of his legs was blurry with movement. But he didn't seem unhappy, merely filled with energy like any small boy forced to sit still on a nice day. "Those are the Kents?" Richard asked.

"Those are my parents," the alien replied, serious, emphasizing the words. Richard looked up to see him staring at the photograph. "My Dad was an amateur photographer," Clark went on. "He didn't have much time or money for it, but he loved it. That one was taken about two days after I arrived."

Richard nodded and handed it back.

Clark replaced it on the wall and moved on to the piano. "That's my high-school graduation, of course," he said, pointing to the standard cap-and-gown photograph. "I'm about six in the one in front of it. This is one Dad took of Mom just after they got engaged, that's one he did of himself about two years before he died. That one was taken out on the north forty, when I showed Dad I could fly. Well, sort of fly, at that point it was more like a combination of jumping really high and throwing myself at the ground and missing. We couldn't take a picture of me in the air -- someone might see it besides us -- but Dad took one of me on the ground to commemorate the occasion anyway. We had pie and ice cream that night, and Dad and I slept outside that night, under the stars."

Clark led him around the room, pointing out photographs, knick-knacks, dings in furniture, and telling the story behind each one. It was fascinating, watching emotions play out across his face as he remembered. Richard had always thought Clark was an open book, emotions written on his face. Then he'd thought Superman -- Kal-El, whoever -- was an extremely accomplished actor, fitting in to the Planet like a chameleon, all surfaces false and misleading. This was a guided tour to the person behind the personas. He'd started to wonder if there actually was one.

When they'd finished with the ground floor, the public areas of the house, Clark turned to him and dug his fists into the pockets of his jeans. "Do you know why I brought you here?" he asked, studying Richard intently.

"I think so," Richard said, returning his gaze. "But why don't you tell me anyway." There was too much at stake for misunderstandings here.

Clark nodded, hair falling forward into his eyes. "Jonathan and Martha Kent may not be biologically related to me, but they're my parents. I got flight and invulnerability and a lot of other things from Jor-El and Lara, but I got family and a good upbringing from Jonathan and Martha. They're my *parents*. They didn't just teach me how to be human, they taught me how to be a man." He looked away. "I haven't told Mom I wiped Lois' memory, and I don't want to, because I don't want her to be disappointed in me. She would be, if she knew. More than she already is that I fathered a child and then disappeared, even if I didn't know about Jason at the time. It was wrong -- *I* was wrong -- both the memory wipe and leaving.

"I went to Krypton to see if there was any chance that any of my species survived. But if Jor-El and Lara had somehow escaped Krypton's destruction and come looking for me as a child and tried to take me away from here..." He shook his head. "I can't even imagine that. I would have been devastated. So would Mom and Dad. I'm not going to do that to my own son. Or to his mother and... other father. I'm not going to try to break up your family."

Richard nodded slowly. "I can accept that," he said, and to his surprise found that he could. "But it may happen anyway." It hurt, to speak his fear out loud. It was a fear he'd had since before he'd known Jason was Superman's son.

"Maybe," Clark said. "But if that's what you're worried about, I'm not the one you need to be talking to."

"I guess not," Richard said.

"I'll take you back to Metropolis," Clark said.

The trip back was just as much of a rush, but this time Richard knew what to expect. It didn't take him quite as long to recover, this time, and Clark stayed with him instead of taking off as Richard had half expected him to do. When he looked up, Lois was watching through the sliding glass door.

"Hey," he said, walking inside. "Finish your project?"

She shrugged. "No, but it'll keep. Where'd he take you?"

"Smallville," Richard said. He turned, to see Clark standing uncertainly, watching the two of them. "You're welcome to come in," he told him.

"You want to talk about custody and visits?" Lois said.

"Yes," Richard said.

"I'm sure Jason will have questions when he gets home tomorrow," Clark said.

"He's a sharp little boy; he likes to know things," Lois said.

Richard headed into the den, the others following him. "I've got something I'd like to do, first," he said. He went over to the shelf that housed the family albums, and picked out a few, starting with Jason's baby book. "How about a stroll through memory lane?"

Lois took the baby book, flipping through it. "I'd forgotten how light his hair was," she said, stopping at the lock of hair from Jason's first haircut. On the opposite page was a picture of the three of them in the hospital: Lois exhausted, but all smiles, Jason just barely visible in his blanket, Richard waving one of Uncle Perry's cigars around (still in its wrapper).

"Is that Jason's first picture?" Clark asked, reverently.

"No," Richard said. He flipped a few pages earlier, to a grainy black-and-white sonogram. "*That's* Jason's first picture." He took Lois's hand and squeezed it, just as he had when it was taken. She squeezed back.

"So, what were you two doing in Smallville?" Lois asked after the pictures had been looked at, the stories that went with them told, and all the albums had been put away. She was sitting on the sofa next to Richard, legs crossed, leaning into him.

"He was showing me where he grew up," Richard said. "Pictures of his childhood, that sort of thing."

"You didn't think I'd be interested?" Lois asked, craning her neck to look up at him.

"I want to ask the three of you over for dinner soon, Lois, so you'll see it all," Clark said from his seat on the easy chair. "Mom wants to meet you."

Richard didn't wonder at his inclusion; the mother who filled Clark's stories would certainly want to meet her grandson's other father. "Sounds good," he said, instead.

"I'm sure Jason will be excited," Lois said. "Particularly when he finds out there's a spaceship in the basement. But don't change the subject: you could have waited till I was home."

"Sorry," Richard said, wincing.

"Richard wanted to talk with me," Clark said.

Lois' eyes narrowed. "Without me? About what, if I may ask?"

"He wanted to know if I was going to try to take you and Jason away from him," Clark said.

There was an ominous pause. Richard could guess what Lois was thinking.

"Richard," she said in measured tones, "I make my own decisions. If I ever choose to leave you, it will be because *I* have chosen to leave you, not because Clark or anyone else has done anything. And the fastest way to get me to choose to leave you? Is to come out with the macho crap. Please tell me you're not going to start doing that. One of the things I love about you is that you generally don't, and I'd hate to think that you backslide to a caveman in times of stress."

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I've been trying to gather the courage to talk with you directly about it. But the house was so empty tonight, my insecurities came out, and I didn't want to disturb you at work. And you said he was always around, so I called. I know it's your decision." He really did know that, and he *should* have talked to Lois first. Just as she should have told him about Jason's parentage as soon as she knew.

Lois nodded. "Apology accepted." She turned back to Clark. "So. Custody and visitation. What are you asking for, and what's going to happen if there's an emergency while you have Jason?"

"I'll make sure that one of you or my Mom are free as a backup," Clark said. "So that if something comes up that I absolutely have to handle, I can drop him off before heading out. I'd like as much time with Jason as I can get, but right now I don't have any place for him to stay, so shared custody or anything like that is going to have to wait until I'm settled."

"Fair enough," Lois said.

"Any idea how long that's going to take?" Richard asked.

Clark shrugged. "Housing in Metropolis is a mess, right now, with all the property damage from the quake -- it could be a while."

"So, you can only take Jason during the day for the time being," Lois said, nodding. "Or at least not overnight on a regular basis, though I'm assuming your mom wants to meet him, and wouldn't object to having her grandson over for a weekend?"

"Of course," Clark said. "Do you have any plans for next weekend?"

"Nothing in particular," Richard said.

"Good!" Clark said. "Mom doesn't either. I was thinking, maybe I could have Jason that weekend, and we could have you two over for Sunday dinner so she can meet you, too."

"Sounds reasonable," Lois said with a nod.

"Just Saturday night, or Friday and Saturday?" Richard asked.

"Both, if I can," Clark said. "I've got years of his life to catch up on, after all."

"Right," Richard said. He swallowed. Jason had never been away from them for two nights in a row, before, and had only just started going on the occasional sleepover.

"One condition, though," Lois said. "You do not to anything with Jason -- and I do mean *anything*, Clark, and Superman or not I'll kick your ass if I find out otherwise -- without asking Richard and I, first."

"Okay," Clark said carefully. "Um, is that because you don't trust me, or something else?"

"A little bit of it's trust," Lois said, ignoring his wince. "Mostly, it's that you're not familiar with his allergies, or our rules. And our rules may be fairly standard, but the allergies definitely aren't."

"Right," Clark said.

"And if his Mom's going to be feeding Jason for the weekend, we'd better give her the list and the recipe book," Richard said, pushing himself to his feet. "I'll go get them."

"I'm sure Mom won't need any recipes, she's a very good cook," Clark said behind him.

"I'm sure she is," Lois responded. "Does she know what adjustments need to be made to a recipe to use gluten-free flour? Does she even know what gluten-free flour is? Does she know how to cook with soy milk? And that's just the beginning. She may not need the cookbook. But it's better safe than sorry. I know you can fly faster than an ambulance, if Jason has to go to the hospital, but I'd really rather he didn't have to."

As Lois explained, Richard rummaged around the kitchen until he found the copy of the list of forbidden foods and the spare allergy cookbook, the one they sent off with Jason when he was going to spend the night with a friend. Looks like they'd need another copy, because Mrs. Kent would probably need her own. The list of Jason's medications, which Clark would also need, wasn't with the book and allergy list where it would normally be. Richard went upstairs to print out another copy.

By the time he got back out, Lois had switched from allergies to inhalers and other forms of medication that Jason took, on a regular or as-needed basis, what each of them did, which ones needed to be taken with food, which ones couldn't be taken together, all of that. She was just wrapping up when Richard dumped his load in Clark's lap and resumed his seat on the sofa.

Clark was looking kind of green as he looked through the lists. "Wow," he said. "That's a *lot*." He sounded a bit overwhelmed, which Richard felt no sympathy for.

"You should have been here when he was a baby," he said, not cruelly. "The doctors couldn't tell us what was wrong, and Jason couldn't tell us his symptoms, and there aren't a lot of medications that infants and toddlers can take. And Jason doesn't always react normally to medication."

Clark sagged. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wish things had been different," he said.

"There's no use wasting energy thinking about what might have been," Lois said. "Here and now, you need to understand that Jason's medical problems are severe, and have been life-threatening in the past, and that means we have to be really careful."

"I'll be careful," Clark said. "And I'll keep in touch."

"Maybe you should get a cell-phone, so you can reach us quicker in an emergency," Richard suggested.

"That's a good idea," Clark said. "I've never really needed one, because I can hear the phone ringing from a couple of miles away and get to it before it goes to the machine, but if something goes wrong I don't want to have to leave Jason to go back to the house and call. Or risk carrying him, if things are really bad."

"You grow corn, right?" Lois said. "He's not allergic to corn. If your mom scrubs her kitchen down to get rid of any flour that might be loose, or ground in to her food-prep surfaces, he should be okay. Chances are, if you follow instructions, there won't be a problem. But a cell would probably still be a good idea."

"I can do that," Clark said.

Next Sunday morning, Richard and Lois sat at the kitchen table together and drank coffee. Richard stared out the window while Lois worked on the Sudoku.

The house was very quiet. He kept listening for sounds that weren't there.

"I'm sure he's fine," Richard said.

"Clark would call us if he wasn't."

"He's probably having a great time."

"Of course he is."

Lois did a great job of projecting nonchalance, but Richard saw through it. It was in the way she kept glancing at the clock when she thought he wasn't looking, and fidgeted with her pencil as she studied the puzzle.

This was the longest Jason had ever been with someone else, the longest he'd spent away from both parents. It had been nice, the first night, having the time for themselves. By Saturday night, Richard had been on edge, and by this morning even the pragmatic Lois was feeling the strain. It wasn't that Richard thought Clark would let anything happen to Jason -- and if something did go wrong, Richard trusted that Clark would tell them immediately. It was just ... Jason could be so fragile, and he'd never been away from home this long.

"Ready to go?" Clark poked his head in the sliding door.

At last, their ride was here.

"You're late," Lois said. She grabbed her jacket and walked over, not hurrying, but not taking the time to fold the paper, either. Richard followed her, carrying the wine they'd chosen as a hostess gift.

"Sorry," Clark said. "Somebody was robbing a convenience store as I flew over Jersey. Took a little longer than I was expecting to handle."

The flight to Kansas was just as exhilarating this time around, although Richard found it easier to handle knowing what was coming.

Which was good, because the moment they touched down in front of the old farmhouse Jason burst out its front door, running to them. "Mommy! Daddy!" He launched himself at them from a few feet away, and Lois scooped him up in her arms. Jason gave her a big hug before leaning over to give one to Richard, as well. "Did you miss me?" he asked.

"You know we did, kiddo. How was your weekend?"

"It was awesome!" Jason enthusiastically shared with them each and every detail of the weekend, many of which they knew already from Clark's reports.

Jason's monologue continued, with a bare pause for them to be introduced to his new grandmother, right up until dinner was actually on the table in front of him, when he attacked his meal with a flourish.

With Jason focusing on his food, the adults were free to strike up a conversation. It was awkward, in places; Lois had worked alongside Clark for years and knew him very well in many ways, and yet there was a side of him she barely knew, and she probed often at the edges between Clark and the Superman persona. Neither she nor Richard knew Martha Kent, with whom they shared very little in common besides Jason. Also, Richard suspected that the grandmotherly Martha would prefer a nice simple family with Clark and Lois together. Still, they managed. Everyone was determined to get along for Jason's sake, and he was a subject they were all interested in, which helped steer the conversation away from dangerous places.

Dinner was an excellent chicken pot pie, and desert was a homemade apple crisp a la mode that was to die for.

"This is wonderful, Martha," Lois said, as she scraped the dish for the very last bits.

"Thank you, Lois," Martha replied. "Would you care for seconds?"

"I've had too much already," Lois said.

"Me, too," Richard said, comfortably full and feeling mellow.

"I'll take some," Clark said brightly, and proceeded to dish himself a second helping of apple crisp almost as large as his first -- which had been much larger than Richard's.

"Me, too," Jason said happily, and Martha served him a little more out of the smaller one she had made that fit Jason's dietary requirements.

"Does flying take that much energy, or do you have a super-metabolism?" Lois asked Clark.

"A little bit of both," he said. "And it's not like Mom makes her apple crisp every day. It's real good this time, Mom."

"Thank you," Martha replied. "Though I may be making more of it in the future -- I wasn't able to get Jason's to turn out quite right. I'll have to experiment with it some more."

"That's always the trick," Richard said. "Both Lois and I can cook, but the experimentation to adapt recipes so that Jason can eat them is a bit beyond us."

"I'm glad to help," Martha said. "And it'll be an excuse to have Jason over more often." She smiled fondly down at the boy, who was still chowing down on his desert. "Would you like that?"

"Uhuh," Jason said. "Then I can play with Shelby and see when the barn cat has her kittens!"

Of course Jason wanted to come back here often. What boy wouldn't want to have the run of this farm, with the animals and interesting outbuildings and Martha Kent's cooking and Superman to play with? Richard shook his head. Clark and Martha had missed the first five years of Jason's life, of course they wanted to see him often. They'd work things out. Richard looked up and caught Clark watching him. He smiled.

Clark reached for his wine glass. "I'd like to propose a toast," he said. The other adults reached for their own glasses, and Jason reached for his water. "To family!"

Yes, thought Richard, *we are all family now*. "To family."