

After the Storm

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Rating: T

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"What have I gotten myself into?" Clark Joseph Kent asked aloud as he sat down on one of the chairs in the newsroom conference room. The baby, Esperanza Ester Kent, a refugee from another time-line, started to wail and he held her to his shoulder, making sure to support her head. "What have I done?"

"What you always do," Lois answered, noting how natural he seemed with a baby in his arms. "What you're best at. Rescuing people. And I can't think of anyone who needed rescuing more than this little one."

"I can't do this by myself," he protested. It was finally sinking in as to what was happening. What Lois had planned for him.

"You won't have to," she assured him. "We'll all be here to help."

"I don't know if I can do this."

"Clark, I promise you, we'll make this work," Lois said. "And besides, despite the fact that I would like nothing more than to knock your block off for lying to me, erasing my memory, *and* running off for six years, I'm in love with you. *All of you.*"

"And I've loved you since the first time I saw you. Will it help if I promise never to do those things again?"

"It won't hurt."

Perry knocked on the door then opened it. He walked in, followed by Polly who was carrying a large bag from the nearby Costmart. Jimmy was behind her, carrying a box with a picture of a baby carrier/car-seat on it.

Clark tried to reach for his wallet once more even though he knew all he had were two credit cards and about ten dollars in cash.

"Don't worry about it, Clark," Polly told him once again. "Consider this the baby shower we couldn't throw you and your wife." Polly peered at the younger man. He looked lost, overwhelmed, sitting there with a newborn in his arms.

The Daily Planet newsroom staff had found out less than an hour before that during Clark's five plus year absence from the Planet, he'd gotten married to a foreign national and then discovered he couldn't bring her into the U.S. Now his wife was dead, murdered with the rest of her village with the only survivor being their newborn daughter who'd been rescued from certain death by Superman himself.

The newsroom of course didn't know - could never know - the real story. That Clark had not been in South America at all, but had spent five plus years in space, traveling to and from the dead world of Krypton. That the child was not his, exactly, but was from an alternate

time-line where *their* Clark Kent was the high lord of the House of El and the baby, *that* Clark's biological child by the daughter of a vicious warlord, was a pawn in dangerous political game. She promised to be a serious liability if left alive, only neither set of Clark Kent/Lois Lane had been willing to make that choice, opting instead to send the child into an alternate time-line for safety. This time-line, this reality.

"Thanks," Clark murmured.

Lois started opening the packages, starting with the baby bottles and formula. She handed a filled bottle to Polly. "Could you warm that up, please?"

"Be back in a jiff," Polly promised, heading over to the women's lounge.

Lois took the baby from Clark and started dressing her in the diapers and new clothes Polly had bought. The pink fuzzy jammies were huge on baby, but Lois knew from experience that the clothes would be just right in less than a month.

She handed the dressed baby back to her 'father'. Clark took the child again, her tiny hands waving around impotently, fingers splayed like wrinkled little starfish.

A strobe flash went off and both Clark and Lois looked up to see Jimmy with his camera. He grinned at them. "Hey, I am the official baby photographer around here, you know."

"Clark," Perry said. "Do you even have a place to live yet? Your bags are still in the storage room."

Clark shook his head. "There's nothing available, with the crystalquake and all, unless I want to commute two hours each way, and even then, who can afford it right now? Rents in the greater metro have more than doubled in the past week."

"Let me call Alice, let her know we're going to have company," Perry said, heading toward the door.

"You don't have to do that, sir. I'll figure out something," Clark protested.

"You haven't got anything yet and we both know it'll be at least a month, if not more, for the housing situation to sort itself out," Perry pointed out. "Besides, Alice would have my hide if she found out I had a homeless new dad with a baby working here."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Clark said softly. He'd looked overwhelmed before, but now he looked exhausted as well.

"Son, when's the last time you slept?"

"I honestly don't remember."

Perry shook his head. "Let me call Alice, then I'll get you both out of here."

"What about the story?"

"Lois can handle it."

Perry maneuvered the black Acura out of the Daily Planet parking garage, over to Clinton, then to Ordway Drive towards Park Ridge. Baby Esperanza was safely ensconced in her car seat in the back. Clark was in the front passenger seat, head resting on the door frame. He was so quiet Perry wondered if he had fallen asleep, but no, his eyes were open, watching the traffic.

"What was the name of the village?" Perry asked.

"Hmm?"

"The village you ended up at? What was its name?"

"Santa Clarita," Clark said. "Not too far from the border between Colombia and Peru, up in the hills. Not a bad place, except for the drug lords and the warring factions."

"What was she like, the girl you married?"

"Young. She was the daughter of one of the local militia leaders. I wandered in, stupid American, and she decided I was her best way out," Clark explained. "I figured she was my best way to stay alive. A marriage of convenience. At least we liked each other."

"So what did you do, aside from boinking the jefe's daughter?"

Clark looked momentarily confused then his expression cleared. "A little of this, a little of that. Bookkeeping, clerical stuff. The jefe's son-in-law didn't have to worry about manual labor, at least."

"Then she got pregnant and that's when you started trying to get her into the States?" Perry speculated aloud.

"Pretty much," Clark agreed.

"Interesting," Perry commented mostly to himself. *The boy's gotten better at lying, at least.*

Richard White looked around the newsroom. Perry's domain, but his when Perry was out. That was one of the roles of assistant editor, although he was giving it up as soon as he had plane tickets for Paris.

"She's decided," he'd told his uncle. "Is that post in Paris still open?" Perry had nodded 'yes.'

Lois was at her desk, no doubt working on the article that she and Clark *and* Superman had been working on, about Homeland Security's impact on families with cross border ties. *I guess that describes Clark right now. The poor guy looked completely shell shocked when Perry took him away.*

Richard searched out one particular person in the crowded room. The noise levels had returned to relative normal after Superman's unexpected appearance, walking in with a newborn baby in his arm. *Clark Kent's baby.* Funny, but Kent just didn't seem to be the type to marry some exotic beauty then run away when she got pregnant. He was honest, wholesome, honorable, a real boy scout. *It must have been a hell of a shock to walk into work to find Lois telling him his wife was dead and he was a daddy.*

He finally found the person he was looking for: Penelope Landris, the new girl, rather woman, in research. She came from well respected Metropolis family, had attended college in Paris, and spoke French fluently. Her first journalism job had been with a small broadsheet in Paris.

It had also been Penny who made sure Richard was okay when Lois and Clark disappeared for three days without a trace.

"Penny," Richard called to her. She stopped what she was doing, dropping off papers at various desks and trotted over to him.

"Yes, Mister White?"

"Mister White's my uncle, remember?" Richard said with a grin. "The Daily Planet has a couple openings in Paris. Mister White wanted me to ask you if you were interested in moving to France for a while to work for us there."

He studied her face as she considered what he'd asked. "Who will I be working under?" she finally asked.

"Me," he said. He noted her glance over at Lois still seated at her desk, reviewing her notes, typing her story.

"Happened pretty fast, didn't it?" she asked, concern in her eyes.

"Not really," Richard said. "I always had a suspicion that if Jason's real father showed up

one day, out of the blue, he'd still be in the running for her."

"Does she know what you're planning?"

He shrugged. *Will she care?* "I'm planning to tell her as soon as we both get home."

Lois finished the first section of Clark's write-up on immigration problems that Norm Parker had started investigating. It had become Clark's story when Parker died and Clark was rehired, taking over both Parker's desk *and* his assignments. Now, with Clark supposedly personally involved in the issue, it was Lois *and* Clark's story.

Funny, she could tell when Norm's writing left off and Clark's began, could see Clark's edits, his change in point of view on the subject. He had obviously not been working on it very long otherwise it would have been a seamless whole. Her job in taking it over was to make it a seamless whole, using Clark's voice, one she knew almost as well as her own, even after him being away from more than five years.

She sent the article over to Perry's printer and also to Perry's in-folder. That finished, she picked up her coat and purse, turned off her computer and started to head home. *Jason! Where is Jason?* When she was in the alternate time-line, she wanted nothing more than to get back home to her son. But when she got back to her home dimension, her worry about Clark and the baby had pushed her own son to the back of her mind. *What sort of mother am I that I can put someone else's child before my own?*

She looked around and saw Richard standing near the elevators talking with Penny Landris. *Clark was right. This Penny is the counterpart to Richard's wife in that other place. They look right together.*

"Richard, are you picking Jason up, or am I?" she called to him.

"You can, if you want. I signed him up for that new aftercare at his school. They'll watch him till about six," he told her. "I know I should have talked to you about it before I signed him up, but I wasn't able to get a hold of you. None of us were."

"It's been a really bizarre last couple of days," she told him.

"Well, why don't you tell me about it over dinner? I'll grab some Indian on my way home," he said.

She gave him a grateful smile. "Sounds good. I'll meet you there." She watched Penny smile at Richard and head back into the newsroom to do her work. *I wonder how long she's been here. Oh God, how do I tell Richard that Clark's back in my life? How do I begin to explain it?*

Alice White hadn't changed, really. Oh, she was thinner, with more silver tracing metallic lines through her hair, but she hadn't really changed, Clark thought as she opened the front door and pulled him into a hug, despite the baby carrier in his hand.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," she said letting him go. "It must be a horrible shock for you."

"Yeah, I certainly wasn't expecting..." He ran his free hand through his hair. "Uh, yeah," he ended up mumbling. He followed her through the door into the house. Perry was behind him with the baby things. Clark would go out later and get his bags out of the trunk of the car.

He still wasn't sure how he felt about the invitation to stay with Perry and his wife, how he was going to handle his 'other job' while under the intense scrutiny of the editor-in-chief of one of the most influential newspapers on the east coast, if not the country.

"Um, I want to thank you for letting me, I mean us, stay till I find someplace to live. I..."

"Don't mention it, hon'," Alice assured him, taking the baby carrier from him and leading

him into the living room. "The Planet is family, and family helps each other, warts and all."

"It's about family," the other Clark had said. "You can love them, you can hate them, be ashamed of them, despise them. When family calls, you help. Despite the wrongs they've done, you care."

Alice peered into the carrier, at the small life wrapped in baby blankets. She picked the child up. "She is so adorable... Look at all that hair..."

The cab dropped Lois and Jason off in front of the house at 312 Riverside Drive. The house she'd left three days ago to go to work, the same house that her counter-part lived in with four kids and Clark Kent.

She opened the door with her key and walked in. Jason ran past her to the kitchen.

"Daddy, Mommy's back! She picked me up at aftercare just like you promised!"

"I told you she wouldn't be gone too long," Richard told him. "Now, go get cleaned up for dinner, and we'll have Mommy tell us all about her adventure with Mister Clark and Superman, and then I have something to talk to you and Mommy about."

She could hear Jason's little elephant feet pounding on the stairs as he ran up to wash his hands and face. She walked into the dining room and found the table set, most of dinner in serving bowls ready to go. She entered the kitchen beyond and saw Richard, a glass of wine in his hand.

"Starting without me?" she asked, trying to keep her voice light. To answer, he pulled a second wine glass from the cabinet and filled it for her. She took a sip. "Not bad for 'two-buck-Chuck,'" she said.

He took a sip of his wine. "Perry and I were really worried about you." He looked up and saw her annoyed expression. "We were worried about Clark, too, but I figure he's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"And I can't?" she asked.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," he explained. "For Clark to disappear is just 'Clark.' It's not like you to take off for days without telling anyone where, or what."

"I called Perry before we left that I was with Superman and Clark and that we might be gone for more than a day."

"But three days without contact? On an INS story?" he asked. "And where *was* Superman? His arrival at the Planet this afternoon was the first sighting of him in three days. Perry and I were watching for him, any sign of him, so we'd have an idea where you and Clark had gone off to. So, where *was* he?"

"The Arctic, for one. Then other places, places without cell phone coverage," Lois said.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Richard said.

She shook her head. "It's complicated."

The White's house was simpler than Clark had imagined it would be. It was a big Craftsman style house in one of the older suburbs of Park Ridge west of New Troy Island. Four bedrooms, two and a half baths thanks to a recent remodeling. Perry and Alice had kept with the 1920's theme in the furnishings, real wood, real leather. In fact, it reminded him of how the other Lois and Clark's house looked. Functional, homey, unpretentious really, but real. No fabulous fakes here, no photo-wood or vinyl pretending to be something else.

"Clark, you look all done in," Alice observed. "I made up your room, first one on the left at the top of the stairs. Why don't you get a little nap before dinner? I'll have Perry get your

bags."

"No, I'll go get them," Clark insisted. "They're pretty heavy."

Wordlessly, Perry handed him the key to the trunk of the Acura.

"Perry, what's really going on?" Alice asked as soon as Clark was out the door. "How the devil could those two disappear off the face of the Earth for three days and come back with a baby that can't be more than a day old?"

"I'm not sure," Perry admitted. "It could very well be, most likely is, everything Lois and Clark have told me. Clark got into a relationship while he was away traveling, found out she was pregnant, tried to get her into the country, couldn't. Then Lois found out, got involved, and got Superman involved."

"So, what can we do to help?" Alice asked. The baby had started to fuss again. Alice handed her to Perry and started rummaging through the bag of baby things. "She's probably hungry again, poor thing..."

"Lois fed her before we left," Perry said. "I'm not sure she trusted Clark to do it yet. I have no idea what she has planned."

"Neither do I," Clark answered, shutting the front door behind him. "But I'm positive I'm not going to like it much."

"You'll get through this," Perry promised. "Tomorrow we'll see what the lawyers downstairs can do about getting a birth certificate for our little princess here." If Perry hadn't been looking, watching for it, he might have missed the flicker of... *what? Worry, fear, something else...* that crossed Clark's face. *We are definitely going to talk, boy.*

"Aren't they libel and copyright attorneys?" Clark asked.

"They're clever fellows. At least that's what they tell me," Perry said, gently bouncing on the balls of his feet to sooth the baby in his arms. It'd been a while since there'd been a baby in the house, since Jason was a baby in fact. Jerry's widow and kids and Keith and his wife and kids lived away from the city. Perry and Alice didn't see them very often.

"And I'm sure they're capable of doing more than just keeping Lois and Ralph out of jail," Perry continued, grinning. "At least you're not on that list...yet. But I have hope."

"Go get settled in, take a nap," Alice ordered. She'd found the formula and bottle in the bag.

"Yes, ma'am," Clark said with a faint smile and took his bags up to the indicated room. He locked the bedroom door behind him and unpacked some of his things. The room had a large window facing the back yard. He opened the window, leaning out to look around. There were tall trees blocking the view of the window from the neighboring houses.

He was tired and he really couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to unwind enough for a good couple hours sleep. He didn't need much sleep, could go days without it, but he did need dreamtime. He hadn't been getting much of that either, not since Luthor stabbed him in the back with a kryptonite shiv. He had nightmares, and would wake up sweating and more tired than he'd been before he fell asleep.

He took one last look around the yard, shed his street clothes in favor of the primary colored Suit then launched himself into the sky at just less than the sound barrier.

In the stratosphere the sun's light was less filtered. It felt good just to float where the sound was muted to near nothingness. He dozed and dreamed. Lex Luthor stalked his dreams, his nightmares. After a short while, he opened his eyes and headed back to the White's home, back to his new responsibilities. *What have I gotten myself into?*

Lois, Richard and Jason sat down to dinner. Tandoori chicken, biryani, chapathis, amti. "Mommy, where did you go with Superman?" Jason asked.

"Well, Clark and I went to Superman's Fortress of Solitude to find out some things from Superman," Lois began.

"Mister Clark was with you and Superman?" he asked. He frowned at her, obviously confused.

"Yes, he was," Lois said. "Why?"

He just looked at her, bright blue eyes, troubled. "Nothing, Mommy." He toyed with his food, watching his mother carefully.

Lois continued, trying to ignore Jason's eyes on her. "Well, then Mister Clark told us a secret he hadn't wanted to tell anybody at work..."

"Mister Clark told you his secret?" Jason asked. He looked more confused than before.

"Yes, he told us he got married while he was on his trip and he was trying to get his wife home to Metropolis so they could have their baby here. I asked Superman to help him."

Jason just looked at her like he didn't believe her story. "Did Superman help?"

Lois looked over to Richard. He was pointedly staring at his plate.

"Yes and no. He found Clark's baby girl and she was okay and he brought her to Metropolis, but her mother was dead," she told he son. "Clark's pretty upset," she added.

"Does this mean I have a baby sister?" Jason asked. He gave his mother a speculative look.

She looked over at Richard again. He was staring at Jason, mouth open in surprise.

"What makes you think that, kiddo?" Richard asked.

"If Mister Clark is my bio... biol ..."

"Biological?" Lois suggested. Jason nodded his head.

"Biological father, then his baby girl is my sister, too," he explained.

"Jason, who told you that Clark was your biological father?" Richard choked out.

"People at your work," he said. "Miss Cat, and Ralph, and Gil all said Mommy and Mister Clark were 'friends with benefits' before he ran away." He looked between the two adults at the table. "What does that mean, friends with benefits?"

Trust Cat and Ralph to put the worse possible spin on the whole thing. "Um, it means that before Mommy met Daddy, Mister Clark and I were very close and did grown-up things together," Lois explained, trying to keep her expression neutral.

"And I heard you tell Mister Clark I was his son, when we were at the hospital," Jason added.

Lois looked at him, wide-eyed. "You heard me say that?"

Jason nodded. Lois looked over at Richard again. He was staring back at her.

"Clark was at the hospital that night, too?" Richard asked. "He didn't mention it to Perry or me. In fact, we're not sure where he took off to after I left to look for you that day."

"Clark is a reporter, remember? He went to cover the disaster, got hurt, ended up at Met General about the same time they brought in Superman. I saw him there as we were leaving," she told him. "We started talking and it just came out."

Jason looked at her, worried, eyes bright with tears. "Mommy, did Mister Clark run away because of me?"

Lois's heart broke. "Oh no, honey. Mister Clark had something he absolutely had to do, that's why he left. He didn't know about you. Even I didn't know about you before he left. But if he had known, I know for a fact he would never have left."

Jason nodded his head, brown hair falling into his eyes. He gave his mother a tremulous smile.

Richard sighed and Lois gave him a curious look. "You said you had something to talk to me and Jason about?" she reminded him.

"Maybe now isn't the right time," Richard said. He ran his hand through his hair. Lois couldn't remember the last time he looked so... *concerned, distressed?*

"Richard, we promised never to keep things from one another..." she started. He stared at her. "Not that I've done a very good job of that," she added. *I told you I didn't love Superman, and now you find out I was sleeping with Clark? That Jason is his son?*

He snorted. "Yeah, that's an understatement," he said, then promptly looked ashamed. "You guys remember I told you a couple weeks ago that there was an opening in Paris?"

Lois nodded, sensing where he was going.

"You told me you weren't interested in moving, so I didn't think any more about it," he said. She nodded, not saying anything, letting him continue at his own pace.

"Considering what's been happening, everything that's happened, Superman, Clark, Luthor," he went on. "I'm taking the post in Paris. I'm leaving next Monday."

"And you decided this without bothering to talk to me? I'm your fiancée, for God's sake," Lois said sharply. She wasn't surprised, really. A little hurt that he'd made the decision without letting her explain, without giving her a choice. Angry, definitely.

"Lois, you disappeared for three days without a word to me." He held up his hand as she started to protest. "I know you told Perry you were going to be out on a story and it might not pan out. But you didn't talk to me. Even when you came back, you called Perry, not me. What am I supposed to think?"

"That I'm dedicated to my job?" Lois suggested.

"Lois, I fell in love with a woman who as it happened, was on the rebound from an encounter that... well, probably shouldn't have happened but did," he said. "I was in love with a woman who I didn't really know, who never showed me who she really was, because she wanted to leave the past behind. But that past has come back with a vengeance and now I'm seeing the woman you used to be, the one who was in love with a hero who can fly. How the hell can I compete with that?"

"You're not being fair, Richard," she protested, but she knew her complaint was weak, even in her own ears.

He just looked at her a long moment. "You're the one who's not being fair, to Clark. I can only imagine what he's going through right now. And if you hurt him the way I know you can, he may never recover."

"Clark is stronger than you think," she told him. She pulled off her engagement ring and set it on the table between them.

"Lois, Superman is afraid of you. What chance has Clark Kent got?"

Clark slipped back into the bedroom through the open window and switched to his street clothes. He could smell meatloaf and potatoes baking in the oven downstairs. He smiled to himself. It had been ages since he'd had meatloaf. He'd heard that Alice White was a good cook.

He heard Perry's heavy tread on the steps to the second floor, lay down on the bed and waited for the knock on the door.

The knock came right on time. "Clark? Alice has dinner ready."

"I'll be right there," Clark told him, getting up and going to the door. He followed Perry down the stairs to the dining room.

Alice had set the baby in her carrier on a dining room chair. The infant was asleep again.

"So, Perry says you've been in South America the whole time you were gone. You weren't in the middle of all those drugs and all that fighting, were you?"

"I did my best to avoid it. Getting involved in that is a good way to get killed," Clark said. "Especially for an American."

"Well, how did you meet her? The baby's mother, I mean," Alice asked.

"I was trying to avoid getting shot and wound up in this little village on the border. It seemed like a nice enough place, and the jefe's daughter took a liking to me, and one thing led to another and you know the rest," Clark explained. His eyes widened as he remembered something he'd overlooked.

"Clark, what's wrong?" Perry asked.

"My mother," he blurted out. "She's going to kill me. It was bad enough when I told her about Jason. I am so dead." *How could I be so stupid? If anybody's called her... I am so dead.*

"You didn't tell your mother you got married while you were gone?" Alice asked. Disbelief was evident in her voice.

"No, it was the other part I may not have been clear on," Clark said. "May I borrow your phone?"

"The wireless is in the kitchen," Perry told him. Clark nodded thanks and went to the kitchen to grab the phone. He walked out onto the back deck, closing the door behind him as he dialed his mother's cell phone number.

"Mom?" he said as the other end picked up. "It's Clark. Um, are you alone?"

"Yes. Ben is outside," she said. "Is there something wrong? Perry called me yesterday asking if I knew where you and Lois were."

"Lois and I are fine," he said. "But things have gotten kind of weird. While we were gone, we were given a baby, a little girl. Her mother is dead and her father...that part I'll explain later. It's complicated."

"So, what does this have to do with you?" his mother asked.

"The baby isn't from around here. I mean she *really* isn't from around here. And Lois and I decided... actually Lois decided," he amended, "the best way to explain the whole thing was if I got married while I was gone, my wife had a baby while I was trying to bring her into the country and Superman found the baby alive but the mother dead."

"What was her name?" Martha asked. "The woman you supposedly married?"

"Conza Nor-Et," Clark answered. "I've named the baby Esperanza Ester."

"Clark, have you any idea what you've gotten yourself into?" Martha asked. "Taking on the responsibility of a baby isn't a spur of the moment type of decision."

"Mom, if I hadn't done it, the people who brought her to where we got her would have killed her," Clark explained. "Her existence was politically *inconvenient*. We couldn't let that happen."

"Do you want Ben and me to fly out there?"

"Mom, I don't even have a place to live yet, the city's so messed up," Clark said. "Perry and his wife are putting me and the baby up in one of their guest rooms for the time being."

"What about Lois? Is she going to help?"

"She said she would," Clark said. "But I'm not sure how much she can. She has a fiancé so I'm not sure what she can do, except be supportive. Look, I'll call you in a few days, let you

know what's going on."

"Clark," Martha said gently. "I know you'll do the right thing. I just hope you'll be okay. And remember, I can always come out there if you need me to."

"I know, Mom. Love you, and thanks." He hit the end button on the phone and sighed. *At least she didn't yell at me. Maybe she figures the responsibility lecture stuck.*

"Ben and I were in Metropolis to see you," Martha had told him. "I wanted to be there for you, be there for my boy. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to... I was afraid I'd be burying an empty coffin next to your father's... We saw Lois and her son leaving the hospital. He's a fine looking boy."

"Yes, he is... Mom, Lois told me - at least I think she did, it was when I was in the hospital, when they thought I might not make it. She told me that Jason might be mine. Although I can't quite figure out how."

"Babies are a common hazard of sex, you know."

Clark had chuckled. "You know what I mean. I didn't think humans and, you know, I didn't think we'd be compatible."

"We know better, now. I'm a little disappointed though. I thought your Dad and I..."

"You thought you'd taught me better," Clark had completed for her. "You did. Before the article about Krypton was published, before I decided to leave, I asked Lois to marry me. I gave up my powers to be with her, Mom. And yes, I spent the night with her. At that moment, it was absolutely right."

"But you haven't lost your powers."

"No. It became obvious pretty quickly that for me to do that was the worst decision of my life. I couldn't do it. Maybe I was selfish and wanted it all, but it wasn't going to work. As much as I've always wanted to be normal, to be human, I couldn't. Lois... Lois couldn't handle it. So I erased her memory of us. I didn't know she'd gotten pregnant. I swear to God I would never have left if I'd known."

"I know that, son. What do you plan to do?"

"Her fiancé is a good man... It's probably better if I don't do anything. But it's tearing me up inside."

"Clark, I know you'll do what's right."

*But what the devil is **right** when your world has been turned upside down and inside out? When two entire universes conspire against you?*

"I'll get the guest room ready for you," Lois announced, getting up from the table. Jason watched her with confusion written across his small face.

"Mommy, what's going on?" he asked, voice small.

"Daddy is moving to France on Monday," Lois explained. "Across the ocean."

"Does that mean he won't live here any more?"

"Yeah munchkin," Richard told him, ruffling his hair. "But I can come back for holidays, or you and Mommy can come visit."

"But I don't want you to live across the ocean," Jason complained, breaking into tears. "I want you here to tuck me in and read me my stories. Don't you want to be my daddy anymore?"

"Jason, Richard will always be your daddy, I promise," Lois tried to reassure him. "And we can visit him in Paris, just like he said. It's just that... when Clark came back, and Superman came back too, things changed and your daddy and I have decided it would be better if we

didn't get married and we didn't live together right now."

Jason looked from one adult to another. "Are we still going to the zoo Saturday?"

"Sure thing, sport," Richard told him. He poured himself another glass of wine, finishing off the bottle.

Jason nodded, content for the moment. Then: "If Daddy is moving across the ocean, then is Mister Clark going to move in here with my sister?"

Richard choked on his wine. "What makes you ask that, Jason?"

"Well, if Mister Clark is my other daddy, and my first daddy isn't around... You said Mister Clark's baby doesn't have a mommy. A baby should have a mommy," Jason told them solemnly.

"Yes, a baby should have a mommy," Lois agreed. "And I did promise Mister Clark I would help. But that doesn't mean he and the baby are going to move in with us."

"Yet," Richard murmured under his breath, softly enough Lois shouldn't have been able to hear. Jason gave him a puzzled look. *He heard me?*

"When can I meet my baby sister?" Jason asked.

"How about now?" Lois offered.

Richard shrugged. "I'll clean up here, get my stuff moved out." He ruffled Jason's hair once more. "See you later."

"How did she take it?" Perry asked.

"Better than I thought she would," Clark admitted. He sat back down at the table. Alice had brought in dessert - apple pie - and poured more coffee.

An alarm went off somewhere in Midtown followed by a siren. Clark stopped to listen for a moment, to determine what, if anything, was happening. A report on the police band indicated a convenience store robbery, a little cash taken but no one was hurt. The police had the situation under control.

"Clark? Clark?" Alice's voice intruded. He turned to see her watching him worriedly.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered. "I, um, just heard something. A siren, I think."

She didn't look convinced. "Clark, have you seen a doctor about these seizures?"

"Seizures?" Clark asked. He had no clue as to what she was talking about. He took a bite of the pie. It was very good. *Not as good as Mom's but very good.*

"You were just staring off into space for a good thirty seconds," Alice explained.

"Although from what I've read, you are a little old for petit mal seizures."

"Petit mal seizures?" Clark repeated. *She thinks I have epilepsy?*

"Alice, leave the boy alone," Perry admonished. "I'm sure if I turned on the police band we'd find out there's something happening three streets over. Clark's just been on the city beat for so long he's positively psychic when it comes to sirens and alarms." Perry smiled at his own joke as he picked up his coffee cup, beckoning Clark to follow him.

Clark picked up the baby, making sure she was well wrapped in the pink and yellow blankets Polly had bought for her, and followed Perry out onto the back deck.

"When you do that, it really does look like you've completely spaced out. The sirens were over in New Troy somewhere, weren't they?"

"I don't know what..."

"Don't lie to me, boy," Perry warned him. "You're the second best investigative reporter I have, next to Lois. That puts you as one of the top five in the world and that buys you a lot of

slack, a lot of unexplained disappearances, and a lot of tardiness. But I've been in this business longer than you've been alive and right now, I want the absolute truth. Who are this child's biological parents?"

"You'll have me hauled off to Belle Reve," Clark muttered.

"Clark, I live in Metropolis. A man who flies saved the city last week. A man who looks an awful lot like you. Try me."

"You've heard of the theory that there are multiple parallel universes? That every decision made, every random event creates a new time-line, a new universe?"

Perry nodded. "I've heard of it. I'm not sure I buy it, but I'm familiar with it."

"It's not a theory," Clark said. "That's what happened to me and Lois. We ended up in an alternate time-line. We were there for maybe twenty hours."

"You were gone for three days," Perry reminded him.

"I know. We were lucky to have gotten back at all," Clark said. "This little one comes from that time-line and her biological parents really were a woman named Conza Nor-Et and Clark Kent. Clark *Jerome* Kent. My alternate. He's about six years older than I am, been married for ten years, has four kids, and he's the editor in chief of the Daily Planet."

"So he what, had an affair with this woman?"

"Nothing so simple. He hadn't even seen her in over ten years. In that time-line their Clark ended up involved in some political issues before he got married, enough to make him a target for their version of terrorists. They managed to get a sperm sample or something, impregnated the daughter of one of the terrorist leaders when she was old enough. I won't go into the government structure of the place they were from there except that this little girl's existence would be enough to completely destabilize their government and plunge the place into civil war."

"So you and Lois decided to bring the child here for safekeeping?"

"It seemed to be the right thing to do."

"So, why are you going through with the charade that she's yours?"

"Perry, her mother was Conza, daughter of Nor, Lord of the House of Et, of the colony of New Krypton," Clark told him. "She's Kryptonian."

"Does Lois know?"

"Oh yeah. She knows." *Lois knows everything. Oh God, what have I gotten myself into? Perry knows too.*

"Will she like the toy I picked out for her?" Jason asked as they crossed the Bakerline Bridge to Park Ridge. Before they'd gotten into the car, Jason had run back upstairs and picked out one of his old baby toys, a little blue bear with a rattle inside. Luckily, the one he chose was one of the lesser used ones and actually almost looked new.

"Jason, Baby Esperanza is a very, very, little baby, like your friend Joey's little brother, remember? It'll be a while before she can play with the bear," Lois told him.

He looked crestfallen. "What if she loses it before she can play with it?"

"I'm sure Mister Clark will take care of it for her until she's old enough," his mother assured him.

They stopped in front of Perry's house and Jason was out of his seat belt almost before Lois had the key out of the ignition. She came around and let him out of the car, grabbing his hand before he could run up to the front door without her.

They walked together up to the front door and Lois pressed the doorbell button.

Clark opened to door, carrying the baby in his arms.

"Is that my sister?" Jason was bouncing with pent up energy.

"Uh, yeah," Clark said, pushing his glasses up with this free hand. He stepped aside to let Jason and Lois into the house. Clark gave Lois a puzzled look.

Lois shrugged and gave him a grin. "Cat, Ralph and Gil told him we were 'friends with benefits' before you left. He figured the rest out pretty much himself."

"Oh," Clark murmured.

"I told you he was a smart one," Perry told her.

"I brought her a toy," Jason said, holding the little bear up high for everyone to see.

Clark settled into one of the leather chairs in the living room, arranging the baby and her blankets across his arm and lap. Jason looked at her, wide eyed. The baby looked up blearily at him and yawned.

"Can she see me?" Jason wondered aloud. "Brandon's dog, Misty, had puppies and they were born blind."

"Well, she probably sees you as a blob right now," Lois explained. "But in a month or so, she'll see you much better."

"She's too little to play, isn't she?" Jason commented. He looked disappointed.

"Well, all she wants to do right now is eat, sleep and grow," Lois told him. "But it won't be all that long before she'll be big enough and strong enough to play with you."

"Would you like to hold her?" Clark offered.

"Can I? Mommy, can I?" He was jumping in excitement.

Lois nodded. "Sit down on the floor," she instructed. He plopped down on the floor facing Clark. Lois took the infant and handed her to Jason whose eyes widened in wonder.

"Mommy, was I this little?"

Lois knelt on the floor beside him, one hand ready in case the baby moved and he dropped her. "Jason, you were even littler. You were so little the doctors put you in a special box to keep you warm and so they could keep an eye on you."

"Oh, Jimmy has pictures of me in the hospital," he said, reminding himself. He peered down at the infant he was holding in his lap. "What's her name?"

"Esperanza Ester," Clark told him.

"There's a girl in my class named Esperanza. Her name means hope, like my name means healer. What does your name mean, Mister Clark?"

"Clark means 'man of learning,' " Clark said. "And Kent means 'shiny, ' or 'from Kent' which is in England."

"And what does Mommy's name mean?" He looked from Lois to Clark and back again.

"Lois means 'famous warrior,' " Clark answered, choking down a laugh.

Jason looked up at his mother in surprise. "Are you a famous warrior?"

"Without a doubt," Perry answered him with a grin.

"In that case, we should be careful what we name babies, shouldn't we?" Jason observed.

"That's very true," Lois agreed.

Jason's expression turned pensive again. "What does Superman's name mean?"

"Well, 'Superman' should be pretty obvious," Perry told him.

"No, I mean his other name," Jason explained. "Kalil."

"Kal El," Clark corrected, emphasizing the space between the two syllables. "El is the family name and means 'star' or 'from the stars.' Kal means 'child.' So his name means 'star child.'"

"Do I have another name too?" Jason asked.

"Well, you have a middle name," Alice put in.

"No, I mean another name like Superman has."

"Jason, why don't..." Lois began. Then she noticed the familiar far off look that had come into Clark's eyes. She reached for the TV remote on the coffee table but found that Perry had beaten her to it. He turned on GNN and they found themselves watching coverage of an oil refinery fire that was raging out of control. It was only fifty miles up the coast from the city.

"Perry, keep an eye on the kids, will you?" Lois said, grabbing her purse and heading for the door. She stopped when she realized Clark wasn't behind her. "Get the lead out, Kent!" she ordered and was gratified to see him start to follow her.

"Mommy, are you sure you don't want Mister Clark to move in now that Daddy's leaving?"

She and Clark both stopped and looked back at the little boy sitting on the floor. Lois shook her head and grabbed Clark's arm, leading him out the door. "I explain on the way," she promised. She turned back momentarily and glared at Jason. "Listen to Uncle Perry and Aunt Alice." The implied 'or else' was understood by all.

Outside, Clark took the lead, going around the side of the house. The side gate was partially hidden by shrubbery and Clark spun at high speed, stopping in front of her wearing the familiar blue and red.

"Sweeet," Lois murmured as he picked her up and shot straight into the air.

"Hey, I did learn something from the other Superman, aside from the fact he considers me a first class jerk," Clark said as they leveled out, heading north-east toward the fire. "So, what did Jason mean when he said...?"

"Richard had an offer from our bureau in Paris," she explained. "He's decided to take it."

Lois felt the air slow around them.

"Are you going with him?"

"No."

The air sped up and she could make out the black smoke spewing into the air in the distance from the heavy oil that was burning.

"Jason has decided that his baby sister needs a mother," she added. "He's elected me. And he thinks I need a roommate. He's elected you."

"I think we really need to talk," Clark muttered, coming to earth away from the fire and away from watching eyes. "A car wouldn't get you here for nearly an hour, remember?"

"I caught a ride with Superman?"

"Not a good idea. Wait for Clark to come back, okay?"

She nodded, tapping her foot in impatience.

He tried to give her a stern look. She just looked back at him, arms crossed in a fairly good imitation of his own stance. With a resigned shake of his head he flew off, toward the fire.

Jason turned and watched the television with Perry and Alice. The GNN news team wondered aloud at the absence of Superman. Then: "Superman!" The cheer went up from the firefighters as Superman landed and sought out the person in charge of the effort.

Jason propped the baby against his chest so she could watch the TV screen. "That's Superman," he explained to her softly. "He flies, and he's real strong, and he's friends with my mommy and our daddy. And when you're older, I bet he'll take you flying, too."

"Superman's taken you flying?" Alice asked.
Jason nodded. "I like flying."

Superman listened attentively as the plant's senior engineer explained the problem. One of the main feed valves had cracked. It probably wouldn't have been a problem, had the technician working to repair it followed proper, or even common sense, procedures. But something happened and the valve exploded into a fireball, killing the technician. Now the fire was out of control with most of the plant involved.

The engineer, Joshua Farger, had a schematic of the plant. "If we could cut the fuel supply here and here," he said, pointing out the two valves in question, "We should be able to starve the main fire out and get the fire teams in to take care of the rest. But be careful," he warned. "You mustn't allow the oil to atomize or create a spray effect. With the air currents in the fire..."

"Venturi effect?" Superman asked.

Farger nodded. "Nasty piece of business. It'll go off like a bomb."

Superman nodded, peering into the inferno, looking for the two pipes Farger pointed out. "I see them," he said and flew off, toward the refinery.

First, cool the oil enough that it became viscous, almost solid, while taking care not to cool the pipes so fast that they would crack even more. Then, flatten the pipes and seal them. The fire screamed at him. He'd forgotten how incredibly loud fire was, especially large fires. It threatened to overwhelm his senses. He spotted the first pipe and sealed it off. The second pipe was harder to find and it took several minutes. Finally, that one too was sealed.

The noise level hadn't gone down. The fire was still raging all around him. Superman launched himself into the air then stopped only a hundred feet above the flames, using x-ray vision to assess the rest of the fire. Other feed pipes had also been compromised. He took note of the locations. The pattern didn't fit - some of the spewing pipes could not have been damaged by the current fire. *Sabotage? Terrorists?*

A blast of cold to congeal the fuel source and cool the combustion. Then seal the cracked pipes, by warming the metal enough to make it flexible, flatten the end, and seal the end with laser-vision. Finally, after five minutes that felt like an eternity, the fire was out. There were still some hot spots, but the fire crews should be able to handle them.

He flew up, making one last survey of the scene before coming to ground beside Farger.

"There are still hot spots, so tell your people to be careful," Superman told him. He peered at the schematic. "May I have this?"

Farger shrugged. "Sure, but why?"

"I saw some things, and the fire marshal will need to know about them."

"Like what?" Lois Lane asked, walking up to them. She flashed her press card at Farger. "Daily Planet." She turned back to Superman. "What did you see?"

"Good evening to you too, Ms. Lane," Superman said.

She nodded at him. "What did you see?" she repeated.

He looked over at Farger. "Some of the damage I observed was not consistent with a single point ignition."

"You're talking arson?"

Superman shrugged, a small almost non-motion. "Sabotage, possibly." He turned to Lois. "You realize this is going to be a criminal investigation."

"I know that, Superman," Lois reminded him. "No details until the fire marshal approves."

By the way, have you seen my partner around, tall fellow, dark hair, glasses, trips over his own feet?"

Superman simply looked at her for a long moment. Long enough for Lois to start to feel nervous about joking with Superman.

"I think you'll find him somewhere around the GNN camera crew," he said finally. He looked over at Farger. "Let the fire marshal know I'll check in sometime tomorrow." With that, he disappeared into the sky.

"Does he always do that?" Farger asked Lois as more reporters arrived on the scene.

"Disappear?" Lois asked. "Yeah. He's a busy man."

"Must be tough," Farger said. "Always looking out for everyone else, always on call."

"It's not easy," Lois said. "But it's what he does."

"Lois!" Clark called out, trotting up to them. He pushed his glasses up his nose as he stopped beside Lois, watching her expectantly.

"Clark, there you are." She looked up at him, smelling smoke in his jacket, in his hair. There was a dark smudge across his cheek. She reached up to brush it off and discovered the dirt didn't want to come off that way. *That's odd.* She grabbed a tissue from her purse, spat on it and started scrubbing the spot. "You are as bad as Jason," she commented. "Oh, this is Joshua Farger, the senior plant engineer." She looked over to Farger. "My partner at the Planet, Clark Kent." She turned back to Clark, satisfied his face was passably clean.

She took his arm and led him away from the other reporters. "Okay, what have you got?"

"Five employees unaccounted for, presumed dead," he told her. "And someone called GNN. The timing indicates they were contacted a good fifteen minutes before the emergency alarms went off."

"Do they have any idea who called them?"

Clark shook his head. "Call was ID blocked, but apparently, the call *was* recorded."

"Any chance we can get a copy?"

"GNN doesn't want to share it with the police," he told her.

"Think they'd share it with Superman?" she wondered softly.

He just looked at her.

She shrugged. "I had to ask."

He sighed. "Actually, they might give Superman a copy of the recording, or the police might. According to Mark Hadwyn, Superman was specifically mentioned by the caller."

"To stay away?" Lois asked. "Or to make sure he knew this was going down?"

"Mark didn't hear the recording," he told her. "But he was given the impression that the caller wanted to make sure Superman was on the scene."

"Why would a saboteur want Superman here?" Lois asked.

"That is a very good question," Clark said, looking over her shoulder at the group surrounding Farger. He absently reached under his jacket to rub the right side of his back with the back of his hand.

"Are you okay?"

He gave her a surprised look. "The place I got stabbed is hurting a little," he admitted. "Funny, though, it hasn't bothered me in a couple days. I figured it was healed up."

"Maybe you should have somebody take a look at it?"

"Whom do you suggest?" he asked. "Our Met General isn't exactly set up to treat my kind."

"Maybe we should suggest it to them."

"Maybe we should get this story written up," Clark suggested.

He flew them both to the roof of the Daily Planet building. He switched back into his street clothes and followed her down the stairs, then down the elevator to the newsroom. It was late enough for the rest of the staff to have gone home except for the cleaning crew. Mahalia glowered at them as they made their way around her cleaning cart.

It took less than an hour to finish the story. Perry would have it first thing in the morning. Lois noticed that Clark was still absently rubbing at the wound Luthor had given him.

"Take off your jacket and let me look at your back," she finally ordered.

"It's fine, really," he protested. "I just strained it a little."

"Clark..." she warned.

"Okay, okay," he reluctantly agreed. She beckoned him to follow her into Richard's office. He trailed after her and she shut the office door behind him and then lowered the blinds for privacy. *No sense in giving Mahalia a show.*

"Off with the jacket and the shirt," she ordered. *He's just like Jason. A grown man as shy as a little boy when it comes to taking off his clothes. It's a wonder we were able to make love.*

"Lois, please..."

"Off with them."

With a sigh of resignation, Clark shrugged off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. His tie was at his desk, thrown over the back of his chair. She pulled the shirt off his shoulders and dropped it on Richard's desk. She'd forgotten how well muscled he was, forgotten how broad his shoulders were, how tapered his waist was. The Suit left little to the imagination, but seeing Clark naked to the waist sent shivers through her belly. *How blind was I that I didn't see it?*

The wound on his back just above his right kidney wasn't healing, at least not as fast as she knew it should. It was still red and swollen and there was dark bruising around it. She touched it and he hissed in pain.

"I know you normally heal faster than this," she commented.

"How bad is it?" His head was down and she could hear the pain, the worry, in his voice.

"It doesn't look infected or anything. Just badly bruised," she told him. "I wonder if an ice pack would help."

"Lois, I have my doubts," he told her. "Heat and cold don't usually bother me."

"Clark, pain isn't usually a problem for you either," Lois reminded him. "There should be ice down in the cafeteria. You wait here and I'll go get some."

The house had been too quiet after Lois and Jason headed over to Perry's so Jason could meet his new baby sister. Richard turned on the television. A fire at the oil refinery up the coast. Superman was already there and the GNN camera crew had pictures of him conferring with plant officials. A dark-haired woman was in the background, watching - Lois. Lois was at the fire.

Within minutes the fire was out, thanks to Superman. The GNN crew approached him, waving a microphone in his face. He gave them his patented smile.

"Superman," Hadwyn, the man with the microphone began. "Can you tell us where you've been the past three days?"

Superman paused, the smile fading a little. "Helping some friends," he said with finality.

Hadwyn didn't seem to get the message. "Doing what?"

Superman looked at the man for a moment, arms crossed over his chest. "Doing what I do well. Being helpful," he told them. "Now, if you'll excuse me." He turned on his heel and walked away.

Lois went to the fire? Richard grabbed the phone and called Perry's house. "Perry, is Jason with you?"

"Of course," his uncle answered. "Lois asked us to watch him while she and Clark headed out to that fire. Looks like they must have hitched a ride with Superman."

"I saw Lois on TV," Richard told him. "Do you want me to come over and take Jason home?"

"Jason's fine," Perry assured him. "He's helping watch the baby with us. I expect the two of them will be back here after they write up the story."

Of course Lois would run after a story like that. Of course she would drag Clark along with her. Of course Superman would be there.

The drive to the Planet took less than twenty minutes. Richard wasn't sure why he was heading to his office. Maybe because he no longer felt comfortable in Lois's house - it was her house, not his. Bought with the proceeds of the sale of her penthouse condo just before Jason was born and a best-selling book on the life and death of Mayor Berkowitz.

Some of the furniture was his, but not much of it and it was foolish to try to ship it overseas. Some of the art was also his and that he would have shipped. But his prize was the seaplane. He hadn't given much thought to what he was going to do with it. He doubted he could take it to Paris with him and he wasn't going to have much time to rent moorage space. Maybe he could talk Lois into letting him keep it at the house.

The newsroom was dark, except for the glow from the monitor on Clark's desk and the lights peaking through the blinds from his own office. The blinds were down and closed, although he remembered them being up when he left for the day.

He opened the door to his office and walked in. Clark was standing in the middle of the office, head bowed, and his shirt off. Lois was standing behind him. Richard couldn't see what she was doing but he had an ugly suspicion. Clark raised his head at the sound of the door opening.

"Couldn't you at least wait until I was out of town?" Richard asked.

"Richard, don't be stupid," Lois warned. She looked up at Clark, then back over to Richard. "There should be some bandages around here, in one of the first aid kits," she said.

"Lois, it's okay, really," Clark protested. "It's not that bad."

"Richard, go find some bandages, now please," Lois ordered.

"Lois, what's going on?"

She stopped and stared at him as if surprised that he hadn't already left. "I told you Clark got hurt during the crystalquake. Well, they didn't put stitches in like they probably should have and he won't rest like he's supposed to and it's all inflamed now."

"Lois, please. I'm not a child," Clark protested. "I can take care of myself."

She snorted and then glared at Richard.

He left to find a first aid kit and some bandages. *If Clark was that badly hurt during the crystalquake, then why the devil was he out with Lois and Superman to wherever it was they'd disappeared to for three days?*

The baby was asleep in Jason's lap and Jason was beginning to nod off as well. Alice gently picked the baby up and placed her back in her carrier then beckoned for her husband to

follow her into the kitchen.

"Perry, is it true what Jason said? That Clark is *his* father too?" she asked quietly.

Perry nodded.

"That's not why he left, was it?"

"No," Perry assured her. "He didn't know. Neither of them knew at the time."

"What about Richard? He's been Jason's father ever since he was born. He was there when Jason was born."

"I know, Alice," Perry said. "But he's decided to take over the Planet's operations in Paris. And I know Lois won't be going with him."

"It's Superman, isn't it?" Alice asked. "She's still in love with him. Despite everything Richard's done for her, she's willing to chuck it all for an alien? Does Clark know that part?"

"All I really know is that Richard is the one who decided to leave," Perry told her.

"Maybe he just didn't want to be her second choice. I know he was waiting for her to decide between them. And when he saw Lois and Clark together with the baby, he made his decision to leave. And Alice, he's taking along a young, pretty female assistant. One he's been hanging around with for the past month."

"You're telling me it was Richard who decided to break up with Lois?"

Perry nodded. "He was making noises about her needing to make a decision between him and Clark even before they came back from wherever they went with Superman. I know he accepted the post in Paris before he even had a chance to talk to her," he told his wife. "So, you tell me who broke up with whom?"

"Does Clark have any idea of the mess he's caused?"

"He certainly didn't intend to," Perry said. "I don't think he intended any of this to happen and I think he and Lois have a lot of issues to work out. But I think Lois is a lot more likely to walk down the aisle with Clark than she ever was with Richard. I mean, let's face it. She and Richard were engaged for nearly five years with no wedding date in sight. It was an engagement of convenience for both of them,"

"What about Superman? I mean, Lois was practically his press agent," Alice said. "And speculation was they may have been more than just friends. That article she wrote definitely came from a woman scorned."

Perry chuckled. "I'm sure *he* will be high on the list of things Lois and Clark will be discussing soon, if they haven't done it already."

"Clark, do you think there was kryptonite at the fire?" Lois asked. She'd found some ice in the tiny refrigerator in the corner of Richard's office and had wrapped it in Clark's handkerchief. *How old fashioned can you get? He carries a cloth handkerchief?* She knew the ice was hurting him as she placed it over the angry looking wound. She could see how the muscles in his back bunched as he held himself rigid against the pain.

"Sorry," she murmured.

"It's okay," Clark told her though clenched teeth. "I'm not used to actually feeling pain. It's something of a comeuppance. I never really appreciated what being human meant. I didn't understand how people could just keep going despite the pain, despite everything."

"And now you do?" she asked.

There was a sharp intake of breath as she moved the improvised ice pack. "Yeah, I think I do, a little," he admitted, although there was a tremor in his voice. "I've always respected police and fire fighters - they go out everyday to do their jobs, knowing that the next call they

get, the next run they make could be their last. But I'm not sure I really understood that it applied to everybody. It's scary."

"Being alive is scary," Lois said. "But it's got to beat the alternative. By the way, you didn't answer my question about the possibility of kryptonite contamination at the refinery."

"I honestly don't know," he told her. "But I don't think so. I'm sure Superman would have mentioned it to one of us."

The way he phrased his statement confused her until she looked over to see Richard standing in the office door. He had a package of gauze and a roll of surgical tape in his hands. "This is all I found," he explained. He looked closer at Clark. "You're not looking so good."

"I'm not feeling so good, actually," Clark said. He shivered when she put her hand between his shoulder blades. He wasn't sweating, but he was very warm - too warm, even for him. She took his wrist, searching for a pulse with the first two fingers of her hand.

"Like I didn't know where Jason got it from," she muttered to herself as she gave up on his wrist and sought out a pulse at his throat. All the color had gone out of his face. "What's your normal resting heart rate?"

"Forty-five or so... why?"

"Because Richard's right. You look like hell and I think you're running a fever."

"But that's..." Clark started.

Lois looked at him with eyebrows raised, waiting for him to finish - *Impossible?*

"Um, that's not good, is it?" he said instead.

Lois shook her head. "That's not good. I'm going to bandage your back and then we'll get back to Perry's and get you into bed. With any luck you'll be able to fight this off in a few days."

Clark just nodded as Lois took the gauze and tape from Richard and began to cover the wound in his back.

Richard and Lois managed to man-handle Clark into the back seat of Richard's Passat without too much trouble but he was shivering violently by the time they reached Park Ridge.

"Lois, I think he needs to be in a hospital," Richard told her, looking at Clark worriedly in the rear-view mirror. Clark's face seemed faintly green-tinged, although it was hard to tell in the dim light of the car's interior.

"Richard, please trust me on this one," Lois said softly, placing a hand on his arm as she looked back at Clark. "There isn't a hospital anywhere near here that can handle this."

Richard parked the Passat behind Lois's A3 and then helped her get Clark into Perry's house. Clark's skin was unnaturally hot, even for a fever.

"What happened?" Perry asked Lois as he helped Richard get Clark upstairs to his room.

"Clark got hurt during the crystalquake," Lois said, following them up the stairs. "Only he hasn't been taking it easy like he's supposed to and he's not healing up like he should. And now he's running a fever."

"I've already told Lois he needs to be a hospital," Richard told his uncle.

"I doubt there's anything they can do for him," Perry responded.

Richard and Perry got Clark onto the bed and started to undress the semi-conscious man. Clark roused enough to try to push them away.

"I can undress myself, thank you," he managed to say through gritted teeth. It was obvious he was trying to keep from shaking.

"Richard, run downstairs and ask your aunt for some aspirin and a maybe a jug of water

and a plastic glass," Perry ordered. Richard looked from his uncle to his former fiancée. Both had turned to the chore of chivvying Clark out of his shirt and slacks and into the bed, over his weakening protests.

The man is obviously very sick, Richard thought. So why won't either of them accept that he needs to get medical attention? With a shrug of annoyance, he headed downstairs.

Jason was asleep on the sofa in front of the television. Richard stuck his head into the kitchen and asked for the supplies Perry had requested. Then he went over to where Jason was lying. *At least I can get Jason home and into his own bed.* Jason's face seemed pale, but he wasn't having any trouble breathing, really. Just snoring softly as he normally did. Then Richard touched him and realized that Jason's skin was hot to the touch. As hot as Clark's skin felt.

"Lois!"

-In Another Universe (Earth II)-

"Clark, are you sure you're up to going to work?" Lois Lane-Kent asked her husband as he sat down to breakfast. "I mean, you've been out of the hospital only two days."

"I'm fine" he assured her. "All healed up. Not even a scar. And the powers came back last night. So everything's back to normal."

"You're sure?"

"I'm fine," he assured her once more, giving her a kiss on the forehead. "Besides, I've been away from the office for four days. They might figure out they don't need me if I don't show up." There was laughter in his brown eyes, laughter that hadn't been there for several days, not since he was attacked by the assassin sent by the now-dead Lord Xon of New Krypton.

"Well, even if they don't need you, I do," Lois said, grabbing his tie to pull him down into a kiss.

"As much as I'd like to stay home with you and the baby, I need to get going." He pulled his tie out of her grasp and smoothed it against his shirt. "I'll see you tonight," he promised. "Have fun with the flooring people."

She grimaced. The flooring people were scheduled to come in today to replace living room carpet. Carpet soaked with the blood of Lord Xon and of her husband. They were having hardwood installed. It was easier to get blood off.

Lois watched her husband leave, but she still felt uneasy. It felt like a storm was brewing on the horizon, flashing lightning she could just see out of the corner of her eye but disappeared when she tried to look straight at it. Four day old Martha Michaela started fussing in her carrier. Lois lifted her out, putting her to her breast.

"One good thing about Kent babies," Lois told her daughter. "I might not be able to have chocolate or regular coffee for another year, but I'll be back in my old clothes in no time." She stepped out onto the back deck and settled into one of the chairs, watching the skyline of Metropolis. Martha suckled wetly at her mother's breast.

"Wind's in the east, mist comin' in. Like something is brewin', about to begin," Lois murmured to herself. Lara and Jordan loved watching Mary Poppins, especially the penguins. She shivered as the wind started to kick up and went back inside. Thinking of Xon reminded her of their alternate-timeline visitors. She wondered how that Lois and Clark were managing with their new baby - a refugee from New Krypton.

She shivered again, only this time there was no wind.

-Earth I-

Lois ran down the stairs at Richard's shout, skidding to a halt at the wide-eyed look of near panic on his face as he leaned over Jason lying on the sofa.

"He's burning up," Richard told her as she hurried to her son's side. She could hear the tension in his voice. She felt Jason's forehead, then put her hand down his shirt to feel his chest. The boy's temperature was well above normal. He started shivering at her touch, his breath catching in his throat.

"Lois, Jason and Clark both need to be in the hospital," Richard told her. "I don't see any choice here." She could see the earnest concern in his eyes.

"Lois, maybe Richard's right. Maybe you should get Jason to the hospital," Perry said. Lois looked over to see him coming down the stairs. "They might be able to help Jason."

"And what about Clark?" Alice asked. She'd been standing quietly in the kitchen doorway, watching.

Lois held her breath, waiting for Perry's answer. *Does he know?*

"Like I told Richard upstairs. I seriously doubt there's a damn thing they can do for him."

"Perry, that doesn't make any sense at all," Alice told him. "Of course they can help."

Richard straightened up and Lois saw a flicker of comprehension cross his face. "No Aunt Alice, I think Uncle Perry and Lois may be right. All they'd be able to do is monitor him and hope he recovers on his own. Isn't that right?"

Lois found herself nodding.

"It makes sense now," Richard said softly. Lois assumed he was really talking to himself. "The partner you never talked about. The anger, then running off with him, everything." He looked down at her, still kneeling beside Jason. "You weren't on any INS story." It was a statement. "But I'm sure it would make interesting telling sometime."

"Richard..." Lois began.

"No, please," he said, cutting her off. "Let's get Jason to the ER. A fever that high can't be good for him."

Esperanza began to wail and Jason woke up enough to cover his ears, scrunching up his eyes as if in pain. Lois reached over to check the baby and then pulled her hand back. The baby's temperature was at least as high as Jason's. Her breath caught in horror as she looked back at Richard and Perry. "What ever it is, she has it too."

Richard drove Lois's car to the hospital. Jason was buckled into his booster seat with a blanket wrapped around him. Esperanza was in her car seat next to him. Lois was seated next to Richard in the front passenger seat where she could at least keep an eye on Jason. The boy had started shivering when they got him into the car. The baby simply wailed in inchoate misery.

"They're going to want to know where they've been, what they may have been exposed to," Richard told her. His mind was still reeling from what he'd figured out and what Perry and Lois had confirmed with brief nods. *Clark Kent, the nerdy reporter from Kansas, was Superman.*

"Clark and I were in upper Alaska, then we were in Metropolis," Lois told him.

"You told me you were out of cell phone range," he reminded her, trying to keep the hurt out of his voice. *She lied to me again.*

"Richard, in the Metropolis we were in, the Wanamaker building was still standing and Lex Luthor had been dead for ten years."

"You're joking, right?" He glanced at her and saw the grim seriousness in her face. *She's not joking.*

"I wish I was," Lois told him. "Something happened when we were coming back to Metropolis. A storm, something... We wound up someplace where Lois Lane, their Lois Lane, was pregnant with her fourth child, Clark Kent was editor-in-chief of the Daily Planet, and Richard White was married to Penny Landris and was considered one of the hottest reporters in Metropolis. It was an interesting visit. Our counterparts weren't very impressed with us."

"That I find hard to believe," Richard commented. The traffic wasn't very heavy and they were making good time. Jason had finally stopped shivering and was watching Richard and Lois with worried eyes.

"Mommy, I don't feel so good," he complained.

"Do you feel like you're going to throw up?" Lois asked him. He shook his head and grimaced in pain.

"My throat hurts and I'm real cold and Baby Esperanza is really noisy and my head hurts," he said.

"We're almost at the hospital, kiddo," Richard assured him. "They'll figure out what's wrong and get you all fixed up."

"Are they gonna help Mister Clark, too?" Jason asked. There was a plaintive note in his young voice.

"Uncle Perry and Aunt Alice are helping Clark," Lois told Jason. "So I'm sure he'll be okay." Richard noted that she didn't sound very convincing.

The light hurt his eyes through his eyelids and everything seemed horribly, impossibly loud. Even the gears of the bedside clock sounded like grating heavy machinery. His skin hurt, the sheets rubbing like sandpaper. He tried to keep from moving, but even breathing brought his skin against the cotton weave of the bedding.

One part of his mind was dispassionately observing his symptoms. Fever, joint pain, sore throat, abdominal pain, headache, sensitivity to touch. The wound on his back hurt like hell, a sharp, digging pain. Of course the operative word in the entire list was 'pain.' *This is what being sick is like. I don't like it. It hurts almost as bad as Luthor's beating only that didn't last as long. Kryptonite hurts this bad, but there wasn't any kryptonite at the fire. Didn't I hear that Jason and the baby had it too...?*

The damp cloth felt cool on his forehead. And the weight and warmth of the blankets was comforting, despite the sandpaper feel of the sheets. He tried to protest when he felt a hand against the back of his neck, lifting his head. A voice cajoled him to swallow bitter tasting pills followed by sips of lemon-lime soda mixed with water. He preferred ginger ale - it tasted less artificial - but they didn't know that.

After a while the pain lessened slightly and the clock stopped making quite so much noise. Finally he was able to fall asleep.

"Perry, please explain what's going on here," Alice White demanded, fists on her hips as she watched her husband of nearly forty years. "Why are you still insisting he can't go to the hospital?"

"Alice, aside from the fact that I know he'd refuse to go," Perry said. "There's little or nothing they can do for him. From what I know about him, he'll either recover completely on his own in a day or so, or he'll be dead. And if he dies, I seriously doubt that Jason or the baby

will survive either, 'cause if it's nasty enough to kill him, it'll be more than enough to kill them."

-Another Universe (Earth II)-

"How was your day?" Lois Lane-Kent asked her husband as he came through the garage door with three of their four children in tow. The kids stayed in the family room as their father continued on into the kitchen.

"Not bad for being gone four days, unexpectedly," Clark replied. "Margot and Eduardo kept things together without too much trouble. And the city was pretty quiet too. That's always nice." He gave her a kiss, then reached over to the baby carrier on the counter and tickled Baby Martha's foot. "So, how was your day?"

Lois managed a chuckle. "Not bad for almost no sleep the past four days."

"You know I would take the three AM feeding if I could," Clark responded. "But since I can't..." He peered into his wife's face. "There's something else."

She nodded. "I've had this strange feeling all day that's something's about to happen, like waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"You too?"

Lois's forehead creased in concern.

"I've had this odd feeling all day, too. Like the weather's going to change or something," Clark told her. "It doesn't make sense, but I was looking behind me all day, even on patrol, to see if someone was there. It's creepy."

"Do you think...? Nah," Lois began.

"Do I think what?" Clark asked. "I know that look. Something's just clicked."

"You and the other Clark, you telepathically communicated, right?"

"Yes," he answered. He watched her process the information. He still found it fascinating to watch her as she put things together. It was rarely logical in any 'normal' way, but she was usually right on in her intuitive leaps.

"And I was linked to them through you, right?"

"Right."

"What if the link wasn't completely broken when they left?"

"And you're uneasy because *I'm* picking up something wrong?"

Her expression cleared. "It makes sense, doesn't it? Kryptonians are telepathic, even if he didn't know it till he got here, and I'm linked to you..."

"But from another universe? Lois, I can't even contact New Krypton."

"But maybe, since there's a physical connection..." she said, thinking aloud. "You have some of his blood in you. Maybe that made the link stronger between you."

"But, honey, even if you're right, there's nothing we can do if they're in trouble," Clark reminded her. "We are talking about Superman here, right? He should be able to take care of himself, right?"

She just looked at him, hazel eyes shining, lips in a half-smile, as if she couldn't decide to be amused or annoyed.

"Okay, I take that back. He's Superman, and he *thinks* he should be able to take care of himself," Clark amended. "But unless you have a plane-hopping device hidden around the house somewhere, there's nothing we can do but be supportive."

Her eyes got wider as she looked at him. Puppy-dog eyes.

"Lois, I know that look," he protested. "You're trying to come up with some way to contact Wells, aren't you?"

"Well, he and Tempus and those Peace Keepers are the only ones with time travel that works and Wells and Tempus are the ones with plane-hopping machines, and I'm certainly not

going to try to get hold of Tempus..."

He couldn't keep from grinning at her. "What have you got in mind?"

"Oh, something simple. Like an ad in the Planet. H. G. Wells, please contact Clark Kent. Superman needs to talk to you... something like that."

Clark chuckled. "Okay, you place the ad and I'll start dinner."

"Pasta with creamy garlic sauce?" She gave him a saucy grin.

"Woman, you are incorrigible! You know what pasta does to me." "And you love me anyway."

-Earth I-

"Miss Lane, you say neither of these children has been out of the country?" the very young pediatrician said. Lois was thirty-three, but the young man with the braided hair and stethoscope looked to be a teenager. Jason and Esperanza had been rushed from the emergency room up to the pediatrics floor. Jason was now in the pediatrics ICU while Esperanza was in the neonate ICU one floor up.

"No, they've not been out of the country," Lois told him trying to stay calm in the face of her child being deathly ill. She ignored the annoyed look Richard gave her at her lie to the doctor. *But Esperanza hasn't been out of the country. She's just from another planet.*

"Have they been in close contact with someone who's just returned from overseas?"

"The baby's father returned from traveling in South America a little more than a week ago," Lois told him.

"Where in South America?"

"The mountains in Peru."

The doctor noted that down. He read through his notes again and sighed. "Look, I've got a call into a specialist and a call in to the CDC. We're hoping to have a better handle on this once the cultures come back. In the mean time, we've started broad spectrum antibiotics to try and knock it down and we're taking measures to reduce the fevers. But I do have to admit, your son's history of allergies made it a little difficult to find a suitable antibiotic."

"But you did find one?" Richard asked.

"Yes, we did find one, and hopefully, once we identify the cause of the illness, we'll have a suitable treatment then as well," the doctor told them.

"When can I see my son?" Lois asked.

"In a few minutes," the doctor promised her.

Richard cleared his throat nervously. "Doctor, the baby was in close proximity to Superman just this afternoon. In there any chance that he...?"

"Richard!" Lois said in horror. *How could he?*

"It was my understanding that Superman was immune all Earth diseases," the doctor said, giving Lois an apologetic glance. "I seriously doubt he could be a carrier of any sort."

"I'm just thinking, we don't know what other horrors Luthor cooked up while he was making that island of his. And Superman did get hurt there..." Richard went on.

"I'll make a note in her chart that Superman was around her," the doctor promised.

-Earth II-

As usual, dinner conversation was dominated by world news and school. Jason White, Zara and Ching's son, was in Lara's kindergarten class at school. Lara announced he was fitting in well, for a boy.

An emergency over the Ordway called Clark away from the table for nearly an hour. He looked worn when he got back.

"Bad accident?" Lois asked.

He nodded. "Tanker truck hit the median wall. I'm guessing the driver fell asleep. Wasn't much left since the tanker blew up. I think he died instantly."

"I'm sorry," Lois said.

"Any sign of Wells?"

She shrugged. "It was a stupid idea. I'm sure they're fine."

They shared a moment of silence, just enjoying being in one another's company after a long day. CJ and Lara were in the family room, arguing over battle tactics on the game they were playing on-line. CJ hated admitting it but Lara's sense of tactics and strategy was excellent, even better than his. Jordan was playing with Legos, creating something only he could identify.

The door bell rang. CJ ran to get it.

"No running in the house!" his mother yelled. She turned to Clark and whispered: "Are you sure he doesn't have super speed yet?"

"I think he just likes to run," Clark replied as he went to see who CJ was greeting at the door. "Plus he knows it annoys you."

-Earth I-

"Uncle Perry," Richard said into his cell phone, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "I think I need to delay going to Paris, at least for a little bit."

"What's going on?" Perry asked. "How are Jason and the baby?"

"They've both been admitted and they're both in ICUs," Richard told him, his voice cracking. *My baby boy is sick.* "Perry, I'm scared. They have Jason hooked up to machinery and they have no idea what's wrong except that he's barely holding his own. And the baby... Clark's baby is dying, Uncle Perry."

He heard Perry's sharp intake of breath, then: "How's Lois doing?"

"They let her scrub up so she could be with him in the isolation ICU," Richard said. "They can't identify the disease agent and they're afraid he might be contagious even though Lois has been around the baby almost as much as Clark has and she's fine. And you and Aunt Alice are okay, so far. I did tell the doctor that the baby had been around Superman..."

"Why did you tell them that?"

"Uncle Perry, Clark is sick with the same thing the kids have. What if Luthor had a backup plan? What if he managed to infect Superman with a space bug of some sort? We both know who Jason's real father is."

"I see what you mean," Perry said. "Tell Lois we're all behind her and not worry about work."

"Uncle Perry, I think you could announce that World War Three had started and she wouldn't budge from Jason's side," Richard told his uncle. "I'll keep you posted," he promised and hung up his phone. He leaned back against the wall outside the ICU. Only one visitor was allowed at a time, so all he could do is look through the glass partition at the woman he'd been engaged to and the boy he had raised as his own for five years.

Lois's head was bowed and he couldn't see her expression beneath the surgical cap and mask she was wearing, but he thought he saw tears on her face. *Dear God, let Jason be okay. And Clark and the baby. The world needs him. Lois needs him. Please don't let them die.*

"How are they?" Alice asked as Perry hung up the phone.

"Both the kids have been admitted to intensive care," Perry told her. "It doesn't look good."

Perry occupied himself by tipping the ice Alice had brought up into a plastic bowl with water. He replaced the folded damp cloth on Clark's forehead with a fresh cold one. Clark's temperature wasn't coming down and he was having fewer and fewer lucid moments in between his fits of uncontrollable shivering.

Clark had tried more than once to get out of bed, to get to the window in response to something only he could hear. It had taken both he and Alice to get Clark back into the bed. That was when Perry noticed the gauze bandage on Clark's back and realized the wound Luthor had given Superman had opened up and was oozing blood and green pus.

Alice changed the bandage without complaint - she had been a practical nurse before she married and had children. She burned the soiled bandages in the fireplace.

Perry had the radio set to a news channel for a little while then changed it when he realized the reports were making Clark more agitated. Easy listening music was doing a better job at keeping the younger man calm.

"Perry," Alice said, placing two fingers against Clark's carotid artery to check his pulse. "He's not doing very well."

"I know," Perry told her. "His breathing's gotten shallower."
"He needs a doctor," she told him, worry darkening her eyes.
"Alice, I haven't a clue as to who to call for him," Perry admitted.
"And you still think he shouldn't be in the hospital?"
"Honey, they can't help him more than we can."

-Earth II-

A slender gray-haired man wearing an old fashioned suit, wire-rim glasses, and a moustache was standing in the entryway - Herbert George Wells. He blinked, breaking into a relieved smile when he caught sight of Clark.

"Mister Wells, you got our message?" Clark asked, ushering the man into the living room. "Oh, watch your step. We're having the flooring replaced. Hardwood cleans up better than carpet."

"Oh, you tried to get a message to me?" Wells asked. He seemed confused as he sat on the edge of the sofa.

"Yes," Lois told him, coming into the living room, holding the baby to her shoulder. "Isn't that why you're here?"

"Actually Missus Kent, I came to ask some questions," Wells said nervously. "If you don't mind."

"Okay," Clark agreed, settling into one of the chairs opposite the sofa. Wells was normally a little on the nervous side when he visited. Of course his visits were usually as a result of some catastrophe he was trying to avert that negatively affected mankind's future. But tonight he seemed unusually diffident.

"Pardon me if I speak bluntly, but did you have any 'odd' visitors in the past few days?"

"Define 'odd,'" Lois said with a grin. "Zara, Ching, and their son were here from New Krypton along with an assassin and Lord Xon. They're both dead, by the way."

Wells frowned. "Was there anyone, anything else?"

"Well, that's what we were trying to get hold of you about," Clark said. "A Lois and Clark from an alternate time-line also showed up, courtesy of a tempocane."

"A tempocane? Oh my," Wells murmured. "Do you happen to know which variation they were from?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't think it's one Lois and I visited while we were doing our involuntary tour of the multiverses. He was born in '72, became Superman in '98 or there about. That Lois has a son named Jason who's the same age as our Lara, but she's engaged to someone other than Clark. And their Clark was missing for over five years."

Wells seemed troubled by Clark's description. "I was afraid of that." He seemed to lose himself in thought for a long moment before looking over at Lois and Clark. "Did they take anything from this time-line back with them?"

Lois and Clark shared a worried look. "Ching and Zara had a baby with them, in a stasis device. The baby went with them for safety."

Wells nodded thoughtfully. "Was the stasis device still sealed when they took it?"

"I believe so," Lois told him. "Mister Wells, what's going on? If you didn't get our message, why are you here?"

"Because there are certain time-streams that seem to be keys, almost like the keys in an arch," Wells told them. "When a key is disturbed in a serious manner the vibrations, if you will, affect the neighboring time-streams. Rarely for the better."

"Is their time-stream one of the key ones?" Lois asked.

Wells nodded.

"Mister Wells, what's happened there?" Clark asked.

"I don't know, exactly," Wells said. "Except that their version of Utopia has been destroyed. In their universe, Superman was never publicly revealed as being Clark Kent. So there were no biographies of Mister Kent, no journals saved, nothing that can be used by

Peace Keepers to trace back problems. The one thing I know is that Superman came back to Earth from a nearly six year absence, and disappeared again less than two weeks later. His disappearance corresponds temporally with a minor change in *this* time-stream."

"And what was that change?" Lois asked. Martha was fussing a little. Wells swallowed hard and Clark and Lois watched him worriedly.

"Originally, your fourth child, a girl named Martha Michaela, died of a sudden, undiagnosed illness when she was only a day old," Wells told them, not meeting their gaze. "The older three were critically ill for a few days but recovered. Another infant girl died of the same disease, but she was never identified."

"But Martha's four days old now," Lois reminded him. "And the other kids are just fine..."

"Exactly, my dear."

-Earth I-

Alice Jeanine Spencer White was not a stupid woman. In her sixty-two years she had raised two sons and buried one of them. She'd worked as a nurse and supported her family while her husband was working as a journalist overseas. She was married to one of the top newspaper editors in the world.

She knew there was something very odd going on and she was annoyed that her husband seemed unwilling or unable to trust her with the truth. She fixed another pot of coffee and carried a fresh mug up to her husband.

Perry was in the process of changing out the damp cloth on Clark's forehead when it finally occurred to her. Clark's hair was pushed back, revealing a high forehead and dark eyebrows normally hidden by glasses. His nose was straight, almost Grecian. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized she'd seen that face on the television, in the newspapers, especially the front page of the Daily Planet. He was famous, not just in Metropolis, but around the world.

"Perry," she finally spoke up, handing her husband his coffee. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

His gray eyebrows rose in momentary surprise. She picked Clark's horn rim glasses up off the nightstand beside the bed and looked at her husband, then over at their patient. "Who could possibly imagine it? He walks among us and hides behind a pair of glasses?"

Perry took the glasses from her hand and put them back on the table. "Actually, I think it's more that he hides behind a blue body suit and red cape."

"How long have you known that Clark was...?"

Perry chuckled softly. "Not as long as I should have. If I'd figured it out earlier, I might have been able to talk him out of making a really stupid mistake. Saved him and Lois a lot of heartache."

"Perry, what are we going to do if he doesn't make it?"

"I honestly don't know," Perry admitted. "We should call his mother."

"He really does have a mother? I thought...?"

"He used to send money to her every week. Lois thought it was funny," Perry told her. "Her number's probably still on redial on the kitchen phone. If not, then I have her number at the office."

"I think maybe you need to be the one to talk to her," Alice suggested.

-Earth II-

Clark sat back in his chair, watching Wells worriedly. "So, what do we do? Not about Martha, obviously, but about the problems over there."

"Actually, Martha remaining alive was only a minor change. If anything, her presence actually strengthened the Peace Keepers, although it's hard to quantify," Wells explained. "Originally, when the child died, you adopted an orphaned baby girl several months later."

"But what do you want us to do about the destruction of Utopia over there?" Lois asked, trying to get him back on track.

Wells looked troubled. "I believe the situation requires the unique talents of Lois Lane and Clark Kent to determine why their Superman has, or will, disappear."

"Do you know what happened to their version of Clark Kent?" Clark asked.

"There was an obituary in the Daily Planet and in the Smallville Post indicating he had died suddenly. There were no other details," Wells told them. "The date on the obituary in the Daily Planet corresponds to the day Superman disappeared the second time. The Peace Keepers of that world were unable to determine if it was his body that was cremated without risking further damage to the time-line."

"Considering how screwed up their time-line has to be right now, why are they worrying?" Lois asked.

"I may have invented the time machine my dear, but I am still boggled by the complexities of temporal mechanics."

"You're sure Tempus isn't involved?" Clark asked.

"I have been assured that Tempus is safely out of the way," Wells told them. He checked his pocket watch. "We need to start moving. Time is of the essence."

Clark started laughing, although it sounded a trifle strained. "You're joking, right? You have a time machine."

Lois just shook her head. "I'll call your mom and get her to watch the kids for us," she told her husband and the strange little man sitting on the sofa. "I'll bring Martha with us."

"Lois, I don't think that's a good idea," Clark said. Something was stirring in the back of his mind. "If the problem is what I think it is, you'll be putting her at risk. She'll be safer here."

"What do you mean?" Wells asked.

Clark shook his head. "Lois, did Zara drop off some vaccines for the kids?"

"They're in the refrigerator," Lois told him. "They dropped off some other stuff, too."

"Pack them up in a cooler," Clark ordered. "They're coming with us."

"You think Xon's behind this," Lois stated.

Clark nodded. "Originally, we must have opened the stasis box here and the kids were exposed. I'm betting Xon didn't realize that we've had the kids immunized against both Earth and New Kryptonian diseases. In fact, he probably had that baby infected with something fairly virulent, since they were supposedly affected despite being vaccinated. Maybe even engineered something."

"Like Johnny Bermuda did?"

Clark nodded again. "Well, all he did was figure out how to culture the stuff, but yeah," Clark said thoughtfully. "In fact, one of the first things Zara did, when I came aboard her transport the first time, was give me full spectrum immunizations against Kryptonian childhood diseases. She figured I had no immunity. She was probably right."

"And chances are, their Superman doesn't either," Lois said, thinking aloud. "And if you're right, then he..."

"He set off a time bomb meant for our kids," Clark completed for her. "And he got caught in it. And it may be killing him."

"But we can't be sure until we get there," Wells reminded them.

-Earth I-

Perry picked up the phone in the kitchen and hit the redial button. Alice was staying upstairs with Clark. Clark had fallen into a deep sleep, or possibly a coma, Perry couldn't tell which.

The phone rang several times before he heard the other end being picked up. A man's voice, muzzy with sleep, answered.

"Is Missus Kent there please?" Perry asked.

He heard a hand go over the microphone on the other phone but could still hear the conversation on the other end. "*Martha, it's for you...*"

"*At this time of night?*" a woman's voice asked. There was the sound of the phone being handed over to someone else. "This is Martha Kent," the woman said into the phone.

"Sorry to call so late, but I'm Perry White," he said. "We spoke the other day?"

"Yes, Mister White...?" she began. "Is there something wrong?"

"I'm afraid there is. Clark, Jason, and the baby became very ill a couple hours ago. Jason and the baby are in intensive care," he said. He heard her gasp. "We're trying to take care of Clark here so..." he added.

"You said *Clark* is ill?"

"He's running a very high fever and is in a lot of pain," Perry explained. "And I know that taking him to the hospital is out of the question. Although, frankly if he gets any worse, I may just call an ambulance anyway and hang the consequences."

"Do what you have to do for my boy, Mister White," Martha Kent instructed. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

-Earth II-

"Thanks for watching the kids for us, Martha," Lois told her mother-in-law. "We're not sure when we'll be back. Hopefully soon."

"Be careful," Martha told them. She gave Lois a hug and then pulled Clark to her. "You come back, okay?"

Wells cleared his throat. "We need to get started."

Lois nodded, picking up the small cooler with the vaccines in it and taking Clark's arm. Wells had a small device in his hand that resembled a PDA. He stepped close to them and pressed a symbol on the small screen.

The room shimmered and changed.

-Earth I-

Richard had wanted to stay at the hospital, but Lois had come out of Jason's room while the nurse came in to check on him.

"Look, there's no sense in us both being here," she told him. "You go home, get some rest and come back in a couple hours so I can get some rest, okay?"

She must have seen the pain in his face because she stretched up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Please, Richard, go home. I promise I'll call you if there's any change."

He nodded, shaky. "I'll give you a call if I hear from Uncle Perry. Hopefully Clark's doing better than the kids are. I mean, he's... you know..."

"I know, Richard. I know. I think right now all we can do is pray for all three of them."

Richard felt his heart squeeze in his chest. She sounded like she was running on the edge of exhaustion, her eyes like bruises in her pale face. He wanted to give her a hug, send her home instead, but he knew it was no longer his decision. She had made hers and he was lucky to be included in it.

"I'll be back in a few hours," he promised.

Clark looked around the room they were now in. It looked both strange and familiar at the same time. It was the living room they'd just left, except the furniture was different, the colors lighter and muted. The art on the fireplace wall was different, naturally - photographs rather than the native art Clark and Lois collected from their travels.

There were family photos on the mantle. "She didn't tell me the name of her fiancé," Clark told Lois nodding to one of the photos. The younger Lois was with a boy that looked like the New Kryptonian boy being fostered on their world. The man with them very much resembled the Richard White they knew.

"Richard," Lois noted. "Let's hope he's like ours. Someone who will help."

Clark nodded, hearing something oddly familiar outside the range of human senses. He scanned the room, then the house. Listening devices. He put a finger to his lips and Lois nodded her understanding.

He took care of the bugs within a minute.

"Do you think they have any idea?" Lois asked quietly.

Clark shrugged. "Somehow I doubt it. Question is who would want to do it?"

Wells had walked over to the French doors that looked over the back deck. "Oh my. How exciting. They have an aeroplane."

Richard was surprised to see the lights on in the house when he pulled into the driveway. He was sure he'd shut them off when he left to go to Perry's house. He left Lois's car and walked to the front door. He and Lois didn't keep money in the house, but they did have computers and electronics that thieves might be interested in.

He quietly turned the key in the lock and opened the front door.

"Richard White, I presume?" a dark-haired man with brown eyes and glasses said as the door opened.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my house?" Richard found himself yelling. There was a dark-haired woman standing beside the man who spoke and behind them another man, older, wearing wire-framed glasses.

"We could say we're waiting for you, but we've just arrived ourselves," the dark-haired man said. Richard simply looked at them for a moment. The man was a little taller than

Richard, athletic-looking with broad shoulders. The woman was slender, but carried herself with ease. They were both a few years older than he was and both were well dressed - the man in a dark tailored suit, white shirt with an open collar, and expensive shoes. The woman was wearing a slacks and a loose knit top.

"Actually, we're looking for Clark Kent," the man continued. "Please tell us you know where he is."

"He's at my uncle's house," Richard responded. "Who are you people?"

The older man spoke up. "Um, I'm Herbert George Wells and my companions here are Clark Kent and Lois Lane-Kent. We're from an alternate time-line and we're here to prevent a terrible catastrophe."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He's H. G. Wells the writer and we're the counterparts for the Clark Kent and Lois Lane you know. We're from another dimension," the woman told him.

"We have reason to believe that there is something terrible going to happen here and we've come to help stop it," the older man added earnestly.

Richard looked at him. "Aren't you dead?"

"Sometimes," all three of the strangers said as though sharing a sad old joke.

"Look, we really need to talk to your Clark, so we can figure out what's wrong," 'Clark' said.

"That might be a little hard," Richard said. "He got sick, really sick after going out on a story. And then so did Jason and the baby. The two kids are in intensive care at Metropolis General and Clark is at my uncle's."

"Oh dear," Wells said, looking to 'Clark'. "It looks like you were right."

"I'd much rather I wasn't," 'Clark' said. There was a grim tone in his voice.

"Who are you people, really?" Richard asked. *This is ridiculous. H.G. Wells, alternate universes. They don't even **look** like Clark and Lois.*

"We've already told you," 'Clark' said. "Now, are you going to help us or not? Because if you're not, then you're not the man we'd hoped you were, and our job just got a whole lot harder."

Richard took a shaky breath. "I'll help. But there's no way I can call you 'Clark' and 'Lois'. You're not anything like them."

"You might be surprised," 'Clark' commented. "You can call me Jerome."

"And you can call me Joanne," 'Lois' said. "That's my middle name." She placed a small cooler that Richard hadn't noticed before on the coffee table. Jerome bent over her as she opened the case and pulled out a sheet of *something* with strange writing on it. It didn't quite look like paper. She handed the sheet to Jerome who unfolded it and read it.

"It looks like Zara sent along some antibiotics and anti-virals this time," Jerome told her. "The yellow is the anti-viral. This also says the antibiotic and anti-viral can be given intravenously if necessary."

"That's good to know," Joanne said, picking out three vials and a small trigger-like device from the case and handing them to him. She looked back over her shoulder at Richard. "I need to get to the hospital with these. Hopefully we haven't lost too much time."

"I'll get these to Clark," Jerome told her. He looked over to Richard. "Where does your uncle live, by the way?"

"Over in Park Ridge," Richard answered. He gave the address and Jerome nodded, heading for the French doors and the back deck. Wells started to follow him.

"And how are you planning on getting there?" Richard asked. Then it hit him. *He's Clark Kent.* "Unless you're Superman, too." He caught the slight widening of the eyes, the flicker of surprise that crossed Jerome's face then was replaced by calm, detached observation.

Jerome took a step then disappeared into a blur the color of his suit which morphed into the primary colors of blue and red. The blur of movement slowed and Superman was standing in his living room. Not the Superman Richard was familiar with. This Superman was a little shorter, stockier, more like a quarterback than the swimmer *his* Superman resembled. *His Superman? What the hell was going on?*

"Let's get everyone into your car," Superman instructed. "I'll fly the car to the hospital then take Mister Wells over to Mister White's house. Hopefully, we'll be in time."

Numbly, Richard followed instructions and went out to the car.

Again, Lois was waiting outside Jason's room as a doctor took more blood samples and a nurse checked the IVs and sensors. Jason's fever wasn't coming down and they'd put him on a respirator to help him breathe. *My baby is dying.*

"Lois?"

She looked up to see Richard hurrying down the corridor toward her, followed by a familiar-looking woman with dark-hair.

"Lois?" Lois Lane asked in disbelief.

"I'm going by Joanne," the alternate Lois responded. "How are the kids?"

Lois shook her head. "Their fevers won't come down. They say the baby..." Suddenly everything came crashing down on her and Lois started to cry. The older woman pulled her into a hug.

"It's going to be okay, I hope," Joanne told her. "I have some drugs that might help. Can you get Jason's doctor out here?"

Lois pulled away, wiping her eyes. She knocked on the glass partition and the doctor looked over at her. Lois beckoned for him to come out. He frowned, shed his gloves and gown, putting them in a container labeled bio-hazard, and came out into the corridor.

"Yes, Miss Lane?" the doctor asked. He gave Joanne and Richard a curious look.

"Doctor Maher, this is..."

"I'm Jason's Aunt Joanne," Joanne interrupted. "I've brought some experimental medications that might be able to knock down the infection in both Jason and the Kent baby."

"What sort of medications?" Maher asked.

"An anti-viral, an antibiotic and a special vaccine," Joanne replied, handing him one of the vials.

He peered at the glyphs on the side of the vial. "Where are these from?"

"The writing is Kryptonian," Joanne told him. Lois watched his eyes widen.

"Superman?"

Joanne shrugged, not denying his speculation. "We have reason to believe someone created an organism specifically designed to attack him. Both Jason Lane and baby Kent spent time in close proximity to him within the past twelve hours, so it's unlikely their illness is a coincidence."

"And how is Superman?" Maher asked.

"He seemed fine at the oil refinery fire earlier," Lois told him. "But who knows where he is now."

"Are you sure these will work?" Maher asked. "I mean, if they're experimental..."

"Doctor Maher, have you got anything that can help them?" Lois asked.

Maheer chewed on his bottom lip. "Frankly, no. We haven't even been able to identify the disease organism. We haven't been able to culture it and the antibiotic shotgun approach doesn't seem to touch it. But we do have rules about using untested or experimental drugs. There are protocols to follow."

Lois's nostrils flared in anger. "Doctor, you would let my son die because of some idiotic rules?" she hissed. "Give him the drugs. I swear we won't come after you if it doesn't work. I mean, what have we got to lose?"

"And the Kent baby?" Maheer asked. "Who's authorizing this treatment for her? We haven't been able to get hold of her father."

"I'll authorize it," Joanne stated. "Her father is my brother-in-law and I am authorized to act on his behalf. I can assure you he won't object. Now please, just do it. The yellow and red can be given intravenously. The blue is intramuscular."

Maheer shook his head but reentered the ICU room where Jason Lane laid in a bed that looked far too big for his small form. Lois watched as Maheer prepared the three vials for injection and then injected the first two into an IV line. The clear fluid in the line turned light orange.

Superman set Wells down in an area hidden by trees before spinning back into his white shirt and dark suit. The Craftsman style house reminded him a little of the older house *his* Perry White had lived in before he died. It was even in the same neighborhood. He rang the doorbell. He figured it was unlikely he was getting them out of bed and a quick check with x-ray vision confirmed that. An older man with gray eyebrows and closely cropped gray hair was coming to the door.

The door opened. The man looked exhausted as he peered at him.

"Perry White?" the alternate universe Clark asked.

"Yes... who are you?"

"I'm sorry about the time, but we're friends of Clark Kent, and we're here to help," he said. "May we come in? Time is of the essence."

Perry looked at him, then past him to Wells who was standing nervously behind him. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"Mister White, my name is Clark Jerome Kent, and this is Herbert George Wells," 'Jerome' said. He watched Perry's eyes widen in surprise. "Your Clark and I met several days ago, along with your Lois Lane. I have reason to believe something very unfortunate has happened to him. We're here to help if we can. Now, may we come in?"

Perry backed away from the door and let them enter. Wells closed the door behind them. Perry peered at the little man curiously. "Herbert George Wells? As in the writer?"

"Oh, yes, quite," Wells agreed cheerfully.

"And you're Clark *Jerome* Kent?" Perry asked.

He nodded. "You can call me Jerome."

He ignored the questioning look Perry was giving him as he scanned the house. No listening devices at least. He pulled out the three vials and the injector. "He's upstairs. I'll be right back," Jerome told Wells as he started to head for the stairwell to give the medication to Clark of this world. He stopped when he felt Wells's hand on his arm.

"Mister Kent, I don't know that you're immune to the disease," Wells said.

"But you said it was just the kids that got sick in the unaltered time-line," Jerome

reminded him. "And I've been vaccinated."

"But I don't believe you were exposed to the disease in that time-line," Wells told him. "I believe Missus Kent opened the case while you were still indisposed. Please allow me or Mister White to handle this."

"What is that?" Perry asked, nodding to the vials in Jerome's hand.

"Kryptonian medicine," Jerome said, handing the vials to Perry. "Where we're from, Kal-El isn't the only survivor. But you need to hurry." Jerome looked through the ceiling to the room above to where Clark lay. Whether he was unconscious or sleeping, he couldn't really tell, but Clark's heartbeat was weak and irregular. "He's not doing well."

Joanne put her arm around Lois's shoulder to comfort the younger woman. Doctor Maher hurried off to give the new medication to the baby, leaving a nurse to monitor Jason's condition.

"How did you get here?" Lois asked. It had finally registered on her exhausted, panicky mind how impossible it was for the woman standing with her to even be there. "Why are you here?"

"It's complicated," Joanne said. "Let's just say that Clark and I, my Clark, had reason to believe something bad was happening here and it was related to your visit. Then somebody with a planar travel device agreed with us."

"Is your Clark okay?" Lois asked. The tempocane had returned before she and Clark could be certain that everything was going to be okay in 'Joanne's' time-line.

"He went back to work this morning," Joanne told her with a crooked smile. "Both jobs."

Richard cleared his throat and both women - one with brown hair and hazel eyes, the other with dark brown hair and darker eyes - looked over at him. "Lois, you know her?"

Lois nodded. "Clark and I ended up at their house while we were gone. Like I said, it was an interesting visit."

"Her husband is the E-n-C of the Daily Planet?" Richard asked Lois.

She nodded.

"Youngest in the paper's history," Joanne said proudly. "Increased circulation by nearly twenty percent in three years."

"Sex, tragedy, and Superman," Richard muttered. "Uncle Perry's mantra. Guaranteed sales."

Joanne chuckled. "When Superman's been around for fourteen years, he's not headline news unless it's Earth shattering."

Richard's eyes widened. "Fourteen years? Are there any criminals left?"

"Violent crime is almost nonexistent, the petty stuff at least," Joanne told him. "White collar crime hasn't changed much. Organized crime has changed its tactics, less violence, more extortion, gambling, that sort of thing. Superman does more work dealing with accidents and natural disasters these days. Of course, there are still the criminals who think they can get away with attacking Superman. Needless to say, that doesn't fly very well with us. We're quite fond of our Superman."

Doctor Maher had come back, hurrying into Jason's room with only a nod to the three people waiting outside the room. The nurse was explaining something to Maher and it looked like he couldn't decide whether he should be astonished or simply pleased. Lois noticed that the tracing on the cardiac monitor seemed more normal, assuming she knew what normal looked like, and the temperature monitor reading was dropping slowly.

Lois watched him give instructions to the nurse then he came out of the room and walked over to them.

He was shaking his head and grinning. "Miss Lane, I'm having a hard time believing it, but the medication appears to be working. Your son's fever has broken, his vital signs are improving. Assuming there's no reoccurrence of the fever, I think the prognosis is good."

"And the baby?" Joanne asked.

Maher's expression turned more serious. "She's very weak, and she hasn't improved nearly as quickly as the boy. Plus her blood work shows some abnormalities. We don't know if it's from the disease, or something else."

Lois turned to Joanne. "I know she's not... Clark missed so much with Jason... If the baby doesn't make it, it'll break his heart."

"I promise you, we'll do everything we can for both of them," Joanne said earnestly. "But you should know, according to Mister Wells, in the original time-line - the one where you and Clark didn't show up - both that baby and little Martha died."

"Oh my God..." Lois murmured. "Is she...?"

"She's fine," Joanne assured her. "My mother-in-law's watching her and the other kids."

Perry hurried up the stairs to the guest room where Alice was tending to Clark.

"Who's downstairs?" she asked.

"Friends of Clark's," he answered. "They brought some special medicine for him."

"What kind of medicine?"

"Kryptonian medicine."

Perry handed the injector to his wife and watched as she inspected it. He quickly passed on the instructions he'd been given. She exposed the inside of Clark's elbow and pressed the device to his arm.

Perry was surprised that the device even worked. *He's not invulnerable any more.* Clark roused from his stupor enough to try to move away from the touch of metal on his skin. To Perry's additional surprise, Alice was easily able to overcome him, holding his arm still until the medication in the vials disappeared.

Dear God, the story of the decade is in my lap and I don't dare publish a word of it. Superman is sick in my guestroom and people claiming to be from a different universe are sitting in my living room claiming to be his friends.

"Easy, hon', easy..." Alice was telling Clark. He seemed to relax at the sound of her voice and his breathing became easier. Alice checked his pulse.

"It works fast, what ever it is," she said. "His pulse is stronger. I'm no doctor, but I'd say he might actually live."

The lights in the room were dimmed, but Perry had the impression that Clark's color was improving as well. He was still pale, even a little blotchy, but not as bad as earlier.

"Perry, I could use another cup of coffee," Alice said. "And maybe bring up a 2-liter of soda and another jug of water. He's pretty dehydrated."

"I'll be right back," he promised.

"Mister Wells, how long before we know if what we've done is enough to correct the problem in the time-line?" Jerome was asking as Perry came down the stairs.

"It does take a little time for the changes to propagate forward," Wells said. "Although I still don't completely understand why that is. Professor Brown at the Academy of Temporal Studies tried to explain it to me once, but I guess I'm just a mechanic at heart."

"You didn't answer my question," Jerome pointed out.

"Oh, yes. You're quite right my boy," Wells said. He checked the screen on what looked like a PDA. "Oh dear..."

"What is it?" Perry asked. Both men seemed surprised to see him standing in the archway leading to the living room.

"It would appear that we have been successful in saving the life of Clark Kent, and of course, Superman - but the future time-line still appears to be in disarray."

Jerome took a deep breath in and out. "Obviously something happened, or will happen, while *he's* indisposed. Do you have any idea what it might be?"

Wells shook his head. "Only that the event had, or will have, repercussions large enough to destroy the future that was."

"Can I go in and see my son?" Lois asked the doctor.

Maher nodded. "He's still weak and we have him on the respirator," Maher reminded her. "But I think it would be a good idea if you're there when he wakes up."

"And the baby? Can I see the baby?" Joanne asked. Maher gave her a questioning look. "I'm her aunt too, remember? Her mother's dead. And if you happen to have a breast pump I can use, I'd appreciate it. I left my four day old home with my mother-in-law." She saw Richard's jaw drop. "You have no idea how much I hurt..." She held her hands, fingers spread, a few inches from her chest.

A thoughtful look came over Maher's face. "You know, one of the problems we've been having with her is she's not tolerating formula very well. Maybe mother's milk will do the trick. We do normally have a stock, but..."

"Lead on MacDuff," Joanne said, ushering the doctor in front of her. She looked back over her shoulder. "Richard you really need to get home and get some rest. You might want to give Perry and my husband a call, let them know that Jason's better. And ask my Clark to come over here. I think he might be able to do something."

The loud noises had stopped being quite so loud and the pain in his joints and belly had dulled to something manageable. He cracked open his eyelids, moving his head just enough to see the person sitting next to his bed. "Perry?"

"Right here, son," Perry told him. "Just rest. You've had a rough night."

"What happened?"

Another voice, impossibly familiar. "We think Xon left a booby trap." The Clark from the alternate world was standing in the doorway watching him.

How did he get here? "And I was the booby?" Clark asked aloud.

The other Clark chuckled. "A sense of humor is a good sign. By the way, I'm going by Jerome, and my wife has decided we're brothers."

"I don't have a brother... wait... Missus Kent is here? What are you two doing here anyway?" Clark asked. He managed to lift himself up on his elbows without being overcome with dizziness. "How did you even get here?"

"Remember I told you about the usual suspects?"

"Yeah. A guy called Tempus, and H.G. Wells."

"And there are the Peace Keepers. Well, somebody realized something was wrong over here and did the usual," Jerome explained. "Enlisted our help. So we brought over some of the medicines Zara gave us for the kids for you. And it looks like they worked."

"Richard called a little while ago," Perry said. "It looks like Jason will be okay."

"And the baby?" Clark asked.

"It's too soon to tell," Jerome told them. "My Lois is with her and she wants me over at the hospital to help out."

Clark studied his counterpart. "There's something else, isn't there?"

Jerome nodded. "What attracted the Peace Keepers' attention was a major disruption of this time-line. We were working under the assumption that your death was the initiating factor."

"Only?"

"Only you're alive and the time-line hasn't reverted to what it was," Jerome explained. He seemed to come to a decision. "As soon as you're up to it, we need to figure out what happened last night that you weren't able to handle so that we might be able to do some damage control."

Clark sat up and ran a hand through his hair. Then he realized how dank and sticky he felt. "Let me get a shower and some clothes on." He started to swing his legs over the side of the bed and found Perry's hand on his shoulder, forcing him back down.

"You're not going anywhere, son," Perry told him. "At least not for a while. I'll have Polly and Mike go over last night's police calls, check the wire, come up with a list of emergencies where Superman might have shown up to if he hadn't been busy elsewhere."

Clark noticed the look of understanding that passed between Perry and 'Jerome'. They were doing the same job, had many of the same employees. Again Clark felt a pang of jealousy. Jerome seemed to have it all - a loving wife, a good career, beautiful children. Everything *he* had thrown away when he left. Jerome had been in this universe for how long? He already had the respect of Perry White and that wasn't easy. Perry was hard to impress.

"Plus, I have a couple ideas, too," Perry continued. "I had to change the channel on the radio last night because there was something being reported on the news that you were determined to take care of, even though you couldn't."

"Oh..." Clark peered at his boss. "Perry, you haven't been sitting here all night, have you?"

"It takes more than an all-nighter to get an old warhorse down," Perry replied. "Get some rest. We'll get this figured out."

"In the meantime," Jerome said. "I'm wanted over at Met General and I need to do it as Superman. That's not something I would normally do in these situations. It causes too many issues for the resident Superman, especially when we're *not* identical twins."

"Your Metropolis took it in stride," Clark reminded him, pulling the blankets up as he settled back onto the pillows.

"*My* Metropolis knows that Superman wasn't the only survivor of Krypton. Their assumption was that you were a member of the House of El and just visiting," Jerome told him. "I don't think that will fly with your people." Jerome spun into the blue and red Suit. "I'll be back."

Clark watched after him as he disappeared out of the doorway.

"He's pretty young to have my job," Perry commented.

"I've seen the list of his awards," Clark told him. "Four Kerths, two Merriweathers, three Pulitzers and on the shortlist for three others, all in international affairs or investigative journalism. The team of Lane and Kent won even more. They are very good. I don't think Lois and I are anywhere in their league. I *know* I'm not."

Perry clapped in on the shoulder. "Don't sell yourself short, Clark. He's been at it a lot longer than you have."

"Yeah... About twelve years. He didn't take off for nearly six years on a fool's errand."

Jerome came to ground just outside the main entrance of Metropolis General Hospital. It looked such the same as the hospital his Lois had been four days before, giving birth to their fourth child. He'd been away from home for less than eight hours and he was missing his family. *One of these days I'm going to learn to say no to these little adventures... Nah. Won't happen.*

He walked into the building and stopped in front of the reception desk. The white uniformed woman at the desk looked up, indifferently at first then her expression changed to recognition, then confusion. "Superman...? I... How can I help you?"

"Could you direct me to the neonate ICU, please," Jerome asked, giving her his most ingratiating smile.

She gave him the directions then chuckled. "It's a little early for Halloween, you know."

He looked down at the Suit, then back at her grinning. "I know."

"And you don't look anything like him."

"I know that, too," he said before he headed off to the stairwell.

He sped up the stairs to the tenth floor then slowed to normal as he stepped into the corridor by the elevators. He walked over to the large window overlooking the newborn nursery. The intensive care nursery was in a side room. He could see 'Joanne' sitting in a rocking chair, holding an infant with tubes snaking around her.

"Can I help you, sir?" another uniformed woman asked, giving his uniform a curious look.

"Missus Kent asked me to come," he told her. "I might be able to help with the Kent baby."

"I thought you were taller," she said, stepping in front of him to keep him out of the nursery.

He sighed and looked around for something that was safe to destroy. He settled on one of the metal clipboards at the nurses' station. He pulled off the paperwork and set it on the counter then proceeded to crush the board in one hand like it was aluminum foil. He handed the metal ball to her.

Her eyes widened, suitably impressed. "Right this way, Superman," she said, leading the way through the nursery to the ICU.

Joanne looked up, relief washing across her face as she caught sight of him. The baby was limp in her arms, too weak to even cry. "We've managed to get some mother's milk into her, and her fever's come down a little..."

"Let me take her," he said, unclipping the cape and pulling the uniform shirt off so he was bare-chested. She carefully handed the infant to him as she got up from the chair, allowing him to slide into her place. He cuddled the infant against his skin, willing his aura to expand and protect her. Doctor Klein hadn't been able to come up with an adequate explanation of why his bio-electrical aura differed from Earth-humans or how it worked. He only hoped he could make it work the same way here.

"By the way, Clark's doing a lot better," he told her, keeping his voice low. "But the time-line's still screwed up."

"What the devil is going on here?" a gray-haired woman in a lab coat hissed at him. The nurse who had allowed him into the nursery was following the woman, flapping her hands like

a butterfly.

"Doctor Matsen, this is Superman..." the nurse was saying.

Matsen stopped in front of him, hands on her hips. "And what, Mister Superman, are you doing with that child?"

"I am attempting to extend my aura to assist in her healing," Jerome replied matter-of-factly.

"You can do that?" Matsen asked.

"Sometimes," he said. "It would be helpful if you could find a full spectrum sunlamp for us. Extending my aura for healing can be quite taxing and it's been a long day."

Matsen checked the monitor readouts and shook her head. "I think it may be working... Her vital signs are getting stronger." Matsen looked back at him. "I didn't know this was one of your powers."

"I'm not sure how it works," he admitted. "But it's how I can sometimes stabilize the injured until I can get them to medical help, and even then it's not always enough."

"I had no idea," Matsen responded.

"I'm going to check on Lois and Jason," Joanne told him.

"I'll be here," he promised before he bent his head to watch the little one in his arms. She was looking better already.

Lex Luthor looked around his domain and growled. Between Superman's searches and an international bounty on his head, he'd been forced to move back into one of his old lairs under the city and he hated it. It reminded him too much of his first defeats at the hands of the damned alien. Defeats he had sworn would never happen again - yet it had. Despite all of his efforts, the damned do-gooding alien had survived to return to foil Luthor's plans once again.

Kitty was cowering in the corner with her stupid little dog. His 'associates' were ignoring her whimpers. Not that Luthor really cared anymore. She was only alive because he wanted her to see what happened to people who disappointed him - and she had disappointed him quite severely when she dropped the Kryptonian crystals out of the helicopter and onto the accursed crystal island.

"What have you got for me?" he demanded. One of the men, Baxter, shrugged.

"Not much, boss," Baxter said. "Supes went missing for three days, along with two Daily Planet reporters. Not a sign of any of them anywhere on the planet."

"I told you to track him with the alpha-wave detector," Luthor grated.

"We were," one of the others said - a man known only as Smith. "Four days ago he went north. A while later he was flying in the direction of Metropolis and simply disappeared. Three days later he reappeared in just about the same place. He flew to Metropolis then we tracked him to South America and back to Metropolis. When he showed up in Metropolis the second time, he had a baby with him. He claimed she belonged to Clark Kent and some South American woman he shacked up with."

"The place where he disappeared and reappeared... anything special there?" Luthor demanded.

Baxter shook his head. "Pennsylvania farmland. But..."

"But...? **But?**"

"But, weather radar in the area detected a severe storm front that appeared without warning and then simply vanished at the time same time *he* disappeared," Smith reported calmly. "The national weather bureau claims it was an equipment malfunction. But the local

papers claim to have found a field that looked like it had been thrashed by a storm. A very small, intense storm."

"And you didn't think that was *special*?" Luthor yelled.

Smith shrugged. "I thought it was a little more interesting that the only emergency the alien has dealt with since his return has been the refinery fire. He left the refinery and flew to Metropolis and hasn't been seen since, even though there were several emergency situations that *should* have attracted his attention. The two warehouse fires on Hobs Bay and a train derailment in Turin."

"No sign of him at all?"

"We tracked an alpha wave signal heading west from just north of the Hobs River and then several hours later, east from the suburbs to downtown New Troy, but there were no sightings of him. No rescues, not even a cat in a tree," Smith said. "All we're getting now is faint readings like he's doing something that takes energy and concentration, but not as much as flying."

"So, where is he?" Luthor demanded.

"We would need to triangulate his position," Smith reminded Luthor, who turned and glared at him.

"We know what direction. We can extrapolate distance by signal strength," Luthor grated. "Do I have to do all the thinking around here? Is there anything important in that direction?"

Smith shrugged again and pulled out a map of New Troy. He double checked the readings on computer monitor then traced out a line on the map. "Metropolis General Hospital."

Luthor turned on the fourth man in the room, Trivas. "Find out what's going on over there, overnight admissions, anything that might interest that flying blue boy. 'Cause if he's interested, so am I."

Lois looked up to see Joanne outside the glass partition. Jason's breathing had improved to the point the respirator could be removed and he was conscious, holding onto his mother's hand so tightly it hurt.

"Jason, I need to talk to Joanne, okay?" Lois murmured. Jason nodded and let her hand go, but she knew he was watching her as she went to the door of the room.

"How's it going?" Joanne asked.

"I think he'll be okay," Lois told her. "What about Clark?"

"Better," Joanne said. "But I'm told the time-line's still not back to normal."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means we have to figure out what happened or what will happen, assuming things take their natural course, that changes things for the worse for your world," Joanne explained.

"It sounds like you have experience with this sort of thing," Lois observed.

"Yeah, sort of," Joanne admitted. "It's a long story." Lois saw Joanne look past her to Jason. "You want to get some rest?"

Lois shook her head. "I'll wait for Richard to come back. You go back to the house."

Joanne nodded then her expression turned grim. "Lois, something you should know... your house was bugged. Jerome took care of them."

"Who would want to bug my house?"

"Good question. Who have you pissed off recently?"

Lois chuckled. "You want a list?"

"Okay, who would be interested in listening in on you, Richard, and Jason at home? I'm assuming you don't discuss details of what you're working on over dinner," Joanne said.

Lois stopped a moment to think about what her alternate had suggested. She and Richard didn't discuss work much, except to share a little office gossip. And they didn't even do that very much. They both wanted to be good examples for Jason. Dinner conversation tended to be about current events, school, weekend plans, and answering Jason's questions about Superman and the world.

"No, we don't talk much about what we're working on," Lois agreed. "I assume the bugs are recent, otherwise I'm sure Clark would have mentioned something."

"I'm sure he would have. When was the last time he was inside the house?"

"Sunday night," Lois said. "After he left the hospital, he came by to talk to me and I'm pretty sure he went inside to see Jason. As far as I know, he hasn't been in the house since." Lois paused a moment, running through the events of the week before - before her world turned upside down with the realization that not only had Superman returned to her world and he was really Clark Joseph Kent, but that there were other worlds, other dimensions, equally real, equally dangerous.

Superman.

"Luthor," Lois's voice was breathless with sudden horror. "Oh my God. I think he might know about Jason."

"How?"

"Jason and I were on Luthor's boat when he threw the piano across the room. There's no way Luthor's thugs wouldn't have told him what happened. He may have even had the room under surveillance." Lois's eyes widened at another realization. "At dinner last night, Jason asked about Clark being his biological father and we told him he was. We also talked about the baby being Jason's half-sister. If Luthor puts two and two together..."

"Is it really likely?" Joanne asked.

"You don't know what sort of sick genius Luthor is," Lois told her. She was trying to calm her reactions. She didn't want Jason to see her panic.

"You have no idea how much I might know," Joanne stated grimly. "I'll stay here while you call Richard and Perry. Then I'll let my Clark know what's going on."

Lois turned back to the little room, to Jason who was watching her with wide, frightened eyes. "Jason, honey, I need to make some phone calls. Joanne is going to stay with you until I come back. She's one of the people Clark and I visited while we were gone."

"Mommy, does she know Superman, too?"

"Yes, I do," Joanne told him. "I've known Superman a long time. Want me to tell you some Superman stories?"

Lois saw her son's eyes light up. "You know lots of stories?"

Joanne laughed a little as she walked into the room and settled into the chair beside Jason's bed. "Yes, but I have to warn you, the Superman I know isn't from around here..."

"Well?" Luthor demanded, standing over Trivas as he watched the screen on his laptop.

Trivas shook his head. "Look, Mister Luthor, STAR Labs did a complete upgrade of Met General's computer systems a few months ago, including state-of-the-art security. It takes time to break into a system like that and if I know Timo Virtanen, he closed off all the back doors except for his personal one."

"Then use that," Luthor ordered.

"I don't have his security token, I don't have his pass code, and I certainly don't have his retinal scan," Trivas shot back. "So either leave me to do my work my way or do it yourself."

Luthor straightened up, glowering at the hacker. "I was assured by your former employer that you were the best in the business."

"I am the best," Trivas replied. "But still takes time."

Luthor stalked away from him.

"Mister Luthor, you might want to listen to this," Baxter called out. He had earphones on, listening to a recording that was playing through another computer.

"What is it?"

"Last night's dinner at Lane's house," Baxter told him, holding the earphones out to the bald man. "I didn't get a chance to listen to it last night, with the other things I was doing."

Luthor listened to the voices coming through the headphones:

The boy: "Mommy, where did you go with Superman?"

Lois: "Well, Clark and I went to Superman's Fortress of Solitude to find out some things from Superman."

The boy, sounding confused: "Mister Clark was with you and Superman?"

Lois: "Yes, he was... Why?"

The boy: "Nothing, Mommy."

Lois: "Well, then Mister Clark told us a secret he hadn't wanted to tell anybody at work..."

The boy: "Mister Clark told you his secret?"

Lois: "Yes, he told us he got married while he was on his trip and he was trying to get his wife home to Metropolis so they could have their baby here. I asked Superman to help him."

The boy: "Did Superman help?"

A long pause then: "Yes and no. He found Clark's baby girl and she was okay and he brought her to Metropolis, but her mother was dead... Clark's pretty upset."

The boy: "Does this mean I have a baby sister?"

The man, Richard: "What makes you think that, kiddo?"

The boy: "If Mister Clark is my bio... biol ..."

Lois: "Biological?"

The boy: "Biological father, then his baby girl is my sister, too."

Richard, horrified: "Jason, who told you that Clark was your biological father?"

"So now the bitch is telling everyone that hack Kent is the brat's father?" Luthor grouched. "Why aren't I surprised? I bet she's conned that stupid hayseed into thinking it's true, too."

"Lex..." Kitty began timidly. "Up north you told us Superman lives among us..."

"Yes, my dear Kitty, I did say that," Luthor agreed. "Frankly, I'm astonished you remember. But think about it. The most powerful being on the planet. He can have anything. Women throw themselves at his feet without caring that he just *looks* human. He can have anything he wants. Tell me why someone like that would settle for pretending to be a mere cog in the media machine, drudging away day in and day out? No, he's somebody with money, who can buy silence, who can live up in his tower and look down laughing at all the unwashed masses he's fooled into believing he's here to help. Believe me Kitty, Superman is *not* Clark Kent."

Luthor turned back to Baxter. "Anything else?"

"A little more conversation. Looks like Lane and her boyfriend are breaking up," Baxter said.

Luthor snorted. "About time that idiot figured out what kind of slut he was sleeping with."

"Lane and the boy headed over to Perry White's house about seven. The boyfriend left about eight and none of them have been back to the house," Baxter told him. "At least as far as I can tell."

"And what does that mean?" Luthor demanded.

"At about ten-thirty, there was some sort of energy surge in the building. It knocked out the video in the living room and I think it may have knocked out the rest of the surveillance equipment as well," Baxter reported.

"And you didn't think that was important enough to tell me?" Luthor was pleased to see how pale Baxter became as Luthor stood over him.

"I wanted to make sure of my facts before telling you," Baxter stammered. Luthor just nodded.

"Mister Luthor," Trivas called. "I think I have something."

"And what, exactly, do you *think* you have?"

Trivas turned his computer so Luthor could read off the screen. "Two admissions last night. Jason White and Esperanza Kent. Both kids were suffering from high fever from an unknown disease."

"You said 'Jason White'?"

Trivas nodded. "Lois Lane's son."

"And Superman's at the hospital," Luthor mused.

Clark opened his eyes again and looked around the room. This time he felt nearly normal - human normal at least. He wasn't in any pain this time and he wasn't dizzy as he sat up. But it felt odd to be mortal again. He'd been 'mortal' on his trip to Krypton - although he'd been in stasis nearly the entire journey, the ship's computer waking him up only for decisions and a little sight-seeing. He'd been sick from kryptonite poisoning on his way back, something he didn't ever want to repeat but he seemed condemned to.

"Perry figured you'd come out of it as soon as the sun came out," Alice White said as soon as she noticed he was awake. "How are you feeling now?"

"A lot better, thanks," Clark told her. "Almost normal."

"Normal for you, or normal for everybody else?"

"Normal for everybody else," Clark admitted. "I'm still a little weak. But I'll live."

Alice peered into his face. "You're still a little pale, but a lot better than earlier. You were positively green." She began pattering around the room. "You gave us quite a scare you know. First disappearing for so long, then falling out of the sky, and then you get sick." She stopped and shook her head. "How does your poor mother stand it?"

"I honestly don't know."

There was a timid knock on the open door and a slight man with a moustache and wire-frame glasses cleared his throat. "Pardon my intrusion, Mister Kent... but I was wondering how you were feeling."

"And you are?" Clark asked.

"Oh, yes," the little man said, eyes wide in apparent surprise. "I'm H.G. Wells."

"One of the usual suspects," Clark muttered.

Wells smiled, obviously pleased. "You've heard of me?"

Clark nodded. "Were you responsible for dumping Lois and me into that other universe?" he asked.

"Oh no, my boy," Wells protested mildly. "That was a tempocane. No one controls those except possibly God, or if you believe Mister Heinlein, authors with a particularly fanciful and perverse imagination."

"You've read Heinlein?" Clark asked in astonishment.

"Of course my dear boy," Wells said with a chuckle. "I must keep up with modern temporal and planar travel theories. He wasn't wrong, you know. So, how are you feeling?"

"Well enough to head into work this morning," Clark said. "Even if I don't get anything else done, I can finish what I needed to get done today and maybe do some research on our little problem."

"You're sure you're up to it?" Perry asked from the hallway behind Wells.

"Give me time for a shower? And you wouldn't happen to have an extra razor, would you, sir?"

"Lois called a little while ago," Perry told Clark as Perry navigated the Acura across the bridge onto Ordway. "Jason's doing much better. But it seems her house was bugged and she's afraid Luthor may think that Jason is Superman's son. She didn't say what might have made him think that."

"According to Lois, Jason threw a grand piano across the room into the man who was threatening to kill her," Clark told him.

"That, uh, kind of puts a different complexion on things, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "It certainly does. Luckily, I doubt any abilities besides strength will manifest before puberty, and strength will only show up when he's under extreme stress."

"So, don't do anything to scare him?" Perry suggested.

Clark nodded once. "I should go to the hospital and check on the baby."

"Actually, I was heading there first," Perry admitted. "I wanted to check on Lois. And just so you know, just because Richard's leaving for Paris doesn't mean I'm going to stop considering Jason a member of my family. Or Lois for that matter."

Clark didn't reply but he had that wary, hangdog look Perry was getting familiar with, the look that said he was expecting to be yelled at. Clark's next move would be to push up his glasses and put on a goofy half smile that said 'Gee Perry, why didn't you say so...'

Perry pulled the car into a space in the hospital parking garage and turned off the engine. "Do you know why Lois wrote that article?"

The wary look was back without the Forrest Gump goofiness. "She told me she was upset that I didn't have the guts to say goodbye."

Perry snorted. "Interesting. And it may even be partly true. But what really hurt her, what drove her to air her dirty linen for all to see was the fact that the two men she thought she could trust not just with her life, but with her heart, turned out to be the same sort of bastards who hurt her before."

"Perry, I swear I never meant to hurt her. I just... It got... It wasn't going to work. I gave up everything to be with her, and it wasn't enough. 'Clark' wasn't enough."

"You're sure about that?"

Clark looked away, eyes focused onto some place beyond space, beyond time. "You didn't see her face when she realized Superman wasn't going to fly off the save the day anymore. When she realized all that was left was someone that half the time she could barely tolerate, someone she was coming to pity for having chosen to be a mere mortal. I couldn't bear to see her disappointment, so I went back and took up the mantle again. The price was

being with her ever again." His voice was shaking as he spoke and grief was written across his face. Grief for everything he'd hoped for and lost.

"Clark, the day after you left, Lois stormed into my office, furious with you because you weren't there. When I told her you'd quit, she was furious with me for letting you leave," Perry told him. "Like I had a choice in the matter. A few days later she realized Superman hadn't been seen in Metropolis. She started tracking down leads, trying to find him."

Clark opened his mouth to speak but Perry put his hand up to stop him. "She was looking for Superman so she could talk him into looking for you, for Clark. She spent nearly six months trying to track you down. I managed to talk her out of going to Smallville and pestering your mother. As it was she was calling about once a week to see if you'd checked in. After Jason was born she asked me whether or not she should put your name down as his father. I told her to use her own judgment. I never asked whether she put you on the birth certificate or not."

"I don't think she did," Clark said, mostly to himself. "And we didn't even think to take precautions because I'd been told for so long that I wasn't human... Who da thunk it, I became a father and I never even knew it. Never even thought it was possible."

Perry sighed and went on. "After a while she settled for Richard. Maybe settled isn't the right word, but he was here when she gave up, when she finally realized that she had to get on with her life. When she realized that you weren't coming back anytime soon and Superman had left for Krypton."

"She knew I'd left for Krypton?"

"Didn't take a genius to figure that one out," Perry said. "The Planet publishes a supposedly reputable report that Krypton's been found and there might be life and the one Kryptonian on the planet disappears only a week later? Lois was in love, not brain-dead. First Clark breaks her heart by running away then Superman takes off without a word at the time she needed his help the most."

"I've already promised Lois that we'll try to work out something, at least for Jason's sake," Clark admitted. "At least I know it's possible. *They* managed it. But he's not the goof up I am."

"Clark, there's something else you ought to know," Perry told him. "Wells didn't want me to say anything yet since he's double checking the information he was sent and he's hoping it's wrong. But apparently the last confirmed sighting of Superman in this time-line occurred at the oil refinery fire yesterday. Wells is afraid the infection may have cost you and Jason your powers permanently."

Clark sighed. "That's just great. And Luthor's out there, plotting something and we have no idea what it could be."

"You know what to do, Kitty?" Luthor asked. The woman nodded, adjusting the nurse's hat perched on her dark hair.

"I know what to do, Lex," Kitty assured him. "Don't worry."

"Good," Luthor commented. "Baxter will go with you, just in case."

Luthor ran his thumb over the sharp edge of the kryptonite shard in his pocket - the shard that had been removed from Superman's back, the shard that still had the alien's blood on it. He'd gotten the piece from one of the hospital employees whose job was to clean up the examining rooms.

The last piece of the kryptonite meteorite Luthor had stolen from the Museum of Natural History was supposed to have been sent to STAR Labs for study, but no one seemed to have noticed it had gone missing. No one seemed to have noticed the employee had gone missing as

well. Luthor figured her body would wash up on the shore of Hobs Bay fairly soon and the police would assume she'd simply been raped and murdered - which she had been, after turning over the shard on the promise of ten thousand dollars cash.

"Have you got a fix on the alien?" Luthor asked Smith who was holding the alpha wave detector.

"He's somewhere above us, on one of the upper floors," Smith responded. He peered at the device in his hand then hit it with the heel of his free hand.

"Be careful with that," Luthor hissed.

"I've lost him," Smith announced.

"You've what?" Luthor glowered at him. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," Smith defended himself sourly. "Obviously he's stopped doing whatever it was he was doing that the detector was picking up."

"But he hasn't flown off?" Luthor demanded.

Smith shook his head. "He's in the building. But unless he does something to trigger the device, we're not going to find him."

"Then we'll just have to do something to bring him to us," Luthor said, checking his reflection in the plate glass. Of all his current collection of wigs he liked this brown curly one best. He pulled a pair of eyeglasses out of his pocket and put them on, smiling. "Show time. You all know what to do."

"I'll stop by and check on Lois and Jason," Perry announced as they got into the elevator. "You check on the baby, see what Jerome is up to."

"Yes, sir," Clark agreed.

The door opened on the ninth floor and Perry stepped out. The elevator doors closed behind him, leaving Clark alone. *Lois was mad at Superman because **Clark** disappeared? But she hadn't made the connection. She hadn't remembered that Clark was Superman, not really. It hadn't clicked. So...?*

His ruminations were cut short by the elevator doors hissing open. He stepped into the tenth floor lobby and over to the wide window that overlooked the newborn nursery. The other Superman was sitting bare-chested, holding a baby in his arms. He smiled when he caught sight of Clark, handing the baby to one of the nurses. He blurred into his shirt and cape before coming out into the main nursery.

"Nurse Marzollo," the brown-eyed Superman said to one of the nurses. "This is Clark Kent, the baby's father." 'Jerome' gave him an appraising look. "You're looking a lot better."

"Feeling a lot better," Clark admitted. "Still not a hundred percent, though."

"You didn't have the same thing she had, did you?" Marzollo asked suspiciously.

"Uh, no," Clark said. "She's too little for left-over Chinese take-out."

Marzollo grabbed the note board with the baby's records. "Miss Lane said the child's mother died during childbirth?"

"That's my understanding," Clark said. "I couldn't be there. We thought we had a little more time until the baby was due. Then things got complicated and Superman got involved."

Mazollo gave Jerome a curious look and he shrugged.

"Well, let's get a cell sample so we can do a paternity test," Mazollo said. "Once that's confirmed, we can get her a birth certificate."

Getting the swabs from the inside of his cheek took almost no time and he watched as Mazollo marked the samples for the lab and set them aside.

As soon as Mazollo was out of earshot. "How is she?"

"Much better," Jerome said quietly. "Oh, and I doubt you have to worry about the test - if it's the same as on my world, they'll stop when they get the complete blood type. Kryptonian is a little rare and we do have the same blood type... You said you weren't at one hundred percent?"

"The powers are gone," Clark admitted. "Wells told Perry it might be permanent since apparently Superman is never seen in this time-line again."

"Time is both fragile and strong," Jerome said. "So are the powers. And things do change."

Mazollo came back.

"Can I see her?" Clark asked the nurse.

"Right this way," she told him, taking his arm and leading him into the interior intensive care area. She looked back the man in the Superman suit. "And thank you for your help."

"Glad to be of service," Jerome said with a smile. Then he left the nursery and disappeared down the corridor.

Kitty and Baxter slipped through the side door and disappeared down the corridor, heading toward the main elevators.

Luthor followed them through the side door to a different elevator. Once at their destination, he headed to the main reception desk. The white uniformed woman looked up at Luthor curiously. "May I help you?"

Sheep. "I had a report that Superman was in the building," Luthor began, smiling at her disingenuously.

The woman shrugged. "A Superman impersonator came through earlier, but I haven't heard anything about Superman himself."

"You're sure it was an impersonator?" Luthor demanded.

"Well, yeah. The suit wasn't quite right and the fellow had brown eyes," the woman said. "I mean he was fit and kind of looked the part, but he certainly wasn't Superman."

"Interesting," Luthor murmured to himself. "Where did he go?"

"He was asking about the neonate ICU," she said. "So I assume that's where he went to visit."

"And the neonate ICU is on which floor?" Luthor asked.

"Tenth. But visiting hours don't start until seven."

"Who said we were visiting a patient?" Luthor asked, jerking his head to Smith. The other man sneered at the woman then went around the counter, grabbing her arm and pulling her out from behind the counter.

Luther looked around and spotted the security camera covering the main door and the reception area. "Not here," he hissed. "Bring her with us. You can have your fun later."

Smith shrugged and Luthor was gratified to see the terror in the young woman's face as Smith started toward the elevators with her in tow.

Kitty looked around the corridor. She smoothed her skirt and made herself look busy reading a patient chart as she and Baxter waited for the other people in the area to leave. She only recognized one of them - Lois Lane, the boy's mother. Lane called the younger man 'Richard,' and the older gray-haired man 'Perry.' Kitty didn't catch the name of the other dark-haired woman.

"No, I'll be okay," Lois was saying. "The doctor was saying he plans to have Jason moved to a regular room in a little bit, then he'll be able to have visitors. Assuming the tests turn out okay, I should be able to take him home tomorrow."

"Lois, you're sure you don't want me to stay with him so you can get some rest?" the younger man asked.

"I'm sure," Lois assured him, gently pushing him away.

"I can't believe she threw him over for somebody else," Kitty whispered to Baxter. "He's cute."

"Kitty, get with the program," Baxter warned. "The bitch is an alien lover and he found out and now she has some other poor sap on the line."

"He's still cute," Kitty stated.

In a few minutes Lois entered the ICU room. She was alone with the boy. Kitty and Baxter crossed the hallway to the glass-walled room.

"Miss Lane, we're here to take Jason over to the lab for some more tests," Kitty announced, turning off the various monitors and disconnecting the lines from Jason's body.

"Doctor Maher didn't mention taking Jason to the lab," Lois pointed out.

Kitty unlatched the side rail and lowered it. Then she bundled Jason into one of the blankets. "Oh, Doctor Maher didn't order it," Kitty told her. "Someone else did."

"Who?" Lois demanded. Kitty watched the other woman's eyes widen as she spotted the gun in Baxter's hand. Kitty was pretty sure she'd been made as well.

"Well, if you come along quietly, you'll find out," Kitty promised. "Otherwise..."

"You can't honestly believe you and Luthor can get away with this," Lois protested. "Kidnapping is a federal offence."

"All we want are some blood and tissue samples," Kitty told her. "If you want to come along, I promise you won't get hurt. Otherwise, he'll just shoot you and we'll take the boy anyway."

"Mommy," Jason wailed.

"I'm right here, baby," Lois assured her son. She glared at Kitty and Baxter. "I won't let them hurt you."

Mazollo handed Clark a surgical gown to put over his clothes then sat him in the rocking chair. The baby still had several monitors attached to her and Mazollo took care not to disturb them as she handed her tiny charge to over to him.

"She's quite a fighter," Mazollo commented.

"Yeah, she is... Do you have any idea what made her sick like that?" Clark asked.

Mazollo shrugged. "As far as I know the lab hasn't come up with anything aside from it being a virus of some kind, but sometimes it takes them a while. But that medicine Superman brought for her seems to have done the trick. Plus having him here... I don't remember reading anything about him being able to do that."

"I'm sure it's something he just found out," Clark told her. "I'm also sure it's something he'd rather not have spread around."

"He did say it didn't always work," Mazollo admitted. "Maybe it's better not to get people's hopes up... He must be a pretty good friend of yours then, to risk letting people know about it."

"Yeah, I guess he is," Clark admitted slowly. "My partner and I do a lot of writing about him and we're pretty good at getting interviews out of him."

"Your partner?"

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet?" Clark explained. "She's my writing partner."

Mazollo checked the clock on the wall as another nurse walked in. "Shift change. I've got to brief the next shift."

"Look, please don't mention *him* being here."

"I won't," she promised then headed toward the newcomers.

Clark settled back to watch the small being in his arms. He hadn't really studied her very closely before. Her eyes were dark and almond shaped. Her hair was also dark and straight. She was so small. He hadn't really noticed how small she was earlier.

"Hello Esperanza," he said. She seemed to try to focus on his face, her mouth making a little 'O'.

"You've had a pretty rough time of it. First your mom dies then you get sick," he continued softly. "But everything's gonna be okay now. You're gonna like it here. There're all sorts of people, and there's green grass and trees and blue sky and cities and forests and farms. I don't know if you're going to grow up to be super, but you have a big brother named Jason... He's all excited about being a big brother, too. You have a grandma in Kansas, even though she's moving to Montana pretty soon... Last week she thought she'd never see any grandbabies and now she has two..."

The ID band Marzollo had put on his wrist caught on the blanket and he peered at it in bemusement. 'Kent, Clark.' It matched the ID band around Esperanza's ankle, identifying him as her parent. "And I guess I'm your daddy. At least that's Lois has decided. We certainly couldn't leave you there. I've never been anybody's daddy before, so we're going to have to work through this together..."

He watched the new shift of nurses go through their paces, checking on their charges, wheeling some of them out to their mothers. Soon he was going to have to give Esperanza back to the nursery nurses and get to work. He had only been back at the Daily Planet for a week and wasn't qualified to take parental leave yet and he couldn't afford to take time off without pay.

"We'll get this figured out," he promised. She yawned.

The door to the main nursery opened and a stocky man with curly brown hair and glasses walked in accompanied by a shorter man with close-cropped hair and flat, cold eyes. Both were wearing white orderly uniforms. The short man was reading something off of what looked like a PDA. The taller man appeared annoyed at whatever the short man was saying.

There was something familiar about the taller man and Clark watched him, trying to identify him. The taller man spoke to one of the nurses who shook her head, then nodded toward the intensive care nursery. The men started toward the glass door and the nurse stepped in front of them. The shorter man shoved her aside and Clark realized he had a gun tucked into his waistband. Clark had also placed the taller man - Lex Luthor.

Clark felt a frisson of fear run down his back as his heart sped up. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to fight down the panic he felt rising. Panic would do no one any good. He was human. He was defenseless.

Luthor opened the door and walked in, his eyes flicking over the small room, the equipment, and finally to Clark holding Esperanza. Clark was reminded of a snake, its tongue flicking about as it tasted the air.

"Where's the flying freak?" Luthor demanded.

"I beg your pardon?" Clark stammered out. That was the last question he'd expected to

hear out of Luthor.

"Superman," Luthor hissed. "He was here. Where is he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Clark managed to get out. Esperanza was starting to fuss, her tiny face screwing up in distress or pain. "Superman hasn't been here. I saw a Superman impersonator, but not Superman."

Luthor took a step forward and Clark felt burning in the wound on his back and in his joints and temples. *Kryptonite*. The baby began to scream and Clark was sure it was pain. He put her up to his shoulder, carefully supporting her head as he patted her back and cooed in attempt to calm her, even a little bit.

"Shut the brat up!" the shorter man yelled.

"And what do you suggest?" Clark yelled back. "I don't know where the hell Superman is and my daughter is sick. So kindly get the hell out of here and leave me alone. I can't help you."

"Can't or won't, Kent?" Luthor asked, stepping closer. The pain in Clark's head and joints got worse, but he realized it wasn't so bad that he couldn't stand. With any luck Luthor wouldn't notice his discomfort or would attribute it to the baby's wails.

"Can't," Clark stated as firmly as he could.

"I think you're wrong," Luthor said taking the PDA device from the shorter man. The other man grabbed Clark's arm and he felt the muzzle of a gun in his side. "Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. You come along quietly and I keep my associate here from shooting this place up." Luthor made a show of looking around the small room. "I don't think this equipment would take kindly to bullets. Neither would the bassinets."

"You are a monstrous, sick old man, Luthor," Clark said, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

Luthor chuckled. "So I've been told." He jerked his head toward the door. "Come on. And bring your brat with you."

With a sigh of resignation, Clark shrugged away from the hand of Luthor's 'associate' and removed the various sensors from the baby's body. He wrapped her in the blanket, hoping it would be enough. Then he followed Luthor out of the inner room and then out of the neonate nursery to the elevators.

"You know the police are probably already downstairs, don't you?" Clark told them.

The doors to one of the elevators slid open and Luthor ushered Clark through, following at his heels. Clark went to the far back of the elevator car, leaning against the back wall. The feeling of weakness wasn't as bad as usual from kryptonite poisoning and he wondered a little at that, although he did feel beads of cold sweat breaking out on his forehead and back.

Luthor nodded to his associate, who pushed the stop button on the elevator control panel then pulled a multi-tool out of his pocket along with another, different, PDA looking device. He opened the panel and spent a few moments clipping wires and splicing them together before running wires to the PDA. He tapped a series of instructions into the device and the elevator began moving up.

"Wonderful, all this technology," the associate said. "The more complex the system, the easier it is to break."

Luthor turned to Clark. "Of course the police are downstairs. But we're not going down, are we?"

"What do you want, Luthor?"

"What I've always wanted," Luthor said blandly. "Superman out of the way. He cost me

five years of my life. Five years I spent in a hellhole." Luthor's voice had gone distant, as though he was repeating something he'd memorized.

"And you cost him more than five years of his," Clark stated quietly. "I'd say you were even."

"You're not the one saying, are you?" Luthor spat. "Superman was at the hospital for whatever reason. And now he'll come to me."

"As far as I'm aware, the last time anyone saw Superman was at the refinery fire last night," Clark told him.

"Well, that's where you're wrong," Luthor stated. "This little black box detects alpha waves. Not the normal low-level ones from humans, but the ones Superman's muscle-bound brain puts out while he's flying or doing 'super' things. The little black box says Superman was flying around last night. *After* he was exposed to a little surprise I left for him at the refinery."

"What sort of surprise?" Clark asked as the elevator doors opened onto the small glass enclosed lobby that looked out onto the roof helipad. There was a helicopter sitting there, rotors lazily turning. The side door was open and Clark could see a woman in a white uniform sitting beside the door - Kitty Kowalski. Beyond her were other figures he couldn't make out in the shadows of the helicopter interior.

"Let's just say," Luthor said, pushing Clark ahead of him toward the helicopter. "I'm astonished he can still fly. But I promise he won't be for long."

Clark Jerome Kent had come out of the side entrance of the hospital in his street clothes. There were no cabs to be seen so he walked over to the Daily Planet building to meet up with Perry and his Lois. The city was a mess with collapsed buildings and boarded up windows. He hadn't paid much attention to the damage the night before - everything had appeared under control and he hadn't detected any life signs in the demolished structures. In the daylight it was obvious the city had been hit by a major earthquake.

The Daily Planet was in slightly better shape than many of the surrounding structures. The building was habitable although many windows were boarded up or covered with tarps, and many of the large decorative sculptures had been damaged. The ornate globe that should have been on top of the structure was missing, no doubt having fallen during the quake.

He paused at the entrance to this version of the newsroom. It wasn't quite the same as the one he'd left the day before, but there was a familial similarity to it. The flat screen monitors overhead, the maze of desks, the beehive busyness of people on the phones. The colors were lighter, more 'industrial.' In his own newsroom wood was favored over metal. The differences were simply part of the mystery of tripping the planes.

Jerome heard sirens in the near distance and debated with himself as to whether or not a visiting Superman would be welcome in the skies above Metropolis. It was rarely a problem when there was a close physical resemblance between himself and the resident Superman. It was much more problematical when it was obvious he wasn't the original.

His own world was well aware that Superman wasn't the only survivor of Krypton's demise. They knew that New Kryptonians occasionally visited Earth with the permission of Kal-El. They also knew that Earth's military forces were capable of defending them against rogue aliens. That wasn't true here and as much as it bothered him to ignore the cries of help, he needed to keep the illusion alive, for this world at least, that their Superman was the only one.

A young man with a boyish face wearing a sweater vest and bowtie noticed him in the

doorway. "Can I help you?"

"I'm waiting for Mister White," Jerome told him. "I'm Jerome Kent."

"Oh, I'm James Olsen, but nearly everybody calls me Jimmy," the young man introduced himself, shaking Jerome's hand enthusiastically. "Mister White hasn't come in yet, which is a little strange. Actually neither of them have come in yet..." He stopped and gave Jerome a curious look. "Kent? You wouldn't be related to CK, would you? Clark Kent? He's one of our reporters... and he hasn't come in yet either..."

"We're related," Jerome confirmed with a smile.

"Oh, wow," Jimmy said. "I didn't know he had any relatives besides his mom."

Jerome shrugged and smiled noncommittally as he followed the younger man through the newsroom to what had to be the editor's office.

"I guess you can wait for Mister White in here," Jimmy said, opening the door to the office.

"Actually, if you have a computer terminal where I could log on as a guest, I have some research I need to get started on for Clark," Jerome told him.

Jimmy's face screwed up in thought. "There's a free terminal in the conference room," he said finally. "But I don't know the login or password."

"I'll see what I can do until Mister White gets here," Jerome said, following the young man to the conference room next to the editor's office

He sat down at the computer in the corner of the room and checked the underside of the key board. *Some things never change.* A slip of paper with the login and password was taped to the bottom of the keyboard. He logged on and began searching.

Richard and 'Joanne' drove out of the hospital parking garage in Richard's Passat. Earlier, Richard had taken a cab to Perry's house to pick up his car. Perry was taking his own car to the Planet.

"So, how long have you two been married?" Richard began conversationally.

"Ten years," Joanne answered. "We have four kids."

She was interrupted by the sound of sirens as several police cars and a police van sped down the street toward the hospital.

"That was the SWAT team," Richard said, suddenly worried. "Something big's going down... Hold on." He threw the steering wheel over hard, crossing two lanes to turn at the intersection. Other drivers wailed on their horns in protest but he ignored them. Another block and they were heading back, parallel to the route taken by the police team. He pulled the car into the nearest parking garage then headed toward the action at a run, pausing only long enough for Joanne to catch up.

"Richard White, Daily Planet," he announced himself, holding out his press pass to the officers who had taken position behind their cars. They were watching the main entrance of the hospital. Other Kevlar-vested officers were inside the building. Richard spotted someone he recognized, a hard-looking woman with close cropped auburn hair. "Maggie!" he called out.

The woman saw him and waved him over.

"What's going on?" Richard asked.

"Hospital security called us," Maggie Sawyer told him. "Possible hostage situation, possible kidnapping."

"Do we know anything?" Richard asked.

Maggie gave him a look he couldn't quite identify, part worry, and part something else.

"All we know so far is four people came into the building from the roof," she told him, keeping her gruff voice low. "One of the reception people is missing and so are two kids and their parents. The kids were taken from intensive care. One from pediatrics, the other from the newborn nursery."

Richard felt his blood go cold and his stomach started doing flip-flops. "You're sure?" he asked, hoping against all odds she wouldn't confirm his worst fears.

"Jason White and his mother, Esperanza Kent and her father," Maggie told him. It was as if the world had stopped as the cold wave of fear washed over him. "Witnesses say they were taken at gunpoint." Maggie looked over at Richard and this time he recognized the look - pity. "We're doing everything humanly possible," she assured him. "Pity the Boy Scout hasn't shown up. He could probably take care of the problem without breaking into a sweat."

"Not if the perps are working for who we think they are," Joanne commented.

Maggie gave her a curious look. "And who is that?"

"Lex Luthor. We have reason to believe he's in Metropolis, and he's after Lois and Jason," Richard told her. "If we're right, then this is part of a plan to take out Superman."

There was the sound of the helicopter overhead and all three of them looked up to see what was happening. Richard had excellent eyesight and spotted a white helicopter with a red cross on the side, but no other markings that he could see.

Maggie started swearing. "That damned thing was supposed to have been secured!" The radio that was secured to the front of her vest squawked and she pressed the receive button on its face. "Yes?"

"We found the receptionist, Captain," a man's voice reported. "She's dead."

Maggie turned to Richard. "Tell me everything you know about this."

Perry strode across the newsroom, ignoring Jimmy and several others as they tried to catch his attention. He spotted Jerome in the conference room and veered off to go there instead of his office.

Jerome looked up at him from the computer as Perry closed the conference door behind him. "I just got a call from Richard," Perry announced. "Those sirens belonged to the Special Crimes Unit responding to a kidnapping and murder at Metropolis General. Somebody grabbed Lois, Clark and the two kids at gunpoint, and killed one of the reception people. The police are chasing the helicopter they were supposedly taken off in."

"Oh, this just keeps getting better," Jerome commented sarcastically. "I just got off the phone with Wells. His contacts with the Peace Keepers finally tracked down some of the information we needed."

"And?" Perry prompted.

Jerome took a deep breath before continuing. "According to what they've found - and apparently this comes from the time-line just adjacent to this one which should be very similar to this one - the skew began when your Lois and Clark disappeared for three days. Originally, they didn't disappear and Richard White stayed in Metropolis. In fact, he and Lois ended up getting married. Your Superman was injured or poisoned at the refinery fire and was missing for nearly three months. But Clark Kent was at work during that time. In fact he won a Pulitzer for his investigation into government malfeasance in regards to their response following the near destruction of Metropolis at the hands of Lex Luthor."

"So, what happened to change things so much?" Perry asked.

"As near as I can tell, the fact that Lois and Clark were gone allowed Luthor a couple

extra days to put together whatever he had planned," Jerome said. "Originally, Luthor and the woman with him were caught by Superman two days *before* the refinery fire. Superman handed Luthor over to the government of Ghana and he died there."

"So, how does it get put back the way it's supposed to be?" Perry asked.

"It doesn't," Jerome answered. "In my time-line, I was originally out of the game for several months as well, following an assassination attempt. My youngest daughter was murdered that same night by someone who wanted my entire family out of the way. Believe me Mister White I will do *anything* to protect my family."

Jimmy knocked on the door to the conference room, then stuck his head in. "Uh, Chief, it's all over the WGBS that the chopper the cops were chasing was forced down."

"And?" Perry demanded.

"And the only people on the chopper were the pilot and a woman the police are identifying as Katherine Kowalski," Jimmy reported. "She's the one Lois said was working with Luthor."

"So where are Lois and Clark and the kids?" Perry wondered aloud.

"Rats hide in holes," Jerome commented. "And this one doesn't want Superman to find him." He turned to Jimmy still standing in the doorway. "We need a list of the bomb shelters, places Luthor has been known to hide out, sewers, subway side tunnels, places like that, within Metropolis."

"Okay, I'll get research on it," Jimmy promised, heading back to the newsroom.

"And then what?" Perry asked.

"And then we figure out how to neutralize this version of Luthor and get your people back safely."

Luthor had urged Clark toward the waiting helicopter on the roof of the hospital then stopped. The baby was still wailing and Clark was trying to shield her from Luthor and the kryptonite. Clark couldn't remember ever feeling so powerless, not from his super powers being gone, or even being a prisoner of Lex Luthor, but that he could do nothing to comfort a tiny baby.

Luthor kept eyeing him suspiciously and Clark knew he was wondering why Clark was looking so ill. Clark put on his most innocently pathetic face. "I ate something that disagreed with me last night," he told the villain, who only seemed slightly mollified.

Luthor grunted and guided Clark around the back of the helicopter. "Watch him," he ordered Smith then he stepped closer to the open door of the copter. "Heads up everybody!" Luthor shouted. "There's been a change in plans. Kitty, you and Joe there get this thing as far away from here as possible, as fast as possible." He looked straight at the pilot. "There'll be a bonus in it for you." He turned to Baxter and Lois. "Out," Luthor ordered.

Baxter climbed out of the helicopter, not bothering to help Lois with her blanket wrapped burden. Clark stepped forward to help her, shrugging off Smith's hand on his arm and giving him a foul glare. Clark watched as Smith gave Luthor a questioning look and shrugged.

"It's nice to know chivalry isn't dead," Luthor said with a dark chuckle. "Misplaced perhaps, but not dead."

Clark ignored him, taking Jason from Lois's arms and handing her the baby instead. Without his powers, Jason actually felt a little on the heavy side. "Are you okay?" he asked Lois, keeping his voice low.

"So far," Lois told him.

"Hey, no talking, you two," Baxter warned, waving his gun around.

Wordlessly, Clark helped Lois out of the helicopter with his free hand. Then they followed Luthor through the open door on the far side of the roof. Clark hoped the sardonic grin Luthor gave them didn't mean things were going to get worse soon.

Lois took his hand as they started down the stairs and he stopped abruptly, startled at what he sensed. *'What?'*

It was Lois's mental voice in his head. He'd thought that he'd lost that power too when everything else went, although the telepathy seemed to be touch-based at the moment. Or maybe there was something with the physics of this reality that made his powers, especially the telepathy, work a little differently. Clark already suspected he reacted differently to kryptonite than the other Clark did.

'It's going to be okay, ' he promised before letting go of her hand. Outside he heard the helicopter rev up its rotors and take off.

Behind him the goon called Smith was peering at the black PDA and frowning. "Boss, I just picked up a spike."

"Blue Boy's on the move?" Luthor asked.

Smith shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Let me know if it happens again," Luthor ordered.

Jimmy brought in the research in record time. "I've also got Penny putting together everything we know about Lex Luthor - his modus operandi, financials, real estate, relatives," he told them as Perry took the maps from him and spread them over the conference table.

Richard and Joanne walked into the conference room. Perry noted how worn out they both looked. He knew Richard had little sleep last night and he doubted Joanne had slept at all.

"Kowalski gave the police the location of Luthor's latest hideout," Richard told them. "An abandoned underground train station."

"Isn't that where Luthor was hiding when he hijacked those missiles and tried to take out California eight, nine years ago?" Jimmy asked. Richard shrugged and Perry saw the blank looks of incredulity on both Jerome and Joanne's faces.

"I think you're right, Olsen," Perry agreed, suppressing a chuckle.

Jimmy was watching Jerome and Joanne, a puzzled look on his boyish face. "You guys don't know about the nuke Luthor set off on the San Andreas? I mean Superman practically had to knit the fault back together to keep everything from falling into the ocean," Jimmy said in obvious disbelief. "Where are you guys from?"

"Never mind, Olsen," Perry ordered. "Go see where Penny is on the rest of that research."

With one last look of disbelief, Jimmy left the conference room, closing the door behind him.

"How the devil did Lex Luthor manage to nuke California?" Joanne asked, looking from Perry to Richard then back again.

"The air force was testing a new missile control system," Perry said. "Somehow, Luthor and his gang managed to put live warheads in the missiles being used and reprogrammed them during the test. One ended up being aimed at New Jersey, the other at the San Andreas. Superman was able to dump the east-bound one into space but the California one went off. Set off a major earthquake, but Superman was able to minimize it, somehow."

"And this madman was just allowed to walk the street?" Joanne asked. "Wasn't there

enough room at Belle Reve or Arkham?"

"Luthor has a talent for escaping justice," Richard told them. "Believe me, he should never have gotten out of prison after being given of two consecutive life sentences without parole, but he managed it. By the time the DOJ got wind that he'd co-opted a federal judge, he was home free and had access to the Vanderworth fortune."

"So, what's this one's beef with Superman?" Jerome asked.

"That depends on who you ask," Perry answered. "According to the people with him when he hijacked the missiles, he was ranting on that Superman was the perfect adversary to prove himself against, but that his superior intellect should have carried the day. Superman stole his glory and that simply wasn't to be tolerated. But, according to the manifestoes Luthor used to send to all the major newspapers, the Planet included, Superman was supposed to be the front man for an invasion and was just lulling us poor stupid humans into a false sense of security. Luthor, with his genius insight, was the only one who wasn't fooled."

"I don't remember ever reading anything like that," Richard said.

"The only paper in the country that bothered to publish them was the National Inquisitor," Perry told them. "And, as you no doubt remember, I refuse to have that rag in my house, not to mention my newsroom."

"At least it sounds like this Luthor's not pissed because Lois Lane chose Superman over him," Jerome said. "He's just pissed because Superman stopped him." Jerome studied the maps, pursing his lips. "Okay Luthor, where the devil are you hiding this time?"

"Pity Lois or Clark can't just call us and let us know where they are," Richard said. "I mean, there's a hundred possible places he could have them, and that's just the ones we know about. Unless you can pick up their heartbeats or something."

Perry watched Jerome's expression turn thoughtful. "I don't know either of them well enough for that, at least not in a city the size of this one. But maybe..."

"Clark, even at super-speed you can't possibly check out every one of these locations," 'Joanne' reminded him.

"No, I can't," Jerome agreed. "But I think I've been looking at this the wrong way. Luthor grabbed Lois and Clark and the kids because he figures he can force Superman to react. He *wants* Superman to find him but only under his terms."

"So he can spring his trap," Richard said.

"So, what will he do if Superman doesn't respond?" Jerome asked.

"He'll do something to make him respond," Perry answered. "Luthor will give directions to the trap knowing that Superman, *our* Superman, isn't devious enough to avoid it. He's a good kid. But he's still a kid."

"Uncle Perry, Clark's my age," Richard said.

"Um, he was in stasis for five or so years. He's at least five years younger than his driver's license says," Jerome said.

"Besides, from where I'm standing, he's a kid," Perry said, pointing a thumb in Jerome's direction.

Down several flights of stairs, across a darkened hallway to a pass key protected elevator which Smith made quick work of, down into a subbasement Lois never knew was beneath the hospital. The markings on the walls indicated it was an old bomb shelter.

Clark had carried Jason the entire way, but Lois could see that carrying the boy's weight was taking its toll on the tall man. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but Lois was sure Clark

was growing paler and there was a pained, pinched look in his face. The baby had exhausted herself and was now asleep, or unconscious in her arms.

Through a maze of access and utility tunnels to... Where? Here. Another subbasement, another bomb shelter, only this one looked like it had been recently refurbished. There was a microwave oven on the 'kitchen' counter and lab equipment she didn't recognize on a counter against the far wall.

Lois sank into the broken down sofa that was shoved against one water stained wall. Clark was close behind her, tripping over his own feet in exhaustion. Smith gave him a shove and he nearly fell, barely catching himself to avoid dropping Jason. Clark made his way to the sofa and dropped beside Lois.

"Smith," Luthor said conversationally. "There's no need to abuse our 'guests.' You can have your fun later."

Another man walked in from a side room. His expression was one of bored disinterest as he looked Lois and Clark over. He turned to Luthor. "Kowalski's singing like a bird to the cops," he said.

"Naturally," Luthor said. "And I have every faith that she will lead them on a merry chase." He turned to Smith who had walked over to the equipment counter and was hooking the black PDA up to one of the pieces of equipment. "Any sign of that flying busybody?"

Smith shook his head. "Not a peep," he said.

Lois leaned close to Clark. "He has a way to track Superman?" she murmured.

Clark nodded. "It tracks brainwaves that are supposed to be unique to him."

Luthor peered at the device then shrugged. "It looks like Superman isn't too interested in finding you or your bastard, Miss Lane."

"If you're expecting me to start screaming for him, forget it," Lois told him.

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to strain your voice, Lois," Luthor said smoothly. "There'll be time for that later." He jerked his head toward Clark and Jason. "Start getting the samples," he ordered.

Baxter and Smith started toward Clark, who tightened his grip on Jason and glared at the two men.

Lois's heart was beating like timpani in her chest. "Kitty told me you wouldn't hurt him," Lois stammered out.

Luthor seemed surprised. "Oh, did I forget to tell you? Miss Kowalski is a pathological liar. You can't believe a word she says, which I'm sure Metropolis's finest are finding out already."

Baxter and Smith started forward again.

"I won't let you hurt him," Clark stated. Lois could hear the tremor in his voice, but his expression was grimmer than she had ever seen it.

Luthor looked at him, eyes wide in mock astonishment. "I can't believe there's so much gallantry in this day and age. You know you're defending Superman's bastard, don't you? Granted, I never imagined until I heard what happened to the piano that Superman was a dead-beat dad. Who'd a' thunk it, that strait-laced holier than thou invading bastard was the love 'em and leave 'em type? Or has she convinced you the little murderous brat is yours?"

"I'm defending a helpless child who happens to be the son of a friend of mine," Clark stated. "As to whether Superman is his biological father or I am, or Richard is for that matter, that's our business and I'll thank you to stay out of it."

"You mean you still think there's a chance the little bastard is human?" Luthor asked

incredulously. "What was it, a ménage a trois? Or did the slut throw you over for the alien the way she threw him over for the boss's nephew? Or do you think you can get in her pants again by agreeing to raise the alien's bastard since her 'fiancé' won't do it?"

Clark just glared at him, holding on to Jason tightly enough the boy was starting to squirm in discomfort. Lois laid a hand on his leg and he calmed a little, but she saw tears running down his face and he was shivering.

"Oh, how positively touching. I so love the female of the species," Luthor commented. "Cold and mercenary, the lot of them." He turned to Smith and Baxter. "We'll do it later. Besides, it might be more interesting if we wait for 'daddy' to show up."

The ultrasonic whistle felt like it was going right through Jerome's head before resolving into a voice. "Superman, it's your old buddy Lex Luthor calling you on our own special frequency. I'm a little disappointed you haven't come looking for your girl friend and her kid. Did she tell you he was a murderer? Oh, and I have your buddy Kent and his brat too."

"Clark...?" Joanne was saying. He held his hand up to stop her so he could listen to the message, slowly rotating his head to get a bearing on the source of the sound.

"I'm going to leave this transmitter on so you can home in on it, Superman. But don't take too long. My associates... well, you know how hard it is to get good help and these guys... wait too long and I can't guarantee anybody's safety... So long, Superman."

Jerome straightened up and looked over at Perry. "You were right. Luthor couldn't resist telling Superman where to come for them. He's left a homing beacon. And he's warning Superman not to take too long."

"Only Superman's in no position to make an appearance," Richard said, saying aloud what Jerome knew everyone was thinking. "And there's no way you can pass yourself off as him."

"But what if you went in as someone else?" Joanne asked. "Undercover?"

"Supercop isn't going to cut it, sweetheart," Jerome told her.

"But Lord Nor might," Joanne said with a grin.

"Not Nor," Jerome corrected. "A name Clark would recognize, though... and I need a Kryptonian military uniform..."

"And we need to warn Clark," Joanne reminded him.

"Assuming we can," Jerome said. "I may end up hurting him."

"Is there a choice?" Perry asked.

Jerome shook his head. He didn't really want to try contacting his counterpart telepathically. New Kryptonians had taken the mental gift for granted, training their children into the ability from birth and looking down on anyone without it. Clark Jerome hadn't even known about it except on a subconscious level until he was twenty-nine. And he freely admitted he wasn't exactly skilled. He wasn't even sure if it would work in this universe.

He took a deep breath and cleared his mind, seeking out the one other Kryptonian on the planet. *There...*

'Jerome?'

'Clark, we have a plan. Stall...'

"Mister Luthor, there's another spike on the detector," Smith announced.

"Where?" Luthor demanded, his back to his prisoners.

"I don't know," Smith said. "It's not localized like when he's flying."

"Luthor," Clark began. "Did it ever occur to you that the reason Superman hasn't come

after us is that he's already down for the count? That maybe your little surprise at the refinery worked?"

"If you're right, which I seriously doubt, then who was it that was flying around last night?" Luthor demanded, turning to glare at Clark. He stopped suddenly, staring at the dark-haired man. "What's going on with you?"

Lois turned to stare at him. "Clark, your nose is bleeding."

He reached up and wiped away the blood from his upper lip. He stared at the sticky redness that had come off on his fingers. Lois reached into her purse and carefully pulled out a small packet of tissues. She handed the packet to him and he pulled out one sheet, wiping the blood from his face and hand.

"Luthor, what if what your gadget detected wasn't Superman, but something, someone, else?" Clark tried again.

Luthor's eyes narrowed. "You think there's another super alien on Earth?"

"Mister Luthor," Smith interrupted. "Whatever it is, it's on the move."

"Heading here?" Luthor demanded.

"Maybe..." Smith said. "I don't know... It's faded out. No wait... oh crap... it's right on top of us."

Luthor turned on Clark. "If that's not Superman, who the devil is it?"

Luthor stepped closer to Clark. More blood started running out of Clark's nose and he wiped at it, smearing more blood on his free hand. Lois grabbed another tissue and started daubing his upper lip.

"You know, don't you," Luthor stated glaring at his prisoners.

Clark nodded. "Lord General Zod." Lois saw Luthor's eyes widen. *Recognition?*

"Jor-El said that Zod was locked up in something called the Phantom Zone," Luthor said. Lois could hear the beginnings of panic in his voice.

"That's who he said he was," Clark told him. "He... he was looking for Jor-El's son. He, um, wants to meet the human who killed him..." Clark winced in obvious pain, his breath catching in his throat as he brought his free hand to his temple. Then, his eyes rolled up and he slumped over. Lois caught his shoulder, keeping him from falling over as Jason slid off his lap. She scooted off the sofa, easing Clark onto the cushions. His breathing was ragged and he was sweating.

"How... Zod has some sort of mental communication?" Luthor murmured, eyeing Lois.

All Lois could do was shrug. Seeing Clark passed out on the worn upholstery was running spears of terror through her. He was still breathing, but the nosebleeds were scaring her. She pulled Jason to her, one arm over his shoulder, her hand protectively on his chest. "I don't know. Superman never mentioned anything about it to me."

Luthor had stopped listening to her. "A Kryptonian super criminal, here on Earth... and he wants to meet me..." He pulled the kryptonite shard from his pocket and showed it to Lois. "That's Superman's blood," he said, indicating the dark brown spots on the crystal. "It tests out as human, until you look closely at it and you realize it isn't. It's alien."

"Wasn't that supposed to be sent to STAR Labs?" Lois asked.

"The hospital kind of 'lost' it," Baxter said with a smirk. "But how do you think we managed to put together the virus that killed your boyfriend?"

"Whatever it is, it's right outside," Smith warned.

"Open the door for him," Luthor ordered, hurriedly placing the crystal in a heavy fabric envelope and dropping it back into his pocket.

Baxter had just taken a step toward the metal door to the bomb shelter when there was the sharp sound of tearing metal and the door seemed to implode in on them. A tall hooded figure was standing in the doorway. Heavy gauntlets covered the hands and in the right hand the figure held a staff a little taller than it was with ornate metal caps on each end.

Behind the hooded figure stood a second one, this one clearly a woman dressed in black leathers and thigh-high boots. A woman Lois recognized - Lois Joanne Lane-Kent. Her expression was cold, imperious as she moved in front of the cloaked figure and entered the room. She stopped and looked around, her eyes finally lighting on Luthor.

"Kneel before your master, Lord Zod," she ordered, bringing the end of her own metal tipped staff down hard on the concrete floor. Luthor just stared at her and she swung the staff around, catching him at the knees, forcing him down. Wide-eyed in astonishment, the other three men followed suit. Clark was still lying on the sofa, eyes closed. Lois dropped to her knees as well holding the baby in one arm. She forced Jason down with the other.

"Mommy?" Jason whispered.

"Shh, honey," Lois said. "Just stay quiet and it'll be okay."

"No, no, you don't understand," Luthor was protesting, looking up at Joanne. "I'm on your side. Luthor's the name. Lex Luthor. Maybe you've heard of me... The greatest criminal mind on earth?"

"They never change," Joanne said turning to the cloaked figure. "Always bluster about nothing. He irritates me. Let me break his bones..."

"If it pleases you, my dear," a deep voice said. Lois knew that voice too. The cloaked figure pushed back the hood - Jerome, sporting a dark beard streaked with gray and gray sideburns. But there was no humor in his face. This was a man who exuded power, authority. His brown eyes were hard, cold and calculating. This was a man to be feared. He pulled off the heavy gloves and handed them to Joanne. Joanne tucked them into her broad metal studded belt.

Lois discovered her mouth had dried up and it was hard to swallow.

Luthor's eyes widened as Joanne took a step toward him. "Wait!" He smiled ingratiatingly. "Wait'll you get to know me better. Wait'll I give you exactly what you want... Unlimited freedom to kill, crush, maim, destroy - plus Lex Luthor's savvy. Lex Luthor's keen mind guiding your careers!"

"You have some interesting assumptions about us, but we have all of that without you. You cannot bargain with what you do not have..." Jerome stated. His tone was patronizing.

"With respect, your Magnificence, I am bargaining with what you do not have - the heir of Jor-El."

Jerome stared at him. "I have been informed that the Jor-El's heir is dead and that you killed him. Was that information in error?"

Luthor climbed to his feet, watching leather garbed couple warily. "Oh, no. Just incomplete. Kal-El, Jor-El's son, is dead and I killed him. But *his* son... Well, see that little lady over there was his mistress and the child with her is his son."

Joanne raised one eyebrow. "Are you saying you claim Kal-El's concubine and holdings on this world as right of victor?"

"Oh no. I wouldn't dream of it," Luthor protested. "Consider her a gift, your Excellency. A goodwill gesture, if you will."

Joanne peered at Lois through narrowed eyes. "What an undemanding male Jor-El's son must have been."

"My dear, be charitable," Jerome/Zod ordered. "Consider his options."

Joanne huffed audibly, but helped Lois to her feet, taking her by the arm and leading her to the sofa. Lois saw that Clark's eyes were open, watching the scene playing out in front of them. Clark managed to push himself upright, giving Lois and Jason room to sit. The baby's eyes were still closed, but she was breathing easier.

Jerome stood, watching Luthor. "You claim you killed the son of Jor-El. How?"

"I created a little virus that attacked the energy storage organelles in his cells," Luthor stated. "You see, your Immanence, your kind of people have a little problem with an element we call kryptonite - just a little bit of the old home planet." As he spoke he pulled the heavy fabric envelope from his pocket and began to open it.

Jerome's staff came down on his wrist. Luthor yelped in pain and dropped the envelope. He glowered at Joanne as she picked up the envelope and tucked it into a pocket in her tunic. The envelope was far heavier than its size would have indicated - lead-lined.

Luthor's henchmen got to their feet, eyes narrowed dangerously, guns in their hands. "Boss..." Smith began. He began to curse and Lois realized she could see heat waves coming off the gun barrels. Within moments, all three guns were on the floor and Luthor's men were blowing on their hands to cool them.

"Did you really think we were fools?" Jerome asked harshly, lifting Luthor off the ground by the neck.

"Lord Zod, I can help you..." Luthor choked out. "I know my way around... I even killed Superman for you..."

"The fact that such a cowardly animal claims to have taken the life of a member of a Kryptonian royal house disturbs me greatly," Jerome stated.

"Hey, around here we have a saying," Luthor gasped. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Jor-El said you were an enemy of Krypton, mass murderer, whole nine yards."

"Jor-El was a man of science, of peace. I am a warrior. *You* were misinformed," Jerome stated. He released his hand, allowing Luthor to drop to the ground gasping. "Where I come from, we have a different saying. 'Never trust a traitor'. You disgust me. You attack and vilify your betters. You claim to have murdered your world's protector and you wish to ingratiate yourself to me *after* you have robbed me of my ascension over the House of El? Pray tell me why I should not save your people the trouble of killing you?"

"Oh God," Baxter muttered.

"No, Zod," Jerome stated. There was a definite smirk on his face.

"Luthor isn't worth the effort," Clark said quietly.

Jerome looked to Lois. "And how say you? As mother of the heir to the House of El, you have the right to demand justice."

Lois was silent for a long moment. It wasn't that things were moving too fast, although she knew she wasn't seeing the whole picture, but rather she sensed that if she asked, Jerome might well be willing to kill Luthor right here and now. She gazed at Clark and saw the troubled expression in his eyes as he watched his counterpart.

"Clark's right. Luthor's not worth the effort," Lois stated. "And I'm sure Earth justice will suffice. We frown on kidnapping and murder."

"As you wish, milady," Jerome said with a tiny bow in her direction. He turned to say something to Joanne and suddenly Lois felt herself jerked off the sofa, a knife blade to her throat.

"Like hell I'm goin' back to prison..." Smith grated, pulling Lois toward Baxter and the

other man. "Do you know what they do to people like me?"

"I neither know, nor do I care," Jerome stated.

Lois felt the blade pressing harder against her skin. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a motion and suddenly Smith was shoved hard against her back, his hand loosening its grip on the knife. She grabbed his arm with one hand, jabbing her other elbow into his gut. Smith dropped and she turned to see Clark standing beside her, glaring at the other two of Luthor's henchmen.

"Don't even think about touching them," Clark hissed. He was shaking, fists clenched.

"Clark, it's okay," Lois told him, trying to calm him.

"No, it isn't," Clark told her.

"Sit. Down. Now," Jerome ordered, glaring at Clark.

"And if I don't?"

Jerome hefted the staff and Lois was suddenly fearful that Jerome was no longer simply playing the part of a Kryptonian warlord. Clark was glaring back at his counterpart, lips drawn thin in anger.

"Don't you hurt my daddy!" a very young angry voice yelled. Jason launched himself at Jerome. Joanne stepped forward and intercepted him, the momentum swinging her around. In the confusion, Smith managed to get to his feet, knife still in his hand. He lunged at Clark who caught Smith's knife hand by the wrist.

Lois watched as Clark's expression turned as implacable as Jerome's. *No doubts. No heart. No mercy. Just the kill.* It wasn't a side of Clark that she'd ever seen before and she wasn't sure if she liked it or not. It wasn't *Clark*.

Smith was down on the ground again, holding his wrist. His face was white with pain.

"It isn't broken," Jerome stated. Joanne pulled a packet of cable ties from one of her pockets and tossed them to Clark.

Luthor's eyes widened in sudden, horror-filled realization. "You're not Zod."

Richard watched as Maggie Sawyer checked her watch once more. "I should never have listened to you and your buddies," she muttered. "I should have sent in a negotiator. And what's with those get-ups, anyway?"

"Do you honestly think Luthor would negotiate with the cops when he's looking to kill Superman?" Richard asked. "If there's anyone on this planet capable of coming in under Luthor's radar, it'll be them."

"And how do you know them?" Maggie demanded.

"Like I told you before, Mags, it's complicated," Richard said. He looked back at the Special Crimes Unit team that had been assembled to backup Jerome and Joanne. He was there out of sufferance - Lois Lane's fiancé - even though he had admitted to Maggie that they were no longer engaged.

"Superman?" she had asked by way of an explanation.

"Jason's father, Clark Kent," Richard had replied.

"It's the quiet ones that sneak up on you," Maggie had commented. "Can't say it surprises me."

"It's always complicated with you people." She stopped, listening to the voice in her headset. "We have a signal... Let's go."

"You are *not* Zod. Who are you?" Luthor demanded, glaring at Jerome as he climbed to

his feet.

Joanne set Jason on his feet with the whispered instructions of "Run away as fast as you can." He ran.

She caught Lois's eye and jerked her head toward the open doorway. Lois looked over at Clark, who shook his head ever so slightly. Then Lois ran after Jason, baby Esperanza clutched in her arms.

"You're right," Jerome stated. "I am not General Zod. If I were, you would already be dead. He would not have taken kindly to your attack on a Kryptonian royal house, even if it was the House of El."

Clark had secured the other three men, lashing their hands behind their backs. He used the extra cable ties to secure them to the legs of the table that was set against the far wall. Then he started toward Luthor.

"Hey, we can work something out," Luthor began again. There was sweat running down the sides of his face. "I know where Kal-El's little home away from home is... I know things... I can give you the world."

"You cannot bargain with what you do not have," Jerome repeated.

Clark grabbed one of Luthor's arms and began to loop one of the cable ties around his wrist. Luthor tried to break away, grabbing for Joanne. Joanne backed away. Then she saw fear in his eyes as Clark's arm snaked around his neck. "Please give me reason why I should not break your neck right now?"

"Clark," Joanne spoke up. "You don't want to do this."

"On the contrary," Clark said softly. "There is nothing I want to do more."

"Clark, don't lower yourself to his level." It was Richard standing in the doorway, wearing a Kevlar vest and helmet. He had a black motorcycle helmet in his hand. Joanne knew the helmet was lined with foil - it was what kept Luthor from tracking Jerome until he wanted to be detected.

Maggie Sawyer was standing beside Richard. Other officers in battle dress were behind them.

Clark pulled his arm away from Luthor's neck and reached down to grab Luthor's other wrist, pulling the man's hand out of his jacket pocket. Joanne and Jerome moved aside to allow several officers enter the chamber to arrest and Mirandize Luthor's henchmen. Then Joanne saw Jerome's head swing around, eyes widening.

"Out!" he yelled, grabbing Clark and Joanne and shoving them both out the open doorway, knocking Richard and Maggie to the ground. Joanne felt the whoosh of air as Jerome flew back into the room, the hood of the cloak covering his head. She saw him grab the three police officers as the roof started to cave in on them. Then, he and the officers were standing in the doorway, pulling Maggie and Richard to their feet.

"Run!" he ordered. Joanne didn't need a second warning. She grabbed Clark's arm and ran hard, hoping the SCU team was following.

"What the hell just happened?" Maggie demanded as soon as they were on the street outside the Wincote building.

Jerome didn't speak but gestured for Joanne to take the heavy cloak off his shoulders. The cloak was covered in green and gray dust. Kryptonite? She eased the cloak away from him, folding it so that the dust remained inside the material as she took it off him.

"Are you okay?" she asked. He nodded and she saw that he was holding his breath. She hurried it away from him and she heard him take a deep breath.

"The lead surrounding the bomb limited my exposure," Jerome explained. "I was damn lucky."

Joanne took the cape over to the officer manning the SCU van. "This will need to be cleaned," she told him as she handed it to him.

"What the devil is this made from?" he asked, hefting it in his arms. Joanne knew it weighed well over fifty pounds.

"It's a new experimental fabric," she told him. "Radiation proof and bullet proof. It's for Superman. Sometimes *he's* the one who needs rescuing." She grinned at his astonished expression then undid her leather belt and unclipped the miniature transmitter that had been hidden inside. She handed that to him as well then turned to make her way back to her husband.

"Luthor set off the second part of his trap for Superman," Jerome was explaining to Maggie and several others, including Lois, Clark, and Richard. "A bomb laced with kryptonite hidden inside the lead lining of the chamber. The trigger must have been the little LED thingy he had on his key chain."

"Could we be so lucky that he got caught in his own trap?" Lois asked.

"I doubt it," Clark answered her question. "Rats always have bolt-holes and Luthor's no exception. I should have killed him while I had the chance."

"Believe me, you don't want to darken your soul that way," Jerome said softly. "He'll be caught and brought to justice. In the meantime, we still have things to do."

Clark gave Jerome a speculative look. "Such as?"

"Getting you and Lois and the kids checked out, and then seeing what we can do about that little virus Luthor cooked up to take out Superman," Joanne said.

"I'm okay," Clark insisted.

"No, you're not," Lois contradicted, looking into his eyes. "You're coming with me and the kids to the hospital. No arguments." She grabbed his arm and led him away toward the waiting ambulance.

"I just want to thank you for helping out, for getting Lois and Jason out of there," Richard began. "And Clark and the baby, of course."

"Richard, I know it doesn't look..." Joanne started.

"No, don't," Richard said. "I broke it off. I realized that although I'm sure she loves me, she isn't *in* love with me. She never was. And as much as I love her, I'll never be number one in her life, or even number two, and that's not fair to any of us."

"Richard, do yourself a favor and don't walk out on Jason," Jerome told him. "Just remember that it doesn't matter who his biological parents are, he's still your son too."

"You sound like my Uncle Perry," Richard commented.

Jerome chuckled. "Perry's a wise man. You'd do well to listen to him."

Maggie stood watching them. She cleared her throat to get Jerome's attention. "I'll catch up to Lane and Kent later and get their statements. But now you can tell me what happened in there."

"I assume you have recordings from the wire my wife was wearing," Jerome said.

"Yeah. Luthor was talking about having *killed* Superman," Maggie told him. "Some sort of bio-weapon. He was also saying Lane's little boy is Superman's kid?"

"Jason Lane, or White or whatever, is Clark Kent's son and a paternity test will prove it," Joanne told her. "Besides, Luthor is nuts. A couple parlor tricks and he thought Jerome was a Kryptonian warlord."

Maggie just shook her head, but Joanne couldn't tell if it was from disbelief or something else. "Come down to my office after you've gotten yourselves into some proper clothes and we'll get your statement." She glanced at the rescue workers who were coming out of the building shaking their heads. "Pity that killing his own people won't stop him from putting together another gang."

"At least you know he's still in the city," Jerome reminded her.

"Oh yeah, Luthor's in the city, but where's Superman?" Maggie asked.

"I'm sure he's around," Jerome assured her. "And even if he isn't, Metropolis got by without him."

"Sure we got by, but it's kinda' like having a man around the house," Maggie said with more than a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "We don't need him, but sometimes he's nice to have around."

Lois stood with Clark and Jason in the examining room as they waited for the doctors to finish checking over a screaming Esperanza. Lois and Jason had already gotten clean bills of health - despite Jason having been kidnapped from the ICU. Lois had been given a recommendation to take some time off and get some sleep. She'd been going for nearly forty-eight hours straight and hospital coffee wasn't helping. *I'm just not as young as I used to be.*

Clark had simply refused to be examined.

"Clark, please be reasonable. Nosebleeds are not normal," Lois found herself saying.

"I have an idea about that," Clark told her, keeping his voice pitched low. "It happened when Luthor had the crystal out. It was making me sick and then Jerome made contact. He had no way of knowing what was happening with me. I didn't tell him and I think he pushed too hard."

"Are you really okay?"

"I'm okay. Not super, but okay," Clark told her.

The doctor who was examining the baby turned to Clark. "She's got a good set of lungs, I'll tell you that. But aside from being hungry, wet, and annoyed as all get out, she's a perfectly healthy baby girl." One of the nurses picked her up and handed her to Clark.

"You're sure?" Clark asked.

"Positive," the doctor said. "But there is a flag on her chart. Doctor Banks up in genetic counseling would like you to stop by her office."

"You're sure you're okay?" Lois insisted. She was carrying Esperanza again. A bottle of formula had calmed the baby and she was now asleep, finally. Clark had Jason on one hip. The hospital had managed to locate Jason's clothes and he was now dressed in something more than the loose hospital pajamas he'd been wearing.

"I'm fine, really," Clark told her. "I should probably be dead, except I think Luthor miscalculated. He thought the virus would be virulent enough to kill."

"Lucky he was wrong," Lois said. "You worried me, you know. I saw your face when that thug came at you. It was like when Jerome was fighting the assassin. No emotion, no nothing. It wasn't you."

"If it wasn't me, then who was it?" Clark asked.

"Maybe I misspoke," Lois said, her voice low as she picked through her words. "All this time I thought I had you pegged. The farm boy in the big city. It has occurred to me that the

reason I didn't make the connection was that I couldn't see you outside of that box I put you in. Even when I knew that you had that other job, the one in the blue suit, I couldn't see you outside of the boxes. The one where Clark Kent is an old-fashioned, nerdy fellow who shouldn't be out on the streets without a keeper and the other one. The one that does impossible things every day."

"And now?"

"And now, I'm not so sure," she admitted.

They arrived at Doctor Banks's office. The door was open and Clark stuck his head in. "Doctor Banks?"

A dark skinned woman with gray hair looked up from a cluttered desk. "Yes?"

"I'm Clark Kent. You flagged Esperanza Kent's chart?"

"Yes, come in," the woman urged. "Take a seat." She typed a command into her computer and then rummaged around the top of her desk for a file. "A request went through last night for a paternity test for you and a female infant prior to issuing a birth certificate for the child."

"Yes, but I thought those tests took more than a week to process," Clark said, settling into one of the two chairs that faced the desk. Lois took the other one.

"The full analysis takes a few days, but we already have some preliminary results. You happen to have a very rare blood type, and so does the baby. In fact, your blood type is rare enough you should consider banking some blood," Doctor Banks told them. She handed Clark a business card. "That's for a blood bank," she explained. "But, given that Superman publicly stated that the child is yours, and the rareness of your blood type, I'm quite confident that you are in fact the child's father."

"So there shouldn't be a problem getting her birth certificate?" Lois asked.

Banks nodded, looking to Clark. "Unless something completely unexpected shows up in the DNA tests, and I seriously doubt it will, you're a daddy."

"You're sure there's nothing else you want to add?" Maggie demanded. Jerome and Joanne were wearing their street clothes again and looked far less intimidating and bizarre.

"Captain, you have the recording off the wire my wife was wearing and we've both told you what we observed," Jerome told her. "We've also told you that I seriously doubt we'll be around to be called to testify at Luthor's trial, once you catch him."

"But you won't tell me where you'll be?" Maggie stated. Jerome shrugged. "Who are you, really? Your ID wasn't issued by the state of New Troy, even though it looks damned authentic."

"It is authentic," Joanne stated. "But I doubt you'll believe the explanation."

"That Metropolis is a city in the Twilight Zone?" Maggie said with a sardonic grin. "Yeah, I believe it. Heck, we've got an alien who flies hanging out here. Once you buy that, you'll buy anything."

"I'm sorry we can't be of more help," Jerome said, getting to his feet.

"Just tell me one more thing," Maggie said, getting up from her desk. "Is Superman okay?"

"I honestly don't know," Jerome told her. "I'm reasonably certain he *will* be okay. But I don't know how long it will take."

"So be prepared for anything?"

"That's always a good bet, Captain," Joanne said.

"How much of the clumsy nerd is an act?" Lois asked as they got into her car in the hospital parking garage.

"Probably less than you think," he said. He sighed. "I try so hard not to be too 'different' at work I tend to over-compensate. Sometimes it's even fun, in a perverse sort of way."

It was Lois's turn to sigh. "Richard is going to Paris with Penny because he thinks I chose you over him. He thinks I chose Jason's father over Jason's daddy."

"Have you?"

"Eight years ago, I fell in love with an illusion, a character, someone who wasn't real," Lois said, staring off into space. "He was bigger than life and unobtainable. He was safe. He knew who I was and I knew that he knew I was his biggest fan and I knew that no matter how hard I wanted it, how much I tried, he would never be anything other than perfectly out of reach."

"And then?"

"And then I discovered that he wasn't out of reach," she said. "I also discovered he had fallen for me, too. I was delighted. Prince Charming was real and he had a palace. He could give me anything. But I didn't know him."

"Lois, I'm not sure where you're..."

"I'm saying that maybe Jason isn't all wrong when he pointed out that a kid needs his father around. And you still need a place to live. And it will be a lot easier for you to do that other job if you have somebody around to help with Esperanza," Lois said. "I'm also saying that we have some things to work out and we shouldn't rush into it. I said I was in love with all of you and I meant it. I just need to get to know you."

"I just hope I'm not too disappointing," he said softly. "Lois, what happens if Luthor wasn't wrong? What happens if he really did kill Superman?"

"Then, Clark Kent will still be the second best reporter on the Planet," Lois said.

"But I won't be..." his voice trailed off.

"Clark, you know what your biggest problem is?" Lois asked, raising one eyebrow at him.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

She chuckled then allowed her expression to become pensive. "You're so concerned about the other person that you don't consider what *you* want, what *you* need."

"I did that six years ago and look what it got me," Clark reminded her.

"It got you me," she reminded him. "And it got you a son."

"And it got me nearly six years missing out of my life."

"So maybe now's a good time to start making up for lost time," she told him.

Richard, Jerome, Joanne and an older man Lois assumed was H.G. Wells were all waiting at the riverside house when she, Clark and the two kids rolled in.

"The kids check out as okay, and the preliminary tests show that Clark really is Esperanza's father," Lois announced as she walked in.

"That's great," Richard told her. Lois noted the suitcase sitting on the floor beside him. He followed her gaze and gave her an embarrassed smile. "I figured it might be better if I moved out now, instead of waiting. Then you and Clark can figure out what you both want to do."

"Where will you be?" Lois asked.

"The downtown Hilton," Richard told her, picking up his suitcase. "Penny offered to put me up, but it wouldn't look right. I'll call you later and we'll work out me taking Jason to the

zoo tomorrow." He ruffled Jason's hair. "You be good, kiddo. I'll see you tomorrow." He started for the door.

"Richard?" Lois said. He stopped and looked back at her. "I know it sounds weird, especially right now, but I think you and Penny can be very happy together."

"You mean that?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Lois assured him. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Richard nodded then walked out. Jason watched after him. "Daddy's leaving?"

"He'll be back, Jason," Clark told him crouching down to be on his level. "I'm sure of it. And remember, you have two daddies now and they both love you very much. But, right now the grownups need to talk and you've had a hard night, so why don't you run upstairs and take a nap?"

Jason looked over to his mother for confirmation and she nodded her head. He pouted, but headed up the stairs anyway.

"So, what's going on?" Clark asked. "Is everything going to be okay?"

Wells looked surprised at the question. "Oh, yes, quite," he stammered. "The future is pretty much back to the way it was originally. Before the tempocane messed things up. In fact, I suspect things may be even better than they were."

"And my powers? Luthor is still loose, you know."

"Ah, yes..." Wells began.

Jerome shook his head and Wells snapped his mouth shut. "Originally, Luthor's virus took away your powers for several months, and you recovered with no other ill-effects," Jerome explained. "But the baby was infected with a New Kryptonian virus. When she was brought over here, you and Jason were also infected. Jason survived, being half-human but you and the baby died. That left Luthor free to do whatever he wanted."

"But they're not dead," Lois reminded them.

"Very true. Like I explained before, Lois and I tend to get called in when things like this happen," Jerome said with a wry smile. "The drugs we brought with us were not available in this universe - although you might want to check with your AI. It might have some information on them. But, just keeping you from dying wasn't enough. Luthor still had to be neutralized. My Lois and I managed to do that, with some help from you, the Daily Planet, and the MPD. I make a fairly convincing New Kryptonian, if I say so myself."

"So now the future is safe?" Lois asked.

"The future is never completely 'safe'," Wells told her. "But the damage this incident created has been repaired."

"So, what happens now?" Clark asked.

Joanne chuckled. "Now we all get on with our lives."

Wells started keying instructions into the 'PDA' in his hand.

"But, will we see you again?" Lois asked.

"Who knows?" Jerome said as Wells pressed one last button. The three shimmered and wavered, then vanished.

Lois put her arm around Clark's waist, pulling herself close to him. He put his arm around her.

"Luthor's still out there," he reminded her.

"But Lane and Kent will find him, and take him out," she promised.

Epilogue

The living room was exactly as they had left it. The carpet was torn up, the furniture shoved against the walls, waiting for the workmen to come and install the hardwood floors.

Martha came out of the kitchen, drying her hands. "I thought you were leaving to help the other Lois and Clark," she said.

"We did..." Clark Jerome Kent said. Then he looked over at the digital clock on the credenza. They'd only been gone five minutes. He gave Wells a curious look.

The older man shrugged. "I wasn't sure if Tempus was behind the problems over there or not. So I decided that it was better if no one realized you'd left home."

"But what about *them*?" Lois Lane-Kent asked.

Wells checked the readout on his Time-Plane controller. "According to this, everything is as it should be. A couple changes came about, the largest one being the appearance of Ultrawoman in addition to Skyhawk, but that happens some time in the future."

"Esperanza and Jason?" Lois speculated.

"Oh, yes. Quite," Wells agreed. "And it would appear that Clark Joseph Kent's journals were not in fact lost, but were published after his death by his, and Lois's, grandchildren. Fascinating reading, apparently."

"Are we mentioned?" Lois asked with a grin.

"I'm sure you are, my dear," Wells said, grinning back at her.

"But you're not going to tell us about it, are you?" Clark said.

"There are some things best left for you to discover on your own," Wells told them.

"However, I will tell you that with the child becoming a part of that time-line, there is now a much stronger than normal link between the two planes. It will bear watching."

"So obviously, they'll make it," Clark commented.

"Oh, things are never obvious until you can look back at them, and sometimes not even then," Wells said. "I will tell you that he should get his powers back in plenty of time to handle the next major threat to his world, and that he and his Lois should have many years together."

Upstairs, a baby began to wail for her mother. "Martha!" Lois ran toward the stairs.

"It's so good to be home," Clark said with a satisfied sigh as Wells shimmered and disappeared.

-Earth I-

The doorbell rang and Clark went to get the door. Lois was busy checking on Jason upstairs and Esperanza was changed and fed and sleeping in her carrier, dreaming about whatever it was newborns dreamed about.

"Mom?"

Martha Kent was standing in the doorway, waiting for him. Ben Hubbard stood behind her, a sheepish grin on his face.

"I called your Mister White and he said you and the children were okay and he figured you were here with Lois," Martha told him, making her way past him. "So, tell me what happened last night that got you so sick, and then... I want to see my grandbabies."