

# A Father First

by LadyFii

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Rating: T

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## Chapter 1: Looking From The Outside

*There's my son,* Kal-El thought to himself as he watched Jason sleep. The little boy shivered slightly as he lay on the bed, bringing his blanket higher up to his chin. Kal-El carefully and quietly closed the window from which he had been looking at his son from. The night breeze must have been too cold for Jason. Kal-El hovered by Jason's window for a few more minutes, enjoying watching his son's peaceful slumber. *I could stay like this forever, just watching him.* The thought brought a smile to his face. Suddenly, he heard a faraway cry for help. *But then again, I guess I can't.* Feeling a tiny bit reluctant, Kal-El flew off into the night sky, heading in the direction of the cry. He knew in his heart that he had a responsibility to the people as Superman.

As he flew, he did not look back at the house by the river. Had he done so, he would have seen someone watching him from the balcony of the master's bedroom.

*He was watching Jason again,* Richard White thought to himself as he stood at the balcony of the bedroom he and Lois shared. Richard knew many things about Superman, but he could not figure out why the superhero had been flying around his house for the past two weeks since he woke up from his coma, always in the dead of the night, always outside Jason's bedroom. *Why?* After several minutes lost in thought, Richard decided to just go back to sleep. As he lay back in bed, he came to the resolution to ask Superman about it the next time he comes for a visit. *Most likely, that would be tomorrow night.* With that thought, Richard fell into a deep slumber.

As the night sky grew darker, Kal-El found himself flying down to 312 Riverside Drive and hovering just outside Jason's bedroom. He decided not to open the window anymore. It was a cold night, and the last thing he wanted was for his son to get ill due to the weather.

Kal-El closed his eyes and focused his hearing on his son's heartbeat. For once, he tuned out all other sounds to hear only his little boy's heart beating loudly. *The world can go on for a little while without me,* he reasoned to himself. He smiled at the sound of the now-familiar *thump thump* of Jason's heart while imagining what life with Lois and their son would have been like had he not left for Krypton five years ago.

"You can watch him better if you're not looking from the outside of his room," a man's voice roused Kal-El from his reverie. He opened his eyes with a startled expression and saw Richard White standing by Jason's window.

Richard had been waiting for this moment since he woke up that morning. He looked at Superman floating outside Jason's room. He smiled and proceeded to open the large window in Jason's room. He beckoned Superman to come inside. Hesitantly, the Man of Steel flew into the room.

For a moment, the two men just stood in silence, both looking at Jason. Then Richard turned to leave. He stopped when he reached the door.

"Superman?" he asked quietly, not wanting to wake up his son.

Kal-El turned to look at him, but said nothing.

"Before you leave, I'd like a word with you. I'll be down in the living room," said Richard.

Kal-El simply nodded, signaling that he understood.

He heard Richard's footsteps grow faint as the man went downstairs, leaving him alone in the room with his son. *His son.* Kal-El still couldn't believe it. It had been two weeks since he learned of this fact, when Lois and Jason visited him at the hospital. He was tired, weakened by the kryptonite after lifting New Krypton into space. It was Lois' revelation that gave him

strength. "I wanted to tell you that...Jason is your son. Please don't die. We need you. *I need you.*" That was what she had said, and though he was partly unconscious at the time, he understood every word out of Lois' lips.

Now, as he looked at his son, he was filled with a renewed energy. He wasn't alone anymore. He had Jason, and that was good enough for him.

Kal-El realized he'd been standing in the room for a good half hour already, and remembered he still had to talk to Richard downstairs. He had no idea what Richard wanted, but he felt he owed it to the man who let him enter his son's room. He knelt down beside Jason's bed, and planted a soft kiss on his son's forehead. Then he made his way silently down to the living room.

Richard was starting to grow impatient. Superman had been in Jason's room for thirty minutes already. He had questions to ask the superhero, and he wasn't going back to sleep without answers to *all* of his questions. As he waited for Superman, he remembered his thoughts that afternoon as he picked up Jason from school. He had been coming up with reasons as to why the Man of Steel kept visiting the boy. Hundreds of ideas popped up in his head, but one thought kept bugging him, and it was something he wanted answered by simply either yes or no.

"Mr. White," Superman said, his deep baritone voice resounding off the walls of the quiet house.

"Call me Richard," the other man said, turning to Superman. "Take a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

"No drink, thank you," came Superman's polite reply. He walked towards the living room and sat across Richard.

Superman looked him in the eyes. "You said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yes, well... I, uh..." Richard began, but suddenly found himself too nervous to utter a word in front of the superhero. He gathered his composure and cleared his throat. "I wanted to talk to you about Jason."

"What about Jason?"

Richard furrowed his brow, trying to formulate his next question in his mind. He decided the best way to ask is just to say the question directly. "Why do you keep visiting my son?"

Superman was a bit taken aback by the question. "You know I've been visiting Jason?"

"I've seen you hovering outside his window for the past two weeks. Why?"

*So that's why he didn't look surprised to see me tonight,* Superman thought to himself. He tried to think of a believable excuse. "It's just, after his ordeal with Lex Luthor in the boat, I thought I'd check up on him. It's a lot to deal with for a five-year-old."

Richard looked straight into Superman's eyes, evidently trying to see through the given reason. "Uh huh. Really? Do you do that to all the kids you've saved? Because then, you would have *a lot* of kids to visit every night."

*Uh oh,* Superman thought. He didn't know how to answer.

Richard continued, "Lois said you never lied. I can see that now - you obviously don't know how to come up with a good excuse. So tell me, why are you *really* here every night?"

"Richard," Superman began, "I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because..."

Richard cut him short. "He's your son. Jason - Jason is your son."

Superman's blue eyes widened. *How did Richard know? Did Lois tell him?*

As if Richard can read what was on his mind, he explained, "I'd been wondering all day why you would visit my son - of all the kids in the world, you picked my son to visit every night. I wondered if it was because of Lois, but that would mean you should be floating outside our window. But no, you're outside Jason's window. The only explanation I could think of was that: he's your son." Richard paused for a while, blinking back the tears that were beginning to form in his eyes.

For a second, no sound could be heard in the room. Finally, Richard broke the silence. "It's true, isn't it? You're his..." he choked before he let the rest of his sentence out. "...*father*. Not me."

Superman looked at the man sitting in front of him. Richard looked as if his whole world came crashing down. He looked helpless, and his eyes seemed to plead to Superman to tell him that his idea was not true. That he, Richard, was Jason's real father.

"I'm sorry." That was all the Man of Steel could say.

Richard buried his head in his hands and breathed in deeply. He couldn't break down, not here, not yet. He still needed answers. He looked up and asked the man across him, "Lois told you that?"

"Yes, when I was at the hospital."

"Oh." Richard didn't think he could feel any worse, but apparently, he did. Lois told Superman, but she didn't bother to tell him about Jason's true paternity.

"Richard," said Superman, "you're as much Jason's father as I am. You were there for the first five years that I wasn't with him. I know this is difficult for you to take in, and I'm sorry. I really am."

"Your apology doesn't really make the realization any less painful." Richard's tone was cold. He had one last question, and proceeded to ask Superman, "Why did you leave her just when she needed you most?"

Superman bowed his head. Almost inaudibly, he replied, "I didn't know. I never would have left if I had known."

Richard looked at him in surprise. He had never seen the Man of Steel so forlorn. It showed a side of him very different from what the world had seen in the newspapers and on TV. Superman no longer looked like the god the world regarded him to be - he was simply a man who made a bad choice and wanted to make up for that.

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, Richard spoke up, "You can come into Jason's room anytime you want to. I'll keep his window open. Just make sure you close it after your visit to keep the cold out. He gets cold easily."

"Thank you, Richard. Lois was right about you."

"About what?"

"She said you're a good man, and you are."

Richard was touched that Lois said that about him. Feeling like a weight has been lifted after having his questions answered, Richard realized it was best to lighten up the situation a bit. "Yeah, well. If Jason gets a cold or develops chills because of the night breeze, I'm pointing a finger at you. I had nothing to do with Jason's open window." He put both hands up in the air and grinned at Superman.

The Man of Steel let out a laugh. He had a feeling that he just made a new friend in Richard White.

"Good night, Richard. Once again, thank you." He went back upstairs and made his way to the window in Jason's room. He took one last look at his son before flying off into the night.

Richard let out a sigh as soon as he saw Superman fly away. And as he sat at the living room couch, the tears came running down as he cried for the sleeping little boy that he wanted so much to be his.

## Chapter 2: What A Child Can See

"Daddy?" Richard heard a little voice whisper close to his ear. He felt a pair of small hands shaking his shoulders.

"Daddy?" There it was again. Richard groaned, he was too tired to move and he wanted nothing more than to sleep.

"DADDY!!"

The high-pitched scream was enough to make Richard jump up and fall to the floor with a loud *thud!* He realized he was sleeping on the couch, and suddenly, the events of last night came rushing back to his mind - Superman's visit, the revelation of Jason's paternity. His thoughts were broken by the sound of a little boy's laughter. He turned to look at Jason, rolling on the floor, laughing.

"You...look...funny, Daddy," Jason said in-between fits of laughter. He was still wearing his pajamas, the one with airplane prints on them.

Richard looked at himself. His wrinkled clothes and his tousled hair, not to mention the surprised look on his face, probably did make him look funny. He began to laugh along with his son. "You think I look funny, huh? We'll see who looks funny now!" he exclaimed as he ran after Jason around the living room. He finally caught up with him and tickled the boy, making Jason shriek and giggle endlessly.

"What in the world - ?" Lois had gone down to find her fiancé and son running and rolling around the house in their sleeping wear. She had to admit it was quite an amusing scene, but she bit her lip back to stop herself from smiling. Someone had to be the responsible adult around the house.

"Richard," she called out, "he'll have an asthma attack if you keep tickling him."

That seemed to make Richard stop playing with his son.

"But Mommy," whined Jason, "I don't use my inhaler much 'nymore! 'S okay."

Richard and Lois looked at each other. Richard just shrugged at her and dove back into Jason, pinning him on the carpeted floor and tickling him again. The sound of Jason's laughter had never sounded so sweet to Richard.

After an hour of playing on the floor, Richard and Jason, along with Lois, were all set to go to the Daily Planet building.

"Remember, sweetie, don't go wandering around the office," Lois reminded Jason as they made their way through the usual Metropolis traffic. "You have to - "

" - stay in Daddy's office," Jason finished. "I know, Mommy. You told me a *gazillion* times!"

Richard just laughed as Lois let out an exasperated sigh. She knew her son got that smart-ass personality from her. Although Lois seemed worried that her son would wander off around the office, Richard was secretly thankful that Jason didn't have school until tomorrow. After what he learned last night, he was determined to spend time with Jason as often as he could.

The trio made their way up to the Daily Planet office, with Jason leading the way. He was often in the bullpen with his parents that people were used to seeing him around. He greeted a few of his parents' co-workers as he made his way to his Daddy's office. He was just two feet away from the door marked "Richard White - Assistant Editor" when he paused and ran the opposite direction.

"Jason!" Lois called out, but before she could say anything else, she found her son throwing himself at her co-worker - a certain mild-mannered colleague by the name of Clark

Kent.

"Mr. Clark!" Jason exclaimed as he jumped into Clark's leg, almost knocking him off-balance.

"Whoa, there, kiddo," Clark said, kneeling down to Jason's level and pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "You're pretty excited this morning."

Lois and Richard went towards him. Lois immediately apologized. "Sorry about that, Clark. My munchkin seems more active than he usually is. He had been running around the house and playing with Richard the whole morning."

Clark gave her a goofy grin. "It's fine, Lois. Don't, uh, worry about it."

Richard scooped up Jason. "Hey, Tiger, how about you and me get settled in my office first, okay? Let Mommy and Mr. Clark get their work done before you cause them trouble, alright?"

"Okay, Daddy!" replied Jason cheerfully. "Bye, Mr. Clark!"

Richard smiled at Clark and gave Lois a kiss on the cheek before walking over to his office with Jason. Clark watched as Richard pulled out a few blank sheets of paper and laid a box of crayons on the table for Jason. He wondered if he'd be able to do that sort of things for his son one day.

"...later, okay, Clark?" Clark had only caught the last few words Lois said. "Clark?"

"Huh? Sorry, Lois. Um, what?" he said shyly, mentally giving himself a kick for not focusing his attention on Lois.

Lois sighed. "I said I'll talk to you later about that article Perry assigned us to do together, the one about the city's reconstruction efforts. I still have to finish this bank robbery article."

"Yeah, o-of course. Sure, Lois."

Lois seemed to find Clark's lack of attentiveness unusual, but decided not to pay any heed to it. He was just Clark, anyway. His attention didn't matter *much* to her.

The day wore on at a slow pace. There were very few newsworthy events that day, and everyone had been simply relaxing. Even Perry wasn't yelling as much. There was nothing to yell about.

As the journalists chatted and shared gossip in the break room, Clark was busy writing another set of articles for tomorrow's edition. He was almost finished when he heard a tiny set of footsteps heading in his direction. He smiled when he felt Jason tugging on his sleeve. He loved every minute he could spend with his boy.

"Mr. Clark?"

"Mm hmm?" he replied without looking at Jason. Clark had just finished his work and was going over it as he grabbed his cup of coffee.

"Since you're Superman, can you take me flying to the stars?"

Clark sputtered the coffee he had just drank and spilled the contents of the cup onto his pants. A few colleagues saw him and laughed, shaking their heads and muttering something along the lines of, "That guy's such a klutz."

Jason, though, wasn't laughing. He just looked intently at Clark and smiled his sweet, innocent smile. "So can you take me flying?"

Clark dabbed at his pants with some paper towels and looked at Jason. "What do you mean, Jason? I think you should ask your...um, Daddy. He has a seaplane, he can take you flying."

"But *you* don't need an airplane to go flying!"

Clark looked around to see if any of his co-workers were nearby. Thankfully, most of

them were at the break room or down at the nearest pub. Clark looked seriously at Jason. "I really don't know what you're talking about, Jason."

"But...but you're *Superman*. You and him look alike - I saw it when you were standing here and he was on TV," the boy said matter-of-factly. "You're the same, except your hair is messy and his hair is neat. And you wear your undies *under* your clothes and he wears his undies *out*."

Clark looked at his son. He would have laughed at his son's comparison of him and Superman, if the situation didn't call for seriousness. He did not want to lie, but he was not sure if telling the truth to a five-year-old was a good idea either. After silently debating with himself, he decided to stick with the truth - it would be nice to have a secret only he and his son shared. He picked up Jason and sat him in his lap. "Yes, Jason, I am Superman. But you can't tell anybody that, okay?"

Jason seemed to think about this for a while, frowning his brows and reminding Clark of the look on Lois face when she was concentrating on an article.

"Why?" Jason finally asked.

Clark replied, "Because then, bad men might come after the people I love and they can get hurt."

"Why?"

"Because bad men would want nothing more than to hurt me, and by hurting the ones I love, they hurt me, too."

"Why?"

"Because..." Clark let out a soft sigh of frustration. He had no idea how else to explain to a five-year-old the complicated life of Superman. "It's just like that Jason."

Jason looked at him, seemingly evaluating the honesty in Clark's words. "Okay, Mr. Clark. It's gonna be our secret." After a moment, he asked, "Can't I tell Mommy?"

Clark smiled at the boy sitting in his lap. "Sorry, Jason, but not even Mommy can know." *Especially not Mommy can know*, he thought to himself.

"Why?"

"Because she'd be in danger if she knew."

"How about Daddy?"

"You can't tell him either."

"Why?"

"Because the less people know, the better."

"Why?"

"Because...You know, you're really a lot like Lois. You ask a lot of questions."

"Is that bad?"

"No, of course not. Not really." Clark grinned at his son, and Jason returned the same goofy grin at him.

"Jason, there you are!" Lois called out from her cubicle. "Time to go home, honey."

Clark let Jason down on the floor and ruffled his hair. Jason had started to walk away, but stopped short after two steps. He looked back at Clark and whispered, "So will you take me flying?"

Clark raised an eyebrow. *Weren't they over this?* "No, Jason. I can't, sorry."

The little boy pouted, very much like the way his mom did. "Why?" He began walking towards Lois' cubicle.

Clark shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. He sighed. Did his son really have

to be so darn adorable?

### Chapter 3: Of Heartaches and Longing

"Clark, how many c's are there in cataclysmic? My spell-checker isn't working again," Lois asked loudly, not looking up from her computer. If there was anybody in the office who could act as her human spell-checker, it was farm boy Kent. When she didn't hear him answer, she looked up and her eyes wandered to his cubicle just two desks away from hers. "Clark?"

"He left a minute ago, Ms. Lane," Jimmy Olsen said as he passed by Lois' desk. He seemed to be in a hurry, fixing his camera and hanging it around his neck.

Lois knew what Jimmy's hurrying meant - Superman. *Good, she thought, I need to talk to him.*

"Hey, Jimmy!" Lois called out. "Where are you headed?"

Jimmy was almost in the elevators when he heard Lois. "Downtown!" Then he jumped into the elevator and gave a quick wave of goodbye to Lois.

Lois looked up at the TV monitors and watched the news report. "Superman has just arrived in downtown Metropolis after a 12-storey apartment building collapsed," the blonde female reporter said. "The apartment building situated along the corner of..."

"Lane!" Perry bellowed. "Where do you think you're going?"

Lois was already running out of the office, recorder and notebook in hand. "Downtown!" she replied, not even looking at the Editor-in-Chief.

"I already sent Olsen and Baker there!" Perry exclaimed, but Lois ignored him. "Lane! Get back in here!"

Too late. Lois was already inside the elevator, giving Perry a cheeky grin as the elevator doors closed.

Perry sighed and laughed to himself. He had always found Lois' hard-headed attitude fascinating, and sometimes he couldn't help feeling a sense of fatherly pride for having trained one of the best female journalists in Metropolis.

By the time Lois arrived at the scene, everything was a mess. There were EMTs, fire-fighters and policemen running around. Some families were huddled together in a street corner, comforting each other. Lois saw Jimmy, Andy Baker and a few other journalists from other newspapers trying to get a closer look at the site. A TV reporter was interviewing a couple who had been tenants in the apartment building. Suddenly, Lois was shaken by a frantic-looking young woman.

"Have you seen a little boy around here? Please tell me you have! Please!" the woman cried out, tears flowing down her young face. "He's got brown hair, he's about this high - " the woman indicated to just below her waist, " - he has big, blue eyes. Have you seen him?"

Lois was stunned. She didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, I haven't - "

"Oh no, oh no! I...I can't..." the woman said, breaking down in front of Lois. Lois crouched down and patted the woman. The young woman just looked at her. "My son, Michael, he's missing. When the apartment began to shake, I was in the kitchen. I called out to him and when I didn't hear him, I ran to the living room where I left him playing, and he wasn't there. I haven't seen him since. I can't - I don't want to think that...that he's..." She didn't have the strength to go on. "Please, help me. He's all I've got. He's just three years old."

Lois gulped, trying to keep back tears. *What if it were Jason lost in the rubble of the collapsed building instead of this woman's son?* Lois couldn't bear the thought. "You should go to the EMTs, ma'am," she said. "You're hurt. I'll look for your son."

The young woman looked up at Lois with her teary eyes. "Thank you, miss."

"Call me Lois."

"I'm Annie."

Lois helped Annie up and led her to the EMTs. Then she went back to the site of the collapse. She looked around and saw Superman gently putting down on the ground two children. The kids ran up to the welcoming arms of their parents. The parents thanked Superman, and the superhero smiled in acknowledgment before flying off to rescue more people. *Now's not the time to ogle at him*, Lois chastised herself.

She strode to the police line, and making sure that no one was looking at her direction, she took off her high-heeled shoes and ran into the ruined building.

"Hey, you!" Officer Landon Briggs called out to Lois, but by then, the brunette reporter had gone into the shambles. Briggs called for two younger cops to run after Lois.

Lois looked around at the ruins. There didn't seem to be any hope of finding any living being there. She carefully climbed up the concrete rubbles, making her way deeper into the dangerous site. "Michael?" she called out. "Michael?"

Nothing. No sound could be heard, except for the faint voices of the volunteers digging for bodies near the outside of the building. "Michael?"

Lois found the eerie silence disturbing. Her heart began to race, and her breathing became rapid. More than being alone in the shambles, what scared her was finding a little boy's dead body. She hoped Michael was okay, for the boy's sake as well as his mother's.

"Michael?" She called out again. She was determined to find the child. She was a mother herself, and there was nothing she wanted more than to have her son in her arms - preferably alive and alright.

Suddenly she heard it, a faint cry of a child. She held her breath, looking farther into the wreckage. It was getting darker as she advanced deeper, but that didn't scare her. She tried to listen for the sound again, and heard it. Now she was certain that there was someone trapped in the rubble. She ran to the direction of the sound. "Michael?"

She glimpsed a tiny brown head hidden in a small space of what she assumed to be a ruined closet. "Michael, honey?"

Bright blue eyes greeted Lois. It wasn't the same hue as her son's, but she found herself reminded of Jason, and her heart ached. "Mommy?" asked the little boy, the question barely a whisper.

"No, I'm not Mommy," Lois said softly, "but I'm Mommy's friend. I can take you to her."

Lois didn't know how much the three-year-old understood of what she said, but the boy looked eager to get out of the ruins. Lois reached out her hands to the boy. "Come here, sweetie. It's okay."

The boy stood up and ran into Lois' arms. She embraced the little boy as if he was her own, and she let her tears fall as she soothingly rubbed the child's back. "It's gonna be okay. It's alright. You're safe now, honey."

Lois checked Michael to see if he had any cuts or bruises. There was a nasty gash on his elbow, which Lois covered with her handkerchief. Then she carried him and began to walk out of the building.

They were halfway out of the shambles when Lois heard a loud, creaking sound. She looked up and saw a very large slab of concrete plummeting at her direction. Michael saw it as well and cried out. Lois crouched down, covering Michael and bracing herself for the worst, hoping that if she didn't survive, at least the boy would.

She waited, but the impact didn't come. Lois was puzzled. She didn't feel anything. And then she realized that Michael had stopped crying. She looked up to see the familiar blue tights

and red cape floating just three feet above her.

"*You.*" She didn't know what else to say.

"Me," said the Man of Steel with a smile. He was lifting the fallen debris and set it aside. He looked at Lois. "Are you alright?"

Lois nodded, trying to regain her poise. Damn the Man of Steel, only he could make her lose her self-possession. She felt like a high school girl whose childhood crush had just waved hi at her. And just when she thought he couldn't surprise her anymore, he did something unexpected.

"How about you, buddy? You okay?" Superman said in a soft, gentle voice Lois has never heard him use before, his eyes twinkling in fascination for the child Lois held in her arms. Superman brushed back the boy's hair and smiled.

The little boy grinned. "Superman," he said sheepishly.

*The Man of Steel getting soft at the sight of a child?* Lois thought to herself. *I never thought I'd see the day.* Superman had saved thousands of children before, but he never showed any sign of affection to the children, at least not in public, as far as Lois knew.

Superman smiled warmly at Lois. "I've scanned the area," he said, his voice deep and regal-sounding again, "and there doesn't seem to be any more casualties. Would you allow me to escort you out of the building?"

"Sure," Lois answered absent-mindedly. Her thoughts were still at the interaction between Superman and Michael. *He would've made a good father to Jason.*

"Hey!" a young police officer called out to them. His partner followed him. "Miss, you had no permission to enter the building. Do you have any idea how dangerous this place is?"

"Don't worry, Officer, she's with me," Superman told the young cop. With that, the two officers left the area.

Superman and Lois walked out of the building in silence. The Man of Steel was thinking of how best to talk to Lois. Unknown to him, Lois was thinking of the same thing. Their thoughts were broken by the shouts of a young woman.

"Michael! Michael!" Annie came rushing to Lois, who still held the boy.

"Mommy!" Michael exclaimed.

Annie took the boy from Lois' arms and thanked Lois a couple of times in-between sobs. "I don't know how to repay your kindness. You brought me back the only thing that matters to me. My son and I are forever grateful to you, Lois."

"Don't worry about it, Annie. I have a son, Jason. I know what it feels like when your child's life is put in danger." Lois smiled at the mother and son.

"Jason is lucky to have a great mom like you," Annie told her with sincerity in her eyes.

Lois choked. She was touched to be called a great mother. "Thank you."

Annie looked at Superman. "Thank you as well, Superman."

"Don't thank me," the superhero replied. "It was Ms. Lane who saved your son."

The mother and son pair walked off to the EMTs to have Michael checked. A crowd had gathered around Superman and Lois, with most taking photos of the two of them. Most were asking blunt questions directed at the rumored relationship between the Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter and Earth's Greatest Savior. "What were you two doing in there?" "Superman, did you save Lois Lane again?" "Ms. Lane, do you still have a relationship with Superman?" The questions were endless.

Lois looked at the Man of Steel. They were too close to each other. Superman had his arms around her, shielding her from the people who kept pushing their way to them. Lois

managed to whisper, "Catch me."

Superman had no idea what she meant by that, but it was no sooner than she said it that he felt her go limp in his arms.

"Ms. Lane!" a few reporters gasped.

"We need a doctor here, Lois Lane fainted!" cried one photographer.

"Is she alright? Is she breathing? Can someone get a doctor for her?" shouted a few others.

Superman looked at the beautiful woman in his arms. *She's a damn good actress*, he thought to himself. He cleared his throat. "Please excuse me. I have to take Ms. Lane to the hospital." With that, he zoomed to the skies.

As soon as they were in the air, Lois opened her eyes and found Superman smiling at her. He said, "Tell me, how many times did you play the lead character in your school plays?"

Lois laughed. "I'm the one who's supposed to be doing the interview, you know."

"Of course," the Man of Steel replied. They flew off in the direction of the Daily Planet building. In less than a minute, they landed at the rooftop.

*This is it*, Superman thought. *Time to talk.*

*I can do this*, Lois thought. *How hard can it be to talk to the father of my child?*

Kal-El had never felt this many emotions at one time. He was standing atop the Daily Planet building, very much aware of the presence of the woman in front of him. Lois Lane stood by the ledge, looking at him. Kal-El took his time staring at her, taking in the image of her beauty. With the setting sun behind her, it gave the effect that she was glowing, and Kal-El could only stand there in awe of her. Despite his feeling of admiration for Lois, he also felt anxious, nervous, scared and excited. He didn't know how to begin.

Lois' voice cut through the silence. "I assume, since you brought me here, that you wanted to talk. So talk."

Kal-El looked her in the eyes, and saw a hint of fiery anticipation in them. *Was she...angry?* He suddenly felt a sense of dread creeping up to him. *No, she just wants answers. And so do I.*

He cleared his throat. It was now or never. "I heard you, Lois, when I was at the hospital. I heard everything you said."

He paused, trying to decipher the expression of her face. He wasn't sure whether she was mad at him or simply trying to keep a neutral appearance. He went on. "He's beautiful, like his mother."

Lois face softened. She felt her knees go weak. *What the hell, Lane?* she yelled at herself. *One simple compliment and all your feelings for him come rushing back! He left you, alone and pregnant, without any idea of how that even happened.*

"Why?" she quietly asked.

At her question, Kal-El had to smile. He remembered his son a few days ago, asking the same thing when he wouldn't take him "flying to the stars." But at the look on Lois' face, he realized just how serious she was.

"Why don't I remember anything about us?" she asked, a little louder this time.

Kal-El could hear the hint of resentment in her voice. It hurt him like a stab of kryptonite shard. *I promised myself that I'd be honest with her*, he thought. *No more lies.* He looked at her straight in the eyes before he answered.

Lois could see that the Man of Steel was having an internal struggle. When her gaze fell

upon his, she was surprised. *His eyes - they seemed to hold an expression of...regret?* She readied herself, knowing that his answer - whatever it may be - would hurt her.

"It's because I made you forget, Lois." It was too much for Kal-El. He dreaded this moment, though he knew it was inevitable. He knew he had to tell her what happened, and he knew Lois well enough to know that she would hate him for it.

Tears welled up in Lois' eyes. "You-you...made...me..." she began, seemingly unable to finish her simple sentence. She took a deep breath. "You made me forget?"

Kal-El breathed in deeply. "Five years ago, we were together. I took you to the Fortress of Solitude, and we stayed there for one night. We were in love, and we were happy. We had plans of being together forever, and because of those plans, I gave up my powers."

Lois looked slightly shocked, but didn't say anything.

"I had to give up everything for you, and I did, willingly. We made love that night, and we thought nothing would ever keep us apart. But I didn't anticipate the events that took place afterwards. General Zod came to Earth and threatened the lives of the people. So many perished under his hands. There was no one else who could fight him but me, so I asked to have my powers back. After his defeat, you and I were together for a while. But I could see it in your eyes, you weren't happy. You...you felt depressed, because you knew I had a responsibility to the rest of the world. It hurt you to hide what we had - our love, our relationship. It hurt you so much to...to share me with the world. So I made you forget about everything."

He looked at her. Tears flowed down her cheeks, and she didn't even bother to wipe them away.

"If I had known about..." he continued. "I never would've left if I had known about Jason. I'm sorry, Lois. I'm sorry." He made to advance to her, but she backed away.

"Don't," she said. It was the first word she uttered in what seemed like forever.

He could see that she was hurting. He was hurting, too. Not even the beating he took from Lex Luthor's men was as painful as seeing the woman he loved crying. It only pained him more to know that *he* was the cause of her tears.

*He made me forget*, Lois repeated to herself. *He. Made. Me. Forget.* It was the only thought she could hold on to. His explanation, his story, his reasons were all disregarded. *He made me forget.*

Her heart was bursting with anger and revulsion for what he did. She gathered all the strength left in her, and she stood up straight. *Let it all out, Lois*, she told herself.

"How could you? You...you had no right to do that! You took away *my* memories, parts of *my* life! How dare you! I would've kept your secret, kept what we had!" she yelled at him.

"Lois..." he called her name quietly, walking towards her.

She pushed him away. "No! Don't come any closer! Leave me alone!"

"Lois, please..." he pleaded.

Lois had never seen Superman this hopeless. But her heart was burning with rage, and she wanted nothing more than to get away from him. Forever.

"Do you know how scared I was when I found out I was pregnant? I didn't even know how the hell it happened! All I had were flashes and dreams of what looked like an ice castle, and you and me together. I knew the baby had to be yours, because..." she paused, not knowing what to say next. She was crying so hard now, she was shaking. "I *loved* you. I never felt that way before, not with any other man. Then you left, and I was so alone. I never felt

*that* alone in my life. Where were you when I *needed* you?"

She broke down and slowly let herself fall to the ground. She was breathing deeply, having finally vented the anger she had kept in her heart all these years.

"When he was born," she said faintly, "he was so tiny. I thought he wouldn't make it through the night. The doctor asked me what was the father's name, and I just...I didn't know what to tell him."

"Kal-El," Superman replied softly.

Lois looked at him. He wasn't looking at her, his eyes were directed to the evening sky. She could swear there were tears in his eyes.

"Kal-El," Lois repeated. "I wanted Jason to grow up knowing his father, and yet I didn't know where you were or how to tell you about him."

"Lois," he called out, "I'd like to make up for that - for the five years I missed in my son's life. I want him to know me, to recognize me as his father."

He looked into Lois' eyes, but instead of sympathy, he saw pain and hatred. Lois walked towards the door leading down to the elevators. She stopped when she got to the door. "You missed your chance. You missed your chance to be his father five years ago. You took away *my* memories, I'm taking away *your* son. Goodbye, Kal-El."

With that, she left him.

Kal-El didn't know what to do. He had lost the love of his life. He had lost his son. He had lost the family he longed to have.

## Chapter 4: Asking For Guidance

Kal-El stood alone at the rooftop of the Daily Planet until the sky grew dark. He was replaying in his mind the heartbreaking conversation he just had with Lois.

*"You missed your chance. You missed your chance to be his father five years ago. You took away my memories, I'm taking away your son. Goodbye, Kal-El."*

Lois' words stabbed his heart deeper than the kryptonite shard had done on his side. He wiped the last few tears he shed for Lois and Jason, and zoomed into the night sky. He had only one destination: *home*.

Kal-El landed in the cornfield, and walked a few meters north until he reached the run-down two-floor house at the edge of the farm. There was light in the kitchen, and one quick scan with his x-ray vision revealed that there was only a woman inside the house. He didn't bother to knock on the door, but instead let himself into the house and went straight to the kitchen. He watched the lone woman sitting at the dinner table. She was seated with her back facing him.

"Ma?" he said.

"Clark." It was a statement, not a question. Call it a mother's intuition; somehow, she knew he was there. She stood up and turned to her son. She was surprised to find him looking anguished and torn. It was not like her son to look so defeated.

"Mom." That was all he could say.

Martha Kent may not have been Kal-El's biological mother, but she raised him and knew him more than anyone else did. And right now, she knew he needed her. She walked towards her son and embraced him.

Feeling his mother's loving arms around him, Kal-El finally broke down. He cried hard as she continued to rub his back, trying to calm him down. For a few minutes, they just stood there like that, with Martha comforting her son and with Kal-El letting all the pain he felt flow with his tears. When he stopped, Martha looked at him lovingly. "Why don't you go and freshen up first, dear? Then we can talk. I'll wait for you here," she said, smiling at her son.

Kal-El smiled back weakly. He kissed his mother on the forehead and muttered, "Thanks, Ma," before going to the shower.

Martha looked at the old wall clock in the kitchen cupboard. It was just a little past midnight. She had woken up with a feeling of anxiety just a few minutes before her son arrived. Right then and there, she knew something happened to Clark, but she didn't expect to find him so distraught. *Whatever is bothering Clark must be very grave for him to be so upset*, she thought to herself. She worried about her son, and wondered what might be troubling him so.

Clark was dressed in jeans and a white shirt when he went back down to the kitchen twenty minutes later. He found his mother pouring hot chocolate onto a cup on the table. There was also a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

Martha gazed up at her son. "I know you're too old for cookies and hot chocolate, but I figured you might want to have some, anyway."

Clark smiled. Hot chocolate and chocolate chip cookies. He remembered how, years and years ago, he and Martha would talk about things that troubled him while they snacked on hot chocolate and cookies. Before, Clark would tell Martha of how the children at school teased him about his glasses, or how most of his high school classmates picked on him and bullied him. Today, though, it was about something totally different - his problem didn't just involve him, it involved Lois and their son. *Their son*. Oh God, how was he going to explain his

five-year-old born-out-of-wedlock son to his strict, traditional mother?

Martha sat at the table, and Clark sat beside her, grabbing a cookie and taking a bite. "I've forgotten how good your cookies tasted, Ma." He smiled at the elderly woman.

"Please don't tell me you just flew all the way out here and cried on my shoulder for God knows how long just because you missed these cookies," Martha playfully told her son.

Clark looked at his mother. She always knew how to comfort him when he needed her. "I guess I have to get this out of my chest now. I still have to get back to Metropolis in time for work, and I know you need your sleep."

"Oh, Clark, don't worry about my sleep. But please, do tell me what made you so upset."

He didn't know where to begin. Taking a deep breath, he began, "Lois and I talked this evening."

His mother only nodded, not wanting to disrupt him.

"I-I told her what I did - the memory wipe. She...didn't take it well, to say the least." He let out a sigh. He thought it would not be painful to tell his mother what happened, but he was wrong. Reliving what happened felt as bad as the actual moments. He continued on to how he explained to Lois why he did it, and how Lois reacted to it all. He left out the part about Jason - that was a matter that needed to be discussed solely. Then he paused.

Martha looked at her son. She knew he loved Lois Lane since he first laid eyes on her. Lois was all he ever talked about when he came home for a visit. It pained her to see him so broken-hearted. But she knew he was also responsible for what he did. "Well, I'd be surprised if she let you off the hook easily."

"What?"

"If she forgave you instantly right after, I would've doubted her emotions. Sorry to say, dear, but she had every right to be angry at you."

"Mom, I told her I was sorry," reasoned Clark. "I was practically begging her for forgiveness."

"I know, dear, but begging wasn't what she wanted. More than anything, she wanted her memories. You took that away from her. You didn't even ask her - "

Clark cut her off. "She would've said no."

"She would have, but wouldn't that have meant something to you and your relationship? That she was willing to sacrifice her happiness to have you in her life?"

"No one should sacrifice something like that. It's like sacrificing yourself."

"This coming from the man who lifted a kryptonite-filled island into space at the expense of his life."

Clark smiled at his mother. "Ouch."

Martha let out a chuckle and reached out for his hand at the edge of the table. "I know you're sorry for what you did to her, Clark. And I know you're sorry for hurting her."

"I just wish there was something I could do - "

It was Martha's turn to cut him in mid-sentence. "Clark Joseph Kent, you may be Superman but you're still not a god. You have to understand that there are some things that you *can't* do. Let time heal her wounds. Give her some time, some space - if she is as smart a lady as you say she is, she'd understand what you did and grant you forgiveness. For now, all you can do is wait."

Clark nodded. He trusted his mother's judgment, and if she thinks Lois needs time to heal, then he would give Lois time.

"There's something else on your mind, Clark." Martha's statement broke his thoughts.

"What, Ma? Sorry."

"There's something else you on your mind. I can see it in your eyes, there's something you want to tell me. So tell me."

Clark braced himself - he knew Martha Kent was a sweet old lady who never really raised her voice at anybody, but as a kid, he'd been on the receiving end of one of her loud chastising quite a few times. And he knew that his next statement would make him deserving of a few old, Midwestern cussing.

"Mom," he said. "Loisendayhavason."

Martha looked puzzled at her boy. She had no idea what he just blurted out. She knew her son was a shy boy, but he had never kept anything from her. She and her husband Jonathan were the only people who managed to get more than two sentences out of Clark when he was younger.

"Clark, I have no idea what you just said."

Clark looked at her helplessly, fidgeting with a chocolate chip cookie in his hand. He bowed his head.

Martha couldn't help but smile. No matter how old her son got, he was still her little boy. She remembered the last time Clark had been this nervous to tell her about something he did. He was about ten years old, and he entered the house after going out to the barn. When she asked him what happened, he bowed his head and showed her what appeared to be the handle bar of the new bicycle she and Jonathan had given him. "I didn't mean to break my bike, Momma," he muttered before running to Martha's arms and began sobbing. He had just been getting control over his newfound strength then, and Martha calmed him down by telling him she understood. Looking at his son now, she wondered Clark did this time.

"Clark?"

With his head still bowed, he mumbled, just clear enough for his mother to understand, "Lois and I have a son."

The silence that followed was unexpected. Clark was waiting for Martha to say how irresponsible he was and how his father would've been disappointed by his behavior. He waited for her to tell him that he was raised better and he knew better. But none of those words escaped the lips of Martha Kent. Instead, Clark felt his mother's hand on his chin, and she lifted his face so that he was looking at her. Clark gulped and asked, "I'm sorry. Are you mad?"

Martha smiled lovingly at her boy. "No, I'm not. A little disappointed and very surprised, yes, but not mad." She kissed his forehead and ran a hand through his thick, jet-black hair. "You're a father now, Clark."

Her words touched him deeply, but at the same time, he felt a pang in his heart. "I am, but Lois doesn't want me to be."

Clark looked at her mother, the sadness in his eyes evident. "Lois doesn't want me anywhere near him. She said because I took her memories, she's taking my son from me."

"You do understand it was her pain speaking, right? I know it was harsh to take the boy away from you, but don't be angry at her for that, dear. She made a decision she was in no condition to make. She's angry and torn and feeling betrayed, and those emotions clouded her judgment."

Clark was quiet. He was thinking about what his mother just said.

Martha looked at her son. She knew how much he wanted this - a life, a family. Not knowing what to say, and seeing how Clark was so upset already, she just asked, "So, what is

my grandson like?"

Her question seemed to cheer up her son. His eyes twinkled as he began to talk about the five-year-old boy. "His name is Jason, and he's wonderful, Ma. He's really smart, and he loves to draw - whenever he's at the office, he comes to my desk, because he knows I've got colored pens and crayons and papers for him. He loves Superman, he always draws Superman for me. He's funny, he lights up the whole office with his smile. I can't believe it, Ma; I have a beautiful little boy. I'm not alone anymore."

Clark went on to tell Martha of stories about Jason as they helped themselves to hot chocolate and cookies. Martha could see just how much her boy loved Jason. She wished Clark could find a way to be a father to his son.

It was almost four o'clock in the morning when Clark and Martha finished their talk. Clark dressed up in his Superman suit and went out of the house, where Martha sat on the porch waiting for him. "Thank you, Ma. I knew I could always count on you."

"Don't think you can get off that easily, Clark," Martha said. "I may not have told you off for getting an unwed girl pregnant, but don't think you're not in trouble anymore."

"Sorry, Ma," he mumbled. It was such a sight to see, Superman being scolded by his mother in the front porch of their house.

"Bring my grandson here and you're clear of all charges," Martha joked.

"I'll try, Ma," Clark had to laugh at that. After kissing his mother goodbye, he took off and headed towards Metropolis.

## Chapter 5: An Unlikely Friend - Part 1

"Lane! Kent! Olsen! Richard!" Perry barked. All four of them - Lois, Clark, Jimmy and Richard - marched into Perry White's office.

"Alright, let's talk strategy," began the Editor-in-Chief. "Lane, what have you got for me this morning?"

Lois was in a daze. Her morning had not been so good. Jason ran into her and Richard's room crying, holding what was left of the pieces of his Kid Galaxy Elite Fleet Hyper Flyer airplane. "I d-didn't mean...t-to break...it!" he managed to say in-between sobs. "I'm s-sorry, Mommy." Lois hugged her little boy. It was all she could do to comfort her son. Jason explained that all he did was try to make the toy plane fly. He got upset when it wouldn't, but decided to just try again when he got home from school. He picked up his the airplane, but just as he did, it shattered in his hands. Lois knew her son had no fault in it. *Stupid Kryptonian genes*, she muttered under her breath. It was during this sort of times that she regretted shutting *him* out of her and her son's life. She knew Jason needed his guidance, but she was too stubborn and still too angry at what's-his-face-with-the-spit-curl to ask for his help in raising *their* son. It had been three weeks since their confrontation on the roof, and she was doing her best to forget about him and move on with her life.

"Lane!" Perry bellowed.

Lois was awakened from her thoughts by Perry's booming voice. "Sorry, uh, what, Chief?"

"Are you alright or do you want to take the day off?" the old man asked Lois softly.

"I'm fine, I just - "

"THEN GO WITH OLSEN TO THE DOCKS!!"

"Okay! I got it, Chief! I got it! Jeez!" Lois yelled back before leaving the Chief's office and banging the door behind her.

Clark and Richard were trying to stifle a laugh. Today was one of those rare days when Lois *actually* got the beating from Perry. Clark could faintly hear Lois' voice outside the office, asking Jimmy, "What did the Chief want us to do at the docks again?"

Perry let out a sigh of relief. *Two reporters down*, he thought, *just two more to go*.

"Okay, as for you two, I need you to work on something - together," he said.

Surprisingly for both Perry and Richard, Clark piped up, "What?!"

Perry looked at him puzzlingly. Clark Kent was never one to ask questions. Whenever Perry had an assignment, all the small-town reporter said was, "Sure, Chief. I'm on it." He didn't know what he said that elicited a different response from Clark.

Clark quickly realized his different reaction and tried to come up with something to make up for it. "Gosh, Chief. I, uh, I mean...W-what I meant was, um, *what* did you, uh, want us to work on?" He cleared his throat and gave Richard and Perry a goofy grin.

Perry didn't think much on Clark's earlier reaction and continued, "I know you've never worked with each other before, but I need to send two of my best reporters to cover the inauguration of the new Sandburg International Tower. Richard, you're on International, so work something on how this would affect the relations of Metropolis and other cities around the world. Kent, you're on City, so focus on how the Tower can help in Metropolis' developments. Got that?"

"Swell!" Clark replied, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Sure, thing Uncle Per -," Richard had started when Perry suddenly glared at him upon hearing the word 'Uncle'. "I mean, got it, Chief."

Richard and Clark left the office of the Editor-in-Chief and headed towards the elevator. "So, Clark," Richard said as the elevator doors closed, "should we take your car or mine?"

"Oh, u-um..." Clark stammered, "I don't, uh, well...I don't have a, uh, car."

If Richard had been surprised, he didn't show it. "That's, um, okay. We'll take my car, then."

They arrived at the parking lot, where Richard led Clark to his Porsche. He opened the doors and motioned for Clark to get in.

"Wow, you have a, uh, a very nice car," Clark said.

Richard grinned as he settled on the driver's seat. "It's pretty cool, but I sort of wish I had gotten something like a mini-van instead."

"Really? Why?"

Richard shrugged. "Well, you know, for Jason - sports cars and five-year-olds don't mix. It's too cramped for Jason. A mini-van would've been better, it'd give Jason the space he needs for his toys and his snacks whenever we go on the road. Sure, it wouldn't be as stylish to go to work with a mini-van as when you've got a sports car, and I never thought I'd ever say that, but I guess having a kid puts things into a different perspective."

"Uh huh," Clark could only agree with him.

The ride going to the Sandburg International Tower was, surprisingly, a fun one. Clark and Richard realized they had a lot in common. They were both interested in global events as well as travel. They loved kids, and Jason was one of the topics of their conversation. They talked about their college lives, and the crazy things they did back then. The two of them got along very well, and by the time they got to the Tower parking lot, Clark had to admit to himself that he liked Richard White. The man loved Lois and Jason, and put their best interest first. Though it hurt him to see *his* family with Richard, he was at least glad that Lois chose a good man to take his place.

"C'mon, Clark," Richard called to him as he got out of the car.

Clark had a bit of a struggle before he got out of the car.

"You okay, Clark?" Richard asked.

"Yeah, I'm, uh...I'm fine," he mumbled. "This car just wasn't built for someone my size." He grinned at Richard.

Richard laughed. "Hmm. I guess it's hard to be past six feet tall, huh?"

"If I had known, I would've stopped myself from growing," Clark quipped.

The two shared jokes as they entered the building. The Sandburg International Tower was huge. Flags of different countries lined the walls, and the glass-paned windows and ceiling brought in enough sunlight to give the place a cheerful glow. There were very few people milling about, all waiting for the inauguration ceremony to begin. Richard seemed well acquainted with the some people, shaking hands with two or three executives and introducing Clark to them.

The ceremony took about half an hour to finish. Clark and Richard parted ways, agreeing to meet after an hour. They began interviewing the business executives, and taking pictures of the new tower. When they had everything they needed, they went back to the car and headed home.

The ride back was quiet for a while, as both men were tired. Clark was perusing through his notes. "The Tower looks promising," he said out loud.

"Hmm. It is. It would help with the economic progress of the city," concurred Richard.

For a while, that was all they talked about - the Tower, business, international relations.

As they drove, they passed by a sign of a Mexican diner just a few meters ahead. Richard spoke, "Oh, hey Clark, would you mind if we do a drive-thru at the diner? I wanted to get Jason a burrito. It might cheer him up after his rough morning. We can grab some lunch here as well."

Clark looked at his watch - it was 1:00 pm. "Sure, a late lunch sounds good to me."

They went to the drive-thru and gave their orders. Richard got two burritos for Jason. "Don't tell Lois," he said. "She's not too keen on me spoiling the little guy. But I figured he'd be happy to get two of these for today."

"Why, what happened?" Clark asked, the concern in his voice evident. Thankfully, Richard didn't seem to notice.

"Well, he said he just grabbed his toy airplane and it broke."

"That's it?"

"That's all that he said. It's weird, though, because I don't think an adult could shatter a toy like that into little pieces with bare hands, much less a little kid." It suddenly occurred to Richard that it might be because of Jason being the son of Superman. Not wanting to make Clark suspicious of anything, he simply added, "But maybe it just had faulty assembly or something."

*Jason's powers are showing?* Clark thought to himself.

"Clark?"

"What?"

"You sort of zoned out there for a bit."

"Oh gee, I was just thinking. You think maybe I could buy Jason a present? A new toy plane, maybe?"

Richard thought about it for a moment. "Sure, as long as it's not too pricey, okay? Jason would love that, he likes you a lot."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he does. Most of the time, on the way home, Jason would be telling us everything you guys talked about. 'Mister Clark this, Mister Clark that.' You two sure know how to have a good time."

"Well, I don't... uh, I don't have... kids, you know. So I guess... Jason's the, uh, the closest thing I have... to a, um, a son."

Richard looked at him, looking as if he wanted to say something. "I know what you're feeling."

"Uh... You do?"

Richard paused. "Yeah. You see, Clark... uh... I haven't told this to anybody yet, but well, I, uh, I feel like I could trust you with a secret..."

"Yeah, of course. I can... I can keep a secret."

Before Richard could speak, both men became aware of a ten-wheeler truck speeding head-on to their lane. Thinking fast, Clark turned the steering wheel, and the car skidded sideways so that the passenger side faced the oncoming vehicle. "Clark!" Richard yelled as his car collided with the large truck. The impact was too strong, sending the Porsche careening to the roadside.

The car had overturned upon landing on the roadside ditch. Richard managed to get out of the car wreck with only minor cuts. His thoughts turned to his colleague. "Clark?" he called out. He was relieved to see the other man crawl out from the passenger seat unscathed.

Clark fixed his glasses and turned to Richard, trying to sound calm and normal. He

grinned at the other man. "So, uh, what was that secret you wanted to tell me?"

Richard laughed. Leave it to Clark 'Farm Boy' Kent to get the mood cheery. "Oh, that. Well... uh, Jason...he's not my son..." His voice trailed away as his eyes widened in shock at Clark. "...but of course, you know that already."

## Chapter 6: An Unlikely Friend - Part 2

"Jason...he's not my son..." Richard's voice trailed away as his eyes widened at Clark. "...but of course, you know that already."

Clark looked down at his clothes and was horrified to realize what Richard had just seen. There, just level with Clark's chest, was a seven-inch tear - enough to reveal a portion of the well-known red 'S' shield of Superman.

"Richard, I can explain," Clark said, his voice no longer the high-pitched tone Richard heard at work. Instead, it was a rich, deep baritone voice.

Richard held a hand up. "Not here."

Clark turned to see a number of people gathering at the side of the road, looking at them. He buttoned his tattered coat to cover his inner clothing, including the Superman uniform. A fat gentleman called out to them, "Are you guys alright there? Someone already called 911, they're on their way."

It was Richard who answered. "We're, uh, we're fine, sir. Thank you. I just need to get my car out of here."

An hour later, Richard and Clark were on a taxi on the way back to the Daily Planet. Richard had answered most of the inquiry by the cops. He also insisted to the paramedics that he and Clark were fine and that neither needed any medical attention. The cab stopped in front of the Daily Planet and Richard paid the cabbie. He immediately went down and strode towards the office building.

"Richard." Clark said.

Richard stopped in his tracks, but he didn't look back at Clark when he spoke, "Can we talk about this later? Lois has been calling me nonstop, I need to go and see her before she worries herself to death."

As soon as the two of them arrived at the bullpen, Richard was welcomed by a pair of slender arms. "I was so worried," Lois said, sniffing. "I heard about it on the news. I was all set to go but Perry stopped me. When I saw the car on TV, I thought...I thought...you..."

Richard embraced her tight, savoring the moment, aware that Clark - no, *Superman* - was witnessing it all. He felt deceived by the man he had called his friend, the man he trusted with a secret. "Hey, I'm fine. I'm okay," he told Lois. "At least now you know how I feel when you go chasing after a story and getting yourself in danger."

Lois playfully punched him on the shoulder before giving him a quick, sweet kiss on the lips.

"Daddy!" Jason came running towards his parents, oblivious to the events that had just taken place.

Richard scooped him up. "Hey, buddy. I, uh, I bought you a burrito but I sort of squished it on the way here. Sorry."

"It's okay, Daddy. Look, I drew you a picture!" Jason held out another one of his colorful drawings.

Clark caught a glimpse of Jason's drawing. It was a group of three people - Mommy, Daddy and Jason - and Clark wasn't a part of it.

Kal-El flew across Metropolis, enjoying the view of the starry sky. He had just stopped a bank heist in London, saved a little girl from drowning in Lake Geneva and assisted in stopping a fire at a suburban house in Chicago. His thoughts wandered to the events earlier that day. *Richard knows*, he told himself. He wasn't exactly being careless then, it was just one of those

things that happen. He sighed. He knew he had a lot of explaining to do. He just hoped Richard wouldn't take it out on him when he was being Clark Kent at the office.

He stopped in mid-air when he realized where his musing had taken him: the riverside house - Lois and Richard's house.

"You think you can stop floating around the air and talk to a mere flightless human like me?" a familiar voice asked, a mocking tone accompanying it.

Clark looked below to see Richard in the garden, a glass of red wine on one hand. He nodded and landed slowly beside Richard. His eyes shifted to the house, scanning the interior.

"Don't worry, Lois and Jason went to Ella's for tonight," Richard said, understanding what Superman was doing. "She's been wanting to have him sleep over since two months ago. You know Ella, right?"

"Lois' mother, yes," the Man of Steel replied.

"Hmm." Richard paused for a moment. He took a swig from his glass. He was aware that Superman was watching him. He grinned at the superhero. "I'm not drunk, nor am I planning to get drunk tonight. Of course, I have reason to do so, seeing as you not only deceived me with your silly glasses, but you also happened to be the real father of the son I raised. But like I said, I'm not planning to get drunk." He took one last gulp of wine. "Listen, I'm gonna go put this on the dishwasher. Do you mind changing into something less...like that? I don't want the neighbors seeing me talking to Superman - that just might become tomorrow's headline." Then Richard headed back inside the house.

He returned a second later and found Clark, dorky glasses, tattered three-piece suit and all, standing in the same spot where he left him. He was looking out at the river.

"Your house has a nice view," Clark said, though it wasn't in his 'Clark voice' anymore.

"Lois said the same thing when we checked out this house," replied Richard.

The two stood in silence for a long time before Richard spoke. "How does anyone get fooled by a pair of thick-rimmed glasses? How did *you* become Clark Kent? God, the Man of Steel and farm boy Kent - who would've thought they were one and the same?" He didn't look at Clark; his eyes were on the rippling water. His questions seemed to be directed at no one in particular, as if he was just thinking aloud.

"I'm sorry, Richard," said Clark faintly. His gaze was still on the water, watching the reflection of the lights around the river.

"You keep apologizing. Stop it."

"Sorry," he mumbled again.

"Can you stop being Clark Kent? It's irritating. I'm trying to hate you here, but you've done nothing to deserve my hate, really. So just stop."

"I'm not being Clark Kent. I *am* Clark Kent."

"Yeah, right. And *I'm* Batman," Richard snapped, the annoyance evident in his voice. He still couldn't bear to look at the man beside him. He was afraid because he could see it clearly now - the goofy grin, the dark blue eyes - Clark and Jason shared so much in common. He kept staring at the river, watching the small waves hit the edge of the garden.

Clark didn't know what to say. *You've messed it up with Lois*, his conscience was telling him, *don't mess it up with Richard, or else the nearest you'd be seeing Jason is through the glass doors in Richard's office - and that's IF he and Lois continue to bring your son to the office.*

"I *am* Clark Kent," he began. "I was sent here to Earth as a boy, and a loving couple adopted me. Jonathan and Martha Kent named me Clark Joseph Kent and raised me as their

own. I grew up in a farm in Smallville, Kansas. I attended school there, before I moved here to the city to study at Metropolis University and then work for the Planet."

He paused. Richard still had not said a word.

"So you see, Clark Kent isn't something I came up with. He's not an invention, a created identity. I *am* Clark Kent."

Richard let out a sigh. Upon hearing Clark's story, he realized he might have over-reacted. He recalled the events of that morning - the drive to the Sandburg Tower, their jokes and stories. All of those were real, as real as the man beside him. He turned to look at Clark. Clark was - and still *is* - his friend, and Richard was intelligent and mature enough to understand why Clark had kept his alter ego from him and everyone else. He gave a weak smile and quipped, "Is Clark Kent really so much of a klutz?"

Clark gave him a puzzled look and let out a chuckle. "Well, *that* is just part of my cover."

They continued to laugh for a while. Then Clark turned serious.

"Richard, I know this is hard for you, learning who I am and learning I am Jason's father. I was hoping you would be understanding, anyway. I want to be a part of Jason's life, and I want him to know me as his father."

"Lois doesn't know anything, does she?"

The regal face of Superman turned into the timid expression carried by Clark Kent. "I, um...I did something to her, which I now truly regret. It has damaged our...uh, relationship, though."

"Jeez, Kent, what did you do?"

"I, well, I, uh...I erased her memories - from the time of, um, Jason's conception to the days that followed. I left for Krypton soon after."

"I guess that's why you haven't been visiting Jason much." He paused. "Jason keeps his window open. He knows you come to visit him. I check up on him once in a while, and I notice his window is always open, which means you didn't come and close it after visiting."

"I didn't...I just..." Clark didn't know what to say. Jason was waiting for him. *His son was waiting for him!* "If Lois caught me, I don't know what she'd do. I just know she'll take him far away from me as possible."

Richard looked at Clark in disbelief. He didn't expect Clark to think of Lois that way. He reasoned, "Lois isn't like that. I mean, she can be quite...*intense*. But she'll never do that. She'll never even threaten you with something like that."

"Oh, but she did. She did. I'll never forget her words. 'You took away my memories, I'm taking away your son.'" Clark paused. Remembering Lois' words burned a hole in his heart. Richard could see how pained he was.

"Well, Jason's as much my son as he is Lois', and I say you get visitation rights. I'll bring Jason by the office as often as I can, Clark."

"Thank you, Richard."

"I'm a father, I know how it feels to have your son taken away from you by someone else."

Clark felt a wave of guilt wash over him at Richard's comment. "At least he knows you as 'Daddy.' I'm only 'Mr. Clark' or 'Superman' to him."

Richard looked at him with a shocked expression.

"He figured it out by himself," Clark said with a hint of pride. "He knows I'm Superman."

Richard crossed his arms over his chest and beamed proudly. "Like father, like son. *We* figured you out all by ourselves."

They stood looking at the river in silence. Only the sound of the water could be heard.

"She still loves you." Richard's words cut through the silence.

Clark gulped. He knew he was hurting Richard, too. *How many more people are going to pay for my mistake five years ago?* he asked himself.

Richard continued. "During some nights, when she thinks I'm sleeping, she'd go to the balcony and just look at the sky. Then she'd go back to bed and cry herself to sleep. I know her tears aren't for me."

Clark didn't say anything. He knew about it, he always had an ear out for Lois and Jason. He'd heard her sobbing, heard her heart beating rapidly, but he told himself not to pay any attention to it. She needed time to heal, and having him around would only hurt her more. But he was hurting, too, as Richard's words swirled in his mind: *"I know her tears aren't for me."*

"They're not for *me*, either," Clark quietly replied, his own words stabbing him deep in his heart. Richard looked up at him, confused. Clark continued, "Her tears - they're for Superman, not for me. *I'm* Clark, and we've worked together for years, and she has never looked at me the way she looked at Superman. Not once. Ever."

This realization had occurred to him long ago, but saying it aloud brought out a renewed pain that not even the power of the sun can heal. He remembered how Lois felt before he left for Krypton, when she learned who the hero she loved turned out to be. He could see the look in her eyes upon knowing that the great Superman was simply dorky Clark Kent - she wanted Superman, *not* Clark. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of sirens.

Richard saw Clark cock his head to the side, as if listening to something. "What is it?"

"Someone needs help. I have to go." With that, he spun for a moment and changed into his Superman uniform, then he zoomed into the night sky, just a red and blue blur to Richard White's eyes.

## Chapter 7: The Boys' Night Out

"So we're good for tomorrow, right, Lois?" Richard asked for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, Richard," Lois replied off-handedly.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Richard."

"You're not mad or anything?"

"No - God, Richard, stop asking! Yes, you and Jason can go to the baseball game. Yes, I'm sure. No, I'm not mad. Happy now?"

Richard was almost jumping on their bed. He'd been begging Lois to let Jason go with him to the baseball game tomorrow evening. He said he wanted some "daddy and son bonding time."

Lois looked at the ear-to-ear grin on Richard's face and shook her head. "You look as if you just got yourself a date with your high school crush."

"Sorry, Lois," Richard apologized, though he was still smiling. "It's just, my dad took me to my first baseball match when I was Jason's age, and I promised myself that when I have a son, I'd bring him to watch a baseball game as well."

"Hey, Clark," Lois greeted cheerfully as she passed by his desk.

"Oh, hi Lois," Clark greeted back. He felt his heart skip a beat. It seemed as if Lois had been noticing him more during the past few weeks. *Since she said goodbye to Superman*, he thought to himself. "You, uh, look like you're having a good afternoon."

"I am," Lois said as she proceeded to her desk. She had just sat down when she heard Perry's voice.

"Lane! Kent! In my office - NOW!"

Lois gracefully stood up from her chair when suddenly -  
CCRRAAAASSH!!

She turned to the source of the sound and found Clark and another reporter, Travis Jones, struggling to get up. There were papers scattered all over the floor, Clark's chair was upturned, a box with file folders was stained with coffee. Most of the Daily Planet journalists were stifling their laughter. A few couldn't help sniggering. Lois felt sorry for Clark, who had been the butt of almost every joke around the office. "If none of you are going to help, then shut your mouths and stop laughing!" Lois exclaimed. Then she strode to Clark's desk and helped pick up the papers and folders as the laughter died down.

Clark was mumbling, "Sorry" over and over to Travis as he picked up the papers and set his chair back up. He managed to get all the papers and sorted out which were Travis' and which were his. "Here," Lois said, handing him a pile of papers. His hand brushed hers for a second as he took the documents from her, making him blush. Hoping she didn't notice, Clark muttered, "Thanks" and continued sorting the papers. He managed to do so in three minutes' time, and gave Travis his articles, mumbling another, "Sorry." He looked up to see Lois still standing by his desk.

"I thought I'd wait for you," she said, smiling warmly.

Clark felt as if he would melt with her smile. He smiled back, but it was not like his usual goofy grin.

Lois noticed how Clark's smile today differed from the usual grin he gave her. It was different. It was...*familiar*, yet Lois couldn't pinpoint whose smile it belonged to.

"Shall we go to Perry now?" Clark asked, the high-pitched tone disrupting Lois' thoughts.

She nodded, and the two of them went off to the Chief's office.

"So, I guess that means we're back to the old days, huh?" Lois said as they left Perry's office.

"I guess so," Clark replied timidly, pushing his glasses up. Perry had assigned them to work together on the latest series of crimes in Metropolis. There seemed to be an increase in crime rate despite Superman's return. Lois had objected to making another article involving the Man of Steel, but Clark volunteered to do whatever was concerned with the hero and Lois could focus on the criminals.

As they made their way to their cubicles, Richard entered the bullpen with Jason in tow.

"Hey, munchkin!" Lois greeted her son.

Jason ran towards Lois and Clark, but instead of hugging Lois, the little boy jumped onto Clark, who managed to scoop him up with a grace that was very un-Clark-like. Jason greeted him, "Hi, Mr. Clark!"

"So my son runs into another man's arms *and* gets greeted first? So what am I now, a decor on the wall?" Lois joked.

Clark just shrugged at her and chuckled. He ruffled Jason's hair. "Hey you, too, buddy."

Richard watched the stolen moment between father and son. A part of him was hurt to see Clark and Jason together, but he reasoned to himself that at least he got five years to be Jason's father. Clark had only five weeks or so. He approached the three of them.

"The school nurse talked to me about his asthma," Richard said as he gave Lois a kiss on the cheek. "She said Jason doesn't use his inhaler often anymore - " he took Jason from Clark's arms and swung him around," - which is a *grrreat* thing since we are going to be screaming our lungs out at tomorrow's baseball game!"

"Yeah! Baseball! Baseball! Baseball!" Jason chanted.

Richard suddenly had an idea. "Hey Clark, I have an extra ticket to the game. You want to come along?"

Clark was taken aback by Richard's offer, but was grateful for it, too. "Oh, um...Thanks, Richard, but I, uh, I don't want to impose - "

"You're not imposing. I'm inviting you. C'mon, it's gonna be a boys' night out."

"Yeah, Mr. Clark," Jason agreed. "We're gonna have fun watching baseball!"

Clark caught Richard's eye and knew the other man wasn't taking 'no' for an answer. "Alright, I'll go."

Jason cheered and chanted, "Baseball!" all the way into Richard's office. Richard followed his son, carrying the boy's backpack and Superman lunchbox.

*Knock, knock.*

Clark hurriedly opened his apartment door. He had on a casual red shirt and jeans, ready for the baseball game.

"Mr. Clark!" Jason exclaimed, running into Clark's arms.

"Hey, slugger," he greeted back.

Richard entered Clark's apartment and looked around. "So Superman does have an address."

"And a cellphone number," quipped Clark.

"Daddy, it's s'pposed to be a secret!" Jason told Richard off. Richard had told Jason the night before that he also knew of Superman's other identity.

The three of them settled into Richard's new Honda CR-V. It may not be as stylish as the Porsche (which was completely wrecked, forcing Richard to sell it to a junk shop), but it had good safety features and was spacious enough for Jason.

They arrived at the stadium twenty minutes before the game began. Finding their seats, the three boys prepared themselves for the exciting game ahead.

When the game ended, Richard told Clark, "I'll be at the car. I'll let you and Jason wander around for a while." Clark gave him a grateful look and nodded.

"Mr. Clark, can we go buy a hotdog?" Jason asked, tugging on Clark's sleeve. Clark had to laugh. He was Lois' kid, alright.

The pair went to the hotdog stand. The sweet lady behind the stand handed Jason a hotdog on a stick. She turned to Clark and asked, "And what would Daddy like?"

Clark looked surprised. "Oh, um, I'm not...I'm just watching him - "

Jason, enjoying the evening too much to care what the lady had said, cut him short. "He wants a hotdog, too."

When they got their orders, they went for a walk around the stadium grounds. Jason pointed at several baseball caps. "Would you like one, Jason?" Clark asked. His son nodded. After picking one cap, Clark handed Jason the money. "Go pay the nice man," he said, leading his son to the cashier.

The two of them continued their stroll, with Clark telling Jason stories about how his father Jonathan used to play catch with him. "Mr. Clark, I'm tired of walking, but I don't want to go home yet," the little boy said. "Can you carry me?"

The pleading look on Jason's face was enough to make Clark melt. "Of course, Jason." He scooped the boy up and sat him on his shoulders.

"I'm so high up! I can see everyone!" Jason exclaimed, his smile reaching from ear to ear. Clark was pleased to see his son so happy.

A few passers-by looked at them. A woman was telling her husband, "Look at them, such a cute father-and-son pair!" Clark caught a few other pleasing comments, but his favorite was, "His boy looks just like him."

After an hour and a half of strolling, they walked to the parking lot and found Richard waiting for them in the car. Jason ran into his Daddy's arms. Richard hugged his son longer and tighter than he usually did. "You had fun with Mr. Clark, kiddo?"

"Uh huh!" came Jason's jovial reply. "Mr. Clark and I had lots of fun!"

## Chapter 8: And Then He Fell

Kal-El woke up and found himself staring at a starry ceiling. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. As he sat up on bed, understanding dawned upon him. He was in his old bedroom in Smallville, where he had been staying for the weekend. He had flown to visit his mother and tell her all about Jason, and the many moments he shared with his son. He also told her about Richard, the boy's other father, and how for the past months, Richard had been kind enough to give Kal-El moments to share with Jason, even asking him to baby-sit the boy once in a while. It was during one of his babysitting duties that Kal-El was able to fly his son to meet Martha in Smallville, much to the old woman's delight. It had been a quick visit, but Martha was grateful for the opportunity to finally meet her grandson, even if she had only been introduced as "Mr. Clark's Mommy."

As he looked at the sky, Kal-El noted that it was still early, just a little past five in the morning. He spun around and changed into his blue tights and red cape. Opening his large bedroom window, he flew out to greet the morning sun.

*Six months.* It had been six months since his arrival back on Earth after a five-year absence. For the past months, his life had had so many twists and turns, but for the most part, he was glad for how things turned out. He had a good relationship with his son, a friendship with the man who stood as his son's father while he was gone, and a renewed friendship with the love of his life who also happens to be the mother of his child. Of course, those are not without complications.

Kal-El had not seen Lois as Superman since their confrontation at the roof four months ago. But as Clark Kent, he and Lois spent a lot of time together, working on their articles and rebuilding the friendship they had lost when Clark left. He welcomed the change - Lois was becoming close to Clark, not Superman.

The sound of a little girl's cry broke the peaceful morning. With a speed faster than a bullet, Kal-El zoomed to the direction of the girl's cries.

Lois woke up early that Thursday morning with a headache. As she opened her eyes, she noticed that everything was spinning. *A nice, warm shower is all I need,* she told herself, slowly making her way to the bathroom. A few minutes later, she went downstairs, ready for work but still lightheaded. She grabbed a cup from the cupboard and poured herself some coffee.

"G'morning, Mommy!" Jason greeted. But not even her son's happy disposition could lighten Lois' mood.

"Good morning, baby," she greeted back, making an effort to sound cheerful. Lois crouched down and kissed Jason on the cheek.

Richard came downstairs a while later, ready for another busy day at the office. He found Lois having a cup of coffee - her second in one hour - and Jason sitting on the living room floor, playing with his Superman action figure. It was the usual sight to see at the Lane-White residence. Richard had just entered the kitchen when he heard the clear sound of breaking china behind him.

"Jason!" Lois shrieked, rushing to the living room. Richard followed.

They found the five-year-old on the verge of tears, his hands limply on his sides and an apologetic look on his face. "I'm sorry," he muttered, sniffing, "Superman was flying and crashed into the flowers."

Lois' eyes shifted to the puddle of water beside Jason, then to the scattered flowers on the

floor, and then to the broken pieces of her favorite flower vase - the vase was a gift from her mother. It was enough to send her over the edge. In a raised voice, she began to scold Jason, "How many times have I told you to be careful when playing with your toys? Why don't you listen to me?"

"I'm sorry, Mommy." Jason began to cry.

"Sorry isn't going to fix this mess now, is it? Go to your room, Jason. I'm taking your toys for today. You are not allowed to play until you realize your mistake. Go."

"Lois - " Richard called her.

Lois snapped at him. "Richard, my day is bad enough without you adding to my problems."

Richard had been with Lois long enough to know it was during this kind of moments that he had to back away from her and give her space. He was upset by her reprimanding Jason, though. The boy already felt bad for what happened, and Lois just made him feel worse. He made to go to the kitchen and get some paper towels to clean up the mess, but before he left, he spoke quietly to Lois, "You didn't have to tell him off like that. He didn't need to feel worse about breaking the vase."

"I had to, if I wanted to instill some sense of discipline in him. It's my job. I'm his mother."

"I'm his father, and I say you were too hard on him." With that, he left the room.

As soon as Richard left, a sinking feeling crept up to Lois. *I was too hard on him*, she admitted to herself, feeling guilty over what she had just said to her son.

Jason was quiet during the ride to school. He was obviously still thinking about the vase incident. Richard noticed how Jason was trying hard not to cry.

"Hey, buddy," Richard said, glancing at the rear view mirror to look as his son sat quietly on his booster at the backseat. Jason looked up and met his father's eyes. "You okay?"

The boy just nodded.

Richard tried to think of something to cheer him up. "Jason, what do you think about meeting with Superman later after school?"

Richard smiled as he saw his son's eyes twinkle with excitement.

"Maybe if you're a good boy, he might even take you flying."

At those words, the frown returned to Jason's face. His eyes downcast, he sniffed and mumbled, "He won't take me flying. I'm not a good boy. Mommy got mad at me, remember?"

Richard let out a sigh. His son was becoming more and more like Clark Kent. Just a few words of disappointment from someone else and they feel the world crashing down on them. "Jason, just because Mommy got mad doesn't mean you're a bad boy. She just...overreacted. She didn't mean any of the things she said."

Jason didn't answer. He just looked at the passing cars and the buildings. He didn't utter a word until they arrived at his school.

Richard helped Jason out of his car seat and handed him his Superman lunchbox. "I'll ask Clark when I get to the office if he can take you for a ride later, alright? Cheer up, buddy. Have a great day at school."

Jason gave his dad a weak smile before walking to his classroom.

"Clark!" Richard hollered the moment he saw the tall, bumbling reporter leave Perry White's office. "Hey Clark!"

Clark turned his head to the sound of the voice and saw Richard just outside his office.

Clark waved at him. Richard nodded his head in acknowledgement and motioned for Clark to meet him inside his office. Clark set his notepad and pen down on his desk and headed for the assistant editor's office.

"Need help with anything?" Clark asked as he shut the door behind him.

Richard paused, wondering how he could best phrase his request for the Man of Steel. "Yeah, uh... You think you can ask Superman to stop by later when I bring Jason here after school? He had a rough morning. Lois scolded him for breaking her favorite vase, and then she went on and on about how Jason doesn't know how to be careful and all. I thought maybe you could...cheer him up? Maybe...fly him around?"

"Oh." Clark said, frowning his brow and thinking what to say. "I'd love to spend time with him, I really do. But Mr. White - uh, the Chief - wants me to go on a daytrip down to Chicago to cover Senator Alan Jameson's press conference there."

Richard understood, but he wasn't going to let Clark off that easily. "Look, it's just a quick flight. Please? Cheer him up. He's your son, you know."

Clark looked at Richard. The other man knew what cards to play; he had to give him that. With a sigh and a shrug, Clark gave in. "Okay, but you have to make sure Lois *does not* find out about this."

"Will do." Richard grinned.

Clark was almost at the door when he stopped. "Oh, and Richard?"

Richard's eyes moved from the stack of papers on his desk to Clark. He raised an eyebrow.

"Thanks...for, uh, giving me a few moments with my son."

By the time Richard and Jason arrived at the rooftop, Superman was already waiting for them, his red cape billowing with the wind. Jason's face brightened up at the sight of his favorite superhero.

"Superman!" he said, running towards the Man of Steel. Superman welcomed him with open arms and picked him up. It was one of those rare moments when the superhero did not seem distant and unapproachable.

"I know you're not yet done with your article," Richard said as he made his way towards them, "so you can bring him to Chicago - but make sure he gets back here by four o'clock."

Superman nodded.

"It's 2 PM," Richard said, looking at his watch, "that means you've got two hours to kill, kiddies. Have fun."

"Bye, Daddy!" Jason waved as he and Superman took to the skies.

They arrived in downtown Chicago after twenty minutes. It would've taken them two minutes to get there, but Superman wanted to give his son more time in the air. He knew Jason loved it. They landed in a dark alleyway, and Superman changed back into Clark. They made their way to the town square, stopping by an ice cream parlor for an afternoon snack.

"So, did you like flying?" Clark asked his son. They were sitting outside the ice cream shop, enjoying their hot fudge sundaes.

The boy nodded vigorously, flashing a goofy grin very much like Clark's. His expression suddenly changed from delighted to dejected.

"What's wrong, Jason?" Clark asked, looking worriedly at his son.

Jason bit his lip. "I shouldn't have gone flying. Daddy said I can only go flying if I'm a good boy, but I wasn't a good boy and Mommy got mad and she said I can't play with my toys

anymore."

Clark's heart ached for his son. He didn't know what exactly Lois said, but he felt slightly angry at her for making Jason feel this way. Clark held his son's chin up. "Hey, look at me."

Jason's deep blue eyes met Clark's - their eyes were of the same intense hue of blue. With a sternness in his voice that contradicted his mild-mannered appearance, Clark spoke to his son, "You're a good boy, Jason. Once in a while, we commit mistakes that make other people think the worst of us, but that doesn't mean there's no longer any kindness left in us. Don't think for one second that you're a bad kid, because you are not. I know that, Richard knows that, and your Mommy knows that as well. You understand?"

"But Mommy shouted at me and I could see she was really angry." Jason's eyes traveled down to lap, hiding the tears that were beginning to fall.

"She wasn't angry at *you*; she was just...surprised at what happened." He paused, looking at his son. "If it makes you feel any better, she's really sorry for what she did. She didn't mean to shout at you."

Jason looked up at him. "Really?"

Clark didn't want to make up stories for his son, but it was all he could do to make the boy feel better. "Really."

When the two finished their ice cream, they only had thirty minutes left until 4 PM. Clark figured they could spend ten minutes in the park before flying back home. Jason ran to the jungle gym at the park, climbing the high bars and crawling around the lower rails. Clark was sitting at a nearby bench, watching his son with amusement. Just then, he heard a piercing scream coming from an alley two blocks away. He waited to hear if cops were on the way, but no sound of a siren could be heard. He knew he had to go. He ran towards his son. "Jason, I need to go somewhere. Stay here, okay? I'll be back in a few minutes."

The boy recognized the urgency in Clark's voice, and nodded determinedly, seeming to say, "Don't worry, I can take care of myself."

Clark ran into the trees, changed into Superman, and zoomed to the alley, where he found a shabby-looking man aiming a gun at a young lady. In a span of three minutes, he had flown the lady to a nearby hospital and taken the crook to the police station. He quickly changed back into Clark Kent and ran back to the park. He was only a few meters away when he found a group of people, mostly parents, huddled together in one area. He realized they were in the jungle gym. Panic flooded him. He didn't need x-ray vision to know what happened.

"*JASON!*"

Richard was pacing back and forth in his office. It was ten minutes past four o'clock, and neither Clark nor Jason was in sight. He knew Lois was beginning to get suspicious. She had asked him where Jason was a few minutes ago, and all he said was, "He's at Jeremy Wheeler's house." Jeremy Wheeler was one of Jason's few friends in school. *Where are they?* Richard thought to himself.

"Richard?" Lois' voice made him stop in his tracks. She was standing in the doorway of his office.

"Hmm?"

"Jason isn't here yet." Lois stated flatly.

"I told you, I dropped him off at Jeremy's house," snapped Richard.

Lois breathed deeply. "Richard."

"Lois." His tone had turned cold.

"Where's Jason?" Lois had been feeling guilty about her outburst that morning, and she wanted to treat her son to his favorite pizza parlor to make up for it.

The irritation apparent in his voice, Richard replied, "Like I said, he's at Jer - "

"Stop with the bullshit, Richard! I called Tina Wheeler. She said her son had been staying with his father since the weekend - in New Jersey." Lois was giving Richard the death stare. If looks could kill, Richard would've been lying dead right at that moment.

Richard swallowed hard. He couldn't think of what to say to Lois.

"Richard," Lois said, trying to keep calm. "Where is *my* son?"

Richard gazed upon Lois' eyes with a look of defiance as he replied, "*Your* son...is in - "

"...in downtown Chicago, where Superman arrived just in time to save a young woman..." the voice of a female newscaster cut him short.

Richard stopped dead in his tracks as he watched the TV monitor, where the footage showed Superman handing a dark-haired man with tattered clothes over to the police. He was vaguely aware of Lois standing beside him, talking to someone on her cellphone but her keeping her eyes on the monitor.

"I have to go," Lois said flatly, and hurriedly went out of Richard's office.

"Lois!" Richard called out. He followed her to her cubicle where she had started gathering her things and putting everything in her bag. "Where are you going?"

"That was Clark on the phone a minute ago. He's with Jason at the hospital."

"But Clark is in - " Richard objected, looking confused.

" - Chicago, I know. *How the hell Jason got to Chicago, I don't even want to know.*" Lois ran to the elevators, calling Metropolis Air on the way to ask for the schedule of flights to Chicago.

Richard put a hand on her shoulders. "I can fly us there," he offered quietly.

Lois forgot all the anger she had - anger for Richard, anger for Superman. All that mattered now was her son's well-being. As she and Richard went inside the elevator, she permitted herself to lean onto Richard's shoulders and cry. "I shouldn't have said those things to him this morning, " she sobbed. "What if he...what if those were the last words he'd hear from me?"

## Chapter 9: He Opened His Eyes

Clark sat at the chair beside Jason's hospital bed, his eyes never leaving the sight of the fragile-looking little boy sleeping on the bed. He was keenly aware of the beeping sound of the heart monitor situated at the other side of Jason's bed. He was told by the doctors that the monitor was just a precaution, and that Clark should not worry about Jason being hooked up to it. Clark glanced at his watch - 6:20 PM. He had been at the hospital for about two hours now, and Jason had not yet woken up.

"Please, Jason," Clark whispered. "Please wake up."

*Ring, ring.*

He took out his cellphone from his pocket, and checked who was calling. He had expected it to be Lois, she had called to say she and Richard were flying to Chicago and would be there at around half past six. He was surprised to see his mother's name on the caller ID.

"Ma?"

"Clark? How - ?" Martha began, but Clark answered before she finished.

"He's fine, Ma. The doctors said he hit his head badly, but there wasn't any internal bleeding or something like that. He's got a scrape on his forehead, though. At least it wasn't a cut, so he didn't need stitches. He hasn't woken up since I brought him here, but one of the doctors said that since Jason's color and breathing are normal, he should be allowed to sleep." Clark heaved a sigh after reporting to his mother about Jason's status.

"I was going to ask about how *you* were doing, Clark."

Clark paused. "Oh."

Clark had called his mother as soon as the doctors were finished examining Jason. Martha had never heard her son so frantic before, and did her best to calm down her son over the phone. Now, she was just wondering how her boy was doing. "So? How are you, dear?"

"I'm...I'm..." Clark replied, but he couldn't find the words to describe the guilt and uneasiness he was feeling. He realized his hands were shaking as he held the phone closer to his ear. "I...d-didn't...I should've..."

"Oh, Clark..." Martha's heart went out to her son. He was beating himself up over the accident.

"I knew I should've stayed with him...but I didn't. And it almost cost him his life, Ma." After a pause, he said, "I'm a bad father."

"Son, that's not true. One mistake does not make you a bad person, you know that."

Clark remembered his conversation with Jason earlier that day, while they were at the ice cream parlor. Martha's words seemed to echo his earlier statement to his son.

"I know, Ma. But it was a big mistake - " Clark cut his sentence short when he heard a male's voice behind Martha's.

"Clark, I'm sorry but I have to go. Ben's here. We had plans to go to town today."

Clark's heart seemed to ache more. Ben Hubbard was his mother's friend - well, now it seems they're more than just friends. He sighed. "Alright, Ma. Take care. I love you."

"I love you, too, Clark. And don't worry about Jason - if he's anything like you, he's a strong little boy. He's going to be okay."

Clark hung up and set his phone on the bedside table. He continued his vigil on Jason, remembering the events that took place two hours ago, knowing full well that Lois would want to know what happened to Jason.

*"JASON!" cried Clark, rushing to the park and making his way through the crowd. He knelt down and looked at his son, lying on the ground with his face down, unconscious. He*

looked at the crowd. "What happened?"

A concerned young mother standing behind him replied, "He fell. He was climbing to the highest bars and he slipped."

Clark made a quick scan of Jason's body to check for any fracture. When he was sure that there was no broken bone in Jason's body, he scooped up his son and ran past the people to the direction of the hospital just a block away.

Panic-stricken, Clark rushed to the emergency room of the hospital. A male nurse approached him. "I need a doctor," Clark pleaded. The nurse gazed down at the limp form of the little boy. Clark explained, "He fell from the jungle gym at the park. He was at the highest bars."

The nurse nodded in understanding. "I'll get a doctor, sir. There's an empty bed to your left, you can put him there. We'll take care of him." The nurse took off and paged a doctor. Another came to assist in putting Jason on the bed, and to ask Clark questions.

The five minutes that it took for a doctor to check on Jason were the longest five minutes of Clark's life. His heart beat rapidly and he was pacing back and forth in the ER. All the other patients, all the chaos of the emergency room were lost to him as he focused on his son. "I don't know what to do," he told himself, letting the tears he had been holding back for so long to just flow. "I don't know...God, tell me what to do." He felt as if his heart was going to burst with the emotions he had inside him.

"Sir?" a man with graying hair called Clark's attention. Clark stopped pacing and looked at him. "My name is Dr. Austin Sanford. I'll be the doctor in charge of..." he read the file on his hand, "...Jason."

Clark simply nodded.

Dr. Sanford continued. "Upon physical examination, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him, except for an abrasion on his forehead. Just to be sure, we'd like to perform a CT scan, and we need parental consent - "

"I'm his father," Clark stated.

"Clark?"

The familiar voice of Lois Lane shook him out of his reverie. He looked up and found Lois and Richard standing in the doorway. He nodded. The pair entered the room, and Lois ran to Jason's bedside, brushing a lock of her son's hair away from his face and kissing him on the cheek. Tears began to flow down her cheeks and she buried her face in her son's chest. Richard walked up to Lois and whispered something in her ear, then he helped her sit on a chair beside Jason's bed.

Clark was at a loss for words. He had never seen Lois so distressed. He quietly said, "The doctors said he's okay. He just needs sleep." He proceeded to tell her and Richard what happened - or at least, as close to what *really* happened. "I was, um, I just finished fixing my article and I was walking, um, a-around when I saw a crowd gathering at the park. And, well, uh, you know, being a reporter...Well, uh, I recognized Jason im-immediately and I, uh, I decided to bring him to, uh, here to the hospital when I didn't see either of you with him."

"He was with...a cousin," Richard quickly blurted out, knowing Lois had not thought about what excuse to tell Clark, though he and Clark secretly knew why Jason was in Chicago in the first place. "Apparently, said cousin *disappeared* all of a sudden." Richard's tone was cold and bitter, and his eyes darted to Clark.

Lois gave Clark a weak smile of gratitude. Clark smiled back. When he looked at Richard, though, all he could see in his eyes were anger. After a moment of silence, Richard

spoke, "Lois? Would you be okay here? I need to speak to Clark for a minute. Clark?"

Clark didn't object nor gave any outward sign of worry. His face was expressionless as he followed Richard out of the room. They headed for the elevators and Richard pushed the "Roof deck" button.

"What the hell happened, Clark?" Richard shouted at Clark the minute they stepped onto the roof.

"Richard..."

"I leave my son with you for two hours - *two hours* - and he ends up in the hospital! I can't believe you! What did you do? Oh, wait, I know! You had to go and save some bimbo who had a gun aimed at her boobs! *You* left Jason unattended to rescue a damsel in distress! What, are you telling me that some random girl on the street is more important to you than Lois' son? Damn it, Clark! *Lois' son!* You know he's the most important thing in the world to her, and you almost managed to take that away from her! He could've died! He could've been kidnapped! He could've received more than just a scrape on his forehead! A hundred things could have happened to him! Did you even think about that?"

Clark had not said a word, letting Richard rant and rant. He understood that it was Richard's way of letting out the tension he felt after nearly losing Jason. Clark heard Richard sigh.

"I'm not like you, Richard," Clark said quietly, his head bowed, not wanting to meet Richard's eye. "I'm not...I-I don't...I don't know how to be a father. I had dismissed that thought a long time ago, when I learned that I was the last son of Krypton. I'm sorry. I made a lapse in judgment that nearly cost my son's life. My biological father, Jor-El, told me I was sent here to be the people's savior. Ever since I learned that, it's all I've ever done. I'm good at it, at rescuing people. But *this* - being a father, looking after my son - I'm new at this...I'm new at this."

Neither of them spoke afterwards. They silently made their way back to Jason's room. Richard stopped in front of Jason's door. His voice was barely audible - yet the coldness was evident - when he said, "If I remember correctly, Clark Kent was raised by a good farmer in Kansas. Why not follow in Jonathan Kent's footsteps? None of us were born good fathers, Clark. We work our way to become one."

Before Richard could turn the knob, Clark stopped him. He could hear Lois inside, and he knew she needed time alone with Jason.

"Hey, buddy, " Lois said, talking to a still-unconscious Jason. Tears continuously streaked down her face. "I'm really sorry for what I said to you this morning. Mommy didn't mean any of it. I was not feeling well, and I took it out on you and I shouldn't have done that because it wasn't fair to you. Please wake up, sweetie. Mommy misses you so much already. I love you."

When Clark was sure he and Richard could come in, he gently knocked on the door and went inside. They found Lois still sitting beside Jason's bed, her shoulders hunched as she leaned on the bed, holding her son's hand. She looked pale and wan. Richard drew close to her. "Lois, how about we grab something to eat, hmm?"

"No. I can't. I have to stay here."

"The doctors said Jason's gonna be fine. *You* need to rest. C'mon, we'll just have a quick bite at the cafeteria. If anything changes, Clark will let us know *immediately*."

Richard gently tugged at her arm, and she reluctantly stood up. She kissed Jason on the cheek and whispered, "I'll be back soon, sweetie," and then she walked towards the door, Richard following close behind. Before closing the door, Richard gave Clark a knowing look,

to which the latter responded to with a nod.

Clark sat at the chair Lois had abandoned. His gaze fell upon Jason's hand. For a moment, he hesitated, but then proceeded to hold Jason's small hand in his. He stayed like that for some minutes, just holding his son's hand and watching Jason's chest rise and fall.

"Jason," he whispered. "I'm sorry I left you at the park. I shouldn't have done that. I just... I was wrong. I was very wrong, and I'm sorry that you had to pay the price for my mistake." He paused. "But I promise you, it won't happen again. I know better now. I'll be there for you, buddy. For you and your mom...and even for Richard. You're very important to me. I really hope you can hear me, because I want to tell you that...I love you, Jason." He then stood up and kissed Jason lightly on the cheek.

Clark sat down again and bowed his head, holding back his tears.

"Mr. Clark?" a faint voice whispered.

Clark's head snapped up. He looked at the boy on the bed. Cerulean eyes met cerulean eyes. Clark stood up, disbelief etched on his face. Jason sat up and wrapped his arms around Clark. "I heard. I love you, too." At those words, Clark let tears of joy flow down his face as he wrapped his arms around his son.

## Chapter 10: A Feeling Called Guilt

Clark left for Metropolis the morning after Jason's accident. Lois, Richard and Jason followed that afternoon. Lois had called Clark to inform him that they had arrived home. At the end of their conversation, Lois told him with absolute sincerity, "Thank you, Clark. Jason wouldn't be here without you." At her words, Clark fell silent. In his heart, he knew Jason wouldn't have fallen off the bars had he been watching the boy like he was supposed to.

"Mr. Clark!" Jason's cheerful voice resounded across the bullpen as he arrived with Richard. It had been a day since he got back from Chicago, and he was back to his cheerful self, as if nothing had ever happened. Jason ran to Clark's desk, where the mild-mannered reporter was busy typing his article for the evening edition.

Clark heard the sound of Jason's footsteps running toward his direction, but instead of turning around and welcoming the boy with open arms, he stood up and immediately took some files from his desk. "Hi, Jason. I can't talk right now, buddy. I'm sorry. Maybe some other time we can hang out?" Clark said, reaching out to ruffle the boy's hair but decided against it, withdrawing his outstretched hand and walking hurriedly to the printing room.

Jason watched him, befuddled. He was not the only one - even Richard noticed Clark's sudden odd behavior. *Strange*, Richard thought to himself. *Clark seemed almost unexcited upon seeing Jason*. Seeing the disheartened look on his son's face, Richard called out to Jason. "C'mon, Tiger, let's go to my office and I'll help you with homework while we wait for Mommy to finish her interview with the mayor at city hall. And then we can go home and we can fix Mommy a really nice dinner, alright?"

Richard had been worried about Lois since Jason's accident. She never talked about it, not once since they got back from Chicago. It was as if she wanted to think it never happened at all. Richard had made attempts to coax her to talk about it - he knew she had been very upset by the incident - but Lois simply dodged his questions and changed the topic of their conversations.

"LANE!" Perry White bellowed early the next morning.

Lois got up from her desk and went to the Editor-in-Chief's office. She raised her eyebrows as soon as the door closed, her expression asking what the Chief wanted with her.

"I've got a job for you today - the Carson case," Perry said.

Lois' eyes went wide. "You're giving that to me? Perry, that's the biggest news of the year! Theodore Carson, owner of the largest shipping empire in the country - he's worth billions, and he's being charged for fraud and plunder."

"He has a press conference today; you might be able to press him for details regarding his charges. I'm counting on you for the front page news, Lane."

"Sure, Chief. Oh, wait a sec - " Lois' phone began to ring.

"Hello?" Lois pulled out her phone. She continued talking on the phone for a few minutes before putting it back inside her bag. She heaved a heavy sigh. "I can't do the Carson case, Chief."

"What?! But you just - " Perry began.

"I'm going to pick up Jason. His school called, they're cutting the classes short because of an emergency faculty meeting. So no school for Jason today."

"Make Richard pick up Jason. I need you on this article, Lois."

Lois seemed to think about it for a while. Then she shrugged. "Nah, I'm going to pick up my son." She began to make her way out of the Chief's office. "And by the way, Chief, I'm

taking the rest of the day off. Jason's spent too many days in the newsroom. The zoo or the park would be a nice change for him. Bye!" She slipped out of the room before Perry could call her back.

By mid-morning, news of ace reporter Lois Lane turning down the assignment on the biggest scoop of the year had spread throughout the office. Many thought it was very unlike her to do so. But Richard knew Lois better than his colleagues did. He knew Lois wanted to make up for what had happened to Jason and the reprimanding she had given the boy the morning of the accident. Before Lois left to pick up Jason, she had told Richard, "I'll be spending the day with Jason. It's what I call Mommy-and-Son bonding time." *It's what I call guilt*, Richard thought, though he didn't say it aloud to Lois. He knew she had been beating herself up too much already.

"Mommy!" Jason exclaimed, excitedly running to Lois's arms. "You have no work, too, Mommy?"

Lois nodded as she kissed her little boy. "It's just you and me today, sweetie. Where do you want to go?"

The mother-and-son pair spent the morning at the zoo. They wandered around and looked at the animals, laughing at a monkey that kept scratching its butt and staring in awe at the big tigers. Lois bought Jason whatever the boy pointed to, and almost gave in when Jason asked if he could keep one of the rabbits in the petting zoo. "We can't have a pet right now, sweetie. You have school, and Mommy and Daddy are busy at the office. But we can come to the zoo more often and you can visit *all* the rabbits again. How does that sound?"

After lunch at Jason's favorite Mexican diner, they made their way to the park. Jason was reluctant to go to the playground. Lois noticed her son's worried look. "Why don't you go and play, honey? I'll be right here, I promise," she assured Jason.

The boy shook his head, swinging his legs back and forth as he sat on the park bench. "I'm okay here, Mommy."

Lois felt sorry for her son. She wanted him to enjoy the park, just like he used to before the accident. She suddenly had an idea, and hoped it would work. "Hey munchkin? You sure you don't want to play on the slide or the swing set?"

"I'm sure," Jason mumbled.

Lois brushed back her son's hair. "Okay, then. Look after my shoes for me, will you?" She took off her high-heeled shoes and began to run barefoot to the slide. She climbed up and laughed as she got to the top - it wasn't easy, especially since she was wearing a skirt. "Jason! Look at me! Watch me!" she raised her hands up as she slid down the winding slide.

She went for two more rounds as her son watched her, a goofy grin beginning to form on his face. After sliding down, she went to the swing set and pushed herself higher and higher, laughing and calling out to Jason. Her laughter echoed throughout the playground, as there were only a few other people in the park. The sound of her mirth was enough to make Jason jump off the bench and run to the swing set.

"I wanna swing, too, Mommy!" he said, jumping onto the swing beside Lois.

Lois stopped and got off her seat. She helped Jason into the swing set and made sure he was safely seated. Then she went back to sit on her swing. "Ready when you are, buddy," Lois told her son playfully.

"Don't go too high, Mommy," Jason said. "Or else you might fall off. And hold on tight."

"Yes, sir," Lois replied with a chuckle. Her son was starting to sound more and more like

her everyday.

They spent the afternoon on the swings, laughing and cheering and telling each other stories about their day. Lois' shoes were left at the park bench, but Lois couldn't care less. She had her son, and that was all that mattered.

As Lois was trying to rebuild the bond she had with Jason, Clark was doing the exact opposite. He was trying to break the friendship he had formed with his son.

The days following the accident, Clark had given more and more excuses to get away from Jason. The boy tried to follow him around the office, but Clark would say, "I'm sorry but I have a lot of work today, buddy," or "Maybe we can draw pictures some other time, Jason."

Richard had noticed the change in his friend. Both Clark and Superman seemed to be avoiding being with Jason for more than two minutes. Superman had not even been to the riverside house since the accident. Richard wanted to ask Clark about it, but he felt that his colleague was avoiding him as well. *For Jason's sake*, Richard thought, *I hope you can tell me what's wrong, Clark.*

Kal-El stood outside his son's bedroom window, watching the boy sleep. It was the first time he had done so since the accident a week ago. Like he used to do, he closed his eyes and tuned out all other sounds except for his son's heartbeat. It was very calming to Kal-El to hear his son's heart. Seven days ago, he thought he would never hear it again; but tonight, he was thankful he could still hear the familiar *thump thump* of Jason's heart.

"So we're back to the whole hovering outside the window now?" Richard White's mocking voice broke Kal-El's thoughts. "Funny, we're back to where we started."

Kal-El opened his eyes to find Richard standing in the doorway of Jason's room.

Richard pushed the door and almost closed it, letting only a tiny slit of light from the hallway to pass through to the dark room. He opened the bedroom window for Kal-El, but the superhero didn't move. He stayed floating outside the riverside house.

"Okay, then," Richard said, realizing the Man of Steel had no intention to enter the room. "If thin air works for you more than Jason's carpeted floor, suit yourself."

Kal-El's eyes traveled to his son's sleeping form. He continued to listen to the boy's deep breathing. He watched as Jason's turned to his side, clutching a stuffed tiger. He had bought it with Lois during their visit to the zoo.

Richard could see the look of longing on Kal-El's eyes. It was a look only another father could recognize. Realization occurred to him as to why Kal-El had been acting distant to Jason. The Man of Steel felt guilty for what happened in Chicago, and was punishing himself by staying away from his son. He suddenly felt sorry for the hero.

"I lost Jason once," Richard quietly began, breaking the silence in the room, "in the mall. I lost him for almost half an hour."

Kal-El looked at Richard. His attention was focused on Richard's story.

Richard continued. "Lois asked me to take him to the toy store while she did some grocery shopping. I was walking around the store with Jason. I had one hand on him; the other on the shopping basket and Jason's backpack. I let go of Jason's hand for a minute - just a minute - to get my phone from my pocket and answer a call from work. And in that minute, I lost Jason. He just ran off, and I didn't even notice. I couldn't find him anywhere in the store. I lost a three-year-old boy in a toy store just because I had let go of his hand to answer a phone call. I found him with a police officer at the Customer Service almost thirty minutes later. Can

you believe that? How pathetic was that?"

The silence that followed was deafening.

Then Kal-El spoke up. "I thought if I didn't see him anymore, I would feel less guilty for what happened. After Chicago, I did not deserve to have him. He does not have to pay the price for what I do for people. If I want him to be safe, I can't be anything to him."

"Clark, you are *everything* to him. He admires you as Clark and as Superman. He sees you as his friend, his idol. And he may not know it yet, but when he does...he'll see you as his father." The last words had a hint of hurt as Richard said them.

"I can't - "

"You're a part of his life, Clark. You need to be there for him. He wants you there. And as weird as it may sound, I want you there for him, too. There are things I can't teach Jason, things about Krypton and your powers. You *have* to be there for Jason."

Kal-El nodded. "Thank you again, Rich - " Kal-El paused at mid-sentence. "I have to go."

Before Richard could react, he realized the reason for the superhero's abrupt departure. Light showered into Jason's bedroom. Without even turning around, he felt her presence. Her question pierced the silence of the night. "How long have you been in contact with him, Richard?"

## Chapter 11: Of Fights and Friendships

Lois tossed and turned in her bed. Dreams of Jason lying unconscious in the hospital still haunted her, even though the incident had happened a week ago. She opened her eyes and realized Richard wasn't in bed with her. *I guess neither of us could get some shut eye*, she thought. Moving up from her bed, she wrapped her bathrobe around her and walked out of the room, hoping to get a glass of water down in the kitchen. She stopped short when she was nearing Jason's room. She heard voices talking inside her son's bedroom. Listening carefully, she recognized Richard's voice. But who was he talking to? Certainly not Jason, because the other voice was deep...and *familiar*. It was the last voice she had wanted to hear. "Superman," she whispered to herself.

"Thank you again, Rich - " Superman paused at mid-sentence. "I have to go."

Before Richard could react, he realized the reason for the superhero's abrupt departure. Light showered into Jason's bedroom. Without even turning around, he felt her presence. Her question pierced the silence of the night. "How long have you been in contact with him, Richard?"

Richard didn't answer. Instead, he walked out of Jason's room and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Lois was close at his heels.

"So?" Lois asked when they stepped into the bright kitchen, her arms crossed in front of her.

"So," Richard echoed flatly.

Lois was not in the mood for fun and games. She wanted answers, and she wanted to be told straight. She waited for Richard to speak, but all her fiancé did was hold her stare. Lois' anger was rising. "Damn it, Richard! Of all people, you had to talk to *him*! I think we've been together long enough for you to know how much I hate him. Does 'Pulitzer' or 'Why The World Doesn't Need Superman' ring a bell to you?"

"I know you hated him up until the time he rescued you from that airplane during the failed Genesis space shuttle flight. After that, I'm not so sure *hate* was what you felt for him." Richard's voice was calm, though his tone was cold and spiteful.

"Well, I hate him, and I don't want him anywhere near me or my son."

Richard raised his eyebrows. "Your son? *Your* son? He is Jason's father, Lois. He has every right to see his son."

Shock washed over Lois' face. "You...knew?"

"Did you ever have plans of telling me about it, Lois? Or did you expect me to live a lie for the rest of my life?"

"I... I want nothing more to do with him. Jason doesn't need Superman in his life. What he needs is stability, and someone like Superman can't give him that."

"God, Lois! Stop using Jason as an excuse! We both know this is more than about Jason. Can you not forgive Superman for taking away your memories?"

Lois' eyes widened. "How did you...? What else has he told you? What is it with you two? Did you suddenly think you can form some sort of *friendship* behind my back? You are unbelievable, Richard! I trusted you, and you just threw away that trust!"

"*I* trusted *you*, Lois! And you broke that trust when you kept Jason's paternity a secret from me!"

"*Still*, I let you be a father to Jason! I moved into this house with you! I've stayed with you for five years! What more do you want from me?"

"I want you to let him be with his son! It's not easy for me either, Lois, sharing Jason with

him. But I don't want to deny him of what is partly his. Why can't you just let go of the past and move on?"

"Because he hurt me, Richard!" Lois yelled at him. She didn't care if her loud voice woke up the neighbors. "He hurt me so much! He hurt me when he left, he hurt me when he got back, he hurt me when he took away my memories! And now you're hurting me, too. You shouldn't have let him see Jason! Not after everything that he did! He isn't entitled to that privilege!" She paused, realization dawning on her face. "My God, *you* let him take Jason to Chicago! You - you've been helping him to meet my son in secret, haven't you? I don't believe this. What did I do, huh, Richard? Why would you do this to me, lie in my face and keep secrets regarding my son from me?"

"Lois - "

"No! Shut up, Richard! Just shut the hell up and stop defending him!" With that, Lois stormed out of the kitchen. She grabbed her jacket from the coat rack, scooped up her purse, which she had left in the living room, and fished for her car keys. Then she marched out of the house.

The last thing Richard heard was the sound of the Audi's engine revving and leaving the driveway.

Lois didn't know why she was standing at that spot. She didn't really have anywhere to go, and somehow she just ended up there.

*How could I have been so stupid?* Clark asked himself as he let the warm water from the shower stream through his body. He had been chastising himself since he flew back to his apartment from Richard's house. He knew Lois had heard him, maybe even *seen* him. He dreaded to think of what Lois would do now - maybe move away and take Jason with her, or something like that. *I shouldn't have stayed long at their house.* His thoughts were shaken by the sound of someone knocking at his door. *Who could be at my door this late at night?*

"Lois?" the high-pitched tone of Clark Kent's voice greeted her as he opened the door to his apartment.

Lois froze at her place. Her eyes traveled from Clark's goofy glasses to his chiseled chest, which could be seen from his loosely-worn white bathrobe. He was drying his hair with a towel as he looked at her. She didn't realize she was blushing. Who knew there was quite a muscled body underneath the outdated and unfashionable three-piece suit of Clark Kent? She found herself attracted to his pale chest and lean arms. She was barely aware of her hands unconsciously making their way to Clark's body. Her anger went away forgotten - replaced by great shock - as she stood in front of Clark, who obviously just came out of a shower.

Clark was surprised to see Lois at his doorstep, but what was even more surprising was the look on Lois' face when she saw him. He watched with fascination as her eyes lingered from his shoulders to his torso. Even so, he knew it was not the time to be doing something like this with Lois. He cleared his throat. "Lois?"

Lois seemed to have come out of a trance. She quickly let her hands, just mere inches away from Clark, drop down to her sides. "Clark, I um...I was just..." She tried to look him in the eye, but she couldn't help but steal glances down at his body. Her cheeks reddened as she tried her best to explain. "I...I-I, well, I um...you know, what? Never mind." She looked at his expression - it was a mix of bewilderment and amusement. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

Clark let out a chuckle as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, I have to

say, the expression on your face is priceless."

Lois shook her head and sighed. "Um...forget it. I'm sorry. I'll leave now." She made to go to the elevators, but Clark caught her hand gently.

"Would you like to come inside and talk?" he invited her kindly, offering a concerned smile to Lois.

Lois snorted. "Will you be talking to me wearing only that?"

Clark led Lois to the living room and excused himself to get dressed.

Lois made herself comfortable in Clark's couch. Looking around, her investigative reporter instincts told her something was off. Clark had told her that he had leased this apartment almost five months ago, but it seemed...*new*. As if Clark seldom lived there. The very few furniture - the couch, coffee table, and newspaper rack - seemed newly bought and untouched. The TV looked as if it was the only thing used, judging by the faint fingerprint markings on the side of the screen and the remote control buried beneath the throw pillows. Lois' eyes turned to the framed photos hanging by the walls. She stood up from the couch and walked towards the photographs. There was a faded photo of an elderly couple, happily smiling and waving at the camera - Lois guessed they were Clark's parents. The next photo made Lois smile - it showed Clark, Jimmy, Lois and Perry having a good laugh as they looked at the camera. Lois immediately recognized it - it was the last office party they celebrated before Clark left to "see the world." Lois was trying to remember how much fun they had - but her journey down memory lane was cut short as her eyes darted to another framed photograph in the next room. Entering the room, she managed to get a better look at the photo. It was of Clark and his parents. Clark was sitting between his mom and dad. He seemed to be about six or seven years old. The photo reminded her of a photo on her desk, a photo of her and Richard, with Jason in the middle. *Jason*. That's what seemed so familiar with the photograph in front of her - Clark looked so much like...*Jason*.

"Lois?"

Lois was startled at the sound of Clark's voice that she jumped and turned around.

"Clark!"

Her co-worker was eyeing her suspiciously. With an eyebrow raised, he asked, "What are you doing in my bedroom?"

Lois looked around. She had been so focused on the photograph that she didn't realize it was in Clark's room. "Oh, I'm sorry, Clark. I...I, um...I was looking at the photograph."

"I noticed," he said, smiling. He was wearing a plain white shirt and pale blue pajama bottoms.

Lois sensed something different about Clark. She had never seen him look so relaxed like this, especially not at the office. *Perry must scare the hell out of him*, she thought to herself, smirking.

"What?" Clark asked. "What's so funny?" His expression had suddenly changed from relaxed to bewildered. It made Lois burst out laughing. "A-are you...alright, Lois?"

Lois nodded, still laughing. "Thank you, Clark."

"For what?"

"For making me laugh. I haven't had a good laugh in a while."

"Sure...no problem," said Clark unsurely. "Don't worry, it doesn't offend me that you find my face as a good object of amusement."

Lois' laugh echoed through the apartment.

Clark smiled. It had been a while since he had seen her this happy. *Finally, I'm doing*

*something right.* Clearing his throat, he asked, "So, to what do I owe the honor of your visit at..." he looked at the clock on his bedside, "...1:45 in the morning - and with you wearing pajamas underneath your jacket?"

Lois settled back on the couch as Clark went to the kitchen. "Want something to drink?"

Lois shook her head. She was thinking of how to explain to Clark her sudden appearance at his doorway this late at night. She didn't really know why, either.

Clark sat beside her at the couch with a glass in hand.

"Milk?" Lois inquired with a raised eyebrow, her eyes looking at the glass in Clark's hand.

"What's wrong with milk?" Clark asked.

Lois tried to stifle her giggles, but failed. She could see Clark blush and look sheepishly at the glass in his hand. "Really *cute*, farm boy. No cookies to go with the milk?"

Clark shrugged. "I finished the Oreo's last night. My mom made chocolate chip cookies for me, though. You want me to get you some?"

It was too much for Lois. She shook her head and laughed heartily, almost falling off the couch had Clark not caught her by the hand. After what seemed like forever, the laughter died down. Lois took a deep breath and faced Clark. It suddenly dawned on her why she chose to go to Clark's, of all places. Here was a dear friend, willing to open his doors for her no matter how late at night it was. He had always been there for her, always the one who listened to her and helped her when she needed it. "Thank you."

Clark smiled. "Don't mention it. I like seeing you happy, Lois." Realizing how his words might have sounded, he quickly added. "I mean, um...you know, uh...I like, um, making my friends...um, laugh."

Lois's heart warmed. She wouldn't admit it, but she missed her shy, mild-mannered friend. Hell, Clark was as close to a best friend as Lois had at the Daily Planet.

"So..." Clark said, his tone serious. "What happened today?"

Lois paused for a moment. Taking a deep breath, she began, "Can you keep a secret, Clark?"

He nodded.

Lois continued. "Richard isn't Jason's real father." She watched the expression on his face. If he was surprised by this information, he didn't show it. "His biological father left before Jason was born. But now he's back."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"He left, Clark. He left without a word. I've spoken to him about Jason - and he said he wants to be a part of his son's life."

Clark swallowed the lump in his throat. He remembered that conversation all too well. "Did you allow him?"

"No! He forfeited that right a long time ago, when he took off and left me pregnant and alone. Believe me, I'm thankful for having Jason. I love my son very much, but I just can't...I can't let Sup - Jason's real dad anywhere near him." She paused, telling herself to slow down. She almost slipped, almost said *Superman*. "And now I found out that this man and my fiancé have become good friends, and that Richard has been letting him see Jason secretly. I confronted Richard about it tonight, and...and we had a huge fight."

Tears slowly fell down Lois' cheeks. "It's just so messed up, you know? I didn't mean for things to be like this. I feel like all the decisions I've done have only made everything worse. God, I've hurt so many people already!"

Clark watched Lois helplessly. He didn't know whether he should hug her, or just pat her

on the shoulder. In the end, he let go of all reason and went with what his instincts told him.

Lois felt two soft, large hands on her cheeks. She closed her eyes, letting herself take in the warmth of Clark's hands. He wiped her tears and lifted her face up to his. She looked straight into his eyes, drowning herself in the deep blue pools behind the thick glasses. "Come here," she heard him whisper.

"Oh, Clark..." she sobbed as she slid closer to him and let herself fall into his strong arms. She buried her face in his chest, her tears soaking his shirt.

Clark rocked her gently, tightening his hold on her, letting her know that she's safe in his arms. Brushing her hair away from her face, he rested his cheek against her head and whispered comforting words into her ear. "Hush, now. It's alright. Everything's gonna be alright." They stayed like that - Lois letting Clark's voice soothe her, and Clark wrapping his arms firmly around Lois - until they both fell into a peaceful, dreamless slumber.

## Chapter 12: Renewed Relationships

Clark thought the sound of a siren wailing in the distance had awoken him. But he realized it was the beautiful dark-haired woman stirring beside him that actually roused him from his sleep. Memories of the night before began to swirl in Clark's head - Lois appearing in his doorstep, Lois laughing, Lois crying, and Lois snuggling up to him as she slept. The last thought brought a smile to Clark's face. The sound of the siren grew louder. *Just this once, I'm taking a break*, he resolved, looking at the sleeping form of the woman he loved resting on his chest. He didn't know when something like this would happen again.

Lois began to stir again. Rubbing her eyes, she looked up to see Clark Kent staring at her behind his dorky glasses, a small smile playing on his lips.

"Good morning, Lois."

Lois smiled. She didn't know why, but Clark's presence was soothing to her. "Morning, Clark."

"Uh...would you like me to make you some coffee?" offered Clark. "I can make you breakfast as well."

*Tempting offer, Smallville*, Lois thought, giving it some thought. But she was still enjoying the warmth of his body beside hers - it seemed familiar and comforting. "No, thanks. But...can we, um...can we stay...like this? Just for a few more minutes?" She felt her cheeks grow warm with embarrassment. Here she was, engaged to one of the most handsome and intelligent men in Metropolis, and instead she chose to lay in the arms of the Daily Planet's resident klutz. She couldn't care less as she burrowed her head into Clark's broad chest.

The morning had been good to Clark. The siren he had heard responded on time to the fire at a general store downtown, resulting in very little damage and no casualties. Superman was not needed elsewhere in the world. He spent the morning having breakfast with Lois before she left and went back to her house to change for work. For the first time in a long while, the hero was enjoying his trouble-free morning as Clark Kent.

He made his way across the street to the Daily Planet building, a goofy grin plastered on his face. He was in high spirits, practically skipping and whistling a cheerful tune on his way to the office. His mood was unaffected by the two-feet-tall stack of papers on his desk, topped with a memo that read, "Chief said organize these files. - Jimmy"

He had been working on organizing the documents for a good ten minutes when he heard one of his favorite sounds in the world - the beating of Lois' heart. He swiveled his chair to look in the direction of the elevators, and soon enough, a glowing Lois stepped into the buzzing newsroom.

Clark was not the only one who noticed Lois' unusual glow that morning. Almost all heads were turned to Lois Lane as she strode through the glass doors and towards her cubicle with a spring in her step. She didn't seem to mind the people looking, even waving and smiling at the colleagues she passed by. When she had finally taken her seat at her desk, a few people had already begun talking amongst themselves. "Do you think she's pregnant? But last I heard her relationship with Richard was going downhill." "I wonder why she's happy? She's not usually like that." "Lois waved at me - *waved* at me. What's with her? Usually she snaps at me or simply ignores me." "Maybe she finally set a date for her and Richard's wedding." "She's *smiling*. Lois Lane doesn't smile, especially not *this* early in the morning."

Richard arrived at the office a few minutes after Lois. Clark noticed the expression on his face. If Lois had a thousand-watt smile on her face, Richard had a grim scowl on his face

enough to cause a blackout in all of Metropolis. He ignored the stares of the people as he made his way to his private office, locking the door and pulling the blinds down to shield himself from the prying eyes of his co-workers.

*It's over*, Richard told himself as he collapsed on the couch in his office. *It's all over*.

He had seen the way people's eyes followed him as he stepped into the bullpen. He also watched them chatting excitedly before that, subtly pointing to and stealing glances at Lois. Then they fell silent when he arrived. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, trying to shove the images of the newsroom out of his mind.

Since his row with Lois last night, Richard hadn't been able to sleep. He tried sleeping on his bed, but the absence of Lois beside him made him feel uneasy. He tried sleeping in the guest room, but the single bed made him feel lonely. He tried sleeping on the couch, but it was too uncomfortable for him. He ended up sitting on the floor in Jason's bedroom, and waking up to find his son looking at him with furrowed brows and asking, "Daddy, why were sleeping on the floor?"

Taking a deep breath, he sat up and walked to his desk. He leafed through the papers and memos, thinking all he needed was work to get him distracted. He walked to his door and pulled up the blinds, watching the chaos around the bullpen. *Yes*, he thought, *all I need is work to distract -*

"Clark?" he muttered under his breath. He watched through the glass door as Clark Kent bent down to whisper something in Lois' ear, and the two of them shared a laugh. *Great, one petty fight and Superman already wins the girl from me*, Richard thought.

Clark watched as Richard slumped off straight to his office upon his arrival at the Daily Planet. With Lois' cheerful disposition and Richard's foul mood that morning, the people had enough gossip to while the morning away. Having finished his task, Clark made his way to Lois' cubicle.

He leaned forward, as close to Lois' ear as he could, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "People are starting to talk, Ms. Lane," he whispered with a hint of teasing.

Lois sneered. "I know. But I've yet to hear about fierce reporter Lois Lane spending the night with shy farm boy Kent."

"Ah, but if I remember correctly, *you* were the one looking bashful when you saw me in a bathrobe."

They let out a chuckle, and Lois playfully punched him on the shoulder.

Unbeknownst to them, Richard was quietly observing their little interaction.

Three months had passed by since Lois and Richard's serious dispute. Three months had passed by since Clark found Lois outside his apartment. Three months had passed by since a renewed friendship between Lois and Clark blossomed. Three months had passed by since Richard first observed the closeness between his fiancée and his son's *other* father.

Life at the Lane-White residence had fallen into an awkward silence, owing to the tension and strain in Lois and Richard's relationship. For the most part, they both tried to act civil to each other, for Jason's sake. They would wait until Jason was in bed, and then Richard would close the door to the guest room where he now slept, and Lois would go up to the bedroom. Richard would climb into Lois' bed just a few minutes before Jason wakes up - the boy had a habit of barging into his parents' room early in the morning and shake them both awake.

During dinnertime, either Lois or Richard would ask the boy about what happened in school, and Jason's detailed account of the day's events would last until the end of dinner, and neither of his parents would be obliged to talk to one another and pretend to be interested in each other's day at work.

As young as he was, Jason could sense that something was not right in their home. Not wanting to side with one parent or the other, he seldom stayed in Richard's office or in Lois' desk whenever they brought him to the Daily Planet after school. Instead, as soon as he steps out of the elevator, he would make his way towards Clark's desk, where coloring materials and art paper awaited him.

Despite having to run off to the rescue and witness crime and violence everyday, Clark had never felt happier in his life, and his happiness seemed to make him a more confident man around the office - something his colleagues were quick to notice. He and Lois had been spending more time together, enjoying hotdogs and walks in the park after a long day at work. Oftentimes, Jason would come along with them. The three of them would get amused looks from passers-by, smiling at Lois and Clark and commenting on the sweet little boy perched on Clark's shoulders. Clark relished every moment he had with his two favorite people in the world. Jason may not call him 'Daddy, ' but he was happy to just feel the little boy's hand in his as they walked around the streets of the city.

Despite the gossip around the office about her, Lois was smiling. She had never felt as happy as she did now, and she knew she had Clark to thank for that. He was dorky and clumsy, yes, but he had a certain charm about him, something people never really saw. She enjoyed spending time with Clark, and she loved watching the interaction between her son and co-worker. *You're falling for the dork*, her mind told her. *You must be crazy, Lois*. Crazy or not, she wanted to be with Clark Kent. And what Lois Lane wants, Lois Lane gets.

"Hey, Kent," Lois greeted him as she stopped by his desk. "You hungry?"

Clark smiled to himself. Without looking behind him at Lois, he said, "No, not really."

"Oh, okay then," Lois said softly, sounding a little hurt. She was turning to leave when Clark closed his laptop.

"Is that dejection I see on your face, Ms. Lane?" Clark teased her. "Who knew being turned down by Clark Kent would make a woman like you feel sad?"

Lois chuckled. "Shut up, dork. I'm not sad over being turned down by *you*. But I will be sad if you don't come along with me."

Clark raised an eyebrow, his look questioning Lois.

"Because you're paying lunch. You owe me pizza."

They shared a laugh before heading to the elevators. Behind them, the rest of the office went abuzz with excitement. They weren't oblivious to the sudden closeness between the two journalists. "Clark Kent and Lois Lane? Who would have thought?" "Please don't tell she's dumping handsome Richard for dorky Clark!" "They seem a bit *too* close to be 'just friends, ' aren't they?"

## Chapter 13: His Newly Discovered Strength

Lois entered the buzzing bullpen one afternoon in time to see Richard in his office, putting the phone back down. Her eyes met Richard's, and something told her he just had a bad talk with someone. Richard caught her eyes and motioned for her to come into the office, and Lois made her way to her fiancé, albeit reluctantly.

"That was Mrs. Miller," Richard told her as soon as she stepped into his office. He was referring to the principal of Jason's school.

Lois raised an eyebrow. "I was just there this morning. I dropped off Jason's cake."

It happened to be Jason's sixth birthday, and Lois had asked the school if she could bring a Superman-themed cake for Jason and his classmates for lunch.

"Yes. Well, apparently, one of his classmates said something to him and he ended up throwing a chunk of cake to the other boy's face," narrated Richard.

"Oh, God," Lois said, her hand automatically covering her mouth in shock.

"Before that, he grabbed the boy by the collar and *lifted* him from the ground. Thank goodness, one of the male teachers was passing by the classroom and made Jason let go of the kid's shirt."

They paused, looking at each other in silence.

"Lois," Richard said after a long time. "Face it, a six-year-old cannot just lift another kid off the floor - "

"Don't even go there, Richard."

"What, do you think *I* am happy with what's happening to Jason?! I'm just saying - he's starting to show his..." Richard tried to find the right word to use, "...*abilities* - the ones he inherited from his father. Sup - "

"I am *not* going to talk to *him* about this!" Lois marched to the door. "And neither are you! Don't even try, Richard. I'm getting *my* son from school."

She grabbed her bag from her desk, turning to look at Richard one last time. Just then, she noticed Clark slipping a few documents into his file cabinet. "Clark?"

At Lois' voice, the timid reporter looked up. He heard Lois ask, "Are you busy?" then shook his head.

"Jason's school called. I need to get him."

"Did something happen?" Clark asked worriedly. "Is he okay?"

"Apparently he got into a fight. So can you come with me?"

Clark nodded and set off with Lois, leaving a flabbergasted Richard standing in his office, watching with envy as his fiancée and Clark went to get Jason. At that moment, Richard wasn't so sure whether he should be *relieved* that Clark was going with Lois and he could explain things to Jason, or he should be *angered* that Lois chose Clark over him to take care of the boy he had come to love as his son.

"Miss Lane?" Jason's teacher called as she approached the reporter. "I asked you and Mr. White - oh, um, I'm sorry, I thought you were coming with Mr. White." The blond-haired teacher just looked at Clark, offering an apologetic smile.

"It's fine, Richard couldn't go," Lois lied. "This is my, um, partner at work, Clark Kent."

Clark pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and grinned at the teacher.

After Jason's teacher, Ms. Jenna Allen, introduced herself to Clark, they strode to Jason's classroom, talking about the incident along the way. Ms. Allen relayed the story, "We were singing 'Happy Birthday' to Jason when one of his classmates, Peter Simmons, shouted something about Superman being Jason's mommy's boyfriend and that his mommy didn't love

his Daddy."

"Oh, my goodness," Lois said with a sigh. Peter Simmons was the son of a photographer at the Daily Planet, Marcia Simmons. Lois knew by reputation that Marcia was one of the leading gossipmongers in the office. It was no wonder how little Peter got hold of that idea on Lois and Superman.

"Naturally, it made Jason upset, and he called Peter a liar. Then he grabbed him by the collar and was threatening to throw him across the room. I was surprised when Jason was able to lift Peter, especially since Peter seemed twice Jason's size. Thankfully, one of the girls in the class called Mr. Roberts and he pulled Jason away from Peter. Jason was still upset, though, and he grabbed a handful of his cake and hurled it at Peter."

Lois and Clark looked at one another. Both of them were thinking of how luck had brought Mr. Roberts into the classroom to break up the fight. If he had not been there, well, Jason could've really harmed the other child. Their thoughts were broken by the voice of Ms. Allen. "He's in there," she directed them to an almost empty classroom. Lois was about to go in when she felt Clark's hand wrap around hers. "Lois," he said in a silent, deep voice. "Would you mind if I go and talk to him?"

Lois was grateful for Clark's offer. She didn't have the heart to face her very upset little boy. Neither did she want to scold him, especially since it was his birthday. She nodded at Clark.

"Jason?" Clark called as he opened the door. At first, he thought he must be in the wrong room, seeing no one sitting on the chairs. Looking at the farthest corner of the room, he found Jason sitting with his knees brought up to his chin, sobbing. The boy seemed to have a bit of difficulty in breathing, and Clark ran to him immediately. "Jason, where's your inhaler?"

The boy couldn't answer. He kept on breathing deeply, gasping for air as tears flowed down his pale cheeks. He managed to point to his bag.

Clark began to worry. He rummaged through Jason's blue backpack, using his x-ray vision to find the inhaler that would help his son breathe. A few seconds later, he had the inhaler in his hands and he lifted Jason's chin and let Jason take a puff of air from the inhaler. Afterwards, Clark held the little boy closer to his body and just rocked him until he calmed down.

"I'm sorry," Jason mumbled a few minutes after. "I didn't mean to get mad at Peter. But he said bad things about Mommy and Daddy and you, and I wasn't gonna let him get away with it."

Clark sighed. At least Jason recognized his mistake. "Your teacher told your Mommy and me that you lifted Peter off the floor and told him you would throw him to the other side of the room. Is that true?"

Jason simply nodded. After a moment's pause, he asked, "Are you mad at me? Are Mommy and Daddy mad?"

"No, Jason, no one's mad at you." Clark looked straight into his son's deep blue eyes very similar to his. "You had the right to be upset because Peter said something bad about your family, but you should never *ever* let others' words get the best of you. You could have really hurt Peter, you know."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Jason, I need you to promise me something."

The boy looked up at him expectantly.

"Jason, promise me that when you're mad at someone, you're not going to do anything to

hurt that person, okay? Do not even threaten him with words. Can you promise me that?"

Jason looked unsure. Then he pursed his lip, and with a look of determination in his eyes, he nodded. "I promise, Mr. Clark."

"Good boy." Clark smiled, and then took out a small parcel from his pocket. "Happy birthday, buddy. Now let's go to Mommy, she's waiting outside." Taking Clark's large hand in his, Jason walked out of the classroom with a smile on his face.

"Mommy! Mr. Clark gave me rubber stamps, look!" Jason exclaimed as he went to his mother, showing her the small box Clark had given Jason awhile ago.

"Don't worry, Lois. The inkpad is made of washable ink. It won't be messy," Clark said as he followed Jason to Lois.

Lois smiled. She set aside all thoughts of Jason's earlier actions and enjoyed watching her son happily showing her the different rubber stamps. She mouthed a silent "Thank you" to Clark, who just stood watching the mother and son interacting.

Lois parked her Audi in the parking lot behind the Daily Planet building. "Honey," she called to Jason, who was squirming in his booster seat, itching to get out of the car, "Mommy's not yet done with her work so you have to go with Daddy in his office, okay?"

"Can't I stay with Mr. Clark, Mommy?" whined Jason.

Clark had to smile. Lois noticed the delight in her partner's face and looked at him questioningly. Clark chuckled. "I'm done with my article, I can take him." He unbuckled Jason's seatbelt and lifted the boy up from his seat, setting him down on the ground. "Hey, kiddo. It's still your birthday, and I know there's an ice cream sundae down the street with your name on it."

"Yay! Ice cream!" Jason exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. After giving his mother a goodbye hug and kiss, he went with Clark down the street to the small café, ready for his ice cream sundae.

"Thanks, Lois, for the, uh, the ride home," Clark said as he alighted Lois' car with some difficulty. His height made him too big for the small Audi.

"Oh, it's nothing Clark," Lois replied. "It's the least I could do after you helped with Jason today. He seemed to have a lot of fun."

"Yeah, and a lot of ice cream, too." Clark flashed her a goofy grin, making Lois laugh.

"He told me this was his best birthday ever." Lois looked at her little boy, peacefully sleeping at the backseat.

Clark shrugged. "Well, you know me - always the one who knows how to throw a party."

"A *kid's* party," Lois teasingly corrected him.

"Still - it's a party," defended Clark. They both laughed.

"Good night, Lois."

"Good night, Clark." With that, Lois drove off in the direction of her house, hoping Richard would be asleep by the time she got home so that she can avoid talking to him.

## Chapter 14: A Tale of Two Fathers

The next day, Lois woke up to find Jason in bed with her. Sitting up, she found Richard standing in front of the full-length mirror, fixing his tie.

"He couldn't sleep," he explained, referring to Jason's presence in their room. "He woke up in the middle of the night and didn't find me here with you. I woke up and saw him standing by my bed in the guestroom, crying. He asked why I wasn't sleeping in the same room as you."

Lois wasn't expecting her morning to be this much of a jumble. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't say anything. So he went on to ask if Superman really was your boyfriend and if you love him more than you love me. I didn't know how to answer that one either, so I just hugged him and waited until he fell asleep, and then I carried him here. I figured both of you could use each other's company."

"Richard..." Lois was not able to say anything else as Richard carried his briefcase out of the room and Lois heard the sound of a car leaving the driveway soon after.

Richard sat in his office, contemplating the events that have happened in the past months. His confrontation with Superman and the discovery of his identity, the friendship he had formed with Clark Kent, and his fall out with Lois. Things weren't going to get any better unless someone sacrifices. And as he looked out of his office and watched Clark Kent playing with Jason, he knew it would be him who'd be bowing out.

"Clark?" Richard called out to his colleague.

Clark sensed the urgency in Richard's voice and immediately went to him, leaving Jason with Lois and promising to come back and play with him again later.

"Yes?" Clark inquired as he closed the door to Richard's office.

"We need to talk - "

But Clark wasn't listening to Richard. He cocked his head to the side, hearing the faint rumble of an earthquake in the Middle East. "Sure, we'll talk, Richard. Let's meet at my place after work. Right now, I have to go." Without waiting for Richard's approval, Clark sped out of the office and entered the empty elevator, changing into his red-and-blue suit before taking off and zooming to the location of the earthquake that was threatening the lives of thousands of people.

His watch read 10:15 PM. *If my math is correct, I've been standing in front of Clark's door for two freakin' hours and forty-five minutes!* Richard thought to himself. His patience was waning, and his legs were stiff from standing too long.

Soon after Clark left him in his office, Richard heard about the earthquake in Israel, and watched as Superman flew in to rescue as many people as he could. That happened at 4 PM. That was more than six hours ago, and Clark was still not back. Just when Richard had thought about leaving his post, the elevator opened with a ding and out came Clark, shuffling to his apartment door.

Clark looked tired and fatigued, but he gave Richard an apologetic smile nevertheless. "Sorry, it took longer than expected," he mumbled as he fished out his keys and opened the door, letting Richard in before he entered.

Richard had seen just how worn-out and weakened Superman was, and felt sorry for him. The world would sleep safer tonight, after Superman's rescues and saves, but it was at the expense of the hero's well-being. As if reading his thoughts, Clark waved a hand in the air. "Just another day at work," Clark said with a grin as he used his sleeve to wipe off the mud

and dirt on his cheek.

Excusing himself, Clark went to his room and took a quick shower, then changed into a clean blue shirt and jeans. He left his thick-framed glasses by the bedside table before going out of his room. He went past the living room where Richard was sitting, and headed for the kitchen. "Would you like something to eat or drink, Richard?" he asked, the timbre of his voice deeper than the one he normally used at work.

"I'd welcome a beer," Richard said automatically, then paused. *Does Superman drink beer?* He asked himself. *Probably not.* He added quickly, "But if you don't have any, water's fine."

Clark returned to the living room with two bottles of beer, handing one to Richard while taking a gulp from the other one. Richard had to raise an eyebrow, watching as Clark drank half the bottle in one gulp. Clark noticed the disbelief etched on the other man's face.

"I went to high school and college, Richard," said Clark. "I've had beer before. It's nothing new. Besides, I'm rather tolerant to alcohol."

Richard laughed. "Right. Of course." He took a gulp from his bottle.

Clark set his empty bottle down and looked at Richard. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

Richard knew it was going to come to this. He had readied himself for the coming conversation since early this morning. "Lois and Jason," he said flatly.

Clark nodded.

"Do you love them, Clark?"

"More than you know. They're my life."

Richard seemed satisfied with his answer. He finished his beer. "Good, because I'm leaving them in your hands."

Clark shook his head in disbelief. "Richard, what are you talking about?"

"Clark, I've been living a lie for God knows how many years now. I've tried to believe that Lois still loves me - or if she ever did, that Jason sees me as his greatest hero. But that's not true now, is it? Lois wants *you* - not Superman, but Clark. And when you tell her who you really are, she'll be *very* angry with you. But she loves you, and she'll be able to forgive you - eventually. As for Jason, what kid would not want to have Superman for a dad? I guess what I'm trying to say is...you win, Clark. They're yours. I'm out."

Silence filled the room. Clark had picked up the sound of a lady's cries and stiffened, not wanting to leave Richard in the middle of a very important conversation, but at the same time not wanting to ignore the woman's cries. He felt relief wash over him when he heard the sound of a siren going towards the direction of the woman's screams. He focused himself on Richard and what he had just said.

"Richard," he uttered. "I don't know what to tell you."

"Just tell me you'll take care of them."

Clark swallowed the lump in his throat as he looked at the man sitting across from him. His respect for Richard grew greater. "I'm sorry, I really am. You're a good man and a good friend. You don't deserve to pay for the mistakes I made six years ago. I know this isn't easy for you, giving up your family. Your son."

"Well, you managed to get through everyday watching Jason call me 'Daddy, ' I figured I'd get through the day hearing him call you that. You've watched Jason running to me and giving me a hug, I can watch him running to you and giving you a hug. Just promise me you'll let me see him once in a while?"

"He's your son. You're free to see him every time you want to. I promise that."

Richard gave him a grateful smile, which Clark returned.

"You know, I think I fell in love with Jason first before I fell for Lois. When I first saw him wrapped in a blue blanket at the neonatal ICU, my heart skipped a beat. He was so small but so beautiful. I've always wanted to be a father, and at that moment, I knew I was being given a chance to be one. I think, looking back at the past, Jason was the reason why I proposed to Lois in the first place. I mean, I loved Lois, but it was my love for Jason that gave me the strength to ask Lois to marry me. He's an amazing kid, Clark. You should be proud of him."

"I am." Clark said with finality.

Richard stood up and began to leave. Before he stepped out of the apartment, he turned to Clark. "When do you plan on telling her? About Clark and Superman, I mean."

Clark stopped in his tracks. He just stared at Richard, not knowing what to say. "I'm trying to find the right time to tell her, but there's no right time, is there?"

Richard shook his head. "No, there's no right time. You *need* to tell her, Clark - she deserves to know everything. You can't have a relationship based on lies and secrets, you know that."

Clark bowed his head and didn't say anything, prompting Richard to leave him alone with his thoughts.

"Lois?" Richard called out to the house when he arrived. It was already past midnight, but he thought he heard scuffling of feet along the carpeted hallway upstairs.

"Daddy!" Jason came bounding down the stairs in his Superman pajamas, Lois following him close behind. Jason threw himself into Richard's waiting arms as the man scooped him up and gave him a warm hug.

"You were out pretty late," Lois commented, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"Yeah," Richard replied. "I was, uh, talking with, um...I had a talk with...with *him*."

Lois stared at him wide-eyed. Her eyes held a mix of anger and confusion. Knowing that she and Richard needed to talk, she took Jason from Richard's arms. "See? Daddy's here now. You can say good night and go back to bed, young man," Lois told her son. After saying good night to his mommy and daddy, Jason happily went up to his room, leaving Lois and Richard to themselves.

"Lois, please," Richard started, "listen to me first before you say anything."

Lois pursed her lips. "Fine. Go ahead."

"I'm leaving."

"Excuse me?"

"You can keep the house, keep everything. I've found an apartment in the city, closer to the Planet. I'm moving out tomorrow."

"Why are you doing this? Have you thought about Jason? This will break him, Richard!"

"Not as much as our present status is breaking him. Lois, he's six years old, but he knows that something isn't right at home. Why do you think he's closer now to Clark than to me or you? Why do you think he was walking around the house late at night checking if you and I were together in bed?"

"He was just asking for you tonight. He wanted to know why you weren't home yet and you left me in bed alone."

"Can't you see, Lois? He knows we don't get along. By continuing to stay here with you,

I'd only make things more uncomfortable than they already are. I promise to still look after him, Lois. He'll always be a son to me. But us, living like this, it isn't fair to him. Nor is it fair to either one of us."

"You talked to *him* about this?"

"Yes, I talked to *Superman* about this. I asked that he take good care of you and Jason. Let him into Jason's life, Lois. He wants that. And deep in your heart, no matter how much you deny it, you know you want that as well."

Lois looked at the man before her. She thought she had lost all love for him, but standing before him, she realized she had a newfound respect and admiration for Richard. "For what it's worth, Richard, I did love you."

At her words, Richard bowed his head and said in a disheartened tone, "It didn't seem like you did when you told me you just simply put up with me for five years, played 'House' with me. Am I supposed to thank you for that, because you did me a *favor* staying with me and all?" When he looked up at Lois, his eyes were filled with tears.

Lois saw hurt, pain, and sadness in his eyes. She felt so guilty having said those words to him during their last argument - she was just so angry that she had let the words roll out of her mouth. She knew he didn't deserve to be treated the way he was for the last few years. "I did, Richard. I know I may not have said it or made you feel it often, but I loved you."

Richard gave her a weak smile. He walked towards her, cupped her face in his hands, and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead. He wrapped his arms around Lois and whispered, "I did love you, too, Lois. I loved you very much."

He had begun to walk to the guest bedroom when he stopped in his tracks. Something was playing on his mind, and he needed confirmation. He looked back. "Lois?"

"Richard?"

Richard held her gaze. "You're in love with Clark." He said it with a tone of certainty.

Lois stared straight into his eyes. "I'm in love with Clark."

## Chapter 15: A New Day Begins

Richard tousled Jason's hair. "Hey, Tiger. It's not like I'm going anywhere," Richard said as he knelt down to Jason's level. "We'll still see each other when Mommy brings you to the office, and remember I promised to bring you to another baseball game on Saturday?"

Jason nodded, sniffing. "But you won't tuck me in at night anymore, or read me bedtime stories."

Richard sighed and looked at Lois, who was standing by the kitchen counter, watching them. Richard and Lois had both called the Planet, saying they had a personal matter to take care of and would not be in the office for the day. Lois had also called Jason's school to let them know that her son would not be attending school today. Both Richard and Lois figured they should spend the day as a family, knowing it would be their last. Both had agreed to explain to Jason the changes in their living conditions.

"Well," Richard suggested, "if your mommy says it's okay, I can come here on some nights and tuck you in and read you bedtime stories. How does that sound?"

Jason seemed to consider it for a moment. His sad eyes held Richard's gaze for a long time. "You promise?"

"I promise, Jason," said Richard in all sincerity.

"Can I still call you 'Daddy'?" His parents had explained to him that Richard wasn't his first Daddy, and that he had another Daddy whom Mommy met before she was with Daddy Richard. Jason had asked, but Lois had told him it wasn't time yet for the little boy to know his other father.

Richard smiled at the little boy he had raised as his own. "Of course, son. You can still call me Daddy."

When all was settled, the three of them got into Richard's car and planned what to do for the day. The mall, the aquarium, the zoo and the Wacky Wally's Pizza Place were included in Jason's plans, and he was glad when his Mommy and Daddy told him they would go to all those places.

When Richard and Lois arrived together at the Daily Planet office the next day, the newsroom went abuzz with gossip. They watched as Richard and Lois shared a laugh before Richard went to his office and Lois sat at her desk. Their eyes darted to Lois' left hand, trying to notice if there was something shiny gleaming in her fingers, but none had seen anything.

Clark's gaze followed Lois and Richard. They seemed more comfortable with each other today compared to the past days. He watched as they laughed at something, then said their goodbyes (though without a hug or a kiss) and went to their respective desks. Clark strode towards Lois' cubicle. "Hey, Lois," he greeted, setting a cup of coffee down on her table.

Lois smiled as she took in the smell of the coffee. "I could get used to this," she said, standing up and giving Clark a kiss on the cheek, making him blush. She let her lips linger for a moment longer on Clark's smooth face. "Hey to you, too, Clark."

"LANE! When you're done smooching Kent's cheek, get in here, will you? You, too, Kent!" Perry bellowed, making all heads turn to Lois and Clark.

Clark felt embarrassed, biting his lower lip and bowing his head. His acute hearing picked up on Richard's sniggering, and he glared at the other man for a moment. *He's definitely enjoying this humiliation I'm getting*, Clark thought. Pushing his glasses further up his nose bridge, Clark made his way to the Chief's office, trying to zone out the hushed voices of his co-workers, who had begun talking about him and Lois.

Lois, who was used to being the center of the rumor mill at the bullpen, simply grabbed her notebook and pen, then left for the office door marked, "Perry White - Editor-in-Chief."

When they had settled into the chairs, Lois and Clark looked expectantly up at the Chief. They listened as he began explaining to them their task. "Do you remember that Niagara Falls trip you two had five or six years ago?"

Lois let out a frustrated sigh. "How can I *forget*? You made me and Mr. Dorky here pose as newlyweds."

"I need you guys to do that again." He explained the much talked-about kidnappings in one of Manhattan's elite neighborhoods (which had been going on for a week now, with none of the children found yet), and how he wanted both Lois and Clark to cover the story.

"Sure," Lois said.

Perry looked at her suspiciously. He had expected her to stand and shout at him for thinking of something as crazy as that, and he had prepared a long speech about how good she and Kent were when it came to making articles.

"Perry, I said sure."

"I heard you the first time. I'm not deaf, Lane."

Lois muttered, "Just checking, old man."

Perry turned to Clark. "You got anything to say for yourself, Kent?"

Clark shook his head. "No, sir. You tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

As they left the Chief's office, Lois whispered in Clark's ear, "Looks like you and I are going to have a lot of fun next week."

"So what happened yesterday?" Clark asked as he and Lois took a walk along Centennial Park, something they had been doing almost everyday after work.

"Hmm?" Lois asked.

"You and Richard looked pretty much ready to kill each other these past weeks, then suddenly both of you were absent from work yesterday because of 'personal matters.' And now you're all friendly-friendly with each other again. About three quarters of the office thought you guys got hitched."

Lois laughed heartily. "So that's why people kept stealing glances at my hand when I arrived at the office! God, office gossip has got to be worse than Hollywood gossip."

"So? What was so important that both of you didn't show up at work?" Clark asked again.

Lois tilted her head to the side. "Why the sudden interest, Mr. Kent?" she teased him.

"Just...curious." Clark grinned. "So, Ms. Lane - if you're not going to say what did happen, I'll ask something else. What *didn't* happen?"

Lois smiled slyly at Clark. Without warning, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her, catching his lips in hers.

Clark was not prepared for Lois' action. He froze for a second, letting himself feel Lois' small hands on his cheeks, and her soft lips brush his. He decided not to fight his feelings nor hold back from this moment. He cupped Lois' face and pulled her closer to him, crushing his lips to hers and kissing her deeply.

They broke the kiss and looked each other in the eye. Lois traced Clark's reddened lips with her finger. "*That* is what didn't happen yesterday."

Rumors on a budding romance between Clark and Lois began to swirl around the office as the news of the breaking off of the Lane-White engagement spread like wildfire. But neither

Clark nor Lois cared. They had not confirmed anything, and they weren't planning to do so - at least not yet.

Lois walked briskly from the parking lot of the Daily Planet to the main entrance. She was already an hour late for work, but that was not what she was thinking about. Instead, her mind was focused on Clark. It had been two days since she last saw Clark. *And four long days since I kissed him at the park*, she told herself. She still wasn't over the fact that she had kissed Clark Kent - and in a very public place at that. What was even more surprising was that she *enjoyed* it. Dork or not, there was no doubt that Clark Kent was a good kisser.

Her thoughts fell on the days that followed their kiss in the park. There was definitely tension between them, as if a single touch could send an electric surge through their bodies. Lois had made up a dozen excuses to go over to Clark's desk, including borrowing his stapler, asking him the spelling of a few words, and borrowing a pen. Clark, Lois knew, couldn't help the yearning he felt for her either. When she asked for his stapler, he let his hand brush against hers as he handed his stapler to her. When she asked him to spell 'mesmeric,' he leaned close to her ear and whispered each letter slowly, enjoying the closeness between them. When she borrowed his pen, he seized the moment to let his fingers intertwine with his for a few seconds. Clearly, they were very much attracted to each other, and each minute they were not together, the attraction just intensified.

Clark was rushing past the people in the sidewalks. He was already late for work, having helped evacuate more than a thousand people just minutes before a volcanic eruption in the Philippines. He mumbled, "Sorry," as he went past people, using his large build to part the crowd and make his way to the Daily Planet office. There was another reason why he had been rushing to the office, and thinking about it made him smile. He was going to see Lois again after being sent by Perry to California to cover a story on the recent wildfires across the state. He had stayed in California for two days, and now he was back in Metropolis. He was hoping the first person he will see in the office was Lois. As if his wish were heard, he found himself staring straight into the beautiful hazel eyes of the woman he loved, as she stood looking at him at the steps of the office building. Clark's face broke into a wide grin at the sight of Lois Lane.

Lois walked up the steps of the Daily Planet when she noticed a head of jet-black hair among a group of blonde-haired pedestrians and brunettes across the street. Instantly, she knew who it belonged to. *Clark*. She could not help but smile as she watched him approach. Neither spoke as they made their way into the building together.

They stepped into the elevator, which happened to be empty. *This should be interesting*, Lois thought, unaware that the man beside her was thinking the same thing. She pushed the button to the 35th floor, where their offices were. The elevator began its ascent, and neither Lois nor Clark had said a word. They stood at opposite ends of the elevator cabin. The tension seemed to hang in the air, though. At the 12th floor, the elevator dinged and two men in business suits entered. Clark heard Lois groan in frustration, and he smiled to himself. The men alighted when the elevator stopped at the 21st floor, leaving Clark and Lois alone again.

By the time they were at the 29th floor, Clark broke the silence. "You're late."

Lois looked at him. His eyes were fixed on the elevator doors, not on her. There was a smile playing on his lips. It wasn't his usual goofy, farm boy smile. It was a confident, teasing smile. Lois focused her gaze on his Clark's lips. "So are you."

That was all it took to break the tension. Neither knew who started kissing who, all they knew was that they were on one side of the elevator, kissing. Clark's right hand gently made its

way to the small of Lois' back, and he pulled her body close to him, his lips meeting hers in a rough kiss. His other hand had settled at the back of Lois' head, pushing her face closer to his as his tongue delved into her mouth. Lois let out a loud moan as Clark's tongue met hers. Her hands grabbed the collar of his suit, pulling her closer to him. They wanted this moment. They *needed* this moment. The rest of the world would not understand them, but it did not matter. Right here, right now, nothing else mattered.

"Clark," Lois moaned into his ear, before she nibbled on his ear lobe.

Clark gasped, burying his face in Lois' dark, wavy hair. "Lois..." God, only Lois Lane could have such an effect on him. He cupped her face and pulled her closer to him again for another deep, long, intense kiss.

Lois broke the kiss as her lips traveled down from Clark's lips, to his jaw line, to his neck, then to his chest. Clark groaned, obviously pleased. His hands brushed her neck, her shoulders, then to the sides of her breasts. Their eyes met, deep sapphire meeting bright hazel, and both held the same fiery desire. Their lips met for another kiss, and then -

*DING!*

The elevator doors opened, and Lois and Clark found themselves as the center of attention at the office, with all their co-workers' eyes on them. Even Perry was staring at them. And right in front of them, bright blue eyes wide in surprise, stood Richard.

Richard had been asked by Perry to get some documents for him from Steven Hess down in the 11th floor. He had pressed the down arrow of the elevator and watched the doors swing open, and his jaw almost fell to the floor as he found himself looking directly at his ex-fiancée and his officemate apparently enjoying a private moment in the elevator.

Stepping out of the elevator, Lois and Clark did their best to straighten their clothes and fix their hair. Lois tried to flatten her crumpled knee-length skirt and pulled her hair up in a ponytail. Clark adjusted his glasses, which had gone askew, and fixed his striped black tie.

Richard watched them in amusement. Surprisingly, even to himself, seeing Lois and Clark together didn't seem to bother him. It made him a bit jealous, but he knew their romance had been going on even before he and Lois called off their engagement. Trying to hide the grin spreading across his face, he cleared his throat. "Lois, Clark - good morning." As he stepped inside the now-abandoned elevator, he motioned for Clark to wipe his cheek. Richard watched as Clark did so, wiping a red smear on his cheek that must have been from Lois' lipstick. He gave the mild-mannered reporter a wink just before the elevator doors closed.

Lois and Clark turned to look at the rest of the office who silently watched the scene between them and Richard. Despite the embarrassment of having been caught kissing by the entire office, neither Lois nor Clark could care any less. They exchanged secretive glances and small smiles, before making their way to their desks. The rest of the office stood frozen, watching the two reporters.

It was Perry who finally got everyone up and running. "I DON'T PAY YOU TO STAND AND STARE AT LANE AND KENT! GET BACK TO WORK!"

## Chapter 16: Sudden Turns and Turmoil - Part 1

Lois and Clark survived the rest of the gossip-filled week at the office. A number of Clark's male colleagues had given him a thumbs-up sign and a grin as he passed by, as if congratulating him on finally snagging the wild and fearless Lois Lane. Most of his female co-workers laughed at him, whispering amongst themselves how he was such a fool to think Lois Lane would go for him. Lois was receiving almost the same beating as Clark. Most of the women at the office would talk as she passed by, not minding if they were heard talking about how she was such a tramp, recovering so quickly from Richard and taking advantage of poor, clumsy Clark.

Lois was just finishing putting on her make-up when she heard Jason downstairs cry out, "Mr. Clark!" Lois smiled to herself. If she and Clark were serious about being together, she was glad she didn't have to worry about her son. It was important for her to get her son's approval on the men who wanted to be a part of her life.

When Lois finished, she quickly went downstairs to welcome Clark. She was surprised to find him out of his usual three-piece suit. Today he opted for a more casual attire, wearing a light blue polo shirt and grey jeans. "Good morning, Lois," he greeted her, flashing his goofy grin.

"Morning, Clark," Lois said. She turned to Jason. "Ready, munchkin? I just called your daddy, and he said he can't wait to have you all to himself for the whole week."

After dropping Jason off with Richard at the Daily Planet, Lois and Clark headed to the airport for their week-long trip to New York City.

"Here, Lois," Clark offered his partner a cup of coffee. Lois gave him a forced smile as she took the coffee from his hands.

They were still at the airport, sitting near their gate, waiting for the boarding announcement. Lois had gotten impatient three hours after they arrived, and had been in a bad mood since. Clark, ever the patient one, tried to keep Lois from bursting in frustration, offering her coffee and even asking if a short trip to the smoking room could clear her mind. "I quit smoking when I found out I was having Jason, but coffee would be nice, thank you," she said coldly.

Two hours before boarding, more people had filled the waiting area. Lois still did not feel any calmer, pouting in her seat. Clark thought she looked cute when she was impatient, but decided against telling her that. He didn't want to be in the front lines when Mad Dog Lane was not in high spirits.

"Well, hello there, sweetheart," a man in a plaid flannel shirt drawled as he sat beside Lois. He had a cheeky smirk on his face, and he was obviously flirting with Lois. "You look like you could use the company."

Lois rolled her eyes. *Where's Clark when you need him?* She was ticked off when Clark had told her *fifteen* minutes ago that he needed to "check up on something-something," and had not come back since. She started to get up from her chair, but the Southern man stood up and grabbed her by the elbow.

"Now, now, sweetheart, you know you want me," the man said with a chuckle, "don't deny the obvious."

"Let go of me!" Lois exclaimed, and a few people turned their heads to look at her.

The man noticed a few eyes turn to them, and he waved them off, saying, "Ain't nothin' to see here, folks, just havin' a little fun with the miss - "

He was not able to finish his sentence as two strong arms grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, making him let go of Lois. He looked at the man who pushed him forcefully back down his seat. His attacker had black hair and thick-framed glasses.

"Clark! Don't, please. Let's...let's just go," Lois pleaded, holding Clark by his arm. Her frustration and impatience had faded upon seeing Clark grab the Southerner. She had never seen Clark react like that, and it scared her a bit.

Clark's temper flared upon seeing a stranger harassing Lois, and he immediately walked up to the man, grabbing him by his shirt and pushing him hard down on the chair. A part of him wanted to grab the guy by the neck and choke him, but luckily he was able to keep his anger in check. When he heard Lois asking him that they should just leave, he was suddenly aware that they were in a public place, and he let out a deep sigh. Feeling Lois' hand on his arms made his tense shoulders relax. He figured it was better to leave, but not before leaning down and whispering to the other man, "Don't you ever touch her again, you hear me?"

Lois and Clark exited the scene and settled on a couple of seats near the boarding gate. Neither spoke a word. Lois was still in shock at Clark's sudden actions, though a part of her felt flattered that he came to her defense. Clark was still fuming over the Southerner. The image of the man holding Lois was enough to make him burst. He didn't want to see anybody - *anybody* - treating Lois the way that man did.

The PA finally announced their flight, and they made their way into the plane. Clark offered to take Lois' carry-on bag, and he put their bags into the luggage compartment before sitting down on the two seats by the window. When they had settled and the plane took off, it was Lois who broke the awkward silence that fell between them. "Thank you...for, um, for a while ago."

Upon hearing her voice, Clark had lost all traces of anger in his heart. He smiled. "For what? For defending you honor?"

Lois snorted. "You make it sound like such a big deal. Oh please, I could've handled him myself."

"Of course, you could have," Clark said in a mocking tone. "I was merely sparing the cowboy from the wrath of Mad Dog Lane."

"Oh, shut up, you big dork."

Clark threw his head back as he laughed. He found it amusing, not the least bit annoying, whenever she teased him and called him that. "Thanks, Lois. I needed that."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "You needed what? This?" And she placed a soft kiss on his lips.

Clark was mildly surprised, but he welcomed her kiss. He kissed her back, relishing the feel of her soft lips on his.

Lois leaned against his ear as they broke their kiss. "You know, we can do it in the restroom."

Clark shook his head as he laughed. "Lois, my mother raised me a gentleman. I don't *'do* it' in restrooms or anywhere else that is public."

Lois pretended to be hurt by his words and pouted at him, making Clark laugh even more. She shrugged. "Fine, then, sir. Maybe we can change your mind once we get to our hotel room in NYC."

Clark grinned. *Yeah, maybe*, he thought to himself.

Clark grabbed his card key and hurried to the door. "Uh, Lois, I'm just, uh...I-I'm just going down to, uh, buy...to buy today's paper. I'll, uh, I'll be back soon."

Lois just nodded her head, leafing through her notes while taking a sip of coffee. They had been in New York City for four days, and they had enough details on the kidnappings to give Perry a good article for the front page. Apparently, a group of ex-cons was behind the kidnapping, using the children of elite businessmen and stockbrokers to get their hands on some money. They were good in keeping their tracks hidden, but Clark - *How on earth did he manage to get the good stuff?* Lois thought - was able to find evidence that led to the whereabouts of the criminals and the missing children. She had been typing away on her laptop when she heard a soft thud outside their hotel room. Opening the door, she found a copy of the day's New York Daily lying on the floor. "Strange, I thought Clark said he was going to buy the paper," she said aloud as she went back to her laptop. Her thoughts were broken by the news report on the TV. Superman was sighted in Paris, stopping a bus full of tourists that had almost crashed right into a famous French museum. She groaned and turned off the TV. She didn't need to see *his* face right now.

"Lois? I brought breakfast," Clark said as he entered the living room of their hotel suite.

Clark's voice made Lois forget about the image of the Man of Steel. Her face broke into a wide grin as she took a bag of hot croissant from Clark. Taking a bite, she told Clark, "Wow, where in New York did you get this, Clark? This is the best croissant I've ever tasted!"

Clark simply grinned at her, knowing she wouldn't believe him if he told her they were from a little bakery in Paris.

"Hey, Smallville, " Lois called out to Clark as she entered the living room, where she found Clark still sleeping on the couch.

The Planet was nice enough to get them a classy suite in a New York hotel while they did their investigation, but the price to pay was for them to share the one-bedroom suite. "I'm sure neither of you would mind, " Perry had told them before they left Metropolis six days ago. "Behave yourselves, kids."

Lois sat at the low coffee table facing Clark, amused to find he had forgotten to take off his glasses before sleeping. She didn't dare take them off, though, for fear of waking him. *He looks so peaceful when he sleeps,* she thought to herself. Watching Clark breathing deeply as he slept reminded Lois of her little boy. She had called Jason every night, listening to him talk endlessly about what he and Richard had been up to. She missed her son terribly, especially since she had never been far away from him this long.

Clark stirred as he slept. Lois smiled, a precious memory from yesterday coming back to her mind.

*"Lois, I don't think this is a good idea, " Clark voiced out his thoughts as they crept into the dark warehouse. "I said this **might** be the kidnappers' hideout, but I didn't say anything about us actually going here!" Clark hissed.*

*"Clark, you were the one who pointed out this place, so shut up, " Lois retorted.*

*They slowly and silently walked to a narrow passageway. There was a door at the end of the hallway, and the slit of light below the door told them there were people inside. Lois' hand had almost touched the doorknob when a voice from behind them stopped her.*

*"Touch that doorknob and I'll shoot, " the voice said.*

*Lois turned around and came face-to-face with a tall, lean man sporting a goatee. He had a gun aimed at her. Lois froze in her place.*

*No quickly had she let go of the doorknob when she felt Clark's warm hand on hers. She heard Clark in his high-pitched voice, "No need to shoot, mister. We're leaving."*

*Lois took a step away from the door when she heard the sound of a gun trigger being pulled. She let out a scream of panic and closed her eyes. Then she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her body. She looked up and expected to see a familiar blue suit and the red 'S' shield, but instead, she found herself looking straight into the deep blue eyes of Clark Kent. "Let me carry you, Lois, " she heard him whisper to her. "I'll keep you safe."*

*She clung to him for dear life as she heard bullets being fired at them, but they didn't stop running until they were three blocks away from the warehouse.*

*"Clark, we have to get you to the hospital!" Lois exclaimed frantically.*

*"I'm fine, Lois, " he replied.*

*Lois looked at him. He wasn't bleeding, although his coat had a bullet hole.*

*"Just grazed my coat. The guy probably didn't know how to aim, " Clark shrugged, hoping Lois would buy his excuse. "I'm going back there. We have to help the kids."*

*"No, " Lois stated flatly. "You can't, Clark."*

*"But Lois..."*

*"No, Clark! No! I won't let you. Please...I-I love you."*

*Lois looked at him pleadingly. The words she uttered spoke volumes, though neither had said anything else after that. Lois was half-angry and half-awed that Clark was beginning to show courage. He was never one to be in the frontlines during a fight, but today he was willing to risk his life for others, for her.*

*Clark advanced toward Lois and kissed her long and deep. When they broke apart, Clark watched Lois wipe away a tear from her eye. She rested her head on his chest. "Be safe, " she sobbed.*

*A few minutes later, Lois had led a group from the NYPD to the warehouse, and her eyes fell on nine burly-looking men tied together on the floor. Her heart skipped a beat. "Where are you, Clark?" she whispered.*

*A gentle pat on her shoulder made Lois turn around, and she found herself sobbing in the arms of her partner. Clark ran a hand through her hair. "It's okay, Lois. Superman came to the rescue. See? I don't even have a single cut or bruise on me."*

*Lois pulled his face close to hers and kissed him. It was short and sweet.*

*Clark smiled and tucked an errant lock of her hair behind her ear. "I love you, too."*

*Clark stirred again. He stretched and rubbed his eyes without taking off his glasses. Upon waking up, he found Lois looking at him thoughtfully. In a teasing tone, he asked, "Did my snoring wake you up, sunshine?"*

*Lois smiled. "Good morning to you, too. And you don't snore."*

*Clark laughed and pulled her down on the couch, making Lois yelp. He cupped her face and brought it closer to him, kissing her. Lois didn't object, and returned his kiss gladly. Then she settled herself on top of Clark, her head resting on his chest.*

*"I can hear your heartbeat, " Lois whispered.*

*"You can?" Clark asked. "It beats for you, Lois Lane."*

*Lois smiled but didn't answer. She just savored the moment with him. Lying with him now reminded her of the first time they had been like this, all those months ago in Clark's apartment. "This was how we started, remember?" she said.*

*A smile spread on Clark's face, remembering the night Lois had gone to his place after her fight with Richard. "Yes. This was how we started."*

## Chapter 17: Sudden Turns and Turmoil - Part 2

Having finished their article on the kidnappings, Lois and Clark decided to spend their last day going around the city. They went around Central Park, ate at a pizza place, and walked around Times Square. Being in a place with no nosy officemates or curious six-year-olds around, they made the best of their time together, holding hands and stealing sweet kisses as they walked along. Anybody who had seen them instantly knew they were very much in love with each other.

By evening, they had returned to their hotel room, satisfied with how their week in New York had gone. Clark set aside his key card as he fixed the couch he was going to sleep in.

"Clark?" he heard Lois call out to him. He looked up at her.

"It's our last night in the city. You've slept in that couch for the past nights. Why don't you sleep here in the bed?" Lois asked him without a hint of teasing. It was an innocent question.

"Lois, I..."

"If you're worried that we'd do something, don't be. *I* will sleep on the couch. I just thought it would be good for you to sleep here even just once."

Clark was touched. He smiled at Lois and held his hand out to her. She took it, and they sat in the couch. "Thank you, Lois," Clark told her. "But the couch is just fine for me."

Lois gazed into his eyes, those deep, intense blue eyes hidden by his glasses. They had a look of longing that, Lois knew, was mirrored in hers. In an instant, Lois had gently pushed him down on the soft couch, her lips crushing his, her hands ravishing his jet-black hair. She bit down on his lower lip, enjoying the softness of his lips.

Clark was lost in their kiss for a moment. *This isn't right, Kal-El*, his mind told him. *You can't do this to her. Not when she doesn't know the truth about you.* As soon as his thoughts cleared, he broke their kiss.

"What? What is it, Clark?" Lois moaned.

Clark sighed. "Lois...we can't."

Lois sat up and looked at him, a hint of disappointment on her beautiful face.

"I'm sorry, Lois. I can't...I can't do this to you."

"Clark," Lois was beginning to sound worried, "what are you saying? What's wrong? You know you can tell me anything."

"I don't want to hurt you." With that, he grabbed his key card and left Lois alone in their hotel room.

Kal-El flew across the city, watching the people along the sidewalks and the cars along the streets. He flew to the places he and Lois had gone to that morning, remembering how much fun they had, and how much they enjoyed each other's company.

*You're doing the right thing*, he told himself. He knew in his heart that leaving her was the right decision, but he didn't think it would hurt so much. He wanted her. He *needed* her. And now he was going to lose her.

He landed in an alleyway a few blocks away from their hotel. Changing into his Clark Kent attire, he stepped out into the alley and made his way to Central Park. He sat down at one of the benches, and gazed up at the sky. A few stars were twinkling.

"Not much people around here at this hour," a stout old man told Clark.

Clark looked up and saw the balding man smiling at him. He smiled at the man.

"Mind if I sit down, son?"

Clark didn't sense anything suspicious about the man, so he said, "No, sir, I don't mind at all."

The man took a seat beside Clark and held out his hand, "I'm Al. Al Stevens."

Clark shook the man's hand. "Clark Kent."

"So, Clark, what brings you to the park at 10 in the evening? Ah, let me guess - it's about a girl, isn't it?"

Clark looked at the old man in surprise.

"Well, don't give me that look, boy. I've been going to this park for the past twenty-two years, and for the same reason as yours."

"You come here for a girl?"

Al nodded. "My wife, Camilla."

"Oh. Um, well, I just, uh...I came here because of this woman that I love. I sort of had to leave her."

Al raised an eyebrow. "Hmm. We're on different sides of the story--Camilla left me."

"What happened?"

"She passed away twenty-two years ago. She had cancer."

Clark was stunned. "I'm sorry."

"I am, too. I loved my Camilla so much, and it hurt me when she passed away. That is why I come here every night. Camilla loved this park. She used to say that when we had kids, she'd bring them here everyday and let them run around."

"And you had kids?"

"Sadly, no. I regret that up to this day. I was too caught up with work, spent more time with my computer than with my wife. I built a successful electronics company, but I never got to build a home."

They sat in silence for a long time.

"You got kids, Clark?"

Clark smiled, remembering Jason. "I have a son - Jason. He's six."

"Ah, right. Well, let me tell you something I learned from experience. Spend as much time with your woman and your little boy. Don't bury yourself in your work. You're still young, and your kid is still small. Enjoy the moments you share with him. Your girl - whatever issue you have with her, fix it. Love your woman and live every moment with your son. Don't be afraid for the future, because it's the present that matters."

Clark watched as the old man spoke. He felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "I'll keep your words in mind, sir."

Again, silence filled the place. Clark was thinking of everything the old man had said. A minute later, he stood up. "Well, I'd best be off, sir. My...um, my girl might be worried, I didn't tell her where I was going."

Al nodded and smiled at Clark.

"Thank you, Al. It's been a long time since I had the chance to have this kind of talk with someone."

"It was a pleasure, Clark. Like I said, I don't have a boy of my own, and talking to you made me feel as if I were talking to my own son."

"I feel the same way. My father died when I was younger, and I think if he was here right now, he'd be saying the same things you told me. Thank you. Have a good evening."

Clark had walked a few steps away when Al called him again. He turned to the old man.

"Just one more thing to remember, son: things always have a way of working out. If

you're having problems with your girl, don't run away. In the long run, things will work out."  
Clark nodded, and then walked back to the hotel.

Clark quietly entered the suite. He listened to any sound of an emergency, and when he heard none, he took off his shoes and changed into a thin, white cotton shirt and white pajama bottoms. He stood by the door to Lois' room and heard her steady heartbeat. Quietly, he turned the doorknob and entered her room.

Lois had cried herself to sleep. When Clark left, she didn't know what to do. Believing that he wouldn't be back anytime soon, she went to her bedroom and wept silently until she fell asleep.

After what seemed to be just a few minutes since she had gone to sleep, Lois felt the weight of her bed shifting to the left side. She opened her eyes and turned around, finding her face just inches away from Clark's, who had laid down next to her.

"I thought I'd take you up on that offer you gave a while ago, of me spending my last night here in bed," Clark softly said to her, running the back of his hand across her cheek. He added teasingly, "The couch is all yours."

Lois took his hand from her cheek and kissed his palm. "I was worried when you left. You went out for more than an hour."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I needed to clear my head for a while."

"And is it clear now?"

"It is." Clark smiled lovingly at the woman beside him. Only the single lamp in the room gave a dim light that illuminated Lois' beauty. "Lois, there are things you still don't know about me, and I'm afraid that when you find out, you'll hate me for it. I'm afraid of that, but now I've given it some thought. I love you, Lois Lane. If tonight is the last night I'll have with you, I'm taking it. I don't care about tomorrow, or next week, or next year. All I care about is right now, right here. With you." He reached out for the lamp switch and turned it off, covering the room in complete darkness.

Lois felt with a mix of admiration and worry. His words scared her, but her love for Clark was enough to make her let go of all her doubts. With nothing but the image of him imprinted in her mind, she let him hold her body closer as he pressed his lips to hers in a passionate kiss.

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois, and gently pushed her down the center of the bed and laid on top of her, propping his elbows on either side of Lois and keeping his weight on his arms. His hands ran through Lois' dark, wavy hair as he continued to kiss her, his tongue going deeper into her mouth.

Lois enjoyed the feel of Clark's body above hers, and she let her hands travel from his firm, broad chest down to his muscled abdomen. She could feel the ridges of his abs through the thin cloth of his shirt. The thought of his warm body so close to hers was enough to make her moan.

They proceeded to rid themselves of all their clothing, and when the last vestiges of their garments lay strewn on the floor, they took a moment to take in the feel on each other's body. Clark's hands wandered from Lois' lush red lips, to her neck, her full breasts, her rounded abdomen. He trailed down the side of her breasts, to her waist, to her legs. "You are so beautiful, Lois," he whispered huskily. Lois' hands gently ran through his soft hair down to his jawline. She felt for his glasses, and felt Clark stiffen, as if he was reluctant to have her touch his glasses. Realizing she probably won't recognize him in the darkness, he relaxed and took

her hand in his, and together they took off his glasses - the last thing that separated him from his other identity.

Clark buried his face at the crook of her neck. There was no place he would rather be than here, with Lois, the love of his life, the only woman he ever loved and will forever love.

"Clark, please..." Lois moaned.

Clark hesitated. "Lois, I can't...I don't - "

"It's okay."

They knew what was to come next. And neither of them held back, letting their feelings take hold of their whole beings...

Afterwards, they lay contented beside each other in bed. He looked at Lois, a dazed look in her eyes. She felt for his chest in the darkness, and when he took her hand in his, she snuggled up to him. "Thank you, " she whispered. She planted a soft kiss on his lips and rested her cheek against his chest, immediately falling into a deep sleep.

Clark put his arms around her, keeping her close to him. "I love you, Lois." He closed his eyes and focused his listening on her heartbeat, the last sound he heard before he fell into a dreamless slumber.

Clark didn't think he would oversleep, but the events of last night apparently tired him out. He woke up to the bright sunlight greeting him, but he didn't find the woman he wanted to see beside him in bed. "Lois?"

Clark climbed out of bed and grabbed his pajama bottoms from the floor. Lois' nightgown was missing, which meant she was probably awake and wearing it. "Lois?" he called out again.

He suddenly heard someone sobbing in the bathroom. He quietly strode to the bathroom, seeing the door half-open. He pushed it wider and found Lois curled up in the corner of the room. "Lois?"

Lois woke up feeling lighter than she ever felt in years. The memories of last night were fresh in her thoughts, and she smiled to herself. Her eyes focused on the man sleeping soundly beside her. Her eyes traveled to his arched eyebrows, his square jaw, his reddened lips. She watched his chest go in and out as he breathed deeply. Then her eyes lingered for a moment at the side of his abdomen. She had almost passed it unnoticed, for it was a very faint mark. But upon closer inspection, she realized what it was. *A scar*. She knew of only of one other man who had a scar like it. She would know that mark anywhere, as it was she who had pulled the shard that had caused it. Suddenly, realization settled in her, and she sat up in bed. Her eyes did a double take on his chiseled face, on his broad chest, and then on the faint scar in his side. "Oh God, " she whispered. "All this time, it was *him*."

Her mind began to swirl, and her heart seemed ready to burst with all the emotions running through her. Carefully, she made her way to the bathroom and began to cry.

"Lois?" Clark stood at the doorway of the bathroom. He didn't know what happened to make her so upset this early in the morning, especially after the night they had. He took two steps closer when what she said made him stop dead in his tracks.

"Don't, please don't come any closer, " Lois pleaded. "Leave me alone. Please, *Kal-El*."

## Chapter 18: The Other Side of the Story

The office had been awfully louder without Lois and Clark. With the two reporters gone, everyone else was free to spread gossip around the Planet about the pair's unlikely relationship. They all knew that Perry had sent Lane and Kent to New York for a week, and they got wind of the fact that the two shared a hotel room, thanks to Jean and Shauna from Accounting. With that in mind, the guys at the office had started to place bets on whether Clark was man enough to get in bed with Lois or not. The ladies had more to talk about, including what Lois found so attractive in the klutzy reporter, the elevator stunt they had pulled the week before, and the talks of what Clark and Lois must be doing in their hotel room right now. The last seemed to be a favorite among the office workers.

Richard was not in the least bit fond of the attention his colleagues were giving to Lois and Clark. At first he had tolerated it, thinking it was second nature to these people to be 'investigative,' even of their co-workers' personal lives. But now even Jason wasn't oblivious to all the talks, and Richard was worried of how his six-year-old son was taking in all he was hearing around the office.

*"Daddy, why do people keep saying Mr. Clark is doing Mommy? What's that s'posed to mean?" Jason had innocently asked Richard two days after Lois and Clark left for New York.*

*Upon hearing Jason's question, Richard almost fell from his chair. For a long time, he thought about what he would tell his son. "They don't mean anything by that, Jason. The people in the office are just making up stories."*

*"What kind of stories?"*

*"Uh...just boring, grown-up stories."*

*"Can you tell me one, like you do during my bedtime?"*

*"No," Richard replied, a little too quickly.*

*Jason frowned, disappointed that his request was not granted.*

*Richard sighed. He ruffled his son's hair and put the boy on his lap. With a reassuring tone, he said, "Don't worry about what they're saying, Jason. The grown-ups are just having...uh...fun. Don't listen to them."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Because you're not supposed to listen to their talks."*

*"Is Mommy with Mr. Clark now? Are they getting married?"*

*"Why would you think that, buddy?"*

*"Because I heard Mrs. Simmons tell Mr. Troupe that."*

*Richard was becoming ticked off with the gossip. His co-workers were way out of line. He made a mental note to talk to Perry about this. He shook his head. "No, Jason. What they're saying aren't true."*

*Jason sat in silence, finally having run out of questions to ask. He jumped off Richard's lap and returned to the picture he was drawing - a picture of Superman flying to the sun. Richard watched him in silence, the little boy's last question still swirling in his mind. And so it was Richard's turn to ask.*

*"Would you want Mommy and Mr. Clark to get married?"*

*Jason bit his lower lip and furrowed his brows. After a while, he shrugged, unsure of what to tell his father.*

*Richard gave him a small smile. "If you want them to get married, it's okay, buddy. I won't get mad. I just want to know what you think. Nobody asks you what you think about Mommy and Mr. Clark, don't they?"*

*Jason shook his head.*

*Richard nodded in understanding. "So how about you tell Daddy what you think, hmm?"*

*Jason tilted his head to the side, much like the way Superman does when he hears a cry for help. "It's okay with me. I like Mr. Clark. You and Mr. Clark are a lot like each other, Daddy." Jason paused before continuing. "Is he my other daddy that Mommy won't tell me about?"*

*Richard thought hard about what answer he would give to Jason. He didn't want to lie to his son. Jason had heard too many lies from too many people. Hoping Lois wouldn't kill him for saying the revelation, Richard smiled at his son. "Yes, Jason. Clark is your other daddy. That's why you and he are alike in a lot of ways."*

*"Like when sometimes I'm strong like him?"*

*"Yes, like that."*

*"Daddy?"*

*"Yes, son?"*

*"I want to be a lot like you, too. You're a good daddy."*

*Richard had to choke back his tears. "Thank you, Jason. We are a lot alike, too, you know. You and I like flying, don't we?"*

*"Uh huh."*

*"And our favorite food is...?"*

*Jason's face lit up. "Burritos!"*

Richard's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the elevators arriving at their floor. Instantly, his head turned to the elevator doors, as did the heads of the rest of the office. Everyone knew Lois and Clark were arriving today, and all of them were expecting to see another sort of stunt like the pair's steamy elevator kiss.

Their expectations fell short when the two reporters stepped out of the elevator and immediately rushed to their respective cubicles, not even uttering a word to each other or to anybody else in the office. There was tension in the air, but it wasn't anything like the sexual tension the two had exuded in the past weeks. The tension today screamed *war*, and Lois and Clark were the two opposing sides of the battlefield.

Richard could feel the uneasiness between the two reporters, and held Jason close to him. The boy was ready to run off to greet Lois, but Richard knew it wasn't a good time - Lois' expressionless face said so. He quickly ushered Jason to his desk, sitting the boy in front of his computer and asking him what DVD he wanted to watch. After popping *The Incredibles* into the disc drive, he put the headphones on Jason, and hoped that his little boy would be engrossed in the film and be oblivious to the goings-on in the office.

"LANE! KENT! In my office!" Perry yelled, shaking everyone out of their stunned moment.

The two reporters made their way to Perry's office, careful to keep their distance from each other. A few minutes later, Clark left the Chief's office and shuffled back to his desk. He began sorting out the pile of papers on his table, leafing through each one before putting them in the file cabinets.

Suddenly, the door of the Editor-in-Chief's office burst open and Lois stomped out, roaring at Perry, "I don't care, Perry! I don't *ever* want to work with him again!"

With that, Lois marched to her cubicle, grabbed her bag and ran to the elevators, leaving the rest of the newsroom confused and shocked, and Clark looking deeply hurt. Like the rest of the office, he knew *he* was exactly the 'him' Lois had been referring to.

Clark looked up from his chair and found Richard staring at him from his office. The other man raised his eyebrows at Clark, seeming to say, *"So she knows?"*

Lois did not go back to the office that day. Clark buried himself in his work, avoiding everyone's stares and trying to tune out all the talks around the office. When he had finished his articles, he went to Perry's office and handed them to the Chief, then left without a word.

As Clark walked along the streets of Metropolis, he began to think about the events that happened yesterday, as he and Lois were leaving their New York hotel.

*"Lois! Lois, wait! Please!" Clark had called out, running after her as she made her way out of the hotel.*

*"Don't talk to me, Clark!"*

*"You can't just run off like that. Talk to me. Please, Lois."*

*Lois stopped in her tracks and turned to look at Clark. "You want to talk? Fine, I'll talk. What the hell were you trying to pull last night? I gave myself to you, and you deceived me - again! Who do you think you are, Clark? You've been playing with me from the start. How many months have we been together? How many chances did you have to tell me? I trusted you! I thought you were the man I needed. I was so wrong. I was clearly freakin' wrong! You've broken my trust over and over! Is this what you wanted, Clark? You wanted to see me hurt? Well, congratulations, you just succeeded in that - again!"*

*She attempted to push Clark back, but he was too fast for her. He caught her hands as they landed on his chest. His eyes met Lois' with a pleading look. "Don't do this, Lois. Please. How can I fix this?"*

*Lois closed her eyes, her hands still on Clark's chest. Taking a deep breath, she looked up at Clark. "I don't know, Clark. I don't know. I'm tired, and I'm hurt, and I just want to go home and see my son. So please, just...don't try to fix this. Not now."*

*And not even a single syllable was exchanged between them afterwards.*

He was sorry to make her go through a lot of pain. He knew how much he hurt her. But a part of him was angry at her. He had always tried to understand her, taking in the full blow of her anger at him. But what about him? She had never really taken the time to listen to him. *Well, it's about time she heard me out.*

Superman flew across Metropolis, assisting in the capture of a few criminals here and there before landing on the roof of the house situated at 312 Riverside Drive. He scanned the house, but did not find Lois inside. Looking around the nearby streets, he found her. She was walking toward the house, trying to light a cigarette. He swooped down and grabbed her, flying her up to the skies.

"I thought you said you quit smoking," he said coldly.

"Cut the crap, Kent! Put me down! Now!"

"I would, Lois, but it's a fifty-foot drop to that street below."

"Put me down, Kal-El!"

"No."

"I said PUT ME DOWN!"

"No, Lois," he said firmly. "I've listened to you and your side of the story. Today you'll hear mine."

Kal-El gently put her down. He, on the other hand, was still floating a few inches above the ground. "Now you'll listen, Lois."

They were on top of an abandoned building in the outskirts of Metropolis. Lois was fuming, her eyes clearly full of hate. Kal-El looked at her calmly as he stood in front of her.

"I know I can't give you back your memories, and I'm sorry. I left you alone to deal with your pregnancy and our son, and I'm sorry. I talked to Richard behind your back, and I'm sorry." He paused. "What I am not sorry for is keeping my identity from you."

Lois made to react, but Kal-El held up a hand to stop her. "Don't you see, Lois? If I had told you who I was, you would have never seen the real Clark Kent. These past months have been my happiest, because you liked me - *loved me* - for who I really was, and not because I wore blue tights and a red cape. Six years ago, you knew everything. And it broke you to see me at the office, and not be able to touch me or show the slightest bit of affection. Then you'd see me on TV as Superman, and it pained you as well. You knew who I was, and it was killing you. It was hurting you for many different reasons - for fearing that people would find out about Superman and Clark Kent, for having to always see me going away to rescue people..." and in a softer voice, he added, "...and maybe, for thinking that the office would see you as a big joke being with the Daily Planet klutz."

Kal-El paused and looked at her. The pain he was feeling was reflected in his deep blue eyes. He knew Lois could see it plainly in his face. He stood before the only woman he ever loved, finally revealing himself, his vulnerability, his flaws. "I want the man I fell in love with.' That was what you told me after I gave up my powers. I never really gave those words much thought - until now. I learned from that, and I thought by keeping my identity a secret from you, you could learn to love me - me, Clark, and not Superman - and it wouldn't hurt you anymore. Call me selfish, but I just wanted to know how it felt to be loved as Clark Kent. Because I'm Clark, Lois...I'm Clark."

Tears were beginning to fall from Lois' eyes, but she kept her gaze on Kal-El.

He bowed his head, holding back his tears. "I'm sorry I kept secrets from you, Lois."

He gently carried Lois, who had been too stunned to say anything. Quietly, Kal-El spoke, "I'll take you back now."

## Chapter 19: Pushed To The Edge

It had been a week since Clark's talk with Lois on the rooftop. He had managed to keep his anger in check for the past few days, though there were still times when he just wanted to scream at everyone. Lois was still not talking to him, while the rest of the office was still talking about him. It didn't help that the rumors had gotten worse and worse. The whole office found out that Clark was Jason's biological father ("I have two Daddies, Daddy Richard and Daddy Clark!" Jason was overheard telling Jimmy three days ago), and that had made everyone *even more* interested in the life of shy and clumsy Clark Kent. Of course, Richard, Clark and Lois didn't blame the boy one bit - all of them were too preoccupied with their issues that none of them really stressed the importance of keeping that fact a secret. But the invasion of his privacy was making Clark angry, and he was trying his best not to lose his temper.

"Mr. Clark!" Jason's voice resounded across the newsroom as the boy came running to his direction. Clark smiled as he watched his son approach him. Thank God for Jason, the only good thing he had these days. Jason was just a few feet away when his mother grabbed him by the arm.

"You are not going there, Jason," Lois told him, lifting him up and putting him on her chair. "You're staying here and you're not going anywhere until I say so."

Clark looked at Lois in disbelief. She was clearly trying to keep his son away from him. Clark took out a box of new colored markers from his drawer. He had bought them for Jason during his trip to New York. He made his way to the boy as soon as Lois left for the break room.

"Hey, pal," he said, kneeling down and handing the package to Jason. "I thought you might like these."

"Wow, Mr. Clark! Thank you!"

"What do you think you're doing, Clark?" Lois exclaimed, striding to her desk with a cup of coffee in hand. "Jason, give those back to Clark. *Now*, young man."

Clark stood up. "Lois, they're just markers."

"I don't care. He's giving them back to you. Jason, give them to Clark."

Jason frowned, looking very disheartened. "But Mommy..."

Lois seized the box of markers from Jason and shoved it to Clark. The little boy began to cry.

The people in the office all stopped what they were doing and watched the scene between Lois and Clark. Richard had noticed the escalating argument, and decided to take action, picking up a crying Jason and leading him out to the elevators, suggesting that they go to the toy store near the office.

"You can't just give my son gifts," Lois said.

"Well, he's my son, too," retorted Clark calmly.

The office had never seen the mild-mannered reporter stand up to a fight, and they were curious at what would happen next and how this argument would end. They looked alternately from Lois to Clark and Clark to Lois.

"Oh," Lois raised an eyebrow at Clark. "That's right - the son you left me with *six years ago*."

Clark stiffened. He was aware of the whole office watching them. "Lois, this isn't the time and place for this."

"No, Clark. This is *exactly* the time and place for this. Tell everyone, Clark, so that they'd stop snooping around. Tell them how you and I got together for one night and then you up and

left after getting me pregnant and - "

Clark's anger was boiling. He couldn't take it anymore - he had kept everything bottled up inside for too long. "What do you want me to say, Lois? Fine, I'll tell them. Yes, I got you pregnant! Yes, I left you for six years! I didn't know, okay? If I had known, I wouldn't have left! Then I came back and found you in the arms of another man, and my son calling someone else 'Daddy!' *My son*, the child you're trying to keep away from me! Everything I wanted, everything I held dear was lost to me. The son I wished for - gone! The family I've always wanted to have - gone!"

He lowered the volume of his voice. There was a hint of exhaustion as he continued. "Are you happy now, Lois? Have I told the world enough of my sad, lonely life? What more do you want from me? I've given you your space, I've tried to understand you. And you just keep trying to shove in my face all the mistakes I've made. Why, Lois? Haven't you hated me or hurt me enough already? You never even cared about me then. You didn't see me as anything other than a face in the office. Sometimes you didn't even see me at all. I was nothing to you - *nothing* - before all this. Face it, Lois, you wouldn't have taken a second look at me if Superman hadn't left you or if you didn't have a fallout with Richard."

Clark was breathing deeply, his hands shaking. The rest of the office had fallen silent, completely shocked at Clark's outburst. Lois stood frozen in her spot.

Clark swallowed the lump in his throat. "You win, Lois. I'm leaving."

Lois was in a state of shock as she listened to Clark. The last time he had talked, when they were on the roof, he had been calm. Today, he was completely different. He had raised his voice at her, expressing all the pain he was feeling.

*"You win, Lois. I'm leaving."*

Those were his last words. She had wanted to call out to him as he stepped out of the newsroom. She had wanted to say she was sorry, and that he was right. She wanted to tell him she didn't want him to leave. But instead, she stood frozen at her desk.

"Ms. Lane?" she heard Jimmy utter her name behind her.

Before Lois could say anything, she felt her world spinning, and she knelt down by the trash bin in time to vomit straight into the container. The contents of her stomach continued to pour out, and she could feel Jimmy rubbing her back. When she had finished, she heard her concerned colleague ask, "Are you feeling any better?"

She pulled a Kleenex from the box on her desk and wiped her mouth with it. "No," she replied, running off to the elevators.

"You look like crap."

That was Richard's greeting to Lois when he found her in one corner of her dimly-lit bedroom, her knees drawn close to her chest, her hair completely messed up, her eyes puffy from too much crying. Richard had just arrived at the riverside house with Jason after their trip to the toy store and the newly-opened Metropolis Children's Museum. He made sure to keep Jason away from the happenings at the Planet, especially since it concerned his parents. After putting Jason to bed, he went to check on Lois and found her in her bedroom.

Lois took one look at Richard with her tear-streaked face. "You're not helping at all, Richard."

Looking at a disheveled Lois, he knew he had to take charge, something he often did not do during the five years he was with Lois. He switched on all the lights in the room and walked

over to where Lois was. "Get up, Lois," he said, a hint of authority in his voice. Richard knew that if he wanted to get Lois to stop with her private pity party, he had to be stern with her.

But Lois wasn't making things easy. She didn't move from her corner.

Richard sighed. He reached for Lois' arms and gently pulled her up. Lois leaned on Richard for support, and her ex-fiancé led her to her bathroom. He helped her sit on the edge of the tub, and then he filled a basin with water and soaked a washcloth in it.

Lois was a mess. She quietly watched Richard gather up a few things - towel, basin, cloth, clean pajamas. She felt a warm washcloth on her face, and she heard Richard say, "Let's get you cleaned up, and then we can talk. Alright, Lois?"

Twenty minutes later, Lois found herself reclining on the living room couch, feeling refreshed and clean in her pajamas. She was sipping the hot cocoa Richard had prepared for her.

Richard sat on the armchair and looked at Lois. He was thinking of how best to talk to her. The silence in the room was becoming uncomfortable.

"So," Richard began, trying to sound very casual, "how was New York?"

Lois simply shrugged, her eyes on the empty cup in her hand.

"Did you have a great trip?"

Lois didn't answer.

"You watched anything on Broadway?"

Still no answer.

"But you were able to finish the investigation on the kidnappings, right?"

Still no answer.

"Did you go shopping? I bet you did - you never pass up the chance to shop in Manhattan."

Still no answer.

"Did you even do anything at all in New York?"

Still no answer from Lois.

Richard was becoming impatient. He'd heard about Clark's outburst at the office, and he knew it was because Clark had everything bottled up inside him. Richard didn't want the same thing happening to Lois - he especially feared that she might take it out on Jason. He'd rather be the receiver of Lois' wrath than have Jason experience it. Snapping his fingers, he said with a teasing tone that was sure to tick off Lois, "Oh! I know, I know! *You* found out that Clark Kent and Superman is one and the same person!"

At his words, Lois' head snapped up. Her hazel eyes met Richard's bright blue ones. "You...knew?"

Richard beamed, annoying Lois even more. Before he knew it, Lois lunged at him and he had to grab the nearest throw pillow to guard his face as Lois banged her small fists at him. Of course, Lois was worn out, so her blows weren't hard enough to hurt Richard. Despite receiving hit after hit, Richard was grinning. *Finally she's letting it out*, he thought.

A little while later, Lois was back on the couch - physically and emotionally exhausted but at the same time feeling as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She was looking at Richard unsurely. "Sorry for hitting you," she mumbled.

Richard shrugged it off. "It's alright."

Lois laid back on her seat, pouted and crossed her arms. "You did deserve it - you were ticking me off."

Richard laughed. "Like I said, it's okay - I sort of knew it was coming. I mean, I wasn't expecting you to kiss me after learning I knew about Clark's secret before you did."

Lois glared at him.

And then they fell silent again.

It was a few minutes before Richard spoke up. "So how did you find out?"

"How did *you* find out?" Lois spat.

"I asked you first."

Lois took a deep breath. She was too tired to argue. "The scar."

"What?"

"The scar - the one on his side. I knew it well; I was the one who pulled out the shard that caused it after Lex Luthor stabbed him. After seeing it, everything seemed clearer to me. I looked at his face - the same eyebrows, the same nose, the same lips. And it wasn't just the physical features. Their five-year absence, their simultaneous returns, Clark's disappearance when Superman was around - it suddenly all made sense to me."

Richard took in her every word. When she finished, he simply nodded. "The scar, huh? And how did you see the scar on his side, unless you and Cl - ?"

"Don't even go there, White." Lois quickly cut him off, grabbing a pillow and attempting to chuck it at him.

Her ex-fiancé smirked and held both hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright. What happens in New York stays in New York."

They laughed for a bit, the awkwardness they felt between each other ebbing away. But then the memory of Clark's pained expression that morning at the office popped up in Lois' mind, and she fell silent. Richard stopped laughing as well, and then the silence filled the room again.

It was a while before Richard broke the quietness. "It's funny how a pair of glasses and bad posture can make a whole lot of difference, huh? I mean, one minute I was looking at my officemate, and the next minute I was looking at my son's other father."

Lois was struck by his words and the disheartened tone that accompanied it. She was so caught up in her issues with Superman and Clark Kent, that she never really thought about how it affected Richard, the man she had made a life with for the past five years. Lois looked at him and saw the same sad look he had that night he asked her if she was in love with Superman. "Richard, I'm sorry..." she said quietly.

"I saw his Superman suit. That's how I found out. That time we were covering a story together, we got into that accident, remember? The truck was heading our way, and I was going to slam head-on to it - but then Clark grabbed the steering wheel and turned the car around, so his side collided with the truck. We got out of the wreckage, and I saw his business suit split open."

Richard sighed. His eyes fell on a piece of paper on the floor. Picking it up, he turned it over and saw that it was one of Jason's many drawings - it wasn't of Superman, though. It was of Clark. "Lois, Clark is a good man. He may have kept you in the dark, but he's got his reasons. It may not have been fair to you, but think about it - when you were with Clark, you were the happiest that you've ever been in a long time. Everyone saw that. He didn't have the heart to ruin that happiness. He was willing to carry the guilt just so he could see you smile and laugh."

"But he hurt me so much, Richard. He could've told me. He should've told me. He wasted a lot of opportunities."

"I know." Jokingly, Richard added, "Of all the men, Lois Lane, you had to pick the idiot who flies around, flashing his red underwear for all the world to see."

Lois let out a laugh. "*You* could've told me."

"He's my friend, Lois. It's his secret to share, not mine."

Lois fell silent for some time. She stared at the picture her son made of her co-worker. She didn't take her eyes off the picture as she spoke quietly. "What should I do, Richard? I know I hurt him. All the things he said this morning, they were true. But I can't...I can't get past the fact that he lied to me. I don't know who he is anymore."

"He's Clark, Lois." Richard took a deep breath. "You know what finally pushed him to the edge? Why he finally let it all out?"

Lois looked at him questioningly.

"Jason," Richard replied. "You kept him away from Jason, and that's what hurt him the most. Clark is *a lot* of things - as I've learned in the months that we've become friends. He is a gifted journalist, a selfless hero." He paused, watching Lois, tears forming in her eyes. "But to him, being a journalist, being a superhero - those come in second. Clark is, and will always be, a father, first."

When Lois didn't say anything, Richard stood up. He was already in the doorway when he turned back to Lois, who was still sitting on the couch and staring at Jason's drawing. "I'll stay away. That's what you wanted, right?" Richard suddenly said.

Lois quickly stood up and looked at him. She shook his head. "Richard, I... I didn't say..."

Richard cut her short. "Clark wanted me to tell you that. Jason and I dropped by his place before we went here. He told me to pass the message to you: *I'll stay away. That's what you wanted, right?*"

## Chapter 20: Still Holding Back

It had been a month since Clark was last seen in the Daily Planet office. No one had heard from him, with the exception of Richard, who promised not to say anything to anybody in the office - not that anybody really cared to know how he was. The office's attention had turned to Lois, who seemed to be getting sicker and sicker by the day. Most of the people credited her ill health to stress - she had to deal with Richard and Clark in a span of a few months, not to mention the problems and troubles she had gone through for most of her articles and investigations.

Lois made her way to the ladies' room for the second time that morning, feeling her head spinning and throwing up what she ate for breakfast. She knew her colleagues had attributed it to stress. Even Perry had offered to give her a few days' leave of absence. But she had a feeling there was more to her sickness than just stress.

She made her way back to her desk, where she found Jason quietly drawing. She was so proud of her son for the way he had dealt with the sudden changes around him. She knew he didn't quite understand what was happening, but he knew enough to know that he had to be a good boy for Mommy.

"Two of the three gunmen had been sent to the hospital with fractured ribs, apparently a result from Superman pushing them too hard against the brick wall as he cornered them in the alleyway along 53rd and Linden Drive," Lois heard the TV news reporter saying as she looked up at one of the monitors in the bullpen. "This has been the ninth reported case of injury caused by Superman to a few criminals as he gathered them up before the arrival of the police. It seems the Man of Steel has come up with new tactics to teach the crooks of Metropolis not to mess with the law..."

Lois knew Superman was *never* one to get violent, and he avoided inflicting physical harm as much as possible. *I guess I'm not the only one dealing with stress*, she thought.

The people of Metropolis and the rest of the world had been aware of the sudden change in their superhero. He seemed to inflict more injury to those who disobeyed the law and committed crimes - whether it was by accident or on purpose, nobody knew. It was both interesting and scary to the public.

"Mommy?"

Lois turned her eyes away from the monitors and looked at her son. *Jason*. At first glance, he looked very much like her. But Lois saw differently - she could see the deep blue eyes, the sharp nose, the lips that belonged to her son's father.

"Yes, sweetie?" she asked, kneeling down and leveling herself with Jason.

"He's really mad, isn't he?"

Lois furrowed her brows. "Who is?"

"Mr. Clark."

At the mention of *his* name, Lois' heart sank. She looked at her little boy, who bowed his head and fidgeted with the crayon in his hand. Her heart went out to her son. She knew how much he missed Clark. *I miss him, too*, she admitted to herself quietly.

"Did I do something wrong? Is that why he's mad an' he's hurting people?"

Tears threatened to fall from Lois' eyes. She quickly shook her head and wrapped her arms around the boy. "No, baby, no. You didn't do anything wrong, okay? Don't you ever, *ever* think that."

"Then why won't you let me see him?"

Lois tried to keep up a strong front for her son, but inside, her son's questions were

breaking her. She realized just how much damage she had caused - for her son, for the man she loved, for the family she could have had. She took a deep breath. "What do you say we go to the park and we can talk there, huh, munchkin?"

But not even the mention of the word *park* could've cheered Jason up. He missed Mr. Clark, and he couldn't understand why his mommy and his other daddy just can't say sorry to each other and be friends again.

"You want sprinkles on your ice cream, honey?" Lois asked her son as they stopped by an ice cream kiosk in the middle of the park.

The boy shook his head. He hadn't spoken a word since they left the Daily Planet building. The last words he uttered were, "See you, Daddy," to Richard before closing the elevator doors and going down to the first floor of the building.

Lois still felt a bit ill, but she took little notice of how she felt. What mattered right now was Jason, and she was trying to come up with ways on how to make her son understand their complicated situation.

The mother-and-son pair walked along the park, enjoying their ice creams. Lois found an empty bench near the playground and sat down. Jason plopped down on the space beside her. "You want to go on the swings?" she asked him.

Jason again shook his head no.

Lois took a deep breath. She wanted to cry. It was bad enough that Clark was mad at her; she didn't want Jason to act distant with her as well. "Are you ever going to talk to me, Jason?"

The boy bit his lower lip. Lois could see he was trying hard not to cry. "I don't wanna be mad at you, Mommy. But I want Mr. Clark back. So you have to stop being mad at him so he can come back."

It was then Lois Lane began to cry in front of her six-year-old son. She cried and cried, letting out all the pain and frustration.

Jason had seen his mommy cry before, but not like this. She was crying *a lot*. Not knowing what to do, he simply hugged his mommy.

Feeling Jason's small arms around her brought back memories of her and Clark together. Clark - he was her go-to guy whenever she had problems, or whenever she needed someone to listen to her and comfort her. And now, her son - no, *their* son - was doing exactly what Clark would have done for her.

When she finally stopped crying, Lois embraced her son tighter and kissed him on the forehead. "I'm sorry for everything, Jason. Mommy was hurting a lot, and it made Mommy selfish and unfair, especially to you. I shouldn't have kept you away from Mr. Clark. He loves you very much and you're very important to him. And you make him happy. I was wrong in making him stay away from you."

The boy nodded, telling his mommy that he understood her. "Will he ever come back, Mommy?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

"I want him to."

"Me, too, Jason. I want him to come back."

Lois strode through the quiet hallways. She could hear children laughing inside classrooms as she passed. She stopped when she reached the classroom at the end of the hall and walked in, coming face-to-face with Ms. Jenna Allen, Jason's teacher.

"Ms. Lane," the teacher greeted. "Thank you for taking the time to be here today."

Lois smiled and settled on a seat in front of the teacher's desk. She looked out the window and spotted Jason among a group of kids playing in the quadrangle. "Is something wrong with my son?" she asked.

Ms. Allen took her seat on the teacher's desk. "Your son is very smart, Ms. Lane. He is also well-behaved, never a trouble-maker - except for that incident during his birthday."

"Yes, I remember that. But I think we've gotten past that and Jason has never laid a hand on any of his classmates since. So what's the problem now?"

"I hope you don't think of me as prying, but I'm worried about how your son is taking in all the changes happening around him. I understand that the past months have been very rough on you and your family - Jason has shared a few stories in class about how he suddenly has two fathers. I'm not sure what exactly you and your family are going through, Ms. Lane, but whatever it is, it's affecting Jason. He's grown quieter, more reserved. He seldom spends time with his classmates, opting to sit in a corner quietly during recess. I just thought you'd like to know how your son is doing. Maybe he just needs reassurance that things will be better."

Lois was dumbfounded. It took a while before she managed to get her voice back. "I didn't know..."

Jason's teacher looked at her sympathetically. She smiled warmly. "I'm sure Jason understands what you're going through, Ms. Lane. I just hope you also understand what your son is feeling."

Lois nodded. "Thank you for informing me, Ms. Allen."

Lois stood up and headed for the door. She made her way to the nearest restroom, feeling sick again. After throwing up in the toilet, she fixed herself, headed out to the playground, and took Jason. They then headed back to the Daily Planet.

Upon arriving at the Planet, Lois and Jason immediately made their way to Richard's office.

"Hi Daddy!" Jason exclaimed, running into Richard's arms.

"Hey Tiger, how was school?" asked Richard as he scooped up the boy.

"Good," came Jason's automatic reply.

"Jason, would you mind staying in Mommy's desk for a bit? I just need to have a little talk with Richard," Lois said.

Jason looked puzzled at first, as did Richard. The older man put the boy down and told him to follow his mother's orders. Jason went out of the office and shuffled to Lois' desk, taking out his favorite picture book and flipping through the pages.

"Everything okay, Lois?" Richard asked as soon as Jason left.

"I need to know where Clark is," Lois said flatly.

Richard raised an eyebrow. "And you think I know where he is?"

"Come on, Richard. You're practically best friends. You know where he is."

"Lois - "

"Richard, please. I made a lot of mistakes and I'm trying to fix what I've done. Help me out here." There was a trace of pleading in her voice.

Richard looked at her apologetically. "If Clark wants to see you, he'll be the one to approach you. And right now, if he's nowhere to be seen, then I guess it means..." Richard paused and shrugged. "...I guess it means he doesn't want to see you."

"But I want to see him. I need to see him."

"I know I'm being a jerk, but I promised Clark I won't go telling on his whereabouts -

especially not to you." Richard could see the disheartened look on Lois' face. He went over and embraced her.

"I have to make this okay, Richard," Lois sobbed. "I have to do something. I need to fix this - for Jason, for Clark. I can't let things go on like this. I have to make everything better."

Richard felt torn between the woman he once fell in love with, and the man who has been one of his greatest friends. He sighed and looked at Lois straight in the eye. "I'll talk to him. I'll tell him you guys need to talk. That's the best I can do, Lois."

Lois nodded, wiping away the tears that streaked down her cheeks before leaving Richard's office. She arrived back at her desk to find her son talking with Jimmy.

"...both love you, Jason. Don't think differently for one second," Lois heard Jimmy telling her son.

"But he doesn't want to come back. And he doesn't visit me. And he doesn't answer when I call him on his phone. Mr. Clark *always* answers when I call him. Is it because I sometimes stay with Daddy Richard?" Jason was letting out his frustrations to Jimmy. Lois felt a pang of jealousy - her son would rather talk to others than with her, especially about Clark.

Jimmy shook his head. "Nah uh, kiddo. It's not because of you and Mr. White. I know it isn't - they're really good friends."

"Do I have to choose between Daddy Richard and Mr. Clark?"

As he looked at the boy before him, Jimmy Olsen felt sorry for Jason. The boy was too young to be caught in the middle of something to messed-up like this. He ruffled Jason's hair playfully. "Nope, you don't have to pick between them. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because they're both really cool guys and they both love you very much. And your mom loves you very much, too. So you see, you're the lucky one, Jason - you have three people who love you no matter what."

"Do you love me, too, Mr. Jimmy?"

Jimmy snorted. "Uh...sure, Jason - when you're not sneaking away with my camera or trying to break it, I love you."

Lois approached them just as Jason gave Jimmy a hug. Jimmy saw Lois coming nearer and figured that was his cue to leave. "Oh, hello there, Miss Lane. I was just leav - "

Jimmy wasn't able to finish his sentence as Lois circled her arms on him. He was shocked at the sudden action Lois had just displayed. Awkwardly, he patted her on the back.

"Thank you," Lois whispered before letting go.

Jimmy swallowed hard and continued to look at Lois blankly. Then he nodded and grinned. "I hope I said the right things to Jason," he mumbled.

"You did," Lois assured him before she knelt down and leveled with her son's face. "Hey buddy, you want to go visit Daddy?"

Jason giggled. "Mommy, Daddy's just there in his office. I'm with him everyday, I don't need to *visit* him," he said matter-of-factly.

"I was talking about your Daddy Clark," Lois replied, smiling warmly at her son.

Jason's eyes lit up. "You know where he is? Are we gonna ask him to come back?"

Lois took her son's hand in hers. "Well, I don't really know where to find him, but we can go and see if he's at his apartment."

"And then we'll ask him to come back?"

"And then we'll ask him to come back," Lois echoed her son's words.

*Knock, knock.*

"Clark?" Lois called out. She and Jason had been standing outside his apartment for the last ten minutes, knocking on his door and calling out to him.

Lois sighed and looked down at her son. Jason was sitting on the floor, his chin resting on his hands. He had gotten tired of waiting four minutes after they arrived. "I guess he's not home, sweetie. I'm sorry."

Jason heaved a sigh. "It's okay, Mommy. You did try."

Lois held her hand out to her son, who stood up and took it. "Let's go grab Chinese take-out and burritos before we go home. What do you say?"

"Sure," Jason replied. He and his mommy were almost in front of the elevators when he ran back to Clark's door. He took out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and slid a quarter of it through the slit between the door and the floor. He then went back to his mommy and they waited for the elevator. "I almost forgot that - Mr. Jimmy said if I wanted to tell Mr. Clark anything, I should write it. Do you think he'll read it, Mommy?"

Lois nodded. "I think he will."

Jason grinned at his mommy with the same goofy grin Clark used to have. And as they stepped into the elevator, Jason looked back at Mr. Clark's apartment and he could've sworn he saw his letter disappear through the door.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, trying to hold back the tears. He let his head fall back on the front door, where he had been slumping against for the past couple of minutes.

"*Do you think he'll read it, Mommy?*" he heard Jason ask.

He looked at the small part of folded paper that the boy had slipped through the door. He took it and opened the letter.

*"Dear Mr. Clark, Are you coming back? Pleez come back Mommy and Daddy Richard and I miss you. Mr. Jimmy said maybe you are sick. If you are sick me and Mommy can take care of you I love you. Love, Jason"*

And not even his powerful Kryptonian genes could've stopped Kal-El from breaking down as he folded up his son's letter and held it close to his heart.

## Chapter 21: A Wake-Up Call to Life

"Clark!" an angry-sounding voice and loud knocking could be heard outside Clark's apartment.

"I'll pay the rent by the end of the week, Todd," came Clark's flat reply from behind the front door.

"It's Richard, not your landlord," Richard corrected him. "Can you open the door, please? We need to talk."

Richard just had a talk with Jason on the phone earlier in the evening, and the boy told Richard about how his and his mommy's visit to Clark's apartment had turned out. The older man felt a bit angry when Jason told him no one was in the apartment, because Richard knew that Clark was home. And so he found himself driving to Clark's apartment later that evening, knowing he needed to speak to Clark about the day's events.

"It's late, Richard. We can talk tomorrow," replied Clark, not even bothering to open the door. He was still slumped against the front door, clutching Jason's letter. He hadn't moved since Lois and Jason's visit that afternoon.

Richard was starting to lose patience. He banged on the door a couple of times. "I'm not leaving until you and I get some things straightened out, Kent."

Clark sighed. He stood up and opened the door for Richard.

The man standing in front of the doorway surprised Richard. "Clark...you-you look...you don't look so good," Richard managed to say. He assessed his friend's appearance - reddened eyes, messy hair falling on his face, blank expression. He looked nothing like the superhero that he was. He looked so defeated.

Clark didn't say anything. He simply let Richard into the apartment and closed the door behind him. The two men sat down on the armchairs, facing each other.

"What do you want, Richard?" Clark said with a hint of annoyance. He wasn't in the mood to talk. He just wanted to be left alone.

"Why didn't you open the door for Lois and Jason? I knew you were here the whole time - there wasn't any news about Superman's rescues today."

"What does it matter now, Richard? It's done, they think I'm not here. That's the way it's going to be."

Richard looked at Clark in disbelief. "It matters, Clark! I want to know why the hell you didn't welcome them into your place. Clearly, Lois is making an effort; why can't you?"

Clark wasn't looking at Richard. Nor was he thinking about answering him. Clark simply shrugged.

*WHAM!*

Richard hurled a throw pillow at Clark, knocking off his glasses. He looked at Clark furiously. "Stop being such an idiot, Kent! You're making matters worse by shutting those two out of your life! So before it's too late, why don't you wake up and do something?!"

Clark still wasn't responding. He didn't even move to pick up his glasses from the floor.

Richard heaved a sigh. "I don't think *you* know what it's like seeing your parents fighting. But *I* do. I know how it is watching Mom and Dad just giving up on what they've built simply because they couldn't see past each other's differences. I had a good family until I was 11, when my father left Mom and me. Dad never came back. I dropped his last name and took Mom's name - White. I never stopped hating my father, and I promised myself that when I get kids of my own, I won't be like him."

Clark watched Richard's tear-filled eyes hold anger and resentment.

Richard continued. "Would you want that to happen to Jason, Clark? Would you want him to hate you? Are you ready to endure that for the rest of your life? Because shutting them out of your life is the first step."

Clark's deep blue eyes went from Richard, to Jason's letter in his hands, then to the floor. "No," he answered quietly.

Richard wiped the tears that streaked his face and took a deep breath. "Come on, Kent. We're going for a ride."

Standing up, Richard walked to Clark's front door. Clark followed. They went down the building and to Richard's car.

The trip was quiet. Clark didn't even ask where they were going. A few minutes later, he found their car parked in front of 312 Riverside Drive. Neither Richard nor Clark made a move to get out of the car. They simply stared at the house.

"What do you see, Clark?" Richard asked him.

"Just a house," the other man silently replied.

"What do you *see*, Clark?" Richard asked again.

Clark understood what Richard wanted him to do, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He didn't want to see Lois and Jason.

"What do you see, Clark?" Richard asked for the third time.

Clark let out a deep breath. Using his x-ray vision, he scanned the house. Everything seemed to be in order on the first floor - the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, the guestroom. His vision then traveled up the second floor and into Jason's room. He found the boy sleeping soundly, clutching a box of colored markers - the markers Clark had bought for the boy in New York.

"The markers," Clark said aloud.

Richard nodded, understanding what Clark had just seen. "Lois took it from your desk and gave it to Jason. That kid never lets go of those colored pens. He makes sure he has at least one in his hand wherever he goes. Those are his last remembrance of you." Richard's eyes quickly darted to the dashboard compartment of his car where an old broken wristwatch was stowed away. He understood what Jason was feeling - the wristwatch was the only thing his own father had left behind.

Clark continued scanning Jason's room. He saw Jason's toys scattered on the floor, a few blank papers on the small desk, and a copy of the book "Horton hears A Who." He remembered one day at the Planet - he was helping Jason read that book. When he was done surveying the boy's room, he closed his eyes.

"Did you see Lois?" Richard asked.

With eyes still closed, Clark shook his head.

Richard didn't say anything.

Even though Clark didn't scan Lois' room, he knew exactly what she was doing - crying. He listened to her quietly sobbing, and it broke his heart. "I don't want to see her yet," Clark said quietly.

Richard looked at him questioningly.

"I got hurt badly, Richard," Clark continued. "My body may be invincible, but my heart isn't. The things she said and did - they went deeper than anything I've ever felt. I'm not yet ready to see her again. I want that when I see her again, it's because I'm ready and willing to - not because *you* told me to, not because I'm forced to open my apartment since she's been standing in my front door for a long time."

The drive back to Clark's apartment was as quiet as when they left for Lois and Jason's house. Clark looked at all the lights of the city. He was deep in thought about what he wanted to do with his life. They stopped in front of Clark's building.

"So now what, Kent?" Richard asked before Clark alight from the car. "What are you going to do next?"

Clark shrugged. "The farm."

"The farm?" Martha asked in disbelief as she looked at her son standing in their kitchen. "You want to help out in the farm?"

Clark went to Smallville a week after his talk with Richard. He had explained to his mother his plans of helping in managing the Kent farm. "Well, Ma, it's perfect, see? I've only got enough money left from my last paycheck, I don't think Perry's ever going to give me my job back, and you could use an extra hand around here. It's gonna be great."

Martha Kent looked at her only son for a long time. She knew Clark better than anyone, and she knew he didn't simply pack up a few things to go to Smallville for a few weeks and help out in the farm. But she respected Clark's decisions, and she believed that in time, her son would open up to her about his real reasons for leaving Metropolis. For now, she let him be. "Well then, stop standing there, dear. Get settled in and then you can start working. Ben and his two boys are good help around here, but I know you're very useful to have, too."

Martha's words rang true. A month after Clark began working on the farm, he proved to be a reliable asset. He was very efficient, finishing his tasks in half the time it takes a normal man to finish the job. He did all the heavy lifting with ease. He fixed up the barn and repaired the tractor, helping them save money instead of spending on a new one.

Such was the life of Clark Kent for the past weeks - wake up early, tend to the farm, leave for his Superman duties when the occasion calls for it, then go back to sleep and prepare for another day ahead. Despite the busy days he has, Clark still could not shake out of his mind the image of two people - Lois and Jason. He had not gone to visit them since that night with Richard, and he was beginning to feel a pang of remorse.

So one clear and starless evening, Kal-El flew to the riverside house.

There was laughter inside the house. Kal-El found Lois and Jason sitting comfortably on the living room couch, watching cartoons on TV. He watched Lois wipe a smear of chocolate on Jason's chin. Jason was oblivious to his mother's action as his eyes were glued to the TV screen. Kal-El observed the closeness of mother and son, watched them laugh at the same time, watched Lois pull Jason closer to her. And as he kept his gaze on them, he caught a glimpse of something that tore at his heart - Jason, *his* son, was holding a blue marker in one hand. It was from the box of markers he had given the boy. *He could've been holding my hand instead of that marker*, Kal-El thought to himself sadly.

"You were out for a long time. Busy night?" Martha greeted Clark as he stepped into the living room.

"No, nothing much going on tonight," Clark replied to his mother. He had changed from his Superman suit into more comfortable clothing before going down to the living room. He sat beside Martha. "What have you got there, Ma?"

Martha had been sitting on the couch for some time, looking at a photo album. She smiled at Clark and pointed to a photo showing Clark, Martha and Jonathan. They were standing in front of the tall corn stalks of the farm. "Your father would've been proud of the way you've

managed the farm," Martha said.

Clark smiled. "You both taught me well."

Mother and son continued flipping through the pages of the album. At the near end, Clark noticed his father wasn't in any of the pictures anymore. "W-where was Pa in these pictures? Was he the one taking the pictures?"

Martha looked at the photos. One photo after the other showed her and Clark grinning and posing for the camera. Clark was wearing an Indian headdress and sported red streaks on each cheek. "Oh, that was during your second-grade Thanksgiving play. Remember, you were one of the Native Americans in it? Pete Ross' father took so many pictures of us after the play!"

Clark furrowed his brows. "*Pete's...dad?*"

Martha nodded. "Don't you remember, dear? Your father went to visit a sick family member in the South. It was the only Thanksgiving he didn't spend with us. You were so mad at him then, you told him if he doesn't watch your school play, you won't ever speak to him again." Martha chuckled at the memory.

Clarity washed over Clark. He remembered that Thanksgiving Day. "And during Thanksgiving dinner, I said I wasn't thankful for anything because Pa wasn't with us."

The memory brought sadness to Clark. He looked at his mother. "I don't want Jason to ever say anything like that about me."

Martha looked at her son and smiled lovingly. She brushed her hand through his hair. "I knew you had other reasons for coming back here, Clark. As much as I want you here, and as great as your help has been, I'm glad you're starting to understand now that your place isn't here anymore. There's a six-year-old boy waiting for you in Metropolis."

Clark nodded. "I know." His eyes fell again on the photos of the Thanksgiving play. "I want to be in every picture with Lois and our son. And *I* want to be the one taking their pictures, not some other kid's dad. I want my son to say he's thankful for having his mom and dad together during Thanksgiving dinner."

Martha smiled and kissed Clark's forehead. "Then go, son. Take the money you've earned here on the farm and go back to Lois and Jason."

*Knock, knock.*

Richard rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock on his bedside table. It read 3:17 AM. He heard the persistent knocking on the door and got out of bed.

*Knock, knock.*

"Clark?" Richard stifled a yawn as he pulled open the door and saw the other man in front of his apartment.

Clark was standing in the doorway flashing his goofy grin. "I'm ready."

Richard looked at Clark blankly. "Huh?"

"I'm ready to see Lois and Jason again," Clark continued. "You were right, Richard. I don't want Jason growing up and hating me. I don't want Lois to raise our son alone."

Richard, too sleepy to completely understand everything Clark had just said, simply nodded. "Good to know, Clark. Can I go back to sleep now?"

## Chapter 22: These Little Wonders - Part 1

"Lois? Jason?" Richard called out to the residents of 312 Riverside Drive. He arrived early at their house with a suitcase in hand.

"Hi Daddy!" Jason greeted him as he ran down the stairs. He jumped to Richard's arms and gave him a hug.

"Whoa, kiddo. What did we say about running down the stairs?" Richard asked, looking at the boy sternly.

"I've tried to tell him a million times about how dangerous it can be, he's just too stubborn to listen," Lois piped in as she went down to greet Richard. She looked a bit ill, but smiled and gave Richard a friendly peck on the cheek nevertheless.

"Ah, I wonder where he got that stubbornness from," Richard teased.

Jason, inheriting his mother's keen sense of observation, noticed the suitcase behind Richard. "Are you going away, Daddy?" Jason asked worriedly.

Richard knelt down to Jason's level. He smiled at the boy he had raised as his own. "Only for a little while, buddy," he said with a smile.

Lois looked at Richard, waiting for an explanation.

Richard stood up and explained to Lois. "Perry wants me to do a follow-up story on that bomb explosion in Moscow. I'll only be gone for a week."

Lois nodded in understanding. "Russia for a week, huh? That should be fun."

Jason ran to Richard and hugged his leg tight. "I don't want you to go, Daddy!"

Richard knelt down again and brushed up the little boy's hair. "I won't be gone forever, Tiger. I'll be back before you know it. I promise."

"But who's gonna come here and visit me and Mommy if you're not here?" Jason asked with a pout.

Richard grinned. "I've got just the person for that job."

Lois' eyes went wide as she saw who stepped onto the doorway. *He* was here - deep blue eyes, jet-black hair, chiseled face and all. And Richard said *he* was going to take care of them.

"Mr. Clark!" Jason exclaimed, running to the man in the doorway.

Clark grinned from ear-to-ear and held Jason in his arms. He embraced his son for a very long time, holding back his tears. He reveled in the feeling of Jason's small arms around his neck. He missed his son so much, and he made sure Jason knew that. "I missed you, buddy."

"I miss you, too, Mr. Clark."

Clark then stood up and looked at Lois. The two of them stood in an uncomfortable silence. They acknowledged each other's presence with a curt nod.

It was Richard who broke the silence. "Well, I best be off to the airport." After giving hugs and kisses to Lois and Jason, and a firm handshake to Clark, Richard left the house.

Lois and Clark stood a short five feet from each other, with their gazes on the floor. Jason had gone to the kitchen to eat breakfast. Neither Clark nor Lois knew what to do next. They both wanted to see each other, but this first meeting was proving to be quite difficult and awkward.

Lois cleared her throat and looked up at Clark. Hewasn't wearing his dorky glasses, but had on a button-down white shirt and jeans. It made him look like a cross between his two characters - Clark Kent and Superman. Lois could not think clearly - the man before her mesmerized her, but also made her nervous, uncomfortable, and self-conscious. "I, uh, I-I have to, um...I have to get Jason ready for, uh, for school."

Clark nodded and raised a finger to his nose bridge before realizing he was not wearing

his glasses. He had been so used to talking to Lois as dorky Clark, with his thick glasses and three-piece suit, that he couldn't quite pull himself together and talk to Lois without his disguise. He brought his hand down to his side clumsily in true Clark Kent fashion. "Force of habit," he mumbled nervously.

Lois looked at him with a hint of amusement. "Well, I-I um...I'm gonna go now."

Clark took a deep breath. "O-of course. Uh, call me i-if, uh, if-if you need...um, anything."

"I will."

"I-I'll be at my a-apartment."

"And, um, and I'll be at the, uh, the office."

Clark gave a weak smile and another nod. He began to leave.

"S-so..." Lois began, making Clark stop and turn. "So, we'll, uh...we'll see you around?" She flashed a genuine smile at Clark.

The man before Lois smiled warmly, the same smile he had given her when he first answered that question. "I'm always around."

Early the next morning, Clark let himself into Lois and Jason's house. He carried a bag of freshly-baked pretzels from New York, where he had just saved twelve children trapped in a runaway school bus. "Lois? Jason? I got you breakfast," Clark called out.

Clark laid the bag of pretzels on the dinner table and tuned in his hearing to Jason and Lois. His son was in his room, and judging from the boy's steady heartbeat and deep breathing, he was still sleeping. Upon hearing gagging sounds from Lois' room, Clark ran up the stairs to Lois. He found her leaning down on the toilet, throwing up. Instinctively, he went to her and rubbed her back gently.

Lois looked up at him when she was done.

"Easy there. I'm calling a truce," Clark whispered. "I've got you." He took Lois in his arms and carried her back to her bed. He pulled the blanket over to cover Lois' body. "Will you be okay here?"

Lois nodded, still feeling lightheaded.

"Alright then. I'll bring Jason to school and call Perry to tell him you won't be at the office today. I'll be back as soon as possible."

Clark had turned to leave when he felt Lois grab his hand.

"Thank you, Clark," Lois said weakly.

Clark gave her a loving smile before leaving the room.

"Clark?" Lois called out. It had been a few hours since Clark left to take Jason to school. Lois went downstairs and found him flying in through the window in his Superman suit.

Superman looked just as surprised as Lois. "Lois!" he cried, accidentally using his high-pitched voice.

Lois gave a small laugh at the sight of Superman in his kingly form using a high-pitched tone. "I guess I'll have to get used to that," she quipped.

Superman smiled sheepishly. "I'll just, um, go a-and change."

Lois waited for him and sat on the couch. A few minutes later, he emerged from the guestroom wearing a red shirt and jeans.

"Hey," he greeted her.

"Hey," she greeted back. "Take a seat."

*Let it go  
Let it roll right off your shoulders  
Don't you know  
The hardest part is over?*

They fell into another uncomfortable silence. Neither knew what to say. They weren't even looking at each other.

Surprisingly, it was Clark who broke the silence. "Perry almost fell off his chair when I called him awhile ago," he said.

"Really?" Lois asked, keeping her tone casual.

"Yeah. He asked why *I* was the one calling about *you* not coming into work for the day. He said he remembered that the last time we were together, we were ready to kill each other."

Lois let out a soft chuckle. "What did you tell him then?"

Clark was quiet for a moment. He swallowed hard and looked at Lois straight in the eyes. "The truth - that we're...we're fixing things."

The pair fell silent once again. Lois wasn't expecting that answer. Clark was mentally giving himself a kick in the head for ruining the moment by saying the wrong thing. He tried to keep their conversation going again. "So, uh, how are you feeling? When I left you, you were pretty sick."

"Yeah, but I'm fine now. Thanks."

"I could check you..." Clark offered, referring to his x-ray vision.

Lois shook her head. "No, it's fine. It's probably just something I ate."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Throughout the rest of the morning, Lois and Clark found simple things to talk about - Jason and his performance in school, Lois and her news articles, Clark and his life at the farm. They were being very careful with the things they were saying; both feared as if they were on thin ice, and one wrong word would shatter what they had going.

Lunch came. Clark had begged off having lunch with Lois, saying he had overstayed his welcome already, but Lois insisted that he join her. And despite spending lunch in silence, both were secretly glad that they didn't have to spend lunch alone in the respective empty homes.

The afternoon wore on. Clark had been called to his Superman duties, leaving Lois alone in the house. Lois watched one TV station cover Superman's saves in Metropolis, while in another channel, there was a report of Superman in Amsterdam. When Clark finally returned to the riverside house, he had Jason in tow.

"Hi, Mommy," Jason greeted, kissing his mother on the cheek.

"Did you have fun in school, munchkin?" Lois asked.

"Uh huh. And Mr. Clark took me flying!"

Clark's eyes widened in fear. He looked at Lois apologetically, but Lois didn't show any outward sign of anger.

When Jason had gone up to his room to start on his homework, Clark approached Lois. "I'm really sorry. I know I should've asked your permission first, it's just Jason really wanted to fly and - "

Lois held up a hand to stop him. "It's okay. Jason missed you a lot. You guys deserve to spend some time together. But I hope next time I get a say in things like this, okay, Clark?"

Clark nodded and smiled. "Thank you, Lois."

Evening came. Clark offered to make dinner, hoping it would make up for not asking

Lois' permission in taking their son flying. They spent dinner as a family, albeit without the warmth of family closeness usually present during dinnertime in almost every household.

After dinner, Lois helped Jason get ready for bed. Clark watched as Lois and Jason climbed into the boy's bed, with Jason tightly clutching another Dr. Seuss book in his hand. Lois pulled the covers up, and Jason snuggled up to his mommy. He had turned the book to the first page when he noticed Clark standing near his door. "Come here, Mr. Clark. Read with me and Mommy," Jason invited him.

Clark looked at his son unsurely. His gaze turned to Lois, who shifted to the edge of the bed. Then she spoke up. "Yeah, Clark - read with us."

Behind his glasses, Clark's eyes twinkled as he smiled and walked over to his son's bed. He sat on Jason's other side and held one side of the book. "Alright, let's start," Clark said as Jason flipped the book.

Together, all three of them began to read, "Green Eggs and Ham by Dr. Seuss. I am Sam, I am Sam..."

And that evening, Lois, Clark and Jason looked every bit like the family they were supposed to be.

The next four days found Clark grinning from ear-to-ear. He spent a lot of time at Lois and Jason's place during dinnertimes. Lois let him pick up his son from school. He took Jason flying again - this time, with Lois' permission. He was finally being the father he always wanted to be to Jason.

His relationship with Lois, though, wasn't as easy. Whenever they were alone, they were usually silent. There had been rare times when they'd find something to talk about - their conversation would go on for hours, until Clark realizes how late it is and he tells her he has to go back to his apartment. Lois hadn't offered to let him stay the night over, and Clark never asked to. Neither was ready to take that step yet. Overall, they were being civil to each other, and for now, Clark was happy with that.

Lois and Clark sat beside each other on the living room couch. It was the fifth night since Richard left for Russia. Clark and Lois had put Jason to bed two hours ago, and they were resting in the living room.

"Clark?" Lois asked.

Clark looked at her. "Yes, Lois?"

"What happened to us?" she asked quietly.

Clark fell silent as he recalled the past months - their public fights, their separation, the effect of everything on their son. He swallowed and bowed his head. "We were having a bad dream, where we were fighting and we were angry with each other, and Jason was suffering because of our mistakes and immaturity."

"Are we awake now?" Lois asked, her eyes welling up with tears.

*Let it in*

*Let your clarity define you*

*In the end*

*We will only just remember how it feels*

Clark took a deep breath and put a warm hand over Lois' hand. He looked at her and smiled. "Yes. The nightmare is over."

Lois looked at Clark and let his words sink in. The tears began to cascade down her cheeks. Clark took her in his arms and held her tightly. He had been holding back his tears, but

as he felt Lois hold on to him, he let the tears fall as well - and with his tears flowed all the pain he had kept inside him for so long. "I missed you, Lois...I missed you so much," he wept.

"Mommy?" they heard Jason's voice from behind them.

Lois and Clark looked at their son in his Superman pajamas. His mop top hair fell on his face and he was rubbing his eyes. "Mommy, I had a bad dream."

Lois wiped the tears from her eyes. She held out her hand to her son. "Come here, sweetie," she gently called out. "It was just a bad dream. It's over now. Mommy and Daddy will keep you safe."

Jason shuffled over to the couch and settled between Lois and Clark. "Hi, Daddy," Jason said, his small hands resting on Clark's cheeks. "Are you gonna stay with me and Mommy?"

Clark looked from Lois to Jason. How long had he waited for this moment! His son finally called him "Daddy." He brushed back Jason's dark brown hair to fully reveal the deep blue eyes they both shared. "I'm staying, Jason. I'm not going to leave. Never again, son."

*Our lives are made*

*In these small hours*

*These little wonders*

*These twists and turns of fate*

*Time falls away*

*But these small hours*

*These small hours*

*Still remain*

Clark pulled Jason and Lois closer to him. *Finally*, he thought. *My family, finally.*

## Chapter 23: These Little Wonders - Part 2

The bright rays of the morning sun shone through the glass windows. Clark squinted and opened his eyes. A pair of large, round eyes greeted him. "Daddy, you like your glasses a lot. You even sleep with 'em on," Jason said matter-of-factly. The boy looked at Clark curiously.

"Good morning to you, too, buddy," Clark said with a chuckle. He embraced Jason, and the boy hugged him back. Upon letting go, Clark surveyed his surroundings. He was in Lois' room. In *Lois'* bed. The events of last night came back to Clark's memory. He and Lois finally being able to fix things; Jason coming down to them in the living room and calling him "Daddy"; Clark carrying Jason and following Lois up to her bedroom; Clark, Lois and Jason settling on the big bed and sleeping together as a family for the first time.

Jason was on his way out of the room when his daddy called him back.

"Where's your mom?" Clark asked his son.

The six-year-old blinked blankly at Clark before shrugging. "Mommy went to the bathroom, and she always takes long in there. Daddy Richard said Mommy takes a long shower because she likes swimming in the tub."

Clark grinned at his boy, who says things with a matter-of-fact tone that makes him sound so much like Lois. *Lois*. Clark couldn't believe that things were finally going great between them. He tuned in to the sound of Lois' heartbeat, and his smile faded as he realized it was going faster than normal. Clark sprinted to the bathroom. "Lois? Are you okay in there?"

Lois didn't answer.

Clark knocked on the door and called her again. "Lois? It's Clark. Do you need any help - ?"

Just then, the bathroom door opened and Lois came out, looking just as ill as she had been yesterday morning. "Hey, you," she greeted with a weak smile. "Good morning."

Clark stopped her before she could take another step. "Would you let me check you, please? You being sick like this isn't something I'm used to seeing. I can tell you what's wrong right now, I just need your permission so you don't go saying I'm doing things behind your back."

Lois waved him off. "I'm fine, Clark. Really, I am."

"Will you at least promise me you'll have a doctor check up on you?"

Lois smiled and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek. "I promise I'll go to my doctor for a check-up - right this afternoon, if my doctor can accommodate me."

Clark grinned. He cupped her face, and he wanted to kiss her full on the lips, but decided against it at the last minute. He wasn't sure it was proper yet, since they just got back together. He sighed. "Thank you," he said before he awkwardly let his hands fall to his sides and leave the room to check on his son.

*Two more days and I'm going home*, Richard White thought as he looked past the window of the rental car the Daily Planet had provided for him during his week-long assignment in Russia. He was on his way back to his hotel after interviewing the head of the police team investigating the explosion. He caught sight of his hotel's façade in the distance when his attention was diverted to something else - a tower of smoke was seen just in the next street ahead of him. His reporter instincts kicking in, Richard turned the steering wheel and headed to where the fire was.

Richard didn't know what to expect when he first saw the huge pillar of black smoke, but it was certainly not the scene he was witnessing. An orphanage was burning, and crying

children were all around. Some were huddled together. Others were calling out to parents who would never come. As Richard looked to the blazing building, he thought he caught a glimpse of a little girl still trapped inside.

"Oh God!" Richard exclaimed. He ran into the burning orphanage, letting go of all his fears. All he thought about was the helpless little girl inside.

The heat was painful to his skin, Richard felt it. Still, he kept going - deeper and deeper into the blaze he went, trying to find a way up to the second floor where he saw the girl. He ran into empty spaces and dodged falling debris, all the while praying he'd reach the child before he burned to death.

*CRAAAACCK!*

A piece of wooden beam fell before Richard. It almost crashed his leg. Waving away the smoke in front of him, Richard turned to look for another way up. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. The heat and smoke irritated his eyes, making it difficult to see through the flaming ruins. With squinting eyes, he spotted a staircase and sprinted to it. He ran up, coughing and gasping. He fell to his knees. He was too tired, and he was in pain.

But then he heard it - a child's cry.

Pulling himself together, Richard stood up and ran to the direction of the cry. In the farthest room ahead of him, he found a little girl crouching in the corner, pulling a blanket close to herself. Richard then noticed another beam hanging low near the girl, threatening to fall on her. With his quick reflexes, Richard ran to the girl and pulled her away from the corner. Mere seconds later, the piece of wood fell to the spot where the girl had been.

"You'll be alright, kid," Richard assured her, hoping his words would calm down the crying child. He carried the girl and turned to run back to the direction where he entered, but realized too late that the hallway was ablaze.

Richard swallowed hard. They were trapped in a flaming building and no one seemed to be coming to their rescue. He held the child tighter in his arms. "Clark!" he called out, hoping his friend could hear him. "Clark!"

"Higher, Daddy! Push me higher!" Jason's shrieks of laughter echoed through the park's playground. He was on the swing set, and Clark was pushing him.

It was a Saturday, and Clark wanted all three of them to spend it as a family. Lois watched as father and son laughed together. For the first time in a long while, she felt at peace and contented. Gone were the pain and sadness, replaced by happiness and warmth.

*Let it slide*

*Let your troubles fall behind you*

*Let it shine*

*'Til you feel it all around you*

As Clark enjoyed playing with his son, his acute hearing picked up on a man's cries for help a thousand miles away. Slowly, he let Jason's swing stop. His eyes held that faraway gaze he always had when someone called for him.

"Daddy? I want another go on the swings, please," Jason pleaded.

Clark looked at his son apologetically. "Sorry, kiddo. I have to go."

The disheartened look on Jason's small face was enough to break Clark. Lois could see how difficult it was for Clark to leave Jason. She went to the pair and took Jason's hand. "You can come with me, honey. I'm gonna go visit Dr. Lauren Keller this afternoon. You like her, don't you?" Lois said invitingly.

Jason pouted. "But I like Daddy more."

Lois looked at Clark. She moved closer to him and whispered, "Can't you sit this one out?"

Clark sighed and shook his head. "I would if I could," he said in a hushed voice. "But I can't."

The tone of Clark's voice was enough to fill Lois with dread.

Clark swallowed and looked at Lois somberly. "It's Richard."

Superman arrived at the scene of the fire and found children crying all around him. He looked around, searching for any sign of Richard amongst the crowd.

"Clark!"

At the mention of his name, Superman knew it had to be Richard. But where was he? Fear crept into the superhero's system as he looked back at the burning building. He zoomed into the orphanage and used his x-ray vision to locate Richard. He spotted his friend and a little girl crouching in the middle of a room, the fire engulfing the walls and encircling the pair.

Richard was losing all hope of surviving when he saw the familiar red boots of Superman land next to him. He looked up and saw the Man of Steel looking concerned. "Are you alright?" the hero asked him.

Richard nodded.

Superman helped Richard up and put one of Richard's arms over his shoulder. Richard was carrying the girl in the other arm. "Hold on tight," Superman said as he flew them out of the flaming building.

The three of them landed on the ground. Superman went back to blow out the flames while Richard took the girl to awaiting paramedics. When Richard had reached the EMTs, the girl wouldn't let go of him. A sweet-looking female paramedic rubbed the girl's back to comfort her, but it only made the girl cry even more. She tightened her hold on Richard's neck.

Richard realized how traumatic the experience must have been for the child. "It's alright. I'll go with her," he told the paramedic as he climbed into the ambulance with the child and headed for the hospital.

A few hours after Richard and the girl arrived at the hospital, the little girl was settled in a room on the pediatric ward. Richard had already been checked and treated at the ER. When he was discharged, he asked to stay with the little girl, much to the child's delight.

"I didn't think I'd find you here," a deep baritone voice said from behind Richard.

"I didn't, either," Richard answered without turning around.

Superman went toward Richard's chair and stood beside his friend, looking at the little girl. "So what do you know about her?"

Richard shrugged. "She's got blond hair, blue eyes. She's about four years old. She doesn't have a name. No family - no one claimed her when they ran a search throughout the country. She came to the orphanage just a week before the fire - an old lady caught her stealing bread from her shop and brought her to the orphanage."

"That's it?" Superman asked.

"That's all the supervisor of the orphanage told me when she came by to check on the kid a few hours ago."

Superman looked at the child and felt a sharp pain tear at his heart. He swallowed hard. His life story wasn't that far off from the little girl - an orphan without a name, without anything. But he was lucky enough to be found by good people who raised him as his own.

Then he looked at Richard. "Why did you do it, Richard? You went into the fire for this little girl whom you never even knew existed until hours ago."

Richard watched the sleeping form of the child. He kept his gaze on her as he answered. "I don't know. I was trying to be a hero, I guess," he said with a laugh.

The Man of Steel raised an eyebrow at his friend.

Richard sighed. "I just thought...well, it was the right thing to do." He paused before continuing. "When I saw her in the building, I just felt this connection with her. You know? Like she was calling me or something. Before I went in, I saw her and she saw me. And then I just knew - I was the only one who saw her there. I knew I was the one who would save her."

Superman nodded.

His friend's lack of response made Richard snort. "Yeah, I know it's weird. I'm probably babbling nonsense. It's been a long day."

"I think," Superman began. "I think you did something very honorable. Whatever your reasons may be for going in there, you did good." He grinned at his friend. "On behalf of all the orphans of the world, I thank you."

Richard let out a chuckle. "Wow. Coming from Earth's Greatest Protector, it's an honor."

The two men fell silent and watched the girl. Then Richard broke the silence. "You were late in rescuing me, by the way," he quipped.

Superman laughed. "Can't you just be glad I even *rescued* you? I would've come sooner, but I had some trouble with Jason. He didn't want his daddy to go."

"Daddy?" Richard raised an eyebrow at him. "He's calling you 'Daddy' now? Clearly, I missed a lot of things while I was away."

Superman grinned. "You did. Lois and I are...well, we've um, we've gotten past our differences now."

Richard nodded. "That's good to know. I don't know how much more crap from you and Lois I could take." He fell silent. "I still can't believe *my* son is calling *you* 'Daddy' now."

"I hope you're not upset about that."

Richard shrugged him off. "Of course not. I knew it was coming." He sighed. In a quieter voice, he added, "But it takes some getting used to."

Their conversation was cut short when the girl began to stir. Richard stood from his seat and settled on the edge of the bed. "Hey kid," he greeted the girl as she opened her eyes.

Instantly, when the child saw Richard, she flung her arms around him and held him tight. Richard felt a sense of warmth flow to his heart. He embraced the little girl.

*And I don't mind*

*If it's me you need to turn to*

*We'll get by*

*It's our hearts that really matter in the end*

Superman watched the scene before his eyes. He wondered how two strangers, two very different people, can have such a powerful connection that can surpass words or cultures, or even - as he thought about him and his parents - forces of the universe. He smiled at his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder before turning to leave. "Do you know what you're getting yourself into, Richard?"

Richard nodded. "I know what I want to do next," he replied, holding the child tighter in his arms.

Clark arrived at the riverside house late in the evening. He expected Lois and Jason to be

asleep by then, but when he went to Jason's room, he could hear voices talking. "Are my two favorite people in the world still awake?" he asked playfully as he stepped into the doorway of Jason's bedroom.

At the sight of Clark, Jason slid down his bed and pulled the covers above his head.

Clark, confused by Jason's behavior, looked at Lois, hoping she could give him answers. "He's still upset about you going away at the park this morning," she explained.

With a sigh, Clark approached his son's bed and knelt beside it. "Talk to me, Jason."

Jason slowly kicked the covers down. He sat up and looked at Clark with a scowl. "Why did you have to go? We were having fun in the park, Daddy."

Clark sat on Jason's bed and pulled his son closer to him. "I know, buddy. I didn't want to go, but I had to. Someone needed my help. It's my job to help those people."

Jason crossed his small arms and said nothing.

Clark continued. "I went to Russia today. You know who I saved there?"

Jason shook his head.

"I had to help your Daddy Richard."

At the mention of Richard's name, Jason looked at Clark, his blue eyes wide with fear. Lois kept still as she listened to her two boys talking. The boy asked Clark, "Is he okay? Did you save him? Is he hurt?"

Clark brushed back Jason's hair and smiled reassuringly. "He's fine. I got to him on time."

"But why do you *always* have to save other people?" the boy asked again.

Clark looked at his son seriously. He was thinking of how best to explain such a big topic to his six-year-old. He sighed. "How would you feel if Richard had gotten hurt because no one was there to save him?"

"I'll be really sad. I don't want Daddy Richard to get hurt," Jason answered quietly.

Clark nodded. "Right. If I don't go and help other people, they'd be sad, too. You and me - we can do things other people can't. And we use those abilities to help. Other people have daddies and mommies, and brothers and sisters. We don't want them to be sad, either, don't we?"

Jason thought about it for a long time. Then he shook his head. "We want everyone to be happy," he answered.

Clark and Lois looked at each other, smiling. Their little boy was not only very smart, but his heart was in the right place as well. Clark echoed his son's words. "We want everyone to be happy."

The boy furrowed his brows. "So I have to help people, too, when I'm bigger?"

Clark smiled at his son. "Well, that's up to you, kiddo." Clark caught Lois' eye and understood that this sort of talk would need to be reserved for some other time. "But for now, how about you just enjoy being Mommy and Daddy's little boy? We can talk about saving the world when you get older, alright, buddy?"

Jason nodded. He looked at his daddy for a long time. "Daddy, you make people happy when you save them...But who makes *you* happy?"

Clark kissed Jason on the forehead. "You and Mommy make me happy."

Jason grinned and said good night as Clark left to get changed in Lois' bedroom. When he had gone, Lois sat beside Jason and whispered something in his ear, making the boy's smile grow wider.

Clark was preparing to go to bed when Jason entered the bedroom. The boy tugged on

Clark's pajama bottoms. "Daddy, Mommy said she knows what will make you happier," the boy said.

Clark gave Lois a curious look. She was standing in the doorway. A small smile was playing on her lips. Clark knelt down to level with his son. "Oh yeah? And what have you and Mommy got for me?" he asked.

*All of my regrets  
Will wash away somehow  
But I cannot forget  
The way I feel right now  
In these small hours  
These little wonders  
These twists and turns of fate*

Jason grinned at his father and leaned in close to Clark's ear. He then whispered, "Mommy said we're gonna have a baby."

## Chapter 24: Caught In the Middle

*"We're gonna have a baby."*

Jason's words echoed loud and clear in Clark's ear. He didn't know how long he stood frozen in his spot. He stood looking at his son, then at the woman standing in the doorway, smiling at him.

Lois watched Clark from the doorway. Their eyes met, hazel and cerulean. Lois could see the emotions in Clark's eyes, and she herself was overcome by a sense of warmth and contentment. She held the gaze of the man she loved, and their understanding of each other went deeper than any word could ever explain.

Clark could feel his heart pounding hard in his chest. He was willing to bet it beat loud enough for Lois and Jason to hear. They were going to have another baby! He was going to be a father again, and the thought made his mind swirl with images of a baby in his arms, with Lois and Jason by his side, laughing and smiling and being the happy family he had always wanted them to be. Gathering his composure, Clark took a deep breath and looked down again at his son, who seemed pleased with himself for being the bearer of good news. He picked up Jason and gave him a kiss on the forehead. "Thanks, buddy," Clark said. "You made Daddy very, *very* happy."

It was hours later, long after all three of them had gone to bed, that Lois woke up and found herself alone in the bedroom. Feeling slightly disappointed, she thought Clark had gone off to a rescue. No sooner had the thought occurred to her when she saw him standing in the balcony, looking up at the starry skies. Putting on her night robe, she made her way outside to join Clark.

The cold night breeze greeted Lois as she stepped outside her bedroom. She walked towards Clark and quietly stood beside him, taking his hand in hers.

Clark felt Lois' small hand hold his. He smiled but didn't remove his gaze from the dark horizon. "I hope I didn't wake you," he said quietly, almost in a whisper.

"You didn't," Lois assured him. "I thought you had to go somewhere to save someone. How long have you been out here?"

"An hour, give or take," he replied. "This is a very nice place to collect my thoughts."

"And what have you been thinking about?"

Clark turned and looked at Lois intently, his piercing blue eyes shining in the moonlight. He had left his glasses on the bedside table. He replied to Lois, "You, Jason, the baby..." He paused before adding, "...and how we are going to raise our family."

"You think too much," Lois playfully chided him. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and looked straight into his eyes. She said with a confident tone, "You know we'll make it work, right? We always do."

Clark nodded. "We always do," he repeated her words, the memories of the past months' hardships and challenges coming to mind. Clark's thoughts were broken by Lois' voice.

"Clark?"

"Yes, Lois?"

Lois looked at him unsurely. "We're okay now, right? We're...okay?"

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois, making her feel safe in his arms. "Yes. We're okay."

They stood together in silence for a moment, watching the stars twinkle in the sky. Lois suddenly looked up at Clark and grinned. "Do we have to do that thing where you say sorry for this and that, and I say sorry for whatever I did, and then we kiss and make up?"

Her question made Clark laugh. *His Lois* was back to her old self, that's for sure. He shook his head. "No, we don't have to," he replied. "We can skip the 'saying sorry' part."

And before Lois could say anything, she felt Clark's arm circle her waist and pull her closer to his body. He used one hand to lift her chin and let his lips fall on hers. Lois wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in closer to Clark, enjoying the feel of his warm lips on hers. Clark ran his hands gently through her hair, reveling in the feeling of having her so close after such a long separation. Their kiss deepened and became more passionate, more full of love - and only the bright, full moon and the twinkling stars in the dark skies were their witnesses.

When they broke their kiss, Lois found Clark smiling. She felt a sense of contentment spread through her body as she saw the man she loved smiling again. *How long had it been since I last saw Clark smile?* Lois asked herself. She tilted her head to the side and furrowed her brows. "What are you smiling at, Smallville?"

Clark's eyes traveled to Lois' tummy. "I can hear the baby's heartbeat."

Lois smiled. Then she sighed. "Promise you won't peek to see if it's a boy or a girl? I want it to be a surprise."

"I promise."

"And I know you have your Superman duties to do, but will you please try to be there for appointments and check-ups with me if you can?"

Clark looked at Lois with so much love in his eyes. He cupped her face. "You won't be alone this time, Lois," he said firmly. "I'll be here for you, for Jason, and for our little one." He trailed one hand to Lois's stomach. "I want you to know that." Then he kissed her softly on the forehead and wrapped his arms warmly around the woman he loved.

"L-Lois, people are look-looking," Clark said nervously, feeling uncomfortable as Lois kept trailing light kisses down his jaw line.

Lois sighed. "Well, I missed you this morning," she whined. She had woken up without Clark beside her. He left a note saying he had to go off to help in a landslide in a faraway village in the middle of Asia.

They were at the airport to pick up Richard. He had extended his trip to Russia for another two weeks, "to fix some urgent matters," he explained. Neither Clark nor Lois complained - they enjoyed having two more weeks to themselves.

Clark heard the PA system announcing the arrival of Richard's flight. He took Lois by the hand and they made their way nearer to the Arrivals gate, hoping to catch a glimpse of Richard soon.

Having gotten impatient waiting for Richard, Lois focused her attention on Clark, his deep blue eyes searching among the passengers who had arrived. She leaned into his ear and began to playfully nibble on his earlobe.

Clark felt Lois softly biting on his earlobe and took in a deep breath. She certainly knew how to tease him and turn him on, but he knew a very crowded airport wasn't the right place to be doing such things. "You're a very impatient woman, Lois Lane," he mocked her quietly.

Lois giggled as she continued playing with his ear. "I am very, *very* impatient."

Clark turned his eyes to the woman he loved. She was smiling seductively at him. Oh, how he wanted those full, red lips of hers! Clark smiled - not his goofy grin, but a confident and teasing smile. He leaned in close to her lips, ready to kiss her, when -

"Do you always have to do *that* every time I'm standing in front of you?" Richard's voice

ruined Lois and Clark's moment.

Lois groaned and turned to face Richard. "Do you always have to *ruin* the moment?"

Richard grinned mischievously like a seven-year-old. "I have to say, it's pretty fun."

Lois glowered at Richard, but then her eyes fell on a little girl hiding behind Richard's legs. "Richard," she began, "who's *that*?"

Clark recognized the blond little girl and simply smiled at his friend. "That's what kept you for two more weeks in Moscow?"

Richard nodded and beamed proudly. He took the little girl's hand and showed her to Lois. "This is Anna. I'm in the process of adopting her."

At his last words, both Clark and Lois' eyes widened. "Oh," Lois managed to say.

Richard furrowed his brow, looking confused at the two people before him. "Wait - is that a good 'oh' or a bad 'oh'?"

Clark cleared his throat and answered quickly. "It's a g-good 'oh.' I mean, L-Lois and I are, uh, very happy for you. Really happy." He let out a deep breath.

Richard still gave them a puzzled look. "You don't look...happy."

Clark shook his head and grinned at Richard. "We are!" he assured his friend. "It's just...wow, it's too fast. I didn't think you'd consider adopting her immediately." A second later, he added, "And...well, Jason was, um, looking forward to spending time with you - you know, Richard-and-Jason bonding time."

Richard scoffed. "He's got you. I figured he would want to spend more time with you than with me now."

Lois spoke up. "Well, we were hoping you'd get to spend time with him, Richard - to help him adjust and all."

"Adjust?" Richard asked, his face completely blank. "To what?"

Lois and Clark looked at each other, then nervously smiled at Richard. Clark pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and answered, "Lois and I...are going to have another baby."

"Daddy!" Jason's excited voice reverberated across the living room of 312 Riverside Drive. He had just arrived home from school with Clark, and he had been looking forward all week to see his Daddy Richard again.

Richard, who had been in the kitchen helping Lois prepare dinner, strode towards Jason, kneeling down to Jason's level. "Hey Tiger," Richard greeted the boy.

Jason ran to Richard's arms and gave him a big hug. "I missed you a lot. But me and Daddy Clark did a lot of things together, too, when you were away."

"That's good to hear, Jason! I'm glad you had fun with Clark."

"Daddy?" another child's voice piped in. A blond little girl came up beside Richard.

*Uh oh.* Richard felt trapped. He looked nervously at Jason.

Lois stopped what she was doing to watch the scene at the living room. Clark, who had been standing in the doorway, was glued to his place. He looked worriedly at Richard and the kids. Neither Lois nor Clark knew what they should do.

Jason stared at the little girl curiously. Then he turned to Richard. "Daddy, why is she calling *you* 'Daddy'?"

Richard swallowed the lump in his throat. "Jason," he began cautiously, "this is Anna. She's...um...she's my little girl. That's why she calls me 'Daddy.'"

The boy's eyes reflected a mixture of shock and hurt and confusion. "But...you're *my* Daddy..." he quietly said.

Richard smiled at the six-year-old in front of him. "Yeah, o-of course, kiddo. You and Anna can both call me 'Daddy'. You remember when we talked before about sharing what you have with others?" He pulled Jason closer to him.

Jason's face went red with anger. He pushed himself away from Richard. "NO! I don't want her to call you 'Daddy' because she's not your kid and I don't want to share!"

He began to run out of the living room as Richard called out to him. "Jas - Jason!"

"I'm not gonna call you 'Daddy' anymore!" the boy yelled without turning to face Richard. Everyone heard Jason's bedroom door close with a loud bang.

Richard stood motionless on the living room. He held Anna close to him. He looked helplessly at Clark, who looked just as torn as he did. "I think...Anna and I should go home now."

Clark led Richard and Anna out the door. "I'll talk to him, Richard. He's just...he just needs time to adjust."

Richard simply nodded. He looked at the little girl in his arms, who was oblivious to everything that had just happened. "I guess there are perks to having a daughter who understands very little English, huh? The things Jason said - good thing this kid here didn't understand a word out of Jason's mouth."

When Richard and Anna had gone, Clark heaved a sigh and collapsed on the living room couch. Lois sat beside him and took his hand. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Clark removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "If this is how Jason reacts to Anna, I don't know how he'll react to having a younger sibling. He doesn't feel jealous now since the baby isn't here yet, but once it comes..." He shook his head. "I'm going to go and talk to him."

Lois nodded and gave Clark a weak smile. She didn't know what else to tell him, so she simply kissed him lightly on the cheek before he got up and made his way to his son's room.

Clark took a deep breath and then knocked on Jason's room. "Jason?" he called out. "It's Daddy. May I come in, kiddo?"

Clark waited, but Jason didn't answer. Slowly, he opened the door and stepped into his son's room. He found the boy covering himself underneath his thick blanket. Jason was crying.

"Hey, buddy," Clark greeted him. His heart went out to his son - he didn't want to see Jason crying. "Can we talk?"

"I don't wanna," came Jason's muffled reply from beneath the covers.

Clark sat on the floor, beside the bed. "Okay. But I'll be right here, alright? I'll wait until you want to talk."

Ten minutes passed before Jason stopped sobbing. Clark thought the boy had fallen asleep, but when he looked up on the bed, he could see Jason's deep blue eyes staring at him. The bed covers were pulled down to the level Jason's nose. "Can we talk now?" Clark asked.

Jason nodded. He sat up on the bed and looked at his daddy with red, puffy eyes. He shifted to the side to give Clark some space to sit on the bed with him.

Clark plopped down on the bed and pulled his son close to him. He ruffled Jason's hair and kissed the top of his head. "How are you feeling?" Clark asked.

"Not good, Daddy," Jason sniffed.

"How come?"

"Because Daddy Richard doesn't want me 'nymore and he likes the little girl now."

Clark lifted Jason's chin in his direction. He looked at his boy sternly. "That's not true, Jason. Richard loves you - he always will. *Always.*"

"But...he loves the girl, too."

"Look, Jason - Richard has a *very* big heart, and you and Anna can fit in it. Just because he has a little girl now doesn't mean he loves you any less. Do you understand that?"

Jason nodded, but Clark could see his son was still trying hard not to cry. A few seconds later, the boy quietly whimpered. "It's not fair. You and Mommy are gonna have a new baby, and Daddy Richard has Anna. Don't you want me anymore, Daddy?"

Clark had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He didn't expect his son to feel this way about their family. He picked up Jason and laid the boy on top of him, keeping Jason's head close to his heart. He held his son in a warm embrace and closed his eyes, enjoying the closeness he had with his boy. After a moment, Clark replied, "Did I ever tell you why I left you and Mommy for a long time?"

"No," Jason softly said.

"Well, you see, I'm not from here, Jason. I'm from a faraway place called Krypton. I never really saw it because I grew up here. But six years ago, just before you were born, astronomers - they're the ones who study the stars and planets - well, they said they found it."

Jason lifted his head and looked at Clark curiously. "So you went away to look for it?"

Clark nodded. "I wanted to see if there were still people like me."

Jason let his head fall back to Clark's chest as he asked, "Did you find anyone?"

Clark took a deep breath, remembering the desolate scene that greeted his arrival in his home planet. "No. There wasn't anyone there. So I went back here. Then I saw you, and Mommy said you're *my* son. *My* little boy. You were like me. And that made me very happy, because *you* were the one I was looking for all these years - and you were right here with Mommy."

Jason snuggled closer to Clark, his small hands wrapped around Clark's midsection. He grinned at his daddy.

Clark grinned back at his son. "You were the one I wanted, Jason. Don't ever think that I don't want you anymore, okay? Because you and Mommy were *everything* I ever wanted, and now I have both of you."

Lois watched Jason and Clark from the doorway. She listened as Clark talked to their son: "Mommy and I love you as much as we love the baby - *our* baby. Not Mommy's baby, not Daddy's baby - we're going to have *our* baby."

Jason nodded at his father.

Clark continued. "And our baby is going to need all the love that you, me and Mommy can give. Can you do that, buddy?"

Lois saw her son give Clark another nod. "I'll love our baby, and I'll love Anna, too," she heard Jason say.

## Chapter 25: Change Begins Today

The white, furry creature curled up in Jason's arms gave a slight shiver. The boy, completely enthralled with the snow-white bunny rabbit, continued to pat it gently. "Can't we keep him, Daddy?" he asked, looking hopefully at his father.

Clark turned to look at Jason. He and Lois had been discussing whether Clark should ask Perry for his job back or just find work elsewhere. Clark looked regretfully at his son, and bit his lower lip. He could sense Lois behind him, staring him down. "Sorry, kiddo," he apologized. "We can't take care of a pet right now. You have school, and Mommy and Daddy have jobs."

Jason furrowed his brows. He looked disbelievingly at Clark. "*You* don't have a job, Daddy," he said flatly, making Lois burst out laughing as Clark felt completely floored by his six-year-old.

Lois' hearty laugh echoed through the area. They were in the petting zoo, a new addition to Centennial Park. It was Saturday afternoon, and Clark thought they deserved to spend time together - especially as it had been busy for Superman for the past days. As they continued playing with the animals, Clark spotted two people coming their way - a brown-haired man and a blond little girl, both with bright, blue eyes.

Richard held Anna's hand as they made their way to the petting zoo. They had spent the whole day together, just the two of them, and the zoo was their last stop. As they walked, Richard recalled how their day had gone.

*When the little girl had woken up early in the morning, Richard had taken her to the nearest IHOP for breakfast. They then made their way to the aquarium, and Richard took pleasure in hearing the girl's shrieks of delight as she pointed at the brightly-colored fishes swimming around her. For lunch, Richard brought her to a pizza place in the mall, and afterwards they went around buying Anna more dresses and toys.*

*Before going to the park, they made their way to the candy shop across from it. Anna's eyes twinkled with glee as she looked at the colorful candy wrappers, but had hesitated when Richard told her to take whatever she liked. "Go on, sweetheart, choose whatever you like," Richard said.*

*Watching the little girl walking around the candy store, Richard tried to remember when he had last felt this happy. It's been a while, he thought to himself. The little girl made her way back to Richard, and Richard laughed as Anna used her white dress to store all the candy packs she had picked up. "I should've known you'd need a basket for those," Richard chuckled as he took the bags of candies from Anna and placed them on the counter.*

*"Aww, how sweet," the young cashier told Richard. "Daddy's little girl, I see. And she's got your blue eyes."*

*Richard smiled, scooping up Anna and eliciting a giggle from her. He looked into the child's bright blue eyes and flashed a proud smile at the cashier. "She does have my eyes, doesn't she?"*

He smiled at the memories of the day, but his smile quickly faded as he noticed Lois, Clark and Jason just up ahead of the path. *Jason*. It had been four days since he last saw the boy - and that last meeting ended in disaster and some harsh words from the six-year-old whom he raised as his son. Anxiety overcame Richard, and he slowed his walk to the petting zoo.

When Richard and Anna were only a few feet away from the animals' pens, Clark greeted them. "Hi, Richard. Hi, Anna."

"Hello," the little girl said, smiling brightly. It was a challenge to Richard, trying to teach the child English - but she was picking up on the language well.

Richard gave his friends a curt nod. "Lois, Clark," he said, the strain in his voice evident. He looked at Jason, who was still holding the bunny in his arms, and offered a weak smile to the boy. He hoped Jason wasn't mad at him anymore. He still loved him, and he couldn't bear to have Jason be angry with him.

Lois went over to Richard and Anna, giving them each a kiss on the cheek and greeting them. Clark looked over at his son, who had not moved from his spot but kept staring at Richard and Anna. Clark gave Jason a stern look, which the boy was quick to notice.

Jason wasn't expecting to see his Daddy Richard and Anna. He still didn't like seeing his other Daddy holding another kid's hand instead of his. But he remembered what he and his Daddy Clark talked about a few days ago, and he told himself he was going to be nice to Daddy Richard and Anna now. He heaved a sigh and bit his lower lip. Hesitantly, he shuffled to Richard and Anna. He stopped when he was right in front of Anna, but his eyes were on his shoes, and he didn't look up. It took a few seconds before he looked at the little blond girl before him, and showed her the bunny he was holding. "Hi, Anna," he said quietly.

"Wanplaywimeanabunny?"

Anna looked at Jason blankly, not understanding a word from the other child's mouth.

Jason took a deep breath and repeated his question. "Wanna play with me and the bunny?"

Clark and Lois watched their son. They both knew he was trying - the events of the past months have been a lot to take in for a child as young as Jason, but he was doing his best to cope and be understanding of it all. Both Clark and Lois couldn't be any prouder of their little boy.

Jason waited for Anna's answer. He stood staring at her, feeling uncomfortable and awkward. He brought the bunny closer to Anna, making the little girl jump back into Richard.

Seeing that Jason was making an effort, Richard helped him out. He knelt down and took Anna's hand gently. Then he laid it on the bunny. "See? It's alright to touch it, honey," Richard assured Anna. "Does your rabbit have a name, Jason?"

Jason stood awkwardly and looked at Richard. The older man smiled to himself - Jason looked very much like Clark, the bumbling reporter of the Planet. Jason swallowed before answering unsurely, "Buster. Me an' Mommy named him Buster. I think he likes his name a lot because he comes to me when I call him that."

"I like his name, too. It's a really cool name, kiddo." Richard offered a genuine smile at Jason.

The little boy seemed pleased with Richard's compliment and began to warm up to him. He grinned at Richard and then turned to Anna, "Come on, Anna. We can play with him. He won't bite." Jason put the bunny down, and watched it hop off to the direction of the other rabbits in the pen. The boy smiled at Anna and extended his hand to her.

Anna looked questioningly at Richard, and when he nodded and smiled reassuringly, Anna grinned and took Jason's hand. Together, they went to play with the rabbits as Richard, Lois and Clark watched them with amusement.

The day wore on, and before they knew it, it was time to go home. Clark drove Lois and Jason back to 312 Riverside Drive.

Clark looked at the rearview mirror and saw his son fast asleep on his booster seat. He spoke to Lois, "The day with Richard and Anna went well." Then he added, "Fortunately."

Lois nodded and smiled. "Jason was very good today. I guess your talk a few nights ago really got to him."

"Well, what can I say? I'm getting better with this 'Daddy' thing."

Lois let out a chuckle. "You know," she said quietly, "I think Jason's going to be okay with a little sibling."

"I hope so."

"I overheard him asking Richard if Anna could come over and play with him again - *tomorrow*."

Clark raised an eyebrow. "Did he, really?"

"Uh huh. But of course, Jason wouldn't say anything to us. I think he secretly likes having a younger child like Anna to play with - he's just too proud to tell us that."

"He gets that pride from *you*," Clark teased.

Lois playfully punched Clark on the shoulder, and the two quietly shared a laugh.

They arrived at the riverside house a few minutes later. Following Lois' lead, Clark went into the house, carrying Jason in his arms. After setting his son on the bed, Clark went to Lois' bedroom to check up on her.

Lois had changed into her sleeping wear by the time Clark entered the room. She was wearing a rose-colored night gown. She found Clark staring at her from the doorway. "What?" she asked.

Clark smiled. He loved simply staring at his woman - he marveled at her beauty. "You look...lovely," he quietly replied. "That's all."

Silently, Clark made his way to Lois, who was standing at the center of the room. He cupped her face and brought it closer to his, catching her lips in a soft kiss. Lois didn't object. She responded to Clark's kiss as her hands encircled around his neck, bringing Clark's face closer to hers and deepening the kiss.

After what seemed like forever, they broke their kiss, but stayed in their spot. Clark smiled, enjoying having Lois so close to him. He circled his right arm on Lois' waist and took Lois' right hand in his left. Slowly, he began to sway, bringing Lois with him.

"Clark, what...?" Lois began to ask quietly.

"Shh," Clark silenced her gently. "We're dancing."

"Dancing?" Lois asked, continuing to follow Clark's lead.

"Yes," Clark simply replied, looking at Lois with those eyes that looked like deep pools of blue.

Lois held his gaze for a moment, letting herself drown in the deep blues. Then slowly, she stepped closer to Clark, resting her head on his chest and closing her eyes as she listened to Clark's heart beating.

Clark began to hum a soft tune as they continued their slow dance.

"What song are you humming?" Lois asked, her voice almost a whisper.

Clark grinned as pressed his cheek close to Lois'. "I actually don't know," he replied with a soft chuckle. "I'm just humming."

Lois looked up at him and smiled, then leaned in to give him a light kiss. "Don't stop," she whispered. "I like it."

And they continued to glide and sway, slow dancing to their own silent music.

## Chapter 26: Of Doubts and Dangers

Superman flew across Metropolis, his heart dampened by this morning's events.

*The Daily Planet office had opened just five minutes ago. This early, only two people were inside - the janitor, and the Editor-in-Chief, Perry White. As Perry settled into his office, he marveled at the quietness of the place. No hustle and bustle, no whispered gossips, no phones ringing off the hook, and no television monitors discussing the latest events. The scene was very different from how it would be in an hour's time. Yes, Perry told himself as he picked up a cigar, here is another fine day to work. No sooner had he thought about this when his office door opened and he found himself staring wide-eyed at his visitor - a young man with thick-framed glasses and an old-fashioned three-piece suit. Clark Kent?"that had gone last time. "Good morning, Chief, " he greeted, giving his familiar farm boy grin and pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I w-was wondering if-if we could, uh...talk?"*

*"Don't call me Chief, " the old man cut him short. - I need commitment. And with your five-year world tour and your sudden two-month disappearance..."*

"Great Caesar's ghost!" Perry exclaimed. "Kent?"

Clark had planned to give Perry a surprise visit early in the morning, while the rest of the Planet office workers had yet to arrive. This way, he didn't have to draw attention to himself - God knows how disastrous

Perry picked up a lighter and lit his cigar. He gave a grunt, which Clark took as a yes.

Too nervous to sit down, Clark continued speaking as he stood in front of Perry's desk.

"Well, Chief - "

"Sorry, " Clark mumbled. He cleared his throat. "Well, Mr. White, I came here to, uh, to ask if I c-could have my, um, my job...back."

Clark shifted his weight from one foot to another, waiting for Perry to reply. He thought the Editor-in-Chief had not heard him, so he repeated his question. "I was wondering if I could have my job back, Mr. White." Swallowing the lump in his throat, he added quietly, "Um...please?"

Perry put down his cigar and looked straight at the journalist standing in front of him. He couldn't help but notice how Clark fidgeted with his tie. For a moment, he didn't say a thing. Then he crossed his arms and ordered Clark, "Sit down, Kent."

Clark did as he was told. He could feel Perry's eyes boring into him, and he began praying that Perry's next words would be good news.

Perry sighed. "So you make a scene in front of the whole office, you leave without a word, you're off the face of the earth for two months...and now you think you can just waltz right in here and ask for your job back?"

Clark looked at the Chief blankly. Then he blinked. "Uh, yes...?" he replied unsurely.

Perry shook his head. "You're a good writer, Kent - you always bring in good reports, you have excellent articles. But I need more than just talent

"...I'm not the guy you need, " Clark finished for Perry quietly.

"You're not the guy I need, " Perry repeated regretfully.

Clark nodded and stood up. "Isn't there anything I can do to change your mind, Mr. White?" he pleaded.

"I don't know, Kent, " Perry shrugged. "I'll think about it. You've been with the Planet for a long time. Heck, you practically grew up here - but we'll have to see. We just have to see."

He began to think of Lois, of Jason, of the baby they're going to have. He needed a

job--and he wanted the job at the Planet more than anything. *What do I do now?* he asked himself.

He didn't have much time to dwell on his thoughts as he heard the sound of a police car being dispatched to the high-profile First Metropolitan Bank in the center of New Troy. Shaking his head and clearing his thoughts, Superman zoomed to the direction of the bank.

Harold Spencer squeezed himself through the flurry of commuters going through the busy streets. Today was a very important day for Harold - today was the day he was planning to rob a bank. The bank he worked in, actually.

"Hey, Harry, " Earl Carlson greeted him before turning back to his computer.

Harold jumped at his colleague's greeting. "H-hello there, Earl."

Harold made his way to his desk in the bank's reception area. He was an accountant for one of the leading banks in the city - and as he sat and entertained the first customer, he ran his plan through his mind.

By five in the afternoon, as most of his co-workers were leaving, Harold crept to the vaults. He had stolen a key card from one of the supervisors, and was beginning to open one of the vaults when -

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" a large voice boomed, making Harold jump.

"I work here! I'm just checking something - I was told to do so by my supervisor, " he said defensively. He had practiced his alibi a thousand times.

But the guard with the loud voice didn't believe him one bit. "I need back-up down here, " he began to call into his walkie talkie. "We've got a suspect for an attempted robbery."

"No, you don't understand, " Harold explained. "I'm not stealing anything!"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to put your hands up in the air. No bank employee is allowed near here - not without a written consent from the administration, which I don't see you carrying."

Harold was shaking. He could feel beads of sweat forming near his temples. He gulped. Suddenly, he lunged at the guard.

They toppled over. Harold, who was of slightly larger build compared to the cop, managed to pin him down and grab his gun from the holster. He quickly stood up and backed from the police officer, pointing the gun at him. "I-I'm taking the money and you're not c-coming near me, you hear?!" he commanded, although his voice was quivering.

He took out the key card, but before he was able to open the door to the vault, he heard another voice from behind - a deep, baritone voice. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Harold was surprised at the sound and turned around, accidentally pulling the trigger at the source of the voice. The bullet flew straight into the Man of Steel's chest and bounced back, falling to the ground.

"S-s...Supe - " Harold began, unable to form the three-syllable word.

Superman casually walked straight to the would-be thief and took the gun from his hand. "I don't think this belongs to you, " he said firmly.

Harold was paralyzed with fear. He looked into the intense blue eyes of the superhero and fell to his knees. "Please...I didn't mean to harm anyone, " he pleaded. Tears began to stream down his cheeks. He pulled out his wallet and showed to Superman the picture of a bald child, who looked to be about Jason's age, wearing a sunny yellow dress. "My daughter - she's sick. I need the money if I want her to get better. Please don't send me to prison."

Superman looked into the eyes of the criminal, and realized he was telling the truth. He

swallowed hard, trying to keep his composure and his expression neutral.

Quietly, the banker added, "If you had a child of your own, you'll understand - you'll do anything for your child."

Those last words hit Superman straight in the heart. Inside him, he was breaking. He was having an internal struggle - a part of him sided with the father, another part sided with the law. He could hear the police coming down to the vaults.

Harold kept on silently crying, his fist tightly wrapped around the photo of his daughter. He looked at the Man of Steel. And then he saw it - *was it regret?* - in the superhero's eyes.

Superman closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "You could've done more for your daughter than to be a criminal in her eyes and in the eyes of other people," he said almost inaudibly.

Slowly, Superman grabbed Harold by the arms and handed him over to the police. He didn't even wait for a word of gratitude from the cops. Instead, as soon as the cops got hold of Harold Spencer, Superman flew off, wanting nothing more than to be as far from the scene as possible. His eyes were already welling up with the tears he had been holding back.

"You've been awfully quiet today," Lois said, gently snuggling closer to Clark. She let her hands fall to the opening of his pajama top, feeling his bare chest.

Clark put his arm around Lois and pulled her closer. He kissed the top of her head and buried his face in her soft brown hair for a moment. He sighed. "I talked to Perry today," he began. "He's not sure he could give me my job back. He says I lacked commitment."

Lois didn't know what to say. They stayed in silence for a long time. Finally she spoke up. "There are other jobs you can apply for," she suggested.

Clark shook his head. "I want to work again for the Planet. I grew up with that paper. It's too close to my heart."

Lois understood. She knew what Clark felt. She herself wouldn't want any other job than writing for The Daily Planet.

"And it's where I met you."

At his last statement, Lois lifted her head to Clark and smiled lovingly. She pulled herself up and leaned in close to the man she loved, kissing him deeply. Clark returned the act, running his hand through her hair and slowly pulling her head closer to him. He could feel Lois' hands making their way lower down his torso. His hand ran down the curve of her side. Lois began unbuttoning Clark's pajama top as their lips brushed lightly.

"Lois..." Clark hesitated.

Their legs were intertwined. Clark's hands gently crept up to Lois's slender legs, inside her satin night gown, and up her inner thighs.

"Hush," Lois whispered, laying her index finger lightly on Clark's lips. "It's okay, Clark."

*It's okay*, Clark thought to himself as he let his passion and hunger take over him, enjoying the feel of Lois so close to him, enjoying making love to the woman whose heart belonged solely to him.

Clark stared quietly up at the ceiling, listening to Lois' even breathing as she peacefully slept. He had been sleeping soundly after he and Lois made love, but he was awakened by the recollection of what had happened earlier in the day at the bank. Harold Spencer's words echoed in his ears.

*"If you had a child of your own, you'll understand - you'll do anything for your child."*

*The man was right, you know, his mind was telling him. Even you will do anything for Jason.*

"Clark?"

Lois' voice shook Clark from his reverie. His intense blue eyes, filled with a flurry of emotions, turned to Lois. "You okay?" she asked.

He smiled at her and nodded. "I'm fine."

They stayed motionless for a moment, simply holding each other's gazes. Lois noticed the sorrow in Clark's eyes. She spoke. "You seem troubled. Is something wrong?"

*Harold pulled out his wallet and showed to Superman the picture of a bald child wearing a sunny yellow dress. "My daughter - she's sick. I need the money if I want her to get better. Please don't send me to prison."*

"Clark?" Lois tried to get back his attention. He had fallen silent and had a faraway look in his eyes.

Clark closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He couldn't look at Lois as he spoke in a hushed voice, "I caught a man today. He was trying to rob a bank." He paused.

Lois knew better than to interrupt. She knew the man beside her enough to know that he took things in his own time. All she had to do was wait.

Clark continued. "He was getting money from the vaults to pay for his daughter's treatment. He has a sick little girl waiting for him at home, and instead I sent him to prison."

Lois kept silent. When she heard Clark breathe out deeply, she took it to mean he was done with his story. She snuggled closer to him and kissed his warm shoulder. "You did what you had to do," she said softly, hoping her simple words would comfort him even just a little.

Clark swallowed hard. He could clearly remember the little girl in the photo - she had no hair on her head, her eyes held a hint of pain, her smile seemed weak. Not even her sunny dress could make her look cheerful in the picture. Then he remembered Harold Spencer - the pleading tone of his voice, the tears that fell from his eyes, the shaking of his whole body as he begged not to be sent to prison. "You know what scared me most at that moment?" Clark turned to look at Lois. "I knew *exactly* what he was feeling - and as I held him by the arm, I almost wanted to let him go. He was just doing his job as a father: to provide the best life for his family. And yet, I took away his freedom. I don't know if he'll get out of prison and see his daughter still alive...What if he doesn't?"

Lois felt Clark's hand on hers. It felt as if Clark was holding on to her for dear life. Her heart went out to the man she loved - she realized just how affected he was by what happened. "Oh, Clark..." she said, holding his hand more firmly, telling him she would be here for him.

Clark pulled Lois closer to him. "I want to give you, Jason and our baby the best life you can have. For that to happen, I need to get my job back at the Planet. But what can I do to make Perry change his mind? He thinks I'm not the man for the job."

"Hey," Lois began, cupping Clark's face gently in her hands. "We'll figure something out. Okay?"

Clark looked lovingly at Lois. Most of the time, it was she who needed rescuing. But today Clark was thankful that she could give him the strength to go on. He smiled and kissed Lois on the forehead. "Thank you," he whispered, then wrapped his arms around Lois until they both fell back into a quiet slumber.

Lois woke up the next morning without Clark beside her. "Looks like it's just you and me today, honey," she said, rubbing her rounded tummy and talking to her unborn child. She had

been finding it harder and harder to keep her pregnancy from her colleagues. She began to make her way out to Jason's room and get her son and herself ready for another busy day.

As Lois spent another day at work in the Daily Planet office, Superman was busy rescuing people and helping the police catch criminals. Despite his hectic day, his thoughts were still on how to get his job back at the Planet. He knew he could get money from working on their farm, but his work at the newspaper paid well - enough to give Jason and the coming baby a good home to grow up in. He wouldn't admit it to Lois, but living with her in a house another man had provided made him feel incapable as a father and as a man. As his thoughts wandered around how to impress Perry White, he knew he had one last person to turn to for help.

Clark pressed the doorbell on the apartment door.

Bright blue eyes and a wide grin greeted Clark. "Hi," Anna said. "Daddy cooking."

"Anna, you're not supposed to answer the door, sweetheart," Richard's voice echoed from the kitchen. Clark heard heavy, hurried footsteps approaching him. "Not unless I tell you to. What if it was a stranger - ?"

Richard stopped short when he saw Clark at the door. He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Oh. Hey, Clark."

Clark grinned. He had never seen Richard wearing an apron before. "Does the apron go with a chef's hat, too?" he joked.

Richard scowled. "Very funny. Come on in, farm boy." And then he added, "Anna, no more answering the door until I tell you to, okay?"

Anna tilted her head and smirked, as if challenging Richard's authority. Then she shrugged. "Yes, Daddy." The little girl made her way back to the living room, sitting on the floor with her dolls and watching cartoons on TV.

Richard and Clark walked to the kitchen. "So, how's life as a single dad?" Clark asked as Richard went back to his cooking.

Richard grinned, glancing at Anna sitting quietly. "It has its moments," he answered thoughtfully. "Ever since she came, the whole apartment seemed brighter, you know? When I first left the riverside house, I hated going home to this place. It was just empty. But now - I guess it's true what people say: there's no place like home."

Clark nodded. His friend did seem more relaxed and happier since the little girl came along.

"But, of course, it's not all easy. One - she sometimes says words I can't understand. Her English is getting better, though," he ended his reply in a proud tone. "Two - her adoption is still on-going. I haven't gotten all the papers. These coming months, it's all about proving that I can be a good father to her. You know how inadequate I feel whenever those folks at Child Protection Services watch me when Anna and I are playing? I mean, I know what I'm doing with the kid and all, but the way their eyes follow my every move..."

"It makes you feel like they're judging you from the way you put your arms around Anna to the way you tuck her in bed at night," Clark finished for him.

Richard nodded. "Exactly." He paused to put the fettuccine pasta in a large saucepan. He topped the chicken on the pasta and added chopped basil leaves on his dish. "How about you stay with us for lunch? And then we can talk about your job at the Planet."

Clark opened his mouth to ask Richard how he knew about the purpose of his visit. But Richard spoke first. "You think Uncle Perry doesn't tell me anything?" the brown-haired man said with a grin as he strode to the dining table and set down the food for lunch.

Lois was *not* having a good day. Not only did she easily feel tired, she also had to deal with her colleagues exchanging whispered gossip about her. She hadn't been the subject of their chit-chat since her fight with Clark three months ago.

As she made her way to the elevators, she could feel the stares of her officemates. Ignoring their glares, she saw Jimmy tinkering with his new camera. She grabbed hold of him and gently led him off to the elevators.

"Uh, hi, Miss Lane," Jimmy greeted her, the confusion evident in his voice and his face. He hung the camera around his neck.

Lois crossed her arms. She turned to Jimmy. "So?"

Jimmy's eyes glanced sideways. "So...?" he repeated quietly.

Lois huffed. "Jimmy, I know I can trust you to be honest with me."

"Well, um...thank you, uh, Miss Lane."

"What has the office been saying about me?" she asked straightforwardly.

Jimmy bit his lower lip. He didn't want to be the one to squeal on Mad Dog Lane.

"Nothing," he answered quickly, shaking his head fervently.

"Jimmy."

The young photographer heaved a sigh, preparing himself for the wrath of the fierce Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. "They think you're pregnant."

Lois raised an eyebrow at Jimmy. "And?"

Jimmy gulped. "And..."

"Come on, Jimmy. Spill it all out."

"And they're betting on who's the father. Some think it's Richard, others say it's, um..."

"It's who?"

Jimmy shrugged. He mumbled, "They think it's just some random guy you've slept with."

A gasp escaped Lois' mouth. She could feel her temper rising. But she knew better than to take it out on Jimmy, who had been nothing but a good friend to her. The elevator dinged, signaling they had arrived at the ground floor. "Thanks, Jimmy," she said, offering a smile to her officemate. "Well, I think you deserve to know it first before everyone else in the office does - I *am* pregnant. I'm having another baby with Clark."

Jimmy stared wide-eyed at Lois, who had begun walking out the office building.

"Hey, Olsen," Lois called out to him, grinning. "Come on, let's go have lunch - my treat."

"No way, Richard!" Clark exclaimed, shaking his head as he opened the front door of the riverside house.

"Well, if you've got any better idea, go ahead," Richard said, following right behind Clark, holding Anna's hand.

They had gone to 312 Riverside Drive that evening. Lois invited Richard and Anna for dinner.

"What's all the commotion about?" Lois asked as she came out of the kitchen.

Richard started, "I was just telling Clark to write an article about - ?"

"Don't, Richard," Clark cut him in. Then he turned to Lois. "It's nothing, really. Just one of his crazy ideas."

"I'd like to hear it," Lois replied.

"What is *she* doing here?" Jason's voice cut in the conversation of the grown-ups. He was looking at Anna.

Richard approached the boy. "Hey, Jason," he greeted, tousling the six-year-old's mop top hair. "How about you take Anna to your room and you guys can play? We'll call you when it's time for dinner."

Jason looked exasperatingly at his daddy. "Do I have to, Daddy? She always says funny words an' she keeps pulling my hair," Jason whined.

Clark grinned. He knelt down at his son. "Yes, you have to. Be nice to Anna, buddy."

They three adults watched as Jason took Anna's hand and led her up to his room. They all knew the boy liked having Anna around as a playmate, he just wouldn't tell them so. A few minutes later, they could hear Jason's muffled voice animatedly telling Anna about his new toy airplane.

As Lois, Clark and Richard went to the kitchen to prepare dinner, Lois brought up her question again. "So, what is it that Superman here is unwilling to do?"

Clark threw up his hands in surrender. "Weren't we over this?"

Richard ignored him and replied to Lois, "I was telling him to write something about Superman for the Daily Planet. We all know how Uncle Perry loves anything about Superman." He cocked his head to Clark. "He's practically *your* biggest fan."

Clark shook his head. "I am *not* going to write about Superman. It's just so...so..."

"Self-absorbed, narcissistic, egotistic and conceited?" Richard suggested.

"Yes!" Clark exclaimed.

Lois was lost in thought for a moment. Then she smiled at Clark. "We'll work on it tonight. Who knows Superman better than you do? We'll show it to Perry, and he'll put you back on the Planet, I know it. Perry's going to love you."

Lois was not looking forward to another day at work. *Another day for spreading gossip about me*, she thought to herself annoyingly. She was getting fed up with her colleagues' prying about her personal life.

She had not told Clark about what was going on in the office. She didn't want him to be bothered by such. After all, this wasn't the first time that she was the center of attention at the office. But she sure hoped it would be the last.

"Good morning, Richard," Lois greeted as she walked past Richard in the bullpen. She made her way to her desk, burying herself in her notes and her files, hoping not to hear the hushed voices of her co-workers talking about her.

Richard could see that something was wrong with Lois. *Something's bothering her*, he thought. He knew it couldn't be about Clark - they were very happy as a couple. Neither could it be about Jason - he knew the tyke was doing well in school. Did it have something to do with the baby? As Richard made his way to the break room, he understood what was troubling Lois.

"I heard it's Richard's," a female voice said. Richard stood just outside the break room, listening in on the conversation. He knew the voice belonged to Tracy Lawns from Lifestyle.

"Nah, she's too proud to go back to an old flame. It has to belong to someone else," Business' Corinne Hughes' voice piped in.

"You think she slept with some stranger she met at a bar?" the familiar voice of Marcia Simmons added to the discussion.

Richard groaned and stepped away from the break room door. He couldn't take any more of what he was hearing. He made his way back to his office and made a mental note to tell this to Clark the next time they see each other.

"Hey. How was work?" Clark greeted Lois as he put dinner on the table.

"Good," Lois answered faintly.

Clark noticed the downcast tone in her voice. "Is anything wrong?"

Lois shook her head. "I'm just tired, is all." She gave Clark a weak smile. "I'm just gonna go check on Jason then take a shower. I hope dinner's ready by then."

"Trust me, dinner's going to cheer you up," Clark assured her with a smile.

The coming days found Lois feeling more and more low-spirited. She was not herself most of the day, and she felt less and less inclined to go to the office every day.

She made her way back to her desk from the ladies' room. She could feel everyone staring at her as she slowly walked across the newsroom.

The hushed voices were all around her. She could catch words and phrases of their conversation. She tried walking faster, her head bowed and her eyes on the floor, not looking at where she was going. Faster and faster she strode to her desk, and then -

"Oh!" Lois exclaimed as she bumped into someone. She mumbled, "Sorry."

"It's okay," a soft, deep voice soothed Lois.

She felt warm arms envelope her, and she knew exactly who she had bumped into. She took a deep breath and buried her face onto his chest. She began to silently cry.

Clark had just left the Editor-in-Chief's office. He had submitted his article, *The Heart of a Hero: An Exclusive and In-Depth Interview with the Man of Steel*. Perry had scanned the article and immediately re-hired the mild-mannered reporter. As Clark was walking out of Perry's office, he heard the hushed voices of the journalists talking about Lois. Immediately, as he saw Lois walking towards her desk, he knew she needed him with her.

Lois continued to cry and hold on to Clark.

He tightened his hold on her, trying to calm her down. "It's all right now, I'm here," he comforted her.

The whole bullpen fell silent, watching with wide eyes the sudden appearance of their old, bespectacled officemate.

Clark took one long look at all of them. "What gives any of you the right to judge Lois?" he asked sternly. "None of you even knows the truth."

When none of them answered, Clark led Lois out to the elevators. They had only taken a few steps towards the door when the TV monitors echoed around the silenced bullpen.

"Breaking news: This just in - five students from the Metropolis Elementary School have been taken hostage by four armed men. The students, ranging from ages six to eight, are trapped inside the school building. The police have arrived at the scene, but no negotiations have been made with the suspects yet. A video, taken from a camera phone, has been sent by the suspects to the police."

Clark and Lois froze in their place as they watched the news. The TV monitors switched to a fuzzy, low-quality video. "Don't even try to send Superman down here," the video showed a masked man talking to the camera. "If you do, these kids die - one by one." The masked man tugged at a little boy's arm and showed him in the screen. He pulled on the little boy's mop top brown hair and put the gun barrel straight at the boy's temple.

"Mommy, Daddy," Jason's sobs could be heard before the video clicked and the screen went blank.

## Chapter 27: The Powerless and the Powerful - Part 1

Clark could feel everyone's eyes on him, but his never left the TV screen even as it turned black. He tried to even his breathing, keeping his heart still. He felt as if his head was going to burst.

"*Mommy, Daddy,* " Jason's cries rang in Clark's ears. He could still remember the men who had taken his son hostage. "*Don't even try to send Superman down here. If you do, these kids die - one by one.*"

"Clark."

A voice was calling him. It sounded as if it came from somewhere faraway. As if it was an echo.

"Clark."

There it was again. He didn't know where it came from. The voice was too faint - the beating of his heart rang loud in his ears, muffling the voice.

"Clark."

He felt a warm hand wrap around his. He turned and looked at Lois. There were tears in her eyes. He realized she was the one calling him. He swallowed the lump in his throat and wrapped his arms securely around the woman he loved. "He's going to be okay. He's our boy. He'll be fine," he said aloud, but at that moment, he did not know whether he was trying more to convince Lois - or himself.

Perry shook his head. "So what do we do? This isn't a job for Superman - if those bastards meant what they said on the tape," he said. He turned to the three people sitting before him - Lois, Clark and Richard. He had called them into his office as soon as the news report on the school hostage taking was finished. He knew they needed the privacy.

Richard bowed his head and rubbed his temples. Despite the fact that he wasn't Jason's father, he still cared very much about the boy, and he felt shocked at what he heard on the news. He was thinking how Jason was doing now.

"Lois?" Perry called out to her. "You're the mother. Maybe you can negotiate a plea - "

"She can't." Clark's voice cut Perry short. His voice had a hint of authority as he spoke.

Perry raised an eyebrow at Clark. Was Kent just showing him attitude?

"She's pregnant," Clark explained, his voice sounding calmer.

Perry turned to look at Lois with surprise. "You're..."

Lois did not answer. She kept staring at the floor, trying to keep herself from crying. She just wanted her son back in her arms more than anything.

Then the tears began to fall again.

The three men watched as Lois wept. And then Perry did something that surprised even himself - he went to Lois and embraced her, just like a father embracing his daughter. "We'll get him back," he assured her. "And then you, Kent, Jason and your baby can be a happy family again."

When Lois had calmed down, they began to discuss their options - with Superman definitely out of the picture. Perry tried coming up with ideas, but each idea seemed bleaker than the previous one.

Clark shook his head as he listened to Richard and Perry talk. He felt as if each minute they spent discussing was another minute wasted - he could be saving his son right now. He was beginning to get impatient.

"I can go there, see if I could negotiate with them," Clark heard Richard suggesting to

Perry and Lois. "I can talk to them."

Before Richard became an assistant editor, he used to take up assignments in foreign countries. He had been once been assigned to do a coverage report on the war in some African country - he knew how to talk to dangerous and armed men, and then live to tell the tale.

"No," Clark said quietly, standing up from his seat. "I'll go." He began to make his way out of the Editor-in-Chief's office.

Richard's eyes widened with horror. Who knew what Clark would do? After all, he *was* the Man of Steel. He went after Clark. "Clark, wait!" he called after his friend.

Clark was almost out of the newsroom when Richard grabbed hold of his arm. "Richard, I have to go. Take care of Lois, will you?"

Richard shook his head. "You're being rash. Come on back to Perry's office. We'll talk this over."

"I have to go to my son."

"Clark, I know how much this is hurting you. I understand, believe me. But you can't just go - "

"I can't?" Clark said, his voice rising in anger. "*I can't?* Who are you to tell me what I can and can't do? That's my son in there, with a gun pointed at his head, and he needs me! I will not just stand here and watch you mull things over."

Richard's blue eyes met Clark's. "Jason was my son for the first five years - "

"Well, he's my son now - he always was!" Clark retorted at Richard before storming out of the Daily Planet office.

Richard stood motionless in his spot. Clark's words hit him hard. He turned and saw Lois and Perry looking at him regretfully. He saw the whole bullpen staring at him, waiting for him to react. Slowly, he made his way back to Perry's office.

"Any word I hear about Kent, Lois, Richard, Jason and the school," Perry warned to his office workers, "and you'll be subject to dismissal from the Planet. Get back to work."

When he had closed his office door, he pat Richard on the shoulder. "You know that was the pain talking, and not Kent, right?"

Richard heaved a sigh and shrugged at his uncle. "I know - I just didn't think it would hurt this much."

The school's large clock read 10:30 AM.

Clark used his large build to weave past the many parents and onlookers standing outside the school grounds. He slipped under the police tape that bordered the Metropolitan Elementary gates. Clark used his large build to weave past the many parents and onlookers standing outside the school grounds. He slipped under the police tape that was bordered the Metropolitan Elementary gates. He had walked a few steps past the gates when a young policeman stopped him.

"Excuse me, sir, you're not allowed to be here," the young cop told Clark politely. "No civilian is allowed past the school gates."

Clark took one look at him. "My son is in there. I need to get him back." He began to step forward.

"B-but sir, you can't - " The cop, evidently of smaller stature than Clark, tried to push the reporter back.

Clark didn't even budge.

"Sir, you have to understand, the police are doing everything they can - " the young man

tried to explain.

"Well, it's not good enough," Clark cut him short. "I want my son back - I don't care what I have to do."

*BANG!*

--

*10:30 AM*

In all the years that he had worked for the Metropolis PD, Doug Gleeson thought he had seen it all. He had gone from having a 19-hour search for an old lady's ginger cat, to standing inches away from the gun barrel of a man charged with killing six people. Life had gotten better when Superman came into the picture. There were less crimes committed and many lives saved. But today, as he stood in the MPD's makeshift tent outside the school grounds, with his eyes fixed on the computer screen, he couldn't help but have a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Don't even try to send Superman down here," the man on the screen said. "If you do, these kids die - one by one."

Doug kept his eyes on the screen as a little boy came into view, his eyes filled with tears. "Mommy, Daddy," the boy cried.

Doug gulped. This was not the first time he had seen an armed man get a child as a hostage. But he couldn't understand why he was so affected by the image before him. Maybe it was because his wife had just given birth two weeks ago to their fourth child - their fourth son - and he could only think about what this incident must put the children's parents through. *It's hard enough to be a father, he thought to himself, but to watch your child be put in a life-or-death situation and realize that you are not in control of what could happen to him - it must be worse than death.*

"Captain!" a young police officer called out to Doug. "I think someone's trying to get into the school."

Doug looked over the cop's shoulder and watched the monitor present a blurred image of something blue that was slowly creeping up the high wall of the school and into the playground. "No," Doug muttered under his breath. "No, it can't be...he knows he can't be here."

"Who, sir?" the younger policeman replied.

Before Doug could answer, they heard a loud sound that sent a shiver down their spines.

*BANG!*

--

Aaron Harte looked at his watch. It read 10:30 AM. Aaron was the youngest among the gang holding the schoolchildren inside the classroom. His older brother, Logan, was also with them. They didn't know why they had to take *kids* as hostages ("Why couldn't we take teachers instead of the poor kids?" Aaron had quietly asked his brother), all they knew was what their leader, a man named Oliver, told them: "The job is to lock down the school, get some of the kids as hostage and tell the damn cops not to send down Big Blue. That's all you need to know."

As the youngest, Aaron was usually the one sent to do more jobs than anyone else. He had to patrol the school corridors, to see if any of the cops were trying to get into the building. He had to go down to the cafeteria when one of his older gang members wanted food. And, he had to baby-sit the children - something he was not very fond of.

"I have to go pee," a small boy with a dark-brown mop top whined. Aaron remembered

the boy's name was something that started with a J - was it Justin? Or Johnny? He really didn't give a shit.

"Pee in your pants, then," Aaron answered annoyingly. He looked out at the window, trying to ignore the child's pleas.

"Mommy would get mad at me," the boy replied.

*Jason*, Aaron thought. *That's the annoying kid's name*. Aaron huffed. "She won't know if you don't tell her."

"My pants would go stinky and wet," Jason answered meekly. "She would know."

"I have to go, please?" Jason pleaded.

Aaron heaved a sigh. The child's voice was getting on Aaron's nerves. He kept his eyes on the window, hoping the boy would shut up. "Look, kid - I don't care what you do! Just shut the hell up or I'll - "

Aaron was not able to finish his sentence because his eyes caught sight of a blue moving object jumping past the wall and into the school grounds. "What the - ?"

He acted the way his superiors ordered him to act. Without thinking whether it had been a civilian or the superhero they dreaded, Aaron cocked his gun and pulled the trigger.

*BANG!*

--

The sound of a single gunshot was heard coming from inside one of the classrooms. People began to panic.

"JASON!" Clark exclaimed, running closer to the school doors. Several officers had to restrain him and stop him from going inside.

Clark immediately focused his super-hearing on his son's heartbeat - he couldn't bear to use his x-ray vision, in fear of what he might see. *Please be alive, Jason*, he thought to himself, praying to God nothing had happened to his boy. He calmed down when he heard the strong, but quick, *thump thump* of Jason's heart.

--

Aaron put his gun down and looked down the window below. He didn't see anything.

Logan Harte rushed into the classroom. He and the two other hostage-takers were trying to come up with their requests to the police. "They won't say no to our demands - we have kids on our hands," Ollie Weston had said. Logan rushed to the next room as soon as he heard the gun go off. He had his gun at the ready. "What the hell happened? Why did you fire a shot?"

Aaron shook his head. "I thought it was Superman down there. Something went past the wall. It happened pretty fast. I thought it was *him*. You said to shoot him at the first glimpse. That's what I did."

Logan took a deep breath. He wasn't so sure why his brother seldom used his brain. "And what did you find out?"

"I didn't see anything."

Logan could have strangled his brother right at that moment. All Aaron had to do was watch over the kids, and he couldn't even manage that. Logan began to exit the room. "I'll go fix this," he told Aaron.

--

A man, dressed in black from head to toe, appeared from the window of the school and began to speak, "Who dared to send Superman here? That was a warning shot for him, and for all of you. If he or anybody else comes anywhere near these kids again, you'll be getting these tykes back in body bags." Then he was gone.

The crowd had gotten quiet. They understood that the criminals meant what they had said. Mothers began to cry silently. Fathers bowed their heads.

From out of the bushes near the gates, a dark-haired man appeared. He was limping. And he was wearing a blue polo shirt.

Clark caught sight of the man. Immediately, he knew the shot was fired at him. Despite the anger boiling inside of him, he ran to the man and helped him to the nearby paramedics. His leg was bleeding, and he looked pale.

Officer Gleeson came running to the scene. "You were the one who went past the wall?" he asked the man as he was lifted onto a stretcher.

The man looked at the cop with fear in his eyes. Slowly, he nodded. "I'm sorry," he said, his breathing becoming heavy. "I thought...I thought I could save them..."

"You couldn't have," Clark quietly answered with a hint of contempt.

It was only then that the police officer noticed the towering man beside him. His and Clark's eyes met. Doug could see there was a fire burning in the eyes behind the thick-framed glasses.

"Please," the wounded man's voice cut through the silence. "If Superman can't go and save those kids..." His voice faded. In a soft whisper, he asked, "...then who will?"

Clark watched as the paramedics drove the man to Metropolis General Hospital. Then he looked at the cop beside him. His ID read *Captain Douglas Gleeson*. He gave the cop a curt nod and began to walk away quietly. But he was stopped by the officer.

"You got a kid in there, sir?" Officer Gleeson asked.

Clark turned and swallowed hard. He gave a heavy sigh. "Yes." Clark's answer was barely audible. "How did you know?"

Gleeson shrugged. "Your kid - he was the one on the video, yes?"

Clark's chest began to tighten. He nodded.

"Your boy looks just like you."

Clark tried to blink back the tears that were beginning to well up in his eyes. He gave a weak smile to the cop, not knowing what else to say.

*Poor guy*, Gleeson thought. He pat the man's shoulder. "We'll get your boy back," he assured Clark.

Clark didn't respond. He simply turned and walked away, disappearing into the sea of worried faces.

Behind him, Clark could hear the clicking of cameras - more people from the press had arrived on the scene. He felt a soft hand grab his arm.

"Clark Kent?"

Clark turned to see Marcia Simmons, a photographer for the Planet, looking distraught. "You should go. Someone from the press recognized you - they know your boy is one of the hostages. They'll want to interview you. Come on, I'll drive you back to the Planet."

The drive back had been quiet at first. Clark seemed to be fuming, though he kept silent as they snaked through the traffic on their way to The Daily Planet. Clark wanted Jason back, but he knew he couldn't do it as Superman. Hearing one gunshot from inside the school was enough to send shivers down his spine.

"It kills you, doesn't it?" Marcia's voice brought Clark back to reality.

Clark adjusted his glasses and asked in his high-pitched voice, "What does?"

Marcia kept her eyes on the road, trying not to show any emotion in her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she replied, "Waiting. Being like everyone else - just hoping and praying that our

kids are safe and they'll be in our arms soon."

Understanding dawned on Clark. Marcia had a son in Jason's class. He remembered the incident during Jason's sixth birthday - the boy had been upset by something Marcia's son had said, and he hurled a cake at him.

"Peter," Clark said, remember the child's name.

Marcia nodded. Unable to contain her feelings anymore, she parked at the side of the street and began to cry.

Despite the fact that Marcia Simmons had always been the first person to spread gossip around the office about Lois and Clark, the mild-mannered reporter couldn't help but sympathize with the woman. They were going through the same ordeal now. He knew what it was like to suddenly lose your child and not be able to do anything about it. He watched his officemate wipe the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Marcia apologized. "I couldn't help it."

Clark nodded and offered a kindly smile.

"Their teacher said Jason and Petey were the last to leave the room," she narrated. "The suspects got them after they had taken a few steps down the hallway. When I heard about that, I didn't know what to do..."

Clark gently pat her on the shoulder. He looked at the woman beside him with determination in his eyes. "We'll get our boys back," he assured her.

When they arrived at the Planet, they noticed the lack of hustle and bustle around the newsroom. It was as if one colleague's worry was the worry of the whole office. As Clark made his way to Perry's office, where Lois was resting, people offered compassionate smiles. Some, like Jimmy Olsen, managed to say a few encouraging words like, "Jason's gonna be okay, C.K., you'll see."

Clark was grateful for his colleagues' support, forgetting how they had acted around Lois during the morning. He thanked everyone he bumped along the way to the Chief's office. He immediately turned to Lois as soon as he opened the door. "Hey," he greeted her.

Lois was feeling very ill. Richard had offered her something to eat, but she declined. Only when he explained that she had to eat "for the baby's sake" did she take in a few pieces of bread and orange juice. She smiled weakly at Clark. "Hey you, too."

Clark could see the red rims around her eyes. He knew she had been crying. He went over to her on the couch and took her in a warm embrace. No sooner had he put his arms around her than she began to cry again. "Hush now. We'll get our son back," he comforted her, rubbing her back gently. "It'll be over soon. Don't cry."

Clark waited until Lois had fallen asleep before he laid her back down on the couch. After kissing her lightly on the lips, he found Perry and Richard in the conference room. They had moved the TV in Perry's office into the conference room and away from Lois - she didn't have to see and hear everything going on at the school. Clark made his way to the two Whites.

"Kent," Perry acknowledged his arrival. "Found out anything?"

"I was, uh, hoping t-to speak, um, to Richard, Chief," Clark said, clearing his throat and fidgeting with his tie. He took a deep breath. "Oh, and uh, Marcia Simmons' boy was also taken hostage. Her son and Jason are classmates."

The Editor-in-Chief nodded. "I'll go check on Simmons."

When Perry left the room, Clark looked at Richard. He could see the worry he felt mirrored in the other man's eyes. For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Then Clark spoke. "I'm sorry."

Richard bowed his head for a second. When he looked back up at Clark, he was grinning. "It's alright. We all have our bad days."

"This has to be the worst," Clark replied softly. He took a deep breath and brushed his hand through his hair. Richard was keeping silent, just watching him. "When I heard that gunshot, I thought something had happened to him. I've never been so afraid in my life."

Richard nodded, signaling that he understood.

"...and I've never felt this powerless," Clark admitted, his voice almost a whisper. "I can't go as Superman. I've looked into the room where they hold the kids. They have Jason and a little girl at gunpoint. Even with my speed, I won't be able to stop the bullet on time if..." His voice faded. He didn't have the heart to continue what he was going to say.

Richard didn't say a word. He took a seat in one of the conference room chairs. After a while, he answered, "Why not go as Clark Kent?"

Clark shook his head. "Richard, I don't need to expose my identities right now. What I need right now is my son."

Richard shrugged. "The fastest way for you to get your son is to go in that school and just grab him and fight off the hostage-takers." He stood up from his seat. "Clark, Lois also needs her son back. She wouldn't eat, she keeps on crying - she's worried sick about Jason that she doesn't take care of herself anymore! You need to get Jason back, and fast - or you might be losing more than just your son."

As Clark made his way back to Metropolis Elementary, Richard stayed with Lois. She was still fast asleep when Clark left. Richard had a tray of food ready for her when she wakes up. Lois began to stir. Richard knelt down beside the couch. "Had a good sleep?" he asked her cheerfully.

Lois smiled feebly. "I'd have a better sleep if I had Jason next to me."

"You know that Clark's going to do everything he can to get that mop-top burrito-loving Superman-wannabe boy of yours, right?"

Lois let out a little laugh. "I know."

Richard helped Lois sit up. He brought the tray to her. "How about you eat and then you can accompany me in getting Anna from her daycare center? I'm feeling sort of jittery - it's her first day and all, and I'm worried she likes it better than hanging out with me, you know?"

Lois eyed him curiously. "You're just saying that to make me leave this office."

Richard took a deep breath. "Well...partly, yes," he admitted with a grin. "But hey, I need you to make me look cooler than the old lady who bakes her cookies at the daycare."

## Chapter 28: The Powerless and the Powerful - Part 2

Unlike the other children who were crying in a corner of the room, Jason sat quietly beside Peter Simmons. He clutched his inhaler tightly, just like his mommy always told him to do when he was scared. The gun shot that went off shocked Jason, but he didn't want to make the bad guys know he was scared of them.

"Jason?" Peter whispered into Jason's ear.

"Yeah?" Jason answered.

"Are you scared?"

Jason gave a small nod.

"You don't look like it," Peter stated matter-of-factly.

Jason's eyes traveled to the skinny masked man who had fired the shot. He closed his eyes. "When I'm scared, Daddy told me I just have to close my eyes and he's gonna come here and get me."

Peter went quiet for a second. "You believe what your dad tells you?"

Jason opened his eyes again and looked at the inhaler in his hands. His daddy had shoved it into his backpack when he drove Jason to school. "You might need this new one," Clark had told him before he helped the boy out of the car. Jason looked at Peter and gave him an encouraging smile. He replied, "Daddy never lies."

It was more difficult the second time around to squeeze past the people gathering in front of the school. Clark looked over the sea of people to find his way closer to the barrier. He heard people calling out his name.

*"Mr. Kent, how is your son doing? Is he still inside the school?"*

*"How do you feel about all these, Mr. Kent?"*

*"Can you give us a short comment on the matter, sir?"*

The questions were endless. He never had to deal with the attention before. Sure, as Superman, he had been interviewed and seen on TV - but as Clark Kent, he had often been ignored and pushed around. The attention was overwhelming him.

He finally found his way to the police tape. Captain Doug Gleeson stopped him from taking another step further. "You can't go past the tape, sir," the officer explained.

"I was hoping to speak with you, Officer," Clark said. "About my son."

Officer Gleeson remembered the bespectacled man in front of him. They had met a few hours ago, when the hostage-takers fired the shot. The man, Gleeson knew, was the father of the boy on the video. He knew how difficult the whole ordeal must be for Clark. As he looked at Clark and saw the look in his eyes, his heart was moved with pity. He nodded. "Alright, Mister..." he said

"Kent," Clark introduced himself, giving his glasses another push up his nose bridge. "Clark Kent."

"Mr. Kent," Officer Gleeson repeated with a nod. "Let's talk here," he said, leading Clark away from the prying eyes of the public.

Clark asked Officer Gleeson to grant him entry into the building. "This is taking so long," Clark explained. "I'm a patient man, Officer, but when it comes to my family, I'll do anything to get them out of harm's way as quick as possible. I'm trained in self-defense, I can assure you that."

"Mr. Kent, what you're planning to do is dangerous. You cannot just go into the building, unarmed, and barge into that classroom. They'll hurt you or one of the kids."

"But like you said, I'm unarmed. They know they have the upper hand - they'll let me in. I just want to see my son."

The police officer looked at the two other high-ranking police officials they were conversing with. He gave them a look of uncertainty.

"Please," Clark pleaded.

One of the other two officers stepped forward. "Mr. Kent, if anything happens to you - "

"Nothing would," Clark immediately replied, the determination evident in his voice.

The officer nodded. "Lead Mr. Kent to the school's back door. We'll send a call to the suspects and tell them we have an unarmed man who wants to see his boy."

Aaron was losing patience with the kids. A little girl, about six years old, continued to cry. She had been sobbing since she had been taken by the hostages. Two boys were in the corner, stomping their feet and throwing tantrums. Another girl was quietly calling out for her mommy. "Shut up, all of you!" Aaron bellowed.

Fearful, wide-eyed stares met Aaron's eyes. Then the 6-year-old girl began to cry and wail again - loudly. It was enough to enrage Aaron. He went over to the little girl and grabbed her by the arm, dragging her away from the group and to the opposite corner.

"I thought I told you to shut the hell up!" he roared at the girl.

"Ow! You're hurting me!" the girl cried out.

Jason watched the scene unfold before his eyes. He ran up to Aaron. "Hey! Leave her alone!" he exclaimed, seizing the hostage-taker's left leg and stopping him from moving.

"Let me go, you brat!" Aaron yelled at the boy.

But Jason wouldn't. Aaron began to feel his leg weakening. The boy's grip was tight and strong. *Too* strong.

"I said let go!" Aaron commanded again.

"No!" Jason shouted back. His hands were shaking, but he tightened his hold on the bad man's leg.

"Let go - NOW!" Aaron used his free hand to grab a tuft of Jason's hair, then he shove both Jason and the girl to the other corner before he crumpled to the floor and moaned in pain, muttering curses.

The girl began to whimper, but Jason looked undaunted. "Are you okay?" he asked the girl.

She just nodded, then began to quietly sob.

Jason looked at her with determination in his eyes. "Don't worry, we'll be okay."

No sooner had Jason said these words when Logan appeared in the room. "What was all the racket about this time?" he asked his brother. "And why are you on the floor?"

"The kid...strong grip...my leg...numb," Aaron said, panting. He was sitting on the floor, leaning against the teacher's table. The pain on his left leg made it difficult for him to stand. "Too noisy...made my headache."

His older brother dismissed his answer. "Stop acting up, fool. Get up. Ollie's gonna watch over the kids. You and I are going downstairs."

Aaron looked up at Logan expectedly. "Why?"

"We've got a houseguest coming. Mind your manners." Logan turned and began to make his way out the door. He stopped and told his brother, "Oh, and bring one of the kids along - we'll be the welcoming committee."

The masked man that opened the door for Clark held Peter Simmons at gunpoint. The boy was crying. Another man had a gun pointed at Clark. "Check his pockets," the first man told his partner. The man holding the gun at Clark limped forward and began to search the journalist, but found nothing on him. He grabbed him by the arm and led him to the hallway.

They had taken a few steps when Clark purposefully tripped, grabbing hold of the leg of the first captor. His gun flew out of his hand, and he accidentally let go of Peter. All three of them fell to the floor.

"What the - ?" The limping masked man exclaimed.

Clark adjusted his glasses. "Sorry," he mumbled to the two criminals. Then he stood up quickly, and his voice and demeanor changed. "But you messed with the wrong daddy."

Before either of the two captors could react, Clark had used his super-speed to grab their guns and take Peter away from them. He took Peter aside and grabbed both suspects by their shirts, lifting them off the ground. "Where's my son?" he demanded.

Clark had them lead him to the classroom where the rest of the kids were. "One wrong move and you're both goners," he warned them.

When they arrived at the room, Clark was held this time by Logan, and Petey, by Aaron. But neither of the Harte brothers had their guns on them.

"Daddy!" Jason's voice echoed through the quiet room. He ran to his father from the corner where he was huddled over.

Clark embraced his son tightly, enjoying having the boy so close to him. He then turned to look around and saw that none of the kids were being held by the armed men. He whispered something to his son, and the boy went over to the other kids and gathered them farther into the corner. Clark looked at the suspects. Petey had been pushed into the corner with the other kids.

"Seen your kid, Daddy-O?" the man Clark assumed to be the leader of the group asked him. He recognized the voice from the video shown on TV. "But you know it ain't over, right?"

Clark's lips curled into a small smile. His hand reached up to his glasses, and he took them off. "You're wrong - it's over. It's all over."

The two armed men in the room fell into a panic. "Supe-Super..." one mumbled as he backed into one wall of the classroom.

The leader, Oliver, pulled the trigger at Clark - once, twice. But the bullets simply bounced off Clark. Oliver looked at the children. They were too far away for him to grab one of them. He looked at his accomplices. Fear was etched in their faces, and none of them had their guns in their hands. He had one last bullet and aimed it at Clark's chest.

Then he began to laugh.

His laugh sound maniacal. "You know you just exposed yourself, right, Superman?" he said, taunting Clark. "The geeky journalist happens to be the world's greatest hero? Who would have thought?"

"No one would have thought," Clark replied calmly as he put his glasses back on, "which is why no matter how many people you tell it to, I doubt they'd believe you."

The sinister grin in the suspect's face turned into an ugly scowl. He was ready to pull the trigger at Clark when suddenly -

"FREEZE! Pull that trigger and we'll shoot!"

The sound of guns cocking surrounded the room. A dozen or so police officers entered the classroom and rounded up the four suspects.

"We heard gunshots," Officer Gleeson explained. "We had to take action."

Clark nodded. "I told you I'm trained in self-defense," he said with a grin.

"Daddy!" Jason called out to him. Clark turned around and picked up his son, kissing the top of the boy's head. "It's all over now, buddy. We're gonna be okay."

Clark then approached Peter. "Hey, Peter. How about you come with us? Your mom is pretty worried about you."

Together, the three of them made their way out the classroom. The shouts of the suspects' leader made Clark stop in his tracks. "He's Superman, I tell you! That four-eyed dork is Superman!" the captor kept yelling.

Clark, assuming his mild-mannered persona, turned around and looked at the police officers and the suspects. He grinned sheepishly at those who had their eyes on him. He bit his lower lip and shrugged. His voice was high-pitched and shaky. "Uh, gee, officers, I think you better have that guy checked out. He, uh...he kind of creeps me out." The policemen roared in laughter.

Clark continued. "Make, uh, make sure he's be-behind bars for life, o-okay?"

Officer Gleeson nodded. "They won't bother you anymore, Mr. Kent - I mean, *Superman*," he quipped with a wink, eliciting laughter from around the room again.

Clark carried Jason and took Peter by the hand, going down to the first floor and out of the school building. They made their way to Marcia Simmons, whose tears continuously streamed down her cheeks. She ran towards them.

"Petey!" she called out to her son.

"Momma!" Peter called back. "Mr. Kent saved us, Momma. He's Superman!"

Clark was thankful that they were far from the press. He slowly approached his colleague. He flashed his signature goofy farm boy grin at Marcia.

"Thank you, Clark," Marcia said with all sincerity. "Petey, thank Mr. Kent."

"But he's Superman, Momma. He's not Mr. Kent."

Clark simply raised his eyebrows at Marcia and continued grinning. He adjusted his glasses.

Marcia smiled at Clark apologetically and knelt down to Peter's level. "Honey, he's Mr. Kent. He's not Superman. Is your daddy Superman, Jason?"

Jason looked at Clark unsurely. His daddy just smiled at him. Somehow, he understood the meaning of his daddy's smile. The boy shrugged at Marcia. "Maybe...Petey thought Daddy was Superman because he saved us. That's what Superman does - and that's what Daddy did."

Marcia smiled at Jason and then looked up at Clark. "You have a very smart little boy. You're lucky to have him. Thank you again, Clark. You two take care."

"You, too, Marcia. Bye, Peter," Clark replied, waving goofily at the boy.

As the mother and son went to their car, Clark carried Jason and walked toward the streets, hoping to catch a cab.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Jason?"

"How come Mrs. Simmons didn't believe Petey when he said you were Superman?"

Clark smiled at his boy. Marcia was right - Jason was very smart. "You know, kiddo, Mrs. Simmons and I have worked together for a long time. You see the way I act around the office, right?"

"Uh huh. You always bump into things and you mess up your shirt with coffee."

"That's right. That's the only thing Mrs. Simmons sees. She doesn't think I can be different when I'm not at work. Do you understand that?"

Jason turned quiet for a while, deep in thought. "I think so."

Clark let out a laugh. "When you're older, maybe you'll understand it better. For now, how about you and I just go home and see how Mommy is doing? She's been worried about you, you know."

Jason nodded enthusiastically. He missed his mommy very much.

No sooner had they gotten into a cab directed to the Daily Planet when Clark's phone rang. The caller ID read *Richard White*. "Richard?"

"Clark! You need to go to Metropolis General Hospital right now. It's important."

Clark could sense the urgency in Richard's voice. "What it is?" he asked worriedly.

There was no answer on the other line for a moment.

"Richard? What is it?" Clark asked again.

Richard took a deep breath. "It's Lois."

## Chapter 29: Our Hopes and Fears

*It's Lois.*

Richard's words were ringing in Clark's ears even after he hung up.

Clark blinked. He swallowed and opened his mouth to speak to the cabbie, but he couldn't find his voice.

"Where to, sir?" the taxi driver asked, looking at Clark through the rearview mirror expectantly.

Clark took a deep breath and cleared throat. "Met Gen, please," he answered, though his voice came out sounding more like a croak.

"Daddy, are you okay?" Jason asked.

Clark looked at his son. He forced a smile. "Yeah, buddy, I am," he replied, holding Jason so close to him and telling himself not to ever let go of his son.

Richard wrapped his arms tight around Anna as she slept. They were seated on the recliner in Lois' hospital room. He could hear the beep of the monitor hooked on to Lois. His eyes were on the small clear bag that hung beside the bed, dripping into a long, slim tubing connected to Lois' hand. *What happened?* he asked himself for the hundredth time, yet he knew he still did not have the answers.

*They arrived at the daycare center's entrance. Lois watched as Anna dashed toward their direction and jumped into Richard's welcoming arms. She listened to Anna chanting, "Daddy! Daddy!" and to Richard laughing heartily at the little girl he was carrying. Tears began to well up in Lois' eyes as she remembered Jason again. He's going to be okay, Lois told herself. Her thoughts were broken when she felt a soft pair of hands holding her arm. She looked down to see Anna standing in front of her.*

*"Hi, Auntie Lois," the little girl greeted her. Anna's smile was like a warm ray of sunshine in Lois' dark world.*

*Lois slowly knelt down to Anna and hugged the girl. "Hey angel," she greeted back.*

*"Me Anna, not 'Angel'," the blonde-haired girl corrected Lois.*

*Lois laughed. "Right - your name is Anna. Hi, Anna."*

*The three of them made their way back to Richard's apartment. He thought it would be better to get Lois away from the office. As they went down the car, Anna held Lois' hand and led her to the elevators.*

*They settled in the kitchen and Richard prepared a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Anna. Afterwards, Richard and Lois watched the little girl scuttle to the living room and play with her dolls and puzzles.*

*Richard began preparing salad and roast chicken for dinner. Lois had volunteered to help. Normally, Richard would say no, but right now, he knew Lois needed the distraction. They had been busy working on the food preparations when Lois spoke up.*

*"So," she began, "did you ever think we would be like this forever - preparing dinner and looking after the kids?"*

*Richard grinned. "I thought I would be like this forever - but you, Lois Lane, are not the homemaker type of woman."*

*Lois laughed. "Hey, I did change when Jason came along."*

*"Yeah - only because I had to drag you out of the office and tell you that you can't go around bringing the baby to work every day. The office isn't the place for a kid to grow up in."*

*Lois nodded. She stayed quiet for a moment before asking, "But did you ever...I mean, do you wonder what life would have been like if...if Clark didn't come back?"*

*Richard stopped what he was doing. He looked at Lois and saw she was sincere with her question. He shrugged. "Sometimes, yeah," he admitted sheepishly, "especially now that I have Anna. I think about how she'll grow up. I wish she'd have a mother to look up to, you know? Someone strong and confident and brave - someone like you, Lois. I think about having you and Jason with us, and we'd be in that riverside house with barbecues at night and playing with the kids on the lawn during the mornings." He fell silent for a moment, then added, "but I'm glad Clark came back."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because he's a good man who can provide for you everything you need."*

*"You proved that you could, too, you know."*

*"Yeah, but not like he can." Richard paused. He grinned, then continued, "No man was good enough for you, Lois. I knew that when I met you. Did you know Perry discouraged me from proposing to you all those years ago? He said I was not the man you were looking for, and I'll only hurt you and myself. But I took my chances - and I learned a lot."*

*Lois smiled. "You're a great man, Richard. And an even greater father..." Lois' voice faded, and she wasn't able to finish her sentence as she felt her world go dark.*

*Knock, knock.*

Richard turned to the door. He heard someone knocking. Settling Anna on the soft lounge, he went to get the door. He found Clark - ashen-faced and worried-looking - holding Jason's hand.

"Daddy Richard?" the boy asked. Richard had told Jason to call him 'Uncle,' but the six-year-old was still used to calling him 'Daddy.' Jason tilted his head to the side, trying to see inside the room. "Daddy Richard," he said again, "what are you doing here?"

Richard saw the look on Clark's eyes. It said, *Jason doesn't know anything*. He nodded and put on a wide grin on his face. He knelt down and pulled Jason into an embrace. "Hey, Tiger," he greeted Jason, "Thank God you're alright. I was worried about you. Anna also wanted to know if you're okay. How about you come over at my place and play with Anna? She's asleep right now, but she'll be up in a bit and ready to play. Would you like that?"

Jason looked up at Clark, seemingly asking for his daddy's permission. Clark pretended to think hard about it.

"Please, Daddy?" Jason pleaded, hugging Clark's leg.

Clark gave a small chuckle. "Alright, buddy. But be good to Richard - and be nice to Anna."

Jason had a hundred-watt smile on his face. "I will be, I promise!" he said, jumping up and down.

Richard nodded. Clark gave him a grateful look. Richard turned to leave. "I'll just go and get Anna," he said.

When he returned with the blond little girl in his arms, he led Jason out to the elevators as Clark followed them. "Thank you, Richard," Clark said.

"Hey, this is what friends are for, right?" Richard replied before the elevator doors closed.

Clark never liked hospitals. In fact, he hated being in the hospital. There was something about the white walls and the quiet hallways that made him uneasy. The sight of syringes and medications did not do much to lessen his dislike, either. Now here he was, sitting on the chair

beside Lois' hospital bed, holding her hand gently in his, hoping that she'll wake up soon.

"Excuse me, sir?" A middle-aged woman stood in the doorway of the hospital room. She had auburn hair and green eyes. Her face was kindly-looking, and she looked at Clark with concern.

"Yes?" Clark replied quietly. He stood up and went towards the woman.

"I'm Dr. Nora Shelton," she introduced herself. "I'm the doctor in charge of Miss Lane."

Clark nodded. "Right."

"Um, I'd like to know what your relationship to my patient is."

Clark's eyes widened. In his worry, he had forgotten to introduce himself. "Oh, um," he stammered, "I'm Clark. Clark Kent." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Uh, Lois and I are...we're, um..." He couldn't find the right words to say. *Dating? Partners? Involved?* He took a deep breath. "We're together," he finally answered.

The doctor nodded. "Can you step outside for a minute, Mr. Kent? I'd like to talk to you about Lois and her pregnancy."

Clark felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. First Jason, and now Lois? *What did I do to deserve this?* Clark asked himself as he followed the doctor outside the room.

Dr. Shelton began. "I take it you are the father of the child she is carrying?"

Clark nodded.

"But it says here she was brought into the ER an hour ago by a Mr. Richard White?"

Clark nodded again. "I wasn't with her," he answered. There was a hint of regret in his voice. "I was with my son."

The silence that followed gave Clark a feeling of dread. "I-I'd like to..." Clark then said, but his voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "I don't know what happened. I'd like to know."

Nora Shelton had seen most of the patients' families looking worried and exhausted before. But this man standing before her seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. He looked tired and weary. She wished she could do more to help. She flipped the chart she had been holding and led Clark to the seats on the receiving area near the nurses' station. She began to explain, "Mr. White rushed Lois to the ER at around 4:20 PM. He said she was helping him prepare dinner. They were simply talking, and then she suddenly fainted. When he carried her to the living room, he noticed droplets of blood on the floor. Immediately, he drove her here for urgent medical attention. She hasn't woken up yet since admission."

Clark could imagine Lois collapsing on the floor and bleeding. The image made him shudder. He didn't want to think about it anymore. He asked, "Do you know what's wrong with her or the baby?"

Dr. Shelton flipped the charts again before answering. She read a few pages then looked up at Clark. "The bleeding was fairly heavy. It says here she must be around twelve or thirteen weeks along. Right now, we have not confirmed anything yet - but we're looking at a few causes, one of which is ectopic pregnancy. That can pose a great danger. If it's not that, we're thinking it may be spontaneous abortion."

Clark looked at the doctor with an expression of fear. "W-what does...what does that mean?"

This was one of the things Nora hated - when she had nothing good to tell to the patient's family. With her eyes full of sorrow, she turned to Clark. "Lois may be miscarrying. She might...lose the baby."

The words made Clark jump from his seat. He shook his head. "No...no..." he murmured, as if trying to convince himself that what he heard was not true.

"Mr. Kent..."

Clark looked at Dr. Shelton. "You have to stop it," he said evenly. He wasn't pleading, he wasn't angry. He was composed and standing straight.

The doctor shook her head. "We can't. All we can do now is wait and see if the bleeding stops or slows. If it doesn't..." She stood up and closed the patient's chart. "When Lois wakes up, we'll know more. For now, I suggest you get some rest, Mr. Kent."

Clark took off his glasses and placed them on the bedside table. Sitting beside the bed where Lois lay sleeping, he cut off all the sounds he could hear - people crying, children screaming. He knew the world needed him, but right now, his family needed him. A part of him wanted to listen in on his unborn child's heartbeat; a part of him feared what he might - or might *not* - hear if he tried.

Lois began to stir.

Clark held her hand and watched her as she opened her eyes. Those hazel eyes he missed. Those bright eyes that seemed to see past his own blue eyes and into his soul. Those warm, loving eyes that were now filling up with tears.

"Clark," Lois said. She had not expected to find him so melancholy. Clark's face had turned a ghostly white color, and his eyes were filled with tears and concern.

He took a deep breath. "Hey," he greeted her.

"Clark, the baby...and Jason..." Lois began, but Clark softly laid his index finger on her lips.

He stood up and planted a light kiss on her forehead, his hand cupping the side of her face. He tipped his head down so that their foreheads touched. "Don't worry about anything just yet," he told her. "Get rest. You need your strength."

Lois didn't answer. She closed her eyes again, taking Clark's advice to rest some more. But she couldn't help wondering whether Clark meant she needed physical strength for herself and the baby - or emotional strength for what may have just happened to the child in her womb.

Clark didn't let go of Lois' hand. He kissed the back of her hand and laid his head on the bed. He was trying hard not to cry.

Lois knew how messed up Clark must have been feeling. Things had been going fine for him - and suddenly everything he had was being taken away. Lois shifted to one side of the bed, giving space for Clark. "Stay with me," she whispered.

Then it happened. Amidst the troubles, the darkness that loomed over them, Lois saw it - the slight movement of Clark's lips that turned into a small smile. His smile, she thought, was enough to spark hope in her. It was enough to make her feel that somehow, things will be all right. And as she felt Clark lie down beside her on the bed, she took his hand in hers. She did not let go even after she had fallen back to sleep.

Clark looked around him and saw nothing but the clouds. He could feel the cold air wrap around him. He could hear the soft *whoosh* of the wind.

"Lois?" he called out.

He looked down at his feet and realized he was not stepping on anything. There was nothing below him, just darkness. "Lois?" he called out again.

Suddenly, he was falling. He could feel himself plummeting down into the shadows. He tried to fly - but nothing happened.

*Why can't I fly?*

"Lois!" he shouted.

There was no answer.

Clark continued to fall. Faster and faster, he fell. He remembered the day he went crashing down to Earth after lifting New Krypton into space. The fear, the panic - he was experiencing it all over again.

"Lois!"

His ears were buzzing with the sound of the strong wind. He couldn't hear anything else. But then a shrill cry penetrated his senses. It was a faint cry - but he recognized it immediately. It was the cry of a baby.

"LOIS!" he kept on calling for her.

And then he felt himself jerk awake. He opened his eyes and saw Lois looking at him worriedly. He rubbed his eyes and put a hand to his chest. He could feel his heart beating strong and fast.

"Hey," Lois said, brushing his hair up and away from his face. "You were having a bad dream. I can tell."

Clark took a deep breath. "Yeah," he replied. He stood and got out of bed. He headed to the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water. He looked at himself in the mirror. The sound of a crying infant was still echoing in his mind. "It was a dream," Clark told himself. "Just a dream."

Twenty minutes later, Clark was hoping he was still only having a bad dream. He had accompanied Lois down to the examination room. The doctor wanted to do an ultrasound to check on the baby.

Lois was scared, but she was not about to let Clark see that. She let her hands rest firmly on her sides, hoping no one would see them shaking. She put on a brave smile as she was introduced to the technician and asked to lie on the bed in the darkened room.

Clark sat beside Lois. He reached out for her hand. It was cold to his touch, and he could feel her hand shaking, but he didn't say a word. He just gave it a gentle squeeze and offered a weak smile at Lois. *We're going to be okay*, he told himself. He wondered how many times he had said it today - he couldn't count anymore.

The technician swabbed gel on Lois' belly and pressed a small microphone-like device against her skin. On the screen, static appeared. It cleared and random black and white shapes.

"Well, the pregnancy isn't in a Fallopian tube, that much we can tell," Dr. Shelton said, her eyes scanning the monitor. "Zoom in on this spot," she added, ordering the technician.

The technician did as she was told. The monitor showed something grainy and white, with a black dot on its middle. It did not look like a baby, but Lois knew that her child was there. When she was pregnant with Jason and the doctor gave her the first Polaroid of her ultrasound, she used to stare long and hard at it, trying to figure out how the doctor could see where the head and the legs and the hands of the fetus were.

The room was quiet, Clark noticed. *Too* quiet. He looked at Lois, who was staring at the screen. Then he turned to the doctor and the technician, who had fallen silent. They were simply staring at the screen, and their faces told Clark that something seemed wrong.

Before Clark could ask, he saw the technician push harder against Lois' belly, rolling the device back and forth. "There we go," she finally said, looking relieved.

The black dot began to pulse steadily. "That's the heartbeat," Dr. Shelton said, smiling at Lois and Clark.

There was a glint of hope in Clark's eyes. "So it's all good, right? That means everything will be alright?"

"We can't say anything for certain, Mr. Kent. Lois is still bleeding heavily. All we can do now is let her stay here overnight, and see what happens from there."

"Just overnight?" Clark asked.

The doctor nodded. She turned to Lois. "If the bleeding hasn't slowed by morning, or if the cramps become more painful, you tell me immediately, okay?"

Lois was too stunned to speak. She nodded. "Can we go now?" she whispered to Clark, her eyes beginning to burn with the tears threatening to fall.

The five minutes that it took for Lois and Clark to reach her hospital room seemed longer. Clark lifted Lois from the wheelchair and set her gently on the bed. He sat on the chair beside the bed, and put his hand on Lois' stomach. Lois covered his hand with hers.

Their eyes met. The look of fear in Clark's cerulean eyes was mirrored in Lois' hazel ones. They were quiet for a moment, but they knew they were both holding back tears, trying to be the stronger one for both of them.

"I'm not letting go of this baby," Lois stated firmly, though her voice was shaking. Then she let herself cry.

When Lois woke up, the room had darkened. She let her eyes adjust to the dimness of the room. She couldn't see Clark, but she felt his hand beside hers. He had fallen asleep on the chair.

Clark was a light sleeper. He felt something stir, and he opened his eyes to see Lois looking at him. "Hi," he said, sitting upright. He reached for the switch near the bed and turned it on. A bedside lamp flickered and shed dim light to the room. He then looked at his wristwatch - 4:40 AM.

Lois patted the side of her bed, inviting Clark to recline beside her. Clark took off his shoes and crawled up on the bed next to her. He circled his arm around her and brought her closer to him. He kissed her on the forehead. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Lois shrugged. "Okay, I guess. No more cramps."

Neither of them said anything after that. "I called Richard," Clark said, attempting to make the tone of his voice light and casual. "He said Jason's okay - but he keeps complaining that Anna still pulls his hair."

Lois smiled feebly. "You didn't tell me how you got him out of the school."

"Well," Clark began, grinning, "what can I say? I have a certain charm that makes criminals go weak in the knees when they see me."

Lois let out a soft laugh. She could always count on Clark to make her feel better. But then she had gotten quiet again. "I thought I would lose..." she murmured, her voice fading. *I thought I would lose Jason*, she was about to say.

Clark lowered his eyes. Just as that moment of happiness had passed, sadness and the harsh reality began to immediately settle in. *Loss* - he was beginning to hate the word. It made his heart beat faster, his breathing shallower. It made his head pound hard, and his whole body shake.

"Clark?" Lois' voice cut through the silence.

Clark turned to look at her. "Yes?"

"What if the baby - ?"

"Don't." The tone of Clark's voice was firm and imposing. "Don't say it, Lois."

Lois looked at him. She was about to say it aloud - say the words neither of them really wanted to hear. A single tear fell down her cheek.

Clark wiped it away with the palm of his hand. He wrapped her more tightly in his arms, letting her head fall on his shoulder. He brushed away the hair on her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"We'll have more babies," he finally said after a long moment of silence.

Lois knew he was acknowledging what might happen. That he was answering, in a less depressing manner, the question she had not finished a while ago. It hurt her to hear him speak so hopelessly, but she also knew it was killing him inside. When you can do everything an ordinary man has dreamt of doing - flying, stopping bullets, becoming invincible - how does it feel to be helpless just like everyone else?

Clark continued. His voice was calm and even, his face serene. "They may not be this one, but they'll be ours. We can have eight more kids to play with Jason, and we'll have a big house and they'll all get their own rooms so they won't fight over who should clean the room and who never fixes the toys."

Lois was crying now. Partly because she was touched that Clark was trying to create an image of the future with her; another part of her was hurting to think that this one baby might not live to enjoy the life she would have dreamt of him or her to have.

"Ten," Lois said when she finally stopped crying.

"Ten? Ten what?" Clark asked.

"Ten babies," Lois answered with a sniff. "I'm planning on a *very* big house."

The farmboy grin Lois had not seen for a long time appeared on Clark's face. "A mansion," he corrected her. "Or maybe I could just let them all sleep on the open field. We have enough space in the cornfields of Smallville for ten babies and Jason. *Eleven kids?* That's how many you want?"

Lois chuckled and nodded. "Yes." After a minute, she spoke up again. "Help me to the bathroom?" Lois requested.

Clark smiled and carried her out of bed and to the bathroom, opening the door for her. "You gonna be alright in there?"

"Clark, I'm a grown woman. I know how to use the toilet."

His intense blue eyes softened. "You know what I mean, Lois."

She gave a small nod. "I know," she replied softly. She took a deep breath. "I can do this."

"I'll be right here - " Clark offered, but Lois cut him short.

"Yeah, I know," she quickly snapped at him, turning around so Clark wouldn't see her eyes filling up with tears.

Clark fell silent. He watched Lois gently close the bathroom door. He went over to sit on the recliner and wait, praying the woman he loved and the baby he so badly wanted would both be okay.

Lois sat on the toilet seat for what seemed like forever. *If the bleeding hasn't slowed by morning...you tell me immediately, okay?* Dr. Shelton's words whirled through Lois' mind.

*If the bleeding hasn't slowed, what do I tell myself?* Lois asked herself. When she was pregnant with Jason, she had read just about every book on pregnancy and birth. She knew the signs, the complications, the things that could happen. But the books never told her how much it would hurt to sit in the bathroom in the wee hours of the morning and wonder if she had lost her baby the night before.

Willing herself not to cry, she lifted up her hospital gown and braced herself for the sight

of another heavily soiled sanitary napkin. She closed her eyes for a second, trying to even her breathing. She opened her eyes and looked down. Then the tears began to fall.

"Clark!"

The bathroom door burst open and Clark came in, rushing to Lois and kneeling beside her. There was a look of terror on his face. "What is it? Are you okay?"

The tears wouldn't stop. Lois laid her head on Clark's shoulder. And then she kissed him full on the lips. "Make that twelve kids," she said between sobs. She pointed to the sanitary napkin she had thrown aside - there was only a light spot of blood on it, and she wasn't bleeding anymore. "This one's staying."

## Chapter 30: The Good Life

The apartment was filled with the sound of laughter. Richard was on the floor, with Anna and Jason on top of him. The kids were hitting him - roughly - with pillows.

"C'mon, Anna, we have to kill the monster!" Jason exclaimed, hitting Richard square on the face.

"Ow!" Richard cried.

Jason froze and looked at Richard with worry. Anna did the same.

Richard's grimace turned into a huge grin, and he picked up the two kids on each of his arms. "Roar!" he bellowed, "The monster lives!"

"Aaahh!" Anna shrieked. "No monster!"

"Arrgh! This is a job for Superman!" Jason shouted, trying to break free of Richard's grip. He succeeded, and ran off to get a pillow. He ran back to Richard and hit him on the leg.

"Don't worry, Anna, I'll save you!"

"Sup-man!" Anna called out to Jason. "Help! Help!"

Richard roared again. "You can't beat me, Superman!"

"Oh yeah? Take that, monster!" he hit Richard on his stomach. "And that!" Jason tossed the pillow, which hit Richard's forehead.

"Ugh, noooo," Richard moaned, pretending to slowly fall down on the carpeted floor. "I...can't...lose..."

He laid down on the floor and let go of Anna. The little girl ran to Jason, who took her hand. "No more monster?" Anna asked.

The kids quietly tiptoed to Richard, who had his eyes closed. Jason knelt in front of Richard. "Ha! Superman saved the day again!"

"Yay! We save!" Anna said, jumping up and down, looking triumphantly at Jason.

"Roar!" Richard growled, sitting up and grabbing both children down on the floor. The three of them were rolling on the floor, laughing.

*Did you ever think we would be like this forever - preparing dinner and looking after the kids?* Lois words swirled in Richard's mind. He looked at Anna and Jason, clearly enjoying a simple game of pretend with him. He was also having the time of his life just rolling on the floor with the children. It was the life he had always wanted to have.

The phone rang, and Anna was quick to pick it up. "Hello?" she said.

"Hello? Anna? This is Uncle Clark. May I speak to your daddy, please?"

"Hi, Uncle Clark," Anna greeted.

At the mention of Clark's name, Jason immediately stood up and ran to Anna. He grabbed the phone from her. "I want to speak to Daddy."

"I talk to Uncle Clark," Anna retorted, tightly holding the phone.

"Give it to me, Anna," Jason demanded.

"No."

"Give me!"

"I won't!" Anna snapped, pulling Jason's hair.

"Ow!" Jason exclaimed. He tried to grab the phone again, and when he couldn't, he shouted near the mouthpiece, "Daddy! Anna pulled my hair!"

Richard could see the escalating argument and decided to act quickly. He grabbed the phone from the children. Being stronger than both, it was easy for him. "Hey, Clark. Can you hold on a minute?"

"Uh, sure," Clark replied, aware of what was happening with the kids.

Richard took Anna and led her to one corner of the living room. "Sit there," he firmly. "I'll call you when I'm done, and then we'll talk."

Anna was pouting. She didn't say a word.

Taking Jason's hand, Richard took the boy to the other corner of the room. "And you stay here, you got that? I'll just talk to your daddy, and then I'll get back to you and Anna. Okay?"

"Yes, Uncle Richard," the boy mumbled.

Richard took a moment to look at Jason. It was the first time he heard the six-year-old call him 'Uncle.' He sighed and went back to the phone. "Sorry, Clark - I had a little trouble with the kids."

"No problem," Clark replied with a soft laugh. "I just wanted to check up on you and the kids - I guess I got my answer."

Richard laughed. "Yeah, it's chaos around here. How's Lois?"

The tone of Clark's voice changed. "She's, uh...she's okay. We're waiting until morning to know about the baby..."

Richard heard Clark's voice faltering. He quickly changed the subject. "Hey, do you want me to call Perry and tell him you and Lois won't be in the office tomorrow?"

"Yeah, that would be great. Thanks."

"Alright," Richard said, his eyes wandering to the two children sitting each in a corner of the room. "I have to get back to the tykes. Jason?"

Jason looked up.

"How about you tell Daddy good night?" Richard offered.

Jason ran to Richard and took the phone from him.

"G'night, Daddy," Jason said. "Is Mommy with you? Can I talk to her? Why can't I go home with you tonight?"

Clark sighed. "Mommy's sleeping, buddy. We're not at home right now. We're at the hospital."

"Why?"

Clark hated to have to explain to his son over the phone. "How about you come here tomorrow, okay? For now, just be good to Richard and get some rest, buddy."

Jason was quiet for a second. "Okay, Daddy. Give Mommy a kiss for me. And tell her I said I love her and I miss her very, very much."

"I will, kiddo. That would make her feel better."

Jason returned the phone to Richard, then went back to his corner.

"You mind saying good night to Anna, too, Clark?"

Clark laughed. "No, give the phone to her."

"Anna, come here," Richard called to his little girl.

Anna shuffled to Richard and took the phone. "'Night, Uncle Clark," she said.

"Good night, Anna. Be good for your Daddy, okay?"

"Kay." Anna then gave back to Richard the phone and went to her corner.

"We'll drop by tomorrow morning for a visit, Clark."

"Lois would love that. Thank you, Richard."

When Richard put the receiver down, he sat on the living room couch and looked tiredly at the kids. Anna looked at him curiously, as if wondering what he was thinking. Jason's eyes were on the floor. "Alright, you two. Get over here," Richard called, patting the sides of the couch, inviting the kids to sit beside him.

Anna and Jason quickly scuttled toward the couch and sat on either side of Richard.

Richard laughed as the kids scrambled to get close to Richard. "There's enough space for both of you," Richard said. He put his arms around the kids.

"Do you understand why I had to put you in the corner?" he asked after Anna and Jason had settled down.

Jason nodded.

"Because we fight with phone," Anna answered.

Richard nodded. "That's right. Anything else?"

"I shouted at Anna," Jason mumbled.

"I pull Jasey's hair," added Anna.

Richard grinned. Hearing the children speak up about what they did wrong, Richard thought, was a sign of good parenting - even at their ages, they understood what is right and what is wrong. "Okay," Richard said, heaving a deep sigh, "let's get a bunch of things straight."

The kids sat up, ready to listen.

"It's alright if you both want to talk on the phone," Richard began, "but you need to learn how to share - because there's only one phone, okay?"

Both children nodded.

"Jason, is there something you'd like to say to Anna?"

Jason looked at the blond little girl. "Sorry, Anna."

Anna smiled. "Me sorry, too, Jasey." She jumped down the couch and went to Jason, giving the boy a hug. Jason embraced her as well.

Richard watched the two children's interaction. *If only we could all be like these little kids*, he thought to himself. It had always been a wonder to him how children are quick to forgive and forget. *Why do we lose this when we get older?*

His thoughts were broken when he felt two pairs of small arms hugging him. Jason and Anna both said, "We're sorry."

Richard laughed and picked up the two, settling them again on the couch. "Speaking of sharing, I don't mean just the phone, alright? You both share your toys and your snacks with each other. I hope I won't hear about Jason grabbing this and Anna taking that, okay?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Yes, Uncle Richard."

The children's answers were good enough for Richard. He sighed. "Alright, then. How about we go out for pizza tonight?"

A sense of peace came over Richard as he heard Anna and Jason squeal in delight, running off to Anna's room to grab a change of clothes. They were chanting, "Pizza! Pizza!" Yes, Richard thought, *this is something I'd like to get used to.*

## Chapter 31: Where We Started

One of the things Richard learned about taking care of kids was that, as a parent, you tend to wake up in the morning with any of the following: pink nail polish on your toes, green face paint on your cheeks, small muddy tire tracks on your shirt, or, simply a very painful backache. And today, as Richard tried to sit up in bed, he had to bite his tongue to keep himself from moaning aloud in pain. His back was killing him. *I am never going to play the monster again*, he promised himself.

When he was finally able to sit up, he looked around him. It took his mind a moment to register the fact that he wasn't in his bedroom. Instead, he was on a tiny pink bed, with stuffed bears surrounding him. He was in Anna's room.

"Anna?" he called out, wondering where his little girl was. "Anna, honey?"

He rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms. *Where could the kids be?* he thought. "Jason?" he called out.

Ignoring the pain in his back, he got out of bed and made his way out of the room. "Kids?"

Soon enough, he got his answer. He heard giggling coming from the kitchen.

"He'll like this," he heard Jason say.

"Put this, too," Anna's voice piped in.

Wondering what the children were up to, Richard craned his neck to see what was going on in the kitchen. He caught a glimpse of Anna's blond head and Jason's dark one, pressed together as they busied themselves over a plate of something Richard couldn't see. Richard smiled to himself - at least the tykes weren't fighting. Knowing that the kids were okay, Richard went back to Anna's room and tried to make himself comfortable as he pretended to sleep.

Before long, the sound of the pitter-patter of small feet echoed through the hallway.

"Daddy?"

"Uncle Richard?"

Richard pretended to have been startled by their voices. "Huh? Wha - ?" He stifled a yawn. "Hey, you guys. You're up early."

"We made you breakfast," Jason said proudly.

Anna presented the plate to her daddy. "Eat, Daddy."

Richard looked at what the kids had prepared. There were two slices of bread, a spoonful of butter, and jelly on the side. And then there was something thick and sunny-yellow on the side. It took a moment for Richard to realize that it was a raw egg. "Er...thanks," he said quietly, his eyes never leaving the yellow goo on the plate.

"Do you like it?" Jason asked, his voice hopeful.

Richard looked at the boy and the little girl beside him. He smiled - it didn't matter that the egg wasn't cooked, or that there was probably a big mess in the kitchen waiting to be cleaned. At that moment, the only thought that crossed Richard's mind was the fact that the kids made him breakfast - it was one of the sweetest gestures he had ever received, and it came from a six-year-old and a four-year-old.

Richard looked from Anna to Jason. "I like it very much. How about I make *you* some breakfast? Come on, kids."

Clark shifted as he felt the rays of sunshine warm his face. Upon opening his eyes, the first thing he saw was Lois, still sleeping soundly. Her head was on his chest. He smiled - he

loved waking up next to Lois, to see her hazel eyes brighten as they opened, to watch her stifle a yawn as she sat up on bed.

The events of last night weren't lost on Clark. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and focused his super-hearing on the heartbeat he wanted to hear the most at the moment - he counted the quick beats of his unborn child's heart. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least the worst was over.

Lois shifted, snuggling closer to Clark.

Smiling, Clark wrapped his arms around Lois, bringing her closer to him. He kissed the top of her head and caressed the side of her face.

"Mmm," Lois moaned, her eyes still closed. "Shouldn't you be somewhere right now? Like in the office, or halfway across the Atlantic saving someone?"

Clark shook his head. "I've been keeping an ear open - there's nothing the police can't handle. I don't have to go."

Lois opened her eyes and looked at him mischievously. "Is someone playing hooky today?"

Clark chuckled. "*No*," he said defensively. Then he joked, "I really don't have school today, *Mom*."

They spent a few minutes laughing. Lois couldn't stop herself from giggling. She would laugh at any little thing she noticed - most of the time, it was something Clark would say or do.

"You know," Clark said with a sigh, "I'm starting to think you find my dorky side charming and - "

He wasn't able to finish his sentence as Lois burst out in another laughing fit. Clark raised his hands in surrender, letting Lois continue laughing as the two of them sat together in the hospital bed, sharing breakfast.

Richard arrived with Jason and Anna a little past ten o'clock in the morning. They could hear the sound of laughter and cheery voices coming in from Lois' room. He knocked twice and was welcomed by Clark.

"Hey, guys," Clark greeted them, kneeling down to hug both Anna and Jason.

"Jason!" Lois exclaimed, her arms outstretched to her son. "I missed you, sweetie."

Jason ran up to his mommy and gave her a big, wet kiss on the cheek. He put his arms around her. "I missed you, too, Mommy. Are you sick?"

Lois grinned and shook her head. "Nope. I'm all good. The nice doctors just wanted to check how me and the baby are doing."

At the mention of 'baby,' Jason's eyes lit up. "Am I gonna have a little brother? I want a little brother, Mommy."

Lois and Clark exchanged looks. Lois' eyes questioned Clark. Clark simply shrugged - he was keeping his promise to Lois not to peek and see what the baby's gender was. *Oh dear, if this one turned out to be a girl, what would Jason feel?* Clark thought.

Lois brushed the boy's hair back. "We didn't ask the doctor what we're having, sweetheart. It's gonna be a surprise. You like surprises, don't you?"

Jason furrowed his brows. "Well...I guess."

Clark breathed a sigh of relief.

"But I want a brother!" Jason piped in again with glee, making Clark and Lois look at each other and laugh at their little boy.

By that afternoon, Dr. Shelton had given Lois permission to go home. "But you have to take things easy," she said. "No stressful work, no staying up late. Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Make sure you get adequate rest."

Lois nodded to all the doctor's orders. She just wanted to get out of the hospital as soon as possible. She wanted to go home.

The people at the office had heard about what happened to Lois. Flowers and fruit baskets and get-well-soon cards littered across her hospital room. There were other cards, too - ones that had "We're sorry" written all over. Apparently, the people at the office felt ashamed of their past actions and were now trying to make amends to Lois and Clark.

Perry took time out of the office to visit. "Make sure you get back on your feet soon, Lane," he grunted. Then he turned to Clark before leaving. "Kent - you've got to be one hell of a lucky guy - you haven't even been in the office for twenty-four hours and you asked for another leave of absence again. You owe me two articles for this - and one more interview with Superman. That last one you did sold millions."

Clark and Lois just laughed off Perry's words. They knew that deep down, Perry cared very much about them - they were practically his family. He just really wasn't the type to say affectionate words straight out.

Evening came.

Jason had called from Richard's apartment to say good night to both Clark and Lois. By this time, the two of them were lying on the hospital bed, cuddling each other. Clark moved closer to Lois, spooning her from behind. His hand traced the curve of the side of Lois' waist, then moved to her tummy.

Lois' hand joined Clark's. They crossed their fingers together on top of her stomach. "I'm going home tomorrow," she declared, the excitement evident in her voice.

Clark smiled, then lightly kissed her shoulder. "*We* are going home tomorrow," he corrected her. "I'm glad. I don't think I can spend another night seeing you in a hospital bed."

"Ah, but you *like* seeing me in bed," Lois said teasingly.

Clark laughed. "Why, yes. Yes, I do - preferably in *my* bed."

They both laughed. Then Lois spoke up. "I love you."

They laid together in silence for a few minutes, until Clark sat up and went down the bed. He wrapped Lois in the thick, warm hospital blanket.

"Clark," Lois began, "what are you planning?"

He grinned. "Shh," he said, gently laying a finger on Lois' lips. "I'm kidnapping you."

When Clark was sure that Lois was warm and settled, he spun around, changed into Superman, and then took Lois in his arms. Together, they made their way out of the hospital room through the open window.

*"Would you guys mind if I take my son out to town?" Clark asked Lois and Richard earlier this morning, when Richard had brought the kids to visit Lois.*

*Lois and Richard, who were both busy leafing through Anna's adoption papers, simply nodded. Richard was told by Child Services that the processing of the papers were going well - so far. As long as he complied with the legal terms - regular visits with the social worker, health reports to the agency and such - the adoption would go smoothly.*

*"Come on, Jason," Clark said, holding out his hand to his son. Jason and Anna were on the floor, drawing pictures with Anna. Jason stood up.*

*"But..." Anna protested. She didn't want Jason to go.*

*Clark knelt down and faced Anna. "Don't worry, kiddo," he assured her. "Uncle Clark and Jason will be back soon. And then we can all draw pictures together, okay?"*

*Anna looked at Clark, as if she were about to cry. Then she bit her lip. "Promise?"*

*"I promise."*

*Together, Clark and Jason took a cab to downtown Metropolis.*

*"Where are we going, Daddy?" Jason asked, looking out at the colorful stores that lined the streets.*

*Just as Clark was about to answer, the taxi stopped. "We're here," he told his son.*

*They entered the jewelry shop. Jason's eyes grew wide at the sight of so many shining objects.*

*"Don't touch anything, Jason," Clark said sternly.*

*"Why are we here?" his son asked.*

*Clark knelt down to Jason's level. "Jason, you know how much I love Mommy, right?"*

*Jason nodded.*

*Clark smiled. "I want us to be a family - a real family. And for that to happen, I'm going to ask Mommy to marry me. Do you understand that?"*

*The boy nodded again.*

*"And I was hoping you'd help me pick the prettiest ring to give to Mommy, so that she'll say yes when I ask her to marry me."*

*The grin on Jason's face was brighter than any gleaming diamond in the jewelry store.*

*"Okay, Daddy. Let's get married to Mommy."*

*Clark and Jason chose among a dozen engagement rings. Clark was becoming nervous as he looked over from one ring to another. It wasn't the price tags that scared him - he had saved up enough for the perfect ring - but rather, it was the idea that once he buys the ring, it would make everything real. Jason, on the other hand, seemed to be having a grand time.*

*"There, Daddy," he said, pointing to the last set of engagement ring on the counter.*

*"Your boy knows how to pick the good one," the old man behind the counter winked at Clark. He showed them the ring Jason had picked out.*

*"This one's white gold, see?" the man explained, holding the band to Clark. "Eighteen karat white gold. These three larger diamonds in the middle symbolize the past, present and future. It's got seventeen accent diamonds surrounding it. If you're too nervous to ask her, let the diamonds do the talking. This will sweep her off her feet."*

*Clark looked at the ring for a moment, mesmerized by its beauty. He knew Lois deserved the best ring, and this was it. He turned to Jason. "What do you think, buddy? You think Mommy will love this?"*

*Jason thought for a moment. "I think," he said, "Mommy will say yes."*

*They flew across the darkened city of Metropolis, looking down at the dancing lights of the houses and buildings of the city. Lois' hand traveled to Clark's chest, and she realized he wasn't wearing the suit underneath his open-collared shirt. "You really *are* playing hooky, aren't you?" she playfully accused him. "Superman's going to get detention if he keeps skipping his duties, especially during nights like tonight."*

*"Tonight," Clark told her, his lips almost brushing against her ear, "tonight, I am yours, Lois. Yours, and yours alone."*

*They landed on the hard, concrete floor on the Daily Planet rooftop. Clark changed back into his casual clothes. The full moon was glowing in the cloudless sky, illuminating the beauty of Lois' face. She looked questioningly at Clark. "This is your hideout, Mr. Kidnapper?"*

Clark smiled at her. He placed his hand softly on her cheek. "***This*** is where we started, Lois. ***This*** is where it all began - you and me, our love. I was hoping that ***this*** is also where we can begin *our* life. You and me, Jason and the baby - *our life*."

"Our...life..." Lois repeated his words softly. She looked into his deep blue eyes, letting herself drown in the deep cerulean pools. She could see it clearly now, the love this man had for her. The love he had offered her since the beginning. The love that never left her even during the last six years of his absence.

"I know we just got back together, I know it seems like I'm doing this out of responsibility for the baby - but believe me, it's more than that. More than anything, I'm doing this because I love you. I love you very much. We've gone through enough trials - as Superman and Lois Lane, as simply Lois and Clark. I don't want to waste another minute without you in my life."

There was only silence. They stood looking at each other.

"Make this *real* for me, for us, for our children," Clark said. He took out the dark velvet box and presented the shining ring to Lois. "Marry me, Lois Lane."

## Chapter 32: Finding Love in the Planet

The hurried footsteps across the marble floors belonged to Jimmy Olsen. With his camera in one hand and a gift-wrapped box in the other, he made his way across the bullpen and towards the office entrance. "Excuse me - Oops, sorry - Ow!" he muttered as he bumped one colleague and then another.

It was still early - the office building had just opened - and yet the newsroom was already full of activity. Journalists, assistant editors, and photographers were all moving about. A pair of interns was hanging a banner across the office entrance. Some women from Lifestyle and Entertainment were busy fixing a table full of gifts and colorful boxes. The break room was laden with a variety of dishes.

While the rest of the office was busy preparing for what seemed to be a joyous occasion, Lois and Clark were taking their time walking up the steps of the Daily Planet building.

"Are you sure about this, Lois?" Clark asked, pushing his thick-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose. He took Lois' hand and guided her up the steps. "I mean, if you're not feeling well - "

Lois cut him off. "Clark, I'm pregnant - not invalid. I'm okay."

Clark knew better than to get Lois ticked off this early in the morning, and on her first day back to work. He knew she was itching to get back to the office after being gone for five days. He was still worried about her and their baby, though he had kept an ear open to hear Lois' and the baby's beating hearts.

Lois pushed Clark's hand away from her. She quickly strode off until she reached the top flight of the stairs and turned back to Clark. "Look, I'll be okay, Clark. I am fine. I will keep the doctor's orders in mind. Besides, you should be thankful I haven't punched you yet for listening in on me and the baby - "

"I'm not listening in on you!" Clark exclaimed defensively.

Lois stared him down.

Clark could feel himself shrinking. Only Lois Lane had that kind of effect on the Man of Steel. Clark thought she was worst than kryptonite. He swallowed hard. "Okay..." he muttered, his eyes bowed down. His dark hair flopped down on his forehead. He shrugged. "So maybe I did listen in...a little bit."

Lois continued to stare at him.

The timid reporter bit his lower lip and let out a huff. "Fine...I listened in *a lot*."

The woman in front of him raised an eyebrow at him.

Clark threw his hands up in surrender. "Yeah, you're right. I'm tuned in to you all the time," he said, his voice now a pitch higher and the tip of his ears going red.

Lois was impassive for a few seconds. Then she smiled brightly at Clark.

Clark shook his head. He smiled sheepishly at Lois.

Lois began to laugh. So did Clark. Soon, they were both laughing on the steps of the building entrance.

Clark pulled Lois closer. He wrapped his arms around her waist. Leaning down, he kissed her.

Feeling Clark's soft lips brush against hers, Lois lifted her arms and encircled them around Clark's neck. Her swollen tummy made it difficult for them to be closer to each other, but neither she nor Clark cared.

Just as they were getting more passionate in their kiss, a familiar voice interrupted them.

"Will you two *please* get a room?" the familiar voice of Richard rang loud in the open

square.

Lois groaned, breaking the kiss. She glared at Richard. "Will you *please* go away?" she answered back.

Richard grinned. "Good morning," he greeted them, ignoring Lois' comment.

"It was," Lois said bitterly, "until *you* ruined it."

Clark shook Richard's hand. "We'll see you up in the office, Richard."

Richard nodded. "It's good to have both of you back. See you guys upstairs." He had taken a few steps forward when he turned to Lois and Clark again. "Oh - and uh, I hope you don't go pulling that elevator stunt again. At least not if you want the bullpen to have something to talk about. Again." He gave them a wink. He laughed as he went away and entered the building.

Clark shook his head. Lois tried to stifle a laugh, but in the end, she and Clark were laughing again. They were both remembering their kiss inside the elevator as they made their way to the building entrance.

As the newly engaged couple was waiting at the first floor for the elevators, Richard had stepped out of the elevator upon reaching the 35th floor and rushed to the entrance of the office. "They're coming," he announced to everyone in the bullpen, the excitement evident in his voice.

The whole office began to move, taking their places near the doors. They put smiles on their faces and waited for Lois and Clark to arrive. Everyone had gone quiet, their eyes on the numbers lighting up above the elevator doors, indicating which floor the elevator cab was.

*9...15...20...*

*26...30...32...33...34...*

*DING!*

The elevator doors finally opened at the 35th floor. Just as they practiced, everyone in the bullpen collectively greeted, "Welcome back, Lois and - "

The voices died down as soon as they saw the people who had stepped out of the elevator.

"*Chief?*" Jimmy exclaimed, his voice echoing across the suddenly-noiseless bullpen.

Perry looked at everyone with a baffled expression. "Well, who were you expecting? The Easter Bunny?"

Beside him, Lois chuckled. She looked at the banner hanging across the newsroom:  
*Welcome back, Lois and Clark!*

Richard cleared his throat. "Uh...wh-where's Clark?"

Lois shrugged. "He had to go."

Perry grunted. "He stepped off at the 7th. Said he forgot to feed Jason's pet monkey. I didn't even know you guys bought the boy a monkey - "

"But Jason doesn't have a monkey," Richard quickly pointed out.

Lois glowered at Richard, and the assistant editor immediately realized what Clark's excuse meant - someone needed rescuing.

"*Until yesterday,*" Richard hastily added, trying to cover up for his mistake. "Right - Jason's monkey. You guys bought him yesterday, right, Lois?"

Lois forced a smile at Richard. "Right."

An awkward silence followed. It was Jimmy who first spoke up. "Well, Lois, we - that is, everyone in the Planet - wanted to welcome you back to work. We thought you needed some cheering up, you know?" He handed her the gift he had been carrying.

Lois was touched by her colleagues gesture. She took the gift from Jimmy and gave him a warm hug. "Oh, thanks Jimmy," she said. She turned to the rest of the office. "And thanks, all of you - from both me and Clark. You didn't have to. I mean, I've only been gone for less than a week."

Marcia Simmons replied, "Well, we all missed you and Clark, Lois. We thought it would be nice to give you a warm welcome back."

Lois gave a grateful smile to Marcia. She knew there was more to their warm welcome than the reason they had given her. Most of them were still feeling guilty spreading rumors about Lois.

As the rest of the office greeted Lois and offered her well wishes, many of them noticed the shining band on Lois' finger. Learning from their mistakes, none of them said a word to one another or to Lois. But almost all of them exchanged curious looks.

*DING!*

The elevator doors opened once again and Clark strode out of it, entering the bullpen. Everyone's eyes turned to him.

Clark saw the large banner hanging from the ceiling. He also saw the mountain of gifts near his desk, and he could make out the gift tags reading *To Lois and Clark - welcome back to the Planet*. He only had time to register what was going on before he heard someone calling his name.

"C.K.!" Jimmy called out to him excitedly. He was walking towards Clark's direction.

Clark waved at him and gave a goofy grin. "Hey, Jimmy."

"So, how's the monkey?" asked the photographer.

Clark looked at him blankly. He blinked. "What monkey?"

"The monkey. You know, Jason's monkey."

Clark understood, and his eyes went wide and bright. A goofy grin spread on his face. "Oh, right," he said. "*That* monkey. He's, uh...he's g-good. Ate lots of, uh...bananas."

By mid-morning, the office was in chaos. Everyone was rushing out to follow leads, the phones were ringing off the hook following one interview after another, the sounds of clicks and taps on the keyboards were nonstop.

Lunch had finally come.

Clark stood up and made his way to Lois' cubicle. "How're you feeling?" he asked her.

Lois' face brightened. "Good. It's nice to be back at work."

Clark held out his hand to her as an invitation. "There's lunch for us at the break room. Jimmy said everyone's there."

"You think it's time we tell everybody?" asked Lois thoughtfully.

Clark paused for a moment. "Yeah," he said, letting out a sigh, "let's get things cleared up."

Hand in hand, Lois and Clark made their way to the break room, where everyone was waiting for them.

As soon as Lois and Clark entered the break room, the loud chatter gradually died down. Every eye in the room turned to the couple. Even Perry was sitting at the head of the table, instead of spending his lunch in the Editor-in-Chief office as he usually did.

Lois gave Clark's hand a gentle squeeze. Clark cleared his throat. He looked around at his colleagues. Despite having his share of attention in the office in the past months, he was still not used to everyone looking at him. "Um..." he began, his high-pitched voice shaky, "I, uh,

w-wasn't able to say thank you, uh, this morning. So I'd like t-to, well, say...er, thank you for the, uh, the warm welcome back to the Planet."

The many journalists in the newsroom all gave Clark their best smiles.

Clark kept his hold on Lois' hand, and he felt the cool, sleek ring on his fiancée's finger. The mild-mannered reporter looked at Lois. When their eyes met, Clark felt himself filling with a sense of warmth and comfort. He was standing beside the woman he loved, and that was all he needed. He grinned at everyone around him. "Alright, um, well...Lois a-and I have some, uh, news...that we thought you should know," Clark continued. "First, uh...Lois is pregnant."

"Obviously," Perry quipped. The whole room erupted in laughter.

The bespectacled reporter bowed and shook his head. "Right, Chief. And, well, I'm... I'm the, uh..." Clark lost his voice for a moment. He took a deep breath. "I'm the baby's father."

The room fell silent. If the journalists were surprised at this piece of news, they didn't show it in their faces. Most of them offered supportive smiles at Lois and Clark.

After a few seconds of silence had passed, Clark spoke again. "And another thing," he began. He looked at Lois and smiled - for a moment, it wasn't his usual farm boy grin, but instead, the confident smile of Superman. He turned to his officemates. "Lois and I are engaged."

Lois and Clark didn't know what reaction to expect from their colleagues. A part of them were thinking the whole room would burst out laughing, as if the news was a joke. But instead, they didn't hear anything from anybody in the break room.

Then Perry White began to applaud.

Following the Editor-in-Chief's lead, everyone began to clap, smiling and congratulating Lois and Clark on their engagement. Jimmy was clicking away with his camera, capturing every moment of the joyous occasion. Some of the young interns were cheering and whistling.

The engaged couple looked at each other and then at everyone in the break room. They saw Perry standing up at the head of the table, looking at them like a proud father. Lois mouthed a silent "Thank you" to the Chief.

The next day, on the front page of the Daily Planet's Lifestyle section, there was an announcement of the engagement, and a photo of Lois and Clark looking happy and very much in love. The announcement came with a caption: *Finding Love in the Planet*.

## Chapter 33: Looking at Daddy

*Craaaaack.*

Clark looked down the wooden floor of his apartment and the crushed remains of one of Jason's toys stuck between his toes. In the dim light, he could make out a fragment of a red boot and a blue arm - it was Jason's Superman action figure.

*I just stepped on myself*, Clark thought to himself. Hoping his son was still asleep, he immediately picked up the bits and pieces of the toy Superman and wrapped it in a small paper bag, then threw it in the trash can. He sighed, and prayed that Jason would not notice that it was missing.

He made his way to the kitchen and began to make breakfast, occasionally listening in to the heartbeats of his three favorite people in the world - Lois, Jason and the baby. He smiled as he heard the rhythmic beating of their hearts.

Since the engagement two weeks ago, Clark had invited Lois and Jason to move in with him in his apartment in the city. "It's not much, and it's pretty small, but I can't sleep one more night in the house given to you by your former fiancé - even if said ex-fiancé happens to be a good friend of mine," Clark had reasoned out to Lois. His fiancée simply smiled at him. Two days later, Lois had put the riverside house for sale and agreed to move in with Clark.

As the apartment had just one bedroom, all three of them had to share the room. Clark liked it - he enjoyed having Lois and Jason close to him. Another thing he liked about all of them in one room was the fact that he didn't have to leave Lois all alone when he had to go away in the middle of the night. Jason kept his mother company, something Lois found comforting. "I've got Jason and our baby looking after me when you're off on another rescue mission," Lois said. "My babies are baby-sitting me, can you believe that?"

During these sorts of mornings, when Clark had the luxury of waking up beside Lois and Jason instead of flying in to see them ready for work and school, Clark liked being the family man. Today, he was preparing a nice, big breakfast for them - eggs, bacon, French toast, and triangle waffles especially for Jason. There was also orange juice and milk ready at the table.

*Knock, knock.*

Clark knew, even before he had opened the door, who was knocking. He had abandoned the bacon to greet two other important people in his life. He smiled as he opened the door for his guests.

Two pairs of bright blue eyes were staring up at Clark.

"G'morning, Uncle Clark!" Anna's cheerful voice greeted Clark. The little girl threw herself around Clark's pajama-clad legs, hugging him tight.

Clark chuckled. He picked up the little girl. "Hey, Anna. Good morning to you, too." Clark had always been amazed at how Anna could keep his two identities separate. The first time the girl had seen him, he was Superman. But she knew better than to call him by that name when other people were around. He had always been 'Uncle Clark' to her. When he had asked Richard how he did it, the other man simply replied, "It's Daddy magic. See, I got superpowers, too, farm boy."

Richard shook Clark's hand as greeting. He held up a big paper bag. "We come bearing gifts," he said, grinning.

Clark smiled as he took the bag and looked inside. "Hmm, bagels. After feeding off *our* breakfast for days, you finally got some sense to bring food to share. Good for you, Richard."

He let the pair enter the apartment, helping Anna to hang her coat on the rack. Both she and Richard were bundled in their jackets. The cold was beginning to settle in. Winter was

getting nearer.

On most mornings like this one, Richard and Anna dropped by Clark's apartment to spend breakfast with them. It had become a usual occurrence that Clark always made sure to prepare breakfast for them as well.

"Well," Richard said with a smirk, "I figured it's all we're going to eat today, since..." He sniffed around. "...I can smell your bacon burning."

Clark's eyes widened. "*What?* Oh, golly..." He ran off to the kitchen and used his super-breath to put out the growing fire on the pan as Richard and Anna watched him, laughing to themselves.

*I'll never get used to Superman saying 'golly,'* Richard thought to himself. He watched as Clark managed to get the flaming bacon onto a platter. "Remind me not to eat that. You used super-breath - ugh, that's got the essence of Clark on it."

"What's got the essence of Clark on it?" Lois' voice piped in from behind them. "Hello, Richard. Hi there, sweetie." She gave Richard and Anna each a kiss on the cheek. Then she went over to Clark and lightly kissed his lips.

"The bacon - Clark *breathed* on it," Richard replied, making Lois scrunch up her nose at Clark. Richard watched as Lois settled herself on her seat at the table. She was practically glowing. Pregnancy was doing her some good. After setting Anna down on a chair, he took a seat beside his daughter. Jason came bounding up to them from the bedroom, still dressed in his striped blue pajamas. After kissing Lois, Richard and Clark, he sat at the circular table.

"Mommy, have you seen my Superman toy?" Jason asked.

Beside him, Clark sputtered the orange juice he had just been drinking, making Anna giggle. Lois looked at her fiancé curiously, and she knew Clark enough to know that his reaction meant he had something to do with the missing toy.

"I'm not sure, honey," Lois said, brushing up Jason's long brown hair. "We'll try to look for it later, okay?"

Across from Clark, Richard noticed the other man's uneasiness and had an idea as to what must've happened with Jason's toy. Seizing the chance to get Clark into a bit of harmless trouble, he suggested to Jason, "Hey, Tiger, I think maybe your Daddy knows where your toy is."

Clark glowered at Richard, who was trying not to burst out laughing. Clark found his son's eyes looking up hopefully at him. He muttered, "I...I, uh...Jason, sorry but I have no...no, um, idea where your toy is." He breathed in deeply, and in a much more stern tone, he said, "If you did what I told you about keeping your toys in your toy chest, then maybe Superman wouldn't have gone missing."

Richard smirked, and Lois was beginning to bite her lip to keep from laughing. Clark gave the two adults an I-can't-believe-you-find-this-amusing look. Clark shrugged at his son and told him coolly, "Besides, why would you need a toy when you've got the real thing right here?" He puffed out his chest, trying to impress his son.

Both Richard and Lois burst out laughing. Richard shook his head. "Smooth move, Kent. I'll give you that."

The rest of the morning was spent talking over their latest assignments on the Planet, Jason's recent participation in a school play, Anna's almost-finished adoption process, and their plans for Thanksgiving. The Kent apartment was like any other home, full of laughter and love.

The burnt bacon was left on the table, untouched.

Jason was having a nightmare.

He was running - running as fast as his short legs could take him. Everything was dark, and he felt cold.

"Mommy! Daddy!" he called out, but no one would answer.

He continued to run in the dark. It didn't matter where he was going, he just wanted to get out of the darkness.

"Mommy! Daddy! Help me!"

He could feel a cold, invisible hand creeping up behind him. He felt himself wrapped in the cold, dark space.

"Mommy! Daddy!"

"Better?" Clark asked as he fluffed Lois' pillow and set it closer to the back of her head.

Lois smiled. "Much better."

It was one of those nights that Clark actually managed to spend at home with Lois. The world was peaceful, although he heard people calling out to him once or twice, but then he'd hear the sound of sirens following shortly.

They were on the living room couch, relaxing and enjoying each other's company.

Lois tugged on Clark's white shirt, asking him to move closer to her. She liked it when he was *this* near. He always made her feel safe and that everything was going to be okay.

"Thanks, Clark."

"For what?" asked Clark, taking her hand and pulling it close to his lips. He gave her hand a soft kiss.

"For everything. I've never felt this happy in such a long time."

Her statement made Clark smile. "I like seeing you happy."

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois, and Lois snuggled closer to Clark. He let her head rest on his shoulder, and he kissed the top of her head. They stayed like that in silence for a moment.

Jason couldn't breathe. He tried to keep on running, but he didn't know where else to go. He couldn't see anything in the dark.

"Mommy! Daddy!"

As Clark laid beside Lois in bed, he sensed that something was wrong. He didn't know what it was, but his instincts told him something wasn't right. "Something's wrong," he whispered to himself.

Lois looked up at him. "What did you say, Clark?"

But Clark didn't answer. He furrowed his brows, trying to concentrate. He listened in on Lois' heartbeat. Then on the baby's. And then...

*Jason.*

"Jason's heart is beating too fast," Clark said aloud.

"But he's just sleeping," Lois replied. "I put him to bed early. He said he wasn't feeling well."

Using his x-ray vision, Clark scanned the bedroom. He could see Jason twisting and turning, beads of sweat forming near his temples. His breathing was labored.

"I'll go check on him," said Clark, standing up.

No sooner had he sat up on the couch than a piercing scream that could only belong to

Jason echoed throughout the apartment, and two small beams of light shot across the living room.

"Lois!" Clark exclaimed, turning his back against the beams of light and shielding Lois. He held on to her tight, then used his super-speed to get her out of the range of the beams and into the far corner of the living room.

"DADDY!" Jason's yells reverberated again.

Clark sped to the bedroom to find his son sitting up on bed, his eyes shooting beams through the bedroom wall and through the living room. *Heat vision?* Clark thought to himself. Knowing it wouldn't hurt him, he went towards Jason and held him in his arms. "Close your eyes, Jason," Clark said calmly.

The boy, despite the fear he was feeling, followed his daddy's orders. At once, the heat vision stopped. Jason wrapped his arms tightly around Clark, with no intention of ever letting go.

"Daddy, I'm sorry," cried Jason. Tears began to streak down his face. He was sobbing uncontrollably.

Clark's heart went out to his son. The boy's heat vision almost harmed Lois, but Clark knew now wasn't the time to tell his son that he could have burned Lois and the baby with his power. Clark knew it must be difficult for him to understand what had just happened, and so he simply did what he knew he had to do at the moment - to comfort his son. "Hush now, son," he said. "It's okay. You're okay."

Gently and slowly, Clark began to rock his son. He kissed the top of Jason's head and held his son closer to him, letting him know that he'll be safe in his father's arms.

From the doorway, Lois stood watching the two boys she loved the most. She watched Clark comforting their son. She couldn't have been any prouder of her fiancé than at that moment, when he was simply Clark, the father of her son.

Lois and Clark's eyes met. They smiled at each other lovingly. "I'll make him some hot chocolate," Lois said softly, making her way off to the kitchen.

Clark continued to comfort the sobbing child. "Jason, open your eyes," Clark said gently.

"No!" Jason exclaimed, burying his face on his daddy's chest.

Clark felt his shirt getting damp with his son's tears. He held Jason close. "It's okay, kiddo," he said.

"I don't wanna," cried Jason between sobs. "I don't want. I don't want."

All Clark could do was look at Jason, hearing him sobbing. He knew Jason must have been traumatized by the incident. "What happened, Jason?" he asked.

Jason sniffed. He kept his eyes closed and his head buried in Clark's shirt as he narrated, "I was having a very bad dream and I was running and I didn't know where to go. I called you and Mommy. I called you lots of times but you didn't come and get me. I got lost and it was dark and I was really, really scared, and then...and then..."

"Then you screamed and woke up," Clark finished for his son.

Jason nodded. Fresh tears burst anew, and he held on more tightly to his daddy.

Clark rubbed Jason's back as he sobbed. He wished he could do more for Jason. "It's alright now, kiddo. I'm right here. You can open your eyes."

"It's not okay, Daddy."

"It is, buddy. It is. Come on, look at me, Jason." Clark held his son and settled him to sit upright facing him. He lowered his head to level with Jason. "Look at me, Jason."

Jason pursed his lips and shook his head.

Clark said in a sterner, deeper voice, "Look at Daddy, Jason. Just look at me. It's going to be okay. You won't hurt me."

Jason's shoulders began to relax, and he began to breathe evenly. His face relaxed, but he had yet to open his eyes.

Clark nodded. "That's good, kiddo. Relax, it's okay. Look at me, son. Open your eyes and look at Daddy."

Jason whined softly. He was still crying. *Look at Daddy*, he thought to himself. He knew that he should follow Daddy, and if he says it's okay, then it was going to be okay. He took a deep breath.

Clark smiled, and he watched as big, intense cerulean eyes met his.

Jason smiled feebly. "I can see you, Daddy."

Clark embraced his son. "I can see you, too, buddy."

## Chapter 34: A Family, First

Clark rubbed the back of his neck and settled down beside Lois on the living room couch. Jason's latest burst of power could have burned down the entire apartment and endangered the lives of many. He took a deep breath.

"You okay?" Lois asked, her hand reaching up to his and squeezing it gently.

Clark offered a small smile to the woman beside him. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I don't know how my parents did it," Clark said.

Lois furrowed her brows. "Did what?"

"Put up with my powers while I was growing up," Clark replied. "I mean, I should know how to help Jason, but tonight I realized I have no idea how to make a six-year-old gain control of his powers, especially since it comes and goes without warning."

Lois cuddled up next to Clark and rubbed his chest gently. "We'll find a way. Jason's going to be okay," she assured him.

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois. "I just wish I had the crystals and we could go to the Fortress - maybe the answers are there. I need to know how to help Jason, and how to protect himself from his abilities, in case they get out of hand."

They stayed in silence for a long time. Both were thinking about what had just happened, and what could happen, with Jason. They were thinking if the same thing would happen with their second child. They were thinking of where to get the answers they needed.

"Clark?" Lois said suddenly. "I think I know where we can get help - but we don't have to go as far as the Arctic."

Intrigued, Clark tilted his head and tried to understand what Lois meant.

Lois grinned. "I think there's an old woman in Kansas who would love to see you and her grandson. She'd know what to do - I mean, if she could've raised The Man of Steel, superpowers and all, then she can help with Jason, can't she?"

Clark smiled. "Mom," he said.

"I'm forgetting something," Clark said, his brows furrowed, as he loaded their luggage onto their rental pick-up truck.

He had just met up with Lois and Jason at the Lowell County Airport, where mother and son had just arrived from Metropolis. Clark was called to Superman duty in China, and just promised Lois and Jason that he would fly to the Kansas airport to meet them when their plane landed.

"You *always* get that feeling, honey," Lois told him, shaking her head. She was tucking in Jason's shirt, which wasn't easy as her son kept fidgeting. "Jason, try not to move so much, okay, sweetie? We want you to look perfect for Grandma Martha."

"I don't like what I'm wearing, Mommy," their six-year-old son said, pouting. He looked at the blue plaid button-up shirt and the red jacket he was wearing.

Clark looked at his son and grinned. "What are you talking about, kiddo? You look smart in your clothes."

Lois chuckled. "That used to be your daddy's choice of clothes when he was your age. You look just like Grandma's little farm boy!"

Jason kept tugging at the shirt collar and scratching his neck. He stuck his tongue out at his mommy and daddy. "Bleh."

Lois and Clark laughed at their little boy. "Come on, buddy," Clark said, holding his arms out to his son. He took Jason and settled him on the booster seat. Then he helped his fiancée

onto the passenger seat.

"I still think I'm forgetting something," Clark muttered as he settled on the driver's seat.

"Honey, I think I know what you forgot," Lois said, tilting her head and looking thoughtfully at her fiancé. Clark turned to her. Lois pointed to his face and said, "You forgot to wear your glasses."

Clark chuckled. "Oh, I don't need to wear those around here. Everyone in town practically knows Jonathan and Martha Kent's boy since forever. I never really wore glasses while I was growing up. For a time, I did - when I was about fourteen. But after a few weeks of wearing them, I could see clearer without the glasses. Everyone's used to seeing me like this, I doubt they'd connect me to Superman." He shook his head. "No, it's not the glasses that I forgot. It's something else..."

Clearing his thoughts, Clark revved the engine and turned the truck in the direction of Smallville.

Smallville looked just like it always did during late November. The whole town was preparing for the annual Christmas Kick-off and Tree Lighting Parade. The sidewalks along the town's main road were already lined with Christmas lights. There were wreaths and cardboard cut-outs of Santa Claus and reindeers on the doors and windows of almost every shop in the town. The town square was full of stalls and booths, and at the center, a gigantic Christmas tree stood proudly for all the townsfolk to see.

"Boy, you people sure go all out for the holidays," Lois muttered under her breath, her eyes trying to take in all the images of festivities they passed by. "It's like I'm right inside a Hallmark card."

Clark grinned. He looked at the rearview mirror and watched his son. Jason's eyes were wide with amusement and awe. "How did you use to spend the holidays?" he asked.

"We had Christmas dinner," Jason said plainly.

"Christmas dinner? That's it?" Clark asked, the disbelief evident in his voice. "How about setting up the Christmas tree? Putting stockings above the fireplace? Making cookies for Santa Claus?"

Jason replied, "Me and Uncle Richard - "

"Uncle Richard and I," Clark corrected his son.

Jason frowned, not understanding what was difference between what he said and what his daddy said. "Yeah, us - we buy the tree from the mall. And it's got lots of stuff already, lots of lights and shiny things. Mommy never got me a Christmas stocking, and we don't make cookies for Santa 'cause Mommy doesn't know how."

Clark glanced at Lois.

Lois raised an eyebrow at Clark and gave him a don't-you-even-think-about-teasing-me-on-my-baking-skills look. "We had good Christmases," she defended. "We tried to enjoy the best we could, even if it was just the three of us. That's how the holidays are like in the city, you know - we don't have town festivals like this."

Clark simply nodded. "Okay, okay - but this time, the holidays will be different for both of you. I'll make sure of that."

By the time Clark was done telling his son about how the town holiday festivals were like, they had arrived at the Kent farm. "The good thing about the festival," Clark said, "was that it coincided with my birthday - or at least the birthday Ma and Pa had chosen and written on my adoption papers. That way, I didn't have to invite kids over at my house and risk accidentally

showing off my powers. We all just went to the town square and my parents would treat me and my friends to ice cream and cotton candy. With so many people, no one noticed if I accidentally used super-speed when running around in my excitement."

He parked the car next to his mother's old pick-up truck. "We're here. Ready to see Grandma?" he asked Jason.

"Yeah! Yeah!" the six-year-old exclaimed excitedly.

Clark alighted from the truck and helped Jason out of his seat. He had just put down his son when he saw his mother coming out of the house he had grown up in.

Their arrival at the Kent farm brought about the widest smile Clark had seen on his mother's face in years. The old woman, accompanied by the Kents' old dog Shelby, stood waiting in the front porch of the yellow house. Her eyes were twinkling with excitement and anticipation as she watched her son walk towards her, with little Jason in tow.

Clark leaned down to give his mother a warm hug. Martha kissed her son on the forehead. "I'm so glad you could spend your weekend here, son," she said.

Jason ran towards his grandmother. He stopped short just a few inches away from the gray-haired woman, looking at her apprehensively. "Daddy says I can call you Grandma now, Mrs. Kent," the six-year-old mumbled.

Martha chuckled and knelt to meet Jason's eyes. "Of course, you can, my darling," she replied sweetly.

The little boy's face broke into a wide goofy grin, so much like his father's, and jumped into the old woman's arms, wrapping his arms around her. "Grandma!"

Martha Kent's hearty laughter was music to Clark's ears. He missed the days when he saw her *this* happy. He was amazed by how his son could bring such joy to the old woman.

Leaving Jason with his mother, Clark went back to the truck to assist Lois.

Lois was watching Jason and Martha, smiling to herself. When Clark had opened the door for her and held out his hand to help her out, Lois looked at him hesitantly. Clark smiled - he knew she was nervous about meeting the woman who had raised the handsome man she loved. Clark assured her, "She'll love you, sweetheart."

"Right," Lois said with a hint of sarcasm. "I, the Army brat from the big city, managed to get her only son, who happened to be raised in a conservative little town in the country, in bed with me, and now said son has a six-year-old boy out of wedlock - and another baby on the way...Oh yes, she'll love me."

Just then, they heard Martha calling out to someone who was walking towards the farm. "Ben! Come here, look! My grandson is here!"

Clark raised an eyebrow at Lois and gave her a 'What did I tell you?' look. Lois glared at him, making Clark laugh. "C'mon, Lois. You gave my mother the one thing she wanted in the world - a grandchild." He paused, cupping Lois's face with his large hands. "She wouldn't tell me, but I saw it in her eyes before, whenever we'd go to town and she'd see her friends with their grandchildren. She wanted to be one of those women, and now she is - because of you."

Lois smiled, touched by her fiancé's words. She slid her hand in his, and carefully alighted from the truck. She and Clark rounded the vehicle when Lois stopped, feeling nervous again. Clark gently squeezed her hand. "Come on," he said. But Lois didn't move.

Martha saw her future daughter-in-law standing by the vehicle, looking uneasy. She smiled at the young woman, and held out her arms to her as she advanced to Lois and Clark, leaving Jason with Ben Hubbard. "Lois," she said. "You look lovelier than Clark described you to be." With that, she embraced the younger woman.

Lois was taken aback. She had expected to be yelled at, humiliated, or worse, shoved away. But instead, Martha welcomed her with open arms, and she let herself fall into the older woman's warm embrace. She whispered in Martha's ear, "Thank you, Mrs. Kent."

Martha let go of her and laughed. "Dear, call me Martha." Her eyes fell on Lois' four-months-pregnant belly. Her eyes widened with shock.

Clark gulped. *Uh oh*, he thought. *I think I know what I forgot now*. He had told his mother about his engagement to Lois, but didn't mention the news about the coming addition to the Kent family. "Um...surprise, Ma...?" he said awkwardly, flashing an uncertain farm boy grin at his mother.

He braced himself as the little old woman grabbed him by the ear and led him away from their guests and inside the house.

"Clark Joseph Kent!" Martha shrieked. Her voice was loud enough to be heard outside, making Jason, Anna and Lois jump in surprise. "You've done it again, haven't you? You've been back here for less than a year and you didn't manage to keep it in your pants! You got her pregnant *again* - out of wedlock! Oh dear! If your father was here..."

Martha Kent's lecture took a fifteen minutes, with the guests outside hearing most of what she was saying. Lois was feeling slightly bad for her husband-to-be, Jason stood quietly near her, too shocked to hear the sweet-looking old woman shriek. A few minutes later, Clark came out of the house, looking as if he was a third-grader who had just been sent to the principal's office.

Jason tugged on Martha's dress. "Grandma?"

"Yes, darling?" asked the old woman.

Jason furrowed his brows, remembering something he heard from his grandmother earlier. "What didn't Daddy keep in his pants?"

Martha's eyes widened. She turned to Clark and mouthed "*Super-hearing?*"

Clark shook his head. "No, Ma - I think you were just really loud."

At Clark's answer, Lois could no longer hold her amusement - she burst out laughing, and so did everyone else.

It was already evening. The wind blew softly, brushing Clark's dark hair away from his face. He was looking out at the vast field across the house he grew up in. Suddenly, he heard the front door open and turned to look at his company.

"You're thinking about him, aren't you?" the familiar voice of Martha Kent broke the silence.

The old woman made her way to the porch swing, and signaled for Clark to join her.

Sighing, Clark took a seat next to his mother. "Ma?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, dear?"

"I'm sorry I don't visit you as often as I used to," he mumbled.

Martha smiled. She wrapped her arm around her only son. "Oh, Clark," she began, her gentle voice soothing Clark, "I understand. The first time you left for Metropolis, I knew I wouldn't see you as much - "

Clark shook his head. "No, Mom - I didn't choose the city over Smallville. I want you to know that this town will always be my home. But I didn't...I didn't go home as much because...because..." He paused and swallowed hard, blinking back tears. "Because everything around the farm reminded me of Dad." He said the last word so softly, it was barely audible. He sniffed. "I wish he was here - and we can all spend the holidays together, and he'd meet

Jason and Lois..."

Martha took Clark's hand in hers. "Clark, as long as Jonathan lives in our memories, he's never truly gone. You know, he's always around."

Clark had to smile upon hearing his mother use those words he had been so used to saying. He took a deep breath. "Thanks, Ma. I'm feeling much better now."

"You better be - I won't have you frowning when it's Christmas and there's much to celebrate!" Martha quipped.

Clark laughed. He stood and helped his mother up. Before he could take another step, he remembered something. "Ma?"

"Yes, Clark?"

"How did you and Pa manage my powers when I was growing up?"

Martha looked questioningly at Clark.

Clark explained, "Jason had a nightmare a few weeks ago. He ended up waking in the middle of the night and shooting fire from his eyes. His powers come and go, and they're unpredictable. I was hoping you could help me and Lois with that."

Martha chuckled. "Well, I *am* the expert on raising a child with superpowers." She paused, recalling the earlier years of Clark as a little boy. "Your father and I were worried about people knowing, but that's one of the perks of living in a farm - we don't live in a place where people would see you when your powers would suddenly manifest. It didn't matter to us, Clark, when you broke your bicycle after gripping it too tight, or that you set the kitchen curtains on fire with your eyes. We were more worried about your safety." Martha paused. "You had problems controlling your powers, then. The same thing is true for Jason, I believe. You can't teach a six-year-old how to control his powers, but there are other things you can teach him." She smiled. "Teach him the same values your father taught you - "

"Patience, perseverance, humility and courage," Clark said, remembering qualities his father instilled in him.

"Yes," Martha said, smiling. "If Jason learns how to be patient and not lose his temper, he won't suddenly have a burst of strength or heat vision. Teach him how to face trials and challenges, and how to work hard - make him understand that his powers are there to help him and others, not so he'll be feared by people or make his life easy. Don't keep him away from other children, but make sure you keep an eye on him, in case he loses control." Then Martha embraced Clark. "He'll be okay, Clark. I know you'll raise him to be a good man."

Clark had been called to a flooded area in the South. Lois and Martha sat in the living room, watching the news report on how Superman came just in time to rescue and evacuate most of the residents in the area. It was almost midnight, and that meant it was almost Clark's birthday.

Lois sighed as the reporter continued to relay the story of Superman's latest rescue. "I don't know how you do it, Martha."

"Do what, dear?" asked Martha.

"You sit in front of the television and listen to the news. I don't know where you get the strength to watch your son risk his life for others every day."

Martha chuckled. "Oh, Lois, I thought you of all people would understand."

Lois thought hard for a moment. "Because I've been with Clark for some months now?"

"No, dear. Because you have a general for a father."

Lois looked blankly at Martha.

Martha explained, "I suppose Clark is like our country's soldiers. For me, I hear about my son going off to other places to save people, flying into burning buildings or defending the helpless against criminals. For other women, they hear about their sons or fathers or brothers going off to faraway places to defend the country. In some ways, we are similar. We have to wake up wondering if we'll see our men again, or if we hear about their downfall on the six o'clock news..." Her voice faded, remembering Superman's fall to Earth after lifting New Krypton to space. She took a deep breath. "Well, we all just have to be strong. They gather their strength and courage from us, you know. Our men know that we believe in them and in their abilities, and it is that faith that brings them through. Just look at Clark - he continues to do what he does because he sees that people believe in him, that people look up to him and count on him to be their savior."

Lois smiled. "I never thought of it that way." She paused. "I used to think there's nothing to worry about when it came to Clark. I mean, he *is* the Man of Steel. He doesn't fall when he gets hit by a bullet. He isn't affected by a hand grenade. But the truth is, there are just some people who would still try to bring him down, won't they? People like Lex Luthor who would do whatever they can to see him gone?"

Martha nodded. "It's not easy being Superman. But being Superman's mother or wife isn't any less of a challenge."

At half past one in the morning, the red boots of Superman gently landed on the guestroom of the Kent house. In a blur, Superman had changed from his red-and-blue uniform to a plain white shirt and blue pajama bottoms. Turning to the bed, he noticed that Lois wasn't sleeping. He didn't need his acute sense of hearing to pick up on Lois and Martha's voices down in the living room.

"What are my two women still doing up so late?" Clark said as he descended the wooden stairs. "Lois, you should be resting - staying up isn't good for the baby."

Lois stood up and gave him a light peck on the cheek. "Happy birthday, honey," she said. She led him to the couch.

Clark gave his mother a kiss on the forehead. "Hey Ma. You should be resting in bed, too."

"Clark," Martha said with a chuckle, "an old woman like me doesn't need as much sleep. Happy birthday, son."

Clark sat between Lois and Martha. He looked at the two of them. They both had excited expressions on their faces. "What's with those grins on your faces?" he asked curiously.

Lois seemed as if she would burst with a secret. "Well, 1 AM seems as good a time as any to give you your birthday gift." She held out a white envelope to Clark. "Open it," she told him.

Clark took the paper inside the envelope, and he spread it out. It was an official-looking letter, and after reading it, he looked at Lois with a wide farm boy grin on his face. "This is for real?" he asked, and Lois nodded. He turned to his mother, and saw her affirm Lois' answer. Unable to contain his joy, he pulled Lois close and kissed her fully on the lips. "Thank you," he told her.

Clark re-read the document, as if not believing it to be true.

*"Under the laws of the city of Metropolis, it is hereby declared that Jason Lane, son of Lois Joanne Lane and Clark Joseph Kent, shall legally be known henceforth as **Jason Jonathan Lane-Kent.**"*

Clark held the paper as if it were a precious jewel. He looked lovingly into the eyes of the woman beside him, the woman whom he loved with all his heart. "Jason Jonathan Lane-Kent," he told her.

"I know how much you miss your father, and I already asked Martha if Jason can have his name," Lois explained, looking gratefully at the silver-haired woman beside them. "This way, Jason - as well as all of us - will remember the man who raised you."

"Your son knows, by the way," Martha added. "He's been asking my help in writing 'Jonathan' on practically everything he owns. He asked me if he could be called 'JJ, ' for short."

Clark couldn't take his eyes off the paper. His mother's earlier words came to mind. "*Clark, as long as Jonathan lives in our memories, he's never truly gone. You know, he's always around.*" With Jason carrying the name of his father, Clark knew Jonathan Kent would live forever in their hearts.

When Clark had finally gotten over his birthday gift from Lois and his mother, he and Lois made their way to the guestroom and settled on the bed. Then she rested her head on Clark's shoulder. "I've never seen you so happy before. That smile of yours can light up the entire planet."

Clark brushed Lois' hair. "I have something for you, too."

"Oh? It's not my birthday for another nine months, if I counted correctly. But you know me - I'll take any present even if it's not my birthday. I'm not complaining."

Clark laughed. "Right, well then, remember when I said I'll make sure this year, the holidays will be different?" He pulled out a little Christmas stocking that had an embroidered name 'Baby Kent' on it. "I had to beg Ma to teach me how to make this."

"A stocking? What am I supposed to do with a stocking, honey?" Lois smirked and raised an eyebrow at Clark.

"You put it above the fireplace, of course - beside yours, mine and Jason's stockings."

Lois laughed out loud. "Sweetheart, we live in a one-bedroom apartment that barely has furniture and definitely *no fireplace.*"

Clark grinned at her. Without saying anything, he wrapped her snugly in a warm blanket and flew them both out the window and into the night sky.

A few minutes later, Lois saw the familiar lights of the buildings in Metropolis. They flew to the suburbs just outside the city and landed on the front door of a two-floor house that seemed to look exactly like those in Christmas postcards. The roof was coated with snow, and colorful Christmas lights lined the edge of the roof. The house's yellow walls were graced with a few fallen snowflakes here and there. The white-painted oak door had a golden doorknob and a glass pane. The lawn had a small snowman to one side, while a wrought iron garden bench stood at the other side. There was light inside the house, and a soft Christmas song was playing. But Lois couldn't see anything. "Clark? Where are we?"

Clark took Lois' hand and led her into the house. "We're home, sweetheart."

Lois took in her surroundings. They were in the foyer, and to their left stood the dining room and kitchen. Ahead of them was the staircase leading upstairs. To their right was the living room, and Lois stepped into the room to find a fire crackling in the fireplace - above the fireplace hung three stockings with the names 'Clark, ' 'Lois, ' and 'Jason.' Clark slipped the small stocking he had shown Lois a while ago. "Here, love. You put this above *that* fireplace," he whispered into her ear.

Lois was near tears as she walked to the fireplace and hung the littlest stocking on the hook already prepared by Clark. She stepped back and stood beside Clark, admiring the four

stockings with their names on it. *My family*, Lois thought.

"Merry Christmas, honey," Clark said.

"How...?"

"I had some help from Richard to find the perfect house. I had everything I wanted in mind, and when I saw this, I thought it looked perfect. I had thought about building a house for you and Jason months ago, when I first learned about our son, and I saved enough to buy this place. The furniture and everything else - well...I, uh... You know how many furniture shops and stores Superman has saved all these years?"

Lois looked at him incredulously. "Clark Kent, are you telling me you used your alter-ego to get these things *for free*?!"

Clark bit his lower lip and looked guiltily at Lois. "Not everything," he mumbled. "Just some."

Lois snorted. Clark shrugged. "Okay, maybe a lot."

Lois was glaring at him. Clark defended himself, "I *did* offer to pay. They just didn't want me to - they said they were paying back the favor. I told them I was buying furniture for a friend's new house."

They spent the next hour looking at their new home. They stopped at Jason's bedroom. The ceiling had glow-in-the-dark stars, similar to Clark's old room in Smallville, and the walls were covered with a space-themed design, showing galaxies and stars and planets. Jason's bed was formed like a real space ship. On the floor, several blue and green beanbags were scattered, and circular pillows shaped like planets were littered atop the beanbags. Even the carpeted floor was a moon-and-stars rug.

Clark then led Lois to their room. It had a Parisian touch to it, as Clark knew how much Lois loved the French city. The walls were mottled beige, and from the ceiling hung dim orange lights in iron cases. They had a big, glass window facing the east, where the sun would rise. They also had a balcony, complete with wrought iron chairs and a glass table reminiscent of small Paris cafés. Their four-poster bed was covered with soft cream linen, and enough pillows to fall into a dreamless sleep. The walls were painted with famous landmarks in the City of Lights. "It's beautiful, Clark," Lois said. "I love it. I love you." They shared a kiss before moving on to the last room - their baby's nursery.

Feeling a tad nervous about Lois' reaction to the next room, Clark took a deep breath before opening the door. He heard Lois gasp, and found her looking shocked at the room that greeted her. "Wow," she said. She did not say anything else, just looked around the room. It was clearly inspired by Disney, with Lois vaguely hearing Clark's explanation about going for something neutral as they didn't know the sex of the baby. The walls were a dark blue. One side had the Disney castle painted on it; the rest had silver stars painted on them. The white crib stood at the middle of the room, and a Mickey Mouse mobile hung above it. There was a pile of stuffed Disney characters near the crib. Several Disney fairytale books were organized on a shelf near the door. A rocking chair was located beside the crib. "Oh, Clark..." Lois whispered, enchanted by all that she was seeing. "Thank you."

Clark kissed her lightly on the lips and wrapped his arms around her. "This is the first of many holidays to come, Lois. I promise."

## Chapter 35: A Walk in the Park

Despite the cold November air, Richard was feeling warm as he snuggled Anna closer to him. Both of them were gasping for air, lying on the merry-go-round at the park. They looked up in the clear, blue sky as the merry-go-round continued to go in slow circles.

"Cotton candy," Anna said, pointing to a fluff of whitish-blue cloud.

Richard laughed. "Not fair," he replied. "You get just one point for the *seven* clouds you've identified as cotton candy." He pointed to a long stretch of clouds. "That one's an alligator."

Anna pointed to three separate clouds. "Cotton candies! One, three...four cotton candies! I get hundred points. I win! I win!" She began jumping on the merry-go-round. "Maybe you win next time, Daddy," she added, shrugging at her daddy.

Richard sat up and shook his head. "How come *you* always win? And where did the hundred points come from? We need to fix the point system next time." He ran up to his daughter and grabbed her by the waist, carrying her over his shoulder.

Anna's shrieks of laughter echoed through the park. There were very few people around - most had probably gone out of town for the long weekend. Having nowhere to go, Richard had decided to just spend quality Daddy-and-Me time with his daughter.

Anna ran around the park grounds, Richard tailing close after her - far enough to make her think he can't catch up, but close enough to catch her in case she falls. "You can't get me, Daddy!" she called back to Richard.

When Richard finally caught her, they went rolling down the field, the grass and earth sticking to their coats and scarves. They rolled around, laughing out loud, as if they were the only two people in the park. Anna's hood fell back, revealing her shoulder-length blond hair. She ended up lying on top of her Daddy's chest, and Richard liked it that way. He looked at his little girl, Anna's bright blue eyes twinkling in delight. "I love you, Anna," he said, brushing his daughter's hair away from her face.

"I love you, Daddy," Anna answered with a smile. She stood up. "I gotta pee."

*Way to ruin the moment, sweetheart*, Richard thought to himself with a grin. He took his daughter to the restrooms. Anna was tugging on Richard's sleeve to make him go inside, but Richard was too much of a gentleman to do so. "Honey, I'll be right here waiting for you. I promise," he assured her. But Anna won't let go and began to whine.

Caught in a difficult moment, Richard looked around and found a woman taking pictures of a group of kids in a nearby picnic table. Taking a deep breath, Richard took Anna's hand and walked up to the woman.

"Okay, Hannah, just move a bit closer to Jessie - there, that's it," the woman was instructing two little girls who were sitting together. "Alright, I want nice, big smiles, kids. Nice, big smiles."

Richard watched the woman. He heard the click of the camera and the giggle from the kids. Before he could call her attention, the woman looked at him. She was tall and blond-haired, and had chocolate-brown eyes that mesmerized Richard.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked him.

Richard cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah. My, um, my daughter Anna - she doesn't want to go unless I come into the restroom with her, which I don't feel is...uh, proper."

The pretty woman lightly chuckled. She knelt down to Anna. "Hey, there, missy. How about I help you go in the bathroom while Daddy waits for you outside? He won't go anywhere. I'll make sure of that." She winked at Richard slyly. Then she held her hand out to

the little girl.

Anna took the woman's hand cautiously.

"Can you look after these kids for me while I take your daughter to the restroom?" the woman asked. "Their mothers would go ballistic if I lose them."

Richard's eyes widened in surprise. "O-oh...they're, uh, they're not yours?" He looked at the two girls playing with boxes of dewberry tarts on the table near the tree.

The woman shook her head. "I'm just a photographer - I'm taking their pictures for a Christmas advertisement to promote some new kiddie snack." She shrugged and smiled, squeezing Anna's hand to get the little girl's attention.

Despite suddenly holding the hand of a stranger, Anna seemed to trust the woman. She waved goodbye and grinned at her daddy before going into the bathroom.

Richard went over to the kids, entertaining them by juggling the dewberry tarts.

A little while later, Anna emerged. The woman followed her close behind, holding out a paper towel. "Honey, come here. Let's dry your hands first, okay?" She took Anna's hands in hers and dried them with the paper towel.

Richard watched the scene before her. *Wow, she's really good with kids*, he thought, smiling to himself. Anna went over to him and he scooped her up. He then approached the woman. "Uh, thank you for coming to my rescue. It's during these times that being a single dad has its drawbacks."

"No problem, dear," the woman replied with a smile. "I love kids."

"Well, um, we better go. But I owe you for this Miss..."

"Lillian Keyes. But please, call me Lily."

"Alright, then. Maybe I could pay back the favor over a cup of coffee, Lily?"

The woman smiled. "I'll be here tomorrow, same time. I'll see you then, Mister..."

"White. Richard White."

"Anna!" Richard called out to his daughter. "Honey, we gotta go!"

A moment later, Anna appeared from her bedroom door. Her pink sweater matched her boots. "Daddy, where we go?"

Richard grinned and picked her up, whisking her out of the apartment. "We're meeting Daddy's friend. You remember her, the nice lady who helped you to the bathroom yesterday at the park?"

"Lily," the little girl said matter-of-factly.

"That's right - Lily," Richard affirmed. "Maybe you and me and Lily can all play together today. Would you like that?"

Anna nodded. "Nice Lily," she said, remembering the blond-haired woman.

They made their way to the car and drove to Centennial Park.

When they arrived at their meeting place, Lily Keyes was already there, her camera dangling from her neck. She took a photo of the father-daughter pair as they walked hand-in-hand toward her. "You two would look perfect for a magazine," she said amusingly.

"You know, I modeled for D&G a few years back," Richard said confidently, working his best smile.

Lily raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Oh yeah," replied Richard with conviction, but his smile gave him away. "No, not really."

Lily laughed. "I didn't think so," she said coolly.

Richard added, "But hey, I could have."

"You're too cocky for your own good," Lily quipped. "Is that how you win points with the ladies?"

Richard laughed and shook his head. "Usually women come running to me even before I say a word."

Lily looked at him disbelieving. She held her hand out to Anna. "Hey, Anna. What do you say we go off and let your Daddy's big head deflate first before we let him join us? Come on, run!"

Anna, delighted to finally play and not just stand to watch his daddy talking with Lily, shrieked and ran away from Richard. She kept a firm grip on Lily as they sped through the field, laughing. "You slow, Daddy!" she yelled.

Richard watched as his daughter went off with Lily happily. Anna had always been shy around strangers, but with Lily, it seemed as if they were best friends. He grinned to himself. He was liking Lily - and not just because of how she looked and flirted with him.

As the day wore on, the trio played on the playground and the field. They watched the Holiday Parade at the center of the park, where colorfully-dressed people danced around and sang Christmas carols to mark the beginning of the Christmas season. By the afternoon, they were simply enjoying a slow walk in the park.

"It must be difficult for you, raising your daughter alone," Lily said.

Richard shrugged. "Sometimes, it is," he replied. "But I knew what I was getting into when I adopted Anna."

Lily stopped in her tracks and looked at the little girl between her and Richard. "Adopted?"

Richard paused. "Oh, I guess I didn't mention it, huh? My daughter - I took her home from Russia."

"So she's not...yours?" Lily asked.

"Oh, she's mine," Richard answered quickly. He looked at the happy little girl skipping about. "She's all mine."

Lily realized how she might have sounded. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't mean to sound insensitive. It's just...you have the same eyes. I swear, I thought she got the bright blue eyes from you."

Richard grinned. "So I've heard."

Anna tugged on her daddy's coat and pointed to the swings. "I swing, Daddy," she said.

Seeing it as an opportunity to just sit and talk with Lily, Richard agreed. He knelt down to Anna's level, and pulled down her beanie to fit more snugly. Standing up, he took Anna's hand and helped her to the swing set, making sure she was safely buckled in. After a few pushes, Richard let her swing on her own.

Lily watched the father-daughter pair in amusement. She had some friends who were single parents, but she was fascinated with Richard White and his bond with Anna. She thought she'd never met a man like him.

"Can you look after her for a bit?" Richard asked Lily. "I just need to go run an errand - I'll be quick, I promise."

Lily nodded. "I'd be happy to," she replied, walking behind Anna's swing and lightly pushing the little girl, to Anna's delight.

A minute later, Richard came back holding two cups of steaming coffee. He called Lily and beckoned her to sit on the bench near the swings. "I remember saying I'll treat you to a

cup of coffee," he said, offering a cup to her. "Here."

Lily gladly took it. "You know, I thought when you were asking me for a cup of coffee, you were asking me out."

Richard chuckled. "Like a date?"

Lily nodded with a laugh.

"That *was* what I meant. But I couldn't find a sitter for my daughter. Well, who says this can't be a date?"

Lily shook her head as she continued to giggle. "And who better to chaperone us than your four-year-old daughter, right?"

They laughed aloud. Richard was enjoying talking to this woman. She was good with kids, she could carry a conversation, and she seemed good-natured.

"So," Lily began, "what made you opt for adoption? You look like the kind of guy who can get any lady he wants."

Richard watched Anna pushing herself higher and higher, enjoying the wind blowing on her face. He turned to Lily. "I found her in a burning building in Russia when I was there on an assignment. I stopped my car, saw her looking terrified in the second floor of the orphanage, and I just ran to get her. When she clung to me, I just felt..." He paused, remembering how he rescued Anna just months ago. "I just felt...I don't know, like I had to protect her. I liked the feeling that someone needed me - Anna needed me."

Lily just smiled as Richard relayed the story.

Richard continued, "Before I adopted her, I had just broken off a five-year relationship. For five years, I was playing house with a woman and her son. When it ended, I felt empty. And then Anna came along, and I've never felt more contented in my life. My world revolves around that little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl. She's my little ray of sunshine." Richard paused. Then he tilted his head and turned to Lily. "You got any kids?"

"Um, no," Lily said, shaking her head. "I was too focused on work to have a relationship and a family."

Richard nodded his head in understanding.

"I wish I had kids, though," Lily added. "I always imagined running after a bunch of little boys and girls early in the morning, getting them ready for school."

"Well, you can come by my apartment anytime. Anna's just as challenging as a brood of five boys when it comes to taking a bath before school," Richard said, making Lily laugh.

As the sky darkened and evening came, Richard and Anna said their goodbyes to Lily. "I had a great time," Lily said. "Thank you, Richard."

"For what?" asked Richard.

Lily shrugged. "It would have been a lonely, long weekend for me if it weren't for you and Anna."

Richard smiled. "Anna and I are glad you spent your weekend with us, too. Isn't that right, Anna?"

"Uh huh," Anna said, nodding. She ran to give Lily one last embrace. "Thank you."

Richard picked up Anna. "Maybe we'll see you around?"

"Maybe," Lily replied. "It's a big city - maybe we'll bump into each other again."

"Oh, I know you'll go looking for me," Richard quipped with a sly grin.

Lily laughed. "Don't flatter yourself, White. I enjoyed spending time with your daughter more than with *you*."

Richard shrugged. "Whatever you say, Keyes."

"Bye, Richard. Bye, Anna."

"Bye, Lily."

Lily waited for Richard and Anna to leave. But they weren't budging. "Until next time," she said.

Richard found himself rooted to his spot. He didn't really want the day to end. "Yeah - whenever 'next time' would be."

Lily smiled. "I'm going...now."

Richard nodded. "Yeah, me, too."

They each took a step back awkwardly. Neither wanted to go their separate ways yet.

"I thought you were leaving," Richard said.

Lily replied, "You said you were leaving, too."

"I-I am."

"So am I."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"Bye, Lily."

"See you, Richard."

"Alright then."

"Yeah, okay."

They said their goodbyes for another five minutes. By the time Richard had gotten into the car and began the drive home, he couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He was really liking Lily Keyes - and something told him the feeling was mutual.

## Chapter 36: Welcome, My Little One

*Five Months Later*

Perry was on the phone, talking to the Editor-in-Chief of The Daily Planet's sister company in London, when he spotted the young brunette reporter walking - more like waddling - to one of the many desks in the office. "Let me call you back, Jansen, something just came up," he said, putting the receiver down. He opened his office door and roared for the whole newsroom to hear, "LANE! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE ON MATERNITY LEAVE!"

Slowly, Lois stood up from her desk with an effort, her small frame carrying the weight of her very round belly. "Chief, It's *Lane-Kent*," she corrected him. "And if you must know, there's still a few weeks to go before I have that maternity leave."

"I don't care, *Lane-Kent*," retorted Perry. "You're leaving this office right now and you're staying at home until that kid comes out. Kent! KENT! Where the hell is that reporter you married three months ago, Lois?"

Lois grinned. She woke up alone that morning and found a note scribbled beside her pillow. *'Sorry, sweetheart, duty called - landslide in South America. I'll make it up to you tonight over a home-cooked meal. I love you always. - Clark.'* Lois began, "Well, Chief, you see, Clark - "

Lois wasn't able to finish her excuse. She felt a sharp, sudden pain on her side. Her heart rate suddenly increased. *Uh oh*, she thought to herself.

Clark was evacuating the last of the landslide victims when he heard Lois' heart rate speed up. He immediately put the two teenagers he had saved down on the ground and zoomed to Metropolis. He changed clothes in the alley behind the Daily Planet building and used the stairs to get to their floor - with super-speed, of course.

"Lois?" he called out as soon as he arrived at the bullpen.

He found his wife sitting on her chair, a few co-workers fanning her and offering her water. She was sweating and was obviously in pain. He kissed her forehead. "What happened?"

"Where the hell have you been, Kent?" Perry's voice boomed. The Chief was a few feet away from where they were, watching what was happening.

"I, uh, I was..." Clark stammered, but he was cut short when Lois gasped in pain.

"Clark," she managed to say. "It's time."

"What?"

"It's time!" she exclaimed as another contraction came on. "Your baby's coming, you big dork!"

Clark's eyes widened. "Oh, right. Oh! Uh, okay..." Clark had a mix of emotions running through his system - excitement, anxiety, nervousness, exhilaration. He began to fix Lois' things and get everything packed in Jason's Superman backpack which the boy had accidentally left in the office a few weeks ago. "Right, well...we just have to remember that we're not supposed to be panicking. Panicking isn't what we're supposed to do. Supposedly, we shouldn't be panicking. Okay, we're good, we're calm. We're not panicking."

"Clark, you've managed to construct three different sentences with the same thought in a span of ten seconds," Lois said, smiling in-between the contractions. Some of their officemates were also sniggering behind them.

Clark swallowed. "Right, uh. W-we should, uh, we should g-go, right? Let's, uh, l-let's go."

"Don't worry, C.K., someone already called for an ambulance from Met Gen, they're on their way," Jimmy assured Clark.

"Great, thanks," Clark replied. "Uh, Jimmy, can you call Richard? He's picking up Jason from school. Can you tell him Lois and I will be at the hospital and that he should just follow with Jason and Anna? Lily can come, too."

Jimmy nodded and excused himself to get his phone.

The rest of the office was also supportive of Lois. They offered her water to drink, fanned her with their folders and most of the other women were trying to calm her down.

By the time the paramedics had arrived, the pain Lois was feeling had escalated, and she was already screaming with every contraction. Clark was doing her best to calm her down. "Don't you dare tell me to calm down! You did this, you farm boy!" she snapped at Clark. The paramedics assisted her to the wheelchair and wheeled her down to the waiting ambulance outside the building as their colleagues offered them well wishes for the coming baby.

"*AAARRRRGGGHH!*" Lois screamed as she lay in her bed. She had been in labor for eleven hours, and she wanted nothing more than to make the pain go away and get over the whole ordeal.

Clark didn't leave his wife's side, letting her hold on to his hand as the pain of the contraction radiated through her body. Clark had to say, though, his wife had a very firm grip on him. He didn't feel the pain, but he could feel just how hard Lois squeezed his hand. "It's okay, honey, it'll be over soon," Clark told her sweetly.

Lois was near tears as the pain swept through her body. She was twisting and turning on the bed, uncomfortable in every position she put herself in. "I...want...this...to...be...over!" she screamed.

Clark did not know what to do. He felt his heart break at the sight of Lois in pain, but the thought of holding his newborn child in his arms kept him strong. He suddenly heard something, and his eyes darted to the door.

Lois saw the look in Clark's eyes. She also noticed him cock his head to the side. Just then, another contraction came on. "Oh, no! You...are...not...*AAHHH!*...going anywhere, Kent!" she shrieked.

Clark's attention went back to her. "I'm not going anywhere, love," he said, brushing Lois' hair to the side. "I just heard Ma talking to Richard outside. I called her as soon as we got here. I guess she got on the first flight from Kansas to Metropolis." Upon seeing Lois grimace, he continued, in the hopes of soothing her, "Jason and Anna are talking about names for the baby. Isn't that sweet?"

Lois tried to smile, appreciating for a split second her husband's efforts, but her smile turned into a scowl as another contraction hit her.

A young nurse came to check on Lois two hours later. She palpated Lois' belly and timed the contractions. Just then, a sudden gush of fluid trickled down Lois' bed. The nurse went rushing off to the door when Clark stood up. "Is something wrong with her, miss?" Clark asked, the concern in his voice evident.

The young nurse smiled. "No, sir. She's alright. And your baby is ready to be born. I'm just going to call the doctor."

Dr. Lauren Rowley arrived a minute later, followed by a group of nurses. The young nurse who had checked on Lois offered Clark a disposable scrub suit and instructed him on how to put it over his normal clothes. Dr. Rowley checked Lois. "Okay, Mrs. Lane-Kent,

everything's ready - you're fully dilated and a hundred-percent effaced. Let's get this done. Your baby is counting on you."

Lois nodded, and looked at Clark. For a second, she let herself drown in her husband's deep blue eyes, and all the pain was forgotten. "I love you," she whispered.

Clark took her hand and kissed the back of her hand lightly. "I love you, too," he replied.

"Okay, Lois," the doctor said, "when you feel the contraction coming, you take a deep breath and push, okay?"

The pain was tearing her up inside, but Lois nodded in understanding. When the next contraction came, she pushed. Two more pushes later, and still nothing happened. Lois was getting frustrated and tired. "I don't want to do this anymore, Clark," she cried helplessly. Gone was the Lois Lane who always seemed fired up about the latest news around Metropolis. She had been replaced by a vulnerable young woman who was in so much pain. "Please...I can't...I can't do this..." She began to sob as the pain of the contraction hit her again.

Clark looked for his wife to the doctor. Dr. Rowley had seen many women going through the process of birth, and knew from experience that she needed to give a little time to the woman in labor. After a minute, she nodded at Clark, seemingly saying, "Lois has to do this - it's now or never." Clark understood.

He took off his shoes, and, asking assistance from the nurses, helped Lois to sit up. He then climbed onto the bed and sat behind Lois, letting Lois' back rest against his body. He held his wife's hand, and their wedding bands gleamed side by side. With his other hand, he gently stroke Lois' hair. He leaned in to Lois, his lips close to her ear, and began to use his deep baritone voice to talk to her. "Sweetheart, you can do this. You're the strongest person I know, and this is nothing compared to all the experiences you've had in your work. Come on, you can do this, Lois. I know you can."

"I can't!" Lois whimpered.

"Alright, here's a contraction. Push, Lois, push!" Dr. Rowley said as she felt Lois' abdomen.

Clark began to softly recite in Lois' ear the wedding vow he had made to her as she pushed. "My beloved Lois, you are everything I have ever hoped to have in my life - and more. When I was alone, you stood beside me. When I was in the dark, you were my light. When I was weak, you were my strength. When I was powerless, you were my life..."

Lois could barely hear Dr. Rowley saying, "Push, Lois! One more push! Alright, you're doing great - the baby's head is out!" as she listened to the deep, soothing voice of the man she loved.

"...As I stand before you today, to be your husband, I stand with a commitment - to you and to our children. I promise that I will be here for you in every challenge that we face, in every trial that comes into our lives, in every storm that goes our way. I will be here for you, Lois, just as you have been there for me through everything. From now until forever, I will be here for *you*, my best friend, my love, my joy, my Lois."

Lois gave one strong push and the shrill cry of a newborn echoed through the walls. Lois threw her head back and rested it on Clark's shoulder as Clark whispered, "It's over, honey. You were amazing. Our baby's here."

"Mr. Kent, Mrs. Lane-Kent - would you like to see your baby?" Dr. Rowley said. "Congratulations, you have a healthy and beautiful baby..."

"Baby Boy Lane-Kent!" Clark exclaimed as he went to the waiting room where his family

and friends sat.

Jason jumped up and so did Martha. Jason had his arms in the air. "I got a brother! I got a brother!" he announced to everyone around him - Richard, Anna, Lily, Perry, Jimmy, Ella Lane and General Sam Lane. He jumped into his father's arms, and they sported identical grins that looked as if they just won a million-dollar lottery.

Martha embraced his son. "Congratulations, Clark," she said. "Thank you for another grandson."

Everyone else had congratulated Clark, including General Lane - although the general's greeting was merely a handshake and a grunt. Jimmy was immediately clicking away on his camera, capturing all the happiness around the room.

"So, what's the son-of-a-dork's name?" Richard joked.

Clark laughed. "David Richard Lane-Kent."

Richard raised an eyebrow at him. "The spawn of Lane and Kent is named after me, then?"

Clark nodded at his friend. "Would you like to see your godson, Richard? Everyone else can come as well; they put Davey in the nursery and we can still make it to viewing time."

Richard froze in his spot for a moment. He looked at his mild-mannered, bumbling friend with a grateful expression on his face. Clark clapped him gently on the back. "You can thank me by paying for Davey's private school when he turns six," Clark quipped.

They made their way to the nursery. "Baby Boy Lane-Kent, please," Clark told the nurse. A little while later, a baby wrapped in a blue blanket was wheeled close to the glass window. Clark and Richard scooped up their kids to give them a better look at Davey. Everyone stood with their noses almost pressed to the window, admiring the rosy-cheeked, black-haired baby. No sound could be heard, other than the clicking of Jimmy's camera.

"Good job, Kent," General Lane suddenly said, breaking the silence. Everyone turned to look at him. He was not one to give compliments easily, and especially not to the clumsy, shy journalist his eldest daughter had married.

"Thank you, sir," Clark replied.

Richard watched as the newborn woke up and a pair of dark blue eyes greeted him. He nudged Clark with his elbow. "You did good, farm boy."

Clark grinned, pointing to his newborn son through the glass and beaming proudly. "I made that."

## **PERSPECTIVES: *Jason Jonathan Lane-Kent, age 14***

"Hey, isn't that your dad?" Maddie Staunton pointed to the man standing outside the classroom.

I turned my head to the small, square pane on the door, and there he was - black hair, thick glasses and all. Oh shoot, Dad was in school. *My* school.

"Alright, class," Mrs. Fulton began, her voice like an owl's screech, "as we continue our Career Week, I've invited Mr. Clark Kent to talk to us today about his work in the field of journalism."

Mrs. Fulton had pretty much lost the class' interest at the name "*Mr. Clark Kent.*" I could pretty much hear everyone - even without using the super-hearing that I inherited from my dad - whispering to each other, "That's Jason's dad." "Seriously?" "Look at those ancient glasses." "He looks kinda dorky...in a cute way." "Lizzie, he's like, as old as your dad! You can't have a crush on *him!*"

Oh, God. Kill me now.

My teacher opened the door for Dad and motioned for him to enter. He had only taken a few steps when he accidentally tripped - on his own foot. My whole ninth-grade class roared in laughter. *Why, oh why did he have to do that?*

Dad managed to get his balance back before he fell face first on the floor. Adjusting his glasses, he straightened his overcoat and fixed his tie. Then he gave everyone that farmboy grin he usually reserved for the people in the office. I heard a few girls behind me giggling. I sank low in my chair, and propped up a book in front of me, hoping it would cover my face.

"Hi, Jason," my dad greeted me.

I felt my cheeks go warm as all eyes turned to me. All of my friends - Peter, Matt, Brandon and Will - looked at me teasingly, as if saying, "*So not cool, man.*" I forced a smile at Dad. "Hey...Dad."

It was bad enough to know that I'd get a load of mockery from my friends during recess, but when I let my eyes wander away from my dad, I found Lacey staring at me. *Lacey Laughlin* - the girl I was planning to ask out to the coming winter dance. Oh well, all my plans have gone down the drain - thanks to dear ol' Dad.

As soon as the class quieted down and everyone had turned their attention to my father, he began to talk about his job. "My name is Clark Kent, and I'm an assistant editor for the Daily Planet's City section. I've been a journalist for the Planet for almost two decades now, and let me tell you, being a journalist is hard work. As I've learned from experience, being a journalist requires more than just skill in writing. You need good instincts and an eye for the unusual - "

"You need a good pen, too," Kyle Rowan, one of the more ill-behaved students in class, quipped. The whole class erupted with laughter. I could've strangled Kyle then and there - but instead, I kept my mouth shut and hid my face behind a book.

Dad just grinned at him. "Yeah, that, too," he said, and then he went on to talk about how he began his career - writing for his high school paper, going to the big city to study at Met U, applying for newspaper agencies and being turned down a couple of times, and finally, working for the Planet.

As he mentioned his roots in Smallville, I began to think back to the last time we had gone there. It had been last summer, and Grandma Martha passed away. It was a very trying time for Dad, and for me and Davey as well. We all loved Grandma, and a lot of people loved her, too. Poppa Ben didn't stop crying during the funeral. Most of the townsfolk came and shared

memories about Grandma. Uncle Richard, Aunt Lily and their kids cut their holiday in the Caribbean short to fly to Smallville and pay their respects to Grandma. There was even a big lunch set in the farm, fit to feed a whole army. But nothing could cheer up Dad.

During our stay there, I usually woke up in the middle of the night and I'd see Dad going off into the dark, far from the farm. I'd sit up in bed and wait for him to come back, but I usually fell asleep before I'd see him return. Sometimes I'd see Mom accompanying him, and hand in hand, they'd walk away into the darkness.

My mother always said I took after her - curious, inquisitive, always wanting to be in the thick of things. Which is why, I guess, I had decided to follow Dad one night. As soon as I was sure Davey had fallen asleep in the other bed, I zipped up my blue coat and tiptoed downstairs. I knew any slight sound would be heard by Dad, what with his super-hearing, so I had to be extra quiet. Out of the house I went, making sure I was far enough from Dad, but not too far to lose sight of him. I went through a lot of twists and turns, and once, I stepped on muddy ground and nearly lost my footing. My curiosity began to wane as we went farther and farther away from the house. My feet were getting cold, and my legs were too tired to take another step. After what seemed like forever, Dad stopped walking.

I looked around. Dad was standing in a clearing in the middle of a cornfield. I hid behind some cornstalks and watched.

At first, nothing happened. Dad just simply stood - his head bowed and his back hunched. And then he fell to his knees. I saw him grab a handful of soil and clasp it tight. His hand was shaking. He opened his hand and let the dirt fall back to the ground.

"Jason," he said. "I know you're there."

His voice did not hold a tone of anger. He was calm. He didn't turn around as I approached him.

"Hey kiddo," Dad greeted me. He smiled weakly.

I bowed my head, too ashamed to apologize to my dad for following him to this place. "You haven't called me that in a long time," I mumbled.

"Yeah, well, I'd like to call you that as often as I could - if that's alright with you."

"You're my dad, you can call me anything," I answered.

My reply made my father smile. I felt better knowing I made him happy. I looked at the ground he was kneeling in front of - there was a big, uneven hole. Like a crater.

"This is where Ma and Pa found me," Dad explained to me in a soft voice. "I was very little, then. Pa wasn't sure about keeping me at first, but Ma begged him to. They don't have kids, see? And Grandma Martha wanted to have even just one baby."

"You were Grandma Martha's baby," I told him.

Dad didn't turn his eyes away from the crater. "I was...Grandma Martha's baby."

Then Dad began to cry. It wasn't like the quiet cry of Poppa Ben during the night, when he thought all of us were sleeping. No, Dad was *really* crying. Loudly. I didn't know what to do, but I had seen what Mom did for Dad when he first heard about Grandma - I ran into Dad's arms and hugged him tight. He hugged me back, and I could feel the sleeve of my jacket getting damp with Dad's tears.

My father - Earth's Great Protector. My father - who was faster and stronger than any human. My father - the Man of Steel. But tonight, as we sat before the place where he was found by Grandma Martha and Grandpa Jonathan, he was simply...my father. And he was hurting.

"Don't worry, Daddy," I said. I hadn't called him 'Daddy' since I was like, seven. "I won't

tell."

"Your mom knows where I go. It's okay," he replied.

I scratched my head, my long brown hair flopping down on my face again. I brushed it up. Dad didn't get what I said. "I mean I won't tell that you cry here at night. It'll be our secret."

My dad sniffed and wiped away the tears that streamed down his cheeks. He stood and picked me up, helping me back to my feet. "Thanks, buddy. It'll be our secret."

It was the only time I had ever seen my father cry, and I had never told a soul about that night.

"Jason?"

My thoughts were broken by the sound of Mrs. Fulton's voice. "Do you have anything to say about your dad's job? Do you want to be like your dad when you grow up?"

All eyes had turned to me again - they were eager to hear what I had to say, knowing they could probably tease me with it. I could count how many of my classmates had blue, green, grey or brown eyes. But it was my dad's eyes that I focused on.

He raised his eyebrows at me.

I looked sideways. I was about to answer when -

*RRRRRIINNNGG!*

Saved by the bell.

I waited until most of my classmates had left the classroom. I could hear words like "Jason" and "Mr. Kent" being thrown into their silent discussions. Being taller than most of the class (something I can *actually* thank my dad's good genes for), I looked above the sea of faces and found my dad still standing by the doorway.

"Hey, Jasey, your Daddy's waiting for you!" Kyle cooed, making a few other boys laugh.

I groaned and sighed. Dad simply kept smiling. A few kids were nice enough to say, "Bye, Mr. Kent." Most just passed him by. *Just like in the office.*

We made our way to the parking lot. I hadn't said a word to my father since we began walking. It was Dad who first spoke. "Sorry I didn't get to tell you sooner - your teacher just called up your mom last night," he apologized.

"You could've told me this the morning," I mumbled. "Now everyone's going to make fun of me."

"For what? For being the son of a journalist? Peter's mom works in the Planet as well."

"*Two* journalists," I corrected him. "And Peter's mom is a photographer for the Planet, not a journalist." I huffed. "Besides, that's not the point, Dad. I mean, the guys are gonna call me 'Daddy's Boy' now or something."

"Well," Dad quipped. "Aren't you?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "Ugh, you're *not* helping."

We got to the car. I opened the backseat and tossed my backpack inside. I kept on muttering complaints against my dad going to my school and talking to my class. "...And now Lacey's probably *never* going out with me," I muttered under my breath. "She's gonna think I'm such a loser - "

"Whoa, what?" My dad stopped in his tracks. He was about to open the door to the driver's seat. He looked at me curiously. "What was that?"

"What was *what*?" I said defensively.

"You were saying something about Lacey. Lacey Laughlin? Tall, brunette, with brown eyes? Is that why you're so angry with me?"

I shook my head. Apparently, I also got my mother's big mouth. "You know what, Dad?"

Let's just go home."

I was about to get inside the car when I heard someone calling me.

"Jason! Hey Jason!"

I turned and froze. Lacey was running in my direction. By instinct, I brushed my hair back, making a mental note to get a haircut soon. I heard Dad snort as he watched me fix myself.

"H-hi, La-Lacey," I stammered. My heart was practically beating out of my rib cage. I swallowed hard.

Lacey was smiling at me. I watched her tuck her hair behind her ear. She looked even prettier this close. "Hi, Mr. Kent," she greeted my dad.

Dad simply grinned at her. Someone called Lacey's name and she turned. Her friends were waiting for her at the entrance of the school. While her back was turned, my dad gave me a thumbs-up sign. I gave him an exasperated look and made him lower his hand.

Lacey turned back to us. "I just wanted to say that I thought you had a really great talk, Mr. Kent."

Dad pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, thank you, Lacey. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Lacey nodded. "I love to write, and now I'm even more inspired to be a journalist."

"I think you'll be a great one," Dad said, making Lacey smile.

*O-kay*, my dad and Lacey are the ones doing the talking. What am I - a lamp post?

"Lacey, c'mon!" her friends hollered.

"I have to go," she said with a shrug. Then she turned to me - finally. "You're Dad's really cool, Jason. See you on Monday."

She had begun walking away when I felt my dad give me a push. "Go," he murmured. "*Ask her.*"

But I stood on my spot, unable to move. Dad pushed me harder. "Go on!" he hissed.

"No!" I hissed back.

"Go!"

"No!"

"This is your chance - "

"I won't - "

"Lacey!" my dad called out to her.

My eyes widened at Dad. Before I could say anything to him, Lacey had walked back to us.

"Yeah?" she asked, looking at us expectantly.

Dad began to walk to the driver's side of the car.

"I-I...I..." I began. But I was looking at Lacey and my mind was a jumble.

Lacey giggled. "Did you need help with anything, Jason?"

"I..." I took a deep breath. "I was wondering...if-if you'd, uh, you'd like t-to go...to the, um, to the dance...er, with me?"

Lacey smiled - it was the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. "Sure, Jason. I'd love to," she replied. "Pick me up at 7?"

I nodded - vigorously.

"I'll see you, then."

"Yeah," I answered. "See you."

She began to run back to her friends. I used my super-hearing to listen in on a bit of

conversation - although Dad always said I should learn to "use those powers wisely." I had to smile as I heard Lacey telling her friends excitedly, "Guess who asked me out to the dance?" and her friends all sighing, "Oh, Lacey, you're like, the first girl in class to get a date! Now *I'm* jealous."

I couldn't wipe the grin off my face as I got in the car.

"You are *such* a Daddy's Boy," my dad said, laughing. "Wait 'til I tell your mom you had to have *me* to ask a girl out."

Leave it to Dad to ruin the moment.

"Whatever, Dad," I told him, but I quickly turned away because I didn't want him to see me grinning from ear to ear again. *Lacey Laughlin and I are going to the dance together.*

Before I knew it, we were in the driveway and Dad had parked the car. "Thanks, Dad," I said.

"For what?" he asked.

I shrugged. "For...everything, I guess."

Dad tousled my hair. "Anything for you, bud. You know you can count on me *anytime.*"

We made our way into the house, where Davey was busy dipping his fingers in tubs of paint in the living room while Mom was preparing dinner. "Hey, sport," Dad greeted Davey, kissing the top of his head. Davey jumped up and hugged Dad, his hands making blue, green, yellow and red streaks on Dad's pale blue shirt. Dad didn't seem to care one bit, complimenting what I could only describe as Davey's...er, *abstract* masterpiece (Later, he explained, "It's Disneyland." - I still couldn't see how the crooked lines could be Mickey Mouse.).

As Dad sat on the floor and listened to Davey's explanation of his artwork, I went to the kitchen to help Mom. "Hi, Mom," I greeted her.

She gave me a kiss on the forehead and hugged me. "Hey, Jase," she said cheerfully. "How was school?"

"School was okay."

Then she eyed me curiously. "Did your father embarrass you in front of your class?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Nah, he was good."

"Did you participate during your dad's talk?"

I shrugged. "Mrs. Fulton asked me if I wanted to be like Dad when I grew up."

"And what did you say?"

I looked at Dad and Davey, playing on the floor. I remembered all the times Dad would have to go away to save someone - in the middle of my piano recital, during Davey's Little League game, halfway during my soccer match. I remembered one evening when it was just Dad and me at home, and he told me how much he wished he could always be there for me and Davey. I realized just how much he had sacrificed - some for the world, many for his family. I thought about how Dad often told Mom how much he loved her, and the smile that would appear in Mom's face afterwards. I thought about Dad, and how he balanced family, work, and Superman.

"I didn't get to answer because the bell rang," I answered. Then I added, "But if I had time, I would've told Mrs. Fulton yes - I want to be just like Dad when I grow up."

## **PERSPECTIVES: *Anna Sophia Keyes-White, age 12***

Daddy always told me never to be ashamed of where I came from, so as I stood in front of my class and saw them all looking at the picture I was holding up, I tried not to think too much about what they would probably whisper and say to each other afterwards. It was Friday, and every week during English class, my teacher Ms. Libby Sinclair always had two kids make an essay about their families and read it aloud in class. Today was my and Collin Spears' turns. Collin was an only child, and he talked about how his mom and dad always got him whatever he wanted and how he liked being the only kid his parents talked about to their friends.

"Anna," Ms. Sinclair called my attention. I had been standing frozen in my spot for quite some time. She nodded, signaling for me to start.

"I-I'm Anna Sophia Keyes-White," I began, feeling my heart thumping hard, "and this is my family."

I held up the picture higher. It was taken last Christmas. I could already hear my classmates whispering, "How many are they?" "Whoa, *that's* her family?" "Are those *all* her brothers and sisters?" *What did they have against big families?* I was one of the last to present, and most of my classmates only had one or two siblings. Charlie Hanes, so far, was the only one who had more than two - he was the youngest of four boys.

I took a deep breath, and began pointing at the people in the picture, starting with the beautiful, blond woman in the center. "This is my mom, Lily. She used to work in a big advertising company, but now she stays at home to take care of us." More whispers - most of my classmates had working mothers.

I ignored their hushed voices and pointed to the brown-haired man beside Mommy. He was grinning from ear-to-ear. "This is my dad, Richard White. He's the Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet, one of the best newspapers in the world," I said proudly.

Then I began pointing at the kids in the picture, starting with the dark-skinned boy on Mommy's left. "This is my brother Leon André. He's nine years old. The two kids on the floor are Chanthy Leigh - " I pointed to an Asian little girl who had a big smile on her face," - and Kino Michael - " I tapped on the laughing face of an Asian boy. "They're seven and six years old."

My classmates' voices were getting louder. I didn't care. I continued my presentation.

"And then we have the twins - " I pointed to the kids on Mommy and Daddy's arms. " - the one on Daddy's lap is Isobel Rae, and the one with Mommy is Eden Laura. They're four years old." In the picture, I was sitting beside Dad. I pointed to the African-American baby I was holding. "My youngest sibling is Roan Haven, who is two. And then there's me - I'm the eldest in the family."

When I finished my introduction, one of the boys in class, Patrick Seeley, raised his hand. "How come you guys don't look like your mom and dad?" he asked candidly.

All eyes turned to him. I bet all of them had the same question in their minds, but none of them were daring enough to ask me. The silence that followed was uncomfortable.

Ms. Sinclair then spoke up. "Patrick - " she began, ready to tell off my classmate for being so frank with his question.

"It's okay, Ms. Sinclair," I said, cutting her short. "It's part of my essay, anyway."

The class turned to face me again. They looked up expectantly at me. I thought they were waiting for me to either explode or drop dead in the front of the classroom. I took a deep breath and read my essay aloud.

"My dad always told me, 'Don't ever be ashamed of where you come from - and that includes not being ashamed of your family.' He said that no matter what happens, your family is the only one who'll stick with you, and that's why you have to love them with all your heart forever and ever."

I looked at my classmates. Most of them were my classmates since first grade, but I never really shared much about my family to any of them, except for my best friend Hailey, who was sitting at the front row and smiling at me. "Go on," she mouthed to me.

I continued. "I know that most of us in the family don't look alike. That's because we were all adopted when we were little."

Everyone in class sat up, fully alert and listening. Only Ms. Sinclair and Hailey didn't look surprised.

"My family started with just me and Daddy. He was working on an article for the Planet in Russia, then. He told me he was driving back to his hotel when he saw a building on fire. It was the orphanage where I was left in. He went there and saw me inside the building. My dad saved me from the fire, and then he adopted me and took me home with him. And then Daddy met my mom, and we became a family. When I was six, Mommy and Daddy asked me how I felt about having a brother or a sister. I grew up playing with my other best friend, Jason, and his little brother Davey. I like playing with them, and I told Mommy and Daddy that I'd like a little sibling to play with. A few months after that, we went to a small town in Kenya, and we entered an orphanage. Daddy said I could go play with the other kids there. None of the kids wanted to play with me, except for a little boy. Before we left, I told Daddy how much fun I had with the boy. He told me, 'The supervisor said his name is Leon. He's three. Do you want him for a brother?' I said yes, and Leon came home with us."

Patrick raised his hand again. "Didn't your parents want kids of their own?"

A few people in class gasped. Others began to whisper. A girl behind Patrick exclaimed, "That was a really mean thing to say, Patrick!"

I shrugged off his question. I used to ask Mommy about it all the time, so it was nothing to me. "I asked that to my mom before. She just said, 'There are so many kids in the world don't have families. Daddy and I want to lessen the number of parent-less kids in the world. It doesn't matter to us where you come from - what matters is what we can help you become when you get older.'"

The class was quiet for a minute. I went on with my speech. "After Leon, we had Chanthly and Kino. Mommy and Daddy brought them from Indonesia. Daddy said Chanthly was from Indonesia, but Kino was originally from Cambodia. Chanthly's parents died during the tsunami that hit their country. Kino was vacationing in Indonesia with his family, but they didn't survive the tsunami either."

My classmate Caitlyn Lear raised her hand. *Why did they have to cut in through my speech?* "Don't you get jealous when they bring another baby home?"

I shook my head. "No, because I like having brothers and sisters. And my parents make sure to tell me that they also love me just as much as they love the other kids. They don't play favorites." I paused and exhaled. "Anyway, Isobel and Eden come from the same place that I do - Russia. They were left by their mother at the same orphanage I was in. Daddy got a call from the supervisor there and asked him if he wanted twin girls. He and Mommy talked about it for a long time, because it had only been a year since Chanthly and Kino came to us. But in the end, they went to Russia to get the babies. They brought me along, and I saw the newly-built orphanage. The supervisor also saw me, and she said I looked healthy and all

grown up."

"Do you plan to go back to Russia when you're older?" It was Patrick again who asked the question.

"Uh huh. And my parents bring us to our birthplaces when we can afford it. Last year, we visited Cambodia and Indonesia. A lot of the kids looked like Kino and Chanthy, but they weren't as healthy-looking. Daddy plans to bring us to Michigan next summer. Roan was born there. Daddy said he wanted to have another kid who looked like Leon, so he wouldn't feel left out. Mommy thought since they'd had kids from Europe, Africa and Asia, an African-American baby would be a nice addition - since there are lots of orphans here, too. That's how Roan came to be adopted."

I showed our family picture again. Everyone was surveying all the members of my family.

Ryan Dougherty raised his hand and asked, "Is it fun to have a big family? I have just one brother, and we fight a lot. I don't think I'd be able to handle having six other kids in the house."

I smiled, remembering the petty fight I had with Leon this morning - we were fighting over who gets to use the shower first. "We fight, too - but just about little things like who gets the toy from the cereal box, or who should take out the trash. It's fun to be in a big family, because there's a lot of people to love, and a lot of people who love you back. I like waking up in the morning and everyone's noisy and loud in the breakfast table. It's also fun when I'm at ballet recital, and I get the loudest cheers because they all come to watch me. I like having brothers because I get to play football with them, and then I'll go to my sisters' room to play dress-up with them. I like my big family, because I know that if anyone fights with me, I'll always have six other kids who will back me up."

The class had gotten silent. I could see that most of them were thinking - but I didn't know what about.

Patrick raised his hand yet again. "If you had a chance, would you want to meet them?"

"Meet *who*?" I asked.

"Your real parents."

The class all looked at Patrick as if he just sprouted twelve heads. "Dude, I can't believe you'd ask that!" Christopher McLean hissed at Patrick.

Before they could say anything else to Patrick, I spoke up. "Lily and Richard White *are* my real parents."

Everyone looked from Patrick to me. I think they were expecting me to punch Patrick.

Ms. Sinclair broke the tension. "All right, class. Does anyone else have questions for Anna?"

The class shook their heads. Ms. Sinclair nodded at me. "Do you have anything else to say, Anna?"

I nodded. "I'd like to end my presentation with something my dad often tells me and my siblings before we sleep. He says, 'There's this saying among adopted families - that you kids may not have come from our bellies, but you came from our hearts.' That's his way of saying that he and Mommy love us very much, and being adopted doesn't make us any different from everyone else."

When the bell rang and Ms. Sinclair dismissed us, I walked out of the classroom and took the nearest staircase to the second floor, where Leon's classroom was. My brother and I usually rode the bus together, but today Daddy was going to pick us up - we were going to the Pizza Palace to celebrate Kino's sixth birthday.

"Ready?" I asked Leon when I met him outside his classroom.

"Yup, I'm starving," he replied.

We made our way to the waiting shed, where most kids were waiting to be picked up by their parents.

"There's Dad," Leon pointed to the blue mini-van approaching.

We stood up and began walking.

"Anna! Hey, Anna, wait up!" I heard someone calling me. I turned around to see Patrick running to our direction.

"Hey, Patrick," I greeted him. "This is my brother, Leon."

Leon smiled at him. Patrick, who was panting, managed to say, "Hi."

I waited for him to get his breath back. Daddy was getting nearer to us.

"I just...I just wanted...to say...sorry," Patrick said in between gasps for air. He stood up straight, his blond hair falling on his face, covering his blue eyes. He brushed his hair up. "I didn't mean to sound rude back there, when you were talking about your family."

"It's fine," I said, waving him off. "I get why you were so curious."

He shook his head. He looked unsurely at my brother, and then at me. "No, you don't get it. It's just...well..."

I heard Daddy honking at Leon and me. I put my hand up, signaling him to wait. I waited for Patrick to speak up, but he suddenly looked shy and hesitant.

"It's just, I really like you and I wanna get to know you more and I think you're family's really cool and you're really nice and brave to tell everyone about being adopted and it's just something I...admire," Patrick said in one breath.

I furrowed my brows. "I didn't get everything you said, Pat."

But before he could say anything, Leon cut in. "He says he really likes you - "

"Leon, I *know* what he said. Can't you go and tell Daddy to wait up for a bit?" I said, annoyed at my brother for ruining the moment.

"Fine!" he cried. As he went off to the car, I heard him yell, "Dad! Anna's got a *boyfriend*! He said he really likes her and that she's really nice - but she's *not* even a teensy-weensy bit nice!"

Before I knew it, my dad had lowered the car window and was calling out to me. "Anna! In the car - now."

I looked pleadingly at him, but Daddy just gave me *the look* - the one that said he was very serious and I shouldn't cross him. I sighed. "Bye, Pat. Maybe we could...um, talk some time?"

"Yeah, maybe," he said. He bowed his head and began to walk away, his shoulders hunched.

I made my way to the car, but Daddy stopped me.

"How about you bring your friend along?" asked Daddy. I looked at him - he was grinning at me.

I smiled.

"The more, the merrier. Right?" he said.

"Right," I answered. I turned back to Patrick. "Hey, Pat! Patrick!"

He turned around and faced me. "Yeah?"

I held my hand out to him. "My dad said I could bring you along - we're eating at the Pizza Palace. It's Kino's birthday today."

Patrick grinned and walked towards me. He took my hand. "Remind me to get your

brother a belated birthday gift," he said.

Before we got inside, I rounded to the driver's side of the mini-van. I opened the door and gave my dad a kiss and a hug. "Thanks, Daddy," I said.

"Just promise me you'll still be *my* little girl?" he whispered.

"Always," I promised.

## **PERSPECTIVES: Clark Joseph Kent, age 42**

"Lois, honey," I called as I knocked on the bathroom door. "We're going to be late."

"Give me ten minutes," I heard my wife answer.

I looked at my watch - 2:50 PM. We needed to be in Davey's school for his class presentation at 3:30 PM. I sighed. Leave it to Lois to make us late.

"Dad?" Jason's voice came from the hallway. It still surprises me to hear his voice deeper - he sounds so grown up.

"Yes, Jason?"

"Can you give me extra money? I was planning to just get Chinese take-out, but now I feel like having pizza delivered."

*Uh huh.* My 14-year-old is taking after his mother - first, Chinese take-outs and pizza deliveries, and then what? A regular caffeine fix?

I pulled a twenty out of my wallet and handed it to him. "Are you sure you'll be okay here on your own?"

My son snorted and raised an eyebrow at me. *He's so much like Lois sometimes.* "Dad, I'm way past that age where you'd drop me off at Uncle Richard's whenever you and Mom had somewhere to go. Trust me, I won't set the house on fire."

"It's not that I don't trust you - " I said defensively.

"I know, Dad. I know," he cut me off with a wave of his hand. "Look, I'll be okay. I promise. I'll keep my phone in my hand the whole time - I'll call you if I need anything."

He pocketed the twenty-dollar bill. "Or you can just use super-hearing to check up on me."

I looked at him incredulously. *How did he know?*

"Gotcha," he said with a grin. "I'm your kid - I know you well enough."

*Right.* My son probably thinks I *really* don't trust him now.

Jason shrugged. "Actually," he said as he walked back to his room, where loud rock music was booming from his iPod's speakers, "Mom just mentioned it to me once."

I shook my head and chuckled.

Lois finally came out of the bathroom. She wore a lovely blue dress that reached up to her knees. "Does this say 'I'm the mother of an eight-year-old who was *wrongly accused* of splashing milk chocolate on his classmate's shirt'?"

I snorted. Lois and I had gotten a note from Davey's teacher a week ago, saying our son had squirted a carton of milk chocolate on his classmate, Kelly Owen, during recess. Lois and I talked to Davey, and he said he did it because he thought it was "just so funny." My son certainly didn't get that knack for trouble from me.

"Honey," I told her as I looked at her attire, "Davey wasn't 'wrongly accused.' He admitted to the act. Anyway, I doubt Mrs. Owen would even notice what you're wearing. Besides, she already accepted Davey's apology. She even baked cookies for him, remember?"

Lois sighed and gave me that you-just-don't-get-me look. She tied her hair in a bun and got her purse. We made our way out of the room. Automatically, she headed to Jason's room.

"Jason," she called out. "Dad and I are leaving."

Jason poked his head from out of his bedroom door. His dark brown hair fell in front of his eyes, hiding his deep blue eyes. "Okay, Mom. You guys have fun."

Lois gave Jason a kiss on the forehead. "Bye, sweetie. Try not to get in trouble, okay?"

"I think I should be the one telling *you* that," Jason said with a sly grin.

"Jason!" Lois exclaimed.

I laughed at my son and ruffled his hair. "Bye, kid."

"See you later, Dad. Try to use that super-hearing of yours wisely, alright?" he said with a wink.

"I told you I *won't* use it to listen in on you," I told him coolly, but I could feel my cheeks go warm with embarrassment.

We made our way to the driveway and got into the car. I checked my watch - 3:05 PM. Hopefully, the presentation started late. It usually took us forty minutes to get to the school.

We arrived in the school in record time. Taking my wife's hand, we strode to Davey's classroom. A lot of parents had already taken their seats beside their children. I spotted Davey in a corner, and I pointed him to Lois. We shuffled over to him.

"Hi, sweetie," Lois said, embracing our son.

"You're late, Mom," Davey stated matter-of-factly.

"Hey, buddy," I said, picking him up and giving him a kiss on the head.

We watched his teacher, Ms. Olivia Bern, lead the kids to the front of the class. They lined up in three rows. Davey, being tall for his age, stood at the back row.

"Good afternoon to all," Ms. Bern began. "This afternoon, the children are going to present a little play entitled, 'Our Families.' All of the kids have shared things about their families, and together, they put their ideas together to form this play. We hope you enjoy it."

I applauded together with the other parents.

"Our Families," the children said altogether, and then they took a bow. They scattered and walked out of the platform. A curly-haired boy and a little girl in pigtails walked to the center and began a conversation about what they would buy at the local grocery.

As the play went on, my thoughts went to my own family. Lois and I planned to have more kids after Davey, but we realized that with work and my job as Superman, having more kids would be difficult. I felt guilty enough to not be able to spend as much time with my two boys as I wanted to, I didn't know how I would divide my time if we had more kids. It would have been very unfair to our children if I couldn't give them my time.

There was always the option of throwing away the blue tights and the red cape, and simply being Clark Kent. But then again, Superman was a big part of who I am. I had tried to leave that life before, when I had gone to Krypton, but I realized upon my return that the world needed me as much as my family did.

I'm thankful to have two strong, smart boys in Jason and Davey. They understand their dad's job - not just at the Planet - but also to the world. I remember just last week, when Jason had a soccer match. I had been called away to an earthquake in California.

"You didn't see me score a goal, Dad," Jason said after the game, his soccer shoes slung on his shoulder, grass and dirt mixed with his mop-top brown hair.

I didn't know what to say. "*I wish I could've seen it?*" "*Maybe next time, bud?*"

"But hey, don't get too worked up about it," my son said, patting me on the shoulder.

"How many fathers did you save from the earthquake today? They just got another chance to see *their* kids score in their soccer matches. That's a pretty cool thing to do - and self-less, too."

I looked at Jason, struck by what he had just said. It's very seldom that my son and I get to talk now - since he was 12, he had wanted more to be with his friends than to be with us. Sometimes I watch him sleeping, and I tell myself I don't know him at all - that he's as much as any other teenage stranger I see on the street. But at times like this, I know exactly who he is - he's the boy who looks like my wife but takes after my quiet personality, much like how Davey

has my features but Lois' aggressiveness. He's Jason. He's my son.

Lois shook me out of my reverie. She nudged me with her elbow and pointed Davey to me. "There he is," she whispered excitedly. "Aww, isn't he so cute with the clip-on tie?"

Davey, his jet-black hair sticking up, grinned at us. He was wearing a pair of thick-framed glasses, the lenses missing. "Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!" he said with a cheeky grin, making the other parents turn to us and laugh.

He made his way to the teacher's table, which now acted as the dinner table. Four boys sat on either side of the table - two on each side. A little auburn-haired girl walked towards the table bringing a plate of spaghetti.

"Here, honey," the girl said, placing the plate on the center of the table. "Dinner's ready."

Davey looked at the plate, disbelief etched in his face. "That's all we're gonna eat, sweetheart?"

The girl put her hands to her waist. "You got a problem with that?"

My son adjusted his spectacles. Lois laughed, and I knew it was because Davey looked just like I did when I fixed my glasses. "Well," he began, "how about I'll cook? This isn't 'nuff for the kids, anyway."

"Do you mean that, or is that just a way of making fun of my cooking?"

Davey shrugged. "See now, honey, you can't really cook even if it would save your life. I'm doin' you a favor!"

The parents roared with laughter.

Davey looked at the audience with a baffled expression. "What?" he asked with a shrug. "That's what Dad says!"

"Davey!" I exclaimed, burying my face in my hands as Lois looked daggers at me and the parents laughed even louder.

The children's presentation finally came to a close. Ms. Bern rounded up the students and let them sit on one side of the room. "Before we end," she said, "we would like the parents to share something about what they have learned from their kids, and the kids will share something they learned from their parents. Who would like to start?"

One by one, the parents went forward with their children. Lois pushed me forward. "Why don't you take this one?" she asked. "I was the one who attended and spoke up at Davey's last PTA. They practically know me enough."

I went to the front of the class and took Davey by the hand. I cleared my throat and spoke, "I have two boys - David, and his older brother Jason. Being a father has taught me a lot of things, especially because I never thought I would be one. I learned how to be strong in spirit, because my boys look up to me and count on me when things get tough. I also learned to appreciate the little things - something Davey taught me. He's a sweet little boy, he never forgets to thank me or his mother for anything. It doesn't matter if it's something simple like a new box of crayons, or something big like his new bike - he never forgets to thank us and make us see how much he appreciates what he has. Lastly, I learned the real meaning of family when my boys were born. I learned that you have to put family above everything else, because in the end, no matter how rich you are or how far you've come, the real treasure is your family, and how much you are loved by them."

The parents applauded. Ms. Bern was saying something about my insights being "one of the best" she had heard. But none of their praises and applause mattered. Right then, all I could see was the face of my wife, the woman I loved most in the world - and she was smiling at me.

"Davey," Ms. Bern said, "what did you learn from your dad?"

Davey looked at me and grinned cheekily. Then he stood up straight and faced the parents and his classmates. Proudly, he answered, "Daddy taught me how to make water balloons."

## **PERSPECTIVES: *Richard Stephen White, age 42***

*Ten, nine, eight...*

I looked at the alarm clock on the bedside table. It read 6:29 AM.

*Seven, six, five, four...*

I took a deep breath.

*Three, two, one.*

"Daddy!"

"Dada!"

"Dad!"

"Daddy!"

"Daddy!"

"Dad!"

"Dad!"

The alarm beeped - 6:30 AM. At that moment, seven pairs of hands, of different sizes and complexion, immediately found their way on me. Seven pairs of feet were jumping on the bed I shared with my wife Lily, who by this time is already in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. Seven different voices - mostly high-pitched - are all talking and calling out to me.

I laugh. This is my wake-up call every day. All seven of my kids, ranging from ages 2 to 12, are hitting me with pillows and screaming in my ears, telling me to get out of bed. My boys Kino, who just turned six, and Leon, who's nine, are pulling my legs and making me stand up. Our twin girls Izzie and Eden, aged four, are pounding my head with pillows. The three other kids - our eldest, Anna; our seven-year-old Chanthu; and our youngest, Roan - are jumping on the bed nonstop. I swear, I'd get a headache before I even get to the office.

"Roar!" I bellowed, getting up from the bed. "Who dared wake up the sleeping dragon?"

I puffed out my chest and acted like a fierce monster, making the younger kids scream and run out of the room. Only Anna and Leon stayed behind, rolling on the floor and laughing. I chased the kids out to the hallway and into the living room.

"Mommy!" Eden cried.

"We destroy the dragon!" Kino exclaimed, grabbing a pillow from the couch and throwing it at me.

"ROAR!" I screamed again.

The kids began scrambling out of the house and into the front lawn. I ran to them. As I stepped out of the house, I took a minute to look at the sky. It was a bright, sunny day, with cotton candy clouds moving slowly in the heavens.

"Take that, dragon!" Izzie, the spunkier of the twins, hit me with Leon's football.

"Argh! I eat you first, little girl!" I said, running to her.

My daughter's shrieks turned into giggles as I caught her and rolled on the grass with her. Soon, the other six kids also jumped on top of me.

"Richard, kids!" Lily calls out. I can hear her coming out of the house. "Breakfast is - "

I watched as her eyes widened in surprise. "What in the world - ?"

"C'mon, Mommy!" Chanthu calls her. "We're gonna destroy the dragon!"

For a moment, I thought my wife would have an outburst. Her husband and seven kids were all rolling on the lawn, the grass and the mud sticking to all their pajamas.

Then she laughed.

Soon, Lily was joining us, taking Kino and Roan by the arms and shouting, "I'm the *other* dragon! You have to fight both of us!"

The sounds of our laughter rang across the neighborhood. Sooner or later, we'd probably get reported for causing raucous this early in the morning. Oh, who cares? My kids and my wife were with me, and we were having fun in the simplest things.

The children eventually got tired, and by 7 AM, we were all just lying on our backs in the lawn, looking at the clouds. It's something Anna and I used to do as a pastime when it was just the two of us. And now, it's an activity my wife and I have with the kids when we have some free time on our hands.

"That one looks like an ice cream sundae," Leon said, pointing to a thick, fluffy group of clouds.

"Nah, it looks more like a ferry boat," Anna countered him.

Roan pointed to a group of round clouds that I thought looked like Santa Claus. "That's Daddy," he said.

Lily laughed as her eyes followed where our son was pointing. "Yes, Roan - that looks just like Daddy."

"A *fat* Daddy," Izzie piped in. I heard her emphasis on the word "fat."

The kids all burst out in fits of laughter. *Very funny*. Lily and the kids knew I was a big health buff, and I always tried to keep in shape.

"Alright, alright," I said, "let's just go and grab some grub. Ready for Mommy's world famous bacon and pancakes?"

A chorus of "Yes!" echoed in the air, and seven pairs of muddy feet all made their marks as they went inside the house.

I wrapped my arms around my wife, and gave her a light kiss on the lips. "Good morning," I said.

"Good morning to you, too," she greeted with a smile.

"Are you gonna join us or should I get you two a room?" Anna's voice cut through the silence. Leave it to my daughter to ruin the mood.

I grin. "We'll get a room," I said.

Anna scrunched up her nose. "Eew. Really gross, Dad."

Lily laughed. She took my hand and led me back into the house. When we got to the door, I took Anna's hand in mine - the once-tiny hand that I used to close in mine now had pink nail polish and a silver butterfly ring on one finger.

"Let's eat, I'm starving," I told my daughter.

All three of us went into the dining room, which by now, was a mess - peanut butter smears on the place mats, maple syrup dripping down the floor, and bacon bits and bread crumbs scattered all around the table. My wife and I don't mind the jumble. It's all part of having a family.

"Okay," I said with a sigh as I plopped down on my seat. "Can someone pass me the bread?"

"You forgot the magic word, Daddy," one of the kids - I don't know if it was Chanthy or Eden or Kino - stated.

I nodded. "Can someone pass me the bread, *please*?"

As the breadbasket was passed from the other side of the table, I saw hands grabbing hold of one or two slices of bread. The tall stack I had seen being passed on now only had two thin slices left. "Wow, thanks for leaving me some," I mumbled.

The hint of sarcasm was not left unnoticed by the kids. Leon and Anna tried to stifle their sniggers. I just laughed along. I took the pieces of bread and shoved the breadbasket on the

counter behind me.

I watched as my seven kids all dug in to their food. Some of them had weird food creations - Kino had what I could see as bacon and peanut butter and scrambled egg sandwiched on his bread; Izzie was scooping up and gulping maple syrup as if it were soup; Roan was dipping a slice of pancake on his milk. I made a mental note to remind my wife to give the kids more fruits and veggies to eat next time. For now, I let my children be.

I caught Lily's eyes as I surveyed the scene in front of me. She smiled at me. I recalled the events of last night...

*"You were quiet at the dinner table today," Lily said, turning to face me.*

*We were already in bed, refreshed after taking a shower together.*

*I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her closer to me. "I was just thinking," I told her.*

*"About what?"*

*I took a deep breath. "Eight years ago, there was only me and Anna sitting on a small dinner table at my apartment. Now I've got this big house, and seven kids having dinner with me every night."*

*"And a wife who cooks dinner for you," she added.*

*"A very lovely wife who cooks dinner for me and my kids," I corrected her.*

*She smiled - the most beautiful smile I have ever seen on any woman. I cupped her face and leaned in to her, giving her a kiss. I could feel the softness of her lips, and for a moment, I was transported back to seven years ago, when we had our first kiss, right smack in the middle of the whole Daily Planet newsroom.*

*"I love you, you know that?" she said.*

*"And I love you, too," I replied. "I love you for giving me the family I always dreamt of having. I love you for giving me all these kids who make my world go crazy."*

*I thought back to the sacrifices we had made together, the challenges we had to overcome. Raising seven kids wasn't a walk in the park. We had to deal with a lot of scrutiny from people around us. Most thought we were crazy, adopting kids rather than having our own. We didn't care. We made a decision together to have a big family, and to give these children the life they deserved - so far, I think we've done a good job.*

*Hours later, when my wife was asleep, I crawled out of bed and treaded softly to the hallway. I went up the staircase to the second floor. One by one, I opened my kids' rooms, watching them sleep.*

*The first room I went to was the twins'. For a second, I noticed that something didn't seem quite right. Then I realized what it was - the bedside table that separated their beds was in a corner of the room. The girls had pushed their beds together, side by side.*

*I went to the room across - it was Chanthi's. There were drawings of ponies and butterflies posted on the wall. A dozen or so stuffed animals were littered on the floor. I crept up to my daughter's bed and pulled the blanket up to her chin. Then I went out and closed the door gently.*

*The third room across the hallway belonged to Leon. I surveyed the room. My son inherited my love for flying - he had model airplanes hanging from the ceiling, and a huge poster of a fighter jet was pasted on one side of the room. I squinted my eyes, trying to see in the darkness. Leon wasn't in bed. My heart skipped a beat. Where did my son go? I then realized that his pillows and blanket weren't there, either.*

*Tiptoeing to the room across - Kino and Roan's room - I found where my nine-year-old*

was. He was sleeping beside Roan, his arm protectively wrapped around my youngest boy. My heart warmed at the sight. All three of them were on Kino's bed, pressed tightly against each other like sardines in a can. The cool wind was blowing outside. I lowered the window, leaving it only slightly open, just enough to let some of the cool air inside.

"Dad?" Leon's voice rang loud in the silent room.

"Hey, bud," I whispered. "You guys look packed tight in one bed."

"Kino called me in here. He said Roan had a bad dream, so I came over and told Roan I'll take care of him. I didn't want to wake you and Mom," my son answered sleepily.

I smiled. People tell my kids how lucky they are to have parents like us, but most of the time, I feel like **I'm** the lucky one having kids like **them**. I kissed Leon on the forehead. "Go back to sleep, Leon," I said quietly.

"Night, Dad," he said with a yawn.

By the time I was in the door, he was fast asleep.

One more room to go. Anna's room was at the end of the hall. I quietly turned the knob and opened the door. My daughter was curled up like a ball, her light blue comforter wrapped tightly around her. She had her back to me, and I couldn't see her face. But I watched her anyway, watched her quilt go up and down rhythmically to her even breathing.

Eight years ago, this little girl was all I had. She was this tiny thing, scared and quiet and shy. Now, she was no longer a four-year-old, but a beautiful twelve-year-old who loved to dance ballet and create scrapbooks. She was confident, very sure of herself - and most of the time I wonder where she gets that poise from. I'd like to think it's how we raised her to be - Lily and I always reminded her not to be ashamed of who she was.

As I stood near her bed, the light from the hallway showering into her room, another image came to me - it was of a little boy, small and dark-haired, and a man wearing a cape and blue tights. The boy was asleep, and the man looked at the boy from the outside of the window. Who knew that finding out about Jason and Superman would lead me to all these?

"Daddy?" Anna whispered, turning to face me. "What are you doing up? It's like, three in the morning."

I stepped towards my daughter's bed. I sat beside her.

"Did you know that Clark used to watch Jason from the window?" I asked her.

She shook her head. Then she grinned at me and sat up. "Is that what you were trying to do just now? Because my window is on that side," she said, pointing to the clear glass on the other side of the room.

I softly chuckled. "No, not really. Besides, I can't fly like Clark can." In our family, only Anna and I knew about Clark's secret identity. It's the only secret we've kept to ourselves.

Anna nodded and yawned. "Well, did you need something from me - this early in the morning?"

I tucked a wisp of her blond hair behind her ear. "No, sweetheart, I'm fine. I just wanted to check up on you."

"How come?"

I shrugged. "I just like doing a head count, see if you're all here."

My daughter smiles at me. Even until now, I can feel the connection I had with her all those years ago, when I first saw her through the burning orphanage. She jumps at me and embraces me tight. I thought I could melt in her arms, the warmth of her hug giving me a sense of peace.

Her voice echoed through the stillness of the night. "Don't worry, Daddy. We're not

*going anywhere."*

The noise in the breakfast table shook me from my thoughts. Before I knew it, I felt something slick and sticky running down my knee.

"Oops," Izzie said, looking at me worriedly. She was holding the now-empty bottle of pancake syrup. "Sorry, Daddy."

Everyone on the table turned to me and fell silent. My wife was looking at me, as if she were saying, *"Don't let this get to you. It's just syrup - on your pajama bottoms."*

I breathed in deeply. From the middle of the table, I saw a small piece of pancake and took it. I wiped it on the syrup flowing down my pajama bottoms. Then I presented it to the kids. "Anybody want some more pancakes?" I asked them jokingly.

"Eew, Daddy!" Eden exclaimed.

The boys were laughing. Anna shook her head. Izzie's cheeks went red. My wife simply looked at me and smiled.

"Okay, kids, let's get all this mess cleaned up," I said, standing up.

In less than a minute, seven small pairs of hands were helping me and Lily clear the table.

- THE END -