

What If He Never Left

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Rating: K+

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Chapter 1 - What If... He Never Left

"Mom, I have to go. I need to see for myself just what did happen, the evidence is just too compelling to ignore." He looked out over the cornfield not wanting to look into her hurt filled eyes.

Martha stood behind her son placing a consoling hand on his back. "Clark, it's a fool's quest. Don't you think someone would have contacted you if Krypton still existed?"

Clark turned back looking down at the floor unable to face her then finally he looked up his soulful eyes meeting hers. "Don't you think I've considered that, but maybe for some reason they can't contact me. According to the records my father sent with me he worked in secret to send me here after the council forbade his work. If part of the planet was destroyed maybe none of the survivors know about me." He couldn't help but think, am I trying to convince her or myself? The reasoning was so flimsy just who did he hope to fool?

"Oh dear, I can see how important this is to you but Clark, if you were ever as close to Lois as you said you were, then you have to tell her you're leaving. Promise me you will tell her before you leave and I won't say another word."

Clark walked over and slumped down into the sofa. His mother followed and took a seat next to him not taking her eyes off him for a second carefully watching his every response.

"Mom...I can't...I'm afraid if I so much as see her again..."

Cupping his chin with her hand she turned his face to hers so she could look deeply into his eyes. "It would be cowardly of you to just leave her wondering if you're dead or alive with no knowledge of what happened. Jonathon and I did not raise you to run away when things got unpleasant."

Clark stung with that acknowledgement and wanted to pull away barely able to withstand the scrutiny she was giving him. He lowered his head momentarily lowering his eyes to once again look at the floor before finally looking back into her eyes resigned. "I know mom. You're right. I promise I'll talk to Lois before I leave."

His mother's last words rang over and over in his head. Clark you have to at least be honest with yourself. Are you leaving to find yourself or are you running away to lose yourself? He had been flying aimlessly for hours trying to sort out his feelings.

Ever since that fateful day when he had taken Lois' memories he had been losing himself. He had taken Lois' memories but his own memories taunted him at every turn with what might have been. Each day was more difficult than the one before. He would see Lois sitting at her desk happily going about her business always trying to wrangle a meeting with Superman. At first he responded and had tried to go back in his mind and just be the unknown 'Superman' she thought she knew. He had quickly found it nearly impossible to maintain the act. Every time he was around her his mind wondered to those stolen hours when they were together without all the layers of deceit. In the end it became too painful for him to deny the longing and utter loneliness he felt. He began to avoid her, ignoring her calls from the roof as she attempted to entice him to a rendezvous.

Superman was able to avoid her but unfortunately Clark didn't have it so easy. The persona became more and more difficult to sustain in her close presence, the façade torturing him with emotional pain as he attempted to keep it in place.

After two and a half weeks he was ready if not anxious to believe the reports that scientists had found what they believed to be Krypton...possibly at least partially intact! He dove into the story and latched on to the hope that maybe he wasn't 'the last' of his kind after

all. Perhaps his father had been wrong or too hasty in his conclusions. Without a second thought he made up his mind to go on a mission to find the truth once and for all. He gave a two week notice to Perry White and soon began preparing the starship.

A week after leaving the Planet as Clark he was almost ready for departure but first he had to say goodbye to the only mother he had ever really known. His mother had been heartbroken and he remembered the pain and hurt that he had seen so evident on her face. In the end though, she seemed to understand his deep need to see for himself what had really happened to Krypton. She hadn't pulled any punches thought, questioning his true motives since she knew his recent heartbreak. He sighed remembering she had made him promise to tell Lois he was leaving. Would he be able to keep his resolve if he saw Lois even one more time? Perhaps his mother knew this and was using it to her advantage to keep him earthbound.

He hovered over The Planet rooftop knowing he had to keep his promise no matter the strain it would cost him. She was right, Lois deserved to know. He didn't want to hurt her any more that he already had. She didn't remember that he had done something she might very well consider unforgivable but he couldn't push it out of his mind for even a second. He was well aware of Lois' long habit of appearing on the rooftop on almost a nightly basis before going home hoping to catch Superman. He had every reason to believe she would appear soon.

He had only a few minutes wait before Lois appeared in the doorway slowly moving out onto the open roof. He caught his breath having not seen her in over a week as either of his personas. He was taken totally off guard seeing her looking so un-Lois-like distraught and appearing truly lost at heart. Had he done this to her? She looked as lost and lonely as he felt. He had never meant for this to happen. How had things gone so wrong so fast? He gathered his courage and called to her as he floated down. "Lois are you alright?"

"Superman, Oh Superman, I've been so worried, did I do something? Why haven't you answered my calls? I was so afraid something happened to you." She ran towards him but he backed up a step as she approached so she stopped in her tracks a couple steps away from him confused by his recent aloof demeanor towards her.

"No Lois, I'm fine and it was nothing you did but I am going away."

"You're going away, I don't understand, where are you going?"

"Surely you have seen the reports that astronomers have found what appears to be Krypton possibly intact. The images appear completely authentic, there is no way I can ignore the possibility that there is still life there. The only way to really know is to go see for myself."

"So, you're leaving Earth to go see if Krypton is still there?" He nodded sadly. "How long will you be away?"

"The trip there will take approximately two and a half years but depending on what I find ..." he turned his back to her unable to face her.

"Are you trying to say you may not ...return?" Tears sprang to her eyes. Lois Mad Dog Lane never let anyone see her cry but she was unable to stop these tears that came fast and unbidden. No longer able to stand his sudden indifference she reached up and grabbed his cape jerking one side near his shoulder to make him turn back and at least face her as he broke her heart. She had sensed something had changed in the last few weeks but this was too much, it was more than she was willing to accept without fighting.

Feeling the unmistakable tug on his cape he reluctantly turned back to face her. His own eyes were glistening but he was surprised to see the tears falling freely down Lois's cheeks. He had only seen her cry once before, that day he had stolen her memories. He had done this to her too. Why was he only able to bring pain to the ones he loved? He ached to pull her into his

arms and kiss away all her tears. Somehow he maintained his resolve knowing she would be better with him completely out of her life so she could forget and heal from the wounds he had caused.

"I'm sorry Lois. I never meant to hurt you."

"Don't you know I'm in love with you? How can you just leave me like this?"

"Lois, you don't even know me. You're in love with a man that doesn't exist."

"How can you say that, you're right in front of me, you do exist!"

She moved to close the gap between them but he once again retreated keeping his distance afraid he would lose his resolve completely if he allowed her to get any closer or heaven forbid touch him.

Sensing he was not going to allow her close enough to actually touch him she knew the unspoken truth. "You really don't know if you'll ever come back, do you?"

He moved his head only slightly in answer continuing his retreat. As he retreated away from her the inches began to feel like light years and Lois felt like she was falling into that dark void suddenly separating them. Unable to breathe she slumped down leaning up against the retaining wall whimpering softly.

His own heart was bleeding at having to see her so pale and broken. How much could a human heart take anyway? As this thought crossed his mind his senses immediately sought out her heartbeat wanting to make sure she was indeed physically alright even while she was so emotionally distraught. He relaxed hearing her heart, fast but steady.

Wait, what was that, an echo? He zeroed in on what he was hearing and quickly realized it wasn't an echo but a distinct separate heartbeat, a fluttering really and it was coming from...Oh my God, Lois is pregnant! He froze momentarily then several thoughts went through his head in a blur. How could it be possible? Does she know or even suspect? Is that why she's so emotional? "Oh my God, Lois you're pregnant!"

Lois looked up suddenly quiet and stark white, tears streaking her face. "What did you say?"

Had he really said that aloud, he hadn't meant to. "Uh, Lois did you know that you're pregnant?" No use trying to deny what he had said. He knew from her reaction that she had heard him.

Lois wiped the tears from her face angry now. "So you think I ran to someone else after meeting you on the roof or after a romantic flight? Just leave, you don't have to have an excuse to dump me. After all, like you said, I don't even really know you do I?" She spoke a little too accusingly as she got up and turned her back to him, she had had enough and was about to leave.

Realizing it was her pain talking, he called after her. "Lois, don't go it's not like that at all. There's something you don't know that will explain everything but it may make you hate me." His voice was suddenly soft but still compelling. He painfully remembered that he had been about to leave her perhaps never to even know that what he was looking for was right here within his reach all along. He made a decision and this time he closed the distance between them placing his hand on Lois' shoulder forcing her to turn around and once again face him.

Lois turned back and looked up into his face as if for the first time seeing past the hero she thought she loved. A single tear fell down his cheek and she could tell he was in as much pain as she was. She had never seen him like this before. He seemed so...so human. She reached up and wiped his tear away forgetting her burst of anger from just a moment before. "What don't I know, what could you have done that would be so bad to make me hate you?"

"Lois you are indeed pregnant, I can hear the fluttering heartbeat of an embryo..."

Lois interrupted laughing looking away nervously. "You're delusional. No way am I pregnant, that is unless it was an immaculate conception. Heh, but then I'm sure God would have chosen someone more deserving than me!"

Superman shook his head once again putting his hand on her shoulder to pull her attention back to his face as he looked her in the eyes, "There is every reason to believe it's mine."

"Why are you playing with my mind like this?" A fresh set of tears dropped from her eyes. "What! Don't you think I would remember if you and I..."

Superman interrupted her this time. "Lois, that is what I did that you may find unforgivable, I stole your memory of our time together."

"Why, why would you do such a thing? What reason would you have?" She backed away slightly forgetting his other statements of her being pregnant for the time being trying to sort everything out making no sense of any of it.

"Lois I was lead to believe I needed to forsake my powers to be with you. I did gladly but at the same time unknown to us Zod and his cohorts were trying to take over the world. That is why Superman was missing in action when they first appeared."

She stopped in her tracks, "You gave up you powers for me?"

"Yes. I was able to restore my powers but the cost to you was almost more than you could bear. I know Jimmy and Perry told you how Zod took you as leverage against me but what you haven't been told, what I didn't allow you to remember is the emotional toll our involvement took on you. I didn't think it was possible for us to be together without endangering you and you were inconsolable so I took your memory to ease your pain."

"Why would it have been so unbearably hard for me? I can't imagine anything being so hard to bear concerning you that would warrant erasing my memory."

He turned quiet, "There was more to it, you found out something that complicated things...for both of us."

"You've just told me we have created a child together, I would think that a big complication in and of itself. What could be more important than that?"

"Nothing..." once again his eyes glistened as he fought to contain his emotions. All of his defenses suddenly shattered. "Lois you found out who I really am."

"What do you mean? Do you really have a secret identity? Do you really walk and live among us?"

"Yes, closer than you think, that was why it was impossible for you. I really am always around... you, at least up until a week ago."

"Cl...ark, Oh my God!" Suddenly she forgot to breath. Turning white once again she almost fainted. Superman was there instantly catching her. She looked into his eyes and realized the truth had always been in front of her eyes. Deciding instantly Superman wrapped Lois up in his cape and took off with her safely in his arms. Before she had fully regained her senses he unwrapped her in a world of white.

"Are you alright? I thought you needed to see and hear the whole truth so I brought you here."

A tear came to her eyes as she looked over at the starship gleaming nearby, "Why, if you're just going to take off. What does it really matter?"

Superman graced her with a tentative smile. "Everything is changed now. You need to understand that I have loved you since that first day we met. There is no way I can leave you now, not when you're carrying our very own little miracle. If you're willing, we need to try and

make this work but not as Superman and Lois."

"But you said it was impossible."

"Yes, I did, but being an alien I also thought it was impossible for me to father a child with you. If I was wrong about that, then I could just as easily be wrong about us. We are being offered another chance at love together. That is if you're willing to forgive me and love the real man devoid of this suit."

"You're saying Clark is the real man?" She seemed dubious at best. Of course she had seen the similarities but had always dismissed it as ridiculous, Clark was, well Clark. But now she realized Clark was indeed Superman, or was Superman Clark. Her head spun trying to figure it all out.

"Lois, Clark is more real than Superman. The real me lies somewhere in between the two. Clark has a paying job, or at least he did a week ago. He has a mother and a past that he can talk about; he can make a commitment and keep it. Most importantly he has a life he can share. Superman is merely smoke and mirrors an image, a shadow that appears when needed and disappears when the need is resolved."

Suddenly standing before her was a man not quite Superman but not Clark either. He was wearing slacks and a white shirt open to the collar, his hair falling over his eyes. He raised his hand offering it to her.

Tears once again filled her eyes as she went to him without hesitation falling into his embrace as their lips met. Pulling away she smiled up at him. "Only for you would I brave the prospect of three kids, two cats and a mortgage. On second thought how about one dog instead of the cats?"

"Anything you want Lois, anything you want I will do my best to give you."

Chapter 2 - Meeting Mom and Someone New

Lois woke and looked up at his sleeping face with a sudden feeling of déjà vu. Had they lain like this before? She couldn't shake the feeling that they had, if only she could remember. He had the hint of a smile gracing his face, his breathing was soft and regular. She moved ever so slightly and his arm tightened around her but other than that he didn't stir. Sighing she lay her head back on his shoulder closing her own eyes as she remembered the intense love making they had just shared a couple hours earlier. He could bend steel with his bare hands, lift immense weights as if they were almost nothing yet he had been unbelievably gentle and patient. He had let her lead the way, uncharacteristically naïve and hesitant. She had been surprised when he admitted she had been his first and the only lover he had ever wanted.

She opened her eyes at that thought once again turning to look up into his face. No doubt he could have had just about anyone he wanted yet he had chosen her, only her. He looked so peaceful and innocent in his sleep, almost like a child. She brought her hand up to lightly stroke his bare chest trailing down to his impossibly well defined abdomen. She didn't want to wake him but still felt a need to affirm he was real. Bringing her hand over to her own stomach she stroked it lightly as he had before falling asleep. A baby, he didn't say mistake, he called it a miracle and indeed it was. Suddenly everything was clear...she remembered it all, the joy, the terror, the pain. As sleep once again overtook her she let go of the pain and terror and held onto only the joy.

Clark woke early as was his custom. He had slept in the Fortress the last week after giving up his apartment in Metropolis no longer needing it as he prepared to leave. Each morning he had been more listless and saddened by his decisions but this morning he woke feeling completely refreshed almost like a new man. He gently moved Lois so he could get up out of the bed without waking her. Quickly donning the suit and checking that she was still soundly asleep he streaked away hoping to return before she woke up.

After handling a minor accident in Metropolis preventing what would have been a multiple car pileup due to heavy morning fog he landed in front of the farm house. His mother had been expecting him to drop by for a final goodbye before taking off on his planned journey. She set her coffee cup down and was wringing her hands as he entered, looking up she saw a big smile on his face. She was caught completely off guard as he rushed to her still in the blue suit not stopping till he reached her. He picked her up spinning around as he kissed her cheek.

"Mom, you were so right, how can I ever ever thank you enough!"

"Clark, put me down. You know I hate it when you do this!"

Clark reluctantly set his mother back down but didn't release her till he had kissed her cheek once again. "Mom, Lois and I talked and... and I'm not leaving. I want you to meet her, this morning."

Martha could hear the excitement in his voice. In fact she didn't remember his being this excited since he had flown for the first time. She placed her hand on her heart feeling a sudden feeling of warmth go through her body as his excitement seemed contagious. "Clark, slow down. What happened? Where is she now?"

"She's at my fortress," he blushed as he continued, "asleep." Martha raised her eyebrow at that admission but let him continue without comment. "We have something big...really big...and very wonderful to tell you."

"And you want to tell me together?" She smiled hoping it was what she had long wished

for her son, that he had finally found someone to share his life with. He deserved to be happy if anyone did and he had been smitten with Lois for years.

Clark smiled back at her almost dancing around the room. "Yes! I haven't mentioned coming here to her yet but I know she'll agree."

Martha patted his shoulder when he stopped within her reach. "Then why don't you go back and get her. How about I pull together a nice big country breakfast? I just bet you two are both going to be ravenous and there is nothing better than a good home cooked fresh country breakfast."

Blushing again at her thinly veiled innuendo he nodded. "Mom, you are undoubtedly the greatest mom on earth. How did I ever get so lucky?"

"Well, I guess it just runs in the family. I never felt luckier than that day when we found you. It seemed like such a miracle after all." She kissed his cheek as he raised his own eyebrow anxious to tell her of his own miracle but wanting Lois with him to share the special telling.

"I'll be back here with her in say, one hour." She felt him kiss her cheek again as he disappeared.

Lois was dreaming of Clark leaning over her kissing her cheek, her forehead, each eyelid and then her lips. The dream grew more and more intense and she realized it wasn't a dream. He really was in bed next to her kissing her as she came finally fully awake remembering the night before as well as their past night together. This time he was taking the lead and she gladly surrendered to him.

Clark had only intended to kiss her awake but when she began returning the kisses he felt himself getting carried away in the moment. *Is this what it's like being married? Boy, he thought, why did I avoid this for so long? What was I so afraid of?*

They were both still slightly breathless lying in each others arms when Clark raised his head to look into Lois' eyes. "Lois, will you marry me? We didn't actually talk about that last night but I can no longer even begin to imagine my life without you by my side."

She smiled broadly then pulled herself up kissing him before responding. "Yes, a thousand times yes! Today, tomorrow or whenever, yes I will marry you Clark Kent!" she felt the need to say his name so he would know she meant Clark and not Superman, then kissed him again.

"Ahhh," Clark suddenly pulled away and sat up "Mom! Lois, I left for a while and went to see my mom. I want you two to meet each other. As a matter of fact she's going to have breakfast ready for us in just a few minutes."

"What! Meet your mother in just a few minutes? But, but I must look a mess!"

"Lois, Mom made me promise to see you before leaving. We're together now thanks to her. I don't think I would have had the courage to see you if not for that promise I made her."

"I think I love your mother already. Breakfast huh? I am starving for some reason." She smiled mischievously at him now standing buck naked beside the bed pulling on her arm enticing her out of bed. "Do we have time for a shower?"

"Barely," he grinned. The next thing she knew they were standing together under the shower head being drenched with the spray.

As they took off and headed to Smallville Lois couldn't help but be glad his mother hadn't seen her the night before since she was meeting his mother wearing the same clothes she had worn to work the day before. She blushed at the thought and wondered if he had room wherever he carried his civilian clothes for a set for her in the future. She was also glad it was

Saturday and she wasn't expected back to work till Monday. They had the whole weekend to get used to things and figure out what to do next.

Landing in front of the porch Clark set Lois down and in a flash was back to 'just Clark', his glasses tucked away in his shirt pocket. He took her hand in his kissing it reverently as he pulled her toward the porch steps. "Are you ready?"

Lois took a deep breath. "Any mother of yours has got to be mighty special. I'm ready." They walked up the stairs hand in hand seeing Martha already opening the door wide for them to enter.

"Mom, this is Lois," he smiled broadly then his smile took over his whole face. "My fiancé."

Before he could introduce his mother to Lois she had reached out pulling Lois into an embrace. "Lois, I would know you anywhere. My son has described you to me so often. I am so happy to finally meet you dear. Oh, when he told me this morning that you two had a surprise I just knew that this was what he meant. Just call me Martha." She wiped a stray tear from her eyes with a handkerchief from her apron pocket. "As far as I'm concerned, you're already a member of the family."

"Thank you... Martha. I'm happy to finally meet you too. Clark has spoken so lovingly of you."

"Aaahhh, Mom that wasn't the big wonderful news I was referring to, although it is big in itself. There is something more." Clark looked back and forth between his mother and Lois.

Lois was suddenly nervous not sure how the older woman would take being told she was going to be a grandmother on the same morning that she was being introduced to the fiancé. After all she now remembered clearly that she had for the most part seduced her near perfect and innocent son.

Martha was now perplexed. What else could possibly be so wonderful. Maybe they wanted to elope, maybe today even. She could see Lois was now feigning back towards her precious boy, something had the young woman suddenly unsure.

Clark pulled Lois close to him sensing her hesitation. He looked deeply into her eyes reassuring her all was fine before looking back at his mother, "Mom, we're going to have a baby." He rushed the words out clearly ecstatic at the very thought of what he was voicing.

Martha once again brought her hand up placing it on her heart tears forming in her eyes almost at once as she registered what had been said. "A baby? Oh my word, my little miracle is having a miracle of his own." She pulled the two into an embrace. "I haven't been this happy for years. You are so right Clark, this is the most wonderful news I could ever hope to imagine. Under the circumstances, I had never allowed myself to even dream that you would one day make me a grandmother. Lois, bless you, bless you."

Pulling back from the embrace Martha again wiped her eyes clearly nearly overcome with the news. "I bet you two are hungry. Are you ready to eat?"

They both nodded and soon the three were settled down to breakfast, the two women taking the time to get better acquainted. Before long curiosity got the better of Martha, "So where are you two planning to live, have you decided yet?"

Clark laughed, "We haven't even had time to talk about it yet, I gave up my apartment last week."

"Why not my co-op apartment, the balcony will give you easy access." she winked. "I'll even quick claim your name on the title."

Martha chipped in, "Well now that that is settled, just when are you two planning to get

married?"

"Uh, we haven't really discussed that yet either." Clark chuckled then added more thoughtfully "But we do need to consider how it will look at the office. Plus I need to either get my job back or find something else."

"Oh, I don't think you'll have a problem there. Perry was crumpling all week about your leaving. Besides, if he doesn't offer you your job back, I'll threaten to quit myself that'll get him off the dime."

"Lois, you can't quit, The Planet is your life's dream. I can always find something else."

"Yeah, I bet you could, easily, but I was already missing my partner like mad. Besides, that will be the glue to them believing I fell for Clark while chasing after what's his name for all these years."

"What's his name? How quick you forget." He smirked. "So I take it you will not be calling me Smallville anymore?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, it could be considered an endearment." She winked at Martha.

Martha smiled at their easy banter it reminded her of what she had had with Jonathan. Oh, she missed that man.

They spent the rest of the morning visiting with Martha then Superman flew Lois home and went to collect his meager things. He had given all of his furniture to the Salvation Army not expecting to need it. All he had held onto was a music collection, a vast collection of books in multiple languages, some special mementos from his travels and personal mementos of his parents and life in Smallville. After settling into the apartment they started making plans for their new life together.

Clark pulled out a small box his mother had given him.

"I want to make it official. Mom gave me this ring before we left. It was her mother's. If you don't like it just tell me, she'll understand, we can pick..."

"Clark it's perfect, I love it." Lois held out her hand anxious to wear the symbol of his love for her. He slipped the ring on her finger, it was a perfect fit.

Late Saturday afternoon they decided to head to The Planet fully expecting to find Perry at the office. After all, he rarely took Saturdays off.

"But Chief! What exactly is wrong with this picture? I thought it was what you asked for."

"Jimmy, its garbage now go..." Perry looked up as his door opened and Lois and Clark poked their heads in. "Clark I'm surprised to see you. I thought you said you were leaving town last week?"

"Uh... errrr... about that..."

Not giving time for Clark to finish Lois jumped in, "Chief, Clark has changed his mind. I traced him down and well he wants his job back and I want my partner back."

Perry leaned back in his chair, steeping his hands in thought. Jimmy beamed beside his desk. "So, how do I know you won't up and change you mind again next week?"

Again Lois jumped in, "Because I won't let my fiancé do that!"

Jimmy's eyes bugged out at that revelation. His mouth formed a circle as he mouthed a wow! He looked from Clark to Lois then back to Clark. "Way to go CK!"

Perry scrunched his eyes clearly not surprised but at the same time giving it careful thought. "I've known there was something between you two for years. I thought my little

nudge to Niagara backfired. Glad to see you came to your senses Kent, about time I might add. I expect you back at work bright and early Monday morning. We'll just call last week a vacation."

"Thanks Chief. You won't be sorry."

"I better not be, and don't call me CHIEF!" he leaned farther back in his chair smiling. "Oh, and Jimmy the picture is fine. Now you kids get out of here before I change my mind and put all three of you to work today!"

Lois and Clark exited his office arm in arm heading towards the main doors leading to the elevators waving goodbye to Jimmy as they went. Just as they reached the doors a man with light brown hair and a quick smile entered almost running right into them.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for Perry White could you possibly direct me to his office? Oh, I recognize you, you're Lois Lane. I've seen your picture often." He set down his briefcase and held his hand out, his overcoat draped over his other arm. Jimmy looked on in interest from his desk as he packed up getting ready to leave.

"Yes, I am Lois Lane and this is my fiancé Clark Kent. And you're?"

"Richard White. Perry is planning on introducing me Monday but hey I'm here now and couldn't resist introducing myself. So...fiancé huh? Ouch... I guess that means I'm too late and don't stand a chance?" He chuckled. "But then I always thought you were linked romantically with Superman?"

Clark eyed him suspiciously, "Well, you thought wrong, you can't always believe what you read. And yes you are most definitely too late where Lois Lane is concerned."

"Sorry, that was just a joke. I guess it really wasn't very funny. I've just been really excited about the prospect of meeting Superman. I've been in London for several years and well, we don't see him much there. I hope neither of you have taken offense. I mean Lois Lane... The Planet, Superman seems to just go with the two." He once again offered his hand.

The three shook hands as Jimmy came over introducing himself. "Hi, I'm James Olsen. I couldn't help but over hear you, so nice to meet you. So you're Perry's nephew, I heard you were coming to take over International."

"Oh, Perry has mentioned me?" he smiled. Jimmy nodded.

Lois and Clark exchanged glances. "Perry is right over there in that office. We were just on our way out. Glad to meet you. I guess we'll see you on Monday. See ya Jimmy."

"Is it true, are you really engaged?" They smiled still arm in arm nodding as they left Jimmy with a big smile on his face. "That is so cool! See ya CK, Lois."

Chapter 3 - A Baby Is Born

"So when are we going to get married? We seem to have put the carriage before the horse so to speak." They were enjoying their first night in Lois's, no in *their* co-op apartment.

Lois shrugged her shoulders, "I never was one for following tradition, or orders for that matter. It used to cause so much friction between me and my dad." She laughed recalling something, "Made living on an army base rather difficult too."

Clark smiled at her shaking his head at the images that came to mind, "I can just imagine all the trouble you got into." Suddenly Clark's attention was diverted, hearing a newscast from a neighboring apartment. "Oh, I need to go. I'll get back as soon as I can but it may be a little while."

He disappeared before her eyes as she grabbed the remote control to turn on the news hoping to catch whatever he was responding to.

Superman flew above England surveying the flooded areas figuring out how he could best help out the stranded people. Entire areas throughout England and Wales had been flooded by days of heavy rain. He worked for several hours first making sure all the stranded people were taken to higher ground then went about making temporary trenches to help drain off the water feeling guilty that he had been too distracted to hear about this natural disaster earlier.

He arrived home to find Lois waiting for him lounging on the sofa in a sheer pink negligee going over her ballot for the upcoming presidential election. She looked up blushing slightly as he joined her on the sofa. "I hope you really do like pink. I seemed to have acquired a lot of it since that interview a few years ago."

"Lois, I would think you beautiful in whatever you chose to wear, or not wear for that matter."

"What about when I'm out to here with our baby?" She held her hand way out from her flat belly.

"Especially then." He smiled as she snuggled up close to him.

"Hmmm, I guess we'll find out soon enough." Holding up her ballot she asked. "Did you vote yet, the election is Tuesday?"

"Yes, thinking I would be gone, I voted absentee a couple weeks ago. I'm really worried about Thorn getting elected. I just don't trust that man or his running mate Bonds." Taking the papers from her and setting them on the end table he pulled her even closer. "I believe we were talking about something much more pleasant than the upcoming election when I had to leave."

"Yes we were, as I recall." She smirked as she settled into his arms. "I was thinking maybe we could just get married in Smallville, I'm sure your mother would love that. You know just a small simple ceremony with just a few close friends and family."

"Ha ha, You don't know my mother well enough yet. She would turn that into a whole town affair faster than I could fly us there to stop her."

Lois frowned, "Oh! Then what do you suggest we do, go to Vegas and have Elvis preside?"

Clark rolled his eyes. "Hardly, what if we just have a simple ceremony here? Mom could fly in and of course your family and maybe a few people from the office."

"I like it, book-it Smallville!"

"Whoa! What... me?"

"Well, it was *your* idea." She moved to sit across his lap then started tracing her finger

seductively over his chest.

"If you put it that way how can I refuse?" Wrapping his arms around her, he leaned down for a kiss. "Now the only question is... when?"

"Hmmm, I was also looking at the calendar while you were gone. How about the Saturday before Thanksgiving, November 18th? That gives us two weeks. It would also give us Thanksgiving week to have a real honeymoon. I'm sure Perry would give us both the time off if we ask him just right."

Clark took a deep breath. Lois noticed. "What's wrong? Is it too soon?"

"No, it's not that. I was just thinking that your father may not be too pleased with all of this. I am not exactly one of his favorite people as I recall."

"Well, lucky for you, you are not marrying my dad and he really has nothing to say about it. Besides if he got to know you a little better I'm sure you could win him over." She laid her head on his shoulder as he continued to hold her close.

"Get to know me better? Just how much better are you talking about? I know he's your father but I don't know if I'm ready to let him 'know me' that much better."

"Don't worry, I'm not suggesting that, but maybe you could let a little of your real self out with him. Let him know you're not a wimp."

Clark seemed surprised, "Is that why he doesn't like me, he thinks I'm a wimp?" Lois just shrugged acknowledgement. "Well, actually I do see why he might think that." He sighed remembering the last visit when General Lane had thought Clark had left Lois in danger while he had 'run to call for help'. Superman had had to save both father and daughter from a gang of thugs, not that he seemed to appreciate Superman either though. All the same he felt resigned to trying to win the man over for Lois' sake.

Deciding to change the subject he moved to another topic, "There's something else we need to talk about besides the wedding. You need to see a doctor and I'm thinking perhaps my doctor in particular."

It was Lois' turn to be surprised. She pulled away so she could look up at him to better scrutinize his face, incredulous. "Your doctor, *you* have a doctor?"

Clark shrugged his eyebrows almost disappearing under his hair as he nodded. "Not that I really see him very often but yes Doctor Hamilton at S.T.A.R. Labs. Lois, this is completely off the record, only a very few people know about it so you can't tell anyone else. There's a secret lab underground set up almost exclusively to treat and study me."

Lois put her hand protectively on her stomach and again studied his face. "What, you want our child to be delivered there... and... studied?"

"Lois, Doctor Hamilton and his personal staff are completely trustworthy. We are in unknown territory with our child. We need someone monitoring you and our baby that knows just what they're dealing with. We *need* Doctor Hamilton."

She sighed, "I guess you're right. So you'll have to make the appointment no doubt and you'll go with me right?"

"Of course I will. I'll be with you every step of the way."

The very next morning Lois came out of the bedroom with her hair still wet, incredible unexpected smells fueling her hunger coming from the kitchen. "Hmmm, what is that wonderful aroma? It doesn't smell at all like my usual banana in a bowl of cereal."

"Well, you *are* eating for two now. I thought a fresh egg and vegetable omelet would be nice with fresh picked berries on the side."

"You can cook!? GET OUT OF HERE! Really?! Just what other talents have you been hiding under your too big suits and red cape?" She hugged him then surreptitiously reached for a handful of fresh berries off the plate on the counter next to where he was standing. "Oh, these are heavenly where in the world did you get all of this stuff? I know it wasn't here last night."

Laughing and happy his cooking was such a hit he explained. "The eggs are from the farm. Mom has more than she can ever use so she insists I take what I want. I try to help her out as often as I can with some of the chores. The place is just too much for her alone and she refuses to hire anyone to help her. The berries and vegetables are from a farm in Chile I have connections with."

"Connections? As in Superman connections?"

He shrugged as if embarrassed. "Superman kinda helped them out a few years ago. They insisted he come back anytime he wanted fresh fruit and vegetables. I try to pay them but most of the time they refuse so Superman helps them in other ways like clearing the brush, that sort of thing."

"You do realize you're going back and forth between first and third person don't you?"

"Ha ha, Mom's always saying that. I guess I'm just letting my guard down with you. Sometimes the two merge in my mind when I am not being careful. Sorry."

She finished the fruit she had taken and reached to pick up a couple raspberries which she fed to him. "Its alright, I think it's cute."

"Hmmm, I love raspberries." Reluctantly pulling away he ladled the omelet onto the plates and set them on the table as she watched. Then he retrieved the plate of fresh fruit also placing it on the table along with two glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice. "Breakfast is served milady."

"Oh, I could totally get used to this."

As they enjoyed their breakfast Clark spoke up. "Oh Lois, we have an appointment for tomorrow afternoon with Doctor Hamilton at S.T.A.R. Labs. It's set up to look like we're visiting the main lab to conduct a routine interview with Doctor Hamilton on one of his ongoing studies. He'll take it from there. I told him why we're coming so it's all set."

"Tomorrow afternoon, how on earth did you book a doctor's appointment on such short notice and on a Sunday morning?"

"Well, I am his only patient, at least till now. I call he says come in, I just have to tell him when to expect us."

"So, you say jump and he says how high?"

"No, no it's not like that but he does make every effort to accommodate me." He seemed somewhat embarrassed at the special treatment.

"So... we won't have to wait for an hour and a half to actually get in to see him reading magazines from two years ago?"

"Huh?" He was truly confused by that question having never experienced it.

"Never mind, I think I'm going to like seeing your Doctor Hamilton. By the way, this omelet is wonderful. You are now the official cook of the Kent-Lane household since my specialties all come in little take out boxes."

Lois was amazed at the secret lab. She had been to S.T.A.R. Labs several times in the past but never once suspected there was a whole secret lab under the building. When they were left alone for a minute she looked over at Clark. "You never told me it was straight out of

James Bond."

Her tests had been mostly routine, both blood and urine taken and a complete physical. Doctor Hamilton and his daughter, Doctor Elizabeth Hamilton were nothing if not thorough. Liz did the physical while her dad handled the other tests. Clark had only met her a couple times before since she usually stayed in the background when he was present, her father always taking the lead. In this instance her expertise would come in very handy. She had originally planned to go into pediatric research before deciding to join her father at the privately funded S.T.A.R. research lab. He had taken her into his confidence only a couple years earlier about the secret lab when his prior partner had died suddenly of a heart condition. What was even better she had privileges at Metropolis General so the baby, depending on the findings, could be delivered there. That would help the parents-to-be cover-up the special circumstances while appearing to be just like any other normal couple having a baby.

Doctor Hamilton came back into the exam room smiling. "Well everything looks good at first glance but we do need to finish some of the more comprehensive lab tests before we can say everything is indeed 'normal'. I would like to schedule a sonogram for the middle of January. And Kal-EL, I had hoped you would come in after that whole incident a few weeks ago. If you're up to it I would like to do a quick exam on you and draw some blood to make some comparisons. You did say you were powerless for a time? Do you know what could have caused that?"

Looking at Lois first then turning to address the doctor he answered. "Yes I do know what happened. My energy was basically drained leaving me, for the most part, what might be considered normal by human standards. I was able to reverse the process by simply undergoing a very intense recharging."

"I definitely think we should test you then. We want to make sure there were no lasting effects. Miss Lane do you mind waiting in the outside room for a few minutes?"

"Wait, he stayed with me for my whole examination, why can't I do the same and stay with him?" Lois seemed a little put off. "You're just going to take a little blood, right?"

"Lois, it's a little more complicated than that. Please do as they ask."

Lois didn't move, seeing no need for her to leave. What was he afraid of, needles? Surely not.

"Miss Lane, in order to get the sample we need to expose his arm to Kryptonite. It might not be safe for you or the embryo you're carrying to risk any exposure. Please he will be alright. We've done this before with no lasting ill effect."

"Lois, it'll be alright. They know what they're doing. Besides it'll only take a couple minutes, and they're right, you do need to leave for our baby's sake."

As Lois continued to watch refusing to budge Doctor Hamilton took a small lead box out of a safe in the corner of the lab while his daughter draped Clark, who was now lying bare chested on the exam table she had just vacated, with heavy lead aprons leaving only a part of his arm and head unshielded. The young doctor prepared his arm, by attaching a tourniquet, selecting a site and swabbing it with alcohol just as she had when drawing blood from Lois's own arm. At this point, both Doctors stopped and looked over at her waiting.

Clark nodded to her then turned to stare intently at the lead box as if bracing himself for what was to come. Lois sighed, finally giving up as she backed out of the room.

Just a few minutes later they allowed her back in. Clark was just beginning to sit up and seemed unusually pale. Lois ran to his side grabbing his arm examining it just in time to see the needle prick disappear and the small bruise fade to nothing.

The rest of the week went by like a jumble. The office was in an uproar with the election results, or more precisely the non-results. Perry was glad he had his top reporting team back in place to help cover the political fiasco that was unfolding. He was also glad his nephew had decided to head the international division from Metropolis rather than clear across the pond in London. He had always liked that kid. Sure, he was a little spoiled and had that typical rich kid, unattached bachelor attitude but he was sure there was more substance there just waiting to surface.

He smiled watching Kent and Lane from the privacy of his office have at it with Richard over 'who really won' the election. He watched Jimmy trying to hold his own with the other three not taking a stand on either side of the issue but a 'lets wait and see what happens' stance.

As he continued to watch their impassioned debate he was glad his reporters had been able to remain impartial in their coverage, but then they always had before in other just as highly charged issues so why not now?

The three really seemed to be enjoying their little debating sessions. Perry grinned. It seemed Clark was finally coming into his own, showing more spunk than he ever had before. He and Lois were good for each other. Good for them, Lois just better keep those Superman exclusives coming or, well maybe they would have to find some other enticement for the big guy. He looked at his watch, it was past 3 AM on a Saturday morning. The place was nearly deserted save for the night staff and a few of his top people, Lane and Kent included who had all been burning the midnight oil on the never ending election for several days.

Shaking his head he was about to go out and tell them to pack in for the night when a bulletin appeared on one of the screens in the bullpen just above Lois's desk where the threesome was still debating. A cable car fire in a tunnel was being reported in Kaprun, Austria. Perry grabbed his remote and switched channels to pull the station up on his own set. According to the report there were estimates of 160 skiers and snowboarders along with a conductor trapped in the ascending railway car. The conductor and at least one passenger were also believed trapped in a second descending car. Looking back out in the bullpen he saw Lois, Richard and Jimmy all staring up at the television as he heard what sounded like a sonic boom. Looking back at the screen in his office he saw Superman arrive at the scene of the tunnel fire a few seconds later. He pondered that for a moment, thinking his reporter instincts were missing something important in the puzzle.

Superman arrived at the tunnel entrance and quickly blew the fire out that had started in the conductor's compartment then inhaled the deadly noxious fumes filling the tunnel like a giant chimney. Exiting the tunnel and streaking into the sky he exhaled the fumes into the atmosphere where they would do no harm. Returning to the tunnel he pulled both trains to safety making sure all aboard were accounted for and recovering from the mishap. Finally he flew back up the tunnel making a final check ending at the Alpine Centre located at the top of the tracks where he proceeded to fly the stranded workers and skiers to safety since the tunnel was now closed for all transport.

As Clark re-entered the bullpen the station was reporting that Superman was being credited with saving the lives of as many as 170 people. Perry looked up just in time to see Clark walk in the main door. He noticed the young man smiling up at the story being reported as Lois ran to give him a hug. The rest of the bullpen was empty except for a few night workers - everyone else had finally gone home. Perry got up from his chair grabbing his coat and headed out of his office. "You two should go home, it's almost daylight already. That's

where I'm going. The place will survive for the rest of the weekend without the three of us. Have a nice weekend I'm sure you have a lot to do what with the wedding next Saturday."

"Thanks Perry. We'll see you Monday morning." Clark answered as he helped Lois with her coat. Lois quickly brushed a little soot off his jaw line hoping Perry and been too tired to notice.

The following week the couple received news that by all appearances the pregnancy was normal and the embryo was developing as would be expected for a typical nine month gestation period. The due date was determined to be June 22nd. The week flew by as they became more excited about making their union official.

Wednesday evening Lois and Clark went to pick up Martha at the airport expecting her to stay in their guest bedroom. They were both surprised when she arrived with Ben Hubbard insisting on staying at a nearby hotel they had already booked.

Seeing his hurt expression Martha pulled Clark aside as Ben was distracted watching for the luggage to appear in the baggage claim turnstile. "Clark I loved your father, I always will but life goes on. Besides, you didn't expect me to attend your wedding unescorted did you? We've been planning on doing some traveling together for a while and this seemed as good of a time as any. Besides now that I don't have to worry about you allowing yourself some happiness, I thought perhaps I could find a little more for myself."

"You're always right mom, and I do want you to be happy and well cared for. I'm glad you brought him." Sighing he continued, "I was just a little surprised that's all. You still could have stayed with us you know."

"Honey, I just thought perhaps it might get a little complicated... if you needed to make a quick exit. I haven't told him anything... but it would certainly be nice to have someone to confide in besides you and now Lois."

"Let me give it a little thought mom, see how it goes for now. Oh! I should help him with the bags."

Lois's father arrived Friday night just after the dinner party started the night before the wedding. Before taking his place he insisted Lois accompany him outside to a heated patio area where he proceeded to grill her as if she was the main course.

"Lois, what the hell is this all about? Out of the blue you are up and marrying this... this." He was at a loss of just how to describe the man his eldest daughter was about to marry.

"Dad, I love him. He's been my best friend for years and he's the most wonderful man you could ever imagine. You just need to get to know him like I do." Reluctantly she decided to tell him the other news. "We're expecting a baby and we want to spend the rest of our lives together."

"Oh, so that's it, a shotgun marriage! Lois you don't have to marry the guy just because he got you pregnant. There are a lot of other options..."

"This is not a shot gun marriage. I never thought I wanted babies till I realized I was having *his* baby. WE couldn't be happier and if you can't share our joy then maybe you should just go back to wherever you came from. I will not let you mar our wedding day." Fuming and not wanting to spoil her mood by hearing another word from him she started to walk away, then turned back. Her eyes were tearing but she refused to shed any on his account. "And I don't need you to give me to Clark because I've already committed myself to him, body and soul!" With that she turned and headed back inside, Clark met her opening the patio door putting his arm around her protectively as she rejoined the dinner party in the restaurant.

Sam watched Lois leave and saw the look on Clark's face as he met her at the door. If he didn't know better he would have sworn the man looked like he had heard the whole conversation. He suddenly felt like Kent was sending him a visual message with his intense stare, as if to say, *if you dare mess with her, you'll have me to contend with*. He had never noticed how tall and imposing the young man could be. Deciding he had little choice he joined the party taking the only open seat near the other end of the table from the now smiling couple.

Jimmy got up from time to time snapping pictures capturing the evening for the wedding book that was to be his gift to the couple. Jimmy hadn't really been too surprised when they announced just two weeks earlier that they were getting married. He had been surprised at how close Lois and Clark had become to Richard though, especially after their first meeting that same night they had made their announcement. They had even helped Richard find an apartment not too far from the office. He guessed it was their closeness in age and except for the political differences they seemed to have a lot in common. He chuckled to himself remembering all the debates about the never ending election that was *still* not decided.

He snapped a picture of Richard seated next to a pretty blonde. Clark had introduced her as a lifelong friend from Smallville, Chloe if he remembered right. The two seemed to have hit it off and had been talking animatedly all evening. As he moved around the table trying to get candid shots of everyone he couldn't help but notice the coolness General Lane exuded. Oh well, maybe the guy will see how those two were just meant for each other. All he had to do was really look at them to see how happy they both were. Clark's mother on the other hand was the picture of happiness. Now there was a sweet lady. She had even known who he was before Clark introduced them. Sweet!

The wedding went off without a hitch and Sam did a commendable job of hiding his uncertainty. The wedding had been conducted at a small church with just a few friends mostly from the office and close family attending. Besides Martha and Ben the only other person from Smallville attending had been Chloe Sullivan. After the couple left Richard offered to show Chloe the 'sights' of the big city. Not wanting to spoil the mood, Chloe didn't bother to tell him that she had spent many days in Metropolis over the years and had seen just about everything already.

Richard was a little bit of a player but Chloe was enjoying his company all the same. She would have to eventually fess up and let him know she wasn't the little farm girl he had pegged her for. In the meantime she was having fun and she had a little time to kill since she was between job assignments doing off camera investigational work for an international cable news channel.

Clark had made all the honeymoon plans in secret wanting to surprise Lois by taking her to one of his favorite places. As they sat in the plane just a few short hours after the wedding reception heading for France, Clark seemed antsy. He fidgeted and moved around in his seat every few minutes.

Finally Lois spoke up. "Clark, what's wrong, surely you're not afraid of flying? Don't you have enough room? Good thing Perry gave us those upgrades to first class you would really be cramped back in coach."

"No, of course I'm not afraid of flying." Looking around to make sure no one was listening he whispered conspiratorially, "I just don't like flying in a plane, it is too confining."

"I guess we needed to fly commercially and go through customs with our passports in order to stay at a hotel huh?"

"Unfortunately yes" he sighed as he looked out the window wishing he was on the other side of it.

Lois moved over in her seat pulling up the armrest between them so she could snuggle up to his side while still keeping her seatbelt fastened. "Why don't we just try to sleep for a few hours? After all we have over five hours left before we arrive in Paris then the commuter flight to Toulouse."

"Sounds like a good idea to me. I'm sure you at least could use the rest." He put his arm around her as she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

As he drove the rental car Clark began to tell Lois about their destination point of Cordes-sur-Ciel in the South of France. He told of how he often flew over the town to see the beautiful countryside and often watched the sunrise from one particular site. He said the town was given the name Cordes-sur-Ciel which means Cords on the sky during the twentieth century because the hilltop town is often above the low lying mists on winter mornings. Lois noticed he seemed particularly excited about sharing the information with her and she couldn't wait to see the sites he was now telling her about that obviously had him so captivated.

Driving up to their hotel the Château de Laborde Lois began to see why, the Château and countryside was breathtaking. They spent the afternoon seeing the nearby sights. Even having their portrait done by a young local artist named Sophie Himene who insisted on being called by her nickname, Noux. She spoke in English but with a delightful French accent.

The next morning Superman woke Lois just before dawn with a light kiss. "Time to get up sleepyhead, you really don't want to miss this." He had just returned from several Superman jobs all over the world. He took special care to handle several around Europe as well as in America to hide the fact that Superman was in France.

Gathering Lois in his arms he took her to the top of a medieval church building at the top of the town. A place only he would be able to access. The sun was just starting to rise and the town was indeed above the mists. Lois was awestruck with the beauty as they sat there in silence for several minutes. It did indeed appear like they were on an island in the sky with misty clouds separating them from the rest of the world.

Lois noticed the sun sparkling in Clark's brilliant blue eyes as he looked out over the town. She leaned back against his chest with his arms encircling her enjoying his warmth. They continued to watch the spectacular sunrise in absolute silence from their hidden perch above the mists.

The week flew by much too fast for the young couple and soon they found themselves back at the office with fond memories to share with each other and friends. Little had changed in the week since they had left and soon they were both back in the thick of the newsroom events.

Finally on December 13th the U.S. Supreme Court by stopping a Florida presidential recount effectively decided the Presidency in favor of Thorn. As the news spread in the bullpen like wildfire Richard approached Lois and Clark sitting at their desks grinning from ear to ear. "So, I win!"

Clark looked up at him frowning and answered, "No, I am very afraid that we have all lost!"

Richard continued to smile, shaking his head.

On January 8th one of the big stories was the reporting that Noah, a gaur or a dark coated ox was born in Southeast Asia. What made it news was that it was the first individual of an endangered species to ever be cloned. The 'baby' sparked a new round of debates in the bullpen. This time Lois, Clark and Richard were all on the same side.

One afternoon, just a few days later Richard came over to Lois' desk looking for Clark. "Oh, I sent him to get me a pickle with mustard on it, suddenly I just had to have one."

Richard made a face and just then Clark came back to his desk empty handed and sat down prompting Richard to ask, "Where's the mustard pickle?"

Clark looked at him as if he was crazy then noticed Lois's expression and figured she must have made an excuse for him. "Oh darn, I got sidetracked and completely forgot. I'll go get it now."

He got up about to leave again when Lois stopped him. "Oh that's alright, but you know what I really would like? A chocolate malt...with peanut butter in it."

Clark smiled and started to leave, Richard caught up with him. "Mind if I tag along? I could use a pick-me-up myself."

"Clark, could you also get them to put some tuna fish in the malt? Thanks, you're such a sweetie."

Clark and Richard both stopped in their tracks, turning around faces showing their distaste for what she had just asked for. Clark asked wanting to make sure his super hearing had not failed him. "Did you just ask for a chocolate, peanut butter and tuna malt?"

Lois looked up from her computer smiling sincerely, "Uh huh, it just sounds really good to me right now. Make it a large one too."

Clark swallowed hard thinking *and I'm the one with the cast iron stomach*. Richard looked like he was about to change his mind about going since he seemed a little green but then took a deep breath as both men turned and walked out of the doors together.

Clark looked at Richard as the elevator took them down to the main floor. "Where are we going to find a chocolate, peanut butter and tuna malt?" The two men stood out in front of the building for a minute looking one way then the other, neither knowing where to go. Clark finally spoke again. "I guess the deli on the corner is as good a place to start as any."

Just as they were about to be waited on a couple punks came running into the deli brandishing guns and telling everyone to just stay quiet and back up against the wall. Richard did as told and didn't even notice Clark disappear. Seconds later Superman was there and the punks were somehow tied up with an electric cord sitting in a corner dazed. The owner hadn't even had time to open his register to comply with the punks demand for money.

"Is everyone alright?" Richard was the first to respond to the hero's question.

"Wow, it's really you. I've been anxious to meet you. My friend Clark here..." He looked around noticing for the first time that Clark was no where to be seen. "Un, sorry I don't know where he is. Anyway wow... this is so cool!" Superman was suddenly self conscious feeling like his friend Richard had turned into some kind of fanboy or something. Richard held out his hand and the two men shook. "Thanks, you are really awesome you know. I guess you get that all the time, huh?"

Two policemen came running in, guns drawn before Superman could answer. He gave a quick statement and then was on his way. A crowd formed outside and one of the policemen stayed at the entrance to keep anyone from entering. Finally after taking everyone else's

statements they allowed the shop to reopen after the punks who were both high on drugs were led away.

Clark came back in and Richard motioned for him to join him at the counter. He had already placed Lois's order asking for the tuna as a separate item. "What happened to you? You just disappeared. Can you believe it, I got to meet Superman! I'm still psyched. Did you want anything, it's on me?"

Clark shook his head smiling, "I snuck out and called 911 when they told us to back up against the wall. The police got here really fast and wouldn't let anyone back inside so I just waited."

Richard was barely listening and said again, almost to himself, "Wow, I got to meet Superman... and shake his hand!"

Clark asked the owner to put the malt in an environmentally friendly paper cup then placed the cup in the bag with the cup of tuna. When Richard wasn't looking as they started walking back to the office he blew in the bag to slightly freeze the malt so it wouldn't melt.

Richard talked non-stop about Superman the whole way back to the office. Just as they got back to Lois's desk he said, "You know they say he can see through anything. I would have fun with that." Lois looked up at Richard somewhat shocked then noticed Clark just behind him looking at her, his eyes wide, shaking his head NO!

"Somehow Richard, I'm sure Superman would find better things to do with his abilities. What took you guys so long I've been starving for an hour!"

"There was an attempted robbery, I got to meet Superman!" as he proceeded to tell her everything she grabbed the bag from Clark and took the lid off the still frozen malt and took a sip from the straw." Holding it up she asked Clark if he would like a taste noticing Richard had a malt of his own but Clark had nothing.

Clark took a sip. "Hmm, not bad. Kinda like a frozen Reese's peanut butter cup."

Richard who had finally stopped his ongoing Superman commentary noticed Lois's frozen malt in the paper cup as Clark handed it back to her and looked down at his own melted chocolate malt in a Styrofoam cup. "HmMMM, that's weird?"

Lois poured the tuna into the malt and stirred it up before taking another big draw on the straw. "Oh, now that's exactly what I wanted! Want another taste honey?" She held the cup up offering it to Clark.

Clark gulped and answered, his voice almost squeaking, "No, I'm good."

Chapter 4 - Jason Meet Your Daddy

Saturday afternoon January 13th Lois and Clark were just about to finish up a story together when the unmistakable newflash music rang out from a nearby monitor.

We have breaking news just in from San Miguel, El Salvador. There has been a devastating 7.6 magnitude earthquake....

Lois felt something at her cheek and a light breeze blew her hair. She smiled to herself bringing her hand to touch where she was sure she had just been kissed. Hoping he could still hear her she whispered, "I love you, get home when you can and be careful." She went back to finishing the article alone. She had gotten used to his taking quick flight and definitely liked being in on his secrets.

Perry had been at his desk when the newflash sounded. He looked out into the bullpen to see who was on call to gather the facts for the Sunday edition just in time to see Lois's hair suddenly blow in the breeze. He shook his head, breeze...inside, naw. Then he saw Lois bring her hand up to her cheek and smile. Wait, who's she talking to? And where did Kent go? HmMMM.

Superman arrived to find the entire country impacted by devastating landslides, everywhere he looked he saw buildings destroyed. He took a deep breath and went to work. Searching desperately for the living among the hundreds already dead he moved from one site to another barely taking a break refusing to give up till he was sure he had saved every last soul that was still clinging to this world. When he had saved all he could he went to work uncovering the dead and doing whatever else he could to ease the pain of the living. He had always hated earthquakes, so much loss, so much despair the least he could do was try and put some hope back on the people's faces.

It was Monday morning shortly before dawn before he crawled into bed next to Lois. She woke up and seeing the pain in his eyes snuggled up to his side. "You did everything you could, you can't save everybody. Just let it go."

He sighed wrapping his arm around her then put his other hand up just under the edge of her night shirt to rest on her belly. For some reason he found such peace when he touched her like this. He seemed to feel some innate yet inexplicable yearning that only touching her like this seemed to ease, as if some base connection was being formed between the three of them. Lois seemed to feel it too but neither one spoke of it not knowing what to say.

Just a few days later Clark was holding Lois' hand as Doctor Liz Hamilton explained to them exactly what they were seeing in the sonogram image displayed on the monitor. Moving the wand slightly for another angle of the fetus she smiled, "Hello, and what do we have here?" She looked up at the two parents to be who were intently studying the ever changing image. "It's not 100 percent but I would say you should start picking out names for a little boy."

Clark swallowed, "A boy?" His eyes sparkled and his face broke out in a smile he didn't even try to contain.

Lois squeezed his hand tighter, "A son!"

Clark couldn't resist the sudden urge to lay his hand on Lois' stomach. The doctor jerked looking at the screen in confusion then turned to see Kal-El's hand resting near the wand. The monitor seemed to show a wave of motion and possibly heat directed towards the fetus. Clark seeing the doctor's sudden alarm immediately removed his hand and exchanged a worried look with Lois.

"What did you just do?"

Clark shook his head ever so slightly, "Nothing, I just put my hand on her stomach. Just as I often do. I'm not hurting the baby am I?"

Liz didn't say anything but continued to look at the readouts of the heartbeat and again studied the monitor, the wave completely died down as she watched.

"I always listen to the heartbeat and it always seems strong and steady when I put my hand there."

"I'm going to get my father in here I want him to see this." she turned off the sonogram machine and went to the door. "We'll both be back in just a minute. Don't touch her stomach again till we get back."

Lois smiled up at Clark, "Honey, don't worry. Somehow I feel what ever is happening when you touch me like that is good for our baby. It leaves me warm and comforted all over. I'm sure it does the same for our baby... our son." She squeezed his hand again.

The doctors came back in both looking at Kal-El before studying the last image still on the monitor. Liz showed her father the readouts and they studied them quietly together. Finally the older doctor turned on the sonogram and studied the monitor for a minute as he ran the wand over Lois' stomach. Looking up at Clark he nodded. "Okay, place you hand back on her stomach like before." Both doctors looked on in amazement as the image clearly showed what appeared to be an energy wave going from where his hand was placed directly to the fetus. The fetus' heart beat seemed to respond changing slightly as if responding to a positive influence.

Clark explained how he often felt compelled to reach out to Lois and the baby in just that manner. Lois repeated what she had told Clark moments before of how it comforted her. In the end none of them could explain just what was happening but all agreed it was if anything a good thing. The best explanation was that Kal-El was unknowingly sending a wave of energy directly to the fetus and the fetus was thriving, quite possibly because of it.

Lois, Clark, Richard and Chloe were enjoying dinner together on Saturday night the 21st of January just one day after President Thorn was sworn in as the 43rd President of the United States. Chloe was in town for just the weekend and Richard had insisted Lois and Clark join them for dinner. Richard was excited about a new purchase he had recently made and wanted to celebrate with his three closest friends and especially Chloe who he had grown quite fond of. He had been pleasantly surprised to find out she was as well traveled and as adventurous as he was.

"Lois, Clark you two have got to go up with me some time really soon. You can't even imagine how free it feels to fly like that. I mean, it's just out of this world, wouldn't you agree Chloe?"

"He's right, it is really exciting to fly in a small plane like that, it's certainly different from flying in a big commercial jet. There's hardly anything between you and the wild blue yonder but I warn you flyboy here likes to dive and roll so I suggest you go on an empty stomach."

Lois and Clark gave each other knowing glances then Clark commented, "I have to admit it does sound like fun, but where are you going to dock a seaplane? It's not like you can land it at a typical airport. "

"The guy I bought it from is letting me store it at his mooring for now. In the meantime I'm on the lookout for a house of my own with a boat dock."

Lois looked up from the salad she was enjoying, "Hmmm, must be nice. Clark and I

hope to buy a bigger house with a nice yard in a year or so. Our place is fine for now but once the baby is bigger he'll need room to play and stretch his wings."

Clark snickered glad they didn't realize she was serious about the baby needing to stretch his wings, then glanced away distracted for a second. Getting up he excused himself. Lois could tell he needed to leave for a few minutes. She was getting good at seeing the signs and was quite adept at covering for him when needed. "If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back." He appeared to head to the men's room but disappeared once he was sure he was unobserved.

The threesome continued enjoying their salads while they waited on the main course. When the waitress started delivering their entrées Richard got up and suggested that he should go track down Clark. Lois said he probably just got sidetracked by something and would be back shortly but Richard insisted on going to retrieve the wayward man. Arriving at the men's room he found it empty and Clark was nowhere in sight. He decided to use the facilities himself since he was there, then washed his hands before returning to the table to find Clark just sitting down. Looking around the small restaurant confused he shook his head and took his own seat.

Clark noticed his consternation and explained, "Sorry, I saw someone I know and stopped to visit with them for a minute before returning. Hmmm, this looks great. So, when do you want to take us up?"

"Huh?"

"Flying, you said you would take us flying but I'm not sure Lois should go if you're going to go all aerobatic."

"Oh, yeah."

Clark winked at Lois sure he had successfully distracted Richard then smiling asked, "Honey, do you want to try some of mine?"

Late Thursday night, Lois and Clark were still up in the midst of talking baby names when a news flash came on the TV announcing a major earthquake had hit Gujarat, India. Clark took a deep but determined breath, looked at her sadly and disappeared into the night not to return till early Monday morning just before dawn once again exhausted.

Most of the historical city had been destroyed, almost 20, 000 people died. Though he had been able to save several thousand that would have died without his presence he was still haunted by the images that filled his mind of those he had been too late or unable to save.

Lois insisted Clark stay home on Monday morning. She told Perry that he was still working on that hot tip she had used Friday morning. She looked up around noon just in time to see him come dragging in still looking like he had lost his best friend. Lois grabbed her coat and ran to meet him pulling him back out of the bullpen insisting they leave for a long quiet lunch.

Perry had watched Clark enter looking beaten down and then leave with Lois. He looked over at his nephew in the next office and noticed he had been watching too. Then he looked over at the TV monitor in his office. The coverage for days had been centered on the devastation in India. Just now they were yet again going over the death count detailing the destruction saying that Superman had finally given up and left the area a few hours earlier. They commended his efforts that had reduced the casualty count by thousands and the recovery of the dead by weeks. Unfortunately many thousands had died instantly, many more had been injured beyond chance of survival.

Perry turned away wondering just what that must take out of a person, seeing all that

death and despair day after day. He thought back to the look on Clark's face as he entered the bullpen just a few minutes earlier. Sitting down in his chair with his hands steeped in front of his face he began contemplating everything he knew or thought he knew about the young reporter. Piece by piece he put the puzzle together.

Lois took Clark to a small cozy restaurant close to the office they frequented often. Clark sat quietly looking at nothing in particular. Lois ordered for both of them then she moved over close to the wall in the small booth. She then patted the cushion next to her motioning for him to join her on the same side even though it would be cramped. He complied and she put her arm around his gasping his hand as they sat quietly waiting for their food to be placed in front of them.

A young couple with a toddler entered and took a booth just in front of them. The waitress supplied a booster seat for the toddler almost immediately but she was insisting on standing up in the booth. The little girl waved at Lois and Clark and smiled childishly when the two grown-ups smiled and waved back at her. She was chewing on a toy she held in one hand and clutching a ball in her other hand. Before her mother could stop her she threw the ball awkwardly in Clark's general direction.

Clark of course pulled the ball out of the air still smiling at the little girl before standing up and reaching his long arm out to hand the ball back to her mother. The woman had quickly turned around to see what her daughter had done.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I hope she isn't disturbing you. **Katherine Jean Jackson** you sit down like a good little girl. I want you to behave." The woman pulled her daughter back into her seat while the husband smiled and nodded to them acknowledging their friendly smiles.

"Kids will be kids. I'm afraid my wife has a hard time understanding that at times."

"No problem, your little girl is adorable. You are a very lucky man." Clark looked back at Lois and then settled back down in the booth next to her.

As Clark sat back down Lois wrapped her arm back around his grasping his hand once again. "I seem to remember we still need to choose a little boy's name. Unless you have your heart set on something I have a suggestion."

Clark's mood had done a one-eighty while being enchanted by the little girl and he answered with a smile in his voice. "And what might that be?"

"Jason Lane Kent" She smiled back at him. "It continues your mother's tradition of using the maiden name only this time it will be used as a middle name. Kinda seems appropriate if you ask me."

"Hmmmm, I like that. Do you know that Jason means healer?"

"That is one of the reasons I chose it. He healed both of our hearts by his just beating in time."

The irony of her choice of words was not lost on him. "Yes I did hear his heart beat just in time."

When they saw the food coming Clark moved back to the other side of the booth to allow them both room to eat comfortably. Just a short time later he heard the little girl once again struggling to get up in the booth behind him. The next thing he knew he felt little arms going around his neck from behind.

"Da-dee?" The little girl squeezed with all the might her little arms could muster and somehow managed to give him a wet kiss on his cheek before her mother could respond.

"Oh. I'm so sorry. She has never done anything like that before. Please excuse her." The woman grabbed the toddler roughly pulling her away from Clark.

The man got up and took the little girl from his wife and then sat back down on his side of the booth with her in his lap. "Kala, is a very affectionate child, but my wife is right she has never acted like this before."

Clark turned speaking to both the father and mother. "Please, there is no need to apologize. We are expecting our first child in June. A boy, and we are both very excited about becoming parents. I guess you have to expect things like this."

"Glad you understand." He then addressed his wife, "See honey, no harm, no foul. I wish you would loosen up and just enjoy being a mother." Then he looked back at Lois and Clark, "She worries too much. Oh, by the way, congratulations! You two look like you'll make great parents."

"Thank you, and I have to tell you that I would be overjoyed to someday have a little girl as precious as yours."

Lois kicked him under the table. "One at a time Kent, let's get the first one born and out of diapers before even thinking about a second one!" then she winked at both men.

On February 9th just as they were preparing to have dinner at home a news flash caught their attention.

We're getting breaking news out of Hawaii, it seems that the submarine USS Greenville has struck and sunk a Japanese fishing vessel, the Ehime-Maru, off the coast of Hawaii. Attempts are currently underway to rescue the survivors. Here from Hawaii is

"Go" was all Lois said.

The fishing ship had sunk to the ocean floor almost immediately. When Superman arrived on the scene he found the survivors life rafts threatening to be swamped by waves being caused by the submarine now trying in vain to come to their aid. He quickly signaled to the ship to back away. Verifying the survivors were in no immediate danger with the submarine backing off he used his x-ray vision to scan the submerged fishing ship for additional victims and saw two that had somehow found an air pocket in the wreckage. He dove down and pulled them both to the relative safety of the life rafts one at a time. They were both seventeen year old Japanese students on a field trip. Emergency vessels had finally made it to the scene so finding no other live victims he made sure all the victims made it safety to the rescue ships then went back and recovered the bodies of the seven who not had survived. Two of dead were also seventeen year old students and two were their teachers.

When he arrived home Lois was there as always. She set her laptop aside and motioned for him to join her for dinner, she had waited.

Lois received an enormous bouquet of red and purple long stem roses at the office on Valentines Day. That night rather than face the over crowded restaurants Clark insisted on fixing a special dinner for the two of them at home. After they finished their meal they cuddled up on the sofa and began feeding each other the desert Clark had brought home for the special occasion, long stem chocolate covered strawberries.

In between the strawberries Lois finally brought out her gift for Clark. As she helped him opened the aluminum foil wrapped box Clark chuckled. "You do know I can see through aluminum foil don't you?"

"No fair then, no peeking. I didn't think it would work but I wasn't sure so I thought I'd give it a try." The box opened up to reveal a blue t-shirt with the stylized S emblazoned on the chest and a pair of matching PJ bottoms with the superman emblem also strategically placed.

"See, I found us matching pajamas. You get the bottoms and I get the top."

"Very funny. That shirt is going to be way too big for you. But that's alright, it will make it all the easier to take off."

One morning in mid-April Clark heard an unmistakable call for help and as he was about to respond he noticed in his peripheral vision that Perry was watching him from his office. He had become increasingly concerned over the last few months that Perry was reading more and more into his sudden disappearances. Making sure to act as if he was responding to a vibrating cell phone he pretended to answer it then quickly got up and motioned to Lois that he had to leave, purely for Perry's benefit. Once out of sight he made up for lost time.

A short time later he returned once again noticing Perry watching his every move. He went over to Lois and leaned against her desk. "I think Perry knows."

Lois looked up from her computer. "Of course he knows, most likely the whole office has figured it out by now."

"What! How?"

"Well, duh, they know when the baby is due and they can all count to nine! Anyway, it's not a big deal. Heck, it didn't even bother your mom."

Shaking his head and squinting his eyes he responded. "No, no that's not what I was talking about. Perry keeps watching me all the time lately, I think he's figuring it out." Lois looked past Clark to Perry's office.

"No, don't look at him he'll know what we're talking about!"

"Clark you're just imagining things, he would've said something to one of us if he was suspicious. Hmmm, he is watching though, so let's give him something worth watching." She stood up and grabbed him by the shirt pushing him tighter against her desk and started kissing him hard on the lips. She almost immediately began loosening up his tie and undoing his top shirt button knowing he would stop her from going too far.

"Lois, what are you doing!" He scrunched up his shoulders and quickly side skirted her, fixing his shirt and tie in the process. He looked around nervously to make note of who had been watching. Luckily the office was mostly deserted and the ones nearby were all too busy with their deadlines to notice what had just taken place at Lois' desk. He did see Perry laughing from his office and Richard was giving him the high sign from his office next to Perry's. Jimmy was trying to pretend he had seen nothing but it was obvious he had been quite amused.

"Very funny Lois."

"Awww honey, you're just being paranoid. Relax, nobody knows."

The next morning as the office staff meeting was concluding Perry asked Lois and Clark to stay behind. "I've been thinking that you two need a quieter place to work on your joint projects. And since Joe Fairaday retired last week his office just happens to be available. I thought it would make a good place for you two to work a little more... privately."

Clark blushed slightly but Lois was grinning from ear to ear.

Perry continued noting the response, "Plus with the baby coming in a couple months it might be a good idea to be off the main floor in case you ever have to bring him in here for a short spell. Not that I'm saying I condone turning the place into a nursery, mind you." He winked.

Clark looked dubious expecting any minute for the other shoe to drop and remained quiet while Lois looked pleased but asked. "I thought that office would go to the new sports editor?"

"Well, it was my call as Editor in Chief, and I decided you two needed it more. I see the difficulties you two have trying to collaborate on articles amid all the distractions. Just keep in mind that I'll expect even more from you with a private office. So don't disappoint me, hear? Now go on, the office is empty so you might as well move on in. I already had them add a second desk. Besides Chloe starts on Monday and I gave her Lois' old desk. She'll be the new roving reporter and will also help fill in for you while you're out on maternity leave."

"Thanks Chief, this is a totally unexpected pleasure! And you hired Chloe? Great! I've seen her work and from what Clark has told me, she'll really make a great addition to the office."

Lois happily went to pack her desk not noticing that Clark had stayed where he was, looking over at the new office still not saying a word. He noticed how not only was it off the main floor it just happened to be conveniently located right next to one of his favorite exit points. Perry cleared his throat and Clark turned back to face him.

"You really didn't think you could fool me forever did you young man? I was a crack investigational journalist while you were still in ...do they even wear diapers where you came from?"

Clark didn't answer but instead asked his own question. "What finally gave me away?"

Perry smiled and sat down at his desk motioning for Clark to have a seat as well. "Don't worry, it wasn't that little stunt Lois pulled yesterday, although that was quite entertaining. It wasn't really just one thing. It was putting it all together that the puzzle began to take shape.

Clark took a deep breath but said nothing more.

"I think Richard is suspicious too but don't worry, as far as I'm concerned this is completely off the record and just between the two of us. I guess you'll be filling Lois in though?"

Clark nodded feeling only somewhat reassured.

"So, when you quit a few months ago what were you doing? Was Superman about to leave too?"

"Yes he was, if he hadn't heard the baby's heartbeat I would not be here now. I would be on my way to see for myself what happened to Krypton, possibly never to return."

Perry shook his head contemplating that scenario. "I don't think that would have gone over very well with Lois especially since she would have been left here alone expecting your baby."

Clark just raised his eyebrows in response still hiding his overriding concerns that someone else was in on the secrets.

Perry eyed him closely shaking his head. "How do you do it, you're at your desk and a second later somewhere across town in the blue suit with that cape flapping behind you?"

Clark shrugged. "What can I say, I can move pretty fast when I want to."

"Do you have the suit on now? How do you hide the cape, and the boots?"

Lois knocked and opened the door slightly poking her head back in the office. "Clark, is everything alright?"

"Yes, I'll be there in a minute." She gave the two a long quiet look then left, she was suddenly concerned that Clark had perhaps been right.

Watching Lois walk away the editor continued, his old reporter curiosity getting the best of him. "Is the baby going to be like you?"

"We can only assume it will have at least some of my characteristics. Only time will tell just how much like me he will be." Perry nodded as Clark continued to scrutinize his face.

"You realize this is about more than just me now. If word were to get out Lois, the baby and even my mother would be put in danger."

"Go on go back to your wife she looks worried now too and there is no need. Your secrets are safe with me. I'll even help you keep an eye on Richard, he's a good kid but a little headstrong. I don't think he would give you up if he did find out though if that makes you feel any better."

"Thanks Chief."

"And don't call me Chief!" The two men exchanged smiles and Perry got up and patted Clark on the back as he left the office. Later at home Clark explained the whole exchange to Lois. She took it in stride telling Clark that Perry had been like a father to her and she trusted him with both her own and their baby's life.

Lois' stomach continued to expand and the couple began to prepare for the birth taking Lamaze classes. Everything was progressing just as expected. The baby would be born at Metropolis General just as hoped.

June finally arrived and both a bassinet and crib were already waiting, an infant car seat already firmly fastened in the backseat of their car. Martha was planning on coming to stay for a week or so as soon as she got word. They already had plans for Richard to go retrieve both her and Ben in his plane. Everything was ready all they needed was for the baby to decide to be born.

Along about June 18th Lois started to get a little peeved because she couldn't even breathe deep without Clark looking to see if she was alright, if maybe, just maybe the baby was finally coming. She was still waddling into work insisting she was fine preferring to work up till the baby was born so she could take off more time after he arrived.

Finally on Thursday night June 21st with a due date of the 22nd Lois got desperate as she tried to get comfortable but found it impossible. She tried the sofa, a chair then back to the other end of the sofa and finally the bed. Clark noticed her every move, plumping up pillows as she went. He followed her into the bedroom where he began to massage her back, remembering that sometimes it helped her relax.

Lois turned around to face him. "Didn't they say sometimes having sex can bring on labor?"

"I thought your back was hurting, is that really what you want to do right now?"

She sighed deeply. "I don't know, my back is killing me but I'm about to the point where I'm ready to try just about anything. The check-up Tuesday showed he's in position so what's he waiting for, an engraved invitation? I'm about ready to give him an eviction notice!"

"How about I fix you a nice soothing bath, I'll even play the part of pillow to make sure you are as comfortable as possible?"

"Hmmm, that does sound relaxing. Will you put on some music and maybe use some nice smelling bath salts?"

"Of course I will." He kissed her and stroked her cheek softly then went to prepare the bath.

As she rested back against his chest partially submerged in the warm sweet lavender scented bath Lois was finally able to relax. The room was dimly lit with sweet smelling candles and soft music was playing in the background. Clark gently massaged her sides and belly going in concentric circles as he kissed her neck and shoulders. When she was almost asleep he got her out of the tub and dried her off before carrying her back to bed where she rolled onto her

And by the way, thank you for letting me share in this miracle."

Lois and Clark took their eyes off their baby for just long enough to look up at her in answer. Clark spoke, "It's us who need to thank you."

The doctor smiled at them again, "I'll tell the nurses to give you three a few minutes to get acquainted before they start letting your family and friends in."

The two looked back at the swaddled bundle making little noises in Lois' arms. They had their heads together both staring at the baby totally mesmerized.

"He looks just like you. He's absolutely beautiful."

"I think he has your amazing blue eyes." Then she spoke lovingly to the baby, "Jason Lane Kent, I'd like you to meet your Daddy."

Chapter 5 - Homecoming

The nurse entered the room and approached the couple still intent on watching every move and smiling at every little peep their new son was making. "Ahem, those smacking noises he's making says, hey, I'm hungry what does a kid have to do to get fed around here?"

Both Lois and Clark laughed nervously, Lois tore her eyes off her newborn and looked up at the nurse. "I was just waiting for you to come back and show me what to do."

"Um...I'll just go out and check on the family." Clark reluctantly got up and started to leave.

"Honey, you don't have to leave. You should listen so in case I need help later, you know, remembering what the nurse said. I'm afraid I may be just a little scatter brained right now. Stay, please."

The nurse smiled and proceeded with the lesson. Jason didn't seem to need any lesson at all as he caught on quickly but all too soon he was sound asleep. The nurse left the threesome and went out to tell the family they could enter.

Clark got up from his seat next to the bed and held out his arm motioning for his mother to take the seat by the head of the bed he had just vacated. She very slowly sat down never taking her eyes off of the sleeping newborn bundled up and nestled in his mother's arms. She brought her hand up to her mouth and tried to stifle a gasp of delight. "Oh My! I've never seen such a beautiful newborn. Awwwwwwwww."

Lois smiled over at the older woman. "Would you like to hold him?" Clark stood next to his mother while Ben, Lucy, Richard and Chloe were all huddled around the bed marveling at the baby.

Martha accepted the little blue bundle from Lois as tears threatened to stream down her face. "I never got to hold Clark when he was this tiny." She looked up at her son with special meaning as she spoke the next words. "These are precious moments you can never get back if you miss them."

People came and went all morning and afternoon and soon Lois was completely worn out. Clark suggested he take his mother and Ben home and get them settled which would allow Lois time to take a much needed nap between feedings. Clark returned to the hospital a couple hours later and spent the first night with his new family.

The next morning, Saturday, they headed home to find the apartment decorated for the baby's first homecoming. Martha, Ben, Perry, Jimmy, Richard and Chloe all there waiting to welcome the little family home. Lois and Clark were caught a little off guard. Of course Clark knew what was on the other side of the door before opening it, having heard the whispers as he approached, but he managed to act surprised and Lois was totally surprised. Even though he was the center of attention with ooohhs and aaawws, Jason slept through the whole thing only waking up later just long enough to nurse before promptly going back to sleep.

Clark was able to take a couple weeks of family leave off work and Martha was there with Ben to help out with the baby and also around the house. Just before dawn Monday morning Clark left to handle an emergency and upon returning started to sneak back into the house to avoid Ben. Stopping for a moment he had second thoughts and instead just entered the apartment from the balcony still in the blue suit. Ben was just pouring himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen area. Looking up in shock at the hero entering the apartment he continued pouring without realizing the cup was overflowing.

"Ben, the coffee!" Martha didn't know whether to laugh or scold, neither did she know

who to scold, her son or Ben?

"Uh, Superman, I guess you must be looking for Lois or Clark, Uh I don't think they're up yet. Um... is there something ..."

Clark smiled at his mother, "Ben, I am Clark." With that the hero in a blur became the defacto stepson before his eyes.

Ben's jaw dropped open and he almost dropped the pot on the counter catching himself just in time but still spilling more coffee. "But Clark's asleep in thehow can youClark's Superman...?" Looking intently at the young man in front of him he could finally see the resemblance as reality slowly sunk in.

"I didn't mean to unnerve you like that. Mom has wanted to tell you for a while now. I trust her judgment implicitly, and well, I guess its time that Lois and I trust you too since you are part of the family."

"Oh, man..." He started to sit where there was no stool, Clark invisibly moved to place one under him. Now sitting but not even knowing how, he continued, "Wow, this is just too much! Uhhh... Who else knows?"

"There are only a few who do know including Mom and Lois of course and a couple doctors at S.T.A.R. Labs. Perry White figured it out a couple months ago and there is one other friend who shall remain nameless."

Ben swallowed hard shaking his head in wonder. "Wow, this is heavy. To think all those years Martha and Jonathan kept this to themselves. Wow. Believe me I won't even tell Bessie the cow."

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I know it's been hard on Mom keeping all of our secrets all these years. I just hope the knowledge doesn't become a burden to you."

"Clark, nothing about you has ever been a burden for me or for your father, bless his soul. You have been the joy of our lives and Jonathan would agree with me if he was still alive to tell you. I'm sure Ben will feel the same way."

Lois came out in her robe still half open yawning, "What's going on here? Everyone seems so serious."

Both Lois and Clark proved to be doting parents with Martha having to remind them both to let the child cry occasionally otherwise the baby would rule the house in no time. Clark couldn't help but notice she was almost as bad as they were. He realized it was going to be very hard for all of them to *not* spoil that child. His very existence was just too special.

The next Saturday everybody was meeting at Richard's new riverfront house for a housewarming BBQ and pool party. He had just recently moved into the Riverside Drive home and no one was surprised that Chloe had moved in with him.

As they were getting ready to leave Clark came out in long jeans and a long sleeved shirt. Lois shook her head. "Clark, this is a pool party, you can't go like that. Put on your bathing suit or at least some shorts and a t-shirt."

"But, Lois, what if 'you know who' is needed! Besides, I don't have a bathing suit or any shorts for that matter." He smiled triumphantly.

"Oh yes you do! Your mother and I bought some just the other day after Chloe invited us to this party. Don't tell me you're shy about showing your legs after wearing that little blue skin-tight number of yours." She smirked looking over at Martha who was laughing outright.

"Son, I'm sure if 'you know who' is needed you will be able to manage, you have always been quite resourceful as I recall."

"I knew there was a reason it wasn't such a good idea for you two to be spending so much time together. What else have you two been up to behind my back pray tell?"

Ben spoke up joining the women in laughter, "Believe me you don't want to know."

They arrived at the party with Clark carrying a large bowl of potato salad his mother had made. A short time later after getting his mother, Lois and the baby settled on the patio Clark decided to join Richard and Jimmy in the pool. Chloe did a cat whistle when Clark removed his t-shirt. "Whoa, it looks like somebody's been working out. Clark, just when did you get so ...well defined?"

Richard glared at him from the water. "Yeah, who knew! Then frowning he continued, "Just what is your secret, do they bottle it, can I get some?"

"Um, I guess I just like to lift weights occasionally. I was used to bailing hay. It helps me... unwind." He almost said it like an apology then looked over at his mother and Lois noticing that they were both snickering at his discomfort.

Perry turned his back to hide his response and pretended to refill his lemonade ice tea mixture from a pitcher on the table behind him. Once he regained his composure he shouted out. "Hey Richard, don't you have anything stronger than an Arnold Palmer? What does a man need to do to get a beer around here?"

"Look in the cooler Uncle Perry. They're on ice getting cold for later."

Soon the men and Chloe were in the pool playing a game of polo. It was Richard and Chloe against Clark and Jimmy. Clark made sure Richard and Chloe won the match. Ben and Perry had wisely decided to sit it out with Lois and Martha.

Later as he started to prepare the BBQ Richard inquired, "So Clark, are you ever going to find the time to go up in the seaplane with me? I'm beginning to think you're afraid of flying or something. I mean your mom and Ben have already been up and will be again when I take them home next week."

"Sorry, and no I'm not afraid. It's just that I've been so busy what with the baby coming and all."

"How 'bout tomorrow, are you busy then? I've already filed a flight plan and it would be great to have you join me."

"Clark you really should take Richard up on his offer. Jason and I will be just fine with Martha and Ben. Go on, you never take time to just enjoy yourself."

The next morning just as Clark was a few blocks from Richard's house he saw a small commuter plane dive down trying to make an emergency landing on the water bouncing up causing the tail section to break off. Clark immediately pulled over and parked looking around he made sure no one was watching and blurred into the air as Superman.

At the same time Richard looked up hearing the unmistakable sound of a plane diving just as he finished his pre-flight inspection. Seeing the plane bounce off the water he immediately yelled out to Chloe, "Call 911. A commuter plane is down in the River. I'm going to go see if I can help." With that he undid the mooring and quickly entered the plane and took off heading to the nearby crash scene.

Superman arrived first and before diving down to the already submerging tail end section he called out to the victims in the front of the plane. "Stay in your seats and try not to move too much, you'll all be fine. I'll be back to help you as soon as I help your fellow passengers who are in more dire need."

"Superman" the pilot called out, "there are four people missing from the tail section."

Nodding he dove into the water checking on the victims as he approached them then

carefully brought the tail section back up to the surface. Once on the surface he lifted the section up into the air and flew it to the nearby shoreline where an ambulance would surely meet them. After x-raying the four victims still bucked in their seats he decided three of them needed immediate aid. He looked back at the other part of the wreckage still floating out on the river surface making sure the victims there only had minor injuries and were all relatively safe for the moment. Satisfied he once again turned his attention to the victims in the section he had just retrieved and not wanting to wait for aid to come to them he carefully picked the tail section back up and flew the whole thing to Metropolis General where he set it down gently near the emergency entrance.

Seeing him land emergency techs ran out of the hospital and started assessing the injured. Superman told them what he had seen when he did his x-rays and they nodded their thanks. "We have them now. Go, we heard about the crash. Help is on its way but I'm sure you're still needed there." Superman took one last look at the injured and took flight back to the river crash scene.

Richard saw Superman dive into the water and pull the tail section up and fly it to the nearby shore and then fly away with it. Circling around the front section of the plane Richard landed as close as he could without causing wakes then taxied even closer. He called out to them. "Is everyone alright? We've called for help they should be here soon."

As he got close one man became frantic and jumped up out of his seat and raced to the opening hoping to jump onto the pontoons of the approaching intact plane. His fast movements towards the open tail section caused the plane to list suddenly causing the man to lose his footing. He fell floundering into the water hitting his head then sank out of sight. Richard stopped his plane at a safe distance and without thinking of his own safety opened the door and dove in after the man.

Arriving back at the scene Superman saw Richard's seaplane floating nearby, empty. And the wrecked plane was now starting to sink. The people were screaming and trying to cling to the plane as it dipped slightly into the water. Superman scanned the water as he dove down to the plane and saw Richard about to break the surface next to the wrecked plane with another man in his grip. Superman dove into the water and held the sinking plane up at a more level position with one hand while offering the other hand to Richard. Richard grabbed hold and with Superman's help managed to push the unconscious man back into the wrecked plane and then climbed in after him. Once they were both safely back from the opening Superman shouted out, "Everybody grab hold. I'm going to fly this part of the plane to shore just like I did the tail section a few minutes ago. Is everyone ready?"

He landed the plane on the shore just as an EMT truck and fire engine raced up. An ambulance was not far behind.

Richard and Superman both started helping the sixteen people from the plane just as the emergency personnel came up and took over. Shaking Superman's hand, the fire chief said, "Superman, thanks, we can take it from here. Great work by the way, you make our job so much easier." Seeing Richard soaking wet he asked, "Sir, are you alright?"

"This is Richard White. He flew his sea plane to provide aid to this group while I flew the tail section to the hospital." Superman smiled at his friend.

"Uh, it was nothing, really." Then under his breath, "but how the heck am I going to get back out to my plane?"

The fire chief laughed, well the coast guard is on the way here. I suppose they can take you back out to your plane. Unless you want to just swim since you are already wet." He

laughed again then went to work directing his men.

Superman stifled a chuckle as he spoke to Richard, "Well, if you're not afraid of flying with me, I can always just fly you back to your plane."

Richard looked at him funny, something seemed very familiar. Then a broad smile crossed his face. "That would be great, would you?"

"Well I did fly you here, it only seems fair."

Superman sat Richard down on the pontoon of his plane and started to take off but Richard stopped him. "That was so cool, and I thought flying in my plane was something!"

It suddenly occurred to him that Superman had introduced him to the fire chief, how did he know who he was? "Wait, how do you know who I am?"

Superman smiled. "I saw the announcement when you took over the International Section at the Daily Planet a few months back. I like to keep up with such things at the Planet since Lois Lane, um Mrs. Kent is practically my press agent." Then suddenly self conscious he ran his hand through his hair making sure his wet hair was out of his face.

Richard nodded, thinking that seemed reasonable. "Thanks, I guess I had better get back I was suppose to meet her husband, Clark, several minutes ago. I was supposed to take *him* flying."

Superman nodded, "Say hi to Clark for me."

Richard watched in awe as Superman floated into the air and disappeared. He then climbed back into his plane and prepared to take off landing a few minutes later to find Clark waiting for him at the dock telling Chloe about all the emergency equipment blocking his route.

"Uh, Clark, boy you messed out! I 'sorta' helped Superman." Richard proceeded to tell Clark and Chloe everything that happened. Chloe ran and grabbed her laptop and wrote the story up as Richard repeated it then quickly sent it into the pressroom.

"Well Clark, are you ready for that flight lesson?"

"Sounds swell!" Chloe and Richard exchanged humorous glances at their colleague's choice of words. Both thinking at least he didn't write that way.

The rest of the week passed quickly with Martha and Ben going home on Thursday one day before Jason was to be two weeks old. Richard flew them and Clark went along for company. Chloe spend the afternoon with Lois doting on the baby.

"I wonder what Richard would think if I told him I wanted one of these?" Chloe was holding Jason, rocking him while watching all the little faces he made in his sleep.

"Just how serious are you two getting? Serious enough for baby talk?" Lois smiled at her friend as she placed an iced tea down on the table in front of her while sipping on her own.

"Pretty serious, I just don't know if it is baby serious yet. I have seen him look at Jason a few times though, like maybe he's thinking about what it would be like." She thought for a minute and then asked. "What was Clark like when you told him you were expecting?"

Lois smiled remembering that she hadn't told him, he had told her. "He was ecstatic and still is. He's becoming a fantastic father and I am sure given a chance Richard will be too. They're both good men."

Clark went back to work the following Monday and just after a second morning staff meeting called Lois for the third time. "Is everything alright there? Do you need anything?"

"Clark you've only been gone for three hours. Everything is fine. I just fed Jason and put him down. I was just about to get on the internet and see what's been happening."

"Nothing is happening. I'm bored. Why did we let Perry give us this big office, I forget? It's too big and lonely without you here."

Lois laughed. "You know why he gave us that office. It was to make it easier on you mostly and well for when we have to bring Jason in to work with us."

"Why don't you bring him in now? I'm sure everyone would love to see him again."

"Clark, I just put him down. Don't you have some work you should be doing?"

"No, it's done already. Like I said I'm bored."

"What about"

"Nada, it's totally quiet this morning. I guess I could go meet Chloe on the roof."

"What do you mean, meet Chloe on the roof?"

"Perry wants her to get an interview withyou know who. When she asked how to find you know who, Jimmy suggested that he thought perhaps you met him there... sometimes."

"Well, why don't you do that?"

"I can't meet Chloe up on the roof, that's our special place!"

"Clark, I'm sure....oh that's my other line...just a minute."

"It's probably Chloe, Perry said she should call you if she needed help."

"Ahhh!" Checking the caller ID she without hesitation hit the button to end the call with Clark and then picked up the other line, "Hi Chloe."

Clark heard the line go dead then shut his phone looking around his office. "HMMMM, I know... E-mail."

"Hi, Lois. Um. Perry assigned me to get an interview with Superman early this morning. Can you tell me the best way to get his attention? I've been standing up here on the roof for well over two hours now but he's a no show."

What Lois wanted to say was something like, *Go back down to the bullpen and ring Clark's neck and you will no doubt find what you're looking for.* What she ended up saying was, "Gee, sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. I'm afraid getting Superman's attention is not always that easy. I'm sure Perry will understand." Her attention was suddenly averted to her computer as, *You've got mail* rang out.

"Do you have any other ideas that might help? You do seem to be the expert."

Opening up a window to her mailbox Lois saw the message was from Clark. "Why don't you ask Clark to help you? He likes to keep it to himself but he has a pretty good record of tracking down Superman too."

"I guess I could give it a try. It does beat jumping off the rooftop. By the way, if I did say, fall off, would Superman come to rescue me?"

"Chloe, don't even think about that. I sure wouldn't. What if he's off saving someone else? Go talk to Clark, you two are friends, I'm sure he'll help out."

Opening up the email Lois wasn't surprised to see. *Hi honey. I miss you and Jason. Do you think you could go take a picture of the two of you and Email it back to me? Love you both.*

Responding, she wrote. *When I hear back that you have met with our mutual friend and helped her take care of what Perry asked her to do, then I will THINK about taking a picture of our son and emailing it to you. Not before.*

BTW, I'm in the mood for Chinese for Dinner. Please stop and pick some up on your way home. In the mean time why don't you go out and try and find some news, or even make some of your own! Kiss kiss

Just as he was about to get up and go find Chloe she knocked at his door. "Clark do you

have a minute?"

"Sure, what do you need?" he asked all innocent all the while thinking, as if I don't already know.

"You heard what Perry assigned me. Lois said you might know how to contact Superman. Do you have any suggestions?" she asked sighing, as she sat down in the chair on the side of his desk.

"Did you try the roof? That's usually where Lois meets him."

"Yeah, he was a no show."

Making a face he said, "Why don't you give it another try. Maybe he wasn't available."

"Huh, well if that is the best you have I guess I will have to give it another try. If you hear a scream it's just me getting desperate." She got up and left the office leaving Clark feeling bad he had ignored her before.

When she reached the roof she saw Superman looking out over the city.

"Superman, I was hoping to find you. I'm Chloe Sullivan, a friend of Lois and Clark's."

"Ms. Sullivan, It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Umm, as you must know Lois Lane is out on maternity leave right now and well, Perry White has assigned me the awesome task of trying to get an interview with you. That is, if you're agreeable to allowing me the opportunity."

A short time later having accomplished her goal she ran back down to the bullpen and poked her head into Clark's office to find him typing away. "Thanks Clark, he was there. I guess I just gave up too fast."

Clark just nodded and went back to writing his email.

Mission accomplished. Said friend has been taken care of.

You're right about the other thing too. Maybe I do need to go find some news or if none is to be found make some of my own. But I do still miss you both so much. I'll be very glad when you're back here at the office with me. But then how are we ever going to leave little Jason alone in a big daycare nursery? That is just too sad to even contemplate. Chinese huh, I'm on it. Kiss kiss back at you.

P.S. Now do I get my picture? PLEASE, PRETTY PLEASE

After a couple of days Clark got used to the quiet office and settled into work finally once again appreciating the easy departures and entrances.

A Couple weeks later on July 18 a 60 car trail derailed in a tunnel located in downtown Baltimore, Maryland sparking a fire almost immediately. Superman arrived at the scene and finding toxic fumes quickly put the fire out then inhaled the fumes. Flying up high in the sky he released the deadly fumes where they would do no harm then returned to finish clearing up the mess finally pulling the train cars out of the tunnel.

It was later reported that eight tankers in a 60-car CSX train were carrying potentially toxic chemicals, including hydrochloric acid and fluorosilicic (hydrofluoric) acid, which when inhaled can burn the lungs. The train had been manned by a two-man crew that stopped the train in the tunnel when they first detected a problem. After seeing the smoke they followed standard procedures set in place for similar incidents. They uncoupled the three locomotives and drove out of the tunnel.

Haz-Mat equipment and personnel were called but it turned out thanks to Superman they were only needed for final mop up efforts after the incident was contained. A five block area that had quickly been evacuated for safety precautions was allowed to go back to business as

usual after only a short time. According to the Haz-Mat director the entire downtown area could very well have been shut down for days if not for Superman's quick and decisive action.

Lois came back to work at the end of August raring to go but at the same time having remorse for leaving Jason at daycare even if it was only for a little over half the normal work day. She had arranged to work from home in the afternoons to make it easier to continue breast feeding.

On the morning of September 11th just after 8:45 AM Lois and Clark were working on a joint article when the monitor in their office grabbed their attention. The picture showed the North Tower of the World Trade Center with flames shooting out. The commentator was saying something about a plane that had just crashed into the tower moments before. Lois felt something at her cheek and then heard the door to their office shut but she didn't see him leave. She stepped out into the bullpen. Perry and Richard were soon both by her side. Everyone was watching the monitors in astonishment at what they were seeing. No one said a word but all were wondering the same thing, how could this have happened?

Chapter 6 - Part 1 - So It Begins

Superman arrived at the North Tower and immediately realized it was useless for him to try and blow the fire out. The building was drenched in jet fuel feeding the fire at an intense rate. Quickly landing on the roof and finding the door locked he tore it off completely allowing victims already arriving there a means of exit.

Remembering that he had passed a large semi end dump tractor trailer combination at a nearby construction site Superman raced back and tore the trailer off the large semi and quickly flew back with it. He then hovered right next to a window one floor above the fire where a large group of people were gathering near a large broken out window threatening to jump. Seeing him, they cheered and immediately started jumping into the open trailer, many helping others that were afraid, unable or reluctant to make the small leap of faith into the flying open trailer. Superman urged them on, imploring them to hurry.

Lowering the trailer to the ground a safe distance away from the building he rushed the people out of the trailer all the while planning his next move. He watched a helicopter pilot make an attempt to land on the roof but have to pull away due to the intense fire and wind. While the people emptied the trailer he made use of the time pulling people out of windows a couple at a time. Once the trailer was emptied he once again took off with it to better collect the victims. This time he headed for the rooftop where many had gathered hoping for a helicopter rescue once he had opened the exit door. Superman feared that means of rescue would never arrive so it was up to him. Flying up he had to keep telling himself to concentrate on what he was doing in order to keep the growing din of screams from distracting him from what needed to be done to make the most efficient rescues. Otherwise many more would be lost. While several dozen people raced to fill the trailer Superman flew off not resting for a second and caught several people falling from the building having either jumped or fallen out windows to escape the fire.

The screams and cries were becoming so overwhelming in Superman's head that he could barely keep from covering his ears. Racing back up to the trailer now full he picked up the trailer and began lowering it as fast as the frail bodies inside would allow. He tried to keep his movements steady all the while the endless screams were taking a toll on his senses. Just as he was about halfway down the drop to unload the group from the roof, now huddled in the trailer, he heard the screams of even more people and the unmistakable sound of a jet moving fast in the sky to his far back. Jerking his head around to look at what he was hearing he saw, to his utter horror, a second jet heading straight for the South Tower.

"No, this can't be happening!" He screamed, nearly overcome by the implication of what he was witnessing. "It wasn't an accident at all!" Without waiting he dropped the trailer down as fast as he dared move with the people cowering in the open trailer finally letting it fall the final few feet. He shot up towards the plane at blinding speed with tears overflowing his eyes barely making it in time to push it away from its intended target and back up into the sky.

Looking through the aircraft shell into the cockpit he saw the pilot slumped behind his seat not breathing while another non-uniformed man sat in his seat screaming and waving his fists in the air as he fought to control the jet after the sudden unexpected jolt from below. The rest of the flight crew was also somehow subdued laying about the small room in heaps.

Without even thinking Superman released his grip of the plane and flew around to the cabin door grabbing it off of its hinges. He entered the plane instantly assessing the rest of the scene. With no remorse he decisively knocked all of the hijackers out including the ones who had barricaded themselves in the cockpit. Before exiting the cockpit he turned the engines off

then exited the plane the way he entered never even having slowed down long enough to be visible. Still moving as quickly as possible while keeping the passengers safe he took a position under the now falling plane and flew it to Lagaardia Airport where he sat it down on a far field as emergency and security cars rushed to the location.

Not stopping to wait for the cars to arrive Superman headed back to the towers once again picking up the trailer since it allowed him the fastest means to get people off the top floors. He knew the firemen were concentrating on the floors below the totally devastated impact zone, floors 93 to 101. Again he had to fight to maintain his concentration amidst the ponderous moans, screams and calls for help.

As he landed on the ground after several more trips letting a group quickly exit the trailer a fire chief ran up and handed him a walkie talkie and the two men quickly exchanged information and concerns. Superman would continue to concentrate on the upper floors 102-110 above the impact zone and the fireman the lower floors. Attaching the device to his belt he searched the building with his vision and hearing and updated the fire chief on everything he saw and heard including the problems the rescuers were experiencing with communication.

Rushing away mid-sentence Superman once again caught several victims falling from the burning tower. He deposited them near EMT units out of harms way before returning to the fire chief where he once again grabbed the trailer for yet another trip to retrieve victims. With each full load of victims others were left waiting for rescue. Superman called out to them offering hope that he would be back for them, they just had to hold on a little longer. As he was landing with the eleventh group of victims in the trailer he looked up at the building in shock as if suddenly hearing something ominous. For a split second he let his mask fall and the fear showed on his face, not for his own safety but for those still waiting rescue.

"Get everyone out. NOW! Call all your men out!" he shouted to the fire chiefs, "The building is groaning, I think it's about to collapse!"

Racing up the side of the building in a last ditch effort Superman smashed through a couple floors below the burned out structure and braced a main beam trying to relieve the pressure as he blew with all his might trying to cool the steel beam structure that was melting as he watched with his x-ray vision. But he was too late, there was no way for his cooling breath to reach the beams hidden in the structure, his efforts would never be enough. His thoughts tortured him, why had he failed to see this coming?

He heard muffled voices far behind him in the stairwell. Searching with his eyes he saw two firefighters helping someone down the darkened stairwell. "Get out NOW! There's no time." He shouted. "The building is about to collapse around us." Bracing the steel beam with his shoulders and back he grabbed the walkie talkie at his belt and pushed the button. "Everyone, out of the building, NOW! It's about to collapse!" ...static... was his only response.

Throwing the device aside he heard the building start to moan even deeper then looking through the building to the upper most floors he saw the structure suddenly start to shake and seemingly turn to a cloud of dust and debris as it fell towards him about to take him down with it as it fell.

As he stayed in place trying to buy just a little more time he heard screams coming from everywhere. Screams of people he had told to hold on and wait, that he would be back for them. Screams of people he had already failed or was within seconds of failing. Unable to do anything more he started to cover his ears feeling totally defeated, but not willing to give up till it was over he instead began moving with the speed of light. Somehow he managed to get

ahead of the destruction and retrieve the two firefighters racing down the stairs with the injured victim in tow before the falling building caught them. Wrapping his cape and body around the three he managed to stay ahead of the white death claiming everything in its wake.

Part 2 - What's Happening?

Lois, Perry and Richard stood in the open bullpen not believing their eyes as the entire room was mesmerized by the unfolding scene. They had seen Superman arrive and leave returning with what looked like some kind of truck bed and began evacuating people. Perry came to his senses first and quickly asked. "Richard can you fly a team of reporters to New York in the next couple hours?"

"Uh, Yeah, sure. Just let me make a couple calls."

He ran to his office as Chloe jumped up having heard what Perry said. She spoke up, "Chief, let me go. I have a lot of contacts in New York City with the Cable News network."

"I'm going too Perry," Lois added, "this is going to be too big of a story for just a couple reporters. I want to be there."

Speaking so the others could easily hear, "Lois, you're staying here. Clark is already out of town on that assignment I sent him on this morning. Chloe you're going, Jimmy, Gill you two get your stuff ready we need full coverage of this."

"What! What do you mean I'm staying here! This has my name all over it, Superman is there."

"Lois you have a baby that is not yet 3 months old. You are staying here! You can still cover the event, but you'll do it from here and that is final."

"Chief!"

"Lois, my office, now!" He gave her a slight nudge in the right direction and followed her closing the door.

"Lois, you and I both know that Clark would want and need you to stay here out of harms way. He can not be worrying about you at a time like this. When he comes home I have a bad feeling he's going to need both you and Jason available to greet and comfort him."

"But, Chief..."

"That's my final decision." Hearing screams out in the bullpen they looked back at the monitor just in time to see a second plane about to hit the South Tower. Slight glimpses of distinctive bright red and blue were barely visible moving under the plane. Superman must have intercepted the plane seconds before it would have hit the South Tower. Seconds later the plane appeared to lose altitude before it recovered with a slight jerk and then moved quickly away, soon disappearing from sight.

Lois sat down hard in one of the chairs nearest the monitor. "Are we at war?" She almost whispered it as if afraid saying it any louder would make it even more real. Perry just shook his head sadly not knowing how to respond.

Within minutes Richard, Chloe, Jimmy and Gill headed out the bullpen heading to the Riverfront house to board Richard's seaplane to head to New York City. Perry barked out more orders to various people in the bullpen superseding the morning's assignments.

Lois raced out to retrieve Jason wanting him within eyesight on this terrible day. Returning a short time later she rejoined Perry in his office, he was busy keeping a close eye on the monitor while making calls to his own contacts. With Jason now sleeping innocently in a baby carrier on the office sofa completely unaware of all the mayhem going on around him she went back to work but like Perry kept a close eye on the monitor.

Every time Superman was mentioned or shown on the screen Lois stopped what she was doing and just watched. At one point they showed a taped feed from another source that showed a close up of Superman lowering a group of victims in the make-shift rescue carrier purportedly just as the second plane was approaching the South Tower. Superman appeared to react, screaming something before speeding up his descent dropping the trailer a few feet from the ground then disappearing.

Perry noticed Lois growing more and more tense. "He'll be fine Lois. He's used to dealing with disasters."

"Perry this is not a natural disaster. This is man made! Didn't you see the look on his face? This is slowly tearing him apart. People think he's made of steel but I know otherwise."

They continued working in silence. A short time later the announcement was made that all planes were to be grounded. Just a few minutes later there was news of a fire at the Pentagon but the cause was not immediately known. Word spread quickly that it had been a third plane that had crashed into the facility at 9:37 AM with possibly hundreds dead and many more injured at the site. Soon the monitor was switching between the two crash scenes.

A short time later news spread that a plane had gone down in a field in southwest Pennsylvania at 10:03 AM killing all aboard. There was widespread confusion across the United States with several erroneous reports of other events being broadcast and then contradicted. The terrible and frightening news seemed never ending.

Richard, Chloe, Jimmy and Gill came back into the newsroom about 10:20 AM explaining they were banned by the FAA and Government from taking to the air as they prepared to take off. Just as Richard entered Perry's office the monitor was showing Superman talking to a Fire Captain while the victims quickly unloaded the trailer. Suddenly he looked up at the building, and for a split second the fear or shock of what he was seeing or perhaps hearing played on his face. Then he appeared to shout an urgent command before blurring out of sight, presumably into the building.

Richard and Perry started talking quietly about what they were witnessing but Lois didn't take her attention off the monitor for a second from when Clark disappeared. As she watched she was barely able to breathe fearing what was happening and not knowing where Clark was. She had clearly seen that unguarded look on his face and it struck terror in her heart as to just what was happening. She watched the screen for what seemed like forever then saw the ominous white cloud of smoke at the top of the building. The tower was collapsing in onto itself.

"NO, NO where is he, where is he!" Richard and Perry looked from her to the monitor in shock then raced to her side as she began to fall, barely catching her before she hit the floor as she slipped out of consciousness.

Chloe came running into the room and moved Jason out of the way as the two men gently carried Lois to the sofa. The three tried to help her all the while barely able to tear their eyes off the horror unfolding on the monitor.

For several minutes the scene was utter chaos with multiple reports from various sources that Superman was inside the building when it came down and no sightings of him since. Richard ran to get a cool wet towel for Lois' head along with a glass of water.

Perry tried to comfort Lois as she came to, "Lois, take a deep breath. We'll manage to get through this, whatever happens."

Lois looked up into his eyes understanding his double meaning, but it was *her* husband that was missing, the father of her young son. Perhaps it was selfish but she couldn't bear the

thought of losing him. The whole world needed him now more than ever. He just had to be alright, where was he? Even with her eyes closed she could see the tower collapsing into the white cloud of smoke and debris.

The commentators continued describing the devastation caused by the collapse of the tower. The images showed it all, the massive all consuming white cloud of dust and debris still filling the air. After several minutes rumors started flying that Superman had been spotted and soon a camera caught his image emerging from the cloud of smoke. Lois inhaled sharply as he was shown landing near an aid station completely covered in dust carrying something in his arms. The object looked like it was possibly a victim completely wrapped in what must have been his cape. He was shown carefully depositing the bundle on a gurney then quickly but gently unwrapped the cape to reveal not one but three unconscious but very alive people, two firefighters and a young woman.

Lois saw a look of desolation on his face, even covered in grime and dust she saw it. After unwrapping the victims he turned and walked towards the smoldering remains and just stared as if looking for any hint or hope of life. Several firefighters and police officers joined him none saying a word all showing to the world the same look of helplessness and utter despair.

Part 3

All across America and the world people were glued to their televisions. Having never witnessed anything like this it was hard to comprehend it was indeed real and not some sick movie.

One middle aged woman in Southern California watched in horror. She had been just getting ready for work when her normal early morning radio show started reporting that some kind of plane had somehow crashed into one of the World Trade Center Towers. Thinking they meant a small plane she continued getting ready for work. Minutes later the radio personality was doing something unheard of by telling people to turn on their television sets. Stopping what she was doing the woman went to the television in her bedroom and turned it on and was almost immediately overcome with what she was seeing. Just a few minutes after she turned the television on she stood in horror as a second plane came into view almost hitting the second tower.

Completely forgetting about getting ready for work she stood in shock tears streaming down her face uncontrolled. A short time later hearing the planes were bound for LAX and remembering her brother was due into LAX from the east coast sometime that very day she grabbed her phone and dialed his house. Thankfully he answered with a groggy voice annoyed his sleep had been disturbed. He had gotten in just a couple hours earlier. Relieved to hear his voice she quickly told him to turn his television on that something horrible was happening.

The woman finally managed to finish getting ready for work and took her usual route which went right past John Wayne Airport in Orange Country. As she passed the airport she noticed how quiet and still the sky seemed. She looked over at the planes all just sitting on the runways and chills ran up and down her spine thankful the sky was empty. She gave a quiet prayer for all those who had died or were even now in pain, physical or mental. What a dark dark day.

Chapter 7 - Heartache

Superman continued to scan the ruins of the North Tower either not willing or unable to accept all was lost. He ignored everything going on around him. Suddenly he flinched and turned his attention to the South Tower as his expression changed from desolation to alarm. He turned to the fire chief standing at his side and spoke with urgency, "We need to evacuate the South Tower and all the other nearby buildings. The fall of the North Tower has undermined their structural integrity and none of them may be safe at this point."

"You're right, some have already evacuated but we need to get everyone out and away from this whole area. I'll get the word and urgency out."

A police sergeant came running up with a phone, held out. "Superman I have a call for you. It's the President."

"The President?"

"Yes"

Taking the phone Superman answered, "This is Superman I understand you wish to speak with me?"

"Superman, have you been made aware of the other two planes that crashed, one into the Pentagon and one into a field in Pennsylvania?"

"What! No, when?"

"Within the last hour, but that is past your doing anything to prevent at this point. We need you in the air helping us to clear the sky of all aircraft with the exception of U.S. authorized fighter and interceptor jets. As we speak there are still a few commercial and private planes in US airspace. We need them all landed ASAP. Can we count on your help?"

"The South Tower's not safe, just a second I want to check with the fire chief here before I abandon this site to scout the airways."

Understanding what was being asked of Superman the fire chief spoke up, "We should be able to manage the evacuation of the buildings. That is unless you see or hear signs giving imminent cause for concern."

Superman once again scanned the buildings from top to bottom then spoke to the chief. "There's evidence of damage caused by the fall of the North Tower but nothing suggesting imminent danger. I would suggest all of the building here be evacuated as quickly as possible. The buildings just don't sound right to me." The chief nodded understanding.

Turning back to the phone he spoke, "Sir, I will commence aerial reconnoiter of all US airspace momentarily. If I encounter any suspicious planes I will personally land them at the nearest military base."

"Excellent, I won't keep you longer other than to say, we owe you much gratitude for what you did today, you are a true hero."

"Mr. President, what I did was nothing when compared with what the firefighters and police officers have done and continue to do. They are the ones risking and losing their lives. They are the true heroes not me."

Superman searched the sky for a couple hours making sure all planes were beyond suspicion only escorting a couple to military bases. All others he watched land at commercial airports. Soon he was alone in the air with only the birds and the occasional military jet to keep him company as he flew from coast to coast keeping a particular close watch on the major cities.

Once he was satisfied the skies were clear he flew to the crash scene in Pennsylvania but found there was really very little he could do to help at that scene so he flew to the Pentagon

and helped there for several hours. Late in the day he returned to the World Trade Center and dropped down towards the fire chief he had been working with earlier.

Looking up the chief shook his head seeing Superman floating down towards him. "The evacuation is complete Superman. By the way, you were right. We had a structural engineer here just a little while ago. He says the immediate surrounding buildings, in particular the South Tower and other World Trade Center buildings are not sound and he wants to do more intensive analysis to determine the full extend of damage. He has red tagged all the buildings here and is inspecting some other nearby ones as well."

Superman nodded and his eyes were once again drawn to the meager remains of the North Tower. The chief saw the pain and guilt he was feeling wash over his face. "Son, you did everything you could do. We all did. Sometimes what you can do is just not enough. It's a hard lesson to learn and I can see you're having a hard time accepting your own limitations but loss is a part of life we have to accept it and move on."

"I should have known the building was about to fall. The signs were there, why didn't I see them sooner? Maybe we could have..."

"Could you have worked any faster, I doubt it. Would I have sent my men in? That is what we do, we run into burning buildings to save lives while everyone else is running out. As long as there were people in danger our fine firefighters and police officers would have run to help them. That is a fact that even your presence doesn't change." Superman tore his eyes away from the desolation and looked into the older man's eyes seeing a kindred spirit.

The man continued, "We all have to accept what happened and make peace with our response. If you hadn't been here many many more would have died. You did make a big difference never forget that. Now go and take care of yourself, you really look like you need a break."

"How are the three people I pulled out, have you heard? I was worried about the woman. She was already badly hurt. I had no time to be careful. I think all three may have been hurt even more during the trip out of the building."

The man held up his hands shaking his head with a slight smile, "They were all three taken to Mercy General. The woman was in critical condition but expected to survive. Both men appeared to have broken bones but that's all I know other than it was a miracle any of you made it out alive."

Superman entered the hospital causing a stir as he passed by a crowd of people waiting for aid. Soon he was being escorted by a doctor to a room the two firefighters were sharing. The men were surrounded by family members and a hush fell over the room as the doctor escorted Superman in.

One of the men looked up surprised and happy to see him, "Superman, I don't know how you did it but thank you. I heard the rumble and thought we were all three dead. I don't even remember seeing you. I was just suddenly coming to on the gurney. You saved us. How can we ever thank you."

Superman answered somewhat embarrassed by all the attention he was getting, "I was just doing the same thing you were doing, trying to get everyone out. I needed to see for myself that you are both alright. Sorry about your ribs and leg." Looking over at the second man he continued "and your injuries too. I think I caused them getting you out."

"Hey, you have nothing to be sorry for, we're all three alive because of you," the second man said softly. "The last thing I remember before everything went dark was a flash of red and blue and then darkness. I thought an angel had come and spirited me away. I guess I was right,

you are an angel."

Superman looked away momentarily then met the man's eyes shaking his head, "I'm no angel, I'm just a man who can fly, move fast and lift heavy objects, nothing more. You are the ones risking your lives time after time."

One of the men's wives spoke up, "You don't give yourself enough credit you are a hero among heroes, you could rule this world instead you serve it. You are Earth's guardian angel and we are all thankful for everything you do."

"I'm glad you're both doing well, I don't want to interrupt your family visit more than I already have so I'll be on my way." Uncomfortable with all the praise he made his way out of the room and followed the doctor back to the front desk.

Superman was told the woman was still unconscious in ICU suffering from broken bones, a concussion, severe burns and smoke inhalation. Her condition had been upgraded from grave to severe a short time earlier and she was expected to recover although her burns would take a lot of time to heal.

Superman returned to the World Trade Center and hovered over the site for a long while once again taking in the entire scene. He went over the entire event in his mind still unable to comprehend or reconcile in his mind how anyone could have conceived such a thing. Did they know what was going to happen? Did they have any idea how bad it was going to be? What kind of human being could plan and carry out such a diabolical plan? Finally, how had he missed the signs of the impending building collapse? He should have known sooner, he should have been able to do more. Too many had died on his watch.

He floated in the stillness as the harsh memory of all the screams and cries for help seemed to fill his head, overwhelming him yet again. After failing so many how could he hope to continue serving mankind. How could he expect others to have faith in him when he had lost faith in himself?

The reporters all worked late into the evening covering all the angles involving the fall of the North Tower, the Pentagon, the downed plane in Pennsylvania and what was being divulged about the hijackers on the plane meant for the South Tower that Superman had diverted. They had all solemnly watched the President as he addressed the country that afternoon. Lois had tried to call Clark several times but each time her call was sent directly to voice mail saying the phone was either out of range or turned off. Perry kept trying to send her home but she refused to leave not wanting to be alone or off the unfolding events.

Superman was last reported several hours earlier visiting the hospital where the final three people he had rescued had been taken. Lois was becoming desperate to talk to him. She wanted to see or at least hear for herself that he was alright. Perry finally insisted on taking her and Jason home himself.

The house was dark but she saw his shadow on the balcony. Turning to Perry she motioned to the silhouette. "We'll be fine."

"Call me if either of you need anything. You can tell Clark that as far as I'm concerned he is still on 'that assignment' out of town and the planes are grounded. He can come up with what ever he wants to fill the cover. I'm open."

"Thanks Perry. I'm not sure I'll see you tomorrow either, I may work from here." He nodded in understanding as she kissed his cheek then he solemnly left the apartment.

After putting a sleeping Jason in his crib now located in the guest bedroom which they had partially converted into a nursery, she went back to the living room and opened the patio door and walked out to stand beside the still figure.

"Clark, you scared me, are you alright?" When he didn't answer she spoke again, "Clark, why didn't you call me. I was worried sick about you."

He sighed and glanced over at her then looked back out at the evening cityscape before answering, "I'm sorry, my phone's broke."

"Are you alright? How long have you been here? Why didn't you call me when you got home?"

"I'm sorry, I just got here a little while ago."

"Are you alright?" she asked just the one question hoping he would finally answer it but she was met with silence. "Clark, are you alright?"

He looked down at the deck then over at her, "Of course I'm alright. There was nothing there that could hurt me."

"Clark, you don't seem alright, please come inside with me." She held her hand out to him then noticing the smoking fire pit on the far end of the balcony she looked at him concerned. "What were you burning?"

"The suits," he looked over into the fire and seemed to almost forget she was there.

"You burned your suits, why?"

"I can't wear them anymore."

Taking a deep breath at the short incomplete answers he was giving she tried again, "Why are you burning your suits and what do you mean you can't wear them anymore?"

"They're wrong, I can't wear them anymore."

She grabbed him by the arms and made him face her as she looked him in the eyes in the near darkness. "Clark, what is wrong?" As she spoke she shook him trying to get him to look back at her.

Clark finally seemed to take real notice of her again, "The suits are wrong the colors are too bright they represent too much hope. I can't wear them anymore."

"Are you going to make new ones?"

"I already have. The colors are darker. The innocence is gone from the world Lois, I've lost my optimism and I don't think I can get it back."

Lois embraced him, "It'll be alright. These feelings will pass. Now come inside with me." She broke away and grabbing his hand pulled him after her leading him to the nursery and to the sleeping child in the crib against one wall. "Innocence is not lost to this world it's safely stored in your son and in children all over the world."

He looked down sadly at Jason and placed his hand on the baby's sleeping stomach then pulled it away as if afraid he was taking some unseen force from the infant. "He'll need all the innocence he has to survive this world and all the trials it has to offer. Perhaps it was time *I* woke up to the real world."

Lois left him for a few minutes looking down at the sleeping child while she called Martha to let her know Clark was physically unhurt but seemed emotionally distraught. Telling her they would call back the next morning she hung up and went back to the nursery.

Lois once again took his hand and pulled him over to a comfortable upholstered chair near the window and pushed him down then settled into his lap. She was glad she had worn comfortable cloths to work that morning because they ended up sitting there for what seemed like hours just watching their sleeping son till they both surrendered to sleep themselves wrapped in each other's arms.

She didn't know how much later it was when she woke up to Clark's movements and hearing his anguished cries. He was thrashing as much as the confining chair would allow and

seemed to be reliving something of the day's events. Lois grabbed his chin to hold his head still then spoke loudly enough to wake him. "Clark, it's alright, you're home. Wake up"

"No, no it can't be..." he mumbled

"Clark, you're safe at home wake up, it's alright."

He finally relaxed and his eyelids fluttered open, he looked around confused as to where he was momentarily then spoke up. "Aaaaaa, sorry." He looked over at the still softly sleeping infant then back at Lois.

"Let's go to our own room so we don't wake up Jason." She got up and stretched the kinks out of her back caused by her odd sleeping position. Once again she pulled him along this time to the other bedroom where they climbed onto the bed still in their cloths not even bothering to get under the covers. They fell asleep quickly each feeling comfort from just being in the other's arms and both just wanting the horrible day to finally be over.

Lois was again awakened by Clark's movements and mutterings just a short time later. He seemed unable to escape the day's events. She tried to sooth him with soft words but when that did little to help she again woke him up. "Clark what's wrong, you need to tell me so I can help you. Please tell me?"

"I let them down, I let them all down." He whispered and turned away as if ashamed to look her in the eye.

"Clark, look at me... look at me!" He reluctantly turned back to face her, his eyes glistening in the moonlight. With her heart aching from the pain so evident in his face and eyes she continued. "What do you mean, you let them down. You saved hundreds, maybe even thousands of lives, how did you let them down?"

"There were others, I told them I would be back for them. I told them to wait that I would be back but I never got back to them. They died waiting for me to come back to save them."

"Clark, you did everything you could. You couldn't stop that building from collapsing. You can't blame yourself and no one else blames you. It wasn't your fault."

"I should have known. I should have moved faster."

"Oh, honey. If it had been possible for you to move faster or to have known more I'm sure you would have done it and known it. You can't let this destroy you too. The world needs you now more than ever and Jason and I need you safe and healthy." She cradled him in her arms and the two fell silent till they once again fell into a fitful sleep.

She woke up to the sound of Jason starting to stir in the other room. She sat up and looked down at Clark still asleep but appearing far from resting peacefully. His brow was furled and he was clenching his jaws tightly. She climbed out of bed and went into the dressing area where the vanity was and threw some water on her face then quickly removed her stale wrinkled blouse and slacks replacing them with a simple lounging outfit. Stealing a look at Clark as she passed she went and retrieved Jason from his crib where he had been entertaining himself for several minutes watching the mobile above his crib.

"Hi sweetie. You are such a good boy." She smiled for the first time since the prior morning as she picked up the squirming infant. "I bet you're hungry huh? Let's get you in a fresh diaper then we'll go see daddy."

She carried the cooing and happy infant back to the bedroom where Clark was still sleeping and lay back down beside him with Jason between them. Clark woke to the sounds of Jason's contented gurgling as he nursed nearby.

Clark opened his eyes and seeing the two of them beside him he relaxed and softened his expression. "You two are so beautiful. With such beauty in the world there must still be hope."

He kissed his son's head and a small smile graced his face.

Looking up into Lois' eyes he expressed unspoken thanks, and then kissed her lips surrendering himself to her care. He knew he needed her help before he would be ready to go back out into the world as Superman. Before donning that mantle once again he would have to be able to put the mask back in place. It would not do for the world to see him this insecure and full of self doubt. He would never be able to help those in need if he could not exude confidence and courage in the face of adversity. At the moment he wasn't sure of his courage and certainly his confidence was lacking.

As if reading what he was thinking Lois spoke up. "There is no need for us to go anywhere today. Perry covered for you saying you left yesterday morning for an out of town assignment. The planes are all grounded so all you have to do is come up with some out of town piece of your choice and come back in a few days with it."

Clark nodded. "Good, I need some time before I can be myself again. Will you stay with me?"

"Nothing will make me leave you today, or as long as you need me. I can work from here just as easy as at the office on what I'm covering and Perry understands that." She saw a grateful look once again cross his face. "I called your mother last night but we should call her again soon so she won't worry."

"What would I do without you? You think of everything."

"We always have made a great team. It's nice being the one providing the support for a change. You always do so much. Would you like me to fix you some breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry. I don't need food the same as you do."

"You need to eat. Your mom told me a long time ago not to let you get away with that garbage of not needing to eat or sleep. I'm going to fix you some breakfast and you are going to eat it, that's it."

"Are you trying to poison me with your cooking?" He couldn't help but smirk.

Getting up leaving Jason on the bed next to his father she started to leave the room but turned back at his remark. "Who said I was cooking, my morning specialty is cold cereal and bananas. Now get up and change, you look like you slept in your clothes," she smirked back feeling the tiniest bit of normalcy coming back in their lives. They would be alright, life would go on perhaps with them all a lot wiser and hardened but life would go on.

Chapter 8 - Loss of Innocence

Lois sat at the small patio table under an umbrella, her laptop open in front of her. Clark was sitting silently in a chair opposite her in the full sun looking out at the city not saying a word unless in answer to a question. Some questions had gone ignored but she decided to not push him at the present. Surely he heard her, but just by the way he was acting she wasn't entirely sure he was consciously hearing everything she said. Lois noticed his cereal bowl in front of him forgotten only partly eaten. As a matter of fact it appeared he had eaten the banana out of the mixture and left most of the milk and cereal. *Oh well, at least he had eaten the banana*, she thought.

Jason was nearby in a portable playpen also in the full sun amusing himself with a rattle and a butterfly mobile that his grandmother had gotten for him before he was born. Lois remembered hearing Martha call Clark her little butterfly once when showing her the family photo album. The pictures started when Clark had first arrived, he couldn't have been more than three in the first pictures. It was hard to imagine his Kryptonian parents placing him in that starship and sending him off all alone as they did. She knew parents would be willing to do anything to keep their young ones safe, she knew she and Clark would, but still to send an infant off into the unknown. At any rate Jason loved the mobile and would entertain himself for hours watching it. He also loved the sun just like his father and seemed to benefit from the exposure. She just hoped Clark was benefiting from the exposure now although she saw no evidence that he was.

She looked back at her screen scanning the article she was working on, debating with herself just how much to reveal, she read it over once again.

The Innocence Is Gone

By Lois Lane

I am sure many of you are wondering where Superman has gone. I'm wondering the same thing as I write this piece. It certainly would have been comforting to see his presence flying overhead today, but I understand why he has gone missing. He appeared to me ever so briefly last night just before he disappeared into the darkness. He told me he needed time to be himself, that he had lost a part of himself and needed to restore his spirit before he could once again serve us effectively.

Everyone thinks of Superman as the Man of Steel. Let me tell you he is anything but. His heart is made of pure gold and the recent events have scared it deeply. He is hurting now every bit as much as the rest of us and just like us needs time to recover. Be patient, he will return, he is too strong and loves this adopted world too much to let anything divert him from his mission for long.

Don't be surprised if when next you see him he looks a little different. He has retired the old bright red, yellow and blue suit saying it represented too much light, too much hope, that he could no longer wear it. The new suit is darker reflecting his current mood, the emblem smaller and gone completely from the cape. The blue is dark sky blue, the red, crimson bordering on a dried blood maroon. It is striking but when compared to the bright colors of the prior suit it definitely reflects a man who feels he has lost a certain innocence.

Indeed the world has lost its innocence and now is a time for mourning. Superman too needs time to mourn and time to find his way back to us. The innocence is already starting to return. I see it in my own infant's eyes, in his cooing and smiles as I'm sure it is in all the other young faces and hearts of the world.

Continue to look up in the sky. I have little doubt that before long Superman will be back as courageous and powerful as ever. Until he does, we must all do our own parts to make this world a better place. All of us have within us the spark to do good for those around us. We cannot just wait around for a savior. Sometimes we must take up the challenge and save ourselves.

Lois continued to study the copy making sure it was what she wanted to see in print. Every few minutes she would look up at Clark lost in his thoughts or over at Jason cooing and playing with his feet or reaching for one of the butterflies twirling above him.

Getting up to get herself another cup of coffee she asked if Clark wanted a cup as well. When he didn't answer she called out his name, "Clark, don't you hear me?" She stood in front of him blocking the sun, "Clark don't you hear me?"

"I can hear you but I can't hear anything else. It's too quiet. I've been trying to listen but I can't hear anything else."

Stooping down in front of him concerned she asked, "What do you mean you can't hear anything else? Maybe there is nothing else to hear."

"There's always something else to hear, but it's lost to me now. I can't hear it."

"What do you hear?"

He was quiet for a moment then answered in almost a whisper, "your heartbeat and Jason's nothing more."

"Are you sure that is all you hear? What about your heartbeat? I hear birds... and car doors closing down below. You hear that right?"

"Birds, car doors? I only hear two heartbeats nothing more."

Lois began to think it hadn't been such a good idea to have breakfast out on the patio after all. He had seemed better before they came out here. That must have been what he was doing out here last night when she got home, trying to listen and only succeeding in getting lost in himself.

She was broken out of her own thoughts by the doorbell. Clark seemed once again oblivious so she looked at Jason deciding he was fine in the little playpen and went to see who was at the door. Looking through the peephole she saw Richard and Chloe looking around the hallway concerned. Sighing she opened the door intending to beg off a visit not noticing their hands were full with takeout boxes.

"Ah, Richard, Chloe... it's not really a good time... I'm sorry, I'm just not up to company..."

"Lois, Perry told us you called in sick. We thought with Clark still out of town you could use some company and a good meal to make you feel better." He pushed his way in, holding up the take out bags, the aroma of egg rolls, Kung Pao chicken, vegetables with snow peas and steamed rice filled the air. Chloe followed close behind with a tray holding three large drinks. They headed for the dining table before Lois could object. What could she say? She looked nervously towards the patio before she could catch herself. Richard and Chloe both followed her eyes.

"Oh good, Clark made it home after all. There's plenty of food for him too and I'm sure you have some drinks here." Richard started pulling several take out boxes of food out of the bags. "When did he get home? Perry said he was stuck out of town because of the airlines being grounded."

"Aaa... he got home late last night and neither of us got much sleep." This was one part of

her life with Clark that she found hard, the fibs to friends needed to cover for his dual life.
"Aaaa, just a minute, I'll get him."

"That's alright, you're not feeling well, let me get him." Richard was already heading for the patio door before Lois could say another word.

She ran and intercepted him as he was about to open the door. "Let me get him... please."

Richard and Chloe exchanged worried looks. Chloe joined them at the door. "Lois did something happen to Clark?"

"No, no he...he's just tired... and so am I. Please, let me get him."

Lois opened the door and went out first picking up Jason from his little playpen then stooped in front of Clark hoping the baby would draw his attention. "Clark, Chloe and Richard are here. They brought some lunch. You need to forget about finding Superman and come inside with me. Can you do that?"

"I'm not hungry and the sun feels so good."

"I know, but you need to come in for a while now Clark. Richard and Chloe are here. You need to snap out of this now, otherwise they're going to know who you are."

"You're right, I can't let them see me like this. I can't let them see Superman like this, I need to leave till they're gone."

"No! They already saw you, but what they saw was Clark. You are Clark. You need to just be Clark until we restore Superman. Just be Clark." She took one of his hands in hers still holding Jason with the other. "I told them you got home late last night and that we didn't get much sleep, which is the truth. Can you manage to just be Clark?"

"I am Clark." His eyes seemed to focus as he looked her in the eye then he looked past her to Richard and Chloe who were back at the table opening up the boxes and continuing to prepare the table setting. Richard looked up and Clark's eyes met his. "Ahem, I'm alright, I'll get the playpen and follow you in. Oh, wait my glasses. I need my glasses."

"I'll distract them with Jason while you set up the playpen, the glasses are on the counter. It will be alright." She let go of Clark's hand and stood up giving him one last look of encouragement.

Lois entered the apartment smiling with Jason in her arms. "Jason look who's here, Auntie Chloe and Uncle Richard." Then addressing the adults she continued, "Clark will be right in, he's just getting the playpen."

While Richard and Chloe fawned over Jason, Clark entered and grabbed his glasses as he put the playpen up near the table. Since Clark was busy with the playpen Richard went to close the door and noticed Lois' laptop sitting open out on the patio table. Lois, Chloe and Clark were occupied so he decided to retrieve the laptop sure she wouldn't want it left open and running on the patio. As he picked it up he couldn't help but notice the heading. He slowly entered the room reading the copy.

"Lois you saw Superman last night? When, where?"

"Ah, hmmm here, last night. He brought Clark back home. That's why we didn't get much sleep, we were talking to him for a good part of the night. He's not handling what happened very well. He feels he let us down."

"Why on earth would he think that? He saved hundreds of lives. No telling how bad it would have been without his help," Chloe said taking Jason from Lois.

"Yeah, I would hate to even imagine how bad it would have been if he had not been there." Richard looked at Clark who refused to meet his eyes. Richard seemed perplexed at his friend's sudden avoidance. "Where did he find you? Uncle Perry never did say where you

went. What were you working on that took you out of town so suddenly?"

Clark turned away, "I'm sorry, I just can't handle this right now." Before Lois could stop him he was out the front door and gone.

Richard and Chloe looked at each other dumbfounded. Richard looked back down at the computer screen still in his arms and finished reading the copy then handed it to Chloe. Lois wasn't sure what to do so she just took Jason back from Chloe and placed him in his playpen then faced her two friends now both staring at her with knowing looks.

"It's not what you think."

Richard looked sideways at Chloe and then responded, "And just what do you think we think?"

"HMMMMM," trying something she said, "that there's something going on between me and Superman."

Richard shook his head softly and once again looked sideways at Chloe before responding. "That is not what I was thinking. How about you Chloe?"

"I certainly wouldn't have put it that way either."

"Lois, there have been just too many coincidences, too many similarities for us to ignore any longer. There's something you and Clark, and Uncle Perry too for that matter, have been hiding from us. Watching you yesterday and now the both of you today there can be no denying it any longer, Clark is Superman." Lois sat down hard in the closest chair and put her head in her hands too tried to fight the truth any longer.

Chloe wrapped her arm around her in comfort. "Lois, you don't have to worry about us knowing. We've been thinking it might be the case since before Jason was born. We won't tell anyone. I've known Clark and his mother for as long as I can remember. I would never do anything to hurt any of you."

"That goes for me too." Richard held up the laptop, "This copy, its worse than what you've written here isn't it?"

Lois looked up between her fingers nodding. "Yes, I'm really worried about him. He seems so lost. He really scared me last night."

"What do you meant, what happened?" Richard asked.

"When I got home last night he was burning his suits in the fire pit on the patio. I have barely been able to get him to listen to me. He seems irritated when anything is said about all the people he saved yesterday. He seems to only be remembering the losses. Last night the memory of all the screams tore at him keeping him from resting. Right before you arrived when I was finally able to get his attention he said he couldn't hear anything but Jason and my heartbeats."

Richard pulled chairs from the other sides of the table close to Lois' and he and Chloe sat down within easy reach of her. "You don't have to try and help him all by yourself, that is what friends are for, let us help you both."

Chloe nodded taking Lois' hands in hers, "I'm no doctor but it sounds like maybe he's unconsciously closing himself off, protecting himself after everything he experienced yesterday. I was numb just watching it on live television."

Richard got up and started for the door, "Chloe, stay here with Lois and Jason. I'm going to go try and find him. You don't think he would have flown away do you?"

Lois shook her head no, "Frankly, I would be surprised if he's willing or even able to use any of his powers right now." Looking up at him her face brightened, "The park, check the park. He loves taking Jason to the park around the corner. We walk there all the time."

Richard practically jogged to the park, as soon as he rounded the corner he saw Clark sitting on a bench in the full sunlight looking off into the distance. He strolled up and took a seat next to his friend. "You can come back now. We won't ask anymore questions. You don't have to hide from us anymore we know who you are." Clark continued staring into the distance not making a sound or gesture of any kind. His only movement was a rare blink of the eyelids.

Richard wasn't sure if Clark didn't hear, didn't register or had just ignored what was said. At any rate he made no response, so Richard spoke up again, "Lois is worried about you, come back home with me." Clark sighed and the two got up and walked back to the apartment without saying another word.

Lois paced the floor after Richard left. "I think I should call his doctor. I'm just not sure what to do to help him. I'm afraid I'm about to lose him. He's just not thinking rationally."

"Superman has a doctor, one that knows?"

"Yes, two actually, Dr. Emil Hamilton and his daughter Dr. Elizabeth Hamilton both are part of S.T.A.R. Labs. She became my doctor while I was pregnant with Jason and even helped deliver him at the hospital." Lois grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number she had long ago committed to memory. "I should have thought of this sooner."

The phone rang several times then the elder Hamilton answered slightly out of breath. "Hello, I've been hoping to hear from you. Is this Lois or Kal-El?"

"Dr. Hamilton, its Lois. I'm worried about... Clark he's not handling what happened very well."

"Slow down dear, tell me what has happened."

Lois explained everything that had happened so far. Then confided "I'm just not sure I can convince him to come to you. Would it be possible for you to come here?"

"Oh my, after watching what happened yesterday I was afraid of something like this. Liz and I both will be over shortly. When he gets back try to keep him in a quiet room with little or no distractions."

As she hung up the phone the door opened, Lois ran pulling Clark into an embrace as the two men entered. Releasing her embrace Lois took Clark's hand and led him to their bedroom without a word being spoken. She pushed him down onto the bed and spoke soothingly.

"Doctors Hamilton are both on their way. You are to wait here for them, doctor's orders. Now lay down and try to rest."

"I don't need a doctor, I'll be..."

"Don't you dare try to tell me you'll be alright, you are NOT alright now and you ARE going to see the doctors, they'll be here shortly. I said lay down." She watched him for a second till he finally complied then headed for the door closing it behind her after one last look.

Richard and Chloe were busy gathering the take out boxes back into the bags as she came back out. "We'll just put these in the refrigerator for later. I don't think anyone is too hungry right now," Chloe said softly. Lois nodded refusing to allow the tears to form that had been threatening all morning. She had to be strong for the three of them, she was really grateful that Richard and Chloe were there for support.

The three sat talking quietly till Jason began demanding attention. Lois walked over and picked him up immediately not wanting him to disturb Clark. Sitting back down on the sofa with the infant in her arms she looked up as Richard spoke.

"So, Jason is... Superman's son?" It was more of a statement than a question and he

expected no answer. "There always seemed something special about the little guy, now I understand what it is." Wanting to fill the awkward silence he continued. "I just can't believe that Clark, my best friend is Superman. Oh, man he must have thought I was such a dork when we first met. Sheesh!"

"He never said anything of the kind, he was just thankful to have you as a friend and you too Chloe. He has always thought highly of you both and so do I. Why else do you think we would have asked you two to be Jason's Godparents?"

Richard made a funny face at the infant looking up at him smiling and nodded acknowledgement.

"I think Clark's been wanting to tell you both for a while now. That is probably why he's been showing parts of who he really is to you knowing you both would figure everything out eventually, and you're right, Perry knows. He figured it out several months ago. That was one of the reasons he gave us the office in the out of the way corner."

Just then there was a soft knock at the door and Chloe jumped up to answer immediately showing the two doctors into the apartment. Lois handed Jason to Richard and quickly introduced everyone before escorting the doctors to the bedroom where Clark lay awake staring at the window.

"I'll leave you two alone with him. Would either of you like anything to drink?" Both doctors shook their heads no. Lois nodded and said, "I'll be right out here if you need anything." And exited the room once again closing the door behind her. She stayed next to the door for a second as if debating something then rejoined Richard and Chloe.

After what seemed like hours but was really less than one the doctors came back out and joined the three. The elder doctor cleared his throat and looked at Lois expectantly.

"Oh, it's alright, you can feel free to speak with Richard and Chloe here. They can be trusted and they're here to help me... help Clark."

The doctor nodded understanding and motioned for his daughter to sit nearby as he took a seat himself. "It seems our boy is suffering symptoms not too different from what any human would likely be suffering after what he went through yesterday. I do believe his senses were totally overwhelmed with all the calls for help and the screams of fear and pain. Not to mention what he must have seen. He has simply shut down and right now is processing very little of his surroundings."

"Are you talking about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?" Richard asked.

"Yes, but there is more to it than that in his case, he is also feeling a great deal of guilt, guilt for not doing enough; guilt for not preventing it from happening; but most of all and this is a big one in his case, guilt for surviving. He has been carrying that particular guilt around for most of his life. I believe that is why he became Earth's protector, to atone for surviving the demise of his own world in the only way open to him."

Lois glanced towards the bedroom then around the room at the others, "This all makes a lot of sense, but what can we do to help him overcome it?"

The younger doctor answered, "Physically he's sound, his vital signs are within normal range for him. They are just slightly on the low side, but that could be easily explained by his inactivity today."

Her father continued, "Normally drugs would be called for... but in his case..." He just shook his head, "That would be pointless. About the only thing we can do is counsel him as we did today and monitor the results."

Lois nodded her head, "What can I do and what can our friends do to help? Surely there

is something more that we can do. He keeps telling me he can't hear anything other than mine and Jason's heartbeats why is that, do you know?"

The elder man nodded sadly, "Yes, he has always used your heartbeat as a beacon to you. That is how he has known when you were in peril time and again. I remember him telling me of this a couple years ago. He added Jason's heartbeat when he first heard it months ago. Those heartbeats must represent a haven to him right now. As far as him hearing nothing else, I believe he has closed off his senses and something within himself is preventing him from opening them back up so to speak. He must have been so overwhelmed yesterday that as soon as he arrived here he literally shut down. Once he processes the pain he is going through I believe he will be back to *his* normal. Just don't ask me how long that might take."

"What about going back to work?" Lois asked.

"No, that wouldn't be good, right now you see, he is confusing the two identities. We don't want to put him under the stress of having to be one or the other. He needs to stay in places he can go unnoticed, unobserved where he can 'just be'." The older man seemed adamant gesturing with his hands as he spoke. "At least for the time being until he's more like his old self. On the other hand you should try and get him back to some sort of normal life. Just don't expect Superman back right away. That may take a while longer. It's just going to depend on how resilient he is."

"Just let him rest for a few more hours, then you need to try and keep him from dwelling on what he can't do. Try to make him feel useful. That should help him work his way back to slowly opening up his extra senses. And what ever you do don't let him spend too much time alone."

Emil stood up and Liz joined him adding, "He'll be fine. It may take several days, perhaps even weeks, but he will be alright in the end. He has a stronger will than all of us realize. I feel confident he will be back stronger than ever."

She started to follow her father to the door. Lois, Chloe and Richard all followed behind them. "One last thing, be sure to let him mourn. He's taking the losses very hard and personal. He needs time to mourn just like the rest of us. And please don't hesitate to call if you need us for anything, day or night."

Chapter 9 - Where Has He Gone?

Richard closed the door and turned to look at Lois who was wringing her hands gazing towards the hallway which led to the bedroom. "If you want to go check on him, feel free, we're not going anywhere."

Lois nodded and quietly left the room. Chloe watched her friend till she was out of sight then turned back towards Richard and spoke softly. "Do you think perhaps Jimmy or someone could bring us our laptops? I don't feel either of us should leave them right now, but at the same time I have work that needs to be completed."

Richard wrapped one arm around Chloe's shoulder as they moved together towards the table. With his free hand he unhooked his cell phone from his belt, flipping it open he hit a number from his speed dial list. "Uncle Perry, Chloe and I are here at Lois and Clark's apartment. Clark is here..."

"Clark's there?" He tried to sound surprised.

"Yes he's here, which you already knew but that's beside the point. He's not doing very well, that's why I'm calling. Um, how should I put this...Chloe and I discovered something, I'm sure you know what I mean without my having to get any more specific. That being said, we both feel compelled to stay and do whatever we can to help support Lois's efforts as she tries to help Clark deal with ...what happened."

Perry was silent for a moment taking in what had just been said. Then he spoke up forcefully. "Stay there, both of you. Is there anything you need?"

"Out laptops. Do you think you could ask Jimmy to drop them off? We could work from here if we just had our laptops."

"I'll see to it that you get them, anything else?"

"Lois wrote a short piece. It seems that Superman may go missing for a while. I think she'll be sending it in for today's cut-off. Oh, wait a minute, here she is. I'll let *her* tell you about it." Richard held the phone out towards Lois. "It's Perry I told him about your article and asked him to send us our laptops so Chloe and I could work from here."

Lois nodded and accepted the phone, "Hi Perry, I'll send the article to you in a few minutes."

"How are you holding up? You sound tired."

"Neither one of us got much sleep last night. I'm afraid Clark has taken what happened to heart. He has me more than a little worried."

"Remember he's stronger than we know. I'm sure he just needs a little down time. Don't let work worry you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know right now, I'm just too tired and emotional to think straight. I really appreciate your offer though. If I think of anything, I'll let you know. I'll give you back to Richard now, bye."

"Bye, and remember to take care of yourself and Jason too, hear." Lois smiled faintly as she handed the phone back to Richard who continued to talk on the phone for a few more seconds before hanging up.

Lois grabbed her laptop and plopped down on the sofa. She hit a few keys to send the file to Perry then placed the machine on the nearby coffee table. Chloe sat down next to her all the while looking with concern at her friend. "Is there anything we can do for you? How's Clark?"

"He's asleep. At least I think he is. His eyes were closed and his breathing was normal but there's no telling how long that will last. Normally he only sleeps two or three hours a night."

"You look so drained maybe you should try to take a nap too." Chloe looked up at

Richard who nodded agreement. "Don't worry about us, we'll have our laptops soon enough and then we can just work right here and keep an ear out in case Clark or Jason needs anything."

"I can't ask you to do that..."

"You're not asking, we're offering." Richard volunteered.

"Well it is a little past time to feed Jason. I'm surprised he's not demanding attention right now." She looked over at the baby content in his little playpen. "He's such a good baby." A small smile graced her drawn face as she surveyed Jason. "I'll take him to the nursery for some privacy and maybe I'll be able to manage a little nap with him afterwards. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Go, you need to rest if you expect to be any help to Clark. We'll be here when you wake up." Chloe stood as Lois got up and the two women embraced.

"Thanks, Chloe, Richard. This means a lot to me, to both of us." Chloe moved back and Richard embraced her briefly before she made her way to pick Jason up from the playpen.

After Lois left the room Richard and Chloe sat talking in quiet almost whispers, Richard shook his head. "I still can't get my head around it. I know we've speculated about it for months but wow, Clark really is Superman. He just seems so... I don't know, so normal."

"How do you think I feel, heck, I've known him all my life and just now figured it out. I guess he really isn't that different from us in a lot of ways. That is if you discount the flying, the invulnerability, eyes that can see through just about anything or if he would rather burn through it."

Richard thought back to a certain pool party, "Bailing hay huh. I should have known better." Then he remembered how he had bragged so often about how cool it was to pilot a small plane. What had Clark really thought about his boasts when he was capable of so much more?

"It's really hard to see him this way, so broken. How can we ever expect to help him?" Richard asked the worry was evident on his face.

Chloe sighed and looked towards the bedroom, "I guess we just need to keep reminding him somehow that he did make a big difference and help him move on. He needs to look towards the future rather than dwelling on what he couldn't do. What no one would have been able to do."

Richard nodded thoughtfully, "We need to figure out something he can do from here to keep him busy and to make him feel useful like the doctor recommended. Wait, I got it! I need to talk to Perry again." Richard seemed pleased with himself as he grabbed for his cell phone.

A short time later Richard jumped up responding to a soft knock at the door. Expecting Jimmy with the laptops he was surprised to find his uncle standing in the hallway instead.

"I decided I needed to check up on my team myself. You had to leave too much to the imagination on the phone and the article Lois sent in only served to arouse my concern."

Richard and Chloe quickly brought Perry up to speed telling him everything Lois had told them, what they had observed themselves and about the doctor's visit.

Perry mulled everything over then finally spoke up. "You two are right. We need to try and keep his mind on other more mundane things for a while. That idea you had about him filling in one of the copy editor desks in the interim is good. He can do it from here. We just need be careful about what's sent to him for editing."

Richard nodded his head and looked up to see Lois coming back into the room headed directly towards Perry. "I thought I heard your voice."

Perry got up and held out his arms shaking his head sadly. "Sorry Lois, we didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's alright Perry, I couldn't sleep anyway." She melted into his embrace then pulled out to look at the threesome. "So what's going on?"

"Richard came up with an idea that I think might just help. The plan is to keep Clark busy with copy editing chores till he's ready to handle his normal duties both in and out of the suit."

Chloe stood up "Why don't we heat up that Chinese food. I'm starting to feel my appetite coming back. Is anyone else as hungry as I am? Maybe the aroma will even wake Clark."

"That does sound good. Why don't you join us Uncle Perry. It's takeout from Chang's and you know how takeout from that place for three can easily feed a half dozen."

"I think I will, but only because I was hoping to see Clark for myself."

Lois looked to the bedroom wistfully, "I don't know about it motivating Clark. He's barely responding to me, Jason's the best bet for motivating him right now. I really would like to get him to eat something more though."

Lois and Chloe went to the kitchen and began heating the take out food. Richard and Perry moved to the breakfast bar so Lois and Chloe could still hear their lowered voices and participate in the plans to bring Clark back from that dark place where he had retreated. Once the food was heated everyone began filling their plates from the boxes arranged on the counter. Lois made one for herself and then one for Clark filled with what she was sure he would have picked for himself in better times and set them both on the table.

Richard couldn't help but smirk when he noticed the hot peppers in the Kung Pao Chicken on both his and Clark's plates. Lois noticed so he explained, "A couple of weeks ago, that day when you and Chloe decided you wanted to go to that big one day special designer sale instead of eat, Clark and I went to Chang's for lunch. We both got the Kung Pao and... well I bet him the check that I could eat more of one of these peppers than he could without flinching or reaching for a drink."

Lois laughed for the first time since the prior morning, "Don't tell me, he ate the whole thing and you just about died trying to outdo him?"

"Actually I didn't even try because I had already taken a tiny nibble and reached for the water and salt to put the fire out. Clark laughed at me and then popped an entire pepper in his mouth, ate it like it was a French fry and made a flourish of handing me the check."

"Hmm, that sounds like something he would do. Like I told you, I think he was ready for both of you to know, he just wanted to be sure you were ready to accept the truth. We talked about telling you when we made you godparents but decided to wait. It's not a secret he's willing to give up easily." Richard and Chloe both nodded understanding why.

Lois looked at the three then took a deep breath sighing as she turned away from the table, "I'm going to go get him. Go ahead and start."

Lois entered the bedroom and found Clark standing by the window looking out. She went up behind him and put her arms around him beckoning him to turn around. He complied reluctantly not wanting to turn away from the window. "Clark it's time to eat, Richard Chloe and Perry are all waiting."

"But I'm trying to listen, and I'm not hungry."

"Clark there's nothing to hear right now, please come eat with us. Do it for me." She pulled him with her to the other room where she got him to take his seat at the table. He seemed to barely acknowledge the others, his eyes remained downcast. She stood behind him momentarily before taking her own seat.

Conversation had stopped as they entered the room and it remained quiet. Lois looked up at the others and motioned for them to continue eating and for someone to say something.

Perry took the lead and spoke up. "I had almost forgotten how good Chinese food is. I try to avoid it because of the high salt content, but I admit I have a real weakness for egg rolls. Hmmm, and snow peas... this is good."

Richard followed, "My favorite has always been Kung Pao Chicken. What about you Clark, you like Kung Pao too, right?"

Clark had barely moved and had ignored the food in front of him till Richard posed his question. Finally looking at the plate in front of him, he reached up and snatched a pepper and popped it in his mouth. "Not like a French fry but it's not hot to me. I shouldn't have let you pay the check."

The room went quiet with the implications they had been speaking quietly he shouldn't have heard anything unless, he could hear, at least selectively. What else had he heard? Each of them began going over in their minds what they had said thinking he was unable to hear them.

Lois broke the silence this time, "Clark, did you hear us talking... before I brought you in here?"

"No, I was trying to listen but I couldn't hear anything. All I hear is five heartbeats."

Richard exchanged looks with Lois, then spoke up, "Clark, there are six hearts beating here including yours. Are you sure you don't hear six heartbeats and are you sure you didn't hear me tell about our bet a couple weeks ago?"

"No only five, nothing more."

The rest of the meal continued with relative quiet. Clark ate very little before leaving the table abruptly to go stand by the door to the balcony. Lois came up behind him placing one arm around his waist. "What's wrong?"

"I thought I heard something, but it's gone now."

Perry cleared his throat and looked at Richard briefly before speaking, "Aa, Clark. I have a favor to ask of you. One of the copy editors is out on leave and we need someone who can fill in for a few weeks..."

With his expression never changing Clark parroted Perry's earlier speech, "Keep Clark busy with copy editing chores till he's ready to handle his normal duties both in and out of the suit."

Perry blanched and swallowed hard, "Uh, yeah. You can handle that right?"

Clark didn't answer but Perry took it as an affirmative and picked up Clark's laptop opening it up. Once the machine powered up he pulled up several files and handed the laptop to Clark. "You can start with these."

Seeing Perry was working at starting Clark off on his new 'busy work' Richard, Chloe and Lois all opened their laptops and took seats at the table. Soon they were busy working on various articles hoping it would encourage Clark to follow suit.

At first Clark just stared at the computer page, unmoving. Finally he sat down at the table across from Lois and put his hands on the keyboard to scroll the page down slowly. Going back he made a correction then moved on.

Perry had started him purposely with two files he had already reviewed and was aware of the corrections that were needed. Silently standing behind him, he smiled when Clark found the same mistakes and made the proper edits. Opening up the second file Clark again found and made the proper edits. Then to Perry's surprise Clark highlighted an entire section and

overwrote some of the major highly technical background facts and then modified the conclusion of the report. Facts the author of the report had spent hours, perhaps days digging up.

Perry bit his tongue and remembered he had the original and could replace what Clark had just written over. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Oh well, he thought if it helped Clark get past this ordeal it would be worth it to let him think he was working.

Excusing himself Perry said he needed to head back to the office. Richard and Lois walked him to his car and promised to keep him informed. Once in his office Perry opened up the first two files Clark had sent back. Satisfied with the first he sent it to press. He opened up the second along with the original and compared the two. He made the proper corrections to the original then looked back at the major edits Clark had made to the background facts and finally the conclusion. Perry looked back and forth between the two. Suddenly not sure he decided to do a little research on his own and after tedious digging realized Clark had been correct to make the changes. The author had not dug deep enough to uncover the true nature of what he was reporting as fact. Perry sat back in his chair steeping his fingers in thought. A smile lit up his face.

Satisfied he sent Clark's edited file to press and noticed he had several more emails from Clark. Going back to his mail window he was surprised to find Clark had already completed all the files that he had been sent. He had worked at normal speed, perhaps even a little slow while Perry was there but now he was working faster, much faster. So fast in fact that it might become difficult to keep him supplied and busy with real editing jobs.

Things continued much the same for the next couple days. As soon as the air embargo was lifted Richard provided transport for Martha and Ben, bringing them to Metropolis. Having Martha and Ben to stay with Clark and Jason, Lois felt free to return to work.

On Sunday the group of family and friends all went to a special memorial to honor and remember all who had been lost and to celebrate those who survived. Lois was worried about Clark but he insisted on going. The group took seats in the back of the congregation and joined in the hymns and prayer readings. Jason slept through most of the event in his father's arms only waking briefly as Clark fidgeted in his seat when the pastor mentioned Superman. Clark settled down and paid close attention when the pastor moved on detailing the bravery shown by all the firefighters, police officers and everyday citizens who did so much that day. The memorial ended with more prayers and hymns celebrating the lives of the brave souls lost.

Clark continued to improve but every time he heard Superman mentioned he became quiet and withdrawn.

Lois's short article had done little to appease the masses as to what had made Superman disappear. There was speculation that he had somehow been hurt, or died from unknown causes or had simply decided to leave Earth, perhaps disillusioned with the world after that terrible day.

The personnel at the hospital where he had been last reported and the firefighters Superman had visited were interviewed repeatedly. Each reporter hoped to dig up some new fact that would shed light on the disappearance.

Lois herself, the last known contact with him simply refused any comment whatsoever other than to insist she had already reported all she knew. She did let them know that she stood by her prior expectation that Superman would return when he was ready to once again take up

the mantle of Earth's protector.

Perry decided to keep to himself that he had been fielding calls from several governmental sources trying to get in contact with Superman for one reason or another.

The family stood close by him letting him set the pace for his recovery. The second week of October Martha and Ben returned to the farm and Clark went back to work at the office. Slowly the hero re-emerged and quietly started helping those in need careful to stay hidden not ready to make his presence known.

Finally on October 19th a news flash broke of an incident involving what was being called a *Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel* dubbed the SIEV-X sinking en route to Christmas Island with 421 passengers seeking asylum. Well over half were reported to be women and children.

Hearing the report Clark finally felt the calling and didn't hesitate to respond.

Lois felt a kiss on her cheek as he disappeared. Smiling she opened up a new file. She had long ago picked out a name for the story, all she needed was for Clark to get back and fill in the facts and if she could get him to pose for Jimmy even better.

She smiled thinking of the new suit and quickly blushed at the idea of getting him out of it later that night. She took one last look at the heading then left the office she shared with Clark to go tell Perry, Richard and Chloe the good news.

Superman Returns

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Author's notes

Author's note¹: Just for those wondering it is early November in the year 2000 (yes 2000)

Author's note²: Sorry, I had really intended to have a different 'Baby' make an appearance but I am having such fun exploring what happened that this story is going to be longer than I thought. I promise the 'baby' you have been waiting for will appear in the next chapter.

BTW the flooding in England and Wales, the Kaprun disaster which left 155 skiers dead and the birth of Noah are all real events that happened on those days in history. Well, I guess we all know about that election mess.

Also I want to acknowledge Saavikam for the S.T.A.R. Labs bit and the procedure for taking Superman's blood like she did in **Aftermath!** She was totally cool with me using it. I just thought it was so well done. THANKS Savvi :D

Author's Notes 3: For those of you who didn't read **All Is Not Well** the Kala in this story is from my previous stories. In **All Is Not Well** I started giving some of the characters names of reviewers. At that time KalaLaneKent and SRWidow of **Little Secrets** were reading my fic. I guess RL got the best of them and they stopped reading most other fics only concentrating on their own. Anyway the little girl was named after KalaLaneKent and a social worker was named Ms. Widow. Short Recap.... Kala was an abused little 8 year old girl going to Jason's school. The two kids became friends both somewhat shy and picked on and Jason told Kala to call for Superman's help if her mother ever beat on her again. Her father had been killed in Iraq. Long story short...she calls he comes and soon she is a part of the Kent family having been taken away from her mother. His saying he would love to have a daughter just like her was a reference to my other stories where she is and perhaps that things will go full circle even if I do take the story that far into the future (present).

Also of Note: The earthquakes are both quite real and actually I could have added more!

1/13/01 7.6 magnitude earthquake El Salvadore killing at least 800 leaving thousands homeless

1/26/01 Magnitude not listed, Gujarant, India causing more than 20, 000 deaths and destroyed most of the historical city

2/13/01 6.6 magnitude earthquake once again hit EL Salvador killing at least 400 (I didn't include this one in the story)

6/23/01 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit the south of Peru. (Also not included)

The USS Greenville submarine hitting the fishing vessel was also real. It happened on 2/09/01 and there were 9 victims. 4 students, 2 teachers among the dead. The bodies were not recovered till mid October as part a deep ocean salvage. One body was never recovered.

Author's Note⁵: So sorry to end this on such a sour note but you were warned from almost the very beginning exactly where this was heading.

Author's Note⁶: The intense scenes based on some very real facts from 9/11

I just want to state that this is my wishful thinking that he would have been able to make a difference on that fateful day if he were only real. It was not meant in any way to diminish the real heroism or loss of life. If Superman could not have made a substantial difference there would be no reason to even write the story. This story is me trying to show what the world could be with Superman in it. Hopefully it would be a better world. Too bad he is not real. I have wished he was almost all my life, never more than on that day.

I let a couple people read and comment prior to posting. babettew54 or as known on mistressbabette51 was at first skeptical about some of the things Superman did. After I explained in a manner similar to the paragraph above she made this comment that she has allowed me to share here:

There were many, many heroes that day. One man can make a difference, so go for it. That is the point, after all.

The scene at the end was taken from my own experience on that day. My younger brother had indeed just barely arrived home from Florida a couple hours before everything started.