

House Call

By [Deadly Chakram](#) <dwelf82@yahoo.com>

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Summary: When Dr. Sam Lane is called upon to help Superman when he falls ill, he calls for reinforcements.

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Author's Note: This story is in response to Kerth Challenge #3 which requested that one character from any (old or new) television show be brought into the Lois and Clark universe, into an actual episode. This one took more time than I care to admit and I can only *hope* that, as a very, *very* casual House viewer, I was able to do him justice.

Many thanks to Val, Feli, and Michelle for completely encouraging this fic.

"I'm sick."

Clark blinked in surprise as the words tumbled out of his mouth – words he'd never once imagined he would ever say in his lifetime and mean it. Oh, sure, he'd had to fib about being ill in the past so as to blend in with regular people. At his last job, for example, he'd had to take a few days off after the entire newsroom had fallen like dominoes to a particularly nasty strain of the flu. It would have been too suspicious if he'd been the *only* person to *not* get sick, so he'd taken a few days and had visited his parents in Kansas. Italy had been nice, but he'd been homesick nonetheless, and his fake illness had given him a chance to go home.

But this time?

This time the words were real, and he was scared.

"You aren't the only one," Lois quipped darkly, sending dagger looks of disgust in the direction of Mindy Church, where she sat in the back of an expensive car, handing out presents.

"Seriously," Clark replied, his voice sounding weak and hollow to his own ears. That got Lois' attention. "I better get out of here," he told her as he started to walk away from the crowded sidewalk where it seemed half of Metropolis had gathered to see Superman deliver the Christmas Tree to the Coates' Orphanage – a yearly tradition he'd come to love just as much as picking out his own tree for his own apartment.

To her credit, Lois didn't ask any questions, and simply helped him to clear an escape path. But with the arrival of Mindy and her sacks of gifts, Superman was now old news. Most, if not all, eyes were definitely *off* him. Still, he had to be careful in how he handled his departure. As much as he wanted to make a quick getaway, he couldn't. Not *just* because Superman was held to a higher standard in the way he acted, but because he physically couldn't move any faster than he was. His entire head was foggy and his body felt like it was trapped in quick-drying cement. Still, he waved clumsily to the crowd, even if few people were paying enough attention to see it. Unable to fly, he made for the opposite

corner of the street so he could duck behind the building there and conceal himself from probing eyes while he tried to get his bearings.

Shaking and sweating, he made it, but just barely. As soon as he was out of sight, he leaned heavily against the brick wall, his chest heaving with the effort walking such a short distance had caused. His head was swimming and he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. His heart was hammering in his chest.

"Aww, man," he squeaked out as his knees buckled beneath him. He slid to the sidewalk as though he'd suddenly gone completely boneless.

With a look of horror, Lois rushed to try and catch him, but she was half a heartbeat too late. "Clark!" she called in a terrified whisper.

But Clark could barely hear her as blackness crowded around the edges of his vision and he fought to stay conscious. He failed. The next thing he knew, Lois was lightly slapping his cheeks trying to get him to come to.

"What happened?" he croaked out.

"You blacked out for about a minute," Lois informed him. "Scared the living daylight out of me."

"Sorry," he apologized with a weak smile.

She smiled back. "Apology accepted. Just don't scare me again," she mock-admonished with a gentle poke to the center of his chest.

"Boy Scout's honor," he promised, just before a cough overtook him.

"Are you okay?" Lois asked, appraising him before offering him a hand up. "Can you stand?"

"I think so," he said, taking her hand and pulling himself up off the ground. "Where's the Jeep?"

"Two blocks over. Do you think you can make it?" Lois replied worriedly.

Clark shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

"Clark, you barely made it across the street just now," she reminded him gently, her voice full of concern. She chewed her lower lip in thought. "Here," she finally announced, taking his bicep in her hands and leading him two stores down to a narrow alleyway between a bookseller and a cigar shop. "Hide in this alley and I'll get the car. It shouldn't take me more than a few minutes. I'll pick you up and then you're going straight home to bed."

Clark nearly chuckled as Lois slipped into her role as his future wife. Was this what it was like to be a normal man with a normal relationship? He hated feeling sick, but he liked the easy way in which he and Lois could lean on each other and trust one another to get themselves out of any jam that they found themselves in.

"Okay," he wheezed in agreement. The idea of making it all the way to the Jeep suddenly seemed as impossible as squeezing water from a boulder.

Stealing a glance around to ensure they were alone, she kissed his sweaty brow, then hurried down the block. He closed his eyes as he leaned against the wall of the bookshop. It was all he could do to remain upright and conscious. He felt so tired, like his entire body had been filled with Kryptonite weights. Everything hurt. His head was swimming in a fog. His chest ached with each deep breath or cough. He could have vomited, if only he'd eaten anything recently.

It seemed to take a life-age before he heard the distinctive roar of the Jeep's engine.

Lois helped him into the front passenger seat as soon as she pulled up. She pulled one of Clark's old sweatshirts over his head and helped him to put it on fully, concealing the suit, then she stuck a battered old baseball cap on his head. Silently, Clark was grateful that he and Lois always kept stakeout bags in her trunk, just in case they needed them in a pinch. Satisfied that no

passersby would notice that it was Superman, and *not* Clark Kent in the car, Clark sagged back into the seat and closed his eyes after pulling the bill of the cap down low, shadowing his face.

He must have dozed as Lois navigated the city streets. He remembered nothing of the ride home until they were pulling up in front of his apartment. Lois put the Jeep in park and gently pulled the cap from his head, checking him to see how sick he looked.

"I know we have to be careful about your identity, but it'll attract a lot more unwanted attention if you get out of this car half dressed as Superman," she explained as she motioned to his lower body, which was undeniably clad in the blue Spandex and red briefs of the hero's costume.

Clark frowned. "Good point." He thought for a moment. "I think I can wiggle into a pair of sweat pants, if I have any in here," he finally said.

Lois nodded and turned in her seat to rummage in the old Bills duffel bag behind her. "Aha!" she called out triumphantly a few moments later as she fished out a pair of thick, black pants. "Try these." She held them out to him.

Clark plucked the pants from her grasp and, huffing and puffing all the way, he wriggled and twisted until he got the sweats on and tucked in all traces of his cape. He still looked out of place without a winter coat on such a cold day, but he didn't really have a choice. He looked as ordinary as he was going to get. He took the hat back from Lois and stuck it on his head once more.

"I'll need to keep my head down," he muttered mostly to himself, pulling the bill down to shade his face. "I don't have a spare pair of glasses with me."

Lois nodded. "Are you ready to go in?" she asked softly.

"More than ready," he replied, just before a sneeze exploded out of him so hard that it rocked him forward, then back, and caused him to slam his head back into the head rest.

"Clark? Are you okay?" Lois asked, alarmed.

Clark nodded. "I think so. Come on, let's get inside before I get any worse."

Clark lay in his bed, his concerned mother and father hovering around him. His mother kept dipping a washcloth into icy cold water, wringing it out, and wiping his brow with it. It felt amazing on his too hot skin. He had to wonder at that. Too hot. He'd never been too hot or too cold in his life. He could walk through the heart of blazing infernos or dive into the middle of a glacier-filled sea and barely register the change in the temperature. But now, laying atop the blankets of his own bed, clad only in the thin, but durable, material of his Superman disguise, he felt like he was being roasted alive from the inside out. Martha pulled away the cloth, wet it again, then draped it over his brow.

"Thanks, Mom," he told her. But it wasn't just thanks for the attempt to relieve his fever. It was a thanks for all the times she'd tried to heal the hurts he'd suffered – not physically, of course, but hurts of the mind and heart.

She managed a brave smile for him. "I'm going to let you rest," she decided.

She got up from her place on the side of the bed, and, flanked by Jonathan and Lois, left the room. Clark closed his eyes again – the light seemed too harsh, despite the fact that his father had drawn the blinds to give him some relief. But he could hear the people he loved most in the world talking in the living room nonetheless.

"My boy is sick. For the first time in his life," Martha said, and it was easy to pick up on the panic in her voice. Clark imagined her turning into his father's broad chest for comfort and reassurance.

"Martha," Lois softly intoned, "does he have any medical records? X-rays? Anything that shows how his body works?"

Clark would have cracked a grin if he hadn't felt like the entire world was spinning crazily around him. Leave it to Lois to go

straight to the heart of things, to ask the reporter-like questions, to remain as level-headed and logical as she could while she fought for something – *someone* – she cared about.

"Nothing," Jonathan replied with a soft sigh of regret. "There was just never any need."

A knock sounded at the door and Clark heard Lois' sneakered footsteps rushing to answer it. There was a *click!* as she opened the lock and a barely audible squeak as the door was opened wide. If he lived through this, he vowed to oil the hinges.

"We got here as quick as we could," Clark heard the voice of his future father-in-law, Sam Lane, say in a grave, but confused, voice. "What's going on?"

Lois cleared her throat, perhaps to knock away the tremble Clark had heard there only a minute before. "Daddy...you're a doctor," she stated simply.

Sam's reply sounded a bit bemused. "Thanks for remembering, Sweetie."

"I was wondering if you could take a look at a friend of mine." There was no hesitation in Lois' voice, only a bit of pleading.

Clark heard no audible reply. But footsteps echoed across the floor as she led her mother and father closer. Clark opened his eyes, squinting against the light. Better to meet Sam with open eyes, then appear as though he were asleep.

"Lois...Superman?" was the only thing Sam uttered, as soon as he entered the bedroom. Clark both heard and saw how stunned the once-famous doctor was.

"He and Clark are very close," Lois effortlessly explained. "Clark's out on assignment, so, when Superman got sick, I brought him here." It was incredible to Clark how easily she spun the fibs to protect his identity. A rush of gratitude washed over him.

Mutely, Sam moved closer and instantly slipped into the familiar actions of a doctor. Clark submitted himself to Sam's explorative touch as he felt for his pulse, checked for swollen glands, and tried to discern a temperature.

"Daddy, we need your help," Lois pleaded. "I need your help."

Clark nearly held his breath. Of all the times Lois had ever spoken about her father – or *to* her father in Clark's presence – there had always been an element of resentment harbored there, even contempt on occasion. Sometimes it was hidden and sometimes it was waved around freely like a banner proclaiming war. But all of that was gone now, and Lois was once again a little girl who wanted to believe that her father could fix anything.

Sam frowned. "Lois, he's very ill," he said, speaking solely to his daughter, as though no one else, not even Clark himself, were in the room. "His physiology may be totally different from ours, and I haven't practiced for fifteen years..."

Lois interrupted him, sounding on the verge of tears. Clark's eyes fluttered shut once more. He was so, *so* tired...

"I know," Lois said, choking back a sob. "But when I was little, I knew my father was a brilliant doctor. Wasn't he?" That had to be meant for Ellen, Clark decided, and there was a murmur of agreement. "If I never ask anything else of you, be that doctor again."

"I..." Sam faltered. "I'll do what I can. But I'm going to need some help."

"If you need a good nurse, I'm here," Ellen offered. *Was that...tenderness in her voice?* Clark wondered.

Sam grunted a sound of acceptance. "Thank you. I'll need all the help I can get. But that...wasn't exactly what I had in mind," he confessed slowly and apologetically.

"Who?" Lois asked suspiciously, protective of Clark. "We can't let it get out that Superman is sick," she warned, though not harshly. Her hand went to Clark's shoulder and he forced his eyes open.

"She's right," Ellen answered for Clark. "This is too sensitive a case to just...call in help."

"I know," Sam acquiesced. "But I can't do this alone. Luckily,

I know a doctor...brilliant man. A bit...brash and hard to get along with. But if *anyone* can diagnose your friend's illness, it's Greg." He nodded to Lois. "It's okay, Princess. He'll understand the need for discretion in this case. *If* we can even get him here."

"I don't..." Lois wavered.

"Lois, it's okay," Clark consented. "If your father says we can trust this other doctor, I don't see that we have much of a choice."

Lois locked eyes with his half-closed ones. "Okay," she breathed in surrender. Then she turned her sharp, determined gaze to Sam. "Let's call him."

Time seemed to stand still, with seconds stretching out into minutes, minutes becoming hours, and hours becoming eons. Clark wafted in and out of sleep and fevered dreams, only to wake into a world of suffering each time he cracked his eyes open. Each time, someone was there in his bedroom, hovering over him or sitting quietly in vigil. It gave him some comfort to find that he was never alone.

"Lois?" he called out during one of his periods of wakefulness.

"I'm here," she immediately replied from somewhere on his left. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

"No. I just wondered...how long has it been? Since your father decided to call his friend?" Clark answered, his eyes too bleary to make much sense of the clock on his nightstand.

"Oh, that. Um...about..." She checked the clock. "Three and a half...no, four hours ago," she finally responded after a quick mental calculation. She sat down on the edge of his bed and put the back of her hand to his sweaty forehead. "He should be here soon. He's coming in from New Jersey. That's not too far away." She seemed to be trying to reassure herself as much as she was him. "You're still pretty hot," she murmured after a minute.

Clark flashed her the best smile he could manage. "So the tabloids have said," he joked, mindful of her still-very-much-in-the-dark parents close proximity.

Lois chuckled lightly, and she patted his shoulder. "Don't flatter yourself, Farm Boy," she said in a whisper as she grinned at him.

That made his own smile widen a bit before a wince of pain shattered the illusion that he was going to be alright. Before he could say anything further, a quick series of knocks sounded at the door.

"Was that...Shave and Haircut?" Clark asked in disbelief as he recalled the old melody.

"Ah, I think he's here," they heard Sam say with relief. There was a groan as he stood from his chair and crossed the apartment. Clark listened as Sam opened the door. "Greg, glad to see you made it," Sam warmly greeted their guest.

"I would have been here sooner, but some idiot jackknifed on the highway," came a gruff voice. "Luckily, I hit it just as it was clearing, but it still ate up a good half hour."

"It's good to see you either way," Sam said. "We really need your help."

"What's the case?" There was a sound of material being shaken out. Clark thought it might have been the other doctor's coat being taken off. Perhaps it had started raining or snowing and the man was clearing it from the garment.

"I'm not sure. It's like nothing I've come across," Sam said in a tired voice, though it sounded as if he was being deliberately vague. "Look, Greg," he added quickly. "I trust you, you know that. You advised me on...I don't even know how many cases, back when I was nothing more than a student logging my way through medical school and you were the resident I was reporting to."

"I remember." The response was guarded, suspicious, but not entirely devoid of nostalgia.

"You have to *swear* to me that not a word of this case will

ever leave these walls," Sam pressed in a somber tone, making it crystal clear that there would be no arguing the terms.

"I already swore to be discreet on the phone." It was obvious the other man was rolling his eyes by the way his words dropped like sarcastic stones from his lips. "Otherwise I wouldn't have *borrowed* my boss' car to race over here in the snow."

"You *stole* her car?" Sam exclaimed, incredulous.

"Tomato, tomahhhto," the other doctor said, casually shrugging off the difference. "Can we get back to the problem now?"

"I know. It's just...a very sensitive case," Sam said again. "If word ever got out...well, you can decide for yourself how disastrous that might prove."

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Are we done now? Can I see the patient?" Whoever this 'Greg' person was, he sounded arrogant and impatient, and Clark wondered if he'd made a mistake in allowing Sam to bring in a colleague to help.

"Right this way," he heard Sam reply with a gentle clearing of his throat, a moment before he ushered his friend toward Clark's bedroom.

Sneakered footsteps made their way closer, along with a strange thumping sound that Clark couldn't quite identify at first. But in the next moment he knew what it was as a grizzled, slightly older man leaning on a cane ambled his way to Clark's beside. He didn't really look much like a doctor, Clark decided. He was used to the idea of a man or woman in a white lab coat with a file or clipboard in hand for note taking. But Greg was dressed in a Pink Floyd t-shirt beneath an open blue oxford shirt, well-worn dark blue jeans and sneakers that had obviously seen their fair share of mistreatment. He was tall and thin, with angular features and a scruffy, unshaven face that made him seem somehow intimidating and commanding of respect.

Greg looked down on Clark with discriminating blue eyes as he scratched at his stubbly chin. A slow, thin smile crossed his lips and it seemed that a fire lit in his eyes as his eyebrows arched in sudden astonishment. For a horrifying moment, Clark felt naked and exposed, as though the doctor was the one who possessed x-ray vision and could see right through him.

"Superman?" the man said to no one in particular, his chin jutting out slightly in a way that spoke of his curiosity about the case. His smile widened into a grin. "Interesting." He brought his gaze back to Clark. He did not offer his hands to shake as he introduced himself. "Good news, Superman. I'm Dr. House. I'll be the one saving your life."

Dr. House.

Clark kept a neutral face as a thousand thoughts entered his head all at once, each of them vying to take control of his emotions. He'd heard of Dr. House before. Most people had. The man was supposed to be a brilliant diagnostician, solving cases no one else could, or refused to touch. Clark knew he should be immensely glad that the doctor had agreed to help him. On the other hand, Clark had heard of Dr. House and his notoriously arrogant attitude. The doctor seemed, from all the rumors Clark had heard, to place himself on par with God himself. Rude, often crude, blunt to a fault, and biting sarcasm were all some of the *nicer* descriptions Clark had heard paired with Dr. House's name. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to subject himself to a person like that. And, more importantly, he didn't feel right about making Lois and his parents be around a person like that.

I have no choice, he reminded himself with a mental sigh.

"Thank you for coming," Clark found himself saying, as pleasantly as the heaviness in his chest would allow.

Dr. House gave him a semi-shrug. "Don't thank me just yet. You can do that *after* I've saved your life." He raised his eyebrows again. "Judging by the way you look – which is like hell, by the way – I'd say time is of the essence. So, let's get started, shall

we?”

Clark nodded uncertainly. “Uh, sure.”

Dr. House clapped his hands together once, a sign, perhaps, that he was ready to dive right into his work. He rubbed his hands together for a moment, then looked at the rest of the gathered crowd in the room. “Okay, anyone who *isn't* currently dying or diagnosing said disease, out into the living room. Unfortunately, my little medical elves couldn't come with me, so I need to take a history.”

Lois locked eyes with Clark, and he ever so slightly inclined his head at her, letting her know that, yes, he would be fine on his own. Jonathan and Martha looked worried, but Clark knew Lois would find a way to give them the reassurance they would need, even *with* Sam and Ellen hovering around. Clark watched as everyone reluctantly filed out.

“Us too?” Sam asked, pausing mid-stride. He pointed between Ellen and himself.

Dr. House nodded once. “I've got it. We can rehash symptoms and discuss potential diagnoses later.”

“Okay,” Sam said, still wavering for a moment. But then he too left the room.

“Looks like it's just you and me,” Dr. House said to Clark and Clark couldn't help but notice, with a sinking heart, that everything he'd ever heard about the doctor's perpetual sarcasm appeared to be correct.

“What do you need to know?” Clark asked, just wanting the interrogation to be over so they could skip ahead to the point where Dr. House figured out some medication or treatment that would cure him.

“Everything,” Dr. House said. He waved his hands before himself, as though dismissing something invisible. “Look, I know all of this is supposed to be secretive and you probably have your reasons for not wanting to let certain information to get out. But I need to know about your medical history. Every last bit of it, even if it seems unimportant.”

“I understand,” Clark wheezed, successfully choking back a cough. “But I'm afraid there's not much to tell.”

“Tell me anyway,” Dr. House replied, his voice even but somehow steely and cold.

“Well...the fact of the matter is...I don't *have* a medical history,” Clark explained, feeling oddly uncomfortable with the admission. While he wasn't bragging, it felt weirdly like he *was* bragging about his extraordinary luck in being immune to sickness.

“There's got to be *something*,” Dr. House encouraged, sounding mildly exasperated. “A cold. A bout with the flu. A scraped knee. An allergic reaction. A broken bone. *Something*,” he pressed.

Clark shook his head and immediately regretted expending the energy to do so as the room spun wildly around him. He lay still and closed his eyes, hoping to make the world go quiet once more. Dr. House's hands found their way to his inner wrist, feeling for and gauging Clark's pulse.

“I've never been sick before,” Clark clarified, not risking opening his eyes. “I've never had any broken bones or cavities or sprained ankles.”

Dr. House's hands felt Clark's forehead before immediately pulling away from the heat of the fever. The man *harrumphed* under his breath as he looked up at the ceiling. “I swear if this turns out to be a case of the sniffles...” He didn't finish his statement – or had that been a threat?

“It's not,” Clark instantly defended himself. “I've been around people long enough to know what a head cold might feel like. This is different. I feel like...”

“Like?” Dr. House prompted when Clark failed to complete his thought.

“Like I'm dying,” Clark said in a near whisper.

“So does every man with a runny nose,” Dr. House volleyed back, his words oozing sarcasm.

Clark opened his eyes to study the doctor before him. “I know what I'm talking about.”

A lightbulb seemed to go off above Dr. House's head. “I heard a nasty rumor about a pretty green rock that seems to do a number on you,” he quipped in an almost chipper way. “I'm guessing that has something to do with this.” His words were measured and logical, each one carefully spoken as Dr. House started to build a case file in his mind.

Clark hated to admit it, but he also couldn't lie to a man who, with any luck, would figure out what was wrong with him. “Kryptonite. Yes,” he admitted so softly Dr. House leaned forward to catch Clark's words. Even here, even in the safety of his apartment, it was hard to talk openly about the radioactive pieces of his home world. “This illness, whatever it is, feels similar to Kryptonite poisoning. But also vastly different.” He took a breath as he tried to find the right words to explain himself.

“It's either the same thing or it's not. It can't be both,” Dr. House countered gruffly, almost sounding a little annoyed, as though Clark were playing a game with him.

“It's...hard to explain,” Clark said, struggling with his words. Why was it so hard to express himself? Was it the weight of the illness or was it how uncomfortable it was to admit anything to this stranger?

No one can ever know about your differences, he heard his father's voice whisper from the distant past, when Clark was just a gangly teenager developing super abilities by the day. *Some scientist will track you down, put you in a lab, and dissect you like a frog. You have to be careful, Clark.*

Clark sighed. His father had been right, of course. People like Jason Trask had proven to Clark the ugly side of humanity. But this was an extraordinary set of circumstances. He *had* to be up front with Dr. House, if he wanted to stand a chance at living.

“The Kryptonite saps my powers. My strength. The pain is excruciating,” Clark explained. “When I'm exposed to it, I can literally feel my life draining away. But this is different. I can *feel* that I'm slipping away. My powers are gone. But the pain is different.” He coughed harshly then and had to spend several long seconds gulping enough air into his lungs when he was done. “Kryptonite feels like I'm being torn apart, burned alive, stabbed with a thousand swords. This...I feel like I'm being crushed to death. It's so hard to breathe. And I'm hot, but in the traditional sense, not the phantom fire the Kryptonite brings.”

Dr. House sat and listened impassively, but Clark could tell by the way his eyes never flickered away that he was absorbing it all.

“Sorry,” Clark apologized after a minute. “It's...hard to put into words.”

“I see,” Dr. House replied, steepling his fingers under his chin. “When did all of this start?”

“What...me feeling sick?” Clark asked, thinking back. “Um... I guess last night?” Could that be right? Was it *really* less than a day since he'd first begun to sneeze out of nowhere? “It started innocently enough,” he allowed.

“Define 'innocently,’” Dr. House prodded.

“I sneezed.”

“And?”

Clark worked up a miniscule shrug. “That was it. I was at wo...” He cleared his throat. With his head swimming with such murkiness, he'd nearly blown his cover. “I was working on a project,” he weakly corrected himself, “and I sneezed.”

“Ah, yes, the old Hollywood ‘I sneezed and now I'm going to die’ routine,” Dr. House said, sarcastically pitching his voice higher like a damsel in distress and putting a hand to his forehead in a mock swoon.

Clark forced himself to shake his head. “You don't understand. I've never really done that before. It was weird, but I didn't think

much of it at the time because it appeared to be an isolated incident. Until a few hours later, I guess it was. Then I started to feel weak and like I was coming down with something.”

“And before the sneeze? Anything unusual happen?” Dr. House asked, and Clark was grateful that the man had turned serious again.

Clark thought back. “Not really. I made a few rescues. Nothing too extraordinary or out of the ordinary for me, especially at this time of the year. I took care of a few personal things in between rescues. Nothing that would have caused this, as far as I know,” he answered carefully.

“What kinds of things?”

“Day to day tasks,” Clark casually replied, unwilling to delve any deeper than that. He paused. “Actually, the last thing I did before I sneezed was a rescue, come to think of it.”

Dr. House’s eyes lit up. He sat on the edge of Clark’s bed and leaned forward in interest. “Do tell. Unless there are superhero confidentially laws I’m not aware of?” It wasn’t so much a question as it was bait.

“I stopped a woman from committing suicide,” Clark replied evenly. “She was up on a rooftop, near a billboard. I talked to her for a few minutes...told her that she had a lot to live for...the same kinds of things I usually tell people who are threatening to take their own lives, because it’s the truth.”

“Sounds almost too easy,” Dr. House taunted.

“Sometimes it’s like that,” Clark countered, though Dr. House’s remark struck him on a primal level. It *had* been over too quickly with Mindy Church. “Sometimes people aren’t *really* willing to go through with it. They just want someone to talk to, to listen to them for a minute, to offer them reassurance that things are going to get better.”

“Most people seek out therapists for that,” Dr. House quipped bitterly. “Therapists that get paid a *lot* more handsomely than you do, I might add. Okay, so...during this rescue, was there anything that you touched or inhaled or kissed or whatever?”

Clark didn’t like the insinuation that he would take advantage of an emotionally unstable woman. “No...” he said slowly. But something was tickling the back of his brain. “Wait...there was a billboard nearby that was letting off smoke...well, steam, I guess it was. It irritated my nose and throat for a second. But that was it.”

Dr. House didn’t appear to be listening anymore. “Okay, so let’s assume this pathogen is airborne.”

“You think the city is in danger?” Clark asked, suddenly alarmed. He tried to sit up a little, but his muscles turned to jelly as he made the attempt and he aborted the maneuver halfway through.

Dr. House shook his head and cracked his knuckles in a carefree manner. “Judging by the fact that Metropolis hasn’t seen massive amounts of people dropping like flies lately, I’d say no. It probably affects only you. Which means it’s probably not something of this Earth.”

That piqued Clark’s interest. “You mean...it might be... *Kryptonian*? But...how?”

“I’ll be damned if I know,” Dr. House offered with a casual shrug. “But at least we’re getting somewhere now. Still, the question remains...how do we stop it from killing you?”

Under a microscope.

That’s what it felt like, to Clark.

He felt like the alien in any one of those old sci-fi movies his college roommate had been obsessed with – the one who gets captured by the US Government and is subjected to testing and studied closely, locked in a cage in some desolate little lab God only knows where.

And yet, it couldn’t have been further from the truth. Clark was kept as comfortable as his friends and family could manage to

keep him. His mother whipped up a batch of her famous chicken soup; never before had it tasted so good. Though Clark could really only slurp at the broth – chewing required too much strength that he didn’t have to spare – it was like sipping Ambrosia up on high Mount Olympus with the gods in his mind. Lois and Martha constantly fretted over him, much to Dr. House’s very verbal annoyance; he chased them away once or twice with a less than kind word. Jonathan paced a lot when he wasn’t wearily propped up in a chair trying to comfort Lois and Martha. Sam and Ellen worked tirelessly with Dr. House, though Clark could see the fatigue in their eyes and a growing sense of hopelessness surrounded them like a little black rain cloud.

As the hours melted away, they came no closer to finding either a root cause to Clark’s illness or a way to treat it. To his credit, Dr. House – for all his arrogance and bluntness – tried an exhaustive list of treatments. Clark was layered with ice packs to try and lower his body temperature – most of them shoved into his groin, armpits, and on the back of his neck. But by then he was so hot that the ice stood no chance of helping before it melted away into lukewarm water. House even – as Clark found himself mentally referring to the doctor in a parroting of the way Sam addressed his friend – disappeared for a while and returned with a “borrowed” IV full of “broad spectrum antibiotics” that did nothing as Clark lay in bed, slipping further and further into his fever. House was constantly on the phone with his team back at Princeton-Plainsboro Hospital; as he explained it, he was getting their opinions in case the diagnosis of a never before seen on Earth Kryptonian virus, or bacterial infection, or plague was wrong. He also explained how he usually met with his team to discuss potential treatments and their likelihood of success.

“This isn’t working,” Clark commented at one point. How long had it been since House had come knocking on his front door? A few hours? A day? Half a week? “What else can we try?”

House rubbed absently at his bad leg; Clark guessed the injury still bothered him, or perhaps it was just force of habit. Outwardly, the doctor looked calm, but there was no mistaking how troubled his eyes looked. “I’m working on it,” he admitted.

“Please don’t lie to me, Dr. House,” Clark found himself saying, despite the fact that he hadn’t actually *wanted* to say the words aloud. “I don’t blame you for not knowing what’s wrong with me. Or for not knowing how to treat my illness. But, please, don’t sit here and lie to me to make me feel better about what’s going on.”

To Clark’s surprise, the doctor didn’t pretend that he wasn’t making up platitudes. “That’s rich, coming from you,” he said evenly.

Clark scrunched up his brow as he tried to make sense of House’s reaction. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t want me to lie to you? Fine,” House volleyed back a bit bitingly. “You’re right, I *haven’t* figured out the best course of treatment *yet*. But, unlike you, I haven’t been lying my butt off this whole time. I’ve told you the truth, no matter what.”

“I’m not sure I follow you, Dr. House,” Clark interrupted gently. “I don’t...”

House snorted a laugh; it sounded like he was about to crack under the pressure of treating Superman’s mysterious illness. “Don’t what? Don’t lie?” He waved his hand dismissively as he rolled his eyes. Then he brought his piercing, x-ray-like gaze to Clark. “*Everybody* lies, Superman. Even you,” Dr. House said with a hint of disgust in his voice.

“I haven’t been lying to you,” Clark swore.

Dr. House laughed again – but it wasn’t a hearty, amused sound. It was a gruff mockery of a laugh. “Oh please!” he nearly shouted. “Do you think I’m stupid? Or maybe blind?” He did a Three Stooges-like double point to his eyes. “You’re lying to the entire *world*, Superman! Your very *existence* is a lie!” He gestured almost violently out before him, as though spreading an invisible

map of the world before Clark's eyes.

Clark gave him a quizzical look before wincing in pain as a spasm twisted his chest. "I'm not following," he managed to get out as he choked on a cough. "I'm real. I exist."

House rolled his eyes. "Obviously."

"Then I'm *really* not sure what you mean," Clark offered, trying his best not to let his growing fear show.

"You want to play dumb? Fine. I'll spell it out for you. It's not like I'm doing anything else important like...oh, I don't know... *saving your life*." The sarcasm in the doctor's voice swiftly degraded to a patronizing, mocking tone. "You're a *liar*. And a bad one at that. You dress up in a blue suit, flying around, calling yourself 'Superman.' Which...it's a little arrogant, isn't it? To call yourself 'super' anything."

"I've only used the name the public chose for me," Clark defended himself.

"Right, because you couldn't have stepped in and given some other, less god-like name," House snipped easily, though there was no anger and no jealousy in his words that Clark could detect.

"Does it matter?" Clark wondered aloud.

House shrugged. "Not in the least. Just thought I'd point out the obvious. Anyway, back to the point."

The doctor reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a plain, amber colored prescription bottle without a label, and tipped a small white pill out into his open palm. He dry-swallowed the pill as he replaced the bottle into his pocket. It was not the first time Clark had witnessed the doctor do that and he had the uncomfortable thought – or was it certainty? – that Sam had asked a drug addict to cure him.

"You're not really Superman." It wasn't a question, nor was it an accusation. It was nothing more than a cold, hard fact laid bare between the two men in the room.

Clark didn't immediately answer, neither confirming nor denying the doctor's theory. Instead, he simply watched as House stared down at him, his icy blue eyes calculating and analyzing every movement Clark made – voluntary or otherwise.

"Do the Lanes know?" House asked in a softer, quieter tone after they'd stared each other down for a solid two minutes. He jutted his chin in the direction of the living room to indicate Clark's future in-laws.

"I never said that you're right about me," Clark replied, neatly side stepping the question.

"No, you didn't. You don't have to. Anyone with two working eyes and a couple of brain cells to rub together would be able to see it right now. The way your fiancée is doting over you. How distraught the Kents are. Hell, I've had my suspicions that Superman might walk amongst us regular people for a while now."

Clark snorted a laugh. "Oh yeah?" he challenged; one eyebrow partially raised before a grimace of pain washed away his panicked amusement for something darker.

House nodded gravely and he folded his hands atop his cane handle before resting his head on top of it all. His eyebrows raised as he explained. "Of course. You showed up out of nowhere, a twenty-something young man from what had to be another planet. Yet you spoke perfect English. Or, rather, as I've heard it, perfect whatever the local language is. You knew about all our customs. Anyone watching the news could see that; your ability to melt steel with your eyeballs aside, you fit right in with regular old, boring humans." He shrugged, as though it were only too obvious. "The languages, the customs...all of that can be learned. But that natural blending in with the crowd even while you stood apart from them?" House shook his head. "That's *not* something you can pick up from a textbook or by spying on people from some spaceship. That's something you learn only by *doing*, and for a long time."

Clark wasn't sure if that was meant as a compliment to the complicated creatures humans were, a dig at how little faith House

had in Clark, or if the abrasive doctor meant nothing at all by his random observation.

"So," House continued after a moment while Clark tried to figure out the man's angle, "we can sit here all day and you can deny that you typically dress in more boring attire and chase stories for a major metropolitan newspaper, or you can trust that I take doctor/patient confidentiality seriously enough to stop myself from running out to the nearest tabloid." He rolled his head on his neck as though working out a kink in his muscles. "That, and I just don't care enough to go around spreading the truth of your identity. The choice is yours." He spread his hands apart like a Vegas dealer showing his cards.

"Why does it matter?" Clark asked, the effort of speaking wearing him out.

House shrugged broadly. "It doesn't. But I'm guessing mom and pop in-law don't know yet, or they'd be a lot more concerned about your *rapidly* declining health." His eyes flickered as he stared off into the distance, as if it helped him organize his thought process. "What if the worst happens, despite my best efforts, hmm? Have you given again thought to that? A grieving Kent family. A heartbroken fiancée. And no Clark Kent to support everyone." He spread his hands, palms up, and moved them up and down as though weighing the words he was saying.

House's words were bullet-fast and just as destructive. Clark had to admit to himself that he'd only really considered that possibility in an abstract, fleeting manner. But House *was* right. It shouldn't have to fall to Lois or his parents to explain to Sam and Ellen about why Clark would suddenly vanish off the face of the Earth if Superman died. He owed his future in-laws the truth. He owed it to *everyone* to be the one to man-up and be responsible for getting the truth out there.

"They...don't know," he reluctantly admitted, wondering every second if the illness savaging his body had taken his wits along with his strength. "Only Lois. Please...don't say anything to them."

Again, House held up his hands in a "not my problem" manner. "It's your call." His tone was aloof, as though he was completely unaffected by the dying man before him. Maybe he'd seen so many that it really *didn't* bother him. Clark wasn't sure which option was worse. "But, between you and me, you might want to consider telling them."

Clark took as deep a breath as he could without coughing and sighed. "You're probably right," he admitted after a moment.

"Probably?" House looked incredulous that Clark hadn't agreed whole-heartedly.

Clark would have shrugged if he'd had the energy to. "It's... complicated."

"More complicated than spinning lies and hiding in the shadows? Please," House nearly spat with a roll of his eyes, but he didn't seem angry with Clark, just oblivious to how difficult a position Clark was in.

"Well...yeah," Clark defended himself, though he could feel his energy flagging. He would need to rest, and soon. "I'm...not human. I may look like one, sound like one, act like one, but I was born on another planet. Imagine, for a moment, your daughter told you that she was marrying an alien. How would you take the news?"

House shrugged, and he made an exaggerated "I don't know" face. "I can't even imagine having a daughter."

"You probably wouldn't take it well," Clark offered. "Lois... Lois is a rare woman. She's accepted who I am without so much as a heartbeat's hesitation. She's never cared that I'm not from Earth. But...she has a strained relationship with her parents and I don't want to be the one to drive a further wedge between them if they can't accept my origins." He sighed again, sadness and the weight of responsibility filling his heart and making his chest feel even heavier than it already did. "I can't do that to her. I love her

too much.”

“You love her enough to make sure she isn’t left holding the ball if you die?” House snapped. “You love her enough to make sure she doesn’t have to explain why Clark Kent vanished from her life? *Tell them*,” he commanded in a harsh, biting way.

“It’s not that simple,” Clark countered once more. “What if... what if they hate the idea of Lois being with me so much they decide it’s better if they let me die?”

Clark paused. He hadn’t even been aware of that fear until he voiced it, but it was true. He *was* afraid that Sam and Ellen might hate his alien roots enough to let him die. Of course, if they loved Lois, they would fight for Clark’s life, but Clark couldn’t muster up enough hope in his heart that that would be the case. Perhaps it was because his head was now throbbing in pain and he was so tired he felt like he could sleep for a thousand years.

“You’re a coward,” House accused, ignoring Clark’s concerns. “Interesting.”

“I’m not a coward,” Clark shot back a bit more heatedly than he’d intended.

“Yes, you are. Which is weird, considering your choice of attire while in public,” House smirked, gesturing to the vibrant blue and eye-catching red of Clark’s tightly fitted suit. “You run the risk of people deciding to hate you every day, every time you fly out of the sky to lend a hand. From what I’ve seen, that hasn’t stopped you yet. But you can’t muster up the guts to tell your girlfriend’s parents that you’ve got the honeymoon flight all taken care of.”

His attempt at a joke came off less than funny and closer to sneering. Clark shook his head ever so slightly. “You think this is easy for me? The lies? The excuses? The hiding?”

“So tell them,” House offered, tempering his voice to a statement, rather than a command. “Stop making excuses. I know the Lanes. They’re not going to let you die. Doing that would only ensure...” House said, but he did not finish his statement. A light kindled in his eyes as some mysterious connection was made in his mind. “I have to make a phone call.” He stood, using his cane to lean on once he was up. “*Tell them*,” he urged once again, just before he left the room.

Clark didn’t want to. He wanted to sleep. But the idea that he might never wake up from his fevered dreams scared him more than the Lanes’ potential rejection. He gave House a minute to get out of ear-shot, then gathered his courage.

“Lois?” he called out, his voice a creaking squawk as he forced it to be loud enough to carry into the living room and be heard over the television. He could hear the *rat-tat-tat* of machine guns in some old war movie.

Lois was at his side in a flash. “Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked as soon as she was over the threshold.

Clark closed his eyes before making the leap. “I think we need to talk to your parents. They should know about me, in case...” He couldn’t force himself to add ‘I die tonight.’ He didn’t want to scare Lois.

“It’s not going to happen. You’re going to beat this thing, whatever it is,” Lois said staunchly.

Clark cracked a small smile. “I love that about you, you know. That stubbornness. That drive to set right all the wrong things you come across.” He had to pause and catch his breath. “I’m fighting, Lois. I promise. And I’ll *keep* fighting. But this thing... whatever disease this is...it’s getting stronger and I’m not sure I *can* win this fight, even with Dr. House and your parents on my side. And if that happens, I need to make sure you’ve got the support you’ll need...not nosy and scathing questions about where Clark is now that your friend Superman is dead.”

Lois’ lower lip trembled and she pressed two fingertips to it to hide the wobble from Clark. Water was pooled in her eyes. “I don’t...” She stopped and started again. She sat and took his hands in her own. “It’s your choice. But...when you get better, are you

sure you want them both to know? Once it’s out there, we can’t just...take it back,” she gently reminded him as she put the back of her hand to his sweaty brow, checking his temperature.

Clark shook his head – a barely-there movement. “It’s not my first choice to have them know, but I don’t see any other choice under the circumstances. And, to be honest, we won’t be able to keep the secret forever. They’re bound to find out sooner or later.” He smiled again, weaker this time. “Either I’ll be called off to a rescue where we can’t explain my absence, or they’ll be babysitting, and our kids will start to fly, or...” He deliberately let his voice trail off.

Lois appeared to think it over, but she did smile a little at the thought of their future together. “You’re right,” she decided.

“Can you bring them in?”

“Right now?” She seemed surprised.

“No time like the present, especially with my clock ticking as fast as it is,” he regretfully replied. He sighed. Lois stood and went to take a step, but Clark clumsily grabbed her hand, stopping her in midstride. He waited until she sat down again. “Do you think they’ll hate me?” he finally asked, trying his best to keep his worry from showing and make it sound more natural.

“How could they hate the man who’s made their daughter so happy?” she replied, skillfully side-stepping giving a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. She took up the abandoned washrag from the night stand and dipped it into the cool, but not quite cold, water and wiped his fevered forehead. “I won’t *let* them hate you,” she vowed. She cleaned his brow of the beads of sweat that had long since sprouted there and gently kissed his clammy skin. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

But a knot of dread had coiled in Clark’s stomach and he suddenly felt very unprepared for the conversation ahead. “Lois? I...maybe I should let my parents know first. About what I’m going to do. It’s only fair...they shouldn’t have it dropped on them in the moment like that,” he said, fumbling his words, a bit too quickly.

Lois smiled at his nervousness. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll get them for you.”

But before she could so much as stand, House reappeared, the regular thumping of his cane against the wood floors even and measured, though quicker than usual; almost with a sense of urgency from the way it sounded. Clark wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Either House had conjured up some plan of attack to beat the Kryptonian illness that was killing Clark, or Clark had run out of options and it was only a matter of waiting for Death to arrive.

“Everyone, gather around in the bedroom,” House commanded as he continued to limp his way to Clark’s bedside. Clark could see the man gesturing in a ‘hurry up’ manner out of the corner of his eye.

“What is it?” Clark heard his father ask.

“Maybe Dr. House has a new treatment or drug to try?”

Martha commented hopefully.

“That was an awfully quick phone call,” Clark heard Sam mutter dubiously under his breath.

“Not everyone takes a million years to make a decision,” Ellen half-heartedly jabbed at her ex-husband. But the usual venom of their exchanges was definitely lacking. Clark noticed distractedly.

“Did you figure out how to save him?” Lois asked, loudly voicing the question burning on everyone’s tongue.

House’s eyes closed for a second as he shook his head and drank in the tension in the air. “Nope!” The word came out sounding optimistic. He opened his eyes and lowered them, appearing to look at everyone and no one in the same instant. “I figured out how to kill him.”

“*Kill him?*” Lois screeched in a strangled cry. Clark half-imagined that she might launch herself straight at Dr. House and

tear out his larynx for saying such a thing. She wheeled on her father, her eyes flashing. “*This* is the so-called ‘brilliant’ doctor you said could save Superman?” She threw her hands up in anger and exasperation. “I don’t think *Dr. Kevorkian* gets this much pleasure out of someone’s impending death.” She brought her deadly gaze back to House, daring him to speak.

House appeared unfazed by Lois’ accusations. In fact, he looked rather...at peace, Clark decided. He held up one hand like a traffic cop calling for a stop, dismissing her in that single motion. “Superman, can you get me some Kryptonite?”

“Why would you need that?” Jonathan bristled angrily. He took a step forward like a bodyguard protecting his son.

“I already told you,” House replied chipperly. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Over my dead body,” Lois and Jonathan growled together.

House threw up his hand again in a gesture of pacification. “I’m not going to *kill him* kill him. Just...kill him enough.”

“You’d *better* explain yourself clearly right this instant,” Martha fairly thundered. Clark nearly smiled at the tone. He’d heard it more than once when his mother had been so angry with him that she’d threatened to “tan his hide like cheap leather,” if only she’d been able to.

Sam snapped his fingers as he made some connection. “Oh, I get it!”

“Care to share with the rest of the class?” Ellen snapped irately.

Sam cleared his throat and stepped forward a little – a brave move considering how close it put him to his fuming daughter. “There’s a theory out there. Mind you, it’s *only* a theory. But, basically, if you bring a host body to the point of death, but not too close, you can kill off a disease. As the body starts to die, it can’t support the bacteria or virus or whatever is causing the illness. Once the body is free of the active, living disease, the idea is that you can bring the person back from the edge and they’ll be completely healthy again as the body is able to recover,” Sam explained with a sure, quick tone. He gestured vaguely with his hands the entire time, as if indicating the host body and the dying illness.

“Sounds like something only a lunatic would try,” Ellen complained.

House grinned. “I’m flattered,” he quipped sardonically.

“No, no, it’s a solid theory, if mostly untested,” Sam defended his friend. “There’s been rumors of it being tested on mice to see if scientists can cure them cancer.”

Lois’ face was a picture of shock. “Does he look like Mickey Mouse to you?” she nearly screamed as she sliced her hand through to air to indicate Clark.

“It’s the only way,” House calmly rebuffed.

“Like hell it is,” Lois snapped.

“Lois...let them speak,” Clark quietly interrupted before anyone else could argue.

“Don’t tell me you’re *actually* considering this?” Lois said with disbelief, turning to him with wide, staring eyes.

“I don’t see that I have a lot of choice,” Clark gently replied, aware of just how many times he’d repeated that phrase recently. “I need to do *something*.”

“But...” Lois went to argue, but Clark was already looking at House.

“I can get some Kryptonite,” he confirmed. “How much will you need?”

House shrugged. “How much does it take to affect you?”

Clark grimaced as unpleasant memories of the green rock surfaced in his mind. “Very little.”

“Let’s get the next size up from ‘very little’, just to be on the safe side,” House instructed.

“This is madness,” Jonathan grumbled, but Clark could hear how defeated his father sounded. It was no secret that his father

hated the plan, but, like Clark, perhaps he didn’t see any alternatives either.

“Oh, try not to worry there, Farmer Brown, I know what I’m doing,” House said, feigning woundedness. He patted Jonathan on the shoulder.

“Oh? Have you done this cockamamie ‘treatment’ of yours often?” Jonathan challenged, stepping to the side to be free of the doctor’s touch.

House shrugged. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“Then how do you *know* you won’t screw this up?” Martha exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation.

“Look, Betty Crocker, *I’m* the one with the medical degree,” House snapped hotly. “I’ve pulled off more dangerous stunts than this.”

“Yeah, really comforting,” Martha muttered darkly.

Clark tried to crane his head enough to see his mother, but she was standing too far behind his head. “It’s okay. Let him do it,” he said, trying to make it sound like he was completely at peace with the decision. “Lois?” He could see her well enough as she sat just to the side of him. “Can you call Dr. Klein for me and explain what’s going on?” He took a shuddering breath. “I’m not sure I have the strength to go through all the details.”

“Okay,” Lois replied with a solemn nod. “If you’re *sure* you want to go through with this...”

“I am,” he assured her, wishing in his heart that there was another way.

“Great!” House said, rubbing his hands together. “Make the call and let’s get this party started.”

Lois took Clark’s hands in hers, gave them a squeeze, then stood up and left the room. Clark could only just hear bits and pieces of her conversation as she paced the living room. After what felt like an hour, she returned to the bedroom, still holding her cell phone. She held it out to Clark.

“Dr. Klein needs to confirm your voice print,” she hollowly informed him. Her inner torment was so real it brought a lump to Clark’s throat. He hated himself for having to put her in this position – torn between wanting to save his life and wanting to protect him from the deadly thing that might stand a chance of doing just that. “Here,” she said, putting the phone to his ear for him.

“Dr. Klein?” Clark croaked out as a spasm in his chest left him nearly breathless. He waited for Dr. Klein’s confirmation that it was, indeed, him. “It’s me. Do as Lois asked, please.”

Lois gently pulled the phone away from his ear and left the room again as she finalized the plans with Dr. Klein. Clark could only imagine how his friend must have been fretting over the potential consequences of letting Kryptonite out of the lab’s vault.

“Okay, Dr. Klein is getting the sample ready as we speak. It should be here within the hour,” she informed everyone as she walked back into the room, now with empty hands.

Before Clark could thank Lois for her help, House nodded, pleased. “Good. In the meantime, I’ll let you all enjoy a little family time together while we wait.”

“Family time?” Ellen asked, lifting her head up in interest and confusion.

Clark felt his cheeks redden with heat that wasn’t from the rampaging fever in his body. He kept his mouth shut and wondered if he should play it off, say nothing, or dive right into the truth.

House rolled his eyes.

“You didn’t tell them,” House stated matter-of-factly, though he sounded mildly annoyed. But then again, when *didn’t* the doctor sound irritated?

“I...uh...” Clark stammered, very aware of the intense look the Lanes were giving him. He could feel his parents’ worry. And he could see how badly Lois appeared to want to shrink away from the conversation. “There wasn’t time, earlier.”

“Tell us what?” Ellen asked flatly.

House rolled his eyes again so hard Clark could have sworn the man had been able to see his own brain. “Coward,” he said, jutting his chin out at Clark.

“Hey now!” Lois bristled, standing directly in front of House, getting in his face. “That’s not fair! You never even gave him a chance...”

“Lois, it’s okay,” Clark told her soothingly, but Mad Dog Lane had been activated and would not be satisfied until her target was destroyed. He lolled his head to the side, to look at Sam and Ellen. “There was...something I needed to say. Before it’s too late and I can’t anymore. Something that I hope won’t affect the way you think of me. Or of Lois,” he amended.” He struggled for a moment to sit up straighter and failed, so he contented himself to remain laying as he was.

“Oh, God, don’t tell me Lois is cheating on Clark with you.” Ellen groaned. “As if we didn’t have enough of that in this family,” she muttered in a slightly lower tone.

“Mother!” Lois exclaimed, shocked. Clark was surprised when Lois didn’t raise a hand to strike her mother, as he so briefly imagined she would.

“I’d be the woman with the cheating husband *and* the daughter who...” Ellen complained but she didn’t get the chance to finish.

“Mother, you are insane, you know that?” Lois yelled.

“Nothing like that!” Clark tried to assure the Lanes, but his voice was fading fast and it got lost in the explosion of voices all around him.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Martha asked him, leaning in close to be heard over the din while Sam started to holler about something that got lost in the noise around Clark.

“I have to,” Clark said. “It’s bound to come out one way or another, and it’s better it should come directly from me.” He tried to smirk but knew it failed. “I’ve learned my lesson about lying to members of the Lane family.”

Martha looked wary but nodded. “It’s your choice,” she told him, neither trying to convince him that he was doing the right thing, nor trying to convince him to keep the secret.

“Just let Superman talk!” Lois yelled at her mother.

“All right, everyone, *shut up!*” House commanded, picking up his cane and whacking it on Clark’s night stand. The sound went off like a gunshot and silenced everyone immediately. “You,” he said, pointing to Ellen. “Your son-in-law is *dying* and all you care about is your precious reputation. Pathetic.”

“Dr. House!” Lois snapped, her face darkening like a storm cloud.

House dramatically put his hand to his mouth. “Oops, my bad,” he mock-apologized. “Was I not supposed to say that out loud?”

“I’ll have your medical license for this,” Lois swore. “Doctor/patient confidentiality is kind of a big deal,” she thundered.

House gestured to Clark. “He was going to tell them anyway,” he blithely defended himself.

“Lois, it’s okay,” Clark told her again.

“So...wait a minute,” Sam said, waving his hands before him, his face wrinkled in confusion.

Clark sighed. “I was going to tell you. Now wasn’t my first choice, but just in case anything happens to me...it’s better if you find out straight from me. Clark isn’t on assignment. The reason he hasn’t been around is because...I can’t split myself in two. I’m Clark.”

“But...you’re Superman,” Ellen gaped.

“He’s Clark first and foremost,” Lois helpfully supplied. She put her hand on Clark’s shoulder and he felt like her touch gave him strength. “He takes on the alias of Superman when he needs to help people. It’s the only way he can use his powers in the public’s eye while protecting himself from nutjobs who would try to extort

or kill him.”

“And you were going to tell us this...when, exactly?” Ellen asked her daughter. She sounded exhausted and like a woman at the end of her patience. She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

“Honestly, I’m not sure I ever would have, unless we needed to,” Lois replied evenly. “Not because I don’t trust you, but because the more people who know his secret, the more dangerous it is for him that it might get out.” She tore her gaze from her parents and looked tenderly down at Clark. “I know this probably isn’t what you expected, and I know it’s a lot to take in,” she told Sam and Ellen, “but you both *know* Clark. Him being Superman doesn’t change who he really is.”

“I’m sorry,” Clark whispered. “I don’t like living a lie but... Lois is right. It’s nothing personal that we never said anything. It’s strictly been for my safety...and yours. If people discovered that you might know where Superman hangs his cape at night, you’d be in danger.”

“He’s right,” Jonathan said, backing Clark up.

“Clark’s parents were almost killed by a government psycho that thought Superman was going to usher in an invasion of extraterrestrials,” Lois added.

“I...uh...” Ellen stammered. She shook her head. “*Of course* my daughter would wind up with Superman,” she said, throwing her hands up in the air.

“At least we know he’ll be good to her,” Sam said with a casual shrug, though it looked like he was still trying to process everything. “She couldn’t possibly find anyone better than him.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing,” Ellen quipped crossly, folding her arms across her chest.

“I didn’t say that you did,” Sam replied soothingly, his hands up in a gesture of pacification. “I’ve met Clark. *You’ve* met Clark. As far as I know, we were both very impressed with him. This,” he said, gesturing to the S on Clark’s chest, “means nothing, as far as I’m concerned.”

Clark let out the breath he’d been struggling to hold. “I’m glad to hear that,” he admitted. “I was worried that you might take issue with my...unique origins.”

Ellen shook her head. “You make my daughter happy, that’s what matters. Not that you’re from another planet.” She shook her head again and laughed to herself. “It *figures* that the only man for Lois had to *literally* be from out of this world.”

Clark took her lighter tone for a good thing. Relaxing a little for the first time since his illness had begun, he found himself drifting into the tempting void of sleep. He tried to fight it, but the slope was slippery and he slid easily into the blackness.

“Clark? Hey, it’s here,” Lois said, shaking his shoulder gently to awaken him.

“It?” he slurred in his half-asleep, still fevered state.

“The Kryptonite,” she said, choking on her words, as though her hatred of the stone was strangling her.

“Oh...oh!” Clark replied as the realization hit. This was it. He was about to willingly allow the stone to sap his life away.

“Look,” Lois said, taking his hands in hers. “You can change your mind,” she urged. “There’s still time...”

“Sorry, but there isn’t,” Dr. House interrupted as he and Sam wheeled a rolling cart with a heavy lead box into Clark’s room. They pushed it against the wall so that it would be close enough to Clark but not in anyone’s way. House threw a glance at Lois and Clark, sizing them up. “You understand that this technique is experimental and as much as I wish I could guarantee everything will go as planned, I can’t.” For the first time since his arrival, Clark heard nothing but absolute professionalism and straightforwardness in the man’s tone.

“We do,” Clark answered for Lois.

House nodded gravely. “Okay then. Let’s get started, shall

we?” He turned slightly to Sam and gave him the command. “Open the box.”

Sam swallowed hard and cut the seals on the box. For half a second, he hesitated, muttering to himself so quietly that no one else could hear him. But to Clark, the pain in Sam’s eyes made it look like the man was seeking cosmic forgiveness for what he was about to do. Then he carefully opened the lid of the box.

Instantly, Clark found himself thrown into a deeper level of the hell he’d been living in since first contracting his illness. He gripped Lois’ hand for support as his body instinctively jerked away from the glowing stone of his home-world. His body jackknifed of its own accord into a nearly fetal position. On a vague level, he was aware of the cruel irony of his life. So far, he’d encountered only two things native to Krypton – tiny pieces of the planet itself and now this, a disease he imagined must have killed scores of Kryptonians in its day. And all he’d learned from them was how deadly they were to him. Only the things that should have been alien to him – Earth’s yellow sun, the bright blue sky and salty oceans, the rolling green hills and majestic, snow-capped mountains, the open farmlands filled with fertile soil and the thrill of growing things, the people – were the things that made him thrive.

And Lois.

She made everything about his world better. She’d taken away every hurt, every scar, every doubt the world had caused him and had healed him with nothing more than her gentle soul. She, more than anything else, had cemented Earth as the place where he belonged. It hadn’t been his upbringing. It hadn’t even been the love of his parents. It had been because one woman had fallen in love with him for who he was, not who he could be or the things he could do.

“Let’s give them some privacy,” Sam said to the others.

Heads nodded, then everyone filed silently out of the room, though Clark heard his mother’s muffled crying. He would have given anything to be able to comfort her, to promise her that he would be alright. But he was in too much pain and too weak to do anything. Even thinking was a struggle with the Kryptonite dueling the virus for the right to claim his life.

How long he lay there, he wasn’t sure. He was only abstractly aware that Lois kept vigil over him. At some point, he wasn’t entirely certain when, he felt like he’d moved beyond the pain. Numbness took hold and it was a new sensation for him. As close as he’d come to dying in Lex Luthor’s Kryptonite cage, he’d never gotten to this point, and he knew he was getting close to the edge of the abyss as a chill ran down his spine and turned the raging fever into a river of ice in his veins. He was terrified, but there was a part of him that felt oddly relieved to know that his suffering was coming to an end.

“Can you forgive me?” Lois asked him at one point.

Clark’s voice was almost gone, and he had to force a whisper out. “Forgive you?” he croaked through dry, cracked lips.

“For putting you through this,” Lois elaborated, brushing a wayward lock of his hair from his forehead. He’d sweated so profusely over the last day or so that it had loosened the hold of the gel that normally held his hair slicked back in Superman’s trademark look.

“You had no choice,” he told her, barely getting the words out. Black spots floated before his eyes. “*We* had no choice.”

Lois sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Can you forgive me for being selfish? Competitive at work? Too busy too often?”

He tried to smile but that was outside of his abilities at the moment. “Don’t apologize for the things I love about you. Your fire, your strength.” He paused to take a shuddering breath. “This is hard on my parents. Please...take care of them for me. They’ll need you...” He found that he was unable to finish.

Lois tearfully nodded. “I will,” she blubbered for a moment before she regained control. She wiped at her eyes, trying to

remove the evidence of her tears. “Remember once I asked you how you felt about me...and you said being with me was stronger than you alone?” She didn’t wait for his confirmation, but Clark remembered the conversation clear as day. “Grab onto that strength now.”

Clark felt the darkness closing in. “I love you,” he said, wanting his last words to be meaningful and true.

“I love you too,” she told him, leaning in to kiss his lips.

That was the last thing Clark was aware of before oblivion crashed down around him.

“Daddy!” Lois screamed, but to Clark’s unresponsive form, her words fell on deaf ears.

There was a rush of footsteps, followed by one slower, hobbling gait. Sam’s hands flew to Clark’s body, checking for signs of life. His face fell with every check he made.

“Is he dead?” House asked, a bit harsher than anyone with an ounce of compassion would have.

“Coma,” Sam corrected him, his voice thick with worry.

“Close enough for our purposes,” House responded with a distracted nod of approval. He scratched at the stubble on his chin, looking deep in thought.

“What can we do for him?” Martha asked.

“There’s not much we *can* do,” Ellen offered, in an oddly subdued tone for her. She put an arm around Martha’s shoulders in a show of support.

“We watch and wait,” House added. “It’s all up to him now.”

“Can we at least close the lid on that accursed box?” Jonathan asked, eying the Kryptonite with disdain.

House waffled for the span of three or four heartbeats, then nodded curtly. “Okay,” he agreed. “It’s probably done as much as it’s going to.”

“As much as it’s going to?” Lois parroted back, incredulous. “Coma or not, that *thing* is still killing him! I thought the point was to keep him balanced on the edge.”

“Which is why I’m closing it,” House patronizingly told her, shutting the box with deliberate care and slowness. “See? It’s closed. No need to call for my head. Sheesh!”

Lois looked at him like the doctor had suddenly sprouted a second head. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

House shrugged. “So my team tells me all the time. Doesn’t make me any less right about my work.”

“Let’s not fight,” Sam interjected. “Clark’s been through enough and the hardest battle is still before him. Now, I can’t prove that he can or cannot hear us while he’s in a coma, but there’s some evidence that suggests that coma patients *can* hear the voices of their loved ones. He needs to hear positive messages, not fighting.”

Lois glowered for a moment, then nodded. “Fine,” she agreed through gritted teeth. “For Clark, I’ll let things go. For now.”

For what felt like eternity, Clark wandered in the darkness. He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. He wondered if he was dead, but this felt nothing like what he’d always been told happened after the spirit left the body. There was no choir of angels, no fluffy clouds, no light, no pearly gates, no deceased relatives or even pets to welcome him into the hereafter. Likewise, there was no heat, no flames, no demons, no grinning devil, no screams of the eternally damned. There wasn’t even a waiting room, the way he’d always pictured the description of Purgatory to look like as a young boy sitting in Sunday School.

Maybe they were all wrong. Maybe all the preaching of an afterlife was wrong. Maybe there is nothing after all, just oblivion.

But that couldn’t be right either. If there was no Heaven, Hell, or otherwise, how could he still have a consciousness? Shouldn’t *all* of his awareness have been snuffed out when he’d fallen off the cliff’s edge into the void?

“Clark?”

In the darkness, Clark’s attention snapped immediately to the direction where a fading echo of Lois’ voice had come from. He wanted to call out to her but it was as if his lips had been glued shut. He couldn’t open his mouth, couldn’t part his lips, couldn’t utter a sound. Frantically, he started to move toward where he thought she was, but it was as though a maze had been erected in the total darkness while he’d been standing still. He felt his way along the glassy-smooth walls, walking as fast as he dared.

“Clark?” she called again and his love for her lit up his heart like an actual fire. He felt some strength returning as hope flooded him.

He quickened his pace to a fast walk, then a trot, and finally an outright run. He crashed into walls seemingly at every turn, but he was dimly aware that he was making progress, though he wasn’t entirely sure how he knew that.

“Clark!” she called again.

With a final burst of speed and a tremendous effort, he tore his fused lips apart and her name ripped from his parched throat as he broke through a final barrier and into a land of light so bright it stung his eyes.

“Merry Christmas!” Sam Lane decreed later that night, though it was, in fact two hours and thirty-three minutes from officially being Christmas Day.

Clark held his glass of champagne aloft as he echoed the sentiment. “Merry Christmas!”

It had taken Lois and himself the better part of the day with the police as they’d pinned the attempted attack on Lois and the Kryptonian virus on Joey Bermuda, thanks, in part, to recordings Sam’s android creation, Baby Gunderson, had taken while the man had been in Lois’ apartment. The Handyman, as Joey was known, had insisted that Mindy Church had been the one to hire him. He’d admitted that she’d tasked him with creating a virus that could kill the Man of Steel. Clark had been mindful to return as Superman after he and Lois had officially left the scene, just to make it known to Joey that his biochemical weapon had failed.

But now all of that was behind them and he and Lois could celebrate a somewhat quiet night in, celebrating life and Christmas Eve. Dr. House had been invited to stay for the celebration as well, and, after some heavy persuasion on Ellen’s behalf, had accepted. Clark suspected that House was, perhaps, glad of the company on such a night, though the doctor insisted that he was only there to ensure that his patient didn’t suddenly keel over and die from some unintended complication of the treatment he’d received. But Clark felt fine, much to his own amazement. It was as though he’d never been sick at all. He felt completely healthy and normal, all of his powers were functioning as usual, and he had boundless amounts of energy. Yet, for all of that, he was subdued as he enjoyed the intimate party at Lois’ apartment. As much as he could have flown up into the heavens and shouted his jubilation to the world, he had no desire to do much more than just laugh and talk with the people closest to him, and the man who’d saved his life.

“Dr. House,” Clark said as the night wore on. “Can we talk for a minute?”

House nodded once, reluctantly, a look of uncertainty flashing in his eyes for the span of a single heartbeat. “Sure.”

Clark led House out onto the fire escape. Outside, the air was crispy, cold, and filled with the fresh scent of the lightly falling snow. “I wanted to thank you, again, for saving my life tonight,” he stated as the doctor leaned against the steps that led down from the apartment above. “Without that, admittedly insane, treatment of yours, I’d be dead by now.” He hung his head, humbled by how close he’d come to his own mortality. “It’s not something I’m used to admitting, but...there it is. The world can’t ever know it, but, without you, Superman would be gone.”

He looked in through the window where Lois was holding a

glass of white wine in one hand, her other hand across her stomach as she laughed deeply at something his mother had said. “Without you...my parents would have been burying their son, instead of celebrating a holiday. Lois...” He shook his head, hating the thought of Lois grieving for him. He looked sharply back at House. “All I’ve ever wanted in my life was to be accepted...loved...by someone who I didn’t have to hide from. As soon as I found Lois, I knew she was the one. I fell in love with her the moment I met her. I’ve wanted to marry her for a long time now. Because of you, I’ll get that chance.”

House nodded again, this time with confidence and acknowledging Clark’s thanks. “So...you’re *not* mad at me for blowing your secret to the in-laws?” he quipped lightly.

Clark chuckled and shook his head. “No, I’m not. Maybe that makes me crazy, but...after all that’s happened in the last couple of days, I’m just happy to be alive. Everything else seems so...insignificant in comparison.”

“They could have rejected you,” House said, and Clark followed the man’s eyes to where they rested on Sam and Ellen, who were, oddly enough, seemingly getting along quite well.

Clark kept watching his future in-laws. “They could have,” he agreed. “Six months ago, today, ten years from now...what’s the difference? It would have come out eventually.” He shrugged. “What’d they say to your offer to come work for Princeton-Plainsboro?”

He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop on the conversation between House, Sam, and Ellen, but he’d inadvertently heard House make the offer to them to come and work for him. House looked unsurprised that a man with super hearing had heard something he hadn’t been meant to hear.

“They turned me down,” House replied, his breath frosting into white puffs of smoke in the freezing air. “Ellen’s comfortable with her current position as head nurse and, quite frankly, who can blame her? And Sam...he’s a good man. Hard-headed and prone to making bad decisions, but...he said he can’t accept, that it wouldn’t be right, in light of that boxing scandal a couple of years ago.”

“He’s mentioned a need to step back from the medical world and atone for his mistakes,” Clark said with a single nod. “Hopefully he’ll realize that it wasn’t really his fault. He was under duress; Luthor would have had him killed – almost did – for disobeying his orders.”

House nodded mutely, and Clark wondered if the conversation was over. But neither man made a move to climb back in through the window, back into the warmth of Lois’ cozy apartment.

“She loves you,” House commented after half a minute of silence. He nodded once in Lois’ direction.

“Sometimes I wonder why, but I’m always thankful for that,” Clark remarked.

“Hold on to her. Good women are rare finds.” Was Clark imagining the tinge of sadness he thought he heard in House’s words?

Unsure of how to respond, Clark merely nodded and kept watching Lois in silence.

“I probably should get going,” House said after a minute or two.

“You don’t have to,” Clark reminded him.

“Unfortunately, that’s not true. I didn’t exactly ask for permission to make this little house call. Cuddy is going to have my head when she finds out I skipped clinic hours...again.” If he’d meant to sound contrite, he’d failed.

“Perhaps I can help with that,” Clark said with a half-smile. He spun into his Superman suit. “I’ll fly you back to the hospital and be certain to thank your boss for allowing me to borrow you on such short notice to assist me with a case. She can’t *possibly* fault you for that.”

“You don’t know Cuddy,” House wisecracked, but he gave a

nod of approval. “Okay, you’re on. Who knows...maybe you and I will *both* cheat death tonight.”

THE END