

Specimen S

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Summary: What if Jonathan and Martha Kent were not the ones to find the infant Kal-El? Just how much of life is chance? And how much is fate?

Disclaimer: I neither own nor make anything. All recognizable Lois and Clark characters, lines of dialogue, and plot points belong to DC comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd productions, and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. I'm just playing with my toys again. I promise to put them all back in the box when I am done.

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Author's Note: Just a couple of mild swear words. Nothing too horrible though.

May 17, 1966

"Is this the place?"

"Yes."

"Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain. How dare you question me? Have you learned *nothing* during our time together?"

"It's just that...this place doesn't look any different from the rest of this backwoods country, that's all."

"Believe me, I know exactly where we need to be."

"And you are certain that the event is to be tonight?"

"Positive. You know, Cameron, I wouldn't have come to you if I'd known how galactically stupid you are. Now, shut up would you?"

"All right."

"Good. Stop here."

"Here?"

"Yes. Now, watch and wait."

The battered old military M38 jeep came to a grinding halt as the driver pulled it to the side of the road, shifted it to neutral, and pulled the hand brake. He opened his door and poked his head out into the cooling air of the darkening night, wishing, not for the first time, that the vehicle's windows could roll down, instead of being fixed into place. It was the perfect mid-May evening. And, if the odd stranger sitting in the passenger seat was right, it was about to get even better. Cameron shot a discreet glance at the man from the corner of his eye. He still wasn't completely sure what to make of him.

All he knew was that the man had first come to him several months ago, claiming to know about the future. Cameron hadn't trusted the man at first, but, over the months, the stranger had accurately predicted everything, from the winners of the 1966 Super Bowl to what the newspaper headlines would be each day. So he'd been forced to believe in what the man had told him. Perhaps he really *was* from the future. And if he *was*...oh the

possibilities.

If anything, Cameron hoped to God that Tempus wasn't lying to him now.

He didn't want to be taken for a fool. And he *wanted* the promised event to actually come to pass. He'd been waiting his whole life for a moment like this. He'd dedicated his life to proving the existence of alien life-forms. Now Tempus had promised him that one would be falling right into his very lap, if only he trusted the self-proclaimed time traveler. A hopeful flutter rose in Cameron's heart.

His entire life, he'd endured the scoffing, the jeering coming from his peers. Cracked, they had called him, in their very kindest moments. Delusional. Insane. Certifiable. Mentally unstable. Unhinged. Cameron had heard it all, mostly behind his back, when the others thought him unable to hear their biting remarks, the laughter in their voices. Some had actually had the nerve to blatantly say these things to his face. He hadn't known which was worse — the mocking voices no one thought he heard, or the vicious remarks made to his face.

But now...if Tempus was telling the truth...he would prove them all wrong. He would prove his theories right. Earth was not the only planet with life — intelligent, humanoid life. And that was enough to trust that the man sitting beside him was telling him the truth. It was enough to trust that Tempus didn't plan on dragging him out into the middle of nowhere to kill him. Still, as the minutes ticked by, Cameron found himself growing ever more anxious.

"So...how much longer?" he finally asked, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Soon," was all Tempus would say.

Despite himself, Cameron started to have his doubts. Perhaps Tempus wasn't who he said he was. Perhaps he was just some guy, hired by his peers, sent to poke fun at Cameron's beliefs. An extremely lucky man, who'd been somehow able to accurately foretell future events. Not only foretell them, but with one hundred percent, down to the minutest detail correctness.

Cameron frowned. No, he was fairly certain that Tempus was indeed the real deal. He *had* to be. Nothing else made any sense.

Still...

He had to wonder why Tempus had entrusted this information to him. He'd pressed the man for details, but the man from the future wouldn't say much. Sketchy details were all that he had been willing to give up. And yet, it had somehow been enough for Cameron. Enough to make him practically salivate with the prospect of what was to come. Enough to make him crack his knuckles in eager anticipation.

Mentally, he ran through the small pile of information Tempus *had* been willing to offer up. The event that was to come would be assumed to be a meteorite crashing in the field he was now sitting outside of. But in actuality, it would be the ungraceful crash landing of a space ship. Nestled within the ship would be an infant boy, a child sent to Earth to escape the explosion that had torn his home world of Krypton apart. Kal-El, Tempus had called the child. The boy would possess all the parts of a human male, would appear no different than Cameron's own son had, when he had been an infant. But the alien baby would grow to become the most powerful man on Earth, with a host of abilities at his disposal. Super strength, hearing, sight, speed. The power to defy gravity and fly. Invulnerability. Heat and x-ray vision. Super breath.

Cameron was sure he was forgetting the rest, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that he get to the ship first, before anyone else could find the landing site. All that mattered was that he get his hands on that child, so that he could shape the boy into the image he wanted. And he had plans — big plans — for the infant alien who would be making his appearance shortly. He would mold and shape the boy until he grew into a man; a super

soldier who did only Cameron's bidding.

The ex-Sergeant-Major allowed himself a tight smile as he thought of having such a powerful being under his control, and his control only. When he did, he'd make the United States military pay for what they had done to him. He'd make them wish they've never doubted him. He'd make them rue the day they'd ousted him from their prestigious ranks. And then, he'd take his revenge on the bitch who'd caused all the trouble to begin with.

Cameron had always served — faithfully, willingly, honorably. He'd always been the model soldier. He'd never questioned his orders. He had never hesitated to do what was asked of him. He'd always been the first man to step forward when volunteers had been asked for. Then, out of the blue, he'd been accused by his ex-girlfriend of rape, a woman he hadn't seen since their split up, seven years prior to the accusation. Though he hadn't actually committed the heinous act, the court-martial had believed the woman. He'd been dishonorably discharged from the army, losing everything in the process — his dignity, his benefits, the only job he'd ever known. Only his wife had stuck by him; his "friends" had all turned their backs on him as soon as the accusation against him had been made.

But now, he'd found a new niche for himself. The cosmos had always held a certain fascination for him, and he'd always believed that Earth was not the only planet out there with intelligent life. So, he'd secretly studied the stars each night, after his wife and son were in bed. He'd waited patiently, night after night, staring up at the vast expanse of the galaxy that lay splayed out in the heavens above, looking for anything out of the ordinary, though he'd never had any luck.

Cameron's fingers still drummed aimlessly, tunelessly on the steering wheel, while his head remained tilted toward the nearly cloudless night sky. His high hopes for the evening started to wane as the minutes ticked by. He cracked his knuckles, wincing at the popping sound they made, but enjoying the actual feeling. Then he stretched and yawned, all but ready to give up this fool's errand.

A moment later, a flash of fire appeared in the endless, dark abyss of the sky, blotting out the expanse of stars in its brilliance. Cameron's mouth gaped open, though he found himself unable to vocalize a single word. As he watched, the streak of light and fire came lower and lower, angling over the road where his vehicle lay, pulled off to one side. Over the field it went, until Cameron lost sight of it.

"That," Tempus said, sitting next to him in the passenger seat, his voice rich with the sarcasm that never seemed to stray too far from his tongue, "was your pot of gold."

In the next instant, Cameron was out the door of his car. Mustering all the speed he could, he raced to the open field on his left. He'd remained in top shape, even after his discharge from service, so it was without any difficulty that he vaulted over the wooden fence rails that ringed Shuster's Field. He hit the ground and took off at a dead run, knowing that he *had* to be the first one to arrive on the scene. He didn't know who else might have witnessed the event. But he wasn't willing to risk being the second one on the scene.

Behind him, he could hear Tempus struggling to keep pace. But the time traveler had warned him not to wait for him. He'd warned him to keep moving and that, if worst came to worst, they would just meet up at the crash site. Still, judging from how close Tempus' footfalls sounded, he was keeping a fairly good stride. Cameron didn't care either way, so long as one of them reached that crash site first. Briefly, Cameron wondered how much farther they would have to go, and if they hadn't lost their sense of direction. If this truly *was* a spacecraft, perhaps it was capable of banking to one side. Or pulling out of the free-fall it had been in.

Cameron shook his head. No, it wouldn't be able to pull out of the fall. It had been moving way too fast. It had been on *fire*, for crying out loud!

But his worries vanished as he looked ahead. A long, deep furrow in the ground appeared before his eyes. Bits of turf and grass were smoldering in the wake of the heat, and small flickers of dying flames lit up the darkness. A surge of adrenaline rushed through Cameron's body, propelling him even faster. He raced along the fresh scar in the soil, keeping it on his right-hand side as a guide. The earthy scent of the turned up dirt filled his nose, and the distant chirps and calls of crickets and frogs lay on the edges of his hearing.

Finally, just when Cameron thought the crevasse had no end, he skidded to a halt before a small, sleek capsule, nestled within a mound of disturbed soil. His heart hammered in his chest, not from the exertion of the run, but from sheer anticipation. For a moment, he just stood there, struck almost dumb from what he was seeing. From what he was *finally* seeing. All his hopes and dreams sat before him, encased in a shiny blue capsule, no bigger than the bassinet his own son had once slept in at night.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Tempus prompted him, jogging up to his side.

"It's more than I could have dreamed," Cameron breathed, awestruck.

"Yes, well, that may be so. But you need to wake up and get to work. We haven't got all night."

Cameron took in a shaky breath, then knelt before the space ship. Carefully, he reached over to it. His fingers caressed the smooth metal, oddly cool beneath his touch. It should have been scalding hot, he reasoned. The speed it had crashed at should have super-heated the metal. But the capsule was comfortable beneath his fingertips — not quite cold, but not all that warm either. It made Cameron very curious as to what kind of metal it had been shaped from, and what kind of technology it had on board to help regulate the temperature of the ship. But mostly, he was interested in the life-form held within.

Holding his breath, he slowly lifted the top of the capsule and peered inside. His breath came out in a rush as he gazed upon the infant within. Intelligent, soft, curious brown eyes looked back at him, blinking rapidly at the change in scenery. Gentle coos came from the child, and he reached toward Cameron. Mesmerized, the man reached out to the baby with one hand, and the tiny boy grabbed hold of his finger, his eyes never leaving Cameron's face.

For his part, Cameron was stunned. Tempus had warned him that the infant alien would appear no different from a human child. Still, the former Sergeant-Major had harbored some lingering expectation of some glaring difference. Purple eyes, maybe. Or the hint of antennas, perhaps. A forked, lizard-like tongue, perchance. Or maybe, a slight greenish hue to his body. But there was absolutely nothing that gave away even the barest hint of the baby's extraterrestrial origin. He looked exactly the same as Cameron's own son had, when he'd been about two months old.

"Incredible," Cameron whispered to himself. Then, to the child, he said, "Hello there, child. Welcome to Earth. Welcome to your destiny."

The baby cooed again, perhaps soothed by the contact with someone — anyone — after his lonely travel through space. He smiled at Cameron.

"My boy, you are going to make me the most powerful man on Earth," Cameron continued, in a sing-song voice.

The man gently took his finger back from the child. A grin overtook his face as he stared at the baby. Yes, things were indeed falling into place. This child was his ticket to revenge and redemption, all at the same time. He was certain that he would be able to brainwash the infant into being his perfect little soldier.

After all, it couldn't possibly be that difficult to mold the child to his will during the coming, formative years.

Behind him, Tempus was staring at the boy with a satisfied grin on his face. There was perhaps, even a flicker of recognition in his face, as though he'd been there before. Cameron took it all in with one swift glance over his shoulder. Then he moved his gaze back to the alien before him.

"Are you sure he's...safe?" Cameron asked. He was a tad fearful of handling the child after Tempus had told him of the strength the baby would possess.

"Absolutely. For God's sake, Cameron, he's *just* a baby. He's completely and utterly helpless...for now. Besides, take a look around. Your insurance policy is all around you."

Cameron lifted the child out of the capsule, and settled him against his chest. The baby's head rested on his shoulder, and Cameron absently patted the boy's back. It was so natural for him to have such a young one in his arms, though he was a bit rusty. His own son was much older than the little one he now held, but he still clearly remembered how the boy used to fit into his arms.

"Insurance policy?" Cameron asked. The time-traveler hadn't spoken of an insurance policy before now.

"Yes," Tempus said, nodding his head. He stooped down to gather a few glowing green rocks in his hand. He turned one over in his palm, staring into the depths of the stone intently. "You see these?"

Cameron nodded. "Yes..."

A wicked grin crossed Tempus' lips and his eyes gleamed with an almost malevolent light, Cameron thought.

"Kryptonite."

"Come again?" Cameron said, blinking at the unfamiliar word.

"Radioactive pieces of the baby's home world," the man from the future explained. "Temporary exposure will cause that *thing* pain. It'll rob him of his powers once they manifest, at least for short periods of time. Prolonged exposure will kill him."

Cameron nodded again, relieved. He'd given quite a lot of thought to all Tempus had told him about the Kryptonian child. If the baby grew to be as powerful as Tempus had led him to believe, he'd worried about finding a way to ensure that the alien stayed in line. He'd agonized over finding a way to destroy the alien life-form if the worst came and he went rogue.

"So...a bullet made from this stuff..."

"Would be lethal," Tempus confirmed.

"Excellent."

"So, you'll be taking this order as a carryout then?" Tempus said, laughing.

He knelt on the ground, opening the small lead case he carried. Cameron watched as the man gleefully filled the case with the scattered bits of Kryptonite. He noted how Tempus hummed to himself, an odd tune Cameron had never heard, and assumed came from some time in the future. Once or twice, the man even kissed the current stone in his hand, throwing a glance at the baby. Cameron thought he saw barely concealed hatred in those glances, and he wondered silently at it. Tempus hadn't shown any emotion, positive or negative, toward the impending arrival of the baby until now. But now, it seemed he loathed the boy.

"Tempus," Cameron said after a moment.

Tempus' head snapped up at the sound of his name, only for a second. Then he went straight back to his work. He placed in the last piece of Kryptonite, then shut the case tightly.

"What now?" he asked irritably.

"Well," Cameron said, shifting the baby's weight on his hip, slightly uncomfortable with Tempus' change in attitude. "I was wondering. Why? Why are you dropping all of this in my lap? What reason do you have for hating this child?"

Tempus grinned, looking very much like the Cheshire Cat.

The smile even touched his eyes.

"Because, my dear Cameron, this child will one day grow up to destroy the world as you and I know it. He'll shape society to his own image, his own values. Trust me, I'm doing the world a *favor* by handing him to you. I believe that people like you and me should be shaping the future. Not some alien *creature*."

Cameron nodded silently as Tempus stood and dusted off the knees of his pants. Cameron was about to pick up the lead case with his free hand when a man and woman came picking their way over to them, following the same line of overturned dirt and the long, unmistakable scar in the ground. Cameron pushed the baby into Tempus' arms, then started to jog over to meet the curious couple.

"Hold it! Stop right there!" he commanded as he moved.

The two people did not slow.

"Halt!" Cameron tried again, mustering up his very best military voice. "This area is off limits!"

"Who are you?" the male newcomer asked. "What are you doing here? This is private property, belonging to a friend of mine."

"Sergeant-Major Cameron Trask of the United States Armed Forces," he said. "And this area is off limits to civilians."

"The military?" the woman asked, her voice colored with confusion. Then, to Cameron, she said, "We thought we saw a meteorite."

"Yes, ma'am. That's why we're here, to recover it. My division has an interest in the object."

He wasn't sure why he was explaining anything to these people. Perhaps it was nerves, or just plain old disuse of official protocol in the intervening years since his discharge.

"Oh?" the man asked.

Cameron could see now, thanks to the moonlight, the man's features. He was no more than a simple farmer, judging from the clothes he wore. It made him crack a tiny smile. These yokels would believe any story he could possibly dish out.

"And what division would that be?" the man pressed, his eyebrow arched.

"Bureau Thirty-Nine," Cameron answered at once, wondering where *that* idea had come from. "Now, I'm going to have to ask you folks to vacate the premises. It isn't safe here for you." He managed to put on his best attempt at caring for their well-being.

"I don't think we should..." the man began to protest, before Cameron cut him off.

"Sir, I'm not going to give you another warning. Don't make me call for backup. I have no desire to see you both placed in handcuffs tonight."

The woman frowned and tugged on the man's arm. Her husband or boyfriend, Cameron assumed.

"Come on, Jonathan," she said, a small sliver of worry in her voice.

The man — Jonathan — said nothing. He instead held Cameron's gaze for a minute longer than was necessary. Then he nodded to the woman.

"All right, Martha," he relented.

Cameron watched silently as the two turned and began to amble back over the darkened field. He allowed himself to feel a small moment of triumph. But the couple's appearance brought to light a new concern. Who else had witnessed the supposed meteorite crash? Who else might show up, uninvited, to the crash site? He had to move, and he had to move *now*. He turned and headed back to where Tempus stood, lurking in the shadows, out of sight of the two farmers. The infant was asleep in his arms, his tiny pink mouth slightly open.

"Took you long enough," Tempus said, pushing the child into Cameron's arms again with disgust. "I am *not* a baby-sitter."

Cameron took the baby almost absently. "We need to move."

I'll take the case. Can you grab the ship?"

Tempus nodded. "I don't see why not. After all, you're preserving the future," he said, a gleam in his eye.

Cameron watched as Tempus grabbed the ship and easily lifted it. He wasn't a muscular looking man at all. Cameron had assumed the capsule was heavy. It certainly looked like it weighed a considerable amount. But Tempus didn't seem to be struggling with it much. In fact, he might as well have been holding an awkwardly shaped bowling ball for all the strain he appeared to be exerting.

Back across the field they went, using the moon's light to see by. At first, they were guided by the torn up soil that stretched across the otherwise grassy field. After that, they just kept moving in as straight a line as they could manage. It was slower going this time, with both men walking side by side. Tempus was quiet as he walked.

"Who were those people?" Cameron finally asked, assuming Tempus might know.

"You mean those two hicks?"

"Yes."

Tempus' smile went from ear to ear. "No one important," he chuckled. "You don't need to worry about them at all."

They emerged from Shuster's Field just north of where Cameron had parked, and they swiftly made their way back to the waiting vehicle. Once there, Cameron placed the still sleeping child back in his capsule, which he placed sideways on the passenger seat. Then he loaded the case filled with Kryptonite into the truck, placing it on the floor in the rear of the vehicle. Tempus pulled a worn, battered olive drab tarp around the ship, hiding it from view, leaving Kal-El exposed amidst a sea of green. While Cameron was busy with the case of Kryptonite, Tempus leaned on the doorframe and peered in at the sleeping infant.

"This time, I've won," he whispered. "You don't know it yet. But you're going to destroy the possibility of Utopia, *not* bring it about. The future belongs to people like me, like this moron Trask." He stopped and laughed a self-satisfied laugh. "Goodbye, Kal-El."

With that, Tempus pushed himself away from the vehicle. He grinned again, then reached his hand into his pocket, feeling the small square of plastic and metal hidden there.

"Get in," Cameron said, coming around and shutting the door to the backseat where the alien child slept. He gestured to the rear seat of the jeep.

"No thanks. I've already got a ride," Tempus said.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Cameron protested, turning to face his companion.

But Tempus was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he'd simply vanished into thin air. Cameron thought it likely that he actually *had*. Perhaps he'd gone back to whatever time and place he'd initially come from. Cameron shrugged to himself. It didn't matter to him. He had what he needed now. The child was in his possession. And he had the means to control the super-powered adult that the baby would grow into.

Cameron climbed into the driver's seat of the truck and buckled himself in. He checked on the baby, peering into the rearview mirror to do so. The child was still asleep, his mouth moving now in a lazy sucking motion. Cameron smiled, not at the child, but at what lay ahead for the baby. He could hardly wait to start the process of making the child into his own, personal super soldier.

June 27, 1968

"Sir, I'm afraid it's no use." The man's voice held a note of frustration mixed with worry. "I've tried."

"Try it again."

"Mr. Trask, I've tried every type of needle known to

mankind. The child's skin is impervious."

The man gestured to a steel side table filled with hypodermic needles. The metal ends were bent into a vast array of odd angles. Every single one was damaged. Every one still held various liquids within their chambers, ready to be dispensed. Cameron took it all in at a glance.

"Look here. I'll show you," the man pressed.

The man picked up another needle from a different table. It was one of a remaining three needles that were undamaged. He stuck the tip into a vial of clear liquid, drew back the plunger, and carefully filled it. Then he tapped out the air bubbles before moving back to the two year old sitting in front of him. The man silently brought the needle to the child's arm and pressed it firmly against his skin. The needle buckled and bent to the left, not breaking through even a single layer of the alien's skin. For his part, the child took no notice, and happily chewed his fingers.

The child was known as Specimen S in the compound, for the sigil that had been emblazoned on the baby blanket he'd been wrapped in when he'd crashed landed on Earth. And so far, S, as they referred to him for short, was developing just as Tempus had told Cameron he would. In every way, he appeared to be a typical two year old child. He hit all of the same milestones on time, no different than Cameron's son, Jason, had once done. S crawled when he was supposed to, said his first word when he was supposed to, took his first uncertain steps when he was supposed to. Only his aura of invulnerability set S apart from other, normal little boys and girls.

"See?" the man asked, setting the needle aside with a sigh.

"Yes, I see," Cameron said, stroking his chin in thought.

"Jenson, try putting a needle through his diaper."

"Sir?"

"Do it," Cameron coaxed. "I want to see something."

Steve Jenson hesitantly prepped another needle, then attempted to puncture the thin diaper the child wore. As before, the needle bent upon impact.

"Interesting," Cameron said. "His aura is already stronger than Tempus made it out to be."

He paused for a moment, then reached beneath his shirt. He drew out a thick, stylish silver chain. Adorning the bottom, a small cylindrical tube hung, one made of lead. Carefully, Cameron unscrewed the tube from the top, revealing a shard of glowing green Kryptonite. Across the room, the baby wailed, a high-pitched scream of pain. A look of alarm flickered over Jenson's features, though he did not understand exactly what was going on.

"Try it now," Cameron said, raising his voice over the child's screech.

"Sir? What? I don't understand," Jenson said.

"Do it," Cameron commanded. "*Now*."

Jenson nervously nodded his head and prepped the final needle. His shoulders were slumped in defeat, knowing he'd never change his boss' mind, and fully anticipating another busted hypodermic needle. Yet, to Jenson's infinite surprise, the needle easily slipped into the baby's flesh this time. S let out another pained scream as the metal pricked him, and fat tears rolled down his chubby cheeks.

"Ssh!" Jenson tried to soothe him. "There, there. It's not so bad."

He quickly pushed the plunger down, administering the harmless placebo. He withdrew the needle immediately, and a round red drop of S' blood welled up on his skin.

"See, all done," Jenson cooed at the baby.

Cameron chuckled from his place on the other side of the room. He swiftly recapped the Kryptonite, shielding it away where it could do no more harm to the child. After all, he wasn't sure how long the baby could be exposed to it without it killing him. And that was something he was unwilling to risk. He needed

the child to live; he'd invested too much in S already. Immediately, S' cries changed. No longer were they shrieks of agony. Now they became only the whimpering cries of a frightened child in desperate need of comforting.

"Very interesting," Cameron said, smirking to himself and tapping the lead tube affectionately with one finger. "Excellent."

Steve Jenson picked the boy up and lightly rubbed his back, hoping to impart some comfort to him. S continued to cry, his tears wetting the man's shoulder. Jenson gently began to sway, hoping the movement would pacify the baby.

"Sir, if I may ask...? What was that?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

"But, sir..."

"No!" Cameron snapped at him. "It isn't healthy for a man to stick his nose in where it doesn't belong."

"Yes...of course," Jenson said, well aware of the threat in Cameron's voice and words.

Cameron eyed him coldly for a long moment. "Good," he finally said.

In Jenson's arms, S was finally starting to settle back down. His cries tapered off and he began to hiccup. Jenson lightly patted the boy's back, though it was almost purely an unconscious effort. He wasn't really thinking about what he was doing. He was just acting. Though, he had to admit to himself, he felt a stab of pity for the boy. And fear. Jenson wasn't sure what his boss was up to, but it bothered him to see the man acting so callously toward a helpless two year old.

And yet, Jenson wasn't stupid enough to say anything. Cameron had a violent temper sometimes, ever since he'd been kicked out of the military. Jenson was almost positive that Cameron wouldn't actually harm or kill him, but he wasn't willing to bet his life on that. And besides, if Jenson said anything, it was certain that his boss would terminate his employment. Jenson didn't want that either. He'd been waiting his whole life for an opportunity like this — an opportunity to study an alien life-form up close and personally. He wasn't about to do anything to throw away an opportunity like this one.

"So...what now?" Jenson asked carefully, shifting S on his hip.

"We proceed with Phase Two."

"Phase Two?" Jenson echoed. He frowned. "What's that?"

"More testing," Cameron said, shrugging as though it were the most obvious thing in all the world.

"More testing how?" Jenson echoed once more.

"Everything," Cameron replied evenly. "We test every disease known to mankind. We test every weapon known to mankind. We see what S can and cannot handle."

"But sir," Jenson said, paling slightly. "Tempus said..."

"I know what Tempus said," Cameron replied angrily. "But only an idiot believes something one hundred percent without checking things himself. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, perfectly so."

"Good."

October 25, 1970

"How's it going there, Jenson?"

"Good," Steve Jenson replied, finishing his examination of four year old S. "Just a minute, please." He took a final listen to the child's heart, nodded, then draped the stethoscope around his neck once more. "Okay, S. All done."

"Can I have a pop?" the child inquired. "Please?"

Jenson chuckled and reached into the clear canister that stood on the countertop of his small medical office. He fished out a cherry flavored lollipop, unwrapped it, and gave it to the boy. S happily popped the treat into his mouth and sucked on it silently. But his wide, brown eyes never left the two adults.

Cameron leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

"Well?"

Jenson sighed. "Well, I think we've tested most of the major viruses and germs. He seems immune to everything. Even when we've tested him against the same things with that green rock of yours, the results have been the same. It's as if Earth viruses simply aren't compatible with his biology. They don't have the power to affect him. For the most part, it seems like his body works the same as yours and mine. He eats, he sleeps, he has a pulse and a heartbeat, he bleeds if hurt when exposed to that rock."

"I already know this," Cameron said, tapping his toe impatiently. "Tell me something I *don't* know yet."

"Well," Jenson said, fidgeting in his chair a little. "We finally got the x-ray machine over the weekend, while you were away."

Cameron perked up a little at that. "And?" he asked eagerly.

Jenson shook his head. He handed his boss a manila folder with the images the machine had taken. Cameron flipped on the lighted board on the wall and held each image up to it. Every single one was a solid mass. He could see nothing. No organs. No bones. Nothing.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded, flinging the x-rays back at Steve Jenson.

The photos flew in all directions. One landed in Jenson's lap. The rest fluttered to the floor. S watched it all, silently tracking the images with his eyes. But he did not move, other than to continue to work at the lollipop Jenson had given him. Even that young, he knew enough to fear Cameron.

"Mr. Trask, please..."

"Don't give me excuses, Jenson! I went through hell to get that machine. And you present me with this rubbish?"

"I know what it looks like," Jenson said, trying to appease the ex-Sergeant-Major.

"It looks like useless garbage," Cameron retorted.

"I know," Jenson said again, nodding. "But...those scans... they tell me something about this child. His molecular make-up isn't like ours. He's denser than we are. Which is why we can't see anything in the scans."

Cameron sighed. "That doesn't do us much good."

"Maybe not. But it puts us a little closer to understanding how different he is from us."

Cameron thought about this for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Proceed to Phase Three."

January 12, 1971

The sound of gunfire blotted all other noise out. S flinched at every shot, the sound reverberating in his ears. He felt the bullets as they hit him, one after another, as the expert marksmen fired at him. But they didn't hurt him. In fact, they bounced right off his skin. But he was afraid nonetheless. He didn't understand what was going on. He didn't understand the loud noises, or why they were being directed at him. He didn't understand the sharp stench of the gunpowder or the flashes of light and fire that exploded out from the barrels of the weapons.

He looked down at the spent rounds that lay pooled around his feet. They were high enough to bury his toes and kiss his ankles. A vast array of bullet sizes and shapes were mixed in that small ocean around him. He didn't understand that either. Why were these people using so many different things against him? And why had they chained him in place? To his almost five year old brain, nothing about the situation made any sense.

He knew, even at that young age, that Cameron disliked him. He also knew that Cameron could hurt him, and hurt him very badly. S was terrified of the green stone Cameron sometimes produced. It made his entire body scream in agony. It made him so weak that he could barely stand. And somehow, S knew, child though he was, that it could kill him.

He closed his eyes as another hailstorm of bullets peppered

his bare chest, though it was not because he was afraid of the projectiles. He was afraid of the people standing on the opposite side of the room, each in their own little compartment. Each face was grim. None held any compassion for S, or showed any worry or remorse over what was happening.

S opened his eyes once more as the guns were silenced and the marksmen reloaded their weapons. S watched as Cameron strode into the room. The marksmen held their fire, respectful of the man in charge. Cameron went to one of the men and whispered something in the man's ear. S could see Trask's mouth moving, but he could hear nothing. However, the man with the gun nodded in silent understanding. Trask stepped back, his hand moving to the chain around his neck.

S gulped in renewed fear. He knew what the gesture meant. The green rock was coming out. In another second, he would feel its effects on his body. S tried to squirm his way away, tried to put as much distance between his body and Trask as he could. But the chains were strong and short. S couldn't move more than an inch or two.

"Wait for my signal," Trask cautioned the shooter.

In the next instant, S felt the Kryptonite as it began to ravage his body. He fell to his knees, scraping them on the rough concrete floor. He cried out, but no one came to his aid. No one said a comforting word.

"Now," Trask said.

The gunman nodded once in acknowledgement, though S didn't see it. The man squeezed the trigger, and a bullet whizzed by S, expertly placed. It grazed the top of his left shoulder. S screamed as his flesh tore open and his blood began to gush from the wound. Fat tears leaked from his eyes, from the excruciating pain and the immense terror that now gripped him.

"Excellent," he heard Cameron say.

A minute later, S felt the Kryptonite vanish. He felt his flesh begin to knit back together as the wound on his shoulder closed. Jenson was at his side in the next second, inspecting the place where the bullet had injured S. But there was no injury to be seen. The skin was unbroken, unblemished, as if the wound had simply never existed.

"I'm sorry, S," Jenson said in a whisper. "I didn't know."

S could only nod his head slightly, now more afraid than ever before.

July 28, 1976

"That's it. Keep going," Jenson encouraged.

"How...much...further?" S puffed out between breaths.

Ten year old S was running on a treadmill. Various electrodes and wires sprouted from his body, monitoring his vital signs. The machine was going at a fairly fast pace, having been modified to reach up to one hundred miles per hour. S was cruising along at about forty miles per hour, Jenson could see. And yet, the boy barely seemed to be struggling. He was breathing only slightly heavier than normal, and his pulse was holding steady. He wasn't even sweating.

It unnerved Jenson.

Once again, it hammered home the fact that S was an alien. Though he looked and sounded like a regular kid, he was not of the Earth. He was not human. It was a fact Jenson sometimes found himself forgetting.

He'd worked closely with S for most of the child's life. He'd grown attached to the helpless baby S had once been. He still had a special place in his heart for the boy, though he kept his feelings tamped down where Cameron could not see. If Trask suspected Jenson's feelings, chances were great that he'd pull the man from his duties. He might even kill him, rather than simply terminate his involvement with the ragtag group of rogue scientists who called themselves Bureau Thirty-Nine.

But Jenson couldn't shake the fondness he had for the alien

child. He could not force himself to view the boy as merely a science project or laboratory animal, the way everyone else did. Instead, he tried to be as gentle to the boy as he could, when no one was looking. He'd slip the boy a cookie when he could, or give him an easy day when they would go through the rigorous medical testing they routinely did. As a result, S had developed a tenuous trust in the man, and he rarely ever fought against Jenson's requests.

"Let's do another twenty miles," Jenson replied. "Then we'll call it a day."

"Okay," the boy said, sighing resignedly.

S continued to run, never faltering in his steps. He didn't need to slow down, didn't need to rest. He didn't need to sip from the water bottle which stood at the ready for him, just in case. It never ceased to amaze Jenson, to see just what S could accomplish. He wondered what other abilities the boy might exhibit in the future. Cameron had hinted at powers to come, but he hadn't divulged just what they might be. Jenson secretly thought that he was seeing only the tip of the iceberg when it came to S' abilities. The thoughts and questions sometimes kept him up at night, truth be told.

How fast would S become? Would he ever be able to outrun a train, for example? Cameron was worried about how strong the boy would grow to become. Would he be able to lift a car with his bare hands? Would he possess the ability to bend steel? Jenson knew that his boss was working — slaving really — over plans to build a more secure cell for S, one he would not be able to break free of once his strength began to manifest. Jenson wondered when that would be. S was lean and muscular by nature, never possessing the "baby fat" the scientist had observed on every other young child he'd ever come across, at least, not past the age of three. He also wondered what other surprises S might have in store for them. Would he be able to control the elements? Would he gain the ability to shape-shift?

The fact was, Jenson was in the dark as to what he should anticipate. And that didn't sit well with him at all.

Soon enough, S finished the remaining miles. Jenson flicked a switch, and the treadmill slowed. S hopped down from the deck before it could wind down to a complete stop. He looked expectantly at Jenson.

"Very good," Jenson said, nodding. "Good work today."

"Thank you," the boy said, casting his eyes downward.

S knew what would come next. It was time for his daily lessons. For the rest of the day, he would sit with Cameron. Trask personally oversaw the child's education. No one but Trask and S were privy to what, exactly, those lessons consisted of. Cameron refused to speak of it, and had threatened Jenson the one time he'd had enough nerve to ask. And S grew afraid anytime Cameron's name was mentioned; clamming up immediately if the man was brought up in conversation.

Jenson sighed inwardly, but S had already moved away, obediently heading to the small, private room where his lessons took place.

For the next five hours, Cameron drilled S on the information he wanted the child to know. Had S known any better, he would have called the lessons brainwashing attempts, not an education. Oh, it was true that Cameron *did* teach the boy some things. S could recite the names of every major city in the world, what countries they were in, and who was in charge. He could accurately point out every type of military equipment from a series of photographs. He could easily figure out the longitude and latitude of any place Cameron could possibly mention.

None of the information that Cameron fed S was hard for the child to learn. He had only to see or hear it once, and the information imbedded itself into his memory. It became an indelible part of his limited knowledge. And yet, S had the nagging feeling that Cameron was withholding information from

him, even at that young age. He'd witnessed Cameron count off items from separate piles and come up with a new amount. S just couldn't figure out *how* Cameron did it. He'd asked once. The question had enraged Trask, and he'd forced S to endure the harmful effects of the green stone for the better part of an hour.

S had never questioned Cameron again after that incident. He wisely held his tongue, bit back any questions he had, and submitted to doing only what Trask asked of him, when it was asked of him. He became as compliant as possible. But alone in his cell at night, S often wept bitterly and wondered what lay beyond the walls of the compound that made up his home — the only home he'd ever known.

He looked forward to the times when he was allowed a rest from his labors. If Cameron was feeling generous, S would be allowed short periods of time outdoors. S reveled in the sunlight during those hours. Perhaps he was imagining it, but it felt to him like he became stronger, more alive in the gentle caress of the sun. It was almost like the warm rays fed his body. It made S all the more miserable on the days he was stuck indoors.

He never complained however. Not to anyone. Not even to Jenson, who had always treated him as gently as possible. And certainly not to Trask. S feared the man. He feared the shard of green stone the man forever had hanging about his neck, ready to pull out and use to punish S at the drop of a hat. Instead, S chose to suffer in silence, dutifully playing the part Cameron wanted of him. To do so, S tried to harden his heart. He knew Cameron wanted him to be able to hurt and kill people, once he grew older and stronger. Who they were, S didn't know. They were simply "the enemy." But S had the impression that "the enemy" was anyone who wasn't Bureau Thirty-Nine.

Try as he might, S found it impossible to force himself to become the cold-hearted killer Cameron wanted him to become. He found such delight in the small things — a bird flying overhead when he was outdoors, a butterfly landing on his nose, the sweet perfume of the flowers that grew in the rough landscape where the compound was located. He couldn't understand why Trask wanted him to destroy so many wonderful, fascinating things.

The more S thought about it, the more it kept him awake at night. The more it flooded his young body with terror for what the future held. He didn't want to kill. He didn't want to destroy. He simply wanted to live his life.

December 23, 1978

Night had finally settled over Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound. S sat alone in his cell, on the rough army cot that served as his bed. His legs dangled off the side, and he swung them listlessly. He felt incredibly lonely in the absolute quiet, as he often did at night. Part of him enjoyed, even relished, the time alone. It meant he wasn't being tested. It meant Cameron wasn't cramming his head full of bad thoughts. It meant S wasn't subjected to the endless attempts to twist his personality into a mindless drone, into Trask's own, personal, super soldier. It meant Cameron wasn't torturing him with that chunk of Kryptonite.

And yet, on the other hand, S had never really liked being alone, with no one to talk to.

S knew, just from observing Trask's men, that they were becoming afraid of him. They never came near him. In fact, they barely glanced in his direction now. S knew he was not quite the same as them, even if he looked just like them. He could easily outrun them — could outrun their cars. He barely had to exert himself to do anything. He didn't sweat in the heat. He didn't shiver in the cold. And he was slowly becoming very, very strong. He could already lift twice his own weight, barely straining to lift the heavy barbell whenever Jenson tested him.

There were other things too. Things that set him apart from

the others. Things he didn't tell Jenson, or anyone, for that matter, about.

Things that terrified the twelve year old boy.

He could hear everything around him. He could hear the generator in the basement as though it were right next to him in his small cell. He could hear the heat whooshing through the radiator system, a steady hissing sound like an angry snake. He could hear Jenson in his office, absently clicking a pen against his teeth, a sure sign the man was deep in thought. He could hear Jenson's heart beating, steady and strong. And somewhere in the storage area, a mouse was ferreting through a box, tearing strips of old newspaper to use in lining its' nest.

S hadn't been able to control what he could hear in the beginning. He'd been in agony then, as his hearing zeroed in on everything around him. A sneeze coming from a worker somewhere down the hall had become a bombshell in S' ears. The sounds of crickets at night had kept him awake, driving him slowly crazy. The footsteps of ants out beyond his cell could not have been louder in his delicate ears. The faltering heart rhythm of Eric Princely had alerted S to the fact that the man's heart was diseased. Princely had dropped dead an hour later.

But through self discipline and a lot of practice on his own, at night when he was finally alone, S had begun to master his special hearing. He could now tune in and out of his hearing as he pleased — most of the time. There were still occasions when it took him off guard. Just that afternoon, a sudden burst of radio static had entered his hearing and made him wince in pain.

S kept his hearing abilities to himself. He didn't want anyone to know what he was capable of. They might try to use it against him somehow. And S feared more testing. He feared Cameron would find a way to try and make S use his ability to hurt people in the future. And, S acknowledged to himself, he could use the strange, sometimes frightening, ability to listen in on the private conversations all around him, though he often felt guilty about doing so. Most of what he overheard was useless. What did he care if Cameron was upset with his son, Jason, for dropping out of college? What was college anyway?

Then, there was the frightening developments happening to S' eyes. That scared him worse than his abnormal hearing. If he tried hard enough, he could see right through objects. Walls of stone and metal meant nothing. When he concentrated, he could see right through the barrier to look at what lay beyond. He could look straight through a person's skin and examine the bones and muscles that made up a body.

It had terrified S, the first time he'd encountered it. Cameron had been well into one of his lessons, and S had been staring at the man, his mind wandering somewhat. The next thing he knew, S wasn't seeing Trask anymore. He was looking at the man's insides. He'd watched as the man's heart had pumped the blood in his veins, had seen the ripples on the surface of Trask's brain, had seen the scar on the bone of the man's left arm, the only reminder of a break he'd suffered as a boy.

S hadn't known what to make of this new development. He had only known that he wasn't about to interrupt Trask. He had only known to hide this new ability.

That night, in his cell, S had tried to duplicate the event. He'd stared at his wall intently for hours, hoping to reproduce the strange vision so that he might come to understand it better. He'd succeeded after a long time, the wall falling away to reveal the moonlit trees beyond the confines of his cell. Every night since then, S had spent some time working on the ability, and enjoying the view it afforded him of the outside world. It was the only bit of solace that he had. And the more he stared through the wall to the outside world, the more he yearned to be free.

S sighed to himself as he sat on the rough cot. To occupy himself, he stretched out his hearing, ferreting out all the members of Bureau Thirty-Nine. He could hear Trask in his

office, locking it up for the night. The metal keys jingled merrily as they clinked together. S heard the sharp snap as the bolt of the lock slammed into place. Footsteps approached, and S listened with even greater attention.

“Goodnight, sir,” Jenson said. S could picture the pleasant smile on the man’s face.

“Night, Jenson.” Trask’s voice was gruff, preoccupied.

“Merry Christmas,” Jenson said brightly. “The same to Marlene and Jason.”

S heard Cameron snort his acknowledgement. “Make sure S’ cell is secure before you leave.”

“Of course.”

“I promised Marlene we’d visit her parents for the holiday. I won’t be around until the twenty-seventh. Take some time for yourself, if you want.”

“I...that’s very generous of you, sir.”

“Leave enough food for S.”

S grimaced. He’d heard Cameron say the same thing when speaking about an animal.

“Will do,” Jenson agreed. “I think I might fly out to Vegas if you don’t mind my taking the time. My sister’s been sick, and I really ought to go see her.”

“By all means.”

“Thank you, sir. Have a good holiday.”

S dialed his hearing back to normal levels. He’d asked Jenson once, what Christmas was. Jenson had told him, in halting tones, about the holiday. S had tried to imagine what it might be like — to spend the day surrounded by family, a large meal, gifts, and a reason to celebrate. But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like. And that thought stuck fast in his mind. What would it be like, to have someone care about him? Not for the abilities he had. Not for the perceived ideas of what he might be able to do in the future. But for him, S, for the person he was on the inside. S had sighed then, knowing that would never happen. And on more than one occasion since then, the knowledge had caused him to cry himself to sleep.

A few minutes later, Jenson entered S’ cell. He set down a fairly large assortment of sandwiches and snacks, fruits and cereals. All things that didn’t require refrigeration or heat. Bottles of juice and water joined the rest in a tidy pile in the far corner of S’ cell. Jenson gave the boy an apologetic smile.

“I’ll be gone for a few days,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “This should tide you over until then. I don’t know who else might be around. And you know the security guards won’t come near your room.”

“I know,” S sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Jenson said.

“Don’t be,” S replied, staring down at his feet. “You have a life outside of this place. I’m the only one who has to be here all the time.”

“I’ll be back before you know it. Besides, you’ll be getting a break from Cameron too. So that’s something to be happy about.”

S nodded. Jenson was right about that at least. S could take some small kernel of comfort in that fact. He said nothing to Jenson however.

“Bye, S,” Jenson said, closing the door and locking it behind him.

S listened as Jenson walked off, whistling a tune. He guessed it was one of the songs that went with the mysterious holiday of Christmas, for S only heard the man whistling it around this time each year. A few minutes later, S heard Jenson’s car start up, then the crunch of the tires on gravel as he turned out of the driveway and headed for home.

S was now totally alone. He looked at the pile of food Jenson had left for him and opened a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He ate it distractedly, as the thoughts swirled in his head. He stifled a sigh as he once again slipped into unhappy thoughts

about how he’d never know what it was like to have someone care for him. A mother or a father. A brother or sister. A wife. A child of his own. He’d even settle just for one real friend.

He gazed at the lock that held him prisoner. And, as he stared, a thin line of searing heat emanated from his eyes. S blinked in surprise, cutting off the flow of heat when he saw the thick steel door beginning to melt. A surge of panic rushed through his entire body. What was happening to him *now*? His heart began to hammer in his chest as phantom alarm bells rang inside his mind. He clamped his eyes shut, not wishing to burn anything else, and hoping that the heat wouldn’t sear straight through his eyelids.

But then, a thought occurred to him.

This could be his chance to escape. Jenson was gone. Cameron was gone. The only people left in the compound were a few rotund security guards. And, if he was hearing things correctly, they were busy celebrating the holiday early. S could hear their drunken singing, could hear the glasses of spiked eggnog clinking together as they all swallowed down another round.

Determination settled over S. He would take this chance. He didn’t know if he’d ever get another. The world beyond the compound was terrifying, but not as much as living his life as Trask’s personal lab specimen. S opened his eyes, focused on the door, and tried to figure out how he’d summoned the heat earlier.

For a long time, he remained unsuccessful. His heart sank and his hope fled. He was about ready to give up when, at last, a hesitant tendril of heat poured from his eyes. At first, it barely had any effect on anything. But gradually, S was able to focus it, strengthen it, and shape it into a effective, precise laser. S worked at the door until it he managed to cut a hole in it, wide enough for him to crawl through. It was, unfortunately, a huge red flag of how he’d escaped, but he didn’t care. Getting as far away from Bureau Thirty-Nine was the only concern flashing through his mind.

Glancing around his small cell, S picked up a thin windbreaker. It had deep pockets, which S thought useful. He slipped into the garment and then knelt by the pile of food Jenson had left for him. He rooted through it, packing as much as he could into the various pockets he sported. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing. And yet, he regretted that he could not take it all with him.

Cautiously, quietly, S slipped down the silent halls of the compound. He made his way down to Trask’s office. The door was locked, but S melted the knob until it ran in a red-hot rivulet down the door. With no lock to hold it in place any longer, the door easily swung open. S didn’t turn on any lights. Enough spilled in from the lights in the rough parking lot, filtered as they were through the blinds on the window. Plus, S never really had trouble seeing in the dark. He looked around the office for a brief moment, then saw what he was looking for.

A manila file folder lay on Cameron’s desk. S knew it was about him, from the symbol emblazoned on the cover. It perfectly matched the one he was forced to wear on the back and chest of all of his shirts, like a shameful brand, marking him as Cameron’s property. He picked the folder up without bothering to thumb through it. He couldn’t read the words inside anyway. No one had ever taken the time to teach him. But he wanted to take it with him, in an effort to help him fade away into non-existence.

He was about to exit through Trask’s office window when he paused. Glancing around the room, his eyes flickered to the small globe resting on one of the bookshelves. S couldn’t explain it, but he had always felt drawn to the object. He’d never been allowed to touch anything in Cameron’s office, had never even had the desire to, knowing he’d be punished if he did.

Except for that globe. He’d always had the intense yearning to hold it and examine it.

Now, however, there was no one to stop him. No one to punish him. He listened intently, ensuring that the guards were all still enjoying their impromptu holiday celebration. Satisfied, he stepped over to the shelf and grabbed the globe, stretching on the tips of his toes in order to reach the high shelf.

At first, he couldn't see anything special about the object — certainly nothing that would explain his life-long fascination with it. It was just a rough map-face of Earth. S had seen the same land and sea shapes reprinted in flat maps before. But then, as he looked at the globe in his hand, the map changed. A single word formed in his mind, whispered from the deepest part of his consciousness.

Krypton.

S got frightened and shoved the globe deep into his pocket. The experience had unnerved him, but he was loathe to leave the globe behind. He knew, somehow, that it was a part of him. Then, he silently opened the window to the cold night beyond, and let himself out of the compound. He dropped to the ground in a crouch, wincing at the sound of the gravel shifting as he impacted it. For a long moment, he hid there in the shadows, looking and listening. But no one was aware of his escape.

It was time.

S took off running, funneling all his energy into a ground-eating pace. He didn't know what direction he was heading. North, south, east, or west — it simply didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was free. All that mattered was that he never be found. All that mattered was that he never have to see Trask ever again. And so he ran, never looking back, save for the occasional fearful glance over his shoulder to ensure no one was following him. But no one was.

S was barely aware of anything as he ran. He saw neither the scenery he was passing, nor the tell-tale changes in the stars and moon, indicating the passage of time. He kept off the roads, taking care to stay away from any place that might still have people. He didn't want anyone to see him. They might try to hurt him, like Trask. Or worse — they might *return him* to Trask.

As he ran, his thoughts turned to the globe. It seemed a safer topic to dwell on than his new-found freedom and all the uncertainties it held. Why had the map-face changed? What was Krypton? Or was it who? Was Krypton a person? S felt fairly sure that the word was describing the new map the globe now displayed. Was it really connected to him somehow? He'd overheard Cameron discussing the "alien child, S" before. Was S truly not of Earth? Was that why he was so different from everyone else?

Each question spawned a dozen others, questions S had no real way of finding answers to. It weighed heavily on his mind and heart, until, at last, he had to force the thoughts away. He tried to focus only on the road directly ahead of him. He had no plan of what to do. He didn't even want to *try* to formulate one just yet. He only wanted to put as much distance as he could between himself and Bureau Thirty-Nine. How long would it take before his absence was noted? How long before they found his trail? How long before they caught up with him?

Around midnight, S stopped in the shade of a large oak tree to rest. His energy reserves were dipping. He was ravenously hungry too, but he had so little in the way of provisions. He sighed, acknowledging that he'd have to eat sparingly, until he could find a new source of food, and something to carry it in. He fished out an apple from one of his jacket pockets and ate it in silence. It tasted sweet to his tongue, more so than ever before. Perhaps it was his freedom that made it taste so delectable. He took a thoughtful sip from the plastic water bottle he'd taken with him, careful not to drink much. He turned his thoughts to the road ahead again, drawing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around his body against the cold. The temperature didn't bother him, but the uncertainties before him sent a very real chill

down his spine nonetheless.

He'd need a place to hide out in during the daylight hours. He had to keep unseen. He couldn't risk being found — not by Trask, not by anyone. He wanted to travel as far as he possibly could before holing up for the day. But he also knew that if he saw someplace that offered a good place to hide, he'd be forced to stop early if it came to it. Sighing, he stood and brushed the grass from his pants. Then he took off again, running at top speed across the cold, silent, dark landscape.

Three hours later, he had passed through a few more state borders, though he was unaware of this fact. He came across a flat swath of land dotted with farmsteads. He wanted to keep going, but found the rest of his energy reserve flagging. He was quickly running out of steam. His pace slowed until he was moving at a very human jog.

He found himself on one of the farms. He was close by a barn. He could smell the fresh straw and the scent of cows. It would be warm inside, he knew, and probably had a place where he could rest. It was tempting, to say the least. But as he thought about it, he shook his head to himself. Too dangerous. He might be seen.

He moved on to the next farm.

The house was completely dark and quiet at that small hour of the morning. Next to the tidy farmhouse was a work shed. That would make a better hiding place, he decided. The door wasn't locked when he tried it, and he cautiously pushed it open. It groaned slightly on its hinges, but it was a soft sound. S stopped and listened nonetheless, but he didn't hear anyone in the house stirring. Emboldened, he pushed the door open wider, then slipped inside. He shut the door behind him.

Even in the dark, S could see the orderliness of the shed. Everything had a place. And almost everything was in its designated place. A few tools lay scattered on a work bench, perhaps dropped in haste to get to dinner, perhaps left out for quick access in finishing the project they'd been employed for in the morning. S had never seen such a variety of items, and couldn't even begin to imagine what they might be used for.

But the tidiness of the place was somewhat comforting. He'd lived his whole life in a place where military neatness had been strictly adhered to. It made the new setting feel almost familiar. And yet, that worried S. Were the people in the house military personnel? Did they know Trask? But, S also took comfort from the fact that despite the orderliness of the place, some things were somewhat out of place, broken, or disordered. Trask had never allowed for that, not even in Jenson's private office. If these people could tolerate things being out of place, surely they couldn't be military — could they?

There was a faint trace of paint fumes in the air. S could tell that, even without the help of his burgeoning super sense of smell. It wasn't hard to see where it was coming from. An easel stood in one corner of the shed, a canvas still on it. S wandered over to it and inspected the painting. A crude landscape was splashed across the canvas, still unfinished, and still lacking a sense of depth. S wasn't a good judge of art, but he could see the places where it still needed more paint. He thought that whoever's skilled hand had been working on it would probably succeed in making it a very nice picture indeed. Already, unfinished though it still was, it exuded a kind of peace that seemed to leap from the rough canvas and straight into his body.

S turned away from the painting reluctantly, giving thought now to where he might sleep. He saw a pile of loose straw in one corner of the room. It smelled dry and fresh. It was both welcoming and inviting. S quickly shed his jacket and went to the straw. As much as he could, he buried himself down into his pauper's bed, throwing the jacket on top of his body as a sort of makeshift blanket. Soon, only his head peeked out from the straw. He was almost instantly wrapped in a deep, dreamless,

restful sleep.

December 24, 1978

S slept deeply as night faded into morning. He did not see the sunrise. He did not hear the few winter birds calling to one another. And he certainly did not hear the carefree whistling as the man entered into his work shed, “Joy To The World” spilling out of his pursed lips. At least, S didn’t hear these things at first. But as the man moved about the shed, S slowly floated up out of the deep sleep he’d fallen into.

Near panic seized his heart as he realized that he’d slept longer than he’d anticipated. He’d meant to slip out early enough to escape detection by anyone. But he’d been so exhausted the night before, when he’d finally crashed in his makeshift bed. Now he was caught. Now he would pay the price for his carelessness.

The happy whistling stopped, fully jolting S into complete wakefulness. Every muscle in his body immediately tensed, ready to run. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into the frowning, yet not unkind, face of the farmer who owned the shed. S swallowed hard, looking for a way to flee, without knocking over the man standing before him.

“Hi there, son,” the man said in a soft voice. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

S reflexively grabbed his jacket to him as he sat up fully. He backed away from the man, not trusting the words he was saying. Trask was a good liar. What made this man any different?

“Hey now, please don’t leave,” the man said, trying again to gain his trust, and seeing S’ intention to flee.

He was still standing right in S’ way. The boy was trying to make up his mind if he should simply swerve around the farmer or not. He felt much stronger than he had the night before, as he lay in a warm pool of sunlight, drifting in through an old, but clean, window. He was certain he could hit even higher speeds than he’d managed the night before. He could be gone, miles away, before the man even knew what had happened.

And yet...

He dared not exhibit his special abilities.

Not in front of this stranger. Not even though S was certain he could flee where the man could not hope to follow. And not in broad daylight. There was no telling who else might bear witness to his special speed. There was no telling if Trask and his team had discovered his absence yet, or if this man wasn’t somehow one of Trask’s spies. And there was no telling how close a search party might be.

“You must be freezing out here,” the man said, looking around for a spare coat or some blankets. There were none. He started to slip out of his own thick coat. “Here,” he said as he shrugged out of one sleeve.

S shook his head emphatically. *No.*

“Nonsense,” the man scoffed in a gentle tone. “You need it more than I do.”

“No, thanks,” S said quietly. “I’m okay.”

The farmer shook his head and took off his coat anyway. He cautiously approached S, trying not to frighten the child. When he was close enough, he draped the tan garment over the boy’s shoulders. The coat was very heavy — perfectly suited for the freezing temperatures. It smelled nice too, in its own way — like wind and rain, grass and coffee. S felt oddly comforted by the smell. It was so different than the stuffy, sterile environment of Bureau Thirty-Nine’s compound.

“You’ll be cold,” the boy pointed out, his eyes downcast.

The man chuckled. “I’ll be all right. I’ve got my thickest sweatshirt on.”

S’ eyes flickered briefly to the man and saw that he was telling the truth. Then his eyes darted back down to the straw he was still partly buried beneath. The man pulled over a stool to sit

on, giving S some space. Again, S had to fight down the desire, the almost overwhelming urge, to run as fast as he could.

“So, what’s your name, son?” the man asked.

S couldn’t tell if he was trying to ferret out information or just genuinely curious. He shook his head. That made the man frown. Was he angry with S? Would he want to hurt S, the same as Trask?

“Well,” the farmer said after a moment, filling the gap of silence that had fallen. “I’m Jonathan. Jonathan Kent. Want to tell me who you are? Where you come from? If you’re lost or in trouble, maybe I can help you.”

“Can’t,” S said, shrugging.

“Can’t?”

“Don’t have a name,” he said after a moment, mumbling mostly to himself.

“Everyone has a name,” Jonathan said, troubled. “Someone had to have called you something.”

S bit his lip in thought. Could he trust this man? Did he dare? He could lie and use a false name. He could always say Steve Jensen, for example. But that didn’t seem right to S, to lie like that. Cameron had always punished him with the green rock if he found out that S had told an untruth. And, he admitted to himself, it wasn’t particularly smart to use any name in conjunction with Bureau Thirty-Nine. But nothing else came to mind.

“No name,” he insisted after a long pause. Then, without even realizing it, he added, “Just S.”

“S?” the man — Jonathan — asked, confusion on his tongue. “That’s not a name for a young boy like you.”

S shrugged. “That’s all anyone’s ever called me.”

“Okay then. S. Where do you come from?”

S shrugged. “Not sure.”

Jonathan frowned again. “Where’s your family? Are you lost?”

S shook his head. “No family.”

“No family,” Jonathan echoed, shaking his head.

S’ reluctance to say much gave Jonathan a very bad feeling. Was the boy hurt? Was he the victim of abuse? Was he a drifting, homeless boy? Had he run away from home? Jonathan thought hard. He knew a great deal of people living in the immediate area. He knew everyone in Smallville, in fact, and much of their extended families. But this child, S, he did not recognize at all. How far had the boy traveled? And to do so in the middle of winter with a thin jacket made almost of parachute material! It bothered him immensely.

S studied Jonathan’s face. A word came to him, one he’d heard once, that summed up his situation, and might take away some of the concern on the farmer’s face. It meant a child with no parents. It meant no mother to love him. It meant no father to have pride in him.

“I’m an orphan,” he said quietly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, son,” Jonathan said.

S had noticed the ease in which the word “son” came from the farmer’s lips. He knew the man didn’t mean it — S was not his child after all. But it sent a little thrill through S to hear someone speak with such affection toward him. Jensen had always been as gentle with S as possible, but there had been no true love there. But this man was different. Somehow, S could feel a genuine feeling of compassion coming from him. It made S’ heart ache, knowing that he’d likely never experience it again, once darkness fell and he was free to move on.

“I should contact the Sheriff,” Jonathan said. “He might be able to locate some extended family who are missing you.”

“NO!” S yelled, pure terror engulfing him.

It was the first time he’d made eye contact with Jonathan. S’ eyes widened and the color drained from his face. He stood in a flash, clutching his jacket to his chest. He made a move for the door, but Jonathan caught him.

“What’s wrong?” Jonathan asked, now extremely concerned. “Take it easy.”

“Let me go!” S demanded.

He knew he was stronger than this kindly farmer. But he’d use his strength only if it was necessary. He didn’t want to hurt the man in any way. He wasn’t a monster, the way Trask wanted him to be.

“Take it easy,” Jonathan repeated. “Please, don’t run. I just want to help you.”

He relaxed his grip on S, trusting the boy not to run. S stood in place a moment, slightly dumbstruck. This man trusted him not to flee. He’d almost embraced S while preventing his flight out the door. He hadn’t been afraid of S. True, he had no reason to suspect the things that set S apart from normal people. But it had felt kind of good, to be held by someone. Everyone in Bureau Thirty-Nine kept their distance from him. Even Jenson rarely ever touched him, the once familiar pats on his shoulder now a thing of the distant past.

“Okay then,” Jonathan said, sitting back down. “You want to come in the house so we can talk?”

S shook his head.

Jonathan nodded, playing along. “That’s fine. We can talk here. Now, what was that all about, hmm?”

“Can’t,” S said, shooting a nervous glance at the door. There was no obstacle this time, if he needed to flee. “Can’t tell anyone.”

“Why not?” Jonathan prodded.

“They’ll tell *him*.” S shuddered involuntarily, wondering inwardly why he was telling this farmer anything. “I can’t go back. I’m afraid.”

“Him? Who?”

“Can’t say,” S insisted.

“I can’t help unless I know the problem. Is this person a family member?”

S shook his head. “No family at all.”

“A caretaker then?”

S nodded. It was close enough to the truth. Although, S thought, master was more like it.

“Does he hurt you?”

“Sometimes,” S said, feeling somewhat ashamed of the admission.

“What does he do?”

“I can’t say.”

How was he supposed to describe the torment Trask doled out with the Kryptonite he had? It would raise too many unwelcome questions. And though S felt Jonathan was a good man, he still couldn’t be sure if he trusted him yet.

“Please,” S pleaded. “I can’t go back.”

“All right,” Jonathan said. “I’ll do what I can to help. Starting with...when was the last time you ate something?”

“I had an apple last night,” S replied.

“You must be starving,” Jonathan said. “Why don’t you come inside the house? Martha will fix you up with all the pancakes and buttermilk you can stomach. And I’m sure she’ll be glad of the company.”

“No, but thanks,” S said, though it was only through sheer willpower that he refused. But his traitorous stomach grumbled loudly. “I should leave. I don’t want to bother you,” he weakly tried to cover for his stomach.

Jonathan wasn’t buying it. “It’s no trouble.”

“No,” S said again, shaking his head.

“All right, suit yourself. I’m going to pop into the house really quick to get myself a cup of coffee. You can leave if you’d like. I won’t stop you. But if you want to stay, I’ll be right back.”

Without giving S the time to respond, the farmer was out of his chair and heading for the door. S used his special vision to watch as the door closed behind Jonathan. The man crossed the

yard, hunched a little against the chill wind that was blowing. He quickly reached the door to the house and went inside. S watched as the man moved through the neat, well-kept farmhouse, until he was in the kitchen.

A woman was there, standing at the stove, checking on various pans and the contents of each. Jonathan went over to her, hugged her tightly, and planted a kiss on her lips. The woman — Martha, Jonathan had called her — kissed him back, then pulled away, smiling. She said something to Jonathan, and S realized with a sudden start that he should probably employ his sensitive hearing as well.

“Need an extra helping,” Jonathan was saying.

“Jonathan,” the woman said in a warning tone. “The doctor said...”

“It’s not for me,” he gently cut in.

“Oh? Do we have company? Wayne? No, wait, he’s out picking up his daughter from the airport this morning. Well, whoever it is, have them come in for goodness’ sake! It’s freezing out.”

“It’s not anyone we know,” Jonathan said, trying to explain. S thought the man’s voice seemed to take a delicate tone. “And he won’t come in. Martha, I don’t want to upset you, but...well...there’s a child out in our shed.”

“A child?” Martha said, her voice catching a little. “What’s a child doing here?”

Jonathan shook his head. “I don’t know. He doesn’t seem to trust me enough to talk much. But I think he’s in a bad situation.”

“Oh my. We’ve got to help then.”

“I agree. But he won’t open up to me. He seems half-starved though, the poor kid. And really ill-equipped for being out in this cold weather. Say...where’d we put that space heater?”

“Basement, back left corner, next to the box of Christmas lights we no longer use.”

S continued to watch as the man left the kitchen. He let the farmer go out of his sight, and focused instead on Martha. She turned back to her cooking, removing the bacon from where it was crisping, cracking open some eggs to fry, and flipping pancakes. S’ mouth was watering. And his stomach was practically throwing a tantrum.

He should leave now, he reasoned. Before these people learned anything further about him. Before he brought trouble to them if Cameron located him. Before he could allow himself to feel any connection to these people. He’d been foolish so far, in divulging the small amount of information he had.

Yet he stayed rooted to the spot. There was something about this place. Something comforting. Something that spoke to him on some deep, primal level. Something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He wanted to explore that nagging sensation further, to see what it was. But the more he tried to grapple with it, the more it slipped away from him.

Had he known any better, he would have called it a sense of home and family.

He snapped out of his thoughts as Jonathan reemerged from the basement, hauling a space heater with him. Martha piled a tray high with plates of food, steaming mugs of coffee, and utensils. Then she grabbed her coat, put it on, and threw her husband’s spare coat over her arm. She followed him out of the house, back to the shed.

S allowed his special senses to fade back into the range of a normal human. He waited patiently as the two farmers entered the shed. Jonathan set down the space heater, plugged it in, and turned it on, ensuring that it was mostly focused on S. Then he dragged over a battered wooden table that wobbled slightly, and a couple of chairs that had seen much better days.

“Hello there,” Martha said, as she seated herself in a chair. “I’m Martha.”

“I’m S,” the boy offered, hesitantly.

“Well, S, it seems I made far too much food. I’d love it if you helped us with it.”

S knew exactly what the woman was trying to do. But he was so very hungry that he allowed himself to nod. Yes, he would stay and eat with them. Martha gave him a warm smile, and quickly fixed him a heaping plate of food. S ate with gusto. It was the best food he’d ever had. Usually, his meals consisted of sandwiches. When he was given a hot meal, it was always closer to lukewarm and completely unseasoned. He’d overheard Trask tell the man who cooked the meals not to waste any effort on S’ meals. But this food was incredible. It was piping hot and so flavorful as to be almost overwhelming for S and his keen senses of smell and taste.

He ate two large helpings, even though he was getting quite full after the first one. It was just too delicious to stop. As promised, there was a glass of buttermilk to go with his breakfast. S downed the glass in six large gulps, pleasantly surprised by the taste.

“Feeling a little better now?” Martha asked in a kind voice. S nodded. “Yes, thank you. It was very good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Would you like to come in the house now?”

“No thanks. I can’t.”

“Of course you can,” Jonathan said.

S just shook his head.

“All right,” the man said after a moment. “Martha? Let me help you bring this stuff back in the house.”

Martha nodded and rose to her feet. In a matter of minutes, the dirty dishes, utensils, cups, and other items were packed back up on the tray. Jonathan lifted it and ushered Martha back to the farmhouse. As before, S listened in with his special hearing, and watched with his unique vision.

“I don’t know, Martha,” Jonathan was saying. “He’s terrified. Poor kid.”

“He’s such a beautiful little boy,” Martha said, dabbing at her eyes with her apron. “I just want to take him into my arms and make his world better.”

“I know,” Jonathan said gently. “But whatever he’s been through, it’s clearly left some deep scars. If we’re going to help him, we have to be patient with him. We have to let him learn to trust at his own pace.”

“I know,” Martha said, her voice a sigh. “Oh, Jonathan. I always wondered what it would be like to have a child here on Christmas Eve. I just never thought it would be like this.”

S heard the woman attempt to stifle a sob. She didn’t quite succeed. Jonathan heard the sob too, and quickly stepped to her side and embraced her. For a long time, neither of them spoke. Martha’s shoulders shook as she wept. That confused S. Why was Martha crying? Did she not want him there? Perhaps it would be best to move on, before he hurt anyone else. Perhaps he should brave the road once more, even though the sun was still up. It had been reckless to stay in this place for as long as he had.

He was so lost to his thoughts that he really didn’t pay much attention to the things he could see happening within the house. He didn’t really register the words that passed between the farmer and his wife. And so, he was a little startled when Jonathan reentered the shed. S snapped out of his altered senses, back to normal once again.

“Look, S, I have to go into town for a little while,” Jonathan said, a kind smile on his face. “You can stay here if you like, for as long as you like. You can go on into the house if you change your mind. Or you can leave. It’s completely up to you. You can come with me in my truck if you’d like a ride into town.”

“No, thank you,” S said. The last place he wanted to be was in a town full of other people.

“All right then. If you do leave, please just turn off the heater. This is the switch right here.” Jonathan pointed it out to S. “I’m

glad to have met you, S.”

“Do you…” S started, clearing his throat before trying again. “Do you *want* me to leave?”

Jonathan shook his head. “No, of course not. But I realize that I can’t make you stay if *you* want to leave. Personally, I’d love if you stayed for a while. So would Martha. But… it’s your choice.”

S merely nodded his understanding. A small wave of relief flooded his body. These people weren’t looking to get rid of him. They wanted him around. He only wondered *why* that was the case. Did they suspect that he was more than he seemed? Were they like Trask, looking to find a way to control him? He didn’t think that was the case though.

Jonathan didn’t wait for an answer. He merely turned and exited the shed, twirling his keys around one finger. His whistling started up again, this time a cheerful rendition of “Hark The Herald Angels” coming out from between his lips. S was unfamiliar with the tune, but it seemed somehow uplifting as he listened. Then Jonathan got into his truck, slammed the door shut, and started the vehicle. The engine roared into life and soon faded as the truck took off down the road.

For several hours, S remained in the quiet solitude of the shed. He wasn’t sure what to do now. These simple farmers were so kind to him. He almost felt he could trust them. But his life thus far had taught him that trust wasn’t something he should give. And besides, if these were truly good people — and S thought they probably were — he didn’t want to get them in trouble if Trask tracked him here. Yet, he didn’t want to leave either. He liked these people. And he was afraid of the road ahead, if he chose to leave.

He felt trapped, no matter what choice he made.

The day wore on, and soon, the short winter day grew gray as the light waned and heavy clouds rolled in. Before long, it began to snow, lightly at first but steadily becoming heavier. S peeked out of the shed’s window, watching as the white flakes pelted the ground and stuck there. It would be a perfect opportunity to slip away, he knew. No one would brave the storm that night, not if they could help it. But he would leave footprints behind. Although, he reasoned, for as long as the storm lasted, it would fill in the impressions made by his battered sneakers.

At that moment, Jonathan’s truck rumbled up the driveway and came to a halt. S heard the engine cut off. Jonathan got out of the cab and swiftly began to unload bags from the back. S watched as the man whisked the bags into the house. When everything was safely inside, S watched as the brightly colored boxes appeared from each shopping bag. Jonathan handed each wrapped box to Martha, who arranged them beneath a tree that stood in their living room, for what reason, S couldn’t begin to guess. He supposed it had something to do with the holiday. He’d overheard a couple of the Bureau Thirty-Nine men discussing picking out trees with their families, but he’d never quite figured out *why* they did it. Jonathan was talking to Martha, and S realized too late that he’d once again neglected to employ his hearing. He tuned into the two farmers.

“There’s one other thing,” Jonathan was saying. “I stopped by the Sheriff’s office before I went shopping.”

“Oh?” Martha’s voice sounded hesitant, tremulous.

“I *had* to. You know that.”

“I know. Wh… what did he say?” Martha wouldn’t — or couldn’t — meet his gaze, and instead, shifted the boxes on the floor.

“I gave Frank a description of S.”

S was stunned. His legs turned to jelly beneath him. Jonathan had told someone about him! Someone with authority. He was certain that Trask would be showing up any minute to come collect him. And when he arrived, he would hurt S. Maybe kill him. S refused to put that possibility past the man. And to think!

He'd almost trusted these people! How could they betray him like that?

"And...?" Martha prodded.

Jonathan shook his head. "There's no missing persons report filed for any child matching S' description."

That caught S' attention, and he stopped short as he approached the door, making ready to leave. He wanted to hear the rest. Apparently, Trask hadn't reported his disappearance to the authorities. S wasn't world savvy, but he knew that Trask *had* to know of his disappearance by now. But what did that mean?

"What does that mean?" Martha asked, her words echoing S' thoughts.

"Now, Martha, please, don't get your hopes too high," Jonathan said, sitting on the couch with her. "But...Frank says that S can stay here for a while, at least until the adoption agency opens back up after the New Year. If he truly has no living relatives, that is."

"Adoption...?"

Jonathan sighed. "Well, probably the foster care system. Frank says the odds of a child S' age getting placed in a permanent, adoptive home are pretty low."

"Everyone wants babies," Martha sighed in turn. "Maybe..."

"I've thought of that," Jonathan said, nodding to her unspoken thought. "We'd have to wait and see, of course. I just don't want to get our hopes too high. We've been turned down before."

"But that was years ago. Surely by now...?"

"I don't know. We can try though...if we can."

S frowned. What did Jonathan mean, "turned down before?" What did he mean by "try?"

"I would do anything..." Martha said softly, closing her eyes for a brief moment. "Anything."

"You know I would too."

"I know." She paused for a the span of two heartbeats. "So... now what?"

"Is he still here, do you know?" Jonathan asked, nodding vaguely toward where the shed lay beyond the farmhouse walls.

Martha shook her head. "I'm not completely sure. I haven't seen him leave the shed. But I haven't been perched at the window in a stakeout either. I wanted to go back into the shed... but I forced myself not to. You're right about one thing. We can't force ourselves onto him. If he wants to trust us, he will. I just wish I could figure out a way to help him."

"You're a strong lady," Jonathan complimented her.

"Not as strong as you think," Martha said, sighing. "I spent part of the afternoon in tears. I've...we've...been praying for so long. I just...I wish..."

"That maybe he's the answer to those prayers," Jonathan finished for her. "I've been wondering the same thing myself, all day."

Martha could only nod.

S' grip on the doorknob tightened a bit as he tried to puzzle out what Martha had meant. Why would he be an answer to anyone's prayers? Did they want to use him? He'd overheard Trask calling S the answer to his prayers too. And Cameron had wanted S as a weapon, as a means to commit mass murder, as a conduit to bring suffering and pain to others.

Martha choked back another tear. "I already love that boy," she whispered, as Jonathan took her in his strong arms.

"Me too," he whispered back. "Me too."

Love?

S' hand slipped from the doorknob. He understood what the word meant. But he'd never known anyone to love him. These simple farmers had only just met him, and yet, they claimed to love him. It was impossible, wasn't it? But then again...they didn't know he was listening in on them. They didn't know that S could hear their every word. It wasn't as if they were trying to

appeal to him, to entice him to stay.

Maybe, just for this night, he would remain. In the morning, he could decide what to do.

December 25, 1978

Christmas morning dawned cold and bleak. Snow still fell from the sky, though the storm had lost most of its power. Instead of racing down from the clouds, the flakes now lazily wafted through the air before joining their brethren on the ground. The whole world seemed awash in a pristine blanket of frigid whiteness. S peeked out of the window in the shed, his eyes wide. He'd been told about snow, had seen videos and pictures of it. But they didn't do it justice. The beauty of it stole his breath away.

The night before, Jonathan and Martha had brought a simple dinner to the shed to share with him, a meal made of pasta and seven differently prepared types of fish. S had curiously asked what everything was, and Martha had patiently answered all of his questions. They had not discussed if S would be staying with them. They seemed to be taking their lead from him, letting him dictate the course of the conversation. S hadn't brought it up either. He still hadn't made up his mind.

He was grievously torn. He ached to stay. Something in his gut told him that he'd found a good place. That he'd found good people. But he was still scared. He no longer thought that these kind farmers would hand him over to Trask. But he feared what might happen if Trask ever discovered that they were sheltering him.

S had wrestled with the conflicting thoughts and feelings most of the night, until he at last fell into an exhausted sleep. He'd stayed in the shed again, had snuggled down into the bed of straw. Jonathan had offered him the spare bedroom in the house. He'd even promised him a mattress, since he'd never gotten rid of the bed he'd slept in as a boy himself. S had staunchly refused, as indecisive as he still was over whether to stay or to flee. So Martha had contented herself to bringing him a pillow and several thick, soft blankets. S had enjoyed the feel of the material. His cell had offered only a hard cot and scratchy, starchy, thin sheets.

All night long, he'd tried to place the feelings he was experiencing, tried to find the proper names for them. All night long, he'd failed. Now, in the light of the overcast morning, S wasn't any closer to making his decision, wasn't any closer to understanding the gut reaction he was feeling toward these kind strangers.

But he *had* decided on one thing. If Jonathan and Martha invited him in this morning, he would take them up on their offer. Perhaps then, he might be able to figure out his next move, and pinpoint the feelings circulating through his body.

He didn't have to wait long. Jonathan waded across the yard through an ocean of white that reached halfway to his knees. When he reached the shed, S opened the door. Jonathan looked pleased to see that the boy was still there. That struck S as a new experience, and his heart gave a little flip in his chest. Trask and the others — even Jenson — had never looked pleased to see him in the mornings. They'd never looked unhappy, per se. Their expressions had only ever been neutral, or at the most, still partly sleepy. But Jonathan was bright-eyed and happy looking.

"Good morning," the man said, in a voice that matched the twinkle in his eyes.

"Morning," S replied.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Glad to hear it. I was wondering if you might want to come in for breakfast. Martha's making her world-famous cinnamon buns."

"I...I'd like that," S agreed.

Jonathan's smile exploded onto his face. "Excellent!" he said.

He turned and quickly shut off and unplugged the space heater. S gathered his things, not that he had much. He tucked the thin jacket beneath his arm, careful not to spill out the contents of his pockets. He wasn't yet sure that he wanted or trusted these people enough to let them see the file on him. He didn't know what the file said, but he could guess well enough. S didn't want to frighten these people with the truth of what a freak he was. If he chose to stay here, then he would worry about things.

Jonathan quickly gathered the blankets and spare pillow, then guided S back across the yard to the farmhouse. S made certain to step in Jonathan's footprints, just in case anyone happened to be prowling around, looking for evidence that S had been there. Trask had taught him the basics of warfare — how to track and ambush, how not to leave a trace for others to follow. He'd also begun to teach S about various weapons — guns and tanks, missiles and knives, gas attacks and hand-to-hand combat moves. Those discussions had left S feeling very uneasy. But now, however, he was glad to know how to cover his tracks.

Jonathan threw open the door to the farmhouse, stepped out of his shoes, and entered into the living room. S followed suit. Jonathan gestured for S to sit before the fire, which blazed merrily in the room's hearth. S shyly sat on the edge of the couch, too nervous to allow himself to get comfortable. But he liked the warmth the flames gave off, and the cheerful light it threw.

"Wait right here," Jonathan said, just before disappearing into the kitchen to help Martha.

S studied the rest of the room. It was true that he wasn't surprised by the decor. After all, he'd looked at it before, when he'd used his unique sight to spy on the two farmers. But it was different, now that he was inside. Looking through walls couldn't convey the coziness of the room. It couldn't allow him to smell the wonderful smells coming from the kitchen. They made his mouth water and his stomach rumble. Looking through the walls hadn't been able to show him just how comfortable the glow from the multicolored lights on the tree was. He decided that he liked the room, and wondered what the other rooms in the place felt like.

Before he could think too hard about it, Martha came into the room, once again bearing a tray full of food. S inhaled deeply. The cinnamon buns smelled fantastic. He watched the steam rise from them and curl before fading away into the air.

"Good morning," S said politely.

"Good morning, honey," Martha said, giving him a smile. "Merry Christmas."

"I...uh...Merry Christmas," he said back. He'd nearly said that he didn't know it was Christmas. He'd nearly admitted to not knowing what it meant.

But neither of the adults seemed to want to comment on his near slip-up. They merely placed the food and drinks on the coffee table. At Martha's encouragement to "dig right in," S bit into one of the hot, sticky buns. It was as if every one of his taste buds exploded into a wakefulness they'd never known before. S hungrily ate the bun, then went back for more. Martha smiled with pride as the boy complimented her cooking and ate another bun. She shot a look to Jonathan, but S missed it.

When they were done eating, Martha cleared away the breakfast items. Then she and Jonathan doled out the presents. S was shocked speechless when a small pile of brightly colored boxes began to materialize before him. Surely, he had to be mistaken. Surely, these gifts could not *possibly* be for him. He was being foolish. He was being a daydreamer. And Trask had always punished him for daydreaming — sometimes with the chunk of Kryptonite, sometimes with extra hours spent being Jensen's personal science experiment.

"These are for you, son," Jonathan said, when S failed to

move.

S' gaze moved from the pile of gifts to the famer's kindly face. "Thank you. But...why?"

"No child should ever have to go without gifts on Christmas," Jonathan replied, as though it were no big deal. "I know it's not much, but, well, I thought you could use them."

"I...I didn't...I have nothing to give you," S apologized. Though he'd never received a gift before, he understood how the ritual was performed.

"You already have," Martha assured him.

"I...did?"

Martha nodded. "More than you know."

S didn't understand that. But his curiosity had been roused. At another word of encouragement from Jonathan, he tore open the first of his gifts. A thick, tan winter coat was inside the box, waterproof and lined with sheep's wool for warmth. It looked just like the one Jonathan had offered him the day before. S had never owned anything so nice in his entire life. He could scarcely believe that this coat was his. True, he didn't *need* the item; the cold didn't affect him. But the thoughtfulness and the kindness behind the gift touched him deeply.

"Thank you," he breathed. "You didn't need to do that."

"Son, whatever you decide to do — stay or leave — you can't go about in such a thin jacket. You'll freeze to death out there."

"Stay?" S asked, feigning ignorance. He couldn't let on that he'd heard their conversation the night before.

Jonathan nodded, and admitted to S that he'd spoken with the Sheriff the day before. S did his best to pretend to be surprised. He thought he did a passable job on it too, since neither Jonathan nor Martha seemed to notice that he was faking it.

"You don't have to answer us right now," Martha said gently. "But think about it. We'd love you to stay for as long as you like...or are able to."

S nodded. He could hear the concealed pain in her voice. It seemed to him that she really didn't want S to be taken away...or to leave of his own free will. It still didn't help him make up his mind, however. He couldn't give them an answer just yet.

To give himself a reason not to speak, S turned to the rest of his gifts. He savored the sensation of tearing the paper on each one. He took time to memorize the anticipation of opening each box. Shirts and pants, clothing of all types came out of each present. S had never owned such well-made articles of clothing. All of his had been ill-fitting or threadbare in places, hand-me-downs from Trask's son, Jason. S was forced to use the same three pairs of pants and three white shirts, each of them emblazoned with the brand Trask used to mark him, until the material grew too small to squeeze into. It didn't matter if the fabric grew threadbare or full of holes. S simply had to deal with it. But the things that Jonathan and Martha gave him now absolutely amazed S. He'd known that such nice things existed of course, for he'd seen everyone involved in Bureau Thirty-Nine wearing clothing that was much better than his own. He'd just never imagined that he would one day have the opportunity to own and wear similar things.

He thanked them after each gift, as a lump grew in his throat, getting bigger and bigger as each item was unwrapped. Finally, there was only one gift left. S was puzzled. It didn't look like the boxes he'd opened thus far. This one had an odd shape. He tore the paper from it, revealing a brand-new football. He knew what that was. Jensen had once allowed S to watch part of a game with him when Trask wasn't around.

S ran his fingertips over the pebbled skin of the ball. *His* ball. A toy — for all intents and purposes — that was truly his own. Something that wasn't used to teach him how to be an obedient little soldier. He suddenly felt like the richest twelve year old on the planet. He could not stifle the huge grin that swept over his

lips. He could not stop thanking the two people before him.

"If you stay...and I hope you do," Jonathan said, chuckling at S' reaction, "I'd like to toss it around with you."

"I...don't know how to play," S said. He hadn't paid too much attention to the one game he'd seen. He'd been too nervous that Trask would somehow know what he was doing, show up, and punish him.

"That's okay," Jonathan reassured him. "I'll teach you."

"I'd like that," S admitted, without consenting to stay.

He wanted to stay now, more than anything in the world. But Trask was still out there. Still a threat. And in all likelihood, hunting for him with that green stone.

When S was done with his gifts, he watched as Jonathan and Martha exchanged theirs. S wasn't interested in what items were given. But he was riveted in watching the two interact with each other. There was such love between the farmer and his wife, that it seemed almost unreal to S. He'd never before witnessed such depth of emotion. Even the times when S had seen Trask's wife and son visit the compound where he'd been kept, he'd never seen love like he was seeing now.

The rest of the morning wore on. S grew more and more comfortable in the presence of Jonathan and Martha Kent. And he became more comfortable in their home as well. They offered him the use of their shower, and he took them up on it, changing into a set of his new clothes once he was clean. He liked the feel of the soft red flannel shirt and of the blue jeans. It was so unlike what he was used to.

Martha soon disappeared into the kitchen, preparing the holiday dinner. Wonderful new smells emanated from the room not long after she entered it. S, for his part, was still wrestling with the decision before him. He'd neatly stacked his new clothes in an orderly pile on the bed of the room Jonathan had said was his own as a child. He still had the football with him, and continually ran his fingertips over its surface as he thought, sitting in the living room and staring into the depths of the flames dancing within the hearth.

He was just coming to a decision when he heard it: the sound of an engine coming up the driveway of the Kents' property.

S' ears perked up at the sound and his body froze. His thoughts scattered like a flock of butterflies taking wing all at the same time. Jonathan heard the noise too, and went to the window to see who was coming. It was clear that he wasn't expecting any visitors. S employed his powerful hearing purely by reflex. He paled as he realized who was coming.

Trask had somehow found him.

"Jonathan? Who's there?" Martha asked, coming out of the kitchen and wiping her hands on a towel.

"Don't know. Some city-looking fellow from what I can see."

"Better go see what he wants," Martha said.

"No," S said, shaking his head violently. "*Don't.*"

"What's the matter?" Jonathan asked, concerned over S' sudden fear. The boy's terror was plain to read on his face and in the way he held his body, ready for flight.

"Trask," S said, the word coming tremulously from his lips.

"Someone you know?" the farmer asked.

S nodded. "Please, don't let him know I'm here. He'll hurt me. Maybe you too. I have to go. I'm sorry."

"Now hold on there for a minute," Jonathan said. "What's this all about?"

"No time," S replied, shaking his head. "He can't know that I'm here."

"Martha?"

"The storm cellar," Martha replied. "You go see what this stranger wants. I'll take care of S."

Jonathan nodded and S followed Martha's lead. She took him down a flight of steps to the basement, then to a sunken door. She pulled it open with a little effort, and ushered S down the steps to

the fortified storm shelter. She switched on a small flashlight and handed it to S.

"Now don't you worry, honey," she reassured him. "We'll take care of that man. He won't find you. I promise. Just stay here, and I'll come get you when it's safe."

"Okay," S agreed, his heart hammering in his chest.

Martha shut the door, leaving S alone in a sea of darkness, only the beam of the flashlight alleviating it. He found the far corner and sat with his back against the naked concrete, hugging his knees to his chest. His entire body trembled with fright. He was terrified of what was happening. How had Trask tracked him so quickly? He broadened the scope of his hearing and silently listened to everything around him. He scanned with his x-ray vision, through the layers of concrete that made up the storm shelter, up through the floors of the house.

Jonathan opened the door a second before Cameron could knock.

"Hello there, stranger," the man said guardedly. "May I help you?"

"I hope so," Cameron replied. "My name is Cameron Trask. My son ran away from home, and I was wondering if you'd seen him."

"You aren't from around these parts," Jonathan observed.

"No sir, I'm not," Trask agreed. "But, well, I have to find my boy. I'm desperate. I've got my entire...family out looking in every direction for him."

"I understand," Jonathan said.

"Here's a picture of him," Cameron offered, whipping a creased photograph out of his coat pocket.

Jonathan took the photograph of S and studied it for a moment.

"Nope, can't say that I have," he lied easily.

S breathed a small sigh of relief. Jonathan hadn't betrayed him. He was trying to cover for him. But S' pulse was still racing, and he still gripped his football as though it had some power to save him. His fingers felt glued to the ball's laces. He kept listening, kept watching.

"You sure?" Cameron prodded.

Jonathan nodded. "Of course I'm sure."

"You mind if I take a look around the property?"

Jonathan shrugged. "Suit yourself. Let me get my boots on and I'll come with you."

"You really don't need..."

"I insist."

Jonathan swiftly tugged on his boots and exited the house, letting the door bang shut behind him. S followed the men with his eyes. Jonathan showed the man his property. The space heater stood as evidence in the shed, S knew. And that worried him.

"My work shed," the farmer said as Cameron opened the door to peer inside.

"A space heater?" Cameron asked, arching an eyebrow.

Jonathan hummed an agreement. "Gets mighty cold in here sometimes. And my wife and I seem to spend half our days out here." He pointed to the easel and painting. "She's taking a course in town."

"Very nice," Trask said with faux appreciation.

They went back into the yard. Trask pointed to the tree house that stood in the lone tree in the center of the yard. From the kitchen window, Martha watched the two men, pretending interest in the vegetables she was slicing.

"You have kids?"

Jonathan shook his head. "No. It was never in the cards for us," he said, his voice heavy. "That house used to be mine."

"Mind if I take a look inside? Never can tell where a kid might hide out."

"Be my guest. Nothing but cobwebs up there is my guess though. Maybe an old bird's nest."

Trask carefully ascended the wooden planks that served as steps, each one affixed to the tree's trunk with rusty nails. He peeked in through the windows and opened the door. The hinges squealed their demand for oil. But the ramshackle tree house was empty. Trask eased himself back down the makeshift steps.

"Sorry. I appreciate you allowing me the chance to look."

"No problem," Jonathan said, in a tone of forced friendliness.

"Look," Trask said, slipping a card out of his pocket. Unlike S' photo, the business card was in pristine condition. "If you happen to see my boy, give me a call, would you?"

Jonathan had no choice but to take the card. He studied it for a moment. "Will do," he lied again. "Good luck to you."

"Thanks. Oh, I should warn you. If you see my son, it's best if you don't approach him. He's got mental issues, and he could be dangerous."

"I'll keep it in mind," Jonathan said tightly. "Now, if you don't mind, I believe Martha's telling me that dinner is ready."

Trask didn't even glance over to the windows. "Sure thing."

The former Sergeant-Major turned and swiftly went back to his truck. He climbed in and after a moment, the engine roared into life. S heard the truck back up, turn, then rumble away down the road. Yet, he dared not make a move. He hardly even dared to breathe. His heart was slamming against his ribs so violently he couldn't believe Trask hadn't been able to hear it. He strained his hearing, trying to ensure that Trask was completely, truly gone. All he heard was the door clang shut as Jonathan stepped back inside, stomping his boots to shake off the snow.

A minute passed, then Martha appeared, opening the door of the storm cellar. He looked up, his eyes wide with his residual fear. But Martha smiled gently, and S found some of his apprehension fading in its warmth.

"Is he gone?" S asked.

"He's gone."

S heaved a sigh of relief. Logically, he'd known that was the case. But he'd needed that knowledge confirmed. Martha reached out her hand toward him. S gratefully took it as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Thank you," S whispered.

In the next second, he found himself in Martha's embrace. It surprised him. He hadn't even been aware of what was happening until he felt her arms close around him. A tremor ran through his body; the last of his tension trying to bleed out from him. Martha held him tightly and stroked the back of his head comfortingly.

"Ssh," she whispered to him.

S closed his arms around the woman, holding her in return. He heard the hitch in her breathing. It didn't sound frightened or pained, so he assumed it was okay for him to hug her.

"He's gone," she told him again. "He's gone. You're safe."

S allowed her to hold him for another long moment, then they both reluctantly let go. S fought down the urge to shed tears, ones that wanted to escape him simply because of the emotional rollercoaster of the past few days. Instead, he followed Martha back through the house to the living room. Jonathan was coming down from the second floor, wearing a dry pair of pants.

Together, the three sat on the couch, and Jonathan recounted all he'd said to Cameron. S nodded thoughtfully, feeling somewhat guilty that he already knew what had been said. But he found Jonathan's observations intriguing. And he found himself opening up to the questions the Kents directed at him.

"S," Jonathan said gravely, "I have to know. Who was that man? Was he truly your father?"

"No," S said. "I don't have any parents. I don't have any family at all. That's what Cameron always told me, anyway. He...Trask...he's the one who...kept me, ever since I was a baby." S struggled to find the right words.

"So, he's been what? Your caretaker?"

"I guess," S shrugged. "He kept me alive. He doesn't care

about me. He only cares about what he thinks I can do for him."

"And what is that?"

"He wants me to be his soldier," S said, knowing his words were grossly inadequate to describe the situation he'd come from.

"And you are afraid of him."

S nodded. "He hurts me."

"What does he do?"

S hesitated. How could he describe the pain that the Kryptonite caused him? How could he admit to it, knowing that the stone didn't affect *normal* people? But if he was to stay with these people — and he'd finally decided that he wanted to stay more than anything — he would have to come clean. If they tried to do what Trask had done to him, he could find a way to escape. S swallowed hard.

"He has something...a stone...it makes me sick. It makes me hurt all over. He has his men conduct tests on me, tries to see what my limits are before I collapse. He locks me in a cell all night."

Martha looked positively horrified. "Oh, honey."

"A stone?" Jonathan was frowning. "I've never heard of a stone causing anything like that to a person."

"Trask says that I'm not a person. He says I'm a...a thing. A creature. An...alien."

"What?" Martha said, shock washing over her slightly pale face.

"When I broke out of that place...I took a file. It's with my things. It can probably explain things better than I can."

S stood and went up the stairs. He wasn't sure why he was being so trusting of the Kents. It was true that he'd witnessed them cover for him. It was true that they'd been kind to him so far. It was true that they'd fed and clothed him. But it was more than that. It came from someplace deep within his guts, his heart, his mind, whispering to him that he could trust these people. He wondered if that was what instinct was.

He swiftly retrieved the file from his jacket. For a long minute he just stood in the quiet bedroom, looking down at the folder in his hands. He hadn't opened it before now. The symbol on the front of the folder seemed to mock him, and he wondered, not for the first time, what it meant. Was it merely a brand that Trask had chosen to represent S? Or did it hold some meaning? He suspected that the answer lay in the pages of notes within the folder. Or, at least, he hoped it might be.

With a sigh, S steeled himself and took the file back to the living room. He placed it into Martha's hands. She looked down at it, then back to S. Her brow was crinkled into an unspoken question.

"I don't know what it says," he said simply. "But maybe you can help me."

"We'll do whatever it takes. We'll go to the police if we have to, to take down this Trask person," Jonathan swore.

S shook his head. "No. I don't want anyone to know about me. I'm...different."

"Different?"

"I have these abilities. Like...well...I can run really fast. That's how I got here. I'm stronger than most of the men in Bureau Thirty-Nine."

"Bureau Thirty-Nine?" Jonathan asked, more to himself than to S. "Why does that strike a bell?"

"They're a group..." S started to explain.

"Government," Jonathan said, as the memory surfaced.

"Trask...now I remember why that name sounded familiar. We meet him once before, almost thirteen years ago, at the site of a meteor crash."

"That's right," Martha said, as she remembered the night in question. "Schuster's Field."

"This is getting spooky," Jonathan said, eying the file with interest.

"I don't think they are with the government," S said, casting his eyes to the floor. "Trask hates the government."

Jonathan took the file from Martha and flipped it open. He sucked in a breath as he looked at the heading on the very first report sheet, unmistakably printed in typewriter ink. It proudly declared May 17, 1966, 23:42 hrs.

"Martha..."

"I see it," she said, her voice shaky.

Neither one of them had ever forgotten the date of the meteor crash. It was just one of those things that a person committed to memory, knowing they'd never witness something like that again in their lifetime.

Most of the evening was spent reading through the file. They stopped only for dinner, of which, no one ate much. Everyone's thoughts were preoccupied with the file and the information it contained. Jonathan and Martha took turns reading the reports aloud, so that S could know what had been written about him as well. When they got to the dates where he had clear memories of the events, he supplemented the report with his own version of how things had happened.

By the end of the night, S knew a few things with absolute certainty.

He wasn't a normal child. He wasn't from Earth. S was an alien. He'd been found in a space ship, which had crashed in a field in Kansas. Jonathan and Martha Kent had been there, had witnessed his ship as it came screaming to the Earth.

The mark that had branded him his whole life hadn't been of Trask's twisted mind. It was a sort of sigil, one that had been on the ship he'd arrived in and on the blankets that had swaddled him. S looked with interest at those photographs, which had been photocopied into the file. There was no further explanation of the sigil's meaning, however, and it was driving S crazy wondering what it could possibly mean.

He also knew now that he had a name — a true name. A name he'd never heard Trask or anyone else ever mention before, not even in the hushed whispers they thought he could not hear. A name presumably given to him by the parents who'd given him life. A name he'd been robbed of in an effort to dehumanize him further in Trask's insane mind.

His name was Kal-El.

He knew also that he would stay with the Kents, for as long as he could. He trusted them and felt a connection with them. He had no reason to be afraid, sitting there in their quaint farmhouse. They didn't seem frightened by the abilities he admitted to having, even when he'd demonstrated the newest one — the thin beams of heat that he could summon from his eyes — by using it to light a fresh log in the fireplace.

As he slipped into bed that night, Jonathan and Martha came into the room. Martha tucked him in, then kissed his brow gently.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask," she said. "We'll be just down the hall."

"Okay." He hesitated a moment before speaking again.

"Jonathan? Martha?"

"Yes, son?"

"Why didn't you hand me over to Trask today?"

Jonathan sighed. "A few reasons. The first being, of course, how terrified you were of him. I wasn't going to hand you over to someone who scared you that badly. Not without knowing the whole story. And then, when I spoke to Trask, nothing seemed to feel right. He said his son was missing, but he never expressed any worry for your safety. He wouldn't even mention your name. He only seemed...eager...to get you back. It didn't sit right with me." He shrugged. "Then there was that picture of you. It was crumpled badly. I couldn't see a loving father pulling out a photograph that was kept in such poor condition. If it were me, I'd treasure a photo of my child and keep it in pristine condition, right in my wallet."

"Thank you," S said. "Thank you for keeping my secret."

"My pleasure," the man assured him.

"There's one other thing," S said.

"Oh?"

"About what you asked me earlier...I really want to stay here with you, if that's okay."

Twin smiles blossomed on Jonathan and Martha's faces.

"Of course it is," Martha said.

"We're really glad to hear that. But, well, there's one thing," Jonathan said, a hint of mischief in his eyes.

S paled a little. Had he been too late in making up his mind?

"What's that?" he asked, a hint of nervousness tainting his words.

"Well, S isn't a proper name for a boy. Heck, it's not a proper name for an animal. Trask called you S as a way to demean you. So, I want you to pick a new name. Anything you want. We can go with Kal, if you'd like, since that's the name your parents gave you."

S shook his head. "I know now that's my name," he said. "But I don't want to use that. Trask knows that name."

"You don't have to decide tonight," Martha said soothingly.

"You can take your time. A name is an important decision."

S nodded, then spoke again, unable to hold in his question. "Martha? Why don't you have any kids?"

Martha's expression grew sad, and S instantly felt sorry for asking. He was about to apologize when she spoke.

"Jonathan and I aren't able to have children," she said after a moment, a glimmer of unshed tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," S said, the sadness in the woman's voice cutting straight to his heart. "I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," she tried to reassure him.

"But...if you did...and you had a boy...what would you have called him?"

Jonathan and Martha exchanged a look, one that was tender and a bit wistful. S saw it, and wondered if he'd again said the wrong thing.

"We would have named him Clark," she answered him.

"Clark," S said, trying out the name. It felt a little strange on his tongue, but it also somehow seemed to fit. "That's a really nice name. Would it be okay if I used that name?"

"Honey, we would love it if you used it. We'd be honored, in fact."

"Clark," he said again, his voice full of awe. "I'm Clark."

January 12, 1979

Clark nervously sat on the hard wooden chair in the Smallville Town Courthouse. The beaten, saggy green chair pad was too flat to offer any real barrier between his body and the solid oak seat. He didn't mind it though. He rarely felt any discomfort, thanks to his alien DNA. But today, he was aware of everything. The feel of the wood beneath him, hard and unforgiving. The incessant ticking of the wall clock, which seemed overly loud in the quiet waiting area, even without his enhanced hearing. The overpowering, but comforting, smell of strong coffee as someone brewed a fresh pot. The uneasy way in which Jonathan and Martha sat beside him, their hands nervously entwined.

He hoped with all his heart that the judge would be kind. He hoped with all he had that their petition would be granted. The Kents deserved to have their request fulfilled. They had been so kind, so caring, so generous. He'd felt their love from the very first, though he hadn't done anything to deserve it. But more surprisingly to Clark was that he had come to love them in return. He'd once wondered if he was capable of knowing what love was. How could he, when he'd been locked away from the world and so badly mistreated? But the Kents had opened a whole new world before him.

He knew love.

He knew what a home was.

He knew what it was to have a family.

The judge they were waiting to see — she couldn't possibly take that away from him, could she? She couldn't possibly tear apart the small, budding family, could she? It would be heartless, cruel, a punishment none of them deserved. But then again, Clark wasn't naive. He'd seen first-hand how easy it was for some to harden their hearts toward others. He'd seen it every day for close to thirteen years. That knowledge put him even more on edge.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kent?" the receptionist, a tall, thin blonde named Ginny, called. "Judge Orin will see you now."

"Thank you, Ginny," Jonathan said.

The three stood from their seats, and Clark found his hand in Martha's, as she gave it a supportive squeeze.

"It will be all right," she whispered to him.

Clark couldn't find words, his throat bone-dry. He could only nod. But Martha's words did little to soothe his nerves. He was scared, it was as simple as that. The woman they were about to see would be made privy to a lot of his story. Although Jonathan had tried to reassure him that she was the epitome of discretion, it terrified Clark to have anyone know too much about him. And even if she never told another soul, she still had the power to remove Clark from the Kents' comfortable home, the only place Clark had ever felt safe and cared for.

Clark followed as they moved from the waiting room into the office of Judge Catherine Orin. He sat uneasily between Jonathan and Martha, as though having them to either side of him would somehow be able to protect him. The thought crossed his mind that, physically, he seemed to be invulnerable. Trask had had him shot at, had had grenades tossed at him, had exposed him to freezing cold and blazing fires. None of that had harmed him. But whatever words the judge spoke today had the potential to destroy him.

The three linked their hands, as a sort of defensive maneuver, and as a way to support one another. Clark looked at the aging woman before him, trying to figure out if she would be kind or not. She appeared to be in her early seventies, with stark white hair and a roadmap of lines on her face. She was thin, but not frail, and exuded an easy confidence. When she smiled, Clark recognized that many of her wrinkles fell into place. What had Martha called them? Laugh-lines? He took that as a good sign.

The judge greeted them in a kind voice. "Good morning."

"Good morning," they answered back, not quite as one.

"Jonathan. Martha. Good to see you again. Clark, it's a pleasure to meet you. Let's get straight down to business, shall we?" Judge Orin said. She glanced over the file before her.

"We're here to decide where to place this young man, correct?"

"That's right," Jonathan said.

"Tell me how it is that you came to find one another," the woman prodded. Then, to Clark, she said, "I promise to make this process as easy as possible."

They told the woman Clark's story — how they had found him in their shed on Christmas Eve morning. They told her how Clark was an orphan, with no relatives to turn to. Clark admitted to having no real knowledge of where he had come from, which was true enough. He didn't know where Bureau Thirty-Nine had been located, in what direction, or how many miles he'd traversed in trying to escape from Trask.

They were forced to divulge that Trask was looking for Clark. The talk around town was about the stranger who had been looking for his missing son. Clark was forced to relate a small portion of the abuse he'd suffered at Trask's hands, though he left the details sketchy on purpose. He couldn't tell this woman about the Kryptonite. That would raise too many questions he and the Kents didn't want to have to answer. The Kents backed up Clark's claims, detailing the ragged, inadequate clothing he'd

been wearing when they found him, and how petrified Clark had become when Trask had come sniffing around their property.

The judge listened carefully, peppering them with questions as they told their tale, trying to dig out further details or to clarify things they had brought to light. Clark could see the woman weighing their words carefully as they spoke, though it was impossible to tell how she felt about what they were saying. A cold knot of fear grew in his stomach. Finally, Judge Orin sat back in her chair, looking deep in thought. She seemed troubled, now that their tale was complete.

"Jonathan? Martha? What is it, *exactly*, that you are petitioning for today?" she asked quietly.

The Kents exchanged a look, determining who would speak. Jonathan cleared his throat.

"We'd like to adopt this boy," he said softly. Then he quickly added, "Or, at least, be granted the right to keep him in our home as a foster child."

"You've applied for adoption before," the judge said, glancing at her paperwork.

"Yes," Martha said, her voice infused with a hint of sadness.

"We were denied, because of our involvement in the Civil Rights movement."

"And that was...? When, exactly?" Judge Orin's eyes flickered over the paper, looking for a date.

"About thirteen years ago," Martha said.

"Yes, yes. I see it here now." The woman went silent as she read the note. She made an occasional "hmm" to herself as she read. After a minute, she sighed. "Normally, I wouldn't even entertain the idea of fighting against a denial like this. Arrest records aren't something I ever take lightly."

Clark's heart sank.

"But, I've known you two for a long, long time. And I'm of the opinion that you would make excellent parents. All you've been lacking is the chance. Besides, you both escaped formal charges, though you were jailed overnight on two separate occasions."

Clark brightened a little inside. Maybe things were looking up.

"Of course, I don't have all of the authority here. If I did, this would be easy. I'll have to speak with a few others, if you truly wish to pursue an adoption."

"We do," Jonathan said solemnly.

"I can't promise anything, you know that. But...there are a few things on your side here. The state agency is bursting at the seams, at the moment. They have more children than they can place. Clark's age is another factor. The chances of an adoption for a boy his age are slim. Personally, I'd rather not see him wind up in the foster care system. I spent four years in the system myself, before I turned eighteen and was turned out to fend for myself. I don't wish to see this child suffer a similar fate. So... I'm of a mind to do what I can for you."

Clark felt himself growing ever more hopeful. It sounded more and more like this woman was going to fight hard to keep his family intact.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to have the two of you step out for a few minutes," she said, gesturing to Jonathan and Martha. "I'd like to speak with Clark, alone."

Wordless, the Kents retreated from the room, giving Clark hopeful smiles. Clark watched them go, twisting in his chair to do so. Then he turned back around to face the judge, listening to the door shut with a barely audible *snick*. He was nervous, to be alone with this woman. But she smiled warmly at him.

"I promise not to keep you here long," she told him in a kind voice. "But I wanted to speak with you in private. I have some questions that I need to ask you. I need you to be completely honest with me. Whatever you say, I will keep confidential. Jonathan and Martha won't know what you say. Deal?"

“Okay,” Clark said, nodding. “I promise.”

He would tell the truth. Lying was for people like Cameron. And he was *never* going to be like Trask. He would work hard for the rest of his life ensuring that he became the exact opposite of the ex-Sergeant-Major, and what the man had wanted him to become.

“Good. Now, we’ve heard what Martha and Jonathan want. But what is it that *you* want?”

Clark was momentarily stunned. He was still so unused to people asking what *he* wanted. Of course, the Kents had always asked. But after nearly thirteen years under Trask’s tyrannical rule, it was hard to get used to people wanting to know his own desires and not just ordering him around.

“I want to stay with Jonathan and Martha,” Clark said, trying to show the woman how sincere he was. “More than anything in the world, I want to live with them. *Please*, don’t make me leave them. I need them. They’ve been so nice to me. No one has ever treated me as well as they have.”

The judge nodded. “I see. Just what have they done, that has been so nice?”

Clark smiled at the memories, though they were only made a couple of weeks before. “When I was in their shed, they kept me warm. They fed me. They took me into their home. They gave me Christmas presents, even though they’d only just met me. I didn’t have a coat to wear or clothes other than what I had on, but they bought me things. Nice things. Jonathan’s been teaching me how to play football when it hasn’t been snowing.”

“What else do you do?” Judge Orin asked, scribbling a few notes. She gave him an encouraging smile.

“Well, I try to help them with stuff. I helped Jonathan fix a broken chair leg a couple of days ago. It felt good to be able to help out. And Martha’s been showing me how to cook. I just watch right now, but I like it. Sometimes I watch her paint. And we talk a lot. They’ve been teaching me things, like how to read.”

Judge Orin nodded. “Are you happy there?”

Clark nodded enthusiastically. “The happiest I’ve ever been,” he said, meaning every word with his whole heart. “I feel safe with them.”

Again the woman nodded. “Anything else?”

“I want to be their son,” he said.

The words had been spoken softly, but they exploded into the room and echoed in his mind. He hadn’t even realized he was speaking them until after they’d already tumbled from his lips. But he knew in his heart that he’d never wanted anything so badly in his entire life. He hadn’t even wanted to be free from Trask with such desperation as he felt now. He wanted to not just be Clark, but to be Clark *Kent*, son of Jonathan and Martha. He wanted to be part of a family, officially, legally, forever.

“Please,” he pleaded. “I love them.”

Judge Orin smiled again, this time even wider and friendlier than before. “I’ll see what I can do,” she promised. “The Kents are good people.”

“The best,” he agreed, grinning.

“They’ve been dealt a rough hand,” the woman said, looking down at her papers again, and at the damning denial from the adoption agency. She sighed, then pressed a button. “You can send them back in now, Ginny.”

A second later, Jonathan and Martha came back into the room. Clark gave them a small smile, trying to tell them that everything was okay. But they still looked worried. Inwardly, Clark was also worried. Just because Judge Orin had said she’d do what she could, didn’t mean that she would necessarily be successful. The older woman stood behind her desk.

“Well, I think I have everything that I need,” she said.

“What do we do now?” Martha asked.

The judge smiled again. “Go home. Try not to worry. For the time being, I’m granting you custody. Clark is to stay in your

home while we try to get this all figured out. Look, I don’t want to get your hopes up. But I know a couple of people. I’m going to call around, see what strings I can pull. I’d like to see this adoption go through just as much as you do.”

“Thank you,” Jonathan said gratefully. “How long before we know anything?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll try to rush it as much as I can, and I’ll be in touch.”

“We owe you one, Cathy,” Jonathan said.

“Not yet,” she said, winking at them. “Let’s get this matter settled first.”

“I don’t know how we’ll ever be able to repay you,” Martha said.

“You just take good care of Clark, and we’ll call it even,” the judge replied with a smile. “I don’t know, I just feel like this was meant to be. You know what I mean?”

“We do,” Martha said. “We’ve felt that way since the moment Clark came into our lives.”

“In any case, I should get to work on this for you. I have a little time now before my next appointment.”

“Thank you again,” Martha said.

“It will be my pleasure, if I can make you three a family.”

“Thank you,” Clark said, shaking the woman’s hand as she exited it.

Together, the three left the court house. The day had started out in apprehension, but now held a tremulous note of hope buried deeply within it. None of them dared to breathe a sigh of relief, but each of them felt as though a tiny weight had been lifted from their shoulders. All they could do now was wait, and hope, and pray.

April 17, 1979

The months since Clark had arrived on the Kents’ farm flew by swiftly. The boy was in love with his new life, easily slipping into the routine of the farm. He was eager to help with anything he could, no matter how menial the task. He’d rush to take out the trash, so that Jonathan didn’t have to do it. He’d get up earlier than his surrogate parents and get the coffee on, once he learned how to do it. He’d race to the mailbox at the end of the driveway to retrieve the mail, heedless of the weather. He helped Jonathan with his chores in running the farm, eagerly asking questions as they worked, and broadening his knowledge. He helped Martha in the kitchen whenever time allowed, when he wasn’t occupied with another task, and found that he enjoyed cooking.

He never complained. He never balked to do anything. In fact, Jonathan and Martha rarely had to ask him to do any task. He wanted to please them. He wanted to make their lives as easy as he could. Part of it, he knew, had been ingrained in him from spending his whole life as Trask’s captive. But it was different, with these people. When he’d tried to please Trask, it was because he’d feared the man so desperately, so completely. With his new family, however, it was because he loved them, and was grateful to them.

Every day of his new life brought fresh joys to Clark. He reveled in watching his very first sunrise as a free man, even though he’d been tired. His breath was stolen away at every sunset, the brilliant colors splashed across the sky seeming more vivid than he ever could have imagined. It was true that he’d seen the occasional sunrises and sunsets from his captivity, but the oppressive sadness of that former life had muted the colors in his mind and had only marked the beginning or ending of another day of torment. Now they marked the passage of time as a free man, well away from Bureau Thirty-Nine.

Every meal was a source of celebration for Clark, as he tried things he’d never imagined before. His meals under the care of Bureau Thirty-Nine had always been bland and uninspired. And rarely had they offered any variety. But Martha’s cooking opened

up an entire world of new flavors and new foods. His appetite, once a meager thing, exploded. Clark wasn't sure if it was only her cooking that kept his appetite peaked, or if his alien DNA demanded more food in order to keep functioning, or if his continually developing abilities were the culprit. He didn't care either. He knew only that he enjoyed such a vast array of new foods.

And as for Jonathan and Martha, they were continuously shocked at what the boy did and did not know.

He knew the fifty states and their capitals. He could point them out on a map. But he did not know what the states were famous for — that California was the leader in movie and television production, or that New York boasted Broadway stage productions. He knew every country on the planet, who the leader was of each, and their respective titles. But he did not know that George Washington was the first president of the United States. He could not point out Abraham Lincoln when shown a picture of the early presidents. He could easily explain tactical warfare, but had no knowledge that Earth was one of nine planets, let alone their names or that they inhabited the third one out from the sun.

Not even the most basic of things had been taught to him. He knew his numbers, yet he did not possess the knowledge necessary to add or subtract them. He knew the names of colors, but did not know that red and blue combined to make purple, or that blue and yellow made green, or that white light could be broken in a prism to reveal the spectrum of colors that comprised it. He had never been taught how to read. He'd never even been taught the alphabet. He had no knowledge that there were twenty-six letters, or that the same sound could be made using various combinations of letters — that “f” and “ph” could make the same sound. He hadn't known that the sigil used to mark him looked just like the letter “S,” though it made sense to him in retrospect why he'd been called that all his life.

It broke the Kents' hearts each time they discovered another thing that Clark should have known, but didn't. So, with infinite patience, they began to teach him. They started with the very basics, home-schooling him from a kindergarten level. Clark learned quickly, devouring the information offered up to him. The Kents were impressed at how fast he was to catch on to things, and how once he learned something, he seemed incapable of forgetting it again. Clark was an enthusiastic student, never seeming to dislike any of the information or subjects. True, there were some things that he enjoyed more than others. Math bored him, but a book could hold his attention for hours. And above all, once he learned how to write, he never stopped doing it in his spare time.

His earliest attempts were haltingly written, and riddled with errors. But he doggedly pursued it, until his essays and stories became stronger and grammatically flawless. It gave him immense pleasure to write, about everything and anything. He'd summarize a book after reading it, just for the fun of it. He'd write a story that popped into his head, now that his imagination had been set free by the Kents. He even kept a journal, chronicling the events of his day to day life. And as he went into the town with Jonathan and Martha, he wrote about the events he saw there as well.

It didn't take long for him to realize that writing was what he wanted to do for a living.

And yet, he also wanted to do something positive with his life. He wanted to give back to the world. He wanted to make a difference.

He felt guilty about the ideas Trask had tried so hard to plant in his mind. He felt ashamed over the atrocities Trask had wanted him to commit. He knew he had to find a way to help people, instead of ways to hurt them, even though he'd never actually had the desire to do the things Trask had wanted him to do. Clark

wanted to find a way to better society, not through intimidation tactics and destruction, the way Cameron had envisioned, but through helping people solve their problems.

Picking up the morning's edition of the Smallville Post from the mailbox and skimming the front page, Clark finally had the answer he'd been searching for. He could use his love of writing, and combine it with his desire to help mankind. He would become a journalist. Not the kind who merely reported on what had transpired at a sporting event, or a local harvest festival. He would become almost detective-like, sleuthing out answers to real problems. He would expose the underbelly of society, and use his words and determination to bring justice to people who needed it.

He would become an investigative reporter.

Late that same afternoon, the phone rang. Jonathan spoke to the person on the other end briefly, nodding his head as he did so. But he looked worried. Martha simply wrung her hands, looking torn between letting Jonathan handle whatever the call was about, and picking up the extension. But after a moment, the call ended and Jonathan hung up the phone.

“That was the courthouse,” he said, not bothering to conceal the worry in his voice. “They want us to come down, as soon as possible.”

“Did they give you any idea...?” Martha asked.

Jonathan shook his head. “No. That was Ginny. She said that she doesn't know anything. Just that Judge Orin wants us to go over there.”

“Jonathan...”

“I know, Martha. I know. But let's not jump to any conclusions yet, okay?”

Clark closed his eyes, leaning against the wall for support. This was it. For months, his newfound family had simultaneously anticipated and dreaded this day. He had no illusion in his mind that this was merely a call to fill them all in on what progress had been made. No, today, he was certain, he would have his fate decided. Either he would be allowed to stay with the Kents, as their son or their foster son, or he would be violently ripped from the only family he'd ever known. He wasn't sure he'd be able to handle it, if he was taken away from the Kents. He wasn't sure what he would do if that happened.

He fidgeted in his seat for the entire drive into town. His eyes barely registered his surroundings. He barely heard the various sounds of the engine, the tires on the road, the sighing of the wind beyond the windows. He was only aware of how fast his heart was beating, how twisted into knots his stomach had become. He was also aware of how elevated Jonathan and Martha's pulses had become. He felt badly about that, and wished he had some way to comfort them. But he was just as nervous as they were, if not more so, and couldn't find any words to offer them.

None of them spoke on the drive. None of them knew what to say, it seemed. Walking into the courthouse, Clark felt almost as though he were walking back into the compound where he'd spent his whole life. The bright, fresh paint of the place mocked him. The pleasant aroma of strong coffee became oppressive, sickening even. The cheerful face of Ginny, the receptionist, seemed somehow cold and distant. Clark swallowed hard as he sat with the Kents. As before, he situated himself in the middle, as though having them on either side could somehow shield him from an unfavorable outcome. They didn't have to wait long. Ginny was ushering them into Judge Orin's office within minutes.

Clark uneasily sat in the same chair he'd sat in months before. He gripped Jonathan and Martha's hands, making them into one chain. Together, they would face whatever decision was coming their way. The judge was not alone in her office. In a chair, off to one side, the Sheriff sat quietly. Clark wasn't sure he

liked that. Was the man there to ensure that he didn't try to run away if things went badly this afternoon? Was he there to take Clark away from his family?

"Jonathan, Martha, Clark," the judge said, greeting them warmly enough. "Sorry to call you out here on such short notice."

"It's no trouble," Jonathan said.

"Well, let's cut straight to the chase," the judge said, pulling a file from a stack sitting to her right side. "I have called every single person that I know who could possibly help us with this case. For a long time, I didn't hear much from them. But this afternoon, I finally got word."

Please, Clark thought. Please let me stay here with the Kents.

"There were some who questioned my decision to fight for you. There were some who refused to look past your previous adoption denial, and the reasons why."

Oh no, Clark thought.

But the judge smiled. "Then there were others who felt as strongly as I do about this case. And I am more than pleased to announce that your request has been granted. All we have to do today is fill out some paperwork, and Clark will be your son, legally. I've asked the Sheriff to bear witness."

The words exploded in Clark's mind.

Son. Legally.

He was going to be able to stay with Jonathan and Martha. And not only that, but they would *truly* be his parents. He was a permanent part of their family now. He could barely concentrate as they filled out the necessary paperwork, though he was proud to be able to sign his own name. With swift, sure strokes, he set the pen to the paper and signed the places Judge Orin pointed out, alongside his new parents.

It didn't take quite as long as he thought it would, and soon the judge was putting the papers away again. Clark was elated. He was practically floating, he felt so relieved. He couldn't stop smiling, couldn't stop the chuckles that escaped from him as the judge talked with them.

"Looks like you are all set," the woman told them, after putting the file in a different stack than she'd initially taken it from. "Congratulations," she said, shaking Martha and Jonathan's hands. "You two are now parents. And you, young man, are *officially* Clark Jerome Kent."

Martha and Jonathan profusely thanked the woman, then hugged each other, drawing Clark into their embrace as well. Clark felt himself swept with emotions. They brought tears to his eyes, and he let them come, feeling no shame in them. Before, in his old life, he'd shed plenty of private tears, when he was alone in his cell at night. But now, for the first time in his entire life, his tears sprang from the greatest happiness he'd ever known.

"We're all finished here," the judge said. "You'll be getting a copy of Clark's new birth certificate in the mail shortly."

"I'd say this calls for a celebration," Jonathan said. "Let's go get some dinner out. Thank you, Cathy. You have no idea how much this means to us."

"You know," she said, smiling gently at the new family, "sometimes, I have to make the difficult decision to break families apart. But *this*...I really do love *this* part of my job," she said, smiling now at Clark. "I love being able to put families *together*."

"Thank you," Clark said, his words feeling too simple to properly express his gratitude. "For everything." On an impulse, he embraced the woman in a grateful hug.

"You're very welcome. I trust you'll take good care of your parents." She winked at him.

"I'll be the best son the world has ever seen," he promised her.

Judge Orin laughed. "I'm sure you will be."

As they left the courthouse, Clark felt like his feet barely touched the ground. All the months of worry were over. All the

tension was gone from him. He had the one thing he wanted in his life. He had a home. He had a family. He had a mom and a dad who loved him fiercely.

He felt like he could take on the entire world.

August 16, 1979

"Go long, son," Jonathan said, a grin lighting up his face.

"Farther. No, no. *Farther*."

"You sure, Dad?"

"Absolutely."

"All right..."

Clark backed up even further, his eyes on Jonathan the whole time. He finally felt that he was probably at the edge of his father's reach. The man let the football fly, and Clark was surprised to find himself running after the ball. He easily outpaced it and positioned himself. The ball sailed right into his waiting arms. Clark smiled and tossed it back, carefully reigning in his strength so as not to hurt Jonathan.

He'd been strong when he'd escaped Trask's compound, less than a year before. But he had steadily been getting even stronger. At first, it had thrilled him. He felt just like Hercules, who he'd read about in one of the dog-eared books he'd borrowed from the Smallville library. But as the days progressed and his strength grew, it became a hindrance. Everything seemed so fragile and he grew paranoid of breaking things. Already, he'd broken three chairs, seven pieces of lumber as he and Jonathan had repaired the broken fence at the entrance to their property, and countless pencils as he'd concentrated on his home-school work. He wondered when his powers would finally plateau, so he could find his limits and learn to deal with them more effectively.

"Nice catch, Dad," he said, as the ball easily came to rest in Jonathan's arms, against his chest.

Jonathan nodded and sent the ball back. It arced as it flew over the dusty yard. But Clark was distracted. He could smell his mother's apple pie just coming out of the oven. It smelled heavenly, making his mouth water. He turned his gaze toward the house for the briefest of moments. In that same instant, the football sailed by his head, bounced awkwardly on the ground, and came to rest under Jonathan's truck.

"Sorry," Clark called over. "My fault. I'll get it."

He walked to the truck and squatted down, looking for the ball. It was just under the rear of the vehicle. Clark reached for the ball, grabbed it, and stood back up. He pulled on the bumper of the vehicle as he did so, for what reason, he was never really sure. The entire back end of the truck lifted into the air. Clark dropped the ball in surprise, his mouth hanging open. He'd known he was getting stronger, but he'd never expected this, not even in his wildest dreams.

"Son?" Jonathan said, concerned, jogging over.

"I...I..." was all that Clark could sputter.

"It's okay, Clark."

"No, it's not," Clark said, setting the car flat on the ground again, trying to be careful with it. "I hate this. I'm a freak, Dad."

"No, you're a very special boy, that's all."

"I *am* a freak," he pressed. "I'm scared to touch anything. I'm afraid to touch you and Mom. I'm a disaster waiting to happen. A ticking time bomb. Maybe Trask was right to want to keep me locked up," he finished in a whisper.

"Don't ever talk like that," Jonathan said firmly. "What Trask did to you is an unforgivable crime. What he *wanted* to do *with* you is monstrous beyond words."

"But, Dad..."

"No buts. Now, you know me. I'm not one to get preachy. But, I'm a firm believer that we all have gifts and talents. It's how we use them that's the key." Jonathan ushered Clark to the porch steps. They both sat, Jonathan with his hand on Clark's shoulder. "You have these powers, these gifts, and I believe that

you'll find a way to control them. It may take time, but one day, I believe keeping control will be as natural to you as breathing."

"You really think so?"

Jonathan nodded. "I do."

"Why me?" Clark softly lamented. "All I want is to be normal. But... I never will be, will I? I'm not human."

"Clark, you're more human to me than some Earthlings I can think of. And I don't have all the answers," Jonathan said quietly. "I mean, Trask's file told us the reasoning behind your abilities. How the sun fuels your Kryptonian body and makes these powers manifest. But why it has to be that way... I don't know. Maybe you're *meant* to have them, the same as some people are meant to be good at math, or at sports."

"Yeah, but people can get jobs using their skills in math, Dad. I'm not sure how being able to lift a car will ever serve me any good. Unless I want to get work as a sideshow freak."

"I don't know. But I have a strong gut instinct that you'll figure it out someday. Come here, give me a hug."

Clark paled and his nervousness came back. "I... can't."

"Sure you can."

"I don't want to hurt you by accident."

"You won't."

"Aren't you afraid of me? *I'm* afraid of me. Every time I go to sit down, or pick something up, or throw a ball, I'm terrified that I'm accidentally going to pulverize it."

"No," Jonathan said. "I'm not afraid. I trust you."

Jonathan reached over and embraced his son. Clark went board-stiff at first, but after a moment, he relaxed and gently returned Jonathan's hug. He let out a quavering breath as he did so. Maybe his father was right. Maybe he would get the hang of his strength with some hard work and patience.

November 2, 1979

Clark Kent stood staring at the smoldering ruin of what had once been his father's work shed. The smoke curled lazily even as the rain beat down. Guilt tore at his heart as he sulked behind the living room window, his hair and clothes still dripping wet, despite the layers of towels his mother had wrapped him in.

It had all been his fault.

He hadn't meant to start a fire. He really hadn't. But it had happened anyway. He just couldn't understand why his parents weren't furious with him. They had lost a lot of tools and several of his mother's paintings that had been in varying stages of completion.

He'd been helping Jonathan in the shed. Jonathan had been sharpening his axe in preparation to split some more wood to last through the winter, now that a large oak had fallen over on the western-most edge of their property. Clark had been trying his own hand at painting, and not succeeding at all, if he was any judge. He'd been concentrating so hard that his heat vision had kicked in.

One minute, he'd been trying to paint a picture of their farmhouse at night. The next moment, the canvas had been on fire. There had been a draft from the door, which had stood slightly ajar as Jonathan ground the axe blade on a sharpening wheel. A spark from the canvas had blown away from Clark, unnoticed, as he used his burgeoning super breath to blow out the flames. The spark had wafted onto a bale of hay, alighting it almost instantly. In the blink of an eye, the whole corner of the shed had been ablaze.

He'd gotten his father safely out of the shed before going back in. He'd tried using his breath to snuff out the flames. But the fire had been intense and his newest power had been unreliable at best, coming and going in fits and starts. It had taken him far longer than he'd thought it would. By the time he'd gotten the fire under control, half the shed had been scorched. Clark still counted himself lucky that it had been raining heavily.

The pounding raindrops had helped to quench the fire until, between it and his own efforts, the blaze had died.

He felt horrible, standing there, watching the rain beat down. He'd ruined everything. Why did Jonathan and Martha even put up with him? He was a walking disaster area. Trask and the rest of Bureau Thirty-Nine had been right to be afraid of him. He could probably — no, definitely — kill someone without meaning to, if he wasn't careful. How could these simple farmers trust him as easily, as wholly, as they did? He couldn't understand it.

He'd thought he'd gotten most of his powers under control. His heat vision had been one of the more difficult ones to summon up, until now. He'd always needed to work so hard to use it. But now, it had all of a sudden become frighteningly easy to call upon. He'd need to work extra hard to find the right balance within himself, to ensure that nothing like this ever happened again.

"Mom... Dad..." he said, turning away from the smoldering ruin beyond the window. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"Oh, honey, it's not your fault," Martha tried to soothe him.

"It *is* my fault," he asserted. "*I'm* the one who started the fire."

"It doesn't matter," Jonathan said, shaking his head. "All that matters is that we're all okay."

"But that's just it!" Clark said. "How easy would it have been for you to get hurt out there, Dad? Nothing can hurt *me*, except for that stone Trask has. But I can so easily hurt others, even without meaning to."

"Clark..."

"No," he said firmly, shaking his head. "I can't keep going like this. Maybe it's best if I... I don't know... go away for a while, until I'm sure that I'm not a threat to anyone anymore."

"Clark Jerome Kent," Martha said, her voice turning sharp. Clark winced to hear his full name used like that. "Don't you even *dare* to entertain the notion of running away. We're your parents. You're our son. We'll help you get through this."

"Mom..."

"No. Not another word about it," Martha said, crossing her arms and effectively shutting the conversation down.

Clark sighed. After a moment, he dragged his hand through his sopping wet hair. "Well... then..."

"Yes?" Jonathan prodded.

"I have to find some way, I guess, of reminding myself of these powers. Sometimes, I forget. I stare too hard at something and x-ray right through it. Or I wind up setting things on fire," he said, unhappily shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Like a string around the finger type of reminder?" Jonathan asked, plucking his glasses off and using the edge of his shirt to clean a spot off one of the lenses.

"Or a pair of glasses," Clark said, watching his father's movements. "If I had to remove a pair of glasses from my eyes in order to use my abilities... that might just do the trick. And the added weight and upkeep of frames might just remind me enough so that I don't accidentally use them right through the lenses. Plus, I'd fit right in with others. You and Mom both wear glasses. So does half of Smallville. Who would imagine that I have the vision powers that I do if I'm pretending to be near-sighted?"

"You might be on to something," Jonathan said, smiling and putting his glasses back on. "Tomorrow morning we'll take a look in the basement. I think I might have some old frames in a box. Your mother makes me keep everything. I know I have some leaded glass down there too. We'll make you a pair of glasses from that. The lead should help prevent you from x-raying through things, at the very least."

"Sounds like a plan," Clark said, smiling for the first time since the fire had flared into life. "And after that, I'm going to help you rebuild the shed."

July 28, 1984

Clark was terribly, terribly nervous. In just a few short weeks, he would be heading off to college, to study his one true passion, journalism. He was excited, of course, to pursue his dream of one day becoming a reporter. And he was more than ready to play college football. Already, he could hear the roar of the crowd in the brisk fall air, cheering on their favorite team and players. He could almost feel the solid weight of the football as it crashed into his arms as he caught it. But to do so, he would be leaving behind the people he loved most. And that made him very uneasy.

Ever since he'd stumbled into the Kents' work shed by chance one Christmas Eve, he'd never been apart from them, not for extended periods of time. Oh, he'd spent the night at a friend's house on occasion, once he was sure his powers were under control. He'd gone to school in town, spending his days in classrooms just like any other normal boy. He'd participated in sports, which had demanded that he sometimes spend the night elsewhere to play against another high school. But never had he gone so far away as he was now preparing to. Never had he spent more than a day or two away from his parents.

That wasn't even to mention the worry he had over the newest of his powers, which had manifested that morning.

He'd been asleep in his bed when he'd bumped his head. Of course, it hadn't hurt, but it *had* immediately woken him from his dreams. He'd opened his eyes to find himself staring down at his bed, his back against the ceiling. He'd instantly panicked, and had come crashing down on the mattress, hard. He'd been lucky he hadn't broken the bed. For a long time, he had sat there on his floor, his back against the bed, the same thoughts running through his mind over and over.

I was floating. I was floating. I was five feet above my bed and floating. What am I going to do? How will I hide this from my roommates? I can't believe I was actually floating.

And yet, now, as he stood out in the secluded back field of his parents' farmland, his fear melted away. He actually longed to experience the sensation again. Despite his initial surprise, the sensation of floating had felt really, really good. Logically, he knew it was completely and utterly unnatural. But it *felt* natural to him anyway.

He just wasn't sure how to go about defying gravity. With a chuckle, he thought of Peter Pan. Peter had used pixie dust and happy thoughts in order to achieve flight. But that wasn't going to help in Clark's case. He tried relaxing, but as the gray of pre-dawn retreated before the blues and pinks of a fresh sunrise, he grew only more frustrated, and his peace of mind shattered. Finally, he funneled his thoughts, trying to consciously lift his body from the ground. That didn't work either.

He was just about to give up and head indoors again to get breakfast started when his feet unexpectedly rose off the grass. Elated, Clark reveled in the sensation. He knew that, logically, it should have made him uneasy. But somehow, it didn't. If anything, it comforted him. He liked the feeling of floating there, three inches above the ground. He tried to go higher, and found it easier than anticipated. Clark's grin grew as he started to experiment with moving around.

He took it slow, at first. Up, down, forward, back. It was easy. He gradually picked up speed, wondering if his ability to travel so quickly would also work with his newfound ability of flying. He allowed himself a burst of speed, and took off like a shot. He laughed as he zoomed away, pleasantly surprised to find that it seemed like he could move even faster in the air than he could on land. He wondered how high he could go, and changed the angle he was moving in. He sharply gained altitude. The land fell away at a dizzying pace, until his house was no more than a black spot against the broader backdrop of Kansas.

His breath caught in his throat as he looked out over the land. The cultivated fields spread out beneath him like a patchwork quilt of varying colors, mostly shades of green and brown, some golden, and some black with freshly upturned soil. Roads spread out like ribbons in every direction, connecting the ant-sized houses and model-toy towns. A flash of metal caught his sharp eyes — a lone car heading into town at that early hour. Clark decided to climb even higher, pushing his newfound power to whatever limits it had.

The higher he went, the colder it became. He felt it, but it did not bother him, though his glasses started to frost over. He pulled them off and stuffed them in the breast pocket of his shirt. The air grew thinner too, and that *did* present a slight problem. Alien though he was, he still needed oxygen to breathe. But he had long ago learned that he was capable of holding his breath for a good twenty minutes. He did so now, as he left the last reaches of breathable atmosphere.

Soon, he was free of the Earth. He was outside the atmosphere. He was in space. All around him was vast, inky blackness, studded with stars and distant planets. He hovered, suspended in place, trapped in between the Earth and the rest of the universe. It was peaceful here. It was quiet. He strained his hearing to its very limit, but all he heard was distant echoes of the world he'd left behind. He felt that he could grow to like it here, and that perhaps it could be a place to escape to when he needed a moment to think.

He stayed for a moment, simply staring out into the vastness of the universe. Up this far, he could see far more stars than he could when earthbound. Or, at least, it felt that way to him. He looked at the moon, and wondered if he could fly fast enough to reach it, though he dared not try. He might reach it, but not have breath enough to make it back. He zoomed his vision in a bit, sweeping his eyes across the reaches of space. He could make out the reddish glow of Mars as it reflected back the sun's rays. He could see the yellowish tint of Venus.

Krypton.

The word came unbidden to his mind. Which, if any, of these brightly glowing specks of light was the planet where he'd been born? Could he even see it from here? Was it beyond the reaches of the galaxy he resided in? Would he ever find a way to gaze upon his home world?

He shook his head. No. *Not* his home world. *Earth* was his home. It was the place where he'd grown up. It was where his friends were. It was where he'd found his family.

Family.

Did he still have blood relatives on Krypton? Was there a sister out there, wondering where her brother was? Was there a brother there, trying to find out what had happened to him? What of his parents? Did they wonder about him? Did they know that he'd survived the trip to Earth, an infant packed away in a tiny spaceship, sent through the endless coldness of space? Did they know he'd crashed on Earth? Had he been stolen from them, sent away by some villain? Or had his parents sent him away? Why? Had they not cared about him? Had they sent him away to escape some evil? Had he been some bizarre type of sacrifice, offered to some unknown god they believed ruled the universe?

He had no answers to these questions. And, he guessed, he never would. How was he to ever find out his origins, if he had no way of finding Krypton, let alone reaching it somehow? It made him sad, lonely, and frustrated, all at once.

He tore his gaze from the stars surrounding him and looked toward the Earth again. The world lay spread out, far beneath his feet. He could see the gentle curve of the globe, could see the land and sea as vague shapes through the haze of distance. He could see the faint distinction where the atmosphere began, could see the rim awash in a whitish-blue glow from the sun. He could see the white swirls of clouds, hanging above the Earth's surface.

A flicker of light caught his eye and he looked toward it. Florida was getting a severe electrical storm, from the looks of things. And further down south, out in the ocean, a tropical storm was brewing. Clark could see the distinctive shape of the clouds.

Up this high, the world looked peaceful. It looked still. Up this high, there was no evidence of war or injustice or poverty. There was no evidence of crime or of suffering. There was no pollution up this high. Clark liked it.

And yet, being where he was, hanging in space, looking down on his home, it only hammered in the fact that he was alone. Different. Isolated. An alien.

His air supply was growing inadequate. His lungs were beginning to ache and burn. He would have to take in a fresh breath of air soon. In a way, it startled him. He hadn't realized that he'd spent so much time there already. With a mental sigh, he turned and headed back. He sped away, knowing he'd need the speed to avoid the detection of anyone who might chance a glance at the sky and see the flying man. The last thing he needed was to blow his carefully maintained guise of being just another regular guy.

He still had nightmares sometimes, about the days he'd lived as Cameron Trask's prisoner. He'd awoken more than once to find himself covered in a sheen of sweat, his heart thudding against his ribs. Though Clark knew that the police had searched for Trask, he'd never been found. Bureau Thirty-Nine had seemingly vanished into thin air. And even if Trask and his crew *had* been found, it didn't matter much. If Clark's true nature was ever discovered, there would no doubt be some other scientist ready to dissect him like a frog, or parade him around as the freak that he was.

Step right up! Step right up! Come see the incredible alien freak, his mind bellowed at him, in the voice of a carnival barker. See him bend steel with his bare hands! See him bounce bullets off his chest! See him levitate right before your very eyes! Step right up! Step right up!

Clark was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't realize how quickly he was approaching the ground. He tried to stop, but only managed to slow down. He scrambled a bit, but his efforts were too late in coming. He smashed violently into a large rock on the very edge of the Kents' property line, which they had affectionately named "The Boulder." The Boulder exploded into a million pieces, and Clark finally found himself stopped. He stood up, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, thankful no one had witnessed that, with the exception of a few curious squirrels that chattered unhappily at him from a maple tree.

"Gotta work on landing," he said to himself, dusting himself off as best he could.

With that, he sped away toward the farmhouse, knowing that it had to be getting late. His parents would be getting up, and he had to get to his chores. As he skidded to a halt and entered the house, the delicious odors of his mother's cooking filled his nostrils. He inhaled deeply, committing the smell to memory. Pretty soon, he reminded himself, he'd be forced to eat less than appetizing cafeteria food.

"What happened to you?" Martha asked as Clark shuffled into the kitchen. Her eyes were wide with surprise and concern.

Clark shrugged. "Well... Mom, Dad... I've got some good news and some bad news. The bad news is, The Boulder isn't there anymore. The good news is, you've now got a couple hundred pounds of gravel up in the back field that you can sell."

November 4, 1987

"Kent, you are a damn *machine*!"

Clark snorted a laugh. "Thanks, Willy." He clasped his friend and roommate on the shoulder.

"No, seriously, man, that was some incredible football

playing. What's your secret?"

"What can I say? I had a good day."

Clark shrugged and sat on the wooden bench in the locker room, his teammates all around him in various stages of undress. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to fix it a little from its current style of being plastered to his head from his helmet.

"A good day?" Willy Thompson said, snorting in disbelief. "That's the third record you've broken in four years."

"Like I said," Clark said, squirming a little under his dark-skinned friend's gaze, "I just had a good day. Last game, it was Jake Nelson who had a good day."

It was the truth — he knew that in his heart. He'd never once used his powers to give himself an edge in anything before, tempting as it sometimes was. He wanted to earn things on his own merit. And his parents had instilled in him a firm moral compass, one that was decidedly opposite from what Trask had once tried to force upon him. Plus, Clark would never do anything to blow his carefully constructed facade of normalcy. He didn't want to draw attention to himself in any way.

Of course, that was often difficult as quarterback of the football team. Especially when he had good days, like today. Everything had just fallen into place, and Clark had managed to set his third record. He didn't know how it had happened. Maybe the planets had aligned or something. He hadn't even been aware of what had been happening until after the game had ended and Midwestern State University had won.

"Yeah, well... I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Willy. I appreciate that. You wanna grab some dinner with my folks and me in a bit?"

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks."

"Anytime."

"You know, it's nice that your family comes to see you play when they can."

"Yeah. Just lucky I guess. Let me guess, both of your parents are on call this weekend?"

"What else?" the other man said, shrugging as if it were no big deal, though Clark knew otherwise.

Clark felt a twinge of remorse for his friend. Willy's mother and father were both respected doctors in New York. And while Willy was proud of them, it often meant that one or both of them were unable to attend their son's football games.

"Well, I'm more than happy to share my family with you," Clark said, giving his roommate a smile. "And so are they."

Clark stripped off his dirty jersey, tossing it to one side. He headed toward the showers, more than eager to have the hot water rolling over his body. He wasn't tired, and he hardly ever broke a sweat, at least not due to heat or physical exertion. But it always felt good to have the hot water on his muscles anyway. The spirit of competition sloughed off his body with the water, refreshing him in every way. He showered quickly, joking with his teammates over the splash of water. Then he swiftly dried and dressed.

He was repacking his gym bag and ensuring that he hadn't left anything in his locker when his coach approached him. He gave Clark a smile and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Kent, you have no idea how proud I am of you today."

"Thanks, Coach."

"You keep playing like that and you've got a shot at playing professionally."

"That... wow... that would be something," Clark said, growing uncomfortable again. But before he could say anything else, his friend Chris Wilson caught the coach's eye and the man went off to speak with him.

It would be amazing to play pro ball. He knew that, deep in his heart. And maybe some small part of him liked the idea. He certainly loved the game. And who wouldn't want a shot at winning a Super Bowl or two? But he also knew that he didn't

want to let go of his dream to be an investigative reporter. He truly felt like that was his calling in life. As much as he loved sports, his true passion was writing. And through his writing, he could change countless lives.

Perhaps, he thought, it was time to stop playing ball so well. Oh, he would still help his team win as many games as he possibly could. He would make the most out of his senior year. And he would savor the triumph of this moment, because this would be the last record he would ever break. He would make sure of that.

His mind made up, Clark left the locker room, his gym bag slung casually over his shoulder. His parents had flown into Metropolis for the game. Or rather, *he* had flown them in late the night before. They tried to make every one of his games, and for that, he was thankful. It was nice to know that they were out there, in the stands, cheering him on. They would be waiting for him, somewhere out in the vast chaos of the emptying Metropolis Stadium, ready to congratulate him and go get some food. He nodded to various players from the Metropolis University football team as their paths crossed.

“Excuse me!” a young woman’s voice cried out, as Clark made his way across the field.

Clark heard the rush of footsteps behind him. A moment later, a hand tapped him on the shoulder. He stopped and turned.

His heart stopped along with his feet.

Before him stood the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen. She had long brown hair that tumbled down her back and shimmered in the late afternoon sunlight. And her eyes! Clark felt that he could get lost in those twin chocolate pools. He could drown in them, and die a happy man for it. But her crisp suit and ready pad of paper told him she was there to interview him, not because she found him attractive. Although, he thought, one could always hope for both.

“Can I help you?” Clark asked, his tongue feeling dumb and unskilled in her presence.

“Lois Lane. Reporter for the Metropolis University paper. I’d like to interview you, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure thing,” he said, giving her his best smile. He turned and led her to an unoccupied stretch of bleacher seats. “So, you’re a sports journalist?” He was proud of himself for keeping the surprise out of his voice.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. Her hair bounced with the movement, entrancing Clark. “I’m filling in for today. The usual sports writer had to go home this weekend to attend his brother’s wedding.”

“I see,” Clark said, sitting down and setting his gym bag aside. “Well, I’m an open book. Ask me anything.”

“Thanks,” Lois said, turning her attention to the list of questions she had with her.

“No problem.”

Lois started in with her questions. Or, rather, Clark suspected that they weren’t exactly *her* questions. She had probably gotten them from the regular sports reporter. He could tell by the way she stumbled over some of the terms. Although, he had to admit, she *did* seem pretty comfortable with most of what she was saying. Perhaps she had a brother who played ball. Or maybe, Clark thought with a sigh, she had a boyfriend who played. He didn’t know why, but that idea made him a little sad. He’d only just met her. It wasn’t like he had any right to feel jealous if she *did* have a boyfriend.

He answered her questions as well as he could, trying to give her the best possible quotes for her article. As an aspiring reporter himself, and member of his own school’s paper, he knew the importance of having good quotes. If Lois realized what he was doing, she didn’t let on that she knew. Clark didn’t mind. It was a thrill just to be sitting and talking with such an incredibly beautiful young woman. It was more thrilling than knowing he’d

set another record.

What questions she asked, he couldn’t recall afterwards. Though he gave her his full attention and his very best answers to her queries, his mind was not on the interview. It was solely fixed on Lois. How her eyes sparkled with the love of what she was doing. How the sun framed her, outlining her in a halo of golden rays, highlighting her features. The sound of her voice as she spoke with him. The sound of her laughter when he cracked a joke or two. The way she moved, ever so gracefully.

By the end of the interview, Clark was certain of only one thing.

He was in love with Lois Lane.

July 22, 1988

Clark woke in the middle of the night, unsure of what had shaken him from the dreamless, peaceful sleep he’d been enjoying. He looked over at the bedside clock, the large red digits informing him that it was 4:15am. Groggily, he realized he only had a few more hours of sleep ahead of him before he’d be expected to show up for work at the Smallville Post. He lay back down and closed his eyes, trying to fall back to sleep.

A light appeared in his bedroom, searing right through his eyelids as surely as the sun. Clark sat up, rubbing the sleep from his heavy-lidded eyes. He looked over his room, his eyes going to the small box he kept on his bookshelf. Light spilled out from beneath the lid, so intensely bright and white that Clark had to squint.

But he felt drawn to the light in the same moment. It was almost magnetic, in a way. Clark felt himself getting out of bed and shuffling toward the box, without the conscious effort to do so. He crossed the room and hesitated before his bookshelf. He reached out to the box and let his hand hover above the lid for a long moment. There was only one thing in that box.

The globe.

He’d nearly forgotten that it was there. For years now, it had been sitting in that box, as the lid gathered dust and Clark had become busy with his life. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken it out to look at it. He wasn’t even certain which map the globe showed — that of Earth or that of Krypton. Clark had lost his fascination with it.

But never before had the object glowed with its own light. Not since he had taken it on the night he’d escaped from Trask’s compound. Then, the globe had briefly illuminated and the map face had changed from Earth to Krypton, the word whispered in his mind from some unknown source. Since then, the globe had laid dormant, no matter how many times Clark had picked it up, held it, examined it, contemplated it, or utterly ignored it.

Until now.

Clark unlocked the box and flipped open the lid. Light exploded into the room as the globe was exposed. Clark was awestruck. He reached in and grasped the globe with a gentle, yet firm, grip. He pulled it from the box and held it in his palm, shuffling backwards until he could sit upon his bed again.

Suddenly, before him, the image of a man appeared in three-dimensional form. It was a hologram. Clark was momentarily stunned. He had thought that the technology needed to achieve such a highly perfected image only existed in science fiction. He quickly assessed the image before him. The man was maybe his parents’ age, perhaps a few years older. He was dressed all in white, the sigil of the house of El wrought on his chest with silver. He looked somehow stately. Regal, even.

But what was more, was that Clark found the man to be familiar looking, in a way. He didn’t think he’d ever seen the man before in his life. At least, he had no conscious memory of it. Yet, there was something about him that felt familiar. Then it hit Clark. The man looked a bit like him. He had some of the same features. The eyes were similar, as was the man’s hair. He

had the same jaw line. He held himself the same way Clark did.

Clark was stunned. Who *was* this man?

But his thoughts were scattered as the man began to speak. His voice was strong and gentle at the same time. It was soothing, yet Clark could not miss the intensity with which the man spoke. This was an important message, Clark instinctively knew.

“My name is Jor-El. And you are Kal-El, my son.”

Clark’s mouth hung open. This man... could this truly be his father? Could this be the man who had given him life?

“The object you hold has been attuned to you. That you now hear these words is proof that you survived the journey in space and have reached your full maturity. Now it is time for you to learn our heritage. To that end, I will appear to you five times. Watch for the light, listen, and learn.”

That sounded almost like the conclusion of a speech to Clark, and he silently begged the hologram not to leave him just yet. He had so many questions. He wanted to learn. He wanted to know who he was. It sounded like this man — Jor-El — had known that Clark was being sent to Earth. It sounded perhaps, like it was of his own doing. And Clark desperately wanted to know the reason why, even if it *was* that his father couldn’t care for him. He *needed* to know, to have his curiosity sated.

The image before Clark widened out, like a movie. Clark could see the planet of Krypton, hanging almost motionless in space. A scattering of stars beyond the planet could just be seen on the edges of the image. Then, it changed, revealing Jor-El in some kind of laboratory, it seemed. He was standing before some kind of console, various lights and images on it. Clark could see some form of writing, but it didn’t look like any language he’d ever seen before. He couldn’t read it.

Jor-El was busily at work at the console. Clark wasn’t sure just what the man was doing. But he seemed to be frantic, in the way that he moved, the impatience he seemed to exude. Clark wondered what was going on. Jor-El’s voice continued to speak, though the image of him did not move its lips.

“Time grows short and we continue to search. The immensity of space is both a blessing and a curse. In that near infinite variety there must be *someplace* suitable.”

Suitable? For what? Clark wondered.

“Hope and desperation drive us in equal measure.”

Us? Who was “us?” Did Jor-El have an accomplice? Maybe a lab assistant?

A tall, elegant woman strode into view, joining Jor-El at his side. Clark was surprised to recognize bits of himself in her as well. And he knew. This woman, whoever she was, was his mother. She was the woman who’d given birth to him.

“Lara works by my side. She is tireless and endlessly patient,” Jor-El continued. “Considering what is soon to come, this is my greatest consolation: that we are together.”

Clark watched in rapt fascination as the image in the hologram shook violently. Jor-El and Lara clutched each other, while the console lights flared into a new pattern. Perhaps it was reading the intensity of the tremor. Perhaps it was a delayed warning. Perhaps it was nothing but jumbled static. But soon enough, the shaking stopped, the lights also returning to normal.

Just what had happened?

But Clark was to find out no more answers. At least, not that night. The hologram retreated back into the globe and the light died. For a long while, Clark stared at the object, trying to will it to show him more of the story. Nothing happened. At last, Clark put the globe away and retreated back beneath his blankets.

Sleep would not come to him, his mind too busy replaying what he’d seen over and over again.

August 1, 1988

Tears streamed down Clark’s face as he sat alone in his room. The globe was in his hand, the hologram faded away into

nothingness. It had just shown him the fifth and final message from Jor-El. Clark had witnessed as his biological parents put him into his spaceship, an infant they had probably barely gotten to know. He watched as his father pressed the command button that sent the ship rocketing away from the planet’s surface. He saw as the ship cleared Krypton’s atmosphere, and not a moment too soon.

For a long moment, the planet hung, suspended in space. It seemed so quiet, so peaceful. In the next second, it was gone, in a flash of light and a violent explosion. Clark saw pieces of the planet, now glowing green, rush out into the universe in every direction. Some raced his own ship, caught in the ship’s wake or by chance, he couldn’t tell. But he knew that those chunks of stone were pieces of Kryptonite, the only substance he’d ever encountered that could cause him pain and make him vulnerable.

Clark’s heart was broken as he sat there, in the middle of the night. He knew now, that he hadn’t been abandoned. His parents — his *biological* parents, that is — had loved him so fiercely that they had done the only thing they could do to save his life. That was a great relief to him.

He had been loved. He had been wanted. Just as the Kents loved and wanted him, so had his biological parents.

But the relief he felt was tempered by an immense sadness. And even more questions popped up into his mind.

His parents had saved him. Why hadn’t they saved themselves? Had it been lack of time? Had they *chosen* to stay until the bitter end? If they had, why? Had anyone else sent *their* child to Earth? Or even, to another planet? Was he truly the last son of Krypton, as Jor-El had called him? Or were there other survivors out there somewhere? If there were, would he ever find them? Would it be strange or comforting to meet another who shared his heritage?

He didn’t regret the decision Jor-El and Lara had made. They had saved his life. And, by extension, they had also changed the lives of Jonathan and Martha Kent. He knew the decision couldn’t have been easy for the two people who had given him life. They possessed a strength Clark wasn’t sure he would ever have, to be so incredibly selfless. He wished only that they hadn’t needed to die. He wished only that he could remember them. But the people in the globe were no more than strangers who shared his features.

March 1, 1990

“Son, it doesn’t have to be this way,” Jonathan pleaded. “We can figure something out.”

Clark shook his head. “No, Dad. I really screwed up this time.”

“No,” Jonathan argued.

“Look, I don’t like it anymore than you do. But I don’t see what other choice I have.”

“Son...”

“We’ve been over this, Dad. We’ve always known that this was a possibility.”

“No one *saw* you, Clark.”

“That little girl did.”

“She’s *five*, Clark,” Martha put in. “Do you think anyone is really going to put any stock in what she has to say?”

“It doesn’t matter, Mom. Whether she was five or fifty-five, I screwed up. I was seen. All it would take is for one rumor to start flying around...”

“That’s all it would be. A *rumor*,” Martha insisted. “All we’d have to do is deny it, pretend we have no idea what people are talking about.”

“You mean lie.”

“Not exactly,” Martha said, squirming in her seat, knowing how much her son hated to fib. “But really, if we laughed it off as impossible, who would believe what the girl might say? Besides,

those people aren't even from around here. You said yourself that the car had California plates."

Clark paced before his parents. He was in their living room. A fire blazed merrily in the hearth, though it did not cheer Clark at all. Beyond the windows, a heavy snow was falling and night was coming on. The snow had been responsible for the entire dilemma he was now facing.

He'd spent the day out on the trail of a story for the Smallville Post. The weather had grown cloudier by the minute. People had begun to leave work earlier than usual, wanting to get home before the storm hit. The temperature had plummeted and the wet roads had begun to freeze up. Clark had known that he needed to call it a day as well. He'd never get the information he needed. So he had started for home.

Normally, he drove into town in his beat up little car, an aging and dented Chevy he'd bought second-hand. But not this day. The weather forecasters had stressed that the storm would be bad, and Clark hadn't been willing to chance driving. So he had flown in, carefully ensuring that he avoided detection. He had more than enough experience in doing so. He had his takeoff and landing points all picked out, places where no one would ever see him come or go.

He'd left the office that afternoon, headed to the alleyway behind the building when he was sure no one was looking, and had taken off like a rocket. Once he was high enough up, and far enough from town, he'd allowed himself to slow down. The wind and cold didn't bother him in the slightest bit. He had enjoyed the flight, until he heard the screams.

They had reached his ears, triggering his sensitive hearing. He had stopped in midflight, hovered, and searched for the source of the sound. He had pulled off his glasses, shoved them into the pocket of his winter coat, and began to search, zooming in with his powerful vision. Finally, he'd pinpointed the source. Five miles up the road, a car had hit a stretch of black ice. It was out of control, sliding across the lanes, and heading for a collision with a skidding delivery truck.

Clark hadn't even thought about anything. He'd simply reacted. He'd sped toward the impending disaster, hoping he'd reach the car in time. As he got close, he overshot the car, changed his angle, and dove. He'd crouched behind the rear bumper of the car, trying to stay out of view. Carefully, so as not to leave impressions where his fingers were, he'd guided the car back into the correct lane of traffic, then ensured that it was no longer on ice.

He'd flown off as soon as he was satisfied that the car was no longer in immediate danger, hiding in a heavy gray cloud. The snow was falling so thickly that it had been a challenge for him to see anything, which he had assumed would also serve to hide him as well. The car and the truck both came to skidding halts, each driver pulling to the side of the road. Clark listened in, needing to be sure that he hadn't been spotted and that the occupants of the vehicles were uninjured.

"My God, are you all right?" the truck driver had asked, exiting his vehicle and jamming a wool hat onto his head. "I couldn't stop in time. I tried."

"We're all right," the man who'd been driving the car had said. "Just shaken up a bit, that's all."

"Good. I'm pleased to hear it. Roads are bad today," the trucker had observed, shaking his head.

"Sure are. I lost control of the car. I don't know how I got it back."

"Just in the nick of time."

"I'll say. Are you from around here? Do you know if there's a place we can hole up for the night? Someplace close by?"

The trucker had nodded. "Keep going straight for another eight miles, you'll reach town. There's a bed and breakfast you can try. Ask for Trina. Tell her Al sent you, and she'll treat you

right."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"You're welcome, and stay safe."

"You too."

The trucker had shaken the other man's hand and went back to his vehicle. The man had turned and headed back to his own car. His wife and small daughter had since gotten out of the vehicle. Clark hadn't been paying them any attention, but he did so when he noticed the girl pointing up at the sky, in the relative vicinity of where he'd been hiding.

"What it is, Cindy?" the woman had asked, shading her eyes and squinting against the falling snow.

"There was a man."

"A man?" her father had asked.

The girl had nodded gravely. "He fixed the car."

"Oh really?" the man had said, and Clark had been relieved to hear the skepticism in his voice. He was only playing along with his daughter. "Where did the man go? I'd like to thank him."

"He flew away," the child stated, matter-of-factly.

"Oh, he *flew*, did he?" The father had chuckled, clearly amused at the girl's overactive imagination.

"He *did*," the girl had asserted, in slightly wounded tones.

"Cindy, stop making up stories," her mother had chided. "Get back in the car. We need to get into town before the roads get any worse."

With that, the family had climbed back into their car and slowly made their way along the road, crawling so slowly they'd hardly seemed to be moving at all. Clark had stayed put, too afraid to move, until they were four or five miles down the road. Then he'd flown, as fast as he could, to his house.

Clark snapped out of his memories.

"It doesn't matter," he argued. "One rumor is all it would take, Mom, to send everything crashing down. I don't know what Trask is up to. I don't know what spies he might have. I have no idea where he might be. No one ever found anyone related to Bureau Thirty-Nine. If rumor somehow reached him of a flying man in Kansas, I don't know what would happen. He'd come after me, that's for sure."

"But you can easily outmatch him, son. Make sure the proper authorities took care of him." Jonathan's face was grim.

"He has Kryptonite, Dad," Clark said, shaking his head. "All it would take would be one well-placed bullet. My heart, my head, my guts..." He sighed. "And that's just what he could do to kill *me*. I can't imagine him having a problem with kidnapping, torturing, or murdering you guys, if he made the connection between us. I can't risk it. I *won't*."

"So, what then? What are you going to do?"

"I need to leave," Clark said, his voice sinking to barely a whisper. "I can't stay here anymore."

"Clark..." Martha said.

Clark shook his head sadly. "I don't want to go. But I don't see what other choice I have."

"There's got to be some other way," Martha argued.

"If I leave, Trask will have a hard time finding me. And maybe he won't make the connection between Kansas and you guys and me. Maybe he'll think I was just passing through the area."

"You're assuming he'll ever hear of today's incident," Martha pointed out. "He probably won't. You realize that, don't you?"

Clark sighed. "Of course I do, Mom. But I can't hang my hopes on 'probably.' Trask is an evil man."

"Where are you going to go?" Jonathan asked.

It was a simple question, and not one that Clark had an answer to yet. He shook his head.

"I don't know," he admitted softly. "I just know that I can't stay."

“Oh, Clark,” Martha sighed, distressed.

“It’s okay, Mom,” he said, coming to her side and resting his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll be okay. And besides, it’s not like I’ll ever really be all that far away. I can come home anytime to visit with you guys. Just so long as I’m careful about it.”

“Son, it’s not going to be the same without you here,”

Jonathan said.

“I know, Dad. But I promise, I’ll still come home at least once a week to have dinner with you. And I’ll still come in to help with as much work on the farm as I can. Besides, it shouldn’t be that difficult for me, wherever I wind up. You guys know that I have a knack for languages. I should be able to just... blend in... no matter where I go.”

Clark stopped and sighed. His hand reflexively curled and uncurled, making a fist and relaxing it again. The muscle in his jaw ticked, a sign of how unhappy he was, and how tightly he was trying to stifle his emotions. He didn’t want to leave. He didn’t want to lose the only home he’d ever known. He didn’t want to go out blindly into the world, trying to find some other place to settle in, hoping against hope that Trask would never find him.

But he saw no choice. His own desires paled in comparison to the greater responsibility of keeping his parents safe. And if that meant leaving behind his friends, his job, and his home, he would do so.

July 6, 1990

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

The word echoed in Clark’s brain as he hastily packed his few belongings in a well-worn suitcase. He had to leave this place, and fast. He had to leave before anyone suspected that he was more than he seemed. How could he have been so careless? Carelessness had been what had gotten him into this self-imposed exile in the first place.

He looked around the small but comfortable cabin, nestled in the Canadian wilderness. He’d gotten a good deal on the place. The rent was more than reasonable and the place was fully furnished. It had been close enough to the paper he’d been working for, though he had only been a free-lancer. But he’d steadily been working toward trying to convince his boss to take him on full time. He had even thought he was getting close to achieving that goal. Until now.

Now he had ruined it all.

He couldn’t believe it. He didn’t regret what he’d done. But the rumors had already started flying.

He’d been at the bank that morning, cashing the meager paycheck he’d made by submitting a few articles to his boss. He’d been standing in line, patiently waiting his turn to speak with the teller. Two men had burst into the bank, hooded and masked. They had ordered everyone to lay face down on the floor before aiming their guns at the teller. They had demanded cash and threatened to shoot the hostages if their demands were not met.

Clark had been able to discreetly slip his glasses down enough so that he could aim his heat vision at one of the men’s guns. The pistol had instantly heated up and the robber had screamed, dropping the weapon. That had taken the second man off-guard. As he’d turned to his partner, Clark and another man had rushed the two thieves. It hadn’t been difficult for Clark to subdue the man who’d still maintained a grip on his gun. Clark had wrested the weapon from the man and tossed it aside. The teller, in the meantime, had tripped a silent alarm. Within minutes, the local police had shown up, made the arrest, and thanked the two men who’d helped to apprehend the criminals after taking their statements.

Clark had slipped out as soon as he could, just barely making it out of the bank before the first reporters showed up. He’d

found the closest vacant alley and had taken off at maximum speed. For a while, he had hovered above his rented house, too high for any prying eyes to see him, ensuring that no nosy agents of the press came knocking on his door. When they hadn’t, he’d finally allowed himself to land and start packing.

But where was he to go? Did it matter? Would Trask hear of this rescue and the rumors of the gun which had mysteriously heated itself?

It was time to move on.

Clark shoved the last of his clothing into his luggage, then hurried to his computer. He typed out a fast letter of resignation, and sent it to his editor. Then he sent a note to his landlord, informing him that he was leaving the month’s rent on the kitchen table along with the key to the place. By the time he was done, curls of smoke rose from the keyboard.

Clark frowned at that. It frustrated him sometimes, that modern technology still wasn’t able to keep up with his speed.

He waited until evening was coming on, then he left the cabin for the last time. Without a look back, he shot up into the sky and bolted away from North America.

September 21, 1991

“I don’t know, Mom,” Clark said, sighing, as he paced the living room of the Kansas farmhouse where he’d found his family, so many years ago. “I just can’t seem to help it. It’s like a curse or something.”

“It’s not a curse, Clark,” Martha argued back. “You’re doing what your heart tells you is right.”

“I know,” Clark sighed again, hanging his head into his chest. “But look what it’s doing to my life.”

“Clark,” Martha said, groping for words.

She didn’t have a chance to find any more before her son gently cut her off.

“I know that I shouldn’t feel badly about helping people. I don’t. And I don’t regret doing the things that I’ve done. It feels really good to be able to use these powers to help, to save lives. But, as soon as I’m finished, I can all but feel Trask on my trail.”

“Son,” Jonathan said, speaking up for the first time since Clark had related his latest rescue and subsequent move. “How can you be sure that he’s even still after you?”

“Dad, I grew up under that man’s rule. I know him far too well. He won’t be content to know that I’m out there, somewhere in the world. He always threatened that he would see me either under his control or dead. And I believe that. It wasn’t a bluff.”

“That may be, but we can’t even be sure he’s still alive,” Jonathan pointed out. “Look at Pauly Overton. Forty years old and healthy as a horse. Bam. Dies of a stroke.”

“I know,” Clark said, still pacing. He reached the wall and kept moving, until he was traversing the room’s ceiling. “But I can’t afford to *hope* that Trask is gone. All the time, I feel this... noose...tightening around me. Every time I make a rescue or help out in some small way, I wind up unable to sleep well for weeks. I see Trask in every shadow. I feel his eyes on me in every public place — be it at a Papal Mass in Rome, or in the Louvre while admiring the paintings, or on the streets of Tokyo. Every minute, I’m expecting to see him jump out before me with a chunk of Kryptonite.”

“What can we do to help?” Jonathan asked, looking up at his distraught son.

Clark sighed again and slumped his shoulders. “There’s nothing you *can* do. I have to figure this out on my own, I guess.”

“You can always come back home,” Martha added.

“I know. And I appreciate that, Mom. But I can’t risk it right now. Not until I figure out a way to either deal with my desire to help people without the fear of exposing myself for what I am, or find a way to squash down the instinct to help at all.”

Martha raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You really think that’s a

possibility for you?"

There was no reproach in her voice. There was only genuine curiosity.

Clark shook his head. "I don't know. All I know is...I have to do *something*."

October 4, 1992

Clark Kent had all but lost track of how many places he had lived in. If it hadn't been for his flawless memory, he probably wouldn't have remembered all of the countries and cities he'd been in. Some of them had been amazing. Others had made him feel uncomfortable and out of place, like the alien he truly was. And none of them had yet felt like home.

Of course, that hadn't been why he'd left them. He couldn't afford to just pick up and leave because he wasn't fond of a place. He couldn't just dash off because he was homesick. He had only ever left those places because he'd used his powers and the rumor mill had once again begun to turn.

Although, he had to admit, he was getting a little better about the whole thing. He'd found discreet ways to employ his super abilities without drawing too much attention. Slowly, he had figured out ways of helping without putting himself too much at risk. A cough could cover up a blast of his powerful breath if he needed to blow a car out of a collision course with a pedestrian, for example. It had helped him settle in places for longer periods of time. He'd lasted six months in Italy before he'd slipped up badly and had been forced to flee. He'd managed a month in Spain. He'd lived in Germany for three months. He'd even landed a full time position at one of the German papers.

But always he had come close to being discovered. He'd grown ever more fearful and restless, fleeing before Trask could find him, assuming the man was still alive. He knew Trask had never been caught. He and the rest of Bureau Thirty-Nine had vanished into thin air. Clark figured that the police had probably all but forgotten their search for the man after so many years.

Clark sighed as he wandered the halls of the Cairo museum. It was getting late. He checked his watch. Three fifty-two in the morning. His shift was nearly over. Just another hour and eight minutes to go. Then he would go back to the tiny apartment he was renting, attempt to get an hour or two of sleep, then hit the streets looking for a story to write up, all the while hoping that the paper would agree to buy it from him.

The halls of the museum were eerily quiet as he patrolled. It both comforted him and unnerved him in the same instant. It was nice, in a way, to be all alone, his colleagues all patrolling other areas of the building. And yet, he missed the sounds of life around him — the chatter of people, the snaps, clicks, and whines of cameras, sneakers squeaking on the floors. It seemed so odd for the place to be stone-quiet.

Clark passed a glass case that stood in the center of the room he was in. He peered in, fascinated, as always. Beyond the barrier was a mummy, almost perfectly preserved, except for a shattered foot. The mummy even had some wisps of hair barely clinging to its shriveled scalp. It simultaneously captivated Clark's mind and crept him out, knowing that the object on display had once been a living person.

As he stared, he couldn't help but wonder about his own future. What if Trask found him? What if Trask killed him? Would his alien body be preserved and stuck on display for the untold millions of Earth to ogle at? Once more, he heard the cynical carnival barker's voice in his mind.

Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! Step right up! See the amazing alien body! He looked like a man, spoke like a man, but possessed powers beyond imagining! See how, even in death, nothing can pierce his flesh! See how, even in death, no flame can burn him!

Clark shuddered in the dark, moving away from the nameless

body in the glass case.

February 13, 2193

Tempus frowned as he took stock of the world around him. Everything had started out so promising. He'd handed over the infant Kal-El to Cameron Trask. The man had been so eager to possess the alien infant. He had been so ready to begin the process of turning the baby into a super soldier, one with the ability to take down entire governments on a whim, all while barely batting an eyelash.

When Tempus had left this universe, he had done so secure in the knowledge that he had won the battle.

With Kal-El nothing more than a science-experiment, a lab rat, a brainwashed minion, there was no way that Utopia could possibly exist. It was a complete impossibility.

But as he looked around Metropolis now, he didn't see any of the trash or graffiti that should have greeted him. He didn't see the violence he'd been so desperately ready for. In fact, there was no sign at all that his plan had worked. Curious, and more than a little annoyed, he wandered through the quiet streets. Dawn was just streaking the sky above him with pinks and blues, and puffy white clouds trimmed in gold from the rising sun. He headed straight for Centennial Park, knowing he would get his answer there.

Only a few early morning risers were out. Tempus nodded irritably as he passed an older man walking his black lab, the dog straining against his collar, hoping for a run. He scowled at the two college age women who jogged toward him down the freshly asphalted path. They had the audacity to shoot him matching dirty looks. That caused Tempus to chuckle to himself. No matter what else, in Utopia or not, there were elements of human nature that did not change.

He found the place he was looking for easily enough. He could find it with his eyes closed if he had to.

The Fountain.

The place where Clark Kent and Lois Lane had become engaged to be married. Now immortalized as a shrine to the Man of Steel and the woman he'd bound his life to.

Some time after they had both passed on, their descendants had gone public with their true identities. But society had been well on its way to becoming Utopia, and there had not been a backlash the way Tempus would have liked to have seen. Instead of condemning the superhero as a liar — after all, he *had* misled the world a few times about who he really was — the world had celebrated the alien. Statues had been erected in his honor, depicting him with his wife, both as Superman and as Clark. Some even showed them with their children, like this one, and still others with their children and grandchildren.

Tempus gritted his teeth as he rounded the bend in the path, coming out from behind the tall evergreen hedge that lined the walkway. The Fountain was still there, along with the statue of Lois and Clark, and their half-breed mongrel children.

Somehow, his plan had failed. Even with Kal-El handed over to Trask, something had gone wrong. Somehow, he'd still managed to find Lois in this universe. And whenever that happened, Utopia was an inevitability.

He needed a new plan. He had to find some way of preventing those two from linking up. He thought carefully over his college Lane History classes. As he did so, glaring at the statue before him as though he himself possessed heat vision to melt it, a seed of an idea took root in his mind.

Smiling to himself, he put his back to the statue and swiftly left the area. He had preparations to make.

February 16, 1993

"Perry!" Lois Lane cried, rushing through the bullpen of the Daily Planet. She pitched her voice loud enough to cut through

the chaos of sound all around them. “Perry!”

Perry turned at the sound of Lois’ voice. It was clear that whatever she was approaching him about, she was excited. He squashed down the proud smile that was threatening to break out over his face.

“Yes?” he asked, as she finally reached his side. “You have something for me?”

Lois thrust a handful of pages at him. “Here’s the stories on the bank robbery, the rash of car thefts, and yes, even the opening of the Lexor. But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. Can we talk in your office?”

Perry raised an amused eyebrow at Lois’ babble. The girl could talk a mile a minute without pausing for breath, but she was also one of the best damned reporters he’d ever seen. She already had two Kerth Awards under her belt, and, if Perry’s instincts were right, she had a good shot at winning another one this year as well. He gestured to his office, opening the door and letting her step inside first.

“What’s this all about?” he asked, as he seated himself behind his desk. “And cut straight to the chase, if you don’t mind. I’m in the middle of something big here.”

“Perry, this is bigger than your trip to Graceland,” Lois said, smiling as though she knew a secret that he didn’t.

“Easy for you to say,” Perry huffed. “Now, spill it or leave my office.”

His tone with her was gentle, teasing almost. He loved the young woman before him like a daughter, and she knew it.

“Gunrunning.”

“Come again?”

“I’ve got a lead on a gunrunning operation,” Lois clarified.

“Uh-huh.”

“In the Congo.”

“Where’d you get this information?”

“Bobby Bigmouth. He got it from someone in the government. Weird name. What was it? Tampos? Timpas? Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“So you...”

“I want to go over there, Perry. I want to be the one to crack this story open.”

“You sure you can trust this?” Perry asked, concerned.

“Bobby’s never lead me astray before,” Lois said, shrugging. “You know his leads always pan out. I have the articles to prove it.”

“I don’t know about sending you over there by yourself,” Perry said, fidgeting with a pencil. “It’s pretty rough over there right now. Especially for someone like you. Young, attractive, American, and female.”

“Perry...”

“Now, Lois, I know you feel like you have the right to this story. And ordinarily, I’d agree. But I don’t know if I’d feel right sending you over there.”

“Perry!” Lois said, her voice hitching up an octave as she fought the impulse to yell. “This is *my* lead. You can’t send someone else!”

“I didn’t say I was going to stop you,” Perry said with a sly grin. “But I want you to take Eduardo with you.”

“Eduardo?” Lois squeaked. “Oh come on, Perry! What’s he going to do, other than get in my way?”

“Lois,” Perry said, in a warning tone.

“No, Perry,” she argued back, crossing her arms. “A story this big could be Pulitzer worthy. And if you think I’m about to share it with *anyone*, you can forget it right now.”

With that, Lois was out of the editor’s office. Perry sighed as he watched her retreating form. It was clear that her mind was made up. And, editor or not, there were times when he knew he would never be able to change her mind. Lois would do whatever she wanted, despite what he asked, begged, or ordered her to do.

One day, it would get her into trouble. He was sure of it.

February 20, 1993

Clark Kent sat at the sagging, shabby bar in the hotel where he was staying. He sipped absently from the mug of beer in front of him, his eyes sweeping over the other patrons surreptitiously. Not many people were around, and those who were sat in small groups of two or three, all with their own drinks. Some spoke in low tones, ones that Clark could easily pick out with his special hearing, if he bothered to. Others laughed loudly. A couple of men threw darts down at the far end of the room. But for the most part, the people around him were subdued. Even in here, the heat of the day still ruled, despite the efforts of ceiling fans and heavily shaded windows. The air was so thick with humidity that he felt as if he were drinking it rather than breathing it.

He sighed softly, trying to figure out his next move, and staring into the amber liquid before him as though it would yield the answers he sought. He hadn’t really been thinking when he’d fled Borneo. He had merely let the winds take him where they wanted. And somehow, that had led him to the Congo.

For three long days he had been here, trying to decide what to do next. Should he stay here for a time and see if he could make a home of it, even for a short time? Should he pick a new place on the map, leaving once it grew dark out? Should he fly back home, to his parents, and ask their advice?

No, he had to rule that last one out. The last time he’d done that, he’d wound up arguing with them until late into the night. They had wanted him to end his self-imposed exile. But he just couldn’t muster up the courage to do that. He still had nightmares about Trask discovering who he was. And in those nightmares, the people he loved always got hurt or killed, without fail. Besides, he hated arguing with his parents. He loved them fiercely and always felt guilty when he argued with them.

No, he would have to figure this one out on his own. With another hearty sigh, Clark drained the rest of his mug, then set it down. The heavy glass made a solid *thunk* as it made contact with the wooden bar top. It was his third beer since plopping down on the worn barstool and, judging from the look on the bartender’s face, he wasn’t going to be permitted to have another. It was times like this when he actually hated the fact that alcohol had absolutely no effect on him. He really wished he could get drunk enough to pass out in his room for a few hours and have a deep, dreamless sleep.

At least the bar served decent food, he thought to himself. It had been a few weeks since he’d last eaten a meal, not really needing to since the sun gave him all the nourishment he required. He hadn’t even really had the opportunity to fly home for his mother’s cooking. So the meal tonight had been more than welcome. He actually wished he could afford another round of food, but he simply hadn’t had much success in finding work. Freelance work wasn’t bad, but it was unpredictable and didn’t pay as well as a staff job. Not that it mattered much. Clark was constantly on the move as it was.

As Clark gazed down at the empty mug on the scratched bartop, he regretted his decision to blow his much needed money on something as pointless and frivolous as beer. Not only did it have no effect on him whatsoever, but it hadn’t even been that great of a brew, leaving behind an unpleasant after-taste.

Stupid, he chided himself.

Unsure of what to do now or where to go, Clark reached into his pants pocket and pulled out his wallet. He extracted a few bills and set them on the bar. He was about to stand and leave when his hearing picked up two voices speaking toward the back of the room. They were talking in hushed whispers, but what had jarred his attention was the fact that one of them, the female, sounded oddly familiar to him. He listened intently for a moment, feeling guilty for eavesdropping, but needing, on some primal

level, to figure out where he'd heard that voice before.

"Come on, Karl," the woman said, a hard edge to her voice. "I didn't fly all this way for you to tell me that you have nothing."

The dark-skinned man she was talking to shook his bald head. "I'm sorry, Miss Lane. I can't help you."

"Damn it, Karl! You know as well as I do about the rumors."

"That's all they are, I'm afraid. Rumors."

Clark blinked. The man — Karl — had said Miss Lane. Suddenly, Clark found himself sitting in the bleachers of the Metropolis University football field after he had broken his third record. He was being interviewed by Lois Lane, the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on. Could this woman possibly be the same person? Had fate crossed their paths again?

He had to know. He twisted in his seat a little, just enough to peer over to where she sat, in a prim, crisp khaki business suit, modest pumps, and pair of sunglasses resting atop her dark tresses. Clark's breath caught in his throat as he looked. She was a little more mature looking, a little more hardened by the world around her, but he would recognize her anywhere. Her hair, once so long, had been cropped into a neat chin-length bob, but there was no doubt in his mind that she was the same woman who had interviewed him and stolen his heart all in the same moment.

"Oh, that's just *wonderful*," Lois complained, throwing her hands up into the air in exasperation. "I'll just fly back home tonight. Then the Daily Planet can post a detailed article on the fact that there are only *rumors* of a gunrunning ring operating in the Congo. We should sell out by noon! My editor will be *thrilled* that he agreed to send me here. In fact, I should go home and clear off some space on my shelf for all the awards I'll win for reporting that nothing is happening here."

"Ssh!" Karl cautioned her. "Not so loud. You don't know who may be listening. It could be dangerous to your health."

"I'm a reporter," Lois argued back, though her voice did drop a little lower. "Danger is part of my job description."

Karl chuckled a little. "Miss Lane, do you have *any* idea what would happen to a woman like you if the smugglers got wind of you on their trail?"

"Aha!" Lois said in a triumphant whisper. "So there *are* smugglers."

Karl sighed. "I merely ask in a theoretical sense."

"That's a load of bull, if you ask me."

"Miss Lane..."

"I don't need you to protect me, Karl."

"Fine. Have it your way," the man said, standing. "Goodbye, Miss Lane."

Karl turned his back to Lois and swiftly made his way out of the bar. Lois' color rose in aggravation. She stood, slamming her palms on the wooden tabletop, then stormed out of the room, calling after Karl. Clark listened for a few minutes, as he made his way out of the bar. But the man never replied to Lois.

"Fine," Clark heard the woman mutter under her breath. "I'll just have to do this the hard way."

February 25, 1993

Clark had been shadowing Lois Lane for days. The gunrunning story didn't interest him in the least. He wasn't the type to swoop in and steal someone else's story. But he *had* been concerned about Lois' safety. So he had appointed himself her unseen protector, staying in the shadows, always out of her detection.

So far, she hadn't managed to get into any trouble, but Clark had the gut instinct that it would find her sooner or later. It was just a matter of where and when. And all the while, he ached to be able to approach her. He wanted so badly to talk to her, get to know her, and allow her to get to know him. But he was afraid. He didn't want the inevitable questions of why was he in the

Congo, was he competing for the same story, how did he manage to randomly come across her, here on the opposite side of the world from her home. And so, he contented himself with watching from a distance, listening to the mesmerizing sound of her voice, getting to know, in intimate detail, the unique sound of her heartbeat.

Clark watched as Lois left the hotel where she was staying, which, as luck would have it, was the same as the one he'd checked into a few days before she had arrived in the Congo. It was late, but the heat of the day still lingered in the air. The humidity was so high that Clark's clothes clung limply to his body, though he did not sweat. He stayed in the shadows as he watched her get into the rental Jeep she was using. For a few moments, she merely let the vehicle idle, waiting for the air conditioner to fully kick in. Then she was off, driving through the night.

Clark followed behind, flying through the dark sky. He barely had to exert any energy to keep up with Lois, though her driving pattern did leave him more than a little worried about her. If she kept driving the way she was, she wouldn't need the gunrunners to find her in order to get hurt or killed. Clark shook his head to himself and flew on.

Two hours later, Lois pulled the car over to the side of the road. She got out, armed with a tape recorder and camera. Clark dropped in altitude a bit, closing the distance between them slightly. He wanted to be as close to her as possible, without giving himself away. He could be at her side in the blink of an eye if need be, but he still didn't want to leave any unnecessary space between them.

He followed her as she took off into the underbrush, wading through various ferns, sapling trees, and high grasses until she was close to a mile from her car. A ramshackle cabin stood in the gloom, light spilling out from the single grimy window in the side facing them. Lois cautiously approached the building, ready with her camera. The window was open, allowing in as much of the night air as possible.

Lois crouched below the window, listening for a long time, the tape recorder in her hand. Clark hovered behind the wide trunk of a tree, directly behind Lois. He scanned right through the solid bark and through the wall of the cabin. He frowned. Lois had been right. There were definitely gunrunners in the building. He watched as they carefully packed weapons into crates labeled coffee, palm oil, rubber, and cocoa.

Lois carefully peered through the window, just enough to barely be seen at the lower edge. Her camera began to snap pictures, the sound all but imperceptible. Photo after photo she took, pausing only to swap out the rolls of film with fresh ones. She stayed there for half an hour, maybe more, before she finally lowered the camera and shut off the tape recorder.

Within the building, the men were finishing their task. Clark heard them lightly joking with each other as they carefully tucked away the last of the guns, then nailed shut the crate they were in. He realized that they were getting ready to call it a night, leaving behind only a couple of guards. Lois realized this as well, and she stealthily began to move away, back through the jungle to her Jeep.

But in the darkness, she didn't see the protruding root from the tree where Clark was hiding. She hit the ground with a thud and an involuntary gasp of pain as she landed flat on her stomach. At the same time, her body crashed nosily through a fern. Inside the cabin, voices rose to shouting. Clark could see the men within reaching for their guns.

Quick as lightning, he flew to the building. Finding a heavy, broken tree limb, he did his best to bar the door. The men inside pounded against the door, frantically trying to get at their eavesdropper. Two men headed to the window, poking the barrels of their firearms out into the humid air. Clark heard their

fingers tightening on the triggers. He had just enough time to check the limb once more and position his body behind Lois. An instant later, he felt the bullets skipping off his back.

Lois, meanwhile, had gotten back to her feet. She took off through the jungle, running as fast as she could manage. Clark stayed behind her, floating just an inch above the ground so she would not hear a second set of footsteps. Now and again, he could hear the sharp crack of the gunrunners' weapons firing at random into the jungle. He heard the crash of the door as they finally muscled it open. He heard them spreading out in all directions, looking for Lois.

He allowed himself a small sigh of relief when Lois was safely back in the Jeep and speeding back toward the hotel. For a moment, he stayed put, hidden in the deep shadows of the jungle, utterly unnoticed by Lois. He wondered if he should round up the gunrunners or if he should tail Lois all the way back to the hotel. But in the next second, he made up his mind. He needed to follow Lois. He needed to ensure that she was all right. He could come back for the gunrunners later, or send the authorities to the hideaway Lois had managed to find.

Lois drove so quickly that she managed to cut the travel time almost in half. Clark stayed with her, flying above the roof of her car, his senses alert for everything and anything. The gunrunners did not follow. That made him uneasy. He had thought for sure they would be tailing the car as closely as possible. Something was going on, he just wasn't sure what.

At last, the hotel came into sight. Lois finally relaxed her foot off the gas pedal, allowing the vehicle to slow down somewhat. She pulled into a spot as soon as she hit the modest parking lot, then hopped out of the driver's seat. For a moment, she stood there, leaning against the car. Clark heard her nervous, yet relieved, laughter quietly slipping out into the night.

"Lois, you've really pulled it off this time," she whispered to herself. "Pulitzer, here I come."

Pushing away from her rental car, she headed back into the hotel. Clark shadowed her, careful to ensure that she did not notice his presence. He took advantage of her momentary distraction in the lobby as she asked the clerk if there were any messages for her, using it to get ahead of her. Something wasn't right in the hotel. He could feel it in his bones.

He had long since discovered what room was Lois', so he headed there first. The light had gone out in the hall, plunging it into deep shadows. Clark grew more and more uneasy. He passed her door, pausing once he was certain he was cloaked enough to avoid her detection. He tuned in his hearing, listening to the sounds of life all around him. He heard snoring coming from several rooms on the floor, since it was bordering on five am. In one room, an insomniac was flipping listlessly through the few television channels. At the other end of the hallway, he could hear a businessman mumbling to himself as he packed his things, rushing to make his flight.

Footsteps.

Lois was coming. Clark slunk deeper into the shadows. Lois reached her door and inserted the key into the lock. That's when Clark heard it. The soft click of a gun's safety mechanism being disabled. Clark dove at Lois.

"Look out!" he called, as he tackled her to the ground.

Lois landed face first on the old, worn, musty carpeting. Clark pressed his body tightly against her, forming a shield. He knew his body would be able to protect her from what was coming.

"Hey! What the hell are...?"

Gun shots exploded, ripping apart the silence and piercing the wood of the door. They left holes in the wall on the opposite side of hall, the wood splintering and taking flight in all directions.

"It's all right," Clark tried to reassure the woman, hoping she wouldn't be able to twist enough to get a good look at him. "I'll

protect you."

A bullet skipped off his forehead. He was infinitely glad that Lois was currently staring only at the floor. Clark heard the hollow click as the shooter pulled the trigger on an empty bullet chamber.

"Stay down," he ordered Lois.

Then, before she could do so much as take a breath, he dashed away, into her hotel room. With a small bit of assistance from his incredible speed, he tackled the shooter before the man could finish reloading. The man fumbled with the new magazine of bullets as Clark grabbed him from behind. He securely grabbed the man's wrists and held them behind his back. With a tiny bit of calculated pressure, he forced the shooter to release his grip on his weapon, then he kicked it across the room.

Taking one of Lois' scarves, he quickly bound the man's hands. He only hoped the thin, gauzy material would hold him. He shoved the shooter into the chair that stood by the window, then used another scarf to tie him to it. One final scarf bound the man's ankles to the chair legs.

In the next moment, Clark had his back to the man and was out the door. He had worked so quickly that Lois was only just now starting to venture a look up. Clark was beside her in an instant, bending over her and offering his hand to her. She took it blindly and he helped her to her feet.

"What... what just happened?" she asked in a dazed voice.

"Your source... Karl. Looks like he was in league with the gunrunners."

"Oh God," Lois groaned. Then she paused, thinking. "Wait... how did you...?"

"It doesn't matter," Clark said. "What matters is that you tell the authorities everything you know about the gunrunning operation."

"You wouldn't be trying to steal my story, would you?" Lois asked, giving him a hard look.

Clark let out a soft laugh. "No," he reassured her. "You did all the legwork on it. Print your story. I dare-say you should win some awards with it." He gave her a grin, knowing that she probably couldn't see it.

"Come into the light," she asked, as the pounding of footsteps sounded behind her.

Clark shook his head. Police swarmed into the room, weapons raised. "They are going to need you to make a statement."

"And you," she countered.

"No," Clark said, stepping backwards a pace. "I can't afford to be associated with this." He took three more steps backwards.

"Wait!" Lois cried, effectively stopping him in his tracks. "You saved my life. Thank you. But please, at least tell me your name."

Clark hesitated. He couldn't give her his real name, but he didn't want to lie and make up one either. And yet, he wanted so much to reveal himself to her. Maybe, just maybe, it would allow him to get to know her. He desperately wanted to get to know her.

"I'm... a friend," he finally said.

"Miss Lane!" Two of the police officers approached Lois. She turned to look at them. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, fine. Just a second," she said, waving them away and turning back to Clark.

But he was already gone, zipping down the stairwell at the far end of the corridor and heading to his own room. Once there, he slipped out of his window. Tonight, he would patrol the area, ensuring that no further attempts were made on Lois' life. And once she left the hotel, heading back to her home, he would move on again.

As he circled around the hotel, a silent sentinel, he kept his hearing tuned to Lois. He listened as she filled in the authorities

on what had taken place that night. Once they were satisfied, he heard her pacing her room, perhaps still riding the wave of adrenaline he was sure she had to have been experiencing. She picked up the phone after a while, dialing a long series of numbers to call overseas.

“Hi, Perry. Yes, I know it’s after midnight. But I have one hell of a story for you...”

September 12, 1993

Clark disembarked from the bus, grateful to be able to stand and walk again. He’d been on the stuffy, overcrowded bus for too many hours. It felt great to stretch his legs finally. He rolled his neck from side to side, working out a kink that had formed in his muscles when he’d fallen asleep, his head leaning against the window. Now, he was wide awake and ready to tackle the world. He stood on the sidewalk, taking in the sights and smells of the city.

Metropolis.

Perhaps it would become his new home. He liked it here already. It had a welcoming heartbeat to it, though most people probably would have called the city cold and impersonal. And, more importantly, this was Lois Lane’s city. Perhaps, if he lived in Metropolis, he could get to know her. He certainly planned on trying to land a job at the newspaper she worked for. Not only would she be a colleague then, but the Daily Planet was one of the most prestigious papers in the entire country. It would be a dream come true to land a permanent position on its staff.

As he stood there, trying to decide his first move, he allowed himself to think back over the events that had led him back to the United States after so many years in exile.

After his time in the Congo, he had wandered aimlessly. For two months he’d disappeared off the map, seeking refuge in the vast, uninhabited regions of Siberia. It had been extremely lonely and depressing, but he had felt it to be a necessity. Rescuing Lois had been the riskiest thing he had ever done. He had allowed himself to interact with the person he had saved, instead of doing his best to be an invisible helper. It was true that she hadn’t seen his face — at least, he was pretty sure she hadn’t — and he hadn’t given her his name. But he still feared Trask somehow finding him out and hunting him down. Or worse, using Lois as a way to get to him.

It had been a rough couple of months for Clark. Though the temperatures didn’t bother him, it had weighed heavily on his mind that he had almost no contact with any people whatsoever. It had dredged up painful memories of his time as Trask’s prisoner during his youth. Although, even then, he’d had human interaction, even if the only people he’d seen then were the scientists who’d poked and prodded and experimented on him day after day and the guards who’d kept him locked in his prison.

He had only dared to see his parents twice during that time, and then for no more than a few hours at a time. He never went to them during daylight hours. It was always under the cover of darkness, when it would be hardest for any prying eyes to see him speed into a landing behind the house. Paranoid had not even begun to describe how nervous he’d been about being seen.

When he could no longer bear the isolation of Siberia, he’d moved on to Fiji, then Australia, and finally Greece, never staying long in one place. He’d kept a tight rein on his intense desire to help people, but always managed to allow it to slip enough to possibly expose him. As before, he’d lived his life by constantly looking over his shoulder, expecting to see Trask coming after him. But then, he’d happened to call home one night, only to get shocking news.

Cameron Trask was dead.

The police had notified the Kents several days before, knowing they would want closure to the case. Trask had been brought to a hospital, complaining of chest pains. He had died of

a massive heart attack right in the emergency wing of the hospital before the doctors could do so much as diagnose him. No one had any idea where the rest of Bureau Thirty-Nine was, but Clark knew that most of them didn’t know much about him. Most were unaware of what powers he possessed and of the effect that Kryptonite had on him. It was true that Jenson knew, but Clark knew that the scientist wasn’t a ruthless man. Trask had been the one who had truly scared him.

But now, Clark was a free man.

He’d come out of exile within the hour, flying with all speed back to Smallville. He’d been, and still was, filled with euphoria, as if the entire weight of the cosmos had been lifted from his shoulders. He would continue to hide who and what he really was from the world, but he no longer needed to fear being pursued by a madman.

And yet, his days abroad had changed him. He was no longer content to spend his days working on his parents’ farm. Oh, he still loved to be able to help them out, to be there with them, to have their reassuring presence so close once more. But he had, in a very real and profound way, outgrown Smallville. It had been time for him to move on once more.

Clark sauntered down the sidewalk, looking for a place to stay. After trying several hotels, he found the only one that was in his price range was the ratty, shabby Hotel Apollo. The place was an absolute dump, complete with cracked walls, peeling paint, and the faint stench of mold, mildew, and decay. But he could afford more than one night there, and they had a vacancy. He took the room without complaint. He frowned as he opened the door to his room. It was even more Spartan than his room in the Congo had been. With a sigh, he dropped his suitcase on the bed, the ancient springs creaking under the light weight of the case. He popped the case open, grabbed the folder with his résumé and writing samples, and headed back out into the warm September day.

It was easy enough to find the Daily Planet, the large, shining globe like a beacon to him. He stepped confidently into the building, breathing in deeply the strong, fragrant aroma of coffee from the newsstand on the ground floor. He passed it by without looking at it, and pressed the elevator button. He rode silently up to the bullpen, his mind focused on what he could possibly say to the editor.

The doors slid back open with a soft ding, letting Clark out into the thick of the newspaper.

“Excuse me,” he said, stopping a man in his tracks. The man couldn’t have been any older than himself. In fact, he was probably a few years younger than Clark was. “I’m looking for Perry White’s office.”

“Right this way,” the man said. “I’m heading to his office right now.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“I’m Jimmy.”

“Clark Kent, nice to meet you,” Clark said, offering Jimmy his hand.

The two men shared a friendly shake.

“Olsen!” An irritated yell punctured through the low roar of the newsroom.

“Speaking of,” Jimmy said under his breath. “Come on.”

“Where in Sam Hill have you been?” the editor asked, in a grumpy southern drawl as Jimmy reached his office.

“Running some research for Lois,” Jimmy said, shrugging.

“Where the hell is my sandwich?”

Jimmy sighed and lifted a brown paper bag in his hand, setting it on the editor’s desk. “Right here. BLT, extra tomato, no mayo.”

The editor cracked a small smile and grunted agreeably.

“Well, all right then.”

“Chief, this is Clark. He says he was looking for you.”

"You have an appointment, son?"

Clark squirmed a little. "Well...no. Not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?" Perry asked, arching an eyebrow. "You either do or you don't."

"I...don't," Clark confessed. "But I was hoping that I could speak with you, about getting a job here as a reporter."

Perry eyed Clark for a long moment with an appraising stare. He must have liked something that he saw. After a moment, he nodded.

"Come on, take a seat."

"Thank you, sir."

Perry nodded and sat down in his high-backed office chair. It squeaked a little as he turned it to face Clark better. He frowned.

"Jimmy!"

"On it, Chief!" came the reply. "I'll run down to the hardware store and get something to fix that squeak as soon as I can."

Perry cracked a smile. "That kid's the best around," he confided. "Just don't tell him that."

Clark smiled back, trying to break the ice. "Your secret's safe with me."

Perry chuckled, then swiftly became serious. "So, what's this about a job?"

Clark subtly cleared his throat. His heart was hammering in his chest. He couldn't quite put his finger on why, but he always became extremely nervous when interviewing with an editor. He was perfectly fine in approaching the people he was investigating or witnesses. Perhaps it had something to do with who held the power. In a job interview, he held no power at all, just like he'd held no power long ago as Trask's prisoner. But when he was doing his job as a reporter, he held a certain amount of control.

"I'd like a job here, Mr. White," he said earnestly.

"Well," Perry said, rubbing his chin. "We aren't exactly needing to fill any positions at the moment."

Clark nodded amiably. "Perhaps my work will convince you otherwise."

"You have writing samples?" Perry asked, though he seemed unsurprised.

Clark nodded again. He handed Perry a folder full of newspaper clippings and Xeroxed copies. Perry shuffled through them quickly. But his frown deepened as he got further into the stack.

"You, uh, seem to be pretty well traveled," the editor observed.

"Yes, sir. I spent a lot of time after college bouncing around from place to place."

"Any particular reason why?"

Clark shrugged a little, uncomfortable with the question. "I just...never really felt like I fit in," he finally said. It was close enough to the truth, he thought.

"Madame Rousseau's Pastry Shop Now Serving Wedding Cakes. Smallville Town Hall To Receive Fresh Coat Of Paint. Smallville's Annual CornFest A Roaring Success. Twenty-One Tips For A Safe Summer On The Great Barrier Reef." Perry's voice was flat and dull as he read through some of the titles of Clark's articles.

"I know they may not be hard hitting news..." Clark started to say.

"That's right, they aren't," Perry agreed.

"I was a free-lancer on a lot of those papers," Clark explained. "They wouldn't print my hard news stories most of the time, opting to go with their full-time staff."

"I'm sorry," Perry said, shaking his head. "I just can't use stuff like this."

"Sir, I know I may still be a little green, but if you just give me the chance to prove myself..."

"Sorry, son, I just don't have a place here for you."

Clark sighed softly. The tone in Perry's voice was

unmistakable. He'd heard the same tone in just about every other editor's voice. The subject — and the interview — was closed. He would not be getting a job here. In his mind's eye, he saw his dream being smashed into a million pieces, like a mirror, the shards flying off in every direction imaginable.

Clark stood and stuck out his hand. "I understand. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me."

Perry handed him back the folder. "Don't give up, son. You seem like a bright kid. I'm sure something will come your way."

"Thanks," Clark said, plastering a smile on his face and a feigned lightness in his voice.

He shook the editor's hand, then regretfully left his office. Out in the bullpen, Clark took a second to take stock of the place, wishing he'd been able to secure a position at the paper. As his eyes quickly assessed the place, they came to rest on her.

Lois Lane.

She was talking a mile a minute into her phone, clearly unhappy with whoever was on the other end of the line. She impatiently tapped her pencil on the yellow legal pad before her, the lead tip making a series of small pockmarks on the paper. Clark wandered slowly toward her desk, choosing the path that went right past her on his way to the exit. He listened to her as he walked, using a small portion of his super hearing to focus on her voice alone, out of the chaos that raged all around him.

"Yes, I'm still holding. I've *been* holding for twenty minutes already. Yes, I understand that. I'm sure the mayor is plenty busy, but perhaps he should busy himself with making statements to the press. No, that wasn't a threat. Look, Dana, I don't care. I want to know why the mayor is using city funds to finance his out of state golf trips. No, don't put me on hold again!"

Lois rolled her eyes and hung up the phone. She shrugged into her coat hurriedly. She nearly crashed into Clark as she launched herself away from her desk, still tugging on one sleeve.

"Jimmy!" she called, picking up her pace.

She seemed to ignore Clark, or perhaps she was so focused on her story that she didn't even see him.

"Yeah," Jimmy said, rushing to her side.

"Dig up everything you can on the mayor and his golf outings. And see if you can get someone at City Hall to call me back."

"Where are you heading?"

"The Fudge Castle."

"Lois, you told me to stop you if you even mentioned that place," Jimmy said.

Lois rolled her eyes again. "Not for *me*. For Larry the Leak. He's got to have a lead for me."

With that, she sped off to the elevator. Clark tried to rush through the newsroom fast enough to perhaps share a car down with her, but he was too late. The silver doors shut, taking Lois Lane out of his sight.

November 16, 1993

Clark glanced at his watch. Three-thirty in the morning. Another half hour before quitting time, when he would head back to his rundown, low rent, and somewhat sleazy apartment down in Hobbs Bay. It was a rough section of town, but it was all he could afford. And to do that, he almost never bought any food. But he did miss the taste of a good meal. Plain spaghetti cooked in salted water just wasn't cutting it, on the nights when he decided to splurge.

He had tried to get home as much as possible, but he was juggling three jobs, and it wasn't easy to make time to make the trip out to Kansas, though it only took him seconds to cover the distance. And when he could make it out there, he all but inhaled his food, hugged his parents, thanked them, then rocketed back to Metropolis to make it to one of his jobs on time.

Two and a half weeks. That was how long it had been since

he'd last eaten anything. Two and a half long weeks.

Clark sighed and kept his eyes roving over the crowd in the club. The Stoke Club was still jumping, even at this late hour. Most of the patrons were tucked away at various tables, the bar, or dark corners, shouting at their companions to be heard over the music. A good sized crowd was on the dance floor, and various bodies gyrated to the beat as the DJ fluidly switched from one song to another. The lights swirled around the room at a dizzying pace, throwing splashes of reds, greens, blues, yellows, and purples over the patrons and up the walls, and painting the floor, which glowed an electric neon blue.

It was nearly blinding, but Clark's sharp eyes were better than a normal human's, and he had no difficulty in maintaining his watchful guard. Something in the far corner of the club, near the bathrooms, caught his eye. He agilely wound his way through the dancing people in the center of the room, heading to the people who had grabbed his attention.

A man and a woman, close to Clark's age, were in a compromising position. The man's belt was undone and his fly was down. The woman's skirt was hitched up around her thighs. Clark could see that he'd made it to them just in time.

"All right," he said, in a commanding voice. "Break it up."

"Hey, man, get lost," the man replied.

"Hey, *man*, get a room. I could have you arrested for indecent exposure," Clark said, crossing his arms.

He made sure to flex his muscles just a bit as he did so. In his sleeveless bouncer shirt, the sight was impressive. It had the desired effect. Both the man and the woman blanched a little. The woman pulled her skirt down and adjusted the fabric. The man's hands fumbled as he tried to zip his fly and buckle his belt.

"Get out," Clark said sternly, pointing to the exit. "*Now*."

"Yes, sir," the man said. He grabbed his companion's wrist and swiftly attempted to vanish into the crowd.

Clark followed them, keeping hard on their heels. Only when he saw them exit the building and head down the street was he satisfied. He alerted Manny, the bouncer at the door, of what had transpired, with a warning not to let them back in. Then he went back to his favorite post to watch over the crowd again.

His eyes swept over the crowd, then suddenly stopped. The air rushed from his lungs. *She* was there. Lois Lane. The woman he'd been in love with since a chance meeting in college. Another woman was with her. The similarities between the two women were so great that they could only be sisters. He tuned in his hearing, needing to hear Lois' voice.

"I could kill you for dragging me out here," Lois lamented, taking the last sip of red wine from her glass. She put it down with a sigh.

"Why? Because I'm trying to help you have a social life?"

"Lucy..."

Lucy shook her head. "No, don't start."

"Look, I'm gonna head back to my apartment."

"Lois, come on. Let your hair down. Live a little."

"I've been 'living a little' with my 'hair down' since eleven. This after chasing three dead leads today. I'm tired. I want a hot shower and my bed. Okay?"

A man approached the two women. He placed a hand on Lois' shoulder. "Hey, baby. How's about I buy you a drink?"

Lois shrugged out of the man's touch. "How about no?"

"Come on, baby. You and me. We'll have a few drinks. Maybe you come back to my place."

The man's hand went back to Lois' shoulder. She turned violently on the man, jerking out of his touch.

"Get your hands off me! I said no. Touch me again and I'll break your arm."

Clark was already on the move. He knew the man was drunk, from the way he swayed on his feet and the slight slurring of his words.

"Oh, rough stuff, huh? Luckily for you, I don't mind."

In the next second, Clark materialized behind the drunk man. He tapped the man on his shoulder. The man only briefly turned to glance at him.

"Excuse me, sir. But I believe the lady wants you to leave her alone," Clark said, crossing his arms imposingly across his chest.

The man laughed as if he'd just heard the world's funniest joke. "And who are you? Her body guard?"

"Right now, yes, I am."

"Oh, really?"

Clark nodded. "Really. See, that's what this logo here means." He pointed to the logo on his shirt, stating that he was Stoke Club Security. "Now, you have two choices. Either you leave these ladies here alone, or I'll throw you out."

"I'd like to see you try!"

Clark sighed. The man was bigger than he was, but he couldn't possibly know of Clark's strength. He shook his head.

"All right. You asked for it."

Clark grabbed the man by his shirt, the denim material bunching in his fists. The man started to punch Clark, but Clark paid it no more attention than he would a mosquito. His gaze went to Lois.

"I'll be right back. I just need to take out some trash."

Jeez, that was a corny line, if ever I heard one, he mentally berated himself.

He shook his head again to himself as he brought the drunk to the door. He placed the man outside, finally letting the drunk's feet touch the ground again. The man gave him a hard look, but Clark crossed his arms over his chest and fixed the man with an even harder look. Perhaps the man's liquid courage was starting to wear off. He relented under Clark's unyielding gaze and ambled down the sidewalk. Satisfied, Clark returned to the table where Lois and Lucy were still sitting.

"I just wanted to make sure that you're all right," he said, fumbling for words.

Lois nodded. "Fine, thanks."

"Happy to help," Clark said, giving her a shy smile.

He saw Lucy give Lois a subtle nudge in her ribs. Lois rolled her eyes.

"Okay, I'm done here," she said to her sister.

Lucy reluctantly nodded. "After that, so am I."

"Let me get you a cab," Clark offered. "It's the least I can do. Uh, I mean, to apologize. On behalf of the Stoke Club, that is."

Lois warily eyed him, then nodded her assent. "Thanks. That would be great."

Clark was nearly floating in his ecstasy. Just talking to Lois set his heart to soaring. This was so different then when he'd spoken to her in the Congo. This time, he wasn't afraid to let her see him. There was nothing notable, or super, about a bouncer in a club. There was no reason to suspect that he was anything more than he appeared to be.

He led the two women to the door, then stepped out into the brisk night. He ignored the cool air on his skin. It didn't bother him. If anything, it actually felt kind of good to get out of the stuffy, hot club and take in some fresh air. He reached the edge of the sidewalk and waved down a passing cab. Then he opened the door for Lois and Lucy.

"Have a nice night," he said cheerfully.

"Thanks. You too...uh..."

"Clark," he supplied.

"Clark," Lois repeated.

She stepped into the cab, scooted over, and allowed Lucy to get in. In the next moment, they were off, the bright yellow car reaching the end of the street and turning the corner. Clark sighed dreamily as he stared after them, well after the cab was gone.

Then he checked his watch. Quitting time.

Tomorrow would be another day.

November 17, 1993

Clark tried to stifle a yawn as he stood at his post on the ground floor of the Daily Planet building. He lost the battle, yawning mightily, trying to hide it with one hand. Luckily, it was still fairly early, so not many people witnessed as he stretched along with the yawn. Glancing around at the somewhat empty floor, he took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes.

He'd barely gotten any sleep the night before. He could usually bank on four or five hours of sleep on the nights when he was at the Stoke Club. But his hours had been much longer than usual the previous night. He'd filled in for Ollie, one of the other bouncers who was home sick with the flu. Clark hadn't minded the extra hours at all. He didn't require as much sleep as other people, unless he really pushed himself hard, using his powers. But he hadn't done that in a long time. And besides, the extra hours had been more than welcome for the extra money they would afford him. Perhaps he'd splurge and buy himself a decent dinner one night.

He rested his forearms against the counter of the newsstand. The strong aroma of coffee made his mouth water, but he tamped down his desire to pour himself a cup. He couldn't afford the expense right now, not until his next paycheck came in. Instead, he contented himself with watching the people both within the building and beyond the large windows that looked out into the street.

Hours passed. The morning rush kept Clark busy, for which he was always thankful. The busier he kept himself, the less time he had to dwell on anything else — how desperately he wanted a cup of coffee, how delicious the pastries in the small glass case looked, and, most importantly, when he would catch a glimpse of Lois Lane as she zipped through the lobby and into work for the day.

Lois Lane.

He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind all night.

Every time he'd closed his eyes, he'd seen her face there. He saw her smile. He heard her voice. He smelled the faint trace of her perfume. Cucumber, if he wasn't mistaken. He'd spent most of the night tossing and turning in his bed, thoughts of Lois running through his mind.

He had to approach her. He had to talk to her. He had to try and find the courage to ask her out.

But...how?

He was broken from his reverie as she came striding through the double doors that led out onto the sidewalk. Clark glanced at his watch. Eleven am. Much later than she usually came in. No wonder the day had been dragging by. The sound of her heels on the marble floor was like gunshots. It didn't take a genius to see that she was aggravated this morning. It was written all over her face and in the way that she carried herself.

She approached the newsstand, barely seeming to focus on her surroundings. Her notebook slammed onto the countertop. Without looking up, she placed her order.

"Coffee. Non-fat dairy creamer, one sugar. And a chocolate croissant."

"Coming right up," Clark said, unable to help the happy smile that crept up over his lips.

Lois' brow crinkled as he spoke. She looked up at him for the first time, studying his face.

"Wait a second. I know you," she said after a moment. "You were the bouncer at the Stoke Club last night, weren't you?"

Clark nodded. "Yes, I was."

"What are you, following me?" she asked, eying him a little warily.

Clark chuckled. "Nope. It's just a happy coincidence, that's all. I work in the Metropolis Midtown Library on the weekends too."

"Clyde, right?"

"Clark," he corrected her gently.

Lois flushed a little. "Sorry."

"No problem," he assured her.

Finding himself at a loss for words, Clark concentrated on making Lois' coffee. He set the Styrofoam cup before her and then retrieved her croissant for her. He popped it into a small white waxed-paper bag. Lois already had her money waiting, and Clark silently made her change. A little thrill shot through his body as his fingertips made contact with her palm as he placed the coins in her outstretched hand.

"Here you go," he said, giving her a brilliant smile. "One coffee, one chocolate croissant. Thirty-five cents is your change."

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

"No, really. Thanks. I know I didn't say it last night but, I appreciate you getting rid of that creep for me at the club."

Clark's smile lit up his face again. "Just doing my job," he said humbly.

Lois crossed her arms. "And is it your job to escort patrons out of the club and flag down taxis for them?"

Clark blushed a little. "Well...not exactly."

"I didn't think so."

A small chuckle escaped Clark's throat. He wanted so badly to ask this woman out, but he hesitated. How could he ask her for a date when he didn't have the spare cash to buy himself a cup of coffee, let alone a decent meal at a nice restaurant? He sighed inwardly. He would have to pass up this perfect opportunity.

"Well, I'd better get to work," Lois said, shifting uncomfortably when Clark failed to speak.

"Oh...right." Clark did his best to bury the disappointment in his voice.

"Anyway, if there's something I can do to thank you for last night..."

"Actually, there might be," Clark said, his brain kicking into gear. "You see, I'm only doing these odd jobs while I look for something permanent. I'm actually a journalist. I met with the editor here at the Daily Planet a few months back. But, well, he wasn't keen on what experience I have."

"And you want me to...?" Lois arched a questioning eyebrow.

"Just...tell me...what can I do to gain Mr. White's approval? I know I lack the experience he wants to see, but at the same time, I refuse to go work for one of the tabloids. That's worse than no experience at all."

Lois laughed a little. "You've got that right. What can you do to impress Perry? Hmmm..." She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "The thing about Perry is, you have to be persistent."

"Persistent...got it," Clark said, although he wasn't really sure what that meant.

He was pretty sure that the editor wouldn't appreciate Clark barging in on him right now, demanding a second interview. He had nothing new to offer the man. Nothing to show him other than these side jobs he was doing in order to survive in Metropolis. He'd have to do...something...to prove to the man what a good writer he was.

Now, there's a thought, Clark thought to himself. I've got to nail down a story or two and prove to Mr. White that I'm capable of producing the kind of writing he'd expect from one of his employees. Something big. Something he'd want his top reporters on. Something like Lois would write.

"Sorry," Lois said, shrugging. "That's not all that helpful, I guess."

Clark smiled warmly. "Actually, you've given me a lot to think about. Thanks."

Lois' beeper started to shriek. She fumbled in her purse for a

moment, then rolled her eyes.

“Duty calls. See you around, Clark.”

“See you,” Clark called after her, as she raced away to the elevator, juggling her purse, notes, coffee, and breakfast.

He smiled to himself once she was out of sight. He had a plan now. All he had to do was keep his exceptionally sharp eyes and ears peeled for a story that he could write up. He could watch and wait, and when he finally found something worth submitting to Perry White, he would knock it out of the park.

January 30, 1994

Clark huddled down into his thick winter coat, hunching his shoulders against the frigid wind. He didn’t feel the cold, though he was aware of it. But in the below-freezing temperature, he would stick out like a sore thumb if he didn’t slouch into his coat a little bit, trying to utilize every speck of the thick sheep’s wool that lined the garment. Around him, everyone else was doing the same thing. He checked his watch and nodded absently to himself. He still had plenty of time before he was due at the Metropolis Midtown Library.

Around him, tiny white snowflakes danced in the air, riding the gusts of wind and swirling around his head. A few had fallen onto his eyelashes, glittering as the heat of his body melted them. His black coat was covered in a fine layer of snow that fell about his shoulders like a royal robe. But Clark didn’t pay much attention to the frosty white flakes. His mind was a thousand miles away.

After his brief conversation with Lois that morning in November, he hadn’t gotten the chance to speak more than a few words with her at any given time. And although he wanted to ask her out, his courage fled every time he thought of his paltry minimum wage jobs, and the recent increase in his rent. He was forced to take on more hours at his jobs, leaving him with virtually no spare time. When he actually *did* have spare time, he spent it trying to recharge himself, or looking for a story worthy enough to submit to the editor of the Daily Planet. He hadn’t even been home to visit his parents since Christmas Eve.

The more Clark looked for a story to write up, the more he became discouraged. With so much of his time spent at his three jobs, he barely had any time to look for a story. And what he did find simply wasn’t good enough. He had a feeling that Perry White wouldn’t hire him if he covered the eighty-seventh Metropolis Dog Show. He needed something big. Something front-page worthy. Something that Lois Lane would go after. Of course, that meant that he’d have to beat her to the scene, which wouldn’t be easy with his hectic schedule. At least, he mused, the writing aspect would be quick enough. So long as he went slow enough so as not to overheat his poor, battered, second-hand laptop, he could fire off an article in seconds.

Standing on the corner of 3rd and Walnut, Clark bounced a little on the soles of his feet, waiting for the light to change. On an impulse, he decided to take the long route to the subway station. Even as sleazy as Hobbs Bay was, there was still something magnificent about the Metropolis Harbor. He enjoyed walking that way when he could.

As he walked along the sea wall, the wind buffeted his body roughly. He simply hunched into his coat further, trying to look like any ordinary, miserable commuter. He was just reaching the end of the wall when several police cars came rushing to the scene, sirens blaring. They skidded to a halt fifty feet in front of Clark. Officers piled out of the vehicles, zipping up coats and tugging their hats down around their ears. Intrigued, Clark stopped.

He watched as the men and women descended down the sea wall steps to the thin strip of beach. Curious, he went to the wall and peered over. There was a body laying on the beach, bluish-skinned and unmoving, the face so bloated and distorted that it

was impossible to tell who it might have once been. Clark felt an immense sadness well up within his chest. Who was that person? A husband? A father? Who was missing them, wondering what had happened? How had this man — and Clark could tell by the expensive business suit that it was a male — died? Had it been foul play? An accident?

A detective rushed by Clark as he stared down on the body. Seeing his opportunity, Clark called out to the man.

“Excuse me? Detective?”

The man turned to face him, a frown on his face. “Yes?”

“My name is Clark Kent. I’m...”

“A reporter?” the man snapped in impatience.

“Something like that. I’m hoping to find employment with one of the city’s papers. I was wondering if you can tell me what happened here? Please? I’d like to, at the very least, secure freelance work with the paper.”

The man sighed and eyed Clark, seeming to appraise him. Clark must have looked convincing, because the man nodded after a moment.

“We’re not sure yet. We got an anonymous call that there was a body, washed up on the beach.”

Clark whipped out a small notebook and pen from his jacket pocket. He always carried it with him, just in case a story arose.

“Mind if I take a few notes?”

“Go ahead,” the detective replied, gesturing vaguely at Clark’s notebook.

“Thanks. So, when was this?”

“Just about twenty minutes ago.”

“I see.”

Clark continued to pepper the detective with questions, scribbling down hastily taken notes. His flawless memory would allow him to play back the entire conversation in intimate detail later on, but he had to act the part of a regular guy. When he felt that he’d gotten all the information possible, he put away the notebook and stretched out his hand.

“Thank you very much,” Clark said sincerely. “If I need to contact you again...?”

“Just ask for Bill Henderson,” the detective said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Of course,” Clark said.

He watched as Henderson retreated. The rest of the homicide team was still hovering around the body. One man was snapping photos from every conceivable angle. Others were combing the beach for clues. Several were standing a little apart from the scene, talking. One of them was gesturing broadly as he spoke. Clark didn’t bother to tune into it with his hearing. He had a job to do.

He turned from the scene, breaking into a fast run. It was difficult for him to maintain a normal human speed. Straight back to his apartment he went, fumbling with his keys in his haste. Once inside, he shut the door, went over to his computer, and hit the power button. He didn’t even bother to take the time to peel off his coat.

The computer seemed to take forever to boot up. Clark drummed his fingers restlessly on the table as he waited. But at last, it was up and running. Clark opened his writing program, then tapped out his article. Two minutes later, he finished. He read it over six times, correcting minor mistakes and choosing better wording, until he was finally satisfied and the keyboard had thin curls of smoke rising from it. Clark printed the story out, shoved it into his briefcase, then hurried back out into the snow.

He took the shortcut to the subway station this time, racing down the streets like any regular commuter who had overslept. He practically flew down the steps to the underground platform, then wiggled his way into the packed train car seconds before the doors closed. His heart was thudding in his chest and his anxiety levels were high. The ride into midtown seemed to take forever,

and every second seemed like a lifetime. A slow, painful lifetime.

It was with the greatest of relief that Clark finally disembarked from the subway at the station directly in front of the Daily Planet. He sprinted up the stairs, back into the wan sunlight, and stopped. He took a moment to compose himself, then entered through the doors into the heat of the building. It felt like he was walking toward his destiny.

“Hey, Kim,” he said, waving at the college-aged brunette who was manning the newsstand.

“Hey, Clark,” she waved back distractedly, as she thumbed through one of the city’s gossip rags.

Clark shook his head. He could never truly understand the fascination some people had with the tabloids. Why would anyone really care if a celebrity went to an event and their shoes didn’t match their outfit? But, to each his own, as his father had always said. By the time the elevator doors slid open and he stepped into the car, he’d already put it out of his mind, choosing, instead, to focus on what he could possibly say to Perry White.

Almost too soon, the elevator spilled him out into the bullpen of the Daily Planet. He checked his watch with a smooth, swift motion. He had less than half an hour to make it to the library if things didn’t pan out here. He could make it — with a little bit of super-cheating. Clark took stock of the newsroom for a brief moment, gathering himself, then headed down the ramp into the thick of things. Straight to the editor’s office he went, this time, knowing his way and feeling very confident in the article he was carrying.

Perry White’s head was bent over an article when Clark appeared in the doorway. The grizzled old newspaperman was muttering under his breath as he marked the paper on his desk with a red pencil. Clark knocked softly, causing the man to look up with an almost startled expression.

“Judas Priest!” the man exclaimed, chuckling a little at his own jumpiness.

“Sorry,” Clark immediately apologized. “Mr. White, I know I don’t have an appointment, but I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time.”

“You’re that same guy who came traipsing in here a few months back, looking for a job, right?”

“Yes, sir. You told me that my experience wasn’t sufficient.”

“Son, I meant that you have *years* of work ahead of you.”

Clark nodded. “I know. But, I was wondering if you might take a look at an article of mine.”

Perry arched his brow, clearly annoyed. But, Clark thought — or hoped — there was a glimmer of interest in the older man’s eyes. Perry waved him in and gestured to the chairs in his office. Clark happily obliged in sitting down, then dutifully took out the article he’d written.

“Here,” he said simply, handing over the sheet of paper.

Perry took it without a word. For several long moments, he just read, making no more than the occasional grunt deep within his throat. Clark wasn’t sure whether to take that as a good thing or a bad thing. He simply waited to see what the editor’s verdict would be. After a long time, Perry cleared his throat.

“This, uh...this is some good work,” he finally said. Then, looking at Clark, he asked, “This is all true?”

Clark nodded. “Thank you. And yes.”

“No offense, son, but I hadn’t heard anything about this yet.”

“Perry!” Lois said, flying through the door and into the office. “Floater washed ashore in Hobbs Bay. I’m going and I’m taking Jimmy.”

“No need,” Perry said, drawing the words out just a touch.

“No need?” Lois echoed. “Chief, this could be big! A mob murder...or a drug deal gone wrong...or...”

“Kent here already got the story,” Perry said, cutting her off. “Lois Lane...Clark Kent.”

“You again?” Lois asked, noticing Clark for the first time.

“Me again,” Clark said, giving her a small smile and a friendly wave.

“You two know each other?” Perry asked.

“We’ve bumped into each other, yeah,” Lois said, not even bothering to make eye contact with her boss.

“Good. ‘Cause I want the two of you on this story. Clark, there’s one thing I value more than experience, and that’s initiative. You proved you have it, and some damn good writing skills to boot. Welcome to the Daily Planet, son.”

“Thank you, Mr. White,” Clark said, taking the man’s outstretched hand and giving it a hearty shake.

“Wait, you want me to partner up with him?” Lois asked in the same moment.

Perry nodded. “That’s right. You *are* my best reporter, right?”

“Of course I am, but...”

“So shouldn’t he learn the ropes from the best?” Perry asked, cutting her off.

Lois huffed, but she did seem pleased with the praise. “Perry!”

“Hush now. It’s not an option.”

“Fine. Don’t ever say I’m not a team player.”

“I thought so. Now scat. I want a follow-up on this A.S.A.P. Got it?”

Lois and Clark nodded. Perry smiled.

“Well, go on! Get going! The story sure as hell isn’t here in my office. Jimmy! Get this article into the mock up for the afternoon edition!”

Lois and Clark scurried away from Perry’s office as Jimmy rushed to grab the paper from the editor. Clark followed Lois as she made her way through the bullpen to her desk. She wheeled on Clark once she arrived, her expression less than thrilled.

“Okay, every time I turn around lately, I seem to find you there. What are you? Some kind of stalker?”

“No,” Clark said, color rising in his cheeks. “I swear, I’m not following you. I’m not a stalker.”

“Look, I know I said that I appreciate what you did for me that night in the club, but here at the Planet, you’re the competition, got it? Just because Perry is assigning us to work together on this story doesn’t mean *anything*. And bear in mind, Kent, that you are working *for* me, not *with* me.”

“Got it,” Clark said. “Except for one thing.”

Lois crossed her arms. “And what’s that?”

“I don’t *want* to be your competition, Lois. But I would like to be...well...a friend.”

Lois’ eyes hardened for a moment. Then it seemed that she softened as some kind of recognition flooded her. Clark saw this all in her eyes. He wondered what exactly was going on in her mind. Clark wasn’t sure he liked the flicker in her eyes.

“You,” she said after a moment. “It was you.”

“Me?” Clark pointed to himself in confusion.

“In the Congo. You’re the mysterious man who saved my life.”

Clark felt a searing bolt of fear flash through his entire body. She recognized him. He wondered how. Then, belatedly, he recalled calling himself ‘a friend’ in exactly the same tone of voice nearly a year before.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I am.”

Lois shook her head, looking dazed. “You...you...saved my life,” she repeated. “But...how? Why? How did you know?”

Clark shrugged, uncomfortable. “I overheard you talking about the gunrunning story. And I...I don’t know...sort of...kept an eye out. I didn’t want anything to happen to you. You needed to stay safe...and to write your article. You needed to bring those men down.”

“I won an award for that.”

Clark nodded. “I know.”

“You do?”

He nodded again. “I’ve always admired your work,” he admitted. “And I did keep tabs on the journalism community here at home, even when I was living overseas. Especially your work, Lois. You’re the best journalist I’ve ever had the pleasure of reading.”

“Oh, I...thank you. That’s quite the compliment,” Lois said, brushing her hair back from her face, looking slightly embarrassed. “So...can I ask? What *were* you doing in the Congo? Since, I mean, you obviously weren’t after the gunrunners.”

Clark sighed and shrugged, trying not to look depressed as he thought back to those days on the run.

“I was there pretty much completely by accident. I wasn’t supposed to be there. I just...got diverted...as I was moving around. It doesn’t really matter. I’m just happy that I *was* there when it counted.”

“All this time, I’ve wondered who that man was in the shadows. I would have been murdered that night. How can I ever repay you?”

Clark smiled. “You already have. You gave me the idea to keep my eyes peeled for a story when you told me not to give up with Mr. White.”

Lois gave him a tentative smile. “Come on. We have a story to chase...partner.”

Clark chuckled. “We do. Just give me a minute, okay?”

“A minute? Clark, what on Earth can be so important that it can’t wait until later?”

Clark flashed her a brilliant smile. “Well, I’m due to start my other job in five minutes. I need to let them know that I probably won’t be making it in.”

Lois laughed. “Oh.”

June 22, 1994

“Morning, Lois,” Clark said cheerfully as he swept into the newsroom, juggling a couple of cups of coffee and a box of donuts.

“Morning,” Lois replied, looking up from her computer screen.

“I come bearing breakfast,” Clark announced, setting down his offerings on her desk with a flourish. “My humble tribute to the writing gods.”

Lois eyed the spread appreciatively. “Thanks. Your tribute is deemed acceptable.”

Clark chuckled. “Don’t mention it.”

“Oh, hey. I saw that you filed the murder-suicide story last night.”

“I did.”

“Nice work.”

“Thanks,” Clark said, sitting on the edge of his partner’s desk and happily biting into a powdered donut. “Uh, Lois? Can I, uh, talk to you about something?”

Lois groaned. “I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because, Clark, you have that tone in your voice.”

“Tone? What tone?”

She nodded. “The ‘I’m going to say something that Lois isn’t going to like’ tone.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Clark tried to assure her.

“Oh really?”

“Well...at least, I *hope*.”

“Okay, Farm Boy, you’ve got my interest up. What’s going on?”

“Well,” Clark said, swallowing down the last bite of his donut. “I was wondering...would you maybe like to...go out with me?”

“Go out? You mean like on a date?”

Clark nodded shyly. “Exactly.”

“Clark, I...we’re partners.”

“And best friends,” he put in helpfully.

“That’s exactly my point! I’m not sure we should jeopardize what we have. I mean, what if it doesn’t work out?”

“Lois, believe me, I’ve put a *lot* of thought into this. I’m willing to give this a chance. If you are, that is.”

“I don’t know...Why now? Can’t you just enjoy what we have?”

“Look, Lois, I’m not just pulling this out of nowhere. I’ve wanted to ask you out ever since you interviewed me after the 1987 Metropolis University/Midwestern State football game. And since I came to live in Metropolis full time, I’ve been biding my time. At first, I was ashamed to ask you out. I was dirt poor... I could barely afford my rent every month, even with three jobs. Since starting here, I, well...I think we needed to learn how to be friends first. If you don’t want to go out, that’s fine. I’ll understand. But I had to give it a shot. Know what I mean?”

Lois nodded slowly. “I think I do. I’d just hate losing you if things don’t work out.”

“You’ll never lose me, Lois. I care about you too much to let that happen.”

“Okay,” she finally said, after taking a deep breath. “We’re on for tomorrow. I mean, we can do something tomorrow. If you want. That is...oh God, I’m being too forward, aren’t I?”

“No, you aren’t. And tomorrow sounds perfect,” Clark said, smiling broadly. “Actually, I was hoping you’d agree to go out with me tomorrow.”

They were both off the next day, so it would be the ideal time for them to spend the day together. Clark could hardly wait. He and Lois had spent some of their days off together before, but never like this. He looked forward to it. It always amazed him to see how relaxed Lois could become outside of work.

“So...what’s the plan?”

“Well,” Clark said, stuffing his hands into his pockets, “do you like Shakespeare?” He gave her a tentative lopsided smile, trying to judge by her reaction if she did or not.

She nodded almost immediately. “Oddly enough, I do.”

“Well, the Metropolis Actors Guild is doing Shakespeare under the stars in Centennial Park. So...maybe we could do that, if you’d like. They’re doing Hamlet.”

“Sounds good. I haven’t done that in years,” Lois said, smiling. “Four years ago they did Macbeth and it was pretty impressive. I’d love to go again.”

“Great, so...I’ll pick you up around noon then?”

“Clark, the show typically kicks off at eight.”

Clark grinned widely. “I know. I have a few other ideas in mind though. Dress comfortably.” He winked at her.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Nope.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Sure I can.”

“That’s not fair! You know it’ll eat me up alive, wondering what you’ve got up your sleeve!”

Clark only chuckled and slipped from his perch on her desk. He shook his head and crossed the twenty feet that separated their desks. Lois huffed indignantly, but didn’t follow him. But she had that look in her eyes — the one Clark knew all too well. She was going to do her best to try and weasel it out of him for the rest of the day.

Clark smiled to himself as he booted up his computer. Let her try. He was perhaps the best person in the world at keeping secrets.

July 18, 1994

Clark felt that he was the luckiest man on the face of the Earth. In the few short weeks since he and Lois had gone on their

first, tentative date, things had quickly spiraled into a realm of happiness Clark hadn't known was possible. Their first date had gone exceptionally well. He'd taken Lois to the Metropolis Zoo, then for a round of mini golf and go-kart racing. They had eaten at Lois' favorite Chinese restaurant, then had headed to Centennial Park to catch the play.

Once there, Clark had produced a large, thick quilt and a picnic basket from where he'd stowed it in the back of Lois' car when she hadn't been looking. She had enjoyed the rich chocolate desserts and deep red wine he'd offered up. Then they had snuggled together to watch the actors on stage, as fireflies had lazily added their own lights to the show. It had been an exceptional performance, and they had even written up an article about it for the paper together the following day.

When they had kissed goodnight at Lois' apartment late that night, there had been no doubt in Clark's mind that the date had been a success. And he had known, beyond certainty, that Lois Lane was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Lois had seemed to have had a good time as well. They had been out several times since that night, grabbing late dinners in some of the local restaurants after work, or spending their free days doing fun, informal little trips. But no matter what they did, it always felt right, natural, meant-to-be.

Clark could not have been happier.

When he thought back over his life, it simply amazed him. His life had started off on such a bad note. Raised by Trask and force-fed brainwashing information in hopes of turning him into a killer, Clark had had an awful childhood. Experimented upon and feared by the very people who had held him captive, he had never felt more alone in his life. Those things had scarred him deeply. Even now, it was hard for Clark to be alone, even when it was just a matter of him having a few hours at night by himself in his apartment to catch a good night's sleep. And it cut him to the bone anytime a person looked at him with nervousness or contempt, which sometimes happened during his investigations.

But ever since his escape from Bureau Thirty-Nine, his life had steadily gotten better, though it hadn't been a smooth road. First, he'd found Jonathan and Martha Kent, the parents who had loved him from the first moment they had known him. They had opened up their home and their hearts to him, as well as his future. Together, they had given him a family, a home, an education, a sense of self-worth. And they had helped him to lose some of the habits that Trask had instilled in him. He was no longer a shy child, fearing punishment if he spoke up for himself or asked a question. His parents had taught him to be his own person, and had encouraged his curiosity.

And yet, some habits had never left him. He still made his bed with the tight, neat military corners that Trask had demanded. He still sometimes had to fight the impulse to speak in military time. He still arranged his pencils on his desk in rigid rows, ensuring that they were all properly sharpened and the same length. Files did not get left on his desk overnight — clutter was distinctly prohibited in Clark's world.

Though he kept his hair longer than the crew cut Trask had forced him to keep, he still shaved every day, sometimes two or three times to avoid the appearance of stubble. It had been mandatory for Trask's men to be clean shaven at all times. His shoes were kept to a shine and his appearance was always painstakingly neat in a professional setting, though he loved the freedom to slip into a favorite pair of jeans and sneakers when he was outside of work.

Even with Jonathan and Martha's support and love, Clark had never lost his fear of Trask, or his fear of being discovered. He yearned to help people, but as soon as he did, the old anxieties would arise. Had anyone seen what he'd done? Would they suspect that there was more to Clark Jerome Kent than just a mild-mannered human being? Would someone else try to capture

him and experiment on him? Would fear drive people to look for a way to kill him?

For several long years after college, these worries had plagued him, leaving him all but sleepless at night. He'd fled his home, bouncing aimlessly from country to country, looking for a fresh start. He'd lived those days with one eye constantly peering over his shoulder, expecting Trask to emerge from the shadows. Those too, had been lonely days, though they hadn't been as bad as when he'd been Cameron's prisoner. At least, during his travels, he'd always had the opportunity to call his parents, or fly back home for a couple of hours to visit with them. As a young boy in Trask's possession, he'd had no one to talk to.

When Trask had finally died, Clark had lost his fear that the man could harm his loved ones. He had allowed himself to come out of his self-imposed exile. And that was when life had really taken off for him. He had, after some initial difficulties, secured a job at the Daily Planet, one of the most respected newspapers in the entire country, if not the world. That had been a dream come true. And he had gained Lois in the process, first as her partner, then friend, then best friend, until, finally, he could call her his girlfriend.

Everything had finally fallen into place for him. All of his hard work had paid off. Life couldn't get much better, unless, of course, he were to marry Lois and raise a family with her. He felt almost ready for that step already. In his heart, he knew he'd never love another. She had become an indelible part of his life.

And yet...

He wasn't ready to take things further than the dating stage. He wasn't even ready to make love to her, though he'd gotten the impression that he could have, if he'd broached the subject. Just the night before, they had gotten pretty hot and heavy with each other, right in Clark's own bed. It had taken a superhuman effort not to take advantage of the situation.

It wasn't that he didn't *want* to be with Lois in that way. He'd fantasized about it. Dreamt about it. But he had long ago decided that he needed to be completely honest about himself with the woman he would wind up sharing himself with. He couldn't just sleep with Lois without her knowing everything about him — even his super side. It wouldn't be fair to her to keep her in the dark, especially if they did get serious. And it wouldn't be fair to him either. He was tired of having to hide who he really was with everyone. He felt guilty about keeping secrets from Lois. She was the one person in all the world that he was closest to. She held his heart.

But he wasn't quite ready to share with her. He was no longer afraid that she would use the information against him. He was confident that she wouldn't run to Perry with the story of how Clark Kent, investigative journalist and adopted son of two simple farmers, was really an alien being from a planet called Krypton. He trusted that Lois would keep his secret in confidence.

The problem was finding the *way* to tell her.

It wasn't something he could casually discuss over takeout dinner and a movie. It wasn't a subject that a person brought up while driving to interview a source. It wasn't something he could mention while hitting some baseballs at the Metropolis batting cages with her. And even if the perfect opportunity did arise, what words could he possibly say to her? How could he make her understand just how difficult it would be for him to divulge such sensitive information? Would the revelation disgust her? Would she be revolted that he wasn't exactly the same species as she was? Would she stop loving him? Would she throw their relationship away?

The questions gnawed at Clark like rabid wolverines. They haunted his mind every single time he attempted to find a way to tell her. On a very real level, he was terrified. On the other hand, he didn't want to hide from her forever. He needed to know if she

could accept him or not.

Determination settled over him. He would find a way. He had to.

July 28, 1994

Clark finished the final preparations, cleaning his already spotless apartment. It had taken him some time and effort, as well as a healthy dose of cheating with his powers, but his new place was finally livable. It had taken months to find a decent place, and although 344 Clinton had been in shambles when Clark had first seen it, it had also held real potential. But, with a little paint and some cleaning products, he'd turned the place into his home in a matter of days.

He had to hand it to himself, he was impressed with what he had managed to accomplish. Everything gleamed. Everything was fresh. Everything was in its proper place, his possessions all placed with military precision. He was content.

A knock at the door pulled his attention from his critical appraisal of his new home. He peered through the door, x-raying right through the curtains hanging before the glass panes. Beyond, he could see Lois standing there, a plant of some kind in her arms. Clark quickly pulled on his glasses and jogged up the few steps to the landing.

"Coming," he called cheerfully.

He could hardly wait to show Lois his place. He hoped she would like it. At any rate, it was in a much safer section of the city. He wouldn't have to worry so much when she left his place after long nights of working or after dropping him home after one of their dates, which she always insisted on doing. Not that she was ever far from his sight. He usually trailed her home after she left his place, flying high above the skyscrapers and using his telescopic vision to keep a watchful eye over her. He was always careful not to be seen, finding alleyways that were completely devoid of life for his takeoff points. That had been a challenge at his old apartment, since Hobbs Bay had rampant homelessness. A quiet alley was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. But here, in this place, Clark had his own secluded terrace that he could use for takeoffs and landings. It would make things a lot simpler for him.

If only he could find a way to help people though. Day in and day out, he heard the cries for help. And it killed him inside, to have to ignore them. Oh sure, once in a while, if he could help or make a rescue without fear of being seen, he would do so. Those moments lifted his spirits, made him feel like he was serving some kind of instinctual purpose. He loved being able to help people through his reporting skills — exposing the nasty underbelly of society in an effort to correct the problems that needed fixing. But to be able to actually, physically pull an unconscious body from a burning building or a car wreck — that gave Clark a sense of fulfillment unlike anything else.

Clark threw open his door, letting Lois inside.

"Hi," he said, before leaning in to capture her lips in a kiss. "Missed you."

"Hi yourself. And it's only been an hour since we left work."
"I know."

Lois swatted his chest affectionately. "Here, I brought you an apartment-warming gift. It's a mini-rose plant. Orange. Or will be, when these buds open up. I thought it might brighten the place."

"Thanks," Clark said, smiling as he took the proffered plant.

"Wow! This place looks great. I thought you said it looked like a bomb had hit it when you rented it."

"It did," Clark said, nodding, and walking the plant over to the coffee table.

"Didn't you only get this place about a week ago? When did you find the time...?"

"I, uh, had a little help," he said evasively. "Like it?"

"Like it? I love it! It feels...I don't know...so...you."

Clark smiled and chuckled. "Well, thank you."

"Where did you get all of this stuff?" Lois asked, examining the various books and trinkets, paperweights, tribal masks, wooden statues, and other items on his shelves.

"Well, you know I did some traveling before settling in Metropolis. I used to send stuff home to my folks to hold on to for me. I had it shipped out here as soon as I got the keys to the apartment."

It was mostly the truth, he mused. He'd actually dropped off the random assortment of items as he'd collected it, whenever he flew home for a quick visit with his parents. And he hadn't exactly had them shipped out to Metropolis — he'd packed them all in boxes and flown them in during the small hours of the morning over the past several days.

"Well, the place looks great. And it's so much closer to work."

"And to you," Clark added. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Good. I picked up a pizza before you came over."

"Sounds great. I've been craving a good slice of pizza."

Please, tell me it's good. I've been lost since Tommy's closed for renovations."

"Oh, I think you'll like it," Clark said, trying to hide his pleased smile.

He went into the kitchen, putting his back to Lois. With a couple of darts of his heat vision, he warmed the slowly cooling pizza until steam rose from it. Then he put a couple of slices on plates, grabbed a couple of drinks from the fridge, and brought everything over to the couch.

"Here we are. One cream soda, one piping hot slice of pizza."

"Thanks," Lois said, settling down onto his couch. She bit into the pizza. "Oh wow! This is good! Where did you go for this?"

Clark chewed thoughtfully. He had thought about it and thought about it. He needed to tell Lois the truth. And he needed to do it soon, before things could progress any further with her. Now was as good a time as any, in his mind.

"Just a little place I know," he said, swallowing down the food in his mouth, then sipping from his soda can.

"You've got to tell me where this is," Lois said, her eyes sparkling. "No more secrets about where you manage to produce the most delicious foods from."

"No more secrets," Clark agreed, the words sounding like a solemn vow.

He took another healthy bite from his slice of pizza, in an effort to buy himself some time. Lois didn't seem to notice that he was stalling, or if she did, she wasn't saying anything. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

No more secrets. The words tumbled around in his fear-soaked brain. This was it. This was the moment he'd both prayed for and dreaded. It really was time.

With a start, Clark realized that he'd wolfed down both of his slices. And he'd barely tasted any of it. He chanced a glance at Lois. She was nibbling the crust of her own slice. He waited until she was done before he spoke.

"Another slice?" he offered.

Lois shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm good. I wish I could though."

Clark nodded and fidgeted on the couch, feeling completely uncomfortable in a way he'd never been before. Lois noticed and grabbed one of his shaking hands.

"Clark? Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"Nothing...everything. I just..."

"What's the matter?"

"No more secrets," he repeated, more like a mantra than anything else. He sighed, trying to still his trembling body,

though it didn't work. "Lois, there are some...things...that I need to talk to you about. Things that I need to get out into the open. I'm just...so terrified...that once you hear them, you'll..." His voice faltered and faded into nothingness.

"That I'll what, Clark? You know you can tell me anything, right?"

"I know. But I just...I don't want to lose you, Lois. I *can't*. You mean everything to me. *Everything*."

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere. You know that." She briefly cupped his cheek with her hand. "No matter *what* you have to tell me.

Clark nodded feebly. "Yeah."

"So...?"

"I guess...the first thing I need to tell you is...that I love you, Lois. I always have, since the moment you called my name on that football field, all those years ago. And as we've gotten closer over the last months, I've only fallen deeper."

"Clark, I..."

"It's okay. I know it's fast. We've only been dating just over a month now."

"Clark," Lois said, more assertively. It got the job done, and Clark's mouth closed in silence. "That's better. Now then. Clark, I'm in love with you too. I love you."

Clark's breath came out in a shuddering rush, along with a shaky laugh. "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh, Lois. You've just made me the happiest man on the planet. Which...makes this next part all the harder to say."

"Clark?"

"Lois, I haven't been completely honest with you."

"You...what?" Lois' voice was disbelieving, but with a harder edge than she had probably anticipated.

"There are things...about me...that I haven't told you. But it's time I cleared the air. Because I *want* you to know. I really do. I *need* you to know. I'm just...really, really scared. These are things that I've been hiding for my entire life, Lois. Because the knowledge...it's dangerous. Not just for me. But for you and my parents, and everyone I've become close with. Even Jimmy and Perry. And I'm so afraid that once you know these things..."

"That...what? I'll use them against you? Clark, you know that's not..." Lois' voice grew a little colder at the perceived accusation. She crossed her arms.

Clark gently cut her off, shaking his head for emphasis. "Of course not. I know you'd never use these secrets to hurt me. The fact that I *want* to tell you...that should give you an idea of how fully I trust you."

That seemed to mollify Lois a bit. Some of the harshness and defensiveness in her features melted away. She nodded, encouraging him to continue.

Clark cleared his throat. "I'm afraid that once you know these things," he said, quickly backpedaling to his original train of thought, "you won't look at me the same way. That what I have to say will scare you off."

"Clark, you're familiar with the term 'Mad Dog Lane', right?" Lois asked, arching an eyebrow, her voice challenging. "Nothing scares me. Except dodgy food joints."

Clark shook his head again. "It's not that simple," he said.

"Clark, for God's sake, just spit it out."

He nodded. *Like ripping off a band-aid*, he thought. *Swift and with less pain in the long run. I hope.*

"I'm not who you think I am. I mean, I am. I mean...I'm Clark Kent. That's who I am, no matter what. And my parents are my parents. They adopted me when I was twelve years old."

"I already knew this..."

"Yes, but, you only know half the story. I wasn't just some orphan kid who happened to wander into their shed one Christmas Eve. I mean, I was and I did, but...I was running away

when that happened. I'd spent the first twelve years of my life locked up in a secret military...no, that's not true...*fake* military compound. A man named Cameron Trask was my jailor. He tried to brainwash me into becoming his own, personal soldier. And he had me experimented on."

Lois' demeanor changed from challenging to horrified. "Oh, Clark, that's awful! Why would anyone do that to you?"

"Trask wanted me to exact his revenge on the people who had gotten him kicked out of the Armed Forces. But the man was insane. I don't think it would have stopped there. I think he planned to use me to topple world governments. In fact, I'm pretty certain that he wanted that."

"You? Don't get me wrong, you're in great shape and all, but just how did he think you were going to accomplish this?"

Clark sighed. He had truly reached the point of no return. He had to forge ahead, despite the cold knots of fear that were multiplying and tightening in his stomach.

"Because, Lois, I have...for lack of a better word...powers."

"Powers? Clark, get real. This isn't some C-grade sci-fi flick. This is real life."

"It's true, Lois. I know that I *look* just like any ordinary man. But...I'm not one. I'm not even human. I was sent as a baby to Earth...from a distant, now destroyed, planet called Krypton. My birth parents, Jor-El and Lara, sent me here to save my life. My name is...was...Kal-El."

"Nice try, Kent, but I think maybe you'd be better off spinning your story to George Lucas."

"I can prove it. Watch."

Clark pushed himself off the couch and stood before her. Then he allowed himself to levitate in the air before her, hovering two feet above the floor. His cheeks were scarlet in his embarrassment. He'd never allowed anyone outside of his parents to witness his power of flight.

Lois' mouth gaped open. She worked it a few times, opening and closing her jaw to no avail. No sound would issue forth. Then, after a moment, a scream came from her throat.

Clark immediately dropped from his hover, landing lightly on his feet. He rushed to Lois' side. He wasn't sure if he should touch her shoulder or not in an effort to soothe her. He ultimately decided not to try.

"Lois? Lois, please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry."

After a long few moments, Lois' distress seemed to lessen. Her scream stopped. A dazed look crept over her features. She stared, but it didn't appear that she was actually seeing anything.

"You...that's not...you just can't..."

"It's true, Lois," Clark said, his voice barely above a whisper. "It's true. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Lois said, still dazed.

"Well...yeah. I obviously freaked you out. I never meant to. So, I'm sorry." There was a knock on his door. Clark x-rayed through the wall beside the door. "Mrs. DeLeo." He frowned, then took in Lois' bewildered look. "I, uh...x-ray vision," he said, shrugging.

Lois followed Clark to the door as he pushed the glasses up his nose once more.

"All this time I thought you were just near-sighted," she mumbled as she trailed him.

Clark reached the landing before Lois did. He plastered a smile onto his face and opened the door. Mrs. DeLeo, Clark's neighbor, stood behind the door with a grim expression. She was middle aged, but well built. Clark knew she attended kickboxing lessons several days each week.

"Hi, Mrs. DeLeo. What's up?" Clark asked casually.

"I heard screaming. Everything okay in there?" Her arms tightened across her chest.

"Oh, that was me," Lois said, coming to Clark's aid before he

could respond. “We were... watching a movie. A horror movie. I, uh, got a little spooked, that’s all.”

Mrs. DeLeo peered around Lois and Clark into the apartment. “The TV isn’t on.” Her frown deepened.

“Well, *of course* it’s not,” Lois said. “We turned it off.”

“Are you *sure* you’re all right?” the woman asked, eyeing Lois appraisingly.

“Positive. Never been better. I appreciate the concern, but, well, Clark and I have some things to finish discussing. Thanks.”

The neighbor nodded, her short crop of blonde hair bouncing. “All right. But if you need me, I’ll be next door.”

“I won’t. But thanks.”

Lois and Clark slipped back into the apartment, closing the door behind them. Once the door was shut, Clark leaned into it, his back connecting with the wood and glass. He let out a shaking breath.

“Thanks,” he said, his mouth feeling dry. “For... covering for me.”

“Well, what else was I going to do?”

Clark shook his head, pushed off from the door, and followed Lois back to the couch. “I don’t know.” He sank onto the couch heavily, feeling somehow drained.

“Clark...”

“Yeah?”

“I...I’d like to hear more about your powers and your life...if you’re willing, that is. I mean, it can’t be easy for you to be telling me this stuff.”

“It’s not. But...well...it feels great to finally get it off my chest too.”

“And...I’m sorry.”

“For what, Lois?”

“For freaking out on you. It just...caught me off guard, that’s all.”

Clark finally allowed himself a smile. “Hey, that’s okay. You should have seen how badly I freaked out the first time I woke up floating above my bed.”

Lois laughed and Clark chuckled, feeling himself relax a little. For the next two hours, Clark related his life’s story to her, telling her everything that he knew about how Trask had found him, the experiments that had been done on him, and how he’d eventually gotten free of Bureau Thirty-Nine. He told her all about that fearful flight away from the only shelter he’d ever known, how he’d wound up at the Kents’ farm, and how they had taken him in. He recounted how they had adopted him, taught him, helped him to shake off the life that Trask had imposed on him. He told her about his powers, how each one had manifested, and how he’d learned to control them, demonstrating them for her as he did so. He related to her his travels in the years after he’d graduated from college, and how desperately fearful he’d been that Trask would find him. He ended with coming to Metropolis once Trask had died, adding in his burning desire to help people, but his complete loss as to how to do it without exposing himself to the public.

For a long time, Lois didn’t speak. She appeared to be digesting the onslaught of information. Her brow was crinkled with a confusion of emotions. Clark thought he saw sadness, anger, concern, and half a dozen others all written into her features.

“That’s just awful,” she said finally, shaking her head. “Oh, Clark, I never realized...”

His soft voice cut her off, along with a shake of his own head. “No, Lois. That’s the point. No one is ever *supposed* to know.”

Lois slowly nodded. “So...can I ask a question?”

“As many as you want.”

“When we were in the Congo, and you saved my life...?”

“I picked up on your voice as soon as you entered the bar in that hotel. I couldn’t help it. I heard you talking about the

gunrunners. I knew how dangerous those guys could be, so I shadowed you from a distance. The night you went out to gather your evidence, I followed you, flying just above your car. I did what I could to delay the men in that cabin, then followed you back to the hotel. Once I was there, I scouted to make sure the coast was clear. I knew what floor you were staying on, and which room was yours, just from keeping an eye on you. When you reached your door, I was already in the shadows. I heard the safety of a gun coming off and I reacted.”

“And you saved my life,” Lois finished for him.

“Barely,” Clark said sheepishly. “I had a bullet or two hit me in the head. That guy, Karl, did a pretty thorough job in spraying the door with bullets, to make sure he hit you.”

Lois paled a little. Clark’s face blossomed into concern.

“What?” he asked.

“I just never realized *exactly* how close I came to dying that night. I’m lucky you were there.”

“I was just glad that I was there and able to help.”

Lois fell silent a moment, then she gave him a mischievous smile.

“What?” Clark repeated, relieved that she didn’t seem to be mad or ready to run out the door.

“Well, you still haven’t answered my question. My *original* question, that is.”

“What question is that?”

“Where’d you get the pizza?”

Clark laughed, the rest of his tension uncoiling out of his bowels and dissipating. “Italy.”

“You mean, Little Italy?”

“No. I mean *Italy*. There’s a place I like that’s just outside of Rome.”

Lois laughed and Clark couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. He leaned back into his couch further, letting the cushions engulf his body somewhat. Lois moved closer to him, slipping into his arms. Her own arms encircled him as well, and she rested her head against his chest.

“Well, that settles that. You are *officially* the designated take-out getter from here on out.”

Clark chuckled again. “So, I take it...you’re not mad?”

“Mad? No. Knowing your whole story...the horrors you suffered through...I don’t blame you in the least for keeping this all a secret. If anything, I’m flattered and honored that you chose to entrust me with this information. I just wish I could have helped you shoulder this burden sooner.”

“That’s such a relief. I’ve been pretty much agonizing over how to tell you. That’s why I didn’t tell you before now. I *couldn’t*. I didn’t have the words to tell you.”

“Just one thing, Clark.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you used these powers of yours on the job?”

Clark nodded. “I have. Too many times to recall. Never enough to arouse suspicion, of course, but enough to get us what we needed, or a new lead when ours had dried up.”

Lois grinned. “I love it. Lane and Kent are going to be unstoppable now!”

September 2, 1994

Tempus stepped through the time window and emerged in Centennial Park. He hadn’t had the opportunity to check up on this universe since he had sent the tip to Lois Lane about the gunrunning ring in the Congo. Granted, his ability to travel through time didn’t restrict him to waiting months or years to see what had happened. He simply had other irons in other fires in other universes. This universe was, perhaps, the least of his concerns.

Still, it was time to see what had transpired since he’d contacted that infernal woman, pretending to be one of her

sources. He was certain that the tenacious reporter had found a way to go and investigate in the Congo, if she was anything like the Lois Lane of his own universe. The woman would do just about anything in the pursuit of a story, especially if it had even a hint of Pulitzer written on it. And the gunrunning story would have reeked of it, if he was any judge.

The man from the future emerged from behind a thick strand of tall hedges. He didn't care if anyone saw him entering or leaving the universe. He was only concerned that some idiot might try to relieve him of the small device that was his way home. Without the device, he would be stuck in this blasted universe. Not that home was preferable to this time and place. Home was worse, in many ways, with all that sickeningly sweet utopian peace, harmony, and utter boredom. But if he lost his time window, he'd never be able to find a way to prevent Superman from existing, and, by extension, squash the idea of Utopia.

Tempus surveyed the park as he walked along in a stylish business suit. He didn't want to draw attention to himself in any way. As far as the rest of Metropolis was concerned, he was just another average citizen out for a midday walk in the park. He kept his facial features neutral as he walked, taking in all of the sights and sounds of the park as he went.

The place seemed clean enough, which wasn't a good sign. It meant there was still some kind of law and order, and caring citizens. Chaos did not rule here. And yet, he could see one of the garbage pails overflowing, the refuse scattered about the can's base. This was not quite Utopia. He allowed himself a small smile. Perhaps this plan of his would work. But, as he looked on, a pack of Boy Scouts descended on the unsightly pile of trash, cleaning it with latex glove encased hands and heavy black trash bags. Tempus watched only for a moment and moved on.

He wasn't surprised. Utopia hadn't started in the nineties. It had taken a long time for the people of the world to start acting together and not against one another. But little things like litter and crime that went unpunished meant that this world had no Superman.

He passed a tidy little newsstand as he walked, just on the edge of the park. He stopped for a moment and browsed the various magazines, cheap romance novels, and assorted newspapers. Quickly locating a copy of the Daily Planet, but without skimming so much as the front page, he tossed the man running the stand a couple of dollars, then tucked the paper under one arm. He made a beeline for an unoccupied bench and sat, unfolding the paper once he was settled.

His jaw tightened. His blood pressure rose. His grip on the paper became so tense that he felt in danger of tearing the thing right in half. He had to force himself not to scream in frustration. Anger welled up within his chest, dueling with his determination. He'd failed. There it was, in black and white, right on the front cover of the Daily Planet, for all the world to see.

LEX LUTHOR FOUND GUILTY ON ALL ACCOUNTS by Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

Tempus didn't bother to read the rest of the article. He wasn't concerned with what the billionaire had been charged with, or how long his sorry carcass would spend rotting in prison. He'd always regarded the man with distaste. Tempus thought Luthor weak, in terms of villains. Sure, he was unscrupulous, completely devoid of morals. But he'd never thought big enough for Tempus' taste. Lex had focused on ridding the world of Superman only for his own benefit. But he, Tempus, *was* a big thinker. He wanted to rid the world of Superman so that all of society would crumble and dissolve into violence and chaos.

And, he reasoned, ridding the world of Superman didn't necessitate *killing* the Kryptonian. Any number of things could prevent Superman from changing the world. Killing him was, of course, the most fun, as well as the most satisfying way. Yet,

even if Kal-El lived, that didn't mean he would necessarily ever put on the blue, red, and yellow suit. If the persona of Superman didn't come into existence, for any reason, it stood to grounds that Clark Kent would never make more than a cursory impact on the world with his blasted news articles.

Separating Clark from Lois was a good way of preventing Superman from being born. Most Clarks in most universes that Tempus had looked into had needed Lois' help in coming up with the idea for the Spandex-clad superhero. In a rare few, he took sole credit for creating the avatar of his works, and, rarer still, there were universes in which Superman became the dominant personality, with the mild-mannered reporter being his cover. Tempus didn't meddle in those universes much. The risk of getting caught was far too high in those cases. And the risk of failure there was too great, even if he did not get caught.

So far, his plan to permanently separate the Lois and Clark of this universe had failed. He'd been all but certain that the Lane woman would get herself killed in the Congo. He'd paid that guy — Karl — handsomely to set her up for failure. He'd paid him to murder the reporter. It seemed that Karl had let him down.

Well, no matter, Tempus mused. *I still have an ace up my sleeve.*

There was still one person crazy enough in this universe to help him. All he had to do was find him. He wouldn't even have to persuade the man.

This was going to be easier than Tempus thought.

October 4, 1994

"You sure about this, Lois?"

"Completely."

"All right." Clark sounded resigned.

"You don't trust me, do you?"

"Of course I do. You know that, honey."

"Honey, huh?"

Clark allowed himself a grin. "Yep."

"I never thought of myself as a 'honey' before."

"You don't like it?"

Lois smiled. "Oh, no, I do. I think I just had to hear it coming from *you* in order to like it."

Clark chuckled. "So...I can still use it?"

"You'd better. What else do you have up your sleeve?"

"Let's see...Sweetie. My love. Dear. Love of my life. My heart." He paused for a moment.

"Is that all?" Lois teased him.

"No. I could go on, if you'd like."

"Later. We're here."

Lois brought her car to a stop outside the abandoned, condemned warehouse. A fire had gutted the building several years before. The owner had never bothered to rebuild, since his insurance on the place had lapsed and he hadn't been covered for the loss. Blackened bricks and scorched paint were still visible as Lois and Clark left the car and entered into the building. A couple of feral cats streaked by them as they walked along. Clark neatly sidestepped the felines, and examined the twisted, melted pieces of metal that lay slumped against some of the walls. He pulled his glasses down the slightest bit, x-raying the place as he walked.

"See anything yet?"

"Nothing."

"Damn."

"Lois, maybe Babbling Bruno was wrong about this place."

Lois shook her head. "You know he's never wrong."

"There's a first time for everything."

"Oh, come on, Clark. We've barely scratched the surface."

Clark let out a controlled breath. "Okay. We'll keep looking."

Lois nodded, though she was getting the impression that Clark might be right. The warehouse seemed pretty empty. Piles of trash stood here and there, mostly comprised of empty beer

bottles. Either the warehouse was a magnet for some of the overwhelming numbers of homeless people in the Hobbs Bay area, or it was the meeting place for groups of underage drinkers.

Maybe both. Lois thought, as she brushed aside a lock of her hair, tucking it behind her ear.

Babbling Bruno, one of Lois and Clark's most trusted snitches, had contacted them earlier that day with a hot lead for them. The warehouse, he had said, was the storage base for a drug ring. Sensing a story, Lois and Clark had jumped at the tidbit, coming down to the burnt out warehouse at Pier Sixteen. They had anticipated a relatively easy story. They would collect their evidence, a few photographs here, a few swiped bags of weed, or cocaine, or whatever drug there, to bring to the police station. But, there was nothing here.

"Anything yet?" she called to Clark, her voice echoing around the vaulted ceiling.

Clark emerged from what had once been an office. He shook his head. "Nope."

"You want to...you know...?" Lois made their secret hand gesture, which stood for Clark's super abilities.

Clark silently scanned the place, ensuring that there was no one to bear witness as he employed his powers. It simply wouldn't do if some half-drunken homeless man suddenly popped out from behind a shabby, moldering box as Clark did his thing. But, he saw nothing. He heard nothing, except a few birds flying around in some back area, trapped and confused, looking for the way out. Clark nodded to Lois, then went to work.

Using his speed, he checked the entire building. He looked into every office. He delved into every rotting box and sack of trash. He checked every melted file cabinet and desk drawer. There was nothing to be found.

In the span of twenty seconds, he was back at Lois' side.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head. "Are you sure Bruno said Pier Sixteen?"

"Positive. Besides, this is the only burnt out warehouse that I know of around here. There was another, at Pier Forty-Seven, but that got torn down over two years ago, and the city turned it into a parking lot."

Clark said nothing. He only rubbed the back of his neck in thought.

"I don't get it," Lois continued. "Bruno never contacts us unless he knows his leads are good."

"I know," Clark said. "Maybe he got his information confused? Are there any other places he could have meant? West River, maybe?"

"I don't think so," Lois said, shaking her head. "He was pretty adamant it was here. Maybe the drugs were moved?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't think so. Bruno indicated that it was a *lot* of drugs. How could they have moved it so fast? Besides, if there *had* been drugs here, I could probably pick up some trace of them in the air, depending on what it was. I don't smell anything except, well, stale beer and animal waste. At least, I *hope* it's just animal waste."

"Why would Bruno send us here then?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I guess we're not going to accomplish anything here. Let's head back and regro..."

"Ssh!" Clark said suddenly, cocking his head to one side.

"What's the matter?"

"I heard something."

"What?"

He listened for another moment. "I think someone's coming. Come on, we'd better hide."

"The drug lords?"

Clark shook his head again. "I'm not sure. I can only hear footsteps, no voices. Come on."

With a burst of speed, Clark flew Lois across the warehouse.

He found a small, well hidden crevice within an old supervisor's office on the narrow second floor, which overlooked the vast expanse of the main floor. The crevice was just barely big enough for Lois to hide in. Most of the office was still intact, though the large panes of glass had been blown out in the heat of the blaze which had torn the building apart. Lois crouched in her hiding place.

"Stay here," Clark whispered. "No matter what."

"What are you going to do?"

"Look for a spot to hide, see what I can see. If these are the drug lords, we don't want them to know we're here."

Lois nodded. In the next second, Clark was gone, across the opposite side of the warehouse. From her vantage point, Lois was able look down on the main floor, right at the entranceway. She could see Clark below, looking for a spot to hide. Finding nothing satisfactory, he simply crouched behind the charred remains of some kind of heavy machinery. It was so badly damaged that Lois couldn't quite figure out what it had once been. He shook his head, then moved to the far corner of the room, and wedged himself behind a different machine.

Six heavily armed men in army fatigues entered into the warehouse. No one spoke. All communication was done via hand signals. The men fanned out, covering the various corners of the warehouse. One even started to climb the concrete steps that led up to the second floor, right near Lois' hiding spot. She held her breath, bracing herself. But a sharp snap of the leader's fingers stopped the man in his tracks. The leader frowned, shook his head, and pointed.

Lois's eyes followed the leader's finger.

He was pointing to where Clark was attempting to hide.

Lois stifled the shout that was growing in her throat. She could see that Clark was aware of what was going on. Drawing the men's attention to her would not do any good. She forced herself to be patient and see what would unfold.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" the leader asked, as he crossed the room toward where Clark was.

For his part, Clark could scarcely believe what he was hearing. That voice. It couldn't be possible. There was simply no way.

It was the voice of a dead man.

"Come out from behind that machine," the leader ordered, as he and the other men continued to tighten like a noose around Clark's position. "Don't make us shoot."

Clark obeyed, simply to buy himself some time. He slowly stood from his crouch. After only the slightest of hesitations, he came out from around the machine to face the leader of the group. He blinked as he did so. It simply couldn't be.

Cameron Trask was dead.

And yet, there he stood, alive and well, looking the same as ever. Clark couldn't quite believe his eyes. The man hadn't seemed to age. That thought sent a tremor down his spine.

Except...

Trask would have to be in his late sixties or early seventies, Clark knew. The man before him appeared to only be in his late thirties or early forties, tops. Sure, some people aged well, but that didn't explain things to Clark's satisfaction.

"You know who I am," the man said, fixing Clark with a cold stare.

"Cameron Trask?" he asked, the name like poison on his tongue.

"Not quite," the leader said, mockingly putting a hand to his heart. "I'm hurt. Don't you remember me?"

"Jason," Clark said with certainty and sudden realization. It was not a question. "Jason Trask."

"Not as dumb as he looks, boys," Trask said, eliciting a chuckle from the rest of the men who were with him.

"How did you find me?"

Trask smiled evilly. “Just like you, I have my sources. They get me what I want.”

“What *do* you want, Trask?”

“Well, it’s simple, Mr. Kent. Or should I say, *Specimen S?* I want you.”

Clark couldn’t help it as his entire body froze up. Hearing that name, that title, in that perfect clone of a voice, stopped his heart for a beat, halted the blood in his veins, rooted his feet to the floor. Instantly, he was a powerless, helpless child again, the captive of Cameron Trask.

Jason saw what effect he’d had on Clark and laughed to himself.

“Old habits die hard, huh, S? Glass, Ashton, check the perimeter. Make sure we’re alone.”

“We’re alone,” Clark said, trying to sound as sincere as he could. It was imperative that Trask not find Lois.

“Why should I believe you?”

“Why would I lie?”

“I don’t know. You’re in a burnt out warehouse, on a tip that I planted. You’re part of a reporting team. Might I be so bold as to suggest that your partner is around here somewhere? *Oh, Miss Lane!* Come out, come out, *wherever* you are!”

“She’s not here, Trask. I’m alone. I was on the trail of what could be a huge story. Maybe something award worthy. I didn’t want to share credit, so...”

“That sounds distinctly unlike the Clark Kent that the Daily Planet has published so far,” Trask said, his voice mocking.

“Hey, it was your own father who taught me the idea of kill or be killed,” Clark said, shrugging casually. “Lois is just a front. I used her experience, rode on her coattails, until I was able to make a name for myself.”

“Very clever. Boys, apprehend Specimen S, please. Now.”

“Jason, don’t be foolish here. I know it’s been a long time since you last saw me, but trust me when I say that I am far more powerful than I once was.”

The men Trask was leading all grabbed hold of Clark’s suit. Clark set his jaw, trying not to show his relief that Trask had seemed to move away from his desire to have the warehouse searched. He knew he could shake the men off him easily, but he was unwilling to hurt them. He’d sworn to himself years ago that he would never use his incredible strength to cause harm to another living thing.

“Oh, I know that, S. But, you won’t take off on me.”

“You sound pretty confident about that.”

“My father didn’t teach just *you* to be ruthless, S. All those years, I watched and learned. And the thing that I learned was ‘always be prepared.’ I have your parents, S. Or should I say, I have the human traitors that sheltered you all these years. Be glad I haven’t executed them for the traitors they are.”

“I don’t believe you,” Clark said defiantly, but he did not move from where he stood.

“Believe it,” Trask said, and the coldness in his voice convinced Clark that he was speaking the truth. “You leave, you’ll never find them. Not even a bone fragment or fingernail. You kill me, you’ll never find them.”

“Leave them out of this,” Clark said, trying to stall for time while he tried to figure out his next move. “It’s me you want.”

“Oh no, S. Not a chance.”

Trask snapped his fingers. One of the men with him drew a small lead box out of a deep pocket. Clark became very uneasy. He tried to back up, but the men held him firmly, and he still wasn’t willing to hurt them. His heart began to race in his chest. He could hear his pulse whooshing in his ears. Somehow, he knew exactly what the box held, even before the man flipped open the lid, a second after it appeared in his hands.

As soon as the green, glowing rock was exposed, Clark felt his legs go to rubber. The pain was unmistakable, though it had

been more than a decade since he’d last experienced it. It was like knives jammed into his body, a lance thrust into his brain. His head throbbled. His skin felt aflame. It became hard to breathe and impossible to stand. Clark crashed to his knees, groaning, and holding his hands to his temples as the men let go of him.

“Trask...no,” he managed through gritted teeth. “Don’t.”

“I’m afraid it’s necessary. You didn’t think I’d trust you to just come along quietly, did you?” Trask asked, mock sympathy dripping from his words.

“Why?” Clark asked.

He had to know. And, more importantly, he hoped Lois would be able to hear everything that was going on. He knew that Trask wasn’t going to let him go. And if something happened to him, perhaps Lois could help somehow. He trusted her, knowing on a deep, primal level, that his very life rested in her more than capable hands.

The agony caused by the Kryptonite did not abate. It grew worse with every passing second. Clark fell forward. He tried to break his fall with his hands, but his muscles had turned to water. He crashed to the floor and lay on his side, curled in a loose fetal position. He continued to fight the grunts and groans of pain that battled to escape him. Every breath felt as though he were inhaling fire and jagged glass.

“Because, S. My father spent the remainder of his years looking for you. He divorced my mother. Abandoned me. Said it was for our own good. He got wind that the police were looking for him. But, he never stopped looking for you. He kept detailed records of his search that I found after his death.”

“He should have...left...me alone,” Clark gasped out against the assault of pain in his body.

“Oh no, S.” Trask stooped and slapped Clark roughly on the cheek with the back of his hand. “He was right to want to control you. And now, you’ll either submit to me, or watch the people you care about die. Boys, take this...*creature*...away.” He snapped his fingers sharply.

Two men roughly grabbed Clark under his armpits. They tried to haul him to his feet, but he was a dead weight in their grasp. It was clear that he couldn’t stand, not with the Kryptonite savaging his body. They looked to Trask but the man shook his head. He was not going to risk having the box closed. There was no telling how quickly the alien’s powers might come back. His father’s notes had debriefed him on it all — how, early on, during the first few encounters with the lethal rock, S’ powers had taken a long time to rebound. But as time went on, and he had more exposure to the radioactivity, his recovery time got shorter and shorter until it was almost instantaneous.

The men holding Clark squared their shoulders, and, with a little effort, dragged him from the warehouse. Clark’s head nodded freely at every bump and movement. He no longer had the strength to resist even that much. His grip on consciousness was slipping, faster and faster as time passed and the lead box was kept open. He was only dimly aware of the man holding the box, keeping step behind the men who were dragging him, but just out of reach in case Clark managed to muster the strength to lash out with a leg.

Through a haze of pain and growing darkness, Clark watched as he was thrown into the back of a plain silver van. Heavy gray curtains blocked out the windows, robbing him of the much needed sunlight. Trask’s men tossed him in like a sack of potatoes and his head hit the floor with a healthy smack. But he was in such excruciating torment that he barely felt the impact. The doors were shut behind him with two solid *thunks* after one of the other men climbed in the back with him to keep watch. The man kept his gun trained on Clark, lest he make a move. Clark kept still, not willing to risk a bullet, even if he *had* been able to move at all.

“Glass. Blindfold him.”

But there was no need. Clark lost the battle to stay conscious and slipped into the void.

October 5, 1994

“Jimmy?!”

Lois’ voice sheared through the normal low roar of the newsroom like a lance. People stopped in their tracks at her outburst. Conversations died in mid-word. It became, for one surreal moment, a still-life painting before the wrath of Mad Dog Lane.

Lois was wild-eyed and disheveled, still in the work attire she’d been wearing the day before. Her voice held a crack in it. Her whole body shook and twitched occasionally, the result of no sleep and so many cups of coffee she’d lost count after the twelfth or fifteenth one. Her eyes were glassy and bloodshot, but open wide, as if she dared to blink, she’d miss some vital clue. Her feet were blistered from pacing in her high heels. She’d long since ditched the shoes and was currently in her stocking feet as she traversed the bullpen of the Daily Planet. She limped a little from the blisters, but she pushed the pain out of her mind.

Clark had been in far more pain the last time she’d seen him.

The last time. She swallowed hard. *Not really the last last time. I’ll see him again.*

That had been thirty-six hours ago. Thirty-six long, terrifying hours. Thirty-six hours of not knowing if he was dead or alive.

Alive! her brain screamed at her, whenever she thought of that. *Trask wants something. He’ll keep Clark alive. Until he gets it. Until Clark denies him. Until he realizes that Clark would rather die than become his puppet.*

“Lois! I’m here,” Jimmy called from the elevator bank.

Lois spun around toward the sound of his voice. Around her, it was as if Jimmy’s arrival somehow signaled a return to the real world. Like a movie taken off pause, the newsroom and the people within it lurched into action once more. Jimmy rushed to Lois’ side, a bag of takeout swaying as he skidded to a halt next to her.

“Please, tell me you’ve got something for me,” she pleaded.

“Shrimp Lo Mein?”

“This is no time to be eating!”

“Lois, please,” Jimmy said, ushering her over to the conference room they had commandeered. “You haven’t eaten anything since nine am. That’s twelve hours ago.”

“Thanks, Jimmy, but my addition skills are perfectly intact.”

“You need to eat something.”

“I can’t. I’m too upset to eat.”

“Lois, look. We’re all worried about CK. We’re all going out of our minds over what happened. But we can’t accomplish anything if we pass out from hunger. Okay?”

Lois balled her fists and tried to blink away the tears that were forming in her eyes. How was it possible to still have tears? She could have sworn she’d used up her quota for the entire year in the last thirty-six hours since Clark had been taken. She didn’t think she’d cried this much when her parents had split up during her childhood.

But this...this was different. This was *Clark*. Her partner. Her best friend. The man she loved. The man who had saved her life — not just in the Congo, but in so many small, personal ways. The man she’d begun to envision spending the rest of her life with.

Still, she allowed Jimmy to escort her to the conference room, his arm slung around her shoulder in a friendly and supportive gesture. She was too tired and too upset to fight him. Jimmy softly closed the door behind them as Lois sank into one of the chairs. She folded her arms on the tabletop and pitched forward, laying half atop the polished wood. She groaned in despair.

All I’ve succeeded in doing so far is making a permanent

butt-print in this chair, she thought to herself with disgust.

The conference room looked like a warzone. Sheets of paper — scribbled notes, printouts, faxes, maps, pencil drawings of Trask from the police sketch artist — littered the entire room. The table was barely visible beneath the volumes of research. Empty cups of coffee completely filled the small wastebasket and had tumbled to the floor. Pens, pencils, markers, and hi-lighters were strewn throughout the room.

The nickname of “Command Central” had been well given.

And yet, half of what they had found had been about

Cameron Trask, not Jason. But the information they had found about Cameron painted a vivid picture of the man who’d held Clark captive for twelve years, torturing him and attempting to brainwash him, studying him like an animal in a zoo. Lois was mildly surprised that the man hadn’t tried to dissect Clark like a frog in a high school biology lab. Lois shuddered to think of Clark at the mercy of that man and it made her blood run cold to think of him at the mercy of Trask’s son now.

There was little to find on Jason. Though he’d appeared to be a military man when Lois had seen him, there was no record of him ever having served. It was more likely that he’d picked up certain habits from his father. Employment records had yielded barely anything. He’d bounced around the country, it seemed, working for a few months here, a few months there. And that record ended a little more than a month before, when he’d abruptly left his job as a guard in a maximum security prison in Pennsylvania. The same pattern emerged in looking at his list of addresses.

There wasn’t much to go on, and Lois knew it.

“Oh, Clark,” she whispered into her arms. “Where are you?”

“We’ll find him,” Jimmy swore, patting the back of her head.

“If we have to go to hell and back, we’ll find CK and bring him home.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois said, her voice muffled by the table.

Lois had entrusted only Jimmy and Perry with the truth of what had happened to Clark. Of course, she had left out certain things. Neither man needed to know that Clark wasn’t quite what he seemed to be. They hadn’t needed to know *exactly* why Trask Senior had kept Clark locked away in some unknown location for his entire childhood. Neither had the police. In fact, they hadn’t even been all that interested in much of Clark’s dealings with Cameron. They had grilled Lois on what Jason had said and done, what he had looked like, what Clark had said and done. Lois had kept it as truthful as possible, while protecting Clark’s secret.

Henderson had promised to call her if they found anything, but so far, neither her work phone nor her cell had rung with any news about Clark. Her beeper was traitorously silent. Lois was growing more frustrated by the minute. Every ring of any phone sent her heart straight into her throat. Every time she realized that it wasn’t for her, or wasn’t Henderson, the disappointment threatened to shatter her.

Jimmy unpacked the cartons of Chinese takeout. He placed Lois’ food and drink before her on the table, then set out his own, along with Perry’s. A moment later, the editor came into the room. He settled himself in his customary seat and sighed. Lois peeled herself off the tabletop and looked at her boss. He seemed to have aged twenty years in the last thirty-six hours or so when Lois had burst into his office in tears and, blubbing, had told him what had happened to Clark.

With a start, Lois realized that she probably looked no better than Perry. In fact, she probably looked worse.

“Lois, honey, you look beat,” Perry said gently.

“I’m fine,” Lois lied. “You have any news?”

“Well, I just got off the phone with Bill Henderson,” Perry hedged.

Lois’ drooping eyes snapped open. “Does he have anything

yet?”

Perry shook his head. “Not a damned thing. Uh, not yet, that is. I’m sure he’ll find something soon.”

“We’re spinning our wheels,” Lois complained, opening her food container. She picked at the Shrimp Lo Mein with a disinterested pair of chopsticks. “That nutcase has had Clark for a day and a half. He could have taken him anywhere by now. He might not even be in the country anymore for all we know.”

She popped a shrimp into her mouth and chewed, more through force of habit than anything else. She really wasn’t hungry. Not even chocolate, her favorite food in the entire world, could have possibly been appetizing to her.

“I doubt it,” Perry said, shaking his graying head again. “Clark won’t go quietly and if I were Trask, I wouldn’t exactly want to be in public with someone making a fuss. Especially since Clark is a well-recognized person in Metropolis, thanks to all those Daily Planet Lane and Kent posters on almost every street corner. The word is out. Every news outlet — television, radio, and paper — has gotten the word out about Clark’s kidnapping.”

“Maybe. But, what if he...he...” Lois couldn’t finish.

“He won’t,” Perry tried to assure her. “It seems like he wants something from Clark. He won’t just...you know.”

“Oh, Perry, you didn’t see how much pain Clark was in. His fear.” Lois shook her head. “And you know Clark. He’s not going to give in to whatever wacko demands Trask makes. When he doesn’t...I’m just...terrified. I can’t lose him, Chief. I *won’t* lose him.”

Perry couldn’t say anything. He only nodded. The three ate in silence for a few minutes, Lois picking at her food like a bird. Jimmy had gone to her favorite takeout place, but this time Lois barely even tasted it.

No, not my favorite place, she thought. Just my favorite takeout in Metropolis. That place in China that Clark usually goes to for our takeout is so much better. Oh, Clark. Where are you? Please, be okay. I’ll die myself before I lose you. I just need...something...some clue to go on. I’ll bring down the entire army down on Trask’s head if I need to. Just hang in there, Clark.

“Lois? Honey?” Perry was gazing intently at her.

With a start, she realized that he’d called to her more than once already. She swallowed a bite of rice. “Sorry, Chief. What did you say?”

“I said, have you had any luck in getting contact with Clark’s parents?”

Lois shook her head. “None. I’ve tried just about every half hour. No one is picking up. I think Trask was telling the truth when he threatened Clark with killing his parents. I’d hoped it was just a bluff, that I would have some time to warn them. But I’m starting to think he really *does* have them.”

“You’re sure about that? They can’t just be out of town or something?”

“I’m sure, Chief. Clark would have told me if his parents were taking a trip or something. And besides, one of their hired farmhands they use when they’re out of town probably would have picked up the phone. Trask *has* to have them. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Have you told Henderson your suspicions?”

“Of course I have.”

“Good.”

“Ugh, I can’t eat this,” Lois complained, shoving the paper boxes of Chinese food away from her and toward the center of the table. She’d eaten less than half of the contents. Even that was enough to do somersaults in her stomach and make her feel ill.

“Lois, perhaps you ought to go home for a while. Get some rest.”

“I can’t, Perry,” she argued.

“Now now, it’s not up for debate.”

“Perry...”

“That’s an order,” Perry said gently but firmly, cutting her off before she could retort. “You won’t do Clark any good if you’re too tired to see straight.”

“But, Perry, I can’t. How am I supposed to sit still and rest when God only knows what Clark is going through?”

“Look, I know you pride yourself on your ‘Mad Dog Lane’ side. But you’ve got to give your body a break. You’ve barely eaten and you haven’t slept at all since before Clark disappeared. You’re going to crash out,” Perry said. “I’m amazed you’re still standing, to be honest.”

“I’ll drive her home, Chief,” Jimmy offered, swallowing down the last gulp of his soda.

Perry nodded. “Good. I’d better not see either one of you until tomorrow. Got it?”

“Got it,” Lois grumpily mumbled.

She stood from her chair, pushing it back. With a sigh, she left the conference room, swept over to her desk, and slipped into her light jacket. Jimmy scrambled along behind her, trying to keep up. Lois felt slightly guilty about making Jimmy race to keep stride with her. But she felt even worse about leaving behind her research. Perry would never allow her to take it home with her, she knew. If she did, she would never sleep. Not that she anticipated being able to sleep with her fears for Clark and his parents keeping her company.

With a scowl affixed to her face, Lois walked with Jimmy to the elevator bank, rode the car down to the ground floor, and exited out through the lobby. A lump formed in her throat as they passed the newsstand there. That was where she had first started to come to know Clark, though they had met briefly prior to that conversation. She swallowed hard, trying to loosen the lump enough to be able to breathe.

Jimmy saw what a struggle it was for Lois to pass by that spot, knowing their history. He once again slung his arm about her, pulling her close, in what he hoped was a comforting manner.

“It’ll be all right,” he whispered to her.

Lois nodded feebly, unable to speak. She *hoped* Jimmy was right. She *wanted* to agree with him. But at the moment, she couldn’t quite believe that it was true.

They drove in silence to Lois’ apartment. Lois sank deeply into the supple leather seat of Jimmy’s car. Once at Lois’, Jimmy parked out front, then walked Lois up the steps, into the brownstone, and to her apartment door.

“Are you going to be all right?” Jimmy asked. “I mean, here, alone?”

Lois nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

“Because, if you need me...”

Lois managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Jimmy. But all I want right now is a shower and some time to think.”

“Okay. No problem. But, like I said, if you need anything, call me, no matter what time it is. I can be here in twenty minutes.”

“Thanks. I will. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Right. Bye, Lois.”

Lois watched Jimmy retreat down the corridor until he vanished down the steps to the main floor. Then she closed the door, locked the numerous bolts and locks, set the alarm, and headed off to her bedroom. Keeping herself moving so that she barely had any time to dwell on her dark thoughts, she stripped out of her work attire and headed into the shower.

The hot water was soothing on her tired body and she momentarily felt a twinge of remorse and guilt over that. There she was, enjoying the basic luxury of a simple shower when Clark was being held captive. She angrily scrubbed down her body, shampooed and conditioned her hair, and rinsed. Hot beads

of water rolled down her face and it took her a minute to realize that they were tears, not shower water. She wiped them away with the back of one hand and scrubbed her face free of the salt her tears had left behind.

She toweled off quickly and threw on her favorite fluffy bathrobe. She tossed herself onto her bed, finally feeling the full extent of her weariness. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, but all she saw behind her eyelids was Clark, writhing on the floor of that condemned warehouse, in pain as Trask stood above him. Her eyes snapped open again. She reached for the silver picture frame she kept on her nightstand, with her favorite picture of her and Clark together. It had been taken on their first date together, as the sun had set over Centennial Park and they had waited for the outdoor theatre group to begin their performance. Lois couldn't help but smile at the image of Clark.

In it, she was sitting before him on their picnic blanket, her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms around them. Clark was on his knees behind her, his arms wrapped around her, holding her close to his chest. She had a blissful smile on her face. Clark's grin was wide as an ocean and more radiant than the sun. Even in that still image, she could see the familiar sparkle in his eyes and the depths of his love for her.

He looked so vibrant, so healthy, so full of life, so happy there, frozen in time like that.

That was the image of him that she wanted to keep in her mind. She had to.

Hours later, she finally fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep, hugging the picture frame to her chest, as though it alone could ward off any nightmares.

October 10, 1994

"Are you ready to cooperate, yet?"

"Never, Trask," Clark said through gritted teeth.

"Wrong answer," Trask said, kicking Clark in the gut.

Clark muffled the moan of pain that escaped him. How long had it been now? he wondered. Days, certainly, since Trask had first entered that warehouse and turned Clark's world upside down in a single instant. Maybe a week. Could it be that long already? Either way, it felt like a lifetime.

"Ashton, please lock this creature back in his cell now."

The man in question — Rob Ashton — saluted Trask. "Yes, sir."

Clark couldn't muster any fight in him. He was too weak, too wracked by pain, too short-winded from the kick to his midsection. Ashton and Nunez hooked him beneath his armpits and dragged him down the hall. He was unceremoniously tossed into the small room that served as his cell. The door clanged shut behind him and he heard the lock slammed home.

Alone.

He was finally alone.

Clark breathed a small sigh of relief to finally be by himself, wincing in pain as he did so. For the past hour, perhaps, Trask had tormented him. He had made demands of Clark, things Clark would never — could never — bring himself to do. Among them was the command for him to fly out to a retirement village in San Diego, where a judge now resided, the same one who had delivered the guilty sentence to Cameron so many years ago at his court martial. The poor old man was now wheelchair bound, blind, and so arthritic that he could barely move on his own, but Jason still craved justice for his father.

Clark had refused.

He would never be allowed to fly there alone. He would never be free from Trask or his minions. There would be no chance for escape. Trask had shown him the bullets he'd formed out of Kryptonite. Clark had no doubt that whoever would be sent with him to kill the judge would put one of those bullets right through his head if he tried to escape.

Cameron had paraded Jonathan and Martha before Clark, threatening to take their lives if Clark didn't change his mind. Still, Clark hadn't been able bring himself to agree to do it. Trask had ordered Jonathan beaten, right in front of Clark's eyes. That had nearly broken Clark's resolve. As a child, on the very day his adoption had gone through, he'd pledged to himself that he would be the perfect son, and to always protect his parents, no matter what the personal cost. Yet, Jonathan had held Clark's eyes with a fierce, determined gaze, one that told Clark not to give in. With an effort, Clark had kept his mouth closed.

Of course, Kryptonite had been around while Trask had done all of this. Although Clark had tried to fight back, the radioactive stone had rendered him more helpless than a newborn child. And the pain had all but paralyzed him. Shame burned him that he hadn't been able to do something — anything — to stop the abuse his father had been taking.

Not soon enough, Trask had raised his hand in a silent gesture for the beating to stop. Jonathan had been doubled over, coughing, and wheezing. Clark had nearly cried as he looked upon the man he proudly called his father. Martha had been white as a sheet, her mouth hanging open, though it seemed her tongue had been rendered mute. Clark's heart had bled for his mother, knowing that she was hurting for her husband and son alike.

But now, Clark was finally away from the deadly green stone. His parents were, for the moment, still alive. If he had to guess, he'd say that Trask planned on keeping them alive for the time being. They were the one thing, the *only* leverage, that the man had over Clark. He wouldn't kill them. At least, not right away. Trask would want them alive for as long as possible in order to try and control Clark.

Still too weak to stand, Clark crawled his way across the tiny room until he was at the far wall. With an effort, he propped himself up, still feeling the lingering effects of the exposure to the Kryptonite. He leaned heavily on the unadorned concrete of the room, thinking, not for the first time, that it reminded him of the time he'd taken shelter in his parents' storm cellar when Cameron had come looking for him so many Christmases ago. Clark breathed as deeply as he dared, his bruised ribs and sore diaphragm aching in protest.

He looked around the room, as he always did, examining it for any clue as to where he was or how he could escape. Like the rest of the complex, the walls were made of concrete. In this room, the walls were rough and not quite finished. Only one wall had been smoothed down and in three spots swatches of different shades of beige had been haphazardly splashed on the surface, as though someone had once tried to decide which one to use. The ceiling, easily twenty-five feet tall, had exposed wires running to the single naked light bulb that hung in the center of the room. There was nothing else in the room, not a chair or bench to sit on, not a sign or scrawled message to give him any indication of where he was.

But, more importantly, there were no windows.

No windows meant no sunlight.

No sunlight meant that Clark's powers had never returned after his initial exposure to the Kryptonite.

No powers meant no hope of escape. No hope of rescuing his parents. No hope of bringing Trask to justice. No hope of getting back to Lois.

Lois.

The image of her floated in his mind, momentarily blocking everything else out. Trask hadn't gotten to Lois. She wasn't his prisoner. If she was, Clark was certain that Jason would have held her life over his head as well. He was sure that she too would have been brought before him, along with his parents. But she hadn't been. She had to be safe.

And if she was safe, she would be looking for him. Clark knew her too well. He knew she'd leave no stone unturned until

she found him. She was Lois Lane. She was *Mad Dog* Lane. She *always* got what she was looking for.

But this time...

Would Lois be able to pull off a miracle? Would she be able to find him before he and his parents were hurt any further...or killed? Did he even want her to do so? She would be exposing herself to real danger if she found and confronted Trask. There was little doubt in Clark's mind that a confrontation would wind up getting Lois killed. And he simply would not — could not — continue living in a world without Lois.

She was his rock, his center, his soul mate. She grounded him. She gave him a home. With her, for the first time in his life, he didn't feel like the alien outsider that he'd always been.

He needed her, as much as he needed air to breathe and sunlight to recharge his body.

Oh, Lois, he thought miserably, *I need you. But please, be safe.*

October 11, 1994

"Good to see you," Trask said, smiling thinly at the man before him. "It's been too long."

"More than a decade," the man agreed, nodding.

"You must be wondering why I've contacted you after all this time."

The other man nodded again. "The question had crossed my mind."

"Come, come. Have a seat in my office."

Trask gestured around the lavish living space. It looked more like a living room in an apartment than an office. He settled himself on a black leather couch while the other man hesitantly took a seat in a matching armchair. The man shifted a little uneasily.

"Pardon my asking, sir, but..."

"Why are you here? Yes, yes, of course. You see, I need a favor from you."

"A favor?"

Trask chuckled. "Okay, you caught me. It's more like a job opening that I want you to fill."

"A job? Is this anything like what your father...?"

"Indeed. In fact, it's the exact same thing."

"Are you telling me...?"

"Yes, Jenson. We've found and recaptured codename Specimen S."

"That's...how?" Jenson breathed, shocked.

"Never you mind," Trask said sharply. Then softer, he added, "Are you interested or not?"

"Absolutely," Jenson said, without hesitation.

"Good. Because Bureau Thirty-Nine is a lifetime commitment. I would have hated to bring you all the way here just to give you your...severance package."

"Is he here? In this facility?"

Trask nodded. "But I'm afraid that, for the time being, I have others for you to see to."

"Not S?"

"No."

"Who?"

"Two human traitors who sheltered the alien creature after he escaped from my father's compound all those years ago."

"So...you want me to...what, exactly?"

"Monitor them. Make sure that they don't die on me."

"Don't die? Sir?"

"You heard me, Jenson. I need them kept alive, as a way to control S. Understood?"

Jenson nodded. Jason had the same ruthlessness in his voice that Cameron had possessed. It seemed that the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. He also knew that if that was the case, then Jason probably wouldn't hesitate to kill him if Jenson

displeased him. Jenson swallowed hard and nodded.

"Of course, sir."

"Any more questions?"

Jenson shook his head slightly. "None."

"Excellent. Now, get to work. You'll find the human traitors just down the hall, the last door on your right. The guards have been given your description and will let you in."

"I, uh, need to get some medical supplies," Jenson protested before he could stop himself.

But Trask shook his head. "No need. We have just about anything you could need right here. Food. Water. Medical supplies of just about every type. Ashton here will give you the grand tour of our humble new compound. Now, go. And Jenson?"

"Yes, sir?"

"If they die, *you* die."

"Not to worry," Jenson said, putting on an air of bravado. "They won't."

"Good."

Jenson stood and faced the man called Ashton. If the man was thirty-five years old, that was a lot. He stood just to the right of the door, in the military at-ease stance, dressed in army fatigues. Jenson wondered if he was actually a military man, or if like Trask, he was play-acting at one. Still, he didn't say a single word. He merely followed Ashton as the man began his tour of the underground facility.

What have I gotten myself into? he wondered.

November 21, 1994

Jenson stepped cautiously into the small room that was serving as S' cell. He shuddered as he did so. The room was no bigger than the bathroom in his old studio apartment. It was so small that S couldn't lay out on the floor stretched to his full length. Instead, the man was curled into a loose fetal position, his back toward the single door. Jenson knelt as Paul Glass shut the door to the room behind him. Another shudder crept up Jenson's spine, now that he was fully enclosed in such a tiny place.

He couldn't see S' face. In fact, this was the first time since Trask had brought him in that he had been allowed to see S. He'd tended to Jonathan and Martha plenty of times, resetting broken bones and administering light pain killers when necessary. Once or twice he'd even had to provide a few carefully placed stitches to both of them. He wondered what Trask was doing to them, or was having someone else do to them, but he feared to ask.

If he had learned anything since Trask had brought him here, it was that he was just as volatile and crazy as his father.

Jenson lightly touched S on the back. The man did not stir. For one brief moment, Jenson panicked. Had S died while he'd been gathering together his supplies and medical instruments? He moved his hand to S' right shoulder and shook him gently. After a moment, S groggily began to shift, his movements painfully slow and far from graceful. But eventually, the man pushed himself up, turned, and sat, leaning against the wall.

Jenson was horrified at what he saw.

A full beard had grown on S' drawn and pained face. Dried blood was crusted in the corners of his mouth and beneath his nostrils. He was thin, too thin, and paler than anyone Jenson had ever seen outside of a corpse in a funeral home. His eyes blinked slowly, all but lifeless. Yet, there was still a wealth of intelligence and a spark of determination hidden deeply within those familiar brown orbs.

He was no longer the little boy Jenson had once known. He'd grown into a handsome young man, though his looks had now been marred. Jenson could see that, despite the wounds he bore and his poor body condition.

As S gazed at Jenson, there seemed to be a flicker of recognition there. It made an uncomfortable jolt run up Jenson's

spine. After all this time, S knew him, though he knew he didn't quite look the same anymore.

"J..." S tried.

"Ssh, don't speak," Jenson encouraged. "You aren't well."

S rolled his head from side to side. "Jenson?"

Jenson nodded. "In the flesh."

"When...?"

"Ssh, now. Let me take a look at you, S."

S shook his head again. "Not S. Not anymore. Clark."

"All right then. Clark. Let me take a look at you."

"Don't bother. Dying."

Jenson could see that S'...Clark's...breathing was labored. He looked barely able to continue in the condition he was in. Clark closed his eyes.

"S...uh, Clark...stay with me now," Jenson said in a warning tone.

"Still here," Clark said in a small voice.

It somehow reminded Jenson of the little boy Clark had once been. He remembered so clearly how big and bright his eyes had been back then, though they had always been swimming in terror of Cameron. It nearly broke Jenson's heart now to see that same boy all grown up and teetering on the verge of what looked like a massive failure of all of his organs.

"Okay then. Let me take a look at you. All right?"

Clark sighed but did not protest as Jenson began to examine him. For his part, Jenson worked as quickly and as gently as he could. Clark hadn't been joking when he'd said that he was dying. From what Jenson knew of Clark's unique body, it did indeed appear to be teetering on the brink of shutting completely down. Jenson did his best to keep his face neutral, but it didn't seem to fool Clark.

"Told you," he wheezed out.

A fit of coughing seized Clark. For a long few minutes, all he could do was cough into his hand, grimacing against the pain that shot through his body. When he was done, he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Jenson could see the spots and smears of blood on Clark's skin, though the man quickly tried to wipe the evidence away on his tattered clothing.

"Let me help you," Jenson pleaded, grasping Clark's wrist.

"Nothing to you can do," Clark said, his chest heaving with the effort of speaking. "Too late for me."

"Clark, that's not true. I can help you, if you let me."

Clark stirred, seeming to gather some scraps of energy. "You want to help? Get my parents out of here. Trask...he..."

"I know. I've been caring for them for a while now."

"Haven't seen them in a few days. Are they...?"

"They are battered and bruised, but alive. A little on the underfed side, but otherwise healthy."

Clark let out a quavering sigh of relief. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"Clark...it will go much easier on you if you just...do whatever Jason asks of you. You *have* to know that. I refuse to believe that you want him to kill you. And he will. You know that as well as I do."

"I know. But I won't kill for him. I'd rather die. Please, Jenson. Just let me die."

"And your parents? Do you want to see *them* die?"

"No," Clark said, choking back another cough. "Of course not."

"Then just do what Jason says."

"Not who I am," Clark said. It appeared that his energy reserves were dropping again.

"Look, Clark, I know Jason's not the most stable guy. But if you value your life..."

"No," Clark said, firmly, as if all of his remaining strength was behind that single word. "*Never.*"

"Damn it, Clark! I'm trying to help you!" Jenson pleaded.

But Clark's eyes had slid shut, the last dregs of his energy spent. Jenson checked his vitals. They were still strong enough that he didn't have to worry about immediate death, though he wondered how quickly that might change. For a long time, Jenson just crouched next to Clark's sleeping form. But Clark did not reawaken. After a time, Jenson stood, shaking his head at Clark's stubbornness, and at the brutality of the situation.

He wanted to help. He really did. But there was only so much that he could do. He would try to get some extra rations of food to Clark. He would do his best to convince Trask that Clark would die without it. But he doubted that Trask would care. If only Clark would just do something — *anything* — to help himself out.

Jenson put his back to Clark and raised a fist to knock on the door, alerting the guards to the fact that he was ready to leave Clark's cell. But at that moment, Clark shifted and murmured quietly.

"Lois," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, though his tongue sounded heavy in his sleep.

November 22, 1994

"Lois? Could I see you in my office a moment?"

Lois sighed and looked up from the stack of research before her in the conference room. Still dubbed "Command Center," it was in worse shape now than it had been the day after Clark had been captured.

"Sure, Chief," she answered, wearily pushing herself up out of her chair.

Perry pulled his head back through the door and led Lois over to his office. He shut the door behind her, then pulled closed the shades, blocking them out of view of everyone else in the bullpen. The late fall sun had already set and the lights of Metropolis twinkled beyond the windows behind Perry's desk.

Lois had once loved the sight of all those lights, but now they did little for her except make her more depressed. They reminded her all too well of the time Clark had flown them to the outskirts of the city, into the mountains. It had been the first time he'd taken her flying, being far too cautious about anyone ever catching him in the act of using his extraordinary gifts. Lois had loved every second of the leisurely flight. She hadn't feared the fact that she had been so far off the ground. She hadn't worried that there was nothing to protect her from a fall aside from Clark's strong arms. Instead, she had reveled in his embrace, trusting him completely. She had felt far safer and more secure than she ever had in her life. They had found a grassy field and had watched the stars until it had grown close to dawn. Then Clark had flown her home again, and the lights of the city had seemed so dim to her compared to those heavenly lights she'd shared with Clark.

"Lois, honey, are you okay?"

"Chief, you ask me that every day," Lois said, flopping down into the red plaid armchair in the corner of the room. "And every day I tell you the same thing. I'm surviving."

"Have you found anything new?"

Lois shook her head. "Not a thing. Oh, Perry...it's been so long now."

"I know," Perry said, sitting on the edge of his desk and facing Lois. "I know."

"Has your source...?" Lois asked, but Perry shook his head before she could finish.

"No. Uh, not yet. Yours?"

"Nothing. Detective Wolfe called me earlier. Said they found Babbling Bruno."

"Well, maybe he'll be able to contribute something. He's the one who gave you that bad lead on the drug ring."

Lois' lower lip trembled. "I don't think so. He's dead, Perry. I mean, Bruno. Not Clark. Oh God, please, not Clark."

“Hey now, we don’t have any evidence to suggest that Clark is anything but alive.”

“We have no evidence of *anything*, Chief. And that’s what scares me.”

Perry cleared his throat and tried to steer the conversation away from Lois’ morbid thoughts. “So, uh, what happened to Bruno?”

“Don’t know yet. Coroner just got his body about two hours ago. I haven’t heard back anything yet. All they would say is that he’s been dead a while. Probably killed right after I got that call from him about the supposed drug ring that got us into this whole mess. Trask mentioned he planted the lead. He must have killed Bruno right after, to cover his tracks.”

Perry fell silent a moment.

“Is that all, Chief? I really need to get back to the conference room.”

“No,” Perry said haltingly, as though unsure of what to say. Or, perhaps, knowing exactly what to say but unsure of *how* to say it. “That’s not exactly the whole reason I brought you in here.”

“What?” Lois asked, seeing Perry’s somber mood.

“There’s, uh...there’s been some talk around.”

“Talk?”

“Lois, you know I want to find Clark as much as you do. Well, Clark and his parents. But, Lois, you haven’t produced a page-one article — or *any* article, for that matter — since Clark disappeared. I’m getting letters asking if you were fired. Other members of the Planet are wondering why you’re allowed to stay on staff.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I need you to start chasing stories again, Lois.”

“Perry! I can’t do that!”

“Yes, you can. You have to. Now, I haven’t pressed the issue this whole time. But I think it’s about time that you got back in the saddle, so to speak.”

“Perry, I can’t just stop what I’m doing, trying to find Clark. His whereabouts aren’t going to just fall out of the sky and into my lap.”

“Look, I’m not asking you to give up your search. But I need you to take a break from it. Cover a few easy stories. Who knows? It might clear your head a little.”

“Perry,” Lois whined.

“No. No arguments this time, Lois. Now, there’s a police academy graduation tomorrow morning. I want you to cover it. Take Rodriguez with you for photos.”

“A police academy graduation?” Lois asked, deeply offended. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“I’m not kidding. I need you to get out there and do your job. But, I also don’t want you getting too deeply involved with anything that will force you to stop trying to find your partner,” Perry said, giving her a sly wink.

Lois nodded, knowing she would never win this battle. “Okay, fine. I’ll do it.”

“Of course you will. It wasn’t an optional assignment.”

“It’s just...I feel like the answer is right under my nose, Chief. I just...can’t see it yet,” Lois said unhappily, leaning back into the chair’s cushions and gesturing futilely.

“I know it’s rough,” Perry said sympathetically. “But we won’t stop until we find Clark and bring his kidnapers to justice. I promise you that.”

November 24, 1994

Lois grumbled as she struggled with the can of cranberry sauce, her ancient electric can-opener smoking as the beaten-down motor started to die. She switched the appliance off before it could start to spark and flame, rummaged through her kitchen drawers looking for a handheld opener, and finally threw the can

across the room in frustration when she failed to find one. The can landed with a heavy thud against the wall. The aluminum dented and some of the red jelly leaked out from the half open top. Lois ignored the mess it was making.

“Honestly, Lois!” her mother admonished her. “Was that really necessary?”

“No,” Lois snapped. “But it felt good.”

“Such aggression,” Ellen said, clucking her tongue and shaking her head. “You’d think we were fighting a war instead of preparing the Thanksgiving meal.”

“A meal that I have *no right* to be enjoying,” Lois said, crossing her arms and scowling at the offending can of cranberry sauce. “I was *supposed* to be sharing the holiday with Clark,” she said, valiantly trying to hold back a fresh wave of tears.

“Have you found anything yet?” Lucy asked from her perch in the living room, sitting cross-legged on the couch and watching the Macy’s parade.

“Nothing,” Lois said miserably.

“And you’re sure that he was...taken?” Ellen asked, not looking up from her task of cleaning out the turkey innards.

“Mother!” Lois exclaimed, aghast at the suggestion.

“I’m not saying that he...staged it or anything, mind you. But, well, how well do you ever really know a person? I mean, look at the lengths your father went to in order to cover up his affairs and the fact that he wanted out of our marriage.”

“Mom,” Lois said, the word more a sigh than anything else.

“I know Clark. He wouldn’t stage his abduction or break free and then run away from me. He’s not like Daddy. He loves me. And I love him. Believe me, Mom. Clark would move Heaven and Earth to get back here if he could. And the fact that he hasn’t been able to come home...I’m the most scared I’ve ever been in my entire life.”

“Lois...I...I’m sorry,” her mother said, looking up from her work and reading the lines of pain in Lois’ face.

“Wait, wait, wait. Back up a minute,” Lucy said, tearing her eyes away from the colorful floats making their way down 5th Avenue.

“What?” Lois asked, irritated.

“Did you just...say that you’re in love?” Lucy grinned at her older sister.

“I am. I really am,” Lois nodded, a tiny smile ghosting over her lips.

Lucy launched herself off the couch and grabbed Lois in a hug. “That is *so* great! I’ve been waiting so long to see you in love!”

“Thanks,” Lois said, trying to muster up another smile for Lucy, and only partially succeeding.

“Anything I can do to help, sis?”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve been working day and night trying to find him. But everything I can think of winds up in a dead end.” Lois’ shoulders slumped. She was close to feeling defeated.

Close, she thought. But not there yet. I’ll keep looking until I either find him or die trying.

“So,” Lucy said, deftly changing the subject. “What can I do?” She gestured to the various ingredients that had laid siege to Lois’ kitchen.

“You could peel the potatoes,” Ellen suggested, laying the turkey in a roasting pan and washing her hands.

“You know, it’s stupid we’re doing this here,” Lucy complained as she picked up the vegetable peeler in readiness to attack the small army of potatoes on the counter. “You suck at cooking, Lois.”

“My apartment has the biggest kitchen,” Lois replied, rolling her eyes. They had this discussion at every holiday that Lois hosted.

The rest of the day passed in a blur for Lois. She made conversation with her mother and sister, but couldn’t recall what

had been discussed afterwards. The television kept up a steady stream of background noise, and after a while, the three women turned their attention to it. It was easier focusing on the old movies than trying to keep up the strained conversation between the three.

Lois could barely concentrate on the images flashing on the screen. Everything reminded her of Clark. The Christmas commercials were playing in full force, only adding salt to Lois' wounded heart, as she watched the happy couples drinking coffee before a roaring fire, or looking for the perfect gift, or sledding with their children. Clark had told her that Christmas was his very favorite holiday. He'd been so excited about the prospect of bringing her home to Smallville to celebrate that year.

That should be me, she thought glumly as yet another happy couple walked arm-in-arm down the sidewalk in the snow on the television. *Will I ever find him?*

Well after the meal was eaten and the dishes cleaned and put away, the three women said goodnight. Ellen left first, claiming a headache. Lucy wasn't far behind her, saying that she had promised a friend she would stop by for a late round of post-dessert drinks. Lois found herself missing their company after they departed, the sudden silence of her apartment oppressive, as though the very walls were caving in on her.

"What am I going to do?" she asked her fish, tossing some flakes of food into the water. The colorful fish raced each other to the surface and greedily started gulping down the flakes. "It's not like Clark's whereabouts are just going to be handed to me on a silver platter or fall out of the sky and hit me on the head. I've hit a wall, and I'm not sure where to turn next." She sighed. "Oh, Clark. Where are you?"

She had asked that question every day, often more than once, sometimes out loud and sometimes only within the dark confines of her tortured mind. And every day, she had been disappointed and frustrated to find herself no closer to the answer.

She moved to the kitchen, washed the smell of fish food from her hands, and was about to head to her bedroom when there was a knock at the door. Wondering who it could be, she moved cautiously into the living room. She didn't think it was her mother or sister.

"Who's there?" she called as she approached. "Lucy? Is that you?"

"Miss Lane?" asked a male's voice through the thick wood. It was not a voice Lois recognized.

"Who are you?"

"Please, Miss Lane, open up. I need to speak with you."

There was a weighty pause. The voice lowered, so that Lois had to strain her ears to hear it. "I have information for you. It's about Clark."

Lois stood for a moment, frozen. Could this be the lead she was hoping for? Her heart leapt into her throat as that spark of hope fared into existence. Or was it some trick, some trap? Had Trask figured out that she had seen everything that day in the warehouse? She and Perry had kept that part of the story out of the papers. The only thing that had been mentioned was that Clark Kent had gone missing while on assignment, and that a report had been filed with the police after Clark had failed to show up for work. That had been true enough. Clark usually arrived at nine am on the dot. Lois had spoken with the police at ten am, after she had calmed down enough to talk in coherent sentences.

"Miss Lane?" The voice had become almost whining, almost begging. "Please."

Jarred suddenly back to the present, Lois stepped over to the door and began to undo the various deadbolts and locks. She kept the chain on and opened the door a crack to peek out. A thin, wiry older man stood behind the door, a woolen cap in his hands. He was nervously twisting the fabric in his fingers, and his fear-

filled eyes kept darting about.

"Who are you?" Lois demanded.

"Someone who can help you," he whispered. "Please. Let me in and I'll tell you everything."

"You can tell me from the hallway."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "*He* might have spies."

"He? He who? Trask?"

The man in the hall simply nodded, his head moving so slightly it was nearly imperceptible. For another moment, Lois hesitated. But, she decided after an internal debate, it wasn't like she was helpless. She had already earned her brown belt in her self-defense classes and was going for her black belt. If this skinny, frail looking man gave her any trouble, she was certain she could flatten him without a problem. She closed the door, unhooked the chain, and let the man in.

"Come in," she said, her own eyes searching the hall. No one else seemed to be around.

"Thank you," the man said politely, stepping over the threshold.

Lois gestured to her living room and closed the door softly. The man ambled to the couch and sat heavily. Lois sat in a chair opposite him, taking in his appearance.

He had to be close to eighty. Stark white hair covered his head, thinning in places. It was impossible to tell what color it had once been. He was clean-shaven, and the left side of his face bore an ugly series of old scars, as though some kind of wild animal had once attacked him. And yet, his features were chiseled, hard, though not unkindly looking. His eyes were piercing blue, intelligent and fearful.

"Well?" Lois prompted, as the man took in his surroundings.

"My name is Steve Jenson," the man said after a moment. "I'm..."

"Steve Jenson?" Lois repeated. "Clark told me about you. You're one of Trask's men." Her voice hardened as she spoke.

Jenson sighed. "Yes, that's true. At least, I used to be. Or...I guess, I still am. I don't want to be, believe me. But, I have no choice."

"There's always a choice," Lois said harshly, crossing her arms.

"Trask...both Cameron and Jason...are...were...cruel men, Miss Lane. If I try to leave now, Jason will kill me. If I had tried to leave back then, so many years ago, Cameron would have killed me. I noticed you looking at my scars. No, no, don't be ashamed," he said soothingly as Lois flushed. "They are hard to ignore, I know. When your friend first escaped from Bureau Thirty-Nine, Cameron took his anger out on me. You see, I was the last person to see S...Clark...before he broke out of Cameron's compound. He blamed me for the boy's escape, as though I should have been able to prevent it. But Clark had hidden some of his powers from me. I was lucky that Trask didn't just flat out kill me. I've borne my scars ever since, a reminder that I will never escape the clutches of Bureau Thirty-Nine and the sins of my past. Then, not long ago, I heard tale that Cameron had died. I thought I was free."

"But his son was still out there," Lois supplied.

Jenson nodded. "Yes. Jason recently contacted me. He said he needed to speak with me. Like a fool, I went to him, never once imagining that he'd resurrected the Bureau. Never once did I, in my wildest dreams, imagine that he'd managed to recapture S."

"What did Trask want from you?"

"One of my jobs under the reign of Cameron was to monitor the alien's...Clark's...health. Of course, he was always healthy, more than any human being I'd ever met, before or since."

"So...what? Jason wanted to make sure that Clark...stayed healthy? I'm not buying it."

Jenson shook his head. "Not exactly. My job was to ensure

that Clark didn't die."

Lois' heart seized up. "Was? What do you mean, was? Clark's not...not...please, tell me he's not..."

Jenson shook his head again, ever so slightly. "No. Not yet. But I fear time is running out for him. He's sick, Miss Lane. Terribly, terribly sick. There isn't much time left for him, I'm afraid."

"Can't you do something?" Lois practically shouted, a few frightened tears slipping past her eyelids and down her cheeks.

"I've tried, Miss Lane. But Clark's body doesn't work like yours or mine. I can't just administer some kind of medication to him. His body would burn it off too quickly for it to have any effect. He needs sunlight for his body to heal itself properly. But the sunlight will restore his powers too. And Jason won't risk that. I don't think he even cares one way or another if Clark lives or dies anymore."

"Wait, what do you mean, anymore?"

Jenson sighed. "I haven't been privy to everything, you must understand that. But I've kept my eyes and ears open. Cameron had a plan to use Clark and his abilities to exact revenge on the people who'd once wronged him. But as Clark grew, so did Trask's plans. He wanted to use Clark to crush world governments."

Lois nodded. "I've heard something to this effect before, from Clark."

"Well," Jenson continued. "Let's just say that the rotten apple didn't fall far from the tree. Jason wants to do the same. He's tortured Clark, or, at the very least, has had his men do it for him, I think. His parents too."

"Jonathan and Martha?" Lois asked, before she could stop herself. "Are they...?"

"Still alive and much better off than Clark is, for the time being. I don't know how much longer that might be the case, though. Trask has kept them alive, hoping to hold their pain and possible deaths over Clark. So far, he's refused to bend to Jason's will. I think Trask's patience is just about gone though. If he can't twist Clark into his own willing and obedient puppet, I fear Jason will kill them all."

"Who else have you told this to?" Lois asked, jumping up and starting to pace.

"Just you."

"Me? Why not the police? Why not the FBI? Why not the entire Metropolis division of the SWAT team?"

"Because, Miss Lane, I'm afraid. If Trask discovers that I've gone to the police, he'll kill me."

"He'll kill you anyway if he realizes that you've come to me tonight," Lois argued back.

"You're right, of course," Jenson conceded with a weary sigh. "If he finds out, that is. But if, say, in a few hours, a certain investigative journalist were to stumble upon blueprints for the abandoned underground nuclear fallout bunkers beneath the Metropolis Trade Tower...the ones built by a certain recently fallen billionaire...well, he can hardly blame me for that, can he?"

"Mr. Jenson...stay here and let me call the police. They can protect you."

"No," Jenson said, shaking his head. "I need to get back. I'll do what I can to keep Clark alive. Besides, if Trask notices that I've been gone for so long, he'll be suspicious. He might panic and put a bullet in Clark's head." Jenson checked his watch. "I've got to be back within twenty minutes. Trask gave me permission to leave only long enough to gather news on the investigation of Clark's disappearance. I need to leave now."

Jenson stood from the couch and jammed the hat back onto his aging head. He crossed the room with confident strides and reached for the doorknob.

"Jenson, wait," Lois called after him. He turned toward her.

"How long have you known that Clark was in trouble?"

"Not long. A few days now."

"And you're only just coming to me now?"

Jenson sighed regretfully. "It took me some time to figure out who he was. When I spoke with him, he said his name was Clark. He mumbled your name once, in his sleep. I just didn't put the pieces together until tonight, when Trask asked me to check on the state of things above ground. I'm sorry for that. And...well... Trask keeps a close eye on everything. I haven't been allowed to leave the compound before now."

Lois sighed, but nodded. "One more thing. Why? Why are you helping Clark? Not that I'm ungrateful, mind you," she quickly added.

For a moment, Jenson just stood there. He sighed heavily. "Because, Miss Lane, no matter how hard I tried, I failed as a scientist. I was supposed to merely observe and experiment, that was all. But, I could never detach myself fully from the boy. I used to find myself forgetting that he isn't human. He was simply a frightened young boy. And now, he's a hurting, abused, and dying man. As much as you might not believe it, I care about him, and I don't want to see him lose his life."

With that, Jenson opened the door, stepped through the opening, and shut the door behind him. Lois bounded after him, threw open the door, and searched the hall. For an old man, Jenson had moved swiftly. Lois hadn't even gotten the chance to thank the man for his information.

Assuming it was true.

Assuming he wasn't working for Trask in order to ensnare her as well.

"No," Lois said, to no one in particular, as she closed the door to her apartment again. "I've seen liars before. Jenson was telling me the truth. Clark, just hold on for me a little while longer," she whispered to the empty air around her. "I'm coming. And I'm bringing Metropolis' finest with me. Trask will either be in handcuffs or a body bag by the morning."

November 25, 1994

Lois grimly strapped on the bullet-proof vest that Inspector Bill Henderson had provided her. It was snug-fitting even on her lean body, but that didn't bother her. The snugness would protect her. What *really* mattered was that they were moments from storming the nuclear fallout bunker beneath the Metropolis Trade Tower. Moments from confronting Trask. Moments from rescuing Clark.

Please, Clark, she thought to herself. Just hang on a little longer. I'm right outside. I'm coming for you. Please, be alive when I get there.

"Lois?" Henderson asked, breaking her train of thought. "Are you all right? If you're having second thoughts..."

"No," she sharply cut him off. "I'm fine, Bill, really."

Henderson nodded. "You will stay behind me at all times. You will do what I say, when I say it. You will not argue. Got it?"

"Got it," she replied sincerely. "But Bill?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm warning you right now. If Clark isn't alive when we get down there, you're going to have to arrest me."

"For what?"

"Killing Jason Trask."

"Lois," Bill said, raising an eyebrow. "It really isn't wise to make threats like that in front of a cop. You know that, right?"

"That wasn't a threat, Bill. That was a promise."

"You shouldn't even be here with us," the Inspector complained. "It's too risky. I'll do whatever I can to keep you from getting hurt, Lois, but I can't make any promises."

"I know. As for why you agreed to this...well, you owed me, Bill. You didn't have *anything* before I came to you with this

lead.”

“Let’s get something straight. You *only* have a lead because Steve Jenson risked coming to you,” Henderson argued back. “I’ll warn you now, Lane. Jenson doesn’t get a free pass. He’s still involved in this. He’ll still be questioned. And he’ll still face a trial if I don’t like the answers I get.”

Lois nodded. “I know,” she said, a little uneasily, hoping Jenson would keep Clark’s secret intact when Henderson questioned him.

“There a problem, Lane?” Henderson scrutinized her features.

“No,” Lois quickly covered. “Just...worried about Clark, that’s all. What’s taking so long?” She gestured to the rest of the officers.

“Last minute checks, that’s all. We should be set to move in a couple of minutes.”

Inspector Henderson turned and walked to the gathered group of police officers and SWAT Team members. Lois knew the group was the best of the best. If they couldn’t get Clark out alive, then no one could. But it did little to ease her apprehension.

Standing on the sidewalk, in that small hour of the night, Lois shivered. It was freezing out. But the shudder that ran through her body wasn’t from the fast approaching winter. It all originated from what was about to happen. Either they would find that Jenson had lied, or they would confront Trask and rescue Clark. *Her Clark.*

And once they did, she was never going to let that man out of her sight again, his extraordinary powers notwithstanding.

Her arms ached to hold his solid frame once more. Her lips hungered for the sweet taste of his own. Her ears were already straining for the slightest hint of his velvety voice, though the bunker still lay five hundred feet below them.

“Ready for this?” she asked Jimmy, who stood fiddling nervously with his camera.

She had called him immediately after weaseling her way into being a part of the rescue attempt. Perry would skin her alive if she didn’t make some attempt to get photos of the raid. And she knew that Jimmy needed a major break, after his last camera had fallen into the harbor when he’d accompanied Jeff on a story. An entire roll of film had been destroyed, including the ones the young photographer had taken of the Vice President visiting the Coates Orphanage. Perry had nearly popped a vein in his anger. But, Lois also knew pictures of this mission and raid would get Jimmy back in the Chief’s good graces once more.

“Yeah,” the younger man said, nodding. “She’s all loaded up and ready to go.”

“She?” Lois asked, arching an eyebrow.

“I call her Diane,” Jimmy said, patting the machine in his hands.

“Diane?” Lois echoed, bewildered.

“Yeah, like Diane Arbus.”

“Didn’t she take pictures of people on the fringes of society? The so-called ‘freaks?’” Lois asked. “Is that what *you* plan on doing?” Her voice was light, teasing. She hoped it masked the true depth of her anxiety.

“Well, yeah, she did. And no, I don’t. But she just felt like a Diane to me when I bought her.”

Lois just shook her head, mildly amused at her friend’s odd sense of humor. It was no wonder why Clark had immediately become so close to the younger man. Clark had that same warped sense of humor that Jimmy had. Sometimes, it made her shake her head in disbelief. But at the moment, it was the most welcome distraction in all the world.

“Ready?” Henderson asked, materializing behind Lois.

Lois stifled a scream as she literally jumped. “Way to give me a heart attack, Bill. They teach you that in the police academy?”

“I thought you were ‘Nerves of Steel’ Lane,” Henderson quipped.

“It’s ‘Mad Dog’ Lane. Get it right,” she shot back. Then softer, “We’re ready when you are.”

Henderson gave her a confident smile. “All right then. Remember what I told you.”

Lois and Jimmy nodded. “Will do.”

“Good,” the man replied.

They tailed the group of heavily armed officers. The SWAT Team led them all, their rear covered by the regular officers Henderson was in charge of. As silent as ghosts, the unit entered into the building, stealthily making their way to the stairs. One of the SWAT members picked the lock on the door that would lead them down to the underground bunker. Two by two, they all filed down the stairs.

Down and down they went. The air grew colder as they descended. Bare concrete surrounded them on every side in a sort of claustrophobic press. Lois grew more and more creeped out as they moved further into the bowels of the building. Every muscle of her body was tense, so much so that her neck started to ache from the strain.

At last, they reached the bottom. Henderson gave a few non-verbal hand commands. His team spread out, rearranging themselves somewhat. Cautiously, one of the men in front opened the door at the bottom of the stairs. Without a word, they all moved in. As each of the officers went through the door, they took up defensive stances, weapons drawn and ready, covering every conceivable angle.

No one came. There wasn’t even a whisper of a sound. At that late hour, it was possible that most, if not all, of Trask’s men were asleep.

For a tense few minutes, the officers waited. But finally, they gave the all-clear sign. Lois and Jimmy were allowed over the threshold.

They were in a long, somewhat wide corridor. The concrete walls here were painted a pleasant, almost cheerful shade of pale beige. And yet, the whole effect was impersonal, sterile, unwelcoming. Lois shuddered involuntarily, as did Jimmy. Scattered every fifty feet or so, maps of the underground mini-city adorned the walls, breaking up some of the monotony, and adding splashes of deep blue to the place.

There were plenty of doors lining the walls as well. The officers opened each as they came across them. A few would pile into the rooms which lay beyond, checking every nook and cranny. Lois peered into them as best she could. They appeared to be unfurnished apartments. Each one was empty, completely devoid of people and typical homey comforts. Jimmy snapped the occasional photo, but there wasn’t much to see and even less to preserve in still images for posterity.

Deeper into the complex they moved, a molasses-slow column of people. Every one of Lois’ nerves was balanced on a knife’s edge. Every door the SWAT Team opened caused her to hold her breath in anticipation, hoping beyond hope to see Clark there, alive and now safe with their arrival. Every apartment was empty, shattering Lois’ fragile hopes and wearing her nerves raw. All patience threatened to leave her completely, but she forced herself not to huff in annoyance. If it took the SWAT Team three days to search the place, she would have to deal with it. Nothing was worth putting their lives, and those of Clark and his parents, at risk.

Another door opened. This time, it was not an apartment which greeted them. It was a store room. Gleaming metal shelves lined the walls, deep and fully stocked with canned and freeze-dried goods. Bottles of water crowded others. Airtight containers of flour, salt, rice, and other dry goods stood in neat rows on yet another series of shelves. Lois tried to calculate how many months of food were stored in this one storage area alone, but

remained unsuccessful. They left the room and continued on.

The next room was another storage space. This one, however, contained not food but medical supplies, paper towels, toilet paper, and other items necessary for safety and comfort. Jimmy snapped a few pictures, his mouth slightly agape. Lois' astonishment matched the unspoken shock written on the photographer's face. Henderson pointed to the next door. A series of heavy generators stood behind the metal door. Most of them were silent. Lois guessed they powered other parts of the bunker that Trask wasn't using.

The group pressed on. Lois admitted to herself that the underground bunker would be the perfect place for Trask and his men to hide out. Not many people knew of the mini-city's existence. And it was well stocked with anything a person could possibly need, enough for months, if not years. Yet, she couldn't help but wonder if Jenson hadn't lied to her. Aside from the fact that the lights were on in the bunker, there was no sign of any living thing, human or otherwise.

If he lied to me, he'd better hope that Henderson is with me when I find him. Because I'll wring his skinny little neck if Trask isn't here, she thought bitterly.

The unit moved down to a new section of hall, turning a corner. More apartments awaited them, some now partially furnished, but abandoned. Most had only a chair or a couch in the center of the living room. A select few had a coffee table or bookshelf as well. But still, there were no signs of life. Lois could see the hard set of Henderson's jaw.

He might be more frustrated than I am, she thought as her heart sank.

They kept at it, turning another corner. That's when they heard it; proof that they were not alone in that cold, unfeeling place.

"Wrong answer, S," came a sharp cry from someplace down the hall. "Care to try again?"

If there was a reply, none of Henderson's team could hear it. But Lois' heart began to race. That had been Trask's voice. And, more importantly, he'd been talking to S, the moniker the elder Trask had once given Clark. That was proof enough to her that Clark was still alive.

Henderson made a few swift hand gestures to the armed men surrounding them. The others nodded their understanding. As quietly as they could, they moved down the hall to the T intersection that awaited them. There they hesitated, checking both branches of the corridor.

"Give up. Not...gonna happen."

Clark's voice was weak, laden with pain, and trembling. And yet, there was still a note of defiance to it. Lois' heart swelled with hope. If Clark was still talking, he wasn't yet in danger of dying from his wounds, the way Jenson had feared. At least, that was what she hoped.

Henderson shot a look to Lois. She mouthed back silently, "Trask." The Inspector nodded. More deliberate hand motions were made. The officers took their positions without comment. From down the left branch of the hall, they heard Trask speak again.

"You are trying my patience," he said threateningly.

There was a muffled grunt of pain followed by a sharp intake of air. A cough rent the air, a brittle, rasping sound that reminded Lois of her grandfather as he'd laid in his hospital bed before he'd died. Every cell of her body screamed silently. Instinct told her that Jenson was right after all. Clark probably didn't have much time left. His earlier bravado had likely been a front.

"Don't make me kill you!" Trask roared in frustration.

"Rather die than..." Clark gasped and coughed again, "help you."

More grunts of pain followed as Henderson's men crept down the hall. At some unspoken signal, they burst into the room,

weapons drawn.

"Freeze, Trask!" the SWAT Team leader, Matthew Knowles, ordered.

Trask slowly turned away from Clark. He calmly stared down the officers who had their weapons trained on him, as well as the rest of the men in the room. A wicked smile crossed his face, as though he knew something that Henderson's team did not.

"Jason Trask, you are under arrest," Henderson told the man in a calm, even tone. "All of you are. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can, and will, be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one..."

That was all in the Inspector was able to get out. As quick as a striking snake, Trask and his men pulled their weapons and began firing. Lois watched in horror as two of the SWAT members staggered back as bullets struck them. They were lucky, the bullets finding not flesh but the protective Kevlar vests. They returned fire, and Lois had the horrifying thought that a rogue bullet would strike Clark. She knew that whatever Trask had done to Clark, it had stripped him of his powers, including his invulnerability.

An ordinary bullet could kill him.

Beside her, Jimmy threw himself down onto the floor. He peeked around the corner just enough to see the action. His camera snapped photo after photo. Finishing the roll, he darted back behind the solid concrete wall and reloaded with shaking fingers. Lois took the opportunity to do the same. She lay flat on her belly, hugging the floor, much as she had when Clark had saved her life in the Congo. Only this time, his body was not above hers in a protective blanket, to shield her from any stray bullets. This time, he was in greater danger than she was. The thought was terrifying, but she was a reporter. She had to see what was going on so that she could accurately transcribe the events for all the world to see.

What she saw broke her heart. Though the bullets whizzed through the air, they seemed distant, an abstract threat to her. Though Trask's men fell, it seemed unreal to her. Though splashes of red blood flew, arcing through the air and spilling onto the floor and walls with violent abandon, Lois felt an odd sense of detachment from the carnage. She only had eyes for Clark.

He was there, doubled over in pain, laying on his side, his face toward the open door. His body was pulled into a tight fetal position and his eyes were slammed shut, either from pain or in a feeble attempt to shut out the fight raging around him, Lois couldn't be sure. He was thin, so painfully thin, that Lois' body ached for him. His features were gaunt, the flesh seemingly stretched too thinly across his bones. His breathing was ragged and shallow. Blood dribbled from his nostrils and his split lower lip, the precious fluid dripping haphazardly to the floor in a lazy manner.

It was the single most difficult thing Lois ever had to do in her life, to keep herself from rushing forward into the thick of the fire-fight to Clark's side.

All of this Lois saw in the span of four or five seconds. In the next breath she took, Trask knelt behind Clark, his gun pressed firmly into the reporter's temple. His finger was on the trigger, ready to pull it.

"Stop!" he ordered. "All of you stand down! Or I swear, I'll blow this creature's brains all over this room."

"Stand down," Henderson echoed to his men. Then, to Trask, "You can't win this one, Jason. We've got you outmanned and outgunned. Drop the weapon and move away from Clark."

Trask snorted derisively. "I mean it," he warned.

From behind Lois came a new set of footsteps. But she dared not turn around. Her eyes were glued to Clark, as if her gaze alone could protect him.

“Jason, stop this madness,” she heard the cool, calm voice of Jenson say. “The officer is right. This can only end badly for you.”

“*You!*” Trask roared, his eyes wide and wild. “You tipped them off, didn’t you?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “*Traitor!*”

Trask’s gun left Clark so quickly it was almost like he himself possessed super speed. He squeezed off three expertly placed bullets. Jenson gave a strangled cry and went down. At the same instant, Henderson’s gun came up.

One shot was all it took.

Trask’s body jerked backwards at the impact. A single bullet hole in the center of his head oozed out blood and brains alike. Suddenly finding themselves leaderless, the rest of the standing guards dropped their weapons and put their hands up in surrender. Henderson motioned for half of his team to make the arrests and to check on the men who were down. The rest he sent back out, to see if there were any others left in the bunker, and to look for Jonathan and Martha Kent.

“Bill?” Lois asked, standing up.

He shook his head, not needing her to finish her question.

“Not yet, Lois. Give us a few more minutes.”

Henderson himself stooped to check Jenson for signs of life. It was too late. The man was already dead, the bullets having pierced his aging heart. Lois was dismayed as the Inspector shook his head. He lifted his radio from his belt as his officers handcuffed the surviving members of Bureau Thirty-Nine.

“This is Henderson. Bunker is secure. Suspect and several hostiles dead. Several others in custody. Send medical personnel.” He looked away for a brief moment

as the officers returned. It seemed there was little left to the bunker.

Lois followed his gaze. She saw, to her great relief, Clark’s parents being escorted toward them by a couple of SWAT officers. She rushed to them, knowing that Henderson would not yet allow her to enter the room where Clark was, as a couple of the officers were still checking on the wounded and dead.

“All friendly units alive,” Henderson confirmed into his radio. For the first time in ages, Lois saw a genuine smile cross the man’s face.

“Jonathan! Martha!” Lois cried, engulfing them in a gentle, but jubilant hug. “Are you guys all right?”

“We’ll live,” Jonathan said, nodding. “What happened here? We heard a lot of gunfire. Clark...is he...?”

“He’s alive,” Lois assured him. “He’s alive.”

“Lane?” Henderson called, cutting off her admission to the Kents.

Lois turned to look at the Inspector. “Yes?”

Henderson smiled again, a slight upward curving of his lips. “We’re all set in there. You...and the Kents...can go to Clark now. Just...be careful, okay?”

“Thanks, Bill,” Lois said, the words barely out of her mouth before she was on the move again. “Clark!” she called out, partly for her own sake, as if to convince herself that he was really safe now, and partly for his, hoping he would hear her voice and fight to stay with them.

She burst into the room, dashed to Clark’s side, and promptly dropped to her knees beside him. He was struggling to get up, despite the efforts of Henderson’s men to still his movements. He was beaten, weak, and bloodied, and they did not wish for him to cause further damage to himself by moving. But Clark wasn’t having any of it.

“Lois!” he cried out, as she wrapped her arms around his shuddering body. He returned her embrace, his arms encircling her loosely. “Is it really you? Please...tell me this is real.”

“Ssh. Ssh. I’m right here,” she said, stroking the back of his head in a comforting manner. She kissed his forehead lovingly. “I’m here. I’m really here. You’re going to be okay.”

“Knew...you’d come,” he wheezed out, struggling against a cough that was rising in his throat. “Knew...you’d find me.”

“Of course I would,” Lois said, the smile on her face evident in her voice as she held him tight. “I love you, Clark. I would have spent the rest of my life looking for you.”

“Love you,” Clark managed.

Jonathan and Martha reached their son’s side. For a moment, they allowed Lois and Clark to continue their embrace uninterrupted. But they could not long keep their desire to hold and comfort their boy at bay. They too sank to the floor and reached out to Clark. Lois felt their presence more than saw it, her eyes too watery with her relief to be able to see much of anything. She pulled back from Clark’s arms and allowed his parents to embrace him.

“Oh, Clark,” they murmured, holding him as tightly as they dared.

“Mom. Dad. You okay?” he asked, still trying to stifle another cough.

“We’re fine,” Martha said, despite the fact that they too were bruised and battered. “We’re okay.”

“What...did he...do to you?”

Martha shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that we’re fine and that you’re alive.”

“Gotta get out of here,” Clark said. “Need to get away.”

This time, he could not squash the cough that had built up in his throat. He was forced to let it come, a dry, harsh, hacking sound. It lasted for a long minute. Lois could see the droplets of blood on his hand when he pulled it away once the cough subsided.

“Clark...” she said, horror in her voice.

“CK?” Jimmy echoed, standing awkwardly off to one side. “That’s...uh...”

“I know.” He sighed heavily, from weariness or in reluctant acceptance of his poor condition, Lois wasn’t sure.

Henderson’s men were still assessing the damage. Trask’s men had since been removed from the room, marched out back through the bunker and up to the waiting squad cars on the street. One of the men found a small, lead box. It was completely plain, utterly unadorned. Curious, the man began to fumble with the lock. Clark saw the movement through half-closed eyes. Immediately, his eyes snapped open and widened in fear.

“*No!*” he called out, his voice suddenly strengthened by his terror. “Don’t open that!”

The man with the box stopped. He looked questioningly at Clark, then at Henderson. Henderson shook his head. *No, don’t open it.* The man shrugged and handed the box over to the Inspector’s waiting palm. Henderson’s brow was furrowed.

“Kent?” he asked.

“Poison,” Clark said. At Henderson’s deepening look of concern, Clark elaborated. “To me. Not you.”

“I don’t follow,” Henderson mumbled.

“Hard to explain. Just trust me.”

Henderson was about to say something else when the paramedics team arrived. A good dozen or so men and women made up the team, most carrying medical paraphernalia of some kind or another. A few manned gurneys. All of them moved with a sense of urgency. Clark sagged against his father’s chest, most of his fading energy gone with his last outburst. The paramedics fanned out, some checking the deceased just to be certain they were truly dead and beyond all help. The rest gently examined Trask’s victims.

Jonathan and Martha could not hide their worry as a couple of the medical team members began to check Clark’s vital signs. Lois could see the growing apprehension the Kents were experiencing. It matched her own. The last thing she wanted was for Clark’s secret to be exposed. It would only put him in further danger, if the world knew. She trusted Henderson, but the rest of

the officers were unfamiliar to her.

Clark feebly attempted to shoo the paramedics away. “I’ll be fine,” he said, his voice almost a sigh. “I just need food, rest, and sunshine.”

“Sir, we have to take you in to the hospital,” one of the women said. Lois could see the name of Canton printed on her lapel pin.

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head a little.

“Sir, please. You’re in really bad shape. We need to get you some help.”

“Can’t go,” Clark said, pleading with Lois. His eyes were as big as saucers.

“CK, don’t do this. Don’t try to act the part of the tough guy,” Jimmy implored his friend. “You need help and these people can give it to you.”

Lois was torn. She knew that if Clark was taken to the hospital, his secret would be out. Though his powers were currently gone, there was no telling when they might kick back in. And even if they were absent for his entire hospital stay, no one really knew how differently Clark’s body worked from regular humans. Except for Jenson, that was. And he was dead.

And yet, as much as she wanted to agree with Clark that going to the hospital was a bad idea, she was too scared for his health. What if his condition only got worse? What could they do for him back at his apartment? Surely a hospital full of doctors and nurses could find some way to ensure that Clark recovered from his nightmarish ordeal.

Lois opened her mouth to speak, unsure of exactly what she was going to say. For a few seconds, she merely gaped, speechless. When the words came, they surprised her.

“Clark, would you go if we were able to hand-select your doctor? Like say, Dr. Klein, for instance?”

Clark understood Lois’ hidden meaning. He nodded. “Dr. Klein would be perfect.”

“From S.T.A.R. Labs?” Canton asked. Then, looking at the determined faces of Lois and Clark, she shrugged. “Lockwood, put in a call to have Bernard Klein meet us at Metropolis General.”

Clark sighed in relief, as did Lois. They had had a fair amount of dealings with Dr. Klein in their investigations. As a result, they had gotten to know the man quite well. They knew him to be trustworthy and more than capable of keeping secrets for them. They both considered him a friend, and knew that he felt the same toward them. If there was one person to trust Clark’s unique health to, it was Bernard Klein.

“Lois,” Clark said, as he tried to aid the paramedics into getting him onto a stretcher. He failed as his limbs gave way beneath him. “Take the box. Dr. Klein will know what to do with it.”

Henderson shook his head. “I can’t allow that, Clark,” he said, sounding apologetic.

“Please, Bill. I’ll explain later.”

Henderson hesitantly nodded. “All right. But *I* will be the one to give it to him.” Then he turned to everyone else in the room. “Okay folks, let’s get these people out of here and get this crime scene processed.”

Canton pulled a warm sheet over Clark’s body, strapped him to the gurney, and began to wheel him out of the room. Jonathan and Martha refused the ones that awaited them, choosing instead to walk behind their son. Lois and Jimmy followed, the hall not being big enough to walk four abreast. Everyone was silent as they found the elevators that led to the surface, rode the car up, and exited the Metropolis Trade Tower.

It was still dark when they stepped out into the street. Lois caught the look of disappointment on Clark’s face as he looked heavenward. She leaned down to whisper into his ear as the paramedics opened the back of the ambulance.

“Don’t worry. The sun will be up in another hour or two. And I’ll make sure you have a large window in your room.”

Clark’s eyes shut and he nodded. “Thanks.”

Jonathan and Martha were whisked away into a separate ambulance as Clark was loaded into his own. Lois hopped up in the back as well, unwilling to let him out of her sight for a moment. She grasped Clark’s hand. He gave her a gentle squeeze to let her know that all was well.

“Jimmy,” Lois instructed the younger man, before the doors of the vehicle were shut. “Let Perry know I’m at the hospital, okay? I’ll call him when I get the chance.”

“Will do,” Jimmy said, saluting her. “Glad you’re okay, CK. I’ve missed you. I’ll be by to visit as soon as I can,” he added as the medical officers shut the rear doors.

With a wail of the sirens, the ambulances took off into the still sleeping city. Beyond the back windows of the vehicle, the flickering lights drenched everything in alternating shades of night-dark and blood red. The paramedics never ceased their fussing over Clark, starting him on an oxygen line, checking his pupils, monitoring his heart rate. An intravenous line of some kind of clear fluid was placed into his left arm. Lois wedged herself into an out-of-the-way corner, not sure what to do.

It didn’t take long for them to reach the hospital. Clark was immediately brought to a room. Lois helped him shed his tattered and torn clothing and to get into the hospital gown, letting him lean on her as much as he needed. Then she helped him into the bed that lay there waiting for him. She leaned over him, unable to resist the urge to kiss him. Her lips met his in a gentle caress, and all felt right in her world once more. Clark eagerly returned the kiss, as if it alone could heal him. After a few minutes, they reluctantly broke apart once more.

Lois remained glued to his side, chasing away any curious nurses or doctors who poked their heads into that room. She paced for a while, but her energy reserve was emptying fast. She’d been running purely on adrenaline, ever since Jenson had come to her apartment. Finally collapsing into the chair next to Clark’s bedside, she drummed her fingers impatiently on the pale pink blanket that covered him. To keep herself busy, she related to Clark all the things that had led up to the rescue that night.

Soon enough, Jonathan and Martha were shown into the room as well, newly bandaged and stitched where it was necessary. Jonathan’s right hand was in a cast, his fingers broken during one of Trask’s attempts to scare Clark into submission. He limped slightly as he walked, but waved away Lois’ concerns, saying it was nothing more serious than a sprained ankle, and that had been gotten when he’d slipped getting out of the ambulance.

Time ticked slowly by as they continued to wait. Lois was just drifting off in the chair when a knock sounded at the door. She was instantly awake again.

“Someone order a doctor?”

“Dr. Klein!” she cried out, relieved to see the man. “It’s about time,” she added, glancing at the clock.

“I got a little stuck in traffic,” the doctor said, shrugging.

“Now, what’s this all about? I got filled in on the gist of things, but I have to say, I was shocked that you’d asked for me. You know I’m more of a lab guy, don’t you?”

“We do,” Lois said, nodding. “But you’re the only one we trust.”

Jonathan shut the door as Dr. Klein moved to Clark’s side.

“I’m a bit of a . . . special case,” Clark said, locking eyes with the doctor, pleading with him to understand just how delicate the situation was. “Mom? Dad?”

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a weighted look. It was clear to them that their son trusted this man with his deepest secret, but that did nothing to make them more comfortable in divulging the truth about Clark. And yet, bit by halting bit, they told Dr. Klein Clark’s story. The man stumbled to the chair Lois had been

sitting in, his mouth agape, though he did not say a word. When they were done, he asked a few questions, trying to discern how best to monitor Clark's health.

By then, the sun had risen and the first pale late fall rays spilled into Clark's room. The warm shafts of light were like a caress to the man, and he sighed in contentment. For a long time, he merely looked out of the large windows, almost in awe of the lightening sky, the streaks of clouds, tinted pink in the sunrise, and of the yellow ball of flame that steadily rose over the city.

Basking in that pool of life-giving sun, Clark felt his body growing stronger by the slightest of degrees. His chest no longer ached with the effort to draw in enough breath. His coughing almost ceased, and when he *did* cough, he no longer found traces of blood on his hand. The pains in his body grew less and less, until he no longer felt any discomfort. Only one thing persisted — his weariness.

After a while, as his parents fielded Dr. Klein's questions, Clark drifted off to sleep, safe and happy in the knowledge that he was alive, his parents were safe, and Trask was no longer a threat to the people he cared about.

December 17, 1994

Clark stepped off the elevator and into the bullpen of the Daily Planet. It felt good, to be back into his old routine again. He drew in a deep breath, reveling in the familiar sights, smells, and sounds of the newsroom. His friends and co-workers bustled from place to place. He could see Jimmy speeding along toward the back of the room, a stack of photographs in his hand, making a beeline for Perry's office. Phones rang shrilly, fingers tapped and danced across keyboards, fax machines beeped, and printers whirred. The air was thick with the smell of stale coffee cut by the strong odor of a new batch brewing in the break area. Someone had brought in donuts — Clark could smell the sweet scent of the sugary glazing on them.

But above all, *she* was there. Lois. Her steadily beating heart drew him like a magnet. Even after all this time, the sound of her heartbeat intoxicated him. It soothed him. It gave his life meaning and beauty.

He stepped forward again, heading to the steps which would take him into the very heart of the newsroom.

"Clark!" Eduardo called out, the first one to spot him.

At the man's outburst, a cheer went through the bullpen. Shouts of "Clark!" and "Welcome back!" and "Good to see you!" rang out over the entire floor while scattered applause sounded. He waved and nodded his head in acknowledgement, while an embarrassed smile crossed his lips. He descended the steps and made his way through the press of his co-workers. Hands reached out and slapped his back lightly or grasped his own in hearty handshakes. Clark smiled at each person, and thanked them for their warm welcome back. But always he worked his way toward Lois' desk.

"Hi," he said, when he finally reached his goal.

"Hi yourself," Lois grinned at him.

"Did you tell people that I was coming in today?" he asked, gesturing to the crowd around them.

"No. I wasn't sure if you were really coming in or not. I still think it's a bit too early."

Clark did not miss the hidden meaning in her words. They had discussed at length when Clark should go back to work. Lois had insisted that he wait a while longer, so that no one's suspicions were aroused. After all, there hadn't been a single Daily Planet employee who hadn't seen the pictures the paper had published of the daring rescue of the up-and-coming reporter. Not a single person hadn't seen the pictures the paper *hadn't* published, the ones Perry had deemed too graphic to print. But Clark had countered with the fact that he was literally climbing the walls of his apartment, bored out of his mind. He had claimed

to be in desperate need of the mental stimulation of his job.

In truth, Clark had healed fairly rapidly after he'd been rescued from the underground bunker. Two days of solid sunlight had helped his body to recharge enough to allow his invulnerability to come back to him. Once that had returned, his body had healed itself. His cuts and bruises had closed and faded. His broken bones had knit back together. Dr. Klein had allowed him to leave the hospital just four days after his arrival, knowing that if Clark stayed longer, word would get out of the man's miraculous transformation to the very picture of health.

Except, he'd been a *normal* person, his invulnerable flesh aside.

The rest of his powers had been gone. Dr. Klein had theorized that prolonged exposure to Kryptonite coupled with the denial of sunlight had depleted Clark's body. Like an electronic device, Clark's internal "battery" had needed time to recharge. Because he used such incredible amounts of energy in order to use his special powers, his "battery" couldn't handle the demand, not coming off such a huge task of healing his entire body. But, over the course of a week, Clark's body had finally fully recharged. With that full "battery," his powers had come back. Clark had never been so happy to have his powers in all his life. He had felt lost without them.

During that time, he had spent every available hour of sunshine laying out on his terrace. Though the weather was turning cold swiftly, it didn't bother him. He would merely lay out in an old chaise lounge chair, listening to the radio, reading, doing crossword puzzles, or talking with his parents. But, though he loved spending time with Jonathan and Martha, the monotony soon threatened to drive him crazy. He couldn't even get out to take a walk. As far as the public was concerned, Clark Kent was still recuperating from his harrowing ordeal.

Only twice had he been bold enough to go flying, reveling in the feeling of the wind in his hair and the freedom from everything. It had felt amazing to leave the world behind for a while, letting the noises and sights fade into the distance, and letting his mind relax as much as it could. He had spent some of that time in that void between Earth and space, facing the sun and basking in its rays, unfiltered through layers of clouds and pollution.

The nights had been the easiest time for him. After work, Lois would come by his apartment. Clark would cook them dinner while his parents went out, in order to give the couple some privacy. He and Lois would share a meal, then snuggle down together on the couch and talk. Lois would relate the events of her day, bouncing ideas off him. He would give his perspective and opinions, and try to help her look for new avenues of information to investigate. But then she would leave again, though she always stayed as long and as late as she could. The loneliness would creep back up on Clark then, and the only balm for that was his dreams.

Now he could stand being home no longer. It was time to dive back into his life. It was time to start chasing stories once more, with Lois by his side. It was time to exercise his ability to change lives for the better, if he could.

"Kent! What in Sam Hill do you think you're doing here?" Perry called, coming up behind Clark. "I thought I told you not to show your hide in here before New Year's."

Clark didn't miss the smile on the editor's face. He returned it with one of his own. "You know me, Chief. I couldn't stay away."

Perry chuckled and patted Clark's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "Now that's the attitude I like to hear. But, uh, you sure you're up for this so soon?"

"Believe me, Chief," Clark said, nodding sincerely, "I feel like a new man."

"Good. But, uh, if you want, I could, uh, give you a few easy

assignments. Just to get your feet wet again, you understand.”

“Thanks, Perry, but no thanks. I’m ready to dive right back in to things. Lois has kept me up to speed on the collapse of the Metropolis Bridge. If you don’t mind, I’d like to help her with that one. We’ve got a pretty good idea of who to talk to about the subpar workmanship that was done on the most recent renovation.”

Perry hesitated a moment. “If you think you’re up for it…”

“I am, Chief,” Clark promised him.

“Well then, by all means.”

“Thanks.”

Turning to Lois, Perry spoke just loudly enough for Clark to hear without his special hearing. “You keep an eye on him, okay?”

“Will do, Chief,” she said, giving the man a smile.

Perry started to walk away, then stopped. He turned back to face Clark. He looked as if he wanted to say something but hesitated.

“What is it, Chief?” Clark asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

“Ah, it’s nothing. I shouldn’t pry.”

“It’s okay,” Clark assured him.

“Well, I never asked, because maybe it’s none of my business. And maybe you don’t want to talk about it. But, well, did you ever figure out just *why* that psycho took you hostage?”

Clark shoved his hands into his pockets as he carefully crafted his answer. “He, uh, thought I could use my…abilities…to take down governments.” He frowned a little, not quite happy with his response now that it had emerged from his tongue.

Perry laughed and slapped his thigh. “Oh boy! That’s a good one. Clark, you know that I think the world of your writing. But, for anyone to think you could use that skill to undermine governments…” He shook his head, still laughing.

Clark chuckled in relief. “Pretty ridiculous, huh?”

“And I thought Jason Trask was one brick short of a full load to begin with. This just seals it.”

Perry turned, still chuckling to himself, and walked off toward the coffeemaker. Clark sat on the edge of Lois’ desk, his habit ever since he’d first been paired to work with her. He gave her a tender smile.

“So, partner,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Shall we get to work trying to change the world?”

December 26, 1994

“Wanna tell me where we’re going, Fly Boy?”

“Nope.” Clark grinned mischievously.

“Come on. Just a little hint?”

“No way.”

“Please?”

“Lois, do you *have* to know everything at every moment? Can’t you just be surprised for once?”

“No! I’m a reporter.”

“Not tonight you aren’t.”

“That’s not fair, you know.”

“Nice try. But I’m still not telling. You’ll see when we get there.”

“Fine. Keep your secrets,” Lois huffed.

She snuggled closer against his neck, kissing him there. Clark groaned in pleasure, closing his eyes for the briefest of moments. She was trying to get him to talk, he knew that. He was silently thankful that they were nearly to their destination. He wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take without breaking.

“Lo-is,” he sighed. “Not that I don’t love when you do that. But, please, I need to concentrate.”

Lois giggled a little, obviously pleased with the effect she had on him. But she stopped raining kisses along his neck and jaw line, instead contenting herself with looking out over the land

below her. She clutched Clark a little tighter, her arms locked around his neck. Clark smiled, looked down at her lovingly, then brought his attention back to his task.

Adding an extra burst of speed, he flew them out over the ocean, the waves below silvered in the moonlight. Above, the heavens sparkled with a countless scattering of diamonds. Clark had always enjoyed flying at night, seeing the world shrouded in darkness, knowing that people were resting from their labors. But now, every one of his senses was heightened, thanks to the beautiful woman in his arms.

He’d flown with Lois before, of course. But tonight was different. Tonight he would be sharing a very special place with her.

“How much longer?” Lois asked, unable to hold in her curiosity.

Clark chuckled. “Stop being such a reporter, Lois. We’ll get there when we get there.”

Lois huffed again and said nothing. But Clark could see her smile nonetheless.

A few minutes later, Clark altered the angle of his flight path, easing them down onto the sandy beach of a tiny, uninhabited island. There he set down his precious burden, letting Lois gently down onto the smooth, unmarred sand. He slipped the backpack from his shoulders and set it aside.

“Clark, this place is beautiful!” Lois said, her eyes seeming to dance in the moonlight.

“I’m glad you like it. I found it by accident when I was running from country to country after college. I like to come here when I need to relax, or want to be alone to think, or just need to recharge. At least… I used to.”

“Used to?” Lois asked. “If I could fly, I’d probably be here all the time.”

Clark shook his head. “I haven’t needed this place since I got to know you, Lois. Not as a bouncer in a club or as your morning coffee boy. But as your partner and friend. And especially now, as your boyfriend. *You’ve* become my refuge, the calm in the center of the storm that makes up my life. *You* recharge me. *You’re* my home. Everything I need, or could possibly *ever* need, I’ve found in you, Lois. I love you. I have, ever since the very first time I saw you.”

“Clark… I don’t know what to say,” Lois managed, her voice unable to hide the emotions swirling through her veins. “You know I love you too.”

Clark dropped to one knee in the sand, a small black velvet box appearing from where he’d hidden it in his pants pocket.

“Say you’ll marry me, Lois. Say you’ll let me spend the rest of my life at your side.”

“Clark?”

He popped open the lid of the box with his free hand. The simple, elegant solitaire diamond sparkled like one of the stars above. If anything, its gleam rivaled that of its heavenly cousins. Clark held the box up to Lois.

“Lois Lane, will you do me the extraordinary honor of marrying me?”

Tears brimmed in Lois’ eyes, and for a moment, all she could do was nod. She swallowed hard, trying to banish the lump in her throat, hating her inability to speak, even — or perhaps especially — in a situation like this.

“Yes,” she finally squeaked out, the word half strangled by the lingering lump that she hadn’t fully succeeded in dispelling. Then again she answered, “Yes.” Her voice was stronger that time.

Clark’s smile lit up the night as surely as a sunrise would. In an instant, he was slipping his ring on his fiancée’s finger. The thought staggered him for the briefest of moments. *His ring. His fiancée.* Then he was up on his feet, bringing Lois into a hug and a kiss so powerful that they both wound up on their knees in the

silky sand.

For a long while, all they could do was trade kisses. They could not speak, not even each other's names. They could not get enough of one another. But eventually, they pulled apart, needing to breathe, needing to calm their racing hearts.

"Thank you, Lois," Clark said, resting his forehead against hers. "You've made me so incredibly happy. Not just tonight. Not just by agreeing to marry me. But ever since you first entered my life. There was a time when I never could have imagined any sort of joy in my life. Being with you though, has given me more happiness than most people will ever know in their own lives."

"It's funny," Lois said slowly, choosing her words carefully. "I used to think that I didn't really need anyone or anything. Well, except for my career, reputation, and awards. But ever since I met you, when you came to Metropolis, that is, you've shown me just how much I need you in my life." She fell silent a moment, then smirked. "You don't happen to have a priest stashed on the other side of this island, for an elopement, do you?"

Clark chuckled and pointed to his backpack.

"No, I'm afraid not. But, I did bring some other stuff with me. Wine. Chocolates." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Bathing suits."

"A swim sounds great," Lois said, seeming to notice for the first time that she was in a sweater and jeans on a warm, tropical island.

"You can change behind that screen of trees," Clark said, pointing again. "I won't peek."

Lois laughed, but rummaged through the pack. She found the swimsuit in question, and wondered when he'd stolen it from her apartment. Probably when they had celebrated Christmas Eve at her place with her family. It couldn't have been Christmas Day, she mused. They'd been in Smallville all day with his parents.

It didn't take her long to change. By the time she got back, Clark was already in his trunks, standing at the water's edge. The gentle surf covered his toes and lapped around his ankles, the salty water warm even without the sun to heat it. He was staring out, up into the vast expanse of the night sky. There was a look of peace on his face, and of deep thought as well.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lois asked, moving to stand alongside him.

"Just...thinking."

"That much is obvious," she teased. "What about?"

"Well...I've always known that I was lucky, despite the rough patches of my life. After all, I managed to wind up on the right farm when I was a kid. I managed to escape certain death when Krypton exploded, because I was fortunate enough to have parents who sacrificed everything to ensure that I had a chance to live. And of all the millions of people on this planet, I wound up crossing paths with you — not just once, but over and over again."

"Fate," Lois said.

"Maybe," Clark said, shrugging. "It can't just all be random chance, can it?"

"I don't know. What I *do* know is, I feel like my whole life has been leading up to this moment." She admired the diamond adorning her left hand. "Like this was meant to be."

"Me too," Clark said, drawing his arm around her and pulling her close. He rested his cheek on the top of her head. "Me too." He sighed deeply.

"What?"

"Sometimes...I wonder. Did my parents...my *birth* parents... know or guess that the other half of my heart was on Earth? Would they be surprised?"

Lois smiled in the darkness. "I wish I could have met them, if only just to thank them for sending you into my life."

Clark smiled as well. "Come on, no more dwelling. On to

happier things. Let's swim, shall we?"

"Last one in is a rotten egg!" Lois declared after dashing from his side and into the dark waves.

"That's cheating!" Clark said, good-naturedly teasing her. With a burst of super speed, he was right next to her in the water.

"No, *that's* cheating!" Lois laughed, splashing him lightly.

Clark only laughed.

After an hour or so, the newly engaged couple made their way back to the beach. Clark dried them both off with a quick scan of heat vision over their bodies, then set out a thin red blanket. He uncorked the wine, poured them both a glassful, and broke open the box of Swiss chocolates he'd purchased in Switzerland that morning. They leaned against one another, not talking, just enjoying the other's presence.

For the first time in months, the world seemed completely at peace and in harmony.

February 3, 1995

Lois and Clark pressed through the throng of gawking onlookers, trying to get to the front of the mob, as close to the police barricade as they could. Clark trailed Lois, apologizing to the people they inadvertently bumped into in their quest to reach the front. Finally, they reached their goal. Half a block away, Lex Tower was burning. Lois immediately launched into reporter mode, flinging questions in rapid-fire succession to the police and fire fighters nearby.

For Clark's part, he was gazing intently at the burning building, every part of his inner self coiled into heavy knots. Thick, black, acrid smoke poured from the upper stories, rising into the air like a cloud of death. Clark could see that, even against the slowly darkening sky. Flames danced in the windows; blazing orange, blood red, and bright yellow, with the occasional flicker of blue where the fire burned the hottest. He could hear the screams of those trapped inside; terrified, panicked sounds without discernable words. He could smell the stomach-churning odor of burning flesh and hair, the sharp stench of carpeting as the fire ate through it, the rich scent of wood as it too, was consumed by the flames.

He looked around at the gathered crowd. He saw the faces of the people, stark fear and utter shock as they stayed, rooted to the spot, their eyes locked on the building. His fists balled tightly. He wanted to help. He knew he had the means to. The fire wouldn't hurt him; it wouldn't even singe his clothing. And, he noted, it was obvious that the fire trucks on the scene could not reach the upper floors of the skyscraper. As he looked on, some of the fire fighters came out of the building, choking even through their oxygen masks. Clark tuned in his hearing.

"It's no use. We can't get past the eighty-seventh floor," one surly man was saying to the fire chief.

"Smoke's too thick and every stairwell is engulfed in flames so intense that we can't cross," another man put in.

The first man nodded. "Even if we could, it's just a matter of time before the entire building comes down. However this blaze started, it's burning too hot and too quickly. We'd have to get it out *soon* in order to preserve any kind of structural integrity."

Clark clenched his jaw. He could still hear the people trapped within the building, and his heart quietly broke for them.

Determination settled over him, replacing his grief. He would find a way to help, consequences be damned. He tapped Lois' shoulder to get her attention. She broke off her question to one of the witnesses immediately. Clark bent his head into Lois' ear, burying his lips in her silken hair.

"I'm going in," he whispered to her.

Lois' mouth opened in surprise but she knew enough not to question him, not when there were so many people gathered around.

"Trust me," Clark said again. "It might be awhile. I'll meet

you back at my apartment.”

“Okay,” she said, unable to argue with him. Then she fixed him with a look that clearly pleaded with him to be careful.

He nodded back, a silent vow that he would take every precaution. Then he was gone, gently forcing his way through the crowd. People seemed eager to let him jostle on by, ready to converge closer to the scene by pressing into the spot he’d just vacated. With great care not to hurt anyone, Clark extricated himself from the crowd, which was only swelling in size as more people stopped to gape at the massive fire.

Clark swiftly put his back to the crowd. Glancing carefully around, he found a deserted alleyway. With a quick scan using his powers, he ensured that the only witness to what he was about to do was a mother cat with a litter of six newborn kittens. Pocketing his glasses, he shot up into the sky, faster than any human eye could follow, then raced toward Lex Tower. He entered the building via the roof, tearing the solid, heavy metal door off its hinges when he found it to be locked. Using another burst of super speed, he entered the building.

His sensitive hearing brought him to each stranded person. The smoke was too oppressive to see much of anything. For that, Clark was almost glad. The same wall of black smoke would help shield him from prying eyes, would help cloak his identity. He went carefully through each floor, working with all speed to get people out of harm’s way, starting with the topmost floor and steadily working his way down. And yet, even in his haste, he was sure to go slowly enough to ensure that no one was left behind.

He carried each man, woman, and child he found through the blazing inferno raging around them, if they were unable to walk. Those that were, he merely aided, throwing an arm around their waist or shoulders and letting them lean on him. When he could, he took precious seconds to neutralize some of the choking smoke so that it was easier for the victims to breathe, or killing small patches of fire. He guided them all down to lower floors, beneath the fire, instructing them to get out of the building. On the floors below, he could hear teams of firefighters coming across the people he’d rescued from the upper floors. He kept one ear partly tuned to them, but no one seemed to know how they had gotten out of the blaze or who had helped them. He allowed himself a short-lived sigh of relief and plunged back into his work.

Time lost all meaning in that burning hell. Clark couldn’t be sure if he was there for minutes or hours, one day or many. All he knew was each beating heart as he searched through the building, working as methodically as he could. All he knew was his drive to keep going, to save as many people as he possibly could before the flames ravaged them or the smoke suffocated them.

In one hallway, he saw a distraught man bent over the body of his young son. Clark raced to the man’s side. Without thinking, Clark dropped to his knees beside the body, gently pushing the child’s father back. He checked the boy for signs of life, and found none. He began CPR, administering his breaths and chest compressions with the utmost care, afraid to do more harm than good. Long minutes passed, minutes that Clark knew were crucial not just to the child, but to everyone else stuck inside the inferno. But finally, the child sucked in a breath and coughed. Clark once more let out a sigh of relief. Without a word, he helped the father to his feet, scooped up the child, and helped them down to a lower floor, handing over the boy to his father once they were relatively safe. Then he was gone again, plunging back into the flames.

For only the briefest of seconds, Clark allowed himself to be worried. The man had seen his face. He’d blown his cover. Listening in, he heard the man reach a fireman. The firefighter took the boy from his father’s arms as the man related his tale.

“I’m telling you. There’s a guy in there, helping. I don’t

know who. His face is all covered in soot and ash. You gotta send some guys up there to help.”

“We’re doing everything possible, sir,” the firefighter assured him, as he helped the father and son down the stairwell.

Clark leaned against the wall and sighed, raking his hand through his dirty hair. He let out a quavering sigh. So far, his secret was still intact. The man couldn’t identify him. As Clark passed a polished metal art hanging, he saw why. Every inch of his exposed skin was covered in smoke, streaked with soot, caked with ash. He could barely recognize himself. His hair, heavily soiled and slicked down from the weight, was a look he’d never worn in public. He smiled at the stranger who peered back at him from the reflective surface, then continued on in his mission.

It was three painstaking hours later when he finally was satisfied that everyone was out of the building. There were bodies, of course, of people he hadn’t gotten to in time. Each discovery had been like a knife in his heart. Still, hundreds of people had made it out of the fire alive, most, if not all, who would have died without a little bit of alien intervention. But Clark didn’t think of his role in that way. He was glad only that he had been able to make a difference.

He had also done what he could in stemming the fire as he worked at helping people get to safety, starting with dousing the flames in the stairwells to allow the victims to escape. He had been too afraid to put out the entire thing, for that would have truly raised eyebrows in Metropolis, and indeed, in all the country. But he had significantly snuffed out enough of the blaze to keep the building from collapsing, and to allow the firefighters access to the floors that had previously been denied to them.

Giving the building one final scan, he headed to the roof once more. He took a deep breath of fresh, clean, frigid air. It felt good, as though that one single breath purged all traces of smoke and burning flesh from his lungs. Then he was off, flying through the night, making with all speed for his apartment. Once there, he landed on his terrace, his arrival no more than a light whoosh of noise. For a moment he stood there, looking in through his windows, seeing Lois sitting at his table, her back to him, typing away at his laptop at a furious pace. Clark smiled to himself. Lois never ceased her work.

At normal, human speed, he went to the door that would take him inside. Lois was instantly on her feet as she heard him open the door, the knob rattling slightly as it turned. She went to hug him, but stopped short as she took in his appearance.

“Clark? Is that really you? Everything okay?” she asked, looking at him concernedly.

“Yeah,” Clark said, nodding. “It’s me. Everything’s fine. Just give me a minute to get cleaned up, and then I’ll fill you in.”

“Deal. You look like you’ve been through a warzone.”

“I feel like it.”

“I’ll make us some coffee.”

“Sure, that’d be great.”

Clark headed off to his bathroom, his shoulders slumped somewhat. Too many thoughts were running around his head. It felt good, stripping out of his filthy clothes, once he was in the sanctuary of his bathroom. He turned on the water as hot as he could, then stepped beneath the spray of the shower head. He scrubbed his skin and washed his hair at super speed, wanting to get back to Lois as soon as possible. He wound up scrubbing himself down four times before he was satisfied that the stench of the fire no longer clung to him like a second skin.

Lois was just finishing getting the coffeemaker set when Clark reemerged, dressed in clean, comfortable clothes. He came up behind her as she set out two mugs on the kitchen counter, and hugged her around her waist, drawing her body against his. His head leaned against her own.

“How bad was it?” Lois asked. “Wait, dumb question. Of course it was bad. You were there for a long time.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, not letting go of her. “I couldn’t...I didn’t...not everyone got out alive.” His voice was soft and regretful. “I...failed.”

Lois turned in his arms and hugged him tightly. “Hey. Because of you, hundreds of people are alive. People who otherwise would have lost their lives tonight. It’s more than anyone has the right to have hoped for. You did a fantastic job.”

“Thanks. I just wish...”

“That you could have done more?” Lois finished for him.

Clark nodded. “You know me too well, I think.”

The coffeemaker finished filling the small pot beneath it, the strong aroma of the brew filling the entire apartment. It was a welcome smell for Clark, chasing away the memory of the horrific stench of the fire. He pulled out of Lois’ embrace and grabbed the pot of fresh coffee. He poured the two drinks, fixed them in their preferred ways, then brought them over to the couch. He sat down wearily and handed Lois her mug.

“How long did you stay?” he asked her, taking a sip from his cup.

“Almost as long as you did. I needed to see what happened. For our article, and because I was worried about you.”

Clark smiled. “You know you don’t have to worry, right? Nothing can hurt me. Except for Kryptonite. And S.T.A.R. Labs has that under lock and key.”

“I know, but still...”

“You know, I love that you worry about me,” Clark said, flashing her another small smile. “And I’m sorry it took me so long to get back. I did a couple more checks of the building before coming home. Just to make sure that it wasn’t going to collapse and that no one else was stuck. Did anyone say how the fire started?”

Lois shook her head. “Not yet. At least, nothing certain. But they suspect arson.”

Clark fell silent and fidgeted with his mug. “There’s one other thing,” he said after a moment, his voice sinking to a near whisper.

Lois saw the seriousness in his face. “Clark? What is it?”

“Someone...saw me.”

“Clark!”

“It’s okay,” he said quickly, trying to stem Lois’ fear before it could explode. “They didn’t recognize me. They said as much to the firefighter. I mean, you saw me when I came in. I didn’t exactly look like myself.”

“That’s true,” she conceded. “But, God, Clark, I thought you were going to be careful!”

“I was. But I didn’t have a choice in the matter. I had to show myself. His kid stopped breathing, and he was too in shock to do anything. I had to do something.”

Lois sighed. “I understand.”

Clark sighed as well, leaning back into the couch cushions. “It kills me to have these powers and only be able to help when I’m sure not to be noticed. I want to be free to help. But if I do that...people will know that I’m...not like them.”

Lois was quiet a moment. But then, she began to speak as an idea formed in her mind. Clark could see the dawning of some inner light as it crept over her face.

“What if...what if you *didn’t* hide what you can do?”

“I can’t do that, Lois. You know that. Look at what happened with Trask. I wouldn’t be safe. *You* wouldn’t be safe. Or my parents. Or anyone else I’m close to.”

“But, what if people didn’t know it was you?”

“I don’t think I’m following. Why wouldn’t people know it was me?”

“Because,” Lois said, resting her head on his shoulder, “you’d be in disguise.”

“Disguise?” There was a note of amusement in Clark’s voice, if not belief that such a plan could possibly work.

But Lois was clearly excited. “Yeah! You could wear something different when you go off to help people.”

“I don’t know, Lois.”

“You know about Zorro, right?”

“Yeah,” Clark said hesitantly. “He wore a mask and cape and helped people out.”

“Right,” Lois said. “He was actually a nobleman, but he wore a disguise to keep his true identity a secret.”

“And you think that will work in my case, Lois?” Clark asked, frowning.

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, Zorro is completely fictional. I, however, am not.” He pressed a hand to his chest for emphasis.

“Just promise me that you’ll keep an open mind.”

“Okay...”

Lois sprang up from the couch and grabbed Clark’s phone, a triumphant smile on her face.

“Wait, who are you calling?”

Lois grinned at him. “Your mother.”

“My mom?”

Lois shrugged. “She’s a better seamstress than I am.” She started punching in the Kents’ phone number on the dial pad.

“Just one thing, Lois?”

“Hmm?”

“I am *not* wearing a mask.”

February 6, 1995

“So, what do you think?” Martha asked from her spot on the bed.

“I’m not sure yet. This whole idea seems really...silly...to me,” Clark answered, sounding uncomfortable and resigned.

He emerged from the bathroom, wearing the latest of his mother’s creations. Lois’ eyes grew wide. Her mouth opened slightly, but she did not speak. She stood, leaving her spot on the bed next to Clark’s mom.

“See?” Clark said, gesturing to his outfit. “I look ridiculous.”

“No,” Lois said breathlessly and shaking her head. “You look *incredible*.” She ran her finger over the well-defined bulge of his bicep.

Clark frowned, still not convinced. “Really?”

“Really,” Lois said, nodding.

The Spandex suit clung to Clark like a second skin. They had tried a number of other fabrics and colors, but none had seemed right. But this vibrant shade of blue somehow felt like the right choice. The added splashes of red distracted the eye, but that was part of the plan. The simple yellow belt at the top of the red briefs seemed to temper the abrupt change in color. And yet...

“I don’t know. I feel like something’s missing.” Lois ran her hand over Clark’s muscled chest. The diamond on her finger flashed brilliantly. Clark saw it in the reflection of the full length mirror he was looking in and smiled at her. “Some sort of...I don’t know. Emblem? Symbol? Something to announce to the world just who you are.”

“Do we really want to *do* that?” Clark asked, arching his eyebrow. “Not that this outfit is subtle. I’ve owned quieter Hawaiian shirts.” He turned, examining the heavy cape. “And this cape...kinda...pretentious, don’t you think?”

“Of course we do,” Lois said addressing his first question, and stilling his movements with a quick squeeze of his body.

“We need to give you an identity that people will associate with the suit. You know as well as I do that there are at least a dozen different names that the fire victims at Lex Tower are calling their mysterious savior. Demon, angel, ghost, Jesus Christ in His second coming. There are even reports of a real live wizard being there.” Lois scoffed at the absurdity of it all. “Whatever we put on your suit will tell people who you are. They won’t ever associate the man in blue with Clark Kent. Because it won’t be

you. It will be... whoever your new identity is.”

Clark nodded. “I guess... you have a point.”

“I know I do. So, any ideas?”

Clark thought for a moment. “Actually, I do. Mom, do you think you could make one last change to the suit?”

“Sure, honey,” Martha said. “But what’d you have in mind?”

Clark grabbed a sheet of paper off the top of the dresser. With sure strokes, he sketched out a design. A design he’d worn as a child. A slightly exaggerated S within an almost diamond shape.

“This,” he said, holding it up for their inspection. “The El family crest.”

“Clark, honey, are you *sure* you’re okay with that symbol?” Martha asked hesitantly. “After all it once meant, I mean.”

“I’m sure,” Clark replied, nodding. “Look, I know what Trask tried to make this S a symbol of. If he’d had his way, this sigil would have stood for death and destruction. I know he used it as a way to try and dehumanize me. I’ve had to come to terms with that, and I have. He was a sick man. But I know now that this S is so much more than what Cameron once made it... or, tried to make it. This S, this crest of El, is a part of me. Not as Specimen S, but as Kal-El, son of Jor-El and Lara, last surviving child of a noble race of people. From this day on, I’m taking back what is rightfully mine, changing this S from Cameron’s warped vision of it. From now on, this S no longer brands a would-be super soldier in a twisted war in a psychopath’s mind. Now it stands as a beacon of hope, of help, of truth and justice.”

“I’m proud of you, son,” Jonathan said, leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed before his chest. “Possibly more now than I’ve ever been.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Clark said, giving Jonathan a smile.

Not long afterward, Clark put on the modified suit. It now proudly boasted the sigil of Clark’s heritage on the chest in gold and red, and in contrasting gold threads on the back of the cape. As he gazed into the mirror image of himself, he couldn’t help but to feel a little strange. The suit itself felt odd and left him feeling uncomfortably exposed. But it was the crest on his chest that had his emotions surging, even though he himself had chosen to wear it.

For so long, the symbol had been a source of shame to him. It had been a brand, a marker, a sign that had indicated him as Trask’s property. It had been as bad as the number on a prisoner’s garb or the arm tattoos of those poor souls in Nazi Germany. But now, thanks to the messages Jor-El had left for him in the globe, Clark knew the proud heritage behind the sigil. For the first time in looking at the S on his body, Clark smiled and felt honored to display it across the whole of his broad chest.

“Well? What do you think?” he asked, turning to face his parents and fiancée.

“You look... super,” Lois said, smiling at him. “Wait! That’s it!”

“That’s what?” Clark asked, confused.

“Your new identity. Superman!”

February 14, 1995

Help! Somebody help!

The screams hit Clark’s ears clear as a bell. His head snapped up from its position, bent over his keyboard as he diligently worked on an article. Across from him, Lois was on the phone, turned partially away from him. She was speaking a mile a minute to whoever was on the other end. Whoever she was talking to must have hung up. She swore lightly under her breath and slammed the receiver down into its cradle.

Clark hesitated, listening to the cry for help. He hadn’t yet dared to make his public debut with his new identity. But as he listened, the single shout became many. Clark could hear the fear and panic in the myriad voices. He started to stand, listening intently. Lois saw the faraway look in his eyes as she came

closer, and recognized immediately what was going on.

“Clark? What is it?” she asked, only loudly enough for him to hear.

“I’m not sure. But it’s big,” he replied, a pensive look on his face. “Wait... it’s a ship. It’s sinking,” he said, as he put the clues, held within the screams, together. “Must be in the harbor. I think it’s time for the world to meet Superman,” he whispered in her ear.

“Go,” Lois urged him. “I’ll meet you down there.”

He nodded sharply, then headed toward the stairwell. Ever since his decision to give Lois’ idea a try, he had fooled around with different ways to change into the blue, red, and yellow suit. He loosened his tie as he went, spinning into his alter ego once he hit the roof, and taking off like a rocket. He made a beeline toward the waterfront, his hearing tuned into the pleas for help, trying to pinpoint the exact location of the disabled ship.

At last, he had it. He increased his speed, tearing through the cloudless blue sky. A sonic boom rang out in the wake of his passing, startling the people on the streets below. In seconds, he was over the Metropolis Harbor, where a mid-sized cruise ship was stranded out in the waves, one end rapidly rising into the air as the opposite side sank beneath the icy water. Clark stopped short as soon as he was alongside the crippled vessel. He scanned the ship, assessing the situation as quickly as he could.

There had to be close to five hundred couples aboard the ship, out for a Valentine’s Day cruise around the harbor. Clark had wanted to take Lois on the same cruise, but had been unable to get tickets for it, since people booked a year or more in advance. In any case, it was far too many people to evacuate individually. The boat would be underwater before he would be able to rescue half of them, even with the help of his super speed to ferry them to shore. And, he knew, that was if the people aboard went with him *willingly*. He didn’t doubt that most of them would panic even further if he tried to scoop them up to fly them to safety.

Some of the people on deck spotted him, floating there, not a hundred feet away. They pointed, alerting their neighbors to the flying man. Some people screamed when they saw him, their fear stoked to new heights at the unearthly sight. “Angel of death,” he heard some crying, making the sign of the cross before themselves. Others pleaded for his help. “Godsend,” he heard them say, or “angel.” Clark floated a little closer and spoke.

“Everyone just stay calm,” he said, letting his voice take on a note of distinct leadership. He had to yell it out, just to be heard over the din onboard. “I’m here to help you. Everyone go inside and grab hold of something that’s fixed down. Stay away from the railings, no matter what.”

He scanned again, not bothering to see if people were following his instructions, going deeper with his vision, beneath the waves. There he saw the reason for the ship’s distress. A large hole had been torn in the hull, straight through the ship. It was taking on water, fast. Clark made the only decision he could. He took a deep breath, held it, and went into a dive, dropping like a stone from the heavens, beneath the water until he was below the ship. He swam to the dead center of the vessel, then started to lift. He only hoped that he would have the strength to accomplish his goal. He’d never attempted to lift something so large and heavy before.

Muscles straining only the slightest bit, he started to fly once more. Straight up he went, like an arrow loosed from a bowstring. The ship rose with him, until, at last, he reached the surface. He continued to rise, water pouring from the hole in the hull like a waterfall, obscuring his vision. But after a moment, it ceased. Floating five feet above the gentle waves, Clark started for the piers. He went as slowly as he could, mindful of the precious cargo made of human lives in the ship above his head. He didn’t want to jostle the boat or its occupants, nor did he want anyone

who hadn't listened to his instructions to get away from the railings to fall overboard.

It was a painstaking process, bringing the cruise ship to port. But Clark was satisfied with the result. He kept his hearing trained on the thousand or so lives above him. He wanted to make sure that no one was hurt, or went into shock, or got spooked and decided to jump from the ship. In the end, no one did. Still, by the time he made it the ten miles from where he'd found the ship back to the docks, word of the strange phenomenon had spread like wildfire. Just about every television station and newspaper in the city had film crews, reporters, and photographers on the scene, not to mention the small army of curious bystanders crowded in behind them.

Clark ignored them all as he worked. He knew Lois was there, of course. Even with his hearing focused on the occupants of the ship he was carrying, he had picked up on her heartbeat toward the front of the crowd. A quick glance revealed her standing there, taking notes, with Jimmy by her side, his trusty camera snapping an endless series of photographs. He smiled to himself at that, then focused on the next leg of his rescue. He let himself lose some altitude, sinking back into the ice cold water of the harbor. He heard the crowd gasp as his head went beneath the surface. With infinite care, he lowered the ship down, until it rested on the sandy ocean floor. Then he was out of the water, inspecting his handiwork.

The vessel sat extremely low in the water, but there was no longer any danger that the water level would reach the passengers. He let out a small, concealed sigh of relief, deciding it was better if he didn't show much of his emotions to anyone, afraid he would do something to make himself look like Clark Kent. He flew up to the deck and landed lightly. His wet cape clung almost claustrophobically to him, dripping sea water behind him as he walked.

"What the hell are you?" the ship's captain asked, voicing the question louder than anyone else, though Clark had heard a few others mumbling things to the same effect.

"I'm just someone who wants to help," he said, giving the captain, crew, and passengers a friendly smile. "Is everyone all right? Does anyone need a doctor?" He searched the crowd, silently willing them to be truthful with him. When no one spoke up, he continued. "Captain, let's get these good people ashore, shall we?"

It didn't take Clark as long as he'd feared to help the people disembark from the ship. He kept a careful eye out, looking for obvious signs of injury, but saw none. The realization made him immensely happy. He'd made a difference, and this time, no one had died needlessly. Soon enough, the last people were off the ship and standing on shore, watching Clark. Teams of investigators came aboard the ship, and Clark spoke with them for a while, telling them about the damage to the ship's hull. Then he finally allowed himself to float off the deck of the vessel and hovered before the gathered crowd.

This was the part he was dreading.

He wanted nothing more than to fly off, and get the reactions of the crowd second-hand from Lois. But if he was establishing himself as a new individual in the city, it was for the best if he gave the press some carefully construed information, so that they didn't go digging for clues as to who he was. Clark braced himself as he moved before the crowd, awaiting the worst. Surely, they had to know that he wasn't human. Surely, they had to be afraid of the powerful being before them. Surely, they would reject him.

To his lasting surprise, a cheer ripped through the crowd, mixed with enthusiastic applause.

There was no fear evident in the crowd. There was admiration, gratitude, acceptance. There was warmth and love.

Then the onslaught began.

Microphones were thrust in his direction. Cameramen and photographers redoubled their efforts, the bright flashes almost making a strobe-like effect. Dozens of questions flew from every mouth; reporters, cruise passengers, and onlookers alike. Clark motioned with his hands for them to all settle down, then floated closer, until at last, he was just high enough off the ground for everyone to be able to see him.

"I'll answer your questions," he assured them, in a voice loud enough for the microphones to pick up and for the unaided ears of the crowd to hear. "But I'll have to take them one at a time, please."

As he'd expected, that only spurred the reporters on, each of them shouting out questions, trying to be the first one to get a quote from him. But one voice cut above all the others, as he had known it would.

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Who are you?"

"Who am I?" Clark smiled a little, musing over the question. "I'm someone who is here to help, in whatever ways I can. Someone who wants to make a difference."

"But, surely you have to have a name," Lois pressed, before anyone else could venture a question. "Everyone does."

"It doesn't matter what name I was given at birth. What matters is what I stand for. Truth. Justice. Because of that, there have been those who've called me Superman. It seems to have stuck." He shrugged.

"Superman! Archie Preston, Metropolis Star. What exactly are you? Some sort of robot?"

Clark chuckled. "No, Mr. Preston. I'm a flesh and blood man, like you. I just come from a distant planet, a place called Krypton."

"Superman! Lois Lane again! With what we've seen here today, it begs the question. Were you the one who aided people in the Lex Tower fire, not long ago?"

Clark nodded. "Yes, I was. I happened to be in the neighborhood when the fire caught my attention. I knew I could help, so I did."

"But, why then, didn't you come forward?"

"That's a good question, Miss Lane." He paused for effect, making it appear as though he was looking for the right words. "I'm not here for recognition or praise. I'm content to be the man in the shadows, so to speak. Besides, it took a lot of time and effort to get those people out of there, the building secured, and the fire relatively under control. I didn't have time to make my presence known or for the explanation such a disclosure would undoubtedly bring. Too many lives were at stake."

"And after the fire?" another reporter broke in. Clark recognized Tonya Binx, from the New Troy Herald.

"After the fire, I had other matters to attend to," he said, giving her a polite smile.

The questions kept flying, fast and furious. For a good half hour, he fielded them, patiently giving the people the answers they so desperately sought. It was easier than he'd anticipated, crafting his answers, giving the people the truth while protecting his true identity. In a way, he'd been doing it his entire life. This was simply on a grander scale. Eventually though, he ended the question and answer session, hearing yet another call for help. He was grateful for that call, being more than ready to get out of the public eye for a while.

"Excuse me," he apologized to the crowd. "I have to go."

"Superman! Wait!" called out Martin Reyes, from LNN. "Will we ever see you again?"

"Yes," Clark nodded, his smile ever-present. "I expect that you will. Metropolis is my home now."

"How can we contact you?" asked Isabella Stonard, from Wake Up Metropolis.

Clark gave her a half smile. "I'll be around. Now excuse me, I really do need to go. There are others who need me."

He took off at top speed, another sonic boom marking his passing. But he was all smiles. Despite his relative unease with being filmed and photographed, being questioned and having people clamoring for his attention, he was happy. It felt so good, so freeing, to finally be able to help people without having to worry about staying unseen. He could help more effectively this way.

And, he mused, not a single person had laughed at his costume. That in itself told him how willing the people of Metropolis were to not only accept, but embrace the alien in their midst. No one had made the connection that he resembled Clark Kent. That too, had surprised him. But it looked like Lois had been right, that no one would associate the man in blue with the dedicated reporter. He could not have asked for a more successful debut.

The next rescue he tended to was a four car pile-up just on the outskirts of the city. Clark had to literally tear the roof off one of the cars to reach the injured, bloodied occupants. They were too weak and too dazed to protest when he flew them to the hospital, leaving astonished police officers behind. He chuckled a little as he flew off, once the wrecked cars were cleared from the roadway and the passengers shuttled to the hospital.

Finally finished with his task, he flew back to the Planet. He landed lightly on the roof, then spun back into his work attire before heading for the bullpen. No one noticed as he jogged down the steps and then entered the newsroom. Lois met him at his desk. Around them, the place was in an uproar. Clark got the gist that everyone was talking about the phenomenon out in the harbor. He was free to exchange a few unobserved words with his fiancée.

“So?” Lois asked him, her voice a confidential whisper. “Where’d you go after the impromptu press conference?”

“Car wreck,” he replied in the same tone. “No fatalities, but it was a close call. How’s Perry taking the newest big news story?”

“He couldn’t be happier if Elvis Presley walked through that door, alive and well, and started to serenade him. He’s already demanding that the Planet get an exclusive with Superman.”

Clark smiled. “I think we can handle that.”

“He thinks you were with me the whole time, by the way.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the cover.”

“We’re going to be doing this a lot, huh? Me covering while you go out and do your thing?”

Clark shrugged. “Assuming I keep...doing my thing.”

“You are, aren’t you? I mean, you did like being able to help, right? I could see it in your eyes.”

Clark chuckled. “Lois, calm down. I’m just teasing you. Between you and me, I have it on very good authority that Superman is here to stay.”

July 28, 1995

Clark had never been so happy, or so nervous, in all of his life. It was a struggle for him to keep his feet on the ground. It seemed so unnatural, for him to be bound to the Earth when his heart was soaring among the stars. But there were too many eyes upon him. He adjusted his glasses for the fourth time in as many minutes, then ran his hand through his hair.

“Nervous, CK?” Jimmy asked in a low whisper.

“Only that I’ll mess up what I have to say,” Clark said, grinning at his best friend.

Jimmy laughed lightly. “You? Nah. You know, CK, I’m so happy for you guys.”

“Thanks, Jimmy. That means a lot to me.”

“Until you came around, I’d never seen Lois so completely happy.”

Clark was about to reply when the organist started to play. The rich, deep tones of the instrument rolled through the church, the familiar tune of “Here Comes The Bride” echoing in that

small, intimate stone building. Clark could not help it as his heels left the marble floor in front of the altar, but he managed to make it look like a natural movement, as though he was merely rocking forward onto his toes. Not that anyone was looking in his direction anymore. Everyone’s eyes, including his own, had been drawn to the back of the church, where Sam Lane was escorting Lois down the aisle.

Clark’s breath caught in his throat. Lois was by far the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on, but today, her radiance was brought to a level he did not have words for. He knew his mouth was hanging half open, and he quickly fixed it into the biggest smile of his life. Lois’ eyes swept the rows of family and friends once as she entered, then locked onto Clark’s. Her smile was as big as the one on Clark’s face.

It took a small eternity for Lois to reach Clark’s side. He eased his impatience and nervousness by listening to her heartbeat, which was racing in anticipation. Still, the sound soothed him, as it always had. It was, he thought, his drug of choice. Finally, she reached him and he took her hand.

“You look incredible,” he whispered to her.

“Thanks. You look pretty amazing yourself. You’ll be lucky if I don’t make you wear a tux all the time.” She winked at him and he chuckled softly.

They turned and faced the priest. The man raised his voice and solemnly began the marriage ceremony. Clark became more and more excited with every passing second. Each word that Father Baker said brought him closer and closer to being Lois’ husband. By the time they reached their vows, Clark was nearly bursting in anticipation.

The priest looked to Clark. Clark cleared his throat subtly, then began his vows.

“Lois, from the moment I first saw you, I have loved you. From the first words we exchanged, you held my heart with an unbreakable bond. You have given me a home and a life beyond anything I could have ever dreamed. You are my best friend and the woman I will love for the rest of my life. I am so in love with the person you are. Your passion, your humor, your determination. Today, I give myself completely to you as your husband. I will spend the rest of my days loving you, doing my utmost to make you happy, and making our future as perfect as I can.”

Clark took the ring from Jimmy and slipped it reverently on Lois’ finger, almost in a daze. The whole thing felt almost surreal, as though it couldn’t possibly be happening to him, the man who’d once been destined to live alone, isolated from all of society. The priest shifted his gaze to Lois as Clark fell silent and still.

“Clark, you’re my best friend. I never really knew what that meant until I met you. It made it so easy to fall in love with you. Since the day we met, you’ve been the gentlest, most kind-hearted man I’ve ever known. When I’m with you, I am complete. I’m home, in a way I’ve never known before. Today, I give you my heart, my love, my fidelity, and the life that we’ll make together. My life will be spent loving you, supporting you, and admiring you.”

Lois fell quiet as well. She took the ring from Lucy and slipped it onto Clark’s finger, with a touch as light and delicate as a butterfly’s wing. Clark could see a sheen of unshed, but happy, tears pooled in her deep brown eyes. He smiled gently at her, and she returned it with one of her own. A smile grew on Father Baker’s face as well.

“Lois, Clark, it is my honor, by the powers vested in me, to pronounce you husband and wife. Clark, you may now kiss your bride.”

Lois practically flung herself into Clark’s waiting arms. He kissed her deeply, his heart nearly bursting with love, knowing that he was now forever bound to the other half of his soul.

May 9, 2196

Tempus emerged in Centennial Park via the time window held cradled in his hand. He'd been so busy, what with jumping from time to time, universe to universe. He still wasn't sure how Herb kept it all straight in his head. It was damn confusing, if you asked him. But, a man had to do what a man had to do. He was determined to see his experiments through to the end.

It had been a while since he had last had an opportunity to check in on this universe. The last time he'd been here, he'd found Jason Trask and handed him Kal-El's identity on a silver platter. The man would have to have been a galactic screw-up to let Kent slip through his fingers.

Tempus smiled to himself. Oh, how he *wished* he could have been there to see it. Kal-El, that blasted last son of Krypton, exposed as Clark Kent. Trask, so ready, so eager, to break the man's mind, turning him into a slave...or kill him in trying. And when that happened, this universe would become a world without Superman. Without Superman, Utopia would never be.

Tempus rounded the corner of the small, neatly kept brick building that housed a set of public restrooms. He frowned as he did so. He anticipated seeing graffiti on the bricks, but the building was clean as fresh fallen snow. The grass was mowed and free of debris. People strolled by idly, without worry or care.

"Oh no," Tempus muttered under his breath. "This doesn't bode well."

How had that moron Trask managed to mess things up? Kal-El should have either been the destroyer of the world or dead. But this place...it was a mirror of the Utopia Tempus knew from his own universe. He quickened his pace, hastening to the spot where he would get his answer. He scowled as he walked, his face all but daring anyone to try and say a single pleasant word to him. No one took him up on the challenge, opting, instead, to give him a wide berth.

He all but ran to the all too familiar section of the park, hoping against hope not to see that damned statue. But there it was, proudly displayed for all to see. The statue that depicted Superman, in all his red and blue annoyance, with Lois Lane at his side, their adult children flanking them. Tempus stared in disbelief. It couldn't be true. He'd worked so hard to ensure that his plan came to fruition. Then, as he looked again, something about the statue started to seem a little off. He squinted, then opened his eyes again. He paced back and forth before the immaculate marble, hoping a new angle would clue him in.

"Oh *no*," he moaned aloud, as he finally pieced together just what was off about the tribute to the Man of Steel.

Instead of three Kent children, this statue boasted *five*.

Two older boys, a girl, then another boy and girl, obviously twins from their similar looks and exact same age. Tempus glanced at the polished, gleaming plaque below the immortalized family. It named the people in the statue. Kal-El, aka Clark Kent, aka Superman. Lois Lane, aka Lois Kent, aka Lois-El, once known as Ultra Woman. Michael Kent, aka Jon-El, aka Guardian. Hunter Kent, aka Jor-El, aka Sentinel. Rebecca Kent, aka Marla-El, aka Huntress. Ashley Kent, aka Luce-El, aka Shadow. Thomas Kent, aka Sam-El, aka Warrior.

Tempus gritted his teeth and kept reading. It seemed that in this universe, Lois and Clark had gotten together much sooner, and with far fewer problems than in his own world, since Lois hadn't had Superman around to confuse her feelings toward Clark. They had married sooner as well, and that had led to the children being born earlier than their parallel counterparts. And that, in turn, had apparently led to the birth of the twins.

Tempus balled his fists, fighting down the overwhelming urge to scream. He could read between the lines of the plaque well enough. Everything he had done had been for nothing. Everything he'd done had backfired. Instead of driving Lois and

Clark permanently apart, circumstances had drawn them together. Instead of death claiming one or both of them, they had survived and thrived. And instead of creating a super soldier, he had inadvertently created a Superman who was even more determined to bring about peace to the world than the Boy Scout of his own world.

The experiment, so carefully construed, was an utter and abject failure. Tempus thought about using his time window to go and find this universe's Superman and a chunk or two of Kryptonite. But it was only a passing thought, and he did not act on it. If he'd learned anything from all the universes he'd toyed with thus far, it was that once Superman made an appearance, no matter for how brief a time, Utopia was an inevitability.

Tempus looked again at the statue with such anger it almost could have melted the stone. Then he sighed. It was ironic, he thought. All of his actions in this world had only worked to ensure Superman's victory. God, how he *despised* irony sometimes.

No matter though. There were *plenty* of other universes left to experiment in.

THE END