

A Farmer's Tale

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Summary: Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a simple peasant fell in love with a nobleman's daughter.

Story Size: 56,901 words (313Kb as text)

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Author's Note: I have seriously toyed with everything in this story — history, character names (the spelling of Tempos comes from the episode "Soul Mates"), pretty much anything you can think of.

Special Thanks: I have to give credit where credit is due. The overall story was inspired by a Friends episode — the one where Joey is pining after Ross and Rachel's attractive nanny. He likens the forbidden romance to that of "the princess and the stable boy." And Lois' situation with Lex Luthor in this story was inspired by the twist in the Belle and Gaston story in the television show, Once Upon A Time.

And now, without further ado, the story.

"Morning, Dad," Clark said cheerfully as his father shuffled sleepily into their tiny kitchen.

"Morning, son. You're up early," Jonathan commented as he made his way over to the sink. He cupped some water in his hands from the bucket that always stood full and ready, and splashed some on his face.

"I've been up most of the night," Clark admitted sheepishly. "Aurora had her foal last night."

"What? Why didn't you wake me?" Jonathan asked, appearing to be jolted into full wakefulness. He took a seat at the battered old wooden table.

Clark shrugged. "I was having trouble sleeping anyway. I figured I'd let you sleep. If anything had gone wrong, I would have woken you up. But everything went smoothly. She delivered a healthy colt just about an hour ago."

"That's great news," Jonathan said. "A healthy colt should be easy enough to find a buyer for."

Clark nodded. "That's what I thought too. He's a beautiful horse. Completely jet black. If he takes after his father at all, he'll make some nobleman a fine mount."

"Let's hope so," Jonathan said with a sigh. "We could use the money."

"I know," Clark sighed in turn, sliding into a chair across the table from his father.

"If things don't turn around for us soon..."

Jonathan didn't bother finishing his statement. He didn't need to. Clark knew how dire their circumstances were. Three years of poor crop yields had wreaked havoc on their limited finances. And, if it didn't rain soon, this year's harvest promised to be no better. In fact, it was only thanks to the occasional sale of one of their animals that they were so far able to keep afloat. Without them, they would have long since been thrown into debtor's prison or sold into slavery. And, Clark had to admit to himself, if not

aloud, he feared that it could still happen, the next time Lord Luthor sent out his minions to collect taxes from his subjects.

"We'll find a way," Clark swore. "I can start hunting again, if anything. Thaddeus is always willing to pay a little something for any kind of wild game to sell in his butcher shop."

"No, Clark!" Jonathan snapped out of concern. "You know what would happen if you were caught. It's illegal to hunt Lord Luthor's game."

Clark snorted in disgust. "Keeping everyone in poverty and hunger should be what's illegal," he replied.

"You know that I agree," his father said, his tone infinitely softer. "But I can't have you risking your life."

"We're *already* risking our lives," Clark retorted. He gestured out beyond the walls of their ramshackle farmhouse. "Every single day, we're risking our lives. Will we die of starvation? Can we afford medicine if we get sick? Will we be sold into slavery if we can't scrounge up the money when the tax collectors come?"

"Clark..."

Clark sighed. "I have to do *something*, Dad. I can't let anything happen to you. Not if I can help it. I already blame myself for Mom's death."

"Son, she was sick for a long time. There was nothing you could have done," Jonathan gently reminded him.

But Clark's guilt was too strong to be swayed by his father's soft words. "Yes, she was sick. And I couldn't get her the medicine she needed. Because I was too afraid to defy the prohibition on hunting and make a few extra coins."

"Clark, you were merely a boy when that happened," Jonathan said, reaching across the table to take his son's hand.

Clark pulled away from his father's touch. "I was fifteen! More than old enough to go out and at least set some traps or something."

"Clark, we've been through this."

He sighed again. "I know, Dad. But I have to do something. I don't care about the risks to me. The only reason I haven't started hunting is because I'm afraid of what would happen to *you* if I got caught. You can't run the farm on your own. The two of us together can barely get all of our chores done every day."

"I know. That's why this new colt is such a blessing. He's hope that we can turn things around a little this year."

Clark didn't reply. He wasn't sure his father was right. Oh, he wanted to believe that Jonathan was correct. But, in his heart, he couldn't banish his growing worry. He simply stood and stretched. Jonathan did the same. Both grabbed a couple of pieces of half-stale bread and ate it as they silently left the house to start on the unending list of chores that needed to be done. Of course, Clark knew, Jonathan wasn't going to head directly to whatever chore he'd chosen to tackle first. First, there was a new colt to go see. It made Clark smile, as he thought of how his father would coo and fawn over the newborn animal, even if they couldn't keep the horse.

Clark started with the cows, as he usually did. While the milking could be tedious sometimes, it was mindless work where he could let his mind wander. Usually, he focused on what he needed to do next. But, sometimes, on days like this one, his mind visited other topics. On this day, in particular, he fantasized about what it must be like to never have to worry about money. To never go to bed with a half-empty stomach. To fall asleep on a feather bed, instead of the hard, flat, uncomfortable straw mattresses he'd known all his life.

When he was younger, after his parents had confided in him that he was a foundling child left out in the cornfields, he'd imagine that he was really a prince. In those moments of make-believe, he'd imagined that his mother was a woman of noble birth, and his father a prince or king. In his mind, his existence was a scandal — the product of a shameful love affair — so his mother ran off to birth him in secret to save his life from her noble

husband's jealous anger.

He knew, of course, that it wasn't a true story. It was more likely that some poor peasant — not unlike the parents who'd adopted him as their own — was running away from her lot in life and abandoned him because she was unable to care for him. And, if Clark was being honest with himself, it was even more likely that his mother had been a runaway slave.

Not that it mattered to him. He was at peace with the fact that he would never know his true origins. And Jonathan and Martha were the best parents he could have ever wished for. His origins — whatever they were — had never mattered to him. He loved his life, even if the life of a poor farmer *was* difficult. The work was strenuous and sometimes monotonous, but it gave him the freedom to enjoy the outdoors. He loved the warm summer days spent out in the sunshine, the wind riffling through his hair, the smells of the rich soil in his nostrils. He loved the warm comfort of the barn on cool, rainy days, and the close proximity of the animals was a balm for his underlying loneliness.

The long, cold winter days and nights were the hardest. There was still work to be done — just less of it. The eggs still had to be collected. The cows still needed to be milked. The horses still had to be tended to. But Clark usually found himself almost stir-crazy by winter's end, especially the last few years when the cold had been especially biting, forcing everyone indoors as much as humanly possible. Even going into town — a task he normally enjoyed — couldn't lift his spirits. All it meant was more time out in the cold, hoping to sell his wares and buy what he needed as fast as he could. The normal, cheerful conversations with friends were limited, as though speaking aloud leached them all of much needed warmth and strength.

"There you go, Bessy," he told the final cow as he finished milking her. "All set. Now, if you ladies will excuse me," he told the pair of cows, "I have other chores to tend to." He gave them a little bow and turned to pour the pail of milk into a larger container. "Looks like I've got enough for market," he told no one in particular.

He put the pail away and headed out of the barn and into the fields. He carefully examined the crops, systematically going from vegetable to vegetable. His frown deepened at each half-withered leaf and he craned his neck to check the sky. As usual, there was no sign of the rain they so desperately needed. He went back to the barn and grabbed two of the largest buckets they owned. For the next few couple of hours, he ferried water from the nearby river to his fields. Carefully, he gave each plant a well deserved drink. He wished they could just build a series of irrigation trenches, but, as it was, if he was caught "stealing" water from the river, Lord Luthor's punishment would be swift and terrible. He viewed the land he ruled over and everything in it — from the soil, to the water, to the creatures — as his property. Taking any of his "possessions" carried harsh consequences.

So Clark worked as quickly as his legs and aching shoulders would allow, until he was nearly ready to collapse. He stopped only when his knees threatened to give out on him. It was nearly noon by then, so he gave his tired body a rest, but only long enough to join his father and eat a scant lunch of eggs, a hard strip of salted pork, and the last of the bread. It was just enough to quiet the rumbling in his stomach and give him fuel to continue his work.

He and Jonathan kept busy the rest of the afternoon, sometimes working alone and sometimes working alongside each other. It was a productive day. They accomplished more than they had hoped to by the time the sun was getting low on the horizon. Jonathan started on dinner — a simple vegetable soup — and Clark took some time to exercise his already tired muscles. It was something he did as often as he could. In his mind, the stronger he trained his body to be, the faster he could work. The faster he worked, the more he could get done each day. And maybe — just

maybe — he and his father could finally get ahead a little bit.

He sighed to himself as he stripped off his sweaty shirt and tossed it to one side. With a grunt of effort, he leapt up and grabbed the low, sturdy branch of the tree where he usually did his chin-ups. He started his usual routine, mindlessly pulling his body up and lowering it back down in a long, repetitive cycle. How many he did, he didn't know. He never kept track. He only went until his muscles seemed ready to give out on him. Then he let himself drop to the ground. He grabbed his shirt and trekked back to the river where he swiftly washed the sheen of dirt and sweat from his body and clothing. It was a dangerous move, but it was easier than trying to draw up water from their well, which was dangerously low.

"Just in time, son," Jonathan said with a smile as Clark opened the door to their home. "The soup's ready."

"Great," Clark said with an enthusiastic smile. "I'm starving."

Jonathan chuckled. "That doesn't surprise me. How much water did you smuggle to the crops today?" He winked at his son.

Clark bowed his head for a moment and shook it slightly. "Not enough. It's *never* enough."

Jonathan sighed. "It's better than nothing."

"True," he conceded. "I was thinking. We've got enough milk to sell at the market. Eggs too. I think I should go tomorrow and see if I can sell them."

"That's a good idea," Jonathan said after a moment. "There's a few things we could use around here too. I'll go with you. There's not much we can do around here anyway. It won't kill us to miss a day in the fields."

"Sounds good," Clark said, watching as his father ladled the soup out into two wooden bowls. "That looks delicious."

"Thank you."

Jonathan placed the bowls on the table. Clark reached for his spoon and dug in with gusto. He had to admit it — his father was a fantastic cook, even if they usually didn't have a wide variety of ingredients at their disposal. He ate half the bowl before speaking again.

"I thought I'd take some of my carvings to market too," he said as he swirled some of the hot liquid around the bowl with his spoon.

"Good idea," Jonathan nodded with approval. "You've certainly got a talent."

"Thanks, Dad."

Though he didn't often have the time to do so, Clark enjoyed carving animals out of pieces of wood — all salvaged from the firewood pile or found by the wayside on the way to and from town. He had but to look at a piece of wood and could see the fox, owl, squirrel, horse, or whatever animal inside, begging to be let out. He took great pains to get the details just right. Sometimes, he could find a buyer for his carvings — usually one of the nobles who happened to be passing through. Oftentimes, he couldn't find a buyer, but it didn't stop him from carving his animals anyway. He found the activity relaxing and soothing. It was a great way to unwind during the busy growing season and it was a great way to keep busy during the monotonous winter months.

"Last time, I was able to sell four," Clark mused aloud.

"I remember. We were able to buy that venison to last the winter," Jonathan nodded in agreement.

"It must be nice," Clark continued. "To be rich enough to spend money on frivolous things like wooden animal figurines." He grinned. "Not that I'm complaining. It's nice to know that I can do something to help, even when the crops are, well, the way they are."

"Son, you've always been a help. Ever since the day we found you, you've been the greatest blessing your mother and I have ever received. You've always been the best son we could have ever hoped for."

Clark nodded, but said nothing. His parents had always been

very upfront and vocal about how grateful they were for the abandoned newborn they'd found. He knew too, how much the two farmers had longed for children before they'd happened upon him out in their field — how much it had hurt them that they'd never been able to conceive a child together. But they'd always said that those wounds had closed and vanished the moment they had adopted him as their own.

"There's enough for seconds," Jonathan urged him, pulling Clark out of his thoughts. He hadn't realized he'd been scraping the bottom of his bowl in an effort to find just one more mouthful. "If you want it, that is."

"Thanks. I think I *will* have some more." He got up and portioned out another bowl of the soup for both himself and his father.

They ate the rest in relative silence. When they were done, Jonathan did the washing up and Clark headed out into the barn. By the light of a lantern, he milked the two cows one more time, hoping for just a little more to sell in the morning. Then he checked on the horses, especially the newest colt. The baby looked good and appeared to be a feisty little fellow. Clark mentally dubbed him Blaze. When he was done, he bid the animals goodnight, then headed back into the house.

"Going to bed?" Jonathan asked as Clark shut the door behind him.

Clark shook his head. "Not yet. I want to finish up something. I've got a carving in the works. I'd like to try to get it done to bring with me tomorrow."

His father nodded. "Don't stay up too late."

"I won't. Night, Dad."

"Night, Clark."

Clark watched as his father went off to the small room that served as his bedroom before heading toward his own. Once inside, he grabbed the half-completed hawk he was working on and his knife, locating them more by habit than by sight in the darkened room. He took them back to the kitchen, threw a few slender sticks onto the fire, and set to work. For an hour or more, he worked in silence, oblivious to the outside world. He was completely focused on the wooden bird before him.

Finally, he set aside the figurine, happy with the way it looked. Silently, he cleaned up the wood shavings, putting them in a basket near the hearth to use next time they started a fire. He doused the fire and took his knife and hawk back to his room, setting it aside with the others. He thought maybe he had a dozen pieces ready to be sold, though he knew that if he sold one or two, it would be a good day. Then he collapsed in his bed, sleeping deeply until morning dawned.

"Ah, Lois! There you are!" Lord Samuel Lane said as he spotted his daughter.

Lois looked up from watching the fish in the pond. It was her favorite place in her family's garden. She'd always found it so quiet and peaceful. She went to give her father a smile, but paused when she saw the troubled look on his face.

"What's wrong, Father?"

Samuel frowned. "There's been news."

"What kind of news?"

"Raids."

"Raids?" Lois repeated. "What...?"

"Lord Tempos. His troops have started raiding villages all over the kingdom."

"Tempos." Lois spat out the name like a curse. "What does that pig want?"

Samuel shook his head. "To take whatever he can. To expand his own territory."

Lois snorted her distaste. "He'll never get away with it."

"He already has, from what I hear. He's taken control of Lord Daniel's lands."

That gave Lois pause and filled her body with dread. "Lord Daniel has a bigger army than we do."

Samuel nodded. "Yes."

"But that means..." She couldn't finish her statement.

Again, her father nodded. "It means we could very well be next on his list."

"How will we stop them?"

"I've asked Lord Alexander Luthor to join forces with us," her father said, not meeting her eyes.

"Lex?" she asked, fully aware that the man in question rarely went by his full name. "He never gives away anything without taking something in return. Even his aid."

"I know," Samuel said in a quiet tone.

"So...what does he want?" Lois demanded to know.

"He hasn't given me an answer yet."

"Then why are you telling me this?" Lois asked, her suspicions raised.

"Because he's promised to think it over and come to our home, personally, once he's made up his mind to help or not."

"You mean, once he's set his price," Lois supplied.

Samuel barely managed a weak smile. "That may well be the case."

"And if he *doesn't* help?" Lois asked, watching as the fish darted around beneath the surface of the clear, cool water.

"I think he will," Samuel said with certainty in his voice. "If we combine our forces, we stand a chance of defeating Tempos so thoroughly, he won't be able to launch a second attack at either one of our lands."

"And where do I come in?" Lois crossed her arms, knowing that her father wouldn't be telling her any of this unless he needed or expected something from her.

Samuel gave her a hesitant half-smile. "You know me too well. Very well then. When Lord Luthor arrives, I'd like for you meet him. Keep him company. Make sure he is made comfortable in our home."

"You mean, model myself as a potential wife," Lois snapped.

"I...uh...that is to say..." Samuel stammered.

Lois nodded curtly. "As I said."

"Lois..." Samuel paused and sighed a little. "Yes. You're right. Word has it that he's looking to remarry."

"His wife's been dead what? Less than a year?" Lois asked with a healthy measure of distaste.

"Slightly more than a year," Samuel corrected her, seemingly more by reflex than by a desire to defend Lord Luthor.

"Oh, well, *that* makes it *so* much better," Lois sarcastically tossed back.

"Lois! Why are you so resistant to this?"

"Why *shouldn't* I be?"

"He's a good man! You'll be well provided for," Samuel argued. "He's one of the richest lords in the entire kingdom."

"Right. He'll make an excellent ally," Lois said, her voice hard.

"You'll want for nothing with him."

"Except for a *real* marriage," Lois snorted. "He's more than twice my age! What could we ever have in common?"

"Maybe you should meet with him and find out," Samuel urged. "At least give him a chance, if he chooses to come. We *need* his cooperation. *And* his troops, if we're to defeat Lord Tempos."

"Fine," Lois huffed. "I'll meet with him. But don't expect me to fall head over heels for him. I've heard the rumors about him. How he's always with other women. How his wife was treated more like...like a hunting trophy than a human being. How he's cruel to the people he lords over."

"I've heard the rumors too. But they may just be that — rumors."

"We'll see."

The morning broke overcast and damp. Clark was glad for it. It meant rain was almost certain to fall. They were desperately in need of some rain. He only hoped it would hold off long enough for both he and his father to complete their errands in town. They needed to sell as much of their wares as they possibly could, so that they could buy the few things they needed. So, in an effort to get to the market all the sooner, Clark flew through his morning chores.

Then they were off, their rickety old cart hitched to a roan stallion named Merlin. Jonathan rode on the cart's single seat, while Clark led the horse on foot. He didn't mind the walk. There were some truly beautiful views along the way and, though the way was long, it was far less tiresome than his usual work around the farm. Halfway into town, the clouds sent down a cooling drizzle that lasted only a few short minutes before stopping again. It was a tease, but it made Clark feel hopeful that more was to come.

It turned out to be a good day at the market. Clark and his father managed to sell all of their wares relatively quickly. Of course, the money they earned was swiftly spent again, buying the things they needed. While Jonathan haggled over prices, Clark took to selling the figurines he'd carved. In that too, luck was smiling down on him. Of the dozen little animals he'd brought with him, three sold in the first few minutes. Two more went shortly after — the butcher traded them half a deer for the two little wooden foxes to give to his children. Clark was more than happy to make the trade. The deer would provide them with some much needed variety in their diet, and would bolster their overall meat stores. It lifted a little weight from Clark's shoulders that they might be able to put away enough food to comfortably get through the winter.

He traded another for a new pair of boots — the ones he was wearing were almost falling apart. He was just glad that Jonathan's boots were still somewhat new and had a lot of life left in them. It seemed like those six figurines would be the only ones to sell. For a long stretch of time, he couldn't find any other buyers. Then, suddenly a group of young nobles — younger even than him — wandered past his cart. They seemed to take a fancy in his remaining carvings and four of them sold. After they left with their newest novelty items, Clark mentally kicked himself. He'd allowed them to talk down his price to half of what he'd hoped to get. It was just that he and his father needed any money they could earn, and the young men and women had seemed ready to move on if he didn't allow them to negotiate the price.

"Ready to call it a day, Dad?" he asked as Jonathan approached the cart, an armful of packages clutched tightly to him.

"Almost," Jonathan replied, as Clark helped him load everything into the cart. "How'd you do with your animals?"

"Pretty well. I've only got two of them left."

"And I see you were able to make a few trades," his father said, eying the meat in the cart and the new boots. "Good work. What is that," he asked, pointing to the wrapped meat, "venison?" Clark nodded. "Half of a young buck."

"Well done! That will go a long way this winter." He clapped his son on the shoulder in an approving manner.

"I hope so," Clark said, glancing up at the sky. There had been no further rain that day, and the sun had actually peeked through the clouds a few times, though the clouds had always rolled right back in.

"I have to speak to Lana at the bakery," Jonathan said, "then we can go back home." He paused and gave his son a mischievous look. "Unless, of course, *you* want to be the one to get some bread."

Clark shook his head. "That's okay, Dad. I'll stay with the cart."

"Come on, Clark. Lana is crazy about you."

"That's exactly *why* I *don't* want to see her."

"Clark, you're twenty years old now. It's time to start thinking about settling down, don't you think?"

Again, he shook his head. "I can't. I have nothing to offer a perspective wife. Or the ability to provide for any future children."

"Son, I want you to be happy. And cared for. I won't be around forever, you know."

"Please, Dad. I don't want to think about that. Not now," Clark pleaded.

Thinking about his father's mortality was too depressing a subject, especially now that Jonathan was all Clark had left. It also brought back painful memories of losing his mother. He missed her terribly. It was an ache in his heart that he didn't think would ever truly heal.

Jonathan chuckled a little and patted his son on the shoulder again. "Okay, have it your way. If Lana asks for you, I'll tell her I don't know you."

That made Clark laugh. He shook his head and waved his father on. "Go on. The clouds are getting blacker. I think we might actually get a little bit more rain."

"Okay. Okay. I'm going."

Jonathan gave him one last look, then turned and headed off in the direction of the bakery where Lana and her family worked. Clark leaned against the cart for a moment, then pushed away from it again. Merlin was getting anxious, perhaps smelling a storm brewing. Clark went to the horse and gently stroked his head, murmuring soothing words to the animal. The horse finally quieted after a few minutes. That's when Clark heard it.

The voice of an angel.

He instinctively turned toward the sound.

"You're really great with him," the woman said.

"Milady," Clark responded in a daze. He bowed slightly. "Thank you."

The woman before him had to be an angel, he told himself. For only an angel could be as beautiful as the young noblewoman who stood before him. Slender and pale, she was radiant. Next to her, Clark felt like a muddy, half-starved pig. He fought down a blush of embarrassment as he took in every detail. The long, dark hair. The brown, warm eyes. The commanding way she held her body. The slight smile playing at her lips. The musical quality to her voice.

Next to her stood a younger woman who bore a striking resemblance to the angel who'd graced Clark's life with her voice. He figured the younger woman had to be a sister, or at least a close cousin. He bowed to the other woman for good measure, greeting her in turn.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Clark found himself saying, before he was even aware he was speaking. He only hoped she wouldn't find him to be speaking out of turn. There was no telling when a noble might take offence to a peasant speaking directly to them.

"Actually, there might be," the angel said. "My sister, Lucy, and I saw another young woman with a carved wooden swan a few minutes ago. She said that she bought it from a man standing in front of the dressmaker's shop."

Clark nodded. "That man would be me, milady."

"Do you have any carvings left?"

"Only two, milady." He stepped away from Merlin and to the cart. He reached in the back and pulled out his remaining figurines — a bear standing on his hind legs and the hawk he'd finished the night before. "These are my last two animals...for the time being."

"May I take a closer look?" asked the angel.

"Of course, milady," Clark said, gently handing the woman the wooden animals.

"Do you like either of these?" she asked the woman Clark now knew to be named Lucy. "If not, we can keep looking for a birthday gift for you."

Lucy shook her head. "No need. The bear is adorable."
 "Are you sure that's what you want?" probed the older of the two.

Lucy nodded. "Yes. I've never seen anything quite like this. It's exactly the kind of unique thing I was looking for, Lois."

The angel — Lois — nodded in turn. "Okay." She handed Clark back the hawk. "How much for the bear?"

"Five," Clark said in a soft voice, for some reason feeling like he shouldn't be so bold as to ask for payment from this woman, even if it *was* below what he would normally ask. He cleared his throat. "Five coppers. If it pleases you," he amended.

Lois frowned. "It's worth more than that." She reached into the purse she carried at her waist. "Here." She pressed a silver piece into his hand.

"Milady," Clark gasped. "I cannot accept this much."

Lois gave him a smile. "You can and you will. Don't sell your work so short."

"Thank you," Clark replied, thoroughly humbled.

"Do you make these often?" Lois asked, as though it was a sudden thought.

He dipped his head in a shallow nod. "As often as I can."

"Good. The world could use a little more beauty in it. Especially in Lord Luthor's lands."

"Thank you," he said again.

"Come on, Lois," Lucy insisted, getting impatient. "We still need to speak with the dressmaker."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Okay, Lucy. Don't get overexcited. I'm coming." Then, to Clark, "Thank you again for the bear."

She turned to leave. Without thinking about his actions, Clark stepped forward and reached out to her. He remembered himself and stopped just in time.

"Wait, milady!" he called after her instead.

Lois turned, and Clark could see a hardness in her eyes at having been interrupted.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I...uh...here." He held out the hawk to her. "Take this."

"I'm not interested in buying another animal right now." Her tone was guarded and annoyed.

Clark shook his head. "No, you misunderstand me, milady. He's a gift, for you." He stretched out the hand with the carving a little further. "Take him. I want you to have him."

"Why?" Suspicion rang in her voice.

That was a good question, he had to admit. Why *was* he just giving away his carving to this woman? He suspected that he knew the answer, though he didn't want to admit it. A noblewoman like Lois would never choose a dirt poor farm boy as someone to love. Still, his heart knew that he was doomed — he was already falling under her spell.

He tried to shrug it off, as though it wasn't a big deal. "He's the last one I have right now. I'd hate to bring him back home with me. Besides, he deserves to be with someone who can fully appreciate his beauty."

"And you think that's me." Her eyebrow was arched in playful suspicion now.

Clark nodded. "Of course. You already called that bird beautiful," he pointed out.

Lois let one precious laugh escape her. It was a sound that cut straight to Clark's heart.

"I guess I did. Well, if you insist..."

"I do," he urged, placing the bird in her hand, now that he was certain it would be welcomed.

"Then I'm honored to have him," Lois said with a smile.

"The honor is mine, milady," Clark replied with a bow.

"Thank you," she returned. "And good afternoon to you."

"And you, milady."

"Lois! *Come on*," Lucy called from the dressmaker's door.

Lois huffed and turned to her. "Coming!"

"Wow," Clark breathed to himself as he watched her go.

"Wasn't she something?" he asked the horse.

"Mind your thoughts, son," Jonathan said, coming up behind Clark and scaring him somewhat.

"Dad!" Clark chuckled as he tried to calm his now-racing heart.

"Don't get your hopes up about her. She's a noblewoman," Jonathan warned.

"How...how much did you see?"

"Enough," Jonathan replied softly. "Enough to see that you're taken with her."

"She's radiant, isn't she?" Clark asked, aware of how dreamily his words came out.

His father nodded. "Absolutely. But..."

"I know," Clark cut in, waving off his father's rebuttal. He patted the horse to settle him as Jonathan walked around to the cart. "She's a noblewoman and I have nothing to offer her. Still...there was something about her. We didn't speak long but I feel like...like I'm...I don't know. Drawn to her."

"Ah, young lust," Jonathan teased him as he put the bread in the cart with the rest of their items.

"I don't know, Dad. I've never felt this way about anyone before in my entire life."

"Your *young* life," Jonathan reminded him.

"Hey!" Clark shot back playfully. "Weren't you the one just telling me how I'm getting older and how I should start thinking about the future?"

His father laughed as he climbed into the seat. "Fair enough. Now, come on. Let's get back home. If we hurry, I can cook up a little of the venison you earned us for dinner."

"My mouth is already watering, Dad," Clark replied as he began to lead Merlin back home.

That night, as Clark cleaned up after a filling meal of venison, carrots, and potatoes, the sky lit up with flashes of lightning. Thunder boomed so loudly it shook their little farmhouse. Rain poured down in buckets, relieving some of Clark's anxieties about their half-dead crops, and their failing well. He ducked out to check on their animals, but found he needn't have worried. While the horses were a little nervous, they easily calmed in his presence. Still, he stayed with them for a while, idly working on a new batch of animal carvings. He knew that it was only sheer luck that he'd sold all the pieces he'd brought with him to market that day. But Lois' approval and appreciation of his work rang in his mind, over and over.

Don't, Clark, he told himself. Don't fall for her. You don't stand a chance. She's a noble. You're not worthy to clean the dust from her shoes.

It was too late, he knew. Her gentleness and beauty had captured his heart.

"She was wonderful, wasn't she, Merlin?" he asked the horse as he brushed the stallion's roan colored coat. Merlin snorted, as though he was answering. "I have to forget her. But...how?"

How indeed? Clark knew, somehow, that she was a person he would never be able to forget, no matter how much time passed. She'd made too big of an impression on him, even though she'd only spoken with him for a few, all too short, minutes. He wondered about her, even now. Did she like the hawk he'd given her? Had she already forgotten about the lowly peasant she'd purchased a wooden bear from for her sister?

"She probably has," he muttered sadly to himself. "Why would she remember me at all? It's not like I'm a lord or in any way remarkable."

"I wouldn't say that, son," Jonathan said softly, startling Clark out of his thoughts.

"Dad! What are you doing out here?"

Jonathan smiled. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. I'm just

not ready to go to bed yet.”

Clark shook his head. “I was just lost in my own thoughts.”

“Thinking about that girl, huh?”

“I can’t help it.”

“Clark...”

“I know, Dad. I know. Try to forget her.”

A pained look crossed Jonathan’s features. “I know it’s hard, Clark. The look on your face when you talk about her...”

“Lois.”

“Lois,” Jonathan amended with a slight nod. “It’s the same look I know I had on my face when I first met your mother.”

“First met?” Clark asked with a wry smile. “You *still* have that look, Dad. I can always tell when you’re thinking about her.”

Jonathan chuckled a little. “I suppose that’s true, isn’t it?”

“It’s just not fair,” Clark continued. “I don’t stand a chance...all because I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth.” He tried not to show the bitterness he felt, but knew it coated his words anyway. “It’s hopeless and I’m...I feel worthless.”

“You are *far* from worthless,” Jonathan softly admonished him. “You are my son and the greatest gift I’ve ever received in all my years on this Earth.”

“Dad...”

Jonathan put up a hand and shook his head. He dripped his way over to where Clark was standing and sat down on the rickety old stool they used for milking the cows. “Listen to me, son. You’re the best man that I know. Someday, you’ll make some woman very happy. You’ll have children of your own that will look up to you and see you as a hero. And, I believe, somehow, you’ll make an unmistakable mark on the world.”

“Nice dream, Dad.” He leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. “But that’s all it is. I’m grateful for my life, really, and for you and mom being my parents. But, let’s face it, I have nothing to offer the world. I have no power, no money, no influence. I was born anonymous and poor, and that’s how I’ll die, unless some kind of miracle happens. And I’m okay with that...or would be, if I hadn’t met Lois today.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

“What do you mean? There’s *nothing* I can do to change things. It would be like...like rearranging the stars. Fun to dream about maybe, but impossible to do. We can barely afford the few necessities we need. If not for this rain and the hope it offers for our crops, we’d probably starve to death this coming winter.”

“Clark, you know me. I always tell it like it is. I’ve never told anyone anything I didn’t mean. Right?”

“Right,” Clark replied after a second of hesitation, while he tried to figure out where his father was going with this.

“You know I don’t sugar-coat important things. I’m not trying to make you feel better when I say that I believe you’ll find a way to better yourself...to make a better life than as a farmer who is barely scraping by.”

“Okay,” Clark conceded, just to make his father happy. “I’ll try.”

“Good boy. Now, how are the animals?”

“Good.” He didn’t mind letting his father change the subject. If anything, it was a much-needed respite. “They’re perfect. And the storm is already moving on. I’ve been listening to the thunder. It’s getting further away, though I think the rain will last through the night.”

“Let’s hope so. We can use all the water we can get.”

“Maybe things will finally start turning around for us.”

“Lois? Lois? Are you in there? Open up!”

Incessant knocking accompanied Lucy’s persistent voice. Lois looked up from the book she was reading. She blinked rapidly, trying to focus on the world around her, and to dispel the lingering mental images of faraway lands where dragons ruled the skies and

unicorns befriended timid maidens. She closed the book with a sigh. Reaching to one side, she deposited the book on the table beside her bed.

“It’s open,” she called out.

The door opened silently on its hinges. Lucy peeked her head in first, then smiled when she saw Lois. She entered the room and gently closed the door behind her. Crossing the room quickly, she perched herself at the foot of Lois’ bed.

“We need to talk,” she said before Lois could speak.

“Okay,” Lois said, suspicion dragging out the word for her.

“About what?”

“You’ve been moping all day long. Except for when you were talking to that peasant today. You know, the one who sold you my bear. What’s going on?”

Lois sighed. She hadn’t wanted to say anything until she knew exactly what was going to happen with Lord Luthor. But, she also didn’t want to lie to her sister.

“Okay,” she said after a moment, her voice hushed. “I’ll tell you. But you can’t say anything, okay? I don’t know if Mother and Father want you to know yet.”

Lucy’s face blossomed into concern. “What? You know you can tell me anything.”

“I know,” Lois said with a nod. “The thing is...you know how Father was telling us how Lord Tempos’ men have been raiding villages? And how the neighboring lands have been having trouble turning back his army?”

“Yes...”

“Well, what Father didn’t say was that the latest is that Tempos’ army overtook Lord Daniel’s. Tempos has claimed those lands as his own. Father is afraid that our lands might be next.”

“What? No!” Lucy exclaimed in horror.

“Ssh!” Lois hushed her, waving her arms in a ‘lower your voice’ manner. “Quiet!”

“Sorry!” Lucy whispered. “What are we going to do?”

“Father thinks we should join forces with Lex Luthor. And he wants me to be the bait to lure Luthor in.”

“Bait...?”

Lois nodded again. “Word is that Luthor is looking to remarry. Father thinks I might be...” She paused a moment, searching for the right word. “Desirable to Luthor.”

“But all the things we’ve heard about him? He’s as bad as Tempos, from the rumors I’ve heard.”

“I’ve heard the same.”

“So, what did you tell Father?”

Lois hung her head. “I agreed to at least meet with Luthor, if and when he decides to help us or not. I didn’t see much choice. I can’t condemn our people to slavery or death if there’s something I can do to give us a chance to defeat Tempos.”

“Lois, you can’t!”

“It’s already done, Lucy.” Lois suddenly felt very tired, as though just the thought of Lex Luthor had sapped her energy. “I hate it, but it’s done.”

“Well...maybe Luthor won’t want to make you his wife,” Lucy said after a moment, her tone suggesting that she was at a loss for words, but looking to somehow lighten the mood.

“Maybe,” Lois said, forcing herself to smile. She took Lucy’s hands in her own for good measure. “So...” she began, looking to change the subject.

“So...” Lucy repeated in the same tone of voice. “What was with you and that peasant today?”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw the way you were talking to him. Seemed like you were...kind of interested in him?”

“The carver?” Lois asked, trying to brush off Lucy’s observation. “Hardly.”

“Oh, come on. I saw how much you paid him for the bear,” Lucy replied with a roll of her eyes.

“So? That doesn’t mean anything. I paid him what I thought the bear was worth.”

“Right. And the hawk?”

“What about it?” Lois asked, throwing a glance over to the wooden bird, who’d taken up residence on the bedside table. “It was a gift, nothing more.”

“Right. Just a gift from a — and I’ll admit it for you — handsome young man. After you overpaid for the bear. Did you even *see* the way he was looking at you?” Lucy asked, incredulously.

“Yes, I saw,” Lois admitted in a soft whisper. “But it doesn’t matter. He lives in his world. I live in mine. I’m probably going to wind up as Luthor’s latest conquest. That peasant today? He’s nothing more than a very talented carver and a polite young man. And even if I’m *not* forced to marry Luthor, I’ll never see him again. So why would I bother thinking much about him?”

“That’s the last of it, Dad,” Clark said as he handed his father a sack of apples.

Jonathan grunted his acknowledgement as he placed the sack on the floor of their underground food cellar. He stepped back and surveyed his work, then dusted his palms off on his pants.

“Looks good,” he declared, passing judgment over their winter stores. “A little leaner than I would have liked, but it should see us through the winter.”

“I’ll hunt if I need to,” Clark vowed.

“Clark, we’ve been over this,” his father said sternly. “I won’t have you risking your neck for...what? A couple of half-starved rabbits? A turkey perhaps? No. No hunting. I can’t have you taking such a risk. You know what happens if Lord Luthor finds out.”

“Luthor.” Clark spat out the name. “Part of me almost hopes Lord Tempos attacks and takes over these lands. The other part of me knows, through the grapevine, that Tempos might be even harder to live under.”

“Sometimes, it’s better to stick with the devil you know, rather than the one you don’t,” Jonathan agreed. “But please, son, promise me. No hunting.”

Clark shook his head. “I can’t promise that, Dad. I won’t have you going hungry.”

Before his father could mount a protest, Clark headed back up the stairs. He went straight outside, into the golden afternoon sunlight. He looked out over his fields. Most of the crops had already been harvested. Only a handful of things still remained. The summer had been hot and mostly dry, with the occasional rain bringing only a fraction of the moisture and relief they needed. Still, he had to admit, the summer had been better than the last few years, even if the harvest didn’t seem like it.

“Sorry, Dad,” he whispered to himself as he crossed to the massive oak tree where he typically trained his body or sat carving his animals. “The Lane lands aren’t too far from here. If need be, I’ll sneak over the border and hunt in *those* woods. I won’t let you starve. Not this winter. Not next winter. *Never*.”

He hoisted himself up into the branches, climbing high, until he no longer trusted the thinner branches to hold his weight. He liked it up here, amongst the topmost branches. From here he had a commanding view of the immediate countryside, especially now that most of the tree’s leaves had turned brown and fallen to the ground below. And, he had to admit, he liked the sensation of being so high off the ground. It made him feel like he could fly right up and touch the sky. Some part of him wished he could stay there forever, leaving his troubles down on the grass.

But, of course, he wasn’t so lucky. He’d been born into poverty, not of wealth. He didn’t have servants to do his bidding. He didn’t have much leisure time. He barely got enough sleep every night, before the first rays of sunlight woke him, alerting him that it was time for another full day of grueling work. He

guessed even nobles had responsibilities, but planning dinner parties and collecting taxes didn’t seem nearly as strenuous as lugging bucket-load after bucket-load of water to half-withered crops.

The breeze picked up as Clark sat amidst the oak’s branches. Though the sun was warm that day, Clark could feel the tinges of colder weather to come on the wind’s mild breath. He only hoped the winter would be short and easy on everyone. He wished the little black colt that had been born that summer was ready to be weaned and sold. He was fairly certain that he could get a decent price for the horse. The money could have gone a long way to securing more food and supplies for the coming winter.

“Can’t do anything about that,” he told himself as he sat and looked out over the land.

That’s when he saw it. Riders some distance down the dirt track that served as a road. Clark put a slender hand up to his eyebrows, shielding his eyes from the sun. He squinted, trying to see better. The riders were in distress, he was sure of it.

Swiftly, he scrambled back down through the tangle of branches. He jumped when he was close enough to the ground, landing solidly on his feet. As soon as his feet hit the dirt, he was off and running, giving a loud whistle as he ran. From across the fields, Merlin heard his master’s call and came galloping, slowing only once he was near Clark. With practiced grace, Clark mounted the stallion, sans saddle, and nudged the horse in the ribs.

“Yah!” he cried, getting the horse to move faster. “Come on, Merlin! Someone needs our help.”

He prodded the horse into as fast a gallop as he dared, holding on to the roan stallion’s neck for stability. He didn’t have to say much to the animal. Merlin knew his master’s body language. Every shift in Clark’s position, every bit of increased or decreased pressure on the horse’s body meant something to Merlin, and he immediately responded in turn. Man and beast were so in synch, it was almost as if they shared a telepathic bond.

Together, they raced down the dirt road, kicking up a storm of dust in the wake of their passing. Clark only slowed once the riders he’d seen came into view. He patted the horse’s neck as the animal slowed to a trot, then a walk.

“Whoa, good boy,” Clark told him as Merlin came to a stop.

The riders had their backs to him, but turned at the sound of his voice. A shock of recognition bolted through Clark.

Lois.

Lucy too. And a man he didn’t know.

Clark easily dismounted as Lois scrutinized his features. He patted the horse’s shoulder for good measure as he addressed the group before him.

“Milady?” he asked uncertainly. “Milord? Is there some trouble here?” He wondered if he was being too bold.

“Do I know you?” Lois asked, peering at him in an unsure way.

Clark swallowed hard and nodded. She remembered him! At least, a little.

“Yes, milady. You bought a wooden bear from me for your sister earlier in the summer.”

The memory of that meeting a couple of months back seemed to dawn on her. Her face changed. It softened and some of the suspicion in her features fled.

“Yes, I remember now,” she said. She gestured to the others. “My sister’s horse came up lame. Lucy was thrown. I think she may have broken her leg.”

“Do you mind if I take a look?” he asked cautiously.

“Please,” Lois said, overriding the protests of the man beside her. “Hush, James. I trust this man.” She looked back to Clark. “Please, if you can help at all...”

“I’ll do what I can,” he swore. He knelt down in the grass where Lucy was sitting and biting back her pain. He rolled up his sleeves before gingerly and nervously touching the younger

woman's leg. "It *does* look like a break," he concluded, drawing on his experiences with the animals on his family's farm. "I can make a temporary splint that will help immobilize it until you can get her to a doctor."

"I don't think Bluebell can carry me," Lucy pointed out.

"Let me take a look, milady. I know a thing or two about horses," he told her.

Lucy nodded her permission. Clark carefully checked the horse, his heart growing sadder with each passing moment. Finally, he stood.

"I'm afraid the lower leg bones are shattered," he said after a moment. "And she looks to be a older horse."

"She is," James said, not bothering to hide the mistrust in his voice.

Clark shook his head. "She won't recover from this. I can end her pain, if you want."

"No," the man — James — said. "I'll do it. You said you can make a splint for my sister's leg?"

"As you wish, milord." Clark bowed his head in respect, then set to work finding the things he would need.

It didn't take long. He found most of what he needed in the woods, which weren't far from the road. Satisfied with what he'd found, he sat down on the grass and began to bind the break in Lucy's leg. He just needed something to tie the splint tight with. He looked around frantically.

"What is it?" Lois asked, seeing his distress.

"I need something to tie the split together," Clark said.

"Here," James said, unclasping his cloak from his shoulders. With the knife which hung from his belt, he cut several wide strips and handed them to Clark. "Is that enough?"

Clark nodded. "Yes, milord. Thank you."

He focused his attention back on Lucy. "This may hurt a bit. I'll be as gentle as I can, I promise."

"Do it," she pleaded through the pain Clark knew had to be shooting through her body.

He nodded and worked the first strip of velvety black cloth around the makeshift splint. He looked to James. "Milord? Would you mind holding the splint? Here?" He put his hands over the place in question.

James nodded and mutely complied. Clark tied the cloth as tightly as he dared. Lucy grunted in pain, but, to her credit, she didn't scream. In a few short moments, Clark was finished. He sat back, checking his work, feeling the breeze whisking away the sweat that had popped up on his brow.

"That should hold, until you can get her to a doctor," he finally proclaimed.

"Thank you," Lois said, lightly touching his shoulder.

Clark could have floated in his elation. "You're welcome, milady," he managed. Behind him, he heard James' sword clearing its scabbard, and the sound of Bluebell's dying moments. "Do you have a carriage nearby? Anything your sister can ride in?"

Lois shook her head. "No. We just took the horses. Our home isn't far from here. A couple hours' ride. We never thought to take a carriage." She worriedly chewed at her bottom lip. "How will we get her home?" she asked, looking toward her brother.

"I have a cart," Clark said, coming to a sudden decision. "If you wait here, I can get it and come back. Your sister can ride in the back, if that's okay...it's only built for a single driver to sit up front."

"Do it," Lucy said from her seat on the ground. "We have to get home before our parents get worried."

"All right," Lois agreed, nodding at her sister. Then, to Clark, "We'd appreciate the help."

"Then I'll be back soon," Clark said, already on the move. He pulled himself up on his horse's back. "Run, Merlin!"

He pushed the horse faster than was probably safe, he thought later on, once he was back at his farmhouse. It didn't matter. All

that mattered was making the best time possible. He flew through the motions of hitching the cart to Merlin and making the back as comfortable as possible, piling it high with old blankets and a bed of clean straw.

"Clark?" Jonathan called, perhaps hearing the commotion.

"What's going on?"

"Remember that woman from the market a couple of months ago? The noblewoman?" Clark asked as he worked, never stopping.

"Yes..."

"She and her brother and sister are up the road a ways. Her sister has a broken leg and a dead horse. I'm going to make sure she gets home as safely as possible."

"I'll come with you," Jonathan said with a determined nod.

"No, Dad. Stay here. I don't know how long this might take. Stay here. Rest up. Besides, someone needs to be here to look after the farm. I'll be fine, Dad," he promised, taking a moment to touch his father's shoulder.

"Okay," Jonathan relented after a moment. "Be careful, would you, son?"

"I will, Dad. I promise."

"Be careful with your heart too," his father reminded him gently.

"I will."

"Good luck, son." Jonathan crossed to him and enveloped him in a warm hug.

"Thanks, Dad. I'll see you late tonight or tomorrow morning, depending on how long the ride there and back is." He gave his father a grin. "Don't wait up for me."

Jonathan laughed. "Deal. Now go. Those people are waiting."

Clark nodded and silently climbed up into the driver's seat. He got settled, then lightly flicked the reins.

"Go on, Merlin," he coaxed.

The horse immediately obeyed, and Clark steered him back to where Lois and her siblings were waiting. It was an ache of pure joy that stabbed at his heart when Lois came into view. His heart raced in his chest. His head swam. His brain entertained no other thoughts other than Lois' beauty.

"I came as fast as I could," he said by way of a greeting.

"Whoa, Merlin. Good boy."

He brought the horse and cart to a halt. With a word of permission from James, Clark scooped Lucy up in his arms and helped her get settled in the back of the cart. He pulled a blanket up over her to ward against the chill that would come as the sun went down in the west.

"Are you comfortable, milady?" he asked.

"Very. Thank you. And thanks for helping us out at all. How did you even know that we were out here?" the young woman asked.

Clark blushed. "There's a tall tree on my farm. Sometimes, I climb up toward the top and just...just look out over the immediate lands. I've always enjoyed doing so, ever since I was a child. I happened to see you, almost at the edges of what I could see and decided to check things out, just in case there was some trouble."

"We're very glad you did," Lois added.

Clark nodded. "With the rumors of raids and possible war in the neighboring lands, I didn't want to risk anyone being out here without help, if they needed it." He took a moment to scramble back up into the driver's seat. "If you're ready...?"

James nodded. "Let's go."

He and Lois mounted the remaining two horses. James didn't speak much, but rode a short distance ahead, leading the way. They traveled as fast as Clark dared to push the aging wooden cart. Lois was next in line, but after a while, she dropped back and rode at Clark's side. From the back of the cart, Clark occasionally heard Lucy's soft snores.

"Hey," Lois said as she came up alongside Clark. She checked

on Lucy with a glance and continued on in a whisper. "I just wanted to say thank you, again. I'm not sure what we would have done without your help."

"I'm just doing what's right," Clark said, trying hard not to blush.

"Maybe. But I doubt there are many people who would go so far out of their way for a stranger as you have."

Clark shook his head slightly. "Maybe. I like to think there are plenty of people who would do what I'm doing."

"You must have incredible parents to raise you to think so," she observed.

Clark nodded. "I do. They are two of the most wonderful people you can imagine. My mom was one of the gentlest, warmest, sweetest people in the world. And my father's the same. I've never met a man as hardworking as he is."

"What is it that he does?" Lois asked, sounding naturally curious.

"We're farmers, milady." Embarrassment roiled in his stomach. He wasn't ashamed of being a poor farmer. But he felt like he should be able to confess to a much more worthy profession.

"Why do you blush?" Lois asked.

Clark sighed before answering. "I don't know. I guess...I guess I wish I was more worthy of being in your company, milady."

"Nonsense! Without farmers, we'd all starve to death," Lois said, giving him a small smile.

"True," he mused after a slight pause. "Milady? May I be bold enough to ask a question?"

"Go right ahead," she encouraged him.

"We're headed to the Lane lands, aren't we?"

"Yes," she confirmed in a guarded tone.

"What were you doing out in Lord Luthor's lands? Of all the places to visit, this isn't the place I would suggest." He shuttered mentally at the thought of willingly wandering onto Luthor's lands.

"Lord Luthor has been coming to our home a lot lately. He and my father, Lord Lane, are negotiating joining forces to turn back Lord Tempos. I'm sure news of his raids on the neighboring lands has made its way, even all the way out here."

Clark nodded, keeping his eyes on the path before them. "We've heard tales, yes."

"Father thinks I may make a good bride for Lord Luthor. And that such a prospect is guaranteed to push him over the threshold of indecision. I'm not interested in being traded like some disposable good or something, so, whenever he comes to visit, I try to be conveniently away, as much as possible. It's worked so far, but after tonight, I'm afraid my days of freedom will be cut short."

"I'm truly sorry, milady," he murmured, his heart breaking for the young woman beside him.

I'd do anything to give you the life you deserve, he thought to himself.

"We all have our dues to pay," she sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm complaining and I shouldn't be. I'm sure you've dealt with harder situations than me. No offense, that is."

"None taken, milady. The truth is, we've had a rough few years, with my mother passing away and the drier than usual summers. The crops haven't been as good and sometimes it's all Dad and I can do to stay afloat."

"Living in Luthor's lands can't make that any easier," Lois mused.

Clark shook his head. "No, it doesn't. My advice? If you can avoid marrying Lord Luthor, do it. I've never met him in person and I don't ever plan to. But he's a harsh lord to live under, milady. Even hauling a fish out of the river is considered theft and given stiff punishment for, if he finds out. Some guards caught a friend of mine with a rabbit he'd snared in a trap. They beat him

half to death and took the rabbit. And that was after he'd explained to him that his pregnant wife needed the nourishment from the meat."

"That's awful!" she gasped, careful to keep her voice down, so as not to wake Lucy. "My father would never allow such barbaric treatment."

"Maybe so," Clark replied, guiding Merlin around a log that had fallen halfway into the road. "But, what choice do we have?"

"You could pick up and start over somewhere else. In my father's lands or elsewhere," Lois argued. "Hardworking farmers would be welcomed, I'm sure."

"I wish it was that simple, milady," Clark said. "But it's not. We barely have enough money to pay our taxes, let alone to pick up and move. Believe me, if I could, I would take my father out of these lands in a heartbeat."

Lois didn't respond right away. For a time, they rode in silence, each of them very much aware of the other at their side. Finally, Lois broke the quiet.

"That's a fine horse," she observed. "I've never seen a farmer with such a fine steed."

"Thank you, milady. My family has been breeding horses for nine or ten generations now. We usually sell the colts when they get old enough and only keep what we absolutely need to. Actually, we have a young colt right now that we'll hopefully find a buyer for come the spring. He's a beautiful little thing — all jet black and feisty, though he can be very sweet."

"And this one?" She gestured to the horse which was pulling the cart.

"This is Merlin. He's been my horse for many years. You wouldn't guess it now, but he was a sickly little thing at birth. He was a twin, but his brother died shortly after birth. I nursed him back to health, along with help from my parents. By the time he was old enough and strong enough to be sold, we'd developed a bond. I just couldn't part with him, so he became a part of the family."

"Merlin, huh?" Lois smiled. "I've read about him."

Clark smiled back. "I saw the puppet shows in town occasionally when I was a small child. It was one of my favorites."

Lois nodded thoughtfully before she looked around at their surroundings. "We should be there in another hour or so."

An hour. One hour before Clark had to say goodbye. One hour before he'd get what would likely be his last glimpse of Lois. And if he *did* ever see her again, she would almost certainly be married to Alexander Luthor — one of the biggest tyrants in the kingdom, if the rumors he'd always heard muttered under breaths in the marketplace were to be believed. And he *did* believe them.

One hour to be with Lois, and hope that the memories would last him a lifetime.

"It's beautiful here," Clark complimented the countryside. "It seems so...so peaceful."

"Let's hope it stays that way," Lois said with a sigh.

"If I may say so, milady, I think what you're doing is incredibly noble," Clark said softly.

It was true. While every fiber of his being screamed in disgust over the idea of this wonderful woman being married to someone like Lord Luthor, Lois' selflessness stood out to him. His heart hurt for her and the position she was being forced into, but somehow, on some level, her actions inspired him. Made him want to be a better person. Made him want to reach out and change the very stars in the heavens.

But Lois shook her head. "It's not noble. It's stupid. But what choice do I really have? I'm trapped."

Clark felt his tongue go leaden. He could think of nothing to say to that. He focused on the path ahead of him, but let Merlin pick his own way over the grassy fields. Around them, the light grew dimmer as the sun began to sink toward the horizon. If he

were a lord or a knight or anything other than what he was, he'd whisk Lois away from her life and make her happy. But he wasn't rich. He wasn't powerful. He had absolutely nothing to offer her.

"Is everything okay?" Lois asked after a few minutes of silence.

"Yes, milady," he answered, more by reflex than anything else. "I just...I just got lost in my thoughts for a moment."

"Good thoughts, I hope."

"I was thinking of how unfair your situation is," he admitted, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Lois closed her eyes for a moment, as though Clark's admission had gone straight to her heart. When she finally opened them, she favored him with a smile.

"You're one of the only people who thinks that way. Lucy hates the idea too. Mother and Father don't see the problem with it."

"And your brother?"

Lois shook her head. "He hasn't said much about it. I think that he isn't thrilled with how things stand, but he also thinks that we need to do whatever we can to protect our people. He's talked about finding a nobleman's daughter to marry to solidify yet another army to our cause."

"I'm sorry," Clark said.

Before long, Lois' home appeared on the horizon. Once that happened, time seemed to speed up. In the blink of an eye, they were at the front gates. One of the family's servants ran to get help as soon as he saw that Lucy had been injured. Clark helped Lois to dismount and, out of sheer habit, brought her horse — who he'd since learned was named Whisper — to the stables. He probably would have unsaddled and brushed down the mare, if not for an aging stableman who immediately took the reins from Clark's hand.

"Lois!"

The angry man storming toward them could only be Lord Lane, Clark instinctively knew. Lois reflexively flinched at the harshness with which her name had been called. Clark took a few steps back and to the side.

"Where have you been?" the man demanded. "No one knew you three left! You didn't even take any guards along with you! Have you forgotten that Lord Tempos' men would kidnap you in a heartbeat if given half a chance? He'd probably demand the surrender of our lands in exchange for just one of you, let alone all three!" He looked accusingly at James, as though blaming his wayward daughter's actions on her younger brother. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking," Lois said defiantly, breaking her father's intense stare from James, "that I needed to get out of here. If I'd tried to take a guard with me, you would have known about it and I never would have been able to leave."

"All for the better!" Lord Lane huffed. "Lord Luthor is getting tired of you conveniently being away during his visits here. He left not long ago in a thunderous mood."

Lois crossed her arms over her chest in a resolute manner. "That's exactly *why* I'm never here when he visits."

"We've been through this, Lois. He is our *only* chance at standing against and defeating Lord Tempos."

"There *has* to be another way!"

"There isn't," Lord Lane snapped. "Now, what happened out there?"

Lois sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, as though trying to ward off a headache. "We went a bit further than we'd anticipated. I guess we were all a little distracted. Bluebell came up lame — she shattered her leg in a deep rut on the road. Lucy was thrown and broke her own leg. We were lucky that this young man here, " she gestured to Clark, "saw our distress and came to our aid. He escorted us back here with Lucy in his cart. I'm not sure how we would have gotten back if not for his help."

"It seems I owe you a debt of thanks," Lord Lane said, turning to Clark and bowing his head respectfully. "What is your name?"

Lois blushed a little in embarrassment. It was then that Clark realized that he'd never formally introduced himself to her.

"Clark, milord."

Lord Lane nodded. "Samuel Lane," he introduced himself. "Thank you for giving my children your aid. I would like to give you a reward. Is there anything you are in need of?" he asked, eyeing Clark discreetly.

"Please, milord. I'm honored, but I can't accept a reward."

"Nonsense," Lord Lane said, brushing off Clark's refusal. "There must be something. After all, you went way beyond what you needed to do, making sure my children got home safely."

"Any decent man would do the same, milord," Clark replied.

"That may be," Lord Lane agreed. "But it seems these days, decent men are harder and harder to find."

"At least stay for dinner," Lois said, taking a single step toward Clark. "It's the least we can do."

Clark hesitated, even as his stomach growled. "I really should be getting home to my father," he said slowly.

"My daughter is right. You look like you are in need of a good meal."

"You can take the leftovers home to share with your father," Lois added.

That decided things for Clark. He nodded.

"I'd be honored to share a meal with you, milord."

"Good. Dinner should be ready shortly," Lord Lane said.

"Come." He turned to one of the guards standing nearby. "Alert me immediately when Doctor Bernard arrives, Jasper."

"As you wish," the man said with a bow.

Lord Lane took the lead, weaving them through his richly furnished home. Clark quietly took it all in, completely overwhelmed and fascinated. He'd known, of course, that much finer things existed than the Spartan, rough furnishings of his own house. But the level of luxury he saw before him now seemed unreal, like the feverish musings of a delirious man.

So this is how the wealthiest people live, he thought in awe as his eyes swept over the pristine home. *Just one of those pillows over there on that chair probably costs more than Dad and I could earn in two years.*

Lord Lane noticed the way Clark was looking at the place.

"Like what you see?"

"Your home is gorgeous," Clark complimented him. "I've never known that such wonderful things could be had."

Lord Lane chuckled. "I suppose so. It's nothing compared to what the truly wealthy own. People like Lord Luthor."

Clark's face darkened. "I'll have to take your word for it, milord."

"Is there a problem with Lord Luthor?" Lord Lane asked.

How could Clark explain? He couldn't say anything too negative about Lord Luthor. He didn't know Lord Lane all that well, and considering that Lois was being pushed to marry Luthor, how could he tell Samuel what he thought of Luthor? He couldn't. And yet, there had to be a way to tell Lord Lane about Luthor's reputation amongst the people he lorded over.

"I don't know Lord Luthor personally," Clark hedged. "But I've lived my whole life in his lands. He's not the easiest lord to live under, milord."

"Father?" Lois interrupted, much to Clark's relief. "I showed you that wooden hawk, right?"

"Yes," Lord Lane said with a nod.

"Clark is the one who carved it."

Some of Lord Lane's intense scrutiny of Clark softened. "Really? Well, I have to say, my boy, you have a rare gift. I've never seen such craftsmanship on something like that."

"Thank you," Clark said as they finally reached the dining room. "I've been making wooden animals for as long as I can

remember.”

“Here, sit by me,” Lois encouraged, as everyone began to sit. “Mother? This is Clark. He escorted Lucy, James, and me back home after Lucy got hurt,” she said, making the introductions. “Clark? This is my mother, Lady Ellen.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Clark offered politely.

“And you,” she replied. “Thank you for bringing my children back home safely.”

“It was the least I could do,” Clark sincerely replied.

Some light conversation started up, and Clark found himself forgetting, for a while, his humble origins. While he felt awkward and out of place on a deep level, the Lane family did a commendable job of making him feel included. Some of his nervousness dropped away, and he allowed himself to enjoy the rich dinner set before them. Never in his life had he tasted food like that. He’d always thought of his father as an excellent cook, but their options for meals and ingredients had always been severely limited, despite the fact that they were farmers. The spread set before him that night boggled his mind and set his taste buds abuzz. He ate his fill, enjoying, for the first time in years, a fully satiated stomach.

When it came time for him to start back home, Lois made good on her promise. She ordered the kitchen servants to pack up the leftovers for Clark to bring home to Jonathan. They quickly complied, and before Clark knew it, his cart was filled with packages of meat, breads, vegetables, cheeses, fruits, nuts, berries, and even a flagon of the heady wine that had been served with the meal. That had been an experience. In all his twenty years alive, he’d never before tasted wine — not because of any personal aversion to alcohol, but simply because his family had rarely ever had money to spare on such frivolous things. He wasn’t sure what to make of the wine. He’d enjoyed the rich, full flavor of the dark red drink, but he wasn’t entirely happy with the way it seemed to dull his senses. In the end, he hadn’t drunk much of it at all — preferring the clear, cold water that had tasted so much better to him than that of his family’s little well.

“Clark? Wait up,” Lois called after him as he made certain that everything was securely positioned in the back of the cart.

“Milady?”

She was alone, as Clark had already formally taken leave of the Lane family. She rushed to him with swift strides. She looked relieved to find him still there, and not vanished into the night.

“I just wanted to thank you again,” she said as she came to a halt before him, the material of her dress swishing with her every move. “Thanks to you, Doctor Bernard thinks Lucy’s leg is going to heal just fine, with no lasting ill effects.”

“I’m relieved to hear it. I *am* sorry about the horse though,” he said.

Lois shook her head. “It’s not your fault.”

“Still, I wish I’d been able to do something for her.”

“It’s okay. Really.” She paused for a moment before switching the subject. “Will you be all right, getting home?”

Clark smiled at her concern. “I’ll be fine, milady.”

“Are you sure there is nothing else I can give you? Something more than just these packages of food? After all, you didn’t have to come all this way with us. Even though I’m glad that you did.”

Another brilliant smile. Another wound in Clark’s heart, knowing that she would forever be out of his reach.

“You and your family have been more than generous, milady. And I thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Well then, if you are sure, I’m glad to have met you, Clark.”

“And I am honored to have met you,” he replied with a bow.

“Will I see you again?” she suddenly asked, as Clark climbed up on the cart and sat in the driver’s seat.

“If fate is kind, perhaps we will meet again,” he answered.

“Goodnight, milady.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

Using every ounce of willpower in his body, Clark forced himself to flick the reins, urging Merlin to begin moving. He forced himself not to look back as he left Lois behind, though every fiber of his being screamed at him to return to her and beg her to run away with him into an unknown future. But, he couldn’t. He couldn’t force that uncertainty on her, even if she might have been willing to go with him.

He pushed Merlin a bit faster than he had on the way out to Lord Lane’s manor. After all, this time there was no injured young woman in the back of the cart. Still, the horse was attached to the cart, and it *was* dark out, so he couldn’t risk too much speed. He was especially worried about the horse catching a foot in a rut in the ground and breaking his leg the way Lucy’s horse had. He didn’t think he could handle another round of heartbreak that night.

And his heart *was* broken.

“Is this what love feels like?” he whispered to himself as the night and his journey wore on. “God help me, Merlin, but I’m in love with her.”

Be careful with your heart too, his father’s voice whispered in his mind.

He’d tried. Oh, he’d tried to remind himself not to fall for the beautiful woman he’d escorted home. But as Lois had spoken with him, he’d lost the fight. Not only was Lois a natural, physical beauty, but her personality and very soul were gorgeous as well.

He groaned to himself. Had he just made the biggest mistake in his life, by falling in love with a woman he could never possibly be with?

“Maybe Dad’s right,” he said to Merlin. “Maybe I *should* just go marry some other girl and move on with my life. After all, Lois is all but engaged to Luthor and even if she wasn’t, I’m too low-born for her.”

But even as he said the words, he knew he would never act on them. Unless he could forget Lois entirely — and he knew it would never happen — he would never be able to give even the smallest sliver of his heart to anyone.

For a while, he rode in silence. The gentle swaying as the cart creaked its way over the land coupled with the heavy dinner he’d enjoyed at the Lanes’ manor threatened to lull him to sleep. To keep himself awake, he finally broke his silence and began to sing old songs that he knew — ones his mother had taught him as a young boy. He knew his voice was far from beautiful, but it had never stopped him from singing before, and at least it broke up some of the loneliness.

Before long, the landscape became more familiar. He was back in Luthor’s lands. He would be home soon. He broke off his singing and urged Merlin to go slightly faster. He couldn’t wait to get home and tell his father everything that had happened, and to share all of the delicious food he’d brought back with him. Suddenly, a feeling of dread lodged itself in the pit of his stomach. Something was off, he realized.

He smelled the fire before he saw the blaze.

“No!” he cried as his family’s home came into view. Or, at least, what was left of it.

The house was nothing more than a tangle of a few burning slabs of wood that were still standing. In the hellish orange blaze, Clark could see the thick black plumes of smoke rising from the inferno. The remaining crops, which Clark had planned to harvest in the morning, appeared to have been razed to the ground. He instinctively knew that the food cellar would have been raided and stripped bare. The barn, remarkably, still stood, as it was set apart from the house, though he could see that it wasn’t undamaged.

“No,” he whispered again to himself, as he reined in Merlin and scrambled down from the driver’s seat.

The horse snorted in distress and tried to shy away from the blaze. His eyes were wide, showing the whites in his panic. Clark took a moment to calm Merlin with a few reassuring pets and a

gentle word or two. When he was sure the horse wouldn't bolt, he stepped away and towards the fire.

"Dad!" he called out in fear. "Dad! Where are you?"

There was no response, save for the roar of the fire as it greedily devoured the house Clark had grown up in.

"Dad!" he screamed into the night.

He felt sick to his stomach as his heart started to race. He grabbed a fallen piece of timber that that was still burning on one end. He used it like a torch, holding it before him to give him an extra bit of light as he searched for his father. He found him in the barn.

Jonathan lay on the ground near the door. In the circle of light provided by his makeshift torch, Clark could see the way his father was struggling to breathe. His chest was covered in blood. So was the ground beneath him.

"Oh, no! Dad?!"

Clark dropped to his knees. He stuck the torch in the dirt floor, freeing up his hands. Gently, he took his father's head into his lap. Jonathan's eyes fluttered open.

"Clark," he said weakly.

"Dad," Clark replied, swallowing around a lump in his throat. "I'm so sorry. I got back as soon as I could. What happened?"

"Lord Tempos' men," Jonathan choked out. He groaned in pain as Clark applied pressure to the wound, in an attempt to stem the flow of blood. "Came. Took everything. Food. Animals. Our savings. Everything. It wasn't enough. Burned the house down when I said we had nothing more."

"This is my fault," Clark said, looking with anger at the destruction around them. "I should have been here."

"Would have hurt you too," Jonathan said, panting with the effort of speaking.

"Ssh," Clark tried to shush him. "Don't try to speak." His hands were completely covered with his father's blood. "I'll get you bandaged up and then we'll get you to a doctor."

Even as he spoke the words, he knew they were a lie. He knew Jonathan didn't have much time. Despite the orange glow of the torchlight, Clark could see the pallor of his father's skin. Death was close. He'd lost too much blood. There was nothing that he or a doctor could do, even if he could get his father into town quickly enough. And even then, Clark knew that, without money, they would be turned away.

"I'll get you help," he vowed again, regardless.

Jonathan tried to shake his head. "Not enough time."

"Come on, Dad. Fight!" Clark urged, frantically trying to figure out how to bind his father's wound.

His eyes came to rest on a couple of threadbare blankets they used under the one saddle they had for the horses. He gently laid his father down on the ground and dashed over to the blankets. Then he tore open Jonathan's shirt and placed the blankets directly on the wound. He tore another into strips and bound them around his father's chest, as tightly as he could.

"Okay," Clark said, more to himself than to his father.

"Water."

He swiftly retrieved a bucket of water and dipped a small ladle in. He held it to his father's lips to drink. Jonathan weakly sipped at the liquid, but Clark could see that his father was fading fast.

"Clark, listen to me."

"I'm here, Dad."

"I need you to go. Get out of here. No son should have to watch his father die."

"No, Dad. I'm staying right here with you, no matter what. I'm not leaving you alone," Clark swore. "Here, have some more water."

Jonathan nodded slightly and eagerly sipped at the ladle when Clark brought it to his lips again.

"Did you get those people home?" he asked Clark.

Clark nodded. "Lois and her siblings got home safely. Her

family invited me to stay for dinner, and sent the leftovers home with me. I can get something if you want."

Jonathan rolled his head side to side in a barely-there shake. "No." He looked at Clark's face. "You love her, don't you." It was a simple statement of fact, not a question.

Clark merely nodded. "Yes."

"Then I hope you can make your dreams come true," he father said, mustering up a weak smile. He shuddered and Clark felt how cold Jonathan's skin had become.

"We need to get you warm," he muttered to himself.

All the rest of the blankets were in his cart. He felt torn between getting them and staying at his father's side.

"It's too late," Jonathan choked out. "Clark...I love you, son."

Tears leaked from the corners of Clark's eyes. "I love you too, Dad." He kissed his father's brow.

Jonathan's breathing became a death rattle. Then he took one last breath and released it with a shudder. He did not draw another and his body went eerily still. Silence ruled for a few, fleeting heartbeats before Clark began to scream his sorrow into the night.

Lois sighed as she climbed into her bed that night. It seemed that every muscle in her body ached in some way, straight down into her bones. At first, everything had seemed wrong that day. Lord Luthor's visit. Lucy's accident. Getting stuck, miles from home, with no way to get Lucy back to Lane Manor without causing her excruciating pain and possible permanent damage to her leg. Then, suddenly, everything had changed for the better. That peasant farmer — Clark — had shown up unexpectedly to save the day.

It was funny, in a way. When she'd first met Clark, she'd barely spared more than a passing thought for the attractive, yet low-born, man, thinking the chance encounter had been a one-time thing. But suddenly, there he was, once again finding his way into her life. And this time, though he hadn't actively tried, he'd made a definite impression on her.

As they'd talked, she'd come to know him. In return, she'd allowed him to get to know her as well. He'd been pleasant company and Lois had found that she'd completely forgotten his humble origins. He could have been any one of the numerous lords she'd met over the years. And, if she was being completely honest with herself, he'd actually been much politer and interesting than any lord she'd ever met.

"Doesn't matter," she told herself. "He's a peasant. I'll never see him again. He doesn't even live in our lands."

She wouldn't have minded striking up a real friendship with him. He'd been so nice and normal and down to Earth. It had made him unlike anyone else she'd ever met. She wished he was a lord. Maybe, just maybe, she could have convinced her father to let her marry Clark instead of Lex. At the very least, Clark was her own age, she thought with a smirk.

But destinies couldn't be changed. Clark's was on his farm, just a couple of hours' ride away, but in a completely different world for the circumstances of his birth. And hers was, unfortunately, with Lex Luthor — her future traded away in the hopes of keeping her people safe.

"It must be nice," she mused to herself as she watched the shadows caused by the flames in the hearth dance across the walls, "to be able to choose your own destiny." She sighed. "In a lot of ways, I envy you, Clark," she whispered.

The night crawled by, unnoticed by Clark. He mindlessly went through the motions of bringing Merlin into the barn, unhitching the cart, and covering his father's body with one of the blankets. Merlin pranced around nervously at the scent of blood in the air, but Clark was able to calm him. Still, the stallion wasn't his normal self during the night, and Clark couldn't blame him at all. For a large portion of the night, Clark simply sat, his knees

bunched up into his chest, his arms wrapped around them, feeling both completely devastated and utterly numb. He didn't even notice when the hellish glow of the house fire burned itself out after running out of fuel.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep. The next thing he knew, the sun was starting to rise. He left his vigil over Jonathan's body and stepped out of the barn. The sky was nearly clear of clouds, and those that *were* around were gossamer-thin and tinged in baby pinks and blues. It would have been a beautiful day — even the weather was warm for the time of the year — if not for the nightmare of the previous few hours. A thick stench of smoke clung to the area like a death shroud and made everything hazy. For the first time, Clark could really see the extent of the devastation that his home had suffered.

The house was nothing more than an untidy pile of cinders and charred beams of wood. The fields were scorched earth as far as the eye could see. With the exception of Merlin, all of the animals were missing or dead — even the two stray cats that had adopted the family as their own and kept the mice in the barn at bay were laying in pools of their own blood.

He ate some of the previous night's leftovers, silently sending his thanks to Lois, even though he wasn't even tasting the flavors of the food. But some part of him acknowledged that without the leftovers, he would have gone hungry. Not even a sack of apples or handful of carrots remained. The raiders had taken everything. When he was finished, he repacked everything and got to work. With an old, bent shovel, he went out to the spot where he and his father had buried Martha a few years before. Directly next to her grave, he began to dig. It was strenuous work, made all the more difficult by the oppressive grief and loneliness that weighed on his heart. All through the morning and into the afternoon he worked, making the hole deeper and wider to accommodate his father's large frame.

He took another short break once the grave was dug, laying on his back on the dying grass. The warm late fall sunshine caressed his body, but did nothing to warm the cold deadness he felt in his soul. He wanted nothing more than to find those responsible and make them pay somehow. Finally, he pushed himself up off the ground and went into the barn. Reverently, he picked up his father's stiff body and carried it to its final resting place. With all the care in the world, he lowered the body into the grave. Then he pulled himself back out of the hole and used the shovel to fill in the grave with the pile of dirt he'd made earlier.

Satisfied with his work, he lashed two large pieces of wood together in the shape of a cross and planted it in the ground at the head of the grave. He stepped back and looked at the place where his parents now resided. To the left was his mother, her grave covered in a carpet of green and a sense of peaceful repose. To the right was his father, the rich black soil overturned and looking like an ugly, fresh scar.

"Well, Mom," Clark said after a while. It had always made him feel a little better to speak aloud to her, as if she could still hear him and answer him somehow. "Dad's with you now. I know you two have been missing each other, ever since you had to leave us. Look after him for me, okay? I did the best I could, but it wasn't enough. Nothing I ever do is enough. I couldn't save you and I couldn't save him."

He sighed noisily. "I should never have left you here alone, Dad. I'm sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing, by sparing you a long trip. I should never have accepted the invitation to stay for dinner. If I'd only gotten home sooner, maybe I could have stopped all of this from happening."

He would have told you that if you'd been here, they would have killed you too, his mind told him.

It was true. Jonathan had said as much the night before, when Clark had first found him bleeding out in the barn. But it didn't make it any easier to bear the knowledge that he hadn't been there

when his father had needed him the most.

"Lois was wonderful though," he admitted after a moment of self-loathing. He almost smiled. "You'd like her, Dad. You too, Mom. She's beautiful inside and out. I'd give anything to be worthy of asking her hand in marriage. But now, more than ever, I can't. I've nothing to offer her. It's not fair."

Nothing about life is fair, son, his mind told him in Jonathan's voice. *All we can do is make the best with what we have and strive to better ourselves as much as possible.*

Clark remembered when his father had first told him that. He'd been no more than five and had wanted a stuffed horse doll that he'd seen in the market. The farm hadn't been doing well that year, and money had been excruciatingly tight. He'd whined about how unfair it was. He hadn't understood that his parents weren't being mean by not purchasing the toy. They hadn't been *able* to buy it. He'd refused to eat dinner that night and had gone to bed hungry, angry, and sad. Jonathan had come in and sat with him, gently explaining things to him. And Martha — talented woman that she'd been — had eventually saved up enough scraps of material to sew him his own horse doll. Clark had loved it dearly and still had the toy. Or rather, he'd *had* the toy until his home had been burned to the ground.

"I know, Dad," Clark continued. "You always said that nothing about life is fair and that it's up to us to change our fortunes to the best of our ability. But...I'm at a loss here. The farm is gone. The animals have been either killed, gone missing, or been stolen. Our store of food...nothing is left. Once the food Lois sent home with me is gone, I don't know what I'm going to do. I'll freeze to death this winter if I try to live in the barn, and I'll never get a house built before the first snows." He sighed. "I wish you were here. I could really use your guidance. Both of you," he amended, looking at the cross that marked his mother's grave.

He took a long, deep breath, trying to exhale some of the panic that was building up in his heart. He had to take things one at a time. He would try to make a list of priorities that night, and do whatever he could to make sure that he survived. He only wished he knew how he was going to do that.

The next few days crawled by. Clark ate as little as he could — just enough to be able to function. He hunted as much as possible, taking down any game he could find — birds, rabbits, squirrels, fish, even a scrawny deer. He collected broken pieces of tree branches as well, to use for the fires that kept the nights tolerable, if not comfortable. His nights were filled with butchering the meat, drying it in strips, and scraping the hides clean, before passing out from exhaustion. He began to tack the skins up to the walls, trying to insulate the barn, now that it bore holes and broken wood in places — scars that reminded him constantly of Tempos' raiders. In the spring, he would do what he could to sell the skins discreetly, and use the money to buy what he needed to rebuild his home, seeds to reestablish his crops, and food to eat in the meantime.

On the fifth day since Jonathan had died, Clark was about to head out into the woods to hunt again when two of Lord Luthor's tax collectors appeared. He was lucky that he saw them coming before it was too late. He popped back inside the barn and hid the makeshift spear he'd fashioned under a pile of straw. Then he strode back out into the cool morning sunlight to meet the tax collectors.

Every bone in his body told him to flee. He knew he couldn't pay. He had nothing at all. Not a single coin to offer up as a promise to pay what he owed in the future. But he knew that if he fled, they would pursue him. And even though Merlin was a swift, strong horse, Clark knew that, eventually, they would catch him. Things would go even worse for him if he ran.

"Are you the property owner?" one of the men asked, dismounting from his horse. It was obvious that he was the one in

charge.

"I am," Clark said with a nod, swallowing around the hurt that statement caused. His father was supposed to be the property owner.

"You know why we are here," the burly man said.

"I do," Clark replied with another nod.

"Then let's get this over with."

"I...I can't," Clark stuttered, forcing the words out. "I don't have the money."

"Why do you mean, you don't have the money?" the tax collector demanded.

"Look around!" Clark said, gesturing broadly. "Not five days ago my farm was raided by Lord Tempos' men. I have *nothing!* I'm living in a barn!"

"I fail to see how that's *our* problem," the man shot back. "Pay up, or pay the consequences."

"I would pay if I could," Clark replied.

"Jeremiah? Take him," the man ordered.

"With pleasure," the second man, Jeremiah, said, a cruel smile unfurling over his lips.

Jeremiah bound Clark's hands and feet with a length of sturdy, thick rope. Just enough slack existed between his ankles to allow him to shuffle along behind the man's horse. He could not move his hands at all.

"Take the horse too, Maxwell," Jeremiah prompted, after Merlin's whinny from the barn alerted them to his presence. "We should be able to get *something* for the beast."

Maxwell marched into the barn with a stiff nod. Clark heard Merlin protesting, followed by muffled cursing as the man tried to get a handle on him. Clark closed his eyes as he came to a heartbreaking decision. He gave a sharp whistle. In a moment, Merlin came trotting out and to his side.

"Hey, boy," Clark told the horse. "It's okay. We'll go quietly. I'm sorry, my friend. But I'd rather see you with a new master than starving to death this winter. Be good for these people, okay?"

"Hey, Jeremiah! You need to see this!" Maxwell called from inside the barn. He came out holding a stack of furs in one hand and a skinned rabbit in the other. "Someone's been stealing from Lord Luthor."

"How do you know I didn't buy them?" Clark challenged, trying anything that might work, knowing the penalty would be steeper if poaching was added to his inability to pay his taxes.

"*Right.* Poor little farm rat can't afford his taxes but can afford all the meat in that barn? After he claims that raiders took everything?" Jeremiah spat his contempt. "And I have a pet unicorn waiting for me back home." He finished tying Merlin to a long lead that he then attached to the pommel of Maxwell's saddle. "Let's move."

Maxwell swiftly loaded the furs into his saddle bags. Then he mounted up and gave his horse a nudge in the ribs. Clark was towed along behind Jeremiah, with shame, loathing, and sadness dueling within his heart. In the end, hopelessness won out and he merely bowed his head, trying to think his way out of the situation. He didn't make eye contact with anyone they came across on his walk of shame throughout the countryside.

It was a long way to Luthor's manor. Clark was aching and exhausted by the time they entered into the main courtyard. The taxmen stopped there, handing the horses over to a young groom. It was the only respite Clark got before he was marched around to the garden in the back of the manor. Lord Luthor was there, sitting beneath a canopy, a glass of dark red wine in his hand. He was giving orders to a couple of servants when Clark was brought before him.

"What is it?" Luthor asked before either of the taxmen could speak.

"We have a 'failure to pay' and a poacher to boot," Maxwell

explained, shoving Clark a step forward. "To your knees, farm rat."

Before Clark could react, Maxwell kicked his knees out from under him, sending him crashing to the marble paving stones beneath his feet.

"We found these skins hoarded in his barn," Maxwell continued, nodding to where Jeremiah stood, holding the damning evidence of Clark's hunting.

"I see," Luthor said with a neutral expression. He turned his cold eyes to Clark. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Milord, my farm was raided and destroyed by Lord Tempos' men. Everything I had — every cent to my name — was stolen. My father was killed. Without the meat, I would starve. And I would pay my taxes, if it was at all possible. Time is all I need, milord. I'm sure that I could find a way to earn the money I owe, if only you'll grant me the chance."

"You peasants," Luthor said with disdain. He sighed. "I've set up banks and money lenders for exactly these kinds of reasons."

"With all due respect, milord, my family never truly had enough money to use the banks. And I could never afford the interest the money lenders would charge."

"That is not my problem," Luthor said icily.

Clark bowed his head, biting his tongue to keep from saying anything he might regret.

"What do you want us to do with him?" Maxwell asked. "The debtors' prison is full. Shall we arrange for a public execution?"

Luthor paused for a moment, thinking. After a moment he shook his head slightly.

"No. We just hung three poachers last week. His death wouldn't mean a thing right now as an example. Sell him on the slave market. At least I can recoup my losses that way."

"As you wish, my lord," Maxwell said, putting a hand to his breast and bowing slightly. "He did have a horse when we found him. It's a fine stallion, I have to admit. Would you like him to be kept?"

Luthor wrinkled his nose in disgust, as though Maxwell had offered him curdled milk.

"What for? Surely my horses are superior to anything this little slave could have once owned. Besides, I have no use for another horse. Sell the beast to the highest bidder."

"It will be done, my lord."

"You heard Lord Luthor. Move it, slave," Jeremiah commanded, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

He grabbed a fistful of Clark's hair and hauled him to his feet. He gave Clark a violent shove forward to get him to start walking. It was as though Luthor's proclamation that Clark should become a slave had caused a complete personality shift in the man, and not for the better. By the time Clark was herded into a large, barred wagon packed with other men and women headed off to the slave market, he was bruised and bloody.

For the next two days, Clark and the others were carted around to several villages. The women all sold first, all to lecherous old men. It left a bad taste in his mouth and weighed on his mind. What kind of rich parasite was going to purchase him? And for what reason? A couple of the biggest, burliest men sold as well. Clark had gathered that one of them had been a blacksmith. By some miracle, Merlin hadn't been sold yet either. It eased Clark's loneliness to know at least that part of his life hadn't been ripped away just yet.

On the third day, the wagon was brought a long way before it finally stopped. Clark wondered where he was, but he'd long since let his tongue go mute. He said nothing to neither his fellow prisoners nor his captors — he'd learned the hard way on the first day that conversation of any type was unwanted. With a heavy heart, he waited his turn as the wagon was emptied. He silently hopped off the wagon and stood between two muscular men — a former butcher on his right and a miller on his left. He didn't listen

as his captors called out in booming voices to grab the attention of passersby. He kept his eyes downcast, not caring about who might be sizing him up and considering buying him.

"Clark?"

Clark's head snapped up, his eyes wide. He'd know that voice anywhere.

Lois!

It was Lois, pushing through the small throng of people who'd gathered to gawk at the slaves being sold. She finally made her way to the front of the crowd, her father hard on her heels.

"What has this man done?" she demanded of the man who was running things. Clark had overheard him being called Oliver. "That one there, in the middle." She pointed.

"Refusal to pay his taxes and illegal poaching of animals," Oliver sneered, glancing at Clark.

Lois searched Clark's face. "Is it true?"

Clark took a deep, shame-filled breath and hung his head. "It's true, milady, but I had no choice."

"How much for him?" Lois asked Oliver.

"Fifty gold pieces."

"Done," Lois said with finality, not waiting for her father to respond. She scanned the area quickly. "And his horse. The roan stallion."

"Lois..." Lord Lane said in a displeased tone.

Lois whirled on her father. "Have you forgotten what he did for me? For *Lucy*? We can help him. And I *will*, one way or another."

Samuel hesitated a moment and nodded. Then he addressed Clark. "You know about horses, correct?"

"Yes, milord," Clark said, not daring to hope that he might get the chance to live at Lane Manor. "I know about horses — breeding, care, just about anything there is to know."

"Good. Our stable master has been thinking of stepping down and retiring. You will be his replacement." He turned to Oliver and tossed him a small bag of coins. "This should be enough."

Oliver deftly caught the bag and hefted in his hand. Satisfied, he nodded and motioned to one of the other men. "Release him."

The man produced a key and unlocked the manacles that bound Clark's wrists and ankles. Clark immediately rubbed at his wrists where the metal had chafed and cut his skin. Dried blood marked the place where the metal had dug in too deeply.

"Get the horse," Oliver commanded the other man.

The man hurried to comply with Oliver's demand. In a moment, he brought the horse over and handed Samuel the reins. Samuel immediately handed them to Clark.

"Can you ride?" he asked Clark.

Clark nodded. "I think so, milord."

"You look weak. Some food and drink first," Samuel declared.

Clark's stomach growled as if in response. He felt himself blush.

"Thank you, milord," he said, slightly embarrassed.

"Right this way," Lois said. "Father and I were just about to get some lunch."

Father and daughter led Clark and his horse through the busy streets to a small tavern run by a smiling, friendly, portly woman and her gangly teenaged son. Lord Lane chose a table in the far corner, where they were unlikely to be bothered. When the tavern owner came to their table, Lord Lane ordered three roasted cornish hens, a loaf of bread, and two mugs of wine, with Clark opting for water instead. He gulped down two mugs before his thirst finally began to abate.

"Thank you, milord. Milady. For rescuing me from those men. I am forever in your debt."

"What happened?" Lois asked. "I know I don't know you well but, well, you don't strike me as the type to dodge taxes and poach game."

Clark shook his head. "I'm not, milady. I swear it." He took a

deep breath and slowly let it out, steadying himself. "The night I escorted you home, I returned back to my farm only to find it razed to the ground. Anything worth having — money, food stores, animals — were taken. My fa...my father," he said, choking around his grief. "He died in my arms. Before he passed...he...he told me it was Lord Tempos' men."

"I'm so sorry," Lois said, reaching out and lightly touching his hand. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't insisted that my brother and sister and I take a ride that day..."

"Milady, there was no way you could have known. I'm just glad you were well out of the area, safe at home, when the attack came," Clark said. "Anyway, there was nothing left — just the barn by some miracle. I had no money to pay the tax collectors. And the only reason why I hunted those animals was in an attempt to lay a store of food aside for the winter, and to use the skins to shore up the drafty places so that I wouldn't freeze to death. My plan was to try and rebuild, as best I could, come the spring. Or even start the process during the winter if it proved to be mild enough."

"Father...we should help him. Let him go back home. Help him rebuild his farm."

Clark shook his head. "That is kind, milady. But there is nothing there for me now. I willingly submit myself to you as your slave, no matter what tasks you may demand of me."

"We will never make demands of you," Lord Lane said, his voice a solemn oath. He cracked a small smile. "We will *ask*. And you are not our slave. You will work for us for a fair wage, housing, and food."

"It would be my honor to serve you," Clark replied, shaking the hand that the other man outstretched toward him.

"Good," Lord Lane said with a smile. "As I said earlier, the stable master is getting older. He's been talking about retiring and enjoying the rest of his days with his grandchildren. If you are half as good with horses as your stallion suggests, we'd be lucky to have you take Frederick's place. Are you up for the task?"

"Horses have always been a passion of mine," Clark replied. "I would love to care for your horses."

"Good. It's settled then. Welcome to the Lane Manor staff."

The ride back to Lane Manor was a blur to Clark. Likewise, he barely remembered as Samuel and Lois went about their few tasks in the town. He'd have thought a lord would be inclined to send a servant to do such menial tasks, but Lois had explained that she and her father always tried to take advantage of the weather while it was still nice out. Going into town together was something they'd always enjoyed doing, for as long as she could remember. Clark's heart felt lighter as he rode beside their carriage on Merlin, ecstatic to still have his trusted old friend with him.

"It'll all be all right," he whispered to the stallion as they rode. "We may be servants now, but at least we won't be mistreated. Or starved. Or left for the elements to end us."

And we'll get to know Lois better.

The whirlwind continued once they reached Lane Manor. Clark helped Frederick to get the horses settled. It did his heart a world of good to see Merlin housed in a proper, warm stable with plenty of oats and water to fill his belly. The horse settled right in, immediately getting to work on ending his hunger.

"Good boy, Merlin," Clark told him, with a pat on the horse's back.

Lois volunteered to give him the grand tour of the house. His head was soon swimming, though he tried valiantly to keep everything straight in his head. Lois noticed and assured him that she knew it was a bit overwhelming, but that the rest of the staff would be able to help him out no matter what he might need. Finally, she showed him to the room that now belonged to him. It was across the courtyard from the stable, a fact which comforted him. It reminded him of home, in a way, to be close to the animals.

"Do you like it?" she asked, as he stood in the middle of the room, taking it all in.

"It's wonderful," he said in awe. "My whole house could have fit inside here."

It was true. Though the room wasn't tremendous, his tiny farmhouse had been just the kitchen, his room, and that of his parents. After all, it had only been the three of them. They hadn't needed much room. None of the six generations who'd lived in that house had needed much room. Few of them had been blessed with many children, and those who had, had suffered from a high rate of infant mortality. The three tiny rooms had been enough for their limited needs.

"I love it," he continued. "Thank you, milady."

Lois shook her head. "It's the least I can do. I'm so sorry about everything that's happened since you escorted me home a few nights ago. I only wish I could do more."

"You've done more than enough, milady. Because of you, I...I have a future to look forward to. If you and your father hadn't taken me in...paid for me...I don't know what I would have done."

"You know, this might sound insane, but I feel like it was somehow meant to be. That our paths have been crossing so often lately for a reason. I feel like you are meant to be here, living in this house," Lois admitted, blushing a bit as she spoke.

"Perhaps it was, milady," he allowed.

Lois nodded. "I will leave you some time then, to get yourself adjusted to your new home. I've instructed some of the other staff to bring you fresh clothing and a hot bath."

"Thank you, milady."

"And Clark?"

"Yes, milady?"

"When we are alone, you may call me Lois."

"Yes, milady...ah...Lois."

It was difficult for him to speak the name aloud to her. It went against every bit of his upbringing. He was never, *ever* supposed to call a lord or lady by their first name. Such a mistake could earn a person a flogging or worse, if the wrong noble overheard.

Lois didn't seem to notice his discomfort. Or if she did, she didn't comment on it. With a swish of her skirts, she was off again, leaving Clark all alone in this strange new world. He set to work examining everything — the nightstand, the closet — empty for the moment — the candles around the room, the basin of water where he could freshen up, the empty chamber pot, the polished mirror on the dresser — also empty, until spare clothing could be brought to him — the windows looking out over the courtyard and stable, the feather bed — so different from the hard, straw-filled mattress he was so used to sleeping on.

Soon, the maids arrived with spare changes of clothing. Clark felt the material as a hot bath was drawn for him. The fabric, like everything else about Lane Manor, exuded luxury and comfort. He could hardly wait to trade his worn, nearly threadbare clothing for the new shirts and pants Lord Lane had bestowed upon him. When the bath was ready, he allowed himself to soak in the hot water. He felt his unease and fears falling away along with the dirt and dried blood that had clung to him like a second skin.

He could be happy here, he knew for certain. He *would be*, as long as Lois was with him.

Once he was presentable — which included one of the maids sheering off his dirty, unkempt black locks into a short, neat haircut — he went out to investigate the stable further. He found Frederick to be an agreeable man — quick to laugh and joke — and an extremely knowledgeable groom. He learned a lot in those few hours — more than he'd ever anticipated learning on his first day on the job. For his part, Frederick was more than happy to answer Clark's questions and pass down everything that he knew to the younger man. He seemed excited to teach his replacement and eager to retire to the cozy cottage where his daughter, son-in-law, and three grandchildren lived.

When it was finally time for Clark to retreat back to his room for the evening, he was feeling tired but elated. He wondered what his parents would have said about the recent upheaval in his life. He knew they would have hated losing the farm. His father had been born there and the fields of crops were his passion. But he also couldn't help but to think that Jonathan would have approved of the family Clark now worked for. He had to admit it to himself — if there was one family to belong to as a servant, the Lane family was it. Everyone had welcomed him warmly when Samuel had announced to them all that Clark was taking over as stable master. In particular, Lucy had seemed thrilled. She'd also seemed to be doing well with her broken leg, as James wheeled her about in a high backed wheeled chair, the likes of which Clark had never seen before. Even James had seemed to approve of Clark moving into the large manor.

"Maybe my fate is finally changing for the better," Clark said in a barely-there whisper as he lay on the feather bed for the very first time.

A moan of contentment escaped him as the bed cushioned his body. He grabbed the feather pillow and pulled it under his head. In all his life, he'd never known such comfort and luxury. It all felt like a dream and part of him was afraid it would end and he'd awaken to find himself hungry, cold, and alone in his barn.

"I can't believe people live like this all the time," he whispered in awe. "If this is how the servants live, I can't imagine what Lord Lane and his family have in their chambers." A wave of guilt rolled over him like a storm cloud. "I wish you could have seen this, Dad, Mom. I know I'm not a free man anymore, but it seems unfair that I should get to experience all of this — a soft bed, a sizable room, a full belly — when you worked so hard all your lives only to live with having only the barest of necessities."

He pushed himself off the bed and looked out the window into the night. "It doesn't seem right when *I'm* the one who messed up. I wasn't there to protect you when you needed me, Dad. I couldn't do anything to help you either, Mom. But here I am, living in a nobleman's home, gifted with fine clothing and a dream job working with some of the finest horses I've ever seen." He sighed. "You both would have loved it here, I think." He fell silent for a moment, staring out into the dark, seeing nothing, not even the reflection of his own face in the glass. "I really miss you both. I always will."

He left the window and paced the floor, unsure what to do next. The fact was, he was lonely. He missed the fireside talks with his father. He missed the stories his mother used to tell him when he was a young boy. He didn't even have a knife or wood to relieve some of his loneliness by working on his carvings. He supposed he should sleep — and he *was* tired — but he didn't quite feel ready to go to bed yet. He sat on the bed, suddenly gloomy.

A knock at his door pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Clark?"

"Milady?" he replied, more to himself than anything else. He went to the door and pulled it open. "Milady?" he repeated in surprise.

"I hate to bother you, but can I come in?" she asked, a bit sheepishly.

"Absolutely," Clark said breathlessly, as the woman of his dreams walked into his room.

"How was your first day here?" she asked with genuine concern as she perched on the edge of his bed, down near the foot of it.

"Fantastic," he replied enthusiastically, taking his cues from her and sitting in the middle of the bed, his legs dangling off the side. "I can't thank you enough for the opportunities you and your family have given me."

Lois studied his face for a moment. "Then why do you still look so sad?" she asked gently, reaching out and cupping his

cheek with one small hand.

Electricity shot through Clark's body at the contact. "I'm just a little homesick, that's all. Or...well...I guess that's not quite right. I...I miss my parents. I'm not used to being alone, mil...Lois." He corrected himself at the last second, remembering that Lois had asked him to use her name in private.

Lois nodded in understanding. "I see. I can't imagine the upheaval in your life lately. Maybe this will help ease some of the loneliness." She handed him the book she held in her other hand. "I remembered you said that you liked the King Arthur legend. I thought you might like a copy of it."

Clark took the book and turned it over in his hands. It was a beautifully bound edition, with gold foil on the edges of the pages.

"Thank you, Lois. I appreciate the thought but I can't accept this."

"Why not? It's a gift."

He hung his head, feeling about ten inches tall. "I can't read, milady."

"Oh...Oh!" she cried, her hands flying up to cover the shocked expression on her lips. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even think..."

Clark smiled to put her at ease. "It's okay. It's just...my family...none of us ever knew how to read. We were simple country folk. We never had the money to buy things like books anyway, even if we *had* learned to read."

"Did...did you ever regret not learning?" Curiosity rang in Lois' voice.

Clark had to stop and think about it for a minute. It wasn't something he'd ever really thought about.

"I'm not sure," he finally confessed. "I guess I never really thought about it like that. I never really had a need for it. Farm work filled my days and my family and I would spend all evening talking, telling stories, singing songs. And eventually I picked up wood carving. There was never really a void in my life that I felt like reading could have filled."

"And what about now?"

Again, he paused to turn the question over in his mind. "Now, yes. I wish I had learned. Reading and writing has its practical uses. It certainly would have helped in keeping track of the crops, and what we bought and sold."

"Then I shall teach you," Lois declared with a grin. "We'll use King Arthur as our starting point. It's a great book to read aloud."

"What about your father and mother?" Clark asked, an ingrained ripple of fear creeping up his spine.

Lois frowned. "They already know how to read."

"I meant, what would they say about you...well...hanging around me and teaching me how to read?" Clark clarified.

"Most of the servants can read and write a little. I can't see them objecting to you learning too. Why are you so afraid?"

"Lord Luthor...he...he hates the idea of educated peasants. Someone like me, learning to read, would have enraged him."

"My father is *not* Lord Luthor," Lois said with a kind smile.

"Perhaps you should ask him first," Clark countered anyway, unconvinced. "I don't want you to get in trouble on my behalf. But if he is all right with it, I would very much love to learn."

"Good. I'll talk to him first thing in the morning."

"Thank you."

Lois looked around the room for a moment. "Is there anything else that would help make this place more comfortable for you?"

"It is more than enough," Clark replied.

"There must be something."

"Well," he hedged, his words coming slowly. "There is *one* thing. For years now, I've spent my evenings making those wooden animals, like the ones you bought from me. I would like permission to keep doing so."

"Of course you can! I would hate to see such talent go unused," Lois said, sounding shocked that he would even need to ask such a thing.

"If milady...if you would be so kind...I have no tools and no wood. Everything I had was lost to Lord Tempos' marauders."

"You shall have as much wood as you need for as long as you want to keep making your animals," Lois declared. "And I shall have a selection of knives brought to you to keep."

"Thank you, Lois. You have no idea what that means to me. It's such a part of me, creating those figurines. I can't imagine how incomplete I would feel without being able to continue."

"You do excellent work. I treasure that little hawk you gave me," Lois admitted.

"It was an honor to give it to you," Clark answered. "And if there are any other animals you'd like me to make you, you have but to ask it of me and I will do my best."

Lois smiled. "I appreciate the offer."

"Lois?" Clark asked after a brief, comfortable silence fell over the room. "May I ask a question?"

"Of course," she allowed.

"I'm not complaining, mind you. Far from it. But...why? Why all of this?" he asked, gesturing about the room.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she asked, mystified by his incomplete question.

"I'm a stranger to you. You owe me nothing. I am just a poor farmer and slave, yet you and your family have treated me...well...almost like a prince. The lavish living chamber. The job of stable master. Teaching me how to read. All of it. I don't deserve any of this."

Lois studied his face for a moment before responding. "You don't give yourself enough credit. Yes, you and I are from different worlds. But there's something about you. Something I can't quite put my finger on. We haven't known each other very long, but I feel like I *know* you."

Clark didn't comment. He *couldn't*. What was he supposed to say? That he knew exactly what she meant because he was hopelessly in love with her?

"I know this sounds insane," Lois continued. "But I feel this...this connection with you. I've never had a friend like you."

Clark couldn't help the smile that crossed his lips or the eyebrow that arched of its own accord.

"Friend?" he asked, almost in disbelief.

"Well...yes. Don't you want to be friends?" she asked guardedly.

"More than anything," Clark allowed himself to confess. "In all my life, no one has ever treated me half so well as you. And I don't mean all the things you and your family have given me," he said, waving off any ideas she might have that he wanted to befriend her for the things she'd given him. "I mean...I feel like...with you...for the first time in my life, someone has seen beyond what I am. A pauper. A farmer. I feel like...like you see me for me. For *who* I am. You've always spoken to me like you and I are equals. Like I'm not beneath you or unworthy of being acknowledged, the way most nobles have always treated me."

"I think I know what you mean. I feel like most of the noblemen I've met in my life have only ever looked at me and wondered how to woo me, to ally themselves with my family. But you? You never looked at me like that. You look at me with honest friendliness. It's made me feel...normal. Like I'm finally being seen as a real person, and not as a prize to be won. I guess we *both* want to be seen for who we truly are."

Clark chuckled, for what felt like the first time in years, though, in reality, it had only been since he'd arrived home to find his father struggling to stay alive.

"What a mismatched pair of friends we are," he remarked with a smile.

Lois smiled in turn. "Mismatched? No, more like perfectly matched in a lot of ways."

Maybe, he thought, *but not perfect enough, or I would wed you and spare you from living under the rule of Lex Luthor.*

Lois shook her head after a minute. "I should go and let you rest. Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois."

"For the record," she added as she stood up, "I'm glad to have you here. I think we *both* need a friend now, more than ever before."

"Me too," Clark breathed in reply. He tried to hand her back the book she'd brought with her. "Here."

She shook her head. "No, keep it. We'll keep it here so I don't need to bring it back and forth every time we have a lesson. Besides, even if you can't read it, there are some beautiful illustrations painted before each chapter. I think, given your eye for incredible detail, you'll like them."

Clark bowed his head. "Thank you. I shall enjoy every moment I get looking at them."

"I hope so. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

After Lois left his chambers, Clark felt both lonelier but somehow not so lonely as before, all at the same time. He changed into bedclothes and settled onto his bed, laying atop the warm sheets on his stomach. He propped the book up on the pillow and reverently opened the cover. With the utmost care, he turned the pages, delighting in each of the illustrations as he found them. He devoted long minutes to each one, absorbing all the details, marveling in the skill that had gone into each painting. Somehow, it felt as if Lois was right there with him while he gazed at the book.

When he finally crawled beneath the sheets and blew out the bedside candle, he drifted off into the best sleep of his life.

"Clark? Are you in here?" Lois called out to him late the next morning.

Clark picked his head up from where he was bent over, examining the shoes of Nicodemus, Lord Lane's bay stallion. He patted the horse, letting the beast know it was okay to put his foot back down.

"In here, milady," he called back. "I'm in with Nicodemus."

He heard her approaching and he stood tall, wiping his hands on a handy rag. He opened the door to Nicodemus' stall, stepped out, and latched the door again.

"Good morning, milady," he greeted her, mindful that Lord Lane was trailing along after her.

"Good morning," she offered in return. "How was your first night here?"

"Excellent, milady. Thank you," he offered sincerely. "Good morning, milord," he said as Lord Lane caught up with his daughter.

"Good morning. I see you've already delved into your work. Good man. That's what I like to see," the man said, looking pleased. "How are the horses today?"

"Very well, milord. A few of them are in need of new shoes. Nicodemus, in particular, is in desperate need."

Samuel frowned. "It seems I was right. Frederick's eyesight isn't what it once was. A shame."

"Shall I call for the farrier?" Clark asked.

"Frederick will give you the information," Lord Lane said with a nod.

"As you wish, milord."

"Any others?"

Clark nodded. "Yes, milord. I've spent all morning checking the horses, one by one. Whisper needs shoes. So do Kensington, Rose, Archer, and Lance." He paused for a moment, embarrassed by the next admission. "And Merlin."

Samuel's frown deepened. "That's a lot of horses. It seems you came along just in time to take over the duties of stable master. I thank you for the information."

"You're welcome, milord. Also, I checked on Stardance. I

think she'll foal within a week or two. It's rare for a horse to give birth this late in the season, but I've seen it before."

"She's always foaled late for some reason. This will be her third."

"Fourth," Lois corrected. "The last one died during the birth, remember, Father?"

A look of sudden remembrance came over Lord Lane's face. "Yes, yes. I remember now. It was a rough birth. Both of them nearly died."

Lois nodded. "He was a beautiful little gray colt too. It was a real shame."

"I will do all I can to ensure that this baby survives," Clark vowed. "There's not much else for me to report. Everyone else seems happy and healthy. Even Merlin seems to have settled in quite nicely."

"Good," Samuel replied. He took a few seconds to take stock of his stable. Then his eyes settled back on Clark. "So, my daughter tells me that you wish to learn how to read and write."

Clark cast his eyes downward, since he was unable to read Lord Lane's neutral expression. "It would be nice, milord, though not necessary. She offered to teach me, and, with your blessing, I would love the opportunity to better myself, even in such a small way. I've always loved hearing stories. To be able to read a book of them would be wonderful. If milord approves." He knew he was babbling now, but he felt like he had to defend his desire to better himself. "And there's always a chance that I could be able to help you if I knew..."

Samuel cracked a small smile and put up a hand, stopping Clark's rambling. "You know something, Clark? I like you. You're a good, simple, honest man. Of course I approve of you learning to read and write. I must warn you, however, if I feel like you and my daughter are getting too close..."

He didn't have to finish his statement. Clark could hear the rest of it in his own mind well enough.

"Milord, I assure you I only wish your daughter's friendship," he heard himself say.

It wasn't a total lie. In his heart, he wanted to be free to love Lois and be loved by her in return. But he would never do anything to act upon his desires.

"With your permission, of course," Clark added.

Lord Lane nodded. "I've never prohibited my children from befriending whomever they deem worthy of it."

"Thank you, milord," Clark said, feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Now then," Lord Lane said, straightening his back a touch. Clark wondered if the man had a bad back, like his own father had had. "My daughter and I need a carriage made ready."

"Aren't you forgetting me?" James asked, appearing from behind his father. He grinned impishly.

"I thought you said you weren't interested in coming with us." Lord Lane shook his head, though a hint of a smile played around his lips.

"Isn't Lady Catherine supposed to be in town today?" Lois asked sweetly.

"Maybe," James replied evasively. "What's it to you?"

"James has been positively lusting after Lady Catherine ever since he first met her two summers ago," Lois hastily explained. "How many times has she turned down your offers to dance, or have dinner together, or take a walk with you, James?"

Clark could see the humor in Lois' eyes as she teased her brother. He mentally shook his head in amusement as well. Was this what it was like to have siblings? he wondered.

"I'll have your carriage ready in just a few minutes," Clark promised, slipping away before James could make a retort.

He chose the enclosed carriage for Lord Lane and his children. Though the sun was unseasonably warm that day, the wind was getting brisker by the hour. He thought the walls of the carriage —

as opposed to an open-air carriage — would be appreciated. Orpheus and Tango were hitched up to the carriage and Clark alerted Donovan, the driver, that his services would be needed. And not a moment too soon. Lord Lane strode out into the courtyard just as Donovan was climbing into his seat.

"Not bad," he said with an appraising eye. "You truly *do* have a way with horses, Clark. I've never seen a carriage readied so quickly."

Clark bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Thank you."

Clark watched discreetly as the carriage drove off. Then he busied himself with other tasks, hoping to make the day fly by. He wanted nothing more than for the sun to go down so he and Lois could begin the process of teaching him how to read.

Reading!

He could scarcely believe that he would soon be unlocking the secrets of letters he barely understood. He was going to receive an actual education — even if only a partial one. It was still more than he could have ever dreamed for himself. He knew his parents had hated the fact that they couldn't provide him with an education. There was always something to be done around the farm and never enough money to go around. An education had become a luxury that was outside of their reach.

"Things are really turning around for me," he whispered to himself in the empty barn, but the words were more for his parents than for himself.

He hated to admit it, even to himself, in the privacy of his own thoughts, but perhaps being sold into slavery was one of the best things that could have happened to him. Especially given his lack of prospects after the raiders had shattered his future.

So Clark worked hard, and was happy to do so. After all, how could he complain? He loved horses — working with them was a dream. He had a place to live. He had all the food he could wish for — never again would he be forced to go hungry. He had free access to being Lois' friend. That, more than anything, made the hard labor easy to bear and even enjoyable.

Lord Lane and his children arrived back home just as the sun was setting. Clark had finished his labors for the day and was simply enjoying brushing down Rose — Lady Ellen's tan and white mare. He left off the brushing and focused his attention on the two horses hitched to the carriage. By the time he was done seeing to their needs, dusk had fallen. Clark closed the stable doors and headed back to his own chamber to wash up before eating.

He had an enjoyable dinner with some of the other servants. He was already beginning to like having meals with the others, and was already getting to know their various personalities. Francois, the chef, was a particularly jovial man. Clark liked his company a lot. Lisette, one of the scullery maids, had taken an instant liking to Clark and had promised that if ever he wanted more than his fair share of food, she would slip it to him. And Johan, the groundskeeper, was a natural comedian who kept everyone laughing whenever he was nearby.

Clark was just poring over the illustrations in the book Lois had given him for the second time when she knocked on the door, calling his name in the same moment. Any tiredness sloughed off Clark as he sprang off the bed and dashed to the door. He opened it to find her shyly smiling at him. A wooden box was tucked under one arm.

"Lois," he breathed, in awe every time he saw her. "Come in."

"Thank you." She made her way into the room and to the same spot on the bed that she'd occupied the previous night. She set the box down beside her. "Are you ready for your first lesson?"

Clark nodded, swallowing hard. He hadn't thought he'd be nervous, but here he was, his heart hammering, his palms moist with sweat, and butterflies in his stomach.

"I think so," he replied.

"Are you okay? You look a little...well, nervous," she

observed.

"I guess I am. I'm not sure why. This is...it's a dream come true. Learning how to read...spending time with you." He clamped his mouth shut, horrified at the words that had come spilling, unbidden, from his mouth. "I'm sorry," he immediately apologized. "I didn't mean to overstep my bounds like that."

But Lois shook her head. "No, don't apologize. The truth is, teaching you how to read, it's a great excuse to get to spend time with you too." She smiled and took his hand. "Don't be nervous. It's just you and me, that's all."

You and me. That's is exactly why I'm nervous, he thought to himself. *I didn't know love could do this to a man.*

"Right," he said instead, agreeing with her. "Just you and me. I just hope..." He closed his eyes and took a breath before his confession. "I just hope I don't completely embarrass myself as you try to teach me."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," she encouraged him.

"I hope so," Clark replied, trying to will his nerves to be still.

"Before we start, I wanted to give you something. Here," Lois said, patting the wooden box next to her and pushing it in his direction. "I think you'll like this."

"Lois, you've given me more than enough," he said, wondering what she could possibly be giving him now, and how he could ever repay her for everything she'd already done for him.

She laughed lightly, a sound more precious to Clark than all the riches in the world. "Just open it," she encouraged.

"All right," he acquiesced. He took up the box, opened the lid, and gasped. "They're beautiful," he said in awe.

Nestled in the box were half a dozen different woodworking tools. Clark reverently took the finest of the knives out and examined it. It was a work of art, in and of itself. The bone handle fit perfectly into his calloused hands. The blade gleamed with newness and looked sharp enough to slice translucent slivers out of wood. The weight felt perfect as he hefted the knife — not too heavy and unwieldy, not too light and flimsy.

"You really like them?" Lois asked, shyly hopeful.

Clark nodded. "They're the finest tools I've ever held in my hands. I'm so used to tools that are merely functional — the same knife I used to use to shape my animals I also used to use to cut leather, skin pelts, and any number of other tasks. To own something like this for just one purpose...it never even crossed my mind. Thank you, Lois."

"I'm glad you like them. When Father and I went into town today, getting these knives was the first thing I did. As soon as I saw them, I knew they had to be the ones I bought for you. I could just see you using them to make more of your figurines." She was almost babbling as she blushed.

"They're perfect," he assured her, deeply touched that she'd taken pains to pick knives she thought she could see him liking. "I can't wait to use them."

"How does that work, exactly?"

"What do you mean?" Clark asked.

"The carving," Lois elaborated. "How do you choose what to carve?"

Clark smiled and chuckled a little. "It's a little hard to explain. But, well, sometimes, when I pick up a piece of wood, I can see an animal inside, just waiting for me to cut it out."

"I'm not sure I understand," Lois admitted.

"Let me try to show you."

Clark stood and crossed to the hearth. Beside it, a large metal semi-circle held a supply of wood. Clark picked up a couple of pieces that were on top and brought them over to the bed. He held them out to Lois.

"Here. See this one? See the ridge here? It's the top fin of a trout. And this one? That long, squiggly piece at the end is the tail of a cat. And this? See how it has the basic shape of a skunk?"

He pointed out each of the distinguishing features on each

piece of wood as he showed them to her. She peered at them for a moment before finally nodding.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I think I *do* see what you mean." She ran her finger over the ridge that would soon become the fin of a fish. "Especially the trout." She looked up and gave him a bright smile. "I'd love to see them, once you've had a chance to carve them."

"Absolutely," he agreed enthusiastically, as he took the wood back and put it away, where it was sure not to be mistaken for firewood. "It's the least I can do. After all, there would be no more animal figurines if not for your generous gift." He gestured to the box containing his brand new knives.

He rummaged through the pile of wood, selecting a few fat logs, in which he saw no potential animals lurking. He carefully situated them on the fire so that they easily caught and began to burn. The light leapt higher in his chamber, and it grew warmer. He wiped his hands on the rag he used to dry his hands after washing up, then he returned to the bed, sitting in the spot he'd commanded earlier.

"Shall we begin?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "One thing before we start. I wanted to say that you were right. I *do* love the paintings in the books. They're gorgeous."

Lois visibly brightened even further. "Oh, good! I'm so glad you liked them!"

"I do." He nodded and took a deep breath. "All right, I think I'm ready now."

And so, Clark's first lesson began. At first, he wasn't so sure that agreeing to Lois' lessons in reading was a good idea. It was difficult to get a handle on how the letters interacted with each other to form the words that were so familiar to him. But Clark had always been a fast learner, and by the end of those first two hours, he could already point out several words he'd come to memorize. He had to thank his poor, farm life upbringing for that. From an early age, he'd been forced to memorize everything. He and his parents were simply incapable of writing down lists of things they needed when they were in town. If they wanted to make sure they picked up everything they needed without having to make a second, long trip into town, they would have to remember it the first time. As a result, the three of them had trained their minds as much as the hard farm work had trained and strengthened their bodies.

"I think that's a good place to stop for the night," Lois said as they came to the end of a chapter. "You did great, Clark. I'm really impressed. How did you like it?"

"Honestly? I thought I'd made a mistake in agreeing to this at first. I've never felt so...so stupid and clumsy in my life. But now? I really love it, Lois. I love reading. Or, rather, I *will*, once I learn more so that I truly *am* reading on my own."

"I'm glad," Lois replied, patting his knee affectionately. "You're catching on fairly quickly. I can't believe how many words you picked up tonight. You'll be tearing through books on your own in no time, I'm sure of it."

"I hope so. There's so much out there that I'd love to learn about. Things I've only ever heard about in passing. Thank you for taking the time to teach me."

"You're welcome. And now, I really should get going."

Clark nodded. "It's getting late. I'm sure you have plenty of things to keep you busy tomorrow. And I have the farrier coming to shoe the horses, first thing in the morning. I should get some sleep."

Lois stood. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois."

He saw her out of his chamber and leaned against the door once it was shut again. His heart ached at having to say goodnight to her. Once again, he mentally admonished himself for having fallen in love with such an unattainable woman. He made himself

ready for bed, but knew sleep would not be coming just yet, so he pulled out one of the pieces of wood he'd set aside. Trying out his new knives, he soon had the rough shape of a trout in his hands. He set it on the mantle and put away the knives when he was done for the night. The wood shavings he'd created were carefully swept up and thrown on the fire, since there was no use in wasting perfectly usable wood. Then he went to bed, visions of Lois dancing through his dreams.

"How did the first lesson go?" Lucy asked with interest when Lois went by her room later that night to check on her.

"Really well. He's smart, Lucy. Very smart."

"And handsome..." Lucy prompted.

Lois sighed dreamily. "Yes, he is. *Very* handsome."

"So, when do you think Father will take *me* into the market to find myself a little toy of my own?" Lucy teased her.

"He is *not* my toy!" Lois defended herself. "He's a friend," she added in a softer tone.

"Right," Lucy said. "Just a *friend*."

Lois knew her sister well enough to know that Lucy wasn't convinced. She let it slide, however, not wanting to get into a discussion about what secret desires her heart may or may not have had.

"I gave him the woodworking tools I picked up in the market today," she said instead. "I think he's eager to get back to his carvings. You should have seen the way he was beaming with happiness."

"I can imagine," Lucy replied with a grin. "I imagine he looked a lot like you do right now."

"Lucy!"

"What? It's the truth."

Lois sighed again. "Is it *really* that obvious?"

"Only...a lot. You have to make sure Father and Mother don't figure out that you're falling for the help. And a poor slave at that."

"He's not a slave. Not anymore," Lois said quietly. "And he won't ever be again. Not if I can help it."

"Lois, listen to yourself! What *is* it about this guy?"

"Clark? Clark is...it's hard to describe. Ever since he helped us get back home a week or so ago, I can't get him out of my mind. It's like some force is pulling me toward him. I can't describe it. It's almost like I've always known him."

"I think you had too much wine with dinner," Lucy tried to joke.

But Lois shook her head. "It's not the wine. It's just...a gut feeling around him. Like we're supposed to be in each other's lives."

"I just don't want to see you get hurt," Lucy said tenderly, taking her sister's hands in her own. "Especially given the fact that Father seems bound and determined to see you wedded to Lord Luthor."

Lois scowled. "I know. Don't remind me," she said sourly.

"Look, Lois, I don't want to be the one to ruin your happiness, no matter what that happiness might entail. I just...I worry about you."

Lois smiled tenderly. "I appreciate it. But I'm your older sister. I should be the one worrying about *you*."

"We're sisters," Lucy replied. "It doesn't matter who is older. We both look out for each other."

Lois smiled again and nodded. "You're right." Then, to change the subject, "How's your leg feeling?"

Lucy shrugged. "Not bad. I can't wait until I'm fully healed. I mean, I'm grateful that I can get out of my room a little bit during the day, but I'm going stir crazy in here."

"Tell you what. Tomorrow after breakfast, I'll bring you some books and maybe we can even play a game or something," Lois promised.

Lucy nodded. "I'd like that. You sure your boyfriend wouldn't mind?" She was teasing, Lois knew.

Lois stood from her seat on the edge of the bed. "Goodnight, Lucy."

But the conversation with her sister stuck with Lois all night long. She wished she knew why she was so drawn to the former farmer and now stable master. Yes, he was young and handsome and well built. And yes, he was sweet and kind and honest and open. But that, on its own, couldn't explain the soul-deep connection she felt to the man.

Forget him, she told herself as she slipped beneath the warm blankets on her bed. *You can never be with him*.

But her heart laughed at her mind and she dreamed of making a life with Clark.

Two weeks passed, quicker than Clark could have ever imagined. He slipped into his new role well. During the day, he was with the horses, tending to their every need and doing what he could to anticipate their future needs. It could be lonely work at times, but he was used to it. Even when he'd been living with his parents back on the farm, before life had gotten so crazy, he'd often been alone while he'd done his chores. There was simply too much to do on a farm — his parents had needed to go about their own tasks.

So, he didn't mind the solitude.

And it wasn't like he was always alone. Depending on the day, there could be any number of messengers coming or going. Or Lord Lane and his family might be in need of their horses. Or visitors might turn up. Clark tended to all the horses, treating even the lowliest messenger's steed with the utmost care. It didn't matter if the beast in question was a purebred steed fit for a king or a half-starved little nag. Clark cared for them all the same — taking pains to make sure they were given as much food and water as they needed, and brushing their coats to put them at ease in their new surroundings.

At night, Clark would wash up and share his meal with the other servants, forging some strong friendships as the days wore on. After the meal, he would work on his carvings until Lois knocked on his chamber door, or if the inspiration wasn't there, he would work on reading the limited number of words he knew in the King Arthur book Lois had given him. Sometimes, he tried his hand at carving letters into pieces of scrap wood before throwing them on the fire in disgust at the shaky, nearly illegible words.

When Lois came to his chamber, everything changed for Clark. Even the worst day suddenly became bright and full of wonder. Even the worst of his moods would lighten. Tiredness would slip from his bones. Muscle aches would recede into the background. Any lingering loneliness he might feel would dissipate like fog in sunshine. Even his heart would feel different during the hour or two Lois would spend in his chamber, as though it would change its very rhythm to beat in tune with hers.

Under Lois' gentle tutelage, Clark's tenuous grasp of reading flourished and grew. By the end of the first two weeks, he could hesitantly read short, simple sentences aloud and could sound out unfamiliar words correctly more often than not. He was extremely proud of his progress, and knew Lois was as well. That alone — Lois' pride in him — fueled his desire to become an even better reader. He would do anything to impress her. And it felt good, working to better himself for his own happiness as well. As for the story of King Arthur itself, well, Clark was simply captivated by it.

Clark was just beginning his third week in the stables — and his second where he was totally in charge of the stable without Frederick's guidance — when it came time for Stardance, one of the mares, to have her foal. Clark noticed the change in the horse's behavior just before he was to quit for the night and get his dinner. He quickly got the horse comfortable and sent Jack, one of the

young servants, to the kitchen for his dinner. He did not want to leave the mare until the foal was born and checked over to make certain it was healthy. Jack returned with all speed, with Clark's dinner packed away in a basket. Clark thanked the younger man and settled down in the fresh, clean straw.

He set to work right away on the food, wanting to eat at least the majority of it before it got cold or the foal could make its appearance. As usual, the meal Francois had prepared was delicious — a steaming hot meat pie, a wedge of hard cheese, crunchy and warm bread with a slab of hard butter, grapes, and a skin of water to wash it all down. Clark tucked right into the pie and bread with butter first, enjoying the wonderful combinations of flavors and the warmth and strength it gave his body. The cheese and grapes he saved to one side, knowing that, in all likelihood, it would be a long night.

The night wore on, the stable and the outside world growing still as the sky grew ever darker. Clouds rolled in, heavy with snow, and soon white flakes were falling from the heavens. Clark left only once, dashing across the courtyard to his chamber. He grabbed an armful of wood and his knives, then bolted back across to the stable. It was a relief getting back into the building, for in there, he was out of the wind and warm.

Once he was inside, he set everything next to his space on the floor and lit one of the lanterns. He set the metal and glass box on the floor in a clear spot and checked on Stardance, but she was still a long way off from bringing her foal into the world. He turned his attention to the wood and went to work, carefully whittling animals out of it. He was just finishing up his first piece when the stable door opened. He felt the blast of chilly air as it played across his skin. He set aside the figurine and stood, looking to see who was there.

"Hello?" he called out. "Is someone there?"

"It's just me," called a female voice.

"Lois?" he whispered to himself. Then, aloud, "Milady?"

She stepped into view, brushing snow from the shoulders of her winter cape. "Don't worry, it really is only me. There's no need for 'milady.'"

Clark smiled. "Just making sure."

Lois smiled in return. "I don't blame you." She hung up her cloak and began walking toward Clark. "I went by your chamber for our lesson. When you didn't answer, I assumed you were here. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," Clark assured her. He waved her closer. "Stardance is going to have her foal tonight."

"Really?" she asked, hurrying now, her voice full of interest.

"Shouldn't be too long now," Clark said, opening the door to Stardance's stall. "At least, I don't think it'll be long."

"Can I stay to watch?"

"I would love it if you did. Here."

He put one of the blankets used beneath a saddle on the floor for her, folding it in half to double the thickness. She took his hand as she lowered herself down on the scratchy fabric.

"I'm sorry I have nothing more comfortable to offer you," he apologized.

"It's fine, really," she told him. She looked around briefly, as if gathering her bearings. "What are you carving?" she asked, her eyes lighting upon the knife next to Clark's leg.

He pulled the figurine out of the hay and handed it to her. "A wild boar," he explained, though the figurine practically spoke for itself.

"It's lovely," she complimented, turning the boar over and over in her hand to examine it from all angles. "Why the broken tusk?"

Clark took the boar back as she handed it to him. He looked again at the wooden animal and smiled softly to himself.

"There was a wild boar who lived in the woods close to my farm," he explained, his mind reaching back to simpler times. "I

used to see him sometimes when I would go into the woods. Sometimes it was to look for firewood — only dead stuff I couldn't be accused of stealing, mind you — or to gather nuts or berries to supplement our food stores — even though that *could* have been called stealing, at least according to Lord Luthor. The boar must have gotten into a fight and broken his tusk. It was pretty distinctive. I tried hunting him a couple of times. I knew the penalty for poaching was stiff, but desperate times make for desperate actions. He was pretty crafty, and always gave me the slip."

"Was farm life really so tough, that you had to resort to going against the laws of your land? Hunting and gathering nuts and the like?" There was no condemnation in her voice, only curiosity.

"Not always," he said with a slow shake of his head. "There were some years where the farm thrived and we had more than enough. We could sell our surplus and buy all the other things we needed, and even a few things that weren't necessities." He paused for a second or two before continuing. "But other years? Yes, things could be bad then — when the crops failed due to drought or pestilence or even flooding. When the animals died due to disease or harsh winters. There were times when we barely had enough food to stay alive from day to day, and there was no money to buy the things we so desperately needed. I hated doing things I knew were wrong, but I saw no other choice."

He sighed a little, hanging his hand in shame. "Please don't think less of me for what I did, Lois."

She reached out and cupped his chin in her palm. Gently, she forced him to make eye contact with her.

"I could never think less of anyone for doing what they need in order to survive. I would have done the same thing, if I'd been in your position."

"Like you will with Lord Luthor," he supplied, his voice soft and barely hiding his regret.

Lois huffed a sigh. "Yes, I suppose I will, as much as I hate it."

"Have there been further raids?" he asked, looking down again. The boar was still in his hands. He took the knife up and idly worked on some of the finer details. "I haven't heard much, but then, I'm out here most of the day."

Lois nodded slightly. "Two more in the last two days. Nothing close to here, but still, it's concerning."

Clark nodded thoughtfully. "It is," he agreed.

A comfortable silence fell between them, broken only by the occasional snort or soft whinny from Stardance as her labor progressed. Clark kept his hands busy with his carving, deftly finishing up the detail work on the boar before starting a new, more ambitious piece — a raccoon family on the broken stump of a tree. He noticed Lois watching with interest.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I'm used to keeping myself busy at night with carving. I can stop if you'd like."

"No, no. It's actually pretty fascinating," she said, watching as he removed a wedge of wood. "I can't do anything even remotely close to that. I can't draw or paint or dance very well either."

"Surely you have to have some kind of unique talent," he encouraged. "My father was a big believer in the idea that all of us have some kind of gift, be it in building, or painting, or growing crops, or breeding horses, or singing, or writing laws that actually benefit the people they are written for."

"I do sing a little," Lois confided in a gossamer light voice. "I've been told I do it well."

"There, you see," Clark said with a grin. "Everyone has a gift. And, let's not forget, you have a knack for teaching a country bumpkin how to read."

That made her laugh. "I guess you're right."

"I'm actually sorry that we aren't working on reading again tonight," Clark confessed.

But Lois shook her head. "No, don't be. This is nice, getting to

just sit and talk and watch you carve. And to witness Stardance have her baby. I've never seen a birth of any kind."

"It's pretty special," Clark said, glancing at the horse, but nothing had changed there. "I've seen quite a few births — horses, cows, barn cats, even a dog we had when I was younger. It never ceases to amaze me. It's just...just the most miraculous thing I've ever seen." He looked at Lois. She was smiling from ear to ear. "What?"

"I've never seen a man so passionate about birth before. You're going to be a wonderful father some day."

Clark shook his head. "I doubt it."

"And why not?" she wanted to know.

"It's nothing."

"No, really, what?" she pressed.

He took a deep breath. "I...there's only one woman I've ever...could ever...imagine myself with."

"Who?" From the sound of her voice, Clark imagined that she already knew who his heart desired.

"I...It doesn't matter. She...I'm not worthy of her." He had to swallow hard around the sudden dryness in his throat.

"Do...do I...know her?" she asked slowly.

"Please," he begged. "I don't want to overstep my place. Your family has shown me every kindness. I can't...I can't jeopardize one of the best things that's happened to me lately."

"Is it...me?" she whispered.

He didn't have to reply with words. He knew his expression gave away his heart. He nodded.

"Yes," he whispered back, fearful that someone else would hear, though he knew they were completely alone. "I'm sorry, Lois, but it's the truth. I fell in love with you the day I first met you, in the market, when you bought that bear for your sister. It's part of the reason why I gave you that hawk. I'm so sorry," he repeated, ashamed of his confession.

"Sorry?" she asked, as though the word was foreign. "Don't be sorry."

"I just...I know I can never act on it. And I don't want to lose your friendship. Lois, you are the best thing that's ever happened to me. I've never known anyone who has made me feel so good about myself."

"You won't lose my friendship," she vowed. "The truth is...I like you too. I think I'm falling in love with you. I have been, since you escorted us home when Lucy got hurt, even if I've been afraid to admit it to myself."

"You...love me?" he asked, incredulous. Surely he hadn't heard her correctly.

She nodded. "I do."

"Wow," he whispered with a grin on his face.

He had to let that knowledge sink in. Lois, the most wonderful woman in all the world, loved him. *Loved him!* Despite his peasant roots, she loved him. Despite the fact that he'd been sold to her family as a slave, she loved him. Despite the fact that they could never be together, she loved him. It was more than he'd ever dared to hope for.

But...what now?

It wasn't like they could do anything about it. She was a noblewoman. He was less than dirt. He had nothing to offer her. And even though her family did not treat him as a slave, he knew that they would have every right to hunt him down and punish him as a runaway slave if he and Lois tried to run off and start a new life somewhere else. It was a hopeless situation, as far as he was concerned.

He felt both elated and cursed. He had found love and she loved him in return. But he was destined to love her from afar. And soon, he had no doubt, he would be forced to watch as she married another man, though he hesitated to call Lord Luthor a man. He was more like the devil made flesh and come to Earth, lording over his subjects with an iron fist and a short temper.

"What a fine pair we make," he said aloud before he realized his thoughts had taken on spoken words. "A perfectly mismatched and impossible love."

"Star-crossed lovers," Lois agreed.

"Two people from completely different worlds," Clark added.

"It isn't fair," Lois replied. "You can't help the circumstances you were born into any more than I can help mine, but because we are from different classes, we can never be free to just be in love."

"Until this moment, I've never hated being low-born. I've never minded being a farmer, even during the worst, leanest years when we barely survived," Clark said. "But tonight? Tonight I would do anything to change my lot in life...to reach into the heavens and rearrange the very stars if that's what it would take."

"And I would give up being the daughter of a lord, if I thought it at all possible," Lois said solemnly.

A sudden change in Stardance's behavior broke them both from their conversation. Clark scrambled up off the floor and went to the mare. He quickly checked her over, then retreated back to his place, though he did not sit back down.

"What's the matter?" Lois asked with concern.

"It's starting. Her real labor has started. The foal will be born soon."

They watched in rapt fascination as the mare labored and pushed out her foal, though Clark's awe was mixed with a healthy dose of fear. Every nerve was balanced on a knife's edge. Every muscle was coiled, ready to spring into action at the slightest sign that the mother or baby were in distress. Neither he nor Lois spoke a word. The only sounds came from the horse. Bit by bit, the baby emerged from Stardance's womb and into the strange new world of humans and other horses, until at last, with a final push and a gush of fluids, a single filly was born. Stardance immediately began tending to her daughter and Clark felt the tension bleeding from his body.

"It's a girl!" he announced as the baby attempted to stand on wobbly legs.

The birth had gone off without a hitch. Mother and daughter looked healthy and strong. The night had been a success, and Lord Lane had a new horse in his stable. Clark had a new charge to care for. When he deemed it safe to do so, he approached the filly and checked her over, helping to dry her coat with an old blanket. As she dried off, the filly's colors started to show better. She was predominately white, with a blaze of gold on her forehead.

"She's beautiful," Lois proclaimed in awe.

"She is. Healthy and strong too." He patted first the baby, then Stardance. "Good job, Momma," he praised her as he stroked her nose. Stardance nickered as though in response. "She'll need a name," he said to Lois.

"Sundrop," she immediately replied. "She looks like a Sundrop to me. Of course, I'll run it by the rest of the family, but for tonight at least, that's her name."

"I like it," Clark said with approval.

"Thanks for letting me stay so I could see her be born," Lois said after a minute of simply watching the new foal.

"I'm glad you were here," Clark replied. "I've always loved when I could share moments like these with someone else. Up until now, it's only been my parents. But sharing this with you? On the night when we admitted...well...what we did? It makes it all the more special. And," he said with a teasing smile and a gentle bump of his shoulder into hers, "having you here certainly made things less lonely."

Lois laughed lightly. "I'll bet. It must be getting close to midnight by now. I can't imagine being here alone for so many hours."

Clark shrugged. "It's not so bad. It's kind of peaceful, in a way. Especially on a night like this — so quiet outside you can practically hear the snowflakes touch down on the ground. Still, it's nice to not be all alone."

Silence fell between them, as they each searched for something else to say. Clark was afraid he'd already said too much about his feelings — feelings he would have to learn to bury deep and leave behind if he ever hoped to be truly happy in his life. Because if he didn't, seeing Lois marry anyone else — Luthor or not — would kill him.

"So," Lois began tentatively, "is there anything else you need to do for Sundrop?"

"No," he replied with a shake of his head. "Everything looks good here. I'll inform your father of the birth first thing in the morning."

Lois nodded. "He'll want to see the baby right away."

Clark nodded in turn. "I thought as much. And now, milady, I think it's well past the time when we both retire for the night. It's getting late and the horses need to rest anyway."

"All right. Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois."

She turned and left the stall. He watched as she retrieved her cloak from the peg she'd hung it on and slipped it over her shoulders. Then she walked out of the stable. Clark merely gazed after her for a moment, then turned back to his work, putting everything away and putting fresh hay down for the horses. He blew out all the lanterns on his way out, keeping only one lit to light his way to his chamber.

He went to bed that night exhausted but completely elated.

Lois loved him.

Lois hummed happily to herself as she walked the halls of her home. She'd tried denying her attraction to Clark since he'd helped Lucy, James, and herself get home when Bluebell had come up lame and Lucy had been hurt. But for all she'd told her heart that it was wrong, it had insisted that she was falling for the young farmer. She'd told herself to forget him. There was no way he could love her. And if she loved him, she would only hurt him, for they could never be together. Her family would never allow it. As loving and accepting as her father and mother could be, they would never find it in their hearts to embrace a peasant farmer as their son-in-law.

So she'd made up her mind that Clark should never know of her feelings toward him. It was the only way she could be fair to him. And, if she tried hard enough, maybe she could convince herself that she didn't actually love him. If she didn't love him, it would be easier to accept that their fates would never entwine.

But then, tonight, he'd opened up to her in a way he never had before. He'd admitted that he'd felt for her what she felt for him. He'd told her that he loved her. And she'd allowed herself to make the fatal mistake of letting him know that she loved him too. It had hurt her heart to see the emotions in his face — the raw, unbridled joy, the shocked disbelief, the tentative hope, the crushing realization that they were destined to forever love one another from afar.

Their souls would never really rest alongside one another.

"What have I done?" she whispered to herself as she reached her chambers. She leaned against the solid wooden door after slipping inside. "How could I have done that to him?"

He'll hate me forever, she thought bitterly to herself. *I'll be forced to marry some lord or another — probably Lex Luthor — and he'll hate me for ever having stirred up hope in his heart, no matter for how brief a time.*

"You deserve every unhappiness, Lois," she chided herself.

"He's a good man and now you've gone and stomped all over his heart."

With sorrow, anger, and regret all dueling in her heart, she got herself ready for bed. She climbed beneath the heavy winter blankets and reclined back on her pillow. But sleep was a long time in coming.

He loves me, her heart seemed to beat. *He loves me.*

But what good is any of that? her brain sneered in return.

Only one thing seemed certain to her. She would never be able to love anyone who wasn't Clark.

Clark had been living at Lane Manor for just over a month when his worst nightmare came true.

It started out like any other day. He woke up early, got dressed, and enjoyed a hearty, hot, and somewhat rushed breakfast before heading out to the stable. It had snowed the night before, and the world glistened and gleamed with a sheen of white ice crystals. Clark thought it beautiful as he made his careful way across the icy courtyard to the stable.

He greeted the horses, as he usually did, and tended to their needs. Sundrop — Lord Samuel and Lady Ellen had loved the name Lois had given the little filly — was getting bigger and stronger everyday. Already she knew Clark — by sight, by scent, and by sound. He had but to whistle and the little foal would come prancing over to where he was. In fact, he was teaching all of the horses in the stable to respond to a series of whistles. He'd been developing the technique since he was a child, having found that sometimes, a sharp whistle could carry further and be better understood by the horses than spoken words across a distance. Most of the horses were beginning to learn and respond to his whistled cues, especially since he had Merlin to act as an example to them.

He went about his usual tasks of mucking out the stalls, laying fresh hay, filling water troughs, topping off food troughs, and setting aside the manure for the gardeners to use as fertilizer. Clark was in a good mood, humming to himself as he worked. Just last night, he'd managed to read most of a chapter from King Arthur, with little guidance from Lois, even if it was sometimes slow going and he sometimes stumbled over some of the unfamiliar words. His writing was getting better too. Lois now furnished him with paper and a quill and ink when they had their lessons. He could now write all the letters of the alphabet in a mostly legible script.

All in all, he was feeling on top of the world.

He should have known better.

About mid-morning, riders approached the manor. Clark instinctively knew that it was a lord, solely based on how large the retinue was that came along as well. He could see them from a long way off, once he heard rumor that riders were heading their way. Until they actually made it to the manor, they weren't Clark's concern. He went about his business as he normally would, though he dropped everything once the riders actually stepped foot on the property.

Clark went out to greet the visitors and to take care of their horses. That's when he saw him.

Lord Alexander Luthor.

Clark felt his blood turn to ice and his stomach turn to lead. Lex Luthor. The man who'd barely spared a glance at him before condemning him to be sold as a slave. The man who'd only spared Clark's life because he felt like a public execution wouldn't be enough of a shock to the people he lorded over. The man who would likely take Lois for his wife.

Clark fought the urge to be sick. He carefully affixed a neutral expression to his features as he strode forward, out into the courtyard. Lord Lane was already outside, enthusiastically greeting Lord Luthor. Clark said nothing as Luthor handed him the reins without so much as a flicker of recognition in his eyes. For that, Clark was oddly glad. He didn't *want* the man to recognize him, though he couldn't quite pinpoint an exact reason why.

"Lex! Good to see you!" Lord Lane said, smiling widely.

"And you, Samuel."

"I'm glad you could visit us. My daughter, Lois, is looking forward to meeting you. It's a shame you two haven't had a chance to cross paths yet," Samuel said, easily lying about Lois'

level of enthusiasm.

Luthor grinned, like a hunter closing in on his prey. "And I cannot wait to meet her. From all I've heard about her, she is someone special to behold."

Samuel nodded. "She is. Now then, tell me what news you bring."

"I'm afraid Lord Tempos has struck again. His men have destroyed three villages to the southwest."

"Isn't that Lord Percival White's lands?"

Luthor nodded. "Yes. I thought the recent snows would slow or halt his advances, but..." He shrugged, letting the statement hang in the air.

"If only we could predict his next move. His men seem to attack at random," Samuel lamented.

"Perhaps it is time we speak more seriously about combining our forces," Luthor suggested.

Samuel nodded. "I agree. Come. Let us go inside and get you and your men something hot to fill your bellies and warm you up."

"I would be most appreciative."

Clark overheard it all as he went about his work. He forced himself not to scowl. He'd never hated anyone in his life — except for Lord Luthor. Just the thought of him made Clark's blood boil. Aside from the obvious reasons to despise the man, there was something about Luthor — some quality Clark couldn't rightly identify — that gave him an uneasy feeling and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand at worried attention.

"Be careful, Lois," he whispered to himself in the empty stable.

"Ah, there she is! My oldest daughter, Lois," Lois heard her father say as she stepped into the library, where he was sitting with a man she didn't know.

"Father? You called for me?" she asked.

Samuel nodded. "Yes. Lois, this is Lord Luthor."

I should have known, she chided herself.

"A pleasure to meet you," she said instead.

"The pleasure is all mine," Lord Luthor replied, kissing her hand. "Please, call me Lex."

"Lex," she forced herself to say, trying to avoid any awkward gaps in the conversation.

Funny, she thought to herself. *I'm usually fairly comfortable talking with new people. But with Lex, I already feel awkward.*

"Isn't she beautiful?" Samuel said, grinning happily.

"Exquisitely so," Lex agreed.

"What brings you to our home?" Lois politely inquired.

"There have been more attacks," Samuel supplied. "Lex and I were going to discuss combining our forces in earnest."

"Together, we stand a chance of eliminating the threat to not only our own people, but to all the neighboring lands," Lex said amiably. He spread his upturned palms as if encompassing all of the lands around. "Lord Tempos must be stopped. Not only does he steal and destroy whatever his troops come across, there have now been several people who have been slain, simply, I would imagine, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Lois nodded thoughtfully. "I can imagine."

Like Clark's father, she thought sadly.

It must have shown on her face as well. Lex took a step forward and took her hand.

"My lady, I did not mean to upset you by speaking of the killings."

"Oh, it's not that," she said with a brief shake of her head. "It's just...I feel bad for those who have lost family members due to Tempos' raids."

She purposefully didn't mention Clark or his father. Some part of her told her not to say a word about them. Chances were, Lex didn't remember the poor young farmer he'd sentenced to slavery, simply for trying to survive in the wake of Tempos' raid. And on

the off chance that he *did* remember Clark, it wasn't likely to be a fond memory of the supposed tax evader and poacher.

"Yes. It's a tragedy beyond words," Lex said coolly, his voice showing no real emotion. "But, come, let us talk of more pleasant things, my lady."

"Oh...of course," Lois stammered.

It was hard to read Lex. Was he simply not comfortable talking of the horrors of Lord Tempos' raids? Or did he deem her too fragile and not intelligent enough to discuss such matters because she was a woman? There was no way to know just yet.

A knock on the door shattered her thoughts. She turned and saw Paulette, one of the maids, standing there with a tray of tea and warm biscuits.

"Begging your pardon, milady," Paulette said, curtsying a little, the tray still in her hands, "but I was told to bring this in here."

"Yes, yes. Come right in," Lois said, inclining her head a bit.

Paulette came and set the tray on the table. With practiced hands, she swiftly poured the tea and set everything down in front of Lois, Samuel, and Lex. Silently, she took her leave when she was finished. Lois sat in a chair next to Samuel and across from Lex. From there, she could easily observe the man her father was pushing for her to marry.

There wasn't much to gather about him while they sipped at their tea. Lex and her father spent the better part of the time making small talk — the weather, rumors they'd heard of other lords and ladies, and other such inconsequential things. Lois said very little. She felt like she had nothing to add and preferred to be in an observatory role anyway.

"My dear lady, would you be interested in taking a walk outside with me?" Lex offered after the tea was gone and the last of the biscuits had grown cold. "After such a long ride this morning, I would love to stretch my legs."

Samuel shot her a pleading look over Lex's shoulder as he tended to the fire that was blazing in the hearth. Lois sighed inwardly and resigned herself to what was to come.

"Of course. Let me get into my winter boots and grab a cloak."

She didn't wait for an answer. Instead, she breezed out of the room and to her own chambers. Her heart was hammering in her chest. Alone with Lex Luthor! She'd only just met him and now she was expected to carry on a prolonged conversation with that same perfect stranger.

Try to give him a chance, her mind told her in the voice of her mother. *Don't judge him too quickly.*

She let out a frustrated sigh. The advice her mother had given her just before she'd joined Lex and her father in the library made sense. Lex deserved a chance just like any other person. She needed to put aside the rumors she'd heard about Lex and the things Clark had told her, in order to give Lex a fair chance. After all, Clark didn't know the man personally. He'd only met the lord once, and only for a few minutes at best. Perhaps Lex had been having a bad day or he'd been distracted. Maybe that had contributed to his dismissive attitude to the poor homeless farmer. Could it be that he was usually more forgiving and warm?

Doubtful, sneered her gut instinct.

Hush now, her mind shot back as she tugged on her boots. *We have no choice but to try to get to know the man he really is.*

"You can do this," she whispered to herself as she tried to steel herself for what was to come. "You can do this, Lois."

"Ah, my lady, there you are," Lex said, his face visibly brightening once she returned. "Are you ready for our walk?"

Lois nodded and allowed him to take her hand. "Yes. Are you?"

"I've never been readier for anything in my life, my lady."

"Please, Lex, call me Lois."

His constant use of "my lady" was starting to grate on her

nerves. It was likely that he was trying to be polite, but it almost felt like a refusal to call her by her name.

"Of course, Lois. Shall we?"

Lois nodded and let him take the lead. Lex didn't speak again until they were outside in the cold, bright daylight.

"I was just telling your father what a lovely home he has," Lex began.

"I've always thought our home was beautiful," Lois agreed. "As a girl, I thought there was no more beautiful place in all the world."

Lex smiled. "And now, Lois?"

Lois shook her head. "Now I know there is more to the world that I ever could have imagined as a child. I still love this place, don't get me wrong, Lex. But part of me wonders what else is out there."

"Perhaps we can both find out. Together," he replied, giving her a shy smile.

Lois smiled in return. "Perhaps," she agreed in a non-committal way.

"I just love the snow, don't you?" Lex asked after a few moments. "See how pristine and clean it makes the world? And the ice! It gives everything such a wonderful sheen to it, like the world has been coated in a layer of pure diamond."

"It *is* very beautiful," Lois agreed. She brushed her fingertip over an iced over section of hedges that had long since lost their leaves. "But I've always preferred the summer. The long days, the warmth, how everything is green and growing." She couldn't help the genuine smile that crossed her lips as she spoke.

"I'd have to agree with you. Summer is a wonderful time of the year. At my own manor, I have sprawling gardens with every type of flower you can imagine. I can spend entire days out there and never get bored." He snapped his fingers as a thought occurred to him. "I know, I'll commission a painting for you, if you'd like."

Commission a painting. Such a stark contrast from Clark, who painstakingly carved his little wooden animal figurines with such love and care. Lois knew that not everyone had artistic talent and that she couldn't condemn the man for his lack of ability, but she still couldn't help the mental comparison between Lex and Clark from being made. She politely shook her head.

"That's a generous offer, but I prefer actually seeing flowers in person than looking at paintings of them. We have quite the gardens here as well. My mother takes great pride in her tulips, in particular."

"Well, I'd love to see them sometime."

Lois merely smiled in response. Then, changing the subject, "So, Lex. What kinds of hobbies do you enjoy?"

"I love books. I have a vast collection of them on every subject you could imagine. The mind is like a knife. You have to keep it sharp. Books are the whetstones that do the job."

Lois brightened. Books were important to her, too. "Really? I love a good book myself."

"Well then, I shall have to give you a tour of my library sometime."

"I'd like that," she admitted.

"I also have an extensive collection of exotic animals," Lex continued. "I have creatures from all over the world. Lions from Africa. Tigers from the jungles of India. Birds of every size and color. Monkeys. Bears. Even a black and white one from the depths of the Chinese forests."

"That sounds...quite intriguing," she managed. Was it her imagination, or was Lex beginning to brag?

"There's more, of course, but it's better to show you in person."

"I suppose it would be."

"There are days when I spend all day out amongst those animals. I've always been interested in animals. Predators, in

particular. There's something about watching them stalk and hunt. It's fascinating."

"Oh? Do you often let them out to stalk and hunt?" Lois asked, concern blossoming in her heart.

Lex chuckled. "No. Of course not. I watch from the safety of outside their enclosures. But I'll admit, I do enjoy a bit of falconry. Watching my birds soar, dive, and twist through the air...it's fascinating, like a splendid, moving piece of artwork. They are extremely graceful and intelligent birds, you know."

"So I've heard. I've never seen it in person."

"Oh? You simply *must*. It changed my life, the first time I saw it. I must have been...oh, seven or eight years old at the time."

"How so?" Lois asked, trying to keep the conversation going. The fact was, she couldn't care less about falconry.

"It showed me that no goal is unattainable. It taught me the beauty of the birds. It inspired me to reach out and seize opportunities, because you never know when it might slip away, like a prey animal escaping the falcon's talons. And if that has me a bit more...aggressive in my approach to life, well, it's worked out well so far."

"And by aggressive you mean...?" Lois pressed, giving Lex the chance to describe his style of ruling in his own words.

"I'll admit that I've been a little ruthless in the past," he said, shrugging a little. "I've had to make some tough decisions. I've never taken them lightly. Oh, it's true that I've made some unpopular decisions and laws, but everything I've done has been in an effort to bring peace and stability to my lands. I'm no different from any other lord in that respect. Even your father has had to make some difficult decisions, I'm sure. Things he may not have wanted to do. Laws he was loathe to pass."

"Yes..." Lois said, hesitantly. She hated to admit it, but Samuel *had* done some things that no one in the family had been comfortable with, but which had ultimately been the best course of action to retain peace in their lands.

"There, you see!" Lex said with a sudden smile, seemingly pleased by her admission.

But Father has never enslaved anyone, Lois thought to herself bitterly.

The knowledge that Lex Luthor had sold Clark off to the slave market burned at the back of her mind and left a bad taste on her tongue. She couldn't imagine deciding that someone's life should be traded away like that. Sure, she'd seen her father order executions before. But those times had been few and far between, and had always been reserved for the worst of offenses, like rapes and murders. Never once had Lord Lane condemned a person who was unable to pay their taxes to death.

"Sometimes, the hardest decision to make is to grant someone mercy," she heard herself saying aloud before she was even aware she was speaking.

"Perhaps," Lex said neutrally. "But I've found that leniency and mercy often spawn regrets."

Lois frowned. "Oh?"

Lex nodded, looking off into the distance, as if sorting through memories locked away long ago. "Unfortunately, it's true. When I was young, after my parents passed away and I found myself as lord of Luthor Manor, I was naive enough to grant several people second chances. Two of them went on to steal again. A third murdered the local priest. Yet another one burned several houses to the ground. That's when I learned that second chances are not always the best course of action."

"Because a couple of people took advantage?" Lois asked, aghast.

Lex shook his head regretfully. "It wasn't just them, Lois. There were others as well. More than I care to admit."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Lois offered.

And so the day passed. Lois and Lex toured Lane Manor's sprawling grounds together for a time, until the wind picked up

and began to chill them down to their bones. They ate lunch together, just the two of them, though dinner was spent with the entire Lane family. Lois could see that both James and Lucy seemed charmed by Lex, despite the fact that they had shared her misgivings at first.

As the hours passed, Lois found her doubts slowly fading. Lex *was* fairly charming. He was well spoken and very intelligent. He was easy on the eyes too, though less than Clark. Clark had a natural beauty to him, Lois thought, whereas Lex's handsomeness seemed more...worked at. It was clear he took great pains to maintain a certain appearance. His shirt collar always had to be perfectly straight. He was constantly smoothing out any wrinkles in his clothing — both real and imagined. His hair had to be kept a specific way — any wayward strands were immediately set back into place.

He was a very flattering man, always complimenting her. But at the same time, Lois sensed that he was holding back in some ways, as if he deemed her not worthy or capable of discussing certain topics. It was insulting, but Lois wondered if she might be able to somehow use it to her advantage. She still hated that she was being pushed to marry Lex, if he proposed. It was true that she could have done worse for a husband. Actually, she hated to admit it to herself, but Lex wouldn't be the worst choice in a husband at all. But she wanted to be free to marry for love. And Clark was the only man she could ever see herself giving her heart to.

There's a chance I'll have to give my body over to Lex, if I'm forced to marry him, she thought to herself that night after she managed to slip off to her own chambers while the rest of the family sat in the main living space with Lex. *But that doesn't mean I won't work to get myself out of the arrangement. And he'll never have my heart. Clark alone holds that.*

Clark.

If only he'd been born a lord.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The noise startled Clark out of his thoughts. He slipped with the knife and sliced his thumb open. He instinctively let go of the knife and the wooden horse he'd been carving. They clattered to the floor by his feet.

"Yah!" he cried out in shock, a second before the pain registered. "Ow," he continued, looking at the line of blood that was welling up and flowing over his broken skin.

"Clark? Is everything all right in there?" came Lois' voice.

"Milady?" He never called her by name until he was completely sure she was alone. "Come in."

She opened the door and slipped inside his room. "I heard a cry. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine, Lois," he said, still checking his wound. "I slipped with the knife just now and cut myself."

"Oh, God! Did I cause that when I knocked?" she guessed.

"I'm so sorry!"

"It's all right," he replied automatically. "It isn't too deep, thankfully. I can bandage it to stop the bleeding and it should be completely healed in a couple of days."

"Let me see," she said, hurrying to where he stood before the fireplace. She grabbed his hand and peered at the wound. "I am so, so sorry," she repeated.

"It's fine, really."

"Let me help you with it," she insisted, leading him across to the bed. "Sit here."

Clark did as he was told. Lois went about the task of gathering the things she needed. With clean, fresh water, she cleaned the blood from his thumb, then gently dried it with a new cloth. Taking a strip of cloth, she wound it around the injured digit and tied it off. Clark gave his thumb an experimental wiggle.

"How's that?" she asked.

"It feels pretty good," he replied with a pleased nod. "Thank you, Lois. That would have been hard for me to do with just one hand."

"Glad I could help, even it *was* my fault that you got hurt to begin with," she said, tucking a strand of her dark hair behind her ear.

"It wasn't your fault. I should have been paying more attention to my surroundings. I guess I let myself get too distracted with my carvings. You always come at night. I should have known to be on the lookout for you. Although," he hedged, not knowing if he was crossing a line or not, "I kind of thought I *wouldn't* be seeing you tonight. I thought you'd be with Lord Luthor this evening. Your family as well."

Lois shook her head as she paced to the window, looking out into the night. "I needed a break from everyone else. An entire day of trying to make small talk with Lex is tiring."

"Perhaps we should forego the reading lesson then," Clark said quietly, keeping his face neutral but with a heaviness in his heart.

Lois turned and shook her head again. "Not a chance. I may have had my fill of Lex's company this evening, but that doesn't mean that I'm not in need of spending time with my friend." She smiled at him. "Unless, of course, *you* rather that I not be here."

Clark shook his head in turn. "Although I didn't expect to see you this evening, I had hoped that perhaps I would get the chance to speak with you in private."

"Believe me, Clark, I've been wishing for a moment spent with you all day long."

Clark stood from his seat and walked over to Lois. "I wish I could do something, Lois. Do some great deed to be worthy of you. To be someone so much more attractive than Lord Luthor and all he can offer to your family."

"I know. And just so you know...if it was up to me, I would be your wife."

"And I would be your husband," he replied reverently. He almost put his hands on her shoulders, but stopped himself at the last minute.

"Why does this have to be so unfair?" Lois asked in a small voice.

"I wish I knew," he responded in a matching voice.

It was Lois who made the first move. She closed the slight gap between them, leaning into him. Automatically, his arms came up to encircle her as her arms wrapped around his own body. He hugged her gently at first, but when he felt her squeeze him ever so slightly, he allowed himself to hold her tightly. He felt her sigh into his chest. He felt his heart beat in tune with hers.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," Lois whispered.

"Me too."

But after a few minutes, that moment of perfection came to an end. Clark was the one to reluctantly pull away first. He felt like he was deflating as he let go of her, like he'd been floating on air only to come crashing back down to Earth. His arms ached without her in them. But he also knew that, even though they were in the privacy of his bedchamber, if Lord Lane ever found out about how close he and Lois were becoming, that things could become very bad for him, very quickly.

"I...I have something for you," Clark said in a shaking voice as he fought to control his racing emotions. "I was just finishing it when you came in."

He gestured for her to sit in the chair by the fire. Once she was comfortable, he retrieved the knife and the wooden animal he'd been working on from where they had both fallen to the floor. He put the knife back into the box with its brethren, then sat on the low footstool before the chair.

"Here," he said, presenting the wooden animal to Lois. "I hope you like it."

He saw her face beam with love and excitement as she reached

for the figurine in his hand, where it lay nestled in his palm. He felt a thrill run through him as her fingertips brushed against his skin.

"Oh, Clark! It's beautiful! I love it!"

Clark smiled, happy to have made Lois happy. "I'm glad."

"Is this...is this Whisper?" Lois asked upon closer inspection of the wooden horse she held.

Clark's smile broadened into a grin that stretched from ear to ear. "I *thought* you might recognize her."

He'd spent hours upon hours getting the carving just right. He'd made it so the horse was prancing, the right front leg lifted off the ground, the head tossed slightly back, the mane and tail flowing out behind as though caught in a stiff, refreshing breeze. He'd taken great pains to ensure that the piece was balanced and wouldn't topple over when left to stand on a shelf. He'd even carved Lois' favorite saddle on the beast, taking care to ensure that all of the intricate designs on the leather made it onto the wooden facsimile.

"It's gorgeous," Lois praised him, nearly breathless in her awe. She seemed incapable of tearing her eyes away from the figurine.

"Glad you like it," Clark replied.

"When did you make this?" she asked. "All the times I've been in here, or out in the stable with you, I never saw it."

"I started...oh, I guess about three nights ago. Maybe four," Clark said. "I kept it hidden so I could surprise you with it when I was all finished."

"It's an amazing piece of artwork," she said. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

Once again, it was Lois who made the first moves. She leaned toward Clark, her eyes closing as she closed the distance between the two of them. Her lips puckered. Clark followed suit, his body overriding the logical warnings of his brain. Never before had he wanted something so much.

An instant later, their lips met, innocently at first. Just the barest touch of skin to skin. A butterfly light feeling on Clark's lips. Then, suddenly, the kiss deepened, though for the rest of his life, Clark was never truly sure which of them had been the one to do it, or if it had somehow been mutually agreed upon though words had never been spoken. All he knew was that as the kiss deepened and became hungrier in nature, lightning ignited in his veins and zipped through his entire being. Every nerve ending was set afire. Every cell vibrated with a sudden influx of heat and passion. Every sense was heightened into almost inhuman levels. Stars exploded behind his closed eyelids. His brain ceased to process anything that wasn't that singular, perfect kiss.

His arms flew up to embrace her. Her fingers weaved their way through his dark hair. He pulled her even closer, never letting his lips leave hers. Her fingers left his hair and raked across his back. Desire flared in Clark's heart. God, how he wanted Lois! But she wasn't his to have and he reluctantly backed off. Lois must have realized that they were heading into dangerous territory as well. He felt her pulling away at the same moment.

"I...uh..." he stammered, looking for words.

"Yeah..." Lois replied, appearing to be at a loss for something to say as well.

"That was..." he tried again.

"Incredible," she finished for him.

"Perfection," he supplied.

"Mmm," she hummed in agreement.

Clark closed his eyes for a second as he gathered his thoughts and pulled his spirit back down from where it was flying amongst the stars. He tried to calm his wildly beating heart, but to no avail.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he finally said in a near whisper. "I should never have...done that."

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "You didn't do it. *I* did. If anyone is to blame for what just happened, it's me."

"I wasn't completely innocent in my actions either," he pointed out. "I wanted that perhaps more than you did. In any case, I'm just a lowly servant. I have no right to even touch you, let alone kiss you." He kept his voice low enough that no one passing by in the hall could have heard him. "If your father ever found out..."

"He won't," Lois cut in, sounding very sure of herself. "*No one* will. Trust me."

Clark nodded slowly, like a man still trying to shake off the remnants of a dream. "I believe you." He sighed. "It's just...that was stupid of me. Because now I know *exactly* what it is that I'll never be able to have."

Lois sighed in turn. "You're right. Maybe it *was* stupid of me to kiss you. Because, let's face it, I'm not sure how I can allow any other man to kiss me now. I've already given my heart away to you."

"Maybe..." Clark began, loathe to say the next words. "Maybe we ought to call off the lesson tonight. You know, spend some time apart, at least for the rest of tonight. I think we both need to cool off and clear our heads, before we do anything else that we might regret."

"Regret? Do you...regret what happened?" she asked, sounding vulnerable and almost childlike.

He shook his head. "Not the act, no. Only the fact that I know that I can never let myself do that again. It's already killing me inside that I can never be your husband. That I'll have to watch some other man — probably Luthor — pledge his undying love to you. I'm sorry, Lois, but I'm just not strong enough to continue down a path I know is only going to destroy me."

"So, what are you saying? That you wish you didn't love me at all?" she asked, and Clark could hear the held-back tears in her voice.

He sighed, wishing he had the right words to make her understand. "No, Lois," he said sadly, with a slow, slight shake of his head. "No, I don't regret falling in love with you one bit. But it kills me inside to know that I can only ever love you from afar."

"You don't think I feel the same way?"

"I guess...I guess I wasn't sure *how* you really felt. I know you've told me that you love me, but I guess I never imagined it was the same kind of love I feel for you. Not until tonight, just now when we kissed."

"Haven't you ever been in love before?" Lois asked softly.

Clark hesitated for half a heartbeat before admitting, "No." He felt his face blossom into a blush. "No," he said again, stronger this time. "There was never anyone in town who ever caught my attention that way. And even if there *had* been, I had nothing to offer them and no time to pursue them. I'd started to believe that love of any kind was simply not in the cards for me."

"Oh, Clark, you really *do* need to start seeing your own self-worth," Lois said gently, reaching out and resting her hand on his shoulder.

"My father used to say the same thing," he replied in a hoarse voice, choking back the raw emotions tearing through his body.

"He sounds like he was a smart man."

"He was. But, what about you?" he asked. "Surely you must have been in love before."

Lois seemed to think for a moment before speaking. "No. Oh, I had crushes here and there as a young girl, but nothing that you can really call love."

"I'll bet you caused a few boys to fall in love though," Clark lightly teased.

Lois laughed a little, but it wasn't the clear, pure laugh she usually had. "I guess. There *was* one. His name was Paul. He told me when I was...oh, I guess maybe sixteen, that he was going to marry me when he came back from this long journey he was going to make. I didn't want to marry him, but he kept saying over and over that I was going to marry him. It was getting very creepy and

concerning for a while there."

"What happened?"

"His ship capsized in a storm not long after he left. His best friend was the only survivor."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that," Clark replied, almost reflexively.

"I wasn't. I was relieved that he couldn't keep forcing the marriage thing. I was young and scared of him. Now...looking back? I guess part of me is sad that so many lives were lost that night when the ship went down, but I still get a chill that runs down my spine whenever I think about him, and not in a good way. What about you? I bet you were quite the heartbreaker."

Clark laughed, a little bitterly. "Hardly. There was one girl in town who took an obvious liking to me. Lana, the baker's daughter. Like your Paul, she was a little...*persistent* in her very unwanted attention. I finally took to avoiding her completely. My father used to do all the business we had at the bakery, just so I wouldn't have to deal with her." He chuckled as he said the words.

"What's so funny?" Lois asked, her expression showing puzzlement.

Clark fought through his laughter. "I just heard it. I mean, really, truly *heard it* as I was saying it. And it's just so funny and sad to me. I'm twenty years old and I had my father conduct all our business with the bakery just so I could hide from some...some...some irritating girl!" He couldn't hold back the roar of laughter that burst forth.

Lois seemed to relax further and joined in on the laughter. "What a pair we are, huh?" she asked after a while.

Clark shook his head as he worked to catch his breath. "You said it."

He stood and stretched his body, which was becoming cramped from sitting on the footstool. Lois stood as well, watching him as if waiting to take her cue from him. When nothing happened for several long seconds, she broke the silence.

"So...what now?"

"I don't know," Clark admitted sheepishly. He looked around the room, as though an answer would just appear there. His eyes landed on the King Arthur book laying on his bed. "Maybe just a few pages of the book tonight?"

"That would be great," Lois said with a tender smile.

She took him by the hand and guided him across the room to their usual places on the bed. Clark easily read most of the words, only stumbling in four different places. He also demonstrated how he'd worked on his writing. Lois, for her part, encouraged him and cheered him on, as she always did. And, as usual, her support meant the world to Clark.

When he finally settled down into bed for the night, sleep was a long time in coming. All he kept thinking of was that kiss — that singular moment where he had experienced Heaven.

Lex stayed for the better part of a week.

Every day, Lois spent most of her waking hours in the man's presence. And as the hours wore on, she came to see multiple facets of the older lord. Layer by layer, she discovered more and more about him. In return, she knew she was letting Lex peel back her own carefully crafted walls. Walls she'd never let anyone look behind before, with the exception of Clark. Although, she acknowledged to herself, with Clark, she'd eagerly lowered her defenses and had let him see more of her true self than she would ever allow Lex to see, even if Lex did eventually become her husband.

Lex.

Her father and mother loved the charming, smooth-talking lord. Even Lucy and James, who'd had their reservations about him in the beginning, had come to embrace Lex. Lois hated to admit it, even just to herself, but she too had come to see Lex in a new light. She would never love him, not in the way that she loved Clark, but she could perhaps be content enough as his wife. She

didn't *want* to be, but it was a relief to know that if she was backed against the wall and forced to marry him, it wouldn't quite be the prison sentence she'd once imagined it would be.

Still, each day that Lex stayed at Lane Manor that passed without a proposal made her ever more hopeful that perhaps one wouldn't come. Maybe Lex wasn't as taken with her as her father had clearly hoped he would be. And negotiations continued to join their forces to stop Lord Tempos, though Lois could see that Lex was holding back. Lois was finally starting to feel like things were going pretty well.

"Lois? May I speak with you, alone?" Lex asked on the morning he was to take his leave.

"Of course," Lois dutifully replied, setting aside the last piece of bread from her breakfast.

She stood from her chair and followed as Lex turned and walked out of the dining area. When she caught up with him, he took her by the arm and gently guided her to the main living space. Large windows overlooked the gardens, and a fire was dancing merrily in the hearth. Beyond the windows, it was ever so gently snowing. Lex stopped before the massive fireplace, faced her, and took both of her hands in his.

"Lois?"

"Yes, Lex?"

"There's something I want to say to you. Over the last week, seeing you every day...it's been one of the greatest pleasures of my life."

"Oh, uh, I'm flattered, Lex," she stammered, taken a little off guard, though she would later wonder why she hadn't seen what was coming.

Lex went to one knee. "Nothing would please me more than to see you every day for the rest of my life. My dear lady, would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

"Oh, Lex. It's a bit sudden..." she said, stalling for time as her mind spun.

She loved Clark. *He* was the man she wanted spend the rest of her life with. Not Lex. But how could she turn him down? He'd made it clear the night before that, although talks about joining together against Lord Tempos had progressed, he felt the Lanes weren't bringing enough to the table. To make matters worse, just that morning, reports had come in of another raid — this one just over the border of the Lane's lands.

"I know," Lex said, brushing aside her concerns. "But if I've learned anything during the last several days spent here in your home, it's that I shouldn't let any opportunity pass me by. Especially given the newest of Tempos' raids. Together, you and I can put an end to his ruthlessness and bring peace to the kingdom."

Lois took a steadying breath. The threat was clear enough, in her mind. Either she said yes to his proposal or he would withdraw his offer of aid. How many more people would suffer and die as a result?

"So, what do you say, my dear?" Lex asked.

The question hung like lead in the air between them while Lois gathered her courage.

"Yes, Lex. I will marry you. For the good of my people, I will be your wife."

Lex's face broke into a wide, pleased grin. He seemed to take no notice of Lois' implication that she was only marrying him to secure his aid in defeating Tempos.

"Excellent!" he said as he stood triumphantly. "We shall wed once I get back from my business with the king."

"And...and when will that be?" Lois asked, trying to sound excited, while her heart quietly shattered into a thousand irreparable pieces.

"It's a long journey, my lady. With the snow, it'll be even longer. And I'm not sure how long it will take for me to do everything I need to. My guess is two, maybe three months."

"That long?" she asked, faking her disappointment.

That short? her heart screamed.

"Well, I suppose I could push off my departure by a day. We could find a priest willing to bless our union today, if you'd like." He sounded only too eager to marry her, making Lois feel even warier.

She smiled at him. "As wonderful as that sounds, perhaps we *should* wait. After all, I don't have a wedding gown and we need some time to plan a feast for our friends and family. Imagine what a scandal it would be if we ran off and married today!"

Good, her mind said with approval. *Play to his weaknesses. Chief among them, his public image.*

Lex's smile dipped into a frown as he mulled over her concerns. "Perhaps you are right, Lois. Though I'm loathe to leave you behind, perhaps it's for the best. Come, let us share this happy news with your family. We can even make plans to finalize our alliance against Lord Tempos before I take my leave this morning."

Lois mutely nodded and linked arms with her new husband-to-be. But her heart lay dead in her chest as she walked toward a future she'd never wanted.

Clark was feeling good. After nearly a week of Lord Luthor's presence in Lane Manor, the man and his retinue were *finally* leaving. It almost felt like a boulder had been sitting on Clark's chest, rendering him unable to breathe, ever since Lord Luthor had stepped foot on Lord Lane's lands. But now Luthor was leaving and the boulder had been lifted, allowing Clark to breathe once again.

He worked extra quickly at getting the horses ready for departure. The beasts seemed to pick up on his excited mood. They pranced and snorted in the snowy air, well rested and ready to move on to wherever it was their masters would be taking them. Clark didn't know or care where that was, so long as Luthor was *gone*. He patted the horses and talked to them as he worked — nothing that anyone could possibly overhear and use against him, of course, just mundane things like the weather and what he was doing to them, like tightening straps, adjusting saddles, and putting the bits in their mouths.

Finally, just as Clark finished walking the last horse out into the courtyard, Lord Lane and his family appeared — with the exception, of course, of Lucy, who was likely resting her broken leg. Lord Luthor and his retinue were with them and Clark had to take a double look. Why was Luthor's arm linked with Lois'?

I've got a bad feeling about this, he thought, his good mood instantly vanishing.

Still, he slapped on a happy enough face and did his job, making sure the horses stayed calm enough for their riders to mount up.

"Goodbye, my love," he heard Lord Luthor telling Lois. "I shall think of you and miss you every day while we are apart."

"Goodbye, Lex," Lois replied.

Clark had to use every ounce of willpower not to cringe as Lex bent his head to Lois and kissed her cheek.

"I look forward to the day I will become your husband," he continued.

Husband?!

You knew it was coming, his mind shot back at his shocked system. *Don't try to deny it.*

Yes, he thought back to that inner voice. *Yes, I knew it was a possibility. But I never really imagined it as something that was actually real. I know I can never be with Lois that way, but to see her with him, of all people?*

"Samuel? I will send word to my army to uphold my end of our new alliance," Luthor was saying, and Clark realized he must have missed part of the conversation.

"I look forward to defeating Tempos' marauders with you,"

Lord Lane replied.

"Until our next meeting then, when we merge our families into one," Luthor said, just before nudging his horse into motion.

The Lane family stayed and watched until Luthor and all of his men had left the manor's grounds. Then, one by one, they each turned and began to leave. Ellen was first, followed in short order by James. Clark could tell Lois was waiting to speak with him, but at that moment, his heart hurt too much to allow that.

"Milord?" he asked, as Lord Lane started to walk away.

"Yes?"

"Begging your pardon, but I was wondering if I could have permission to take Merlin out for a ride. He's in need of the exercise. I won't go far and I'll be back before dark. Everything is in order in the stable."

Lord Lane immediately nodded. "Of course. You've proven yourself reliable and a man of your word. I trust you to go wherever it is that you wish."

"Thank you, milord. That means a lot to me." He inclined his head respectfully.

He saw the fleeting look of hurt on Lois' face, but she quickly covered it up again. She turned without a word and made a swift exit. Clark winced a little as he watched her go. She was angry with him for doing what he'd done. But in that moment, Clark couldn't deal with her anger. He was too busy bleeding from his torn and mangled heart.

"Come on, Merlin," he said, turning to his old friend. "Let's get out of here. Just you and me, buddy. Just like the old days."

He saddled the horse swiftly, eager to be on his way. Then he threw on the warmest cloak he'd been supplied with and mounted up. With a gentle, practiced manner, he nudged the horse into a trot. Once he was out beyond the manor grounds, he urged Merlin into a gallop. Over the snow covered land they flew like a gale-force wind. They didn't stop until Clark felt Merlin beginning to slow on his own as he tired. Clark guided the horse to a strand of pine trees growing alongside a fast flowing little stream. He slipped off Merlin's back and led the stallion over to the water. Both man and beast drank from the icy water.

Once he and Merlin were refreshed, Clark sat beneath one of the towering pines. The canopy above had kept the ground clear of snow and provided him with some cover from the falling white flakes as well. He let Merlin graze as he wished on the few patches of sparse dead grass that had been exposed by the wind. He leaned against the tree and sighed.

The ride out to this spot had been exhilarating. Clark hadn't directed Merlin at all. He'd simply let the animal run wherever he wished. The speed of the gallop, the icy wind in his face, the sensation of freedom had helped to purge all thought and emotion from Clark. He hadn't thought of Lois or his broken heart the entire time. He'd focused only on the here and now. How he'd missed such rides on Merlin! In his old life, such carefree rides had been much more frequent, even if there *were* times when Clark was simply too busy to have time for such things.

His old life.

Sometimes, like now, Clark missed it immensely. And sometimes, like during the hours spent at night with Lois as she taught him how to read and write or just sat and talked with him, Clark didn't miss it at all.

Lois.

Soon, he knew, he would be missing her as well. She would be married off to the devil himself — as Clark saw Luthor — and living in Luthor Manor. And he would be left behind, with the rest of Lois' family. No more visits at night. No more patient lessons. No more late night vigils as horses gave birth or needed some other kind of round-the-clock observation and care. No more stolen moments of complete bliss.

Oh, he supposed he would be content enough living with the Lanes, even without Lois. They were all nice people. He really did

like each of them. And they treated him much better than he was sure he deserved. He had a good job working with the animals he so deeply cared for. Though they were merely a servant's quarters, his room and all the furnishings seemed like the stuff of royalty, compared to what he'd known all his life. He always had more than enough to eat and had never once felt more than a gurgle in his stomach to remind him to take a break to eat lunch. Hunger and the weakness caused from hunger were things of the past and almost completely forgotten, save for a passing memory. As long as he stayed with the Lanes and remained in their good graces, Clark knew he would never want for anything.

Except for Lois.

He would go to his grave loving and wanting her.

"Oh, Merlin," he lamented as the horse wandered closer to him. "What am I going to do? Lois is everything I've ever wanted in my life but she's promised to the devil." He sighed. "Mom and Dad would have had some pearl of wisdom or advice for me. But what that might have been, I don't know. It feels like I've never needed them more than right now. I miss them, boy."

The horse lowered his head and nuzzled Clark, as though he understood and was trying to comfort his master. Perhaps he was. Clark often felt like the horse understood what he was telling him. He stroked the horse's nose affectionately, if not a little distractedly.

"Go on, boy," he told Merlin after a few minutes. "Go enjoy yourself. It's been far too long since you and I had time to do whatever we want."

He watched as Merlin drank again from the stream, then frolicked in the snow. It was good to see his friend so happy, but inside his own heart, Clark felt cold and dead. He ceased to feel how cold it was as he sat under that tree. Any traces of an appetite disappeared — not that he'd remembered to take any food with him. He almost felt like he became part of the landscape — small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

What's wrong with you? he chided himself. *You knew this would happen. Did you really think that some miracle would just happen and you'd be free to marry Lois? She's a noblewoman for God's sake! You are an absolute nothing. So snap out of it already!*

He stayed in that peaceful, quiet place until the late afternoon. By then the temperature had dropped further and he was beginning to feel the cold. He was more concerned about Merlin than he was for himself though. He whistled for the horse and Merlin came trotting over immediately. Clark rubbed the animal's nose again before mounting up.

"Merlin, go home," he instructed the horse.

With that, Merlin sprang away. Clark gave him free reign, knowing that horse knew his way back to Lane Manor, and that Merlin now associated the place with "home." They made good time, and before Clark knew it, he was dismounting and unsaddling Merlin. He fed and watered the horse and brushed him down. Then he checked on the other horses, filled a few troughs in order to last the night, and crossed the courtyard to where his quarters were. He changed into warm, dry clothing before joining the rest of the household servants for dinner. But he wasn't in a joking mood and spoke very little, brushing aside the few concerned questions he received, claiming that he was fine but tired.

He didn't eat much, despite having skipped lunch. For the first time, the food seemed flat and tasteless, like sawdust, to his tongue. His throat was too dry to swallow much, regardless of how much water he consumed. His stomach threatened to reject each and every morsel that made it down. Still, he ate enough so as not to offend Francois, and even managed a few compliments to the chef.

He was more than glad to finally make it back to his chamber at the end of the evening. All he wanted was to sleep and wake up

in the morning to find that Lois' engagement to Luthor had all been just a particularly horrid nightmare. He immediately changed into his bedclothes upon entering his bedchamber. He thought about picking up King Arthur, but decided against it. He had no desire to do anything that made him think too much about Lois.

"Maybe I'll work on one of the animals," he said to himself as he stood, lost, in the middle of the room.

He padded over to the fireplace and picked up his knives. Then he searched the small pile of wooden figurines he kept on the mantel. Usually, one of them would call strongly to him, making the choice of which one to work on easy. But not tonight. Tonight the wooden figurines — all in various stages of completion — were silent. He forced himself to choose one anyway. It was a tiny cat, laying on his back, belly exposed for a rub. Clark sat in his chair, put his feet up on the footstool, and carefully worked to free the creature's rear legs and tail from where they still lay hidden in the untouched wood. But he was distracted and still more than a little hurt and angry. He pressed too hard with the knife in a delicate spot and snapped the cat's back leg right off. Disgusted, he threw everything except the knife onto the fire and moodily watched it ignite and burn.

"Oh, what's the use?" he asked aloud.

He put the knife away after another quick glance at his unfinished products. He seriously considered the figurine he was making for James. The younger man had politely asked if Clark could make one of Brutus, his beloved dog. It had taken over a week, but Clark had finally found the right piece of wood for the carving. It was mostly done. He just needed to free the tail from the scrap wood and add the details — the eyes, mouth, and illusion of fur — but he decided against it. He'd already completely ruined one piece tonight because his head and heart weren't in it. He didn't want to destroy a second piece.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"Who is it?" Clark asked, knowing the answer before he even asked the question.

"It's me," came Lois' voice. "We need to talk."

He wanted to say no. He wanted to say that he wasn't in the mood for talking. He wanted to pretend that he was already halfway to dreamland to avoid the conversation he knew was coming.

"Come in," he said instead.

He leaned his back against the windowsill and crossed his arms. A second later, the door opened and Lois walked in. She quickly crossed to where Clark was standing. He could see a sheen of unshed tears in her eyes. But, to her credit, not a single one of them fell as she leveled her gaze at him.

"Clark..." she began, letting his name hang in the air between them.

"Lois..." he replied, just as at a loss for words as she appeared to be.

"I'm...I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Why?" Clark asked. "Why did you say yes to him?"

"What choice did I have?" she responded bitterly. "It was either agree to marry him and secure his help in defeating Lord Tempos or turn him down and watch as Tempos' men continue their reign of terror." She signed miserably as she plopped down into his chair. "I hate this, Clark."

He sighed in turn. "I do too. And I'm sorry you were forced into such a choice."

"I wanted to talk to you earlier, but you took off so fast," she said after a minute.

"I know," he admitted. "I was just so...angry and hurt and even a little taken aback. I mean, I've known all along that it was a possibility. You made that very clear from early on that your father was pushing for this exact outcome. But I really prayed it would never come to pass. I know I can't be the one to marry you, but I had wanted so badly for it to be anyone but Luthor. You deserve so

much better than that...that devil in human form." He nearly spit the last words out.

"I know you hate him. And I know he's a bit of a heavy-handed lord. What he did to you was wrong. But I've gotten to know him on a personal level and found him to be...nicer than I ever expected."

"It's a mask, a show he's putting on to fool you," Clark said with certainty.

"Clark, you've met him, what, once? One horrible time where he was harsher on you than he should have been? You don't know him like I do," she said defensively.

"No, you don't know him the way I do!" he snapped back, his anger flaring. "I've lived my *entire life* under his rule. Maybe I didn't share dinners and walks in the garden with him, but I got to know him pretty well," he spat out. "I saw countless people publicly whipped or thrown in jail for failing to pay outrageously high taxes. I saw good people hanged for killing squirrels to ensure that their children had some kind of meat on the table so they wouldn't starve to death. But, yeah, sure, you know him less than a week and know him better than I do," he thundered in a low, intense voice.

"I can change all of that," Lois said, sounding very self-assured. "Once I marry him, I will be in the perfect position to *help* the people living under his laws."

"No. You won't."

"You really doubt me that much?" she asked, hurt.

He shook his head. "Rumor has it that his late wife tried to do something similar," he finally said after a moment.

"And?" She crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow, daring him to make his point.

"And, rumor has it that her death wasn't as 'unexpected' as Luthor claimed. There are some who think he may have slipped her some kind of slow acting poison."

"You lie!" she accused.

But Clark wasn't lying. The talk of it had circulated all over the lands. For more than a month, it was all anyone had talked about in the marketplace.

"I wish I was," he said sadly. "Lois, look, you know me. And I thought you trusted me. I know, I know. I have no actual proof of it. I'm not even sure if I believe it or not. All I know is that Lady Arianna only gave him three daughters. One of them died hours after birth. The other two are married to lords in the south. There was talk of one son who died while still in the womb. That was just before things got really bad under his rule — as if he was punishing everyone else for the death of his heir. Supposedly, Lady Arianna became tired of his overbearing laws and tried to help. I know there was talk of her having food delivered to the poor in other parts of his lands — they never got to where I lived. Soon after, she died under mysterious circumstances."

"I...I heard the same rumors," she admitted after a moment.

"At least, the one about the stillborn son and how Lex was never really the same after that."

"See? I'm not lying to you, Lois. I would *never* lie to you."

Lois took a long, deep breath, then slowly let it out of her nose. She appeared to be thinking over everything. "I know you wouldn't. It's one of the first things I noticed about you...your honesty. Still, even if the rumors are true, there's nothing I can do but to try to make the best of a bad situation. If trying to help people costs me my life, so be it. It won't be much of a life without you in it anyway."

"Lois," he replied, touched. "Don't waste your life on some fruitless endeavor. Please. I don't think I could bear it if you lost your life to that monster."

"I'm already losing my life, don't you see? The moment I sold myself to secure his aid against Tempos, my life...my freedom...ended."

"Do you love him?" Clark suddenly asked.

"What?"

"Do you, in any way, love Lord Luthor?" he elaborated. "Do you *think* you *could* love him, given enough time?"

"No. I don't love him. And I never will. He's not you."

"What about him? Does he love you?"

Lois paused and thoughtfully chewed on her lower lip. "I think so?" It was more of a question than a statement. "I don't know, for sure. He's never actually said it."

"Wait," Clark said, pinching the bridge of his nose, as though warding off a headache or nose bleed. "He never said that he loved you, but he expected you to say yes to his proposal?"

"I...well...I guess so," Lois stammered.

Clark rolled his eyes. "Wonderful."

"I don't care if he loves me or not, don't you get it?" Lois said, her voice pitching higher as she fought back her tears. "I just need to be able to tolerate him. That's all."

"But you deserve more than that!" Clark fired back, his desperation rising. "You deserve to be loved, Lois!"

"Maybe I can convince Father to let you come with me when I marry. We can figure out some excuse to have you come along...maybe I can refuse to trust Whisper with any other stable master. Lex said he's often away conducting business with other lords. It shouldn't be too difficult to..."

"Lois, no." He put his hand up to stop her as he interrupted.

"No. Please, if you care at all for me, don't make me go back there. Don't make me live under his rule ever again."

"But at least we could be together!"

"And he'd kill us both if he suspected that we were more than just servant and master," he said firmly.

"So...what then? We just never see one another again, save for whatever brief visits I might make back here?" she demanded.

"I don't know!" he exclaimed, exasperated. Then, calmer, "I don't know. Maybe?"

"I'm sorry, Clark. Please believe me. But this is the only way I can protect innocent lives from being lost," she said after a brief silence descended on the room.

"I know it is. I hate it, but I respect that you're doing what you think is necessary," he conceded. "And if it was any other lord, I could at least pretend to be happy for you. It's just...*him*." He sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be adding to your stresses. It's not fair to you. So let's just..." he took a breath, swallowing down the despair in his voice, "drop the discussion."

"Fine." The word was short and clipped, indicating that she was not at all happy to change the subject. "How was your ride?"

"It was good," he said, wincing inwardly at how emotionless his words sounded. "Merlin and I both needed to get out and just be on our own. It's been too long. I used to take him out for long rides all the time."

"Do you miss your old life?" Lois asked quietly.

"Parts of it," he immediately admitted with a shallow nod. "I miss being my own master. Doing what I wanted, when I wanted. But my life here? It so many ways, it's better. I don't have to scrape for food or worry that the next big snow storm is going to collapse the roof or something. I feel...secure here, in a way that was never possible in my old life."

"I'm glad," she said with a slight smile.

"No matter what happens, I'll always be thankful that you stepped in and saved me from a life of slavery under who knows who. I'll never regret falling in love with you."

"Morning, everyone," Clark said in a subdued tone the next morning. The horses glanced in his direction, but for the most part, ignored him. "Nice to see you too," he limply joked.

He set right to work, hoping the monotonous tasks would numb his spinning mind. Lois hadn't stayed all that long the night before. Their once easy conversations and banter had turned stiff and uncomfortable in the wake of Lois' engagement to Lex. He'd

told her that he was tired and wanted to turn in early for the night. He could see that she'd believed there was more to it than that, but, mercifully, she hadn't pressed the issue. In truth, Clark *had* been tired, but it had been a weariness born of his emotions rather than any physical labor he'd preformed. Thankfully, once he'd slipped beneath the warm blankets of his bed, sleep had claimed him almost instantly.

He took an earlier lunch that morning, the previous day's near-fast catching up with him. He still wasn't all that hungry, but the meager breakfast he'd eaten and the slightly larger lunch, he started to feel a little better. Even his mood was slightly improved from the previous day. He almost felt like things were sliding back into what passed for the new standard of normal in his life. He even allowed himself to do some heavy lifting, for the sole purpose of strengthening his muscles. After all, with Luthor and his retinue gone, there wasn't all that much to do.

It was just past noon when a single rider approached. Clark met him in the courtyard, as he did with anyone who came to Lane Manor. He took the reins and the man slid off the horse's back. The poor beast was lathered with sweat and breathing hard. Immediately, Clark felt bad for the animal.

"Is Lord Luthor still here?" the rider demanded, almost breathlessly.

Clark shook his head. "No. He left yesterday in the late morning."

"Damn," the man muttered. He tried to mount up again.

"Whoa, wait a second," Clark said, raising his hand in a 'stop' gesture. "Your horse is about to drop. He needs a rest. And so do you."

"I can't. I need to get to Lord Luthor right away."

"You won't get to him at all if you kill your horse," Clark reminded him. "You can still catch up with Lord Luthor, after you and your horse both get something to eat and drink."

"I can't..." the man argued back, but it was clear that the idea of getting some food was inviting.

"You *can*. Here, let me show you the way to the kitchen, just as soon as I stable your horse."

At that moment, however, one of the maids passed by, hurrying to get out of the cold. Clark called to her.

"Colette? Could you do me a favor, please? Can you take this gentleman to the kitchen? He's a guest and is in need of something hot to eat and drink."

"Of course," she replied, giving Clark a flirtatious smile that Clark chose not to react to. "Right this way, please," she told the rider, looking disappointed by Clark's disinterest.

"Thanks, Colette," Clark said as she guided the visitor away from the stable. Then, to the horse, "Okay, fella, let's get you taken care of. Poor guy. You're totally overworked."

He looked at the horse, then took a double take. Something seemed very familiar about that brown and tan face. Suddenly, Clark had a very bad feeling. He hurried around the side of the horse and checked the animal's hindquarters.

"Wiley?" he breathed, his breath coming in a puff of white mist in the cold air. "Is that you, buddy?"

Of course, there was no question about it. The brand on the horse's flank was undeniable. A crude star with three lines coming from the back, as if the star was hurtling through the sky. It was the brand used by Clark's family for generations, used on all the horses they intended to keep for themselves.

"What are you doing with one of Luthor's men?" he asked the horse as he guided him inside the stable. He opened the door to the first unoccupied stall. "Here you go, buddy."

The stall he brought Wiley to happened to be right next to Merlin's stall. The horses sniffed at each other and neighed happily, long lost friends reunited. Clark fed and watered the tired horse, then ran off to find Lord Lane. He found the man in his study. Clark took a moment to catch his breath, then knocked on

the open door.

"Clark?" Lord Lane said, looking up from the book he was reading. "Is something wrong?"

"You could say that, milord," Clark hedged. "May I speak with you in private?"

Samuel set aside the book on a small round table next to his chair. "Of course. Come in."

Clark inclined his head in acknowledgement, then entered the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. Samuel gestured to the chair across from him. Clark sat and clasped his hands together worriedly.

"Milord, a visitor just arrived at the manor, looking for Lord Luthor. He seemed very agitated when I told him that Lord Luthor and his men left yesterday. I sent him to get some food from the kitchen while I tended to his horse. The poor animal was about ready to drop."

Samuel nodded. "Good work, giving the horse a rest, and for tending to our guest."

"Thank you," Clark said.

"Is that all you needed to tell me? That we have a guest?"

Clark shook his head, taking a deep breath, nervous about what he had to say next. "No, milord. When I was tending to the horse, I...I realized something disturbing. It...it's *my* horse."

Samuel's friendly expression darkened and his brow furrowed. "What do you mean?" he asked as his frown grew.

"I mean...it's Wild Heart. We used to call him Wiley, for short. He...uh...he was one of the horses that was stolen from my farm when Lord Tempos' raiders came through and destroyed my home."

"Are you certain of this?" Samuel asked. It was hard to tell if he believed Clark or not.

"I'd know that horse anywhere, milord. It's Wiley all right. And I can prove it. He's got my family's brand on him, same as Merlin."

Samuel's eyebrows raised with interest. "Show me."

"Yes, milord."

Samuel grabbed a cloak and followed Clark. The two men walked at a swift pace through the manor and out to the stable. Clark opened the stall door to where Wiley was, letting Lord Lane go in first. He followed behind and showed Lord Lane the crudely designed shooting star on the horse's hindquarters. Then he showed off the matching design that Merlin sported. When he was done, Lord Lane looked troubled.

"Yes, I see," Samuel muttered to himself as his fingers traced the brand on Merlin's flank. "This is...troubling," he said in a halting, muted tone.

"I'm sorry, milord, but I thought it urgent to tell you."

"You did the right thing. Thank you, Clark."

"Thank you, milord," Clark replied uncomfortably.

He wasn't proud of what he'd found. In fact, he felt wrong for seeing it. And despite Samuel's assurances that he'd done the right thing to bring it to his attention, Clark felt about six inches tall. He felt lost as to what to say or do next.

"I suppose it could be a matter of a stolen horse being sold to an unwitting buyer," Samuel said, rubbing his chin as he stared at the two horses. "In fact, I'd wager that's exactly what this is."

"It could be," Clark had to allow. "But, milord, why would Lord Luthor buy anything from Lord Tempos? Especially if he's as committed to stopping the man as he says he is?"

Lord Lane frowned. "It's a good question, I'll admit that. I suppose Wiley could have changed hands one or more times to muddy the trail."

Clark didn't think that was the case at all. Feeling bolstered by the fact that Lord Lane usually encouraged him to speak his mind on things that mattered, he shook his head.

"Begging your pardon, milord, but my gut instinct is telling me no. From the little I know about Lord Tempos, he's not one to

make things more complicated than they need to be. Especially not something as trivial as selling a horse."

Samuel appeared to turn that over in his mind before speaking. "Another good point. But what else could it be? No offense, Clark, but while Wiley is a fine horse, there are plenty of other fine horses out there that Lex could have purchased."

"I don't know, milord. But something doesn't feel right about this."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it has an innocent explanation."

Samuel paused for a second. "But, that doesn't mean I won't be looking into things. Again, thank you for bringing this to my attention."

Clark simply nodded.

"That being said, there's something else I'd like to speak with you about, in private."

They were alone in the stable, but Clark understood what Lord Lane was saying. Anyone could just wander into the stable at any time. They needed to go elsewhere.

"Yes, milord. Perhaps my chamber?" Clark offered.

Lord Lane nodded, a bit gruffly. "Yes. Perfect."

Clark nodded and mutely led Lord Lane to his chamber. He opened the door and allowed Lord Lane to enter first. He watched with trepidation as Lord Lane appraised the room. The wooden figurines on the mantel caught the lord's eye, and he went over to inspect them. He picked up the partially completed dog and turned to Clark.

"Brutus?" he asked, lifting the dog in his fingers just a little.

Clark nodded. "Yes. I was making it for your son. He actually requested it."

"It's a great likeness. You have considerable skill, Clark."

Clark fought down a blush. "Thank you, milord."

Lord Lane put the dog back where he'd found it. He picked up the rough form of what would eventually become Merlin, inspected it from all sides, then he set that one down as well.

"Clark," he began, sitting down in the chair before the hearth.

Clark paced to the small table and leaned against it. "Milord?" he asked, when Lord Lane didn't continue.

Samuel sighed. "Clark, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. Something a bit, well, awkward." He paused again. "I know that you and my daughter have feelings for one another."

Clark's stomach dropped and turned to lead. His heart beat faster in fear. What would Lord Lane do to him, for daring to fall in love with Lois?

"I...I..." he stammered, looking for words.

Lord Lane waved his hand as though swatting away a fly.

"Don't bother to deny it. You aren't in any trouble. I want to speak plainly with you, that's all."

He was caught. What else could he do but to tell the truth?

"I...do care for her," he admitted.

"I think you do more than just care for her," Samuel prodded.

Clark hung his head, like a child caught with his hand in the treat jar.

"I love her," he said, his voice nearly a whisper. "I know I shouldn't but...I love her. I have, ever since I first laid eyes on her, when she bought a wooden bear for Lady Lucy."

Lord Lane closed his eyes, as though Clark's admission pained him. "I thought so. And I've no doubt that she loves you."

Clark decided to neither confirm nor deny Lord Lane's statement. "How?" he asked instead. "I tried to hide it. I guess I didn't do as good a job as I thought I did. What gave it away, milord?"

Samuel smiled, taking Clark completely off-guard. "It's the way you look at her. The way you talk to her. It reminds me of the way I was around Ellen when I first met her. And then, yesterday, you couldn't stand to be here just mere moments after finding out about Lois' betrothal to Lex. It was pretty obvious why."

Clark felt his face heat up with a blush. "I...oh," he managed. He swallowed hard and tried again. "Milord, I'm sorry. I can't help loving Lady Lois. But I swear to you, I will never act on it. I will never do anything to jeopardize her betrothal or marriage to Lord Luthor. You have my word."

"And I appreciate that," Samuel said with a nod. "Look, Clark, it's not that I don't like you. It's not that I don't think you're an upstanding, dependable young man. Because you are exactly the kind of man I'd always prayed for my little girl to marry. But..." he shrugged, letting the word hang in the air for a moment.

"But I have nothing to offer her. I'm not a lord. There's nothing I can do to help put an end to Lord Tempos' reign of terror," Clark supplied. "Believe me, milord, I know my place. It's in the stable tending to the horses, wishing your daughter well in her marriage."

"You're wrong about one thing. Maybe two," Samuel said softly after a moment.

"Milord?"

"You *do* have something to offer Lois. Your friendship. I've never seen her so happy, ever since the two of you became friends. You see, friendships have never come easy for her. I know, it's hard to believe, especially given how easily the friendship has grown between you two. But it's the truth. She's never had that life-long, 'I would do anything for you' relationship with anyone before. So, I'm thankful that you two have become close."

Samuel took a second to clear his throat. "And the second thing? Well, depending on how Wiley wound up in Luthor's hands, maybe you *can* help put a stop to Lord Tempos. If we can help cut off some of his finances, we may be able to weaken his reign of terror, as you so aptly put it. But that's assuming we can figure out how he's moving his stolen property. I'll need your help to do it though."

"My help, milord?" Clark asked, puzzled. "What can I do?"

"I'm not sure yet, but servants are often in better positions to discover hidden things. You see, many lords and ladies tend to...well, to forget about the servants. They dismiss them as unimportant, sometimes as even unintelligent. In many ways, servants can become invisible to them, unless, of course, they happen to make a mistake of some kind."

"You are not such a lord, milord," Clark assured the man.

Lord Lane smiled slightly. "I'm glad you think so. But lords like Tempos and Lex? They may well be those kinds of men."

"What would you have me do?"

He shook his head. "I wish I knew. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open any time a visitor arrives here. Let me know immediately if something seems amiss."

"Yes, milord. You can count on me."

"Good. In the meantime, I promised Lex that I would send two of my horses — Apollo and Maximus — to his manor. Sort of a gift that I'm giving him to celebrate our new alliance. I'd like you to deliver them for me."

"Milord?" Clark asked, feeling himself begin to panic. He never wanted to set foot in Luthor Manor again. "Please don't make me go there."

"I know you dislike the man, but he won't even be there. And I trust you more than anyone to get those horses where they need to be. You have a way with these animals that goes beyond anything I've ever seen."

"Milord, please," Clark begged.

Lord Lane shook his head. "I need you to be the one to do it. You can deliver the horses and be back in what? A day? I'll give you money to stay in an inn if the need arises."

"Milord," Clark nearly whined.

"Clark, don't make me order you to do it."

Clark sighed. He knew this was an argument he wasn't going to win. He bowed his head in deference.

"As you wish, milord. Apollo and Maximus, right?" He knew

he sounded defeated, but he was caught. He couldn't defy his lord's wishes. His parents had taught him never to argue with a noble.

Lord Lane looked relieved that Clark wasn't going to argue with him. "Those are the ones."

"I'll leave first thing in the morning then," Clark said, already mentally preparing a list of things he would need for the trip.

"Good. I'll meet you in the stables in the morning with the money for your meals and lodging."

"I'll be there at dawn," Clark said with a nod.

At least some good will come of this, Clark thought as Lord Lane took his leave. If I'm forced to go to Luthor's home, I'll be able to look around and see what other secrets he might be hiding. He's already got one of my horses. What else does he have that he shouldn't?

True to his word, Clark was ready to depart by dawn the next morning. It was overcast and cold, with a stiff breeze blowing, but Clark didn't think it would snow. At least, he *hoped* it wouldn't. He wanted to get this trip over and done with as soon as possible. Lord Lane met him in the stable as promised.

Lois didn't see him off. He'd told her of his plans the night before, when she'd come to his room for their nightly reading lesson. She'd immediately expressed an interest in seeing him off, but he had begged her not to. What was the point in dragging her out of bed so early in the morning, just to watch as he mounted up on Merlin and rode out into the countryside? Reluctantly, she'd agreed, though Clark had secretly wondered if she just might come out to the stable anyway, despite his wishes. He was glad to see that she'd respected his request.

They'd managed to finish King Arthur that night and Lois had promised to pick out something new and different when he returned. Lois had thought that perhaps Clark might enjoy a book about the ancient gods worshipped by the Romans and Greeks. He had agreed that it could be interesting. He'd also wound up telling Lois about his conversation with her father. She was less than thrilled to find out that Samuel knew of her love for Clark, but she seemed relieved at the same time, knowing that Samuel wasn't going to punish Clark for their shared feelings. Some lords, she had said, would kill or sell a servant who dared to fall in love with one of their family members.

Clark's mind and heart stayed with Lois the entire time he and Merlin led the other horses to Lord Luthor's manor. It was slower going than he would have liked, but all things considered, the journey went smoothly. He reached Luthor Manor without incident, stopping a couple of times to eat or to let the horses drink from frigid little streams that they came across. It helped that the horses now responded to Clark's language of whistles. He had but to whistle and they did exactly what he wanted. He stopped just before Luthor's home and took a deep, steadying breath.

"Ready for this, Merlin?" he asked, his breath white in the cold air. Merlin snorted. "Me neither, buddy," Clark replied. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

He urged the horse forward, with Apollo and Maximus trailing behind. Two guards opened the gates as he approached. He identified himself and his reason for visiting and was permitted entrance to the manor. He immediately brought the horses to the stable, where a skinny, freckle-faced young man greeted him.

"Hello!" the man said pleasantly. "I'm Jude, the stable master."

Clark inclined his head in respect. "My name is Clark. I am the stable master of Lord and Lady Lane."

"Nice to meet you," Jude said. "What can I do for you today?"

"Lord Lane sends these two horses as gifts to your master,"

Clark said, nodding in the direction of Apollo and Maximus. "The golden one is Apollo. The black and silver is Maximus."

"Apollo? Lord Luthor will like that," Jude replied with a

smile. "Almost all of his animals bear the name of some ancient god or another." He pointed down the row of stalls. "Zeus, Athena, Osiris, Horus, Odin, Loki, Ares, Pluto, Juno...well, you get the point."

Clark vaguely recognized some of the names. But it made sense to him on a very visceral level that Lord Luthor and his extraordinary ego would name his animals after some of the most powerful beings that human minds had ever conjured up. He wondered briefly if Luthor considered *himself* to be a god.

"What's that one's name?" he asked, pointing to a silver colored mare. His mind was telling him not to demonstrate his ability to read, though each stall bore the name of the animal within in gold.

"Oh, the silver? That's Freya. She's one of our newest horses," Jude said dismissively. It was clear he wasn't all that interested in making small talk about the horses' names.

"She's beautiful," Clark complimented.

She's mine, he thought to himself. *That's Aurora, I'm sure of it.*

He craned his neck a little, searching for the brand on her hindquarters. He tried to keep the motion looking natural. The horse shifted just a little as he pretended to admire her. There it was! The shooting star of his family.

What are you up to, Luthor? Clark asked himself as he wandered away from the stall, sudden fear drenching him. *That's two of my horses that you have. How many more?*

"Would you mind if I looked at the rest of the horses?" he asked Jude, working hard to keep his voice steady. "Breeding is one of my interests, and these are some fine animals."

"Sure, sure," Jude replied, waving Clark off as he went to fill some water troughs.

Clark took a quick, but thorough look around as he gave Jude a quick rundown of the whistled commands that the he'd taught the horses. As he looked around, Clark found two more of his horses — a coal black stallion named Ronin and a light brown mare named Butterscotch. Both of them bore his family's mark on their flanks. Clark felt more and more uneasy as the minutes passed. He saw to Merlin, making sure that the horse was well taken care of, as well as the two animals he'd been told to bring to Luthor Manor.

"It's cold out today. If you'd like, I'm sure the kitchen would get you something hot to eat," Jude offered as he approached Clark, wiping his hands on an old rag.

Despite his aversion to Luthor Manor, something in Clark told him to stay. He nodded.

"That would be great," he said.

"Come on. I'll take you there. I was just about to get something to eat myself."

"Thank you," Clark replied. His stomach rumbled as if to prove that he was solely interested in the food, and not the reason why his stolen horses were the property of Lord Luthor now.

"Right this way," Jude said.

They made idle talk about the animals as they walked. Clark feigned interest in Luthor's quest to find only the best horses available. Although, he had to admit to himself, it *did* feel good, knowing that Luthor thought of *his* horses as some of the best, no matter how he came into possession of them. He even had to force down a satisfied smirk at the thought.

"August? Fix our visitor up with some food and drink, please," Jude said as they walked into the kitchen. "He's just brought the master two fine horses to add to his collection."

"Aye," the one-eyed chef replied.

"I must return to my duties," Jude told Clark as he grabbed one of the meals the cook had set aside, apparently for the servants to grab on the run. "Rest assured your horse will be ready for you when you return."

"I appreciate that," Clark said with a nod. "I won't be long. I

have to get back to my own master."

"Until later then."

Jude turned on his heel and walked off. With a series of grunts and half-formed sounds, August heated up some chicken and vegetable soup for Clark and gave him a small loaf of warm, flaky bread. A draught of cold water washed everything down. Clark was surprised at the meager meal. He was, of course, grateful for any offer of food, but perhaps he was getting too used to life under Lord Lane's rule. At Lane Manor, Francois would have made sure that the meal included butter for the bread, some cheese, perhaps a piece of fruit, and as many helpings as a person required to fill their belly. Good conversation would have been provided as well, but Luthor's chef was a man of few words it seemed, and he barely spared any for Clark.

Clark ate in silence, preferring to spend the time with his own thoughts. Everything kept spiraling back to his horses out in Luthor's stable. But no matter how hard he thought about it, no matter what angle he tried to see, nothing made any sense to him. Still, he would report this new, disturbing development to Samuel when he returned. Surely Lord Lane would know what to do with the information, or so Clark hoped. Finishing his meal, Clark thanked the cook, who acknowledged him with a guttural grunt.

Clark made his way back to the stables, eager to be on his way. He felt grimy and greasy for having even stepped on the grounds of Luthor Manor, let alone for having partaken of food on the premises. He wanted nothing more than to be back at Lane Manor, to have a hot bath, and to pass the evening with whatever book Lois had chosen for him to learn from next. With a quickened step, he hurried back to Merlin, thinking of how much faster he would travel, now that he wasn't leading other horses.

When he got to the stable, he could hear voices coming from beyond the door, which was slightly ajar. Neither of the voices belonged to Jude, and Clark immediately felt like an intruder. Still, he felt something compelling him to stay.

"You are late," said a snooty male voice.

"I came as fast as I could," replied the other, younger voice.

"What message do you bring?" the first man asked, getting straight to the point.

"Lord Tempos would like..."

Lord Tempos?! Clark thought, momentarily losing the thread of conversation. What does Lord Tempos have to do with Luthor?

"...the horses are acceptable?" the messenger was asking when Clark pulled himself out of his thoughts.

"Very," the snooty voice said. Clark thought hard about the voice, knowing he'd heard it once before.

"My master will be glad to hear it."

"Lord Luthor has a message for your master," the first voice said again.

Nigel! Clark had only met the man once, when he'd been dragged to Luthor Manor as a terrified prisoner, but he could never forget Luthor's right hand man.

Clark peeked through the open crack of the door, just in time to see Nigel hand a sealed letter to Lord Tempos' young messenger. The man slipped it into his saddle bag and patted it for good measure, as if to prove that it was safe and secure. Nigel nodded and Clark pulled back from the door, just in case they happened to look his way.

"Make sure that gets to Lord Tempos with all haste," Nigel instructed.

"You can trust me," said the other.

"Good. Lord Luthor is away at the moment, but he expects an answer by the time he returns. He will send a messenger for your lord's response, so tell your master to be prepared."

"Understood."

"Good. Now then, August will see to giving you a meal, and then I expect you to be on your way."

Clark's heart skipped a beat as he turned, frantically looking

for a hiding place. He made do with ducking behind a thick, tall, evergreen bush, and not a moment too soon. Both men exited the stable together, though they both took to going in different directions once outside. It was only through pure luck that neither of them turned in Clark's direction. Still, Clark's blood ran cold with the fear of discovery until they were both well out of sight. Then he grew confident enough to release the breath he'd been holding and to leave the facade of safety that the bushes had provided. He went into the stable and checked on Merlin. The horse was still there, looking rested and ready to be on his way.

"Are you as eager to get back home as I am?" he asked Merlin, giving the animal a pat on his neck. "Me too, buddy. Me too," he said as the horse made a low whinny and nuzzled Clark's chest. "Now, where's your saddle?"

He looked around and spotted it hanging up near the back of the stable. He gave Merlin one more pat and then went to retrieve the saddle. But as he got near the place where it was, something on the floor caught his eye. Clark bent to retrieve it. The message for Lord Tempos! The messenger must have had a tear in his bag and it had slipped out, unnoticed as they'd exited the stable. Clark straightened up, the note in his hand. He felt torn as to what to do. If he was caught with the note, he would be punished, possibly killed. But if he knew what it said, he could report back to Lord Lane, and possibly do something to uncover the mysterious relationship between Luthor and Tempos. He could possibly find a way to stop the raids and give Lois a reason to break off the engagement.

Making a sudden decision, he broke the wax seal. He read as fast as he could, more grateful now for Lois' reading lessons than ever before. But his hands shook in nervousness and his heart was pounding, making it hard to read. His stomach felt queasy and heavy, and despite the cold weather, beads of sweat popped up on his brow.

He felt worse as soon as he began reading.

"Come on, Merlin, we need to go," Clark said, stuffing the letter into his pocket.

He did it not a moment too soon. As he began lifting the saddle from its hook, Jude the stable master returned. Clark heard him coming as the doors creaked ever so slightly. He forced himself to act natural. Getting the letter to Lois' family was everything.

"Leaving so soon?" Jude asked, seeing Clark with Merlin's saddle.

"Unfortunately, yes. You know how it is, having all of the responsibilities of the stable waiting for you," Clark replied, pleased at how normal he sounded.

Jude nodded thoughtfully. "I do, only all too well. But, it's rewarding work, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," Clark replied, walking by the stable master. "I've always loved horses, for as long as I can remember. I love the bond I have with them. Especially with Merlin here. He was the first horse I ever truly raised on my own."

Jude nodded again. "Oh, I understand that. I have the same thing with Odin over there. I saw him being born and raised him myself when his mother died."

Clark put the saddle on Merlin's back. "They are incredible creatures, huh?"

"Absolutely." Jude looked around for a moment. "Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

Clark shook his head. "No, thanks. I was just sent to make sure the horses got here. I wasn't told to...pick up anything in return, or anything like that."

"Did August give you enough to eat? He can sometimes be a little...stingy with the servants and low-ranking visitors."

"Yes, thank you," Clark said, mildly impressed that the man seemed less than starry-eyed with life in Luthor Manor, a place so opulent it made Lane Manor look like a beggar's shack.

"Well, that's good," Jude said, more to himself, it seemed, than to Clark.

"Look, Jude, thank you for looking after Merlin. But we really do need to get on our way. I'm not liking the look of the sky. I think we'll get rain before night. I'd like to get as close to home as I can before that happens." He began to lead Merlin out of the stall.

"I was just saying the same thing to my wife," Jude said. "I think you're right. Rain is on the way. Godspeed on your journey."

"Thanks," Clark said, mounting up. "Merlin, lets go home."

Clark forced himself to maintain a nonchalant posture and speed until he was sure he was out of sight of anyone at Luthor Manor. Then he goaded Merlin into a run. They flew over the land at a ground-eating pace. Neither man nor beast was in control over their direction or speed. They simply tore over the countryside, enjoying the feel of the cold air rushing at them and the pretense of true freedom.

They made good time, but not good enough. The storm broke, fast and furious just as the last rays of sunlight would have been fading from the sky, had the cloud coverage not been so dark and thick. The freezing drops of water forced Clark to seek shelter in the inn located in the town where he and his family had always sold their crops. It was a bittersweet moment for him. For the first time in his life, he had money to spend on a night at the inn and on a full, hot meal. For the first time, he would be leaving the town and not returning to his farm and his parents.

Not many people were in the inn when he arrived, which suited him just fine. He wasn't in the mood to pass the time with meaningless chatter. There were too many thoughts in his head. He brought Merlin to the stable and tipped the stable boy well, knowing that the money would ensure that Merlin was well taken care of. He promised the animal that they would be leaving first thing in the morning. Then he went inside and secured a room for the night. His stomach was growling, but he forced himself to go to the room first and change into a spare, dry set of clothing that he'd carried in his saddle bag. Feeling better, he went back downstairs to the dining room.

Roasted venison with small red potatoes, with diced carrots and peas was the night's fare. The innkeeper also brought him a loaf of crunchy, hot bread, straight from the oven with butter and a mug of steaming tea. Ale had been offered, but Clark neither liked the taste nor the effect it had on his mind. And right now, clarity of mind was of the utmost importance. When the food was placed before him, steam curling lazily in the air, Clark began to eat with gusto. His appetite should have been diminished, given the information he'd found in the letter he'd taken, but the meager lunch he'd been supplied with hadn't really been enough to carry him through the day.

The food was good, Clark found to his delight. The venison was perfectly seasoned, even a little on the spicy side. He normally didn't like spicy food, but it somehow worked well on the meat, even whetting his appetite further. The vegetables were perfectly cooked — neither too raw nor too mushy — and simply seasoned with a little salt and pepper. The bread, though crunchy on the outside, practically melted in his mouth. All in all, he couldn't have wished for a more filling or more satisfying meal. He left the dining room with a full stomach and a warm feeling radiating through his body from the hot food and the cozy fire he'd sat beside.

On a normal night, he would have felt inspired to work on his reading or his carvings. Or he would have climbed into bed and fallen into a deep, refreshing sleep. But not tonight. Clark locked the door as soon as he was back in his room. For a while, he paced, restless and wishing he could ride through the night to get back to Lane Manor. But the incessant drumming of the torrential rain on the roof of the inn mocked his agitation and kept him bound to the inn. As he paced, he kept looking back at the bed,

where he'd hidden the letter beneath the mattress when he'd changed out of his wet clothing. Finally, he gave in and retrieved it.

He sat on the bed and opened the letter carefully. Really taking his time, now that he was safe and not in danger of being discovered, he read the contents of the message again. He read it not once, but three times, still in disbelief. It was clear as day. Lord Luthor and Lord Tempos were in a twisted alliance with one another. Tempos' men raided and looted at will. And Luthor not only encouraged it, he was actually *aiding* the other lord, in exchange for a cut of the profits.

Which means, even if Lois marries Luthor, the attacks will never stop. Luthor will ensure that Lord Lane's men are defeated out in the field if it comes to battle. And if that happens, who is to stop Luthor from taking over Lord Lane's lands, under the guise of protection? he thought to himself.

"Profit can't be the only reason those two are allied," he whispered to himself, staring at the letter without really seeing it. "There's a bigger picture I'm not seeing here."

He put the letter away again, for safe-keeping, then crawled beneath the thin, but adequate blankets. For a long time, he lay awake in the dark, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

"Good boy, Merlin," Clark said the next day, as he slipped from the horse's back.

He breathed a sigh of relief. It was a weight off his shoulders to finally be back in his new home of Lane Manor. Wanting to speak with Lord Lane as soon as he could, he rushed through his tasks of getting Merlin in his stall with food and water. One of the younger grooms in the stable, a teenager named Dennis, offered to unsaddle and brush down the animal. Clark thanked him and allowed Dennis to take care of Merlin. Merlin, for his part, didn't seem to mind. If anything, to Clark's eyes, the horse looked happy to be home again. Clark nodded to himself, pleased. Then he was off to find Lord Lane.

He found the man with Lady Ellen in the main room of the manor, sipping hot tea in front of the massive stone fireplace. Clark knocked on the open door. Both the lord and lady looked in his direction.

"Ah, Clark!" Lady Ellen said by way of a greeting. "We were just wondering if you'd returned yet."

"I only just got back, milady," he said with a slight bow of his head. "The storm last night forced me to take a room in an inn, though I sorely wished I could have ridden through the night to get back sooner." He looked to Lord Lane. "My thanks, milord, for the means to rent a room for the night." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the unspent money that had been left over. He placed the coins in Lord Lane's hand. "This is everything that was left."

Lord Lane took a quick glance at the money. "Did you even buy any food? This seems like far too much left over."

"I did, milord. I just knew of a cheap inn to stay in, that's all."

"Well, I admire your thriftiness. How did the trip pan out?"

"The animals arrived safe and sound," Clark reported. "I had no trouble with them at all."

"Good to hear," Samuel said with a pleased nod of his head. "You have my thanks for bringing them to their new home."

Clark nodded in turn. But he hesitated to either say more or to take his leave, suddenly feeling afraid and very uncomfortable with the news he carried. Lady Ellen noticed.

"Was there something else?" she asked, concerned.

"Actually...yes, milady, there *is* something else," he admitted.

"Go on," she urged. "You know you can speak freely here."

"I know, milady, but it doesn't make it any easier to say this," he replied respectfully. "I'm not even sure how to begin." He thought for a moment before speaking again. Then, "Remember the other day, milord, when I showed you how my family's brand

was on Lord Luthor's messenger's horse?"

Samuel and Ellen both nodded. "Of course," the lord replied.

"Well, when I was in Lord Luthor's stable, I took a moment to admire the beasts he keeps. Three more of my family's horses were in his stable. A silver mare named Aurora, a black stallion named Ronin, and a light brown mare named Butterscotch."

Samuel frowned deeply. "So he has at least four of the animals that were stolen by Lord Tempos' men. What are the odds of that?"

"Unfortunately, very high," Clark responded. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the letter he'd taken. "While I was there, I saw something I shouldn't have. I chanced to see a meeting between Nigel, Lord Luthor's right hand man, and another man. One of Lord Tempos' men, to be accurate," Clark said, extending the letter to Lord Lane.

Samuel took the letter but did not open it. "How do you know it was one of Lord Tempos' men?"

"I heard him say it, milord. He and Nigel spoke briefly. Nigel gave the other man that letter," he said, pointing at the paper in question, "saying that Lord Luthor expected a response upon his return."

"And how did you come by the message?" Lady Lane asked, peering at the folded note in her husband's hand. "If Nigel did indeed give the letter to Lord Tempos' man?"

Clark understood her concern. "I knew I wasn't supposed to witness what I had, so I hid. When I went to saddle up Merlin to come home, I found that on the floor. I can only assume it slipped out of the man's saddle bag from a rip or tear or something.

Anyway, I picked it up and something told me to break the seal. When I read it, I knew I had to bring it straight to you. If I was wrong to open the letter, I'll gladly accept whatever punishment you deem necessary."

Clark waited while Lord and Lady Lane opened the letter and read the contents. Two pairs of eyebrows raised together as they read. Identical looks of shock and horror crept over their faces.

"Is this real?" Samuel asked. Clark had never before heard his voice shake like that.

"I'm afraid so, milord."

"Are you positive?"

Clark wasn't offended by Lord Lane's need to question the legitimacy of the letter. After all, it was no secret that Clark hated Luthor and was in love with Lois. It made sense that, on some level, his master might question if the letter was an elaborate ruse meant to stop the impending wedding.

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "As far as I know, the letter comes directly from Lord Luthor and was meant for Lord Tempos' eyes. Although, I suppose Nigel could be doing this behind Lord Luthor's back, without his knowledge or consent. But, milord, I highly doubt that. The script is too neat. From what I understand, Lord Luthor does not allow his servants to become educated in reading and writing. He prefers his servants to be more...helpless, I guess is the word. They are less of a threat to him that way."

Ellen nodded her head. "That *does* make sense, Samuel."

"As much as I hate to admit it, this *does* look like Lex's handwriting," Samuel said slowly, his eyes never leaving the paper. "Clark," he said suddenly, after lapsing into a short-lived silence.

"Milord?"

"I want to thank you for bringing this information to me. Once again, you've proven yourself invaluable to our family. If this is true, there is no way my little girl is going to marry that warmonger."

Clark felt the iron chains that had been squeezing around his heart since Lois' engagement loosen and fall completely away.

"I have to be careful about how I handle this," Samuel said, more to himself than to either Clark or Ellen.

"*We* have to be careful," Ellen told her husband. "I want to see

that man face justice just as much as you do.”

“I’ll take my leave, if you wish,” Clark said.

“Yes, yes,” Samuel said distractedly. “Take the rest of the day, if you’d like. But be ready tomorrow. I’ll likely be sending out a messenger to the king.”

“As you wish, milord.”

Clark bowed his head and made a quick exit from the room. He immediately returned to his chambers and bathed the travel dust from his body. The steaming water refreshed him and helped him to feel like he was finally leaving his dealings with Luthor in the past. His skin still tingling from the hot water, he dressed and wondered what he should do next. Lord Lane had given him the option of taking the rest of the day off and away from his duties in the stable, but he wasn’t sure what he would do with himself if he took Lord Lane up on that offer. In the end, he went to the stable and checked on the horses.

He stayed in the stable for a couple of hours, but there wasn’t much to be done. And he didn’t want to go for a ride in the countryside, not after spending two days on the road as it was. He went back to his chamber and worked on his animals for want of something to do. Not long after, there was a knock at his door.

“Come in,” he said distractedly as he finished the wooden dog he was carving for James.

The door opened on silent hinges, and Clark was surprised to see not only Lois entering the room, but also James pushing Lucy in her wheeled chair.

“Milord! Milady! And milady!” he gasped, standing up and greeting them.

“Don’t get up,” Lois said, brushing off the formality. “Can we talk? Are we interrupting anything?”

“No, of course you aren’t interrupting anything,” Clark said.

“In fact, I was just about to come find *you*, milord. I just finished the last detail on your carving of Brutus.”

“Really?” James asked, excited. “Can I see?”

“Of course, milord.” Clark crossed the few steps and placed the figurine in James’ outstretched hand.

James immediately inspected Clark’s handiwork and smiled. “It really *does* look just like him! Thank you, Clark. As always, you’ve proven that your skill is without parallel.”

Clark felt his face heat up with a blush. “Thank you, milord.”

He always felt pride in the things he made, but having Lois’ family praise his work never ceased to make him feel good inside, like he really was worth something, despite his humble lineage.

James turned the dog over in his hand, again and again as he sat on the footstool, leaving the chair for Lois. After a few minutes, he looked up at Clark. “We need to have a very frank talk.”

Worry blossomed in Clark’s heart, but he tried to force it down. “About what, milord?”

“Take a seat first,” Lois encouraged.

Clark dragged a heavy cedar chest out from where it sat flush against one of the walls. He sat on it and clasped his hands, waiting for one of the nobles to speak first.

“What happened at Luthor Manor?” Lucy asked bluntly, breaking the silence.

“I’m not sure...” Clark began. What if Lord and Lady Lane didn’t want him to speak?

“Look, you’re not in any trouble.” That was James. “We know something happened that really upset our parents. But they’re holed up in their bedchamber and won’t answer us when we knock.”

“We’ve only seen them do something like this in the worst of situations,” Lois added. “So we know something awful must have happened.”

“Were you mistreated at Luthor Manor?” asked Lucy, concerned, peering at him as though checking for injuries.

“I’m fine, milady,” he began. “It’s just...something *did* come

up while I was there. But I’m not sure how much I can say. I don’t want to betray your parents’ confidence.”

“If they get mad, I’ll say I ordered you to tell us,” James said with a conspiratorial smile. “Now, please, tell us.”

Clark sighed. What could he do? If he still refused, one of the three was bound to command him to tell them what had happened anyway. And he didn’t want that at all. He was proud of the fact that no member of the Lane family had had to command him to do anything yet. Instead of master and servant, the arrangement had always felt more like employer and willing employee.

“All right,” he conceded after just a few heartbeats of internal debate. “But I’ll warn you, milord, milady, and milady, it...it won’t be easy to hear. Especially for you, milady,” he said, locking eyes with Lois.

“I can handle it,” she assured him.

Clark nodded. “All right then. This *has* to stay between just us and your parents,” he said, trying to stress how sensitive a topic it was.

“Agreed,” Lucy said, speaking for all of them, it appeared. Lois and James nodded in turn.

“The thing is,” Clark began, searching for the best way to break the news, “we have evidence to support that Lord Luthor isn’t exactly who he claims to be.”

“What do you mean?” James asked.

“He’s in league with Lord Tempos,” Clark said confidently, but still lowering his eyes to stare at the floor. “While I was there, I witnessed Lord Luthor’s right hand man and one of Lord Tempos’ men having a meeting.”

He quickly told them of what he’d seen and overheard at the meeting, how he’d found the note, and of its contents. He told them about finding his horses — the ones Tempos’ men had stolen in the raid on his farm — living in Luthor’s stable under new names. When he was done, the three of them just stared at him in mute horror, much as their parents had.

“Well,” Lois said after a few minutes where no one made a sound. “That’s a relief.”

“A relief?” Lucy asked, incredulous.

Lois smirked. “At least I won’t have to marry Lex.”

“Let’s all take a moment to be thankful for that,” Clark said.

They continued to discuss the matter before moving into more idle conversation. But soon it came time for the nobles to take their leave and — presumably — meet up with their parents for dinner, unless the lord and lady of the house were still working on what they might say and do about Luthor’s betrayal. As they made ready to leave, James hung back for a minute, letting Lois wheel Lucy out into the hallway.

“Clark, I just wanted to thank you, again,” the young man said. “Lord Luthor had us all fooled, I’m ashamed to admit. Even me. I had my doubts about him at first, but after meeting him, I thought he was a morally upstanding man who would make an excellent husband for Lois, even if the circumstances of that marriage were less than ideal. It turns out he was merely a great actor.” He paused for a heartbeat, thinking. “Too bad Lex wasn’t more like you.”

“I’m flattered, milord,” Clark said, bowing his head, humbled by the nobleman’s words.

“Our family owes you a debt of gratitude. If there’s anything I can ever do for you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, milord. I appreciate that.”

His eyes strayed to the door for one beat of his heart. There was only one thing he would ever truly want or desire, but she would forever be out of his reach. James followed his eyes and smiled sadly.

“If there was something I could do to help you and Lois be together, I would do it,” James said softly.

Clark winced. Had Lord Lane told *everyone* about his and Lois’ mutual love?

But the smile on James' lips went from sad to bittersweet. "Don't worry. I've known for a while now. Since the night you escorted us back home from Lex's lands, actually. I thought she was crazy for falling so fast for a complete stranger, but I can see in you now what she did back then. It's obvious that you both share a love for one another."

"As I told your father, I know my place," Clark said. "It will have to be enough for me, knowing that she will never be married to that monster in a lord's clothing."

"Clark? Are you in there?" Lois called out from the other side of the door, later that same evening.

"Come in, milady," came the reply from within.

"Hey," she said as she entered.

As usual, Clark was sitting in his chair. But this time, he had neither wooden animal nor book in his hand. He was simply watching the flames dance in the hearth. He looked kind of peaceful, she thought. A little thoughtful too. Even a bit...different in her eyes, as though in the day and a half he'd been away from Lane Manor, he'd grown up in some intangible way. She liked the change in him. It made him look almost like a wise lord, not a young stable master.

"I brought a new book, as promised," she said as she closed the door behind her.

"Huh? Oh, thanks."

"Should I come back another time?" she asked, noting his distraction.

Clark pulled his eyes away from the writhing flames. "No, no. I'm okay, really. I was just a little lost in thought."

"About Lex?"

"Yes," he admitted with a sigh.

"Come, let's sit," Lois offered, nodding in the direction of his bed.

"Sure."

He followed her across the room and they each sat in their accustomed places. Lois set the book to one side. She reached for Clark's hand and was relieved to see that he wasn't shy about taking it. As always, his hand was warm and comforting, callused with years of hard work, but gentle in the way that he touched her.

"I wanted to thank you, again, for discovering what Lex was up to," she said. "You saved our entire family from a really bad decision to ally ourselves with him."

"Yeah," Clark said, somewhat gloomily.

"Hey, what's wrong? You should be proud of yourself. You just potentially saved countless of other lives and livelihoods. Not to mention the fact that you saved me from what would have been a disaster of a marriage."

"Oh? So *now* it would have been a disastrous marriage? You seemed determined to make it work not two days ago," he said bitterly.

"What would you have had me do? I was trying to convince myself as much as anyone else that I could find...I don't know! Some hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. Some promise of better things to come in what was becoming the darkest time of my life," she said, letting her raging emotions spill out into her words. "You *know* that I never wanted Lex!"

Clark sighed, looking defeated. "I know. I know you never wanted to be Luthor's bride. I know that you would choose a very different life if given half a chance. But I still can't help but to feel guilty."

"Guilty?" she asked, surprised. She felt her entire argument stop short and vanish into nonexistence.

"Well...yeah," he stammered. "Logically, I *know* what I did had to be done. Luthor and Tempos both needed to be stopped. And you deserved to be freed from a marriage arrangement that was based on complete lies. But I still can't help but to feel...I don't know. Dirty? I've never been the reason why someone has

been locked away in a jail before. I've never been the one to break up a couple of any kind. It's just...uncharted territory for me and I guess I'm having trouble reconciling things in my own head."

"It's the way you were raised," Lois said gently, rubbing his forearm. "From everything you've told me about your parents, and from knowing you on a deep, personal level, you were raised to be a good man with a sensitive, caring heart. But you have to realize, none of what happened or will happen is your fault. Lex and Tempos chose their own paths. All you did was to shine light on the atrocities that were being committed."

"That doesn't soothe the sting in my heart," Clark mumbled unhappily.

Lois stayed quiet, unsure what she could say to ease Clark's guilt.

Clark ran his hand through his hair. "Why is this so hard?" he asked miserably. "Why can't I just...I don't know. Be happy."

"Because you're a good man, who I've never seen wish ill on anyone. Even Lex."

"I hated him. I *still* hate him. I've seen such bad things happen to good people, and they all happened at his command. My father *died* because of him. Oh, I know it was Lord Tempos' men that raided the farm and ran my father through with their weapons, but if Lord Luthor hadn't been allied with Tempos..." He let his voice trail off with a shudder. His shoulders drooped and he sighed hard. "Yes, I knew Luthor was a despicable man. But I never believed he could be capable of such evil...of *using* you."

Lois shook her head. "I don't blame you for hating him. I hate him too, for the same reasons. And I wish every day that I could have met your father. I wish I could thank him for raising such an amazing man as you."

"You know what the worst part of it is for me? Now you're free to marry whoever you wish and it *still* can't be me," Clark confessed in a near-whisper.

She merely nodded her agreement.

Silence blanketed the room, broken only by crackling sounds from the hearth as the fire consumed the wood there. Outside, the wind picked up, moaning against the window panes. Lois shifted a little, trying to find a more comfortable position.

"Forget it," Clark finally said, sounding like he was speaking to himself. "What's done is done," he said louder. "I can't change what's happened and I wouldn't even if I could." He shook his head, as if clearing his thoughts. "So, what book did you bring with you tonight? After all, I have your patient reading lessons to thank for my ability to put everything together. If I hadn't been able to read that message...who knows? Perhaps I would have chucked up the exchange I overheard as something completely innocuous. But, because of you, I *was* able to read it and understand what, exactly, was going on. I owe you more thanks than I can ever properly say."

Lois smiled and reached out, touching his warm cheek with her hand. "I'm glad to know that these lessons came in handy. And I think you'll like the book. It's about the gods and goddesses worshipped by the ancient Greeks."

For the first time since Clark had returned from Luthor Manor, Lois saw a smile ghost over his lips.

"Sounds interesting," he said. "Where do we start?"

"I think," Lois replied, a happy smile on her face and with a soul that felt lightened by his change in attitude, "we should start with the story of Prometheus. He alone dared to steal fire from the gods and gave it to humans."

"Stole from the gods?" Clark asked with a mischievous grin. "That can't have turned out well for him."

"Well...no," Lois admitted. "The gods punished him harshly, until he was freed by the hero, Hercules." She thumbed through the book until she found the myth in question. "Here."

Clark took the book and began to read aloud, sounding out — with accuracy, much to Lois' delight — the unfamiliar names.

They didn't stop there. They backtracked and read about the creation of the world, the reign of the titans, and the fall of those same titans at the hands of the Olympian gods. They read about Hercules and his twelve labors. Lastly, they skipped through the book to find the tale of Orion — a renowned hunter who was placed in the stars upon his death. Lois had always loved the story of Orion, but hated that the scorpion who'd stung the hunter had also been placed in the stars, even if when Orion rose in the winter, the scorpion set until the summer, so it could never sting the hunter again. Clark seemed to love the story as well.

"I think that's enough for the night," Clark said, rubbing his eyes. "I'm beat. I barely slept last night in the inn. My mind kept going back to that thrice accursed message."

"I can imagine. Get some sleep. You've more than earned a rest. We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Lois," he said, rising from the bed as she did.

"Goodnight, Clark," she replied. "I...I hope you know, I still love you. I always will."

He smiled at her — one of his blindingly wonderful smiles that lit up the whole world. "And I love *you*. I will spend the rest of my life loving you."

Lois leaned in and kissed him on the lips. "For all eternity," she whispered, just before he kissed her back.

"Forever my soul mate," he murmured.

The winter wore on. Snow storms howled some days. Other days were clear and sunny, but absolutely freezing. The day after Clark had brought his disturbing findings to Lord and Lady Lane, Samuel sent out a messenger to the king. The palace was a long way off, and it seemed to take forever before the rider returned with news. Lord Tempos and Lord Luthor had both been taken into custody and the king was personally looking into their alleged alliance. For the first time since learning of Luthor's now-broken betrothal to Lois, Clark felt like he could breathe freely, and he tried to push the entire incident from his mind.

Like a good servant, he went about his duties as the stable master. He even developed a few new commands to add to his language of whistles. It was a help, particularly when he got sick and lost his voice for several days. His days remained unchanged. He spent the daylight hours tending to the horses, seeing to any visitors who dared to brave the cold, and took his meals in the cozy kitchen with the other servants. Some days, if there wasn't much to do, Lord Lane would encourage him to take one or more of the horses out for a ride in the countryside to exercise them. His nights were a happy mixture of time spent with Lois, reading, and carving his wooden animals.

But one day, more than three months since the king had been alerted to Lord Luthor's underhanded dealings, word spread throughout Lane Manor. A large group of riders was approaching.

Clark was in the kitchen, enjoying a cup of hot tea and a bowl of oatmeal, heavily drenched in cinnamon. He was nearly finished with his meal when Olivia, one of the scullery maids rushed in with a half-peeled potato still in her hands. She quickly informed him of the approaching host. But Clark knew he had time. He finished the rest of his food, thanked Francois, and headed out to the stable.

It was a beautiful day. The sky was a perfect sapphire blue, unblemished by any clouds. The air was fresh and crisp, though Clark's farm-trained nose detected hints of warmth and the promise of growing things to soon begin sprouting. Spring would be arriving early, it seemed.

He had plenty of time to do his chores, including mucking out every stall, before the host made it to the gates of Lane Manor. He heard the herald at the gate allow the visitors entrance.

"That's my cue," he told Merlin, as he headed outside.

His jaw hit the ground when he saw just who it was that had come to pay a visit to Lord Lane.

"Your Grace," Clark gaped, instantly dropping to his knees.

"Welcome to Lane Manor."

"Rise," the king said in a kindly tone, smiling down on Clark.

Clark obeyed and took the king's reins. "Please, allow me to assist you."

The king nodded. "Much appreciated."

"Roland!" Clark said, calling to Olivia's ten year old son.

"Please escort his majesty and his men to Lord Lane while I see to the horses."

Roland dutifully nodded and waited patiently while the king and his men dismounted their horses. Then he was off, the king and his royal entourage swiftly following the boy's lead. Clark shook his head in wonderment, then turned his attention to the horses. Luck was with him — the stable had just enough stalls to house all of the animals. Then he set about unsaddling them all, and making sure they each had enough food and water. He was about to brush the beasts after their long journey, but Roland appeared at the door.

"Clark?" the boy called.

"Back here," Clark called from the rear of the stable, where he was setting down some fresh hay for the last of the horses.

"His Grace requests your presence in Lord Lane's study."

"He...what?" Clark asked in disbelief as the words registered in his mind. What could the king possibly want with *him* of all people? Trying to regain his composure, he looked at the boy. "Thank you, Roland."

"Anything I can do to help? Mom's too busy in the kitchen and Gregory — you know, the groundskeeper's son? — is sick. So I've got nothing to do."

"Actually, yes, there *is* something you can do for me. Remember last week when I showed you how to brush down the horses?"

Roland's face lit up. "Of course I do!"

Clark smiled. He knew the kid loved the horses, almost as much as Clark himself did. One day, Roland would make a fine stable master. "Perfect," he said. "The royal horses have had a long trip. Think you can get them started for me? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"You can count on me," the boy said solemnly, sounding much older than his years.

"Thanks, Roland. You have no idea what a huge help that is to me."

He didn't wait for a reply. He was already moving, heading out of the stables and back to his chamber for a quick check on his appearance, to make certain he was presentable enough to stand before the king. Satisfied by what he saw in the mirror, he headed for Lord Lane's study with swift, long strides. He knew his bearing exuded confidence, but inside, he felt more nervous than he'd ever had before. It took both an eternity and a blink of an eye to reach the study. The solid, dark wood door to the room was closed. For a long couple of minutes, Clark merely stood before it, gathering his courage.

You can do this, his mind told him, though Clark wasn't sure he believed it.

Finally, he knew he had to just get it over with. With a shaking hand, Clark reached out and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he heard Lord Lane say from within, though the sound of his voice was muffled by the thickness of the wood.

Clark took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and pushed the door open.

"Milord? You sent for me?" he asked, trying to keep his nervousness out of his words.

"Yes," Lord Lane said, nodding. "I'm glad you came as quickly as you did," he continued, in a kind, approving tone. "His Grace wanted you to join us."

"I wanted to speak with you directly," the king replied, turning from where he stood gazing into the fireplace to appraise Clark.

"Your Grace," Clark said, kneeling on the thick rug in the center of the room.

"Please, take a seat," the king replied, gesturing to the chair which sat across the way from the one he himself settled down in. "There's no need for formalities in this room." He smiled a little as he spoke, perhaps in an effort to put the nervous young stable master at ease.

Clark did as he was bid, never taking his eyes off the king. He'd heard tales of the man before. Everyone in the land knew the story of King Bruce the Young. Orphaned at the age of eight, and the sole heir to the throne, he'd become the youngest king in the history of the kingdom. And although he was now well into his forties, the title of "Young" still stuck with him. Clark thought it appropriate, considering the sort of agelessness that seemed to surround King Bruce.

"I've been talking with Lord and Lady Lane," King Bruce said, gesturing vaguely to where they sat to one side. "And their children," he added.

Clark followed with his eyes as King Bruce swept a hand in their general direction. All of them sat silent and still, their expressions unreadable. Perhaps they themselves didn't know what was to come. But Lois caught his eyes and held his gaze for a moment. Something about the way they seemed to sparkle at him reassured him and bolstered his confidence. He nodded to her, so slightly that it was nearly imperceptible.

"They have told me that it was you who found evidence that Luthor and Tempos were scheming together in an unholy alliance," King Bruce said in a friendly-enough tone.

"Yes, Your Grace," Clark replied, his attention snapping back to rest solely on King Bruce.

"Tell me about it," the king encouraged. "All of it. Leave nothing out, even if you think it only an unimportant detail."

Clark found himself relating the tale once more, of all that had happened since Lord Luthor had stepped foot on Lord Lane's lands and asked for Lois' hand in marriage. He took great pains to make it clear that finding the damning evidence against Luthor had been a matter of blind luck and not something he had actively been looking for.

"I see," King Bruce said at the end, steepling his fingers together thoughtfully. For a long moment, he seemed to lose himself in thought and his gaze shifted to some place a million miles away that only he could see. "It would seem that I owe you a debt of gratitude," he eventually said. "Since the raids began, I've had my top men on the case. Trying to figure out where the next strike would occur. Where the stolen goods were going. Where Tempos' support coming from. Not one of those men could offer any answers. Tempos had hidden his tracks too well, had made his strikes too random to predict any pattern. But you, a simple farmer turned stable master, managed to do what my best military strategists could not."

"I'm just glad I could help, Your Grace," Clark said, fighting the urge to blush and losing.

"My advisors urged me to simply go and arrest Tempos at his home, but I knew it would be like plucking a weed. If I didn't remove the roots, the weed would grow back and spread." He sighed. "As time passed, I began to doubt that I'd done the right thing. Perhaps I'd been wrong to look for a support system. Then, suddenly, Samuel's messenger arrived and handed me the information I'd sought."

King Bruce nodded thoughtfully as he spoke. "As I'm sure you've already heard, I've arrested both men and have had them thoroughly questioned."

Something about the way King Bruce said the word "questioned" left no doubt in Clark's mind that the process had included more than a little pain to get the answers they sought.

"I haven't even had the chance to tell your master yet, but we found out some interesting things during the questioning process,"

the king continued. "Most notably, why. Why the raids. Why the alliance. Everything. Would you like to know the reason?" he asked gently.

Clark nodded. "If Your Grace is willing, I would love to know why. One of those raids cost me everything — my farm, my animals, my home, and my father."

"So Lord Lane has told me," the king said kindly. "Very well. Luthor and Tempos were both in league together to go after the throne. The raids were meant to cause chaos and keep their real intentions hidden. Luthor planned to wed Lady Lois, with the promise of merging the Lane and Luthor armies. Luthor's army would have been instructed to throw the battle, ensuring that Tempos' men decimated Lord Lane's army in the field. With few left to stand against him, Luthor would have easily taken over these lands, killing the entire Lane family, including Lois, so that no one could oppose his claim to everything, as the husband of the late Lady Lois."

"That would have doubled the size of his lands," Lady Ellen gasped.

"And his power," Lord Lane put in.

Clark felt his chest constrict around his heart at the very thought of Lois coming to harm.

"With the wealth and whatever remained of the soldiers, Luthor would have grown in power," King Bruce agreed. "He and Tempos would have easily toppled over any other lord's lands, until they were strong enough to challenge my own army, in hopes of getting to me."

"But," Clark said, thinking aloud, forgetting, for a moment, his proper place. "I...uh...my apologies, Your Grace."

But King Bruce didn't seem fazed by Clark's outburst. "But only one could claim the throne," he finished for him. "Yes, I know. Each of them planned to betray the other and claim the kingship for himself."

Clark shook his head in disbelief. He'd known Luthor was overly arrogant, but to think he could scheme and murder his way to the throne? The disgraced lord had to be insane.

"Both have been executed for treason," the king said grimly.

"Good," Clark heard Lois say under her breath. "I hope he's roasting in hell."

Either King Bruce didn't hear her or chose to ignore her. He stood and paced to the fire, looking into the flames once more, the way he'd been when Clark had first entered the room.

"A lordship," he said in a quiet voice after a long silence. He turned to Clark. "I was about to offer a lordship to anyone who could bring me information that would lead to ending the threat of Tempos. And now? Now I find myself humbled by the simplicity with which that information was obtained...by one of the unlikeliest of people." He smiled slightly. "Take a knee," he commanded.

Clark obeyed without hesitation, despite his nerves. What else could he do? This wasn't some lord commanding him. This was the *king*. He went to one knee and bowed his head in respect. He heard a sword being unsheathed. An irrational flash of fear shot through him as he imagined the sword separating his head from his neck. But in the next instant, he felt the blade lightly come to rest on first one shoulder, then the other.

"You have protected both king and kingdom alike," King Bruce said as the sword first made contact with Clark's body. "For that, I am indebted to you. I hereby declare you a lord."

Thunderstruck.

All his life, Clark had heard the term before, but he'd never truly understood it. Until now. Now it felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck his brain and sent a rush of electricity throughout every molecule of his body.

"Arise, *Lord* Clark," King Bruce commanded, as he extended a hand to him.

Clark took the proffered hand and stood. "Your Grace?" he

asked, unable to form a coherent sentence, it seemed.

"Though the knowledge of my offer of a lordship never went public, I am a man who stands by my promises. You are a free man, Clark. A lord. Your own master and soon to have wealth and lands to govern over."

"But, and I mean no offense, Your Grace...but I'm a nobody. I'm not a lord. I don't know how to be one. I'm a farmer and horse breeder, nothing more."

"I disagree," Lord Lane said, coming up beside Clark and clapping him supportively on his shoulder. "I've always seen a lot more to you than you think there is to you."

"We all have," Lady Ellen said, mimicking her husband's movements.

"I want you to come and be my advisor," King Bruce said. "It's obvious that it's past time for me to rethink the effectiveness of the council I keep."

"Your Grace, I'm flattered. But I'm not fit for great halls. I don't know how to advise a king. I'm a simple man," Clark said, dumbfounded.

"You'd be well trained," came the gentle rebuttal.

But Clark wasn't convinced. The idea of becoming an advisor to the king terrified him beyond words. He could advise people on how to grow crops, or train their horses, or how to breed their animals for finer specimens with the attributes they preferred. But giving advice on creating laws that would affect people's lives?

"I...I..." he stammered, trying to buy time.

King Bruce touched his shoulder in a kindly manner. "I understand your hesitation. But, for better or worse, you *are* a lord now. You'll be creating laws for people to live under, regardless of where you live."

"I guess that's true," Clark said, thinking out loud. "But, if I'm to be a lord, please let me go back to the lands I grew up in. I know those people, Your Grace. I know their problems. I know their concerns. I think I can make a difference in their lives. And, frankly speaking, Your Grace, they need a gentler lord ruling over them, after so many years of enduring Lord Luthor's heavy-handed laws."

The king appeared to turn this over in his mind. "You're right," he declared after a moment. "The people will need a kind-hearted lord to look to. Yes, you will be their new lord. But you will not live at Luthor Manor. A new estate shall be built — a fresh, clean start, free of the corruption and treachery that is Luthor's legacy. Construction shall begin at once. Samuel? Do you have a map for us to decide on a location?"

"Your Grace? If I may make a request?" Clark asked, before Samuel could so much as nod. "I would dearly love to spend the rest of my days on the farmland where I grew up."

"Farmland?" King Bruce asked, as though weighing the idea.

Clark nodded. "It's my home. And, perhaps, a reminder to both myself and the people I will be looking after, of how unassuming my roots are, and what I should be like."

"Perfect," the king replied with a smile.

"I will take Clark under my wing in the meantime," Lord Lane offered. "I will teach him all that I know so that he may be an effective leader for his people."

"Thank you, milord," Clark said, humbled.

"Samuel," Lord Lane corrected him with a fatherly smile. Then, perhaps to lighten the mood, "So, Clark. What will your first official act as *Lord* Clark be?"

"Well," Clark replied without any hesitation, "with your permission..." He let the thought hang in the air, unfinished, while he moved to stand before Lois. He took both of her hands in his before going to one knee. "I would ask you to marry me, Lois. Since the moment I first met you, I have loved you. Living here, getting to know you, has only proven to me that you are everything I'd ever hoped to find in a woman. You are the woman I've always dreamed I'd find. I love you and I want to give my life

to you as your husband."

He half-expected a protest from Samuel or Ellen. He was shocked to hear none in the split second before Lois answered by flinging herself into his arms, knocking them both to the floor. The delighted laughs of Lucy and James followed them both to the floor.

"Of course I will," she told him as her arms encircled his neck. "I love you, Clark. I would marry you as a lord or a pauper. All that matters is being with you."

"You've just made me the happiest I've ever been," he murmured to her before gently kissing her.

After a minute, he helped her off the floor. Samuel approached him.

"Clark," he began sternly, and Clark grew a bit worried. "You'll take good care of her, I trust."

"Of course," Clark said, bowing his head slightly, relief flooding him.

"Then welcome to the family," Ellen put in, smiling wistfully.

"Congratulations," Lucy and James added in turn, embracing them both.

King Bruce gave Clark a mischievous smile, with a matching twinkle in his eyes. "See? Your first official act as a lord couldn't have been wiser."

"I'm a lucky man, Your Grace," Clark replied, his heart so full of joy and love that it was hard to imagine why it hadn't burst open already. "Lois is the most wonderful, perfect woman in all the world."

"James!" Ellen called to her son. "Alert the kitchen. Tonight, we will feast and celebrate not only the visit from His Grace, but of Lois' engagement to a fine, new young lord."

Sixty Years Later...

Clark lay in his bed under a pile of warm blankets, his family all around him. He knew the end was not far off. Soon, he would be called to whatever waited for him, beyond the veil of death. In his younger years, the thought would have terrified him down to his very core. But now? Now he was completely at peace with his impending death. In fact, he welcomed it.

He'd had a wonderful life. Not long after he'd been given the title of "Lord," he and Lois had been wed in a small, intimate ceremony. He'd had no one to invite from his side, and Lois' extended family was tiny. It hadn't made any difference. All he'd cared about was becoming Lois' husband. After learning all Samuel had to teach him, Clark and Lois had moved into the manor King Bruce had commissioned. It was a beautiful home — rustic and grand, simple and fancy, comfortable and inviting. But best of all, it had given Clark the space he'd wanted to restart his crops and breed his horses, the same as he always had, only better, because this time, he was doing it because he loved it and not as the only way he could possibly survive.

He'd come to be known, affectionately, as the Pauper Lord. News of his humble origins had spread like wildfire throughout the kingdom. And his earth-tilling ways had often left a film of dirt under his fingernails, no matter how much he'd washed and scrubbed. The soil seemed bound to him in some inexplicable way. Some of the food he'd kept, using it to feed his family and his staff — he'd made a point to never call them his servants. And any who'd come to him as slaves had been immediately declared free and paid a salary in exchange for their work. The excess food — and there was always a large amount of excess — was distributed amongst the poor.

Under the Pauper Lord, those lands had grown to be more prosperous than they'd ever been. King Bruce, with whom Clark and Lois had stayed close, had often praised them for what they'd been able to accomplish, even adopting some of their methods for his own. Other lords had followed suit and slowly, but surely, the entire kingdom had become stronger and wealthier, with the

people happier and healthier.

As for Clark and Lois, they had only grown more and more in love with every passing year. But she had always been so much more than just his wife. She'd been his partner, his best friend, his most trusted confidante. She'd been his sounding board for every law, every act. Most of the laws they passed had been joint efforts — carefully crafted by the two of them with their unique perspectives as a woman who'd grown up around lords and a man who'd grown up as one of the people he now governed.

Together, they had also raised ten children. Ten wonderful children — six boys and four girls. Those children had gone on to have children of their own, and those children now had their own families. Clark was proud of each and every one of them. Each of them had helped to further build the prosperity of their land — in particular, his first born child, Thomas, who had stepped into the governing role when Clark had stepped down once he'd felt his age catching up with him. That had come just in time. Shortly after, Lois had taken ill. For five long years, she had battled against her failing health.

When Lois had passed away during the previous summer, it was all Clark could do to keep going. It was the one death he'd never really recovered from. Time had never healed that wound — it had only made the heartache worse. Every single day, the longing to be with her had grown.

Now, he looked forward to the prospect of seeing Lois on the other side, as he'd heard it preached all throughout his life.

He'd said his goodbyes to his family already. He was more than ready to go into the unknown. His heart knew no fear, save for the fact that he hoped it would be a gentle death with no pain. Still, his family sat around his bedside, keeping vigil around the clock. For that, he was glad. He didn't want to die alone.

But now he felt Death's presence, as though a physical manifestation of it stood by the head of his bed. Clark had to look through failing eyes to make sure that no one was really there. He felt his breath growing shallower. He felt his pulse slow and weaken. He tried to relax and closed his eyes. He was ready for this, he had to tell himself.

Then, suddenly, it seemed as though he could hear Lois' voice calling to him in a clear, strong voice. His eyes flicked open weakly, but it seemed as if he could actually *see* Lois standing at the foot of his bed, hand outstretched to him. But it wasn't the Lois who had died. It wasn't the old woman with silver hair and so many laugh-lines crossing her features. It wasn't the shriveled, frail woman she'd been at the very end. No. The Lois who stood before him was the vibrant young woman he'd met one fateful day in the marketplace, back when he'd been nothing but a poor farmer. She smiled at him — the private, blindingly beautiful smile she'd always reserved just for him.

"Lois," he croaked out. "I'm coming to you, my love."

He felt his spirit reach out and take her hand. With that, the world around him vanished.

Thirty Years Later...

"My lord?" Robert, the local doctor, said, poking his head into the study where Lord Jonathan — so named after his great-great-grandfather — was nervously pacing.

"Huh? Oh!" Jonathan said, starting at the sudden break in the silence that had been surrounding him for most of the day. "Yes, what is it?"

"I'm proud to say that Lady Elizabeth has delivered her baby. A healthy little boy."

"A boy?" he asked, a smile exploding onto his face. "And completely healthy?"

Robert nodded. "Yes, my lord. Completely healthy. Rosy cheeked and with a healthy set of lungs, I might add."

Jonathan felt all of the tension bleed out of him. "Thank God," he whispered to himself.

The pregnancy had been hard on his wife. There had been several scares where she'd bled heavily and they'd feared that the baby had been lost to them. There had also been two times where she'd experienced false labor pains so intense that they'd both been afraid that the baby would come too early and perish. But she and the child had fought to make it to a healthy time frame, when the baby would almost certainly survive the birth.

Still, it was weeks before when she should have been delivering and tensions had been running high, ever since they'd realized that this was not a false labor but the real thing, and that their child would soon be making his or her appearance.

"Can I see them?" Jonathan asked eagerly. In his hand was a small, stuffed animal that he'd had made for the child when he'd first learned that he was going to be a father.

Robert nodded. "Of course, my lord, for a short time. Lady Elizabeth needs to rest after the birth."

"I understand. Thank you, doctor."

"I'll see myself out," Robert said with a light dipping of his head. "I'll be back in a few days, just to make sure her recovery is going well and that the baby is growing normally."

"Very good. I will see you then."

Without waiting for a response, Jonathan turned and left the room. With long, eager strides befitting the lord of Kent Manor, as the place had come to be known, he made his way to the bedroom, where his wife and new son were waiting for him. Still, it was hard to keep his poise when all he wanted to do was run at top speed, like a carefree child, to meet his little boy.

"My love?" he called softly as he opened the door to their bedroom.

"Come in, Jon," Elizabeth responded in a matching tone. "Come meet your son."

He pushed the door fully open, to find his baby boy suckling from his mother's breast. A smile broke out over his features and he shut the door quickly, before making his way over to sit on the bed alongside his fledgling family. He peeked over the edge of the blanket that the boy was swaddled in.

"He's beautiful," Jonathan whispered in awe. "Thank you, Beth."

"We still need to choose a name for him," his wife reminded him, her eyes never leaving the boy.

Jonathan nodded. "You're right, my love."

"I was thinking. He looks like a Charles to me," Elizabeth said after a moment.

The baby finished nursing and Elizabeth gently lifted him to her shoulder, gently patting his back. The newborn lightly burped and settled down into sleep. Elizabeth carefully passed the infant to his father.

"Charles," Jonathan said with approval, gazing down at his sleeping son. "Yes. You certainly *do* look like a Charles." He smiled at the baby and placed the small stuffed fox in the newborn's arms. "One day, you will be a great lord or a revered knight, who will be a hero to the less fortunate. I can feel it."

THE END