

Relative History

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Rated: PG

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Summary: A simple burglary sends Jonathan Kent back in time to 1997, where he has to balance his desire to help with his fear of messing up his future. It's up to the extended Kent family, and some friends from their superpowered social club, to bring him home, if they can.

Story Size: 64,343 words (351Kb as text)

NOTE: Some dialogue is taken from the episode "Lethal Weapon." Standard disclaimers apply.

February 15, 2025

Bruce Wayne sighed as he sat at the desk in his study. A sense of foreboding had been building in him steadily over the last several days, and one look at the calendar told him why. Tomorrow was a date that had been circled a long time ago, so long ago that he wondered what the world would be like when it finally came. He had assumed that he would be exiled or dead when it did come around, but he was still here, retired from his former line of duty, and his life had instead become fuller, surrounded by his adopted family. And although he was sure Sam Wayne, the erstwhile CJ Kent and current Batman, could probably handle whatever came – he had survived death once, after all – he wasn't so sure about the rest of them, and that brought a deep sense of worry. It was amazing how protective he had become of them, even though they weren't his blood. That's just what family was, he supposed, a lesson finally learned after decades of pushing away anyone who came too close.

His hand reached out and opened a drawer to his left, three from the top. Pressed up against the front was a yellowed envelope, which he gently clasped and pulled out, looking at it closely before turning it over in his hands. After a long moment, he regarded his visitor, then handed him the envelope. "This has been in my possession for 28 years," he said, his voice taking on the same even tone that it always did when he discussed business. "It showed up out of thin air one day, placed by some invisible hand in front of the computer monitor in the cave while Dick had watched. The only clue as to how it got there was a strong gust of wind, which meant that it had to have been delivered by one of two people."

Sam Wayne, seated in a chair opposite Bruce, nodded slowly, his eyes locked on Bruce's. He hadn't given the envelope more than a cursory glance yet, though Bruce was sure he would have more to contribute to the conversation once he did. "You think this came from my dad?"

"I thought maybe so at first, but at the time I had yet to even meet Superman, or the Flash, and neither should know where to find me. I puzzled over it for a while, but decided that a post-dated letter didn't warrant that much of my time, so I put it away and forgot about it." Its presence had caused to him to invest heavily in better security, to mistrust Superman for a while before he realized that there was no way that the envelope could've come from him. By all rights, Bruce probably should've thrown it away, but whether out of curiosity or respect for the unknown sender, he hadn't. He also could've opened it, he supposed, but something held him back. So it had sat, moving from time to time from one desk drawer to the next, hanging for a time on a bulletin board

before finally making its way here, to this time and place.

CJ furrowed his brow, then examined the letter more closely. The writing on the front, in slightly smudged pencil, indicated that the envelope was intended for "The Current Batman," as if the sender knew that Bruce would've passed off the mantle before the delivery date, given as February 16, 2025, came. After a second he blanched, his eyes growing wide as he looked back at Bruce. "This looks like my brother's handwriting," he croaked, confusion evident in his features. "How could that be?"

"Maybe it's not. Maybe it is, I don't know. But I'm fairly certain that something is going to happen in the next 24 hours that will answer that question. For the sake of the past, we have to let whatever that something is happen. Then it looks like you have a letter to open, and probably a case to solve."

CJ took a couple of deep breaths and pondered the possibilities. His gaze shifted past Bruce, and he lost himself in thought for a while before a ghost of a smile began to form on his face. "If knowledge of every time travel movie ever made is an asset, then I have this one in the bag," he said. "Though I'm almost jealous that Jon gets to be the one to experience it."

Jonathan Kent hung up the phone and regarded his computer screen. His current assignment was proving to be rather frustrating, and not only for him. A series of robberies had occurred throughout Metropolis over the last couple days, and although plenty of high profile items had been stolen, neither he nor the police were any closer to figuring out who was behind them, and that was due in large part to the fact that the robbers seemed to simply disappear after pulling the job. One theory was that superpowered individuals were behind it, but Jon could say from firsthand experience that was not the case. In observing one of the robberies, it had seemed to him that there was some sort of hand-held device that the robbers activated, causing the air around to shimmer before they took a step forward and vanished. In the split second it took him to reach the site, they would simply vanish without a trace. There was also no pattern to the robberies, and trying to predict where they would hit next was proving to be difficult.

Jon had a leg up on other reporters covering the story, though, in that he had several connections within STAR Labs. Aside from Superman's usual group of doctors and advisors, he had some old friends that worked there, that he often called when he needed information regarding the cutting edge of scientific research, and this seemed to fit the bill. In conversing with his friend, it was mentioned that other branches of STAR Labs has been attempting to develop personal teleportation devices, which, to put it in science factor terms, created little portals that would take a person from one place to another. It was fascinating research, but Jon's friend was fairly certain that it hadn't gotten beyond the conceptual phase.

Jon drummed his fingers on his desk, wondering how much of that information to put in the article. The robber's method of disappearing was really just speculation at this point, and his editor was rather firm that speculation, rumor, and gossip had no place in the news. And anyway, he was on a deadline, which was only a few minutes away. With a sigh, Jon gave the article another once over, edited a few words and phrases to clean things up, and submitted it. The information from STAR Labs would just have to wait for another edition, when he was able to flesh it out a little better. In the meantime, he did have other sources he could probe for information. With a half-smile, he picked up the phone again and dialed a familiar number.

His smile widened as his wife's voice came through the receiver. "I see you're calling from the Daily Planet — I suppose that means you'll be asking me for a subscription," she said cooly. It was a variation on a joke she used every time he called, but it never got old.

"I was just in need of information, so I thought I would call the smartest person I know," he said. Phoning her during working hours was probably not strictly necessary, given the amount of time they spent together during the rest of the day, but there was an unwritten rule between them to leave work at work. And anyway, talking to her could only help improve his mindset on what had been an otherwise frustrating day.

"Ah, flattery," she said, the good humor in her voice soothing to his soul. "I can't possibly say no to you after that. What's up?"

"Well, the most recent case of disappearing burglars happened in your precinct, and since I'm running into a brick wall in trying to figure it out..."

"Wait a second," Diane said, interrupting him mid-babble. "You haven't thought up an alliterative name for these guys yet?"

"The Daily Planet is above those kinds of tacky publicity stunts," Jon replied with mock indignation. "And besides, we're not the Hardy Boys."

"Aren't you the same paper that coined the name 'Skyslot Sanchez' for the Metro's newest slugger?" Her voice was downright lyrical as she teased him.

"That was the sports section," he answered. He waived his hand dismissively out of habit, even though he knew she couldn't see it.

"And when historic Old Town went up in flames, didn't you guys christen the perpetrator the Authentic Architectural Arsonist?"

Jon signed. She had a point, and he would be lying if he thought of some sort catchy nickname didn't cross his mind. "I was leaning toward the Porthole Purloiners," he said. "But it seemed like a stretch. Anyway, about the case?"

She laughed lightly, then cleared her throat. "Ah yes, the case. Tell you what, Kent. I will trade you information about this in exchange for a desk-side lunch. I'm positively starved, but I'm on duty here for another hour."

"You drive a hard bargain," he said, his cheeks hurting from trying to smother his grin. "I'll be down there with sandwiches before you can say 'pumpnickel.'"

A soft "p" sound had barely escaped her lips before Jon set the phone down, looked around, then, finding himself alone in his corner of the office, took off for his favorite lunch spot.

Jon took a bite out of his sandwich and raised his eyebrows as Diane pondered the information that he had given her.

"So STAR labs doesn't have anything capable of doing what these guys can do?" she asked as she absently stabbed her fork into her salad. "They're the most advanced research laboratory on the east coast. You would think if anyone could match the technology available to the random criminal element, it would be those guys."

Jon bobbed his head and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "Well," he said, "Just because they've been the most cutting-edge tech company in the past doesn't mean they're the most cutting-edge research company now. I can name off the top of my head another half dozen companies and a few universities between here and Gotham that have been involved in revolutionary technological breakthroughs in the last couple months. Then again, for all we know someone could've come up with the portal device in their garage."

She snorted. "Yeah I can see that now. A couple scrubby guys hanging out in their garage tearing apart household appliances to construct a device that particle physicists have a hard time explaining. Somehow I think that's not the answer, but..." She raised an eyebrow and took a bite, taking a moment to compose her thoughts. "If they were looking for someplace to disappear to where we would never think to look, some random garage in the suburbs would fit the bill pretty well," Diane said.

"You know, it's possible that they don't disappear to a certain

place, but to a certain time." Jon leaned forward and lowered his voice. "My dad tells a story about a time when he had to deal with someone who used a sort of window to move through time periods and to even different dimensions."

Diane blinked a few times. "Wow, really?"

He raised his eyebrows. "The technology came from the future, but the person using it didn't come here to commit petty crimes. They were more... megalomaniacal than that. My dad can tell you the whole story, but... what's going on here doesn't have the feel of something big, so I doubt it's related."

"Still, it makes you think about the possibilities," Diane said, then took another bite of her salad. They ate silently for a few moments, pondering, before Diane spoke again.

"There's no pattern in their targets, right?" she said.

Jon sighed. "Not that I can find. Like I said, it's frustrating."

"And do you know what was stolen?"

"For the most part," he said. "But it's possible that we don't know everything. Reporters usually only get told about the big ticket items."

Diane's eyes began to twinkle. "But I bet I could find out the whole list." Putting her fork down, she began to type on her computer terminal, smiling as she found what she was looking for. Jon leaned over slightly and she tilted her monitor so he could see. "This is strictly off the record, of course."

"Come on," he said with a smirk.

She wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, look who I'm talking to." As they read over the list, they started to postulate on ways the items could be related, throwing out items that could be made from components or ways that the items could be reconstituted. Something was beginning to tickle the back of Jon's mind, but before he was able to zero in on the thought, he caught the crackle of a police radio in the dispatch room.

"Jon?" Diane whispered, laying her hand on his arm and drawing his focus back to her. Years of marriage to him meant that she could read his cues, and although she had been speaking when he heard the radio, probably saying something profound, she didn't seem upset. Excitement seemed to burn in her eyes as she awaited his response, and he had to smile as he briefly pondered how lucky they were to have each other. Trying to catch thieves, even ones that used novel model of transportation, could easily be very routine. But working with her, both in his guise as reporter and as a superhero, made it much more exciting, much more fresh. It always seemed like they accomplished more when they paired up than they did alone, and her presence certainly made the experience more enjoyable. The thrill of the hunt, the adrenaline rush that came with a successful outcome seemed to carry over once they got home at night, too, and he found himself suddenly just as excited as she was.

"They're back," he whispered back, standing abruptly. "The Diamond Exchange in the Hub Tower." She stood, then gave him a small smile.

"See you there?" she said, and his smile widened.

"I look forward to it," he replied, then leaned in to give her a quick kiss before jogging off to an empty hallway. Then, before anyone in the building could notice, he shifted into super speed and made his way toward the scene of the crime. Approaching the diamond exchange offices, he could see three men gathering things together, as if they had accomplished their mission, then suddenly one of the men took a step and seemed to disappear into a shimmering circle floating in the air.

It was true then, he thought, pouring on the speed. He had seen surveillance video that showed something similar, but video could be altered, and he had found himself skeptical that he was actually seeing what he thought he was. As he entered the building and zipped through the stairwells and hallways to the diamond exchange, he could see a second man step take a step and disappear. If he didn't get there quickly, he might lose the best lead

he had so far, and lose the suspects in the process. With one more burst of velocity, he reached the shimmering circle, which looked like nothing so much as a desert mirage, a distortion of air that could easily be dismissed as a hallucination. Time seemed to slow down as he reached it, and without a second thought, he entered it ahead of the third thief.

He wasn't quite sure what he expected to experience as he entered the portal. Part of him thought that maybe he'd see important events from his life flash past him in a burst of colors, or see some lines of light pass by him as if he was moving at warp speed in a Star Wars movie. But what he found instead was an abrupt change of scenery. A moment earlier he had been inside an office building downtown, now as he stopped he found himself in a large, empty warehouse. The angle of the light streaming in through the windows made him believe that it was still around the same time of day, but the thick layer of dust covering everything, and the general state of repair of the place seemed to indicate that the building had been abandoned for some time. He also didn't see any crooks, or any signs of life at all, outside of the rats and cockroaches scurrying around the base of the walls. He activated his x-ray vision and checked out the world outside the warehouse, and found that he was in a neighborhood near the docks, one that seemed familiar yet different from the warehouse district that he knew. The entire neighborhood seemed abandoned, overgrown, and forgotten.

With a frustrated grunt, he dropped to the ground and made his way to the nearest door. A padlock locked the door from the outside, though a small push was all he needed to make the lock succumb. Once outside, he took another thorough look around, then sighed and took off into the air, hoping to orient himself then return to his wife and his lunch. Clearing the top of the warehouse, he turned toward downtown, then stopped cold. Something was wrong with the skyline – buildings seemed to be missing, and others were there that shouldn't be. He'd spent enough time staring at that skyline, populating the tops of the buildings there, that he should know what it looked like. His brow furrowed, and he started to question his memory, but it was at that moment that he became aware of sirens, a whole lot of them, and a police dispatch indicating a fire in a hotel not too far from where he was. Without another thought he took off to help.

The fire was in the middle floors of a 30 story hotel, and people could be seen in the windows on the upper floors, signaling for assistance. Jon quickly got to work rescuing people, though he noticed a certain reaction to his presence, almost as if people were surprised to see him. He didn't let the reaction slow him down, though, and soon enough he was satisfied that the upper floors were vacated. Landing atop the building across from the hotel, he pondered the firefighters' approach to the blaze and how best to help them, when his father landed next to him. Jon glanced toward him, but had to do a double take at what he saw.

"Get a new suit?" he asked with a half-smile, noting that the fabric and stitching all seemed very different than the last time he saw him. The color was a slight shade different, too, and the size of the S shield somewhat larger. Even aside from the suit, though, the way he styled his hair seemed different. Their costumes and overall look were not exactly static, despite what the public thought. From time to time Jon or Clark would experiment with different materials or make slight tweaks to the costume to simplify its construction or take advantage of some new technique or technology. The changes tended to be minor, though, and they would rarely make more than one small tweak at a time. This was the most radical change that Jon had seen in Superman's appearance, and it was a little jarring. And the expression on his face – was he confused? alarmed? – didn't help. Jon felt his smile starting to fade as his dad opened and closed his mouth a couple times, acting like he wanted to say something, but ultimately not saying anything. Jon shook his head and reminded himself that

this was his father, after all, and the two of them didn't have any reason to feel uncomfortable around each other, even if the air between them seemed very stuffy at the moment. He was probably just concerned about the fire. "I, uh, was going to work on putting out the fire around the building core, if you wanted to work from the outside," Jon said, and his father nodded dumbly.

After a moment of hesitation, Jon took off again and went about his work. Working as a team with his dad, it didn't take long to finish. Once all the hot spots were taken care of, Jon flew out of the building and hovered in the air for a moment, noting with some puzzlement that there seemed to be an awful lot of media members on the street for a simple fire, even if it was a rather visible one. And they all seemed to go crazy once they caught sight of him, which hadn't really happened much since his first year on the job. He was going to ask his dad about it, but noticed that Superman had apparently disappeared. No doubt to go write up the story, Jon thought with a grateful smile. Giving the crowd a salute, he took off for the police precinct and the rest of his sandwich.

He found his velocity slowing as he went along, his attention diverted by a thousand little things that just seemed wrong. The vehicles on the road – all seemed to be from sort of period movie, where old cars looked new, older cars were way more common than he could ever remember, and any car manufactured since the turn of the millennium was completely absent. The clothing and hair styles of the people on the streets also seemed odd – too pastel, with too much hair spray. Nobody walked around distracted by small screens in front of their faces, though a minority of people still seemed to be conversing on odd cell phones. Even the sounds in the air were different – the radio spectrum seemed much less crowded, with some digital bands entirely missing. There was a pervasive high-pitched whine in the air characteristic of tube-type televisions, a sound that was usually quite rare, but now seemed to be everywhere. In all, it made an odd picture, but he didn't begin to get worried until he reached the police precinct where he had been conversing with his wife less than an hour earlier. Watching from the air, he could find no sign of Diane, and her desk seemed to be occupied by someone else. The furniture in the building looked old and beat up, the carpet different, the computers on the desks gigantic.

Gaining altitude, Jon looked toward his apartment, and blanched when he saw that it was completely missing. In place of his building stood an abandoned warehouse, not too different from the one he found himself in after entering the porthole. Panic began to seep into his consciousness as he drifted toward the Daily Planet. Looking inside, he saw a newsroom that looked nothing like the one he knew, and his desk was gone... a closet occupied the floor space where it should be. And there, in the middle of it all, he could see his parents, only.... Only they were young, very young, his mother's hair devoid of grays, her face smooth and vibrant. His dad didn't look terribly different, though his wardrobe did. At the sound of Jon's gasp, he saw his father look toward him, directly at him, his eyes widening.

"Where... when am I?" Jon whispered, though he had a terrible feeling that he already knew the answer. His father's eyes diverted to a wall on the far side of the newsroom, and Jon's gaze followed, noting the Daily Planet's masthead splashed above a series of clocks and, finally, a calendar. The year at the top of the calendar stated that he was, in fact, in the year 1997... 28 years earlier than when he had awoken that morning.

"No. No no no," Jon said, the panic building inside of him. How could he be in 1997? What had happened when he went through that porthole? With the exception of his parents, everyone he knew, everyone he could confide in or try to work out the answers to his questions was gone, or technically had yet to be. CJ, Laura, Jenny...Diane. He had seen enough science fiction to know that he couldn't talk to his parents, that he should just get as

far from them as he could, for the sake of his own future. But where could he go? Who could he talk to?

In an instant the answer came. There were two people he could seek out, people who weren't a part of the world he left, people who had always known the right words to say and the right advice to give. Without a second thought he left, bound for Kansas.

The Hub tower was abuzz with police officers and the press as Diane pulled up to the scene, causing her brows to furrow in question. Starting about the time she got up from her desk, she had felt an odd sense of foreboding, as if something were terribly wrong, though she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. The feeling had only intensified as she approached the scene, but the more she puzzled over it, the more she probed at it, the more dark and hollow she began to feel, like some important part of her was missing. It was hard to put into words, hard to quantify, but she knew what her eyes were seeing wasn't at the root of whatever it was. Outwardly, everything looked like a normal, active crime scene. There were no grisly sights, no loud demonstrations in front of the building. Officers stood guard at the elevators and stairwells, only allowing authorized access to the upper floors where the robbery happened, and they appeared almost bored as they manned their positions.

The elevator ride to the top took an eternity, the emptiness inside of her inexplicably growing as she ascended. Her first tangible hint of what was wrong came as she reached her floor and the doors opened, and she noticed the distinct lack of any super assistance, even though Jon had made it known that he was on his way. "Johnson!" she said, signaling to the nearest officer.

He greeted her with a small nod. "Kent. Not much to see here, I'm afraid." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "It was a smash and grab, with the suspects disappearing into thin air. It's a weird way to go, but..." he shrugged. "They didn't leave any clues or notes, gave us nothing to go on."

"What about security camera footage?" she asked, easily picking out the camera locations in the ceiling. Given that the office housed a diamond exchange, she doubted that there was an inch of office space not under surveillance.

Johnson pointed toward the back of the office. "We've been watching the recordings in the General Manager's office, but I'm telling you, there's not much to see. It's just like the other ones."

Diane opened her mouth, anxious to ask whether Superman or Crimson Superman had been around, but officially she should have no reason to believe that they'd be there, and professionally she didn't want to give the impression that they should somehow be relying on super assistance. Deciding that the question was best left unasked, she closed her mouth, gave Johnson a small smile, and made her way to watch the recording. On the way, she kept her head down and her ears sharp, listening in on the conversations going on around her. And while she overheard some things she would be better off not knowing, she didn't hear any mention of her husband, and that only made her unsettled feelings increase.

In the General Manager's office, several officers were circled around a computer, watching a recording of three masked men. Every now and then the view would change to a different angle as the recording cycled through the cameras in the office. "What's the word, Meeks?" Diane asked the ranking officer in the room.

"See for yourself," he said, gesturing toward the screen. "They turned the place over pretty well, grabbing a lot of high value loot."

Diane watched as the three men rifled through drawers and cabinets, shoving items into large duffel bags they carried with them. Oddly, though, the search didn't seem random. Not every drawer was touched, and at one point one of the men produced a piece of paper, reading it before searching for the correct drawer. "Do we know what they took?" she asked. "More to the point, do

we know why they only seemed to take certain things?"

"We need to inventory to know for sure what's missing," Meeks answered. "As for the why, I'm not sure I care until we figure out the who." As they watched, the picture on the screen seemed to shimmer, and just like that, one of the men took a step and vanished. Soon it happened again, but before the third man similarly vanished, there seemed to be the brief flash of something.

"Did you see that?" Diane asked, lunging forward to put her finger on the screen.

"See what?" Meeks asked. "They disappeared."

"No, right before the last one did. There was something else. Back it up."

Dutifully, the officer operating the computer backed up the recording, and once again she could see what looked like a blur, but only maybe for a frame. Looking around the room, Diane realized that nobody else saw what she did. Her stomach began to clench up, and the feeling of foreboding began to form into something more concrete. What if Jon had been there, after all? What if he saw the robbery in progress and tried to find out where it was the suspects went by going through the porthole? What if he was that blur?

"Excuse me," Diane mumbled, abruptly leaving the room. If that was him, then the fact that he was able to follow them through the looking glass could lead to a big break in the case. And maybe that's where he was, but her gut told her there was something more. Making her way toward a quiet corner of the office, she reached for her cell phone and quickly punched the icon to call Jon. Rather than ringing, the call went directly for voicemail. Taking a deep breath and silently telling herself to calm down, she entered the number for the Daily Planet, then punching the extension for her father-in-law.

"Clark, hey, it's Diane," she said, trying to add some cheer to her voice. "I don't suppose Jon made it back to the office yet did he?" Upon hearing that he hadn't, she hung up and took another shaky breath. Jon disappearing for a while to take care of some disaster or crime was nothing new. She couldn't count how many nights she'd spent worrying before she figured out that he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. He'd always come back before, and he would again, despite what her gut kept trying to tell her. Without another thought, she went to work, surveying the scene, making notes, chatting with her colleagues. She had just wrapped up her duties and was headed toward the elevator when her phone began to ring. A quick glance showed it was her brother-in-law, Sam Wayne, on the phone.

She didn't even have to say hello before he began to speak. "He's missing isn't he?"

"What?" Diane said as a shiver worked its way up her spine.

"Jon. Went through a porthole of some sort. That sound about right?"

"How...?"

"Because he sent me a letter." Sam said, a hint of amusement in his voice. It was the same inflection that Jon usually found infuriating. Diane couldn't disagree.

"A letter?" she said, more impatient than confused.

"Yeah! Haven't you seen *Back to the Future 2*? He sent you one too," Sam answered, and this time she most definitely was confused. "Why don't we meet for supper and talk about it? I'll have Laura fly me up there."

"Look, I have to get the twins before 6, and I don't want to talk about the fact that their father is missing in front of them. Meet me at my office in a half hour." With that she hung up the phone before he could object or get in any more quips. It was with renewed purpose that she turned toward the elevator en route to her office. If Jon really was stuck somewhere – the past? – then she was going to do what she could to bring him back, vague feelings of emptiness be damned.

The sun hung high in the cloudless sky as Jon located his grandparents' farm. He flew in a large, lazy circle above it, observing, calming his nerves, before finally landing at the end of their gravel drive. Even from high up in the air he had been able to smell the scent of bacon, his stomach growling ever so slightly at the thought of BLT sandwiches with juicy, farm-grown tomatoes, just like he had in bygone summers gathered around the table just beyond those walls. A large pitcher of iced tea sunned itself on the porch, just waiting to be served with a late lunch. The farm really wasn't much different from what he remembered, he thought as he looked around. The vehicles parked by the garage looked different, and the tree was maybe not as big, although it was still massive by City standards. The tire swing he used to love so much hadn't quite made its way to the large tree branch yet, though the big wooden swing hung from the porch. The place still felt the same, well-loved, like a home away from home, like the haven away from the city where he escaped for a week each year. But now he came here as a stranger, and a part of him feared that they would refuse to help, even as he reminded himself that they were the kindest people in the world and would never dream of turning away a person in need. And he was counting on that, because he didn't know where he would go if they did.

A quick glance told him that his grandmother was in the kitchen, gathering plates and glasses for their meal, while his grandfather was putting some tools away in the barn. Slowly, Jon, started walking up the drive toward them, glancing down at himself and frowning slightly at the fact that he hadn't brought a change of clothes with him. He was still in his guise as Crimson Superman, and one glance at the S on his chest would immediately reveal his family association before he had a chance to tell them the whole story. It would be so much easier to simply present himself as a stranger, but... he would wind up telling them the truth eventually, he supposed. And anyway, he looked enough like his dad that they would surely notice the relation right away. Best to just get the confrontation over with. He picked up his pace, and after a moment he seemed to catch the attention of his grandfather.

"Clark?" his grandfather said, some hesitation in his voice, probably due to the different uniform. Jon paused ever so slightly, then held up his hand in greeting and resumed his pace. "Martha! Clark's here!" The elder Jonathan Kent took a few steps toward his visitor, then stopped, his brow knit together. "Wait, you're not..."

Jon slowed his pace, not wanting to frighten him. He was close enough now that his grandpa could probably see him quite clearly. "Actually, I..."

At that moment, Martha Kent barreled out of the house. "Clark!" she said with a smile, which faded quickly as she got a good look at her guest. "What are you wearing? Who are you?" Her posture rapidly changed from welcoming to defensive, and her husband moved to her side much more quickly than Jon would've expected for someone his age. The reaction was probably to be expected considering the New Kryptonians had invaded their town, what, a year earlier? Maybe less? Jon bore a Kryptonian symbol on his chest, and although it was the family emblem, that didn't mean that he couldn't be one of them, at least in their eyes.

Jon sighed, then halted his progress. "My name is Jonathan Kent," he said. The words served to soften the expressions of his grandparents, though their body language still spoke of distrust. "Look, I know you've seen a lot of strange things over the years. I know that your son comes from another world, that he does incredible and wonderful things as Superman. I know you've met others from the same planet as him, some who were friendly, but others who tried to take this world for their own. You've seen things and experienced things that any normal person would label and crazy or impossible – clones, vindictive billionaires, angels,

dead gangsters, and any number of other odd things – but were very much real. So believe me when I say I appreciate how crazy this sounds, but if anyone can handle the bizarre and unusual with love and understanding, it's you." He took another couple steps toward them, and they did not flinch. "I was named after my grandfather. You." He nodded toward Jonathan. "I'm from the future, the year 2025 to be exact, and I need your help to get back to my own time."

His grandmother's eyes met his, and he could feel her looking into his soul, trying to find the truth. Without breaking eye contact, she moved around her husband and toward Jon, stopping directly in front of him, then shifting her gaze to his face, drinking in his features until finally looking down to his chest. When her eyes met his again, he could see moisture in the corners. She reached one hand up and cupped his face, taking another long look before closing the gap between them and embracing him warmly. Reflexively Jon's arms came up and he closed his eyes and returned the hug. After a moment, he felt another hand on his back, and he noticed that his grandfather had made his way over to show his acceptance and love in his own way. Jon smiled at him, and he knew everything would be okay.

After a moment they pulled apart, and the spell was broken. "We were just sitting down to lunch," Martha said. "Would you like to join us?"

Despite having already eaten with his wife before accidentally going back in time, Jon couldn't think of anything he would rather do. "I would love to," he said, and they all went in the house.

As they dined, his grandparents quizzed Jon about his life – where he went to school, what he did for a living. They danced around questions about his family, probably not wanting to be too presumptuous in case he was still a bachelor, but he offered up the information readily. He pulled the chain holding his wedding ring from beneath his suit top, then remembered his cell phone, which held numerous pictures of his wife and children. At first they seemed more interested in the phone, which was understandable considering what he had observed of cell phones in 1997, but photos of his children quickly captured their attention. After a while, once he had gotten through the basics of his life and the sandwiches were gone, they settled into a comfortable silence.

"So you said you need our help?" Martha said, and Jon nodded. "Can't you talk to your folks?"

"I don't want to do anything or say anything that might change the future. It would be so easy for something to slip out when I'm not paying attention to what I'm saying. I mean, I don't think I've ever called my dad by his name, even at work. All I would have to do is call him 'dad' once and the jig will be up."

Martha put her hand on his arm and smiled. "Oh, honey, all anyone would have to do is take a good look at you and they will know the truth. You truly are a spitting image of Clark."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Jon said with a half-smile. "And that's another part of the problem."

"So, wait a second," Jon's grandfather said. "If you don't want to change the future by being around anyone close to you, then why are you here?"

Jon looked at the ground and tried to think of how to break the news, but his grandmother saved him the trouble. "Isn't it obvious?" Martha asked, her voice calm and resigned. "It's because we aren't there."

"I'm sorry," Jon said quietly, bringing his eyes up. Martha squeezed his arm and smiled at him again, reassuring him.

"Don't be. Can't say I'm surprised. It happens to all of us eventually, though I must say that I'm disappointed that we won't be around to see these beautiful children."

Jon gave a pained smile. "Well, you're seeing them now. And your spirit is there, certainly as long as Dad is around."

His grandfather stood and patted his shoulder, before continuing to the counter and grabbing an apple from a bowl.

“Well you need to get back to your family, sooner rather than later. How did you get here in the first place?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Jon said, then told them about the case he had been working on. “I followed the suspects through a shimmery porthole, which should’ve brought me to wherever they went, but instead brought me to this time.”

“Does anyone know you’re here?”

“Dad knows,” Jon said. “I saw him this afternoon, at a hotel fire. I thought he was acting weird...everyone was acting weird. No wonder, I guess, considering that I shouldn’t exist in this time.”

“He’s probably confused about who you are. We should know,” Martha said with a smile. “I bet it takes years before he figures out what he really saw today, especially if you aren’t planning to talk to him. Does anyone else know you’re here?”

“My wife knew I was chasing after those guys. It won’t take her long to figure out that something’s wrong, but anything aside from that...” he shrugged and sighed.

“Couldn’t you send someone a message?” Jonathan asked. “Twenty eight years isn’t exactly forever. I think I have socks older than that.” He chuckled. “It shouldn’t be too hard to send someone a letter.”

“Back to the Future 2,” Jon mumbled, then smiled. CJ would most certainly appreciate the situation he found himself in, and in his place would probably send a certified letter Western Union just for the novelty value. “The problem is figuring out where to put it or who to give it to so it will get where it needs to go at the correct time. I can’t just slip it into Mom or Dad’s desk, or hide it in a box. It has to be delivered.”

“So you need to give it to a person who will be in your life in 28 years, and who can keep a secret.”

“Batman!” Jon said, sitting up straighter.

“The vigilante in Gotham?” his grandfather asked.

“My brother,” Jon said with a smile. “At least in 2025.”

“Really?” his grandmother asked, amused.

“It’s a long story,” Jon said. “But the current Batman’s still around giving him a hard time. Their base of operation should be the same now as it will be in the future, and I would trust him with my life, even if he has no idea who I am right now. Could I borrow some paper?”

“Of course, sweetie!” Martha said, then rose and grabbed him a notepad. The paper had the symbol of a seed corn company in the upper corner, Jon noted, as did the pen that she handed him. A memory suddenly came back of all the other little things they had around their house with seed corn advertising on it – refrigerator magnets, coffee mugs, hats, calendars. It was big business in this part of the world, and the little trinkets were everywhere. The familiarity made him smile. “We’ll leave you alone. And if you want a change of clothes, there should be some old stuff up in Clark’s room. Come on, Jonathan.”

Martha shooed Jonathan out of the room, and Jon got down to business, composing a letter to his brother. If Bruce got curious and read it ahead of its intended delivery date, he might end up somewhat confused, since it was filled with personal references and a fair number of time travel movie comparisons. It also gave CJ enough information to find and retrieve him, which was the goal. Satisfied, Jon folded the letter and placed it in the envelope his grandmother gave him. He was about to seal it up when he hesitated. Diane was probably worried about him, and would no doubt be involved in whatever effort they undertook to get him back. She deserved at least an acknowledgement from him that he was thinking about her. Jon took another piece of paper, and as he pondered what to say to his wife, a wave of emotion suddenly and strongly washed over him.

Of course he knew fundamentally where and when he was, that his life was three decades in the future, a span of time greater than he had been alive. But even upon finding that out, he had

been calm, buoyed by the idea that it was a temporary situation. He wouldn’t be here long, and whatever had allowed him to get here in the first place would certainly allow him to get back where he was supposed to be. Besides, now that CJ was on the case, the solution should be in the bag. But...what if it wasn’t? How many time travelers did he know, anyway? It was the thing of science fiction, for the most part. And even though his parents spoke of a time traveler that they had met several times, they also said that the chaos he inevitably brought with him made them relieved when his visits ceased. He doubted they would willingly summon him again if Jon told them his predicament, which he wasn’t planning to do in any case. If CJ couldn’t figure it out, there was the real possibility that he wouldn’t see his kids for another 28 years. And his wife would enter the world in 2 years or so, but she wouldn’t be the woman he knew and loved for a very long time. They were the best part of his life, and an existence without them would be incredibly hollow, even if he had his grandparents to lean on.

With a deep breath and a shake of his head, Jon pushed his emotions aside. No point in becoming negative now. And there was no point in writing his wife some sort of flowery declaration of all the ways she fulfilled him, and how much he missed her. She knew all that already, and she hated sappy platitudes. “Diane,” he wrote, smiling as his pencil moved along. “Sorry I ruined our lunch. I promise I will make it up to you when I get back. Please give the kids big hugs for me when you see them, and let them know that everything will be okay. I will be there before you know it, even if I have to wait for the passage of time. I would prefer not to, though – stay on CJ until he figures this all out. Remember, I love you always.” Signing his name, he folded the note and wrote her name on the outside of the paper before slipping it into the envelope.

He quickly stood and located his grandparents on the porch. He exited the house through the old screen door, drawing their attention. “I’m going to drop this off, if you don’t mind. But I’ll be back soon. And I’d like to help you out around here, if I could. Do something to make up for the hospitality you have shown me, and will show me. It’s the least I can do.”

They both nodded. “It’s not necessary, you know,” Martha said, moving toward him and wrapping an arm around his waist.

“You don’t know all the stunts my brother and I will pull on our visits here. Trust me, it’s necessary.” He returned the light embrace, put a hand on his grandfather’s shoulder, then took a step away from them and took off toward Gotham.

Even under the glare of the afternoon sun, Gotham City was a dark and gloomy place. It had always felt like a distorted mirror image of Metropolis, the type of place where happiness was in short supply. In recent years, hope had emerged from the darkness under his brother’s example. But the Gotham of 1997 seemed to hold only ugliness and violence, and a few short minutes in the skies above the city was all Jon needed to see that the Batman had his work cut out for him. It gave Jon a new appreciation for the work Bruce did, seeing now where the city had been when he was still new to the job. His gaze was quickly drawn toward Wayne Manor, a place that looked no different now than it would in the future, and the cave sitting below it. At this point in time, the souvenirs were in short supply, and the advance technology looked positively ancient through Jon’s eyes, though it could well be the best that 1997 offered. In front of the vaunted bat-computer sat a very young Dick Grayson in a very hokey Robin outfit. Jon could only stare for a moment, unable to reconcile the lanky, innocent-looking teenager with the bitter man he knew. Blinking a couple times, Jon shifted his gaze to the letter in his hand. It was probably a good thing that Dick was there, since that meant that someone could witness his delivery. It didn’t look like it would be too difficult, especially since most of the security systems that he was an expert in circumventing had yet to be installed. Well, he

supposed, might as well get on with it. It a matter of moments, the letter was placed on the desk in front of Dick and Jon was making his way back toward the Midwest.

His grandparents were no longer on the porch when he landed again at the house. “All right,” he said, pulling the door open and entering the house. “Mission accomplished. Now, please, put me to work.”

He rounded the corner and stopped cold. There, standing in the kitchen with his grandparents and looking right at him, was his father. Jon felt like he had been punched in the gut, and he was aware of a squeak escaping his mouth as Jonathan and Martha turned toward him, apology in their expressions.

“Hello,” Clark said, and Jon started to consider where exactly he could run away to from there. But he knew there was nowhere to go.

“Uh, hi,” he said, then swallowed hard.

“Why don’t we all go sit down,” Martha said, gesturing toward the kitchen table. Jon wasn’t entirely sure he could move at that moment even if he wanted to, but he ended up not having to find out as his father declined the offer.

“No, I don’t plan to be long,” Clark said to her, then turned his attention toward Jon. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“You have?” Jon asked weakly, trying to put an element of surprise in his voice, but failing miserably.

“I have so many questions.” His expression was eager.

“Do you? I, ah, I’m not sure I have the answers you want.”

Clark took a step toward him, and Jon was aware that his eyes had gotten wider.

As if sensing Jon’s discomfort, Clark put his hands up defensively. “Just tell me, you’re not from New Krypton, are you?”

Jon shook his head vigorously. “Actually, I’m from Metropolis.” He cringed a little, realizing that he might have said too much.

“Really?” Clark took another step forward, his hands dropping. “Then why haven’t we met before? Where have you been before today? Why did you act like you knew me?”

Jon subconsciously took a step back, which halted Clark’s progress. “I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you that.”

Clark’s expression softened. “It’s so rare that I meet anyone like myself. I feel like if we could just talk...”

“...we would have a lot in common.” Jon closed his eyes and took a breath. He was so close to his Dad, and their talks always had been something he looked forward to. It was becoming almost painful to say no, and looking at Clark’s face, seeing the sincerity it held, wasn’t helping. He kept repeating to himself that he couldn’t talk to him, that his dad couldn’t know anything about what was going on. But it was already a little late for that, wasn’t it? Jon had been the one to let the genie out of the bottle in the first place at the hotel fire, talking to Clark as if they were in his own time, but that was before he realized where and when he was. He certainly didn’t want to make things worse now, but...he still existed, his future hadn’t been destroyed, and there was probably no reason to be as afraid of his father as he felt right now. It was an odd feeling, completely unnatural, and the young boy inside of him kept looking for that spark of recognition in Clark’s eyes, to be comforted by the man who had always been there for him before. But Clark still saw him as a stranger, and maybe that didn’t necessarily have to be the case. His expression softened. “You’re right about that.”

“My wife and I were hoping you would come over for dinner tonight,” Clark said. “There would be no expectations, and we wouldn’t have to discuss anything you didn’t want to. I just...” he shrugged. “I’m curious about you, and would like to, I don’t know, compare notes I guess. And if Mom and Dad trust you, then I do, too.”

“Okay,” Jon said, the word coming out before he consciously

got a chance to ponder the question.

Clark smiled broadly. “Seven o’clock eastern. 348 Hyperion Avenue.” With that he disappeared, and Jon looked helplessly at his grandparents. Slowly, he walked toward them, then sunk into a kitchen chair.

“What did I just do?” he asked, conflicted.

“You’re just having dinner with your parents,” Martha said. “You’ve probably done that a thousand times before. You’ll be fine.”

Jon signed and nodded. They were right. And there were no expectations, that’s what his father said. Surely he could get through it without too much trouble.

“So, I hear that you want to get put to work?” Jonathan asked. At Jon’s crooked smile, he clapped his back and then turned toward the back door. “Well, change your clothes. I’m going to keep you so busy, you won’t even have time to worry. Meet me in the barn for your first assignment.”

“Yes, sir,” Jon said, and with that he got to work.

CJ had never considered himself a particularly patient person. He was fairly good at playing the long game, at setting things up for sustained success, but that involved action at prescribed times. Just sitting around watching the seconds tick by on the clock had always been torture for him, and having that letter in his hand first thing in the morning had made for a very long day. He had told himself that he couldn’t open it until he knew for sure that the time was right, and he tried to keep himself occupied with other things to keep his mind off it. But all morning it had sat on his desk and stared at him, taunting him, and eventually he gave in. And oh had it been worth the wait. Jon was in the past! With their grandparents! And had accidentally revealed himself to the world, a fact that a quick scan through the news archives had been able to confirm. When the whole thing was over he wanted to quiz his dad on what exactly he remembered from the whole encounter, but that would have to wait. For now he had a mystery to solve.

Even after opening the letter, CJ hadn’t been entirely sure that the event that sent Jon back had happened yet. He waited for a while to get a call or email from his dad or Diane, but it didn’t come, and eventually he got impatient. A quick internet search of Metropolis news revealed another appearance by the disappearing bandits, and he knew the time had come. That was when he called Diane.

He hadn’t expected such a short turnaround to their meeting, but he supposed it made sense. Her husband was gone and she wanted to remedy that...CJ just wanted to have a little fun with the situation. Rousing Laura to get a ride to Metropolis had been a little bit harder than he had expected. She had been spending a lot of time with Matt these days, which was probably to be expected since they announced their engagement last Christmas. CJ often got the feeling that he was interrupting intimate moments between them when he called her into action, and today was no different. It was somewhat amusing to him how completely she had gone from a loner with no interest in men to being plastered to the side of her boyfriend, but love was a funny thing. He couldn’t say that he felt guilty in prying them apart to get some actual work done, though, no matter how much Laura tried to do just that. The whole flight to Metropolis had been forlorn sighs and good-natured ribbing about how much of a slavedriver he was until he told her the whole story of what was going on, then it was all seriousness as she agreed that this job was definitely worth her time.

They landed in the alley adjacent to Diane’s precinct, and Laura changed into normal clothing before they made their way inside and asked for their sister-in-law. Another officer escorted them into a meeting room, which looked a little too much like an interrogation room for CJ’s comfort, and in a moment Diane joined them. Without a word, CJ handed her the envelope. She put the letter addressed to her in her back pocket without a second

glance, then started with the main letter.

"1997?" Diane said. "And nobody else went with him?"

"There was no one else at the place where he emerged... WHEN he emerged."

"A warehouse on the docks," Diane said. "Have we checked that place out yet?"

"I haven't had time," CJ said with a sigh. "And there wasn't exactly an address, just an approximate location."

Both Diane and CJ looked at Laura, and she smiled. "On it, boss," she said, then disappeared.

"Stargate rules, I guess, but no physical hardware on either end," Diane said, reading further.

"No time machine, which means no way back. Not unless we get really smart really fast."

Laura showed up again at that moment. "That area's been under redevelopment recently, by the looks of it. Lots of new lofts and upscale shops. I didn't see anything that looked suspicious."

"Strike one," CJ said, wandering over to the table and leaning against it. "The letter talks a little bit about his investigation into these guys who use the portholes but doesn't get into details, and I can't say I follow Metropolis news all that closely these days. Do you know what he was looking at?"

Diane pulled out a chair and sat. "As a matter of fact, we were just talking about that before he left." She proceeded to repeat the conversation they had, and all the information he had given to her. "I get the feeling that if we can get our hands on these guys, we can start to get some answers."

"And nobody has anything yet?" CJ asked. At Diane's shake of the head, CJ stood up again and started to pace. After a moment he stopped and looked at her. "I think maybe you're looking at this case the wrong way."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're going about it in the way that police typically do – gather evidence, look for patterns, interview witnesses, et cetera. But you're dealing with a new technology, and new technology never works the way you want it to the first time out, trust me, I should know. They had to have tested it. There must have been some time that they used it before they pulled off that first heist. What kinds of things could've gone wrong that might have made the news?"

Laura put up her finger and looked off at some point in the distance. "You have a device of some sort that transports you someplace, right?" She turned back toward CJ for confirmation, and he gave a small nod. "When we think about transportation, we usually think in terms of the x and y coordinates – latitude and longitude, northing and easting. But every point in space also has an elevation."

CJ snapped his fingers and pointed at Laura. "You're right!" he said. "So let's say you program your gizmo to get you to a certain point in space and you get your elevation wrong, because unless you have survey or very accurate LIDAR data, the best you can do is guess. And if you do get it wrong, if you walk through that porthole and can't see what's on the other side, you could wind up 20 feet in the air, or somewhere underground." He turned toward Diane, excitement coursing through him. "Do you have any weird, unsolved deaths that might fit the bill?"

Something flitted across her features, and she stood up suddenly. "Actually, I think I might. Excuse me." CJ watched as she jogged over to her desk and punched something up on her computer, then quickly made her way to another room. He found himself pacing again, impatient, though the sound of something... unexpected permeated his conscious, causing all the energy to instantly drain out of him. It was a sound that had no doubt been present earlier, that he had dismissed like so much background noise while they were out in public. But now that he and Laura were alone, it was almost deafening, and it was absolutely unmistakable. He found himself looking more closely at his sister,

studying her. She seemed to sense his gaze.

"What?" she asked, and he wasn't quite sure whether to smile or frown.

"When are you going to tell Mom and Dad?" CJ asked, then looked at her midsection. She gasped, her eyes growing wide.

"Tell them what?" she said.

CJ crossed his arms across his chest. "Come on, you think I don't know the sound of a fetal heartbeat? It's very distinctive. You're, what, 10 weeks along?"

She stared at him, almost terrified, before looking at the floor and shrinking down in her chair. "I haven't even told Matt. I don't know what to say. I mean, we're not even supposed to be married until fall. Hell, I'm still not done with school for another couple months."

CJ went over and knelt down in front of her, giving her an encouraging smile. "The circumstances might not be the best. But you should be elated. I'm elated! You're going to be a mom! I'm going to be an uncle again!"

She finally broke a smile, albeit a nervous one. "I just don't know if I'm ready for it. And this kinda messes up all the plans I had. Grad school probably isn't happening now, and I know Daddy is going to be disappointed. I mean, he's all about truth and justice and all that... I'm going to be the daughter who got pregnant out of wedlock."

"I don't think he could ever be disappointed at the thought of a new addition to the family. And plans change, but that's part of life. I mean, look at me. I'm the poster boy for that." Her smile became more genuine. "Enjoy this. Because it really is special." He opened his arms, and she leaned forward to embrace him, sniffing slightly as she blinked back tears. They were still locked in their embrace when Diane came back into the room carrying a cardboard box.

"What's this?" she asked, a crooked smile coming to her face. CJ and Laura pulled apart, and he gave her a questioning glance, silently asking permission to let Diane in on the secret.

"I'll tell you about it later," Laura said with a self-effacing smile. She took a breath to compose herself, then sat up straighter, back to business as usual. "Looks like you have something," she said, pointing to the box.

Diane looked at Laura for a few long moments, intrigued, before returning her attention to the box. "About a month ago, we got a report of a body in an abandoned lot," she said, taking the lid off and setting it aside. "When we got there, and found a guy, dead, in the middle of the property, surrounded by undisturbed weeds and grasses, meaning nobody could've gone in and dumped him there. He had a broken skull and broken neck, almost like he had been dropped from a great distance, but there was nothing around that he could've jumped from, certainly nothing tall enough for him to receive the caliber of injuries that he had, and there were no reports of low-flying aircraft that day." CJ and Laura peered into the box, which contained some papers, photographs and a couple other objects that CJ couldn't quite make out. "We identified the body pretty quickly, but the guy's family had no clue as to how he could've wound up where we found him. There are a lot of theories out there about what happened, but none of them seemed plausible. So barring magic or some far-fetched revenge plot by certain flying superheroes, we've got nothing."

Diane reached into the box and pushed some of the papers aside, finally pulling out an object about the size of a cellphone, but fatter. "Then there was this," she said, handing it to CJ. "We found it in his pocket. Nobody around here has any clue what it is, and neither did the family."

"But I have a guess," CJ rasped, looking at and through the object as he turned it over in his hands. The circuitry was odd, but very sophisticated. Components that shouldn't go together were paired, and the power source didn't look entirely stable. He was

intrigued, and very excited. “Do you mind if I bring this home and play with it a little?” he asked her.

The look she gave him was one that cops all seem to have perfected, the one that spoke of authority, the one that made most people think twice before disagreeing. But CJ wasn’t most people. “Officially it’s evidence, and I can’t just give it to you to do with as you please.”

“Uh huh,” CJ said, giving her a lopsided smile. “But...”

Diane, like her husband, seemed to have an unnatural ability to resist his good humor, to maintain her steely resolve even in the face of even his goofiest grin. But today she smiled back, and CJ knew for certain that he was going to get what he wanted. Which, in turn, would hopefully get her what she wanted, namely Jon safe and sound in his own time. “But I don’t think anyone is going to miss this, at least not if you make it quick. And since your forte is solving the unsolvable cases, I’d think that we would welcome the help.”

“You need me to write a Bat-receipt or something?” CJ asked, and Diane’s good-natured grin began to take on the more annoyed quality that he was used to.

“Just keep it on the down low,” Diane said, and CJ smirked in response. He could be outrageous at times, at least around those who knew him, but his alter ego could keep a secret as well as anyone.

“Fine,” he said. “And while I try to reverse engineer this thing, or at least try to get it to work, you need to look a little more closely at your mystery man and who he associated with prior to your death. If this thing does what I think it does, then he’s absolutely connected to the case.”

Diane nodded and made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “Of course,” she said, and CJ knew the meeting was over. They both had enough to keep them busy for a while, and Laura, well, CJ knew he could find a way to keep her occupied. Turning toward the door, he shoved the device into his jacket pocket. When he did, his fingers brushed across a paper, and he remembered the other little delivery he had for Diane. With a smile, he handed her the paper, which she quickly unfolded. “For the scrapbook,” he said, then gave her a nod and pulled open the door to the room.

“Thanks,” Diane mumbled, caught up in what she was seeing. On the paper was a printout of the 28-year-old article that CJ had found, which had a large color photo of a man suspended in midair wearing a red top with the S shield and no cape — Jon, unmistakably — saluting the camera. Even as CJ and Laura walked out of the building, she remained transfixed. They were already in the air and rapidly heading out of town before she finally seemed to snap out of her trance. “He always did know how to make an impression,” he finally heard her mutter, causing him to grin widely. They were going to get there eventually, he was sure.

Jon stood outside the door to the brownstone at 348 Hyperion Avenue in Metropolis, the place where he had lived his first couple years of life, but of which he held no memories. He had dressed in clothes that he could scavenge from his Dad’s childhood bedroom, which consisted of a pastel-colored polo that was horribly out-of-date even by 1997 standards, and some shorts, which would not normally be appropriate for wear during the current season. On his left hand was his wedding band; his cell phone remained safely at his grandparents’ farm. He didn’t bother with glasses, since he didn’t currently have a secret identity that needed protecting, certainly not from his parents.

No, he told himself, not his parents. The people he was meeting with had no children, at least not yet. More than half the life experiences that made his parents the people they were would be missing from the Lois and Clark that he was meeting, which really made them strangers. It was certainly easier to think of them that way. Not acknowledging their connection and putting a mental barrier between them would help him get through the

evening, and not thinking of them as his parents would hopefully help him to avoid calling them Mom and Dad.

He still had to be very careful, though. The temptation would be there to reveal too much about himself, especially if he started to relax around them. Of absolute importance was that he couldn’t reveal that he was born on Earth of human and Kryptonian parentage. The belief that they couldn’t be parents had been important in shaping their lives, had brought them closer together and made them realize how much they wanted what they thought was unattainable. If they had thought that they could procreate like any couple, they might have been more careful, and he might not have come into their life. For the sake of his own existence, he had to make them believe that he was also a visitor to the planet, an exile from Krypton just like his father. Maybe he could imply that he also arrived as a baby, which would make mentions of childhood memories not seem out of place. He also had to be careful when talking about his own children, possibly implying that they had been adopted, if he even wanted to mention them at all. It would be difficult, but a little misdirection would go a long way, and he had been mentally preparing his strategies ever since Clark left the Kent farm that afternoon.

With a deep breath, Jon pushed the buzzer and waited. It only took a few seconds before the door was pulled open, and there they stood, the 1997 version of Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Lois positioned herself behind her husband, her features almost painfully neutral, her eyes appraising. All Jon’s friends had been intimidated by that look when he was a kid, which usually resulted in him playing at other kids’ houses a lot. He had only been on the receiving end of it once or twice before, usually when he had been doing something he shouldn’t, and for a moment he felt like squirming. But Clark seemed very eager and welcoming, which effectively cancelled out his wife’s outward coldness.

“Hi, I’m Clark,” he said holding out his hand, which Jon shook. “This is my wife, Lois,” he said, gesturing toward Jon’s mother, who also shook his hand, mustering a pleasant smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Jon,” he said, thankful for once that the shortened form of his name was probably the most generic name in the English-speaking world. Clark had raised an eyebrow as he got a good look at Jon’s attire, meeting his eyes with an inquisitive glance. “I, uh, apologize for my wardrobe,” Jon said, gesturing to himself as he released Lois’s hand. “I didn’t arrive with a change of clothes, and this was the best I could find in your closet in Smallville.”

Clark gestured for Jon to enter, then closed the door behind him. “So you’re from...out of town,” Lois said, taking a seat on one of the couches in the living area.

Jon grinned, trying to soften her up. She was in reporter mode, which made sense considering how little they knew about him, but he wanted to quickly reassure her that they had nothing to fear from him. “I’m from a different Metropolis.”

“You mean like a different universe?” Clark asked.

“Something like that,” Jon answered. Technically it wasn’t a lie — his Metropolis was different from this one in an infinite number of ways. It might as well be a different universe, and he coached himself to think of it that way.

“So how did you get here?” Lois asked.

Clark went and sat next to Lois, and Jon took a seat across from them. The couch was different from the one he remembered, more stiff and formal. This was the furniture of people who didn’t have kids, he thought with a little grin. It probably didn’t survive long after he and his brother had their way with it — the large fish tank off to the side of the room certainly hadn’t. There were so many little things around the room that were familiar, from the photos and trinkets that hung on the wall to the books in the bookshelves, but so many others that he didn’t recognize at all. It all helped to remind him that these were different people from the parents he knew, and made him feel less nervous. “That’s a good

question,” Jon said, settling in as best he could. “I was investigating a group of robbers who disappeared through some sort of porthole. I managed to catch them in the act, and figured if I followed them through their porthole I could stop them once and for all. But instead of winding up where they were, I came here.”

“And in your other Metropolis, you know me?” Clark asked. “I gather you work with me?”

“A version of you,” Jon said, which again wasn’t a lie. “And yes, we work together.” He turned toward Lois. “I know a version of you, too. And although we don’t work together in the same sense that Clark and I do, you’ve provided a lot of inspiration to me over the years.” He smiled at her, and that seemed to break the ice.

“So why go to the Kents? Why not come to us for help, or to your parents?” Lois asked, her voice holding less of an edge than it had.

“Well, like I said, I’m not from this Metropolis, and this place is very different from the place I know. You are a constant in both worlds, as are the Kents. But my parents...” he shrugged. “There are versions of them here, but they don’t know me, just like you don’t know me.”

“But the Kents knew you,” Lois said. It was a statement rather than a question, stated softly and confidently.

“Once I reminded them who I was, yes.” He smiled warmly.

Clark scooted forward on the couch. “How can it be that our worlds are so completely different? How can a person exist in one and not in another? It seems, I don’t know, almost hollow, to know that the possibility exists to work alongside someone like myself, someone who shares my powers and identity and sense of responsibility, someone who could be like the brother I never had. Yet somehow I exist in the reality where that didn’t happen.”

Jon wondered, not for the first time, what it must feel like to exist knowing that you are the last of your kind. Even having found someone to share it all with, even having a family as loving as the Kents, couldn’t stop the undeniable fact that there is nobody else in the world who can do what you do and see the world as you see it. Jon never had to know what that was like, since he always had his dad and his siblings. But for Clark, the loneliness must be overpowering sometimes. To have even one other person to share his experiences with would be a dream come true, and Jon knew that he would have that opportunity before he knew it. “I’m not a scientist,” he said. “Far from it, actually. But I’ve seen a lot of the world and dug into a fair number of oddities, and I do know this: each moment of each day is shaped by the choices we make and the choices made by those around us. A million different things over an indeterminate amount of time had to line up just right to create the world we live in, and if just one decision is changed anywhere along the line, the end result could be so different that you wouldn’t even recognize it. I couldn’t tell you what happened to make this place so different than mine, but I just know that it is. And as much as I would like to help you make your world more like mine, I also want to get back to the people who know and love me.”

Lois and Clark looked at him with respect and determination, and he knew he was no longer just a stranger to them. With uncanny timing, the buzzer in the kitchen chose that moment to go off. Both Clark and Jon turned to see what it was, and Jon was pleasantly surprised to see that his Dad had gone all out in cooking a roast with carrots and baked potatoes, no cheating required. “Looks like dinner’s ready,” Clark said, looking at Jon and nodding. “Come on,” he said, and they all made their way to the dining room.

The discussion over dinner was more pleasant and familiar. Jon took the opportunity to ask questions of his parents, to summon the stories that he’d heard countless times before, ostensibly to probe for the differences between their worlds. It was interesting to him, though, how the stories were colored by their

perceived audience. All the other times he’d heard their tales, it was as a son. Now they told them to him as a colleague, a peer, and there were subtle differences in the details that they let slip. He had never known, for example, that the most intimate conversation of their pre-married lives happened inside a virtual reality computer. Why they felt the need to leave out that detail before, he wasn’t quite sure, but he supposed in their places, mentioning anything remotely intimate to his children would be rather awkward.

They asked him about his life, of course. The wedding band on his left hand didn’t go unnoticed, and they were rather surprised to hear that he’d been married over 5 years already, and even more so to hear that he and Diane had eloped. “Wish we’d thought of that,” Lois muttered, just as she did shortly after his wedding. “What about your parents?” she asked after a moment.

“They were fine with it, happy even,” he said, and at Lois’s confused gaze he blinked a couple times. “OH, you mean, what are they like?” Lois and Clark nodded in unison, and he had to hide a smile. How could he describe them to themselves without them knowing that’s what he was doing? “I couldn’t ask to be raised by two more caring people,” he said. “They were very busy, between work and hobbies and such, but they always found time to be there for me and my siblings.”

“Siblings?” Clark asked, his eyebrows raised.

“They have two other, natural children, my brother and sister. They’re younger than me.” Of course, he was their natural child, too, but they didn’t need to know that.

“Interesting,” Clark said with a tip of his head. “Do they know about you? Was there any jealousy?”

Jon laughed gently. “We’re siblings. There’s all the normal sibling stuff, jealousy included, though that went both ways. And, sure, they know about me...they didn’t know right away, but they were told in due time. My sister is so much younger than me that when it was her turn to find out, I was already out in public with my image in newspapers and magazines and such. Her friends all had crushes on me...and you, too, I guess,” Jon said, nodding toward him. “It was really weird. Then there was the thing with my brother’s fiancée’s roommate...” He shuddered involuntarily.

Clark laughed. “And Lois and I are close with your family, too?” he asked.

“Very,” Jon said.

Lois and Clark smiled at him for moment, then Clark sighed. “I wish I could visit this world – it sounds wonderful. How are you planning to get back there? And could we come with you for a few days?” Jon was pretty sure he was kidding about the last part, but he couldn’t help but notice something wistful in his expression.

“I, uh, accomplished a little task earlier today that should hopefully summon the cavalry. My brother’s a tech wiz, and if he can’t figure out how to get me home...well, let’s say I’m confident I won’t have to complete that sentence. And unfortunately, I think it’s a one way trip. But who knows, maybe some day we’ll figure out a way to bring you to our Metropolis.” Little did Clark know that he would most definitely be able to visit Jon’s world, that he would in fact be an important part of it.

As they finished their meal, Clark asked if Jon could stick around for a little while and socialize. As was common at the Kent household even in his era, eventually a deck of cards was brought out, and the games began. With a threesome, they could play games like Sheephead, which he had gotten fairly good at over the years. They had only played a few hands when the distant sound of an alarm drew the attention of Clark and Jon. “Excuse me for a second,” Clark said, changing into uniform and taking off. Lois and Jon switched to spades, a game they played throughout Jon’s childhood.

Lois dealt and they played in silence for a few moments. Jon knew her moves quite well, and countered all of them, bringing a

long glance from her. “You seem to know an awful lot about Clark and me, but we really don’t know a whole lot about you.” She played another card, and he countered expertly. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re keeping an important bit of information from us?”

Jon lowered his cards and regarded her. She was right, of course, and he couldn’t bring himself to deny it. “I never could keep anything from you,” he said.

“That sounds like something Clark would say.” She searched his features, and he had to tell himself to keep calm. “I know his face like I know my own, and looking at yours, I can see a lot of him. It’s almost like you’re brothers.”

“We’re not,” Jon said. “I’ve certainly heard that before, though.”

“But you’re related,” Lois said.

“We are,” Jon said quietly, raising his cards again.

“How?” Lois asked, and Jon shook his head.

“It’s enough to say that we share some DNA.” He floated slightly from the couch. “I mean, that much is pretty obvious. I just...I don’t exist here. And getting into the exact nature of our relationship won’t change that. It’s better just to enjoy our time together and leave it at that.”

Lois nodded thoughtfully, gave him another long look, then turned back to their card game. They made small talk until Clark returned, which ended up being quite a bit later than either of them had expected.

As Clark landed in the living room, he seemed perplexed. “The strangest thing just happened to me,” he said. Both Lois and Jon looked at him questioningly, wordlessly, and Clark continued. “I flew to the bank, and when I tried to come in for a landing, I couldn’t stop.”

“Couldn’t stop what?” Lois asked.

“Myself,” he said, biting his lip. “The next think I knew, I’d burrowed fifty feet under the pavement.”

Lois looked at Jon, who was having a vague feeling of déjà vu, then stood and walked toward Clark. “Wow. Are you all right?” she asked, putting a hand on his arm.

“It was like I momentarily lost control of my powers. Then it turns out that nobody actually robbed the bank. The door was jimmied just enough to set off the alarm.”

“Red kryptonite!” Jon blurted out, standing. He’d heard this story before, too. And his brother had lived through something similar. Both Lois and Clark looked at him, confused. “It was a test,” he said, starting to pace. “Someone set up a situation that they knew you’d react to, then exposed you to red kryptonite to see what would happen.”

“How...?” Lois asked.

“I’ve seen it happen before,” Jon said, which was more or less true. He’d seen the after effects of red kryptonite poisoning, and it was not pretty. More to the point, he knew how this story ended, and if he said too much more, he might change history. Willing himself to stop, he addressed his parents again. “Look, you need to keep an eye open for that stuff. For the next few days, you have to assume it’s around wherever Superman shows up. If they expose you again, the effects could be worse.”

“Worse than 50 feet underground?” Lois asked.

Jon held up his hand. “Trust me,” he said, then looked between them. “I should probably get going now,” he said. “Thank you for inviting me to dinner – I had a great time.” Before they got a chance to protest, he changed into his uniform and flew back to Kansas.

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The work table in the center of the Batcave, normally pristine, was covered with various tools and electronic devices. In the center of it all was CJ, hunched over the device that Diane gave him, poking at various locations on it with a metallic probe. He had been inspecting, probing, zapping, dismantling, and otherwise

trying to reverse engineer it for the better part of four hours, and he thought that he might finally be making some progress. It wasn’t the type of work that would generally be considered spectator friendly, but he hadn’t been alone. In the comfortable high-back chair in front of the computer sat Matt Owens, with Laura perched on his lap, her head resting on his shoulder. “So Candy and Rachel enter into a deal with each other to try to make Lauren go crazy. You know, start moving things to confuse her or giving misleading answers to questions, then they start spreading these rumors about her – real brutal stuff,” Matt said.

CJ gave a disgusted grunt, then put down his probe and picked up a voltmeter. “So did it work?”

“Oh yeah, by the end of the episode everyone was giving her these looks, talking about her, and she started to lose it.”

“Why are women so horrible to each other?” CJ asked, giving a glance toward Laura before returning to his work. She just rolled her eyes and went about nuzzling Matt’s neck.

“But THEN, believe it or not, Cody takes pity on Lauren, because he’s oblivious to everything that’s going on, and he ends up giving her the rose.”

CJ stopped what he was doing and looked at Matt, incredulous. “No way! I didn’t think Lauren would make it past the first week, and now she has a rose?!”

Laura sat up. “The fact that you two girls sit around and discuss The Bachelor...I mean, don’t you have better things to do?” she said.

“Well, yes, I DO have better things to do, that’s why Matt watches the show and tells me about it,” CJ said with a smirk, then started working on the device again.

“Girls?” Matt said, tightening his arms around her. “I’m all man and can prove it. In fact, I have proven it, several times and on several continents.” Laura sat up and gave him a look that tried to convey how adorable she thought he was, despite how easily his masculinity was threatened.

“I tease because I love you,” she said.

“And I love you because you tease,” he replied. Without any more discussion, she leaned over to kiss him properly. It was CJ’s turn to roll his eyes at the spectacle of it all, though he was well aware that he and Jenny were just as bad at that age. As the kiss reached into several long moments, CJ cleared his throat, bringing their attention.

“If you’re done, I think I’ve got this thing more or less figured out.”

Laura gave a reluctant sigh, looked longingly at Matt, then turned toward CJ. “And? What can it do?”

“See for yourself,” CJ said, then pushed a button on the device, causing a shimmering circle to appear in the air. All lingering passion between Laura and Matt evaporated in an instant, and Laura sprang out of his lap, walking in a wide circle around the porthole.

“Where does it go?” she asked, tentatively reaching a hand toward it, which CJ quickly swatted away.

“I’m not sure,” CJ answered. “There are some sort of coordinates coded into this thing, but I can’t tell if they’re relative or absolute. Does it go a set distance from its current location or to fixed position in space? Are the coordinates in degrees / minutes / seconds? Feet? Meters? Furlongs?” Matt snorted at that. “And, last but not least, will it bring us back to where it came from?”

“So let’s go look,” Laura said, gesturing toward it.

CJ held up a finger. “Rule number one is that nobody else goes through this thing until we figure out how it managed to transport Jon 28 years into the past. I don’t care if you are invulnerable and can fly – I kinda need you around.”

“Aww,” said Laura.

“So what gets used as a guinea pig instead?” Matt asked, rising from the chair and moving so that he was behind CJ.

“I’m glad you asked,” CJ said with a smile. He reached toward

the workbench and grabbed a hollow ball with an electronic device taped inside it. With a push of his finger, he activated the device and a little light came on. At the bank of computers, one of the monitor screens changed to a map view with a red dot over Wayne Manor. “I have a transponder inside this ball. I’m going to toss it through the porthole, and Laura’s going to go get it.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “So, what, you’re training me to play fetch?” CJ just grinned. Laura sighed. “Yeah, I know, who else is going to do it?”

Matt bit his lip to stop himself from saying something that would put him in the doghouse for a very long time, and looked at CJ, who got the joke even without Matt saying anything. It was scary how much alike they thought sometimes. It was a bit of an odd feeling for CJ – he’d never had a friend who seemed to understand him so well, who had the same sense of humor and similar view of the world, even though they were quite different in terms of skill sets and knowledge base. Jenny, of course, understood him, too, but...she felt more like his other half, and what they shared went way beyond friendship. Matt felt more like a brother that he didn’t feel animosity toward. It was probably for the best, then, that he actually would be, by law anyway, his brother in the near future.

CJ gave Matt a wink, then tossed the ball up into the air a couple times as he suppressed a chuckle. After a few moments, he gave it a soft underhand toss and it disappeared through the porthole. Almost before it had left his hand, the computer screen shifted, centered on an area well west of Gotham.

“You know what to do,” CJ said to Laura with a wave of his hand. “Give me a call once you get there.” She studied the computer monitor for a long second, then disappeared in a blur. A couple seconds later, his phone started ringing. CJ answered it quickly and put it on speaker.

“Well, this isn’t some evil lair,” Laura said. “I’m in the mountains, in a pretty isolated location. There’s nothing here except trees and...hey!”

“What?” CJ asked.

“I just got beamed by something. What the heck?” There was the sound of shuffling as she searched for the item.

“Don’t tell me what it is,” CJ said, then gestured at Matt to bring him a couple items on the far end of the work bench. Matt held up a marker and a more solid plastic ball, the type of mini-basketball that often came with playsets made for toddlers. CJ set the phone on the work bench and wrote a random number and letter combination on the ball before having Matt take a picture of it on his phone. He then covered the phone receiver with his hand. “How’s your spitball?” CJ asked Matt, handing him the ball.

“I was more of a curveball, slider kind of guy,” Matt said, turning the ball over in his hands.

CJ waved at the pothole. “Put a little mustard on it and toss it through.” As Matt wound up and zipped the ball through the porthole, CJ removed his hand from the receiver. “You find what hit you?” he asked Laura.

“It looks like a toy ball,” she said. “And that’s your handwriting on it.”

CJ felt the goosebumps start to rise on his arms. “Tell me what it says.” Matt brought up the picture he took of the ball as Laura read the exact sequence of letters and numbers off to him.

“Thanks. You can bring that stuff back now.” He ended the call, then looked at Matt. They both smiled knowingly.

“It went back in time,” Matt said, and CJ raised his eyebrows. “Wow.”

Laura appeared at that moment. “So you mean to tell me that you threw this after you heard me get hit by it?” As both CJ and Matt nodded, her eyes got wide. “But how?”

CJ reached over and deactivated the porthole, pulling up a stool and settling onto it. “I think it has to do with velocity,” he said, absently grabbing the marker he had recently used and

tapping it against the table surface. “The first time, it was just a light toss, but even then it was almost as if it arrived a split second before I threw it. The second time we put a little more juice on it, and it arrived, oh, a minute or two before we threw it.”

“So we know how Jon got sent back,” Laura said.

“But that’s about all we do know. The problem is that we don’t have any kind of hold on the actual numbers involved, and we won’t unless I do a whole lot more work. I think I can work out how the coordinates translate to where we found the transponder, but the time thing?” He sighed and reached for the device. “I have no idea what kind of speed that ball had either time we threw it, or how quick Jon was moving when he went through. And even if I did know, there’s no saying that there’s a linear relationship between the velocity of the object and the distance back in time that it goes. For all we know, it could be an exponential or logarithmic relationship, and to find out we would have to do a lot of testing and a lot of math.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, drawing concerned gazes from Laura and Matt. At that moment, an alarm went off on CJ’s phone.

CJ gave a small frown as he looked at the screen. “Justice League meeting tonight,” he said, swiping away the meeting notice. “They’re just going to have to get by without me for one night. I need to work on this...” He brought up his messaging app and started composing a text to his dad to let him know.

“Hold on a second,” Laura said. “Justice League?” Laura asked.

“I didn’t come up with the name,” he said, pausing his typing and looking up at her. “It’s basically a guy’s night...with spandex.”

“But...the Justice League?” Laura repeated.

CJ looked down at his screen, then turned the phone off without finishing his message. He was never one to pass up the opportunity to tell a good story. “So a bunch of years ago, Dad and Bruce decided that it would be fun to get together every now and then to BS and discuss the cases they’d been working on. When they would meet another hero from another community, one of them, usually Dad, would invite them to BS and discuss cases, too, and the other guys would meet new heroes and invite them, too. Eventually the gatherings became pretty large. Then someone suggested that a group that included some of the most powerful and recognizable beings on the planet deserved an appropriately epic name, and the Justice League was born. So now, once a month, we all get together without our wives, play cards, sometimes grill out....”

“Who is ‘we’?” Laura asked. “Because I know it doesn’t include me.”

“Barry Flash, Wally Flash, Green Lantern, other Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, Jon... Dad and Bruce, of course...”

Matt got a faraway look on his face as CJ listed off a few more names, then he snapped his fingers, interrupting the discussion. “Flash!” he said excitedly, then looked at CJ.

“What about him?” Laura asked.

“Remember that time we went through my comics and you helped me separate fact from fiction?” she nodded. “The cosmic treadmill...”

“Was based on a real device,” Laura finished, an enthusiastic look on her face. She and Matt looked at CJ, who suddenly knew where they were going.

“So we could theoretically send someone back to get Jon without having to do continuous testing in this stupid thing,” CJ said, pointing to the device.

“And it should have a counterpoint in the past that can be used to get back,” Laura said.

CJ pointed at Matt. “You, sir, are a genius.”

“You, sir, should look in a mirror,” Matt said back.

Laura rolled her eyes. “Oh, get a room you two.”

CJ smirked. “Can’t. Apparently I have a meeting to get to.”

"So do you guys seriously go in costume?" Matt asked.
 "Because if you did, I want a picture."

"Capes allow too many opportunities to cheat at cards. So, no, we don't meet in costume. Besides, most of these guys have neighbors. We meet in their back yards in costume and we blow the whole 'secret identity' thing."

"Are sidekicks allowed?" Matt asked, looking at Laura, who was not amused by the comment.

"Yeah, what the heck," he said to Matt then turned to Laura. "You can come, too."

"Why do I get the impression that you need a ride?" Laura asked. CJ shrugged.

"Dunno. But it's here this time. Come on, let's go upstairs so those guys won't have to suffer Bruce alone." With that, CJ ushered Laura and Matt up the long staircase out of the cave.

It was dark in Kansas when Jon returned to his grandparents' farm, though the moon provided enough illumination that enhanced vision wasn't necessary to navigate. The stars painted a much more radiant portrait in the night sky here than it did back in Metropolis, and he took a moment to appreciate the view before proceeding toward the bright lights of the house. He knocked on the door and called out a greeting before entering.

"Come on in, honey," Martha replied from the kitchen. As Jon strode through the house to her location, he noticed that she had found his phone. She gave a sniff and ran the back of her hand across her eyes, trying to act nonchalant as he approached. He wasn't fooled, though, and a pang of sympathy and guilt stabbed through him.

"Grandma?" he said, drawing a sideways glance from her.

"It will take me some time to get used to that. There's no way I'm old enough to be anyone's grandma." That brought a smile to her face, which helped soften his mood.

"Well not yet, anyway," he said, sitting down next to her. "So what are you doing?"

She gestured with his phone. "Oh, I wanted to see those photos you showed me again, and then I indulged in the other photos you have on this thing, and, well..." she looked momentarily embarrassed as she handed him the phone. "After a while, I think I got a little lost in it all."

Jon took it and opened the photo gallery, noticing that she had been in the middle of the photos he had taken last Christmas. "I think you just need the right guide," he said, scrolling through a couple of photos before bringing up the list of videos. "There's a story behind all these, and I like to think I'm pretty good at telling stories. Of course, a video is worth a thousand words." With that he opened the video of the kids opening Christmas presents at the family gathering. Christmas was one of the few times throughout the year that the whole family was able to get together, and it was always an epic party. Martha watched in rapt attention without saying a word for a long minute, then as the camera panned across the room, Jon started pointing out who everyone was, and the spell seemed to be broken.

"Where was this taken?" she asked, as the video image stopped on Lois and Clark.

"Well, we used to have Christmas at Mom and Dad's, but the family has outgrown the dining room there, so we moved it to CJ's place in Gotham City."

"But it looks like a hotel ball room," Martha said. The room was probably overkill for them, but it was used so seldom that CJ had thought that it deserved a little love and attention. Besides, if the kids got too excited, it left plenty of room for them to run around, which Adam had started doing in the video.

"It's Wayne Manor," Jon said, causing Martha's eyebrows to raise in surprise. "And that," he said, pointing to the screen, "is Bruce Wayne."

"And your brother lives there?" Martha asked, so Jon

proceeded to tell her the story of CJ Kent's untimely death and the birth of Sam Wayne. It also required explaining the situation with their powers, and the fact that CJ couldn't fly. At some point during the story, Jonathan walked in, pulled over a chair and sat next to Martha, his eyes glued to the video.

"I admit, I had that Batman pegged as a lawless thug," Jonathan said with a shake of his head. "But if he could do something like that for your brother, he's a saint in my book."

"Well, I'm not going to tell you that you're wrong about him being a vigilante, at least at this point in time," Jon said. "But age and perspective can do a lot to a person. It's still a few more years until Dad officially meets him, and more time yet until Gotham starts to turn around a bit. Having someone like Superman showing him that there are other ways to do things, that hope can be just as strong of a force for change as fear, had to have affected him, too."

"He looks like a doting grandfather," Martha said, smiling at the screen. Bruce had intercepted Adam, who was running in large circles with an action figure thrust above his head, coaxing him back to the family and ultimately into helping his young cousins figure out one of their new toys.

"And don't think that Dad doesn't let him hear about that," Jon said with a smile. "Seriously, though, I think my brother and his family are probably the best thing that's ever happened to Bruce."

"Having a family can give you an all new perspective," Martha said, looking at Jon knowingly. On the screen, the phone had been passed to CJ who had turned the view back to Jon for a moment before turning it toward Jenny, who was holding her droopy-looking one-year-old daughter. Little Kate was a doll, her hair so light it was almost blonde, gathered into two petite pigtails with a used bow from a present centered between them. Her little dress was an iridescent red, though lunch had left its mark. As much as Jen liked to dress her up in the cutest available fashion, Kate seemed to take delight in making her dresses dirty and roughhousing with her brother. She was already showing flashes of a strong personality, and Jon could see that she was destined to be a tomboy, much to her parents' consternation.

"Looks like this is too much excitement for our little princess," CJ said off camera, causing Jenny to smile gently and nod knowingly. "Turns out all you need to make her fall asleep is the assembled Kent family," he quipped.

"So what are you saying?" Clark asked.

"That you've been telling the same stories too often," Bruce Wayne chimed in dryly.

CJ laughed. "I'm just saying that she's normally a creature of the night," CJ said. "Which is probably inevitable, given her DNA. But inexplicably she goes right to sleep around you guys." The camera panned to Clark, whose eyes held a twinkle as he gave a duck of the head.

"So, Clark, do you do bedtime stories?" Jenny asked, causing Clark to laugh.

"I think he could still recite 'The Cat in the Hat' from memory," Lois said from beside him, placing her hand in his and intertwining fingers.

"I still have awkward dreams where everything is spoken in Dr. Seuss," he said, drawing chuckles from around the room.

"I think she's more the 'Goodnight Moon' type anyway," Jen said.

"Probably just as well," CJ said. "If you're here every night the kids might start to wonder how it is that their grandparents from Metropolis are able to keep showing up Gotham. We have another dozen years or so before they can start getting suspicious about your travel habits and tendency to disappear."

"With your luck Adam will have it all figured out in Kindergarten, shortly after he starts reading the comics," Jenny said, which seemed to have the effect of silencing CJ. Jon seemed

to recall a look of horror on his face at the thought, which caused him the snicker involuntarily with the memory.

Laura snuck up behind her father and gave him a hug. “Your stories could never be boring, Daddy,” she said.

As Jon and his grandparents watched the video in silence, it occurred to Jon how lucky he was, how lucky his whole family was, and it all started with the two people seated next to him. Their love for a boy who fell from the sky, their values, guidance, good humor, and patience passed down through the generations to create the family that he saw. Everyone in that video owed a debt of thanks to the Kents, and if his impromptu trip to the past served no other purpose, it at least allowed him to show them the future that they created.

“Before I walked up your drive, did you ever think that the future would look like this?” Jon asked quietly.

His grandparents didn’t look at him, but continued to watch the video until it ended a few seconds later, then handed him the phone. “Right after we found Clark, I used to think about the future,” Martha said. “At first I thought about his real parents, and braced myself for a future where he was taken away to wherever he came from. Then, as time went by and our future together became more certain, I allowed myself to think about birthdays and Thanksgivings and teenaged rebellion, maybe a loving girlfriend... standard things. But then, when his powers developed, the thoughts turned darker. And while I still dreamed of a future that held a loving family, for a while even a normal life seemed out of reach. But then he landed in Metropolis, and met Lois. Even then, Superman made sure his life wasn’t ever going to be normal, that the future would be filled with uncertainty and the real possibility that he would be taken from us too soon. Realistically, before you walked down that drive, I thought the future held a laundry list of villains and struggles over the future of Metropolis and the Earth in general, lots of anxiety and questions, but plenty of love. But this,” she said gesturing toward the phone, a tear forming in her eye, “is beyond even my most ambitious dreams.”

“It’s all thanks to you, you know,” he said, and Jonathan put an arm around Martha as she sobbed once, though her smile was in stark contrast to her tears. “If you want to see more, I have a few other videos on here – Eddie and Ellie’s second birthday, their first trip trick-or-treating. And plenty of other photos, too. You deserve to see the future that you helped build... I want that for you. Look through this thing all you want, at least as long as the battery will let you. And when you’re done, you can play all the sudoku that you want.”

Martha nodded and picked up the phone again. Jonathan gave her one more hug, then stood up and clapped Jon on the back once. “What I want to know,” he said, “is what happens in baseball in the next 28 years.”

“Oh, you are in for a treat,” Jon said, rising to follow his grandfather into the living room, leaving Martha to go through the photos in peace, though she occasionally asked questions that ended up launching him into interesting stories. In between the stories, he told his grandfather the history of baseball to the best of his recollection – the 1998 home run race, the steroid era and subsequent questioning of everything that came out of the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, moneyball, the breaking of baseball curses from the Red Sox to the Cubs, and the fact that the Royals finally broke through and won the world series. “That happened when I was in high school,” Jon said. “I had no idea my Dad was such a closet Royals fan, but when they won he made sure to let everyone know.”

The conversation transitioned to television trends, and as Jon was marveling over the VCR, he heard the distant wail of weather sirens. Jon had been so lost in conversation that he hadn’t even noticed the gathering clouds and distant flashes of light behind the curtains, and he was adept enough at filtering out background noise that the distant roll of thunder went undetected. The tornado

siren, though, had been hard to ignore. As Jon stood and trained his senses to the storm outside, his eyes widened as he saw the telltale ridge in the sky, and the swirling winds starting to tilt out of the clouds a couple counties to the west. A tornado was imminent, and it appeared to be very close to a town.

“I have to go help,” he said and tensed his muscles in preparation to take off, but before he could make a move, Jonathan’s hand touched his arm.

“If you do, I would recommend taking one of Clark’s suits. Martha always has a few extra around just in case, and there would be a lot fewer questions if the folks out there believed you were him.”

Jon nodded then turned toward the room that served as his grandmother’s sewing room until the day she died. Sure enough, suits in several states of construction were present throughout the room, though it wasn’t too hard to locate a finished one amongst the others. He changed into it, then paused, tugging at the cape and sighing audibly.

“Everything okay?” Martha called, making her way to the doorway a moment later.

“Every time I wear my dad’s suit, I’m reminded of how much I HATE capes,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. It was especially true tonight, when he would be dealing with wind. As long as he was acting the part of the original Superman, though, there was not much he could do about it.

“You look great,” Martha said with a smile. “So very much like Clark. I’m sure he’s proud of you every day.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jon said softly, forgetting about the cape. “Well, wish me luck,” he said, and with that, he took off to help save western Kansas from the ravages of the storm.

Lois sat on Clark’s lap as the news of the nation flashed across the television screen in front of them. They were both in various states of undress, the friendly game of strip poker that they had indulged in shortly after Jon left quickly degrading into more pleasurable pursuits. Clark had lost all track of time and the world in general as he had given his attention to his wife, but now, in the afterglow, the news couldn’t be ignored. Pictures out of Kansas showed Superman stopping several tornadoes and cleaning up the aftermath of others, then saving residents from localized flooding.

“Thank God Jon was around to help those people,” Clark said, watching the man who so closely resembled him effortlessly and unquestioningly take on the Superman persona, wearing a suit that was no doubt provided by Martha. “He looks so confident.”

“He looks... Super,” Lois replied, then sighed. “Almost as if he was born to do that.”

Clark gave her a curious glance. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

Lois twisted in his arms so that they were face-to-face. “Well... he’s obviously a genuinely nice and caring person, they type of person that I could certainly see being friends with. But what if, wherever he’s from, we’re not just friends.

“If we’re not friends, that makes us...” Clark’s eyebrows raised as he waited for her to finish the sentence.

“Family,” Lois said. “And he admitted as much. I mean, even a blind person could see the resemblance between you two. He wouldn’t say what the exact nature of your relationship was, which is in and of itself suspicious, but it wouldn’t take much imagination to think you were close relatives of some sort – cousins, maybe.”

“Yeah, I can believe that,” Clark said with a nod and a smile.

“But I think it’s something else. What if – and I know this is probably a stretch – what if he’s not from some parallel universe or dimension? What if he’s from... the future?”

“Making him...?”

“Our son,” Lois’s voice was soft, sincere, and the words hung in the air between them for a few long moments. “It explains a lot.

Why else would he go to your parents instead of us for help? And why would they so readily take him in?"

Goosebumps rose on Clark's arm as he pondered the question and replayed in his mind the interactions that he'd had with Jon since he arrived. There were some things that he had said, when put into a different perspective, could make the whole thing very believable. There were other things that he didn't say that, if he allowed himself to think about, could be filled in to paint the picture that would back Lois's assertion. He seemed to speak very deliberately at times and generalized a lot of his answers, but Clark had noticed that certain words or phrases or acronyms had slipped through anyway, things that seemed like gibberish, but meant something to him. Blogging, for example, or social media, whatever that was. But possibly the most damning thing he had said happened earlier in the day, when he had been outside the Daily Plant and asked WHEN he was. That said it all, didn't it?

"No," Clark said suddenly.

"No?"

Clark sat up a little straighter and began gesturing as he spoke. "We know time travel is possible – we've traveled in time ourselves – but we either were accompanied by H.G. Wells or traveled in his machine when we did. Wells has been nowhere to be found lately."

"And thank goodness for that," Lois said.

Clark laughed once, then continued. "And it's not like you could travel through time by his methods without knowing it. If Jon managed to get here without knowing how or why, then that can't be it."

"But who's to say that there isn't some other method of travelling through time? One that can be accomplished without you even knowing that you had? Why couldn't that technology be developed in the next quarter century or so?"

Clark shook his head. "But we're talking about probabilities, here. We know there are other living Kryptonians, that I wasn't the only person to make it off the planet before it exploded. Couldn't a relative of some sort – a cousin, like you speculated – have also escaped? In the spectrum of what's possible, I'd say that was more probable." He paused, looked Lois in the eye, then diverted his gaze out the window. "I might look human, but we both know I'm not. My body works so much differently than a human body...how could it be even remotely possible that we could...?"

Lois put her hand on his face and applied pressure until he was looking at her again. "All it takes is a little chemistry," she said with a sly smile. "And if there's something we have in spades, it's chemistry." The hand that had been on his cheek worked its way around to the back of his head, and she pulled him into a tender kiss. The tension that had been in his body seemed to drain away, and he was at peace again as she pulled apart. "There are infinitely more things, both tangible and intangible, that you share with the human race than not. You are, in fact, the most human person that I've ever met. That must count for something."

He tightened his arms around her and leaned in for another kiss. "Time will tell, I suppose," he said. "But for now?" He looked at the television, with more pictures of Jon saving the day. Every now and then Jon would give an angry glance back toward his cape, a little detail that Clark couldn't help but smile at. "I'm just glad we've gotten the chance to meet Jon, wherever he's from. The fact that he exists at all fills me with...hope, I guess."

"Well, now you know what the rest of the world feels like when we watch you," Lois said. With that, she twisted back around so that she could lay her head on his shoulder, then reached for the remote and changed the channel on the television.

"Behold, the Hall of Justice," CJ said with a flourish as he opened the doors to the large Wayne Manor ball room, the same room that had hosted the assembled Kent clan the previous Christmas. The couches and chairs remained arranged in a U

shape around the fireplace, though a television had been placed on the mantle, with a football game tuned in. CJ had managed to scrounge up a foosball table and pool table from elsewhere in the house, and they took a spot at the far end of the room. A large circular table was set up in the center of the room, with several chairs around it and a few games stacked on top. It was set up like a classic game night, Laura thought, and it instantly felt like she was transported to an average Saturday night during her early college years. The difference, of course, were the people that were already starting to gather in the room. She didn't recognize everyone, but she had met most of them, typically from family picnics as a kid.

CJ brought Laura and Matt around the room, introducing Matt as he went, and giving Laura a chance to show off her modest engagement ring. Matt seemed a little wide-eyed at first, which in itself was a little unusual considering how little her family seemed to fluster him. He was always so cool and collected around her dad and her brothers, but he had also known her fairly well before the revelation was made, and her brothers had taken it upon themselves to show him that the family business didn't change the fact that they were normal, incorrigible knuckleheads. In the room now, though, he could meet any number of people who were very far from normal — a cyborg, several obvious aliens displaying skin tones in various hues, beings made of energy, and at least one living God. Everyone wore their street clothes, such as they were, which helped to soften the shock, and talking to them and seeing their sincere happiness about Laura and Matt's engagement seemed to help. It only took a few minutes before Matt settled in, and shortly after they made their circuit of the room, he left Laura and CJ to take up a conversation with the Blue Beetle. Laura stuck to CJ's side, and scanned the room a second time, giving a frustrated grunt.

"Where's Barry?" she whispered, knowing full well that CJ could pick up her voice without any problem. As she continued to look around, she found that her Dad had snuck in, and was now over by the television. She gave him a little wave of acknowledgement, which he returned with a smile.

"You know how he is," CJ whispered back. "Iris likes to tell the story about how he was late to his own wedding."

"Great," Laura said. She wasn't actually planning to spend much time hanging out with her Dad's pals, and Barry's delay meant that she would have to spend more time with people who still remembered her from when she was a half pint with pigtails. But it wasn't hard to see that another female presence was sorely needed at their little party. And she had plans to enter the hero scene in a few months after...well, when she was able to wear spandex without issues, so it was probably inevitable that she would be invited to the group eventually anyway. A little bit of socializing with them now might dispel the notion that she was just Superman's little girl, and hopefully smooth things out when she did join club. "So what do you suggest we do until he shows?" she asked CJ. "What DO you do at these things anyway?"

CJ looked at the game table, where a couple of people had already started to gather. "Stratego?" he asked with a raise of his eyebrows, and she rolled her eyes, then patted him on the shoulder.

"You have fun with that," she said. "I think I'd rather watch the game with Daddy."

With that they split up, and she joined the crowd with her father. The stories had already started, she noticed as she took up a spot on a couch at the fringe of the action. Something about superheroes getting together always seemed to bring out their chatty sides, probably because they could understand each others' experiences better than anyone else on Earth, and this night it was no different. Tonight the stories seemed to center around unusual experiences with family, and it did not surprise her at all to find that her dad had one, too, though this was one she hadn't heard

before.

“So there was one night when I came home after cleaning up a ship wreck, and a particularly nasty one at that,” Clark said. “Lots of diving into the ocean to save crewmen and important cargo, and there had been an oil leak. Suffice to say, I was a mess. It was late when I got home, and Lois was asleep, so I was moving quietly and slowly in the dark, intending to take a nice, long shower. I had only managed to peel off my cape and top when Jon, who only about 3 at the time, came stumbling into the bedroom, complaining of a bad stomach ache. Of course, he saw me in the shadows and approached me, but as he got closer, the smell of saltwater and fish and oil must have been enough to push his stomach over the limit and, splat, all over the floor, my legs, and my feet.”

Laura joined everyone else as they erupted in laughter. She could imagine Jon turning beet red if he were there...the fact that he wasn't was probably why her Dad had decided to tell the story in the first place.

“We both just stood there for what seemed like an eternity, dumbfounded,” Clark continued as the laughter died down. “Then I saw that he was about ready to cry, and I was probably twice as ripe now as I had been when I got home, so as his eyes closed and he took a deep breath in anticipation of a full-blown wail, I shifted into super speed and moved about as fast as I've ever gone in my life. The pants, briefs and boots came off, I located a damp cloth and ran it over myself, destroying it in the process, put something smelly in my hair to mask the scent of shipwreck, then grabbed him and relocated him to his room, all before a sound could escape his mouth. Then we cleaned everything up at normal speed, got him calmed down and back to sleep, all without waking Lois or CJ.”

Laura glanced across the room toward CJ, who had obviously been listening in. The twinkle in his eyes meant that Jon would be hearing about this once he got back. “I thought for sure the jig was up after that,” Clark continued, “that a billion questions would come in the morning about just why I had been wearing blue spandex and red boots. But they never came, and everything returned to normal, though I wish I could say I was never caught off guard again. Kids...” Clark smiled and raised his eyebrows, to a chorus of nods, and suddenly all eyes seemed to be on Laura.

“Gee, I wonder what you talk about when I'm not here,” she said with a wrinkle of her nose.

“Well, there was that time you accidentally set the curtains on fire...”

Laura stood quickly with acute embarrassment. A chorus of chuckles greeted her as she started toward the game table, where Stratego suddenly sounded like a lot of fun. But before she could take more than a step away from the crowd, Barry Allen abruptly appeared out of thin air, standing a couple paces away from the crowd.

“Darn it, sounds like I missed something good,” he said.

“Nothing you haven't heard a dozen times before,” Clark answered.

“That doesn't mean it's not a good story,” Barry replied. He acted like he was going to say something else, but Laura interrupted him.

“Hey Mister Allen,” she said with a raise of her hand. She quickly moved toward him, deciding to not waste any time in asking for his help, which conveniently meant that she wouldn't be subject to further embarrassment from her father.

“Laura, hi. What's up?” he asked, and while he spoke, CJ also made his way over, catching Matt's eye on the way. The three of them converging on him didn't escape Barry's attention, and suddenly a very knowing expression passed across his features. “Oh, don't tell me that's today.” Laura gaped at him, momentarily unsure of what to say. “Don't look so shocked. Your little favor... it's not the type of thing a guy forgets.”

Matt made his way to Laura's side, slid his left arm around her waist, extended his right toward Flash, and introduced himself. “I think Wally's going to be upset you're off the market,” Barry said with a wink. Laura smiled sweetly, biting her tongue to hold back the sarcastic comment that was just begging to come out.

“Barry, can we go somewhere to talk?” CJ asked, and with his nod, the four of them made their way back down to the cave. As they went, CJ told Barry about their case, and once they arrived, he showed Barry the letter. “After spending all afternoon and evening trying to get the porthole device to work, I'm left more questions than answers...”

“And you thought the easiest way to go back in time and retrieve Jon is to use the cosmic treadmill,” Barry said, and all three nodded. “You're not wrong. But here's the thing: in 1997, the cosmic treadmill worked a little differently than it does now. When I first invented it, it allowed me to travel to different points in the timeline so long as I kept up an internal vibration. As soon as I relaxed, I wound up back where I came from. It was handy in that it stopped me from taking prolonged trips that could really affect the timeline. At the same time, though, it took a lot of energy just to travel at all, and it made anything but the simplest missions almost impossible.”

“So what changed it?” Laura asked, and Barry just smiled at her for a second.

“You did,” he answered pointing to her, and she found herself surprised again. Barry chuckled slightly and shook his head. “I was sitting in my office one day, minding my own business, when you and Jon walked in and completely blew my mind. You have to understand, at that point I'd never even met Clark and was still pretty new to the hero business myself. Then I learned that Superman had children, or that he eventually would, that they've traveled in time, that they've known me their entire life, and have a way to help me make it possible for them to time travel on my treadmill. The cherry on top was when you whipped out your phone and showed me a video of myself giving instructions on how to modify my treadmill to run on raw kinetic energy instead of vibration.”

“My head hurts thinking about this,” Matt said. “You basically created some sort of time loop where the future is dependent upon the past, which is in turn dependent on the future.”

“I've learned to not think too hard and just go with it,” Barry said with a wave of the hand. “Anyway, after I gave myself instructions on how to modify the treadmill, I then ordered myself to figure out what I did and why. It doesn't quite take 28 years to get smart enough to figure it out, but it was close.”

“A video from the current you to the past you...” Laura said thoughtfully, drawing curious looks from Matt and CJ. Jon was staying with their grandparents, who Laura had barely known before they died. But what if she could offer them the chance to get to know her and the rest of the family that they wouldn't be able to get otherwise? What if she could bring the future to them, to let them know how much they're still loved?

CJ cleared his throat, drawing Laura out of her introspection. “So when do you want to do this?” he asked, looking between Laura and Barry. It went without saying that it would be Laura's task to retrieve Jon, since she was the only other one in the family beside their father that was capable of the kind of speed necessary to operate the treadmill.

“I just need to record that video,” Barry said, then sighed and looked back toward where they had entered the cave. “But, you know, I just got to the party. And when it comes to getting Jon, we have all the time in the world. Can we do this a little later?”

“Yes,” Laura said immediately. Truthfully, postponing the trip by a few hours would give her some time to get some things together. CJ gave her another sideways glance, then nodded toward Barry.

“Yeah, no problem. We'll go back up too, I suppose.”

"I was just getting into an interesting discussion with Mr. Kord," Matt said, moving toward the cave entrance.

"Has Booster shown up yet?" Barry asked, and CJ took a long look toward the cave roof before shaking his head. Barry put his hand on Matt's shoulder and ushered him along. "Kid, if you're there when Ted Kord and Booster Gold get together, it'll feel like you're in the middle of a situation comedy."

"So you're saying it will be kinda like getting between Laura's brothers at Christmas?" Matt asked, bringing a snort from Laura.

"Ouch," CJ said with mock hurt.

"You guys go on ahead. I have some things I need to take care of," Laura called after them. Matt gave her a smile and a nod. As soon as CJ, Matt, and Barry disappeared up the staircase, Laura took off, bound for Metropolis.

Landing at Jon's condo, Laura took a long glance inside. It was past bedtime for the twins, but they appeared to still be awake, and Diane looked rather worse for the wear. A stab of pity knifed through Lara — she knew how the twins could jump on Diane's nerves when they got in the right mood, and not having Jon there to offer a steadying hand had to make it worse. Laura rang the buzzer, knowing that Diane would probably be grateful for the help, and she wasn't disappointed. Diane seemed very relieved to see her, and waived her inside immediately. It took another twenty or so minutes of stories and signing and snuggling before the twins finally quieted down and allowed Laura and Diane to talk about what she had come to discuss.

"We're getting him tonight," Laura said as she settled into the living room couch. Beside her, Diane closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.

"Thank God," Diane said. "The prospect of more nights like this..."

Laura nodded. "I understand."

Diane looked at a family photo sitting on the bookcase on the far side of the living room. She was quiet for a moment before continuing. "I spent a lot of time after you guys left this afternoon watching people, looking to see if I could find his face among the older folks in the crowd. If he did go through all those years without rescue, would he come back to us? What would he look like? Would the years he spent without us change the chemistry between us, or would he be the same person he always was? I tried to look back through my memories to find places where he might have been watching me, my own guardian angel, but..."

Laura put her hand on Diane's arm, drawing her attention back to her. "We're getting him, don't worry. Flash already told me that he remembers me and Jon coming to him for help."

"And did he mention a memory of you successfully leaving?"

Diane asked, then shook her head and smiled. "Forget I asked."

Laura smiled back. Diane could be skeptical to a fault, which was probably the policewoman in her. It was hard to be cynical with all the blessings in her life, though, even with her other half temporarily stuck in the past. "Well, I'm glad I was able to be here for you tonight. But truthfully I didn't come to help with the kids." "No?"

"Jon mentioned in his letter that he was staying with our grandparents — dad's folks. I don't know if Jon's ever told you about them before, but they were the best. Everything my dad is, everything that Superman does, is all thanks to them and the people they were." Her voice grew quiet. "I never had a chance to know them, and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to see them and tell them everything that's going on in my life...tell them how much I miss them. And it's a shame that CJ and Dad and everyone else won't get that chance. But then I got to thinking, and I realized that there's no reason we can't all send them our own messages, thanks to the wonders of modern technology." She took out her cell phone and held it up. "I know you never met them, but they did play a part in shaping Jon into who he is..."

Diane nodded. "Say no more," she said, reaching for the

phone. "It's too bad we can't get some footage of Eddie and Ellie to send them, though."

"Oh I'm sure Jon's already shown them everything that's on his phone," Laura said. "Do you have any photo prints of them that I could bring?" Diane shook her head, then directed Laura to her computer, where the pictures were housed digitally. If Laura could download them to her phone or a thumb drive, she could print a few out at CJ's house before heading out.

As Laura was paging through the photos on the computer, Diane recorded her message to Jonathan and Martha, then put the phone down and looked at Laura intently enough that she couldn't help but notice. "So what was going on between you and Sam this afternoon when I left the room?" Diane asked.

Laura looked at her with wide eyes, then went back to the photos, wondering how much she should say. On the one hand, she was still waiting to break the news to Matt about his impending parenthood, and she still had no idea how to tell him. On the other...it would be nice to have another woman to talk with about her pregnancy. Much like Jon, Diane was a lot older than her and somewhat distant. Because she lived in Metropolis, Laura didn't see her very often, and they almost never confided in each other. This could potentially change that relationship, bring them a little closer. But...it was probably better to let her fiancée know the good news before she spilled the beans to anyone else. Laura sighed. "He just gave me some good advice." Diane raised her eyebrows, skepticism written on her face. "He can actually be pretty smart about life matters, believe it or not."

"I once saw him and Jon argue in great depth over whether hot dogs were sandwiches or not."

Laura laughed. "When those two get together it's like they're both perpetually ten years old," she said, and Diane conceded the point. "Honestly, once I reached my teenage years, it made me feel pretty smart by comparison. But it doesn't mean they don't know a thing or two about what's important in life."

"Like having a baby?" Diane said with a twinkle in her eyes. She sat up straighter on the couch and gestured toward Laura. "You're positively glowing. I know the signs, trust me."

Laura groaned and leaned her head back. "I can't even keep this secret — how am I ever going to fare with a secret identity?"

"That's hardly the same thing," she said. "I think Jon is positively terrible at keeping his, but that's just because I more or less found it out myself. I can see all the clues and hints he gives, but so long as nobody else bothers to follow those breadcrumbs to their conclusion, it's fine. But being pregnant...your body is fairly screaming out for the world to notice. And I think it's fantastic."

"CJ was happy for me, too," Laura answered, allowing herself a smile at Diane's enthusiasm. "But I still don't know what to think about it."

"Look, I know that kids can be horrible little things that rob you of sleep and sanity and destroy all your stuff. But honestly, they can also bring so much more to your life, a whole other dimension that you had no idea existed. And when they tell you that they love you, when they laugh..."

Laura nodded, smiling at the memories of her niece and nephew, and how they stormed into their parents' lives. It could be because they were two years old, but it seemed that they were into everything all the time, and turning your back on them was a recipe for disaster. Jon and Diane's once pristine condo now bore scars delivered by little hands, from the pictures drawn in permanent marker on the walls, to the furniture that now bore little tooth marks to the juice stains on the carpets. The twins were smart enough to be able to get into almost everything — the refrigerator, the pantry, the desk — but lacked the impulse control necessary to hold back their curiosity. Laura often got the feeling that Diane felt overwhelmed by her children, which was completely understandable, but she could also see how much she loved them. Laura wasn't sure she was ready for a baby tornado to

descend upon her life, but she was certainly open to bringing more love into her home, and making a family with the man she loved.

Laura and Diane kept their eyes locked for a few long moments, and Laura felt that they had finally made a connection, something deeper than they had ever experienced before. Then Diane blinked, and the spell was broken. “So, did you find anything that will work on there?” Diane asked, and Laura forced herself to remember what she had been working on.

“I, uh, think these photos you had taken on Eddie and Ellie’s second birthday will work.”

Diane slid over next to her to look, then nodded. “What about our last Christmas photos?” She touched the screen a couple times, bringing up the images.

“Oh, yeah, I like those. They have all of you in them.” They chatted a bit more while Laura downloaded the photos, then Laura said her goodbyes and left, but not without giving Diane a big hug. She would’ve loved to have stuck around and explored their new connection, but she figured that she had plenty of time to do that after her mission was completed, and in the meantime had a lot of things to do before she left.

Laura’s next stop was her own apartment, where she scrounged up a couple of her high school senior photos and an engagement picture to print off. Then she headed back to Wayne manor and the vaunted Justice League. Their meeting was still very much in progress when she arrived, slipping back into the room unnoticed. Her Dad had moved on to the game table, and was now engaged in a spirited game of Monopoly with Barry, one of the Green Lanterns that Laura couldn’t quite place — Kyle, maybe? — and a few others. They were still talking and laughing as she approached, putting her hand on her dad’s shoulder. In her other hand was her cell phone, which she was surreptitiously fiddling with to try and activate the camera so she could record a video.

“So, Barry, please tell me that Dad didn’t tell more embarrassing stories about me and my brothers after I left,” she said.

Clark gave one of his crooked smiles. “I wouldn’t call them embarrassing,” Barry said. “Though there were a few that were... moderately amusing.”

Laura locked eyes with her dad, but he definitely wasn’t contrite. He was far from it, actually, and she had to suppress a flare of anger before considering her plan. Smiling sweetly, she glanced down at her phone and made sure the camera was pointing at her Dad, then pushed the button to start the recording. “I think turnabout is fair play,” she said. “You can’t tell me that you don’t have any embarrassing, or mildly amusing, stories from your childhood and your parents.”

“I was a kid once, so, yes, I was embarrassed by my folks.”

“Come on, spill it,” she said, and magically found that her brother had decided to join the crowd at the table, no doubt tempted by the prospect of getting a little bit of dirt on their father.

Barry put his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his fist. “This could be intriguing.”

Clark raised an eyebrow and looked toward Laura’s phone. “I suppose you’re recording this for posterity.”

“Or blackmail,” she replied, making a face at him. There was a glint in his eye as he gave her a long look, then sighed.

“Okay,” he said, making a play on the Monopoly board, then looking down at his lap for a moment before turning back toward his companions at the table, who were now giving him their undivided attention. “So I was in middle school, probably thirteen years old, and my class was taking a trip to Kansas City for an overnight lock-in at a museum there. We had all loaded onto the bus and were getting ready to leave, and I was palling around with some of my friends. We were making a show for the girls...typical teenage posturing and all that. Anyway, out of the corner of my eye I notice that someone was approaching the bus, but I actively

ignored them in favor of my friends. After a minute I became aware of banging on the side of the bus, and I hear my mom yell, ‘Clark Jerome Kent, if you want clean underwear tomorrow, you best get your butt out here and grab your bag!’” Everyone at the table started to laugh, and Clark joined them for a moment. “My friends had a similar reaction,” he said as the laughter began to die down. “So I slinked out of the bus, grabbed the bag that I had forgotten, then got back on board, pressed myself in my seat and tried very hard to be invisible. It made for a very long ride, let me tell you. But somehow I survived the trauma, and I think I had a good time on the trip despite the rough start.”

Laura smiled and congratulated herself for a mission accomplished. The recording would make nice blackmail material, sure, but her grandparents would probably get a kick out of it, too, and she was sure that they would be happy to see how 28 years had treated him. She ended the recording, squeezed her dad’s shoulder, then bent down and gave him a kiss. “See, that wasn’t so bad,” she said. “Now if you don’t mind, I need to steal my brother and take off.”

Clark patted her hand. “Glad I could share my embarrassment with you.” He glanced up at her, and she found herself appreciative of their relationship. Despite the fact that he liked to play the dad card from time to time and sometimes seemed to embarrass her for sport, they really were quite close, and she never doubted his love for her. She smiled at him, then looked at CJ and started toward the door, swinging by to get Matt before leaving.

Once they had gotten well away from the ballroom, Laura filled in CJ on what she was doing. His eyes lit up at the thought of making a video for their grandparents, and she sent him away to the cave to get to work on his recording with Matt in tow, while she diverted to the Wayne Manor living quarters and Jenny’s office.

Jen was more than happy to help Laura collect photos to bring to the past, and her office conveniently had a photo printer that she used in her work with Gotham Magazine. As Laura printed the digital photos, Jenny recorded her message, which was short and sweet.

“Jonathan, Martha, I’m sure my husband will be recording a long-winded life story filled with jokes and movie references and the occasional tender moment. It may seem like manic bravado, like he’s showing off, and maybe he is a little bit. But rest assured, you are seeing the genuine Clark, and I for one find him adorable. Even after all the Bat-stuff at night and being a junior executive by day, he’s also a really wonderful dad, and the kids adore him, too. Your family...they’re my family, and I couldn’t ask for better. I don’t know if Jon told you, but I actually knew him before I knew Clark — he introduced us — and I had a little crush on him for a while, too, just because he was so, well, honest. And Clark, he was that and more. If that’s because of your influence, then I just have to say thank you.”

Jenny handed Laura the phone and shooed her away. Jen was always very composed, never seemed too high or low, and even when she was stressed out or scared, it never showed. But Laura was beginning to notice the little changes in Jenny’s behavior that gave away her inner turmoil, and she was worried now. Even though she was married to CJ, she still counted Jon as a close friend, and she was obviously concerned. Laura stopped for a moment, her phone in one hand and a stack of photos in another, and gave Jenny a smile. “Jon will be back before you know it. Trust me.”

Jenny smiled back, straightening up slightly in her seat, making sure any signs of distress were well hidden. Not for the first time, Laura thought that she would make a dangerous poker player. “I do trust you. But time travel...that’s what I don’t trust. Look what’s happened so far! And if you or Jon somehow change the future during your trip to the past, our whole world may change without any of the rest of us remembering what had been.

Plus...well, in your condition, do you think you should be doing something so potentially dangerous?"

Laura's smile faded. "How is it that EVERYONE knows?"

Jenny shrugged. "I could tell you that Moms just know, that we can sense our kind, but I'd be lying." She leaned forward and winked. "Come on, if you let Clark in on a secret that big, you have to expect half the eastern seaboard to know within hours. He's really excited about it, and so am I. I'm sure Matt will be, too. Just...be careful in the meantime, okay?"

Laura nodded, then left for the Batcave.

As she arrived, CJ was in the middle of recording his video, with Matt acting as cameraman. As Jenny predicted, his story tended to wander, and it was sprinkled with little in-jokes and non-sequiturs. And at its core it was really quite sweet. Laura halted about halfway down the stairs to watch as the story continued.

"Adam's almost five, and already he's started asking why it is that he has a different last name than the rest of us. There's no easy way of answering that question without telling the truth, and he's really too young to know that, so Jen and I sat him down and told him the official story, which is basically just a horrible lie. It makes me feel a little sick to my stomach just thinking about it, and I'm sure he'll hate us for it once he finds out. Until then, there will be a lot of the kid angst a whole lot of 'you're not my REAL dad!' moments."

CJ sighed, then gave a little half smile as his eyes focused off into the distance. "In my mind, I had worked out this scenario where he finds out all about me, modeled loosely on how I found out about Dad. He will start to get extra tough and strong, then suspect that our cover story wasn't the truth, because it wasn't and we're terrible liars. So he will seek out the other really tough and strong guy in town atop a tall building under the cover of darkness. And he will ask Batman, a guy who looks a lot like Darth Vader but with a different cowl, what the truth is about his parentage. And I will say, 'Adam,'" CJ's voice switched to a gravelly, lower timbre in his best Darth Vader imitation. CJ took a couple of exaggeratedly heavy breaths, then continued. "'*I* am your father,'" he said, his hand in the air. His voice returned to normal as he finished. "Then I will take off my cowl and reveal the truth, and after he gets over his initial shock there will be a great reconciliation, maybe some fireworks or something, and lots of father-son bonding. It's a fun fantasy, but in reality what will probably happen is, in a fit of teenage angst, he'll yell at me that his REAL dad wouldn't make him do his homework or clean his room or do whatever mundane thing I'll be asking him to do, and in frustration I will let him know that I am his real father, then I'll have to go bench press a tractor or bend a light pole in half or something to demonstrate. Then when he gets mad and storms off, I will probably add the chestnut that his grandfather in Superman, and to think long and hard about that before engaging in any teenaged rebellion."

"You've thought a lot about this," Matt said from behind the camera, and CJ nodded.

"It's a hobby," he said with a shrug to Matt, then looked back at the phone. "Sorry to unload on you like that. I'm just jealous of Jon and Laura for getting the chance to see you again. Before I go, I would like to apologize for my childhood in general. Specifically, I apologize for thinking your art studio needed a little more art in it...all over it, really. Why are paints there if you're not supposed to use them? I also apologize for what became of your tree and for the incident with red cool aid and pop rocks. I love you guys for putting up with me and for your infinite patience. I'm now directing my sister to give you a hug for me." He saw Laura and gestured for her to come down next to him. In a heartbeat she was by his side, and he was wrapping his arms around her. "Something like this," he said to the camera, then laid his head on her shoulder. Laura started to laugh as she squirmed out of his grip.

"Okay, I think they get it," she said, then gestured for Matt to stop the recording.

"Aww," CJ said with an exaggerated pout. "That was kinda nice."

"There's only one man with gets to rest his head on my shoulder," Laura said, approaching Matt, who handed the phone back to CJ and wrapped his arms around her. Instead of imitating CJ's move, though, he went straight for a kiss, and Laura found herself lost in the moment. It was a nice interlude before she went on her mission, and she found herself nudging Matt toward the chair by the workbench so they could continue for a little while longer. A glance at CJ revealed an expression that has become quite common over the last year and a half or so, one that spoke of exasperation at their over-the-top affections, mixed with good humor. CJ busied himself with finding a bag that Laura could use to stash her loot, then put the photographs and Laura's phone in there. After a moment of hesitation, he also located a phone charger and cable and put those in the bag, too.

"What else do you think you'll need?" he asked, interrupting a bit of snuggling.

"A change of clothes, probably," she said, quickly changing into her secondhand Shadow Woman outfit, then putting the clothes she had been wearing into the bag. "Money?" she asked, almost as an afterthought.

"If I give you some, you'll have to bring me back a t-shirt, one that says something to the effect of, 'my siblings went back in time and all they brought me was this lousy t-shirt.'"

"Yeah, pass," Laura said.

"Ditto," CJ said with a wrinkle of his nose. Before he had a chance to say anything further, Barry Allen showed up immediately next to him, causing CJ to do a double take. He then looked toward the roof of the cave before turning back toward Barry. "Party winding down, huh?"

"Not for you, though," Barry replied, looking at Laura. "Are you ready? The treadmill's at my place in Central City."

Laura took a long look at Matt, then turned back at Barry. "Just give me a second. I'll meet you there," she said, and Barry nodded and disappeared.

CJ, obviously aware of what was coming, settled into his stool at the work bench, a secret smile on his face. Laura felt her heart begin to race as she looked at Matt, who regarded her with raised eyebrows. He knew she could whisk him away to anywhere for a night of fun at the drop of a hat, and they had done that more than once in the course of their relationship. Little surprises like that made things fun, and besides, she liked to show off for him. He also knew that she wouldn't hesitate to tell him if she had a problem or if he was pushing her too far on something. So her nervousness must be confusing, certainly uncharacteristic, and the longer she waited, the longer she stared at him and tried to find the right words to say, the more his eyebrows seemed to pinch together.

Mentally nudging herself, Laura placed her hand on Matt's cheek. "I love you, you know that, right?"

"Of course," he said, leaning in for a quick kiss. "I love you too." His voice betrayed the fact that he was confused.

"Well, what if I told you that there soon may be...more of me to love?"

"What are you...?" he asked. Cutting off any further words, Laura leaned in, put her lips up next to his ear, and whispered the truth to him. Immediately, his hands came up to her waist and he pulled away, looking at her with wide eyes. "You're...?" he asked looking between her face and her midsection. Laura nodded and scrambled out of his lap. "This isn't a joke, right?"

"It's real," CJ said, pointing to his ear. "Junior has a healthy heartbeat."

"Wow," Matt said with wonder, then he picked up Laura and twirled her around once. "WOW!" he said again as he set her

down, then pulled her into a protective embrace. “No wonder your appetite has been a bit spotty lately,” he said, then pulled apart.

“I wasn’t sure how to tell you,” Laura said with a small voice. “I mean, we had plans...”

Matt shook his head. “Doesn’t matter now,” he said. His eyes got distant as he pondered the implications. His degree was in journalism, but after graduation, the job prospects were slim, and even his connections with the Daily Planet couldn’t help him find employment in his field. Even so, he was a good writer, creative and outgoing, so he scared up a job with the athletic marketing department at Gotham State. It wasn’t ideal, and was never meant to be a permanent job, just something to pay the bills while he worked on his novel. That novel was going to be the thing that got his foot in the door with a publishing company and hopefully lead to a more permanent job as an author. Laura had to admit that what she had read so far was intriguing and wholly original. His status as an insider to her family’s secret gave him a unique perspective on issues of identity and heroism, and it allowed him to craft a story that incorporated many of the conversations they had had over the years. “Maybe I work for the University longer than I had wanted, but I don’t mind. I still have...how long to finish my novel?”

“About 7 months,” Laura answered. “And graduate school...” She diverted her eyes from his face and looked down.

“You can always go back later,” he said, squeezing her slightly.

She sighed, then looked back up and gave him a small sigh. “Well, I need to go. We can talk when I get back.”

“Are you sure you should be doing that while expecting?” he asked, his arms still steadfastly wrapped around her.

“I’ll be fine. And if I don’t do it, who will?”

“Wally? Barry?” He raised his eyebrows, practically pleading with her. She leaned in to give him a quick kiss, then patted his shoulder.

“Look, I know the whole time travel thing is unknown territory, but I’m pretty tough. Jon got through it okay, and I’m sure I will too.” Reluctantly, he lowered his arms, and she stepped away.

“Just...be careful,” he said.

She picked up the bag with the photos and other items, put her phone in it, then strapped it on. It draped over her shoulder and hugged her body tightly just above the waist, which should keep it under her aura and reduce wind resistance. “I promise. Love you,” she said, then looked at CJ and nodded before disappearing.

It only took a moment before she arrived in Central City, landing in a driveway she knew well. Iris opened the door before Laura was able to even set foot on the stoop, silently waving her in. Laura paused next to her, giving her a small hug and making small talk before continuing to the basement and Barry’s workshop. She took her phone out of the bag and handed it to Barry, watching silently as he gave himself instructions on how to modify the treadmill. It was interesting how straightforward and unsentimental he was in talking to his past self. It made her wonder if he had experience in dealing with former versions of himself...he certainly had experience in receiving messages from the future. The very fact that the treadmill existed at all meant that he had made multiple forays into time. She had thought time travel to be a fairly novel thing, but not for him. It made her wonder what he had changed, how he had affected the past and future, and it made her head hurt.

“Okay,” he said, handing her the phone. “You’re all set. Now, I’ve set the controls for a day after your brother sent the letter, since there was no way to tell the exact time he sent it.” He gestured toward the track on the treadmill, and Laura stepped on, making sure her bag was secure. “All you need to do is keep running as fast as you can until you see a porthole appear, then it will slide over you and when you emerge, you will be in 1997.

This thing is set to place you in a field outside of town.”

Laura took a deep breath and nodded. “Thank you for your help,” she said, extending her hand, which he gladly shook.

“Bon voyage,” he said, then stepped back. Without another thought, she started running, quickly increasing her speed until she thought she had hit her maximum, then she pushed harder yet. It was odd to be running flat out, yet have the scenery around her remain static. Barry was still standing there, watching with an analytic eye, and the lights on the treadmill blinked in some pattern she couldn’t decipher. Then, slowly, a shimmering circle not unlike the one she saw in CJ’s cave began to form in front of her, growing as it moved closer, until eventually it enveloped her. Suddenly it was like she was in a tunnel, with visions of the past flashing by rapidly around her. She tried not to let the images distract her, but it was hard. She saw moments from her life – when Matt proposed, when she graduated from high school, when she first learned to fly – and she saw major events that happened around the world. After a while, no doubt once she had moved past her birth, the images became those from her parent’s life. It seemed like an eternity passed before she reached the end of the tunnel and finally emerged into a corn field, the sun low in the western sky. She had made it...probably. It would take a little looking around to know for sure that she was where she needed to be. In the meantime, it would probably be a good idea to try and find Jon, and she would start at her grandparents’ farm.

Clark sighed as he closed the townhouse door behind Lois. “I’m beginning to think that Jon was on to something when he mentioned that my problems might be caused by red kryptonite,” he said, and Lois greeted him with an impatient gaze.

“Oh?” she said. She had spent a good part of the day researching associates of Gene Newtrich – family, friends, former business partners, cell mates – trying to track down the red kryptonite and who might profit from Superman’s powers going haywire. Clark, though, had remained skeptical and not all that concerned. Sure, his powers hadn’t been quite as responsive as he would like of late, and turning them off had proven to be a little difficult, but no real harm had come of it. That afternoon after trying to foil a robbery he had managed to overshoot the perpetrators by a few miles, but the only negative consequence, besides some embarrassment, had been a couple of friction burns on the pavement where he stopped. Still, partly to appease Lois, he had gone to Dr. Klein to get himself checked out and to see if they could formulate any other theories about what was going on. After a thorough examination, the doctor had mentioned a couple of potential maladies that sounded rather dire and much more serious than temporary exposure to kryptonite, and Clark found himself starting to wonder if Jon had been right all along.

“Doctor Klein was stumped, and I have to admit that it’s possible that I was exposed to red kryptonite without being aware of it. In the heat of the moment I haven’t exactly been careful about checking my surroundings, and all my symptoms seem to manifest themselves immediately after responding to some sort of robbery or attempted robbery.”

“So how do you feel now?” Lois took a step forward and laid her hand on his arm. “Aren’t you worried about what else could happen? What if this goes on? So far nobody’s gotten hurt, but if you can’t control yourself, sooner or later someone might.”

The thought had crossed his mind, and when he was in the midst of one of his episodes, he did find himself frightened about what might happen if he couldn’t stop himself. At the same time, though, he had managed to use his powers normally after each episode, either to travel back to work or home, and he felt himself bristling a little at the insinuation that his actions could hurt innocent people, intentionally or not. “Superman can’t afford to be worried,” he said. “There’s too much at stake. If the criminal element sees me pulling back, they will have a field day.” Lois

looked at him with an expression that he knew well, one that told him that she thought he was being stubborn, but she didn't say anything. "Did you find anything with your research?" he asked, attempting to change the subject.

She gave him a long look, then shrugged off her jacket. "I have a lot of data, I just need to sort through it and look for patterns," she said. "Fortunately the Newtriches aren't especially popular."

He smiled at her encouragingly, but before he could continue there was a knock at the door. A quick glance with his x-ray vision, which seemed to be working fine, revealed their visitors. "It's Perry," he said.

A panicked expression passed over Lois's face. "I forgot all about him," she said as she lunged for the door. "We don't even have crackers and cheese whiz!" She put her hand on the handle and composed herself, then pulled it open. "Perry, Jerry, hi!" she said, ushering them inside.

Jerry offered a bottle of wine as he entered. "It was really nice of you to invite us, Lois. I hope you didn't go to a lot of trouble."

Clark stepped behind Lois and put a hand on her shoulder. "Nope, no trouble at all. In fact, while you make yourself comfortable, we should go check on dinner."

Lois nodded and gestured toward the living room, then went with Clark toward the kitchen. As soon as they entered, she made a bee line for the pantry, looking for a few moments. She then headed toward the refrigerator, pulling the door open, closing it, and looking in the freezer. "Oh, this is fabulous. We have two bottles of water, a jar of mustard, and a half-eaten sandwich. Even that emergency roast we had in the freezer, which you made last night, is gone. At least if that were here I would have something to beat myself to death with."

Clark smiled reassuringly at her. "We aren't completely without our resources. I could always run out and get something... some of my favorite takeout places are good enough that nobody would guess the food's not homemade."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, considering?" she said, and his earlier annoyance flashed briefly.

"Honey, we don't have anything else to feed the boss. Besides, it's only takeout. What harm can I do going to a restaurant?"

She sighed as she conceded. "Fine, go," she said. "But... be careful?"

He nodded, then quickly changed into a suit and took off. Almost immediately, he found himself traveling much faster than he intended, and a loud boom echoed through the neighborhood, shattering windows. He tried to hold in a yell as the earth sped up below him, but after a moment, the frustration got the better of him. He couldn't stop and couldn't slow down; the only thing he could control was his bearing, and although he considered heading out to sea to limit the disruption from his sonic boom, he set his sights for Kansas, and the one person who might be able to help him.

The sun was just slipping below the horizon as Jon joined his grandparents on their front porch. The day had practically flown by, and he had kept himself busy helping his grandparents. With his assistance they fixed some bad spots in the barn roof, repaired fences throughout the entire farmstead, did some landscaping work, and he even went to help out in the neighboring towns hit by storms the night before. His day had been full, but he had spent the whole time looking over his shoulder, searching for someone or something to arrive and help him get home. It had made him somewhat distant, he knew, but his grandparents had understood. As dinnertime had come and gone, what had started as distraction began to morph into anxiety, and he began to wonder how much time would have to pass before he would have to start building a life in the present. It made his heart ache to think about waiting 28 years to see his family again... to experience true happiness again.

It was a long time to be alone, a long time to keep a secret, and he wasn't sure he would be able to hold back for that long.

"I'm beginning to think the cavalry's not coming," he said as he leaned against the support post. His grandparents looked at him with concern from the porch swing.

"It's only been a day. It's still too early to lose faith," Martha said, and Jon smiled.

"You're right," he said, then turned toward the technicolor sky.

"Besides, maybe there's a reason you're here, some purpose you are meant to fulfil. You made a difference last night when you tackled mother nature. Maybe there's something else waiting on the horizon that you need to help with, too."

Jon shrugged and pondered the statement. It was possible that something more than random chance brought him to this moment. But time was a fragile thing, and small changes now could lead to monumental changes in his time. He was terrified of the potential destruction to his time that his intervention here could cause.

"The opposite could very well be true, too," he said. "What if the people I saved yesterday were meant to die? What if one of those people goes on to become a serial killer?"

"Or cure cancer?" his grandfather said. Jon looked at them for a long moment, then nodded.

"It's scary. I hate the idea that the very future of my world depends on what I do, and I don't even know the rules. I just want to get home before I screw anything up."

"Well, we're glad to have you for as long as you need," his grandmother said, and they settled into companionable silence for a while. The sounds of spring surrounded them, from the croaking of frogs at the pond in the distance to wind in the trees. He had always found the country to be so pleasant and relaxing, so completely different from the bustle of humanity that was everywhere in Metropolis. He closed his eyes and lost himself in the peace and quiet, and let his mind wander. It occurred to him that he wasn't as helpless as he thought, that there were possibilities for getting home even without intervention from the future. He was pretty sure that more shenanigans from Tempus were looming in the near future, which would bring the appearance of H. G. Wells. There was something else, too, he thought, opening his eyes and looking in the direction of Central City, surprised that it hadn't occurred to him earlier. Maybe he would take a little trip tomorrow to see what the Flash was up to these days.

The thought caused some of his anxiety to melt away, and he found his mood improving. It was nice to just be able to enjoy the moment – the beautiful sunset, the company, the quiet – but his contentment only lasted for a few minutes. Gradually, he became aware of a distant sound, something similar to thunder, although the sky was cloudless. No, he amended, not thunder. That had to be a sonic boom, and with it was a voice yelling for help. There was only one thing that could be, he thought, standing up straighter and searching the sky, quickly locating the source of the sound and confirming his suspicions. "I'll be right back," he said to his grandparents, then jumped into the sky, not bothering to change into uniform.

He quickly caught up to his father, matching his speed and flying alongside him. Clark was concentrating so hard on the airspace in front of him that he didn't even look at Jon, though he obviously sensed his presence. "What's wrong?" Jon asked.

"I can't stop!" Clark said, and as his eyes met Jon's, Jon found himself at a loss for words for a moment. The look of terror in those eyes was entirely new and frightening. His dad had always been a pillar of strength and wisdom, and even at his most vulnerable, he had always seemed composed... fatherly. And right now he was anything but. "Please help," Clark said, almost pleading, and Jon mentally shook himself into action. Without another thought, he wrapped his arms around Clark and willed them both to stop, which was no easy task. He had never tried to

match his dad in full out combat, and had certainly never been asked to try and counter his speed. It was akin to trying to stop a freight train, and at first nothing happened. But after a few long moments their momentum began to slow, then, suddenly, it was like someone had flipped a switch, and there was no resistance at all. Jon forced them to a complete stop.

“Are you okay now?” Jon asked, his arms still around Clark. He looked around, noting that they appeared to be in upstate Oregon now. Clark nodded weakly, breathing heavily. “Do you want to fly yourself back?” Jon asked.

Clark hung his head. “I don’t think that would be a good idea,” he said, his voice small. Jon shifted into a looser grip, then began to guide them back toward the Kent farm.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened,” Jon said, though Clark really didn’t have much to say. Despite the probable exposure to red kryptonite, he had still donned the suit and tried to get takeout from one of his famous out-of-town locales as if nothing was wrong. It was incredibly reckless and stubborn, Jon thought, wondering for the first time if he maybe hadn’t traveled to a different universe altogether. The Clark Kent that Jon knew was never reckless, and though he could be stubborn, he was also well aware of his limits and failings. As Jon set them down on his grandparents’ porch, he felt the desire to tell Clark what he thought, but looking at him again, seeing the defeat on his face, he couldn’t do it. But it was obvious that he would need someone to watch over him, to help in making the correct decisions, at least until the effects of the kryptonite wore off.

As Jon let go of Clark, Jonathan and Martha crowded him to show their concern. Jon backed away and watched in silence for a minute, then announced that he was going back to Metropolis with Clark. “And I’m staying,” he added, setting his stance to let them know that there would be no argument.

“I don’t really think that’s necessary,” Clark said. “I appreciate the help in getting home, but after that...I can take care of myself.” Even through his defeat, a spark of determination burned in Clark’s eyes.

“Now, son, I think Jon has a good idea,” Jonathan said, and Martha nodded. “These episodes seem unpredictable. At least if he’s there, he can keep an eye on you and limit any damage that might come from this.”

“Let me help you,” Jon said, taking a step forward. “Let me help Metropolis. You can’t go out there like this, but I can take your place – I can be Superman.” Clark set his chin as if he was going to protest, but Jon could tell he was getting to him. “If you go out while your powers are on the fritz, you may cause some damage, and even if that damage doesn’t result in someone getting injured or, God forbid, dying, it will frighten people. It’s scary to think of the world’s most powerful man as being out of control, and fear causes people to do irrational things sometimes. Who’s to say what someone might do to stop you and get rid of the threat that you pose.” As Jon spoke, he could see Clark’s resolve melt, and he finally conceded with a nod. Jon smiled, although he never doubted that the speech would work. After all, the words were very similar to something that Clark had told once him during his teenaged years. It was surreal to think that they had somehow switched roles, that Jon had suddenly become the steady voice of reason and Clark was the inexperienced hothead. One of the constants in Jon’s life had always been his father, and for the longest time Jon had seen him as someone who could do no wrong, the man who had all the answers. But at this point in time he was very much capable of doing the wrong thing, and apparently didn’t have all the answers yet. Knowledge was something gained through experience, and at this point in their lives, Jon actually had more experience as a superhero than Clark did.

Jon blinked a few times and cleared the thoughts away. For now none of that mattered; for now, he needed to get Clark home

safely. “Let’s go,” Jon said, offering his arm to Clark. He gave a look of apology to his grandparents. “I’ll be sure to stop by before I leave...if I leave.” They gave him sympathetic nods, and with that he took off for Metropolis. He had intended to drop Clark off at home, but Clark reminded him that he and Lois had company, and he still needed to pick up some takeout. Jon was pretty sure that most of his favorite restaurants were years from coming into existence, so he had Clark direct him to his favorite spot in Metropolis, then bummed some money off him before going in to order. Jon stashed Clark in the alley and went in himself. It only took a few minutes for everything to be prepared, then they were back in the air for a brief trip to his parents’ brownstone.

Jon landed on the back patio, gaining the attention of Lois, who was still in the kitchen. “Jon? Clark?” she said, rising from her spot on a stool and quickly making her way toward them. “Did something happen?” she looked pointedly at Clark.

“I, uh, lost control again, this time while flying. I was able to angle toward Smallville, where Jon intercepted me and brought me home.” Clark seemed embarrassed, and Jon knew Lois well enough to read the unsaid words in her expression.

Lois sighed, then turned to Jon. “Thank you. I don’t know what we would do if you weren’t around.”

Jon smiled at her and made his way into the kitchen to deposit the food on the counter. “It’s no problem,” he said. He pointed at Clark, noting that he was still in the suit. “You better change, and at normal speed,” he said, then looked at himself. He was dressed in another outfit from his dad’s closet in Smallville, and to call it casual would be an understatement. He also hadn’t cleaned up since helping his grandfather, and it showed. “Do you mind if I borrow some clothes? I think I’m a little underdressed for socializing.”

Lois looked questioningly at him, then at Clark. “Jon’s going to stay and help me out with my...issues,” Clark said, and Lois nodded, turning back toward Jon with an appraising eye. After a moment she smiled, and Jon knew he had her blessing.

“We’d be honored to have you. And take what you need from the bedroom.”

“What about you?” Jon asked Clark. “Do you need me to get you something?” Clark shook his head and then gestured toward the patio. In a darkened corner sat a pile of clothing that Jon hadn’t noticed earlier. “Okay, well...I’ll see you in a little bit.”

With that, he shifted into superspeed and grabbed some clothes, putting them on without making a sound before leaving the brownstone and setting down in an alley a block or two away. He walked slowly, taking a long look at the neighborhood, trying to jog his memory of this place, but not really having any success. After he was sure that he had given his father enough time to get presentable, he ascended the brownstone steps and rang the buzzer. Lois greeted him after a moment, escorting him into the house, where he came face to face with someone he hadn’t expected to see.

“Perry, I’d like to introduce you to Jon, one of Clark’s friends from the gym. We, uh accidentally double booked our dinner tonight,” she said with the appropriate amount of embarrassment. “Jon, this is Perry White, editor-in-chief of the Daily Plant, and his son Jerry.”

Jon reached out and shook hands with both men. “Mr. White, it’s an honor,” he said, and it was true. Perry had passed away when Jon was quite young, and he didn’t really have many memories of him. He had heard plenty of stories, though, and his parents liked to bring up his name or his words of wisdom quite often, including odd stories that referenced the life of Elvis Presley. Jon had always seen him as being larger than life, an image that was buoyed by his memories of Perry’s jovial laughter and loud, booming voice. But now, from his perspective as an adult and a peer, Perry White seemed very human and not quite so intimidating, though Jon could see mischief in his eyes.

Jerry White, on the other hand, rubbed Jon the wrong way right off the bat. While outwardly charming and outgoing, he was also fidgety and looked nervous. His smile never seemed to reach his eyes, and there was something calculating in his expression that Jon just didn't trust. He tried to summon memories of Jerry, or of times when his parents had mentioned him, but nothing was forthcoming. It was almost as if Jerry White didn't exist, which was odd considering his parents' affection for Perry. There had to be something more to the story, and he made a note to ask his parents when...if he got back home.

Aside from some awkwardness with Jerry, the evening was a success. Jon let it slip that he was also a writer, which led to some more in-depth conversation than he had intended, though it was definitely engaging and interesting. He wished he could have more time to pick Perry's brain, but soon enough the Whites were saying their goodbyes, and Jon was alone again with Lois and Clark. He busied himself helping with the cleanup, volunteering to do the dishes while his parents relaxed. It was nearing bedtime, and he was afraid that his presence there wouldn't be entirely welcome. The last thing he wanted was to feel like an intruder in his parents' home, but he also had no intention of going anywhere. It was uncomfortable, but he supposed in that sense it mirrored his trip to 1997 in general.

Lois took that moment to poke her head into the kitchen. "I think we're going to get to bed. Clark will put a pillow and blanket on the couch for you, if that's okay." Jon nodded, grateful. "Did you need anything else?"

"Shorts and a t-shirt?" Jon said, and Lois nodded.

"Clark will get you those, too," she said, then left him alone. He wandered into the living room and made himself comfortable on the couch, amusing himself with the offerings on the television. He was flipping through channels when Clark brought down the promised items before quickly leaving him alone again, and tuned into Jay Leno out of sheer curiosity. He lost himself in the show for a while, though soon enough he began to feel himself nodding off, and he turned off the television and spread out on the couch. He had just closed his eyes when he sensed movement, and looked over to see Clark descending the stairs.

Jon sat up again and furrowed his brow. There was something dark in Clark's expression, something that spoke of hurt and caused a small shiver to work its way down Jon's spine. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Clark sat on the other couch, pointedly not looking at Jon. "I...hurt Lois today. Unintentionally. I thought it would be best to get as far from her as I could." Clark sighed. "This has to stop. I can't go on like this."

"I know how you can stop it," Jon said. "But you're not going to like it."

Clark's head snapped up, and he looked at Jon with intensity. "You do?" he asked.

Jon laid back down and looked toward the ceiling. "Ask yourself what normally makes your powers go away," he said, glancing back toward Clark, who now seemed shocked. "Chances are that a small exposure will set things right, and with any luck, you won't even end up powerless."

"Kryptonite," Clark whispered, then shook his head. "It makes sense. You're right though – I'm not looking forward to that."

"Is it really worse than that bruise on Mo—Lois's arm?" Jon asked with a knowing glance, then yawned. "On the other hand, this could resolve itself after a while without any intervention. But the wait...that can be its own form of torture."

"Right," Clark said, thoughtful, laying down. Silence descended upon the room, and for a moment Jon thought that Clark would take the opportunity to get some sleep, and he found his eyelids getting heavy at the thought. "Do we spend a lot of time talking, where you're from?" Clark asked, interrupting the quiet.

"We do," Jon said. "We've spent more late nights atop the Trade Tower or floating over the city than I could count."

"And what do we talk about?"

"Life, family, work..."

Suddenly a new voice spoke, one that was faint and feminine. "Football," it said, though Clark didn't seem to hear.

Jon's heart began to beat faster and his eyes widened as he activated his x-ray vision, searching the night sky. "...football," he repeated absently.

"Please tell me that I hold my half of the conversation," Clark said with humor in his voice, which was just startling enough to divert Jon's eyes from their search of the sky.

"Easily," Jon said with a half smile. "In fact, for a long time you did most of the talking. Believe it or not, I was pretty shy when I first started my superhero career."

"Liar," Jon heard from above, bringing his attention back to the sky outside. He sat bolt upright as he finally noticed his sister floating directly above in the sky. She waved as their eyes made contact.

Jon's action seemed to startle Clark, who sat up tentatively. "Something up?" he asked. Jon looked back up in the sky, and before he knew it, his sister's voice came again.

"Unit 1, this is base. We have a 2-0-2-5 at the Lexcorp Tower," she said, and Jon could tell by Clark's expression that he heard her this time, too. "Requesting backup. Over."

"Sounds like there's something I need to check out," Jon said, standing. "Could I, ah, borrow a suit? I'd use mine, but..."

"You don't want to bring unwanted attention, I get it," Clark said, then gestured toward the wet bar. "The wall rotates and the suits are on the backside. The switch is under the counter."

"Right," Jon said, hustling over and opening the compartment. In a matter of moments he was ready to go. As he exited the house, he noticed an expression on his Dad's face that bordered on helplessness, causing a stab of pity. Jon hesitated for a moment, wondering what he should say. "Hopefully it's nothing. I'll be back shortly," he said with his most reassuring smile, then left.

Rather than fly directly up toward Laura, Jon angled toward downtown, gesturing for her to follow. Since she mentioned the Lexcorp Tower, he decided that was as good of a place as any to talk. It only took a moment for her to land beside him. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you," he said, wrapping her in a tight embrace as soon as her feet hit the roof.

"Oof," she said with a small laugh, returning the embrace. "I, uh, have some idea," she said. "So what are you doing in Metropolis, in Dad's suit no less? Your letter made it sound like you'd be in Smallville."

"Well, it's a long story."

"I have 28 years," Laura said, sitting down and dangling her feet over the edge.

Jon gave her a smile, then pushed the cape away and sat down next to her. "It's all about red kryptonite, and Dad's stubborn refusal to realize that even Superman has his limits."

Laura raised her eyebrows in question, and Jon proceeded to tell her everything that happened in the last couple days. "So now I'm babysitting, I guess, until this whole thing resolves itself," he finished.

Laura stared out over the city and shook her head. "I just have a hard time believing that Dad would ever be that guy. You know the one – the guy who never thinks there's anything wrong with him, and who would rather put people in danger than admit he has a problem."

"It's been eye-opening, let me tell you," Jon said. "But nobody is born knowing everything, and maybe it took experiences like this to turn him into the person we know. Anyway, I promised to cover the city in his absence, to BE him until he's back to normal. Which means I'm going to get a little more familiar with 1997. It gives me a better appreciation of how good we have it on our time,

I suppose.”

“I’ve only been here a couple hours, but I think I kind of like this time in history,” Laura said. “I don’t think I’ve seen a single Starbucks since I got here. I mean, there should be one per block, but none? Is this really Metropolis? People in this time might actually not go broke buying coffee.”

Jon laughed. “I guess I hadn’t noticed. Though, now that you mention it, I see what you mean. Seem to be a lot more Mom and Pop shops around in their place.”

“People actually talk to each other here, too,” Laura said. “I haven’t seen a single person walk into traffic because they’re staring at a cell phone. And how is it that I’ve never heard of the Spice Girls before?”

“If I had to go out on a limb, I’d have to say it’s because they’re terrible,” he said, making a face. She nudged him playfully. “So I have to ask, how DID you get here, anyway? And why send you back instead of sending a message or simply opening another porthole?”

“I guess the short answer is expediency,” Laura told Jon about the death they uncovered that was potentially connected to the porthole bandits, the device that the police located on the dead guy, and how CJ had managed to get it operational after borrowing it from the evidence locker. “Turns out that the reason you were able to travel back in time was because you were moving very quickly when you entered the porthole. But even with that knowledge, we still aren’t exactly sure how your speed and the time jump are related, and we’re working out how the positioning works, too. And, might I add, we only managed to send items backward in time. Sending things forward via the porthole could require a completely different action, if it’s even possible at all. So rather than drive CJ crazy trying to figure this all out in a timely fashion, we sought out the one guy we know who can travel through time...”

“Flash,” Jon said, drawing a nod from Laura. “Ha! I knew it! I was going to go see him tomorrow.”

“Well, he probably wouldn’t have been able to get you home without my help,” Laura said, patting the bag she was wearing. “Turns out the cosmic treadmill works differently now than it does in our time, and you wouldn’t have been able to stay in the future, only visit, without modifying it. Fortunately, our Barry was available to tell this era’s Barry how to make it work like it should. He gave himself a message on my phone.” She shrugged. “Plus, I have to admit that the opportunity to visit Grandma and Grandpa again was too good to pass up.”

“I can understand that. You hardly knew them when they...” He looked down and shook his head, trying to keep positive. “So you don’t mind sticking around a little longer than intended, then?” Jon asked

“Absolutely not. If it means I’ll get to hang out long enough to have some real conversation with them, then I’m all in. Grandma can help clear up some of the notes on her recipes, and maybe I could get some advice, too.”

“Advice?” Jon was suddenly very curious. “On what? Boyfriend troubles?”

She narrowed her eyes momentarily, then put on her most neutral expression. “Girl things. You wouldn’t understand. And sometimes it’s nice to have some perspective other than Mom’s.”

“Uh huh,” Jon said skeptically, but he didn’t have the heart to pursue the discussion any further. “Have you stopped by the farm yet?”

“I flew over just to see if you were there. When I saw that you weren’t I came right to Metropolis. Took me a few minutes to track you down, though. Even though I knew Mom and Dad hadn’t always lived in the same house that they do now, it was still weird to see another family there when I flew over.”

“I bet,” Jon said. Truthfully he hadn’t really looked around Metropolis much outside of those few panicked minutes after he

first arrived. Since then, he’d been actively avoiding the familiar places he had known, even if there really wasn’t any reason to do so. It helped him keep things straight in his mind, he supposed.

“How about I take you to Smallville and introduce you?” he asked, and Laura smiled and nodded. “Come on,” he said, standing up, and soon enough they were airborne. It was getting late in Metropolis, but Kansas was a time zone behind, and the hour, while still not exactly respectable, wasn’t terrible. Given Jon’s experience from the night before, he guessed that his grandpa would probably be watching the late local news in his recliner, eyes at half mast, while his grandma got ready for bed. Peeking inside the house as they approached, Jon found that his hunch hadn’t been too far off.

The pair landed on the walk just in front of the porch stairs, and as Jon approached the house, he noticed that Laura seemed to lag behind. A quick glance over his shoulder showed that she had suddenly become apprehensive, which he supposed he could understand. It had only been a day since he had been in her position, after all. She was about to meet people who were living legends, the basis for so many stories and family lore, but were barely more than ghosts of memories to her. She had probably built up this meeting in her head ever since she realized it was going to happen, and now that she was faced with it, she was probably worried that it wouldn’t meet up with expectations. He gave her his most reassuring smile, then turned and knocked on the door before opening it. “Hello?” he said, poking his head inside. “It’s Jon.”

From the living room, Jonathan’s breath caught in his throat for a moment as woke from the semi-sleep that he had been in. “Jon? Oh come in, boy,” he said as Martha descended the stairs in a nightgown and robe.

“Sorry I’m so late,” he said, taking a few steps into the house. “I wasn’t planning on coming back tonight, but...” he gestured for Laura to come in. “My personal rescue squad finally showed up.”

Laura finally stepped in the door, pulling off her uniform mask as she did. Her normally long hair was gathered onto her head, making her look quite different from the videos that Jon had shown from the previous Christmas, but there was no mistaking her face nor her feminine form. Immediately Jonathan and Martha’s faces lit up, and they quickly approached with open arms. “Laura?” Martha asked. Laura beamed at the recognition.

“Grandma!” she said, stepping into her embrace. After a few long moments, she let Martha go and embraced Jonathan.

“Grandpa! I really missed you guys,” she said.

Jon stood back and watched as they exchanged pleasantries, and smiled in amusement as Laura showered them with gifts from home – photos, a drawing from Adam, and a whole phone loaded with videos. “I need the phone back, though,” she said, then something seemed to occur to her. “Oh, I brought something for you, too,” she said, handing Jon a phone charger.

“It’s just like Christmas!” Jon said, gratefully taking the charger. Truthfully, it was probably better than Christmas, because he had assumed that even seeing one would remain just a wish until he got home. He had switched his phone to airplane mode to save whatever battery he could, but a day spent looking at photos and videos had put his phone on the verge of death. He took a couple of steps toward the end table and grabbed his phone, deciding to take it with him to Metropolis to discreetly charge up at his parents’ brownstone. “I, uh, should be getting back to Metropolis,” Jon said, drawing their attention again. “You don’t mind if Laura stays here? I really don’t think she should be interacting with anyone else in this time if we can avoid it. It’s bad enough that I’m here playing Superman...”

“It’s no problem at all,” said Martha enthusiastically. In a family overloaded with men, she was probably giddy to have another woman around to talk to.

“Hopefully everything will clear up tomorrow. I’ll be in

touch.” With a nod, he backed out the door, then pivoted once he was on the porch and leapt into the air, bound for Metropolis. It was hard to stop smiling as he thought again about the care package that Laura had brought with her, permanent reminders of the family that Jonathan and Martha Kent created. It might be awkward for them to try and hide the photos from his parents, but they could just as easily be explained away as pictures of friends, or of the children of friends. He was glad they could have that.

Approaching the brownstone, he saw that his Dad was still awake, staring at the ceiling, apparently lost in thought. Jon landed on the back porch and entered the house, changing back into a t-shirt and shorts. He scanned the house at superpeed, locating an extension cord that he plugged into a corner outlet in the kitchen, running it into a cabinet that contained Tupperware and other items that Lois Lane had no use for, and plugging in his phone, all before Clark was even aware of his presence. He then slowed down to a human pace and made his way to the couch. As he lay down, Clark asked how things went, and from there they resumed their discussion where it had left off, transitioning to other topics, things like sports and childhood experiences. It was nice, and personal in a way that their discussions hadn’t been when Lois was around the previous night. It was different discussing childhood experiences with his father, someone who had been there for almost every important moment in his life, than it was discussing them with a friend, a virtual stranger, who nevertheless could appreciate his experiences. Even though a lot of the stories were similar to ones that he’d heard before, the difference in perspective made them seem new. After a while, once the hour got decidedly late, the discussions ceased, and both Clark and Jon slipped into deep sleep.

Laura stretched as she crept into consciousness, a comfortable sigh escaping her lips. Her eyes popped open, and she noticed with some puzzlement that the bright morning sun was streaming in through an unfamiliar window, illuminating a room filled with unfamiliar furnishings. Then she remembered the previous night, and her confusion morphed into contentment. She closed her eyes again and mentally stretched, reaching out her senses, taking in everything that the Kent farm had to offer.

First, close to her, she heard her grandmother in the kitchen, putting together a big country breakfast that was surely more than three people could eat. Laura’s nose filled with the aromas of bacon and eggs, toast with butter and homemade jam, coffee and orange juice. Her stomach rumbled at the thought, but breakfast could surely wait for a few moments. Further out, she could hear her Grandpa working in the barn, the clicking of a socket wrench and gentle tapping of metal-on-metal indicating that he was working on some piece of equipment. If she reached out further, she could hear the activities at the neighboring farm a couple miles down the road, and the smells from their barn, the “fresh country air” as her Dad called it. Behind everything came the sounds of the bugs and birds and wildlife that called the country home, sounds that could easily be overwhelming given their sheer quantity. Taken all together, it was a very soothing picture, one that she could gladly get lost in.

Sometime before she drifted off to sleep the night before, after she had similarly stretched out her senses, she had realized something. The last time she came to this place as a kid, the summer before her grandparents died, she had been several years from coming into her superpowers, several years from the knowledge of who her father was. She was an otherwise normal kid from the big city, and to her the farm had never exactly been an attractive vacation destination. It was dusty and dirty, and so much buggier than she had ever even fathomed. Nothing was nearby, and even getting groceries required an eternity in the car. She was used to manicured lawns and plenty of kids her age around to play with. She was used to being able to walk or ride her

bike to wherever she wanted to go, be it the park or the pool or the library. Smallville didn’t have a pool, and its library was smaller than the periodicals section in the Metropolis library, and if you wanted to bike somewhere, you better be prepared to spend the better part of the day trying to reach your destination. To her childhood self, this place might as well be jail. But now that she was here as an adult, one who could get to anywhere in the world in seconds flat, Smallville represented a place that was away from all the noise, the people...problems. It was freedom, acceptance, love. It was sanity in an often insane world, and she suddenly realized why her Dad loved this place so much. It also occurred to her that it was probably a place that was made that much better when shared with the people you loved. Matt was once an outdoorsman, someone familiar with nature. Maybe when she got home, she could convince him to take that up again, so they could have a few adventures in the country, alone, and experience this kind of comfort again.

She yawned briefly with the last vestiges of sleep before deciding that it was probably time to grab some of the food waiting for her downstairs. Without another thought, she got out of bed, shaking her hair out and absently braiding it into two strands as she made her way to the kitchen. She was currently wearing an oversized Smallville High t-shirt from the dresser in the room where she had slept, and her uniform pants, which were actually quite cozy for sleeping in. Reaching the first floor, she immediately caught the eye of Martha, who gave her a warm smile. “Morning, sweetie!” she said, gesturing toward the table. “Pull up a chair and grab a bite. Jonathan should be in in a minute.”

“Thank you,” Laura said. “You didn’t have to do all this for me.”

“Pfft,” Martha said with a wave of her hand. “We don’t get company all that often. Anyway, I say any occasion is a good occasion for bacon and eggs.”

“I can’t argue with you there,” Laura said, pulling up a chair and digging in. Martha joined her a moment later.

“So what’s on the agenda for today?” Martha asked as Laura took a bite of toast.

“Well,” Laura said, wondering why she suddenly felt shy again. She supposed it was the thought of asking for help from her grandma or burdening her with her troubles, since Martha was supposed to be the person being pampered and made to feel loved on this trip. At the same time, though, how else could grandmas best show love than to cook for their grandkids and dispense good advice? “Dad and I have been going through your recipe box, and we had a couple of things not exactly turn out, so I was hoping to pick your brain.”

“Sure,” Martha said, grabbing for a piece of bacon, then hesitating as she surveyed the table full of food. “I think we might want to wait until lunch time for that one.”

Laura giggled. “No problem. I also have probably a dozen videos to show you.” She had wanted to watch them the night before, but it had been late when she arrived, and the excitement of her arrival had tired her grandparents out before they had gotten the chance.

“Those phones sure beat the heck out of VCR tapes. Much smaller, too,” Martha said, drawing a chuckle from Laura. They ate in silence for a moment, then Martha looked over at Laura again, her smile softening. “Your ring is beautiful,” she said, her eyes directed toward Laura’s left hand.

Laura wiped her hand on a napkin, then extended it toward Martha so she could get a better look. “Thank you,” Laura said in a small voice as Martha grabbed her hand. The ring was modest, to be sure. Matt didn’t have much money and didn’t work at a high-paying job, and he had been too proud to ask CJ for any money to buy the ring, though CJ probably would’ve lent it to him in a heartbeat. It was no doubt more than Matt could afford, but it

really was quite beautiful. What it didn't have in terms of sparkly bits it made up for in style, and it made her feel special just to wear it.

"Why don't you tell me about your fiancée?"

Laura leaned back in her chair and momentarily pondered where to start. "Matt and I met in college. We both worked for the school newspaper – he was going to make a career out of journalism, but for me it was more of a hobby. We became friends pretty quickly, though friends were all we were for a long time – years, really. But over that time he started to become important to me in a way that I didn't realize at first. He was the person who made me laugh, the one I turned to for advice; he put up with my stormy moods and never seemed fazed by my bluster."

"I'm having a hard time believing that you have stormy moods or could ever be blustery," Martha said with a wink. "You seem awfully sweet to me."

"I'm Lois Lane's daughter. Trust me, I can bluster with the best of them. I certainly come by it honestly," she said. "Thank you, though. Anyway, Matt could give just as well as he received, but never in a way that was mean spirited. When we had disagreements or different perspectives on issues, he always thoughtfully articulated his perspective, and even if I didn't ultimately agree with him, I could always respect where he was coming from."

"I look back on it now I wonder how I never saw the way he looked at me, like everything I said was the most interesting thing in the world. I think maybe I didn't want to see. But eventually I opened my eyes, and what I saw made me feel...special. Even after he found out everything about me, he never looked at me differently. And maybe that's what ultimately made me fall hard for him – the fact that he greeted my special talents with grace and admiration and humor. Even when he realized that he would always be the physically vulnerable person in the relationship, he understood that it didn't mean that we couldn't still be equals, that he could still make a contribution to the relationship even without superpowers. Of course, the fact that he plays guitar didn't hurt, either."

"Of course," Martha said with a grin.

"He really is talented. The whole journalism thing hasn't worked out so far, but that's a testament to the state of the industry in 2025. He doesn't let that stop him, though. I'm so proud of the initiative that he's taken since graduation, finding a job that still lets him be creative, and writing a novel in his spare time. If he can get his foot in the door in the publishing industry, it could open up a whole world of possibilities." Laura looked at her Grandma, wondering if she should push on with what she intended to say, knowing that it would open the door to another conversation altogether. It was one she wanted to have, though, especially with someone who had always been so adept at knowing just the right thing to say. Taking a deep breath, Laura decided that this really was the right time. "We will be starting our lives together with so much hope, so many plans...and we haven't even talked about the possibility of me going out and doing the superhero thing. But now it's going to have to wait, all of it."

Martha's expression morphed into confusion. "Why would that be?"

Laura sighed. "Because despite our best planning and grand visions for the future...I'm pregnant."

The look of joy on Martha's face was genuine.

"Congratulations!" she said, putting her hand on Laura's arm. "Oh I'm so happy for you!" After a moment, his smile began to fade as she caught the inference in Laura's words. "You're happy, too, aren't you?"

"I'm ecstatic," Laura said without hesitation, and she truly was. The more that others showed their happiness at the news, the more joy she felt. "And Matt...I just told him before I came here, and he was over the moon. But all the big things I still want to do

with my life – getting a master's degree, establishing my career, introducing a second identity – seem very far away now, and I can't bring myself to tell my Mom and Dad."

"Oh, honey," she said with empathy. "All any parent wants for their child is to be happy. You don't need the perfect job or the perfect future – things never turn out the way you plan, anyway. All you need is love, and a baby represents the purest form of love there is. They say the best things come when you least expect them, and that sure seems to apply here. I'm sure your parents will agree."

Laura smiled widely. She knew her grandma could help put things in perspective. "So I should tell them," she said, the words a statement rather than a question.

"When you get back home, preferably." She patted Laura's arm, then looked down at her plate. "In the meantime, let's dig in before our food gets cold."

"The food's getting cold?" Jonathan said as he walked in the door. Laura still couldn't get over how young and vibrant he seemed.

"Not yet – you're just in time," Martha said.

Jonathan's eyes fairly danced as he looked between Laura and Martha. "Good to hear it," he said, detouring to the sink to wash his hands, then sitting down at the table with them. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to spending my day with my two best gals."

Laura raised her eyebrows. "You just met me last night and already I'm one of your best gals? Wow, Grandpa, you know how to flatter a lady."

"Don't I know it," Martha said with an affectionate glance toward her husband.

Jonathan laughed. "I can't help it," he said. "I know a good kid when I see one. Now, can someone pass the bacon?"

Laura obliged, and settled in. Yes, this was a completely different Smallville experience than what she remembered, but it was so much better. She tried to burn the moments into her brain so that she would remember this, but then she realized, just as she had used her phone to record messages from the future, now that she was here she could bring some messages back with her. Her smile widened as she ate, knowing that all was right with the world.

Lois had awoken to the subtle feeling of being watched. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, especially once she realized that the eyes on her probably belonged to her husband. But as the last vestiges of sleep fell away, she remembered what had transpired the previous night, and how she had gone to sleep alone. With a start, her eyes popped open, and she could see Clark perched on the edge of the bed. "Good morning," she said, stretching. He smiled, but she could see the sadness in his eyes.

"Morning," he said, acting as if he wanted to bend over and kiss her, though something held him back. She watched him ball up his fists and sit up straighter with a sigh.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, sitting up and reaching for his cheek. He turned his head into her touch, closing his eyes.

"I don't know. About the same, I guess. I don't really want to push my luck and try anything until I know for sure..."

"I understand," she said, trailing her hand down his shoulder to his arm before taking his hand in hers. "So how do you want to handle today?"

"Well, Jon and I were talking last night, and he pointed me in the right direction on how to fix all this. So I think I'll probably head down to STAR labs sometime this morning." He ran his free hand through his hair. "Until then, I don't think I should go anywhere or do anything, just in case."

Lois squeezed his hand. "I think that's very sensible." She glanced toward the clock and frowned. "And I need to get moving if I'm going to make it in to work on time." They smiled at each

other for a long moment, then she got out of bed and started getting ready. As she left the bedroom, Clark stepped into the shower. She quietly made her way down the stairs, aware that they still had a visitor. Getting a glimpse at the living room as she reached the landing, she noticed that he was still asleep. With a small smile, she diverted to the kitchen and breakfast.

Throwing together a quick breakfast was fairly routine – grabbing some bread and cramming it in the toaster, pouring a glass of juice, gathering the butter and jam and waiting for the toast to finish. It was probably the least exciting part of her day, but this morning, something caught her eye. Normally, staring absently at a dark corner of the kitchen would give her mind a chance to wander, to formulate her approach to the day and mentally review the work assignments she still had to complete. But today she noticed what appeared to be a power cord going into one of the cabinets. Curious, her mental checklist was abandoned as she went to check it out. Opening the cabinet, she saw... something. It looked like a glass screen on one side with a protective case around the sides and back, and it was no thicker than a pencil. On the front was a large button, which just seemed to be begging to be pressed. Pressing it, she marveled at how the screen activated, with words telling her to swipe the screen to unlock it. Following the directions given, the device made a noise, and suddenly a photo popped up, one that appeared to be of Jon – in glasses, no less – a woman, and two children, and the photo had dozens of smaller photos and icons on top of it. “Whoa,” Lois said, wondering for the first time just what the device was supposed to be.

At the bottom of the screen were four icons, one of which appeared to be a phone. Touching that part of the screen, a list of people and phone numbers popped up. One name – Diane – matched his wife’s name. Others, though, looked more familiar than they should – there were entries for “Mom” and “Dad,” and the home number for each matched the number that had been hers ever since she moved into her first apartment, a fact that caused goosebumps to rise on her arm. Touching the entry marked “CJ” – Clark Jerome? Clark Junior? – brought up a record of when the number, out of Gotham City if the area code was any indication, was last called. Touching the number brought up a warning that the phone was in “airplane mode,” whatever that meant. Lois wanted to navigate back to the screen she had previously seen, but couldn’t quite figure out how to do that. With a shrug, she pressed the big button again, and she was brought back to the first screen. One of the other icons at the bottom looked like a camera. Curious, Lois touched that one, and suddenly, a live image of the room in front of her came up. If she moved the device around, the picture moved, too. It was a video camera! In the upper left corner of the screen was a smaller, still picture. Touching that brought up a picture, taken earlier. It was of the same woman she saw on the first screen. This must be the photo gallery, Lois thought, but she couldn’t figure out how to see more photos. Out of frustration, she drew a squiggle with her finger on the screen, and noticed that as her finger went side to side, the photo seemed to slide. Picking up her finger and touching the screen again, sliding it to the side, she made the photo change to another. She smiled in triumph, and noticed that this photo was of two dark-haired little kids at a park, one a boy and the other a girl. Sliding her finger to the side again and again, she noticed more photos of the children, some also with the woman in them. This must be Jon’s family, she thought as she paged through the photos. His wife was all smiles, and the children were absolutely adorable. He had mentioned the wife in their discussions, but never the children. Why was that, she wondered? He was obviously a proud and attentive father, if the photos were any indication. Maybe he didn’t think the information was important, she thought, but those kids seemed to be a big enough part of his life that in his place they would be the first thing she mentioned to others. There had to be some other

reason...

Her exploration of the device was interrupted with the popping of the toaster. With a grunt, Lois pushed the big button again and put the device back where she found it, closing the cabinet door. While preparing and eating her toast, all she could think about was the family in those pictures, and why Jon hadn’t said anything. If she was right and he was their son from the future, a theory that seemed even more plausible if that device was any indication, then maybe...he didn’t WANT them to know about his children. But why?

What if...he didn’t want them to know that he could even have children, and by extension that THEY could have children? Clark seemed quite dismissive of the notion when they had discussed it the other night. Absent Jon’s presence, she probably would’ve been skeptical of the idea, too. In the face of so many questions about the biology of their coupling, she and Clark would probably go to Dr. Klein and have tests run, uncomfortable tests. What if in his world they had been told, as result of those tests, that they couldn’t get pregnant? What if he had been a surprise? If that were the case, then knowing now that they could have children might lead them to taking precautions that they wouldn’t have taken otherwise, which might lead to him potentially not existing at all.

Lois took a long look into the living room at his sleeping form. During their earlier discussions, he had mentioned that his parents had two other, natural children. If she was right and Jon was also their natural child, then that meant that she would wind up with three children. Yes, Lois Lane, terror of the newsroom, with a trio of kids. The thought was staggering. She never thought of herself as the motherly type, but Jon had been nothing but complimentary when he spoke about his parents. It was entirely possible that at some point in the future she would turn over a new leaf, that Martha’s influence would finally rub off on her. Or maybe she had more inside herself than she ever realized. But it was also entirely possible that she was completely wrong, although she didn’t think that was the case. Her instincts now were just as good as they had always been, and her gut told her that she had found the truth.

It was probably time to wake him up, she decided, walking purposefully into the living room and perching herself on the edge of the couch. Before doing anything else, she allowed herself a long look at his face. The strong resemblance to Clark was still obvious, but the more she looked, the more she could see herself there, too – in his nose and in the shape of his mouth. All of a sudden she wanted so badly to gather him up in a hug, to let him know how much she... loved him. The feeling was so strong and inexplicable, based on hunches and the idea of what he possibly was, but it was also undeniable. Mothers often said that they loved their children the first time they saw them, and she had always been somewhat skeptical. Now that she knew who he was, though, she knew it was true. The urge to embrace him only grew stronger as the moment wore on, but she forced herself to refrain, if only to maintain the peace. Instead she put her hand on his shoulder, jostling him lightly. “Daddy just wants a few more minutes,” she heard him mumble, bringing a smile to her face.

“Jon?” she said, jostling a little harder.

“Not now, Ma,” he said, more clearly this time, the words causing her heart to beat harder. He rolled over so that he was facing the back of the couch.

“It’s time to get up,” she said gently.

“Jeez, Mom,” he said, stretching his arm up and opening his eyes. Almost as soon as he realized where he was, his eyes grew very large, and he looked at her with something akin to terror for the briefest moment before taking a breath and molding his features into something decidedly more neutral. He gave a humorless chuckle and sat up. “Wow, what a dream I was having,” he said, and Lois nodded slowly.

“Must’ve really been something. You referred to yourself as

‘Daddy’ at one point.”

“Maybe it was a nightmare,” he said with another dull chuckle, deliberately looking away from her as he sat up.

“What, you don’t want kids?” Lois said, trying to meet his eyes. “I mean, Clark and I... we haven’t really talked about it, but we haven’t been married all that long, either.”

He shook his head and frowned. “That’s not.... It was just a bad joke, I guess,” he said, bringing his eyes back toward hers. Suddenly there was something more in his expression, something deeper than a weak attempt at humor. She thought for a moment that he would leave the conversation as it was, avoiding the substance of their conversation in favor of the superficial. But then his gaze seemed to harden, almost as if he had made a decision, and suddenly he was talking again. “At first my wife and I were both so busy that we agreed that kids could wait. The wedding was so sudden that we figured we needed that bit of stability in our lives. But after a while things began to become...not hollow, I guess, but we both realized that there could be so much more. Then my brother had his kid....”

“And you wanted that, too,” Lois finished, and he nodded.

“So we decided to start down that path,” he said, though he didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t give any indication where the path had led. The Lois Lane of old would have taken that thread and pulled at it until his story unraveled, but she had already deduced that he was being deliberately vague for some reason that was important to him. Lois took the hint and didn’t prod him for additional information.

“Did you ever think about what kind of parent you’d make?”

Lois asked, drawing an almost startled expression from him.

“Personally, I’ve never pictured myself as a mother.”

“Why?”

“Well, given that I learned everything I know about parenting from my mother, I always figured any poor kid unlucky enough to find himself under my care would be doomed to an array of neuroses and insecurities. He or she would probably grow up highly resentful.”

Jon’s smile was warm, and when it met his eyes, they almost twinkled. “Are you saying that being the child of Mad Dog Lane would automatically inflict your kid with baggage?” at her nod, he continued. “I have to point out that any child you have would be fathered by Superman – what do you think THAT would do to him?”

“God, I hadn’t thought of that,” Lois said, and Jon laughed gently.

“I think that all a kid needs is to know that they’re loved, and everything else will take care of itself,” Jon said, and Lois nodded thoughtfully. It was a pretty laid back view of parenthood, and Lois had to wonder how anyone carrying the Lane genes could ever be so well-adjusted. Yet, inexplicably, here he was.

“It sounds like your parents did all right by you,” she said, expecting him to break eye contact and nervously change the subject, but he looked at her warmly for a long minute before speaking.

“My family has always been very close...we still are, even now that everyone has moved out of the house and built their own lives. But a little humor and a lot of love go a long way and cover for a lot of sins. Were my folks perfect parents? Of course not, because nobody’s perfect, but they did try to be good examples, they taught me right from wrong, and they made me the person I am today. The best I can do is try to emulate the example they set with my kids...if I get the opportunity.” The last part was tacked on almost as an afterthought, though Lois hadn’t heard it.

A single tear formed in the corner of her eye, and she had to turn away to avoid letting on how much his words meant. Abruptly she stood, deciding that the conversation had gotten a lot deeper than she had expected. “I should probably get going to work now,” she said, subconsciously reaching up to her eye and

shooing the tear away. It was at that moment that Clark made his way down the stairs, and she was suddenly grateful for the company.

“Hey there,” he said, slipping his glasses on his face. Jon held up a hand in greeting, and Lois made her way over toward the desk to grab her briefcase.

“I was just telling Jon that I should head out,” she said, gesturing toward the couch. “Shall I tell Perry that you’re not feeling 100%?” she asked him.

“The problem is that I’m feeling about 700%,” he quipped.

She smiled. At least he was trying to keep a positive attitude. “Well, I know I’m leaving you in capable hands.” She walked up to him, cupped his arm, and leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek. Clark kept his hands in fists like he had earlier, and although he smiled gratefully at the gesture, she knew this day would probably be torture for him. With that, she gave a glance back to Jon, then left for work.

Almost as soon as Lois left the house, all the wind seemed to leave Clark’s sails. Jon watched with some concern as Clark slipped dejectedly into the chair in front of the desk, eyeing the computer. “I, uh, should probably get cleaned up,” Jon said, reaching up to feel if his hair was as messy as he imagined. If anything, he decided with a sigh, it was worse. “Then, maybe, I can make us some breakfast? My father-in-law gave me the family recipe for huevos rancheros and I’ve gotten pretty good at making them, at least according to my wife.”

Clark nodded and mustered a half smile. “That sounds good. I have to say, it’s nice to have someone else around who can whip up a nice, home cooked meal.”

“What, Lois doesn’t cook?” Jon knew what the answer to that question was in his time, and he had vague memories of his mother sticking to sandwiches and pre-packaged meals when he was a kid.

“She’s trying, don’t get me wrong, but Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Clark said, some of his good humor coming through at last. Jon chuckled, knowing that, much like Rome, Lois’s cooking skills would take a very long time to develop.

“I’ll just be a minute,” Jon said, clapping Clark on the shoulder as he passed him on the way to the staircase. Jon was always quite appreciative of the fact that superspeed gave him the ability to essentially fast forward through some of the more mundane aspects of life, which included getting ready in the morning. Though he could certainly appreciate a long, hot shower, especially on cold days, today was all about getting through it so that he didn’t have to leave his Dad to his own devices for too long. He hadn’t proven to be the best decision maker of late, and Jon feared that if an emergency came in while he was showering, it could lead to Clark deciding that he needed to do something about it.

As if to highlight the problem, when Jon made his way back down the stairs a couple minutes later, he found Clark waving away smoke from the computer keyboard. Jon cocked his eyebrow and was about to ask what happened, but Clark shook his head. “There’s a fine line between being a fast typist and being a ‘super’ one,” he said.

“You just need a better keyboard,” Jon said with a wink. STAR Labs had helped him with that problem a while back, but only after he had burned out more than a couple keyboards in similar fashion. It took technology a while to catch up with his speed, but now he could compose an article in seconds. “Now, breakfast,” he said, striding toward the kitchen. He no sooner crossed the threshold than he became aware of a police alert for a robbery downtown. Turning his attention toward Clark, Jon could see that he heard the bulletin, too.

“Duty calls,” Clark said with a sad glance toward the wall with the suits hidden behind it.

"This shouldn't take too long," Jon said, then grabbed a suit and quickly headed toward the scene. Hovering high in the sky, he observed the commotion on the street at the robbery scene with a critical eye. This was just the type of activity that the red kryptonite problems of the last couple days had made him wary of – a non-violent crime that could be easily staged, in an area filled with people. Although the robbers were brandishing guns, they didn't seem too serious about using them, and nobody on the street appeared to be anxious to get in their way. The crime was still too fresh for the police to be there yet, so there was very little possibility of anyone getting hurt. Jon was happy to watch the situation develop, and use the time to scan the crowd. Activating his x-ray vision, he immediately saw that he had been right to be wary. There, at a table in the little café next door to the bank, sat a man holding a suitcase lined with lead. The lead lining might as well be a neon sign, and it fairly screamed sinister intent. As soon as he saw it, Jon had no doubt about what was inside.

The robbers were now in their vehicle, the tires screeching as they pulled away. Jon made a note of the car's make and model, as well as the license plate, then turned back to the man with the kryptonite. Even if the briefcase wasn't a giant red flag, his clothing would certainly have caused alarm bells – he was wearing a long trenchcoat, pulled tightly closed, with a fedora on his head. Even his location, concealed in the shadows cast by the early morning sun, seemed designed to obfuscate. A normal person at the scene would probably have trouble making out the man's face, but fortunately Jon wasn't a normal man. With a quick burst of x-ray vision, Jon revealed the suspect's face, and what he saw shocked him. "I'll be damned," he muttered as he instantly recognized who it was.

He had known in general terms about his father's 1997 run-in with red kryptonite from some of the stories that had his folks had told over the years. Because of the nasty run-in his brother had with the rock a year or so earlier, those stories were actually pretty fresh in his mind. But in all the discussion of what had happened and why, the actual villain of the story had gone unmentioned, and now Jon knew why. No wonder he had never heard much about Jerry White...he had probably spent most of Jon's formative years in prison.

With a mental shake, Jon forced himself to locate the get away vehicle again. By now it was a few blocks from the crime scene, barreling through midtown at a pretty dangerous clip. After a few more moments and with the knowledge that they were probably out of the effective range of the kryptonite, Jon flew down and landed a half block in front of the vehicle. At first it seemed as if the robbers were looking to play a game of chicken with him, but at the last moment they thought better of it and stopped. When they tried to run instead, Jon quickly intercepted each man, grabbing them in a secure yet slightly uncomfortable location and heading toward the nearest police station. Luckily for him, the locations of the police stations hadn't changed in Metropolis over his lifetime. After dropping them off and explaining what happened to the startled officer, he quickly headed back toward the brownstone.

Landing in the living room, he didn't even bother to take off the suit. Clark looked at him questioningly, and Jon was pretty sure that he looked as dazed as he felt. "I know who's behind the red kryptonite problem," he said. As Jon told him everything that had just happened, Clark stood up slowly, his initial shock quickly replaced with the type of resolve that Jon was very familiar with.

"I need to call Lois," Clark said, taking one step toward the phone before his stomach let out a growl that was probably audible to the neighbors. He stopped abruptly, acutely embarrassed, then looked at Jon, who started to laugh almost as soon as their eyes met. A moment later Clark was laughing, and all tension in the room was gone.

"After breakfast?" Jon said, quickly changing into normal

clothes.

"Deal," Clark said, and with that, both headed into the kitchen.

Breakfast turned out well, and Jon found himself enjoying spending one-on-one time with the younger version of his father, especially now that an end to his current problems was in sight. In an odd way, it was like talking to himself, and it made Jon wonder what the passage of years would do to him – would he wind up telling bad jokes like the older version of his dad seemed to do whenever possible? Would his relatively tame rough edges be smoothed out and his personality mellow? Would his experiences in life leave him with the easy confidence that Clark would eventually develop in place of his current brashness? Would he someday look back at his younger self and shake his head at the follies of his youth? No, Jon decided, he probably wouldn't, because he had a mentor who had tried to ensure Jon didn't make the same mistakes he had.

As Jon cleaned up the kitchen, Clark called Lois to tell her the news, and it turned out that Lois had news of her own. While Jon and Clark were eating, a bruised and beaten Jerry White had stumbled into the Daily Planet newsroom and confessed to everything. Apparently, the crime family that had paid him protection money to keep Superman at bay didn't take kindly to failure. Jerry voluntarily told the entire story of how he had found out about and acquired the red kryptonite, then practically begged Perry to take him to jail, if only to get out of the clutches of the crime family that had sent their goons after him. "So it's over!" Jon said with a clap of his hands after Clark hung up, and Clark nodded enthusiastically. It was as if the weight of the world was suddenly taken off his shoulders. "Well, except for the lingering effects of the kryptonite."

Clark waved away the concerns. "I've been okay today. And I'm sure that spending a nice, relaxing day at home will help this all go away." It was a pretty cavalier attitude, and Jon frowned at the dismissiveness of it, though he didn't say anything further. He didn't want to be a killjoy, but he was a realist, and the reality was that nothing had actually changed, at least not as far as Clark's health went. If Clark didn't want to face the truth, then that meant that Jon would have to stick around a little longer to keep an eye on things and make sure nothing happened.

With renewed enthusiasm, Clark got back to work at the computer, first doing some researching, then writing an article that had been assigned to him that morning in his absence from the staff meeting. There was no big story to author about Superman's lack of control over the last couple days, because as far as the public knew, there was absolutely nothing wrong with Superman, and there was no such thing as red kryptonite. And absent the red kryptonite angle, the Jerry White story really wasn't a story, just a cautionary tale of what could happen when running afoul of organized crime in Metropolis. Despite the fact that this left Clark with some boring story on political maneuvering in Washington, he seemed about as happy as Jon had ever seen him.

For his part, Jon busied himself with the best morning television that 1997 had to offer. There was Regis Philbin, relatively young and spry, and Bob Barker on *The Price Is Right*, still asking people to spay and neuter their pets. The prices on everything from cans of pet food to the new cars seemed to be half of what they would be in Jon's time. On a couple of occasions, Jon found his viewing interrupted by minor emergencies, but nothing that took too much time. Everything was going so smoothly that as lunchtime approached, Jon found himself contemplating how long Clark would need to stay incident-free before he could make his exit. Before those thoughts got too far, though, he heard Clark's breath catch in his throat, followed by what could only be a hiccup. Then, suddenly, all hell broke loose. Looking toward where Clark had been, all he could see was a blur ricocheting off the walls.

Jon moved quickly, intercepting Clark and wrapping him in a

bear hug until the energy coursing through him abated. Once they could both relax, Clark looked around, and Jon noted with some relief that the damage was limited to the area immediately surrounding the desk. One thing that he remembered clearly from his parents' red kryptonite stories was the fact that its effects had caused untold damage to their house. Jon could easily imagine the episode leading to holes in the walls and broken furniture and knick-knacks if he hadn't been there to help, and once again he was grateful for his presence. Depositing Clark in the righted desk chair, Jon shifted himself into superspeed and cleaned up the mess in a matter of seconds. Coming to a stop, he matched eyes with his father, and he could see that the relief that had been there at the thought that the red kryptonite was now off the streets was completely gone, replaced with a now familiar wide-eyed helplessness.

"You need to get to STAR Labs and stop this," Jon said, trying to sound firm, leaving it unsaid that if he had done so earlier, this episode would've never happened. "It's not just going to go away with a little R and R and a positive attitude." He gave Clark a look that dared him to argue for a few long seconds, then sighed and relaxed, diverting his gaze to the window. "I need to get home," he continued quietly. "As fun as it is to spend time with you and Lois, Jonathan and Martha, my family in my Metropolis needs me, too. Once we get you straightened out, I won't have any other reason to stay...."

"Your rescue party?"

"Showed up last night." Jon looked back at Clark, and was a little surprised to see shock and sadness on his face.

Slowly, Clark began to nod. "I'd be lying if I told you that didn't want you to stay. And a selfish part of me just wants to forget about STAR Labs and stay right here, or go hide away in some secluded mountain fortress until everything clears up. But I can't do that to Lois, and I can't do that to you, either."

Jon exhaled and gave a half smile, a little gesture that mimicked his father in a way that even Clark seemed to recognize. "Thank you. Look, I know it's hard sometimes, trying to find that balance between desire and necessity, between what's best for you and what's best for your family, or the world. But you're the one who taught me how to make the right decision, and I'm better because of it. That I'm able to return a little bit of that..." Jon gestured, then forced himself to stop. These sounded suspiciously like the words a future son would say to a past version of his father, and he didn't want to continue down that path any further than he had to.

Clark stepped forward and laid a hand on Jon's shoulder, his eyes speaking of understanding. "Let's go," he said.

"You want me to come along?"

"You're providing the transportation," Clark said with a crooked smile. "Besides, it might be time for you to meet Dr. Klein."

Jon's eyes widened with recognition. Dr. Bernard Klein, personal physician of Superman for 20 years, and of Jon and his siblings for most of that time, too. He was also the one who told Jon's folks that they couldn't have children, a fact that had been repeated many times when Jon was a kid, most notably when his mom found out she was pregnant with each of his siblings. Given Dr. Klein's curiosity and knowledge of Kryptonian anatomy, Jon wasn't too sure he wanted to go face-to-face with him right now – if anyone could figure out the truth, it was him. "Tell you what, I'll drop you off and then be on my way. I'm sure Dr. Klein is a really nice guy, but the fewer people who know I'm here, the better." Jon shrugged.

"So, then you'll be leaving?" Jon nodded. "I think maybe Lois should meet us there so she can say goodbye."

"Yeah," Jon said with a small voice. A moment later, Clark was on the phone, telling Lois to meet them at STAR labs in ten minutes.

Ten minutes was an eternity for someone who could move as fast as Jon, but now that he knew these would be the last ten minutes he would be spending in this place, it went by entirely too quickly. Clark took the time to change into a suit at normal speed, careful not to exert himself and cause another episode. Jon took the opportunity to surreptitiously grab his phone and charger, and leave a little note of thanks on the desk. After a moment of thought, he also found a pen and wrote a note to his brother on the inside flap of what would become his favorite, most dog-eared book. The note was a silly inside joke, something that might make him question his sanity in his teenaged years and could certainly be played for laughs when he got home.

When the time came to leave, Jon changed into his own uniform, gladly leaving the blue spandex and red cape for its rightful owner. There really was only one Superman when you came right down to it. Jon provided the flight to the office, which took a matter of seconds. A quick scan located Lois in the alley next to the STAR Labs building, hiding deep in the shadows. Jon landed, depositing Clark next to his wife, though he still seemed unwilling to touch her for the time being. Lois and Clark exchanged a non-verbal greeting, then both turned to him. Clark extended his hand, and Jon shook it. "It was so great to meet you," he said. "If only we had more time...."

"I wish it was under better circumstances," Jon said, then looked at Lois, who was regarding him with an odd expression. Even since their conversation that morning, Jon had felt that Lois knew something, or at least suspected something, that she shouldn't know. It was hard to put his finger on how or why he thought that, though he knew his mother well enough to know when she was holding back or when she was humoring him. She looked at him for a long moment, and even though he stuck out his hand for her to shake, she just looked at it.

Clark watched the interplay with some curiosity, but after a moment, he turned toward the side door to the building. "I should go in and get this over with," he said, reluctance still heavy in his voice.

"Are you sure green kryptonite will do the trick? That there's no other way?" Lois asked. She turned her eyes back toward Clark, and Jon slowly brought his hand back to his side.

"It makes sense," Clark said. "And even if it goes too far and takes all the powers away, at least we've solved the problem."

Lois looked back at Jon, the question lingering. "The only other way is to wait for it to go away. But given the number of times he's been exposed, it could be a while. And in the meantime there's no telling what kind of destruction might happen."

Lois sighed. "You'll stick around to make sure everything goes okay?" she asked Jon. At his nod, she turned back to Clark, putting her hand on his arm. "I'll be here, if you need me." They looked longingly at each other for a few moments, then Clark nodded and stepped away.

"Wish me luck," he said softly, walking toward the door.

"You won't need it," Jon said, drawing a half smile from Clark as a reward. Once Clark entered the building, Jon addressed Lois again. "I'm going to go across the street, away from any potential effects of the kryptonite."

"Take me with you," Lois said quickly, almost too quickly. "I, uh, still need to say my goodbye."

"Okay," Jon said. It felt odd picking his mother up, cradling her as his dad always did. The gesture was more intimate than he had hoped, but at the same time, carrying her with an arm around the waist like he held strangers didn't seem right, either. The flight was mercifully short, and they quickly landed atop the building across the street. As he put her down, she straightened out her clothes in a fidgety, nervous way, and he realized that this was just as odd to her as it was to him. Silence hung on for a long moment and it began to feel awkward, so Jon took the opportunity to look into STAR labs to see how everything was going. "Clark's talking

with Dr. Klein now,” he said, waiting for Lois to answer with some mundane small talk.

Instead, she stepped in front of him and embraced him warmly, tightly, almost too tightly. It was an embrace that Jon knew well, and he couldn’t stop himself from returning it. “I’m so glad that you came into our lives,” Lois said into his chest, a statement that could be taken with much more value than just the superficial. “It’s been an education, to see what life could be like with you in it...how it’s like in your Metropolis.”

“Thanks for all your hospitality,” Jon said, his voice small. “This trip has certainly been something I will always remember.”

Lois seemed almost reluctant to let Jon go, but after some hesitation she finally did, wiping the back of her hand across her cheek again to catch a stray tear. It seemed like she was going to say something, but at that moment Jon felt something that made him wince, the pain a shadow of something far worse that he had felt in the past. He reached out and put a hand on Lois’s shoulder to steady himself. “Kryptonite?” she asked, and he nodded. The pain lasted only a second or two, then was gone. Straightening up, he looked back inside STAR labs, and saw Clark standing tall, doing a quick check of his powers – bending a piece of steel, floating a few inches off the floor, setting a piece of scrap paper on fire and quickly squelching the flames. Finally, his eyes met Jon’s, and he gave a small thumbs up gesture. Jon felt relief course through him.

“Everything is going to be fine,” Jon said with a smile, looking at Lois. “Come on, I’ll bring you back.” Before she had a chance to respond, he gathered her up again and quickly deposited her where they had been in the alley. Jon set her down and quickly stepped away, though he noted that his mother didn’t seem at all disoriented by the suddenness of their quick flight. She had no doubt been quite literally swept off her feet plenty of times before by her husband. “Can you get where you need to from here?” he asked.

Lois nodded, pointing her thumb down the street. “I brought the Jeep. Though it looks like Clark can also help now, thanks to you.” She smiled at him in silence, then nodded. “My best to your family,” she said. It was a farewell, he knew, said in a way that spoke of a secret shared. They stood like that in silence for a moment, then he held up his hand and took off.

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Laura sat next to Martha at the kitchen table of the farmhouse, recipes stacked in neat piles in front of them. As they poured over the most recent one, the family recipe for scones, the scent of soufflé greeted them from the oven. As promised, Martha was giving her notes on all the recipes held in the box, a box that would eventually pass from Clark to Laura. Although Laura had heard many stories about the creations from her father, it was interesting to get Martha’s take on everything. Whereas Clark’s perspective was of a son whose mother would make special dishes at parties or on holidays, Martha’s perspective was that of a mother, or a daughter whose own mother passed on the recipes. At times when Laura mentioned the stories that her dad had told, Martha would give the other side, embellishing with small details that Clark either forgot or wanted to be forgotten. As they discussed the keys to getting certain recipes right, Laura had started taking notes on the same notepad Jon had used to produce his letter to the future. The seed corn logo in the corner was probably retro enough to be considered trendy in her time, not that Laura would be sharing her notes with many people upon return.

It was as the soufflé was being taken out of the oven that Jon arrived, a wide grin on his face. “If you’re here, that must mean...” Laura said, raising her eyebrows in anticipation of Jon completing the sentence.

“Everything is back to normal in Metropolis,” Jon said. “A little bit of green kryptonite counteracted the red. Fortunately this time it wasn’t delivered via bullet, but in a lab under the watchful

eye of Dr. Klein.”

“So what you’re saying is that you changed history,” Laura said with a frown.

“Back up,” Martha said holding up her hand. “What’s this about kryptonite bullets?”

“In the original history, Dad went out while his powers were still going haywire and destroyed a bunch of the central business district trying to stop a robbery. The mayor grew so fearful that the next time he showed his face in public, they positioned the snipers, and...” Jon held out his hands. “In that case the green counteracted the red, too, but he was lucky he didn’t get killed in the process.”

“Then I guess it was a good thing you’re here,” Martha said. “But if you changed history, how is it that you remember how it was?”

Jon and Laura just stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded, before Laura spoke. “What if it was just a story all along? One of Dad’s little fables meant to show us the consequences of acting impulsively? I’m learning from Grandma that Dad hasn’t always been a hundred percent honest with us.”

“You mean the symbol of truth, justice, and the American way isn’t above bending the truth to make a point to his kids?” Jon made a face. “Though, given the way he was behaving, the story is completely believable.”

“Don’t be too hard on him either way,” Martha said, gathering up the recipes. “Whatever the real history is, the fact is that you all learned your lesson, and you’re better for it.” Both Jon and Laura nodded in agreement. With a glance toward the clock on the wall, Martha stood and went over to the oven. “Now, it’s about time to sit down to lunch. What do you say we dig into this soufflé before you take off for home?”

With that, they all gathered around the table, joined a few minutes later by Jonathan. It was a family gathering fit for a major holiday, with plenty of banter and gentle ribbing, though Laura had to admit that having CJ there would truly make things complete. As an afterthought, as Martha dished up the food Laura dug out her phone and showed Jon the video that CJ had made for their grandparents, complete with the high production values. At one point, Jon covered his face in embarrassment. Once the video was over, he looked at his grandparents. “The terror of Gotham City,” he said, pointing at the phone. Martha and Jonathan just smiled.

“I’m sure he’s just misunderstood,” Martha said with a wink, eliciting a snort from Laura. The rest of the meal passed in much the same way. Laura couldn’t believe how gracious and understanding her grandparents were, and it made her heart ache to think of returning to a future without them. It was true that they had recorded a video to send to the future, and she was sure that she would treasure it forever. For now, though, she tried to enjoy the moment, because she knew once lunch was over, that would be it.

The end came much too quickly, and Laura tried to stall by offering to do dishes or any number of other chores around the house, but Martha was having none of it. “Your family needs you,” she said, grabbing Laura’s left hand and drawing attention to the ring on it. “Jon’s family needs him, too.”

Laura sighed as Martha released her hand. “They really do. Last night Diane was a mess. And the kids...they can sense when something is not right...” She looked at Jon to see a concerned look on his face. Martha was right, of course. It was selfish to draw things out any longer, and she had been taught better than to let her feelings override the best course of action. Without another thought, she rushed to change into her suit, reappearing where she had started before her grandparents even knew what happened.

“I’m really going to miss you guys,” she said, gathering them each up into large hugs. “We didn’t even get a day together, but it feels I’ve known you forever. I could spend days catching up...”

She felt a tear welling up in her eye, but she covered it by brushing her hand across it as she put on her mask.

"Ditto," Jon said, giving hugs. "I love you guys. And we should be meeting again it about, oh, 14 months, so you won't have much time to miss me."

"Showoff," Laura muttered. Jon just gave her an amused glance.

"We love you, too, and you have beautiful families. We're so proud." Martha and Jonathan came together, Martha's arm on Jonathan's waist and Jonathan's arm around her shoulder. "Take care of yourselves, and them."

"Thank you for everything," Laura said, and with that, she and her brother walked out of the house and onto the porch, then, with a long last look back toward their grandparents, took off toward Central City. "That was rough," Laura said as they landed in an alley next to the police station and changed into civilian clothes.

"I keep forgetting how little time you had with them," Jon said, leading the way toward the front door and into the building.

"I never appreciated them when they were around," Laura replied. "In fact, I know it sounds horrible, but...I kinda resented them as a kid. Kansas was so incredibly boring."

"I understand, trust me," Jon said. "Those last few family vacations, though, after I came into my powers, started to get interesting. Dad and CJ and I would go out to the pastures and just let loose. We had some epic baseball games..."

"And I'm insanely jealous of that," Laura said with a sigh. They had now made their way through the bowels of the police station, finally stopping in front of the crime lab. Jon and Laura looked at the sign, looked at each other, then entered the lab. Several desks dotted the periphery of the room, with a high table in the center. All the desks were empty except one, in the far corner, where Barry Allen sat with his back to the door. He didn't even turn around at the sound of visitors.

"Mr. Allen? Barry Allen?" Jon said, approaching him. Barry finally looked toward them, his expression less than welcoming. Laura had to stifle a gasp at how much younger Barry looked. He seemed to be just a kid, maybe only a couple years older than Laura, with none of the worry lines that decades of sparring with his rogues would eventually bring. His hair was cut short in almost a military-style cut, and his clothes...well, it was obvious that he didn't have Iris around yet to help in out in that department.

"I am. And you are?"

"I'm Jon and this is my sister Laura, and we're, ah, friends," Jon said, looking over to Laura and then back at Barry. "You're actually good friends with our father, and we need your help."

That seemed to soften him up considerably. Laura never knew Barry to be unfriendly, though he could be rather intense when working. "Oh? Who's your father," he asked.

"Superman."

Barry raised his eyebrows, skepticism quickly morphing to suspicion. "I've heard of him, of course, but we've never even met."

"Well, you haven't met YET, but trust me, in a few years you'll be very close." Laura smiled, but Barry had apparently heard enough. Standing, he gestured toward the door.

"If you don't mind, the psychiatrist's office is a couple doors down on the right. I get a few of you stragglers in here from time to time, and while it's good for entertainment value, I do have work to do."

Laura dug around in her bag as Barry tried to move Jon without luck. It only took a moment to locate her phone, and another moment to open the video Barry made for his past self. She held it up so it was in his line of sight, and Barry stopped immediately, his jaw dropping as he saw the picture of his future self. "Barry, you need to listen to them," the video said, then Laura paused it.

Barry staggered backward, then pointed his figure silently, his

mouth opening and closing a couple of times before he was actually able to speak. "Who are you guys, really?" he said. Laura just watched as Jon looked around, then pulled up his shirt, revealing the suit underneath. As Barry's eyes turned to Laura, she levitated a couple of feet off the ground before landing again.

"We told you who we are, Barry. Or, should I say Flash?" Jon said.

He flinched slightly as the mention of his other identity. "And what kind of help could you possibly need?"

"I'm going to say it," Laura said to Jon, with a mischievous grin. Jon pinched the bridge of his nose and gestured for her to continue. There was no way she was going to leave without saying this line, which would no doubt leave CJ very jealous. Laura turned back to Barry and tried to compose herself. "We need your help to go back...to the future."

"Happy?" Jon asked.

"Very." Laura beamed.

Barry seemed to be processing her statement. "The future?" he said, skeptical.

"The year 2025, to be exact. We don't have any flying cars and food does not come in pill form, contrary to what cheesy science fiction movies would have you believe. Though you can have the world in the palm of your hand," Laura said, waving around the phone.

"You must have gotten here somehow," Barry replied, not even cracking a smile at Laura's attempt to soften him up. "I mean, I doubt you can hitch a ride to the past from the bus station in 2025." He paused and looked between them with narrowed eyes. "You can't, right?"

Jon shook his head and smiled. "No, you can't. In fact, when it comes to time travel, there's really only one game in town."

"I got here via your cosmic treadmill," Laura added. "You're the one who helped me get here, and you're the only one who can get us home."

Barry practically turned white. "My treadmill?" he croaked. "I've never even told another living soul of its existence."

"Yet," Laura said. "You're not above showing it off to your friends in the years to come, though."

"But you shouldn't be able to be here, to STAY here, using the treadmill. Relax your vibrations and you should be able to go right back to where you started."

"Between your time and ours, you figure out a way to make it run on speed, on raw kinetic energy." Laura pointed at the phone.

"You...FUTURE you, are going to walk present you through how to make that change, so we can get back to where we belong."

Barry sighed. "Which no doubt means that he knows I'll do it, and that it will work. It sounds like this whole thing is a fait accompli. Do I even have a choice?"

"You always have a choice," Jon said. "Though I will let you tell our Dad, the most powerful man on Earth, that you won't help us." He gave the little half smile that always indicated when he's kidding, though Barry didn't seem too amused, at least not as first. Gradually his wide-eyed, almost comical look of horror gradually gave way to contemplation, then finally to acceptance.

Barry shook his head and finally smiled. "Yeah, of course I'll help."

He stared at them for a long moment, probably processing everything that had happened so far. "So, twenty eight years?" he said, allowing himself to relax against his desk. He nodded toward the phone. "Flying cars or not, technology sure seems to have advanced a lot in that time."

"Think of what a computer looked like 28 years ago," Jon said. "What fits on your desk now used to take up a whole room. Current calculators have more computing power than what was on the Apollo spacecraft. It doesn't take a stretch to believe that the tower sitting on your desk will soon fit in the palm of your hand."

Barry held out his hand, and Laura put the phone in it. "This

thing is a video player and a personal computer?" He turned it over and thoroughly looked it over.

"Actually, it's a phone. And a camera. It can also be a flashlight, calculator, calendar, compass, alarm clock..." Laura gestured as she spoke, looking toward Jon as she finished up.

"We live in a digital world," Jon continued. "Videos that used to be magnetically transferred onto tapes are now digitized, which means they can be put into a computer. The same goes for music. And once everyone's little computers holding music and photos and videos are networked together..." he held out his hand.

"The world in the palm of your hand," Barry finished, handing the phone back to Laura. "Impressive."

"Yeah, well, technology has its downside, too," Jon said. "When you have access to any information imaginable whenever and wherever you want, why do you need books? Newspapers? Why even bother to talk to anyone? Those phones make it possible to be utterly alone in a city surrounded by millions of other people."

Barry cringed slightly and pushed away from the desk, headed for the door. "I guess every advancement has pros and cons. I'm sure that some caveman thought that the wheel would lead to the downfall of civilization, such as it was." He smiled, and Laura could tell that he had finally accepted the situation and relaxed. "So, Superman gets married and has kids. Who would've figured that?"

"He's actually already married, not that anyone else knows that," Jon said, following Barry. "I'm telling you, you two have a lot in common. A lot of those similarities will make it so my family can come visit yours on our summer vacation without anyone batting an eyelash."

Barry looked over his shoulder questioningly, though Jon only smiled at him. Laura noticed that he pointedly wasn't giving away any information as to Superman's real identity, no doubt to preserve the timeline, though he was certainly giving plenty of clues. He was getting good at being cryptic, Laura decided, though hopefully that didn't follow them home. "As soon as I open this door, I'll start moving pretty fast. Can you two keep up?"

"Oooh, a race. Just like old times," Laura said rubbing her hands together, memories of races past springing to mind. Of course, the races between her or Jon or Clark and Barry or Wally never really seemed to have a clear winner, and she could never tell if the Flashes were humoring them or they were just evenly matched.

True to his word, Barry pulled open the door and instantaneously vanished. A split second later Laura and Jon shifted into super speed and followed, keeping a respectable distance behind in order to let him lead them to his current apartment. Laura had only ever known Barry after he and Iris were married and living in a tidy little house in a newer part of town. It stood to reason that the bachelor version of Barry Allen didn't live in the same house, which proved to be true. He led them to an apartment near the business district, then into a back room with a secret lab and the treadmill. Barry seemed surprised for a moment that Laura and Jon were able to arrive within mere moments of him, though soon enough they were down to business, with Laura pulling out the phone again and playing the video for Barry. After it was done, he moved like a blur around the treadmill, making tweaks here and adjustments there, at one point zipping out of the room to get some components from the store. In all, it took maybe ten minutes to get the work done, between watching and rewatching the video and doing the actual work.

Barry finally came to a stop next to Jon, crossing his arms over his chest. "Well, I've done everything that I told myself to do, so it should work for you now. Who wants to be the first to give it a try?"

Laura looked at Jon. "I've already taken it for a spin once," she said. "It's your turn now."

Jon nodded. Laura suspected that he would've volunteered to go first even if she hadn't said anything. Barry walked with him over to the treadmill, punching a few buttons on the control panel. "Okay, I need an exact date, time, and location."

Jon gave Barry the date corresponding to the day after he left, 7 AM eastern so that he could surprise his family as they woke up. "As for where, I can get wherever I need in seconds, so put me anywhere."

Barry punched a couple more buttons, then stepped back. "I'm putting you in the countryside outside of town. Hopefully it doesn't build up too much in the next couple decades."

"I guess we'll find out," Jon said, turning to shake Barry's hand, then stepping on the treadmill. He took a deep breath, and started running. The air around the treadmill started to shimmer, and Laura found herself mesmerized for a moment, until she became aware of Barry talking to her.

"So you said my treadmill was the only time travel option, even in your time, but it's clear from your conversation that he didn't use it to get here. So how DID he travel back in time?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Laura said quietly, turning so that she met his eyes with her own. "It was some sort of device that normally simply moves people around in space. But for whatever reason, when speed is added to the equation, you travel through time."

"Intriguing," Barry said, pinching his lip. "You know, I already have one homework assignment to complete some time in the next 28 years. I could try looking into that problem, too. I mean, I think I know a little something about what it takes to move through time." He gestured to the treadmill, where Jon was quickly fading away.

Laura nodded slowly. "I guess we could use any help we can get. My other brother is working on it, too, though I bet you could get a lot done between now and then." She smiled, then gave him a quick hug. "Thanks for your help, Barry. You've always been my favorite uncle." He seemed somewhat hesitant to return the hug at first, and it made for a rather awkward exchange. She took pity on him and pulled away, quickly stepping up for her turn on the treadmill. "Trust Iris," she said, no longer looking him in the eye. "You won't believe how great it will be once you let her in on your secret." She held up her left hand and looked at him again. "I know how it is, my brothers know, and my folks know. You guys are a wonderful couple, and it will only get better." She started running. "I'll see you, Barry."

"See you," he said, though she could see in his eyes that he was distracted, that her words had hit him like a hammer. She allowed herself to smile, then pushed her speed faster and faster, until she became enveloped by the shimmery porthole once more, surrounded by memories that played in fast forward. Finally, she saw herself getting engaged, then talking to Diane at the police station the day before, then she emerged into a field, Jon waiting for her, and she knew that they were home at last.

CJ shifted, fluffing the pillow behind him as he heard his wife give a small moan. A circle of light radiated out from the little LED clipped to the top of his book, bathing the center of his bedroom in a faint white that quickly faded to blue, then black. He paused to lean over and kiss his sleeping wife on the cheek, wrapping his arm around her just until he felt her relax, then turning back to the task at hand.

The book he was reading probably should've put him to sleep an hour earlier. "A Brief History of Time," by Stephen Hawking, which CJ had assumed would be dry, theoretical quantum physics, actually managed to pull him in, and the issues that it discussed were fascinating. More to the point, the theories the book described could have some bearing on Jon's disappearance. Although CJ was under no obligation to continue to research the device that had created the porthole similar to the one Jon

disappeared through, it still gnawed at him. How did it work? What was the theory behind how it did what it did? Who built it and why? CJ liked to pride himself on being pretty knowledgeable, or at least being resourceful enough to find people who knew enough to help him solve his cases. He had taken on the mantle of the world's greatest detective, which was a lot to live up to. And up until now he had done a pretty good job, or so he had thought. But he couldn't accept that in this one instance he was completely stumped.

With a sigh, he got back to reading. After getting another couple of paragraphs further into the book, his phone, which was sitting facedown on the nightstand, vibrated. Only a handful of people, mostly family and close friends, had his personal cell number, and even though Bruce was not above trying to contact him at this time of night, he usually left CJ alone once he entered his bedroom with his wife. CJ looked at the phone questioningly for a moment, then lifted it up to see who was trying to get a hold of him. The message, from Barry, said simply, "I'm waiting downstairs."

Without another thought, CJ scrambled out of bed as gently as he could, throwing on a shirt as he did. He slipped out of the room and quickly made his way through the mansion and down to the cave, x-raying along the way to confirm that Barry was, in fact, standing there waiting for him.

"Took you long enough," Barry said with a teasing grin as he caught sight of CJ.

"Yes, I'm slow, I get it," CJ said in a joking tone. He had developed a banter with Barry that rivaled that with his family, and Barry wasn't above dishing out the little jabs that CJ was famous for delivering. "To what do I owe the pleasure? What couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"I have a little story for you," Barry said, making himself comfortable at CJ's desk. CJ took his cue and found a chair, the same one Matt had been using earlier in the evening. "So, 28 years ago, as Laura was waiting for her turn on the treadmill for her return trip through time, she mentioned how it was that Jon managed to find himself in the past. Since I dabbled in theoretical physics and time travel, I told her I would look into the problem. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and I figured with that much time to look into things I should be able to get you something that would be useful."

"Why didn't you say something about that earlier?" CJ asked, though his heart rate started speeding up at the implications of Barry's statement.

Barry smiled shrewdly. "I wanted the conversation to be spontaneous," he said. "It was already established that I was going to help you with your little time travel problem. Anything else on top of that had to happen on its own. Trust me, I've messed around with the timeline enough to know when to keep my mouth shut."

CJ ducked his head. That was probably another little jab at him, since he tended to say what was on his mind, at least around close friends and family. "You didn't come all the way down here to tell me you came up empty," CJ said with a raise of the eyebrow.

"Do you have the device?" Barry asked. CJ motioned to the center of the workbench where he left it earlier in the night after Laura left. Barry sauntered over and picked it up, giving it a once-over before continuing. "As I got to thinking about how what she described would work, I came to the realization pretty quickly that theory behind it was nothing new, even back in 1997. Quantum theory states that space and time are linked, so it would only make sense that if you had something that could create a shortcut through space, it should be able to shortcut time, as well. How that something would work, though, was another question." He reached for a small screwdriver and took the back off the device. "I started looking into guys who were deep into research on the subject, which wasn't too terribly difficult since it's a rather

specialized field. Tracking down academics that received government grants was the first step, but I got to thinking... if the person who used the porthole was doing it for less than lawful purposes, which seemed likely given that Superman was after them, then it was possible that whoever created it wasn't able to get funding through the government or other legitimate sources."

CJ felt himself leaning forward and scooting toward the edge of the chair. "A rogue researcher, sure," CJ said. "Probably someone who didn't have the best standing and a short fuse...."

Barry looked at him with raised eyebrows, then turned back to the device. "Universities seem to value their grant money almost more than the actual research that comes out of it," Barry said. "So your guy works in academia, probably in or around Metropolis, has no government funding, and is a little morally flexible. I found him about a week ago, even did a little surveillance to make sure he was the correct target," Barry said.

"You did?!"

"Yup. Ah, here we are," Barry said, smiling as he turned the open part of the porthole device to face CJ. "I theorized this worked by creating a distortion in the local gravity field. Here's the little bugger that did it." He pointed at one of the more unusual components, something that CJ hadn't been able to positively identify when he had examined it. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but the porthole robbers were stealing specific items, right?"

The conversation was starting to move too fast for CJ. No big surprise, he supposed, considering it was the Flash he was talking with, but he found himself a little slow to respond. "Uh, yeah, I believe Diane mentioned that. Jon was investigating a robbery at a diamond exchange when he disappeared."

"They're trying to get better components," Barry said.

"There's only so much you can do with the stuff available at Radio Shack...or wherever you get electrical components these days. They maxed themselves out here, but with more sophisticated and expensive material they could gain more control."

"We were able to figure out how to make it transport an object to a particular place," CJ said, getting up and pointing to another part of the device. "It used USGS coordinates, for the most part, though I imagine if you wanted to travel much outside of the general vicinity of Metropolis it would get a little wonky, since different locations have correction factors applied to them..." he took a breath and looked at Barry, who seemed amused. In an effort to add something to the conversation, he had started rambling...which, now that he thought about it, tended to happen more often than he liked to admit. "Getting a hold on the elevation at the porthole exit seems to have been rather tricky," he said.

"Yeah, I heard. It's all part of controlling the spatial part of the space-time relationship. Jon's trip to 1997 is proof that they had absolutely no control on the time part of it, which makes sense considering the enormous amount of energy that takes. Super speed and the speed force are both able to impart the kind of energy you need to control time. Your perpetrator was looking to get there through more conventional means, which is why he stole the components that he did. Then he could create a functioning time machine, and have all the fame and glory he missed out on before."

"I'm not discounting the theory that he's stealing stuff to get rich, though, either," CJ said, drawing a chuckle from Barry.

"Well, yeah, that too. There's no way he's going to have a career in academia after producing a device made of stolen components. Plus his robberies are all over the news. I'm sure he has something bigger up his sleeve. Fortunately for us, he won't be able to follow through." Barry put the device down and pulled a paper out of his pants pocket, placing it on the work bench and sliding it to CJ.

CJ looked at the paper a long moment before taking it.

"This...?" he asked.

"The inventor of the porthole device. Probably the guy pulling

the strings on the robberies,” Barry said.

“And you’ve had this for a week?” CJ asked again.

“History is something held in delicate balance,” Barry said.

“You change one thing, and a whole cascade of events is triggered as history tries to correct itself. Jon was supposed to go back in time, and Laura was supposed to follow him. I’m just an observer in this.”

“You’re more than an observer,” CJ said. “I mean, you solved the case!”

Barry didn’t even blink. “I’m CSI, that’s kind of my job.”

“In Central City,” CJ mumbled. He wasn’t sure if the feeling he had was jealousy, but he was starting to think that it was. He wasn’t used to having other people step in and hand him the answer to his problems. In this case, though, he had to remind himself that Barry had been looking into it for longer than CJ had been alive. He shouldn’t be surprised that Barry found the solution – he probably would’ve been more surprised if he hadn’t. “Thank you,” CJ said, swallowing his pride and giving Barry a smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” Barry said, giving CJ a quick clap on the back. “I’m just glad I could be of help.”

“Always,” CJ said, and like that, Barry was gone. CJ had to blink a couple of times to get his mind back on track, and once he did, he finally took a look at the name written on the paper. It wasn’t someone he had ever heard of before, and in the name of due diligence, he decided to do some quick research on the man.

Half an hour at the Bat Computer gave him more than enough information to believe that Barry was probably right. He looked at the clock and saw that it was now 3 AM, way too early to be making any other calls on this. He debated going back up to bed and taking care of business in the morning before work, but he ultimately decided that this was too important to keep to himself. Without another thought, he reached out for the phone and dialed a familiar number. After a half dozen rings, a very drowsy voice finally answered.

“Diane? It’s Sam. I have some information for you.”

She sighed. “Look, it’s late....”

“I know who’s behind the porthole robberies,” he said, and for a long time there was no response from the other end. “Diane?”

“Sorry, I’m just...getting up. Good thing I’m used to not sleeping much these days.” He heard rustling and some grunting before she continued. “This is great. Who is it?”

“Let me tell you a story....”

—
Jon’s first stop after waiting for Laura to arrive was to go home and surprise his family with some breakfast. It felt so good flying over Metropolis, seeing the sights that were familiar in a way that he had taken for granted for so long. At last he saw his apartment, and he sped toward it, landing on the back patio, spinning into his normal clothes as soon as his feet hit the concrete. So intent was he on seeing his family that he entered the house without even looking to see who was up. It quickly became evident that this wasn’t a normal morning.

“Mom?” he said, stopping after two steps. His mother was in the kitchen, wrangling two toddlers while simultaneously trying to pour cereal into bowls and milk into sippy cups.

“Daddy!” two little voices shouted, their eyes lighting up as they noticed his presence. As they ran toward him, a look of relief passed over his mother’s features. It was a little strange seeing the present version of her after just leaving a much younger version in 1997, but it was also comforting, another cue that he was where he needed to be.

“Hey, sweetie,” Lois said. “Where’ve you been? The news has been rather quiet.”

“Oh, just on an out-of-town case,” he said, squatting down and opening up his arms to let his two little ones tackle him. They all broke out in a fit of giggles for a moment before he scooped them up and carried them back to the kitchen and the breakfast that now

awaited them. “It’s kind of hush-hush,” Jon continued after a moment. “Nothing that would make it on the news.”

“Oh really?” Lois said, something in her voice telling him that she didn’t believe him. He turned to look at her and saw... something on her face, a knowing expression that was there and gone in the blink of an eye.

“I’m just glad you made it back in one piece,” she said.

“That makes two of us,” he muttered, then shook his head and smiled. “So where’s Diane?” he asked, scanning the house quickly.

“She went in to work,” Lois said. “I guess she got a break in her case overnight.”

Jon stiffened. “She did? That was quick.”

“You know how these things go. Once they get something credible, they pounce on it before the suspect catches wind that they’re on to him.” Lois turned to the toaster and started making herself something to eat. “She got out of here a couple hours ago.”

Something tickled the back of Jon’s brain, an unquantifiable feeling of danger. He knew Diane was a cop, and while she wasn’t routinely in the field anymore, she still got out of the office to investigate cases and help in wider operations. If she was the one to finger a suspect, chances were that she would want to be in on the bust. He would be lying if he said he didn’t worry about her, but he knew she was a professional and could keep herself out of trouble. This time, though... He couldn’t explain why he felt that something was wrong, especially since the porthole robbers hadn’t been especially violent in the past. But he had learned a long time ago to trust his hunches when it came to Diane and potential problems.

He leaned over and gave each of his children another small hug and kiss, before moving to hug his mom. “I know I just got here, but I think I might need to go and check on Diane. I don’t suppose she left any clues about where she was going?” Lois sighed and shook her head. “Okay. Well, I suppose I’ll see you at work a little later?”

“Certainly,” Lois said. Jon started for the patio again, but was stopped by his mom’s voice. “Jon?” she said, causing him to look back at her questioningly. “I think your dad and I need to talk to you about your trip,” she said with a smile. “Maybe over lunch?”

He looked at her for a long moment, wondering how much she knew about where he had just been, but he decided that he would find out at lunch either way. “I’ll be there,” he said with a nod. As he reached the patio door, he pulled the curtains aside and stepped outside, waiting for them to bounce into place before taking off. From behind, he could hear his son ask for him.

“I think a big vulture carried him off because he didn’t eat his breakfast,” Lois said playfully to little Eddie, causing him to giggle. “What, you don’t think that’s what it is?”

“That’s silly, Grandma,” he heard Ellie say, though there was a question in her voice, something that said she could be convinced that it wasn’t just make-believe.

“I don’t know...I think I saw one out there earlier. Maybe you should eat your breakfast to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to you.” Jon shook his head as he forced his attention away from what was happening at home. Yes, Mad Dog Lane, scourge of the newsroom, had managed to become a great mom without a doubt. She was also very practiced in running interference with little ones, something earned after years of experience.

Jon headed upward, positioning himself over Diane’s precinct, and closed his eyes, zeroing in on the police band. He wasn’t sure how much he would hear, given that sting operations tended to be stealthy. Maybe it would help to think about where she might be headed, he thought, his eyes popping open. His gaze wandered to the docks and the area where he had emerged from the porthole in 1997, noticing that the old warehouses were now gone, replaced with higher end condos. And, he thought with a smile, it was impossible to miss the fair number of police cruisers that were all

parked near one of the new buildings. Looking through the walls, he saw a force making its way to the second story, a couple of officers parking themselves in front of an apartment door, while others manned the stairwells and elevators. Another few officers waited on the ground, out of sight of the apartment windows. Diane, of course, was leading the charge, knocking on the door of the apartment flanked by two officers with drawn guns. A quick glance into the apartment showed that this operation wouldn't be a smooth one. A half dozen men quietly scrambled to gather guns and ammunition, each pointing their gun at the door as they became armed.

This had all the hallmarks of a potential bloodbath, Jon decided, speeding toward the scene as soon as he saw Diane's hand raised to knock on the door. He was about a block away once her knuckles finally made contact, and he smashed through the apartment window a split second after the first shots began to fly. He plucked the bullets out of the air before disarming each of the perpetrators, stockpiling the guns in the corner before looking for a way to subdue the men.

"Metropolis PD," Diane said from outside the door. "Open up, NOW!" Jon located a roll of stereo cable that could be repurposed as restraints, and got to work in tying the men up. He had managed to hog tie three of the now very surprised men before he heard kicks at the door. As he finished, the door splintered at the handle and flew open. Jon came to a stop, crossing his arms over his chest, as officers poured into the room, guns drawn. Diane, who had broken down the door, stood motionless in the middle of the chaos, taking a moment to survey the scene before shifting her eyes to his. As he watched, the intensity that had been there quickly faded, replaced by a look of relief. As officers continued to pour into the apartment, tending to the perpetrators and their cache, searching the apartment and shouting orders, the two of them stood with their eyes locked, oblivious to it all. He wanted to sweep her into his arms, to take her away from it all and make up for lost time, and it didn't take much to see that she wanted that, too. But he was also painfully aware that they were not alone, and he could see her straining to not smile.

"Superman?" one of the officers said, and Jon was aware that he had been speaking to him, though what had been said had been completely lost.

Jon blinked, forcing himself to pay attention to the task at hand. "These men had you dead to rights, officer," Jon said, his voice taking on the deeper timbre it always did while he was in uniform. "Lucky I happened to notice your operation while I was flying over."

"And these are all their weapons?" the officer asked, looking toward the makeshift stockpile of weapons Jon had removed from the men.

"That's what they had on them," he said, taking the time to x-ray the apartment now that the excitement had died down. "Looks like there's some more hidden in a storage area below the floorboards in the bedroom." He brought his eyebrows together as he saw something unfamiliar. "There's also...something else. Devices of some sort that I'm unfamiliar with."

"Those must be the porthole devices," Diane said, approaching him. Jon nodded mutely, then led the officers toward the bedroom, pulling up the loose board to reveal the items. A couple cops scrambled to start cataloging the find, as Jon looked around some more. "There's also a safe in the wall," he said, gesturing to a large print on the wall. "Lead-lined, so I can't tell you what's inside."

"Jones, summon the safecracker," one of the officers shouted, but Jon shook his head.

"Allow me," he said, removing the print to reveal the lock mechanism. If he was trying to be discreet, he probably could've cycled through a number of combinations in a matter of seconds, or found a way to short the controller, but on this morning he

didn't have the patience. The steel of the door provided little resistance, and he easily punched through to reveal diamonds and other stolen merchandise on the inside.

A couple of officers quickly moved in to start cataloging everything, and Jon stepped aside, his gaze inevitably turning back to his wife, who had now gotten down to business of her own. It was probably time to go; the officers seemed to have things well in hand, and the danger seemed to have passed. Without another word he left, though he didn't go far. A couple moments later, Jonathan Kent emerged from the dark space between buildings a couple blocks away, dressed for work.

The fact that this was also his story came in pretty handy, giving him an excuse to return to the scene. He could bear witness to the final chapter in a story that he'd been following since the beginning and at the same time he could go see his wife, who he missed terribly during his time away, without any additional pretenses. Approaching the scene, he made small talk with the officers outside guarding the entry, all of whom knew him well from various after-hours precinct gatherings. Because of his relationship with Diane, they didn't need to ask how he knew what was going on, and they weren't as guarded as they might be around other reporters. After a while they waved him through the door, and he made his way up to the apartment he had so recently left. He produced a notebook and started jotting down some observations and quotes, gathering the information he needed to tell the story that he had observed firsthand. Wandering through the apartment, it didn't take long for him to catch the eye of a certain officer, who sought him out as soon as she caught sight of him.

"Hey, you," she said with a smile, wrapping an arm around his waist in a very unusual public display of affection. "I was wondering when you were going to show up."

Jon returned her gesture, then went further, wrapping both arms around her and pulling her closer. Diane didn't resist, instead looking up at him with amusement. Her eyes danced, the corners of her mouth quirked into a little grin, and she had never been more beautiful in his eyes. Before he knew it, he was leaning down for a kiss, and she was returning it gladly, though he only let it last for a few moments. "So," he said, dropping his arms. "You want to find a quiet corner so we can conduct a little interview."

"I'd love to, Mr. Kent," she said, having the grace to look disappointed at the loss of his embrace. Diane was not normally one for public intimacy, though she could be persuaded into hand holding or small kisses if she was in the right mood. Jon could practically feel the eyes of other officers on them at that moment, and he knew Diane could, too, but he didn't care. It felt wonderful just to be in her arms again. Diane gestured toward the kitchen area, on the opposite end of the apartment from the earlier action, and he led the way there. "How was your trip?" she asked as they settled up against the counter.

He sighed, reaching for her hand. "It was...odd. Educational. Humbling, I guess. Confusing. I met my grandparents, who were wonderful, and my parents, who were...the younger, more impulsive version of the people I know. In some weird role reversal I ended up being the steady, experienced voice of reason and my dad was the hothead that you just want to smack some sense into."

Diane raised her eyebrows. "Clark? A hothead? I have a hard time seeing that."

"Well, I'm sure we all have things in our past that we look back on after the passage of years and cringe at." He interlaced his fingers with hers. "Our first dinner, for example."

"Or any of the first half dozen times we met," Diane said with a nod.

"I'm sure I was more...overconfident when I first started out, too. I'll try not to be too hard on Dad the next time we talk, since we've all had our youthful indiscretions and he was the one who

taught me all about control. But that's not to say he won't hear about it." They looked at each other for a long moment, then he turned to survey the scene again. "So how did all this come about?"

Diane followed his gaze. "Wish I could say I was the brilliant mind that pieced the case together, but I wasn't." She lowered her voice and looked around, making sure nobody was nearby to overhear their conversation. "Your brother, believe it or not, provided the first breakthrough. He changed how we were looking at everything, and it led to us discovering an unsolved death that could very well be linked to the robberies. I was able to deep background the victim and come up with a list of associates and known addresses, which was enough to start some legwork and dig deeper, but not enough to prove anything definitive. Enter a certain member of Central City's finest, who just so happened to have been on the case for almost 3 decades without anyone knowing."

Jon gave a low whistle. "He and Laura must've talked after I left, because I never told him about any of this," he said with a sweep of his arm.

"Well, let's just say that he's good at his job. He basically gave us the suspect on a silver platter. Normally a name without any other corroboration doesn't get you much, but then your brother did his homework, filled in the evidence gap, and gave it all to me. The lynch pin in it all was the fact that Barry's suspect and my dead guy had a connection, which was enough to secure a warrant. And here we are."

"I'm just glad I decided to come home in time for breakfast with my family or else this could've had a very different ending."

Diane squeezed his hand and gave him another smile. "Thanks for saving our bacon," she said. "I think we'll have to take a rain check on that breakfast, though. The Captain is probably going to have my hide if I don't get back to it soon."

"It's okay," he said, fighting the urge to kiss her again. "Looks like I have some work of my own ahead of me. Are you guys going to officially call this case closed, do you think?"

"You saw what was in that safe. It's a pretty close match to what was stolen over the last few days, so I'd say it's a pretty good bet. But don't publish that until we give the word." She took a step away from him and back toward the crime scene. "And by the way, you didn't officially see any of the stuff in that safe, right?"

"Of course. But I bet you could confirm what an unnamed source of mine might have seen..."

She laughed and took another step away. "In your dreams, Kent. Oh, and if you see your unnamed source again, let him know that I missed him while he was gone."

"You did? I think I might be jealous," he said, drawing a smirk from her. The terms of endearment always seemed to flow more freely once the conversation shifted to coded discussion about his other identity. It was an old game between them — her complimenting his anonymous sources and him feigning jealousy — but it never got tired. His other identity had always had that effect on her, even before she knew the man behind the S.

She smiled at him, unsaid words passing through in her eyes, then she turned and made her way back to the scene. With that, Jon took another turn around the apartment, then made his way in to work. Even though he had spent a couple days in the past, he had only been missing from this time for a few hours, which was less time than he spent at some of the more serious disasters that he tended to. Nobody at work even so much as acknowledged his absence from the previous afternoon, which was fine by him. Without any interference, he was able to put together quite a substantial story about the pothole robbers and their capture. This story was sure to be featured prominently in the afternoon edition, and might even be interesting enough to pick up national attention. The outside world remained quiet throughout the rest of the morning, and by the time lunch rolled around, he was about ready

to send the story to his editor. Before he got the chance, though, his dad approached his desk.

"Join us for lunch?" he asked, gesturing toward Lois, who was making her way toward them, as well.

"Sure," Jon said, grabbing his suit coat and rising from his chair. "Where to?"

"Let's go home for this one," Clark said with a glance toward the stairwell.

Jon held up a finger. "Meet you there? I need to make a quick call." Clark nodded once and left with Lois, making their way discreetly toward the stairwell. Once they were out of immediate earshot, Jon called his sister, letting her know about their meeting. It was only right that she be there, too, since she played an important role in the expedition to the past, and Jon was fairly certain that's what this little meeting would be about. Once he was done, he also headed for the stairwell, changing into his suit and taking off as soon as the door closed and he was sure he was alone. It only took a couple seconds to reach his parents' house, where he landed in the back yard. His mom and dad were already inside, with Clark raiding the refrigerator and setting sandwich components — bread, lunchmeat, cheese, lettuce, condiments — onto the table while Lois gathered dishes. Soon some chips, fruit, and drinks also arrived, and once Jon joined them, they all got to work putting together their lunches.

"So did I see that Diane's precinct caught the guys involved in the pothole robberies this morning?" Clark started, drawing a silent nod from Jon. "Must feel good to finally solve that case."

"It really seemed to come together pretty quickly," Lois added. "And all while you were at some mysterious location."

Jon looked at them closely, mentally confirming that this was the conversation that he had expected, even if they were a bit circuitous in getting to the point. "Well, you know, Barry decided to give us some help. Diane said his contribution really put it over the top."

"Barry, huh?" Lois said, putting the top piece of bread on her sandwich and taking a bite. "What was his interest in the case?"

Jon only smiled, letting them fill in the blanks. "Barry's pretty resourceful," Clark replied. "Batman has the reputation of being the master detective, but Barry's right up there, too. He can also help you out with other problems, too. Say, if you find yourself in the past..."

Jon nodded once and relaxed. "I wondered if you would figure it out. I probably said way too much to you guys when I was in 1997."

"It was nothing you said," Lois said, looking at him thoughtfully. "Though some of it was what you didn't say, the blanks that were left and the story that could be told if you filled them in the right way. That, and I found your phone."

Clark laughed at his wife's nonchalant admission. "Even before that, she was on the right track. It took me a lot longer to be convinced."

"I was really worried that if I said the wrong thing or left the wrong clues, something terrible would happen to the future," Jon said. "Part of me was just waiting to wink out of existence at the slightest slip of the tongue. If I said something that made you realize you could have kids, maybe you would decide that's not what you wanted, or at least not until you got your Pulitzer or something, and then that would be it for me."

"I can understand that, I suppose," Lois continued. "But the thing is, once I knew for sure who you were and let myself absorb the information, once I got a chance to study your face knowing that you were my child, something washed over me that I had never felt before. I felt protective and proud, and I felt the most incredible sense of love, but it was a different type of love than I felt with Clark. Up to that point, I was rather ambivalent about children — I didn't know if I wanted them even if we could even have them, though we were pretty sure we couldn't. And if we did

have kids, I was certain that I would be a terrible mother, given the examples that I'd had in my life. But then you came along, and I realized that I wanted you in my life more than I wanted anything. I couldn't care less about any stupid journalism awards or career benchmarks, or about what would happen to my life by adding a child to it. I just knew that if you were the result, it couldn't happen soon enough. I'm not sure how long it would've taken me to come around to the idea of having children if you hadn't visited us, though I'm sure I could've been convinced eventually...but it might have been too late to have brought you into this world."

"Of course, she never told me any of this," Clark said. "All I knew is that she was insatiable for a while after that..." Lois smacked him gently, though her smile revealed that she wasn't really all that upset. Clark laughed gently again, grabbing her hand and kissing it.

"I did tell you my suspicions, as you recall, but you were rather adamant that I was wrong. So once I found the truth, rather than bringing it up again and starting some sort of argument, I just kept it to myself." Lois looked rather smug at that moment, and Jon couldn't blame her. He had always thought that his mother was amazing, and this just reinforced that.

Clark looked at Jon with an eyebrow cocked. "I was kind of stubborn when I was younger. I don't know if you noticed."

"Kind of hard not to," Jon said, looking over to his mother and giving her a knowing smile before turning back to Clark. "So when did you make the connection?" Jon asked.

"Well, after you were born it occurred to me that you shared a name, and as you got older it was hard not to notice that you kind of looked similar, though memory can sometimes fool you. Then after Mom died and we were cleaning out the house, we found these." Clark got up and walked toward his study, disappearing inside for a moment, then re-emerging with some faded photographs. He pushed away some of the sandwich supplies and set them down on the table. The top photo was CJ and Jen's most recent Christmas photo. Reaching out to rifle through them, Jon found his family portrait and Laura's engagement photo, as well as an older photo of Lois and Clark with Jon, CJ, and Laura, dating to about the time Jon graduated from college. He had seen some of these when Laura delivered them to their grandparents, but not all.

"Laura brought these," Jon said, turning over the photos to see names written on the back in Martha's hand. "She wanted to bring them something to show them the family they built."

"Laura was there?" Lois asked, genuinely surprised. Clark, too, seemed startled at the news.

"I used the cosmic treadmill to get back, but Barry had to modify it to work for me. Laura delivered the instructions on how to do that. She was only there for maybe 12 hours. It would've been less if I hadn't had to watch over you." Jon shrugged and waved his hand. "So when you saw these photos, what did you think?"

"We recognized you right away, of course," Clark said. "CJ...I think I thought maybe he looked familiar, but there's no way that I was going to connect this sophisticated and responsible-looking adult wearing stylish glasses with the CJ I knew." Clark grabbed CJ's family photo and turned it over. "And it was labeled as Sam Wayne, so that stumped me, too. I asked Bruce once if he had any relatives named Sam, and he looked at me like I was crazy." He shuffled to Laura's photo. As he did, the sound of a heavy thud came from the back yard, and Jon knew right away that Laura had come for her debriefing, too. "This photo was the most interesting one to me, because Laura was so young at the time. I was blown away when I saw what a beautiful young woman she would grow into."

Laura walked into the kitchen as Clark was talking, and immediately went over to give him a hug, though her cheeks grew a brighter red the more he spoke. "Thanks, Daddy," she said softly, breaking off the hug after a moment and settling into one of the

empty chairs.

"She brought them some videos, too," Jon said. "Nothing that they could keep, but enough so that they knew we were thinking about them."

"So that's what you were doing with your camera last night," Clark said to Laura. "I bet they appreciated it."

"I think it was a little overwhelming, to be honest," Laura said, grabbing a plate and assembling her lunch. "Jon had already shown them everything he had on his phone, so by the time I arrived they already knew the basics. Then they got messages from Matt and Jen and Diane, and the one from CJ...oof."

Clark got a faraway look in his eyes. "They never let on that they had met you, or that they knew what the future held. I always found it a little disconcerting how calm they were when we had concerns about you guys, about conceiving, about how various events would turn out. When we worried about how you would react to figuring out the big family secret after having been deceived for so many years, they were steadfast in their belief that it would all turn out fine, that you wouldn't be resentful, despite my fears. I guess I always just chalked it up to their positive natures, which was probably part of it. But you gave them a wonderful gift: the knowledge that everything would work out for the best and that the future would be filled with happiness."

"They sent something back, you know," Laura said, reaching for her phone. "One recorded message for each of us. I showed Grandma how to shoot videos, and I left her and Grandpa alone so that they could do it privately. I have no idea what they said, but there's one here for you, Dad. You too, Mom."

Laura held the phone toward Lois and Clark, but for a long moment all they could do was stare at it. Clark's face was a mixture of surprise and apprehension. Jon knew that he had been devastated when his parents had died, and it had taken a long time for him to make peace with their absence, even though the whole family knew that the inevitable had to happen eventually. Jon didn't want to know what that feeling must be like, and he fervently hoped to not have to find out, at least not for a very long time. He could understand why his dad might not want to watch that video and open that old wound, but at the same time the urge to see them one last time, to be at the receiving end of their words of love and support, had to be overwhelming. Slowly, Clark's hand reached up and took the phone.

"Do you want some privacy?" Laura asked, looking at their parents before turning toward Jon.

"I think we'll wait until after lunch to watch these, if you don't mind," Clark said, and Laura nodded.

It was quiet around the table for a few minutes as everyone indulged in their lunches. Eventually Lois broke the ice. "So, Jon, please tell me that visiting our younger selves wasn't too traumatizing. Clark said that when you first met in Smallville, you looked like you were going to go into shock."

Jon smiled and shook his head. "Like I said, years of watching time travel movies had convinced me that a dire fate awaited me if I interacted with anyone who could affect my future. Once I relaxed, I actually had a pretty good time. Even going out in your suit, cape and all, was a lot more fun than I remembered it being when I was younger."

Clark looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to Jon, a half smile on his face. "That's right, you went out and helped with some storm fighting in Kansas your first night there. I had forgotten about that, but now that you mention it..." He chuckled, shook his head and reached for a handful of potato chips, popping one into his mouth and chewing on it before continuing. "Shortly after we revealed the family secret to Jen's parents, Randy Sears came up to me and stated that he'd met Superman before, but for the life of me I couldn't remember. Then he said that he had been driving on I-70 on the way home from Denver one day, when some weather came up and he was forced to stop in a small town

just off the interstate. Before he knew it, the tornado sirens were going off and he was stuck in a gas station bathroom while an F4 bore down on him. If Superman hadn't swooped down and saved him and the others from that gas station, he probably wouldn't be alive. I smiled and nodded, took his thanks gracefully, though I still had no idea what he was talking about. But I think maybe it wasn't me that he met, it was you."

"Are you saying that I saved Jen's dad when I was there? That, if it wasn't for me she would not have been born?" Jon felt his appetite leave him at that moment, and the weight of that statement sunk in. Clark raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Wow," Jon whispered, bringing his hand up and running it through his hair. Jenny Sears had been his friend before she ever met his brother, and even though they never had a romantic relationship, he counted her as one of his closest friends. It helped that she knew his secrets, that he didn't have to keep anything from her, and that she still treated him like she always had, even before she knew that he could fly. It was incredibly heady to realize the he was responsible not just for her life, but for CJ's life as he knew it, for the very existence of his family. If there was no Jen, what kind of man would his brother be now? Where would Laura be, without a nephew to draw her to go to college in Gotham? How different would all their lives be?

"You were meant to be there all along," Laura said, lightly touching his arm. "And not just to help Mom and Dad get through their red kryptonite problem."

"I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around all this," Jon said.

"Barry once told me that the strands of time were like a spider web," Clark said quietly. "Past, present, and future all weave together to create reality, the strands crossing each other, interacting with each other, such that it is impossible to separate them. Pull on one thread and the whole thing falls apart. Having traveled to the past myself, I've seen how reality can be affected by the things we do outside our own time. It makes you wonder if there isn't someone out there who knows how it all fits together, who watches over time to make sure that what is meant to happen, does."

"That's a good point," Jon said, pondering it for a moment. "I've saved people I love before — did it this morning, in fact — and I know how my actions can affect my own future and the futures of those I love. But we typically operate in the here and now, and the future is just an abstract idea, something that is guided by the choices we make and is at least somewhat under our control. But what if it isn't? It wasn't my choice to travel to the past, but if I hadn't, then the world as we know it would be completely different. It all feels predetermined somehow, and if that's the case, does choice even play into it?" He stood up and started pacing, gesturing as he did. "Whether guided by some sort of divine providence or stupid luck, my actions when I was in 1997 had consequences. If I hadn't made the choices I had, I might not have a niece and nephew, I might have a brother who was utterly destroyed by that plane crash, so much so that he might have actually become the dark and brooding man his costume represents. You might not have met the love of your life," he said to Laura.

"Make no mistake, life is about making choices," Lois countered, her gentle voice coaxing Jon to sit back down at the table. "Even though your actions were in the past and your life has been spent living with the aftermath, they were still your actions, your choices. I think that, rather than fretting about what could've happened, you should be proud of what came out of all this. Ultimately, you trusted your instincts did what was right, and this is the world that was created because of that. Have some faith in yourself, honey."

Jon smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

Laura fidgeted at that moment, drawing a curious look from

her parents. The talk about choices and consequences seemed to make her uncomfortable, and it was very hard not to notice. "Is something wrong?" Lois asked her.

"No, nothing's wrong, not really, it's just..." Laura sighed, looking down momentarily before putting a forced smile on her face and looking at Jon. "Thank you," she said to him, her voice sincere. "If you played a part in creating the world we live in, then I'm grateful. You seem to have a knack for doing the right thing, and you make it look easy. That's a gift, because in reality it's not an easy thing at all."

"Whoa, hold on," Jon said, putting up his hands. "Thanks for the compliment, but I don't think I've earned it. Despite what Mom said, I'm still pretty sure that it was luck that made everything turn out. My wife could tell you that I'm less than perfect, that I don't always make the right decision or do the right thing." He stopped and looked at her, really looked, and he saw for the first time that she seemed almost scared. "I get the feeling this isn't about me, though."

Her eyes got a little wider for a moment, and he knew he had hit on something. Before she could say anything, though, Clark jumped into the conversation. "Well I, for one, admit to not being perfect, but you guys knew that. I mean, Jon just got back from saving me from my own pigheadedness. And that episode was hardly the worst thing I did in my youth. I got your mom to admit she loved me, then promptly broke up with her. How dumb was that?" He smiled supportively, almost mischievously, and Jon could see what he was doing. Superman could be a hero to his daughter by admitting he had flaws, not that any of them were under the illusions that he didn't. But because Laura was doubting herself for some reason, feeling unequal to her brother, he was levelling the playing field. Jon looked to his mother, seeing a sparkle in her eyes, and he knew what she would say before she even said it.

"In a display of terrible decision making, I about got myself killed dozens of times, all in the name of journalism. Apparently, it took me a while to figure out that directly confronting megalomaniacs could get me tied to explosives. Lucky for me that your Dad was watching out for me, or I'd have checked out a long time ago." She stood up and took her plate over to the sink as she spoke. On her way back she trailed her finger along Clark's chin, finally cupping her hand under his chin and tilting her head up to kiss him. "I had to marry you, despite your stubbornness and numerous character flaws, just to thank you."

"Yeah, that's the only reason," Clark said, the corner of his mouth quirked up before kissing her again.

Jon could almost feel Laura rolling her eyes. "Okay, guys, I get it. You're not perfect and I shouldn't expect myself to be, either. So when I tell you that I'm pregnant, you won't be too disappointed."

Lois gasped, and Clark just gaped at her for a long moment. "Disappointed?" Lois said, scrambling over to her. "That would be the last thing I felt. Come here," she said, motioning for Laura to stand, then wrapping her in a big hug.

"This is wonderful," Clark said, giving her his widest smile. "Why on Earth would you think we would be disappointed?"

"I'm not married yet," Laura said simply with a shrug, stepping away from Lois to get her hug from Clark.

"This isn't 1950," Lois said. "You and Matt love each other, right?"

"Yeah."

"You were planning to have a family together eventually, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. We didn't talk about it, but..."

"Well, when you do certain things, it's probably going to happen," Jon chipped in, and Laura shot him a look that told him that he wasn't helping.

"You're a responsible person, despite what you believe," Clark

said. “I’m sure you’ll be a great mom.”

“It feels like I’m not ready yet, like I’m not adult enough to guide some other little person,” Laura said.

“Nobody does,” Lois said. “You think CJ seemed adult enough to be a Dad when Adam came along?”

Jon cringed, though he had to admit that his perspective was a little skewed. A part of him always saw his brother as the little twerp he knew as a kid. Likewise, his little sister would always be the little kid in pigtails, and he couldn’t believe she was old enough for motherhood. But the simple fact was that she was getting ready to graduate from college, to get married, and she WAS going to be a mom. “If you do it right, you can prolong your childhood through your child,” Jon said, pointing to her belly. “You will be able to build pillow forts, play dress-up and do all the other fun kid things with them. Could you do that in grad school?”

“You might be surprised,” Laura said with a laugh, and Jon couldn’t help but smile. With that, Laura started talking about her revised plans for the next few months, and Jon sat back and ate his lunch, silently observing. With Laura’s announcement, it suddenly felt like all the drama around his trip to the past didn’t matter much anymore. The past was past, the present was what it was for better or for worse, and the future held so many possibilities. At this point it was best to just enjoy the ride and stop worrying, and that’s just what he intended to do.

Matt Owens grunted as he swiped across the screen of his tablet, dismissing the story that had been up. It was almost physically painful to read the poorly crafted stories that passed for journalism on some of these internet sites, especially knowing that plenty of decent journalists, himself included, were out of work. In his case, at least, it might work out for the best, he thought as he ladled a spoonful of his lunch into his mouth. If he had been employed as a working journalist, he might never have discovered his creative side, and he might never feel as fulfilled as he did right now. Sure, he had always felt some satisfaction at seeing his byline in print, but when his book ended up in bookstores and libraries throughout the country, it would be thrilling in a way that would be entirely new. Until that time came, he needed patience, and if there was one thing Matt Owens had in spades, it was patience.

His train of thought was interrupted by the key turning in the apartment door lock. A moment later Laura entered, causing a grin to spread across his face. “Hey there,” he said, and she raised her hand and smiled in response. “How did it go?”

“Pretty good, I guess,” she said, dropping her backpack on the floor by the door and wandering over to take a seat by him. “Mom and Dad had no idea I had even been there, which is a good thing, I guess. But Jon’s trip to the past was apparently preordained. Come to find out Jenny – you know, Sam’s wife – owes her life to him.”

“What?! How does that work?”

Laura shook her head. “Jon saved her dad when he was there. If he hadn’t been around, Jenny’s dad would have died before she was ever conceived. So the future influenced the past which in turn influences the future. It’s like he created some kind of infinite feedback loop. Time travel makes my head hurt.”

“Yeah, my head hurts just listening to you try and explain it,” Matt answered, picking up his bowl and scraping together the last of its contents. After taking care of it, he looked back at Laura. “What about...that other thing you were going to talk with them about?”

She reached her hand behind her neck and grinned. “They were really happy for me. After the initial round of congratulations and hugs, we didn’t dwell on it too much except to talk a little bit about what my plans are for the next few months. I’m glad I didn’t chicken out, though I thought for a moment I might.”

Matt looked at her for a long moment, then reached for her

hand. “So, I just have to ask...why would you have chickened out of it today?”

She put her hand in his and looked past him for a moment. “This probably sounds silly,” she said, re-focusing on him. “Do you remember how it felt when you were a kid and you did something you weren’t supposed to? If you were the honest type, you would get this feeling of foreboding, because you knew something bad would happen once someone found out what you did. You ended up going to great lengths to avoid your parents and other authority figures because of that. Then the punishment would end up being nowhere near as bad as you thought, if you got one at all, but still...it was the anticipation of it that drove you crazy.”

“So...you thought you would be in trouble?” he asked, and she shrugged and bobbed her head. “What we did here – we created life! It’s probably the most precious thing there is. Why on earth would you be in trouble?”

“Well,” she said, diverting her gaze to the table. “It’s all about the rules. I mean, I know we didn’t break any laws or any moral code, but there are unwritten rules to relationships, especially when seen from the eyes of parents. There are certain things that people aren’t supposed to do until they’re married. And even if they do end up jumping the gun, then they should definitely be cautious enough to make sure that they don’t end up pregnant, especially while they’re still in college. You flaunt that rule and the world knows just what you were doing when you were supposed to be studying, or doing whatever upstanding young citizens are supposed to do.”

“You’re an adult...we’re both adults. Adults have sex, that’s just the way the world works.”

She turned away shyly, using her free hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. As confident and brash as she liked the world to think she was, the truth was that underneath it all she was sensitive and shy, vulnerable, and ultimately very charming. This was the side of her that only he got to see, and his heart ached every time she showed it to him. “My head knows that, but my heart? I’m still a student, I don’t have a job, and I still rely on my parents for rent and grocery money. I don’t feel like an adult at all. Even though I’ve grown up enough so that I’m not the same kid I was when I lived in Metropolis, that little girl isn’t that far away, and all she wants is to make her parents proud of her.”

Matt scooted his chair over and wrapped his free arm around her, applying pressure so that she was leaning into him. “Oh, you’re all woman, I can attest to that,” he said in a deep voice, drawing a laugh from her. “And your parents are the most supportive people I’ve ever met. I’m envious of the relationship you have with them. Of course they were going to be happy, because I could never see them being mad about something so joyous.”

She sighed and snuggled into him. “What do you think your parents are going to say?” She asked after a few moments.

“I’m sure they will be glad, too. I won’t be subjected to years of questions about when we might grace them with the pitter patter of little feet, so there’s that.” He smiled as they sat silently for a moment. “I almost hate to ask, but...” he said, pausing as he tried to pose the question as delicately as he could. “Why did you wait so long to tell me about the baby?”

“Because I was trying to convince myself that it was real,” she said quietly. “First I missed a period, but then I told myself that I just miscounted days, or misremembered when the last one was. But after a few weeks I knew that something wasn’t right. The next logical step for a normal person would be a pregnancy test – I could go down to the drugstore and get one of those little stick ones but...I’m only half human, so who knows if it would work right? I mean, I can’t take the pill because my hormones don’t work like normal people’s do, so why would this be any different? If I wanted confirmation, I would have to make an appointment

with the family doctor at STAR labs, and there's no way to be discreet about that. So I put it off and pretended that everything was fine. Then, one night, I was lying in bed and I could hear it."

"Hear what?"

"The faint sound of a heartbeat, fast but sure. It was coming from me, and if I closed my eyes and concentrated on it, I could hear it clear as day. Then there was no doubt."

"When did that happen?" Matt asked, hugging her tighter.

"A week or so ago. It's taken me that long to come to grips with what it means for me, for us."

"But you're happy, right? You want this?"

She sat up and looked at him. "I want it more than anything." She smiled and put a hand on his cheek. "Except maybe you. You made all this possible."

"I'd say it was mutual," he said, leaning in to kiss her.

"Well, I couldn't do it by myself, that's for sure," she said, drawing a chuckle from him. "But talking with my grandma helped my come to peace with what the baby will do to all my carefully laid plans, and just relax and enjoy it."

"Good advice," he said. Her grandmother sounded like someone he could relate to pretty well. It made him wish he'd been able to meet her. "So...we should probably move up the wedding, huh?"

"Yeah, probably."

"We could go down to the courthouse tomorrow and go in front of a judge...."

"That's a little too soon, I think." She wrinkled her nose.

"Fly off to Vegas?" She looked at him, incredulous. "What? Just because your brother did it doesn't mean we can't."

"It's just so...impersonal," she said. "Can't we just have a little ceremony in a park somewhere, just us and our closest family and friends?"

"It's winter, and I want to get this done before you get big – er, uncomfortable enough that you won't be able to enjoy the honeymoon." He sat up and gave his most charming smile, hoping that she didn't think he would somehow find her less attractive as she progressed in her pregnancy. She didn't seem to notice, though. "I know this nice guy who has a really big house we could use for free...."

"I hate the feeling that half my life happens at Wayne Manor," she said, some her fire returning.

"So, okay, where should we go, then?"

"Metropolis," she said quickly. "Maybe at the botanical center, or the lodge in Centennial Park."

"Oooh, sounds lavish," he said, bringing a sly expression to her face.

"It's scenic...rustic. You want lavish, we could go to the Lexor, or the restaurant at the top of the Liberty Tower."

"Let me rephrase," he said. "Sounds expensive."

"That's what parents are for."

"Why do I get the feeling that this topic didn't come up during lunch?" He raised his eyebrows, and she waved her hand.

"It kind of goes without saying," she said. He looked at her skeptically, then stood up from the table, taking his dishes into the kitchen. "Then we can save our money for the honeymoon, I guess."

"Ooh, there's a thought." He deposited his dishes in the sink, then came back toward the eating area, leaning against the wall. "Though, really, where could we go that we haven't already visited? Your whole flying thing...it's been very handy."

She stood up and sauntered over to him. "So all my abilities – strength, invulnerability, x-ray vision – serve their highest purpose in ferrying us to exotic locales for more interesting dates?" She stopped in front of him and ran a finger from his forehead, down past the side of his eye and around his jaw. She loved to play the cynical naysayer, but he knew it was all just an act.

"Until the next alien invasion or giant asteroid, sure," he said

with a shrug and a crooked smile, putting a hand on her hip. "See, I think if you weren't who you were, if you weren't super and didn't have the perspective that went along with that, then we probably wouldn't have the conversations we had. Without years of verbal sparring over superhero-related topics, I might not have seen how brilliant and interesting you are, and I might not have fallen madly in love. So I guess you could say that your powers brought us together."

Her smile was genuine. "I probably would've been less guarded, and might have ended up dating some loser, or a series of losers...which probably would've led me to decide that I was better off all alone. I might have 2 or 3 cats by now and an in-depth knowledge of Jane Austen novels." They both laughed lightly, and her hand relocated to his shoulder. "Do you think we should tell your parents before the baby comes? About me, I mean, and about Dad?"

He shook his head. He would be lying if he were to say that he hadn't thought about it. But he wasn't especially close with his parents, and his mother had a tendency to say things when she shouldn't. "I don't think they'd take it well. I mean, they like you, but...Mom once told her best friend one of my more embarrassing kid secrets, and pretty soon every kid in school knew it. Not my favorite memory."

She absently twisted his shirt in her fingers. "It's just...Jon and Diane told her folks before the twins came, and even though Diane was not that close to them and they had anger issues in the past, they were totally cool about it. Finding out that their son-in-law could fly also gave them a good excuse to come to Metropolis often and visit the babies, which I think was the point. If your Mom and Dad knew, I could bring them here whenever they wanted to."

"Maybe I don't want to share you," Matt answered, only half joking. She didn't seem impressed. He sighed. "Look, I've known them my whole life, and even though I love them, I don't trust them with something this big. My Dad is liable to overreact and my Mom won't be able to resist telling everyone this great new secret she found out."

"Maybe we don't tell them, but start dropping clues, the types of things that aren't necessarily obvious but could lead them to the truth if they really want to find it."

"Like showing up unannounced at the front door, without a rental car or other means of transportation?" He gave her a knowing smile and moved fractionally closer. That was one of his favorite memories, though at the time he was so happy to see her that he didn't even think about just how weird of a situation it was.

"If I recall, you didn't even catch on after that one," she said, with a wiggle of the eyebrows. She was irresistible when she teased him, and he couldn't stop himself from leaning down and capturing her lips. After a few happy moments he forced himself to pull away. There wasn't enough time to continue down that path, no matter how badly he wanted to.

"What if we give them a smaller secret to digest first and see how that goes? I still haven't told them that my new friend is the famous, rich, high-powered executive Sam Wayne, son of billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne. When I tell them, they'll probably wonder why I haven't asked him for a job."

Laura nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good first step, I guess, and you can tell them that without revealing any of the finer points of your relationship to him and his relationship with me. Then you can see if that causes any issues, if they get that whole celebrity shell shock that some people get."

"Right. Then if everything goes smoothly we'll move up to the bigger stuff. 'Hey Mom, Dad, guess what? I climbed to the top of the tallest building in Gotham to meet Batman, who then took me out to help with crimefighting. Yeah, he's Laura's brother by the way. And the girl I'm marrying? She flies! My future father-in-law was born on another planet – how cool is that?'"

Laura pulled a face. “I guess it sounds like a lot when you put it like that. Starting small is probably a good idea.”

Matt raised his eyebrows, then looked at his watch and uttered an expletive. “I need to get back to work,” he said, giving her another quick kiss. “Love you.” He moved to leave, but then stopped, turned back to her, and bent down to kiss her stomach. “Love you, too,” he said more quietly. Laura put her hand on his shoulder, and her expression at that moment made him feel warm inside. They were on the cusp of becoming a family, a real one, and it was scary to think about how everything would change when that did happen. But he knew without a doubt that Laura loved him, and even though she could literally move mountains, he would find it within himself to do the same for her if she asked. And as long as they had that level of love and commitment, they could get through almost anything.

“See you tonight,” she said softly, and he nodded. With that, he left. It would be darn hard to work that afternoon, but he would get through it, and his reward would be coming back to her once it was done.

Clark leaned back in his chair and stared as his computer monitor. When Laura had been there over lunch, she had given him videos recorded on her phone when she was in the past, little tributes from his parents meant for him and Lois. He had immediately installed them on his PC, his phone, and saved them in about 5 other places, just to make sure they never got lost. Then, after the anticipation got to be too much, he sat down with Lois in the study and watched them. Then they watched them again. And now that he’d had the whole afternoon and evening to ponder the situation, he wanted to watch them yet again, though he knew that Lois would accuse him of obsessing once he did.

When he had first met Jon 28 years ago, it had been an eye-opening moment. For the first time in his life, there was someone like him, someone he could talk to about all the challenges that came with growing up “super,” someone who would have his back when things weren’t going his way, or could fill in for him on the superhero circuit when he just needed some time off. Even though Jon was only there for a couple of days, it made Clark realize how much better things could be, and how much he wanted someone like Jon in his life. He had only recently found out that Jon’s presence was what made Lois decide that she wanted children, and if he was honest, the same was true for him. If having kids meant having someone like Jon in his life, then he wanted that more than anything, even if it would probably take years before they were patrolling the skies together. It was only as time went by that he realized that the Jon he met in 1997 was, in fact, his son. So many little things added up to prove the point, from happenings that reminded him of stories that Jon had told him, to just his general appearance and demeanor. The photos, of course, were the lynch pin, though even after he got that confirmation, it was interesting to watch things play out, to watch the Crimson Superman come to life and move from a shy, uncertain kid to the confident man he was now, and to watch Jon become a husband and father along the way.

About a week ago, when the first robbery was reported involving perpetrators who disappeared through some invisible pothole, Clark began to suspect that they had arrived at the point in history when Jon would be sent back in time. He had made a vow long ago that he wouldn’t butt into the case when it came around, if only to preserve history, though the fact that Jon hadn’t asked for help had made it easy. He had known immediately when Jon had disappeared – it was hard to dismiss the strong feeling that something was missing, and the fact that Jon never made it back to work that afternoon, coupled with the lack of disasters requiring super attention, only confirmed it. He kept waiting for Diane or Laura or CJ to come ask him for assistance at that point, but to his surprise they didn’t. He mentioned his concerns to Lois before

leaving for the Justice League mixer that night, and she advised patience. It was both satisfying and frustrating that his responsible, intelligent children really didn’t need his input and advice to solve problems anymore. In this case, they quickly made some headway in putting the case together without his help, though, as he found out, they hardly did it by themselves.

When Laura had stealthily recorded him at the party, he figured something was up. It was only after Laura left and the party had wrapped up that Barry had come to Clark and told him what was going on, and how he was involved, both in the present and the past. As much as Jon’s trip to through time had affected Clark and Lois, it had undoubtedly affected Barry more. First and foremost, it had been a stark demonstration of what his cosmic treadmill was capable of, and led him to contemplate the real dangers that it held, certainly in the wrong hands. On a more personal front, knowing that Superman was married and would eventually have children forced him to rethink his relationship with Iris. Before meeting Jon and Laura, he had loved Iris, but he had resigned himself to a life where she was kept at arm’s length, figuring it would be better for both of them. But if Superman had decided that the danger his wife would be exposed to due to her association with a superhero was dwarfed by the strength they both gained from their relationship, then what was he so scared of? If the Man of Steel could make his relationship work, then surely there was hope for Barry with Iris. The encounter with Jon and Laura also made him think about the potential benefits that could come from simply talking with someone who faced the same challenges in their life. They could be resources for each other, offer support and backup; all the things that Clark had yearned for when he met Jon were true of Barry as well. Clark recalled the Flash introducing himself not too long after Jon left; now he knew why.

Barry had let Clark know that he’d been on the case of the porthole bandits for a very long time, long enough that he’d been able to crack it almost before the first robbery happened. As far as villains went, the porthole robbers were hardly more than a blip on the radar, and they were memorable really only for the technology they invented and the havoc it caused. But the technology had the potential to be revolutionary, and as dangerous as the cosmic treadmill could be in the wrong hands, a portable device that could create shortcuts through time and space was doubly perilous, especially since it didn’t require any special powers or abilities to do so. As someone who had created a couple of hiccups in time himself and learned the hard way what comes from irresponsible time travel, Barry had a vested interest in making sure that this particular case got closed quickly and fairly quietly. Nobody outside of a select group of people would have any idea what had actually happened, or what the device was capable of, and that was just fine with Barry, and Clark.

Now that Jon was back safe and the case solved, Clark had been ready to debrief him, his planned discussion 28 years in the making. What he hadn’t been prepared for in all this, though, would be the role that a simple smart phone would play. He knew that Jon had stayed with his folks, and he assumed they had talked, but he had no idea about Laura’s great plan to share the future with them via video, and was not expecting anything from them upon her return. He had some old videos of his parents that he watched upon occasion, usually when he was feeling melancholy. They generally showed old birthday parties or holidays, or other important moments in their life, such as when CJ and Laura had been born. Those were snapshots of individual moments in time, old familiar memories viewed from a different perspective than those held in his mind’s eye. These videos from Laura were something new, unexpected, and it felt odd seeing them, listening and watching his parents after thinking that all his interactions with them were relegated to the past. It was almost intoxicating, and he found that he couldn’t get enough.

The wait to watch them again through a long afternoon of work had been pure torture, and once he got home he found his gaze often wandering toward the computer. Lois surely noticed, though she was kind enough to not mention anything to him. Her expression had been knowing when she had excused herself for a walk a few minutes earlier, leaving him alone to indulge in another viewing of the video. Now, finally, he could see their faces again, listen to their words, and bask in their affection. His heart raced slightly as he leaned forward and pushed a button on his keyboard to play the video. After a second, a window popped up, and the video started to play.

The first image that came was his mom fiddling with the phone that the video was recorded on, then setting it down and backing up so she was next to his dad. “Hi Honey!” Martha said, the happiness in her voice genuine, just like he remembered. “We’ve had a great couple of days with Jon and Laura. They are such wonderful children, Clark, and we can’t tell you how much we enjoyed having them here. They’re both sweet, polite, helpful, and so eager to please...they really do remind me of you.” She smiled for a moment, then her smile started to fade. “I know from the way that they talk that we aren’t with you anymore, and probably haven’t been for a few years. It’s hard for us to think about, though I can’t say I’m surprised. I just want to make sure you’re okay.” She looked down and swallowed. “Superman may be invulnerable, but you have so much love inside you that I’m sure you were devastated when it happened. But you have a beautiful family who loves you, and you have our permission to move on, to be happy.”

Martha sniffed and smiled, her hand chasing away the wetness from her eye. “Jon and Laura talk about us like revered Gods sometimes, and we had to set them straight,” Jonathan continued with a little chuckle. “I’m sure you’ve told them all the flattering stories and left out the more humanizing ones. And I can tell from their words that you’ve insinuated all the good that’s within you, all the good that Superman does for the world comes from us. It’s a flattering thought, but you deserve so much more credit for all that than we do. We just did what we thought was right, tried to teach you right from wrong. You were the one who wore the suit and faced down Lex Luthor and marauding aliens. You raised those kids, and you did a fantastic job. You and Lois.”

Martha nodded. “You taught them their values and made them who they are. I just wish we could’ve met Sam, too. He sounds like he was quite the handful.” She looked at Jonathan, who bobbed his head. “The future is in good hands, we can tell.”

“Your boy showed us video from your last family Christmas,” Jonathan said. “Between that and the testimonials that Laura brought with her, it felt like we got to meet everyone. And we got to see you and Lois. Your family has so much love...you should be proud. I know we are.”

“And that family we saw in the video, the roomful of men and women, they all knew you are Superman. We heard coded conversations about going to rescues and making excuses, and nobody batted an eyelash. You trusted them with your secret – you, who once told me that you were never going to tell another living soul about yourself. But you let them in, and it’s led to nothing but love. That’s probably what I’m most proud of. I’m sure you’re not the man now that we know, I’m sure life has changed you, but it sure looks like you’ve learned the correct lessons from life.

“We love you, honey,” Martha said. “Lois, too. And those kids of yours, even though we just met, we love the heck out of them, too. Keep up the good work. And be happy, you deserve that.” With that, Martha reached toward the phone, and the video stopped. Clark stared at the computer for a long moment, unmoving, before finally forcing himself to minimize the window. It was amazing how they always seemed to know just what to say. Even from 28 years in the past, they anticipated what he needed to

hear to heal the wounds that their passing had left.

At that moment, he became aware of a hand on his arm, and looked up to see Lois standing behind him, a sad smile on her face. “You couldn’t resist, huh?” she said, and he could only shrug. She patted him a couple times, then went to sit on the small sofa. “I can’t blame you. It was great to see them again.”

“Really great,” Clark said with a nod, turning his desk chair to face her. “And so unexpected. We’ve had decades to digest everything else that happened on that trip, but this...I had no idea.” He gestured toward the computer.

“You have a very thoughtful daughter,” Lois said. “Maybe too thoughtful. It’s almost like she was buttering you up to deliver some big news....”

Clark scoffed, though Lois’s half smile told him she was teasing. “She knows that she doesn’t need to butter me up, especially when her news means that our family will be expanding. And I can imagine she used her trip to the past to talk the situation over with Mom, since she is renowned for giving sound advice.”

“Oh, I’m sure. Though I’m a little disappointed that she didn’t come to me first.”

Clark reached out for Lois’s hand and gave his most reassuring smile. “Can you blame her? You’re her mom, the person who always laid down the law in this family.”

“You were no help there,” Lois muttered, and Clark chuckled.

“I’m just saying, even though we’re all happy that there’s a baby on the way, it isn’t happening under the best of circumstances. She was probably scared of what you’d say. If it makes you feel any better, she didn’t come to me, either, even though we have a very trusting relationship.”

“I guess,” Lois said with a sigh, turning Clark’s hand over.

“Well, the truth is out there now, and there’s no going back.”

Clark looked at her for a moment, then hid a smile. “It’s going to be hard to dote on her when she’s all the way up in Gotham City, isn’t it?”

“Terrible,” Lois answered immediately. She released his hand and stood, walking over to bump him with her hip before continuing toward the door. “At least I have reliable transportation.”

“I see,” he said, leaning over to turn off the computer monitor before rising and following her out of the room. “I don’t see her willingly being mothered over the next few months.”

“You might be surprised,” Lois said with a glance over her shoulder. “She still has a wedding to plan and school to finish on top of doctor’s appointments and everything else. This might be the ideal time for a little mother-daughter bonding. My mom and I did a fair amount of bonding when Jonathan came along, if you recall.”

“How could I not?” he mumbled. Even with Ellen living in Metropolis at the time, she practically moved into their brownstone when Lois was pregnant. And although Lois grumbled about it at the time, she also gladly accepted the help, especially in the last few months, when she was generally uncomfortable most of the time. It had been an adjustment for Clark not being able to relax and be completely himself at home, though in some ways it was a precursor of things to come.

“Seems like a long time ago,” Lois said wistfully, quietly.

Clark put his hands on her shoulders and guided her into the hallway. “Then let’s go make some new memories,” he said with one last glance back toward the computer. The message from his parents was a new memory that he would cherish forever. But in the grand scheme of things, everything else that was happening in their ever-expanding family was much more important. Dwelling on the past could make you lose sight of the future, and right now the future was exciting indeed.

EPILOGUE

2 MONTHS LATER

CJ put down the screwdriver and leaned back, regarding his creation with a pleased smile. Before returning the porthole device to the Metropolis PD, he had thoroughly reverse engineered it, ensuring that he could build one himself if the mood struck him. After the robbers were busted, he got a list of the stolen items recovered from the apartment from Jon, who had seen the whole stash firsthand. Then he had embarked on a series of theoretical physics discussions with a friend of his who worked at Gotham State. Gradually a picture began to form of what the stolen components could accomplish when put together with the existing porthole device, and he decided to see if he could engineer something that would accomplish what the porthole robbers couldn't.

Many long nights at his workbench later, his own device was now ready. In addition to being able to move through shortcuts on space in a controlled way, it should also be able to move through time, sending him to where he wished in a predictable fashion, and without having to use any sort of super speed. He had prepared for this moment, of course, rigging up a little camera on a selfie stick with a wired connection in his cave that he could send through the porthole in his place, beaming back images of whatever was on the other side. That way he could test it out and not risk anyone's safety.

Without further ado, he pushed some buttons on device's display, and a shimmery porthole formed in front of him. In testing it out, his first stops would be known events from the past, since they found out firsthand that traveling to the past was the easier trip. He picked up the stick, made sure the camera was on, then looked over to his computer monitor and saw the pictures it was sending. Then he approached the porthole, regarded it for a second, and pushed the camera through.

He couldn't help but smile as he saw the image that presented itself on his monitor. It was the fountain in Centennial Park in Metropolis on a stormy evening in the spring of 1995. Reaching for a remote, he turned on his computer speakers so he could hear the audio from the feed, as well. As he watched, the much younger versions of his parents stopped, obviously engaged in an emotional conversation. The camera was relatively far away from them, so he had to turn up the gain on the microphone before he could hear them speaking. Once he could, though, his heart swelled.

"...I felt ashamed," Clark said.

"Ashamed? Why?" Lois answered.

"Because I kept pushing you away, even when I promised I'd stop. And if you died without ever knowing why, I'd never forgive myself. Because I love you. And so, I wanted to say..." Clark took a step back and moved to reach for his pocket, but at that moment lightning flashed, and a loud peal of thunder shook them.

Lois laughed. "Do you want to go back?" she asked, but Clark's face only filled with resolve.

"If the earth opened up at my feet, I wouldn't move until I'd said this," he said, then dropped to his knee. "Lois, will you marry me?"

She regarded him for a long moment, then smiled slyly and reached for his glasses, pulling them off his face as she spoke. "Who's asking — Clark, or Superman?" she asked, and at first Clark seemed shocked, but it quickly passed, and he was soon smiling back at her. They stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity, then the skies opened up and he took her hand. They raced away toward shelter, away from the porthole, and CJ decided that it was time to call this experiment a success.

He withdrew the stick from the porthole, shaking the rain off it as he did. His cheeks were starting to hurt from smiling so wide — that proposal was the thing that sappy TV shows were made of. He'd heard all about it before, of course, but there was something about actually seeing it. Even for two people who showed their

love for each other in small ways every day, the proposal stood out for its honesty and simplicity. With a contented sigh, CJ put the stick down and picked up the porthole device, pushing a button to deactivate it. He then pushed a few more, and another porthole appeared. Next stop: the night Crimson Superman was born.

On the screen was the campus of Metropolis University at night, the green filled with people streaming toward the chemistry building, which had recently collapsed in an explosion. Something that sounded like thunder filled the air around them, and a moment later, Crimson Superman, Jon, showed up cradling a middle-aged man covered with blood and soot. As he landed, the crowd seemed to stop, their gasps audible. Jon leaned over and gently laid the man on the soft grass, then looked up, his eyes wide with fear. It was an odd sight for CJ, who was used to seeing the confident hero that Jon has turned into, though her seemed to recall that it had taken him several months to get over his initial shyness. The scene only lasted a moment, then Jon was gone, back into the fire, though he returned again a minute or so later, this time avoiding even glancing at the crowd. CJ watched the cycle repeat a few times until, finally, their dad showed up. CJ withdrew the stick from the porthole and sighed. In some ways that night seemed like it had happened yesterday, but so much had changed since that time, and it only took a look around to confirm that. It had literally been a lifetime ago for him, and a stab of nostalgia knifed through him before he shook his head and refocused. He still had an experiment to complete.

Next came the hard part: opening a porthole to the future. For simplicity's sake, he decided to direct it to the cave, right where he was standing, 20 years on the future. Pushing a few buttons, the shimmery circle appeared again, though this time it seemed to carry a slight tint. He took a deep breath and put the camera in the hole, and frowned a bit at the image that appeared onscreen. The high tech equipment appeared to be gone, and the cave in general seemed covered with debris. It also looked like part of the ceiling had caved in, he thought, repositioning the camera to get a better look. As he did, someone grabbed it and yanked it out of his hand, rotating it such that it was now looking in the opposite direction from where it had been. There, in the image on the screen, was a younger man with a full beard and shaggy, almost shoulder-length light brown hair, wearing a blank gray spandex suit with padding at the shoulders and forearms. His eyes were a piercing blue, but the lines around them made him appear much older than CJ had previously thought.

"It's you, isn't it? Looking at me from the past?" he said, his voice intense, almost angry. A moment later, a gray spandex-covered leg was coming through the porthole, and CJ found himself subconsciously backing away, though he couldn't take his eyes off the scene in front of him. Next came an arm, hips and shoulders, then, finally, the man that he had seen on his monitor. The man's intimidating demeanor seemed to soften as he caught sight of CJ, and the then rest of his surroundings. For a moment he seemed almost awestruck, until his eyes landed on the device generating the porthole, and the anger returned. "You need to destroy that thing. You have no idea what you're dealing with," he said, pointing at the device.

CJ stood up straighter and set his feet apart, crossing his arms across his chest in his most commanding pose. It occurred to him that at that moment he wasn't wearing any kind of mask or uniform, he was just Sam Wayne in his cave of toys, but his visitor didn't seem at all surprised about that. He seemed to know exactly who he was dealing with and where he was, and the fact was that he wasn't wearing a mask, either, and the clothing he was wearing seemed to be part of a more involved costume probably meant that he was another member of the League. "Why don't you enlighten me, then," CJ said, trying not to sound defensive.

"History is held in delicate balance, and when you start playing with time, changing things, time will always try to make it

right,” he said, parroting lines that CJ had heard recently from Barry. “And the more you change, the worse it gets. Jon recently went in time, didn’t he? And his actions directly led to your wife’s very existence.”

“How did you know that?” CJ asked with narrowed eyes, but the other man just smiled coldly. He was sure that the story of Jon’s time travel adventure would become the stuff of legend in years to come, the story told at League meetings and family events, to new family members and friends. But that little detail, the fact that Jenny owed her life to Jon, was not something that he ever intended to advertise.

“Because a time anomaly led to her coming to be, time is going to try to reclaim her. The more you mess with time, the more little things you change, intentionally or not, the more time is going to try and correct itself. It will start off as little incidents, close calls that could be shrugged off as bad luck or coincidence – barely avoided car crashes, near misses with speeding vehicles or falling debris while walking, even close calls with mother nature while out on family trips. Barry will warn you about what’s happening, but you won’t listen.” The man took a step forward, and what was intensity in his expression was gradually transitioning to raw pain. “Then, after one particularly memorable trip in time, a triumph of crime fighting that led to the dismantling of organized crime in Gotham...” he stopped, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “There was a gas leak, somewhere under the mansion. It probably leaked for days, the fire marshal thought, settling in the subbasement. All it took was one little spark – nobody knows where it came from – to set off a humongous explosion. You survived, of course, but Mom...” He looked away.

Goosebumps rose on CJ’s arms, and they slowly dropped to his side. “Adam?” he whispered.

“She never had a chance,” he continued. “And my siblings... they weren’t strong enough yet. I barely survived,” he said, pulling up his sleeve to show burn scars. CJ activated his x-ray vision, looking beneath the surface of Adam’s clothing and seeing the scars covering his body. In some places he could see what looked like shrapnel damage, missing muscle and healed bones, and, as his eyes swept down his body, a couple missing toes. CJ gasped, but Adam kept talking. It was all CJ could do to listen past the blood pumping loudly in his ears. “And you might as well have been dead. You lost yourself in the cowl for a while, took out your pain on the criminal element that remained, then you just left...” Adam looked at him, sadness reflected in his eyes for a moment, before his expression hardened.

“I have a hard time believing I could ever become that person,” CJ rasped. “I’ve spent years trying to bring hope to Gotham, to change Batman’s image, make him into someone positive, someone more like Superman.”

Adam’s smile was rueful. “If you lose enough, you’d be surprised what you’re capable of.”

“I’d never abandon you,” CJ countered adamantly, but Adam shook his head.

“I made it clear that I didn’t want you around,” Adam said, turning back toward the porthole. “As far as I was concerned, you might as well have killed them yourself. It took a lot of patience from Grandpa to help me tackle that anger and try to find forgiveness, but the scars will always be there.” He took a step forward, then relaxed, letting his guard down ever so slightly. In that moment CJ could see the shadow of the boy he knew, and the tragedy of the story that was told finally him fully. “Something told me I needed to keep a watch over the cave, that something would happen there, and now I know why,” Adam said, his voice quiet. “We’ve been given an opportunity to set things right, to rewrite the past in a positive way.” He stood up straighter and looked back over his shoulder toward CJ, his features hardening once again. “If you care about your wife, about any of us, about yourself... destroy that damn thing,” he said, pointing again at the

device, then he stepped back through the porthole.

For many moments, CJ was too stunned to move, and he could feel his heart beating quickly and heavily in his chest as he stood there. The dystopian future that had just presented itself was almost too terrible to contemplate. But that had been Adam, his beautiful, perfect boy, now scarred and emotionally broken, standing here in his cave, and there was no denying that. There was also no denying the pictures he saw from the other side of the porthole, the rubble and destruction. The story had to be true, as awful as it sounded, and he vowed that he would move heaven and earth to make sure that it never came to be. Without another thought, he strode over to one of the display cases, broke the glass, and grabbed the large mallet that once belonged to Harley Quinn. He then walked over to the porthole device, pushed a button to deactivate it, then threw it on the ground, swung the mallet, and smashed it into a thousand pieces. He swung the mallet a few more times in blind anger even after there was absolutely nothing left to destroy, then stopped himself, putting it down. Next he reached to the workbench for his research notes and schematics, held them over the concrete floor and shot a beam of heat vision, incinerating them. All at once he felt exhausted, the adrenaline that had been fueling him having drained away, and he stumbled over to the chair by the computer, sinking into it and burying his face in his hands, letting the rest of his emotions out. A wave of nausea swept over him, and for a moment he thought that he was going to throw up for the first time since he was a small child, but the moment quickly passed.

As he sat there, the images of the future version of his son passed in front of his vision. The accusation in his words and eyes, the sheer contempt with which he looked at CJ... even in his darkest nightmares, he would never imagine such a thing was possible, especially considering CJ’s relationship with his own father and how much he tried to emulate that with his son. Maybe his future self deserved that contempt, he thought briefly, ruefully, before dismissing the notion. Losing Jennifer, losing any of his children, really would be a fate worse than death for him, and the idea that he would run from Adam in those circumstances was abhorrent. But, what if...? What if the knowledge that he was responsible for those deaths led him to believe that the only way Adam had any chance of survival was staying as far away from him as he could? What if he couldn’t stand to look at himself in the mirror anymore and didn’t want anyone else seeing him, either? What if he secretly wished that the explosion had taken him, too? CJ shuddered. It didn’t matter, he told himself, because that future was gone now, and would never come to be.

It felt like hours passed before he had the strength to get up again, though in truth it was probably only a matter of minutes. He wanted to go upstairs and embrace his family, to hold them and not let go, but he was afraid of what he looked like at that moment, and he didn’t trust his voice. Instead he turned on the computer and composed an e-mail to the Wayne Manor groundskeeper asking him to look into a replacing the natural gas system and all appliances than ran off it with something that ran on renewable energy, ostensibly in a bid to help the environment. He would gladly tear up the yard and install geothermal elements, or ruin his view of the city by installing wind turbines, if it meant eliminating any possibility of the future that Adam laid out coming to bear.

After finally calming his nerves, he switched everything off and left the cave without looking back. Maybe the time was right to start spending less time out fighting crime and spend more with his family. Being Batman could easily become an obsession – Bruce Wayne was the poster child for that – but next to his children and their future, it just wasn’t all that important. Time could be fleeting, and every moment he was able to spend with them was precious. He never wanted to have Adam look at him the way that future Adam had, never wanted him to be think that CJ

had anything but his best interests in mind. And he never wanted to turn into the type of person that would run away from his family when things got tough.

Forcing a smile on his face, CJ laid his hand on the door to the mansion, took a deep breath, and opened it. Sleep would probably not come easily that night, and whatever sleep he did get would probably be filled with horrible visions of a possible future that would now never come to be. But he had survived bad dreams before, survived plenty of questions about what his future held, and he had come out just fine. No close calls would cause him to lose his sense of humor or positive outlook, and he vowed to never lose sight of the important things in life. The future wasn't written yet, and that was a beautiful thing.

THE END