

Stepping Into the Light

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

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Summary: After leaving Gotham (and Nightwing) behind, Clark Kent finds himself in Metropolis, and facing his true destiny.

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This is a direct sequel to "[Embracing The Darkness](#)." Please read that story first, if you haven't already. Thanks! And enjoy!

Clark Kent stepped off the Greyhound bus and took a long, deep breath, inhaling all the scents the city had to offer. It wasn't unlike others he'd been to around the world. That mixture of pollution, -from exhaust pipes and discarded cigarette stubs still smoldering on the sidewalk and dumpsters filled to the brim with rotting refuse — chaos, and too many people crowded into too small an area was familiar to Clark. He took another breath, this time concentrating on the subtler scents. Hotdogs being sold from a cart on the corner. The smoky, choking fumes as the bus pulled away. The cloyingly sweet scent of the perfume that the old woman next to him was wearing. The minty gum the man on his other side was chewing. Ripe mangoes being sold in front of a small grocery store. Roasted chestnuts from another cart. Fresh horse manure from a mounted policeman's steed.

And something else, Clark thought. Something intangible.

Hope.

A fresh start.

Home.

Clark found himself instantly entranced by the city and all the opportunities it held within it for anyone and everyone. He only hoped that he would find his opportunity for a permanent home and job here too.

Please, he mentally pleaded with the universe.

His cell phone rang, just as the light to cross the street turned green. Clark answered it as he picked up his suitcase. He started to move with the throng of other pedestrians.

"Hey, Bruce," he answered, correctly guessing the caller without even looking at the small display.

"Hey. How's Metropolis?"

"Just arrived," Clark responded with an involuntary shrug.

"The bridge was a little backed up, so the trip took a little more time than I'd anticipated. It's a good thing I'm not scheduled to meet with Perry White until tomorrow."

"Well, good luck with it," Bruce replied sincerely. "Glad you got there safely."

"Thanks, Bruce."

"So, where are you staying?"

"Not sure yet. I'll let you know. I passed a few hotels on the way to my stop, but I didn't get a great of at look at them."

"Let me call in a few favors. I can get you a room at the Lexor, for as long as you need."

"That's generous of you, but I'd rather not," Clark said with revulsion in his voice and an actual, physical shudder as he reached the opposite sidewalk.

The mere mention of the multibillionaire's name caused bile to rise in the back of Clark's throat and his heart rate to spike in defensiveness. And that wasn't just because he was Bruce's rival in practically every way — business acquaintances or not. There was something about the man that unsettled Clark. Something hidden deep within, that Luthor clearly worked hard to hide from the world. Something that felt...sinister, in a way.

"You still don't trust Lex Luthor, do you?" Bruce sighed audibly.

"I haven't trusted him since you introduced him to me when I was seventeen," Clark confirmed. "There's something about him, Bruce. He just strikes me as someone to stay away from."

"He's a businessman, Clark. Half of them act just like him. More than half," he immediately corrected. "I'll admit he's a bit cutthroat, but sometimes a little...aggression...is needed in running a company as large as LexCorps. Or Wayne Enterprises, for that matter."

"No," Clark said, shaking his head. "Look, Bruce, I've known you for eleven years now. Not once did you *ever* make me feel uncomfortable in your presence. But *him*? A chill runs up my spine every time. I feel like...like an insect under his microscope. And not just me. He looks at *everyone* that way, even you. Only with you, it's worse. There's a lot of contempt there, when he looks at you."

Bruce hesitated for a moment. "I may not necessarily feel the same way, but I've always trusted your instincts. If you say to watch out for him, I will."

"You know I've *always* said it," Clark confirmed with a slight smile.

Bruce chuckled. "Yeah, you have. Okay. So, the Lexor is out. Any other ideas?"

"None. I'm going to look around a bit. Like I said, I passed a few on the way in. I didn't get a great look, but I thought I saw a decent place a few blocks up from where I am now."

"Okay. Let me know. I have a conference call coming up in a few minutes. Glad you arrived in Metropolis okay."

"Thanks, Bruce. I'll be in touch."

Clark ended the call and looked around, feeling intangibly better for having talked to Bruce, their conversation about Luthor aside. He could scarcely believe that he was here, in Metropolis, with an interview scheduled for the next day at The Daily Planet. He'd been reading that paper for as long as he could remember. Even back in Smallville, when he was a kid, the Planet had been accessible to him at most of the stores that sold magazines and newspapers. He could remember pouring over the front-page headlines as a kid whilst standing in line at the supermarket with his mother, or picking up a copy at the local barbershop while waiting for a haircut, or for Martha to finish getting her hair done.

At first, he'd liked the comics and had paid little attention to the news. But as he'd grown older and more aware of the world around him, he'd felt it was important to see what was actually going on around the globe. The Daily Planet was the best place for him to get that kind of information. And now, in a dream come true, he was going to do everything in his power to get a job there.

Still, the mention of Lex Luthor had thrown a dark rain cloud over his otherwise sunny afternoon. He wished he could pinpoint what, exactly, it was about the man that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand at uncomfortable attention. There was just something about Luthor. Something that felt almost bloodthirsty — more so than just a rich man commanding an empire he'd built from basically the ground up. As yet, it was so much more than just the man's reputation as a ruthless businessman. Luthor had always felt *fake* to Clark, despite the way he could ooze with

charm in the public's eye. But Clark knew better. The man was cold. Calculating. Almost reptilian, to Clark's discerning eyes. Like a snake, tightly coiled in the corner, waiting to strike at unsuspecting prey.

But, Clark had to admit — as much as he hated to — that perhaps Bruce was right, and it really *was* just Luthor's way of conducting business. After all, as Clark had seen up close and personally for eleven years, the nice guys in business rarely finished first. Bruce himself was as nice as they came, but even he would often resort to taking a hard, firm approach to business deals. Never in a rude or hurtful way, but in a manner that clearly showed who was in charge of things.

It was a real shame, Clark thought, that Luthor's home was Metropolis — the same place Clark desperately wanted to make his *own* home.

Well, no matter.

Clark Kent was no longer a part of the elite society of the one percent. He was just an average, working man now — gleefully part of the middle class. Aside from articles he might need to cover about Luthor, chances were slim he'd have much dealings with the man. At least, he hoped.

In any case, he wasn't going to think about Lex Luthor right now. Today he was simply going to live in the moment, find a hotel, and just enjoy his first day in the city. Somehow, in his world travels, he'd never spent any time in Metropolis. Flown over it on his way to other places, sure, but never landed and explored the place.

Now that he was here, he couldn't help but to wonder why that was.

Five blocks up, Clark found the hotel he'd seen whilst still on the bus. The Metropolis Tower Suites, it proudly boasted in shining gold letters. Clark entered through the front door and made his way to the reception desk. A plucky young woman named Allison was manning the desk, and smiled flirtatiously at Clark as he approached.

"Hi there! Welcome to the Metropolis Tower Suites! Are you checking in?"

"That depends," Clark said with a friendly smile as he set his luggage down. "What are your rates?"

"Well, we have several room options available," she replied, her smile unmoving. She slid a brochure over to him to look at. "Our standard Queen room is one hundred eighty a night. A King bed is a little more. All the way up to our top of the line, multi-room suites for five hundred a night."

Clark hesitated. It was a little more expensive than he'd hoped for, but considering some of the other hotels he'd passed on the way, he was inclined to spend the money for a decent place. The Hotel Apollo, in particular, had appeared to be moldering just from a glance at the outside. He mentally shuddered at the memory of the rusted, crooked sign.

"Okay," he said at last. "I'll go with the Queen-sized bed."

"Perfect!" Allison exclaimed. "And how long will you be staying with us?"

"I'm not sure," Clark said with a shake of his head. "Depends on a few factors that are out of my hands. I hope that isn't a problem?" he said, the statement somehow twisting into a question as he said it.

"That's fine," Allison encouraged him. "I'll just make a note in the system..."

She typed away at her computer for a moment before continuing on to take Clark's personal information and a credit card to have on file. Finally, she handed him the key to room 231.

"Thanks," Clark said, pocketing the key to free up his hands.

"My pleasure. Enjoy your stay!"

Clark dipped his head in acknowledgement, then picked up his luggage and made his way to the elevators. One was letting off passengers as he approached, so he stepped inside once it was fully vacant and pushed the button for the second floor. A minute

later he was getting back out of the car and heading down the hall to his room.

It was a completely unremarkable room, not that he'd anticipated anything overly fancy. A comfortable looking Queen bed commanded the center of the room. A cherry colored wooden desk stood off to one side. A small television stood atop the dresser and a laminated card nearby informed him of what channels he could choose from. The bathroom boasted a simple shower stall — not even a tub — and a toilet. Outside of the small room was the sink with a marble countertop and a large mirror. It wasn't home, but it would do. Clark went to the window to check out the view. At least that was exceptional, he mused. Since his room was toward the back of the building, it overlooked a small courtyard with a few benches and some flowering bushes and trees. It was quieter on that side of the building too, without the constant noise of the city streets and traffic directly before the window.

"Well," he said to himself, "with any luck, I'll be looking for an apartment within the next week or so."

To give himself a task, he unpacked his scant belongings. Then he put his suitcase in the closet, getting it out of his way. He stretched out on the bed and sighed contentedly. It truly *was* a comfortable mattress.

"Although," he continued, "I could get used to this place." He chuckled.

He set up his laptop on the desk and booted it up. The first thing he did was to check his email. There was nothing except spam there, so he deleted all of the messages. Then he sent a quick message to Bruce, giving his friend the information about his accommodations. The hotel had a pool, so he quickly changed his clothing and made his way back down to the lobby. Following the signs to the right of the elevators, he found his way to the indoor pool.

The area was exquisite. Trees stood everywhere in the room and large glass windows looked out over the courtyard. Tables, chairs, and lounge chairs were more than abundant. Clark picked a lounge chair and tossed his towel and room key on it, staking his claim. Then he was stepping into the warm water, and feeling some of his tension melting away. He was here, in Metropolis. He'd made it. And tomorrow, he would nail his interview at The Daily Planet. He was sure of it.

At first, he merely stood in the chest-high water, but soon he began to swim laps back and forth across the length of the pool. No one else was in the water — it was, after all, two o'clock in the afternoon on a Wednesday — so he didn't need to worry about disturbing anyone as he swam. Still, to be on the safe side, he kept his speed to that of a normal human being, just in case someone was to come into the area.

After an hour or so, he grew bored with his laps. Attached to the pool was a hot tub, and its continuous bubbling was too enticing to pass up. Clark swam over, hoisted himself over the edge of the pool and into the steaming water. He sighed audibly as his body sank down amongst the bubbles when he sat. Invincible or not, he still could suffer from tired and knotted muscles. The hours on the bus to Metropolis hadn't been pleasant ones. And the traffic snag they'd hit hadn't helped things at all. A part of him wondered — again! — why he hadn't taken Bruce up on his offer to send him in a more comfortable car. Even his motorcycle would have been more comfortable, if only he'd had the space to put his luggage on it.

He closed his eyes and let the heat and constant pressure of the jets of water work their magic on him. Even the sound of the ever-roiling water and bubbles was soothing to him. It was so much better than the noises he'd heard on the bus — the roar of the engine, the blaring of car horns around them, the coughing and sneezing of individuals around him, a steady stream of conversations from people who'd only *thought* they were whispering to one another, the screech of the air brakes each time

they'd needed to make a stop. It had been exhausting to his sensitive ears. He sighed again as he slid an inch to the right, which allowed a jet of water to blast itself against the middle of his lower back.

After about half an hour, Clark grew bored. He left the hot tub and toweled off before heading back to his room. Once inside, he took a well-deserved shower and dressed once more. It was getting close to dinner time by then, so he headed out into the city again. He supposed he could just eat in the restaurant located within the hotel itself, but he wanted something that was more unique to Metropolis, rather than just standard, chain restaurant fare. He wasn't sure where to start looking, exactly, so he simply chose a direction and began walking. Downtown seemed as good a direction to go as any, so he found himself backtracking his earlier footsteps as he'd gone to the hotel. Fifteen blocks later, he found a charming-looking French restaurant and went inside.

The atmosphere was subdued as he entered; a definite positive in Clark's mind. He glanced over the menu and placed his order, then quietly watched the people out on the streets as he gazed out the large window he was next to. It was nice sometimes, to just sit and observe the world around him, even if he was a little lonely while he ate by himself. The food was good though and he mentally added the place as somewhere to return to. He left a hefty tip for his waitress before heading back to the hotel. A part of him wanted to explore the city some more, but he was also very tired. It was better for him to go rest and mentally prepare himself for his interview in the morning.

The elevator softly dinged, half a second before the door slid open, revealing the bullpen of The Daily Planet. Clark's heart skipped a beat. It had never done that before, not in regard to a job. Even when he'd gone to the Gotham Gazette to interview, it hadn't had this big of an impact on him. The Gazette was the big leagues to be sure, — after all, they *did* cover the news all over the world — but The Daily Planet was on a completely different level. This was a paper he'd been able to read in practically every country he'd ever been in. A job here would be a dream come true.

If Perry White liked him.

If he was offered a job.

If he could be an investigative journalist and stay in the city, the way he desperately wanted.

Well, he told himself, there's nothing to be gained from standing here all day.

So, he took that first, frightening step out into the bullpen, his briefcase in hand, packed full of writing samples, in case the editor asked for it. As the elevator door closed behind him, Clark stopped again and took in the atmosphere. Strong coffee brewing in the break area. A plate of fresh bagels. Phones ringing almost constantly. The beeping of the fax machine. The clicking of computer keyboards as the paper's reporters raced to get the news down into print. The smell of ink and newly printed papers. The trace of chemicals in the air as someone came out of the darkroom, a stack of photographs in hand. The low murmurs of the staff as they chatted about everything from the latest sporting event to the cases they were hard at work on.

This was what he'd always been missing, what his heart had yearned for as he'd traversed the globe for The Gotham Gazette. This sense of collaboration. This sense of permanence. This sense of truly making a difference in the world.

Please, he begged the universe. Let me get this job.

He made his way down the ramp and into the heart of the bullpen. From there, he wound his way through toward the back, where he could see the editor's office. As he made his way over, a young man nearly crashed into him in his haste. A camera hung around his neck and a camera bag was slung over his right shoulder.

"Oh, hey, sorry about that," the man apologized.

"No problem," Clark replied.

"I'm Jimmy," the man introduced himself. "Are you new here?"

Clark smiled. "Clark Kent. And I'm hoping to be."

Jimmy chuckled. "I take it you're here to see Perry then."

Clark nodded. "I am."

"You want me to walk you over to his office?" Jimmy offered.

"No, but thanks. I can manage. Besides, you look like you've got enough to do," he smiled, nodding at the camera Jimmy was fiddling with.

"Yeah," Jimmy admitted. "I need to get these pictures developed for the evening edition." He hesitated. "Uh, would you mind letting Perry know I'm working on the Silverstein photos? Since you're headed in that direction, I mean."

Clark chuckled. "You can count on me."

"Thanks," Jimmy said, nodding his head. "Good luck in there!"

"Thanks," Clark returned.

In the next second, Jimmy was off again, cutting through the bullpen with the speed and grace that only came from having spent a couple of years working in the same newsroom. Clark watched for a moment before he continued on. A few moments later, he found himself before the editor's open door. He took a steadying breath, then knocked.

The editor looked up, startled, from the article he was marking with a red pencil. Then he chuckled at himself. A good sign, Clark thought. Clearly, the man didn't take himself as seriously as some of the other men and women he'd known his lifetime.

"Boy, you scared me half to death. How can I help you?" the editor asked, putting aside the paper and pencil.

"Mr. White? My name is Clark Kent. We spoke on the phone a couple of days ago. I'm scheduled to interview with you," Clark began. Despite himself, he could feel every one of his nerves standing on edge.

"Kent? Kent?" Perry asked himself, as though trying to make a mental connection. He drummed his fingers on the top of his old wooden desk as he thought. Clark saw the flash of recognition when his name registered with the older man. "Oh yes! Kent! From The Gotham Gazette." He snapped his fingers as he did so, looking relieved and pleased to remember who Clark was.

Clark nodded. "That's me."

Mr. White waved him into his office as he stood. "Come in. Come in," he encouraged, extending a hand to Clark. "I apologize for not recognizing your name right away. It's been, well, a rough few weeks around here. Feels like my attention is always split between things lately. But we'll push through. The Planet always does."

Clark shook his hand. "Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. White."

"My pleasure," Mr. White said, gesturing to the plaid armchair in his office. "Have a seat."

Clark did as he was bid, and the editor took the opportunity to close the office door. Immediately, the sounds of the bullpen were shut out, making it easier for the two men to talk. Mr. White retreated back to his seat behind the desk.

"Thank you. And, might I just say, before I forget, I bumped into Jimmy in the newsroom. He said he's working on the Silverstein photos."

Mr. White cracked a tiny smile. "That kid's one of the fastest photographers I've ever had. He comes in here and he gets his film developed quicker than you can say 'blue suede shoes.' Thanks for letting me know."

"My pleasure," Clark said, relaxing by the tiniest of degrees. "He seemed like a great guy."

"Jimmy? Hell yeah. He's the best. Used to be more of a gofer around here, until he got shots of a bank robbery on his way into work one morning. Guess that was about... oh... maybe a year ago. A little less, I suppose. Kid's got a killer eye. I don't think I've turned away any of his photos yet. Does a hell of a job helping

with research too. But, well, let's get down to business, shall we?"

"I have a copy of my resume, if you'd like," Clark offered, nodding.

Mr. White nodded his approval and Clark handed it over. The man scanned it silently for a moment.

"So, The Gotham Gazette. That's a fine paper," he said after a moment.

"It is," Clark affirmed.

"I see you have a number of years of experience working there. What makes you want to come work for the Planet?"

"Well," Clark began, carefully choosing his words. "The Gazette was my first job out of college. I learned a lot there, and I'll always be grateful for the experience and the opportunities they gave me. But I was an overseas reporter. I basically just reported the facts and moved on. I had hoped to do more...to investigate hard hitting cases. The Gazette wasn't able to offer me the opportunity to move into that role," he explained, in response to the editor's unasked question of 'so why did you leave them?'

"I see," Mr. White said, in a tone that was hard to read. "And why do you want to work for the Planet?"

"Who *wouldn't* want to work for a world-renowned publication?" Clark replied with a smile. "It's been a dream of mine, ever since I decided on a career in Journalism, to work for a paper like this. A news source that outdoes itself on covering the events occurring all around the world. A paper everyone knows and respects as not only a pillar of truth, but of justice as well, because the investigations it runs get real results for the public."

Apparently, it was a good answer. A small smile tugged at the corners of the editor's mouth.

"Yes, well," Mr. White fairly beamed, "we *do* pride ourselves on getting just the facts out there."

"I remember being struck by how impressive the paper was, even when I was just a kid reading the headlines in the supermarket checkout line," Clark agreed.

Mr. White chuckled lightly. "You and me both. And I've been with this paper most of my life." He scanned Clark's resume again. "So, let me see. Looks like you left the Gazette a few months ago. And it doesn't look like you've done anything since."

"I know it probably doesn't look great," Clark acknowledged. "But after I resigned from the Gazette, I decided to take a few months to recharge. I'd been on the road for years, never settling in one place for more than a few weeks on average. I was a bit burnt out, to be perfectly honest. I knew I wasn't at my best, and didn't want to waste your time until I knew I was completely ready to dive back in and give it my all."

"And if I were to hire you, what guarantee do I have that you won't need another...shall we say, break?"

"Because," Clark said with all sincerity, "I thrive on being able to help people."

Mr. White chuckled again. "Whoa there! You aren't some vigilante hero, like that Batman character."

Clark allowed himself to laugh. "No, but reporters are their own class of superhero, if you think about it. Going out there, uncovering corruption, helping bring criminals to justice. It's...it's invigorating, isn't it?"

"Son, you sound like a man after my own heart," Mr. White laughed. "So, let me take a guess here. You aren't looking for an overseas reporting position."

Clark smiled at the man's teasing tone. "No, sir. It was an interesting experience to be sure, but I'd rather stick close to home from now on."

"You have some samples of your work?" Mr. White asked.

Clark's heart beat a little less fearfully. If the editor was asking to see his work, it could only mean he was at least interested in the idea of taking Clark on as an employee, right?

"Of course," Clark replied. He deftly extracted copies of his articles and handed the stack over to Mr. White.

For a long time, Mr. White looked through Clark's articles.

His features remained neutral, unreadable, and Clark felt his stomach tighten into knots. Mr. White cleared his throat a couple of times as he flipped through the stack of paper. That made Clark even *more* nervous. His heart was hammering so hard he thought that surely it would burst right out of his chest. After a small lifetime, the editor handed him the articles back.

"Well, you certainly *do* have quite the repertoire there," he said thoughtfully.

"I've been lucky enough to cover a wide variety of stories," Clark allowed.

"So it seems. Look, son, normally, I'd be looking for someone with more direct experience in doing in-depth investigations."

Clark's heart sank. "I see."

"Chief!" The door to Mr. White's office burst open half a heartbeat after a knock sounded on it. It was Jimmy.

"Olsen? What in the name of Elvis are you doing interrupting my interview?" Mr. White demanded.

"Hostage situation at the art museum. Lois said she's going and taking me," Jimmy said. He didn't even enter the room. He just stuck his head inside the doorframe.

"Hell, she's supposed to be covering the demolition of that old theater on Flatbush," the editor grumbled. He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. Then, "Go, but you tell her she'd better bring back Page One stuff!"

"Doesn't she always?" Jimmy asked with a teasing shrug. In the next second, he was gone, the door closing in his wake.

"If she wasn't the best damn reporter I have..." the editor said, rubbing his temples. He left the statement unfinished and shook his head. "All right. Where were we?" He thought for a couple of seconds. "Oh, right. Well, Kent, like I said. I usually would look for someone with a bit more investigative experience than you have. But I spoke to your old editor at the Gazette this morning, and he had nothing but the highest of praise for your work. So did Vicki Vale, by the way."

"Vicki? You spoke with her?" Clark asked, surprised. "I mean, she was never my editor or supervisor or anything. In fact, we never worked together on any stories. She was just a friend, that's all."

Mr. White nodded. "I know. And I took that into consideration. But what she said about you, Mr. Waters had said as well."

"Well...that was certainly nice of her," Clark said.

"And from what I saw in your articles," Mr. White continued, pointing to Clark's briefcase, where the stack of articles had been returned, "I see a lot of potential in you."

"You...do?" Clark stammered, shocked.

The editor nodded. "I do. Welcome to the Daily Planet, son."

He extended a hand and Clark took it, dazed. It all felt too unreal, a dream literally coming true. All the tension he'd been holding inside bled out of him, and Clark felt like he was in danger of shaking with relief.

"Thank you, Mr. White! I promise, you won't regret giving me this chance."

"I suspect I won't," Mr. White agreed. "But, well, there's one thing you need to do for me."

"Anything," Clark said sincerely.

"This is the last time you call me Mr. White, you hear?" He was smiling broadly now. "From now on, it's just Perry. Or Chief."

"Got it...Chief," Clark obliged.

It was so different at the Planet, he mused in the back of his brain. Everyone had been nice enough at The Gotham Gazette, but there had been far more formality there. Mr. Waters would never have permitted his staff to call him Hank or Chief. And that interruption by Jimmy? That would not have been tolerated nearly so well as Perry had allowed it. Already, the man felt more fatherly and caring than Clark had ever seen in a work situation. Even Bruce, to a certain degree, was unlike Perry, and Clark had always thought of his friend as an excellent, approachable, open,

and friendly boss to his staff.

“Good man. Now, normally I wouldn’t do this but, uh, would you mind starting today? As you heard, I need someone to cover the theater demolition. It’s scheduled for three this afternoon.”

“You can count on me, Chief,” Clark grinned. His first real assignment with a world-renowned paper! He felt like he was dreaming. “Flatbush, right?”

Perry nodded and smiled, delighted that Clark remembered. “That’s right. The Majestic Theater.”

“Got it,” Clark assured his new boss. “You’ll have the article in time for the evening edition.”

Perry looked perhaps a tad surprised at Clark’s confidence, but he didn’t comment on it.

“Good,” he said instead. “Let’s go find you a desk.”

Clark hadn’t felt this good about himself in a long, long time. Sure, he’d always felt incredible after a successful night out on the streets with Bruce, the two of them assuming the identities of Nightwing and Batman. But this was something different. This was him taking the first real step into making a difference in the world as *himself*, in broad daylight. This was him finally finding his place in the world, fulfilling his dreams, and making his future possible.

He wished he had someone to call, to break the news to.

He could always call Bruce, he knew. And he *would*. Just not right this second. The computer chair hadn’t even grown warm from his body heat yet. He wasn’t going to immediately jump on his phone on a personal call. He could wait until he was out of the office.

He bided his time by getting his desk set up. He got to know a few of his new coworkers and wondered who owned the desk across the aisle from him; the nameplate was missing. Perry got him set up with his press pass, as soon as Clark signed some paperwork with human resources. All in all, the hours passed by quickly and Clark was feeling pretty good about himself.

He took a late lunch, figuring he could also drop off his briefcase in his hotel room while he was out and then head directly over to the theater. It was almost two in the afternoon when he finally left the building. He’d seen a pizza place on his way in for this interview, so he headed there first. His super nose hadn’t betrayed him; the delicious scents he’d caught wind of on his walk to the Planet translated into some of the best pizza he’d ever had, despite his world travels. Clark wolfed down two generously large slices and a bottle of Pepsi.

His stomach full and happy, he pulled out his cell phone. With it being so late in the afternoon, the place was fairly quiet. Clark figured now was as good a time as any to share his good news. He called Bruce’s office, hoping the man was there. After two rings, the phone picked up.

“Bruce Wayne,” he heard Bruce’s voice say on the other end.

“Mr. Wayne? My name is Clark Kent. I’m a reporter at The Daily Planet and I’d like to know if you’d allow me to interview you,” Clark joked, barely biting back his laughter.

“You got it?” The sheer pride in Bruce’s voice was unmistakable. It made Clark feel even prouder of *himself*, a feat he hadn’t imagined possible just a few short minutes ago.

“I got it,” Clark confirmed, unable to keep the smile off his face.

“Congratulations!” Bruce said, sounding genuinely thrilled. “I knew you’d nail it! When do you start?”

“I already have,” Clark replied.

“What?” Astonishment rang in Bruce’s voice. “Even *I* didn’t put you to work the first day I hired you to work at Wayne Tower,” he joked.

“The editor needed someone to cover something this afternoon. It sounds like a puff piece, but I’m more than happy to do it,” Clark explained, a casual shrug in his voice. “I would have volunteered to do it even if he hadn’t asked.”

He heard Bruce chuckle quietly. “Figures. You’ve always liked jumping right into things. I’m reminded of a night long ago when you stepped out of the shadows and took on...well, a new role in your life.” There was no mistaking the fact that Bruce had a grin on his face a mile wide.

Clark found himself smiling at the memory. He’d stepped out of the shadows in the guise of Nightwing to assist Bruce, even though the billionaire had specifically told him that Batman worked alone.

“It worked out well for you then,” Bruce continued. “I *know* that quality will work out for you in this job too.”

“Thanks, Bruce.” Clark’s heart swelled with pride.

“You want to come for dinner tonight and celebrate? I can have Alfred whip up one of your favorites.”

“Yeah, sure. That’d be great,” Clark conceded. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be at work. Let’s shoot for seven?”

“Seven is fine. Lobster ravioli okay?” It was less of a question and more of a statement, in a way. Bruce knew that Clark *never* turned down an offer of Alfred’s famous lobster ravioli.

“More than okay. It’s been a while since he’s made that,” Clark chuckled.

“Perfect. Listen, congratulations again,” Bruce said sincerely. “I’ll see you tonight. I’ll ask if Vicki wants to join us as well, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Clark said with a shrug. “Apparently she gave Perry White a pretty glowing recommendation for me. I owe her my thanks.”

Bruce chuckled the slightest bit. “That’s Vicki for you. Okay, listen, I’m sure you have plenty to do at your new job. I’ll talk to you later. Besides, I have a meeting coming up in about five minutes.”

“Yeah? What for?” Clark’s interest was piqued.

Bruce sighed in what sounded like weariness. “I’m still trying to get Wayne Airlines up and running. It hasn’t been the smoothest road and I know this meeting is going to be a game of hardball. I’m starting to wonder if it’s even still worth pursuing, to be honest. This might be the last attempt I make on the venture.”

“Ouch,” Clark said, feeling genuinely bad for his friend. Bruce had been trying to expand his business ventures into airlines for nearly three years, with almost no success. “I won’t keep you on the line then. Good luck, Bruce.”

“Thanks. I’m going to need it.”

The phone line disconnected and Clark put his phone away again. He hoped Bruce would be able to finally seal the deal on his airline idea. He certainly deserved it. After all, the amount of time and effort that had gone into the venture had been incredible.

Clark cleaned up his table, then used the pizzeria’s restroom to wash up. Though delicious, the pizza had been a little on the oily side. Checking his watch as he left the little shop, he saw that he still had enough time to make it to the theater demolition. Ducking into a deserted alley, Clark took off into the air. He made a beeline for the Metropolis Tower Suites. About a block from the place, he landed again, then casually walked to the hotel. Luckily, there was an elevator just opening up as he approached. An elderly couple exited the car, then Clark entered. He pushed the button for his floor and was there in moments. He supposed he could have dashed up the stairs at super speed, but he wanted to fit in. No one used the stairs if they didn’t have to, especially with an open elevator car right there in front of them.

He tossed his briefcase onto the freshly made bed as soon as he walked in the door. He took a moment to check his appearance in the full-length mirror, then brushed his teeth. Feeling refreshed, he started back downstairs. Excitement made his heart pound. He was about to go on his first assignment for The Daily Planet! He would do his job, and do it well, he vowed in his heart. He would make Perry White proud to have hired him.

He got to the site of the demolition with about twenty minutes to spare. He took his time to commit the scene to his flawless

memory, idly jotting down some notes in a notebook to keep up appearances. He introduced himself to a couple of bored looking construction workers who were standing by, making small talk and killing time before they had to get to work. The men were unimpressed by the press pass he flashed, but were more than willing to give him a quote or two that he thought he might be able to use once he wrote up his article.

He moved on, speaking to some of the curious bystanders who'd flooded into the street, behind the police barricades. Most of them expressed how disheartened they were to see the old theater being torn down. It had been, apparently, a staple of the neighborhood for almost seventy years. Many of the residents fondly recalled seeing various plays performed there during their lifetimes. Two teenaged boys, on the other hand, only appeared to be interested in seeing the building be "blown up," as they put it. "Mr. Kent?"

Clark turned toward the sound of his name, only to find a young man pointing a camera directly into his face. "Yes?"

"Oh, good. I was hoping I'd gotten the right guy. Perry gave me your general description but...well, you never know, I guess." The camera lowered as the man spoke. He fidgeted with the settings for a moment, then brought it up once more to look through the viewfinder. "Nope," he muttered to himself. "Still not the right aperture setting." He went back to fiddling with the dials on the camera.

"And you are...?"

The man flushed a bright red. "Oops, sorry. Let me start over. I'm Todd. Todd Farris. Perry set me to cover the demolition from the photographic aspect. I figured I'd introduce myself to you while I'm here. Nice to meet you."

Clark smiled and shook the young man's hand. During all of that, he didn't think Todd had stopped to take a breath. He had the impression of talking to a whirlwind.

"Nice to meet you too," he offered.

"First day on the job, huh?" Todd commented.

Clark nodded. "Yeah."

"You're going to love the Planet," Todd assured him as he snapped a few shots of the crowd. "I've been here three years, ever since I got out of college. Perry can be a demanding boss, but he's more than fair and approachable."

"Thanks for the advice," Clark said, giving him a small smile that went unnoticed. The young photographer was far too preoccupied with changing the roll of film in his camera.

"Hey, you want me to grab any specific shots?" Todd asked. "I know some reporters don't necessarily care, but some do, so I always ask."

Clark thought it over for a moment. "There was a poster on the building," he said at length. "It was a flier celebrating the theater's most recent anniversary. It might be a good, emotional shot. Otherwise, I trust your judgement."

"You got it, Mr. Kent," Todd said.

Clark didn't waste any time watching the man leave. He dove right into his work, talking to a couple of police officers to get their take on things. One of them — an Inspector Henderson — was particularly helpful to Clark, and gave him some solid quotes that Clark was sure he could use — if not in the main article, then in a sidebar piece that was slowly taking shape in his mind.

At ten minutes to the scheduled demolition, a protest broke out as a large group started shouting and waving signs in the air. Clark took notes in rapid-fire succession. Two of the men approached the heavy machinery, mischief in their faces as they tried to disable the engines. The police moved in swiftly to break it up and make whatever arrests were needed. But it was another sound that caught Clark's attention.

Crying.

Inside the theater, someone was crying.

Clark's head whipped around toward the sound. He x-rayed through the building. There, on the stage, was a young woman.

Clark telescoped in a little, and corrected himself. The girl was not yet out of her teenage years.

No one was paying him any mind. Everyone's attention was fixed on the protest now. Hopeful cheers rang out in the crowd as people hoped the protesters would succeed in stopping the demolition. Clark ducked around the police barricades and slipped into the building.

"Hello?" he called out as he walked, not wanting to scare the girl. "Is there someone in here?" he continued, feigning uncertainty. "Hello?" he called again, as he reached the auditorium.

The girl looked up, sniffing. "Go away!"

"You have to get out of here! They're about to take the building down," Clark warned her.

The girl put her back to him and didn't respond. Clark was torn. He wanted to talk to the girl and find out what was upsetting her so badly. On the other hand, there was no telling how much time they had before the building would come crashing down.

"Stay there," he cautioned. "I'll be right back."

He dashed outside and raced to where Inspector Henderson was talking to what Clark could only assume was dispatch, probably for back up. The crowd was getting unrulier by the moment. Henderson finished his call and scowled.

"Kent? What are you doing in this side of the barricades?" he demanded to know.

"There's someone in the building," he said simply.

"Impossible! We checked the place top to bottom!"

"Then she was either hiding or slipped in afterwards," Clark said. "I was just in there. There's a teenaged girl standing on the stage, crying."

"You were in there? Are you out of your mind? What drove you to go into a building that's about to be knocked down?"

"Just a hunch," Clark easily fibbed. "Look, I know you don't know me from the next guy, but trust me. There's a girl in there. You have to call off the demolition, at least until she's out of there and the building is checked again."

Henderson sized him up for a moment. After a moment, he nodded. Perhaps he'd seen the earnestness in Clark's face.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll talk to the demo crew."

"Thank you," Clark said, feeling relieved.

Henderson nodded again and strode over to speak to a burly, heavily tattooed man in a yellow hard hat. Clark supposed he could zero in on their conversation, but he didn't. He turned back to the theater, slipping his glasses down to x-ray it again. The girl was still there, still crying, but kneeling on the stage now instead of standing. He took one step toward the door when, suddenly, the incendiary devices on the building were set off. The building collapsed in on itself, the way it was supposed to, Clark knew, from having seen other controlled demolitions before in his travels.

Instantly, the shouting of the crowd grew angrier and louder. Clark hoped it wouldn't devolve into a mob scenario. But Henderson was right there, getting on a bullhorn, addressing the crowd.

"Everyone calm down!" he ordered. "Clear the area! We have reason to believe someone may have been in the building. I need everyone from the construction crew to start clearing away bricks. Carefully now! We don't want to risk taking any chances, in case anyone is trapped."

Clark heard an officer nearby calling for help, but Clark tuned the man out. He slipped his glasses down for a third time and x-rayed the building again. All the while, he prayed the girl was still alive. After an agonizing half a minute, he found her. She was, indeed, trapped in a pocket beneath the tons of rubble. Clark jogged over to Henderson, his heart torn in two.

He needed to protect his secret, at all costs. If anyone ever found out that he was more than he seemed, he knew he'd never have a life again. He'd be a target for every nutjob on the planet

and pursued by every scientist in an effort to have a chance at dissecting him in a lab somewhere. On the other hand, he could have the girl out of danger in mere moments, whereas the construction crew would have to go slowly and deliberately. It would take hours — maybe even days — to get her out of there safely. In the meantime, anything could happen to her. She could run out of air. The pocket could collapse and crush her. She could go into shock.

She could die.

“Inspector?” Clark called. “I think she was around this area, over here,” he said, waving the officer over. He gestured to the area around where he knew she was trapped. “Right in the center of the stage. At least, when I saw her last,” he said.

“Okay,” Henderson said with a curt nod, all business now. “Start in this area!” he called to the rest of them. “Sorry, Kent. I appreciate the help, but I’m afraid I’m going to need you to get back behind the barricades now.”

“Sure, of course,” Clark agreed with a heavy heart, while his brain screamed at him that he could save the girl in seconds, with next to no effort.

If only Nightwing lived in Metropolis, he thought to himself as he retreated.

It was an intriguing thought, to be sure. But he’s sworn off Nightwing when he’d decided to leave Gotham. If he was to pursue the idea of another costumed alter ego in Metropolis, it would have to be someone new. There was no place for Nightwing in his life now. He’d outgrown the dark and was ready to step out into the light. Any hero he might decide to create would *need* to be someone who had no fear of operating in broad daylight.

Clark kept vigil over the excavation efforts, his fists clenching and unclenching as he fought to keep himself from rushing into the thick of things to rescue the girl — and exposing himself as an alien to the world in the process. He kept tabs on the girl to reassure himself that he was doing the right thing and letting others rescue her. There was far too much noise in the immediate area for him to even attempt to focus his hearing on her. He had to content himself to giving the area an occasional x-ray. Each time, he could see that she was alive and scared — and he didn’t blame her one bit for her terror.

After the first half hour passed, the crowd began to slowly break up. Random stragglers began to drift away, having other matters to attend to or just getting bored with the lack of dynamic action on the scene. Clark pulled out his cell phone and called into the office. Swiftly, he informed Veronica at the City Desk of what was going on. She assured him that she would pass the message along to Perry, while Clark swore to stay put until the girl was rescued. Next, he called Alfred, cancelling on dinner. He knew both Bruce and Alfred would excuse him if he didn’t show up, but he’d been raised with better manners. Besides, it kept him from pushing past the barricades to assist in the rescue.

It wasn’t long before Clark lost complete track of the time. The rescue team was nearly through the pile of rubble. Small, carefully placed air holes had been made; their primary concern being that the girl would suffocate if she was still alive. After the first air hole was made, faint sounds could be heard from where she was trapped. Clark couldn’t hear what she said, but he could clearly hear and see the construction workers and police alike celebrate the fact that she was still living.

Eventually, enough rubble was cleared away, leaving a small opening just large enough for the girl to crawl through. Clark saw a tiny policewoman crouch down by the hole. She couldn’t have been more than five feet tall and a hundred pounds soaking wet. She crawled inside and disappeared from sight. Long moments passed until she emerged again, the girl following along in her wake. Cheers rang through the remaining crowd. Clark felt the vice around his heart loosen, though he still felt guilty and ashamed for not lending his aid.

Paramedics immediately surrounded the shaken girl. Clark got

only a fleeting glance of her. She looked almost like a statue. From head to toe, she was covered in gray dust, dirt, and grime from the building as it had come crashing down around her. Her blonde hair looked nearly black. Her neon pink shirt was muted and the logo on it had been obscured. She was coughing hard, and an EMT swiftly got an oxygen mask on her. That was all he could see before she was bundled off into an ambulance and whisked off to the hospital.

He breathed a sigh of relief. The girl was alive.

He knew he needed to get back to the office and write up his article. Blinking, he pulled himself from his thoughts and noticed for the first time that it was getting dark out. More time had passed than he’d thought. He sighed. He’d failed Perry on at least one of his promises — that the story would be ready in time for the evening edition.

With nothing more to see, the rest of the bystanders departed, leaving just the press behind. Clark once more crossed the police barricades. With all that happened, he needed to do some more work before he could return to the office. He hastily, but thoroughly, interviewed some of the construction workers who were willing to speak with him. Next, he spoke to the policewoman who’d gone inside the pile of rubble to help the girl get out. Marilyn Mueller, as she identified herself. He talked to Henderson too, since he’d been the one to step up and take charge of the situation when it had first happened.

“Any idea what her name was?” he asked at the end of his questions.

Henderson shook his head. “No. She didn’t say.”

“If you find out anything?” Clark asked, knowing he didn’t need to finish speaking.

“Sure, sure, I’ll send it along. I’m sure a press conference will be held tomorrow, regardless of what we find out tonight.”

Clark nodded absently. “Inspector? Maybe I’m crossing a line here but...the charges went off after you clearly said someone was still in there.”

Again, Henderson nodded. “That’s been bothering me too. Lord, it’s times like this when I need a cigarette.”

“Sorry, I don’t...”

“Nah, you’re fine, Kent. I quit, oh, five years ago. Most days are fine and I don’t miss it. But cases like these? Brings back the cravings in full force. Guess I never really got over the addiction. Maybe no former smoker ever does.”

Clark wasn’t totally sure how to respond to that. Luckily, he didn’t have to. Henderson slipped a business card out of his breast pocket.

“Listen, Kent. Here’s my card. You hear anything about this, you let me know. And I’ll do the same for you. Got it?”

Clark nodded and took the card. “Got it. Thank you, Inspector.”

“Now get out of here. We still have a lot of work ahead of us.”

“Kent?”

Clark’s head snapped up from his computer.

“Yeah, Chief?”

“You just get in?” Perry asked.

Clark nodded. “About ten minutes ago. I’m writing up the article on the Majestic Theater now.”

Perry cracked a satisfied smile. “Good man. How’s it going?”

“Pretty well. I started drafting the basic outline of it in my head on the way over. It’ll be in your inbox in an hour or less. I’ve also got a sidebar piece in mind, if that’s okay.”

Perry chuckled. “Quite the overachiever, aren’t you? I admire that.”

Clark hesitated. “Uh, Chief?”

“Yeah?”

“This article...that’s not all I want to do with what happened out there,” Clark said, confidence in his words. “I think we need to investigate this further.”

“Investigate an accident? Look, son, I know you didn’t get to do much, if any, investigating at the Gazette, but...”

“What happened *wasn’t* an accident,” Clark said with conviction. “I don’t know how, but I’ll prove it. I know I can. The police made it clear that someone was inside *before* the building came down.”

“If you find something, you have my blessing, of course,” Perry said with a shrug. “Just you make sure you’re not out there chasing evidence that doesn’t exist.”

“Of course,” Clark agreed. “And...thanks, Chief.” He looked at his computer screen again and Perry started off.

Wow, Clark thought as he typed. *This is the first time an editor has really listened to me. Listened and given me permission to follow the story the way I see fit.* He smiled to himself in contentment.

The article practically wrote itself. Words flowed from Clark in a way that they hadn’t in a long time. Working for the Gazette, some articles had been easier to write than others, but there had always been a part of him that had needed to hold back, because he wasn’t involved in investigative writing. Even sometimes when he’d written in his journals, as Grandma Tildy had made him promise he would, the words were slow in coming. He supposed it was a natural thing, to sometimes be in a state of mind that wasn’t exactly conducive to writing. But now his joy and pride over being employed at The Daily Planet seemed to pour into his writing. Without even needing to use his super speed, he was done with both the article and the sidebar piece he’d planned on in no time at all.

He fired off an email to Henderson, touching base with the man and checking to see if there had been any news on the girl’s condition or new details as to her identity. He didn’t expect an answer that night, so he resisted the urge to keep checking his inbox. Then he fired off the article to Perry, with a note stating that he was already in the process of following up on things. Finished, he sat back in his chair and simply took in his surroundings.

The Daily Planet.

He’d made it. He’d *finally* made it to the big leagues. Sure, the Gotham Gazette was a powerhouse in its own right. But this was different. This was everything he’d ever hoped for and more. This was where he was destined to make his mark on the world.

“Hey! I see the Chief must have hired you!”

Clark broke out of his thoughts at the voice. It was the younger man he’d met earlier in the day, though after all that had happened, it felt like eons ago. What was his name again? Jimmy?

He chuckled as he laughed. “Yeah.”

“Long interview?” the man joked.

“If only,” Clark joked back. “I wound up covering the theater demolition.”

“On the day he hired you? Wow! Perry must have been pretty impressed with you.”

Clark chuckled again. “Or desperate.”

“Nah,” Jimmy assured him. “Perry would have nabbed someone to cover it if need be. To send you out right away, that’s big.”

“It was a puff piece,” Clark said, downplaying the significance of being sent out on assignment moments after being hired. “Or, it was supposed to be.”

“Yeah, I heard about the girl,” Jimmy nodded. “Uh...” He struggled for a moment. “Sorry, I’m blanking on your name. I’m *so* embarrassed.”

Clark smiled. “No big deal...Jimmy, right?”

“Jimmy Olsen, that’s right,” he nodded.

“Clark Kent,” Clark offered.

“Glad to meet you, Clark. Hmmm,” Jimmy said, thinking, almost like he was testing something out in my mind before he spoke it aloud. “Clark Kent. CK. I like it. Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? You mind if I call you CK?”

“Not at all!” Clark replied, feeling an instant connection with

the younger man before him. He knew, somehow, in that moment, as Jimmy decided on a nickname for him, that the two of them would be good friends.

“Cool. CK,” Jimmy said, as if confirming Clark’s new moniker. “I’m happy to hear that you got the job. You’ll love the Planet.”

“I already do,” Clark agreed. Then, remembering how Jimmy had barged in on his interview, “Hey, how’d the hostage situation go?”

“Boring, mostly. At least from a bystander’s point of view. Which is good, don’t get me wrong. The police liaison was able to talk the gunman down less than an hour ago. I got my photos and hightailed it back here to get them processed. Last I saw, Lois was still trying to nail down an interview with some of the victims.”

“Lois?”

Jimmy nodded and gestured to the empty desk across the aisle from Clark. “Lois Lane. Perry’s top reporter. And she’s not shy about letting anyone know that either.”

“Lois Lane?” Clark could help but to repeat, his eyes going wider. “*The* Lois Lane? Youngest reporter ever to win a Kerth award?”

“That’s her. And she’s the only woman to win one three consecutive years in a row.” Jimmy shrugged. “That’s something *else* she isn’t shy about keeping to herself.”

Clark shrugged in turn. “Can you blame her? Those are some impressive accomplishments.”

“Absolutely. Anyway, I wish I could stay and talk some more. But I need to get started on these if I ever plan on getting home tonight,” Jimmy said, hefting his camera bag on his shoulder just a little.

“Of course,” Clark said graciously. “See you tomorrow, Jimmy.”

“Night, CK. Uh...it *is* okay if I call you that, right?”

Clark shrugged again. “That’s fine by me. I like it.”

“Cool. See ya, CK.”

“See ya, Jimmy.”

Clark stepped into the bullpen, bright and early the next morning. He should have been floating on air, he knew. This was it. He was living his dream. He was a *real* reporter, for one of the most respected newspapers in the entire world. He was *finally* where he was meant to be. But he just couldn’t muster up as much enthusiasm as the situation should have required. Not when he’d stood by and done nothing when that girl’s life had been in danger. His first assignment with the paper and he’d almost witnessed someone get killed.

He sighed. In time, he would find a way to push the images and the associated feelings of failure to the back of his mind. But not now. It was still too fresh in his mind.

“Morning, CK!” Jimmy greeted him, far too bubbly for Clark’s current mood to appreciate.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Clark said, subdued.

“Whoa! Who let the wind out of your sails? Last I saw you, you were on top of the world, landing the job here,” Jimmy said, concern flooding his features. “You look like you didn’t sleep a wink last night. Worried about the job? Because, if it helps, there’s nothing to stress over. Perry’s bark is way worse than his bite... most of the time. And everyone is pretty friendly, willing to help you if you need, and highly competent. Except, well – and you *didn’t* hear this from me – Ralph. Guy’s a real blowhard without the skills needed to be all that effective of a reporter, but he’s related to one of the bigwigs, so what can you do, right?”

“Oh, it’s not that. But I appreciate the information. I just had a rough night, that’s all. I didn’t sleep too well.”

“Hey, anything I can do to help?”

“It’s nothing. I just...I couldn’t stop thinking about the girl that got trapped in the theater demolition. Something fishy went on with it, and I’m going to find out what,” he replied

determinedly, setting his mouth in a hard line as his mind started to whirr on just *how* he was going to accomplish that.

The truth went deeper than that all too simple explanation, of course. Clark had tossed and turned most of the night. Thoughts of the girl and the peril she'd been in had replayed in his mind every time he'd closed his eyes, robbing him of sleep. And the few brief times he'd nodded off, his dreams had been even less forgiving than the apparitions that haunted his waking hours. In one dream, he'd stood helplessly by while she'd died. In another, he'd helped, but his secret had been exposed. He'd awoken in a cold sweat of fear just as government agents had cornered him, ready to tear him apart to see what gave him his powers. In the most disturbing one, he'd once more stood by without offering his aid. The girl survived, but she's approached him after her rescue. Her pleading, terrified eyes had bored into his soul as she'd asked him, "You could have saved me. Why did you let me suffer?"

Too afraid to go back to sleep, Clark had slipped out onto his narrow hotel room balcony. After a careful check, he'd flown off into the dark predawn air. For two hours, he'd circled Metropolis, trying to clear his head. When he'd returned to his room, just before the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon, he'd felt only marginally better. And he'd vowed to himself that, even if he hadn't done anything to help get her out of the collapsed building, he would do whatever it took to find out just what had gone wrong and ensure that justice was served.

"Kent?" The Chief's voice broke him out of his thoughts before Jimmy could respond. "Come to my office for a moment, would you?"

"Sure, Chief," Clark replied, dipping his head in acknowledgement as Perry walked by, a fresh, steaming cup of coffee in his hand.

"That was a hell of a first assignment you got yesterday," Perry said as they entered his office. "I'm sorry it turned out that way. And I didn't get to say anything yesterday — you were gone before I finished going over your articles — what you submitted to me last night? Top notch stuff. You keep it up and I see Kerths in your future."

"Thanks, Perry," Clark replied, touched. "I promise you, this is just the beginning for me."

Perry chuckled. "Good man. That being said, I think you may be onto something. It certainly doesn't *feel* like a mere accident. You are *absolutely* certain the demolition was called off before the charges were set off to detonate?"

"Positive, Chief," Clark said with a confident nod. "Whoever did it... it feels like it was done in blatant disregard for the order to stop. They were even told someone was in the building."

"Okay, I want you to chase this thing down. Find out *exactly* what happened."

"Thanks, Chief. I appreciate being trusted with it."

"Hey, it's your baby. You covered the initial story. This is yours, no matter what. Just, uh, one thing."

Clark looked at his boss, a little uncertainly. "What's that?"

"This is your first rodeo here. You have a lot of experience at the Gazette, that's true. But not in investigations. I'm going to partner you up with someone for this story, just until you get your feet wet, you understand?" Perry said in his soft Southern drawl.

"Of course," Clark said, nodding. "It makes sense. You have a certain way of running things here. What better way for me to learn the ropes?"

Perry looked pleased at his response. *Happy as a pig in slop*, Clark heard the memory of his father's voice whisper in his mind.

"I appreciate the understanding," Perry said.

"Who will I be working with?" Clark asked, curious now.

"The way I figure it, you might as well learn from the best,"

Perry replied, crossing the room to the door. He looked out. "Lois? Come here a second, would you?"

A minute passed, then a woman entered the room. Clark's eyes widened. His pulse skyrocketed. He felt in danger of floating as he

took in the sight of her. The shoulder length bob. Twin chocolate eyes. Her petite frame. The confidence that exuded from her. Her poise — commanding and self-assured. The crisp maroon business suit — jacket and skirt — paired with a cream-colored blouse and no-nonsense black pumps.

It was in that moment that Clark Kent became a believer in love at first sight.

"What's up, Perry?" she asked as she entered, completely ignoring Clark as he stood by the red plaid couch Perry kept in his office.

"Your next assignment," Perry said, getting straight to the point. "And your new partner."

"Partner?" Lois asked, sounding offended. Her eyes narrowed as fire ignited in them.

"Lois Lane, this is Clark Kent. He's a new hire, come over to us from the Gotham Gazette."

"It's a pleasure meeting you," Clark heard himself say, still in a daze.

"A newbie?" Lois retorted, ignoring Clark. "Perry! You can't be serious!"

"Serious as a heart attack," the editor deadpanned. "Clark might be new to the Planet, but he's by no means new to the news business. He handled *your* assignment from yesterday. The Majestic Theater demolition. Which, I might add, turned out to be quite the story, with that girl getting trapped when the building went down."

"And?" Lois replied, apparently knowing there was more Perry was going to say.

"And now you're going to work with him on a follow-up investigation."

"On an accident?" Lois asked. "Come on, Perry. There *has* to be something better to work on."

"It wasn't an accident," Clark interjected. "The crew was told not to blow the charges, and that someone was still inside. And someone did anyway. I'm going to find out why."

"You're going to help him," Perry added. "It's his first investigation with the paper, and I want you to work with him. Show him how we do things here."

"But, Perry..."

She didn't get a chance to finish her protest.

"Now, Lois. You're the best reporter I've got. Clark here... he's got the talent. He just needs the guidance. I want him to learn from the best, you hear me?"

"I..." She sighed. "Fine. But don't say I'm not a team player," Lois conceded. Her words felt loaded though, as though she'd recently been told that she didn't play well with others.

"Good. Now get out there, you two, and bring me back some Page One news," Perry commanded them, a glint in his eyes.

They both left the editor's office, Clark allowing Lois to lead the way. As they wound their way to their desks, Jimmy stopped them. He had a copy of the morning edition tucked neatly under one arm. He smiled brilliantly as he caught sight of them.

"CK! Way to go, my man! First day on the job and you snagged the front page! Man, I wish I'd gotten a look at the paper before I saw you earlier."

Clark gaped and Lois looked livid.

"What?" they both asked together, each of them shocked, though Lois' voice held a note of anger too.

"You haven't seen the morning edition yet? Here, check it out," Jimmy replied, handing Clark the paper he'd been carrying.

Clark took the paper and unfolded it. There, in bold print, was the headline to his story and, in a smaller typesetting, his byline. On the *front page*. Clark felt the world tilt on its axis, throwing his entire life into a new dimension. The front page. He'd *never* had a Page One article before in his life. He'd come close, having a few stories that had landed on the second or third page, but most of what he'd reported on had, by chance, been smaller, less important events.

Clark looked again at the page, scanning the words at super speed. It was all there. Every last word and punctuation mark that he'd written. And, he noted with satisfaction, a number of Todd's photos had made the cut as well. Even Clark's sidebar piece had made it into the paper.

"CK?" Jimmy asked, when Clark failed to speak. "You okay there?"

Clark blinked and shook his head a little, bringing himself back to the present. "Huh? Yeah, I'm fine. It's just...the front page. I can't believe it."

"What, don't tell me this is new? Not with writing like yours." The surprise and puzzlement on Jimmy's face spoke volumes.

"Actually, it *is* new. I was one of the overseas reporters at the Gazette," Clark hastily explained. "Front page stuff was rare for us, so it just never panned out for me."

"Well, then this is all the more reason to be proud," Jimmy beamed, while Lois folded her arms across her chest.

Clark chuckled a little, mostly because he was nearly giddy from the morning's events. First, he was given the green light to pursue an investigation, then he was paired with Lois Lane — of all the talented reporters out there! — and now he'd discovered he'd made the front page. Could life get any better than this? he wondered. He tried to hand Jimmy the paper back.

"Thanks for the head's up, Jimmy. I really appreciate it."

Jimmy refused the paper. "You keep it, CK. You should *definitely* frame that or something."

"Maybe," Clark said with a laugh.

Lois' expression was dark with anger. Her look reminded Clark of the sky when a storm came rolling in, complete with the distant crack of foreboding thunder and far off flashes of lightning.

"Catch you later," Jimmy said as he continued on, to whatever task awaited him first thing in the morning. Clark had to wonder if part of Jimmy's haste to leave had anything to do with Lois' annoyed body posture.

"The front page, huh?" Lois asked as they reached their desks. She may have meant it to sound casual, but the words came out as almost mocking, in a way. "The Chief put you on the front page, but still thinks I need to be partnered up with you?" She silently fumed as Clark shrugged. "This is to get back at me," she decided after a long moment.

"For what?" Clark asked, surprised.

"For ditching the theater story yesterday for the hostage situation," she replied, her tone slow and deliberate, like she was talking to a child, incapable of understanding her.

"I'm sure that's not the case," Clark said. "And I really *do* want to learn. Like Perry said, it might be for the best. To be honest, I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to learn from you, of all people. I've been following your work for years. Maybe since you started writing for the paper. I've always been impressed with your ability to crack cases open. You're the best reporter I've ever seen...even if only from a distance."

Lois seemed to brighten and puff herself out a little at the compliment.

"What'd you say your name was again?" she asked for a moment.

"Clark. Clark Kent."

"Kent...Kent...where have I heard that name before?" Lois pondered for a moment. Clark could practically hear the wheels turning in her mind as she fought to place his name.

"That's easy," purred a voice from behind Clark. A tall, scantily clothed woman sauntered around to stand in the aisle between the two. "He's Bruce Wayne's most recent...*roommate*." She said the word in such a way as to imply that she believed there was more to their relationship than just mere friendship. "Cat Grant, by the way. *Very* nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," Clark managed, fighting down a blush. He supposed it was inevitable, someone knowing his past life of luxury living at Wayne Manor, but he'd hoped to make a

name for himself at the paper and prove his worth before anyone put two and two together.

Lois snapped her fingers as she recalled that information. "Right! You surfaced out of nowhere and Bruce adopted you into his family. Now I know why your face looks so familiar. You used to be on the Gazette's society page all the time with all those galas and charity functions."

"You read the Gazette?" Clark asked.

"You read the society page?" Cat asked in the same instant.

"Reading about what you'll never have, I suppose," she baited Lois. "You know. A social life," she added dismissively.

Lois gave Cat a withering look, but bit back whatever retort was burning on the end of her tongue. Clark could see it took great effort for Lois not to take the bait and he was silently impressed. Most women he'd met wouldn't have had such restraint.

"Bruce didn't adopt me," Clark said, in an effort to cut the tension. "We became friends and he opened his doors to me when I had nowhere else to go."

Lois thought this over for a moment. "What are you doing at the Planet?" she finally asked.

"My job," Clark replied, confused. "Same as you."

Lois shook her head. "That's not what I meant."

"Who cares?" Cat asked. "Are you really going to question things when the view just got so much more...enticing?" She slid a little closer to Clark. Ignoring Lois now, she spoke exclusively to him. "Listen. You're new in town, right? If you'd like, I could take you around. Show you all of my favorite...spots."

Clark discreetly moved back a step. He didn't like the underlying sexual advances Cat was attempting to make. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate women who took the initiative, who knew what that wanted and went after it. But he wasn't comfortable at all with the way Cat seemed focused merely on his looks and — probably — his assumed wealth.

"Ah, that's really okay, Ms. Grant. I appreciate the offer but I'm sure I'll manage on my own," he politely declined.

A look of surprise shot through Cat's eyes.

Must not be used to being turned down, he figured.

"Well," she said coolly, deftly saving face, "if you change your mind..." She shrugged, leaving the invitation open. "You know where to find me."

She sauntered away, back to her desk, swaying her hips with extra emphasis as she went. Perhaps she was hoping the movement would entice him and lure him into having a relationship with her — even if the relationship was merely a physical one. Clark simply shook his head. Her kind of woman was not unknown to him. He'd turned down every one he'd ever met. They hadn't been right for him. And neither was Cat. But Lois! Lois was a woman who he *very* much wanted to get to know better.

He turned to her. "So, partner, where do we start?"

"Oh no! Don't you 'partner' me!" Lois said. "There is you and there is me. We are *not* partners, despite what Perry thinks."

"Well, for the duration of this investigation, we are," Clark replied with a smile, letting her know he wasn't trying to give her a hard time. He sighed. "To be honest, all of this is new to me. When I worked at the Gazette, I was constantly on the move, covering whatever I was told to cover. I never got the chance to really delve in and investigate. I know that maybe you don't like the idea of being paired with a green reporter, but, well, *I'm* glad Perry assigned us to work together. I want to be the best reporter I can. That means learning from the best. *You*."

Lois studied him for a moment. "You...you actually mean that?"

He nodded. "I do. I wasn't lying when I said I've always followed your work. Getting to work with you on my first real investigation is...I couldn't have asked for a better mentor."

"Um...thanks," Lois said, a little uncomfortably. "But let's get something straight. You might be a spoiled little rich kid, but *I am*

the one who's worked her butt off to get where I am in my career. This might be your investigation, but *I'm* the one in charge, got it?"

"Got it," Clark replied. "You call the shots."

"Good," she said with a nod. "I'm not going to risk my reputation just because I have to train some green reporter."

"You won't," Clark promised, trying not to let her anger get to him. But every barb about him potentially dragging her reputation as a reporter down hurt a little more. "I'm not useless, Lois. I've already started some of the footwork on this. And clearly the Chief thinks my writing is good enough to be Page One material. You can relax. I'm capable of pulling my own weight on this assignment."

She nodded again, curtly. "Good. Prove it."

"I will," he vowed, retreating to his computer chair.

He logged into his computer, doing his best not to let Lois' words hurt him. But they did. She'd already decided that she didn't like him, simply because Perry had partnered them up. He guessed it was a pride issue. Lois was obviously the type who prided herself on flying solo, accomplishing great investigations on her own, winning Kerths she didn't have to share with anyone else. If he had to make a guess about her personal life, he thought she might be the same there too – used to doing things on her own. It made him indescribably sad, to think of Lois as someone who felt she needed to go through life alone.

Of course, he reasoned, he could be very, very wrong in his theory. Only time would tell.

"Lois?" he called out after a few minutes, scrolling through his email. "I've got something here."

Lois looked up from her own work, with perhaps a little interest on her face. "What's that?" She stood and walked over to his desk.

Clark sat back in his chair a little. "When I was at the theater yesterday, I struck up a conversation with an Inspector Henderson. He's the one I told when I happened upon the girl inside the theater."

Lois nodded. "I know Henderson. He's a good cop."

Clark nodded in turn. "He seems like it. He sent me some information on the girl."

Lois scooted in a little closer to peer at his screen and Clark's heart rate jumped at the close proximity.

"Tiffany Bronson. Age 18. In stable condition at Met Gen," she read aloud, skimming the email for the most important information. "Press conference this afternoon at one-thirty." She looked at Clark. "It's not much, but it's a start. Not bad, rookie."

Clark allowed himself a smile at the minor compliment. "Thanks."

"But don't get cocky," she warned him.

Clark threw up his hands in a gesture of pacification. "Wouldn't cross my mind."

"All right, let's get started. There's plenty of time before the press conference," Lois went on. "We should be able to come up with something before then."

"I agree. Where you do want to start?" He figured he couldn't go wrong with letting her take the lead. Perhaps it would help take the barbs out of her demeanor, if he deferred to her experience.

Lois thought for a moment. "I know a few sources. I'll call around and see if anyone knows anything."

"Tiffany seemed rather attached to the theater," Clark mused aloud. "Like maybe she'd performed there or something. I'll do a bit of digging and see if I can come up with a connection."

Lois nodded. "Okay."

She walked away, going back to her desk. Clark got busy with his computer. The first thing he did was to check the theater's website. He carefully read through every link, but found no mention of Tiffany. Whatever her connection to the place was, he wasn't going to find it here. He was about to click out of the site when he noticed that he'd skipped a link. He dragged his mouse

over and opened the hyperlink.

"Interesting," he murmured to himself.

The page he was looking at was a dedication to a Fiona Bronson-Wilder, who had died the previous year. He read with interest as the dedication waxed poetic about the woman, who'd been a part of the theater for nearly thirty years, acting in almost every play during that time. Things started to make sense in Clark's mind. Fiona had to be Tiffany's mother. The picture of her looked like an older version of the girl Clark had seen the day before. The dedication went on to talk about how Fiona had grown up in the theater, with her parents having been heavily involved in it, and how her daughter, Tiffany, had also grown up in the theater by default.

"No wonder she was so upset," he said as he read.

The theater had been a part of her. And now that part had been ripped away. It had been a place that reminded her of her family. Clark could relate to that. He'd lived through something similar when he'd been forced to see his family home taken away after his parents had died. He'd felt the same shattering of the ties to his past when he'd been shipped off to Grandma Tildy's — far from Smallville, where he'd grown up.

"Okay," Lois called over after a moment. "I've left messages for my sources. Let's hope one of them has something we can use. What about you? Find anything?"

"Actually, yeah," Clark replied. "When I was there yesterday, I was wondering why she was so upset about the demolition. Now I know why."

"What've you got?" Lois asked, sounding curious.

"Her mother," Clark replied. "Her mother and her grandparents, to be exact. All of them were heavily involved in the theater. That building was probably just as much a home for her as her actual home."

Lois frowned. "It's a start. Not much of one, but it's a start."

"The mother died last year," Clark went on. "The Majestic probably felt like one of the last tangible connections Tiffany had to her. Losing it would have been devastating. It explains why she was inside, at any rate. My guess is she went to say goodbye to the place. Get one last, final memory of being inside."

"That's a lot of guessing there," Lois said, sounding less than totally convinced.

Clark shrugged. "We can confirm it if she allows us to interview her. The important thing is, we found a connection. And I'm curious about the mother. Her last name is hyphenated. Bronson-Wilder. Looks like she probably remarried at some point."

"So?"

"So...I feel like I saw the name 'Wilder' somewhere." He clicked around a bit, then froze when he found what he was looking for. "Got it!" he announced. "Gary Wilder was the owner of the Majestic. I think we should pay him a visit."

Lois grabbed her purse with a tight smile. "What are we waiting for?"

"No, no. I have no idea why Tiffany would have been inside the theater," Gary Wilder assured them, less than two hours later. "But, to be fair, she hasn't been the same since her mother passed away last year. It almost doesn't surprise me that Tiff pulled a stunt like that — going inside the Majestic as it was about to be demolished."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think, Mr. Wilder?" Clark asked, aghast at how casually the man spoke of his step-daughter's possibly suicidal actions.

Gary Wilder shrugged. "Perhaps it might seem so to you. I can't really blame you for feeling that way. I suppose I might see it from your viewpoint if I didn't know Tiff personally. But, you see, I *do* know her. Quite well, I assure you. I first met Tiffany when she was eight, almost nine. Her father was long out of the picture and her mother and I started dating. Tiff would always act out for

attention. This latest stunt...it's nothing more than a cry for attention."

"Mr. Wilder, how would you describe your relationship with Tiffany?" Lois asked.

He steeped his fingers in thought. "As well as can be expected, I suppose. She can be a bit...difficult, sometimes. We haven't always had the best of relationships. Nothing out of the ordinary for a step-father, step-daughter relationship though. She's always resented me, I think, on some level. I think she hates the fact that I 'replaced' her loser father. I've always done my best to win her over, but it hasn't been enough, I fear." Here he sighed for emphasis.

"And since her mother died? How would you say she's been? How has your relationship changed with Tiffany?" Clark asked.

Gary sighed again. "She shut down after Fiona died. I barely ever hear from her, and only if I pursue it. It's been...*exhausting*. She seems to forget that she's not the only one who lost someone they loved that day. I lost my wife."

"I see," Clark nodded, jotting down a note.

As Lois asked another question, Gary shifted his attention to her. Clark used the opportunity to sweep the man's tight little office with his super sight. Bills were mostly what he found. Overdue bills. Lots of them. Most were addressed to the Majestic Theater. Some appeared to be personal bills. A few pictures in frames, scattered around the office. All of Fiona Bronson-Wilder, or of Gary with her. None featured Tiffany, not even as a figure in the background. Clark frowned. This was not a case of a loving step-father at all, no matter how difficult he claimed Tiffany could be.

Nothing was to be seen on the man's computer. A twisting, amorphous shape bounced around the machine's screen, keeping whatever he might have been working on hidden from prying eyes. The message light on Gary's phone was cold and dead, indicating no voicemails — not that Clark could get to them, even if there had been. And then, as Clark's eyes whisked over the desk again, a paper he'd missed on the first scan. A legal document from Sheldon Bender.

Lex Luthor's attorney, Clark recalled. *And all-around slime-ball*.

He surreptitiously zoomed in on the paper and his brows raised slightly.

A life insurance policy.

He couldn't see the details though. He thought about lowering his glasses enough to x-ray through the binder that was sitting atop the letter, but at that moment, Lois got up from her seat. He had no choice but to stand as well and extend a hand to the former owner of the Majestic Theater.

"Thank you for your time," Clark heard himself say as Gary took his outstretched hand.

Gary didn't respond, other than a grunt of acknowledgement.

"Well, he was less than helpful," Lois declared as they left the building and stepped, blinking, back into the bright sunlight of the mid-morning.

"I don't know, Lois," Clark replied.

"All we got was that he's not exactly father — or step-father — of the year, the way he was going on about Tiffany's personality," Lois argued.

"We'll see what Tiffany herself has to say about things, if we can," Clark said confidently, following Lois as she made her way down the sidewalk. "In the meantime, I checked out his office a bit, while you were questioning him at the end," he admitted.

"What do you mean, 'checked out'?"

"You know, just sort of let my eyes wander," he hedged. "He had a ton of unpaid, overdue bills. It's no wonder why he sold the theater. He apparently wasn't lying about running deeply into the red. And did you notice the pictures he had up?"

"No, why?"

"All the ones I saw were of his wife. Or of him with his wife. Not a single one of Tiffany. It doesn't seem consistent with what he was telling us, about him doing everything in his power to forge a relationship with his step-daughter."

Lois reluctantly nodded. "I hate to admit it, but...I'd have to agree with you on that."

"And one final thing."

"What?"

"It's probably nothing but..." He hesitated, feeling uncertain. After all, he had no *real* information about the life insurance document he'd glimpsed.

"Come on, Clark! Spit it out!" Lois demanded.

"Okay," he relented after a moment. "Bear in mind, it's probably nothing. But...I saw a letter on his desk. From the office of Sheldon Bender."

"Lex Luthor's lawyer?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "I saw the words 'life insurance policy,' but that's all I could see. It was sort of partially sticking out from beneath that binder he showed us, with all those preserved playbills in it. But, for all I know, he might be thinking about the future and preparing for his own death. I mean, the guy's got to be in his seventies, right?"

"I didn't know Bender's office handled that sort of thing," Lois mused. She reached the crosswalk and stopped, waiting for the light to change.

Clark nodded. "I've unfortunately met Bender before, at a few charity events. He handles more than just the occasional multibillionaire and their corporations. He doesn't do much of the small-time stuff anymore, but if Gary Wilder has been his client long enough, he'd still handle something like that for him."

"Looks like we've got a lot more digging to do," Lois said firmly, determination settling over her features. The light changed and they started across the street. "But first, I need to get something to eat."

Clark checked his watch. It was eleven forty-five — a more than acceptable time to take a lunch break.

"I could do with some lunch myself. Where to?"

"There's a diner I know of. It's across town, but it puts us close to Met. Gen. Maybe we can talk to Tiffany after lunch."

"Sounds like a plan," Clark said. "Lunch is my treat, by the way."

"Trying to score points, rookie?" she asked, eyebrow arched, as she stopped to hail a cab.

One wave of her arm and an ear-piercing whistle later, and a yellow taxi pulled over to let them in.

"Wow," Clark said, impressed, as he opened the door to allow her inside the cab. "And, to answer your question, no. It's just... well, two-fold, actually, if you want to know the truth. It's how I was raised. And also...it's the least I can do. Like I said at the Planet, I know you don't like being stuck with a partner, or trainee, or whatever it is you're calling me in your own head. This is a sort of thanks, for letting me learn from you." He climbed in the back seat beside her.

"I...well...thanks," she stammered. In the next breath, she was giving the driver the address of the diner. The cab lurched into motion and Clark was silently thankful for his invulnerability as the driver wove a dangerous path through the city streets.

"So, what made you, Mr. Rich and Living on Easy Street, leave Gotham to come work for the Planet?" Lois asked him a little while later, while they dug into their burgers and fries.

Clark smiled a little. "Why so interested?" he teased. "I thought only partners got to grill each other on their personal lives."

Lois rolled her eyes. "I'm *not* that interested," she argued. "It's just that, if Bruce Wayne adopted *me*, I'm not entirely sure I could walk away from a life like that." She shrugged.

Clark shook his head, both at the wrong impression that Bruce

had adopted him, and at Lois' weak attempt to feign disinterest in him.

"Well, for starters...he never adopted me," Clark began. "We met when I was seventeen. I was in a bad situation and we sort of wound up crossing paths often enough that we struck up a friendship. I didn't even know who he was when we started talking. He found out that I was in need of a place to stay, and he offered to take me in. I saw no other choice and accepted. But he never adopted me. It's not who he is. And, honestly, it's not something I would have wanted anyway."

"But you still must have been living in the lap of luxury," Lois pointed out, nibbling on the end of a French fry.

"I guess," Clark said with a shrug.

"You guess? Bruce Wayne is the wealthiest person on the planet!"

"I know. And, yes, I was afforded every luxury. Without Bruce, I wouldn't have been able to finish my schooling, for example. But I always worked, as much as I could. I felt guilty about just being handed everything, so I tried to pay my own way as much as I was able to," Clark explained.

"Not many people would think that way."

"Maybe not. But I grew up on a farm. There was no such thing as just skating by while others did all the work. As soon as I was old enough to help out, I did. Picking strawberries. Helping to dust. Painting the fence. Whatever it was that needed doing. And if my dad hurt his back or something, my mom and I just worked that much harder to pull up the slack until he felt better. It's a part of me, to work, and work hard."

"Why journalism though? You probably could have worked for one of Bruce Wayne's companies, I'm guessing."

Again, Clark shrugged. "I've always wanted to help people, especially given the way I was raised, and the circumstances that shaped my teenage years. I've always loved writing too, so when it was suggested to me that I could use my love of writing to help people as a journalist...it just felt natural. I worked for the Gotham Gazette for a few years, as you know already, but I got tired of bouncing around from place to place. I felt like I wasn't really making a difference. So, I left after a while. The Daily Planet seemed like the perfect paper to work for. Once I decided to try for a job there, I hopped on the bus and, well, here I am."

"I get wanting to help but, you probably could have done just as much good sitting back and funneling money to the charities Wayne Enterprises runs," Lois said, just before taking a sip of her soda.

Clark shook his head. "Bruce and I *did* work on a couple of charities together, but it was a bit...passive, for my tastes. I'm glad we did what we did, but *this*? Being out there and really being an active part in fixing society? *This* feels really good."

"So, Rich Boy needs to stroke his ego, is that what you're saying?"

Clark would have been offended at the untrue statement, if he hadn't caught the barely-there note of amusement in her voice.

"Well," he began slowly, choosing his words carefully, "I don't usually make a point of discussing my financial status with near-perfect strangers, but...I'll go on the record and say...I'm *not* rich. I didn't take a single penny of Bruce's money when I left Gotham. Every cent I have to my name, I've either earned by working or inherited when my parents died. And they were *not* rich people." He allowed a small, albeit sad, smile, to let her know he wasn't angry about answering her question. "I chose my career because I wanted to help those who can't help themselves, Lois. I didn't want to sit in an office all day every day telling *other people* how to get out there and help those in need." He took a breath, then turned the tables on her. "Why did *you* pick your field?"

He was both genuinely curious and eager to take the spotlight off himself.

"My parents. They wanted me to be a lawyer or doctor or

whatever. But I knew I was good at digging up the truth when I wanted to. Journalism made sense for me. So, I ignored what they wanted, studied hard, and started working for The Daily Planet." She paused a moment, frowning. "I felt...vindicated, proving them wrong at every turn. But it was more than just that. I came to realize, really early on, that I really loved what I was doing."

"Oh," Clark said, a little shocked. He couldn't imagine a world in which his parents would have stood in opposition of his career choice. "Sorry about your parents."

"I'm not," Lois said, without the slightest hint of remorse. "I know most people want their parents' full support in whatever choices they make. But the truth is, I was driven even before they told me they hated the idea of me pursuing journalism. Once they voiced their disapproval, I just worked even harder at it. It motivated me like nothing else. And then I went on to break several awards records." She shrugged.

Clark studied her in silence for a moment. Though Lois spoke and acted like her parents' disapproval was no matter to her, he sensed that, deep down, it had to hurt her. It made his heart a little sad for her.

"Anyway, ancient history," Lois said, waving her hand as if shooing the conversation away. "And we aren't here to rehash the past."

"True," Clark allowed, before taking another bite of his burger. "I have to admit," he said once he swallowed down the bite, "these are pretty good burgers. Nice choice for lunch."

Lois nodded. "Best in the city, even if the place isn't much to look at. Actually, most of the food they serve is pretty good. You ever want a turkey club or a BLT? This is your place."

"I'll keep that in mind," Clark said, smiling. "So, what do you give our chances at getting to speak to Tiffany?" He asked the question to lighten the mood a bit, and to set their conversation back on track.

Lois shrugged. "On a one to ten scale, ten being a definite yes? About a three."

Clark's face fell a little. "That bad?"

She shrugged again. "Depends. Will the doctors allow us in? Does Tiffany herself feel like talking? Usually it's the doctors who won't even allow us to ask, and we have to wait until the patient is discharged. Unless we find a way around it."

"You mean sneak in?"

She paused, a French fry raised almost to her lips. She pointed it at him and gave him a sly look. "I wouldn't call it sneaking in. I'd call it...going undercover."

Clark laughed. "How often do you get caught?"

Lois shot him a glare as she swallowed the bite of French fry she'd taken. Clearly, she wasn't as amused as he was. "Almost never. And if you ruin it for me..." She pointed a finger at him in warning.

"Whoa! Slow down, Lois. I was joking," Clark replied, his hands up in surrender. "And, I guess, genuinely curious. It just seems...risky, that's all."

"Yeah, maybe. But I'm damn good at my job. I've gone undercover more times than you can imagine and gotten some pretty earth-shattering stories out of it."

"Okay. I believe you."

Lois narrowed her eyes as she looked him over. Apparently seeing no trace of a lie in his features, she nodded. "Good."

"No."

"No?"

"No. Miss Bronson isn't allowing visitors," the rail-thin, stern looking Dr. Medford said, clutching his clipboard to his chest.

"Could you please just *ask*?" Lois insisted. "We're from The Daily Planet and..."

"Yes, you've already said that," Dr. Medford said. "And I've already explained to you that no one outside of family is allowed to see her."

“Please,” Clark said, breaking the silence he’d so far kept. “Can you let her know that we’re here? Maybe she doesn’t remember me, but...I’m the one who found her in the theater, the one who tried to get the demolition crew to stop their work so she could get out. I’d like to see that she’s okay, if she’s willing, even if she still declines an interview.”

“Sir,” the doctor began, his frown deepening, “if you don’t leave right now I’ll be forced to call for security and have them...”

“Wait,” said a young woman’s voice, from beyond the doorway that was behind Dr. Medford and to his right.

Tiffany poked her head out as she clung to the doorframe. She appraised Clark for a moment as the doctor spun around.

“Miss Bronson! You should be resting,” he gently reminded her.

Tiffany shook her head. “I’ve been resting all night and all morning. I want to talk to that man.” She looked again at Clark as the doctor hesitantly nodded and shuffled off. “It really *is* you. You really *are* the man who saw me on the stage last night, aren’t you?” she asked, continuing to scrutinize his features.

Clark nodded and fiddled with his glasses, swallowing around a lump of guilt in his throat.

“I tried to stop them,” he repeated. “I’m sorry. I really tried.” He sighed.

“Who are you?” she asked, surprising him.

“My name is Clark Kent.”

I failed to save you.

Tiffany’s eyes flicked over to Lois. “And who’s she?”

“Lois Lane,” Clark answered, before Lois could. “We’re both reporters from The Daily Planet. We thought...”

“I’d give you an interview, about my tragic accident and miraculous rescue?” Tiffany asked, a bit of mocking venom peppering her words.

“Not quite,” Clark said. “We want to know what happened, of course. But, more importantly, we want to find out *why* it happened. The police called for the demolition to halt, but someone went ahead and triggered the incendiary devices anyway.”

“You think someone deliberately did that?” Tiffany asked, sounding a little scared now. Her eyes were wide and staring.

“We’re not sure,” Clark said, carefully choosing his words.

At the same moment, Lois said, “It looks that way.”

Tiffany took a second to take it all in. Then she nodded.

“Come on in,” she offered, waving them into her room. Lois and Clark shared a look, then Clark gestured toward the door.

“Ladies first,” he offered.

Lois said nothing and started to walk. Clark followed. They found Tiffany sitting on her bed. Lois took one of the chairs and Clark took the other.

“Why did you come to the theater yesterday?” she asked as Clark sat.

“I was assigned to cover the demolition,” he told her. “To be honest, it was my first assignment for The Daily Planet.” He wasn’t sure why he was telling her this, but he hoped it would help her to trust him. “Something told me to check inside the building, and that’s when I saw you on the stage.”

Tiffany looked him over and nodded slowly.

“What were you doing in there?” Clark asked gently.

“Saying goodbye,” Tiffany replied, her voice hollow with pain. “I...I thought I had more time. I guess...I guess I was there longer than I’d thought. I didn’t mean to be in there so close to the demolition time.”

“You said you were saying goodbye?” Lois asked, trying to steer the conversation back to where they needed it to be.

“Yeah,” Tiffany nodded. “I basically grew up there. Seeing it torn down...it was like losing my mom all over again.”

“We know she was heavily involved in the theater,” Clark supplied.

Tiffany laughed ruefully. “That’s putting it mildly. That place

ran in her very blood. She ate, breathed, dreamed that building. As much as I hate to admit it, it’s probably for the best that she didn’t live to see it close down and be destroyed. It would have killed her.”

“Tiffany, your stepfather said,” Clark began.

She cut him off. “Let me guess. He told you some sob story about how I’m emotionally unstable ever since my mom died. How he’s the long-suffering victim of a hateful, spiteful stepdaughter. Am I right?”

“Well...” Lois hedged, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

“Typical,” Tiffany spat.

“We’d love to hear your side of the story, if you’re willing,” Clark offered.

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “You’re looking for a story.”

“We just want to understand what happened yesterday,” Clark said. “Because if foul play was at work...”

“You think Gary did this on purpose, somehow?” the young woman asked, not waiting for him to finish his sentence.

“We’re not sure what to think,” Clark said, shaking his head. “All we’re trying to do now is understand all the angles. And yeah, if you’re willing, we’ll print your side of what happened at the demolition.”

“People are going to talk about it anyway. Talk about *you*,” Lois added. “You might as well control what information they hear. Because misinformation can — and will — get out there, believe me. You’ll want to set the record straight.”

“Is that a threat?” Tiffany challenged.

“No,” Lois replied in a softer tone. “It’s the truth. The two of us want to help, that’s all.”

“You’re right,” Tiffany admitted after a moment, where she appeared to think it over and weigh her options. “People will come to their own conclusions about what happened. I might as well them know the truth. Okay. I’ll talk. But...where to start?”

She paused and gestured vaguely as she sought for the right words. “I guess...I guess I should, as you said, set the record straight on my relationship with Gary. I first met Gary when I was eight. He was the new owner of the Majestic. Mom was playing Golda for their production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. She was immediately taken with him. I wasn’t. He just rubbed me the wrong way, always barking orders at people. I guess he was under a lot of stress, coming in as the owner just weeks before the show was to open. But I got bad vibes from him. It got worse when he and Mom started dating, and came to a boil when they married.”

“What happened?” Lois encouraged.

“Gary is a very hard man to get along with. It’s his way or the highway. I never felt valued. I was always pushed to the side. It was clear he loved my mother and considered me a burden.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case,” Lois began.

“No, it *is* the case,” Tiffany protested. “I overheard him telling a friend of his on the phone one time. He said that he loved my mother but wished my father wasn’t a deadbeat so he could just ship me off to him so he’d never have to deal with me again. Meanwhile, I’d only known him for only a couple of months. Three or four months, at best, I’d guess. I’d always been polite and friendly, as far as I could tell. But he went on and on, and even went so far as to warn whoever he was talking to about the ‘baggage’ associated with dating a divorced woman. How much it sucked to have to care about another man’s kid. So, yeah, I distanced myself from him. Who wouldn’t have?”

“Can’t say I blame you,” Lois said, and Clark could tell she wasn’t just giving the girl platitudes.

“Right?” Tiffany agreed. “I was never outright rude or rebellious,” she continued, “but he hated me. I was blamed for everything. He never showed any concern or affection toward me, not that I expected any. I tried telling Mom how I felt, but she was too blindly in love with him to really see it. She thought I just needed to give myself more time to warm up to the idea of her being with another man. So, eventually, I stopped trying to get her

to see what was happening. Anyway, after my mom died, Gary and I washed our hands of each other. I think we were both relieved, in our own way, to have an excuse to never deal with each other ever again. I went to live with my aunt. Gary took control of the finances and basically cut me off. Took everything Mom had set aside for my college education and gambled it all away. Told me to deal with it, I'm not his kid, and that he's no longer responsible for me in any way."

Clark winced at the callousness Tiffany was accusing Gary of. But the tears in her voice convinced him that she was telling the truth. This wasn't an act. These weren't lies. This was how things had actually played out.

"He gambled away your college fund?" Clark asked. "Is this something..."

Clark didn't get to finish as Tiffany steamrolled right over his question. "He's an addict. Gambles away whatever money he comes into, almost as soon as it's in his pockets. Mom sure knew how to pick'em. My father was addicted to painkillers. Stole from several methadone clinics and has been in and out of jail since I was six. Then she gets away from him and ends up with a serial gambler. You know that's why the theater shut down, right? He kept taking money from the business to support his habit. He's got overdue bills coming out of his ears. Shutting down and selling the lot the theater was sitting on to the highest bidder was all he could do to stop the creditors from going after him."

"Makes sense," Clark said to Lois. "I told you I saw a bunch of unpaid bill notices in his office."

Lois nodded. "You did."

"I'm not surprised," Tiffany added.

"Tiffany? What else can you tell us about Gary?" Clark prodded.

Ring!

Ring!

"Hang on a second," Lois said, reaching into her purse later that day.

They'd finished speaking with Tiffany and had attended the police press conference about the collapse of the theater and the young woman who'd been trapped inside when the building had come down. The official police statement hadn't given them any real new information, but Clark *had* been able to speak with Henderson again, strengthening what Clark was sure would become a solid working relationship with the man.

"Yeah, sure," Clark said, as they moved over and leaned against the side of a massive pharmacy store.

Lois nodded and pressed the talk button on her cell phone. "Hello? Oh, hey, Bobby. You're what? Where? Okay, for how long? That's on Ashland Avenue, right? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay, great. See you there."

"Wrong number?" Clark joked.

She shot him a withering look. "Come on. We need to get to the deli." With that, she started walking at a brisk pace.

Clark blinked and watched her in shock for a moment. Then he went after her. "The deli?" he called out, confused, as he closed the distance between them.

"Ronnie's, to be exact," she clarified.

"What's at Ronnie's?"

"A whole lot of food."

"Are you hungry?" he asked, still trying to piece together what was happening.

"Not in the slightest."

After a quick stop at Ronnie's Deli — where Lois spent nearly forty dollars on the "Bobby Special" — they headed to a soup kitchen on Ashland Avenue. Walking in the door, Clark was hit with a ton of memories from his time living on the streets of Gotham. He had to squeeze his eyes shut as the memories flooded him. His fist tightened on the deli bag he was carrying for Lois

and he felt himself sway a little on his feet.

Please, I know I'm late getting in. Isn't there anything left? A piece of bread even?

Phil! You leave that young boy's plate alone! You've had your share tonight! That's his plate of ziti! I catch you so much as eyeing his food again and I'll throw you outta here myself!

Here, sir. You look like you need this sandwich more than I do today.

"Clark?"

He snapped out of his thoughts, realizing he'd hesitated at the doorway. He was gripping the molding to keep himself upright. Slowly, he released his grip and mentally tried to shake away the memories. He shot a glance at the molding, and felt a rush of relief that he hadn't left impressions of his fingers in the scuffed and chipped wood.

"You okay?" Lois asked, eyeing him.

"Yeah," he lied, still reeling a little.

"You look like you just saw a ghost," she replied in disbelief.

"It's nothing."

"You've never been to a soup kitchen before, have you? I guess it's a bit of a culture shock," she guessed.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I've been in them before. I've volunteered at some of the ones in Gotham. I just... I guess it just hurts, you know? That people have to rely on places like this so as not starve to death."

"Poverty knows no bounds," Lois agreed sadly.

Clark nodded. "I mean, look. Over there. Those kids can be more than six and ten, respectively."

"At least they have someplace to get a hot meal," Lois said softly, following his gaze. "They'll go to bed tonight with a full stomach."

"It's not enough," Clark said, shaking his head and sighing. "It's *never* enough." Then, to change the subject, "So, uh... why are we here?"

"Lane! You just gonna stand in the door or what?" called a friendly voice.

"Bobby," Lois shrugged to Clark. Then, turning to the man who'd called to her. "Hey, Bobby."

Bobby waved them back to the kitchen. Lois went ahead, with Clark trailing. He felt enormously self-conscious holding the bag of deli food dangling from his left hand. A part of him wished he could turn invisible, so no one would see him with the obscene amount of food. But no one looked up at him. No one saw the deli bag. Everyone kept their heads down and focused on the food before them — for some, Clark knew, it would be the first and last meal of the day. No one wanted to risk having someone else try to take their food away from them. He remembered only too well how he'd been the same way, sticking to himself, never making eye contact with anyone if he didn't have to, practically inhaling his food in order to ensure that no one attempted to steal it from him.

"In here," Bobby said, as they reached the kitchen. He opened the door and held it for them.

"This a bad time?" Lois asked. "Looked kind of busy out there."

"Nah," Bobby said, shaking his head. "The real rush won't start for another hour or two. And I've been here for hours already. It's high time I took a break. Did you get my order?"

Lois took the bag from Clark and went to where Bobby had flopped down onto a dented gray metal folding chair that was pulled up to an old, beat up, round metal table. She handed it over to the man.

"Everything's here. Even weaseled my way into getting you an extra pickle."

Bobby grinned broadly. "You're the best, babe."

Lois rolled her eyes good naturedly.

"So, I see you got yourself a new partner," Bobby went on, ignoring the eye roll. "Nice to meet you, Clark."

Clark's eyes widened a little. "How did you...?"
 "Bobby's the best source in town," Lois explained.
 "Nothing happens in this city that I don't know about."
 Lois arched an eyebrow. "Really. So the Munoz case...?"
 "Okay, okay," Bobby recanted. "Almost nothing happens in this city that I don't know about. Okay? Happy?"
 "He's been a great help over the years," Lois said, ignoring Bobby. "Which is one of the reasons why I don't necessarily mind paying his fee."

"Fee?" Clark asked.
 "She keeps me fed, I keep her informed," Bobby explained.
 "Ah," Clark said in understanding. "Got it."
 Bobby reached into the bag, pulling out the thickest sandwich Clark had ever seen. There had to easily be at least a pound of blood-red, rare roast beef between the club roll halves. A bag potato chips came out next, followed by a soda. Bobby looked at it and frowned.

"What's this?" he asked. "You know I hate the generic stuff. Gives me gas."
 Lois shrugged. "They didn't have anything else. Guy behind the counter said their scheduled delivery didn't come through this week."

"Who said it? Derrick?"
 Lois shook her head. "No. Must have been a new guy. I've never seen him before. He didn't even know the 'Bobby Special.' He had to ask."

Bobby nodded, opened the bottle, and drank. "Fair enough."
 "Okay, so what do you have for us?" Lois asked as Bobby unpacked the rest of his meal.

"Okay, so the owner of the Majestic?" Bobby said, his mouth half full with a healthy bite his sandwich. "Huge gambler. Has a *ton* of debt. Six months behind on his mortgage, the whole nine yards. So, three months ago, he decides to sell the theater to this real estate group. They want to tear it down, erect an office building. You know the type."

"Yeah," Lois said, nodding. "Unfortunately, I do."
 "Word is, he got enough to cover most of, but not all, of his debts, out of the deal."

"About how much was left to cover?" Lois asked.
 Bobby thought for a moment as he chewed. He swallowed, then, "I don't know the actual numbers, but I've heard it said that he still had a good fifty grand or more than he needed to pay off."

"That's nothing to sneeze at," Clark remarked.
 Bobby nodded. "You're telling me. So, right around the same time as he was negotiating the sale of the property, he takes out a life insurance policy on his step kid. Not a little policy, mind you. Apparently, it's a sizable payoff, if she dies. Like over a million."

A knot formed in Clark's stomach. "You don't think he..." he started, looking at Lois.
 "Planned on her going into the theater," Lois finished for him. "I'm starting to wonder. Thanks, Bobby."

"Wait, that's not all," Bobby replied, unwrapping one of the deli pickles. "There's something else."
 "What?"

"One of the demolition crew from yesterday? He was found dead in his apartment this morning. Real suspicious if you ask me. From what I hear, he was one of the guys on the explosives."

Clark's eyebrows went up, along with his dread. "I think we'd better start talking to the demolition team," he told Lois.

"Okay, so that got us nowhere," Clark sighed as he and Lois stepped foot off of the elevator and back into the newsroom.

"I'll try back in the morning," Lois said, checking her watch. "I know a guy who might be able to help, but I doubt I'll get him now."

"Okay," Clark said. "Let's at least combine our notes and get the preliminary article on Tiffany written up, so Perry has *something* to print in the morning edition."

"Right," Lois nodded. Her stomach growled.

"Hungry?" Clark asked.

"A little," she admitted. "I can order in. We can eat while we work." When they reached her desk, she opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a thick binder. "Maybe Chinese?" She opened the binder to a section filled with Chinese takeout menus.

"Yeah, I could go for Chinese," Clark agreed with a smile.
 "But let me pick it up," he offered.

"You don't need to. All of the places around here deliver."
 "Really, it's not a big deal. I know of a place I think you'll like."

Lois eyed him critically. "You've been in Metropolis all of, what? Three hours? And you think you know better food places than me? I grew up in this city."

"Trust me, Lois," Clark said gently, holding back his eagerness to impress her. "I'm not trying to... I don't know? Show you up? I just happen to know of a place."

"Fine," she huffed.

"Great. What do you want?"

"Surprise me," she said, the words somehow sounding more like a challenge than of acceptance.

"You've got it," he replied. "Be back before you know it."

Before she could retort, he was making his way back to the elevator. He rode the car down to the lobby and exited the building, then ducked into a quiet alleyway. From there, he took off into the sky like a shot, faster than any person could dare hope to track him, then he rocketed away, angling his flight path toward China. As soon as he landed again, he went to his favorite restaurant. He'd frequented the place during his couple of stints in China, back when he'd traveled for the Gotham Gazette.

"Ah, Mister Kent," the owner's wife greeted him in Cantonese when he stepped inside. "Glad to see you again. It's been a long time."

Clark favored her with a smile. "It's been awhile since I was last in China. How are you feeling? How's the knee?"

He spoke in nearly fluent Cantonese. He'd noticed, early on in his travels, that it was almost effortless for him to learn the myriad languages he was exposed to. In a matter of days, he could easily converse with the locals of whatever area he found himself in, usually to the delight of the people he spoke with.

"Getting better since the surgery," she replied with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear it. And the kids? How are they doing?"

She rolled her eyes a little. "Young people these days! Never home! Always out with their friends!"

Clark chuckled, since it was clear that she was being only half serious. "One day, they'll be glad to come home and stay home," he assured her.

"I can only hope so. But where are my manners? Let me show you to a table."

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary," he told her. "I need to take my order to go this time."

"No rest for a reporter," she nodded knowingly. Clark had often needed to take his food to go when he'd been stationed there. He shrugged. "The news never stops."

She smiled in return. "What will it be today?"

Clark thought for a moment, then began to place his order.

"Meals on wheels!" Clark announced as he set the bag of Chinese food down on Lois' desk. She was so buried in her work that she hadn't noticed him.

"Huh?" She looked up from her research, blinking. "Oh. Wow, that was fast," she admitted.

Clark shrugged. "I promised it wouldn't take long." He looked at the mess of papers on her desk. "You want to take this somewhere else?"

Lois thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "The conference room."

"After you," he gestured, picking the bag of food back up.

I'd follow you anywhere, if you only ask it of me.

Lois paused only long enough to save whatever she had up on her computer screen. Clark didn't bother to sneak a peek. He was solely focused on impressing Lois with the food he'd retrieved from half a world away. So, he followed her quietly to the conference room. Closing the door behind them, he got to work unpacking everything he'd brought.

"I got a little of all of my favorites," he explained as he worked, a little heat blossoming on the back of his neck. He found himself feeling incredibly self-conscious all of a sudden, as if his entire future with Lois hinged on this one meal. "Since I don't know your preferences, I tried to get a wide sampling of the food."

"Well, I'll admit, it all *smells* amazing."

"Just wait until you taste it."

"Look at the way it's packed! It looks... authentic," she said, appraising the containers of food. The bamboo containers were a far cry from the paper boxes Americans were so used to seeing.

"Trust me, Lois, this is about as authentic as you can get," he promised, hoping she wouldn't pick up on how nervous he was. His hands shook slightly as he unpacked the last few containers.

Calm down, he chastised himself. It's not a date. Hopefully it will be one day, but tonight it's just two coworkers having dinner.

Clark busied himself with opening up the containers and retrieving some paper plates and utensils that had been left, forgotten, on a shelf in the corner of the conference room. He set it all out before two chairs that faced each other.

"What can I interest you in?" he asked, ready to serve her.

"A little of everything," Lois said. "Let's see how good this mysterious place of yours really is."

"All right," Clark said with a nod. He dutifully portioned out a little of every dish out onto Lois' plate, then did the same for himself. "Dig in," he encouraged her.

After the first bite, Lois' eyes rolled up into her head and a look of bliss came over her features. "Okay, this is seriously some of the *best* takeout I've ever had. Where did you get this from? Because I plan on ordering from them more often."

"Oh, uh," Clark stammered. "It's an out of the way place. They don't deliver."

"Shame. They *should*. They could make a killing with food like this."

Clark chuckled nervously and shrugged, but his chest puffed up with pride. Fireworks exploded in his heart at her praise, even if she wasn't directly praising *him*. "Speaking of killing, anything new on the Majestic case?"

To Clark's relief, Lois took the bait and dropped the subject of where Clark had gotten the food. "Nothing yet. I left a few messages around though. The more I think about the case, the more I get a bad feeling."

"Me too," Clark acknowledged. "My money's on the whole thing being a set up. The owner of the theater *had* to have known Tiffany would be upset over the demolition. Upset people aren't usually rational thinkers. Maybe they do stupid things...like go inside building that's about to be torn down."

Lois nodded. "And maybe, just maybe, someone's banking on that happening, because they have a big, fat insurance policy out on the potentially irrational thinker."

"Exactly," Clark said, swallowing a bite of a dumpling. "Only it doesn't go to plan and the stepdaughter lives. How do you stop it from getting out that you've hired someone to kill your stepchild?"

"Murder the guy who bungled the kill," Lois finished for him. "I'd bet money on it."

"So would I," Clark agreed. "All we have to do is prove that's what happened."

"Easier said than done with the assassin dead now," Lois pointed out, literally poking at the air with a pair of chopsticks.

"True, but not impossible. Someone had to have killed the construction worker."

A lull formed in the conversation as they each got lost in their own thoughts. Clark only hoped he was impressing her. He desperately wanted Lois to regard him as her equal. Then, maybe, she could accept him as a partner and friend. And if she did that...

Maybe one day we can be more. Please, let us one day be more, he pleaded to the universe.

"We'll get the people responsible," Clark vowed after a time.

"You're pretty confident, for a rookie," Lois retorted with a half-smile. "Perry'll love that about you."

"I hope so," Clark said. "And hopefully he'll be even more impressed with me as a reporter. This job? It means *everything* to me." Then, switching gears, "So, uh, you like the food?"

"Like is an understatement," Lois said with a laugh.

"Whenever you feel like more, I'll be happy to pick it up," he offered.

I don't care if it's the middle of the night and you get a craving for duck sauce.

Lois studied him for a moment. When she spoke again, it was not what he'd expected.

"Don't fall for me, Richie Rich. I don't have the time for it."

It was like a knife in Clark's heart and his found his – admittedly fragile – ego around her deflating. He could see she was putting on a tough act for his benefit, but it still hurt to be shut down before he'd even truly tried to woo her.

"You may be used to women falling all over you, but I don't date coworkers," she continued. "Too many bad experiences with that."

"You...have?"

"Yeah. Perry fired the last one after he stole my story and put his name on the byline."

"Ouch," Clark winced. "I know you don't know me from a hole in the wall, but, I promise, I'm not that kind of guy," he swore.

"So they all say."

"Look, Lois, I'll prove it to you. I'm not here to ride anyone's coattails or steal stories. I'm *not* looking to be the competition. I just...Perry partnered us up. I'd like to work together with you and learn everything I possibly can. And maybe, in the process, at least become your friend."

"I've been burnt by so-called 'friends' before too."

"Which is unfortunate," Clark countered. "But...I'm not like other people, Lois."

"Sure. Whatever you say, Gotham."

"Nice work, you two!" Perry congratulated them, several days later.

They'd broken the true story of what had happened at the Majestic Theater. Gary Wilder had been arrested and was awaiting trial for conspiring to kill his step-daughter, Tiffany Bronson. He'd hired Vincent Jonas to ensure that the building came down while Tiffany was inside, if, indeed, she decided to pay her last respects to the aging theater. When the job had been botched and Tiffany had miraculously survived the attempt on her life, Gary had stormed his way over to Vincent's apartment. After a brief, but loud, struggle, Gary had overpowered the wiry young man and killed him in his rage.

It was a sad story, Clark reflected, but closing the case and helping to catch the bad guy was a huge victory for him. He felt on top of the world, not unlike how he'd felt each time Nightwing had left tied up and disarmed criminals for the Gotham PD to round up.

"Thanks, Chief," he and Lois said, almost as one.

"Boy, I never would have thought your first assignment would have turned into this, Kent," Perry laughed, patting a hand on Clark's shoulder. "How's it feel, wrapping this thing up?"

"Best feeling in the world," Clark grinned.

"Atta boy!" the editor smiled. "You're a *real* newsman, now," he continued. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, Perry. But, to be honest, a lot of the credit goes to Lois. Her sources were invaluable, and she taught me a lot over the last few days."

Lois appeared to fight down a blush and lost. "Well... thanks. But, I have to admit, you have pretty decent instincts yourself. Better than a lot of reporters I've dealt with over the years. Not too bad for someone new to the investigation side of things."

Before Clark could thank her, Perry interrupted. "Yeah... about that. Come into my office, you two."

"Uh... sure, Chief," Clark said, suddenly nervous.

They followed their boss to his office. Lois commanded the couch, sitting down in the direct middle. Clark opted to lean against the wall as Perry closed the door. He stuck his hands into his pockets, feeling unsure of himself, like a schoolboy called to the principal's office.

"I've been thinking," Perry began, sounding a little uncertain of where to begin.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" Lois asked, voicing the concern Clark certainly shared with her.

Perry hesitated before answering. "Probably not."

"Great," Lois huffed, rolling her eyes.

"What's going on, Chief?" Clark asked.

"The thing is... I only meant for you two to be paired up for just that one investigation," Perry hedged. "I'm well aware to your aversion to partners, Lois. But well, when something works, it works, you know what I'm saying?"

"I, uh," Clark stammered.

"Oh no!" Lois swore. "No! No, Perry! I was a team player. I took the rookie under my wing and showed him the ropes, like I was told to. Don't make this..."

Perry cut her off. "For the time being, I'm making the both of you permanent partners."

Clark physically bit his tongue to keep from shouting for joy.

Lois, on the other hand, was incised. "Perry!" she admonished. "I refuse to..."

"Lois, honey," Perry started, raising a hand in a gesture of 'stop.' "I know what you're going to say. But I don't want to hear it. You two, working together... I think it's going to be the best thing for the paper. And you want the paper to succeed, right?"

"Well, yeah..." she stammered.

"So, it's settled then. You two will work together as partners, unless I assign you to different stories, which I will do, from time to time as needed."

"But, Perry!"

"No buts now, Lois. Clark? You have any objections?"

"No, Chief. No complaints."

That was an understatement. He was practically floating, he was so thrilled. He'd been convinced that nothing could have been better than the Chinese food they'd shared as they'd worked on the case several nights before. But becoming permanent partners with the woman of his dreams beat everything.

Perry cracked a satisfied smile. "Good. Now then, now that we've gotten this squared away, I want you two to get back out there and find something to fill the blank spaces of my paper with."

"Got it," Clark said.

Lois glared at their boss. "Fine," she growled, when it became clear that Perry was never going to budge from his position. She slammed the palms of her hands on the couch, stood, and stormed out. Clark was about to follow when Perry called his name.

"Clark?"

"Yeah, Chief?" Clark asked, turning away from the door.

"Don't mind Lois. She can be a bit...abrasive...I know, but... try not to take it personally."

"I won't," Clark said. "She told me that she hasn't had any luck in being partnered up with someone before, so I know it's probably more of a defense mechanism for her to...be how she is."

Perry nodded thoughtfully. "Good man." He hesitated a moment, then continued speaking. "You know, something tells me that, in time, this partnership might be the first one to work out for her." He cleared his throat. "Okay, go on. Get back to your partner and find me something that'll sell my papers."

"Yes, sir," Clark replied with a genuine smile.

"So, what did Perry want?" Lois asked when Clark finally rejoined her at their desks.

"Nothing," Clark said, shaking his head. "Just... a few words of wisdom, that's all."

Lois appeared to accept that at face value and nodded.

"So... permanent partners," Clark began.

"Looks like it." She frowned slightly, as though she'd seen or smelt something mildly unpleasant.

"I know you aren't thrilled but..."

Lois sighed, cutting him off. "It's not you. It's the whole idea of a partner."

"I know. But, I promise, I'll pull my own weight in this team, just like I have been. You don't have to worry about anything, Lois."

"It's not just that. It's just... I've spent years clawing my way to the top, distinguishing myself as a standalone journalist. No offense — because you have some decent reporter skills — but... I feel like I'm... I don't know. Giving up something by becoming part of a reporting team, instead of doing it on my own."

"I can respect that," Clark said. "I might feel the same way, in your position."

"Well... I appreciate that." She looked surprised at his response, as though she'd perhaps anticipated him arguing the point with her, or flat out telling her that she was wrong.

"But, honestly, you aren't losing anything, if you really think about it," Clark continued on. "Hopefully, you'll be *gaining* something from this partnership."

"Like what?"

"Like, maybe... a friend?"

"A... friend?"

"Well... yeah. We've gotten along pretty well so far, inside and outside of work."

"I guess that's true, even though it's only been, what? A week since you started here? And so far, I can tolerate you a lot more than I've ever been able to tolerate any of my other partners."

"So... friends?" Clark offered, extending a hand.

Lois gave him a partial smile, and Clark could see the change in her eyes as some of her inner walls began to crack. "How about we learn to be partners, first?"

Clark grinned. "I can live with that."

"So, what do you think?" Floyd asked, spreading his arms as if to encompass the entire apartment.

Clark tried hard not to let his disappointment show. "It's okay," he hedged, "but it needs a ton of work."

"Sure, it needs little cosmetic touch ups here and there," Floyd said.

"We're way beyond 'little touch ups,'" Clark said, turning on the kitchen faucet. The water spluttered violently, then came out brown. He frowned. "I've seen flophouses in better shape," he argued, his mind immediately leaping back to the old, rotting, abandoned cabin in the woods he'd once lived in after fleeing Grandma Tildy's halfway house.

Floyd shrugged. "A simple plumbing fix."

"I don't know," Clark said, his voice filled with sincere skepticism. "How much do you want for the place?"

"A grand a month, due the first day of the month."

"A thousand dollars?" Clark shook his head. "No way. I'll pass."

"Well, I suppose I could knock fifty bucks off," Floyd said, a little too swiftly. It was clear the short, overweight, balding man was eager to get the apartment rented.

Clark blinked at the man, incredulous. “Sorry,” he said simply, shaking his head.

“All right, all right,” Floyd haggled with him. “Don’t twist my arm! I’ll knock a hundred off.”

“I don’t know...” Clark said, letting his voice trail off.

In truth, the apartment he’d found on Clinton was in terrible shape. It needed a lot of work. Even with Clark’s super abilities, it would take days, maybe even weeks, to get the place in decent, livable shape. But, as Floyd had pointed out, the problems were *mostly* cosmetic. A fresh coat of paint here, a new faucet there, a layer of spackle there to patch a hole in the wall. He could do the repair work himself. He was, after all, a farm-raised kid, despite having lived, for a while, in Wayne Manor and the lap of luxury. He still remembered — down to the minutest detail — doing all of the same kinds of repair work with his dad, back at the old farmhouse.

He’d seen plenty of other apartments that had been in better shape, but they had been far outside of his price range. And the ones that *had* been affordable had had far more problems. In the last place he’d seen, a plump rat had raced down the stairwell ahead of him as he’d left the building, and several dead roaches had greeted him when he’d peered into the kitchen cabinets.

If Clark could whip this apartment into shape, he reasoned that it would be as good a place as any to live. While Floyd had waxed almost poetic about the apartment and the building in general, Clark had surreptitiously scanned the place with his super senses. There wasn’t a speck of mold to be seen, nor had there been roaches, termites, or any other undesirable houseguests dwelling within the structure. And, Clark admitted, he liked the relatively open floor plan of the apartment. But the best feature was the secluded balcony, from which Clark could fly off or land on without prying eyes catching him doing something so extraordinary. It was almost enough to make him agree to Floyd’s new offer.

Almost.

“I’d have to do a lot of work in here,” Clark continued.

“Eight hundred a month, my final offer,” Floyd quickly amended. “But for that price, you do the work yourself. If I need to get guys in here to paint and whatnot...” He allowed the implications to hang, unsaid, in the air.

Clark mulled it over for a moment. “Okay, Floyd, you got yourself a deal.” He extended a hand and Floyd shook on their compromise.

“Welcome to the building, Mr. Kent. You can pick up your keys as soon as the check clears.”

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The sound of someone knocking on the door pulled Clark out of his thoughts. He put down the paintbrush he was holding, carefully laying it in the paint tray. Although, he ruefully admitted to himself, things were long past the point of being careful. The plastic cloth covering the floor was a roadmap of paint drips. His hands were flecked with color and a long slash of dried paint ran vertically over his left nipple, like some kind of bizarre scar or war paint, and all because he hadn’t been willing to potentially mess up any of his shirts. At least he’d managed to keep his pants clean, he mused, though he wasn’t entirely sure just *how* he’d accomplished that.

“Just a sec,” he called out as whoever it was knocked again.

He wiped the fresh, wet paint from his fingertips as he strode to the door. When he was clean enough, he slung the rag over his right shoulder. He checked his pocket for his money and fidgeted with the glasses on his face. Then he opened the door, cash in hand.

“Lois?” he stammered in disbelief. “Wh...” He cleared his throat, suddenly very aware of his half-dressed state, and the fact that he had a fistful of cash extended. He knew it looked compromising, at best. “What are you doing here?”

“I, uh...” she stuttered, and Clark saw her staring at his exposed chest. “I thought we could go over some of the details on the case we were working on yesterday. You said this was your new address, so...”

“Uh, yeah, makes sense,” Clark said, clearing his throat. “Come on in. Sorry the place is a bit messy.”

“Were you expecting someone?” Lois asked as she entered, nodding toward the cash in his hand.

“Just a pizza,” he said. “And, I think that’s it now,” he added, seeing the delivery man walking, box in hand, toward his door. “Care to stay for dinner?” he asked her.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt your meal,” she said, shaking her head.

“No, really, it’s okay,” Clark said. “It gets, well, kind of lonely, eating alone. I’d be glad of the company.” He nodded to the delivery man as he reached the door. “Here you go,” he told the man. “Thanks.”

“Any change?” the man asked, taking the money.

“No, thanks. All set,” Clark said, smiling. He could see the man was unsure about the decent tip amount. “Have a good night.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Lois admitted. “Eating alone does kind of suck. My sister, Lucy, just moved out two...no, three...months ago to go back to school in New York. I guess I kind of got used to her being around when I was home. Anyway, the pizza smells great.”

He came back inside and shut the door. The living room was a mess, but at least he’d cleaned off his kitchen table that morning. He set the pizza box down there. He caught Lois checking the place out.

“Again, I apologize about the mess. I just have the painting to finish,” he explained. “Every room needed a fresh coat, and the living room is the last of it. Then I can rearrange the furniture and *finally* feel like I have a functional apartment.”

“No, it’s fine,” she told him. Then, quizzically, “I thought you said this place looked like a war zone when you rented it.”

“It did,” he admitted.

“How’d you get it looking so...so livable in a week?” she asked, sounding almost awed.

Clark shrugged. “Hard work. I came home from work every night and did whatever I could until I needed to sleep. It wasn’t so bad, taking it one task at a time. It takes only seconds to fix a loose cabinet door, or to glue down a wobbly newel post. The kitchen faucet took a little longer,” he admitted sheepishly. “I messed it up the first try, but fixed it the second time around. Honestly, I spent more time picking up what I needed at the hardware store more than I spent on actually fixing half the things I worked on.”

“Painting takes a while,” Lois pointed out.

“True. But I did all my taping the first night in here. I’ve always found that to take the longest. Running a roller over the walls or doing touch ups with a paintbrush isn’t nearly as time consuming.” He gestured to the kitchen cabinets. “With all the work I’ve been doing, I haven’t had time to shop for dishes and the like, so all I have right now is paper plates. There’s some soda in the fridge too. Help yourself. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just go get cleaned up.”

“Right,” Lois said. Although his back was toward her as he headed into his bedroom, he could feel her eyes fixed on his bare torso. “I mean, yeah. Take your time.”

“Thanks.”

He rummaged through his drawers for a moment and found some clean clothing. He took everything into his bathroom, where he took a speedy shower, though he was sure to linger long enough to keep up the facade of normalcy. When he emerged, he was clad in black sweatpants and a plain gray t-shirt. He settled into the chair opposite Lois at the table.

“I guess I should apologize,” Lois said, opening the pizza box. She set a slice down on a plate and handed it to Clark. “I really should have called before I came over. I’ve just been kind of

distracted by our investigation and...well...I wasn't thinking."

"Really, you don't have to apologize. It's nice to have company, even if the place is still only half furnished." He gave her a smile before taking a bite of food.

Lois smiled back — just a brief, almost shy, curving of her lips. "I know the feeling. It took me months to completely furnish my place. Maybe I was a little too picky but I'd find a table here, a bookshelf there. I guess it was four or five months before I finally felt like I'd bought everything I needed to make it really feel like home. But it looks like you're off to a pretty good start," she said, gesturing vaguely. She sipped at her cream soda.

Clark nodded and bit into his pizza. It was good. Very good, in fact. "I went shopping the day I met with the landlord. I lucked out. The store was able to deliver two days later. There's still a few pieces I have in storage, back in Gotham City. Stuff from the house I grew up in, like my dad's favorite armchair. When I moved in with Bruce, he moved it to a storage facility in Gotham, finally freeing up some space at my old neighbor's house, back in Smallville."

"Smallville? Where's that?"

Clark took it as a good sign that Lois was interested enough to ask even basic questions about his story.

"Kansas," he said with a smile, and a sense of nostalgia washed over him as his mind's eye painted a detailed picture of the place where he'd spent his childhood. "I'm not surprised you've never heard of it. Most people haven't. It's a tiny little town nestled in amongst farmland." He grinned broadly. "My dad always used to say 'it's not called *Smallville* for nothing!'"

Lois laughed. "Let me guess. Your school was ten kids and a cow?"

Clark chuckled. "Okay, maybe not quite *that* small. What about you? Where'd you grow up?"

"Right here, in Metropolis." She flicked her wrist as she said it, as if dismissing the thought in the same moment. "Studied here too, at Met U." She paused to eat some of her food.

"Met U has a great Journalism program," Clark said in awe. "One of the best in the country." He finished his slice of pizza and took another.

Lois nodded. "Yeah. Truth be told, I almost decided on a different school, just to get out of New Troy for a while. You grow up and live your whole life in one place and it gets a little... stifling, at times. But I wanted to intern at The Daily Planet, and figured I'd have a better chance coming to them as a Met U student. I was right. I got the internship and walked straight into a full-time position with them when I graduated."

"Impressive," Clark said, nodding.

"What about you?" Was he imagining it, or was her smile perhaps a bit more than just friendly?

"What *about* me?" he asked, carefully keeping his voice neutral, in case he was misinterpreting her expression.

"You came from the Gotham Gazette. It's no Daily Planet, but it's still a good paper," Lois pointed out, lightly ribbing him.

Clark nodded again. "After I met Bruce, he introduced me to Vicki Vale. I was only seventeen or eighteen at the time, but we hit it off. She let me pick her brain on any Journalism topic I could think of. After I finished my college degree, she put in a good word at the Gazette, and they hired me." He shrugged. "Probably not as impressive as your way, but...there it is. My humble introduction to my career. Hopefully that doesn't make me any less competent or qualified as a reporter to you." He bit into his pizza.

Lois swallowed the last bite of her food. She hesitated until Clark slid the box a little closer to her. She nodded absently and took another slice.

"No, it doesn't," she finally said. "I would have done the same thing, if I were you. If I'd had a contact within the Planet, I absolutely would have enlisted their help in securing the internship. Besides, we've done a couple of investigations

together. You're more than capable as a reporter. I've met others with far more years of experience than you have who, well...let's just say that I'm amazed they can tie their own shoelaces, let alone act as a reliable news source."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Clark said with relief. "Uh, that you think I'm a capable reporter. Not about the other guys."

Lois laughed. "Yeah. It's weird. I know I gave Perry a hard time about him partnering us up and everything. But...well...out of all the partners I've ever had, so far, you're the only one I could ever stand. I, uh...I even *enjoy* it." Her face went scarlet in a blush as she looked shyly away.

Clark put a hand to his heart in a playful way. "I'm truly honored to know that."

"Yeah, well, don't let it go to your head," Lois said with a wry smile. "It hasn't even been a month yet."

He shrugged. Then, tentatively, "So...friends, then? As well as work partners?" He stuck out his hand, reaching across the table."

Lois hesitated for half a heartbeat. "Yeah. Friends." She took his hand and shook on it.

"Are these your parents?" Lois asked an hour later, after dinner was over and everything had been cleaned up. She picked up a framed photo from the top of an open box.

Clark looked over. "Yeah." He took the frame from her hands and gazed at it for a moment before handing it back. "Jonathan and Martha Kent."

"You look like your dad here," she said, taking the photo and looking at it once more.

That made Clark crack a small, sad smile. "I wish that was true. But that's impossible. They, uh...they weren't my biological parents. They adopted me as a baby after I was left on their doorstep one night," he said, reflexively falling back on the 'official' story the Kent family had always used.

"Oh, Clark! I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Lois stuttered.

He shook his head. "It's all right. They might not have shared my blood but they were my parents. And...it's nice. To have someone think I look like them."

"Have you ever considered looking for...?"

"No," he said, cutting off her thought before she could finish it. "I looked into my biological parents once, a long time ago. They died, well before my real mom and dad did."

Lois looked saddened. "I'm so sorry." She cleared her throat and looked back at the photograph again. "They look like such nice people."

"They were," Clark replied with a tender smile, as he looked at the image, frozen in time. "The best people you'd ever hope to meet. They would have liked you," he offered.

"They look like they smiled a lot," Lois said, not meeting his gaze.

"All the time," Clark said. "The day this picture was taken? The town had thrown its annual Sunflower Festival. My dad had volunteered to sit in the dunk tank for most of the afternoon. The proceeds all went to charity. My dad — and everyone else who went up to try their luck at the dunk tank — didn't stop laughing the entire day." Clark smiled at the memory, but his heart ached thinking about the day as much as it welcomed the happy recollection. "This is the last picture I have of them. They died less than three weeks later."

"Oh, God, that's awful, Clark," Lois gasped, putting her free hand to her mouth. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked about the photo."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Don't apologize. It's nice to be able to talk about them. To remember them. This is one of my favorite pictures of them, simply because it's such a great memory. It's how I like to remember them best."

"How did they...?" Lois asked, sounding embarrassed. She put the frame back in the box where she'd gotten it. "I mean, if you're willing to share."

Clark nodded. “My mom and I were in a bad car accident,” he explained briefly. “A drunk driver ran the red light while fleeing the police...in a stolen vehicle...after robbing a store.”

“Geez, is there anything that driver *didn't* do wrong?” Lois wondered, shaking her head.

“No,” Clark admitted ruefully. “He didn’t even buckle up, and he wound up dying in the crash too. My mom...he hit her side of the car and she died instantly. I was lucky and walked away unhurt somehow.”

“Very lucky,” Lois agreed.

“We’d been on our way to the hospital,” Clark continued, lost in his memories.

He no longer saw his apartment. He saw only flashes of that awful day when his life had been turned upside down. The bright sunlight. The world spinning and flipping as the car had rolled over. The look of his mother, her face a mask of shock and horror, frozen in time. The people who’d helped him get out of the car. The body bag being zipped up around his mother’s unmoving form. The sterile hospital room where his dad had laid, sedated, attempting to recover from his heart attack. The return to the empty farmhouse with Sheriff Harris. The look on their faces the next morning when they’d tried to gently break the news that Jonathan was gone — as if becoming an orphan could have been “gentle” in any kind of way.

“My dad,” he said, swallowing around a sudden lump in his throat. “He’d had a heart attack earlier that day. We were on our way to see him when the crash happened. Dad never even knew Mom had died. He had another, stronger heart attack that night. He didn’t make it.”

“Oh, Clark!” Lois said, going to his side and rubbing his left arm. “That’s awful. To lose both of your parents so quickly...”

“I know,” he said, after her voice had trailed off. “My entire life...it was shattered. Part of me wanting to become a reporter stems from that day. I don’t want other people to have to suffer. Okay, there’s nothing anyone could have done for my dad but...people like that drunk driver...it just boils my blood. Not one should have to lose their loved ones because of people like that...criminals doing illegal things. I wanted to help keep people like that off the streets. But I knew that a career in law enforcement wasn’t right for me. My strong suit is writing.”

“So you chose to expose people like that to the world as a journalist,” Lois supplied.

He nodded. “It made perfect sense to me, even if it took Grandma Tildy to point me in the right direction.”

“Grandma...Tildy?” she asked, sounding confused.

Again, he nodded. “The woman who ran the halfway house I was sent to, when the court couldn’t decide where else I should go. I was only thirteen. It wasn’t like I had the choice to live on my own, so I got shipped off to a home for boys. But...if it’s all the same, I’d rather not rehash that part of my life. Not now. Maybe one day. For now, I’d rather focus on more important things.”

“Sure,” Lois said with a shrug. “Like what?”

Clark felt a bit of his bleak mood lifting. “Well...I’m still setting up my apartment, for one thing. Actually, if I might be bold enough to ask...I’d like to pick out China patterns with you.”

Lois raised an amused eyebrow. “Getting ahead of yourself, huh, Kent?” she teased. “We’ve only just become friends.” She winked, letting him know she was truly just poking a little fun at him.

Too late, Clark realized what he’d said. “Picking out China patterns” was a phrase he’d often heard his mother use toward couples who were engaged to be married. It meant the two would be setting up a home together.

He had to laugh at his unintended meaning. “Let me rephrase that,” he offered, still chuckling. “What I meant was...I’m new to this whole ‘setting up a home’ thing. I went from my parents’ house to the halfway house to Bruce Wayne’s house. I could use

some pointers in picking out stuff for my apartment. If you wouldn’t mind, of course.”

“Well,” she said slowly, as if thinking it over. “Given how truly awful your taste in ties is, I’m guessing you’ll need all the help you can get.”

Clark tried to feign a crestfallen look, but he failed. “You don’t like my ties?”

Lois rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Well...not *all* of them are bad. But some of them? The thought has crossed my mind that perhaps you shop with your eyes closed.”

“Really?” He was both amused and embarrassed. Sure, some of his ties were a bit outlandish, but they were fun, and he enjoyed picking out new ones that caught his eye from time to time. “Which ones?” he asked, out of sheer curiosity.

“The one you wore on Tuesday. It looked like a clown went through a blender.”

He mock pouted. “I liked that one.”

“And that is exactly why I’m agreeing to help you furnish your place,” Lois said with a grin.

“Nice place you’ve got here,” Bruce said approvingly as he looked around Clark’s apartment.

“Thanks. I’ve been here three months now but it’s finally starting to really feel like home,” Clark said, gesturing to the couch.

Bruce and Alfred sat. Clark took a seat on his dad’s old armchair, which he’d only recently had time to fly in from Gotham.

“I really appreciate the storage facility, back in Gotham. It’s nice to have some of the things I grew up with here, in my own apartment. And with Wayne Irig passing away last year...I’m afraid I would have lost all of it, if everything had still been at his place.”

“It was my pleasure,” Bruce replied. “I’m glad you got to hold on to the things you wanted to. I know, for me, there are things in my house I could never part with, for the memories attached to them.”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded. “Walking into that storage unit...it was like taking a trip back in time. I kept half expecting to see my dad sitting in this chair, or Mom sitting at her sewing machine.” He sighed and allowed a silence to lapse between them.

“So, how are you enjoying Metropolis, Master Clark?” Alfred asked.

“I love it here,” he answered honestly. “I feel like...like I’m finally where I belong. No offense to you or to Gotham, of course,” he quickly amended. “But there’s something about it here in Metropolis...something I can’t quite place my finger on.”

“Uh huh. And it has nothing to do with Lois Lane, I’m sure,” Bruce teased.

Clark felt his face go hot as a blush overtook him. “Well...” he stammered.

“Uh huh,” Bruce repeated.

“Okay, yes, I can admit it. Meeting Lois has been amazing. Working with her every day...being her friend...that alone would have made me want to stay here. Even just working for The Daily Planet would have been good enough. But there’s something else. Something about the city itself that just feels *right*.”

“It’s a good city,” Bruce agreed. “As a matter of fact, I’m toying with the idea of building another office here. Sort of a support hub for Wayne Tower, back in Gotham. The two cities are close enough in distance that it wouldn’t be a hassle to pop in as needed. And Wayne Enterprises is growing. We need more offices, plain and simple.”

“That’d be great!” Clark said. He truly meant it. He loved seeing Wayne Enterprises expand and succeed.

“Actually, we’re already expanding into Metropolis, in a way,” Bruce added, almost as an afterthought. “We’re merging Wayne Tech with S.T.A.R. Labs. They’ll still operate as normal, but we’ll

be sharing our resources and discoveries with each other.”

“Makes sense. Wayne Tech and S.T.A.R. Labs are the leaders of their fields. Technology under your company and medicine for S.T.A.R. Labs. Teaming up... there’s a *lot* of good that can come from such a relationship,” Clark said thoughtfully.

“We think so too,” Bruce said with a nod. “We’re hoping it will lead to better, more effective medical breakthroughs. We’re pretty excited about it, particularly since Dr. Bernard Klein will be heading the Board.”

Clark’s eyes widened a bit. “I’ve read about him. He’s a smart guy.”

Bruce nodded. “He is.”

“Sounds like a pretty amazing merge,” Clark offered, approval shining through in his voice.

“Anyway, the merge won’t happen until next year, once we settle all the fine details.” Bruce waved his hand in the air, as if dismissing the thought.

“When you announce it to the public,” Clark began, thinking ahead already, “I’m going to need an exclusive interview. Perry will skin me alive if I don’t.” He grinned.

Bruce laughed. “Done.”

“So how was London?” Clark asked, changing the subject.

Bruce shrugged and sighed.

“Tedious, if I may say so,” Alfred answered instead.

“Uh oh. What happened?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem. Two weeks and we got nothing accomplished. I’d feared that would be the case but I’d hoped for *something* at least. But Theodore Rammel is *not* an easy man to strike a deal with. The London venture might be out of reach, for the moment anyway.”

“Sorry, Bruce,” Clark offered sincerely. “I know how much you were hoping it would pan out.”

The billionaire nodded. “Next time,” he said quietly.

After half a minute of silence, Clark spoke up once more.

“Alfred?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately. And I was wondering... could you make me a suit?”

“Of course, Master Clark. What style would you like? I’ll contact Monsieur Dupont and have him make whatever you’d like.”

“Oh...no,” Clark gently corrected. “Not *that* kind of suit. I meant the *other* kind. With Bruce’s permission to utilize your services, of course.”

Both men perked up and looked at Clark intently. He tried to read their expressions. Alfred, at least, was extremely interested. He could tell by the way the older man’s eyes gleamed and seem to dance with readiness for the challenge. He seemed to sit up in even straighter than before. Bruce, on the other hand, was harder to gauge. He was, perhaps, a little *too* good at Batman’s neutral personality.

“*What* kind of suit?” he finally asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Clark took a deep breath before taking the lunge. “A super suit,” he said, simply and honestly.

“You mean, you want to resurrect Nightwing?” Alfred asked.

Clark shook his head and stood up. He felt compelled to move, even if it was only pacing.

“No. I wasn’t kidding when I said I was done with Nightwing. It’s not that I have hard feelings toward that alter ego. It’s just... I *loved* being Nightwing. But I’ve already embraced the night and the darkness. I want... I *need*... to be able to help people in the daylight. I have these abilities... these powers. I can do a lot more good if I don’t have to hide in the shadows.”

“Clark, I appreciate what you’re saying but... are you *sure* it’s a good idea to go out there and show people what you can do? What you can *really* do?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Clark said again. “I’m not sure. I don’t know if people

will hate whatever character we create, like some did when I was Nightwing. I don’t know if flying around in broad daylight will terrify, rather than reassure, the public. All I know is, three months ago, when I first arrived here in Metropolis, I stood by helplessly while a young girl was trapped in a collapsed building. I could have saved her in seconds if I had a character I could become, to protect my identity. But I couldn’t. I *still* have nightmares about all the ‘what ifs’ and how it would have been my fault for not helping when I could have.”

“I know you want to help,” Bruce offered after a couple of seconds. “But... people will know you aren’t like them. They’ll come after you. People hate and fear what they don’t understand.”

“I know, and I’ve thought about that... at great length,” Clark assured him. “But it’s a risk I need to take.”

“There will be those who will want to see you dead,” Bruce pointed out in a flat voice. “I don’t want to see that happen.”

“Believe me, neither do I,” Clark replied. “But, aside from that Kryptonite we accidentally discovered a while back, nothing can hurt me.” He sighed, stopped pacing, and looked Bruce in the eyes. “Bruce, you know as much as I do, that my life is already on the line, every single day... so to speak. I’m a reporter. Any lunatic criminal could see me as a threat and decide they want to eliminate me. Last month Lois and I had a guy pull a gun on us, simply for asking for an interview. And he was the victim!”

Bruce studied him for a minute, his face that same, unreadable mask. After a small eternity, some of the hardness melted away and he nodded.

“You’re right,” he said, his voice coming out as a defeated sigh.

Clark blinked. He’d expected more pushback from Bruce before the man might finally agree with him.

“I am?” he asked, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them. “I mean, I am,” he amended a second later.

“Look, Clark, I’ll go on record here. I don’t like the idea of you exposing yourself to the public the way you’re planning to. But I also know you’d never do it unless you were certain it’s the only way to keep helping.”

“It is,” Clark said softly. “I’ve been thinking about it since my last time out as Nightwing. The need to be able to go wherever I can help, whenever I’m needed, has only grown stronger. That earthquake in South America? I’ve been watching the news all week. If I had the freedom to fly down there and help, I could have the roads unblocked in an hour or two, so the emergency crews could get to the people who need them. It’s killing me inside to not be able to help.”

“Even so, you can’t possibly be at every disaster or emergency, every single time,” Bruce reminded him.

“I know,” Clark replied with a solemn nod. “I’ve thought a lot about that too. I’ll have to prioritize a bit. Obviously, huge natural disasters would be higher than, say, a carjacking. It’ll also be easier to stop crime in Metropolis than elsewhere, simply because I’ll be closer to the action here and be able to pick up on it with my super hearing.” He shrugged.

“It won’t be easy for you to ignore cries for help,” Bruce said, his voice serious but concerned. “I know you too well to think you’ll be okay with having to pick and choose who to help.”

Again, Clark nodded. “I know. But it’s nothing I haven’t had to do before. We had to pick and choose our battles in Gotham on occasion. Helping some people is better than helping none at all.”

As he said the words, a memory flashed before his eyes. He’d been seven at the time. It had been a long, hot summer and a series of storms had spawned tornadoes in the area. One twister had ripped right through the center of town, but had mercifully dissipated before it could tear its way across the farmlands in the surrounding area. Several buildings in town had been torn apart. The bookstore had vanished. All that had stood where the church had once been was the heavy marble altar and a pile of debris. Half the school had been damaged — most of the roof had been

ripped away. Several houses had been in various stages of collapse from the powerful tornado. Cars had been dragged in every direction from the winds. Power lines had snapped and live wires had laid in the streets, shutting down the town until professionals could remove and repair the danger.

Jonathan and Martha had immediately volunteered to help with the restoration efforts. Every capable person in Smallville had helped in what ways they could. His parents had chosen to dedicate their time to helping the Baron family. The twister had done serious damage to their house. The roof was gone. Every window had shattered. The entire back half of the house had been demolished.

“Why are we only helping the Barons?” Clark had innocently asked one afternoon, while he watched his father and two of the other men cutting pieces of wood for the new house frame that was being built.

“What do you mean, son?” his dad had asked, looking up from measuring the beam he was about to mark for Ted, who was manning the saw.

“There’s lots of people who have broken houses,” Clark had clarified. “Not just the Barons. But we haven’t gone to their houses and built stuff. Not the Dickersons or the Cranz family or even the Franks.”

“Ah, I see,” Jonathan had said, the familiar amused twinkle in his eyes. “You think it’s maybe a little unfair that we’ve spent the last week here, instead of moving from house to house? Is that it?”

“Well... yeah. I guess.”

“Clark,” he’d said, smiling and putting his hand on Clark’s shoulder. “When things like this happen, it’s easy to think that one or two men... or even a group of people... working on only one task doesn’t really amount to much. But we’re only one person, each of us. There’s only so much we can possibly do at a time. So, we take it one task at a time, and we do that job well, instead of rushing around from place to place. We take our time and use our talents to the best of our ability. And whatever good we can do... whatever help we can give... helping one person is better than not helping at all. And once we finish our work here, then we can move on to whoever else still needs a hand.”

“I get it,” Clark had said, brightening a bit. “And I guess... there *are* a lot of other people helping. Pete’s folks are helping to fix the roof on the grocery store. Lana and her family are helping with the food and clothing collection to help people replace what they lost.”

“Exactly,” Jonathan had said, nodding once. “We do what we can. No one can do everything, no matter what abilities they have.”

“Whatever I *can* do, it will have to be enough,” Clark said aloud, snapping back to the present, though he wasn’t quite sure if he was trying to reassure himself or Bruce.

“If you’re absolutely sure,” Bruce began.

“I am,” Clark said, before Bruce could finish.

“Then... what did you have in mind?” the billionaire asked.

Clark blinked twice in disbelief. Had he just heard that right? Had Bruce agreed to allow Alfred to assist in creating the alter ego Clark had been toying with for the last three months?

“Clark?” Bruce prompted after a minute.

That snapped Clark out of his shocked thoughts. “Huh? Oh. Uh, I mean... thanks.” He chuckled. “Sorry, I guess I was expecting more of a pushback from you.”

“I still could, if you’d prefer it,” Bruce replied with a smirk.

Again, Clark laughed. “No, that’s quite all right.”

“Master Clark? What kind of super suit did you have in mind?” Alfred asked, repeating Bruce’s earlier question.

Clark shook his head. “I don’t have a concrete idea just yet. I kind of liked the overall feel of the Nightwing suit — the tight fit cut down on the wind resistance when I flew, but maybe we can add a cape to give me a bit of...modesty...in the back.”

Alfred nodded as Clark spoke, mentally making his notes,

Clark knew.

“And a mask, I assume?” he asked, gesturing with one hand, as if it was a given.

Clark shook his head again. “No. Not this time. I want people to see me. I want them to know I’m not hiding anything from them. A mask suggests a certain level of...secrecy.”

“But you *will be* hiding information from them,” Bruce pointed out, leaning back and settling deeply into the couch cushions.

“My true identity,” Clark nodded. “I know. I’ve thought about that. Hopefully showing my full face, without the glasses interfering with my visual abilities, of course, will be enough to stop people from prying too deeply. And besides, I won’t *really* be me. I’ll be this new character we’ll create. Which is why I want bright, distracting...even clashing...colors used for the suit. I want to put this character as far from Clark Kent as I can.”

Bruce thought about it for a moment. “It’s just crazy enough to possibly work,” he admitted.

“It *has* to work,” Clark insisted.

“Okay, so, the same basic cut as the Nightwing suit,” Alfred said. “Any particular colors, sir?”

“Hmmm,” Clark mused, thinking it over. “Maybe blue,” he finally said.

“A dark blue would look dashing, if I may suggest it,” Alfred replied.

“Yeah,” Clark said, nodding. “But not *too* dark. Is there such a thing as a bright, dark blue out there?” he laughed.

“I think I know just the shade we can use. It might even invoke images of a police uniform, and law and order,” Bruce put in. Then he smiled wryly. “Even though it would be worn by a vigilante.”

Clark grinned. “Well, I never claimed to be perfect,” he joked.

Bruce roared a laugh. “You and me both, it would seem.”

“A vibrant dark blue,” Alfred said, gently bringing everyone back to the task at hand, “for the body suit. If you want to provide a contrast, I would go with red, maybe a hint of yellow. Not only will it ‘pop,’ as they say, but it should provide the distraction you’re hoping to get from the outfit.”

“That works for me,” Clark shrugged. “You’re the expert on super suits, so whatever you think is best, I’m willing to go along with. Just...I’m not a huge fan of yellow, so let’s keep that to a minimum. I like the idea though.”

“And this new character’s name, Master Clark?” Alfred asked.

Clark was struck dumb. In all the thought he’d given to this new character, he’d never once settled on a name.

“I...don’t have one yet,” he admitted sheepishly. “I’m sure I’ll think of something...eventually.”

“The sooner, the better,” Bruce said. “We’ll need to figure out how to ‘brand’ you, so to speak.”

“You mean like the bat symbol,” Clark said, understanding. A thought occurred to him. “Wait here. I think I have an idea.”

He crossed the living room to his bedroom, then pulled out the old cedar trunk his mother had always kept at the foot of her and Jonathan’s bed. It had been one of the things Clark had saved, and he was glad, even now, to have that small piece of home with him. At the bottom, under the blanket his mother had made for him, was the manila envelope he’d carried with him into the halfway house and kept close during his homelessness. He opened it and took out the single item contained within the creased and dirty envelope.

“Here,” he said, coming back into the living room and holding his prize before him. “Put this on the chest. This will identify me to the world.”

“What is it, if I may ask, Master Clark?”

“I think...I think it’s who I am. Or...who I used to be, when I was born, before I was sent to Earth. When I saw those messages in the globe...you know the ones? Where my biological parents appeared to me and told me about Krypton’s demise? They both

had this symbol on their chests. I think it's maybe some kind of family crest or something. Something that announced to their planet that they were the El family. Why else would they have been wearing it? Why else had they made sure that the same symbol was on the blanket I was wrapped in?"

Clark studied the scrap of fabric in his hand. It was roughly diamond shaped with a stylized S enclosed within the borders of it.

Jor-El and Lara had both worn the symbol. They had appeared to be strong, elegant people, and smart as well. All of that equipment he'd seen in the hologram had looked extremely scientific. The messages had alluded to the fact that they hadn't been able to find a way to fix their dying world. Even if the S shape didn't stand for their family, Clark felt that it at least marked them as important members of their society. To wear the S now, as he embarked on his quest to save the people of Earth, was an honor of the highest degree, in his mind.

"This is who I will be," he said quietly, more to himself than to either of the other two men sitting on his couch. "This symbol was always meant for me."

"Hey, Lois?" Clark asked, the next day, just before they were to leave work for the night.

"Hmm?" she answered, distractedly, as she checked her email one last time.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Uh huh," she replied, her attention still mostly on her computer screen.

"Lois, I'm serious," Clark said, sitting down on the edge of her desk.

"That's great, Clark," she said, scrolling through the items on her screen.

"It's horrible, Lois," Clark went on, making up whatever came to mind. "They say it'll be the biggest disaster to hit the world since the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs. The Double Fudge Crunch Bar company is going out of business! And with the impending coffee shortage..."

"What?" Her head snapped up to look at him.

"Ah, I see I have your attention now," he teased, grinning.

"Not funny," Lois said, crossing her arms. "None of that is meant to be joked about." Though she said it as an admonishment, he couldn't miss the amusement in her eyes.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean to offend the sacred."

She rolled her eyes but grinned. "I'll let you off with a warning this time. But don't let it happen again." She wagged a scolding finger at him.

Clark mock bowed. "As you wish."

"Okay, so what did you *really* want?" she asked after a couple of seconds, while she shut her machine down.

"Well," he began slowly. "The White Orchid Ball is coming up in a few weeks."

"Yeah?"

"I was wondering if...you might want to go. With me, that is," he clarified. "I mean, I know you're probably going to go anyway, being a member of the press and all."

She nodded. "Well...yeah. I go every year. Anyone who's anyone goes to The White Orchid Ball. It's the biggest event of the year...at least, in Metropolis," she amended quickly. It was well known that there was an informal competition between Lex Luthor and Bruce Wayne to see who threw the more opulent ball each year. "You're going?" She blushed, apparently embarrassed. "I mean, I know you're with the press too and all but..." She let her voice trail off.

Clark nodded. "I feel like I have to," he admitted as he helped her into her coat. "I've known Lex Luthor a long time. He's come to pretty much all of Bruce's major events. Well, I guess...some of the events were mine too. Some of the charity ones," he clarified. "It wouldn't look right if I didn't go."

"You don't sound too thrilled about going," Lois pointed out. She slung her purse over her shoulder and they began to make their way to the elevators.

Clark sighed. "I'm actually really looking forward to getting to meet some of the people who will be there. Not the celebrities and other rich people," he added quickly. "I mean the other members of the press. I feel like I really missed out on stuff like that when I was doing the overseas reporting for the Gotham Gazette."

"Yeah," she said thoughtfully, "I guess you *would have* missed that kind of stuff, for the most part.

"I mean, I *did* meet *some* reporters from other papers but it's not really the same, when you know the chances are slim that you'll run into them again."

"Understandable," Lois said, nodding to herself. "But the ball is more than just meeting colleagues. It's a great chance to rub elbows with high society and make those kinds of important connections. I've nabbed a number of exposes just from talking to people at the ball. And this year, I'm going to nail the one that really matters. I'm going to get Lex Luthor himself to agree to an interview with me."

"He never talks to reporters," Clark said with a visible shudder.

"I'll be the first if it kills me," Lois vowed.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Clark replied, not bothering to hide his disdain for the billionaire.

"Whoa," Lois said, stopping dead in her tracks and spinning on her heels to face him. "You have something against him?"

Well," Clark hedged with a shrug.

"Oh, come on, Clark! You can't leave this without an explanation," she demanded.

"Okay, fine. To be perfectly honest and blunt with you, I really don't like or trust Luthor."

Lois looked almost like his words had physically slapped her. He tried to ignore the look and kept walking as she spoke. "What? Why? He's a great man, from all accounts. He's a self-made billionaire. He gives a *ton* to charity every year. His company employs tens of thousands..."

"I know," Clark said, gently cutting her off before she could truly get started babbling. He stabbed a finger onto the Down button at the elevator bank once they reached them. "There's just...something about the man, Lois. Something I can't put my finger on. But I get extremely uneasy when he's around. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up straight. It's like...like what a prey animal must feel like in the presence of a hunter."

Lois looked at him in surprise. "You're...kidding, right?"

"I wish I was. Look, Lois, I know evil when I see it. I've been through a lot in my life," he began. A second later, the elevator softly dinged and the silver door slid open. They boarded and he pressed the button for the parking garage. When the door shut again, he spoke. "I've met a lot of really great people, and a lot of people who are really, *really* great at *pretending* to be great people. Luthor is one of the latter. I just...I can't prove it. One day, perhaps."

The door opened again and they exited into the underground parking garage. Lois was parked right by the elevator bank, which Clark was thankful for. It had been a freezing day, and was steadily growing colder. The forecast was even calling for light, scattered snow flurries. He didn't want Lois to be cold. They hurried to the car and Lois unlocked it swiftly. They climbed inside and Lois cranked the heat up, while the car idled in place. After a few minutes, as the heat began to slowly make the car more bearable, she turned to him.

"What did you mean just now? About seeing evil and being through a lot in your life?"

He sighed as the memories flooded back to him. His heart hurt and he grew sad. "Not in the car," he pleaded. "Let's go somewhere and get some food. Then, if you still want to know, I'll

tell you everything.”

Lois appeared to mull it over. She nodded slowly. “Fine. Your place. Call Tony’s while we drive. We’ll pick up dinner on the way.”

“Fair enough. And...thank you, Lois.”

She nodded again. “I *do* want to know, you know.” He voice was soft, concerned, curious.

“I know. I promise to tell you. And I always keep my promises.”

Forty-five minutes passed. As planned, they’d picked up dinner on the way back to Clark’s apartment. He’d tried a bite of Lois’ penne vodka and had enjoyed his baked ravioli as much as he could. The conversation to come had him a little too nervous to *really* enjoy his meal. His stomach was too busy turning somersaults for him to be able to eat much.

“Lois? Did you want to get changed into something more comfortable?” he asked, knowing she’d brought her stakeout bag inside with her.

“Yeah,” she nodded. She reached for her plate as she stood. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. I’m going to change too. Just leave the dishes. I’ve got it,” he offered. “I’ll clean up everything.”

“Thanks.”

He watched as she grabbed her bag from the couch and then headed off to his bathroom. He picked up the remnants of their meal, packed away the leftovers, and washed the dishes, using a fraction of his super speed to get through the tasks a little quicker. Then he headed into his bedroom to change. Using the technique he’d perfected during his years as Nightwing, he spun out of his work attire and into a soft pair of maroon sweatpants and a maroon and white sweatshirt. He hung his work suit up carefully on a hanger and put it away in his closet.

Lois emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later. She was now in a pair of jeans and a fuzzy coral colored sweater. Her hair, once loose, was now bound in a loose ponytail. She sat on the couch after putting her stakeout bag by the door. Clark joined her a moment later, pretending to still be occupied with his suit.

“Hey,” he said as he sat. It was a weak opener, he knew, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Hey,” she replied.

“So...I guess I owe you a story,” he said, fidgeting in his seat.

“Yeah. If you want to, I mean.”

“I promised I would.”

She nodded. “You did.”

He sighed. “Okay. Just...this isn’t easy for me, okay?”

Thinking about what happened in the past...it’s not pleasant. So...if it seems like I’m struggling? It’s not because I don’t want to tell you. It’s because finding the right words...thinking about the time between when my folks died and Bruce took me in...some of it still haunts me. Most of it does, to be honest.”

“Oh, Clark,” Lois said, looking horrified. “I don’t want you to do it if it means so much pain for you.”

“No. It’s okay. It’s bound to come up sooner or later,” he reasoned. “Okay, so...where to begin?” He thought for a moment. “Lois, remember when we first started working together, on our first story as partners?”

“The Majestic Theater demolition. When the owner tried to have his stepdaughter killed.”

“Right. We were at the diner together, and talking. You said something about Bruce adopting me, and I corrected you. I said that he’d taken me in, getting me out of a bad situation. I’d thought for sure you’d ask what that bad situation had been, but you never did. At the time, I was thankful for that. But that’s exactly what I need to tell you about now.”

Lois nodded. “Are you sure, Clark?”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation. “Lois...look. You’re my best friend. I want you to know this. Because...because that’s

what best friends do. They let people get close to them. They tell them things no one else knows. Up until now, I’ve never had the chance to build a friendship like you and I have. I’ve never let anyone get this close to me. But with you...it’s different. I want to share everything with you.”

Almost everything. One day, maybe I’ll be ready to tell you about my super abilities. But not now. I’m still too afraid.

“Wait. You...think of me as your best friend?” Lois sounded taken off guard.

Clark nodded solemnly. “I do.”

She smiled tenderly, looking deeply touched. “I...I guess... You’re my best friend too, Clark. I mean, I know you are. I guess...some part of me didn’t want to admit that...mostly because I am a *lousy* best friend. And, before you argue and say I’m not,” she quickly added, killing the retort that was already on his tongue, “I really am. I can’t even tell you the last time I really, *truly* had a friend. One way or another...and it hasn’t always been my fault...my friendships always seem to crash and burn. Not unlike my love life, come to think of it,” she added with what sounded like a self-loathing laugh.

“To be honest...I’m not much different in that respect. Pretty much all of my friendships, with the exception of Bruce, have fallen apart over the years. And when I tell you my story, you’ll see why.”

“Well...if you’re ready...then I’m ready to hear it.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding once more. “And Lois?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks. You know. For caring enough to want to listen.”

“Well, as you said...what are friends for?” Lois replied, smiling encouragingly.

Despite himself, Clark smiled too. Then he took a deep breath before he began, trying to steady his nerves and mentally preparing himself to relive his memories.

“Okay, so...where to start? I guess...at the beginning. The *very* beginning,” Clark began nervously, feeling his palms go sweaty. He rubbed them on his pant legs to dry them. “I was adopted by my parents after they found me on their doorstep one night.” It was so easy to repeat the lie of a story the Kents had concocted to keep his origins secret. “When I was thirteen, my mom and I were in a car crash. I got lucky and walked away unscathed, but my mom was killed on impact. The driver of the other car slammed right into her door. My dad died of a heart attack that night. There was no one else to take me in...at least, there were no blood relations. Plenty of friends and neighbors offered to let me stay with them. But, instead of letting me stay in Smallville with any of the people who wanted me to live with them, I was sent to live in a halfway house while my fate was decided. Every day I wondered: Would the court decide to let me stay with a neighbor after all? Would I be sent to a foster home? Was there some other couple out there willing to adopt a teenager?” He shrugged and sighed.

“I lived at Grandma Tildy’s until I was fifteen,” he continued. “Grandma...she’s an incredible woman. She’s the one that got me started on the whole idea of becoming a journalist. Her house...it was never home, but all things considered, it was a great place. I made friends. I worked on my high school diploma. I even helped Grandma find ways to save money around the house. But when I was fifteen, I ran away.”

“Why? I mean, if it was a great place and all...?”

“It just...I needed to get out of there,” Clark stuttered. “There was an incident that wound up being a bigger deal in my own head than it was in reality. It wasn’t until much later that I realized how badly I’d overreacted. But by then, it was far too late. Doesn’t matter what the incident was,” he said, ending Lois’ question before she could voice it. “I left and I knew I couldn’t go back. I was *afraid* to go back. But the problem was...I had nowhere to go. I wandered aimlessly for long time, living out in the woods and whatnot, because I didn’t want to be found and brought back to

Grandma's. Eventually, I wound up in Gotham City. I spent months moving from homeless shelter to homeless shelter."

"Oh, God, Clark! I had no idea!" Lois gasped.

He nodded absently. "It was bad, Lois. I couldn't believe the theft and violence I saw. That's why I didn't stay for too long at any one of them. I kept moving around, trying to find one where I felt even remotely safe. My meals? They mostly came from the local soup kitchens. But I was seventeen at that point, and was able to snag a few part time jobs, so I at least had a little money coming in. Not a lot, of course, but enough to buy the occasional piece of new clothing or a sandwich."

"That's why you were so unhappy with Bobby Bigmouth during our first investigation," Lois said, snapping her fingers in remembrance. "When we met him at the soup kitchen, with that big bag of deli food."

"Yeah," he admitted, hanging his head for just a moment. "I was shocked at how insensitive I thought he was being. There he was, feasting away, while the people on the other side of the door were eating what was probably their only meal of the day." He waved his hand in the air, as if dismissing the thought. "Anyway, one day, Bruce happened to come into one of the stores where I was working, because he was considering doing business with the place. We wound up running into each other later on at one of the local parks. I had no idea who he was but we struck up a conversation."

"You didn't know him?" By the tone of her voice, she found it hard to believe.

He shrugged. "I was seventeen and homeless. I wasn't exactly up to date on my Who's Who of the rich and famous. Over the course of the summer, we kept bumping into each other at the park. I'd spend some time there between shifts at work and he liked to get out on his lunch breaks. We became friends. I let it slip one day that I was looking for a roommate...the shelters only let you stay for so long before they kick you out. He offered to take me in."

"And, obviously, you said yes," Lois supplied.

"Not at first," he gently corrected her. "I was wary at first. Friends or not, we were still mostly strangers to each other. I couldn't believe his offer was genuine. But there was an incident at the shelter a few nights later."

"Seems like there were a lot of 'incidents' back then," Lois said, though not unkindly. She sounded curious.

Clark laughed ruefully. "Unfortunately, yes. I was getting ready to go to sleep a few nights after Bruce offered up his home and we got to know each other a lot better over a dinner. I was at the shelter, like usual. There was this guy. Drunk like you wouldn't believe. He, uh...tried to force...himself...on me. That sealed the deal. I was out of there as soon as the police were done arresting him and taking my statement. I went to live at Wayne Manor and never looked back. From there, I worked hard, finished my schooling, and went to work for the Gazette, until I felt it was time to move on. I quit the paper and came to Metropolis, hoping Perry would hire me."

For a long minute, Lois sat in stunned silence. Clark began to worry after the first thirty seconds had passed. In his, albeit limited experience, a quiet Lois was usually to be feared. It meant she was on the verge of erupting with anger. When she did eventually speak again, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Clark...I'm so, so sorry. That story...I get why it's hard for you to talk about. And I'm sorry I ever thought of you as a spoiled, rich kid. I never realized...I assumed that you were a rich man getting used to living a life of...mediocre middle class. I never once imagined that *you*, of all people, could have ever had it so rough. I mean...you're the kindest, nicest person I've ever met. I guess...I guess I've always pictured people who've had it hard in their lives as having a...a rougher edge to them. Stupid, I know, but..." She shrugged and let her voice trail off for a moment.

"Please, tell me you pressed charges against the man who did that

to you."

Clark nodded. "I did. He served jail time and had to register as a sex offender. I'm not sure if he's out of jail now or what...it was over ten years ago. But Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"You don't have to apologize. I understand exactly why you would have...thought the things that you did. I might have thought the same way, in your shoes."

"But...it's just not fair," Lois said. "You're the best person I've ever known. For life to hand you cards like that..."

He smiled slightly and shrugged. "Life's never been concerned with what's fair. Besides, most of my troubles were of my own making. I'm not ashamed of my past. I wish I'd maybe made a few different decisions, but, ultimately, meeting Bruce was *exactly* what I needed. I learned a lot, living in Wayne Manor, and it really helped to shape who I am now. Even my years of homelessness taught me valuable lessons. I wouldn't be who I am without those experiences. Do you know what I think of as the worst part of my past? The fact that I didn't know you."

Lois smiled, but it was one of disbelief. "Please," she said, brushing off the comment.

"No, really. The worst part of not having a home was the loneliness. Everything else I could tolerate. The not knowing where I'd sleep or where my next meal would come from was nothing compared to not having a friend to turn to."

"Well...you never have to go through that ever again," she assured him.

His grin was more confident this time. "I hope not."

"Trust me. And...to prove it...I never got the chance to answer your question earlier."

Clark was momentarily puzzled. "What question?"

"About the White Orchid Ball. I was going to answer before but we got a little sidetracked. I'd love to go with you."

Clark felt his heart take flight. "Really?"

"Really. The truth is, as much as it's a working night for me, trying to make connections and whatnot, it's always been a little bit of a lonely night too. Despite the fact that Perry and Jimmy always attend."

"Jimmy goes?" Clark was surprised, though he couldn't pinpoint why, exactly.

"Well, *someone* has to take photos of the event," Lois said with a casual shrug.

"Makes sense," Clark admitted with shrug to match hers.

"Jimmy's the best photographer we've got. So...it's a date then."

"It's a professional, working night," Lois countered.

Clark chuckled. "It's an expression, Lois," he teased.

"I know. But, like I've already told you...I'm not someone you want to get too involved with. You're too nice a guy to be destroyed by my awful dating record. And I couldn't bear to lose you as a friend."

"You'll never lose me, Lois," Clark vowed. "But, okay, sure, it's a working date. Not a *date* date."

There's time for that yet, his mind told him. Get to know each other as best friends first. This is too new for the both of you still.

True, he reasoned back at his inner voice. I can be patient. It'll be worth it. Lois is worth it.

"Lex, good to see you again," Clark forced himself to say politely a week later, at the White Orchid Ball.

"Ah, yes, Clark Kent! It's been a long time," the billionaire said, shaking Clark's hand. "I'd heard you'd given up the life of luxury to pursue a life here in Metropolis."

"I did," Clark nodded. "I'm with The Daily Planet now."

"That's a great publication," Lex said with a nod to match Clark's. "How are you liking it?"

Clark's hackles rose. There was something cold, almost reptilian about the way Lex spoke. There *always* was.

"It's a dream come true and the paper certainly is the best,"

Clark agreed amiably. “Uh, Lex? This is Lois Lane. Also of The Daily Planet.”

“Ah, yes,” Lex said, taking her hand and kissing it. “I recognize the name. Enchanté.”

“So much so that you refuse to return my phone calls?” Lois answered, one eyebrow arched. She gracefully withdrew her hand.

“A grievous mistake on my part,” Lex replied. “I should dearly like to get to know you better.”

“Yes, well,” Lois said, giving Clark a side glance. “I was actually hoping to interview you.”

Lex’s painfully fake smile faded. “I don’t give interviews,” he said, almost frowning. “I find reporters to be...typically biased against people like me. But I would be more than glad to speak to you on *other* matters.”

“Sounds like you haven’t met the right reporters,” Lois said, sidestepping his offer to...

To what? Clark’s mind asked. *A date? To be his next conquest?*

The thought burned him with revulsion. He wasn’t a hateful man by any stretch of the imagination. He could count on one hand the amount of people he’d ever met whom he really, truly hated. But Lex Luthor had always, *always* topped that list, ever since he’d first been introduced to the man. The idea that Lex might attempt to make a move on Lois inflamed his hatred to a level he hadn’t known was possible. He slung a protective arm around Lois.

“She’s right you know,” he said, jumping in. “Lois is a complete professional. You couldn’t ask for a better reporter to represent you in print.”

Lex eyed the placement of Clark’s arm coolly. “Yes...well...I will consider it. But I make no promises.”

“Of course not,” Clark replied, holding Lois imperceptibly tighter.

“Sir?” an older gentleman interrupted. Clark knew Nigel only in passing, from two separate occasions when Lex had visited Wayne Manor on business. “The Mayor and her husband have arrived.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Nigel.” Lex turned back to Lois and Clark. “Please, excuse me. You know how it is,” he said, focusing his gaze on Clark.

Clark nodded once, politely. “Of course.”

“Please, enjoy the evening,” Lex said. In the next moment, he was gone, exchanging pleasantries with others while he moved.

Lois turned to Clark. “What the hell was that all about?” she demanded in a low hiss.

“What was what all about?” he asked, confused.

“Horning in on my conversation like that?”

Clark lowered his voice. “I told you. I don’t trust him. I was trying to help. First, by trying to help *you* score the first ever interview with him. And secondly, by trying make sure he was *only* focused on the interview.”

“You mean make him think we’re together, in case he wanted to...to *date* me?” Her eyes flashed her anger.

Clark felt his entire face, neck, and even his ears heat up in a blush. “Not exactly.”

“Then what, *exactly*, were you trying to protect me from?” she demanded again, grabbing his elbow and leading him away from the crowded center of the room to a more deserted corner.

“I just...I don’t want to see you get hurt, Lois. You said yourself that you’ve have problems with men using you to get what they want from you. Luthor is no different from those other men, Lois. His bank account is the only thing that sets him apart from people like Claude, believe me. I’ve heard plenty of stories about Luthor. He’s got at least two illegitimate sons that I’ve heard about. Maybe more for all we know. Both women were paid off extremely handsomely so that they would just...go away and never breathe a word of their children’s father. Some of his business dealings are...vague and shadowy at best. Again, I’ve

heard the payoffs to keep things under the rug were massive. Before you ask, no, I can’t prove it. Maybe one day, but not right now. I just...I don’t put it past him to try something...unwanted...with you.”

She scowled. “I don’t need a bodyguard, Clark.”

He hung his head, feeling suddenly sheepish. “I know,” he admitted. “But you’re my best friend, Lois. I didn’t think. I just...don’t want to see you get hurt. I overstepped the line and I’m sorry.”

Lois studied his face for a moment. “You really don’t trust him, do you?”

“I’d trust a rattlesnake more than him.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. I’ll be careful. *If* he agrees to ever let me interview him.”

Clark nodded. “That’s all I ask.” Somehow, he felt a little bit relieved.

“Hey! Fancy running into *you* here,” came a new voice.

Clark snapped his gaze away from Lois to find the speaker. His face lit up in a grin.

“Bruce! It’s about time you showed your face here!” he teased. “What happened? Your private helicopter break down or something?”

“Funny,” Bruce rolled his eyes good naturedly. “I got caught up on a call with S.T.A.R. Labs. We think we might have figured out the kinks in that robotic leg we’ve been working on.” He waved his hand in the air, dismissing the topic. “It doesn’t matter. How are you?”

“Great. Bruce, this is Lois Lane, my best friend and partner. Lois, this is Bruce Wayne, my friend and mentor.”

“Miss Lane! A pleasure to meet you. I’ve been a big fan of your work for a long time now. Excellent job you did on busting open that gun smuggling ring in the Congo. My money’s on you taking home another award for that series.”

He, like Lex, took Lois’ hand and lightly kissed the top, although the way he did it didn’t set off Clark’s alarms. He knew Bruce was merely being his usual polite and charming, genuine self, whereas Lex always felt like he was calculating his next move and how to use a person to his own benefit.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Lois replied. “Clark’s told me a bit about you. He really admires you.”

Bruce grinned. “And Clark’s told me practically everything about you. He’s quite smitten with you.”

“Hey now,” Clark started to protest as Lois blushed and giggled a little.

“Yep, he’s fallen pretty hard for you,” Bruce said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Oh really?” Lois said, eyebrows arched. At least she appeared to be amused, Clark saw.

“And now I need to go find a hole to go crawl into and die of embarrassment,” Clark joked. “Thanks for that, Bruce. I *really* owe you one.”

Bruce’s grinned grew unbelievably wider. “Hey, we’re practically brothers. It’s what we do.” He snapped his fingers as a thought occurred to him. “Oh, hey, before I forget. I have some of your things with me. Can I stop by after this and drop them off?”

“Things?” Clark asked, confused. All of his things had already been moved to Metropolis, all flown in in the dark post-midnight hours while Batman had prowled the streets and Clark Kent would have been presumed to be sound asleep, like any sane person. All of the trinkets he’d collected on his word travels, his books, even his clothes... “Oh! Right! My things,” he said as the realization hit. Bruce *had* to mean the super suits he’d asked Alfred to make for him. “Sorry, I guess I didn’t expect you to be bringing stuff with you to the White Orchid Ball,” he continued to cover for himself.

Bruce shrugged. “Now seemed as good a time as any. And I figured I could save you a trip out to Gotham. No matter. May I get you a drink?” he asked, turning to Lois.

“Oh, no, I’m fine for now,” she replied. “Thank you though. So, you and Clark are pretty close, huh?”

“Mmm hmm,” Bruce nodded.

“You must have some good stories about him,” Lois said slyly. “As his best friend and, apparently, the woman he’s fallen for, I think I should hear some of them.”

“Oh no,” Clark groaned in mock embarrassment.

“Maybe,” Bruce replied in the same sly tone as Lois.

Lois laughed as Clark’s face went scarlet in a blush. “What?” she asked innocently. “I think a story or two is the perfect penance for you trying to act as my bodyguard earlier.”

Clark opened his mouth to protest, but found no retort on his tongue. He closed his mouth again and stuffed his hands into his pockets like a chastised schoolboy. He nodded. “You’re probably right,” he admitted.

Lois nodded in turn. “But not now. Later. Right now, I wouldn’t mind a dance,” she said, looking straight at him, as the lively music melted away and a slower song took its place.

Clark smiled. “Of course. May I have this dance?”

“Mmmm,” she hummed. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Clark took her hand and led her to the middle of the dance floor, which was growing thick with dancing couples. He took her in his arms and began to sway.

“I love this song,” Lois said after a minute.

Clark listened for a heartbeat. “Me too.”

“This is nice,” she commented after another small silence had lapsed between them.

“Yeah,” Clark remarked. “You know something, Lois? I’ve been to a ton of these kinds of receptions before. And I’ve hated them. Every single one of them. Oh, I’ve liked the fact that most of them helped us raise money for a charity or cause or whatnot. But I’ve never enjoyed them. Tonight though? For the first time, it doesn’t feel like a chore to be here. I’m enjoying myself, despite the fact that we’re in Lex Luthor’s home. And it has *everything* to do with the company.”

“You know what? The feeling’s mutual.” She smiled up at him for a second, then laid her head against his chest.

For half a heartbeat, Clark’s feet left the floor as he began to float in his bliss. But he became aware of the danger he was in quickly, and forced himself to stay earthbound.

I want this forever, he realized in that instant. Lois is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. He mentally sighed, then sent out a plea to God or the universe or fate or whatever it was that kept the world marching on. Please, I’ve been through a lot in my life. I’ve made a ton of mistakes. I’ve done things that I’m ashamed of. But please, let me find a way to be Lois’ husband. I want a family again, more than anything else in this world.

“Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you, for tonight. I really did have a great time.”

“Me too,” he said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Ready to leave?”

The White Orchid Ball was winding down to a close. Most of the guests had already taken their leave. Even Lex Luthor himself seemed to be missing. Clark hadn’t caught sight of the man in almost an hour. It was likely that the billionaire was locked in conversation with someone in a private room someplace. He didn’t care. He was more than ready to leave Luthor’s home. His only hesitation was saying goodnight to Lois.

The night had been a dream. They’d laughed together, talked together, and danced together the whole evening. It had felt almost like a date. Almost. Except it *wasn’t* a date. They’d simply been two friends on a work assignment together. There would be no walking Lois to her apartment door. There would be no goodnight kiss.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” he answered. “But, um, I need to talk to Bruce

first.”

“Oh, sure,” Lois said with a nod. “He had some stuff to give you, right?”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded in turn. “I’m not sure exactly how much he has with him.”

As if he’d materialized at the mention of his name, Bruce approached them. “It’s not much,” he said, looking at Clark. “A couple of boxes. I can drop you home, if you’d like. Or I can give you the boxes and we can catch up in the morning.”

“Option two sounds great. I have the day off tomorrow. Maybe we can talk over brunch?”

“You buying?” Bruce teased.

Clark shook his head, laughing. “No way! I’m a poor working stiff now. *You’re* the man with money to burn.”

Bruce chuckled. “Cheapskate.” He grinned.

“Is this one of those weird, best male friends jokes that nobody gets?” Lois asked, amused and perhaps a bit bewildered.

“Yeah, we’ve been giving each other a hard time since... well... probably since right after I moved into Wayne Manor,” Clark replied, unable to wipe the grin off his face and choking back a laugh.

“I see,” Lois said, shaking her head. “Well, if it makes you happy, who am I to judge, right?”

“Okay, brunch then,” Bruce said.

“I know of a great little spot,” Clark confirmed.

“And you, Miss Lane?” Bruce asked.

“Lois,” Lois reflexively corrected. “Please.”

“Okay, Lois. Will you be joining us?” Bruce’s tone sounded genuinely curious, but Clark knew the man was hoping to keep the meeting between just Clark and himself.

“I wish I could. I’d like to talk to you more,” Lois replied.

“But I promised one of the other reporters that I’d cover his shift so he can visit his ailing mother.”

“A shame. Perhaps another time then? Will you be available for dinner?” Bruce offered.

“A late dinner, but yes, that would be lovely. Besides, you still owe me some stories about Clark here.”

Bruce’s smile turned impish. “Ah, yes. I do believe you’re right about that.”

“Oh boy,” Clark gulped in dread that was only half feigned.

Clark carefully opened the door to his apartment, ensuring that the two large cardboard boxes he was balancing didn’t tip over. Not that a spill would do the contents any harm. It was, after all, just a bunch of fabric suits. But it felt somehow wrong to even *think* of the boxes tumbling over. Whatever was inside — whatever design Alfred had concocted — it was his new identity, at least as far as when it came to helping save people’s lives. In his mind, it was almost as if a living, breathing person was contained within the cardboard he held, and he felt a certain amount of reverence for that.

As soon as he’d worked the door open enough, he slipped inside and used his foot to kick the door shut again. He headed straight for his couch and gingerly deposited the boxes on the plush cushions. Then he went and locked the door again. He was itching to open the boxes and see what Alfred had created for him, but he felt dirty from having been in Lex Luthor’s home. Sighing, he went into his bedroom and striped out of his tuxedo, placing the pieces of the garment to the side to bring to the local dry cleaner. He couldn’t help but to smile to himself a little. Lois had seemed very appreciative of the tailor-made tux. True, he’d had it made several years before for one of his and Bruce’s charity dinners, but there was something about a tuxedo that never went out of style.

Naked, he strode through his apartment, heading for the bathroom. Normally, he’d shower at super speed, in order to get that much closer to delving into the boxes awaiting him in the living room. But not tonight. Tonight he lingered under the hot spray of water and methodically scrubbed his skin until he no

longer felt the phantom sheen of slime that always coated his body each time he'd ever been in Luthor's presence. After fifteen minutes, he finally shut off the water and stepped out of the shower stall, his skin tingling with cleanliness. He toweled off slowly, making sure to get himself completely dry, then he used his heat vision to ensure that any stubble that had dared to start growing was seared away.

In short, he was stalling.

And he knew it.

"Why am I so nervous about this?" he asked himself in a near-whisper.

It was true. As excited as he was about seeing what Alfred had created for him, there was a very real part of him that was nervous about it. Oh, he was sure that Alfred had come up with something amazing, but there was something that felt very permanent about all of this. He knew that, whatever character he found waiting in those boxes, this was it. This would be the last alter ego he would ever adopt, in an effort to help the people of Earth. There would be no going back from this. If it worked out, he would forever be whatever name came to be associated with the uniform. And if it didn't... well, Clark knew he didn't have it within himself to start over again and create yet another brand-new superhero. So, whatever he found inside the two boxes Bruce had given him, it was all or nothing.

Clark sighed, trying to calm his nerves, then he seared away the last few stray patches of barely-there stubble. Satisfied with the image he saw staring back at him in the mirror, he hung up his towel and retreated to his bedroom. He pulled on a pair of boxers and some fresh socks, then went to the couch. Carefully, he opened the first box, his hands nearly trembling in anticipation. He sucked in a gasp and then let out a low whistle as the contents finally came into his view. He reached in eagerly, and gently extracted the first blue unitard. He stood, holding it up before him, to get the full effect. His heart skipped a beat to see the stylized S crest on the chest. Then he turned his attention to the rest. Out came a pair of red briefs, followed by a rich red cape, with the same S on the back in contrasting gold threads. He was glad to see that Alfred had barely used any yellow — just a few hints of it — as he'd promised. For a long moment, he admired the cape. It would reach nearly to the ground when he wore it, making it look regal. And, more importantly, it would provide him plenty of coverage in the back.

Clark opened the second box and was greeted by a collection of red boots, which perfectly matched the color of the cape and briefs. He took a pair out and looked them over, impressed by the quality. He set them aside after a minute and turned his attention to a note that lay in the box. He opened the envelope and immediately saw Alfred's distinguished handwriting.

Master Clark,

I hope the costumes meet with your approval and live up to your expectations. As we'd discussed, I took the basic design of the Nightwing outfit and modified it. You may have also noticed, all of the protective armor has been removed, giving you a broader range of motion and making it easy to wear even under a business suit, if you so choose. Besides, the armor always was a bit unnecessary, in light of your unique aura, wasn't it?

I have sent you several copies of the costume, as one can never be too overly prepared for fighting crime, as I am sure you are well aware.

With this note, I have included my initial sketches for the costume, in case you might be interested in them. I dare say that you are more than ready to get out there and show the world who you are. You need only to decide your new identity.

I wish you the best of luck once you make your public debut, sir.

Alfred

PS — Stop by in uniform sometime. I should dearly like to see the final result on you.

Clark smiled to himself. It was funny. When he'd first moved into Wayne Manor, he'd been shy and withdrawn around Alfred. It had unnerved him to have someone constantly calling him "sir" or "master." But the older man's personality and good cheer was infectious, and soon Clark had felt like Alfred was the grandfather he'd never had. He'd even been able to overlook Alfred's refusal to stop using such formalities with him.

Setting the note aside, he looked through the boxes again. All totaled, he had half a dozen complete suits. Clark shook his head, awed and amused. Alfred had outdone himself, as usual. Six suits were definitely more than Clark thought he'd need, but he was grateful all the same.

"Okay," he whispered to himself, "time to try one on."

He'd long ago perfected the art of spinning into and out of his Nightwing uniform, and knew he could do it with this new, still unnamed costume. But that felt wrong, somehow. In the future, he would definitely use the spin to change, but for now, for this first time, he would take it slowly and savor the sensation of transforming from a mild-mannered reporter into a super powered alien hero.

After consulting the sketches Alfred had enclosed, he pulled on his cape first. The shoulder harness was meant to sit beneath the blue unitard, so it made the most sense to put it on first. With the cape snugly and comfortably in place, Clark then pulled the tight spandex suit on and zipped it closed. It was a hair snugger than what he'd grown accustomed to wearing as Nightwing, but he knew, from talking with Alfred, that the tighter fit would cut down on the wind resistance as he flew, which could make all the difference in getting to a disaster in time to save a life or not. The briefs were next and the boots were last.

When he was at last fully dressed, he strode confidently into his bedroom to check out the end result. What he saw took his breath away. He'd tried to imagine what he would look like in his new uniform, but seeing it in person exceeded his expectations. The outfit was imposing, yet approachable. The bright colors stood out, like a beacon of hope. Even the cape — which had only been there as a practical way to afford Clark some modesty in the back — looked dashing, like the cloak of a revered knight out of legend.

Clark smiled. "You've outdone yourself, Alfred," he said to the empty air around him. He glanced at the clock. It was just past midnight. "Plenty of time to take this out for a spin," he told his reflection.

He went out onto his terrace and stood for a moment in the chill night air. He breathed in deeply, savoring the moment. He wasn't ready to attempt a rescue as this new, still unnamed hero — not yet. He merely wanted to fly around and get a good feel for the suit. Already, he was used to the snug fit of the material against his body. It was like a second skin and it gave him a sense of sleek purposefulness. He stretched and flexed in the outfit, getting a feel for the range of motion it afforded him. Without the built-in armor, he could move freely, no different than if he was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. The Nightwing costume had been much the same, but the armor had cut into his range of movement, even if only minimally.

The light breeze snapped at his cape, urging him to take flight. Clark closed his eyes for several heartbeats, then opened them again. Resolve came over him and made him feel as if his very heart beat differently than before. He was ready.

This felt *right*.

This alter ego — regardless of the name he would eventually choose to call it by — was who he was meant to be.

Of course, he knew the costumed character would never replace Clark Kent. Clark was who he *was*, inside and out. It was who he'd always been, and always would be.

This character was meant only to be the physical representation of his powers. It symbolized everything he could *do*, not unlike how Nightwing had showcased a portion of how he

could help people.

“Clark is who I am,” he repeated to himself, his breath misting lightly in the air. “This costume is what I can do.”

It was an important distinction in his mind. He’d learned long ago that keeping the two aspects of his life separate was vitally necessary for his mental health. It could be almost too easy, sometimes, to lose himself to the avatar of justice he’d taken on.

“This is it,” he continued, whispering into the night. “Nightwing was a test run...my training wheels. This suit...this is the real deal, the character I was always meant to take on.”

Without another thought, he shot up into the sky, careful to ensure that he didn’t accidentally break the sound barrier. He wasn’t ready for the world to know that an alien walked — or flew, as the case might be — amongst them. Not yet. Soon. But not on this night. All the while, he laughed mirthfully at the freedom he had to fly around his sleeping city. He could scarcely wait to introduce the world to his alter ego, in the broad light of day, instead of skulking around the shadows of night as Nightwing.

He circled the city twice, angling his path toward Lois’ apartment building. He wanted to make sure she’d gotten home safely after dropping him off at his own apartment. The light was on in her windows, and he slowed to a halt, half a mile above the building. He tuned in his hearing and heard Lois rummaging around in her kitchen. He winced at the cacophony of sound that assaulted his ears as she opened a cabinet and a pile of what sounded like pots and pans spilled out onto the floor. She swore once and Clark severed the connection, satisfied that she was safe and sound at home.

He began to move again, pointing himself in the direction of Gotham City. It was still barely twelve-thirty at night. Alfred could very well still be awake. And Clark wanted his friend to see the results of his handiwork first hand, before anyone else in the world met their new protector. Even Bruce would have to wait. Clark owed it to Alfred to go to him first.

With that decision made, Clark zoomed off into the night, punching through clouds and racing the moonlight.

“Looks like Alfred is still awake,” Clark said to himself as Wayne Manor appeared on the edges of his vision. With his sharp eyesight, he could see the warm glow of the mansion’s lights spilling out through some of the windows. He grinned. “Wait until he gets a load of his handiwork.”

He pushed himself to fly even faster, still keeping well below the danger of tearing the sound barrier. In the span of mere seconds, he crossed the distance and landed without a sound on the front porch. He rang the doorbell, then stepped back so Alfred would immediately be able to see the suit in all its red and blue glory.

Inside, he heard the man’s exclamation of surprise. The television shut off and Clark heard footsteps coming closer. There was a heavy *clunk* as the first of the door locks was opened. Then the familiar scrape of the chain lock being drawn back. Finally, the jiggle of the doorknob as Alfred opened the door.

“May I help...” he began, then stopped and gaped. “Master Clark?”

“What do you think, Alfred?” Clark asked, spreading his arms and turning in a slow circle to show off the costume.

“I think we’ve definitely achieved our goal of creating a distracting outfit,” the older gentleman said. “Not a single person will be studying your facial features all that closely. Not with an outfit *that* tight.” He grinned as Clark’s face went scarlet. “But come in. Let’s talk in the living room, sir.”

“You think it looks bad?” Clark asked, embarrassed, as he followed Alfred inside.

Alfred shook his graying head and closed the door. “It looks fabulous. Truth be told, sir, I feel like it’s a bit more...you...than Nightwing ever was.”

“I agree,” Clark said, nodding. He took a seat on the opposite side of the couch from Alfred.

“Have you decided on a name for the suit yet?” Alfred asked.

“Not yet.” Clark shook his head. “Whatever it is, it’ll have to be really good. This...” he gestured to the outfit he wore. “All of this *has* to work, from the outfit, to the name, to whether or not the public accepts me or fears me. If it doesn’t...this is the last costume I want to ever wear, Alfred. It’s the last one I ever *will*.”

“It *will* work, Master Clark,” Alfred assured him. “Despite Master Bruce’s fears about the public’s acceptance of such a powerful being in their midst, I know they will welcome you with open arms.”

“How can you be so sure? *I’m* not even all that confident.” He crossed his arms over his chest protectively, as if it could conceal him from phantom eyes.

“Because, Master Clark, it’s not the name, nor the outfit, nor the powers. It’s the *man inside* the suit that matters. As soon as they see the kind of person you are, the people will love you.” A wry grin twisted his lips upward. “Except, for course, for the criminals. They will loathe you with a passion.”

Clark chuckled. “Yeah, well, you can’t please everyone,” he joked.

Alfred laughed in turn. “Very true, sir.”

“So,” Clark asked after a minute had passed. “Any ideas on a name? After all, you nailed it with the idea of Nightwing. And this new outfit is your creation more than it is mine.”

Alfred shook his head. “I’m sorry to report that not a single name crossed my mind while I was creating the costume. With Nightwing, it was too easy. The name came first and the design of the suit followed on its heels. This time, I have no name to offer.”

Clark shrugged. “That’s okay. I’m sure some idea will come up sooner or later. Hopefully sooner but it’s not exactly a requirement for going out there and helping people.”

“And when might that be? I’ll keep my eyes glued to the news, searching for a glimpse of the hero wearing blue, red, and yellow.”

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted, standing up again. He felt too worked up to sit. “I love the suit — you really outdid yourself, Alfred. And I love that I’ll have the freedom to use it in broad daylight.”

“But?” Alfred prompted.

“But the first time this costume makes its appearance, it has to be something newsworthy. I want the world over to be introduced to this new avatar of mine in one fell swoop. And I know, I know,” he said, waving the air before him and beginning to pace, “it sounds really conceited. But I’m not doing it for any personal gain. I just...I think it might be easier for the world to come to terms with the fact that a powerful alien wants to help them, if that first appearance is shown all over the globe. Saving a cat in a tree might be easy and make me feel good, but it’s not necessarily going to make people fear me less than if I...I don’t know. Stop a nuclear reaction from melting down or stop a plane from crashing.”

“Rip the Band-Aid off swiftly,” Alfred agreed with a vague gesture. “It may sting more, but it gets the ordeal over all the quicker.”

“Exactly. Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Clark said, grateful for the metaphor Alfred had provided. It accurately summed up his feelings on the matter. He paused as a thought struck him. “What did Bruce have to say about the outfit?”

“He thought it to be a bit too...colorful. But then again, Master Bruce *does* tend to prefer a bit blander of a color palette, doesn’t he?” He shrugged, unfazed. “Does it bother you so much if he likes it or not, sir?”

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head as he stopped pacing. “I’ve made up my mind about this. I’m an adult and I don’t need his approval to take on this new identity. But...there’s a small part of me that still feels like that same recently homeless kid, desperate

to please my generous benefactor.”

“Perhaps you need to speak directly with Master Bruce,” Alfred suggested.

“I will. We’re meeting for brunch tomorrow.”

Alfred nodded. “Good, sir. And, for what it’s worth, I think you’ve made the right decision...about using your powers and no longer living a life in the shadows. There are times when I almost wish Master Bruce would do the same.”

“You’re here early,” Clark commented as he approached the little table where Bruce sat, already enjoying a cup of coffee and reading the morning edition of the Daily Planet.

“And you’re late,” the billionaire grinned. He folded the paper again and put it to the side.

Clark checked his watch. “By two minutes. There was an accident on Tenabross Avenue and the cab had to make a detour.”

Bruce nodded and gestured to the seat across from him. “How’d you enjoy the packages last night?”

Clark knew that his eyes lit up as he slid into the booth. “The suits are fantastic, Bruce. Thanks again for letting me borrow Alfred to create them. It means a lot to me.”

“The more I’ve thought about it, the more I understand why you want to do it. And I’m proud of you for making that decision.”

“Really? Did you talk to Alfred this morning?” Clark wondered.

Bruce frowned for a second. “No, why?”

“Just...nothing. I stopped by your place last night so Alfred could get a look at what he made. And I happened to mention that while I know I don’t need permission to...do what I’m planning to do, that there’s a part of me that kind of wants your approval anyway. Stupid, I know.”

“No, it’s not stupid. Actually, very understandable,” Bruce replied. “When I first started out, I knew I was an adult and that I was the master of my own house. I could do as I wished. But I still wanted Alfred to approve. After all, he’d raised me ever since my parents had died. He’d been there from the moment I was born. He’d seen my first steps, tended to me as I cut my first teeth, ran out in the middle of the night to pick up medicine if I needed it. So, believe me, I understand that desire to hear someone else say ‘you’ve made the right choice and I support you.’ So, I’ll say it to you now. I think you’ve made the right choice – a brave choice. And I support what you’re about to go out there and do.”

“I appreciate that,” Clark said, just as the waitress appeared.

“Morning, handsome,” she said, winking at him. “My name is Tracy and I’ll be your waitress today. What can I get for you?”

“Coffee, please,” Clark said. “Bruce, you ready to order?”

“Yeah,” came the reply, with the accompanying nod in the affirmative.

“Perfect,” Clark said. “I’ll have the two egg meal, sunny side. White toast and bacon. And can I swap out the hash browns for fries, please?”

“You got it, sugar. And for you, stud?” she asked, turning to Bruce as she jotted down Clark’s order on her pad of paper.

“The Belgium waffles, please. And another coffee.”

“No problem. The kitchen’s not busy so it shouldn’t be long. If you need anything, just let me know. *Anything* at all,” she stressed.

“Thanks,” Clark and Bruce said in unison as Tracy swished away.

Bruce watched her go. “You said you like this place? The waitresses all seem a bit...borderline inappropriately flirty.”

Clark shrugged. “True, but the food is worth it. Are you complaining? I thought this place would fit right in with your playboy reputation,” he teased.

“Not at all. But it seems a bit...not your style. You usually shy away from overt advances like that.”

“This is different. She’s a waitress, looking to boost her tips. It’s not like she’d actually want to date me or anything. So, I can overlook the flirtation.”

“And Lois?”

“What about her?” Clark asked guardedly. “She’s the one who introduced me to this place. She’s nuts about their Ruben sandwiches.”

“That’s not what I meant. And you know it.”

“She and I are friends,” Clark began slowly. “I’ve never known what it’s like to have a best friend like her. No offense, that is. I consider you to be my brother, you know that.”

Bruce nodded. “Mmm hmm.”

“With Lois, it’s different. I can’t explain it properly. I just...my parents would have said it was like I found my soulmate in her.”

“You love her.” It was not a question.

“More than my own life,” Clark admitted. He laughed ruefully. “I’ll probably regret telling you that at some point. But...there it is.”

The waitress chose at that moment to return with their coffees. Clark took his gratefully and immediately dumped in three packets of sugar and a couple of drops of milk.

Bruce looked appalled, as he usually did when watching Clark prepare his coffee. “After all these years, I still wonder: how do you drink it like that?” he teased, adding one sugar and stirring it.

“I ask myself the same question every time I watch you drink yours basically black,” Clark shot back in a playful tone.

“Fair enough. Now...have you asked her out yet?”

“No,” Clark said, a bit too quickly to his own ears. “I mean, not yet. We’ve only just come to terms with our friendship. I think we both need a little time. She’s been hurt by coworkers she’s dated before. And I’ve never been in a relationship that’s lasted more than a couple of months. I’ve always been too afraid to let a woman get too close to me, because of who I am.”

“Your abilities, you mean.” Bruce’s voice barely broke the level of a whisper.

“Yes. I’m not...not even *human*,” Clark replied, dropping his voice and only mouthing the word ‘human.’ He sighed. “What kind of sane woman could ever look past that and want to be with me?”

“You’ll never know unless you give it a chance.” Though he didn’t move, there was a definite shrug in Bruce’s voice.

“I know. But the thing is, once the knowledge is out there, there’s no...putting the cat back in the bag, so to speak.”

“The world will know soon enough. Maybe not that it’s Clark Kent out there in the blue, but that there’s someone not like them in the world. And trust me, you’re an attractive man. Women — and probably some men — will be throwing themselves at you regardless of where you were born.”

Clark thought it over. “Maybe,” he agreed. “But there’s no one I could possibly want who isn’t Lois. And I don’t want to be wanted for the things I can do. I want Lois to love me for who I am. So I have to be careful, Bruce. I need to make sure that, when I eventually do ask her out on a date, that she’s accepting the invitation from Clark, not...the man in blue.”

“Don’t you think she’ll be just as prone to falling for the icon you’ll create?” Bruce asked thoughtfully. “That she may well have stars in her eyes that’ll blind her to the average Joes all around her?”

“It’s a risk I don’t want to take,” Clark agreed, looking down at his coffee and stirring it idly. “But it’s one I *have* to. She’s not ready for me to ask her out. She’s only just accepted me as her work partner and best friend. So she can’t know that it’s me out there in the suit, once I introduce my new alter ego to the world. It’s too much, too fast, and I need to know it’s the real me she likes.” He looked up sharply, cupping his mug with both hands. “I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

Bruce looked pained. “Probably. I told you once that Vicki Vale and I have dated here and there. I loved her. I still do, in my own way. But my own secret? It’s too great a wedge between us. That’s why it never worked out. She got tired of me never being

around, making up excuses for why I couldn't be there when she needed me. I broke her heart, Clark." He shook his head sadly. "I broke her heart but, somehow, she found it within herself to remain my friend."

"Did you...did she ever find out?" Clark asked. "I mean, if she knows, she's never let on."

"No. I think she may suspect it but, as far as I know, she's never known for sure."

"If you love her, why haven't you told her...everything?" Clark asked carefully.

Bruce shook his head again. "The same reasons you just gave. It can never be undone. And while I trust Vicki in most things, I'm not sure she'd take the news of my hobby well."

Clark nodded thoughtfully as he sipped at his coffee. "Yeah. She's a good reporter. It would tear her up, deciding to keep the secret and not print what's truly newsworthy, or to print it and destroy you in the process."

"Is Lois so different?" Bruce asked softly. There was no accusation, no judgment, only pure curiosity.

"I..." Clark paused and thought for a second, hanging his head. "I'm not sure. I want to say no, she would never betray my secret if she were to ever find out — and I know she'll need to know if we were ever to date and get serious — but...she's also the most driven, dedicated reporter I've ever met. It's no coincidence her nickname is Mad Dog Lane. And let's face it, my story could well be Pulitzer material, if my debut goes the way I hope it will."

"Just...whatever you do, be careful," Bruce warned.

"Believe me, Bruce, I will."

Help! It's a bomb! Someone call the police!

Clark snapped his head toward the where the cry of alarm had originated. He and Bruce were just settling the bill from their brunch together. Bruce looked at him in concern, knowing exactly what was going on behind Clark's faraway, but intent, look.

"What?"

"A bomb," he said in a hushed voice. "At the Planet. Looks like I won't be able to name my suit before unveiling it after all," he mused darkly, frowning.

"Go. We'll talk more later," Bruce encouraged.

Clark nodded mutely — just one solemn downward movement of his head. Then he was up and moving toward the exit, straining to keep himself moving at a normal, human pace. He didn't breathe the entire way through Harlow's Spot, until he was safely outside and hidden away in the alley behind the establishment. Except for a stray cat, the alley was deserted. But Clark was far from safe. There was a door back there that led to the kitchen, which gave the cooks quick access to the reeking dumpster that stood there. He had to move quickly, lest he be spotted.

Clark spun into the costume that he wore beneath his civilian clothing. He'd planned on showing the outfit to Bruce at some point, if time had allowed for it. It had felt silly at first, but now he was more than glad he'd done it. Then he shot up into the air and oriented himself so that he was facing the direction of the Daily Planet. Without taking so much as a steadying breath, he rocketed away.

He was too late.

The bomb exploded before he arrived, five seconds after the blast.

His heart seizing in fear, he punched a hole through the clouds of billowing smoke and delved into the heart of the fire. The bomb appeared have been set off in the boiler room, but the building had suffered heavy damage nonetheless. Clark scanned with his x-ray vision as he moved. He saw no signs that the structural integrity of the building had been compromised. There seemed to be no danger of the building coming down. For that, he sent out a silent prayer of thanks. But the fire was already spreading rapidly.

He had to make a decision.

He got to work putting the flames in the boiler room out first, mostly because he was worried that the boilers themselves might blow up from the intense heat. Using his superspeed, he worked his way up, using his icy super breath to extinguish the blaze that had consumed half of the lobby. The newsstand where he and Lois often picked up a coffee and a donut or bagel was beyond saving — the explosive had been set off directly beneath it. The stand was nearly unrecognizable and it made Clark's heart hurt.

He kept going, checking every floor, putting out fires and helping the trapped occupants of the building to escape the inferno. Finally, he reached the newsroom. Even here, as high up in the building as it was, the bullpen was not untouched. Fire had destroyed patches of the room and Clark had to bite back an anguished cry. Fury ignited in his heart and he redoubled his efforts to put an end to the damage the explosive had caused.

A cough caught his attention.

Immediately, he swiveled his head toward the sound. It was coming from the elevator bank. He blitzed over to the silver doors and, using his strength, pried them open. Caught between the bullpen and the floor directly below it, was the elevator car.

"Help!"

"Lois?" he said to himself, panicking. Then, louder, "Don't worry. I'll have you out of there in a minute."

"Is someone out there?"

"Jimmy," Clark said, his voice once again only loud enough for his own ears.

"Who's there?" Lois called.

"I'm..." He paused, still at a loss for a name to call himself by. "A friend," he finished weakly, x-raying through the top of the elevator car. "Are you okay in there?" The authoritative tone that his voice took on didn't surprise him in the least. It was one he'd perfected back during his nights roaming the streets of Gotham as Nightwing.

"We're not hurt, if that's what you're asking," Lois equipped irritably.

"I *could* use a bathroom though," Jimmy added.

"Okay," Clark said. "Stand back. I'm coming down to get you," he reassured them. "I want you to move to the back right corner of the car, okay?" he called down. "I don't want you to get hurt when I cut through the roof."

Without waiting for a reply, he floated up off the floor and through the opening he'd made in the elevator doors. Then he gently lowered himself down to the top of the elevator car, so that he stood atop it. He heard Jimmy gasp as the sound of his touchdown sounded on the roof.

"Okay, I'm cutting through the metal now," he said by way of a warning.

"We're out of the way," Lois confirmed.

He checked again with his x-ray vision, to ensure that they were safely ensconced in the corner. Satisfied that they were, he switched to his heat vision and began to carefully melt and cut the metal into a rough square that would be big enough for him to slip through. Once it was wide enough, he sat on the edge and dropped into the car.

"Who the hell are you?" Lois asked, as she caught sight of him.

"You're not a first responder," Jimmy said, blinking in surprise.

"Well, technically, in this case I *am*," Clark tossed back lightly, to break the tension. "Come on, let's get you two out of here."

They both hesitated only for a heartbeat. Then Lois stepped forward. She looked ready to step up into his hands to be given a boost up to reach the access point he'd made. He simply shook his head. Holding on to both Lois and Jimmy, he floated them up through the hole and out of the elevator shaft.

"Whoa," Jimmy exclaimed in awe. "Cool."

"Who are you? *What* are you?" Lois demanded again.

“Just someone who wants to help,” Clark replied calmly, although the question of *‘what are you’* had hurt more than he wanted to admit. “Let’s get out of the building, so you two can be checked by the paramedics.”

“Thanks for getting us out,” Jimmy said as Clark flew them through the huge window that was in the bullpen.

Clark felt Lois reflexively clutch at him even tighter as they moved through the window, out into the open air.

“My pleasure. How’d you get caught in the elevator?” he asked, hoping to draw away any more questions about his identity.

“We were on our way back from a story,” Jimmy offered. “We were almost at the newsroom when we heard the blast and felt the shockwave. Next thing we knew, the power was out and we were stuck.”

Clark nodded. It made a lot of sense, and he made a mental note to check the other elevator shafts in the building, once Jimmy and Lois were safe.

“How are you doing this?” Lois finally asked, looking down at the ground below without any trace of fear on her face.

Clark chuckled. “The flying? That’s as easy as breathing,” he smiled. “It’s something I’ve been able to do for a long time.”

“What else are you capable of?” she wondered.

“Enough to make sure this building and anyone else who may be inside are safe,” he replied. He set them gently on the ground and waved over two paramedics. “They were caught in one of the elevator cars,” he quickly explained to the men. “I’d appreciate it if you could check them over.”

“Of course. Uh...who are you?” the one with Keller on his name badge asked.

“A friend,” Clark told him. “Excuse me,” he said, inclining his head. “I wish I could talk more, but I need to make sure the building is clear and safe.”

He shot away then, zipping back into the building and checking it over with every super ability he possessed. He found two elderly accountants trapped on the floor above the bullpen, and one of the owners of the Planet as well. Clark ferried them out of the building before putting out the remaining fires. Then he scanned the building once more. He found no more fires, not even smoldering embers, and he almost breathed a sigh of relief.

Almost.

He was about to leave and declare the building safe for the firefighters and other crews to enter and assess the damage when he heard a faint beeping. His heart seized up as he frantically searched for the source of the sound. Seconds stretched into eternities as he looked, until, at last, he found it.

A second bomb was strapped directly onto one of the boilers, hidden and wedged between the boiler and the wall. In his haste to make sure everyone in the building got out safely, he hadn’t had the chance to thoroughly search the boiler room, a fact he now regretted immensely. A countdown clock showed fourteen seconds before it was set to explode. Clark ripped the device off the boiler and dashed outside, into the street directly before the Planet. His mind raced as he tried to decide on the best course of action. He wasn’t a bomb expert — there was no way he could diffuse it, not without risking the lives of everyone in the vicinity. He could throw it into the stratosphere, but he couldn’t be sure the pieces of it might not rain back down on the city below, possibly injuring people, if the pieces were large enough. And the device he held was sizable. He’d had smaller textbooks in college.

The beeping grew quicker as the counter wound down. Five seconds left.

Clark threw the explosive down onto the asphalt and dove on top of it, a cry of “Everyone stay back!” ripping from his throat without him really even intending to speak at all.

A panicked scream rose from the throngs of once-curious onlookers.

Two seconds left.

Clark closed his eyes and tried to brace for the impact. He

only hoped his invincibility held up against a direct bomb blast. He wished there was something to grip onto, to stop the force of the blow from tossing him backwards into the air.

One second.

Let me save these people, he pleaded to God and the universe at large.

When the bomb detonated, it was like nothing Clark had ever felt before.

It felt like he was torn to pieces and turned into jelly, all at the same time. He felt the reverberation jar his entire body, hard enough to make it seem like his bones were pounded into dust. His ears rang and his lungs filled with dirt, dust, and street debris, making him choke. Dimly, he was aware that he possessed the ability to hold his breath for roughly twenty minutes at a time. He immediately tried to hold his breath, but it was too late. The wind had been knocked from his lungs. He was forced to breathe in the tainted air around him, and the acrid stench of the explosive burned his already irritated eyes.

He knew he should get up off the ground. He knew the danger was past. But, for one terrifying minute, he wasn’t sure he *could* get up. All around, he heard the screams, once the ringing in his ears died away.

“He’s dead!” he heard a horrified woman cry out.

“He saved us all!” That was Lois, sounding awed and shaken.

“Someone go help him!” Jimmy screamed, trying to get the attention of the first responders on the scene.

“He just...jumped on top of that bomb!” a man said, disbelief in his voice.

“What a lunatic!” cried another man, standing behind the one who’d just spoken.

“Is it over?” wondered a woman.

“Are we safe?” asked a man.

“Are there more bombs?” a little boy asked, worriedly.

“Who was that guy?” a gruff man’s voice asked aloud.

“I dunno. Alls I know is that he saved our collective butts,” said another man, who appeared to be answering the other’s question.

“Must be some kind of angel,” said a different man.

“Or a demon,” said the woman with him, a cigarette dangling from her lips.

Clark tried pushing himself up off the ground, and found it to be easier than he’d anticipated. Now that the initial shock of the blast had faded, he found himself feeling no different than usual. He got up onto his hands and knees, coughing, then stood upright, as the gathered crowd gasped in wonderment, and maybe even a little fear, if he were to be honest with himself. Instinctively, Clark looked down and put his hands to his chest and torso, to prove to himself that there wasn’t a huge, gaping hole blown into his body from the explosive. He nearly laughed when he found not only his body whole and unharmed, but also his outfit, though the proud S on his chest was a bit dirty. He brushed away some of the grit as he struggled to contain his mirth and keep a neutral look affixed to his face.

“He’s alive? How the hell can he be alive?” a policeman asked his fellow officer.

“Beats the hell out of me,” replied the other, as she stared, unblinking at Clark.

You and me both, Clark couldn’t help but think.

“Who cares?” That was Lois again. Clark could see her near the officers, the paramedic he’d left her with still at her side. He mentally breathed a sigh of relief to see her unharmed, even if logic demanded that she be fine. After all, the bomb hadn’t been able to hurt anyone else. “He saved all of us. He saved the Daily Planet. Just be glad he’s still standing.”

Jimmy said nothing. He simply stood, snapping pictures of Clark and the crater that had been blasted into the middle of the street. Clark looked down and winced at the damage. A *lot* of people had almost just lost their lives. Shaking his head, he turned

away, facing the Planet. Then he dashed inside and gave the place a more thorough check. He did *not* want to miss anything else that might cause harm to anyone. But there was nothing. Whoever had done this, they must have counted on the second device to finish the job, in the event that the first one failed.

He exited the building ten or fifteen minutes later. It was hard to keep track of time as he searched. He was solely focused on the task at hand. The passage of time no longer mattered. But, eventually, he was satisfied. Stepping back out into the bright sunlight, he took a deep breath, then he strode toward the two police officers who stood near Lois, simply because they were the closest to him.

“Officers,” he greeted them, his voice authoritative but friendly. “I believe that was the last of the explosives. I didn’t see any others when I was inside the building just now. It should be reasonably safe for your fellow officers to go in there now. And I’ve made sure that no one was left in the building.”

“Yeah,” the first officer said in a daze. “Sure. Right.” Ramirez, his badge declared.

“Uh...thanks,” the woman, Billings, stuttered.

“Just glad I could help,” Clark assured them.

“Hey! You there!”

Clark looked over to see Lois trying to get his attention. He nodded at her. This was the *real* test, he knew. Lois would either recognize him as the man she worked alongside every day and called her best friend, or the disguise would fool her into believing he was someone else altogether.

“Yes?” he said politely.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Which, I guess you already knew.”

Clark’s heart skipped a beat in fear. She could see right through his disguise!

“I mean, you got Jimmy and me out of the elevator, while we were on our way up to work,” she continued.

Clark’s heartbeat returned to normal. She *didn’t* recognize him after all!

“I guessed as much,” he replied with a friendly nod and a reserved smile. “Are you all right, Miss Lane?”

“Fine, thanks to you,” she said. “Listen, I know the press is going to converge on you in about three seconds, but, if you wouldn’t mind giving me the exclusive? I mean, a one on one interview, about who you are, where you came from, the works.”

He had to chuckle. It was just such a typical Lois Lane request — to ask for the story before anything else.

“You have my word,” he promised.

“How can I contact you?”

“Don’t worry, Miss Lane. I’ll be around,” he assured her.

Later, in hindsight, he would realize it had been a stupid thing to say. The Planet was a mess. It would take probably weeks before it would be clear to resume work in the building. So it wasn’t like he could just fly in through the window later that night, sit down at her desk, and give her the exclusive. He would need to find an excuse for knowing where in the city to look for her apartment.

But none of that crossed his mind now.

Instead, his attention was drawn to the members of the media who were converging on the scene, just as Lois had said they would. Crews from half the city’s papers, television stations, and even radio news outlets were jostling their way through the crowd. Clark ignored them all and gave Lois a brief nod of his head, before striding away to talk to the police and fire chiefs. He told them, in detail, what he’d seen and done inside the building, and promised to stop by the police station later that day or the next to give his official statement.

That presented another problem. He would need to give them a name to go along with it. They would need to know who they were speaking with, for the record. And he still had no idea what to call himself. But, once again, he put it on the back burner. There were more important issues to deal with.

“Thanks,” the police chief said, shaking his hand. Clark knew him to be Charles Marmouth. “We appreciate the help. But, I have to say, you took a real chance there with that bomb. That wasn’t some pop gun. That was the real deal. You could have killed yourself.”

Clark shrugged. “There wasn’t time to do anything else safely. I had to do whatever I could to protect people.”

“I’m glad you didn’t get blown to bits,” the fire chief added with a grin. His name tag showed T. Jarvis.

Clark allowed himself a smile. “Me too. Was there anything else you needed from me?” he asked.

“No, I think we got what we need. Aside from your official statement later on,” Marmouth said.

Clark nodded. “Well, if you’re sure...”

“Go on,” Marmouth encouraged. “I believe the press is waiting for you.”

Clark glanced over. The crowd was dispersing, and mostly only the press remained. This was the part he was dreading. He was used to *conducting* interviews, not *being* interviewed. He swallowed hard and, squaring his shoulders, faced the crowd fully. He walked over to where everyone was gathering at the police barricades, hoping he looked more confident than he felt inside.

As soon as he reached the wooden barricades, the barrage of questions began.

“What’s the S stand for?”

“Who are you?”

“How’d you survive the bomb blast?”

“What was it like inside the building?”

“Is it true you were flying?”

“How did you know about the bombs?”

The questions came fast and furious. Clark’s head was spinning within seconds and he was forced to use his hands to motion to the crowd to slow down. To his relief, many of them did.

“I’ll answer your questions,” he assured them, “but I’ll need to take them one at a time.” He gave them all a smile, to show them he was being friendly and not criticizing them. He knew only all too well how important first impressions were.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” came Lois’ voice, cutting through the crowd, vying to be the first to have a question answered. Mentally, he smiled. He expected nothing less from her. “Who are you and what is it that you want?”

“I’m a friend,” he repeated, knowing that it wouldn’t be enough. “All I want is to help people.”

“A friend? That’s hardly enough to go on,” snorted Leo Nunk. Clark knew him as an arrogant, sleazy reporter for a gossip rag that called itself *The Dirt Digger*. “Who are you really? What’s the S for?” he asked, pointing at Clark’s chest.

“I think that’s obvious,” Lois retorted loudly. “Seems to me like it stands for ‘super.’”

Several people around her laughed and voiced their agreement. Lois appeared to think about what she’d said for a moment.

“Superman,” she finally decided. “He’s Superman.”

Clark had no idea where she’d come up with the name, but he liked the it. It sounded so much more friendly and approachable than *Nightwing* ever had, although he’d loved that name as well.

“Superman?” he mused aloud. He chuckled. “Well, I appreciate the nickname. Okay then, Superman it is.”

Clark gave it an hour after the impromptu press conference, when the world at large had been introduced to Superman. Then he rushed over to Lois’ apartment, a bottle of her favorite wine and five pounds of Swiss chocolates with him. The wine he’d picked up at the liquor store three blocks from his apartment. The chocolates were something he’d flown to Switzerland for. After all, he reasoned, if he was going to give her chocolates, he might as well get the real deal, directly from the source. In hindsight,

five pounds had been a bit much to buy, but he was hyper aware of how close she'd come to dying that day.

He'd almost lost her forever.

It made cold sweat roll down his back in fear.

She's okay, he had to remind himself. *She's safe.*

But even that didn't make him feel better. All he wanted was to actually be with her, to talk to her — not as Superman, but as himself.

He reached her door and knocked.

"Who's there?" he heard her cautiously call out from behind the door.

"Lois? It's me," he offered. "Clark."

"Clark?" He heard the locks being opened in succession. Then the door flew open to reveal Lois in pink sweats and her hair up in a messy bun. "Clark!" She threw herself into his arms.

He hadn't been expecting that, but his used his lightning fast reflexes to catch her and hug her close. To his surprise, he felt her quaking as he held her.

"I heard about the bomb," he murmured as he hugged her. "I came over as soon as I could, to make sure you were okay." The lies burned his tongue like flaming acid. Was this what it was going to be like, now that he was Superman? Never being able to tell Lois the truth? He held her at arm's length and looked her over. "Are you okay?"

Lois stepped away from him and shrugged. "I'm fine. A little shaken and completely livid that someone would plant bombs in the Planet, but I'm not hurt."

"Thank goodness for that," Clark replied.

"It was actually pretty incredible," Lois went on. "You should have seen him, Clark."

"Him?"

"Superman." The way she said the name implied that he should have expected that answer. "Have you been living under a rock all afternoon? He's all the news is talking about."

"Oh...right," he acknowledged, frowning. Was it his imagination or had Lois said 'Superman' with a heavy dose of infatuation?

"You should have seen it. The way he dived right into the building. The way he just *threw himself* on top of that bomb. The way he...*flew*...through the air, like a speeding bullet."

"Gee, Lois, you sound a bit...smitten," he forced himself to say, swallowing down his hurt. Never once had Lois spoken about Clark that way.

"Oh...no, I'm not," she said, waving off his words, but her tone and posture belied her casual indifference. "It's just...you don't see something like that every day. This is the biggest news story of our lifetimes! He's already promised me the exclusive and everything. I can almost smell that Kerth award!"

"Glad to see you have everything in perspective," Clark lightly quipped though his heart was quietly breaking. She was already eyeing Superman over Clark — choosing the costume over the man — and thinking ahead to how to use Superman to her own advantage.

At this rate, I can never let her know it's me in the suit, his mind whispered sadly. *But if we're ever to be more than friends, she'll need to know. I already hate the position I've put myself in.*

"So, what's in the bag?" Lois asked, oblivious to the struggle in his heart.

"Huh? Oh!" He chuckled. He'd nearly forgotten the bag he held. "I thought you might need a pick-me-up after what happened this afternoon. So..." He shrugged and handed over the bag. "Your favorite wine and some authentic Swiss chocolates," he said as she pulled out the contents.

Lois hefted the boxes of chocolates in her hands. "Clark! This must have cost you a fortune!"

He shrugged again. "Don't worry about it, Lois. I know how much chocolate comforts you and I figured, if ever you might need it, today would be it."

"Thanks," she said, giving him a bright smile.

She placed his gifts down on the coffee table and grabbed him into a hug. She placed a kiss on his cheek. Clark felt himself go weak in the knees. If he hadn't already been madly in love with Lois, this would have sealed the deal for him.

"You really are a thoughtful guy," Lois continued.

"It's no big deal. I just...I wanted you to know that I care... and that I'm here for you," Clark said, fighting down a blush and stammering just a little.

"That's just it, isn't it?" Lois mused, still not letting go of him. "You'll always do something for me and then say it was 'no big deal' or 'not a problem' or whatever. But it *is* a big deal...at least to me. No one — and I mean absolutely *no one* — has ever treated me the way that you do."

"I...uh..." Clark stammered as she squeezed him one last time, then stepped away again. "The thing is, Lois, the things that I do...I *like* doing them. Getting you coffee from the break area when you're absorbed in a story. Buying you a Double Fudge Crunch Bar when I'm in the lobby and I know you're having a rough day. Things like that. They make you happy and I'm more than happy to do them for you."

"But that's *exactly* what I mean!" Lois explained, gesturing wildly. "You say it makes you happy but...my own *family* wouldn't do that for me! Dad would be too absorbed in his own work to even know I was upset about something. And Mom would warn me against eating the chocolate bar. 'A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips, Lois! Men want fit, petite girls, not pudgy candy addicts!' As if *she* has a right to talk, what with her being a recovering alcoholic and all. And Lucy..." she sighed. "Lucy might actually do the things you do, if only she was ever around."

"Lois...I'm sorry," Clark offered. "I didn't realize things were so bad with your family."

"Never mind," she said, waving away the topic as she started to pace. "I'd rather not talk about them."

"Sure. But, Lois? Not to uh, harp on the subject or anything, but...do they even know what happened today?"

Lois nodded. "Mom does. She saw the news coverage and called earlier. It was all I could do to convince her that she doesn't need to come to Metropolis to check on me. Dad's at a medical conference in Australia until next week. Chances are good he has no idea that the Planet was bombed. I tried Lucy but she didn't pick up her cell. The way she is, it could be tonight that I hear from her or in a week." She flopped down onto the couch, defeated.

Clark sat next to her. "I'm sorry, Lois," he repeated. He reached over and rubbed soothing circles on her back. "Really, I am."

She shrugged but scowled slightly. "It been this way since... since forever, really. I've gotten used to it."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'll never be like them," he vowed.

She turned and cupped his cheek in one warm hand. Studying his features for a moment, she nodded.

"I know," she whispered. Then, thoughtfully, "Bruce was right, wasn't he?"

"Huh? About what?" he asked, thrown by the sudden change in the conversation.

"You," she said, pointedly.

"Me?" Unbidden his hand came up to rest against his own chest, as though he was identifying himself.

"You," she repeated, nodding. "You don't *just* care for me as a friend, do you?"

"Lois..." he said, struggling.

He wanted to say yes, that Bruce had — embarrassingly — told the truth about his deep, abiding love for her. But, he just couldn't bring himself to admit it. It was still too early into their friendship, wasn't it? He sighed, torn.

"I hate that Bruce said anything," he settled on saying, after a

painful fifteen seconds of trying to make any kind of response to her. “I’m sorry he kind of put you...put *both of us*, really...on the spot like that.”

Lois shook her head. “Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Still,” Clark said with a shrug. “I know he meant well and that he was trying to have a little fun with us. Even, in a weird way, I think, to put you at ease. But...we’ve only just become true best friends. I would never, ever do anything to jeopardize that. Even if we were in the mindset to trying dating...I would never, ever force you to move at a pace that didn’t feel right to you.”

“And I appreciate that,” Lois said.

A small lull in the conversation took place as Clark tried to figure out what to say next. Finally, a thought occurred to him. “Would you like me to open the wine?” he offered.

Lois brightened as she was dragged out of whatever thoughts she’d been ensnared in. “That would be great, yeah. I think we could both use a little drink to relax.”

Clark took the bottle into the kitchen. He’d been to Lois’ apartment almost as often as she’d been at his. They’d eaten many a meal together, so he knew his way around her kitchen as well as he did his own. He found the corkscrew without incident and had the bottle opened up in less than a minute. Then he extracted two delicate wine glasses from an upper cabinet and poured them each a glass of the dark, rich liquid. He took them both into the living room, as well as the open bottle.

“Here,” he said, handing Lois her glass.

“Thanks.”

“To us,” he toasted, clinking his glass against hers.

“To us,” she echoed. “And to better days ahead.”

“Hear, hear,” Clark replied, lifting his glass in a salute. “I think we can both appreciate the idea of easier times ahead. Who knows what will happen to the Planet. From what I heard, the damage was minimal, but who knows how long it’ll be before we’ll be able to get back in there to work.”

“If I know one thing about Perry White,” Lois said with a determined smile on her lips, “it’s that he will move Heaven and Earth to find a way to keep the paper operating, even if he has to run it out of his own basement.”

“Good,” Clark responded with a solemn nod. “The world needs The Daily Planet. Perhaps now more than ever.”

“Agreed,” Lois said, once more clinking her wine glass with his.

They both took a sip. Clark savored the rich wine on his tongue a moment before swallowing it down. It wasn’t as rare and exquisite as some of the wines he’d sampled at Wayne Manor, but he found it more palatable than any of the others. Perhaps, he reasoned, it was because it was exactly the type of wine that an average, middle class person would buy. He took another sip. Noticing the open box of chocolates on the coffee table, he gestured to them.

“How are they?”

Lois shook her head and grinned. “I haven’t tried them yet. I was waiting for you.”

“Well, I’m here now. Dig in,” he told her, smiling widely.

“I will, in a second,” Lois said, her voice becoming serious. “I just...I need to say this first.” She took a long drink from her wine glass, as though her courage lurked within its deep red contents.

Clark nodded to encourage her. “Sure, Lois. You can tell me anything, you know that.”

“I know. And the truth is...I’ve been thinking about what Bruce said. Especially this afternoon. When I was in that elevator and the bomb went off, a million thoughts *could* have gone through my mind. But all I could think was ‘I wish Clark was here.’ I mean, that sounds horrible, I know. I didn’t want you to be there and potentially die with Jimmy and me. But...there was a selfish part of me that wanted to be with *you* if I was going to die. I didn’t want to lose my life without seeing you one last time. I didn’t want to die knowing that I’d never gotten a chance to...to

explore the feelings I’ve been having...toward you lately.”

“*Feelings?*” Clark managed to squeak out in his shock. Then, mastering himself once again, he continued, after clearing his throat, “Ah, I mean? Feelings? For me?” He said it lightly, playfully, praying that he hadn’t heard her incorrectly.

Lois smirked but it melted into a shy smile. She tucked a strand of stray hair behind her left ear. “I’m not even quite sure what they mean yet,” she said, a bit too hastily. “But...when I was in that elevator, I made a decision. If I got out of there alive, I’d be willing to find out what those feelings mean.”

“Why, Lois Lane!” Clark said in mock surprise, complete with a dramatic hand over his heart. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Her smirk returned. “I’m saying that...I would not be opposed to going out with you.” She beamed him a huge grin, making him laugh.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’re asking me out,” he joked, grinning right back. “Well, I accept. How about this Saturday night since we’re off...” He paused in mid-sentence as the realization hit. “Uh...I mean...we would have been if the Planet hadn’t...” He couldn’t finish the statement.

Lois sighed. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“You’re right though. Perry will figure something out,” he said with a nod that was more confident than he felt.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed.

“So...Saturday?” Clark couldn’t help but to confirm with her. “Say...six o’clock. Dinner at The Lobster Claw? And after dinner...whatever strikes our fancy? A movie, some bowling, dancing, whatever.”

Her shy smile returned. “I’d like that, yeah.”

“I can’t wait,” Clark said, already feeling like he was living in a dream.

Clark hovered in midair, just beyond the windows of Lois’ apartment. He took a deep, steadying breath, trying to prepare himself for what was to come. He wasn’t worried about the interview. Now that he didn’t need to give her a name for his costumed avatar, he felt confident about his ability to answer whatever questions she might throw his way. No, the interview would be the easy part of the night. The difficult part would be to maintain the polite, but aloof personality he’d decided that Superman should have. He could not let on that Superman was nothing more than Clark Kent in a silly looking outfit.

How am I supposed to do that? he wondered.

How was he supposed to pretend to not be affected by her brains, her beauty, and the fact that she’d agreed to date him? He wanted to sing and dance and fly up into the heavens and yell out his joy to the entire world. And all because he’d been caring enough to check on her this afternoon, to make sure she was okay after being caught in the Planet’s bombing.

That, and maybe a little bit because of Bruce’s comment last night at the White Orchid Ball, he had to admit to himself.

Last night.

Had it really been less than twenty-four hours since he and Lois had been at the White Orchid together?

Had it been less than a full day since he’d first tried on the Superman suit?

He blinked in disbelief.

Too much had happened in such a short span of time. He and Lois had spent a dreamlike evening together at the White Orchid Ball. He’d accepted the Superman suit. He’d unveiled the alien hero to the world and — if the snippets of news coverage he’d managed to hear so far could be believed — he’d been *accepted* by the world. The Planet hadn’t been completely destroyed, but the building had suffered heavy damage in the bombing. And, most importantly, Lois had admitted that she had feelings for him. Admitted it and let him know she was ready to date him to see where those feelings might lead them.

Life was good.

He wished only that his parents could have seen what had been going on in his life. They would have been proud of the decisions he'd made — he felt quite certain about that. They would have been afraid of him using his powers in public, but they would have understood why he felt the need to do so. They would have understood that he felt, in a way, obligated to use such incredible gifts to help people and to better the world — a world that hadn't given birth to him, but which had given him his family and a home that he was fiercely proud of.

Clark took another breath, then, before he could change his mind, he knocked on the window.

Lois looked up from her laptop, surprised and even a little afraid, until she realized that it was Superman and not some villain or intruder. She stood from the couch and hurried over to the window, unlocking it and opening it up to allow him entrance. A fleeting look of nervousness flashed across her face before she banished it and once more was the 'cool under pressure, Mad Dog Lane' that their coworkers both admired and hated in equal measure.

"Hi," she said breathlessly.

"Hi. Is this a good time?" Clark asked. "For your exclusive, I mean."

He pretended to look around her apartment in interest, a stranger in that place. Because, as Superman, he *was* a newcomer. Only Clark had been in her apartment before.

"Huh? Yes, of course," Lois said, sounding a little star-struck.

Clark suppressed a groan. This was exactly why he couldn't yet tell Lois that he, Clark, was actually Superman. In the future, he knew he would have to tell her, but not now. Not while the blue and red clad alien was so new and made her starry-eyed. And, he cautioned himself, he still had to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that his secret would remain safe with her.

"You have a beautiful home," he commented politely.

She blushed. "Thank you. But...uh...how?" she asked. She cleared her throat and tried again. "How did you know where I live?"

"How? Oh!" He chuckled nervously. "I, uh, heard your voice...earlier in the day. I was out...patrolling." Here, he made a little waving gesture with his hand to indicate flying. It came as second nature to him. He'd been using the hand signal for years with Bruce. He tapped his ear, pleased with the story he was concocting. "I have pretty good hearing, as I mentioned earlier, at the impromptu press conference in front of The Daily Planet. I heard you talking to someone and took note of where your voice was coming from. It made it easy to find you just now, when I was ready to give you your private interview."

Lois nodded thoughtfully, taking his story at face value. "I see."

"I would have stopped by then, to give you the interview, but you sounded like you had company. I thought it would be better for me to come back later. I didn't want to interrupt." He didn't know why he was still spinning his story, but there it was, pouring out of his mouth without a conscious effort to do so, while loathing built up in his heart that he needed to lie in the first place.

Lois nodded. "Clark was here."

He returned the nod. "I see." He threw some confusion into his voice. "Uh...Clark?"

Lois blushed. "Oh. He's my partner at The Daily Planet. I'm sure you'll meet him at some point, especially if you continue to make a point of throwing yourself on top of bombs," she joked weakly.

He chuckled lightly. "Hopefully nothing as dramatic as that, but we'll see." He thought for a moment and feigned remembrance. "Kent...Kent. Oh, right. I've seen your shared byline in the paper."

"You...you read my work?" Lois asked, incredulous, immediately seeming to forget about Clark.

Clark mentally chuckled to himself over how awed she sounded. He didn't even mind that she'd said '*my* work' instead of '*our* work.'

He inclined his head in respect. "Every day," he said truthfully.

"I...wow," she breathed. Then she cleared her throat. "So, um...would you like a drink? Something to eat?"

"Oh...no," he politely declined. "But thank you."

She nodded again. "Well then, take a seat. Please."

Clark did as he was bid. He took up the center of the couch when Lois took the armchair. He clasped his hands together, mostly because he wasn't sure what else to do with them. Lois picked up a tape recorder and held it up for him to see.

"Do you mind if I record this, for my notes?" she asked.

"Not at all. Go right ahead." He gestured at the recorder, then folded his hands back together, like a schoolboy awaiting the day's lesson. "So...what do you want to know?"

"Everything," was her immediate answer. "Who are you, really? Where did you come from? Why do you have such incredible powers? When did you get here? Are you here for good? What's your real name? I mean, obviously, it isn't Superman." She bit off her questions there, blushing once more. "Sorry, I have a tendency to babble quickly when I get excited."

Clark smiled softly, letting her know he was just fine with her babbling. "Okay, I get it. Let's take it from the beginning, shall we? No, my name isn't really Superman, although, I *am* flattered by the name you gave me this afternoon. My birth name is Kal-El and, no, I wasn't born here on Earth. I was born on another planet. One far from Earth and which, unfortunately, no longer exists. Its name was Krypton and I am the only living survivor of the explosion that tore it to pieces. As for my powers, I believe, as my father did, that the difference between the two suns — the yellow sun of Earth rather than the red one Krypton once had — is the reason why I can do the things I can do."

"This is amazing," Lois wondered in a whisper. Somehow, each word sounded like a complete sentence on its own, the way that she said it. "I mean, the world got a small glimpse of your powers this afternoon, when you saved The Daily Planet and all of those people out there on the street. We all saw you dive on top of a bomb, and...*walk away* from the blast without a scratch. How did you do that? How many powers *do* you have?"

He chuckled, relaxing a bit further. And then, as he began to describe the things he could do, the interview began in earnest.

Clark landed on his balcony. It was getting late — just after eleven at night. He'd spent a lot of time with Lois, giving her the interview that would make every reporter in the world green with envy — the exclusive, very first, interview with Superman. He yawned and rubbed at his eyes and the back of his neck, feeling tired but not yet sleepy. His adrenaline was running too high to allow him to go to sleep just yet, despite the fact that he felt utterly drained.

He'd done it.

He'd introduced the world to Superman.

Every corner of the world knew, by now, that there was an alien in their midst. Not only that, but they knew at least a fraction of the things he could do. By the morning, they would know the rest, once the article was released.

Clark stopped in his tracks.

"No, they won't," he whispered to himself. "Unless Perry pulls off a miracle, we don't have a place to print the paper for the moment."

He sighed, feeling a lance of pain twinge through his heart. He stepped into his apartment, shed his Superman costume, and headed for the shower. When he emerged, clad in soft black pajama pants and an old Gotham Knights T-shirt, he noticed the red light on his answering machine was blinking. He flopped onto couch and pressed the button.

“Kent? Where in the name of Elvis are you?” Perry’s voice boomed from the machine. “Well, wherever you are, I’m sure you know about what happened at the Planet today. And I’m sure you’re worried about what’s gonna happen now. Where we’re gonna work, how we’re gonna print the paper. For the time being, work from home, email me your stories. Turns out, Mr. Stern has an unused printing room for a magazine coming out next year, thank the King. It’s not ideal for a paper the size of the Planet, but we can make do with it. Anyway, check in with me when you get this message. Call or email, it doesn’t matter. I still have the rest of the staff to call.”

The message ended with an abrupt *BEEP!* Clark smiled to himself, the vice around his heart slipping away. The Planet would continue on as if nothing had happened, never missing a beat, dedicated to its mission to bring the unbiased news to the world.

The world.

Clark grinned. The world had met Superman. And they liked him, by all the accounts he’d heard. No. They *loved* him. He’d flown around the globe after leaving Lois’ apartment, never landing, just merely cruising by, slowly enough to scan and get a general idea of how the people were reacting to the caped hero’s arrival. He’d heard overwhelmingly positive reactions. Oh, sure, some people had expressed doubts and fears, but it was the vast minority of what he’d heard.

He’d been right.

He’d stepped out of the shadows — quite literally, once he’d left the character of Nightwing behind — and into the light.

And it felt *so* right.

He’d made the right choice. Superman was the hero he’d always been meant to be. Nightwing had been a great way to prepare for this new role, but that’s all Nightwing had ever really been — a practice run. He was still Clark first, and always would be. Clark was who he *truly* was. It was his real identity. Superman was merely an avatar of what it was that he could do — how he could help better the world and protect the people who might not be otherwise able to help themselves. It was his best chance to be a physical force for good while taking the least amount of risk.

“At least,” he mused aloud, “in a more immediate way than I can as a reporter.”

Ring!

The phone rang, breaking his reverie. He reached out without thinking and answered it in the middle of its second ring.

“Hello?”

“Nice work today,” came Bruce’s voice, pride and approval more than evident in his words.

“Thanks, Bruce,” Clark replied, relieved that Bruce sounded pleased.

“Mind if I stop by to give you my congratulations in person?”

Clark shook his head, although, Bruce couldn’t see it. “It’s faster if I come to you. Where are you?”

“About six blocks from your apartment,” Bruce replied and Clark could practically hear the man’s grin. “I just got out of seeing *Cats* at the Victory House Theater.”

“Well, by all means, come on over,” Clark agreed.

“Great, I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“You want me to fly out and pick up anything? Snacks? Drinks? I have the freedom to fly wherever now,” Clark joked, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

Bruce chuckled softly. “Thanks, but no.”

Clark shrugged. “Meh. Your loss,” he teased.

“Yeah, yeah. See you in a few minutes.”

Click!

The line went dead. Clark looked around his apartment and, at super speed, tidied up a few things, then unlocked the apartment door when he heard his friend’s footsteps approaching. He opened the door just as Bruce was about to knock.

“That *still* creeps me out, you know,” Bruce playfully complained.

“I know,” Clark said, shrugging and stifling a laugh. “That’s why I do it.”

He shut the door behind Bruce as the man made his way into the living room to sit on the couch. Clark followed behind.

“Coffee?” Clark offered.

“Yeah, that would be great. Thanks,” Bruce nodded.

“Coming up,” Clark replied as he set the coffee maker.

“So, that was some debut today,” Bruce said after a moment.

Clark shook his head. “Of all the scenarios I could have imagined, a bomb at my workplace was *not* one of them.” He sighed. “Perry called and said we have a place to print until the building is repaired. But, for now, we’re all working from home.”

“Good,” Bruce said with a curt nod. “The world needs the Planet to keep bringing them the news.”

“Yeah. Whoever planted that bomb obviously didn’t want us to be able to do our jobs.” His expression and mood darkened considerably.

“You think they were after the building, rather than an individual?” Bruce asked.

“It *has* to be. If they were after one person in particular, there are easier ways to get to them. Ones that are a lot less likely to fail.”

“Good point,” Bruce conceded. “Any leads yet?”

“No,” Clark said with a sad shake of his head. “The police kept everyone away. Even Superman. I can’t really blame them — they don’t know me yet — but I wish I’d gotten a chance to check things out for myself. I was too busy looking for further threats to check for clues about who might have set the bombs.”

“I’m not surprised they didn’t give you access. Like you said, they aren’t used to Superman yet. They’re still gauging whether or not to trust you. I’m more surprised that you didn’t just go in anyway.”

“I couldn’t,” Clark tried to explain. “If I’d gone ahead and ignored them, they’d never have reason to accept me as their ally. I’d always be the guy that thinks he’s above the law.”

“You always have liked playing by the rules,” Bruce allowed. “For the most part.”

“Maybe,” Clark said with a shrug. “We always *did* play it kind of fast and loose with the law in Gotham. I guess I was never one hundred percent happy about it, even if we *did* do a *lot* of good while we bent the rules. But Superman *has* to be different. He’s not like Nightwing or Batman. He’s not the guy in the shadows. He’s right out there, in broad daylight. He needs to be an example to the rest of society.”

“Part of the price you need to pay for giving up the anonymity,” Bruce supplied.

Clark shook his head. “Not really. I don’t feel like I’ve given up anything. It’s just...it’s what I need to do. I want people to look at Superman and know he’s on their side. That he’s not going to break the rules and ignore the law, just to get what he wants. Granted, I’m not saying I’ll never use my powers on a story to uncover a lead if the trail goes stale. I’ve already done that... several times. Nothing major and nothing illegal, of course. But enough to get Lois and me moving in the right direction.”

Bruce was silent a minute, his face unreadable. Then, slowly, he nodded. “Okay,” he said with approval. “I get it.”

Clark audibly sighed with relief. “Thanks.”

“But, even if you *do* abide by all the laws, you’re still breaking one. You’re a vigilante, the same as Batman or Nightwing.”

“I know,” Clark admitted. “But what choice do I really have? I can’t just sit back and passively watch all of the horrible things going on in the world.” He sighed heavily. “It’s not something my conscience would ever allow.”

“I know. I have, ever since you ignored my direct and very firm refusal to let you roam around Gotham with me at night. You’ve got a good heart. Too good of one, in some ways. And I hope that doesn’t backfire on you. I don’t want to see you get

heartbroken out there, if you aren't able to help someone."

"I won't," Clark vowed.

"So...how did you like it out there, in the public's eye?" Bruce asked after half a minute.

Clark brightened. "It was amazing, Bruce. For the first time, I felt like...like using my powers where I could be seen was something to embrace and celebrate, instead of something to be terrified of. It was amazing, to not have to hold back, to not have to watch from the sidelines with guilt eating me alive while someone else's life was on the line. I feel like...like everything I've done...all the time I spent perfecting my control over my powers, all the years spent roaming Gotham's streets with you as Nightwing...has led up to this. To Superman. It feels like...like I've finally found my destiny."

"I thought your destiny was to be the world's greatest reporter," Bruce said, sounding mildly confused and frowning a little.

"That's not what I meant," Clark clarified. "I meant... Superman is a huge part of my destiny. I can't deny that. But it's not just him. It's everything that's been happening lately. Moving to Metropolis. Being hired by The Daily Planet. Meeting Lois. Falling in love. Getting Lois to agree to date me. Becoming Superman. All of it feels like its *always* been my destiny."

"Wait. Back up a second. This morning you were saying it was too early to ask Lois out. Now you're saying you're dating her? What happened?"

Clark smiled. Bruce was acting as both his friend and his older brother at the moment. It felt comforting, just like old times when Clark had been a teenager struggling with his new role as a member of the elite society.

"I thought it was. But she kind of asked me...or almost asked me to ask her out, I guess. I went to check on her after the bombing, which I would have done, even if I wasn't interested in dating her. She's my best friend and my partner at work. I brought her a bottle of wine that she likes and some chocolates. Anyway, apparently, getting stuck in the elevator during the bombing made her reevaluate how she felt about things. About me. And I suppose, maybe, the gifts didn't hurt either." He shrugged as he fought down an embarrassed blush. He cleared his throat. "She, uh, also happened to mention that you got her started on the thought process last night when you oh-so-helpfully outted my feelings about her."

Bruce grinned impishly. "No need to thank me."

"I'm not entirely sure I want to," Clark laughed. "I *still* can't believe you said that...even if it wound up helping me in the long run."

"What are friends for?" Bruce replied, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Just don't forget to invite me to the wedding."

"Invite you?" Clark roared a laugh. "Bruce, if this works out, you can *officiate* it!"

Bruce slapped his knee as he laughed in turn. "I'll hold you to that."

"I'm sure you will, Bruce. I'm sure you will," Clark said, wiping tears of laughter out of his eyes.

"Clark? Is that you?" came Lois' muffled voice from behind the door of her apartment.

"Are you expecting a different date?" he teased.

He heard the locks to her door being undone, then the door swung open to reveal Lois in a tasteful maroon dress with a plunging neckline. Clark knew in an instant that he'd never seen her wear *that* one before. This was a dress he would remember, his flawless memory aside. She was still trying to put in one diamond stud earring. Clark felt his heart rate skyrocket as he gazed upon her beauty while his mind screamed its disbelief that she was going out with him on a date.

"Come on in," she invited him.

He stepped inside her apartment without the slightest

hesitation.

"Lois...wow," he breathed, unable to say more than that. "You look..." He shook his head, her beauty rendering him mute. "These are for you."

She blushed, the color rushing into her cheeks in less than the span of a heartbeat. But she took the bouquet of pink roses that he held out to her. She took a moment to sniff their sweet scent.

"Oh...thank you. You too. The charcoal suit is..." She was struggling as much as he was to get the words out. "The flowers are beautiful. Thank you, Clark."

"Thanks," he quickly stepped in, rescuing her from floundering for words. "And you're welcome."

"Is it new?" she asked before blushing again. "Uh, the suit?"

He smiled nervously. "Oh...no. I've had it a while. I just haven't really worn it before."

"Well...it looks good on you. The charcoal color suits you somehow."

It was Clark's turn to blush. "Thanks. Maybe I'll have to get some more in charcoal." He rocked on his heels. "So, uh...are you ready to go?"

"Almost. I just need to grab my shoes."

Clark chuckled as he snuck a peek at her stocking feet. "Yeah, I guess that might help, what with us going outside and all."

Lois laughed too and, just like that, the nervous tension in the room seemed to break a little.

"A little bit, yeah," she joked back. "Be right back."

"Sure," he replied, nodding. "You want me to put the flowers in some water for you?"

"Yeah, that would be a big help," she said, smiling. "I think I have a vase under the sink on the left side."

She darted off to her bedroom while Clark found the vase and arranged the flowers, adding the little packet of plant food that the florist had attached to the bouquet. Lois emerged a minute later in a pair of low heels that matched her dress perfectly, just as Clark was wiping his wet hands off on the dish towel. Clark took a moment to admire her and she stood before him.

"Wow," he said, repeating his earlier elegant appraisal of her wardrobe.

Her only response was a slightly embarrassed looking smile.

"Lois?" Clark asked, hesitating.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you an honest question?"

"Of course."

"Are you...a little nervous? About this date?"

"Well...yeah," she admitted hesitantly, as if ashamed of herself. "Like I told you, you're my best friend and I'm still afraid of what happens if tonight...doesn't go the way we hope it will." She paused, then, "Why? Are you nervous?"

"Very," he confessed. "Not about our friendship staying intact. I know it's strong enough to survive anything. I just...I just want tonight to be perfect for you."

"Me? What about you?"

"Lois, you saying yes to this date has *already* made it perfect. I mean...it wasn't so long ago that I never thought I would be... well...*good enough* to date a woman like you. Brilliant. Strong. Fiercely independent. Passionate. You know. All around perfect."

"Give yourself a little credit," Lois said, smiling and bumping her arm into his. "You're the best man I've ever known. You could probably have any woman you want. I'm just...well..." She turned away, unwilling — or unable — to meet his gaze. "I'm flattered that *I'm* the one you asked out."

"Lois, if I can continue to be completely honest here, how could I *not* ask you out? You're exactly the woman I'd always hoped to meet." Clark smiled shyly as the back of his neck heated in a blush. He gestured to the door to take her attention away from his face. "Shall we?"

"We shall," Lois grinned, pulling on her coat and slinging her

purse over her shoulder.

“This is a nice place,” Clark commented as they sat at the small, intimate table in the back corner of The Lobster Claw. “I’ve been meaning to check it out, ever since I arrived in Metropolis.”

“The food is everything you’ve heard and more,” Lois assured him. “Granted, it’s been a while since I was last here,” she quickly amended.

“I hope so. I’d hate for our first date to be remembered with terrible food,” Clark joked.

“First date?” Lois playfully smirked. “Feeling confident about a second one, huh?”

Clark shrugged in an exaggerated fashion. “Maybe.” He purposefully dragged the word out a little for dramatic effect.

Lois laughed — a light, airy sound that Clark knew was born of genuine amusement. “Oh yeah? Going to sweep me off your feet, are you?”

“Give me a chance to, and I’ll do more than that. I’ll fly you to the moon,” he vowed, though he played off the remark as casual and almost off-handed.

“We’ll see, Farm Boy,” she replied with another grin.

Clark smiled at the term “Farm Boy.” Ever since he’d told Lois of his roots — his *true* roots — she’d called him that. It was a nice reminder to him of his simple upbringing, before the world had been turned upside down and inside out on him. Back when his mother and father had been alive. Back when school and his chores had been his biggest worries. Back before he’d been forced to grow up too fast. Back before Nightwing and Superman and innumerable powers kept carefully hidden from the world. Back when life had been simple and straightforward.

The waiter appeared with their drinks and a basket of piping hot, fresh bread. Lois and Clark each reached for a piece — the same piece. Their hands briefly touched — a light brushing of Clark’s fingertips over the top of Lois’ hand. Sparks ignited in Clark’s brain and his skin felt aflame where it had made contact with Lois. They’d touched before, it was true. They were forever exchanging little touches — a pat on the shoulder, a hug, even a kiss on the cheek once, when he’d brought her wine and chocolates after her near miss when the Planet had been bombed.

But this was different.

The circumstances weren’t the same. This wasn’t two friends congratulating each other after cracking a particularly difficult case. This wasn’t a gentle touch to get the other’s attention. This wasn’t done out of relief that the other was safe or done out of gratitude. This was accidental, that much was true. But it had been done outside the bounds of coworkers and friends. This touch, fleeting as it had been, had been done in a romantic setting. If Clark hadn’t already been hopelessly in love with Lois, it would have sent him spiraling over the edge of friendship into love.

You’re a hopeless romantic, his inner voice told him with great amusement.

There are worse things, he reasoned back with a mental shrug.

“Sorry,” he apologized to Lois. “Here, you take this one.” He picked up the piece of bread and offered it to her.

“Thanks,” she said. Was it just Clark’s imagination, or did she sound as flustered by their shared touch as he felt?

She took the proffered slice of bread and buttered it, while Clark took a different piece. Following her lead, he skipped the plate of seasoned olive oil on the table and went for the butter as well. Together, they took a bite. Clark’s eyes closed in delight at the first taste of the hot, flaky bread.

“Well, if the meal is as good as the bread, this place might be my new favorite place in Metropolis,” he offered after swallowing down the bite of bread.

“Mmm,” Lois agreed blissfully. “I’d forgotten how good their bread is.”

“You said it’s been a while since you last came here. How come?” Clark asked, by way of starting the conversation.

“I’m not really sure you want to know why.”

“Try me.”

Lois shrugged. “Okay. The thing is...remember how I told you I dated a coworker, once?”

“Claude, right?”

“Right. We only had a handful of dates. Our last one ended up with him...spending the night. When I got up the next morning, he was gone. And so was my story off my laptop. He’d stolen it and handed it to Perry as his own work.”

“Let me guess. You had dinner here that night,” Clark supplied.

Lois nodded her confirmation. “I couldn’t bring myself to come here after that. It left a bad taste in my mouth. Not because we — obviously — broke up, but because any time I thought about what had happened, I got so mad at myself for ever allowing myself to be put in that position, to be so badly taken advantage of.”

“Oh, Lois!” Clark said, his heart breaking for her. “Why didn’t you say something? I had no idea this place had such a bad connection for you. We could have gone anywhere else.”

Lois shook her head. “No. When you suggested the place, I thought it might be nice to have a *good* memory associated with it.”

“I won’t let you down,” he promised.

“I know,” she said earnestly. Then, to shift the focus, she asked him, “So, what about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. What about you? You know all about my disastrous love life. What about your previous relationships?”

Clark chuckled. “Turnabout is fair play, huh? Well, the truth is, there isn’t much to tell. I was working my nerve up to ask out my friend Lana, back in Smallville, right before my parents died. Then I was shipped off to the halfway house, never to see Lana again. While I was living at Grandma Tildy’s, I knew this girl in town, Jen. We used to hang out sometimes, but she liked me more than I liked her. I really only liked her as a friend, but I got the feeling she was planning our life together. Then I was on the streets for a while. It was a struggle enough just to survive. I didn’t have the luxury of even *thinking* about dating, let alone doing it.”

“Once you and Bruce met, you must have met a ton of women,” Lois said, taking a sip from her wine glass.

“I did, but most of them were much older than me.” He fidgeted with his glass of ice water. “At seventeen, eighteen years old...even at twenty-two...it was a bit...off putting. It wasn’t like a year or two difference between me and the women who tried to...be with me. It was usually like ten or twenty years of an age gap, and I turned them all down. I dated a little bit in college, but nothing that lasted long. I got the impression that most of the girls who were interested in me were actually interested in my perceived wealth. I couldn’t...I didn’t want a relationship that was based on something so...material. They didn’t really want me for *me*.”

Lois reached across the table and took his hand. “I can’t fault you on that. I’ve been in that position before and it hurts. Like Claude. All he wanted was to ride my coattails. He never cared for me. But...it doesn’t matter. Please, continue.”

He nodded. “Yeah. So, for a while, I just...focused on my work. I was all over the globe for the Gotham Gazette anyway, so a sustainable relationship wasn’t really something I could give my full attention to. Even after I left the paper, I stayed out of the dating pool while I tried to figure out what to do next.”

“Are you saying...I’m the first one since then?” Lois asked, picking up on the subtle signs he knew his body was giving off.

He squirmed a little in his seat. “Well...yeah,” he admitted, feeling embarrassed.

“So...we both haven’t had the best luck in the dating world,” Lois said with a shy smile. “I’m not sure if that makes me feel better or if it puts more pressure on me to give you a good dating

experience.” She grinned playfully.

Clark laughed. “I guess we *both* feel a bit of pressure to have this work out,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed. “But...not as much pressure as we have to figure out who bombed the Planet.”

“True,” Clark conceded. “Oh! That reminds me. I saw Superman earlier. I guess he recognized me from our byline or something. He said he was going to try and get a look inside the boiler room, to see if he can find anything we can use to track down whoever it was. If the police will allow it, that is.”

“If the police are smart, they’ll give him access,” Lois said. “I mean, if it hadn’t been for him, the building might not have even still been standing.”

Clark shrugged. “He’s new around here. I guess I can’t blame the police for being a little wary, until they get to know him.”

“Oh please,” Lois replied, passion and fire in her voice. “He’s already proven himself to be their ally! He saved all of us, the police on the scene included. He walked...flew...around in broad daylight. It’s not like he’s hiding anything. He’s not...skulking around in the shadows, like Batman or something. Even though, from all I’ve heard, Batman does a lot of good too,” she swiftly amended. “But I can see why Gotham PD is a little leery of him. Superman, however...” She shrugged, allowing her voice to trail off.

“You know that, and I know that,” Clark said, choosing to avoid the topic of Batman. “But the MPD...this Superman guy...he’s pretty powerful. Anyone would be smart to get to know him and his motives before trusting him without question.”

“I guess. But...no offense. You weren’t there, Clark. When he got Jimmy and me out of that elevator...it was like I *knew* him. Call it intuition or whatever you’d like, but I *knew* I could trust him. You said you talked to him. Didn’t you get that same feeling?”

“Yeah,” Clark said, ransacking his brain for a way out of the conversation. “He *does* seem like he’s trustworthy. But for a lot of people, he’ll have to prove it. In any case, he promised he’d let us know if he finds anything. That is, *if* the MPD allows him in there.”

Lois nodded. “That’s nice of him.”

Clark nodded in turn. “Anyway...let’s not focus on the Planet right now. As much as I want to catch the person responsible, the paper can wait until the morning. Right now, I want to know more about *you*, Lois.”

“Only if you promise to tell me more about yourself,” she countered with a smile, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear and biting her lower lip in a shy manner.

Clark laughed. “Deal.” Then he grinned impishly. “I know if I don’t, Bruce *will* offer stories. And we *definitely* can’t have that,” he joked.

Lois laughed. “Don’t be so sure, Farm Boy. He gave me his cell number and said he would be more than willing to swap stories.”

Clark rolled his eyes playfully. “Of course he would. So, what do you want to know?”

“That was an *amazing* dinner,” Lois said later, as they walked through Centennial Park.

It had been her idea to take a walk, rather than go someplace loud – like a bar or club – or impersonal – like a movie. She’d insisted that there would be more than enough time in the future to do things like see films and go bowling. For this night, she’d simply wanted the chance to keep talking.

How could Clark argue against that logic? Secretly, he’d hoped to spend more time talking with her too. The quiet, nearly deserted park was exactly the type of place where he wanted to be. So, when she’d asked if going to the park was okay, he’d eagerly and sincerely answered with a yes.

“It really was,” he agreed. “We’re *definitely* going back there

again. If that’s okay with you.”

“Absolutely,” she confirmed. “I think it’s safe to say, I no longer associate The Lobster Claw with bad memories.”

Clark’s heart beamed with pride and love. “I’m glad to hear that,” he said sincerely. “When would you like to go back?” he teased.

“Maybe for another date?” Lois asked, though her tone of voice made it more of an invitation than a question.

“Hmmm, well, that depends,” Clark replied. “Do you *want* another date with me?” He winked at her, letting her know that he was joking with her.

“Definitely,” she agreed with a laugh and a playful slap on his shoulder. “I really have been having a great time tonight, Clark. More than I ever hoped I would. I mean, I knew I’d have a good time...we’re best friends for a reason. But it’s different, with it being a date and all and I...I wasn’t sure what to expect tonight. But...I’m really glad we did this.”

“Me too, Lois.”

“Just promise me...you won’t break my heart, right?”

“Lois, I would rather die than ever cause you a single ounce of pain,” he assured her. “Trust me. I’m not the same kind of guy as the others you’ve known up until now.”

Yeah, none of them flew around town wearing Spandex, his inner voice said, dripping with sarcasm.

“I promise,” he continued, tamping down that voice inside. “I will never break your heart.”

Unless you find out I’m Superman and hate me for it, his mind shot back.

“Good,” Lois said. “And I promise the same. This relationship of ours...I’d never do anything to harm it. It may only be our first date but...I can already feel it. This isn’t like any relationship I’ve ever been in. I want this to work between us.”

“Me too. Since the moment I met you, I’ve dreamed of being more than just coworkers and friends,” he admitted, thankful for the darkness of the night, that hid the slight reddening of his cheeks as he made his confession.

“Friends? I was awful to you in the beginning,” Lois pointed out.

Clark shrugged. “Maybe, but I understood where you were coming from. I knew that, given time, we’d come to see eye to eye.”

“Still, there’s no excuse for how I acted.”

“It’s in the past. It doesn’t matter anymore. Everyone has things they’ve done that they’re not proud of. You and I are no exception.” He shrugged again. “All that matters is right now and how we choose to move forward from this moment. For me, I choose to be happy, to forget what came before, and to ask you on another date...say...Wednesday?”

“I’d like that,” Lois said softly.

Feeling emboldened, Clark reached out and took her hand. Immediately, she moved closer to his side. She gave his hand a gentle, quick squeeze, which he returned. His heart was soaring. He didn’t think he’d ever been this happy in all his life. Maybe, he thought selfishly, he’d finally earned the right to have some happiness. Maybe he’d finally done enough good deeds for the universe to give his heart the love he’d always hoped to find.

He only hoped he could maintain it.

Already, Superman was in demand. Since his first outing as the caped superhero, he’d already made rescues in half a dozen countries around the globe – everything from the Planet being bombed in Metropolis, to a disabled plane in Paris, to a hostage situation in Beijing. And those had only been some of the bigger emergencies he’d gone to. In between looking for leads on the bombing, he’d assisted at two fires, seven car accidents, and saved a little boy from drowning when he’d fallen overboard during a fishing trip in Bermuda.

All in all, Clark loved the freedom he had to use his powers in broad daylight. It was a feeling like none other, when he could

save a life. It gave him a rush to know that the world didn't fear the alien they now knew resided on Earth, but instead accepted and loved him.

But Clark *did* fear how his Superman duties might affect his ability to work as Clark Kent. And, more importantly to him, how he would be able to juggle his need to sometimes dash out to a crisis with being there for Lois when they might be out at dinner together. So far, he'd been lucky. The most urgent calls for Superman had come while he was alone and able to slip away into the sky without the need to excuse himself from a conversation with Lois or staff meeting. But he was painfully aware that that wouldn't always be the case. He would have to think of something.

All in good time, he told himself. Take things as they come, as Mom always liked to say. When the need arises, I'll figure things out.

"Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"I really had a great time with you tonight," Lois said.

"Me too. Tonight was...more perfect than I ever imagined anything could be."

"It's weird," Lois mused and Clark chuckled.

"Uh, thanks. I think," he joked.

But Lois shook her head. "Not *weird* weird. Just...weird. I've never had a first date like this before."

"What do you mean?"

"Usually first dates are so...awkward and uncomfortable.

Even when they go well, there's always that element of the unknown. What do I wear? Am I talking too much? Does he think I'm boring? Did I order something too expensive, even if it was only just a salad? But tonight? Tonight...tonight wasn't like that. It was like...like we'd been dating for a long time. It's all still new and exciting, of course, but that comfortable level? The kind that comes from being with someone for a while? It was already there. For me, that made it the best first date I've ever had."

"Me too, Lois," Clark answered truthfully. "I guess...I guess us being such good friends made the difference. We're still learning new things about one another, sure. But we *know* each other. We're comfortable with sharing everything."

"Yeah," Lois said, agreeing.

Clark smiled at her. "Personally, I've always hated first dates, for exactly the reasons you stated – the awkwardness of it all has always made me really nervous. But not tonight. This was better than any first date has the right to be."

Lois nodded. "Exactly. So, really...thanks for tonight."

"You're welcome. But *I* should be the one thanking you."

He guided her to a bench as they reached the fountain in the middle of the park. He let go of her hand and, instead, put his arm around her, drawing her close. She snuggled into his side, and rested her head against his shoulder. With his super hearing, he heard her sigh – a sound as light and airy as a baby's breathing. It took all of his iron will to not kiss her atop her head, and he very nearly lost that battle. He felt like he'd been created for the sole purpose of being with and loving Lois Lane.

Lois looked up into the sky as they sat there, silently enjoying each other's company. She sighed again.

"It's such a beautiful night out," she remarked. "Too bad you can't see many stars with all of the lights from the city."

"Mmm," Clark agreed.

"When I was a kid, I was obsessed with the night sky," she continued. "I used to love the summers when I would go away to camp for a couple of weeks, out into the mountains, simply because being out there, away from all the city lights, I could really get a good view of the stars. And yeah, okay, it helped that I was getting away from my family for a while too."

"You would have loved my family's farm," Clark said softly, marveling at the passion in Lois' voice, which had dipped to nearly a whisper. "Year round, we had a great view of the night

sky. I used to go out all the time at night, so long as it was a clear sky. Sometimes I'd climb out my bedroom window to lay on the roof to get the best view. It felt like I could see the entire universe from there."

"I wish I could have seen that," Lois replied, snuggling in even closer.

"Maybe one day, we can take a trip together. Maybe not to my old house – the bank seized it a long time ago for what was left on the mortgage when my parents passed away – but to Kansas in general. In all honestly, I haven't been out there much, since I was sent to the halfway house. Just a few quick visits to the cemetery, after I went to live in Wayne Manor. It might be nice to visit again...see the places I used to know so well."

"I'd like that. It'd be nice to see where you grew up."

"I'm not even sure if that's where I grew up anymore," Clark admitted. "I spent the first thirteen years of my life there, sure, but I think I did the most 'growing up' everywhere else. I haven't thought about Smallville as 'home' in a long time. Until I moved to Metropolis, I didn't feel like I *had* a home anymore. Grandma's certainly wasn't it, and I've never felt so lost as I did when I was living on the streets. Wayne Manor came close but there was something it was always missing. Something that kept me from feeling like I was destined to spend my entire life in Gotham. But thanks to you...I'm finally home."

"That's um..." Lois stammered, clearly at a loss for words.

"That's probably the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"I wouldn't say it if it wasn't completely true."

"I know. We might not know each other all that long but...I know. You've proven how...how earnest and truthful and pure hearted you are, over and over again."

"So...the stars," Clark said, clearing his throat and trying to steer the conversation back away from his heart. "Did you, uh, want to take a drive? We can be outside of the city limits and in the countryside in about an hour. Maybe less, since there won't be as much traffic at this time of night. We could find a place to park and stargaze, if you'd like."

He looked over to see a dreamy smile on her face. "Tempting. But it's getting late and I promised Perry I'd cover for Rusty tomorrow."

"Rusty? But he's in sports," Clark replied, surprised. "Wait...are you a closet sports fan?"

Lois laughed. "Far from it. But," she shrugged, "I do know my way around just about any sport. Comes with the territory of having a father who's specialized in professional sports medicine."

"Sports medicine?" Clark asked, his mind leaping into action. Only one Dr. Lane in sports medicine popped into his mind. "Wait a second. Your father? Don't tell me he's Sam Lane."

Lois nodded. "One and the same."

"Really? He's a legend! Most sports fans liken him to basically a god-like status." He tried to keep the excitement out of his voice, for Lois' benefit.

"Yeah, if only they knew what a miserable human being he's been to his own family," Lois quipped sourly.

Clark winced. He was aware of Lois' family situation and how her father had abandoned them all after having several affairs. Sam had never remarried, but, instead, had thrown himself fully into his work, almost to the exclusion of all else – his daughters included. It had brought Clark's blood to a boil, when he'd learned all of that. Sam Lane didn't know how lucky he was to have a family.

"I guess everyone has their secrets," Clark said without intending to. "Things we hide away from the world, for whatever reason."

"Even you?" Lois asked, arching an eyebrow. "No offense, Clark, but I've never known you to be shy or evasive about anything."

"Of course I do," he replied truthfully, and with a wry smile. "I mean most people have no idea that I lived on the streets for a

time, because I don't present myself like that. I don't go around advertising it. I wouldn't lie about it if someone asked, but if they don't, I keep that part of my life hidden away."

Lois paused. "I guess that's true. I mean, I know I have my own secrets – things I'm too embarrassed about to ever want to admit to." She thought for a second. "Do you think Superman has secrets? He was pretty forthcoming when he let me interview him. But, well, we don't really *know* him, on a personal level."

"I'd bet my life on it," Clark replied without making eye contact, choosing, instead, to look back up into the sky. "His motives for keeping secrets are probably different from yours or mine – his safety over something like embarrassment, for example. But yeah, he's probably got plenty of secrets."

Like the fact that he's sitting right next to you.

A few minutes of companionable silence passed between them, then he felt Lois shiver a little in the cool night air.

"Hey, are you getting cold?" he asked.

"Maybe a little," she confessed.

"Let's get back to the car then," Clark offered. "You want to get a cup of coffee or something?"

"I wish I could," Lois said as Clark stood. He gave her his hand and she took it as she rose from the bench. "As much as I hate to see this date end, I have an early morning tomorrow."

Clark nodded. "I understand. Maybe I can meet you in the morning for breakfast?" he offered.

"I'd love that," Lois said, brightening.

"Great. I'll bring the croissants," he said, leading her down the path, away from the fountain. "I know this great place. I'm sure you'll love them."

"Make it chocolate croissants," Lois said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"I wouldn't dream of bringing anything else," he replied.

"Well, here we are. Safe and sound back at your apartment door," Clark said with a cheesy flourish as they arrived back at Lois' place a little while later. "Door to door service, as promised."

Lois giggled a little and flashed him a brilliant smile. "Thanks, Clark."

"So...I'll see you at eight then?"

"Mmm...better make it seven," Lois said.

"You've got it," he replied happily.

"Clark...I really did have a great time tonight."

"Me too, Lois."

"Thank you, for everything. It's been a long, long time since I had a great date."

"I'm just happy that you had a good time," he said sincerely.

"Maybe next time, we can take that drive out into upstate New Troy to stargaze," he offered. Then he grinned. "So long as it's nice out."

Lois laughed. "With my luck dating, it'll probably rain if we plan on that...but yeah, I'd like to do that, Clark."

"It's a deal then."

"Deal."

"Lois?"

"Yeah, Clark?"

"Thanks for not turning me down."

"Thanks for being someone I can respect and not *want* to turn down," she replied, cupping his cheek in her hand.

For a moment, they stood there, frozen in time, each of them seeming to search for what to say or do next.

In the end, it was Lois who broke the spell first as she fought back a tired yawn, though her hand stayed in place on his cheek.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"Don't be. We've had a rough week, and we're still not done with our investigations," he told her gently.

"True," she conceded. Then, "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois." He mimicked her and cupped her own

cheek in his hand.

When she didn't shy away and her hand lingered on his face, he took it as a sign that she would welcome a goodnight kiss. His eyes closed as he leaned forward. His heart began to race in anticipation. He felt himself nearly begin to float and he forced his feet to stay on the ground. Half a second later, he felt his lips find hers.

Sparks flew before his closed eyelids. Fire ignited in his veins. Lightning shot through every last one of his nerves. The world closed in around him and vanished into a pinprick of light, leaving only Lois and himself floating in the vastness of eternity – a place that was both devoid of any color, yet touched by every color that had ever been or ever would be. A place without sound – where the beating of their entwined hearts deafened any external noise. A place where time simply ceased to be – where eons took only heartbeats to pass by and seconds stretched into days.

For the first time in his life, Clark felt completely separate from the world while simultaneously feeling connected to every last atom that made up the Earth. His senses dimmed to anything that wasn't Lois. But he was keenly aware of the way her lips felt against his – full, soft, demanding more out of the gentle kiss he'd initiated. He heard, in intimate detail, the way her heart was pounding. No other scent existed outside of the flowery smell of her perfume and the coconut lime of her conditioner. His skin tingled and burst aflame everywhere her hands touched – his face, his scalp, his back, his neck.

He felt the rest of his body responding to her touch as well, and knew that he had to break the kiss off before he got himself in trouble. But it was still one of the greatest struggles of his life when he finally pulled back from her lips. Instantly, he regretted leaving her embrace. He felt cold and the world around him felt all wrong – as if the kiss had been real and the world was the dream.

"Wow," Lois murmured, looking as stunned by their kiss as Clark felt. "Where'd you learn to kiss like that?"

"Believe me, Lois, that was all you," he said, shaking his head. "I've never had a kiss like that in my life."

"Who knew the Farm Boy could be so...talented," Lois said, grinning shyly.

"It's because I love you," he admitted, the words slipping off his tongue without his consent.

He clamped his mouth shut in horror when he realized what he'd just said. He felt his entire body erupt with heat as he turned scarlet red in a blush. He very nearly physically put his hands over his mouth, like a cartoon character. A thought occurred to him – of all his strange and amazing powers, why didn't he have the ability to shrink down small enough to escape without detection?

"I...uh...I didn't mean to say that," he stuttered, trying to salvage what was left of his relationship with Lois. "I'm sorry, Lois."

"Sorry?" she asked, sounding confused.

"I know I've probably made you uncomfortable. And I know how desperate and pathetic I must have sounded just now. It's only our first date, after all. It wasn't my intention to...put that out there. So...I'm sorry. I just...I hope that doesn't scare you off. I'd hate to think that I just made things way too awkward between us." He sighed. "But, if I did, I understand. The last thing I wanted to do tonight was to make you feel...pressured or uncomfortable in any way."

"Clark?"

"Yeah?" he asked cautiously.

"Stop apologizing," Lois said gently. "Okay, so, I wasn't totally expecting that. But, um, I'm not surprised by it either. Between the way you've always treated me, and what Bruce said at the White Orchid...I knew already. And I appreciate it. I just...this is all still very new to me. And while I love you, I'm still learning what that means – if it's a 'love you as a friend' or the kind that you feel. I'm sorry, Clark. But, for what it's worth, it doesn't scare me, to hear you say it."

“Really?” he asked dubiously, not quite daring enough to trust that he was hearing things correctly.

“Really. It’s nice to hear. If we’re being completely honest, this is the first time a man has ever said that to me when I know that I can believe it’s the truth. And I wish I could say it back right now. But I need a little time to get there.”

“Take all the time you need, Lois. I’ve waited twenty-eight years to find you. Almost twenty-nine. If I have to wait twenty-nine *more*, I’ll do so happily.”

She touched his face again — gently, lovingly — and she smiled softly. “Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*, for not freaking out about this,” Clark smiled back. “Now, before I can stick my foot into my mouth any further, I’ll let you get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning, Lois.”

She smiled, and then, perhaps on an impulse, she reached up on the tips of her toes and kissed his forehead. “Goodnight, Clark.”

“Night, Lois.”

After leaving Lois’ apartment, Clark couldn’t bring himself to go back to his own place — not just yet. He wasn’t in the least bit tired — he was far too energized by the way their first date had turned out — and sleep was simply not an option. He didn’t want to be alone either, at least, not confined to the walls of his apartment. But he didn’t necessarily want to be with other people either. A part of him felt like if he spoke to another person, the magic spell of the evening would be broken, and he’d once again find him on the outside of humanity looking in, instead of in the relationship he’d always prayed he’d find.

For a little while, he wandered the streets of Metropolis. The city never really slept, and he found that he was not the only one still awake and out and about at that late hour. He saw at least half a dozen people out walking dogs, and at least eight more staggering home from bars — all of them too intoxicated to drive themselves. Trucks still rumbled down the streets — big delivery trucks making their way to stores so that the shelves could be restocked with goods for people to buy in the morning. Outside of an apartment building he passed, two men stood talking and smoking, while a couple stole kisses in the shadows. Dogs barked in the night. Laughter and voices wafted through the air. In the distance, an ambulance siren blared.

It was too much for Clark.

He found a deserted alleyway and ducked inside. A swift, but thorough, check of it assured him that he was alone. He ducked behind a rusted green dumpster and spun into his Superman outfit, then shot up into the sky. He flew due east, blitzing through the sky at a speed that fell just short of the sound barrier. He kept moving until he’d passed through several time zones and he could see the faint lightening of the sky before him as the sunrise approached. Then he finally slowed down and came to a rest on the peak of the highest mountain around. Clark wasn’t even sure where he was anymore — he’d lost track as he’d replayed the kiss he’d shared with Lois over and over in his mind.

Wherever he was, the view was breathtaking. A sea of mountains stretched out before him, white capped with snow that gleamed golden as the sun rose higher and spilled its life-giving light out over the land. A large boulder stood bald and smooth where Clark was, and he sat down, with the fleeting thought that he could well be the first person to ever sit upon that rock. Wrapping his cape around him — for comfort rather than to protect himself against the biting cold — he simply breathed in the clean air, delighting in the scent of trees and snow and wind, unmarred by the pollution of the city. His breath misted out in wispy white puffs when he exhaled again.

In a way, he mused, his journey to this place had mirrored his life. He’d had to wander in darkness for a time, alone and without really belonging anywhere. So, he’d kept moving, kept pressing onward, kept looking for the light where he knew he’d find some

happiness and a sense of acceptance, if not belonging. Along the way, he’d learned to live with his lot in life. He’d even come to embrace the darkness — not *just* the darkness of the physical night, fighting side by side in Gotham with Bruce, but the inner darkness of his lonely heart as well. And then, he’d moved on again and found himself in Metropolis. There, he’d fully stepped into the light, embraced his destiny as a reporter, and had left fighting in the shadows behind to let Superman walk in the sunshine. As he’d done so, his loneliness had fallen away and his world had been flooded with the light that was his love for Lois.

As a simple farm raised orphan, he couldn’t have asked for more.

THE END