

A New Dawn

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Summary: After establishing himself as Superman, Clark Kent continues his mission to help people. But he isn't prepared for what it might cost him.

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This is a direct sequel to "Stepping Into The Light," which is a direct sequel to "Embracing The Darkness." Please read those two stories first, if you haven't already. Thanks! And enjoy!

Clark took a deep breath as he drank in the sights and smells of the bullpen. It felt so good to be back, even if the entire place had been redesigned after the bombing, roughly six months before. But the redesign had bettered the place more than Clark could have ever dreamed. The equipment was the top of the line and had vastly improved their effectiveness in reporting the news. Clark mentally grinned to himself. The Gotham Gazette had never had such impressive equipment, or such a comfortable, inviting environment. Of course, the newsroom had only just reopened three months before, so it still had that "shiny and new" quality to it, as Jimmy had so aptly put it.

They could have been working in a mud pit for all Clark cared. It was still nice to be back to his normal routine of going into the office, rather than writing their stories in the cramped living room in either his or Lois' apartment, shuffling their piles of research between armchairs, couches, coffee tables, or the floor — or, on occasion, kitchen tables and counters — then emailing their copies to Perry and waiting by the phone to hear if he approved of them or not. Clark felt more useful, somehow, by having an office to report to. Of course, working from home had had *some* benefits. Namely, he could usually duck out to respond to a crisis as Superman without needing to make excuses.

No matter. He was still infinitely glad to see the Daily Planet survive and thrive in the wake of the bombing.

If nothing else, being in the office guaranteed that he got to spend all day almost every day with Lois. He sighed happily at that thought. All his life he'd wondered what love was like. Now, being in love with Lois, it exceeded even his wildest dreams. He'd even begun to think ahead to the future — something he hadn't really done since the day he'd become a thirteen-year-old orphan. Back then, his world had stopped. The future had only stretched so far as who would take in him, now that he had no family. When he'd been shipped off to live in Grandma Tildy's halfway house, the future had been limited to whether or not he'd ever be adopted, or if he'd eventually age out of the home and be forced to make his own way, alone. As a homeless, drifting teen, the future had

meant only what the next hour or day would bring — another night camped out in the rain or snow, another day with a gnawing, growing feeling in his stomach, another series of nightmares that would rob him of sleep. After meeting Bruce and going to live in Wayne Manor, his future had broadened once more, and had even become a little brighter. He could afford to think in terms of the next semester at school, the next year working as an intern for the Gotham Gazette, five years down the line and whether or not he'd still be able to perform his duties as Nightwing once he entered the workforce. But even then, the future had never once meant his *entire* future, only a relatively short road ahead of him.

But now things were different. For the first time in his life, the future didn't seem so abstract and lonely. After living as a recluse for long, wrapping himself in the shadows as Nightwing, and wandering the Earth as an aimless, overseas reporter, Clark finally felt something about his future that he'd never felt before. Hope. Hope for permeance and stability. Hope for love and a family. Hope for a life with Lois. Hope for a family of his own, in time. He wanted to share everything with Lois — waking up with her next to him in bed, making love to her, having children with her, raising their family together, planning vacations, celebrating milestone birthdays and anniversaries together. He could picture himself growing old with her, and, eventually, dying in contentment over a life spent with the woman he loved.

He felt a flutter in his chest as he thought of Lois. A grin spread over his face. Ten months. For ten months he'd been graced with the opportunity to love Lois and be loved by her in return. Working side by side with her every day, they had both learned almost everything there was to know about each other. Clark knew that sometimes, couples that worked together could grow to resent one another. But not Lois and himself. The hours they'd spent together both inside of work and outside of it had only served to strengthen their relationship, like steel forged in fire. Nothing could break them. Their future was solid. Again, Clark sighed to himself. The future. Every thought, every musing, every dream came with Lois. In every scenario he could concoct, Lois was there with him as his wife.

But before that could happen, he knew he had to divulge his biggest secret to her.

The secret.

The secret that would end the lies and deceptions.

The secret that would explain everything to her — once she knew it.

The secret that would, more than likely, destroy everything Clark had worked so hard to create.

The secret that would make him more vulnerable than he'd ever been in his entire life.

Soon, he vowed to himself, trying to ward off the guilt that ate away at him every moment he went without telling Lois about his double life. He knew he had to tell her. He'd already made up his mind to sit down with her and tell her the whole truth about himself, as soon as possible.

But not now. Now he had *other* important things to discuss with her. He left the break area and made his way to her desk.

"Morning, Lois," Clark said cheerfully as he placed an expertly made cup of coffee on her desk.

"Morning to you too," she replied, stretching her neck up toward him as he bent to place a quick, light kiss on her lips. "You're in a good mood today. And thanks for the coffee. I was just about to get up and get one for myself."

"You're welcome," he replied. "And yes, I *am* happy. I just heard from the DA's office."

"The DA? What about?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with interest over the rim of her mug as she took a sip of coffee.

Clark couldn't help but to crack a tiny grin. Coffee mug or not, Lois couldn't hide her curiosity or her impatience. She was nearly bursting with the need to know, he could see.

“Oh, nothing much,” he teased, unable to resist the opportunity to toy with her a little. “Just the Planet bombing.”

“Really?” she said, asked incredulously.

She set her mug down and seemed to immediately forget about the coffee. She swiveled her chair to track him as he moved to sit on the edge of her desk. She reached out and blindly grabbed a pen and a pad of paper, looking ready to jot down whatever information Clark had to share. Her bright eyes looked up at him, waiting, but Clark could already see the wheels in her mind whirring rapidly as she tried to guess as to what he might tell her.

“They arrested the bomber months ago,” she said thoughtfully. “Did they find a second culprit? Is the bomber pleading guilty? Is he finally going to talk and say why he did it? God, I hope they nail his hide to the wall and leave him to rot.”

Clark raised his eyebrow at her in amusement. That caught her attention and she cleared her throat.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “I got a little ahead of myself. But thinking about what he did just boils my blood.”

“I know,” Clark said gently. “I love that about you.”

“Really?” she asked, tucking a strand of wayward hair behind her right ear. “It’s not annoying?”

“Never,” Clark swore. “I love your dedication to the case. Besides, I feel the same way about what happened to the Planet.”

Lois nodded solemnly. “Anyway, you were saying?”

Clark nodded in turn. “The bomber? Joey Bermuda? He’s willing to talk.”

Lois’ eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

Clark nodded again. “The DA’s working out a deal for a lighter sentence in exchange for Joey’s employers – not only for the Planet bombing, but on a whole slew of other cases. Remember, he’s been linked to at least twenty other bombings in the tristate area in the last two years alone, that we know of. And that’s only because you and I found the evidence for them when we discovered Joey’s lair.”

Lois grinned for just a moment. “That felt good,” she beamed. “Pinning all those unsolved terror attacks on him. It was about time he got caught for everything he’s done.”

“It sure did,” Clark agreed with a smile and a feeling of pride swelling his heart.

“You really think he’ll give up his employers?” Lois asked hopefully as Clark took her hand in his and brushed his thumb over her knuckles soothingly.

He shrugged slightly. “He’s apparently already alluded to the fact that there’s a *big* name involved, at least in the Planet’s case.”

“Big?” Lois repeated. Then, scrunching her brow, “How big are we talking?”

“Not sure,” Clark shrugged helplessly. “All I know is that Joey made it seem like whoever it is, his employer is extremely dangerous and very powerful.”

Lois tapped the capped end of her pen on the pad of paper impatiently. “How long before he talks?”

“The DA’s office didn’t say. They’re still working out the details of the deal. It could be as early as this afternoon, but, to be honest, I’m not holding my breath on it. The DA’s swamped right now with a lot of high profile cases.”

“Well, whenever we find out, you and I will be there getting the front page exclusive,” Lois swore. She looked around the bullpen for a long moment. “It’s hard to believe the bombing happened six months ago,” she said in a quiet, almost contemplative tone.

“I know,” Clark said soothingly, reaching out and touching her shoulder. “But, honestly, I’m surprised the DA’s office was able to build their case against Joey as quickly as they did.”

“Well, they *did* have a little help in that department,” Lois teased him proudly.

Clark nodded ruefully. “I wish we’d gotten that lucky break sooner than we did. Two months of valuable time...” His voice

trailed off, then he sighed. “Not that it was our fault. The guy was practically a ghost until we stumbled upon that ATM photo of him when we were working on the Call Girl Slasher case.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lois conceded, dropping her head a little. “It’s just...so frustrating, that’s all. I mean, it took three months just to get the Planet back. Now we’re this close,” Lois said, holding her thumb and index fingers a hairs-breath apart, “to finding out who wanted to take us down.”

“Don’t worry, Lois. The DA is putting a *lot* of pressure on Joey. One way or another, that name will come out. And when it does, you and I will be right there, making sure whoever it is goes to jail for the rest of his or her life.”

Lois grinned. “I can smell the awards for our coverage already,” she joked.

“Absolutely!” Clark agreed with a chuckle. “When we take down Joey’s employer...whoever he or she might be...I think we’re going to find that they were behind a *lot* more than just trying to destroy a newspaper.” He reached over and cupped her cheek in his hand. Gazing into her worry-filled eyes, he stroked her cheek with his thumb. “It’ll happen, Lois. I promise.”

“I know,” she admitted, covering his hand with her own and appearing to bask in the warmth of his palm. “And I think you’re right, about the potential to find more skeletons in the closet when we nail whoever ordered the hit on the Planet. I mean, we *know* Joey has ties to Intergang. And we’re reasonably sure the Churches run Intergang.”

“Right,” Clark said, sipping his own coffee. “But we already know Intergang *wasn’t* behind the bombing. The lie detector tests proved it.”

“Right,” Lois echoed. “We also know Joey has worked as a free agent in the past. He’s admitted to it.”

“Only after you and I found that bizarre collection of his,” Clark pointed out.

That had been truly disturbing – Joey’s trophies from the jobs he’d done. Just the thought of it still sent a chill down Clark’s spine. He could still picture every last gruesome detail. The way everything had been labeled – pieces of debris from each and every successful bombing he’d committed, all of them paired with newspaper clippings chronicling the disaster. Clark had immediately felt a cold sweat run down his back as he’d realized that Joey truly loved what he did. It was, in that moment, when he’d come to fully understand the darkness within the man. This wasn’t someone who did a job simply because his palms had been greased with enough cash. This was Joey Bermuda’s *passion*. Every malicious, evil act had been a source of pride for Joey – another notch in his belt that he could brag about. And he *had* bragged about them when the police had questioned him. The lives lost didn’t matter to him. In fact, it had seemed like the more lives that were lost in each bombing, the more Joey had beamed in pride.

Clark had started to get a sense of the depth of Joey’s evilness before they’d ever found his lair. The more he and Lois had dug into Joey’s past, the more they’d discovered how sick and twisted he truly was. In fact, the only thing that hadn’t been deprived about the man was his devotion to his young daughter, who – and Clark was thankful for this – lived across the country with her mother, Joey’s ex-wife, Joanne. But finding Joey’s lair had hammered home just how demonic the man was inside.

“Don’t remind me,” Lois said with a shudder. “It was bad enough finding it the first time, let alone going back with the police.”

“No argument there,” Clark replied with a deep frown. “I still don’t understand it though. How someone could take such obvious pride in such gruesome memorabilia. Sure, it’s not like his trophies were covered in gore or anything, and it wasn’t like he’d acquired a collection of human skulls, but...” His shoulders slumped as if under a great weight. “Some of those bombings

killed hundreds of people.”

Lois shook her head sadly. “I don’t get it either. Not to mention the fact that they were a dead giveaway that he was responsible for all of those incidents.”

“It takes a truly sick mind,” Clark said, the words tainting his mouth with a bad taste. He took a sip of coffee to wash it away. “In any case, someone from either the DA’s office or the police department is supposed to call me when they get that information.”

“And that’s all the information they gave you?” Lois pried hopefully, though Clark knew it was more out of a force of habit than any real expectation that he was hiding any information.

Clark shook his head resignedly. “Sorry.”

“Perfect,” Lois said, sarcasm dripping heavily from the word. But Clark knew she wasn’t exasperated with him. It was just the overall situation.

“Still,” Clark said, looking around the office, “you have to admit. After the forced renovation to deal with the damage caused by the bombs, the Planet has never looked better.”

“Yeah,” Lois said, rolling her eyes good-naturedly. “Thank God for the silver lining.”

“Oh, come on, Lois. The entire place is more modern, more updated, and *much* better equipped to handle our needs now,” Clark said, defending his choice to see the good in the tragedy. “The new computers alone have been a huge help. They’re faster and a lot more reliable than the ones we had before.”

“Sure,” she admitted. “As soon as Joey names his employer, I’ll be sure to have Perry send a thank you card to them.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” Clark playfully pressed. “Just...pointing out how generous Mr. Stern was when it came time to rebuild.”

“We’re lucky to have him for an owner,” Lois agreed. “A lot of other places might not have been so fortunate.”

Clark nodded silently, drinking his coffee. Then, “So, partner, what’s on the agenda for the day?”

“Aside from the break in the Planet bombing...well, *potential* break...not much.”

“Okay,” Clark said with a sip of his coffee. “I guess we’ll have to find something.”

Lois nodded. “Any ideas?” she asked over the rim of her coffee cup.

“Nothing yet. I filed the murder-suicide last night after you left. And I still haven’t heard back from the City Council on that new town hall proposal.”

“You want to head over there?” Lois chewed her lower lip, looking less than enthused about what she clearly viewed as a puff-piece, but ready to propel herself into action to get the story out of the way.

Clark shook his head. “My contact isn’t there until tomorrow. I’ll try back then. No one else will talk to me. Besides, the vote on it isn’t for months, so it’s not like we need to rush it.”

“Wait,” Lois said, circling back. “You said you filed the murder-suicide? When?”

“I came back in last night, I guess around eleven. I don’t know why. Being home was driving me stir-crazy. I had to get out and do something. It was bothering me that we didn’t get a chance to finish it.”

“Well, thanks,” Lois said. “Did it help?”

“Help?”

“The feeling of being stir-crazy,” she clarified.

“Oh...yeah,” Clark said.

The truth of the matter was, he’d heard the cry for help. But Superman had been occupied with a bus crash at the time. Too many people had had injuries that required him to shuttle them to the hospital. By the time he’d gotten a moment to check out the cry for help, it had been too late. The teenaged killer had already shot and killed his girlfriend, and had turned the gun on himself. It

had shattered his heart, knowing he’d needed to ignore the call for help. It hadn’t been any easier returning later as a reporter. He’d felt responsible for their deaths, even though he knew, logically, that there was no way he could have saved them. The bus accident had been the priority. He’d saved a lot of lives by staying on the scene.

But logic only got so far with his heart.

So he’d spent the night second guessing his every decision at the rescue, even though he *knew* there hadn’t been any other course of action. It had driven him completely stir-crazy, and the only thing that had helped was telling the victim’s story.

At least, he mused darkly, he was getting better about brooding over lives he couldn’t save. In the beginning, even though he’d had years of Nightwing experience under his belt, he’d had much more trouble forgiving himself over lives lost. But now, almost a year later, he was finally starting to let such unfortunate circumstances go. He was only one man, and despite his incredible powers, he couldn’t be everywhere at once.

Oh, he’d known going into the whole Superman thing that this would happen. Bruce had warned him moments like this would arrive, when he’d have to pick and choose who to save. But knowing it didn’t make *experiencing* it any less difficult. It still hurt, every time he was too late to save someone. It still tore him to shreds, to have to make split-second judgment calls out there, knowing whoever he chose to leave behind might die before he could return.

Still, he had to admit, saving even one life made what he did worthwhile. He could still be proud of himself each and every time he got someone out of a life or death situation. It didn’t alleviate his grief over the times when people died, but the successful rescues *did* help him to maintain a positive attitude toward his decision to keep up his mission as Superman. But there *were* still times when he couldn’t help the nightmares that followed a rescue gone wrong.

“That didn’t sound too convincing,” Lois said with a frown. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing,” Clark brushed it off. “Just tired. After I went back home, I still had a rough time falling asleep.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said sympathetically. She rose from her seat and gently massaged his shoulders. “You could have called me.”

“Thanks,” he said gratefully. “But there was no sense in having *both* of us awake in the middle of the night.”

“Well...I guess that’s true,” Lois conceded, giving him a quick, feather-light kiss on his lips.

He kissed her back a little harder, groaning in bliss. “Maybe I *should* have visited you after all,” he smiled through their kiss. “Just a few of your kisses would have calmed my mind instantly.”

Lois smiled as she pulled away. “I said *called*, not *visited*,” she gently teased.

“Semantics,” he lightly tossed back with a tiny grin.

She laughed in response. It appeared she was about to respond with a retort of her own when Clark’s phone began to ring. He gave her an apologetic look, then he moved to his desk to answer the call.

“Clark Kent,” he answered on the third ring.

“Kent, hey. It’s Henderson,” came the reply.

“Hey, Bill,” Clark greeted the policeman.

“You have a few minutes?”

“Absolutely,” Clark said with a shallow nod, though the man couldn’t see it. “What do you need?”

“It’s more like I have something for you,” Henderson corrected him. “Specifically, Joey Bermuda,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“He talked?” Clark asked, surprised. He hadn’t expected to hear anything so early, if at all that day.

“Yeah, he talked,” Henderson confirmed. There was a pause.

“He, uh... you might want to be sitting down for this,” he warned.

“What? Did he name the President or something?” Clark joked.

“He might as well have,” Henderson deadpanned.

That got Clark’s attention. He sat down, his body stiff, every muscle coiled as if ready for a fight.

“Who?” was all Clark could ask.

“A friend of yours,” Henderson replied sarcastically. “Believe it or not, he named Lex Luthor as one who hired him to carry out the bombing.”

At least it was sarcasm in Henderson’s voice, rather than an actual accusation of friendship with Luthor. While it was well known that Clark and Luthor were personally acquainted, it was also no secret that Clark was not a fan of the multi-billionaire.

Clark froze in shock, blinking rapidly as his vocal chords ceased to function. His eyes darted about the bullpen. It seemed surreal that his coworkers all continued to move about in their normal routines, as if a bombshell hadn’t just gone off in Clark’s ear. For one stomach-churning moment, he wondered if he’d heard right, or if Henderson was making a joke at Clark’s expense. But no, Henderson was a good man. He’d never make light of something so important or of such a sensitive topic.

“Kent? You still there?” Henderson worriedly prompted after half a minute.

“Uh... yeah. But... are... are you sure?” Clark asked in halting tones as his voice finally crept out of hiding.

“Positive. I’m the one he told.”

Clark let out a low whistle as he processed the information.

“Did he say why?”

“Said he had no idea why. That Luthor’s manservant, Nigel, contacted him about the job, offering an amount he said he would have been insane to refuse.”

“I buy the ‘insane’ description,” Clark quipped, squeezing a stress relief ball that was sitting on his desk. It was blue with the Superman S on it. Jimmy had given Lois and Clark each one after snagging a few goody bags at the rally when Superman had been presented with the key to the city for his good works.

“About the money or Joey Bermuda?” Henderson asked, sounding amused.

“Both,” Clark automatically replied.

Henderson snorted a chuckle. “Anyway,” he said, deftly returning to back to the business at hand, “he said he never spoke directly with Luthor. But it was obvious that Nigel was approaching on his boss’ behalf. He said he never asks *why* someone wants a job done, just the *when, where, and how much money.*”

“Safer for him,” Clark said absently.

“I think so, yeah. Too many questions can get a man like Joey a one-way ticket to the bottom of Hobbs Bay.”

“Right,” Clark responded with a nod of his head, though of course Henderson couldn’t see it. “Okay, I guess the next thing is... do we have proof of any of this?”

“We’re working on it. It’s our top priority right now,”

Henderson assured him. “I’ll let you know if we find anything. And if you and Lois do...” he said, letting his voice trail off in an unfinished question.

“We’ll share whatever we find, if anything,” Clark promised.

“Thanks, Kent.” Clark could almost hear the Inspector shaking his head. “I don’t know how you two find half the leads you do but... well, I’m grateful that you do. And for your cooperation.”

“We’re always happy to help,” Clark said, squeezing the stress ball, forgetting, for the moment, that he was doing so. “Thanks, Bill. We’ll be in touch the moment we know anything.”

“Thanks. And the same with me. I’ll call you once I know anything more. But for now, I have to ask you keep this information between the three of us.”

“Not a problem, Bill.”

There was a faint *click!* as the phone connection was severed. Clark listened to the dial tone for a moment, lost in his own thoughts.

Luthor! What could that spineless, gutless, downright evil demon in a tailor-fit business suit have hoped to gain with having the Planet blown up? After all, it wasn’t like he was in the paper’s crosshairs as the subject of an investigation. If anything, the Planet had been more than kind to the man. After Luthor had agreed to break his media silence and given Lois the exclusive interview with him – the one and *only* interview he’d given to *any* reporter of *any* news source – the Planet had painted him in quite the positive light.

Of course, Clark knew better than to be blinded by the sickeningly sweet public veneer that Luthor put on to fool the public. Though he still had no proof – only his gut instinct – he didn’t trust Luthor one bit. He had *never* trusted the billionaire. Not the first time he’d been introduced to Luthor and certainly not now. Every time he was in the man’s presence, Clark’s hackles rose and he got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was worse now than ever before, now that he’d had a few encounters with Luthor while in the disguise of Superman. For whatever reason, Luthor was less skilled at hiding his true, insidious nature before the superhero’s steely gaze. Perhaps, Clark thought, Luthor knew that Superman wasn’t buying his innocent, philanthropist act, whereas the rest of society usually bought right into it, without thinking.

One of these days, I’ll find the proof I need, Clark vowed to himself once again. *Maybe the Planet bombing – if this is true – will give me the opportunity to finally get him behind bars. As it is, I’m fairly sure he’s behind most of the crime in Metropolis. More so than even Intergang.*

Clark hung up the phone as he pulled himself from his thoughts. Lois looked over as he placed the headset back in its cradle. Then she stood and crossed the aisle that separated their desks.

“Wrong number?” she joked.

Clark shook his head, still somewhat dazed. “Funny. That was Henderson.”

Lois’ interest rose. Clark could tell by the way her eyes widened and her eyebrows lifted. “Really? What’d he have to say?”

“Joey Bermuda talked,” Clark replied, lowering his voice so their coworkers wouldn’t be able to hear. “Apparently Lex Luthor is the one who ordered the hit on the Planet.”

The word shock was too mild to describe the look on Lois’ face. Her mouth dropped open and her jaw worked for a moment without any sound issuing forth. Her eyes went wide and she blinked rapidly. She shook her head in obvious disbelief. “You’re kidding!” she finally managed.

“Shh!” Clark warned, with a furtive glance around. “I swore we’d keep this information just to ourselves. If word got out, it could throw a wrench into investigating how true that claim is.”

Lois nodded. “You’re right.” Then, softer, “But... why?”

“That’s part of what Bill’s team is working on. And what I think you and I should look into... provided it’s true.”

“Where do you want to start?” Lois asked.

“Luthor’s always about the money,” Clark said as his mind raced. “Maybe we should start there.”

“Where though? It’s not like Lex has a financial interest in the Planet,” Lois argued.

“Maybe not. But what if he was trying to?” The thought struck Clark’s brain out of nowhere. “Let’s try talking to Mr. Stern. Maybe he has an idea.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to be letting on that we have suspicions,” Lois countered.

Clark shrugged. “So, we keep it vague. Come on, Lois, it’s worth a shot.”

"I agree," she said. "But you're right. We have to be careful to keep it vague."

"I'll call Mr. Stern's office," Clark said decisively. "And see if we can schedule a meeting."

Two days later, their patience was rewarded with a meeting in Mr. Stern's office. Clark discreetly looked around the spacious room, impressed by the tasteful, though obviously rich décor. It spoke of a man who'd done quite well for himself, and who enjoyed life's luxuries, but who didn't try to flaunt his wealth. Still, Clark knew the paintings on the walls were each worth tens of thousands of dollars, if he wasn't mistaken. Clark had never met the artist in person, but he'd helped Bruce procure several of the artist's paintings as gifts for a few of Bruce's friends, back when Clark had still been living in Wayne Manor.

"Thanks for meeting with us, Mr. Stern," Lois said as he welcomed them into his office.

"My pleasure," the older man said in a deep, rumbling voice. He smiled at them both as he shook first Lois' hand, then Clark's. "Granted, I was surprised to hear that you both wanted a meeting with me. But for the two best reporters at my newspaper? I'll always happily make time for that."

"We really appreciate that, sir," Clark said humbly.

"Please, take a seat. Can I get you a drink perhaps? A cold soda? Ice water? Lemonade?" Mr. Stern offered.

"Oh, uh, sure. A lemonade sounds great," Clark said, mostly because it seemed like Mr. Stern really hoped they'd take him up on his offer.

Lois seemed to take the hint as Clark nudged her subtly. "Same for me, if it's not too much trouble," she said.

"No trouble at all." Mr. Stern grinned and went to the wall.

There, perfectly camouflaged against the mahogany wood of the office, was a hidden refrigerator. Mr. Stern pulled out two glass bottles of pink lemonade, and a bottle of Coke for himself. He popped off the bottle caps and brought the drinks over to where Lois and Clark had taken seats on the tan leather couch. Then he sat in a matching armchair. In silence, they drank.

"Wow," Lois complimented after swallowing down the first sip. "That's delicious!"

"I'm glad you like it," Mr. Stern said with approval. "I recently took over a bottling company. I insist on glass bottles only. It may be a little more expensive, but in the long run, it's worth it. There's something fresher about the taste of a drink in a glass bottle, wouldn't you agree?"

"Actually, yes," Clark immediately answered. "I've always thought the same thing. Where I grew up in Kansas, at the local grocery store, we always had Coke in glass bottles. When I had my first one out of a plastic bottle, it didn't quite taste the same."

Mr. Stern roared a laugh. "Good man!" He slapped his knee in amusement as his laughter continued to rock his body. When he was finally done, he coughed, cleared his throat, and wiped at his eyes. "So...let's get down to business, shall we? What is it that brings you to my office today?"

"The Planet's bombing," Clark said, sitting forward a little and steeping his fingers.

"What about it?" Mr. Stern asked. "Is there some new information?"

"Nothing concrete," Lois hastily replied. "Just a new angle we're pursuing."

"I see. Well, I'm happy to provide whatever information I can. But...I thought the bomber was caught?"

"He was," Clark confirmed. "But knowing what we know about him...he's not the type to take down a building just for the sake of blowing things up."

"Someone would have paid him to do it," Mr. Stern said, nodding to himself.

"Exactly," Clark said, nodding as well.

Mr. Stern hummed to himself thoughtfully. "So...what is it, exactly, that you need from me? If I knew who ordered the bombing, I would have told the police."

"Oh, we know," Lois said with a chuckle when Mr. Stern cracked a small smile.

"We were wondering if...if anything...out of the ordinary happened before the bombing. Anything at all, at any time," Clark said.

"Let me think," Mr. Stern said, looking up at the ceiling while he thought. "I'm not sure if this helps at all, but, about a month... maybe a month and a half...before the bombing, I was thinking about selling the paper."

"What!?" Lois gasped in shock.

Mr. Stern nodded. "It's true. I was thinking about selling quite a few of my businesses...kick back a little, enjoy myself, maybe retire to my place in the mountains, fishing my days away in utter relaxation."

"Sounds like Perry's dream too," Clark commented, the corners of his mouth turning upwards in the slightest smile.

The older man laughed again, hard. "Bah, that old newshound will never retire!"

Lois and Clark laughed along with him.

"I'd have to agree with that," Lois replied. "I swear, he probably has it in his will to have his ashes left in the newsroom, so he can spend eternity haunting this place and making sure we reporters turn in only the most excellent work possible."

That made the paper's owner laugh all the more deeply. So deeply, in fact, that he started to sputter and cough for several long minutes until he was left nearly breathless.

"You know what? I like the two of you," Mr. Stern said with a bright grin and approval in his voice. "Anyway, like I was saying. I toyed around with the idea of selling, but I kept the information fairly secretive. I didn't want to cause a panic, you understand. There was no sense in making Perry...and, by extension, you and your fellow reporters, worried for no reason, when I wasn't a hundred percent sure I really was going to go through with it."

"Makes sense," Clark said. "People tend to act unpredictably. Maybe even quit, if they feel like their job is in danger."

"Right. So, I only mentioned it to a few people. People who had expressed interest in possibly getting into the news business, or who I thought might be up to the task of running a paper. But then the Planet was attacked and, well, it put a new fire in me. I dropped any notion I had of selling. I was determined to not only rebuild the Planet but to make it better than ever."

"Mr. Stern? Who did you tell? Who knew that you were thinking of selling the paper?" Clark asked. He shot a look at Lois, and it was clear she'd been about to ask the same question.

"Not many," Mr. Stern said. Again, he looked to the ceiling as he thought. "There was your friend, Bruce Wayne."

"Bruce? Really?" Clark knew his jaw was slack in surprise. "He never said a word to me."

The older man nodded. "I'm not surprised to hear it. He wasn't comfortable with the idea of owning the paper you work for."

"I believe that," Clark said with a nod. "Besides, he told me years ago that he could have bought the Gotham Gazette at one point. He turned down the offer because he said he felt ill equipped to run a paper."

"That's what he told me too."

"Who else knew?" Lois asked, putting the conversation back on track.

"Arthur Chow. Lena Janek. Allison Macking," Mr. Stern said, ticking off the names on his fingers as he continued on. Clark recognized all of the names. They were all extremely wealthy individuals, and several of them owned other news sources. After nine or ten names, Mr. Stern shrugged. "And, Lex Luthor."

It was like a bolt of lightning shot through Clark at the

mention of Luthor's name.

"Luthor?" he asked, needing the clarification and shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"Yes," Mr. Stern said, looking confused. "He seemed pretty interested, until I decided not to sell."

"When did you decide to keep the paper?" Lois asked.

"And did Luthor know?" added Clark.

"Oh...I guess it was maybe three weeks before the attack," Mr. Stern said, rubbing his chin. "My wife and I were talking over dinner one night and she convinced me to keep the paper. Lex and I happened to run into each other a few days later. He made an offer, but I turned him down and said I'd changed my mind."

"What'd he say to that?" Lois asked, jotting down notes.

"Not much. Uh...he said he was sorry he wouldn't get the chance to take the helm. And then he congratulated me on my decision. I guess...he alluded to the idea that, if I changed my mind again, his offer would stand. But then the bombing happened and I never heard about it again. Although, I have to say, the attack? It strengthened my resolve more than ever. That's why I put so much money into the remodel, to ensure that everything was top of the line. I figured someone had a good reason for targeting us and I was determined to throw it in their face that we will not be intimidated. That we'd come back stronger than ever." Mr. Stern smiled grimly. "Where I once wondered if I should move on from the news business, now I will own this paper until I die and they the Daily Planet from my cold, dead hands."

"I think we can all appreciate that," Clark said sincerely. "There's no denying that you've been a great boss to all of us."

"Well, thank you for saying that," the owner said with a pleased grin.

"Clark's right. Everyone at the Planet seems so much happier since you took things over a few years ago. Clark wasn't here while Mr. Harold owned the paper. But I was. And, well, there's no yearning for the olden days," Lois added.

"So I've heard," Mr. Stern said with an almost absent-minded nod. "The management has told me, in detail, of how things used to be run."

"Mr. Stern? Was that anything else out of the ordinary that happened before the attack?" Clark prompted, although he felt like they might have the connection to Luthor that they needed.

The man thought for a moment, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair as he did so. "No," he finally said, "I don't think so. Not even my lawyers knew I was thinking of selling. And, as I told the police, I didn't receive any threats or anything. The bombing happened out of the blue, with no warning."

"Did you tell the police about any of this? That you'd toyed with the idea of selling?" Lois asked, taking the question right out of Clark's mouth.

"I mentioned it, but they didn't seem terribly interested. It's not like anyone was trying to force me to sell."

Forced to sell! That's it! Clark's mind screamed.

"Thank you, Mr. Stern, for your time and information," Clark said suddenly.

"Any time. I hope I was able to help you in some way."

"I think you may have given us the angle we need," Clark replied with a grim smile.

I should have known, Clark mentally admonished himself ten minutes later from the passenger seat of Lois' Jeep. *It has to be Luthor. I've always known he's not the great philanthropist he makes himself out to be. He's evil to the core, even if no one else can see it. I need to prove it though. The question is...how?*

"So, what do you think?" Lois asked later, as they drove through the streets of Metropolis, heading for the Jade Tiger – Lois' favorite Chinese Restaurant in the city.

"Huh? What?" Clark sputtered, blinking, as he tore himself out of his thoughts.

"You haven't said two words since we left Mr. Stern's office," Lois clarified. "You looked like you held the secret to the universe while we were there, but now...? You look...troubled."

"I've been thinking a lot about what Mr. Stern told us," Clark replied. "And it all points to Luthor."

"I think so too," Lois confided.

"I think he ordered the hit on the Planet in order to try to scare Mr. Stern back away from his decision not to sell. Maybe he thought that something that disturbing would make Mr. Stern hesitant to keep the paper. After all, who wants to own something that's been a target of a terrorist attack, because who knows if it will be hit again?"

"Okay. So, let's say it had worked and Mr. Stern turned tail and sold the paper. Lex would have swooped in and bought the business," Lois continued, following his train of thought.

"Putting him in charge of one of the most important news sources in the world," Clark added. "And giving him the potential ability to control what information gets out to the public or not."

"But if the building had come down...that's not exactly a cheap rebuild. Mr. Stern spent millions on the renovation, and the damage was minimal. I can't imagine what it would have cost if the entire building needed to be built from the ground up."

Clark shrugged. "Pocket change for Luthor."

"Even so," Lois said, conceding the point, "Lex seems more... I don't know. Practical about his money. Why would he risk needlessly spending that kind of money?"

"His image," Clark said with another, less exaggerated shrug. "Can you imagine what the public would have said about the 'good guy billionaire' who saved The Daily Planet?"

"You really believe he would have spent so much just to look good?" Lois asked incredulously.

"There's not a doubt in my mind," Clark instantly and calmly replied.

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

"Lois, I've known the man for years," Clark interrupted gently. "He would starve a puppy just to make a grand show of giving it a feast later on, for the sole purpose of making himself look like the puppy's benevolent savior. He ordered the hit on the Planet. I know it. We just have to prove it."

Lois glanced over at him as they stopped at a red light. She looked uncertain, but determined to get to the bottom of things.

"So let's prove it, partner."

"Okay, thanks, Bobby," Lois said into her phone late the following morning.

Clark watched as she doodled absently on a legal sized pad of paper. She had the phone cradled between her neck and shoulder in order to free up her hands. He had to marvel at how focused she could become. The nickname 'Mad Dog Lane' that the newsroom had collectively labeled her with had been well and truly earned. Clark had seen more easily distracted bloodhounds in his time.

"You've got it. See you there," she promised. She hung up the phone and flashed a triumphant smile across the aisle at Clark.

"What's up?" Clark asked, his curiosity immediately piquing. He'd tried to guess as to what Bobby had called about, but Lois' conversation with the informant had been rather vague. And Jimmy had interrupted his eavesdropping twice to drop off research on one of the cases he and Lois were working on.

"We need to go," Lois said, standing and grabbing her purse.

"Go?"

"Bobby's down at the docks. Says he's got some information for us regarding the bombing."

Clark's eyebrows shot up in interest. "Did he say what he has?"

"No," Lois said, shaking her head. She gestured frantically for him to stand up. "He

couldn't talk much on the phone. Too many people around. He's meeting us at The Crow's Nest."

"Of course he is," Clark said, suppressing a chuckle. "At least he didn't pick *too* expensive of a place this time."

He sighed recalling the last time they'd paid Bobby for one of his tips. In a brazen move – as Clark viewed it — the man had chosen a steakhouse to meet them in. Dinner had run close to seventy-five dollars. Perry had turned so red that Clark had feared his boss would burst a vein. Clark had felt incredibility guilty about the bill, but all had been forgiven when Bobby's lead had turned out to be good and over five hundred thousand dollars' worth of cocaine had been seized by the police, leading to the arrest of seventeen drug dealers.

Lois shrugged. "Okay, so Bobby's taste is a little on the expensive side. But you have to admit, his leads always pan out, unlike some of the other sources we've been forced to use."

Well," Clark hesitated as he thought it over. "I guess you're right. Still, I feel like we buy enough food to supply a small country every time we meet with him."

"Believe me, I know," Lois agreed as they started toward the elevator. "But if he really does have a lead on our investigation into...you-know-who," she said, glancing around to ensure none of their coworkers were in ear-shot, "then it's worth the extravagance."

"I agree," Clark conceded. "It would be nice to find something...*anything* to pin this on...you know." He dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Speaking of, I was thinking. Maybe we should clue Bobby into who it is, *exactly*, that we think might be the one behind things."

Clark's eyes widened in surprise. "Are you *sure* that's a good idea, Lois?" His concern for her well-being overtook him as he turned to her. Though he'd never say it aloud, her eyes were heavily shadowed from their late-night research session. "It's one thing to let him know that it's the bombing that we're looking into. But naming Luthor?" he stressed in barely audible whisper. "I'm not sure that's the best idea. If he's *not* the one behind things and he gets word that we're investigating him, he could end our careers. And if he *is* responsible..." He shuddered slightly. "We could be putting our own lives at risk."

"Clark, you don't have to worry so much. Bobby would never let something like that leak. He's a complete professional. I'd trust him with my life. Actually, I *have* trusted him with my life, on several occasions now. He's never let me down."

Clark sighed. "I know. But, I can't help but to be a little nervous and overly cautious here. I guess...maybe some of that stems from the fact that we were up pretty late with our...research on the subject," he said, doing his best not to offend her with how concerned he was.

Lois seemed to sense his unspoken meaning anyway. But instead of looking offended, she gave him a small smile. "I've pulled much later nights and earlier mornings than this before," she proudly reminded him. "In fact, I felt like I hardly slept at all when I was covering the President's reelection bid a couple of years ago."

"I know," Clark conceded, unable to suppress his grin. He pushed the elevator call button with his thumb, then he turned to her. Once again, he couldn't help the thought that he was the luckiest man alive to have Lois in his life to love and worry about. "But...I *do* worry sometimes that one day..." He let his voice trail off, unable to give voice to his fear that, even with his super abilities, that one day he might not be there to protect her from any of the world's evils.

Lois cupped his cheek with her hand and peered into his eyes. "Hey, what it?" she asked, concern furrowing her brow.

Clark sighed. "It's just...I love you Lois. "I guess...I worry too much sometimes, that's all. I'm still getting used to how lucky I am to have found you. If you got hurt or I lost you...I'd never be able to live with that. What we're doing here, going up against Luthor," he said in an intense whisper. He shook his head. "If he really *did* order the hit on the Planet, imagine what he might order against two nosey reporters."

"I know," she admitted softly. "I'm a little nervous about it myself. But we *have* to do whatever we can to make sure he pays for what he did. And, for the record, I love you too. You know that." She kissed him then, and that one simple act reassured Clark and almost made him forget for a moment all of the ways their investigation could blow up in their faces. He groaned as he gave in to her kiss and wished they didn't have to meet Bobby so quickly. "Besides, we've taken down some *extremely* dangerous criminals before," she added with a grin. She toyed with his jacket lapels, brushing imaginary lint off of them and adjusting them until they sat just right. "This will just be the biggest notch on our belts, that's all. Just *think* of all the awards we'll win for our riveting coverage of the story!"

Clark was still unconvinced, but he figured he could concede the point for the time being. "Yeah, we *do* make a pretty good team." He grinned at her.

"Lane and Kent. The hottest team in town," she agreed with a laugh and an explosive grin. Clark recognized the quote as one Perry had used in a marketing campaign for the Planet after they had become permanent partners.

Clark chuckled. "No kidding. We've done a lot of good work together."

"And it all started with what should have been a run-of-the-mill puff piece about the Majestic Theater being demolished," Lois added thoughtfully.

"Who knew it would turn into a botched murder attempt?" Clark mused. "Then we had the Mayor's sex scandals...the bodies that were found in the harbor...the wedding night serial killer..." Clark ticked off on his fingers. "Intergang..."

"Intergang? They're *still* a thorn in our side," Lois grumbled.

"Anyway," Clark said, waving his hand slightly, as if to dismiss the topic at hand. "I wasn't going to say anything until later but...I was thinking. We've been going out nearly ten months now."

"I know," Lois said, slinking an arm around his waist. She pressed her body into his – not enough to raise anyone's eyebrows, of course, but enough to send Clark's pulse skyrocketing.

"I was thinking that, well...we should do something *special* for our first anniversary." He paused to gauge her reaction.

"What'd you have in mind?" Lois asked.

Clark shrugged. "I don't know. Get away somewhere. A tropical island. A cruise. Anywhere Perry can't reach us for a week or two." He grinned when he caught sight of the glint in her eyes. She was *definitely* interested by the idea.

Little do you know, he thought dreamily. *If all goes well, you might just be wearing a new ring when we get back. If you don't mind the fact that I'm an alien...and if you can forgive nearly a year of lies.*

"He *has* been pushing us pretty hard lately. Not that I blame him," she reasoned aloud, turning to him and giving him a soft smile. "But getting away from it all...getting the chance to recharge our batteries a little...it just sounds..." Her voice trailed off dreamily.

"Yes?" he prompted her, giving her a playfully expectant look.

"Heavenly," Lois grinned impishly. "I'm sure Perry can manage to survive without us for a couple of weeks. Even if he thinks he can't," she added with a slight laugh.

"Great!" Outwardly, Clark cheered.

But inwardly, he felt the weight of nervousness settling over his chest, squeezing like a vice. His mind immediately wandered

to the conversation he still had to have with her first. It wouldn't be right to go on a romantic getaway without giving Lois all of the facts first. He needed to be sure that she knew what she was getting herself into. As it was, he hated that he'd kept Superman a secret for as long as he had, and had mentally berated himself many times for what he deemed as his cowardice. But telling Lois – exposing his greatest secret – terrified him beyond words. For the first time in his life, he'd be willingly exposing his super side to another person. Bruce didn't count, in his mind. That discovery had been an accident, and although Clark divulged the extent of his uniqueness, he'd felt trapped and compelled to tell Bruce about his abilities after he'd been caught floating in midair.

With Lois, things would be different. *Much* different.

He still wasn't sure how to even *begin* that conversation with her. He'd tried a thousand times to find the right words when he was alone. Sometimes, he'd test the wording out in the confines of his mind. Sometimes, he'd whisper the words with trembling lips to his reflected image in the mirror at home, or while showering away the evidence of a rescue he'd made, or while laying in bed at night with his brain racing too much to allow him to sleep. None of those attempts had sounded right. And now, nearly ten months after Superman's birth, Clark was still stuck with no idea how to break the news to Lois, and worse, no idea how to explain why it had taken him so long to finally tell her the truth.

He knew only one thing – he was long overdue in having that conversation.

The conversation.

The one that scared Clark witless.

The one that would make his – eventual – proposal to Lois seem like a walk in the park.

The one where he would finally let her in on his greatest secret.

Lois, I'm Superman.

It terrified him, to know that he was on the brink of letting her in on his secret, for several reasons. He was no longer afraid that she'd run off and publish the story of Superman's true identity, even though he knew it would earn her a Pulitzer. He trusted her fully to keep the knowledge of his alter ego safe. And he wasn't afraid she would choose to be with him just for his powers and all he could offer her as Superman. She'd already chosen him for who he really was: Clark Kent, the orphaned son of two humble farmers, reporter for The Daily Planet, her partner and best friend.

But, as he was all too painfully aware, once he told her his secret, there was no coming back from that. There was no way to take that information back and leave her in the dark as to his dual identities. And that could be very dangerous, for the both of them. Already, there had been attempts to discover if Superman had another identity. Clark had been lucky to find ways to throw his pursuers off his trail. But he knew now that there would be those who would stop at nothing to uncover his true identity. With Lois knowing what that was, she would be in danger from people like that. He feared that she might be kidnapped, tortured, or even killed for that knowledge.

Fear.

Fear had ruled him thus far.

He wasn't afraid to let Lois see him in such a vulnerable state. He really did want her to know everything there was to know about him. He didn't care if he looked weak in her eyes. He didn't care if he broke down into shuddering sobs in front of her while he told her his tale.

Clark looked into Lois' trusting, expectant eyes. As always, he was humbled to see the well of love shining there for him. A wave of guilt washed over him and he did his best to squash it down. It wasn't enough. He still felt the heat of a guilty blush blossoming in his neck. He cleared his throat and rubbed his neck, hoping Lois hadn't noticed. But the guilt remained in his mind, stirring up his fear anew.

He could only hope Lois would forgive him. But he certainly wouldn't blame her if she couldn't. He'd spent almost a full year lying to her face, making her believe that Clark Kent and Superman were two separate people. And now he was ready to drop the bombshell on her that Superman wasn't even real – just a shadow puppet he threw in front of the masses to protect his identity. Would she resent him? After all, resentment would be a natural response to such an utter betrayal. He wanted to believe that Lois would be able to understand why he'd done what he'd done. But his fear wouldn't allow him to convince himself that Lois would be above resenting him.

Abandonment.

Isolation.

Those were what scared him the most.

Any of his other fears paled in comparison to the absolute terror that seized his body whenever he thought of how she might react when he finally got up the nerve to tell her. Specifically, he feared that she might not take the news well – that by him lying for so long and making her believe Clark and Superman were two separate people, she might resent him. More than that, what if she hated him for his deception? What if she threw him out of her life and locked the door behind him?

He knew he wasn't strong enough to survive the devastation that would bring to his heart.

On the other hand, he could scarcely wait to tell Lois everything and finally be done with all the deception and outright lies. He was tired of hiding from her. He was tired of making up lame excuses. Mostly, he was tired of making Lois upset when he had to dash out on her – yet again! – usually while they were in the middle of an important conversation. And, even *more* importantly, he knew Lois' patience was wearing thin with him. How she was even still dating him sometimes boggled his mind.

He looked forward to sloughing off the chains that his secret had bound him in.

He sighed. It had taken him months to gather up his courage enough to get to this point – this indication that he had something of the utmost importance to tell Lois. He supposed he could wait a little longer, until they both had enough time to get everything out into the open, and for Lois to have enough time to process everything he had to tell her.

Lois gazed into his eyes, waiting for him to speak it seemed, and Clark had to quickly shove his inner turmoil aside. He closed his eyes for half a second to center himself.

Take a leap of faith, he heard his father's baritone voice whisper in his mind.

Clark made the instant decision to take it as a sign.

He gave Lois a small smile and a nod. "Maybe we can start researching ideas this weekend," he said casually. "Take a look around and see what we might want to do."

"Why not tonight?" Lois asked with a sparkle in her eyes.

Clark shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Lois nodded and looked at him in concern.

"What?" she asked, her brow scrunched in tense worry.

"Well...that's the *other* thing," he hedged cautiously. As he said the words, he could almost feel himself taking a literal plunge into a deep, unescapable ocean.

"There's *another* thing?" Lois repeated in confusion.

"Yeah," Clark said, his voice trembling as he unsuccessfully tried to hide the reemergence of his fear. "There's something we need to talk about first. Something...something really important."

There was a soft *ding!* that announced the elevator's arrival. The doors slid open, letting Jake, Wally, and Jill out into the newsroom. The three of them were locked in a spirited debate and hardly paid Lois and Clark any mind. When they were passed, Lois stepped into the car, followed by Clark. Clark hit the button for the lobby.

"Clark? This 'something' that you mentioned? Is it...a good

something? Or a bad something? Because you're sweating and making me nervous," Lois asked as the doors closed again. She pressed the button for the lobby.

"It's...it depends," he answered cagily. "I'm not entirely sure how you're going to react when we have that discussion."

"Well, we can always find out right now. What is it?" she asked gently, touching a hand to his shoulder.

He shook his head. "Trust me, Lois, this is the worst possible time and place for me to tell you what I need to tell you. I was hoping that we could talk about it this weekend, when we're both off."

"Well," she replied, thinking it over and scrutinizing his features. "Maybe. Whatever this is...it's not going to be a quick chat, is it?"

"No," Clark said with certainty.

"Hmm. Well...we're supposed to have an early dinner with my mom and Lucy on Saturday," Lois reminded him. "But... maybe after that?"

Clark snapped his fingers with sudden remembrance. "That's right! I *completely* forgot. And I'm filling in for Eric on Sunday." He sighed. "We'll figure something out," he said, more to reassure himself than Lois.

"Are you sure?" Lois asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah, it's fine," Clark said, though he was torn between being upset and euphoric that it would be a while still before they needed to have that conversation.

"Well, okay. If you say so," Lois answered, but she sounded far from convinced.

"Really, it's fine, Lois," he assured her. "It can wait. Believe me. It can wait."

I hope, his mind whispered.

The elevator's doors opened again, letting them out in the lobby. They made their way to the ATM, and Clark swiftly used the machine to take out some cash. He stuffed it into his wallet, then they were out the door. As they waited on the sidewalk, trying to hail a cab, Cat Grant happened by, on her way into the office.

"Lois. Working the corner, I see?" she teased as she caught sight of them and angled in closer.

"You would know more about that than I would," Lois tossed back. "What are you doing here? I thought you had alleys to prow around today."

"Dates, Lois. Dates," Cat replied, casually flipping a stray piece of hair out of her face. She eyed Clark up and down, then pulled a compact out from her purse. She swiftly checked her appearance and settled on reapplying her lipstick. "You know, I don't think I could be like the two of you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lois asked, bristling.

"You know. Being so...boring. I can't imagine what it's like to not go out and be the life of the party. To *not* be where the action is..." She shrugged and gave Clark a lingering look. "I guess it's not for everyone. Still, Clark, I'd hoped with your...previous experience as Bruce Wayne's roommate...well, I thought you'd be a lot more like me."

Clark shook his head and put an arm around Lois' shoulders – both in a "Sorry, I'm taken" manner and to prevent Lois from clawing out her rival's eyes. Lois crossed her arms over her chest.

"The life of the party?" Lois scoffed defiantly. "I supposed that's one way to put it. Most people would just call it pole dancing though."

Clark had to bite back a chuckle. As much as he enjoyed seeing Lois' feisty side, he wasn't sure he should do anything that might encourage the constant verbal warfare between the two women.

Cat growled at her. "Jealous, Lois?"

Lois snorted. "Hardly."

Clark shook his head slightly and mentally rolled his eyes. He swallowed down a retort, unwilling to add to the banter between

Cat and Lois. Although, he had to wonder how much of their exchanges were genuine dislike for one another and how much of it was a bizarre game between them that he neither understood nor really *wanted* to understand. It certainly *felt* like a game with Cat, he mused. The woman seemed to get a perverse sense of pleasure out of needling Lois. He knew Cat wasn't making her remarks in a serious manner, though perhaps, on some deeply buried level she might still be holding out hope that he and Lois would break up. It felt like it was more of a force of habit for Cat to make such comments than anything else. It made him feel a certain amount of pity for Cat, mixed in with a healthy dose of annoyance. He hated seeing Lois get upset. And, although Lois would rarely admit it, there *were* times when Cat's comments stung her deeply.

"You just keep telling yourself that," Cat said, squaring her shoulders and adjusting the thin jacket draped over her shoulders. She gave a cursory glance down the busy sidewalk and gave Lois a mischievous, but satisfied grin. "So where are the two of you off to? Dog show? Perry was pretty livid with the two of you last week."

"That was *last week*," Clark quietly stressed, intervening before the conversation could end with Cat being taken away in an ambulance. He had no doubt that, if push came to shove, Lois would easily overpower her rival in a fight.

"And he got over it when we pulled in that bank fraud scandal," Lois shot back. "And no. Not that it concerns you in the *least*, but it just so happens that we're looking into something *big*."

"Ooh, goody!" Cat gleefully mocked. "I can't *wait* to read *all* about it in between the classified and the retractions! Maybe you'll even get lucky enough to have it printed by the obituaries!"

"Careful or it might you *your* obit," Lois sneered.

Cat said, ignored Lois's barb and turned to Clark. "Hmmm. On second thought, it doesn't happen to involve your friend, Bruce Wayne, does it?"

"No," Clark replied immediately in a guarded tone.

"Pity. I'd *love* to meet up with him sometime. Talk to him... one on one," she said in a sultry way. "You really *should* introduce me, next time he's in town."

"Sorry, Cat. But that won't be happening," Clark said, shaking his head again.

"I meant for an *interview*," Cat argued. "You don't have to be so...*protective* of him, you know."

"Cat, one thing I can assure you of – I will *always* be protective of Bruce," Clark said, his tone brooking no argument.

At that moment, a cabbie finally noticed Lois' efforts to flag him down. The car screeched to a halt in front of them. Clark reached for the door and held it open for Lois.

"Sorry, Cat," Lois smirked victoriously. "Duty calls. Come on, Clark, let's go track down some *real* news."

Clark dutifully followed Lois as she wound a path through the crowded restaurant. He couldn't help but to note the half empty glass of soda on the table in front of Bobby as the man eagerly waved them over. He was sitting in the furthest corner of The Crow's Nest, likely in an effort to remain inconspicuous. An effect he had now shattered by calling out to him, Clark mused.

Apparently, he'd been keeping himself busy while he waited for them. Half the loaf of bread on the table had been demolished and he had a plate of a dozen oysters before him – only two of which hadn't yet been consumed. At least he stopped eating long enough to greet them, Clark conceded with a mental grin. He had to chuckle to himself. It wasn't so long ago that the idea would have made Clark shake his head and wonder about Bobby's manners. Now, however, he was so used to Bobby's quirks that they no longer bothered him. Besides, Bobby's leads *always* panned out. Clark could easily overlook what he'd been brought up to view as bad manners.

He and Lois finished making their way across the dining room to where Bobby was waiting for them. When they reached the table, Clark pulled out Lois' chair for her. Only once she was seated and comfortable did he take his own seat. Bobby watched, grinning.

"Nice to see that chivalry isn't completely dead," he commented as he took another piece of bread. "So, how are you two lovebirds? Clark, did you plan your trip yet?"

Ten months ago, it would have surprised Clark that Bobby knew about his plans to take Lois on a trip out of town. But not anymore. Now he just took it as a given that Bobby seemed to know everything about everyone. He made a mental note to use a travel agent in Gotham if Lois took the news that he was Superman well and still wanted to go away with him. He certainly planned on using his friend, Max the jeweler, to design a ring if and when the time came to ask Lois to marry him. He was the only one Clark trusted with such an important task. And it didn't hurt that Max was located in Gotham — *hopefully* outside Bobby's sphere of knowledge.

"Ah, no, not yet," Clark said. "But, can we, uh, just stick to why we're here? Lois and I still have a lot to figure out before we can plan any vacations."

"Sure, sure," Bobby said dismissively, as he sucked down one of the last two oysters.

"So, what do you have for us?" Lois asked as the waitress came by to fill everyone's water glasses.

"Can I take your order? Or do you need another few minutes?" the waitress asked.

"Oh, uh...Lois?" Clark asked. "Do you know what you want?"

"Just the fried shrimp platter with fries. And a cream soda, please," Lois said, almost robotically giving one of her usual orders to the waitress.

"Same thing, but a Coke with no ice," Clark replied.

"Any soup or salad today?"

"No, thanks," they responded in unison.

"And for me," Bobby said to the waitress, "I'll take the surf and turf. Medium rare on the steak. Grilled shrimp, not the fried. Caesar salad. A side of fries, heavy on the salt. Some more bread for the table. And a refill on my drink, please."

"You got it," the waitress said, jotting it all down before walking away.

"Gee, Bobby, cutting back?" Lois teased.

"This place gives me heartburn," he replied with a shrug. "Good food, but I half turn into a dragon from it." He pounded a fist against his chest in emphasis.

"The Planet?" Clark prompted after the moment of silence that followed.

"Right, right," Bobby said, as if suddenly remembering why they were all together. "Thanks, Sweetheart," he told the waitress as she returned with their drinks. He turned back to Lois and Clark. "You have to understand. I don't exactly have anything concrete."

Lois frowned. "Then why are we feeding you lunch?" she wondered.

"Because I'm the best. And because I have a lead for you, that *might* be able to get you something concrete."

"We're listening," Clark said amicably.

"Okay, so apparently, there's this kid, who supposedly has a video tape you really ought to get your hands on."

"A video?" Lois asked, sounding a little miffed that Bobby didn't actually have the tape with him.

Bobby nodded, polishing off his last oyster. He set the plate aside and took a long sip of his drink. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "From what I gather, the tape shows your boy Bermuda meeting with a certain billionaire's Mr. Belvedere."

"Nigel," Clark replied contemptuously.

"Again, *supposedly*," Bobby pointed out with a shrug.

Silently, the waitress reappeared with bread and Bobby's salad. She collected Bobby's empty plates, then promised their meals would be out soon.

"Gotta love how fast this place serves food, am I right?"

Bobby asked, watching the woman walk away again.

"The video," Clark reminded him. "How do we get it?"

"You need to track this kid down," Bobby replied, digging into his salad. "But it might not be easy."

"Where do we find him?" Lois asked.

"That's the thing. From what I understand, the kid's homeless, but he doesn't stay at the shelters. My source thinks the kid squats down by the old railroad yard in Hobbs Bay. Makes sense, if you think about it. Lots of drifters wind up down there."

Clark's heart clenched in his chest at the word 'homeless.' He didn't even know the kid's name, and yet, he instantly felt a certain kinship with him. His heart broke to know that this kid was out there alone, living on the streets. The thought instantly brought back a thousand unpleasant memories of his lonely years, before he'd lucked out and met Bruce. The need to help flared into his heart and mind in the same moment. Even if he couldn't do it as Clark, he would make certain that he did as Superman.

"Any idea which one is his?" Clark asked.

"Not a clue," Bobby responded around a crouton. He swallowed. "Sorry."

"What about the soup kitchens?" Clark pressed. "Any idea if he frequents them?"

"I'm not sure. But your best bet would be the one on Charleston. It's the closest one to the tracks."

"Right," Clark nodded thoughtfully.

"Any idea how this kid got a hold of this tape?" Lois asked, steering the conversation back to their investigation.

Beneath the table, she reached over to Clark and squeezed his hand in silent reassurance that she knew where his mind was. Clark's aching heart flooded with gratitude for that simple act of mindfulness. He gently squeezed her hand in return in a mute gesture of thanks, letting her know that he understood her wordless reassurance.

"Apparently, he took the video himself," Bobby responded, gulping his drink.

"A homeless kid has access to a video camera?" Lois asked, eyebrow arched.

Bobby shrugged. "My source says the kid finds or steals items, then resells them to others, just to scrape by."

Clark closed his eyes and looked away for half a second, his heart hurting. He'd been lucky during his own homelessness. He'd never needed to resort to doing anything immoral just to survive. It killed him inside to know that this kid needed to resort to acts of crime just to get from day to day.

"Do you have a name for this kid?" he inquired in an almost whisper-like voice.

"Jack," Bobby said. "From what I gather, his name is Jack."

After lunch had been eaten and paid for, Bobby went on his way, with promises to contact Lois and Clark if he came across any other potential leads for them.

"Lois? I've been thinking," Clark said, a determined look settling over his features as they stood outside of The Crow's Nest. "It sounds like this kid is in big trouble. I've been in his shoes. Hungry. Homeless. Living in a rundown, moldering shack, alone, with little to no hope of ever getting out of that situation, regardless of how much I wanted to better myself. Even if all I can get are boxes of cereal, I need to do something to help this kid out."

She nodded solemnly. By some unspoken cue, they both began to walk again. "Sometimes, I forget, you know," she said softly with a gentle sigh. "I forget how dire your circumstances were

before you met Bruce. It just seems so...so foreign a concept, that the smartest, kindest person I know could have ever have been without reliable meals and a roof over his head. Looking at you... looking at all the success you've had in your life since those days...it's just hard to imagine you ever having suffered so badly. And maybe...maybe part of me *wants* to forget, in a way, because it hurts too much to think of you being alone and living on the streets. I don't mean that to sound snobby, but..." she sighed again. "I just wish I could do something, to erase the pain of those years for you."

"And I love you for that," Clark replied in a soft voice, giving her a gentle smile. "But, as odd as it sounds, I *can't* forget the past. Not from any noble standpoint of not forgetting my roots. But because I *literally* can't forget those days of darkness. I've never been so lost or alone or scared. I'm not entirely sure that I *want* to forget either. For better or worse, those years helped to shape who I am. They led me to Gotham and to Bruce. And, in turn, they led me to Metropolis, and you. For that, at least, I can be grateful. And yeah, it's made me a lot more aware of how lucky I am to have the things that I do. A lot of people aren't so lucky as to have even the basic necessities of life. If there's *any* chance I can help Jack, I want to do it. Even if it's just providing him with a few meals that he can count on."

"I love that about you, you know," Lois said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze as they crossed the street. "You've got the best heart of anyone I've ever known. I feel like...like even Superman pales in comparison."

"Why's that?" Clark asked, amused now.

"Well," Lois shrugged, "you're just this average guy, you know? You don't have this whole host of incredible powers at your disposal. But look how willing you are to help someone you've never even met."

"Thank you," Clark replied, deeply touched.

But at the same time, his heart was troubled. Would Lois think less of him, once she knew that he did, indeed, have a whole host of powers at his beck and call? It made him fear that conversation now more than ever. He shoved the thought aside and forced his mind back to the topic at hand.

"Anyway, it might be for the best if I go to try and find Jack, alone. I can meet back up with you at the Planet," he continued after a moment.

Lois looked at him like he'd just grown a second head. "No way. I'm going with you," she said defiantly.

"Hobbs Bay is a rough area," Clark swiftly backpedaled, his brow scrunched in concern.

"So?" Lois' hands flew to her hips and her stance dared him to argue with her.

"So...it might attract less attention if I go looking for him alone." His argument was flimsy at best, and he knew it.

"Nice try, Kent," Lois scoffed indignantly. "I'll hail a taxi for us." She went to raise a hand to flag down one of the bright yellow cabs on the street.

"No, wait," Clark replied, his mind whirring.

"What?"

Clark felt his body tense up as he gave in to Lois' demand to be a part of finding Jack. He debated with himself for a moment, wondering if he should tell her that homeless kids like Jack might scare easily, and that he had a better chance of gaining Jack's trust alone, rather than if Lois were with him. After a second of mulling it over, he decided it wasn't worth arguing over. Lois wouldn't be swayed from her determination to go with him. In the end, he would probably just wind up hurting her feelings and wasting valuable time if he said anything.

"We have a stop to make first. It's important," he settled on in an instant decision.

"Clark, we're *this close* to nailing the Planet bombing on Lex. What could *possibly* be more important than getting that tape?"

Lois demanded.

"Food," Clark replied.

"Uh, Clark? We just ate. Did you forget already?" she teased, though she still seemed mildly annoyed.

He shook his head, not feeling amused. "Not for *us*. For Jack. Come on. There's a grocery store about two and a half blocks from here." He started to walk.

"Clark? I'm not sure Perry will approve of the charges..."

"Forget Perry then. I'll pay for it myself," Clark said, not slowing his stride.

Forty-five minutes later, Lois and Clark exited the supermarket. Clark was silent as they left the brightly lit store behind and went back out into the street. A few large clouds drifted by, obscuring the sun and darkening the world below. Clark felt himself withdraw a little into himself. All the talk of Jack and of life on the streets had dredged up some terrible memories for him that he couldn't quite shake. He remembered, in perfect detail, the agony of going for days on end with nothing to eat. He remembered the grimy feeling of going for weeks, sometimes, without a chance to wash the travel dirt from his skin and clothing. Most of all, he remembered the oppressive silence that can only come from being completely on one's own, without a friend or even a passerby to offer a kind word and to lift some of the loneliness.

Sub-human.

That's how he'd felt.

When he'd be on his own, sticking to wooded areas to avoid detection, it was like he'd ceased to exist in the world. And when he'd been in cities, even in Gotham, he'd gone from ceasing to exist to becoming invisible. He hadn't needed to worry about people recognizing him as a runaway orphan. Most people simply choose to ignore his presence – some of them seeming to look right through him, not even seeing the beaten down young man before their eyes.

In a lot of ways, Clark mused darkly, being ignored like that had been worse than if he'd been discovered as an alien freak with a host of terrifying powers.

But Bruce had changed all that. He'd *seen* Clark. Maybe he hadn't recognized Clark as a homeless youth in the beginning – after all, by then, Clark had access to an ill-kept shower at the shelter he'd been living in and a job that allowed him to afford clothing that wasn't threadbare and falling apart at the seams – but as a billionaire with a thousand more important things to do with his day, Bruce had still chosen to befriend Clark. And when Bruce had learned of Clark's dire plight, he hadn't turned his back. He hadn't been horrified to learn that his young friend was homeless and struggling. He'd been compassionate and chosen to help.

That, more than anything, had made Clark feel like maybe he *wasn't* sub-human after all.

Now, Clark had the chance to be a beacon of hope for a young man who wasn't so different from the homeless, hungry, drifting youth he himself had once been. Now, Clark had the opportunity to help Jack, maybe not in *quite* the same way that Bruce had once done for him, but in a way that might truly make a difference for Jack.

If he lets me, Clark reminded himself. *It's possible he may not let me get close enough to talk to him. Either way, the groceries stay. That kid needs food, maybe even more than he needs anything else. But I won't know until I find him.*

"Where do you want to start?" Lois asked, her arms laden with bags from the supermarket.

"Huh? Oh," Clark said, startled out of his inner thoughts.

"Um...let me think. There's too many of those tumble-down homes to check one by one," he continued thoughtfully, his arms also full. "Let's start at the soup kitchen, see if anyone can point us in the right direction."

“Maybe we should have waited to buy so much, until we knew we can find this kid,” Lois commented as she waited to flag down a taxi.

“If I’m right, and we do find Jack, he’ll need this food as soon as humanly possible,” Clark replied.

“I *hope* we find him,” Lois said, spying a taxi.

To Clark’s amazement, even with her arms full of grocery bags, she still managed to put her fingers to her lips and whistle loudly enough to be heard over the bustling Metropolis crowds. Seconds later, the cabbie pulled over to let them in. Still juggling her bags, Lois opened the door and got in.

“Where to?”

“The soup kitchen on Charleston,” Lois said, sliding over to let Clark into the car.

“You got it, lady.”

Clark got in and closed the door, putting his bags down on the seat between Lois and himself. As soon as the door was shut, the cabbie took off through the streets, setting a breakneck pace that soon got them to their destination.

“Would you mind waiting for a minute?” Clark asked the driver after the man put the car into park. “I just need to pop in for a quick second.”

The driver shrugged indifferently. “Fine by me, but the meter’s still running.”

“That’s fine. It shouldn’t take me long,” Clark responded.

“Lois? Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

For once, Lois didn’t argue. Clark nodded absently, then got out and went into the building. He never got used to it, he mused as he stepped inside. He’d been in plenty of shelters and soup kitchens since his days of living on the streets. Sometimes, he’d brought in supplies or helped to serve the food, once he was living comfortably in Wayne Manor. Other times, he’d needed to speak to a source – like Bobby – or a witness or victim, after he’d become gainfully employed with the Planet. But, no matter how many times he stepped foot into one of those places, it never got easier. He’d never been able to stop the flood of memories from coming, or fend off the accompanying feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. He didn’t think he ever would. His excellent memory aside, he didn’t think anyone could ever truly forget such a traumatic time in their life.

He swiftly surveyed the room as he entered, but no one within could be mistaken for a teenage boy, so he moved on, making his way to the long serving station. A portly black man named Randy waved at Clark from across the room, beckoning him in.

“Hey, I know you!” the man exclaimed brightly when Clark came closer.

“You...do?” Clark asked, surprised.

“Sure do! You’re that reporter, for the Daily Planet. Clark Kent, right? I’ve seen the posters around town.”

Clark chuckled quietly to himself. It made sense that he’d be occasionally recognized. He nodded.

“Yes, sir,” he confirmed. “That’s me.”

“I thought so!” Randy said, extending a hand. “Champion of the little guy, that’s what my wife and I call you. You and that partner of yours, Lois Lane.”

“Well,” Clark said, fighting down an embarrassed blush and succeeding, “we do our best to help.”

“You two are two of the few who do,” Randy said gravely.

“And Superman, of course. I’ll tell you, that Superman Foundation of his has been a huge blessing for a lot of families in this community. I just wish we could do more for them.”

“More?” Clark asked, his curiosity instantly piqued by the tone of Randy’s voice. His eyebrow arched as he tried not to look like he had *too* much of a personal interest in the Foundation and any possible shortcomings.

“Well,” Randy hesitated, scratching at the sparse, closely cropped beard on his chin. “We’re grateful for everything that

comes our way, of course. But lately, we’ve been getting in more and more people looking for a hot meal. It’s hard to keep up. We try not to turn anyone away, but sometimes, we barely get everyone fed.” He dipped his head in embarrassment, but it shone in his voice anyway.

Clark’s heart quietly broke at the crack in the man’s voice.

“I’ll let Superman know as soon as I see him next,” he promised. “He’s a friend of mine, and I’m sure he’d like to see the families here fed just as much as you do.”

I’ll fly over to the Foundation tonight, he vowed to himself.

“Thank you, Mr. Kent,” Randy, touching a hand to his heart. “It’s good to have someone like you on our side. Someone who gets things done for the little guys. I’ve been reading your work ever since your first article with The Daily Planet. You and Miss Lane...you’re something else.” He blushed and shook his head, as if to clear away his emotions. He rubbed his chin once more for good measure, then chuckled lightly. “But something tells me you aren’t here for chitchat and a meal. So, what can I do for you today?”

“You’re right,” Clark said with a slight smile. “I’m not. I was actually wondering if you might be able to help me. I’m looking for someone. A kid. His name’s Jack. I was told he might be a frequent visitor here. I don’t have a physical description, I’m sorry.” He shrugged helplessly. “A source of mine said Jack may be able to help me in an important investigation Lois and I are doing. I was hoping you might have an idea of who he is and how I might be able to find him.”

“Yeah, I think I know who you’re talking about,” Randy said thoughtfully, one hand on his hip, the other holding a spatula. “He comes in here every other day or so. Brings another, younger boy with him. His brother, if the striking resemblance doesn’t lie.”

“Any idea where they might be living?” Clark asked hopefully.

“I’m not totally sure. Down by the tracks I know. I gave them a ride back once, when it was pouring out. They had me drop them off on the corner of LaSalle and Stanley. I remember the building had a red roof and door. I’m not sure if that’s where they’re living or not, but it’s the closest I know of. Sorry if that doesn’t help much.”

“It actually helps a lot,” Clark replied with a smile. “If nothing else, it gives me a good starting place. Thank you, Randy.”

“Right. Good luck with that. I mean it.”

“Thanks.”

Ten minutes and a white-knuckle ride later, the cab came to a stop. Clark glanced uneasily out of the dirty windows. He wasn’t afraid of the rough neighborhood. He knew he could hold his own – even without the use of his powers – if it came to it. And he knew that it might. Shifty looking teens and adults walked down the streets. A few of them cast scowls at the cab as they went on their way. But Clark was worried about Lois. Logically, he knew she’d covered more than her fair share of stories that had led her to the bowels of Hobbs Bay. He knew also that she had a brown belt in self defense and that she was more than capable of flattening anyone who might even *think* of mugging them.

But he never ceased to worry for her safety anyway. It was ingrained in him. He loved her too much to even entertain the notion of putting her in a potentially dangerous situation. But he also knew that Lois was stubborn and that she’d never allow Clark’s apprehension to dictate what she did or did not do. She was too fiercely independent, which, as much as it could unnerve Clark sometimes, also endeared her all the more to him. She was his equal and his better in every way.

“This looks like the place Randy described to me,” Clark said as the taxi pulled up alongside the dilapidated building on the corner of LaSalle and Stanley.

He looked at the worn brick and the fading paint and his heart

felt a stab of pity for the people who lived in the area. It reeked of poverty and broken dreams – as if the majority of the populace had simply given up on life. Broken glass littered the cracked sidewalks. Trash bins were overflowing onto the ground. A few unkempt youths in tattered clothing skulked around smoking cigarettes when they otherwise should have been in school.

He closed his eyes and sighed. He knew how hopeless these people probably felt. He'd been in their worn-out shoes before. He only wished he could do something to help them all.

Start small, his father's voice whispered at him. Change one life at a time.

That's not good enough, he thought back. There has to be more I can do – with or without Superman.

You've already done so much. This time, he heard his mother's gentle voice. Your investigations have already helped to improve the area. Crime rates have dropped nearly fifteen percent in Hobbs Bay since you and Lois were paired up at the paper. And since the Superman Foundation was started, people here have more access to food at the soup kitchens and cleaner, safer shelters to turn to in their need.

"You ready for this?" he asked Lois, in an effort to make his internal dialogue stop.

"More than ready," she replied, looking eager as ever.

"Thanks for the ride," Clark told the cabbie as he opened his wallet and fished out a few bills – more than enough to cover the fare and give the man a generous tip to boot.

"No, thank *you*," the driver said, eyeing the cash as Clark handed it to him.

"Let's do this," Clark said to Lois.

They got out of their respective doors, each of them grabbing bags of groceries. They shut the doors once they were out and immediately the cab pulled away from the curb, leaving them behind. Clark turned to face the building and sent up a silent prayer that they would actually find Jack.

"After you," Lois encouraged after half a minute.

"Stay close. People in situations like this can sometimes be unpredictable. I doubt he'll try to hurt us or anything but...you never know," Clark cautioned.

Lois nodded. "I know. This isn't my first time in Hobbs Bay you know," she teased him lightly.

He felt his cheeks redden. "Sorry," he apologized. "I'm still working on the whole 'not being so overly protective' thing, I guess. But...I can't help worrying about you."

"I know," she said, reaching up on the tips of her toes to kiss his cheek lightly. "And, actually, it's kind of nice to know you care so much. In a lot of ways, I'm still getting used to having someone worry about me. I've been on my own for so long, I guess part of me forgot what it's like, to have someone be so concerned for my safety."

"I'm sure your sister and your parents care," Clark gently countered with a smile.

"They don't count. They're family," Lois said with an amused shake of her head. "I *meant* having a best friend and partner and boyfriend who cares about me."

"Ah," Clark said with exaggeration, as if just now seeing what she meant. "An important distinction."

Lois shook her head again at his antics. "Come on," she said, hefting the bags in her hand. "Let's check the place out. I may be able to handle myself, but I'm not dumb enough to be blind to the fact that this food might make us targets."

Clark nodded. "Stay behind me, just in case."

Mutely, Lois nodded and followed behind as Clark cautiously approached the door. He heard Lois struggling for a moment with her bags of groceries and once again he felt guilty. If Lois knew about his secret, he wouldn't have to hide his strength from her anymore. He could easily scoop up all of the packages in her laden arms and carry them himself, instead of pretending to be so much

weaker than he was. He could do so much more for Lois, if he didn't have to hide who he really was. Resolve grew in his heart, making him more determined than ever to sit down with her and finally reveal everything he'd kept secret from her.

On the next street over, he heard the screech of airbrakes as a bus stopped to pick up new riders. An old motorcycle backfired as it started up. A dozen or so dogs in the area yipped and howled mournfully, as if they too, shared the misery than was their masters' lives.

Reaching the door at last, Clark looked around for a moment, sizing up the situation. Then he bent down and put his bags of groceries down on the concrete ground. Straightening again, he knocked gently on the door, then listened. Even without his super hearing, he could hear movement within. But the door did not open. He slipped his glasses down his nose just enough to x-ray through the door. A rusty chain held the door firmly locked. Beyond that, he could see a boy approach, a scuffed and nicked wooden baseball bat gripped in his hands, ready to deal a blow to the intruder if the need arose.

"Jack?" Clark called out, pushing his glasses back into place.

"Go away!" came the sneering, angry retort.

"Please, Jack, we just want to talk to you," Clark said in a soothing tone, trying to gain the kid's trust. "I promise. We just want to talk," he stressed.

"Maybe I'm not in the mood for talking," Jack said in a flinty tone.

"It's important," Clark said gently.

"Important for *you* maybe. I guarantee you that, whatever it is, it's of no concern to me."

"You're right," Clark agreed. "It *is* important to us that we talk to you. But, I promise, we can make it worth your while."

The doorknob turned and the door opened just enough to reveal half of a teenage boy's face. Clark could see that the rusty chain lock was still firmly in place, lest he and Lois try to barge in. Silently, the boy looked Clark up and down.

"Who are you? What do you want?" the boy demanded, rolling his eyes. He looked past Clark and eyed Lois. "And who's the chick?"

"My name is Clark Kent. And this is my partner, Lois Lane," Clark introduced them.

Jack moved to slam the door shut again. Clark saw his intention and with only slightly faster than human reflexes, he grabbed the edge of the door and held it firm, preventing it from being shut again. The kid scowled angrily and tried to pry Clark's hand from the door, but Clark's grip was steel and he didn't budge.

"Please, just hear us out," Clark asked almost pleadingly.

The boy's face hardened into a frown as he cut Clark off. "You cops?" he asked brusquely.

Clark shook his head. "Reporters. From The Daily Planet." He reached into his pocket, extracted his wallet, and showed Jack his press pass, all at a distance so the teen wouldn't get any ideas about trying to rob him.

"Reporters?" Jack scoffed. "Why would a couple of *reporters* want to talk to me?"

"Word on the street is, you have a videotape that a lot of people want to get their hands on," Clark said, gambling with cutting straight to the chase.

"And *why* would I bother helping you?" Jack asked flatly. His eyes flickered nervously between Lois and Clark, despite his attempt to keep a hard edge to his appearance.

"We think it might help us prove who ordered the bombing of our newspaper building six months ago," Lois replied gently.

Jack rolled his eyes in annoyance. "That's *your* problem, lady. Not mine."

"We know," Clark said, rushing to cut off any retort Lois might be tempted to make. "But we're willing to help you in return," Clark offered evenly.

“Your help?” Jack asked with a near-sneer. “Look, I don’t need your charity, okay? I’m doing fine on my own.”

“Really now?” Lois muttered under her breath so softly that Clark could only catch it with his super hearing.

“Besides,” Jack went on, “if so many people would be willing to *pay* me for the tape, why would I just hand it over to you, assuming I had it?”

“Because, unlike those other people, we genuinely want to help you,” Clark pressed gently. He bent down and held up his bags for inspection.

“What’s that? A bribe?” Jack asked, but Clark could tell the hard tone was more forced now as interest in the bags took hold.

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “When we heard about your situation, we figured you might be hungry, that’s all.”

“That so?” Jack replied suspiciously, though his eyes didn’t stray from the bags.

Lois nodded. “He’s telling you the truth. As soon as we heard about your situation, Clark couldn’t get into the grocery store fast enough to get you something to eat.”

Jack took a long moment eyeing the bags before him. Then he allowed his gaze to shift back over to Lois, who also held her bags up for Jack to see. Clark could see the indecision written on the teenager’s face. But before he could argue his point further, he heard another voice.

“Jack? Who are you talking to?” The question was followed by a harsh cough.

“Never mind, Denny. Go lay back down, okay?” Jack said softly. “It’s okay.”

“Come on, Jack! All I’ve been doing is laying down! I’m hungry. You said you were gonna bring back some *food*.” The younger boy coughed again.

Jack looked over his shoulder at his younger brother, then back at the food Clark held. With a look of self-loathing, he rolled his eyes. The door shut and Clark heard the scrape of the chain lock being drawn back. Then the door opened again. Jack stepped aside, letting them pass inside.

“Fine,” he told Clark. “Bring in the food, and we can talk.”

“Deal,” Clark said with a nod.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Come in,” the kid said, looking around outside nervously. “Quickly. This ain’t the best neighborhood, you know. And you two look like targets ripe for the picking.”

“We know,” Clark said, sweeping his eyes over the ramshackle conditions Jack and his brother were living in.

As Clark’s sharp eyes took in all the details in one super-fast glance, his heart broke anew. He couldn’t help but to recall the moldering cabin in the woods he’d stumbled upon during his first winter living on his own. He’d holed up in that abandoned little cabin for the entire winter, which had been wild with snow storms. His own little fortress of solitude, as he’d come to think of the place. But even that cabin, half falling apart as it had been, had been a virtual palace compared to what Jack and Denny were living in.

It wasn’t even a proper house. It had probably been an office once, long ago during more prosperous days. There was no kitchen at all. There were no bedrooms. It was just one basic room that seemed to serve as a bedroom, living room, kitchen and dining space. One grimy window in the center of the back wall provided a hazy film of light. Broken Venetian blinds hung down to the window sill, though the slats were open enough to light the small room. The door was dented and the paint on the walls were chipped badly. The chain on the door was rusted over, even though it still appeared to be strong and functional enough for the time being. To Clark’s left, a single door stood, a tiny bathroom beyond. The incessant *drip, drip, drip*, Clark heard gave evidence to the fact that, through some miracle, the two boys had access to running water.

A hot plate stood in a far corner on a table, which Clark knew would allow the boys to make a few simple hot meals if and when they had the means. A blue plastic plate stood nearby, the remains of some kind of unidentifiable dried food on it. *Chili, maybe*, Clark thought to himself. But overall, the room was a tidy enough space – which he found impressive, given how messy he knew boys their ages could be.

“Welcome to our humble abode,” Jack said sarcastically, with a mock bow to match.

Lois and Clark set their bags down on the wobbly wooden table on the far side of the room. Jack immediately got to work inspecting the contents.

“Let’s see what you got,” Jack said as he opened the first bag, pulling out packages of fruits and vegetables. “Huh. Not a bad selection,” Clark heard him murmur to himself a moment later, as he peered into the second and third bags. Then, “Denny, come here. What do you want to eat?”

“I don’t know. A sandwich I guess.”

Jack nodded and got to work fixing a peanut butter sandwich with the bread and jar of peanut butter Clark had provided.

“So, how’d you find me?” he asked as he worked.

“One of our sources told us he’d heard about you,” Lois answered softly. Clark saw she was doing her best not to scare Jack off. “We’re investigating a possible angle on the bombing and he said you might be able to help. Supposedly, you have a tape showing the bomber meeting with Lex Luthor’s manservant.”

Jack took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, as if in heavy thought. Finally, he looked Lois in the eyes. “Yeah, I have the tape.”

Clark heard Lois breathe out a sigh of relief before asking, “Can we have it? Please?”

Jack scoffed. “I didn’t say I’d give it to ya.”

“Please, Jack,” Lois begged. “If we don’t get that tape, Luthor could get away with...”

“I already told ya, that’s *your* problem,” Jack interrupted. “I ain’t about to stick my neck out for two hack reporters who don’t give a rat’s rear end about me and Denny.”

“That’s not fair!” Lois retorted loudly. Clark could see how deeply the accusation had cut her. “You don’t know the first thing about Clark or me! For your information, Clark was going to give you the food anyway. It was his idea...you have no clue what he’s...” she sputtered, clearly at war with herself over what she could say and what she couldn’t.

“Lois, it’s all right,” Clark said, gently touching her shoulder. He looked Jack square in the eyes. “She’s right though. The food’s yours, regardless of if you give us the tape. We just...we wanted to make sure you were *safe*.”

“Yeah, right,” Jack snorted accusingly. “You’re a terrible liar, you know that?”

“It’s the truth,” Clark said sincerely. “As soon as I heard about your living situation, it didn’t matter to me if you gave us the tape or not. I needed to make sure you were okay.”

Jack eyed him uncertainly. “Why? What’s it to you?”

Clark shifted uncomfortably, trying to decide how much of his own life experience he should share with Jack. He’d only just met the young man and his brother and he wanted to help them. And he knew only too intimately how horrible life on the streets could be. He knew the dangers of being robbed and assaulted. He knew what it was like to fear for his life. And while Jack and Denny seemed to have escaped from that immediate danger, Clark was well acquainted with how swiftly things could change. Just because they were barely scraping by today didn’t mean they would be able to do it again tomorrow.

“Because it matters to me,” Clark finally settled on.

“Yeah, right. Well, we’re doing just fine on our own.”

Defiance blazed in the teen’s voice.

“Jack,” Denny whined in a warning tone.

"You hush up," Jack told his brother, though not unkindly. "I can handle this, Denny."

"I'm sure you're doing just fine," Clark said neutrally, gesturing around the room. "A roof over your heads. Running water," he said, nodding toward the bathroom. "Food on the table." He swept his hand in the direction of the groceries he and Lois had brought with them.

"I told you. We can manage," Jack said, but his façade was beginning to crumble slightly.

"I believe you," Clark said, his tone unchanged. "So...you're what? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen in a couple of weeks, yeah," Jack said cautiously.

"Which means you're old enough to get a job," Clark went on. "But without schooling or experience, that might be rough. Especially in this economy. But let's say someone *did* hire you. It'd likely be part time. Which means they don't have to give you many hours *or* health benefits. Still, you'd be making *some* money, after taxes and everything. You *might* be able to keep putting food on the table, maybe afford some new clothing once in a while, things like that. Assuming you only had *one* job to go to."

"Get to the point," Jack said roughly, but his eyes betrayed him. He cast his glance down to the soiled and ripped carpet on the floor and wouldn't meet Clark's gaze.

"The point is, there are programs out there that can help you," Lois put in. "We can help you get set up with everything you could ever need."

"Oh sure," Jack said sarcastically. "Sounds great. Denny gets taken into some foster home God-knows-where and I stay out on the streets, simply because of my age. No thanks. Denny's better off with me."

Clark shook his head. "That's not quite what I meant. The Superman Foundation just opened a new halfway house in midtown. You and Denny could stay together in a much safer environment. You'd have access to regular, nutritional meals, hot showers, real beds – everything you could need." "Even *if* I wanted to, you talk like it's easy. Just pop on over to some office somewhere and *poof!* Instant ticket to easy street," Jack said, snapping his fingers. "That's not how the real world works, Pops. You think I haven't heard of the place? *Everyone* around here's heard of it. *And* the massive waiting list to get in."

"We can help with that," Clark replied, unwavering in his determination to help Jack.

"And I've got a bridge to sell you," Jack sneered.

"No, really," Clark insisted. "I can make sure there would be room for you and Denny."

"How? What are you, Superman or something? Because, last I heard, he was the only one with enough clout to influence the waiting list."

"No," Clark said carefully, shaking his head. "But I *do* happen to know Superman, personally. I can talk to him about you and ask him to make sure you both get in. Come on, Jack, think about it. What's so great about having to constantly look over your shoulder and going to bed hungry half the time? Isn't it worth giving it a chance? As it stands...your brother's cough? He needs to be seen by a doctor."

"Yeah, 'cause we really have the money for that."

"I can help you with that too. So can the Foundation, if you give either of us the chance to."

"What's the catch?" Jack asked warily, and Clark heard the boy's stomach growl.

"No catch. The halfway house will help you get on your feet."

"No catch, seriously?"

"No catch, I swear," Clark promised. "Give it a chance," Clark urged. "If nothing else, let me help you get your brother to the doctor to get that cough looked at. Please. Isn't Denny's health worth taking a chance and trusting me?"

Jack didn't answer right away. Instead, he turned looked at his

younger brother. Denny met Jack's gaze and an entire conversation passed between them, without a word being spoken. Clark said nothing, choosing instead to simply watch and wait. He'd learned a long time ago, when Bruce had offered up a room in Wayne Manor to him, that sometimes it was best not to press an issue and, instead, let a person come to a decision at their own pace.

Finally, after a good five minutes of silence, Jack suddenly turned to him, his expression quizzical now, instead of openly hostile.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, his voice uncertain.

"Because you remind me of someone close to me, who was once in the same situation."

"Pfft!" Jack laughed a sound of disbelief. "Nice try."

"I'm serious," Clark said, his voice firm. "I was younger than you when I lived on the streets." Too late, he realized he'd slipped up.

Jack's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold up a sec. Was it someone close to you, or was it *you* that was homeless?"

Clark closed his eyes and sighed. He'd meant to protect his own story, but now that he'd slipped up, he wouldn't lie to Jack. He'd worked so hard to gain the teen's trust. There was no way he would throw that all away now, when he felt so close to convincing Jack to gamble on the halfway house.

"Me," he admitted sheepishly. "It's a long story but, the point is, I've been where you are. Living on my own. Barely scraping by. Never having enough to eat. Trying to survive in a world that viewed me as less than human and not worth helping or even being concerned about. It's not a life I'd wish on anyone."

"You look like you turned out well enough," Jack said with a shrug.

Clark shook his head. "I got lucky. I met someone who was able to help me get back on my feet. Without him, I'm not sure I ever would have been able to get out of that awful situation. Maybe I can't do things for you the way he was able to do things for me, but..." He let his voice trail off for a moment. "I just want to give you the chance you need to make a better life for yourself...and your brother."

Jack looked back to Denny again, as if seeking the younger boy's permission or approval. Denny gave him the slightest of nods, but he did not speak. This time, when he turned back to Clark, his features spoke of his new resolve and decision.

"Okay, what the hell? Anywhere has to be better than this dump."

Clark gave a half-smile that was accompanied by a stifled chuckle. "Can't argue that."

"Come on," Jack said, walking away. "I still have to give you that tape."

The bullpen was eerily quiet, just the barest skeleton crew working. The phones were mostly mute, the fax machine was still, and most of the computers were dark. People spoke in muted tones – nearly whispers in some cases. Warren, the janitor, whistled an upbeat tune as he swept up and emptied trash bins. Even Perry was gone for the night. Clark had overheard him telling Yvette that he was talking his wife to the opera that night.

For once, he liked the subdued atmosphere.

He needed the mental break the quiet bullpen would afford him...or, rather, he *hoped* it would afford him. His heart still hurt for Jack and Denny. His memories of living on the streets and in that moldering cabin in the woods still flashed across his mind, lancing him with pain and shame. He wished he could forget, just for a few minutes so his mind didn't seem to weigh so heavily. But that was impossible. He would need to find his solace elsewhere. He would need to find some other well of strength.

He knew exactly where to go for that.

Lois.

He smiled as she came into his view. Her head was down as she looked over a legal pad with notes scrawled on it. But, as if she sensed his presence in the newsroom, she looked up and favored him with a brilliant smile.

“Hey, Lois,” Clark said wearily as he approached her desk, though he already felt a little restored by her smile. “Sorry I took so long. But, I brought food from Rino’s as my penance,” he joked gently.

“And all is forgiven,” Lois decreed with a smile. “Thanks for getting the food.”

“My pleasure,” Clark said, dipping his head in acknowledgement. “I just wish it wasn’t so late.” He nodded to the piles of research on her desk. “Conference room?” he suggested.

“You read my mind.”

“After you,” he encouraged her.

He followed her as she made her way to the conference room. It was dark inside, so she flipped the light switch on, then she pulled out two chairs – one at the head of the table and the other to the immediate right of that one. Clark set the bag down and silently began to unpack their dinner. He was struck, suddenly, with the memory of when he’d first begun working for the Planet and he’d brought Lois authentic Chinese food for their first dinner together. Back then, she’d been resistant to the idea of a partner – let alone a friend.

Now, almost ten months later, they were still partners and had cemented more than just their friendship. They were a true couple, and Clark was ready to propose to her, if he could ever find the time and courage to tell her his secret. And *if* that secret didn’t destroy their relationship.

“What?” Lois asked in concern, studying his face.

“What’s what?” he asked, confused.

“Just now. You had a smile on your face like you were the happiest man alive, then, suddenly, it disappeared and you looked...scared, almost. What’s going on?” Lois softly explained, still scrutinizing his features.

“Nothing,” Clark said dismissively. “I just...I couldn’t help but remember how we shared our first working dinner together in the conference room.”

“The *old* conference room,” Lois corrected with a nod as she closed the door to afford them some privacy, though there was really no need with how few people were around.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed with a wince. “Before Luthor hired Joey Bermuda to bomb the building.”

“Ugh,” Lois said in disgust as she took the container of her food at sat at the head of the table. “I can’t wait to see him go down for that.”

“Speaking of,” Clark said as he sat and opened the Styrofoam container that held his meal, “did you get a chance to review the tape Jack gave us?” He could scarcely wait to know what was on the slightly beat up looking VHS tape.

Lois nodded excitedly. “I did. I don’t know how he got it, but he has a *clear* tape of Nigel and Joey Bermuda meeting. There’s even what might be an exchange of cash. All we can see is Nigel passing Joey an envelope. Joey doesn’t even look in it. Paired with Joey’s recent testimony...I think it’s enough to nail them – all three of them – to the wall.” She was grinning broadly now, her face lit up like the sun. “We did it, Clark. We *finally* have enough to put Lex Luthor away for the rest of his miserable life. I’ve been doing some research and I think Joey Bermuda is right. I think Lex might be behind a *lot* of the crime in the city. He’ll pay for what he’s done, not *just* to the Daily Planet, but to all of Metropolis.”

“That’s great!” he replied, carefully maintaining a low near-whisper. It was hard, keeping his voice down, when he really wanted to shout his excitement from the rooftops.

“I just...part of me still can’t believe it,” Lois went on, her gaze looking far and distant as she became lost in her own

thoughts. “I mean...Lex *Luthor* – a crime boss? I know you’ve always been frank with your misgivings about him. I just never thought...I figured that, yeah, you’ve always had good instincts but that you were probably, well, biased against him. It’s no secret that Bruce and Lex are rivals in the business world.”

“And with me being so close to Bruce, you thought I *wanted*...to see some kind of evil in Luthor?” Clark asked. There was no accusation in his voice and he grinned, to let her know he wasn’t angry with her assumption.

“That’s not quite how I was going to put it,” Lois smirked.

“But, I know how much Bruce means to you, and how willing you are to defend him and take his side on things. I figured that your animosity toward Lex was just a part of that – Lex and Bruce are rivals, so of course you’d choose a side and maybe even judge Lex more harshly than he deserves. I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said, reaching across the conference table to hold her hand. He rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. “I might have wondered the same thing, in your position. But, unfortunately, my dislike of Luthor has always been a lot more than me just wanting to support the man who saved me from a life on the streets. I’ve always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt. You know that.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Lois agreed with a tiny nod.

“But with Luthor?” He sighed and frowned. “Instinct took over. I instantly felt like I couldn’t trust him, from the first moment I met him. I’ve always felt like there was something sinister about him, lurking just below the surface where no one could see it. But I could always, *always* feel it there, even if most people couldn’t. Sometimes, I wondered if I was crazy for feeling that way.”

“Must feel good then, to know your instincts were right,” Lois said gently.

But Clark shook his head. “Not really. I guess it’s good knowing that I’m not completely crazy but...I would have preferred to be wrong and *not* see the Planet bombed.”

“I wish I’d taken your mistrust of him more seriously sooner,” Lois replied.

“He’s an excellent showman, if nothing else,” Clark said with a slight shrug.

“Maybe. But part of me was blinded by my own views on him. First, it was the mystery and the intrigue and the thrill of chasing down that first interview with him. I was too wrapped up in wanting to be the first ever reporter to do an expose on him. Then, after he agreed to let me interview him after the White Orchid Ball...I was too giddy with having achieved my goal to see what might have otherwise been red flags, right before my eyes. I was too self-congratulatory to stop and wonder if you might be right about him. Maybe if I hadn’t...maybe I could have seen the attack on the paper coming.”

She wouldn’t meet Clark’s gaze and he heard the self-pity and blame in her voice. Though her eyes were dry, he could see the inner tears her mind was shedding. It broke his heart.

“Lois, listen to me. Not a single one of us could have seen the attack coming. I didn’t...and I’ve known Luthor for years,” he assured her. “Things happen. No one was hurt or killed. The building suffered only minor damage, compared to what it could have been.”

“Because of Superman,” Lois interrupted, her voice shaky with concealed tears. “If it hadn’t have been for him...”

Clark cut her off. “Ok, sure, he made a difference in how that day played out. But my point is, there is *nothing* you could have done differently. Even if you’d suspected Luthor’s darker side, none of us even knew Mr. Stern was thinking of selling. We couldn’t have prevented any of what took place.”

Lois sighed and appeared to mull it over. Then she gave his hand a little squeeze. In a moment, resolve came over her features and she gave him a tiny smile, accompanied with an even more

minute nod.

“You’re right,” she finally admitted. “What matters is... we have him. Hook, line, and sinker.”

“We have him,” Clark agreed, hoping it was true and the video would be enough.

“Perry is going to flip out when we tell him,” Lois said thoughtfully as she took a bite of her rigatoni a la vodka.

“So will Henderson and the DA,” Clark laughed.

“We’ll be heroes,” Lois mused with a smile.

Clark shook his head, though he was smiling as well. “I don’t want to be a hero, Lois. I just want to see justice served.”

Lois nodded mutely as a companionable silence fell between them. Each of them focused on their meal; Clark hadn’t even realized how hungry he was until now. But his stomach and mind were at war with one another. As willing to eat as his stomach was, his heart and mind were heavy with everything that had happened in Hobbs Bay that afternoon, which robbed him of what should have been a healthy appetite. He forced his body to compromise and ate half of the generous portion of shrimp scampi before losing interest in eating. Lois noticed as she tore into the hunk of warm Italian bread that had come with each dinner.

“Not hungry?” she asked, gesturing to his half-eaten food.

“Yes...no...I don’t really know,” he answered honestly. “I just keep thinking about Jack and Denny, that’s all. I’m so glad they listened to us and decided to give the halfway house a try, but... I’m still worried about them.”

“What happened after you left with them? Were you able to get them a spot in the halfway house?” Lois inquired.

“I was. I didn’t even need Superman’s help,” he said with a tiny half-smile. “Turns out the place is doing better than anyone had hoped in getting people back on their feet. Six residents just moved out this morning and they were able to offer Jack and Denny a spot starting tonight.”

“That’s great news!” Lois said, her eyes sparkling with love and pride.

“Yeah, it worked out perfectly,” Clark said with contentment. “I brought them over there myself, after Denny was seen by the doctor. Even Jack looked impressed with the place.”

“So...do you think they’ll really stay there, at the halfway house?” Lois asked, reaching for her cream soda.

Clark pushed his shrimp scampi around the Styrofoam container with his fork. “I hope so. I didn’t like the look of the place they were living in. Probably all sorts of infestations and mold and things there. I got the chance to talk to Jack a bit, when Denny was being checked over by the doctor. The kid is bright, Lois. A little rough around the edges, but if he applies himself – sticks with a job, finishes his schooling – he’s going to accomplish great things someday.”

“A job,” Lois mused. “You think he’ll be able to find one? Like you said when we were at his...I hesitate to call it a house... between his probably incomplete education and the fact that he’s resorted to stealing to get by...” She let her voice trail off.

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted after a moment of thought. “In normal circumstances, I’d guess that his chances would be probably pretty poor. But I’m going to do what I can to give him a leg up on the job hunt.”

“Oh?” Lois asked curiously.

Clark nodded. “Tomorrow I’ll talk to Perry about getting Jack a job here, at the Planet.”

“Are...are you *sure* that’s a good idea? He’s a bit...abrasive. I don’t know if Perry will tolerate his attitude.”

“Well,” Clark hedged. “You’re right about that. I’d have to talk to Jack about maintaining a respectful tone. But, as for the rest? I’m sure this is the best place for him. Think about it, Lois. He’d be making steady money. We *know* this is a safe environment for him. And it gives us the ability to keep an eye on him – make sure he stays on the straight and narrow, so to speak. Besides, I got

to know him a bit better, while we were waiting for the doctor to see Denny. Once he came to trust me, he started to open up a bit. As much as Jack needs the safety and opportunities the halfway house will afford him, he needs a friend too.”

“And you think he’ll let you befriend him?” Lois asked gently.

“In time...maybe.”

Lois smiled at him tenderly. She reached over and took his hand in her own. “You really *are* an incredible man, you know that?”

Clark’s smile was more rueful than anything. “I’m really not, Lois. I just...I just want to help, because I *can*.”

“But that’s *exactly* what I mean! Most people, in your shoes, would wash their hands of Jack at this point, figuring they already did more than enough – buying food for Jack and Denny, getting them a space at the halfway house, taking them to the doctor. But not you. You’ve done so much for them both and you’re still looking to do more.”

“It doesn’t feel like enough,” Clark said, shaking his head. “I wish...” He sighed and tried again to get the words unstuck from his throat. “I wish I could do what Bruce did for me.”

“I know,” she said in a near whisper as she leaned over and cupped his cheek with her hand.

Clark closed his eyes for a moment, simply basking in the warmth of her palm. Her touch was intoxicating, in a way. He felt his weariness melting away beneath her light caress. He felt his guilt over not being able to do more easing. The vice around his heart loosened a little and he felt the chains squeezing his lungs slip away.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last.

“What for?”

“I didn’t mean to be such a downer,” he explained. “I just wanted a nice meal with you to celebrate getting that tape.”

“It’s okay,” Lois assured him. “I know how much Denny and Jack’s situation affects you. But, can I ask? What did the doctor say? About Denny, I mean. The poor kid looked and sounded so sick.”

“Walking pneumonia,” Clark said sadly. “He’s being treated, and should be feeling better soon.”

“It’s a good thing you convinced Jack to bring him in,” Lois commented in a soft tone.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “But it’s scary, how easily that could have been much, much worse.”

“Did you ever have close calls like that?” Lois asked gently after a moment. “Back when you...?” She let her voice trail off, knowing she didn’t need to finish the question.

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “I got lucky.”

If you can call Kryptonian genetics lucky, he added in his mind.

“Can I ask?” Lois continued after a few bites of her dinner. “I’ve never pried and you’ve never said why. But after today...I guess it’s been in the back of my mind. When you left the halfway house...”

“I had my reasons. And I promise, I’ll tell you...soon.”

“Soon?” She pursed her lips and squinted a little as she focused on the fact that he wasn’t willing to share right now. Then her face changed as a thought seemed to occur to her. “Does it have anything to do with that important conversation you alluded to earlier?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He sighed wearily. “I just hope...when that conversation happens...I hope you don’t think less of me. Because when I think about it...I feel like...” He paused, searching for the right words.

“Like?” Lois prompted after almost half a minute.

“Like...I’m not good enough for you.”

Lois’ eyes widened in shock. “How could you not be good enough for me?”

Clark rubbed the back of his neck subconsciously. “It’s hard to

explain. But I feel like you deserve so much better than me sometimes. Someone who can always be there for you. Someone without the past that I have. Someone who isn't terrified of sharing everything with you."

"You're... afraid?" Lois asked. "Of what?"

"Of losing you," Clark replied sincerely. "The thing is... I've wanted to tell you about this thing for a long time. But there's this huge part of me that can't imagine you..." He cut off abruptly as Lois' cellphone began to ring.

She glanced at the display and rolled her eyes. "Oh, perfect. It's my mother."

"Go on," Clark encouraged, grateful for the distraction. "Answer it."

"She can wait," Lois said dismissively.

Clark gave her a wry smile. "Yeah, right. You know she'll just call you fifty-two times until you pick up." As if Ellen Lane could hear him, the ringing stopped only to start right back up again.

Lois frowned and sighed. "You're right," she acknowledged. "We can talk after, okay?"

"That's fine," Clark said with a dip of his head. "If you're finished with dinner, I'll clean up."

Lois nodded as she picked up her phone. "Hi, Mom," she half-sighed into the phone. "No, no. I'm still at work. Yeah, late night. Uh-huh. Yeah. No, there's just this possible lead on a story Clark and I are working on... I really can't say much about it. No, that's not it. Right."

That's all Clark overheard as he cleaned up their meal, depositing the remainders of their dinners in the garbage pail since it wasn't enough to save for another meal. Then he left Lois alone in the conference room to talk to Ellen. He made a beeline for the men's room so that he could wash up and use the facilities. Then he went to his desk. He knew he didn't have much to do – most of his stories were awaiting interviews – but he figured he could begin to draft some notes on the Planet bombing case.

Luthor!

He should have known!

He still felt incredibly guilty over not having foreseen that Luthor was after the Daily Planet. It didn't matter to him that there had been no outward signs that the paper was in danger, or that the multimillionaire had been plotting such a dastardly deed. He still felt like he should have done more to prevent the bombing. But he couldn't change the past, no matter how much he wanted to. At least, he reasoned, no one had been killed in the bombing. He'd been there to save those who'd been trapped – *like Lois and Jimmy*, his mind sickeningly reminded him. He'd been able to remove the second bomb from the building and prevent it from killing everyone in the area. It had to be enough, he told himself.

And, he reminded himself, even if I can't change the past, I can change the future. Luthor's future. Or lack thereof.

He and Lois would make sure Lex Luthor's future consisted solely of four cinder block walls and maybe an hour a day out in a prison yard, surrounded by fences topped with barbed wire.

It's over, Luthor; his mind whispered grimly as he turned on his computer and began to type up the notes he and Lois would use for their article once Luthor was arrested.

Half an hour later, Lois emerged from the conference room. Clark was so deeply lost in thought that he jumped a little when she came up behind him and slipped her arms around his neck. She kissed his temple, then simply stayed there hugging him for a minute.

"Are you okay?" he asked, noting how tired she appeared.

"Fine," she said. "Just... phone calls with mom can be a bit... exhausting." She let go of his neck then moved to stand before him. She leaned a hip against his desk. "She wanted to remind me about our dinner. Should be a blast."

"Aww, it's not so bad, Lois."

She rolled her eyes again. "Please, tell me you're joking."

"Okay, so your mom is a little... intense," Clark allowed. "Lucy is sweet though. We've gotten along well, the few times we've met."

"Yeah, she really likes you," Lois said, her features brightening in a smile. "I'm lucky to have found you first. Otherwise I think she'd make a move on you." She chuckled lightly.

"Nah," Clark said, dismissing the notion with a quick, but restrained, wave of his hand.

"No, really," Lois insisted.

"Even if she did, she'd not my type. She's not *you*, Lois."

Lois smiled shyly. "Thanks."

Clark shrugged slightly. "It's the truth. When I was growing up, especially once I was in Gotham, I always wondered if there was someone out there for me. Someone to take away all the loneliness I'd ever felt. As soon as I met you, I had my answer." He cleared his throat to change the subject. "So... where are we having dinner with them?"

"Armand's Steakhouse," Lois said, taking a sip of her water.

"Nice place," Clark said with approval. "Who picked it?" he wondered idly.

"I did. Lucy loves it there and it's been a while since you and I were there last, so I figured it was a perfect choice."

"Definitely," Clark agreed.

"Our reservation is for six. I'll pick you up at five-thirty," Lois continued.

"Sounds good."

Lois yawned. "I'm beat. You ready to head out?"

Clark nodded, thrilled that Lois seemed to have forgotten their earlier conversation, and how close he'd been to having to tell her that he was Superman. "Yeah. Let me just save this first."

"What is it?" She turned around slightly to peer at his computer monitor.

"The end of Lex Luthor's freedom," Clark replied darkly.

"Hey, do you want me to drive you home?" Lois asked after dinner was finished and they'd left the newsroom. "It's getting late."

"Thanks, but... I can make it from here," Clark said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He took a moment to breathe in the warm night air outside of the Daily Planet's building, taking solace and strength in the city's familiar heartbeat as much as he did from having Lois at his side. He looked up at the dark sky for a few seconds, then turned his gaze to her, giving her a soft smile as he did so. "You're right. It's getting late and your place is a lot closer to here than my place is. No reason to have you driving all over Metropolis."

"Really, it's not a big deal," Lois tried to reassure him. She touched his arm gently. "I..." she stuttered for a moment, as if looking for the right words or perhaps knowing them but afraid of using them. "I know today was a lot harder on you than it was on me. Confronting your past through Jack and all..."

Clark smiled, his heart melting with warmth over her concern for him. It was nice, he mused, to have someone care so much about him. Of course, Bruce and Alfred cared deeply about him, but that was different. They were family. Lois... well... Lois loved him in a forever kind of way... or so he hoped. He knew she loved him – she told him all the time. But would she *still* love him, once he came clean about masquerading as Superman?

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "If anything, I'm relieved over Jack and Denny being in the halfway house now. Today wasn't easy, but... it was worth it."

"You were pretty amazing today," Lois said with a bright smile.

Clark shrugged self-consciously. "I didn't do much. Jack and Denny did the hard work by choosing to gamble on us and going to the halfway house."

“They never would have taken that step without you,” Lois pointed out.

“Maybe,” Clark allowed.

“Come on, my Jeep’s down this way,” Lois said, taking his elbow and trying to guide him down the sidewalk.

Clark shook his head. “I’ll grab a cab or something. It’ll be faster than making you drive all the way over to my place. We’ve both been working hard lately. You’ve got to be exhausted. I know I’m beat. Go home and rest.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, biting her lower lip in indecision. “Absolutely.”

“Well...okay. I hate leaving you here but...if you insist,” she said in halting tones. “You’re right about one thing. I’m ready to get home and climb into bed.”

“You and me both,” he told her.

“Well...goodnight then, Clark,” she said, still sounding less than happy to be leaving him there.

“Night, Lois. I’ll see you in the morning, and we can get started on nailing Luthor for the bombing.”

That thought made her whole face light up. “You bet we will!”

Clark chuckled. “No one gets away from Lane and Kent,” he grinned.

He took Lois in his arms. His hand reached up automatically to stroke her cheek. Then he craned his neck down to kiss her passionately. He poured all of his love for her in that kiss. The tension he’d felt since discovering Jack, the tape, and Luthor’s evil deeds dissipated as he held Lois tightly. His relief that Jack and Denny were safe was forgotten. Only his love for Lois existed in that moment. Nothing else mattered. As much love as he gave her in that kiss, he drew in strength and comfort from her in return. She was his rock, his safe haven in the storm that had been his life up until now. She was the light that penetrated the darkness he’d once lived in – in the shadows as Nightwing and as a very lost and lonely man who’d wondered if anyone could possibly ever love him. She was his reason for continuing to be Superman. She was the person who made him feel connected to the world around him. She was his every dream, his every wish made on far off stars come true in one miraculous woman.

“I love you,” he said breathlessly when they parted.

“I love you too,” she replied, just as breathless, before capturing his lips again in softer, more lingering kiss. “Call me when you get in?”

Clark smiled tenderly as he ran his fingers through her hair and down along her jawline. “I wouldn’t dream of going to sleep without calling you first.”

Lois patted his chest playfully. “Good. I’ve trained you well.”

That made him laugh harder. “You sure have. Go on. I’ll call you in a little bit.”

“Okay. Night, Clark.”

“Night, Lois.”

He watched as she turned – with regret in her features – and walked down the sidewalk to where she’d parked her Jeep. Listening in on her heartbeat, he began to walk in the opposite direction, toward his own apartment. It brought him such peace in his heart and mind to listen in on that perfect sound – the sound of his soulmate’s heart beating steady and strong. And he knew, without a doubt, that Lois was his soulmate. No one else in the entire universe could compare with her or make him feel so at peace in his own heart. She was the one he was meant to spend his life with, there was simply no question about that. All that was keeping him from asking her to marry him was his secret. And that, he vowed, would soon be out in the open.

He listened in until she was out of his range of hearing – some of that being the distance between them and some of it being the city noises all around him. Even at that hour, trucks and cars still rumbled down the streets, their angry and tired drivers blaring their horns at the other drivers on the road. People still walked

down the sidewalks – chatting, singing, whistling, or silent enough while their canine companions yipped and barked and howled in excitement of being outside. Music was heard too – spilling out of bars and restaurants, thumping out of open car windows, drifting out through the screens of windows from apartments all around.

Clark smiled to himself.

The sounds of home.

Perhaps some people might find the constant assault of sound and lights from the city exhausting or even intimidating. But not him. He felt comforted by the constant hustle and bustle of Metropolis. The city had a unique heartbeat, a pulse that drew him in and let him know in his heart that he was exactly where he’d always been meant to be. He was *home* – more than he’d ever been in Gotham or at Grandma Tildy’s or even, he admitted with a jab of guilt, in Smallville. While a part of him missed – and would always miss – the farmlands of his youth, he’d far outgrown the place as his powers had developed further and his passion for helping others had been kindled from a small, uncertain spark and into a raging bonfire.

Home.

Lois had made Metropolis his home, more than anything else in the world could have. Sure, working for The Daily Planet was great, but without Lois, it was just a job. *With* Lois, it was Clark’s dream come true.

She also made it possible for him to pull on the Superman outfit each day. When he’d first created the hero, it had been refreshing for him to be able to use his powers in the full view of others, out in the sunlight, letting the world see what he could do. But it had also been far more demanding than he’d ever anticipated. He’d known, on some level, that Superman would be sought after. Everyone would want to meet the powerful alien. People would call for his aid.

He’d still *seriously* underestimated how in-demand Superman would actually wind up being.

Everyone wanted a piece of the hero. There had been demands for his endorsement on products, calls for licensing rights so people could profit off his image and his S “logo” – as they put it. Everyone wanted him to support their cause, their charity, be there for the unveiling of a new business, or hospital, or school. And then there were the calls for help. All over the world, when people needed him, they cried out for Superman. And even if they didn’t, Clark would catch wind of a situation where only he could help – a raging wildfire, a mudslide, a plane going down over the ocean, the threat of war between two countries.

In the beginning, he’d tried to respond to as many situations as he could, but it had taken its toll on him. He’d barely slept, leaving him exhausted. His work had nearly suffered, and he’d been glad to have Lois’ help and guidance to make sure he didn’t falter in the quality of his work. And the nightmares! Some of the things he’d seen had left scars on his very soul.

There had been moments – ones he wasn’t proud of – when he’d considered hanging up his costume for good and letting Superman vanish just as suddenly as he’d emerged onto the scene. And each time, just before he could finalize his decision to go home and burn his uniforms, Lois had said something to him that somehow wound up being exactly the kind of encouraging thing he so desperately needed to hear. As if by magic, his heart and soul would feel healed, and he’d find the strength to face a new dawn in the guise of the hero.

There were no two ways about it.

Superman existed because of Lois.

He stopped only once on his way home, to intervene in a mugging that was taking place nearby. Quickly changing into his Superman costume, Clark was just in time to grab the switchblade out of the mugger’s hand before he could use it on the terrified old woman the young man had cornered. He carted the mugger to the closest police station and escorted the woman to her home, a short

block and a half away from where she'd nearly been robbed of her purse. Satisfied with another rescue made, Clark flew the rest of the way home, after watching to ensure that the police arrived to take her statement.

As soon as he was inside his apartment, he called Lois, as promised. He didn't even bother to change his clothing.

"Hi, Lois," he said as she picked up the phone with a tired 'hello.'

"Clark? You're home already?" She sounded surprised.

"I lucked out and didn't hit any traffic," he easily fibbed.

"Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I got home safely."

You're a liar, his mind hissed at him.

"Thanks. That puts my mind at ease." She yawned.

"You sound pretty beat," he offered. "Get some rest and I'll see you in the morning."

When are you going to man up and tell her the truth?

"Yeah, okay," she agreed. "Night, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois. I love you."

You love her so much you can't even tell her what you are, his inner voice sneered. His shoulders slumped and he forced himself to squash down his self-criticizing thoughts. Now was not the time to get into things with Lois.

"Love you too."

Clark gently hung the phone back up once the dial tone sounded, then hesitated. What to do next? He wasn't opposed to a quick shower and spending the rest of the night in his bed. While he didn't need as much sleep as a regular person, he *had* been pushing himself pretty hard lately, and hadn't slept as much as he would have liked. On the other hand, he was too ecstatic over how close they were to seeing Luthor safely locked behind bars for the rest of his life. It felt impossible to sleep just then.

"A patrol wouldn't be the worst thing," he said to himself, rubbing his chin in thought. "Maybe a fast one, just to burn off some of this excitement."

Nodding mutely, his decision made, he left his comfortable apartment again. He took off from the privacy of his secluded balcony, shooting straight up into the clear night sky. For a moment, he hovered there, far above the city where he'd made his home. Up as high as he was, most of the noises of Metropolis faded away into a barely audible murmur in his sensitive ears. But he knew, from experience, that if a cry for help were to come, his ears would instinctively zero in on it, allowing him to pinpoint where he was needed.

He began to fly at a pace that was neither leisurely nor rushed – just an effective, ground-eating speed that allowed him to scan the city with both his enhanced vision and powerful hearing together. But the city was quiet that night, and before Clark knew it, his patrol was complete.

"Not bad," he whispered to himself as he gauged the time by the moon's position in the sky. "Maybe now I can get some sleep."

He should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Just as he was about to head home once more, he picked up the sound of a television in one of the apartments he was near. His ears tuned in of their own accord. It was the news, he realized a few seconds later. A state-wide manhunt for an escaped serial killer, out in Kansas. Clark frowned. He could *not* ignore a problem like that, no matter how strongly his bed was calling him.

"Kansas it is," he said to the stars.

In the next heartbeat, he was rocketing through the night, heading west. Three seconds later, he'd zoomed over the Metropolis city limits. A minute later, he'd left New Troy in the dust. Before five minutes was up, he found himself above Smallville. It always felt different, seeing the town from above. It almost felt like looking at a model toy town from as high up as he was. Especially on nights like this – dark and clear, the sky above glittering with thousands of stars, the buildings and land below awash in silver moonlight, the streets almost completely devoid of

life as the town's residents slept soundly or simply relaxed in their homes. Clark saw quite a few houses with lights on – he wondered if the people within were following the ongoing manhunt on the news.

He listened in, locating another news report with ease, but there was no new information to be gained, other than that the killer's name was Colin Coleman. Clark recalled the name. When Coleman had been captured and tried the previous year, the story had been page one news in every news outlet in the country. He was the most prolific serial killer in fifty years. Clark didn't even need to see the man's picture on the news – the image was seared into his mind from all the press coverage during the trial.

Without having a decent idea of where to start searching, Clark decided right there in Smallville was as good a place as any. He flew to the direct center of town, then began flying in slow, deliberate circles, gradually widening the circle with each revolution. He strained his eyes and ears, searching for something – anything – that might give him a better clue of where to concentrate his efforts. But he found nothing. He left Smallville behind, broadening his radius to the surrounding farmlands, but all was still and quiet in the night.

He moved on again, going beyond the world he'd known growing up in Kansas. As he flew, he caught glimpses of search teams combing through the countryside, all of them looking for the escaped criminal. Floodlights lit up the night. Flashlights swung in slow arcs, cutting through the darkness. Bloodhounds sniffed everything in their paths. German Shepherds barked and whined, eager to do their jobs. Police officers and Sheriffs spoke in hushed tones to one another, made calls over their walkie talkies, or outright called out to one another. Clark thought he heard Sheriff Harris at one point, out in the farmlands as he passed overhead. A younger woman was with him, and Clark heard the man call her Rachel.

A smile ghosted over his lips at that. It made sense that Rachel would follow in her father's footsteps. She'd wanted to go into law enforcement ever since the third grade, as he recalled. He'd had no doubt in his mind that she would make an excellent Sheriff herself, one day. He was actually a little more surprised that her father was still on the force. He wasn't elderly by any means, but he was well past retirement age. Clark would have thought that Sheriff Harris might have wanted to kick back and relax at this point in his life, instead of continuously suffering the stresses of the job.

"Nah," Clark said to himself as he flew, with the slightest shake of his head. "That's not really his style. He always did love his job. *Lois* will probably retire before he does," he joked.

And still he kept on moving, seeing no signs of the escaped fugitive. He did, however, see a ton of police activity, even blockades on the major roadways. An hour slipped by, and most of another. Clark was getting frustrated. Coleman *had* to be somewhere. It was possible, he knew, that the killer could have crossed over the state line and out of Kansas, but he wasn't convinced by the idea. Search teams were *everywhere*.

"No, he *has* to be holed up somewhere, waiting for the search to die down a bit. But, where?" Clark wondered.

He came to another small town. For a moment, he stopped and hovered in midair, giving himself a chance to take stock of the place. It was maybe half again as large as Smallville, he noted in his mind. But it was quaint and homely in its own way. And... *familiar?* Clark did a double take. Yes, he was *sure* of it now. That clocktower was unmistakable!

"I'm not far from Grandma Tildy's," he told the night air in an awed, hushed whisper.

He was stunned. Had it *always* been so close to Smallville? He did a quick calculation in his mind. Just a couple of hours' drive between the two towns. Yet to the terrified, grieving thirteen-year-old he'd been at the time, he might as well have been shipped off

to a different planet.

Shaking his head to clear away the sad memories, Clark set to work, carefully combing the town with his super abilities. The movie theater was still fairly busy, he could tell. The lights blazed in the darkness and laughing groups of people exited and entered into the building to see the latest movies, seemingly blissfully unaware that a killer was on the loose. He moved on, searching the much quieter areas. The local cemetery was quiet. But what was that? Clark froze, listening – all but straining his ears now. Yes, he was certain of it. A series of barely audible, stifled sneezes coming from the rickety, old, abandoned church that stood before the graveyard. Clark x-rayed the place.

It was a mess inside, to say the least. Rotted wooden beams had splintered and fallen down over the years. The heavy wooden pews had been moved around – possibly by squatters, or maybe just bored teens out looking for a cheap, safe thrill. Graffiti was scrawled over everything – some of it obscured by mold that blackened the walls. The marble floor was covered in a thick layer of trash and moldering leaves that had blown in through the broken windows. The altar was cracked badly, but still standing together in one piece. And behind that, cowering in the dark, Clark could see Coleman.

There was no mistaking the man, not with the prominent scars on his face and the way the moonlight framed the sharpness of his features. There were a few defining tattoos on his forehead and neck too – the bleeding moon and stars on his right side was a dead giveaway, at the very least. He was furtively checking this way and that, probably fearing that the police would find him any minute now.

Clark dropped into a silent, swift landing. The front door of the church was broken – standing ajar and hanging on by only one rusty hinge. Clark didn't even need to move it aside to enter into the building. He didn't want to spook Coleman and risk what he knew would be a brief chase. He simply wanted the criminal back in police custody as soon as possible. So, in an effort to not make any noise, Clark floated a few inches above the floor, easily clearing the layer of debris laying there. Coleman's back was too him; the man neither saw nor heard Clark coming. But he *did* shriek when Clark laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Colin Coleman?" Clark asked sternly.

"S...S...Superman?" the killer gulped.

"Shouldn't you be in jail?" Clark continued icily.

He always tried hard to ensure that his voice remained neutral when he spoke to criminals, but he couldn't stop his contempt from surfacing in this case. He remembered only too well the grisly details of Coleman's murders from the trial coverage, and they sickened him to his core. How he liked to violate the women in front of their boyfriends or husbands before skinning them alive. How he made the men watch before stabbing out their eyes, then slitting their throats. How he dismembered the bodies and scattered them over the entire state of Kansas.

Coleman licked his lips nervously, his eyes darting about the room, as though he might have a chance of escape. "You don't understand..." he started.

"I understand perfectly well," Clark interrupted. "I've heard the reports. A riot in the jail. Two officers killed. Five others wounded. And *you*, somehow managing to escape."

"I didn't start that riot! And I didn't hurt nobody!" Coleman shot back angrily.

"Maybe so," Clark allowed as he grabbed Coleman with two hands and lifted off. "But you still have to pay for your numerous other crimes."

"Put me down!" was Coleman's indignant demand.

Clark ignored him completely. He didn't even look down at the killer as he guided them out of the church and into the night air outside. He flew up above the treetops and started to scan the surrounding area, looking for the nearest police team he could

spot. It didn't take him more than thirty seconds before he spied a roadblock, just a few miles up the road. The red and blue flashing lights lit up the surrounding darkness, and a floodlight illuminated the desolate road. In the far distance, a helicopter swept over the land, its spotlight ceaselessly exposing everything below.

Coleman continued to protest, but Clark hardly heard him as he focused on his task. He picked up speed – not enough to potentially injure Coleman, but enough to cross the distance to the police in under a minute. He landed before the group of startled officers and gently pushed Coleman forward, without letting go of the man.

"Good evening, Officers," Clark greeted them politely.

"Superman!" exclaimed one of them.

"I believe you've been searching for this man," Clark continued.

The same officer nodded. He seemed to be the one in charge. Clark glanced at the name on his uniform. W. Manheinz.

"Thanks, Superman. You just saved us a world of trouble," Manheinz said graciously. He took the cuffs from his belt and deftly secured Coleman's wrists behind his back.

"I scanned him earlier," Clark informed the policeman. "He has no weapons."

"Thanks. Dodson? Get him in the car, would ya?" Manheinz said, nodding to a burly man on his left.

"You got it, Boss. You want me to call it in too?"

"Yeah, would you mind? I wanna get Superman's statement."

"No problem." The dark-skinned man flashed a set of perfect white teeth as he guided Coleman to the squad car. Clark heard Dodson start to recite the killer's rights to him.

"You have no idea how much work you just saved us, Superman," Manheinz said, turning back to Clark, relief in his eyes. "We owe you, big time."

"Just glad I could help," Clark said, giving the officer a friendly smile. With Coleman back in custody, Clark felt like he could release some of the tension that had invaded his entire body as soon as he'd heard the report of the serial killer's escape.

"Still, a lot of people are going to be able to sleep a *lot* easier tonight, thanks to you."

"I'm just happy he's off the streets now," Clark replied.

Manheinz chuckled. "Us too, believe me."

Clark smiled and nodded.

"Can I take your statement now? Or do you have anywhere else to be?" the officer asked thoughtfully.

"I can do it now," Clark told him, gesturing to the side of the road.

The policeman followed and leaned his back against an aging oak tree. He pulled out a pad of paper and a pen, ready for Clark's story.

"Okay, Superman, whenever you're ready," he told Clark.

Clark leaned crossed his arms before him — an old, self-conscious habit. "I was in Metropolis when I overheard a news report, saying Coleman had escaped," he began, feeling like he was obligated to start at the very beginning. "I flew out to Kansas immediately, because of how dangerous the situation was. I searched for a while – I'm not sure how long. But, eventually, I wound up here, in town. I heard Coleman sneeze while I was searching near the old, abandoned church on Astor Place. I found him inside, hiding behind the altar. He didn't put up a struggle when I apprehended him."

"Uh huh," Manheinz said, scribbling notes as quickly as he could. "And you said he had no weapons, right?"

"Nothing," Clark confirmed. "I checked carefully. The guy didn't have so much as a baloney sandwich with him."

"Good," the policeman said, still focused on his notepad.

"Anything else?"

Clark hesitated a moment, then, "He said he wasn't involved in the prison riot that broke out when he escaped. He claims he

didn't have anything to do with the officers who were wounded or killed."

Manheinz frowned but nodded. "I'll make a note of it. Frankly, I don't know much about what happened over there. All I know was that we got the call for a state-wide manhunt. What about you? Do you believe him? Off the record, of course."

Clark shrugged, his arms still folded over his chest. "He sounded scared, but that's all I know."

"Anything else you can think of for the report?" the officer said, glancing back down at his notepad.

Clark shook his head. "That's pretty much it. I can stop by during the day to file my official report."

"Perfect. Here's my card." Manheinz extracted a business card from the breast pocket of his jacket.

Clark read it and committed the address to memory, then declined the card.

"I'll be by as soon as I can," he swore as the other man returned the card to the rest of the pack. "In the meantime, is there anything else I can do?"

"No, you're done more than enough, Superman. We're grateful for the help." He started to say something else, but stopped.

Clark smiled. "Go ahead, you can ask whatever it is," he encouraged the policeman.

"Well...it's kind of embarrassing," Manheinz stammered. "But...well...would you mind...taking a picture with me and my team? You know...you're kind of a role model for all of us."

Clark chuckled, genuinely and pleasantly surprised and pleased by the request. "Absolutely."

Manheinz's face lit up. "Thanks, Superman! Hey, Taylor? You got the camera?" he called as he started back toward where his fellow officers were taking down the roadblock. "Bring it here and tell the guys it's picture time."

Clark smiled happily to himself ten minutes later as he lifted off the ground, leaving the police behind. He'd taken not only a group photo with all of the officers on the scene, but individual photos as well. All of them had asked for his autograph – many of them saying it was for their children – and he'd gracefully obliged. It felt good, to have it be reinforced once again that the alien superhero had been embraced by the world, rather than feared, the way Bruce had worried when Clark had first tossed around the idea of creating the Superman character and using his powers in full view of the public. It wasn't that he needed or wanted to feel *important*, but it was a relief to be able to use his abilities to make a positive impact in the world.

Without planning to, he found himself returning to the town. He hovered there, in a thick, puffy cloud, and looked down on the place he'd once known so well. It had never been home, but it *had* become familiar and almost comforting, during the time he'd been nothing more than one of Grandma Tildy's boys. It was weird, he thought. He neither missed the town nor did he *not* miss it. It had been a part of his life for a couple of years – he knew every nook and cranny of the town. But he'd never truly felt *connected* to the place – as though it was just a place to visit, not the place where he was actually living.

Not like Gotham.

Gotham had been his home for a while. And, although Clark had always known it wasn't his *true* home – that title had been reserved for Metropolis, though Clark hadn't known it at the time – he loved that city fiercely. Gotham ran in his veins, the same as Metropolis now did. He felt a certain sense of pride in those two cities.

He felt nothing for the town spread out below him.

He knew, on some level, that the place still represented a host of negative memories for him. His loneliness and isolation as a newly orphaned teen. His fears of being without his parents'

guidance as new powers had developed. His resentment that life had chosen such a rough road for him to travel – as if having terrifying powers hadn't been enough to deal with.

And yet, Clark had to admit, the place still held some fond memories for him as well. How his loneliness had been abated by the friends he'd made while living at Grandma Tildy's – especially Chen. He and Chen had been practically attached at the hip. Grandma had even jokingly referred to them as "the twins" occasionally, despite their age difference. He had even come to be content here, in his own way. It had become comfortable and familiar. He liked the town well enough – it was small enough that it felt like everyone knew everyone else, just like in Smallville – but big enough to cater to just about any need anyone could have.

I'm not that far from the halfway house, he thought to himself. *I haven't been back there since I ran away. I wonder...*

He paused.

Would he have any emotional reaction, if he were to fly by the place? Or would he have the same neutral reaction as he had toward the town? He'd never even been so much as *tempted* to go back there, even on just a quick fly-by. Should he go now, just to satisfy his curiosity?

The sound of crying in the distance halted his musings. Without another thought, he was racing away, toward the sound. Clark followed the old abandoned railroad tracks that cut through the center of town and out in the surrounding countryside. Even when Clark had been a young teen living at Grandma's, the tracks had laid dormant and rusting from the passage of time and disuse. Some of the boys living at Grandma's claimed that the tracks had been abandoned after a serious accident that had claimed the lives of hundreds of train passengers many years ago. According to those stories, the tracks were still haunted by the ghosts of those who hadn't survived. Clark had never believed in ghosts, but had tried to find information on the train crash featured in the story. No amount of research at the library or direct questions to any of the older residents in town had ever produced a shred of proof the accident had ever occurred. Many of the locals had shaken their heads, laughed, and said how they had also heard of a similar story to the one Clark had been told.

The old memory surfaced without warning, but it made Clark smile nonetheless. He hadn't thought about the old "haunted railroad" story in ages. His smile didn't last long, however. In the next moment, he found the source of the crying.

There, on the tracks, was a young boy. He was all alone, a backpack on his back, walking along the tracks. He was sniffing and rubbing tears from his eyes. Once, he looked back and appeared to sigh before continuing on. Clark watched for just a moment, assessing the situation, then he gently descended from the sky. He didn't wish to startle the boy, so he landed with whisper-softness on the tracks about ten feet from the boy. The boy's eyes widened with surprise and he gasped in awe.

"S...Superman?" he asked in disbelief.

Clark smiled. "In the flesh," he confirmed.

"Wh...what are you doing here?" the boy asked, looking torn between staying where he was and approaching Clark.

Clark stood still, letting the boy decide what felt the most comfortable to him. "I was in the area when I heard crying. I wanted to make sure whoever it was is okay. *Are you okay?*" he asked.

The boy's face darkened in a blush as he scrubbed away the salty tracks on his cheeks with his sleeve. He looked at the ground and toed the dirt beneath his battered sneakers. Clark guessed he was embarrassed that he'd been caught crying.

"Yeah," the boy finally said, "I'm okay. Thanks. You know...for checking."

"What's your name? If you don't mind my asking," Clark said, trying to get the boy to talk. Something was bothering the kid, and Clark wanted to know what it was so he could set things right.

“Benjamin,” the boy replied after a moment of hesitation. “But most people call me Benji.”

“Benji. That’s a good, strong name,” Clark commented with approval. “What are you doing out here, all by yourself?”

“I...uh...” Benji stammered.

“It’s okay. I’m not here to get you in trouble or to judge you. I just want to help, if I can,” Clark assured him.

Benji swallowed hard and nodded. “I was...running...away,” he managed to get out in fits and starts.

“Ah,” Clark said with a knowing nod of his own. “Running away from home.”

“It’s *not* my home. It never will be!” Benji exclaimed, his lower lip trembling. “Please, just let me get away from that place!”

He tried to run past Clark, but Clark gently stepped into the boy’s path. Benji wound up crashing into Clark’s arms. In his grief, the boy didn’t try to escape, but dissolved into fresh tears. Clark felt the kid’s arms tighten around his torso. Taking a chance, Clark gently hugged the sobbing boy for several long moments, until Benji pulled away. Blinking back further tears, Benji wiped his runny nose on the back of one sleeve. He looked up into Clark’s face.

“I’m sorry, Superman.”

“Hey now,” Clark said, placing his hands on Benji’s shoulders in a comforting way. “Don’t ever apologize for your emotions. Do you want to tell me what’s going on? If you’re trying to get away from a bad situation, I can help.”

Benji sighed heavily. “It’s not that,” he admitted. “Everything about the place is fine enough, I guess. It’s just...I hate it there. I just want to go back home.”

“What place?” Clark softly prodded.

“Grandma Tildy’s.”

Clark felt his entire body go cold as a chill ran up his spine. Grandma Tildy’s.

The boy was running from Grandma’s, just as Clark himself had done a long time ago. All of a sudden, Benji wasn’t just some random kid that Clark had happened across. He was Clark himself, in a way. A little younger – Clark guessed Benji was eleven or twelve – but he wasn’t so different from the fifteen-year-old Clark who’d run away from the halfway house and into a scary, uncertain future.

“I see,” Clark managed, trying his hardest to keep his features neutral, to mask the pain his heart felt.

“It’s an orphanage,” Benji said, explaining.

“I...” Clark stopped and sighed. “I know,” he admitted a few tremulous heartbeats later.

Benji’s eyes widened even more. “You...do?”

“Yes,” Clark confirmed. “A close friend of mine used to live at Grandma Tildy’s.”

“Really?” Benji sounded almost excited that Superman, of all people, knew about the halfway house.

“Really,” Clark confirmed gently. “Why don’t we find someplace to talk? Someplace maybe a bit more comfortable than abandoned train tracks in the middle of the night.”

“There’s a park. In town,” Benji suggested.

“Perfect,” Clark said with a smile.

He knew exactly the place the boy had in mind. He’d spent plenty of afternoons at that park as a teenager himself – sometimes playing ball with friends, sometimes supervising the younger kids as they played on the jungle gym, slides, swings, or other equipment. He had extremely good memories of that park. Going there to try and talk Benji out of running away, if possible, seemed only too perfect.

“I know the place,” Clark continued. “I flew over the town just a little while ago.”

Benji nodded and let Clark scoop him up. Together, they flew to the park. Clark set them both down in the play area, near the swings. Benji looked around a moment, seemingly unsure of what

to do. Then, after a minute, he sat on one of the swings. Clark sat next to him, and the boy stifled a chuckle at seeing Superman sitting on a swing. Benji swayed back and forth on the swing, saying nothing. Clark let him be, allowing the kid to approach their conversation in his own way, at his own pace.

“So...your friend knows Grandma’s,” Benji said a couple of minutes later.

“Yeah.”

“Was he an orphan too? Or was he like some of the other boys? With parents who couldn’t care for him?”

“He...his parents died when he was thirteen,” Clark stammered. It still hurt to talk about the loss of his parents. “There was no one else to care for him, so he was sent to live at Grandma’s.”

“Same thing for me,” Benji admitted in a small voice. “My dad died when I was a baby. It was just my mom and me from when I was eighteen months old, until a month ago. She was sick and...” His voice trailed off and he shrugged.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Clark said sincerely.

“My aunt couldn’t take me in. She can barely afford to keep herself out of the poor house. There’s no way she could care for a kid. So I got shipped off here, to Grandma’s. But...I hate it here. I just want to go back home. I miss my house. I miss my town. I miss my friends.”

“I can understand that,” Clark sympathized. “It must be hard, having to leave everything you knew behind.”

“It sucks,” Benji confirmed. He sighed. “It’s not fair. I just turned twelve. This isn’t supposed to happen. I miss my mom and dad, even if I never really knew him.”

“I know,” was all Clark could say.

“I was trying to go back. Back home, where I belong,” Benji offered. “I...I thought it might help. I thought...I don’t know. Maybe I could live with my friend Zack’s family. I don’t fit in here.” Benji fell silent for a few seconds, then, “You said your friend really lived here, at Grandma’s?”

Clark nodded. “Yes. My friend, Clark.”

Benji nodded in turn. “Did he...like it at Grandma’s?”

“He liked it well enough,” Clark answered truthfully. “He said that it was...different. It took some getting used to, living in a new place. It always does, even when you *want* to move to somewhere new. Trust me, I know.”

“How?”

Clark smiled wistfully. “Well, I had to travel across the universe from my home world to Earth, right?”

Benji laughed a little. “I guess that’s true.” He paused. “Your friend...Clark. How long did he live at Grandma’s? I know the courts are trying to find a foster family for me but...some of the other boys at the home have been there a long time.”

Clark cringed internally. He didn’t want to lie to Benji, but he didn’t want to crush whatever dreams the boy had about getting a foster family quickly either.

“He...he was here for about two years,” Clark admitted slowly. “But,” he quickly amended, “during that time, he made a lot of friends. He learned how to fit in with the other boys at the home. He said that two years went by fast.”

“Oh.” An entire world of disappointment was in that single word. “And then...he got a family?”

Clark shook his head, trying to stave off a flush of embarrassment from reddening his cheeks. “He left, like you did tonight.”

“He did?” Interest was in Benji’s voice and face. “Wh...what happened? Did he go back home?”

“No,” Clark said simply. “Things...didn’t turn out the way he’d hoped. He was alone for a long time. It was hard for him. He was lucky to survive, out on his own. He was too young to be on his own.”

“I’m not. I’m twelve,” Benji said proudly.

“Clark was fifteen,” Clark gently countered.

“Oh.”

“Benji, I know things seem bad right now. And they are. Your whole world has been turned upside down. I understand that. But trust me, things aren’t quite as bad as you think at Grandma’s. Clark told me about what a great woman Grandma Tildy is. How friendly. How giving. How loving. It might not seem like it, but you’re lucky to have wound up at her home. She genuinely cares about every single boy who comes into her house. And I know, it sounds like I’m not hearing your feelings and concerns. But I am. I don’t...I just don’t want you to wind up like Clark, alone and on the streets, fighting to survive.”

“Clark...Clark...Clark,” Benji said, as if turning the name over in his mind. “Wait...Clark Kent, of the Daily Planet? Is that that your friend? Everyone says he is. I’ve read his articles about you. I read anything I can about you,” he admitted sheepishly.

Clark nodded. “Yes. That’s him. And yes, we’re close friends.”

“Seems like he did well enough for himself on his own. I can do the same.”

Clark shook his head now. “Maybe. But he got very, very lucky. He happened to make a friend who got him out of the trouble he was in. But before that, Clark went hungry most days. He could barely keep clothes on his back. He shivered in the cold, with nowhere to go. He had what little he had stolen from him by others. He was physically attacked on the streets.”

Oddly, telling his story to Benji felt different than when he’d been trying to convince Jack to go to the halfway house in Metropolis. Perhaps it was the suit that gave him courage. Perhaps it was because, by talking about himself in the third person, he could almost pretend that he was talking about someone else altogether.

Benji’s face was pale in fear. “Really?” he gulped.

“I wish I was making this up,” Clark said, looking away to mask the pain his memories had brought to the surface. “But unfortunately, it’s all the truth.” He turned back to the boy and allowed himself to swing slightly in his seat. “I’m not trying to scare you,” he told Benji, “but I *do* think it’s important to tell you the truth. Believe me, Grandma’s house is paradise, compared to what life on the streets is like.”

“I believe you, Superman.” Benji sighed. “Chen said a lot of the same things. About giving the home a chance. About it being the best place for me right now. I didn’t want to believe him. But hearing about your friend...” He let his voice trail off.

“Chen? Chen *Chow*?” Clark asked, surprised. He realized a heartbeat later that he wasn’t supposed to know the other man.

Benji looked as surprised as Clark felt. “Yeah. He and Grandma run the house. Why? Do you know him?”

“Only by his reputation,” Clark quickly fibbed. “He and Clark were the best of friends, back when Clark lived at the home.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Clark said, allowing himself just the tiniest ghost of a smile. “But that was a long time ago.”

“Superman?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I *should* go back. But...I’m afraid Grandma Tildy will be too angry to *want* me back,” Benji said, nervously biting at his lower lip.

“Benji, if there’s one thing Clark taught me about Grandma Tildy, it’s that she will forgive just about anything, if you apologize and mean it.”

“Then how come he never went back?”

Clark sighed and thought of how best to phrase his response. “He felt too ashamed,” he finally settled on. It was true enough, without revealing the whole truth. “After a while, he said it felt like it was too late to go back, even if he knew deep down that Grandma would have forgiven him for running away, and taken him back with open arms.”

“Superman? I think...I guess...Can you take me back? Please?”

“Of course,” Clark replied, thrilled to have persuaded the boy away from running away. “Are you ready to go now?”

“Mmmm...maybe in a few minutes. I...uh...it’s kind of a dream come true for me to get to talk to you. Maybe I’m being selfish but...I kind of don’t want this to end just yet.” He gave Clark a toothy smile.

Clark laughed aloud. “There’s no rush. We can talk for a little longer. But, well, I’m sure Grandma Tildy is worried about you.”

“I know. And I feel bad. But...meeting you is the best thing that’s happened to me, maybe ever.”

Clark smiled. “You know what? Meeting *you* has been pretty great too. The highlight of my night, in fact.”

Benji simply beamed with joy.

Clark stood nervously before the halfway house where he’d spent two years of his life, though he was sure to maintain a cool, neutral expression for Benji’s benefit. For a long moment, he merely gazed at the house.

Funny, he thought with surprise, *it looked so much more imposing back then.*

The house was still quite large to accommodate all of the boys who lived there at any given time. The gray stones were strong as ever, and gave off the same charm that Clark had eventually learned to see in the place. The surrounding land was just as neatly manicured as he remembered it being – just the way he and the other boys had worked so hard to make it, in order to save Grandma from needing landscapers.

It seems smaller, somehow, he noted to himself.

Back when he’d first arrived, the house had seemed like a mansion. Clark had simply never seen a home that large in his life. Even after living in it for two years, it had still felt like the biggest house in the world, even with as crowded as it could sometimes feel as boys moved in and filled the home to capacity.

But Clark had done a lot of growing in the intervening years. He’d lived in an *actual* mansion. He’d flown all over the world and seen real life palaces. As a result, Grandma’s had shrunk in his eyes. Why, a rough eye-balled estimate told him that the house was approximately the same size as the Batcave.

He forced himself out of his thoughts. “Ready?” he asked Benji.

“Ready,” the boy tremulously replied.

Clark raised his fist and summoned all his courage, fighting down the unease and guilt which roiled his stomach. Then he gently rapped his knuckles against the door in a soft knock he knew would be heard.

“Who’s knocking so late?” Clark heard Grandma Tildy mutter to herself from within the house.

“I’ll get it, Grandma.”

Clark froze. He *knew* that voice. It was older and deeper, but unmistakable.

Chen, his mind informed him.

What would it be like, to see him again? Not that Chen would recognize him. He wasn’t there as Clark, after all. He was Superman, and he was bringing Benji back to the home.

The door opened slowly, cautiously. Chen appeared in the doorway. He stared, wide-eyed, as he caught sight of Superman.

“Superman?” he asked, sounding flabbergasted.

Clark inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Good evening. I’m looking for Grandma Tildy. I heard she’s in charge here.”

“That’s me,” came the familiar voice of Grandma Tildy. She ambled to the door.

Clark was shocked as he gazed at her. She seemed to have barely aged in the intervening years since he’d last seen her. Her hair was a little whiter now. And she moved a little more slowly – likely from arthritis. But she stood as tall and looked as friendly as

ever. She shooed Chen away from the door.

“Superman? How can I help you?” she asked.

“I...uh...found one of your boys,” Clark stammered.

“One of my...” Grandma Tildy began.

“It’s me,” Benji interrupted, stepping around from behind Clark’s cape.

“Benji?” Grandma Tildy cried. “What in the world!”

“I...was...trying to leave,” the boy said, every word sounding carefully chosen. “I’m sorry. I know I did a horrible thing by running away. But Superman found me and talked to me. I...I want to come back, if you still want me here.”

The words came out in a rush and a couple of fresh tears spilled out of Benji’s eyes.

“Still want you?” Grandma Tildy sounded confused by that. “Of *course* we *all* want you here, Benji! Come inside, both of you, please,” she continued, ushering them both into the house. Using just her ever-moving hands, she gestured for them both to sit, but not before she enveloped Benji in a welcoming hug and checked him over for signs of injury. Clark sat uneasily on the couch as flashbacks shot through his mind, of the very first time he’d sat upon the same couch in Grandma’s living room. “Here now,” Grandma said. “Can I get you a drink or anything, Superman? Benji?”

“Thank you, but no,” Clark replied, while Benji merely shook his head mutely.

“Benji? When did you leave?” Chen asked the boy, squatting down on the floor to be eye-level with the boy. “Grandma and I have been up this whole time. We had no idea you were gone.”

“I waited until you were in the shower. And Grandma was baking in the kitchen. It was easy enough to slip out. I’m sorry.” His lower lip quivered.

“Hey, don’t get upset. No one is mad,” Chen said gently. “We just want to understand what’s going on. Okay?”

“Okay,” Benji replied, taking a deep breath. His lip stopped trembling.

“Come on,” Chen said, standing, and beckoning to Benji. “Let’s talk about what made you want to leave tonight. And if there’s something Grandma and I can do to fix things, we can work on it, all right?” He playfully tousled the boy’s hair, like a loving father or doting older brother. Benji nodded and Chen turned to Clark, extending a hand. “Thanks for finding him and bringing him back, Superman. I think I can speak for both Grandma and myself when I say we’re grateful for your help.”

“My pleasure,” Clark said, standing and shaking Chen’s outstretched hand. “Just glad I could help.” He turned to Benji. “Benji? You made a good choice tonight. I’m proud of you.”

“I wouldn’t have come back, if not for you. Thanks for talking me out of it, Superman. I...I wasn’t thinking when I left. I’m glad you found me tonight.” With that, he launched himself into Clark’s arms. He gave Clark a tight hug. “Thanks for everything, Superman.”

“You’re welcome,” Clark said, smiling. “Be good for Grandma Tildy and Chen. It’s pretty obvious they care for you a lot.”

“I will. I promise,” the boy swore. Then he was walking away, toward the rec room, where Chen was waiting in the hallway.

“Grandma?” Chen called.

Grandma Tildy waved him off. “You two talk. I’d like some time to speak with Superman. Alone.”

“Of course, Grandma,” Chen replied, bowing his head in respect.

“Don’t wait up,” Grandma instructed him.

Chen nodded. “Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight,” she replied. Then, to Clark, “Do you have some time to talk?”

Clark inclined his head in a shallow nod. “Of course.”

She smiled. “Good. Would you mind if we walked out in the

garden? It’s such a pleasant night out, and I’d love a bit of fresh air.”

“Sure,” Clark agreed.

He followed her silently as she led the way outside. She said nothing, and gave no indication of what she might want to talk to him about. But Clark was patient. Moreover, he knew that it wasn’t unlike her to hold her tongue until she was completely ready to broach a subject. So he walked alongside her in the dark, his hands clasped behind his back in a casual, comfortable way. She led him to the small gazebo at the edge of the garden, out near the lake, well away from the house.

Once there, she sat on the worn wooden bench and patted the empty space next to her. Clark obediently sat down and clasped his hands together, resting them in his lap. Grandma Tildy remained silent for another half a minute, then a smile spread across her face as she twisted in her seat to look him in the eyes.

“As I live and breathe,” she began. “Clark Kent. I never imagined I’d see you again, though I’d hoped to.”

The world exploded around Clark.

Lightning sizzled through his brain.

His ears rang worse than when he’d jumped on top of the bomb meant for the Daily Planet.

His entire body went ice cold in fear.

He could feel the blood rushing away from his face to leave him a sickly pale color.

His mouth went bone dry.

He couldn’t even blink.

Deny it! his mind screeched. *Deny it! Deny it, you idiot!*

Clark’s mouth opened in an effort to comply with the alarms ringing in his brain and deny the claim of his true identity. His jaw moved, but no sound made it out of his throat. One look from Grandma stifled even that poor effort.

“Don’t deny it,” she said softly. Amusement twinkled in her eyes and danced on her tongue. “I know it’s you. I never forget any of my boys. And don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“I...” Clark stammered.

“You can admit it,” she encouraged gently. “It’s me, after all. Not some bloodthirsty, story-seeking ne’er-do-well.”

Lie to her! Lie to her just like you’ve been lying to Lois all this time!

He closed his eyes and drank in the stillness of the night. Crickets chirped in the darkness. A firefly nearly clipped his ear as it flew by in an erratic path. Mosquitos buzzed. One landed on his hand, tried to drill its needle-nose into his ring finger, then flew off after several failed attempts. The light wind rustled the leaves on the trees ever so gently. He could smell the rich earth and the sweet perfumes of the flowers that grew all around the gazebo. He could feel Grandma’s eyes boring into him, patiently waiting for him to respond.

His heart rate spiked. He could hear the whooshing of the blood in his ears now. He could almost feel the fear and his racing thoughts hammering in his brain. He felt his stomach clench and twist as nausea rose in his body, sending bile into his throat where it burned hotly. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow and his neck, only to roll down his spine like an icy ball of shame.

What are you waiting for? Tell her that she’s wrong!

Clark sighed and shoved his inner voice aside. “You’re right. You aren’t. And...you’re right about me,” he admitted, feeling sick to his stomach at his confession.

He knew he should continue his lie. He knew he should deny the claim that he was Clark Kent. Every cell of his body was *screaming* for him to swear that he wasn’t Clark. But...he couldn’t. After all this time, after all he’d done wrong against Grandma Tildy...he couldn’t lie to her face like that.

I owe her the truth, he told himself, to quiet the queasy sensation he had in his stomach and his thudding heart – all of it caused from the frightening knowledge that he’d just told someone

about his true identity. Someone who wasn't even Lois – the one person he *wanted* to know.

"I can't lie to you," he continued. "But...how? How did you know it was me?"

Grandma chuckled and patted his knee. "I've known since Superman first appeared in public, back when that newspaper was nearly destroyed by bombs."

"The Daily Planet," Clark absently supplied.

"Right. I saw it on the news. The cameraman got a good shot of your face and, for the life of me, all I saw was the teenager who'd once lived under my roof." She smiled wistfully. "At first, I thought I was imagining things, but, the more I thought about it over the following days, the more it made sense. I'd always known there was something different about you. Not in a bad way, mind you. But something...remarkable. I used to watch the way you interacted with the other boys. You were always so careful, like you were afraid you could break them in half if you touched their shoulder the wrong way or something. I saw how you'd sometimes become withdrawn into yourself, as if struggling with some internal burden. I never knew how to approach you about it, and you always seemed to snap out of it just as soon as I resolved to speak to you. I'm guessing now it had something to do with your...uniqueness."

Clark nodded. "My powers. I was still developing them when I came to live here. Each time a new one manifested...it scared me. So I'd shut myself off a bit, until I knew I wasn't a threat to anyone, once the ability was under control."

"You could have told me. I could have helped you through it," Grandma Tildy said, a bit sadly.

Clark hung his head, mildly ashamed of himself. "I was afraid. My parents were the only ones who ever knew about how different I was. They were scared that, if anyone else found out, I'd be taken and locked up in a lab, to be poked and prodded and dissected like a frog. We decided, as a family, that no one could *ever* know that I'm not normal."

"I can certainly understand that," Grandma Tildy gently replied. "Still...I wish I could have helped. I hate seeing my boys in pain."

"I know," Clark whispered. "At the time though...it didn't feel safe, letting anyone know I'm different. It *still* doesn't. No offense."

Grandma chuckled. "None taken. Still, for a long time after you left, I blamed myself. Told myself I should have said something to you earlier," Grandma Tildy mused. "I wondered if it might have stopped you from running."

Clark shook his head. "I'm not sure. Back then...it might have made me leave *sooner*. I was...still am...terrified of people knowing about me." He sighed, his guilt nearing squeezing his lungs shut. "I'm so sorry that I ever ran. At the time...it felt like my only option. Something...happened, and I got too scared to stay. I was too afraid I'd hurt you or someone else."

Grandma Tildy nodded in understanding. "It wasn't until after I realized that you're Superman that I finally understood why you left. Or, rather, could guess well enough well. It was because of your gifts, wasn't it?"

Clark nodded in turn and looked away, unable to face the kindly old woman. "My powers were still developing. The morning I left, I set the tree by the lake on fire. Not intentionally, and it wasn't a big fire. Just two smoldering holes where I'd been staring, deep in thought. But it was enough to send me into a blind panic. I knew I couldn't stay. I couldn't risk setting another fire, even if by accident. What if I took down the entire house next time? What if I got someone killed? You or Chen or one of the other boys?" He could feel his heart breaking anew at his confession. "I never would have forgiven myself. I knew it would hurt everyone if I left without saying anything but I didn't see any other option. I wanted to get myself as far from other people as I

could until I was *sure* I wasn't a threat anymore. My powers had scared me before – sitting in a chair too heavily and breaking it into splinters, reaching for a ball under my dad's truck and lifting the entire back end by accident – but none of them had made me feel that terrified of myself before. And none of my other abilities has scared me that badly since."

"That *would* be terrifying for a fifteen-year-old," Grandma agreed. "It would be for *anyone*."

"I couldn't live with myself, knowing I might put the people I cared about in harm's way. Leaving...going off to live on my own, away from the rest of civilization, felt like the only way," Clark whispered into the night.

Grandma Tildy put her hand on Clark's back, making him turn his gaze back to her. "I appreciate the fact that you wanted to keep everyone safe," she told him.

"I'm *so* sorry," Clark said, choking back a sob.

He wasn't a crier by any means, but being here, in this place, reliving the fear and pain of those memories, confessing it all to a woman who'd been like a grandmother to him, was too much for his broken heart to bear.

"I won't ask for forgiveness," he continued once his emotions were in check. "I know I don't deserve it."

"Yes, you do," Grandma said firmly, lifting his chin so that she could look directly into his eyes. "And you don't need to ask. I've already forgiven you. Clark, there's *nothing* you could have ever done that I wouldn't have been able to forgive. You did what you felt you needed to do, with the best of intentions. That's noble, even if I wish things had gone differently."

"No, it wasn't noble," Clark said, shaking his head sadly. "I caused you pain. You and Chen and everyone else. It was selfish. I didn't even leave a note to say goodbye." He sighed and paused for a few seconds. "How *did* he take it, after I left?"

"You mean Chen?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah."

"Hard," Grandma answered after a moment. "I won't lie about that. He missed you. I think he half expected you to come back, in the beginning, especially once the summer was over and the weather started to turn meaner. He threw himself into his role as my helper. I think, in his own way, he wanted to distract himself. Maybe even 'fill in' for you. After all, it was you who helped us find a lot of ways to save and make money to help with running the house."

Clark hung his head, ashamed. "See? I caused problems."

"Clark Kent, you stop beating yourself up right this instant!" Grandma scolded, but not unkindly. "You have to forgive yourself." She reached over and patted his knee.

"I wish I could," Clark replied. "So many times, I thought about coming back to apologize, once I realized I had my powers under complete control and that I was no longer a danger for others to be around."

"Why didn't you?" The question was full of curiosity and devoid of accusations. She cocked her head slightly to the right as she waited his response, a habit Clark knew she had when she was giving someone her full attention.

"I..." Clark began, searching carefully for the right words. He rolled his eyes upwards to the heavens, as if the words were written out for him in the stars. "Honestly? I felt like I had no right to come back. I'd been gone too long. I couldn't even offer a good explanation for why I'd left, not without exposing my super side. And once Bruce took me in...I felt like coming back would be...kind of like rubbing my dumb luck in everyone's faces." He brought his gaze back to Grandma.

"Bruce Wayne," Grandma nodded. "We'd heard he'd taken you in. The police informed me that you were safe in his care after he notified them that he was opening up his home to you." Sadness was welled in her eyes, and something else too. It almost looked like...

She felt like she could never measure up to all Bruce could offer; he realized with a fresh jolt of guilt.

"You knew?" he forced himself to say instead.

For some reason, the idea that Grandma might have been told his whereabouts had never crossed Clark's mind. But, he had to admit to himself, it made complete sense that she would have been told, if only to put her mind at ease. He wondered if maybe Bruce had reminded the police to tell Grandma that Clark was safe.

Again, the older woman nodded. "I was relieved to hear that you were well and safe. And I'd thought about writing to you at Wayne Manor. But I thought that maybe it might only upset you, because I didn't understand yet why you'd run away. Had I known it was because of your powers, and not anything about the house, I would have sent you a letter." Her voice trembled slightly as she smoothed out an imaginary wrinkle in the lap of her skirt, and Clark knew that she was ill at ease with her decision to quietly leave him to his new life in Gotham.

"Oh, Grandma," Clark said, his heart hurting. He reached over and hugged the woman, feeling her hug him back fiercely in return. After a moment, he pulled away again. "I never really got the chance to say this but, thank you. For everything. I really *did* appreciate everything about living here. I still do. I would have been lost, if not for you. You gave me a roof over my head. Food to eat. Clothing. Friends. You gave me my career too. I don't think I ever would have considered journalism, if not for you." He smiled softly. "I did what you told me to do, by the way."

"What was that?"

"I wrote. Every day. Sometimes it was only a line or two. Some days, it was a page or more. But I wrote. I bought new notebooks and pens when I could, with what little money I could find or earn. And you were right. It was good for me. It helped alleviate some of the loneliness and it gave me a chance to hone my writing skills. It helped me to work out my feelings about my powers too. Thank you, for putting me on that path."

Grandma Tildy smiled brightly. "I always knew you had the skill to become a great writer. When I first saw your byline in The Gotham Gazette and then The Daily Planet, I couldn't have been prouder."

"Thanks, Grandma," Clark replied humbly. "Being a reporter...it's a dream come true. Especially working for the Planet."

Grandma laughed. "And I'm sure that has nothing to do with working with Lois Lane."

How did she know about Lois? he immediately wondered.

Clark felt even his ears heat in a blush and he rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. "Is there *anything* you don't know about?" he joked with a reserved smile.

She'd give Bobby Bigmouth a run for his money, he mused. He had to bite back the laugh that threatened to escape his throat. *Chen always did say she's got eyes in the back of her head and ears everywhere.*

Grandma Tildy laughed again. "The gossip rags have featured the two of you more than once," she explained with a casual shrug. "Is it true?"

"We're..." He paused for a split second, debating on how best to define their relationship. It was true that they'd been dating for almost a year, but with him being so close to coming clean to her about Superman – and not knowing how she would react to it – he knew it could all come crashing down in the next couple of days.

"You love her." Grandma's face split into a wide grin. "I can tell from the sparkle in your eyes."

"I do," he confessed, a happy grin transforming his face from the picture of heartbreak it had been only moments before.

"Does she know?" she asked, gesturing to the S on Clark's chest.

Clark shook his head. "Not yet."

"You need to tell her," Grandma warned sternly, her mouth

twisting into a shallow frown, "if you're to get serious with her." She wagged a finger at him as she spoke, but Clark knew she wasn't unhappy with him, only giving him advice that she hoped he'd take to heart.

"Oh, I'm *very* serious about our relationship. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. And...I'm working on telling her."

"Working on it?" Grandma Tildy asked, arching an eyebrow. The tone of her voice left the expectation in the air that he would explain what he meant. He'd heard it many times before when he'd lived under her roof – not only directed at himself, but to the other boys living there as well.

"I'm ready to tell her. Just...finding a time to sit down for as long as I'm going to need to explain it all to her isn't easy," Clark began to explain, a bit sheepishly. "Between the Planet and Superman..." He let his voice trail off.

"Excuses," she said with gentle dismissiveness.

Clark took a deep breath as he allowed himself to admit that she was right. He nodded slowly. "Well...yeah." The words tumbled out in a rush as he exhaled again. "I've let my...my insecurities find...or *create*...excuse after excuse. But not anymore. I'm...I'm finally ready. I think."

"Well, I'm glad you found someone," Grandma said, putting a slightly gnarled hand on his shoulder. "And I hope she can understand just how special you are. But you need to make telling her a priority. Better she should hear it from you than figure it out on her own. She seems like an intelligent woman, from all I've read. Mark my words, Clark," she warned.

"Thanks. I know. She deserves to hear it from me. You're right, she's probably the smartest person I know. But, more than that, I don't want to break her heart. Superman is already causing problems. I know it hurts her, whenever I disappear to make a rescue."

"All the more reason to tell her as soon as possible," she insisted. A moment passed, then, "Clark? About the Superman thing?"

"Yes?" he asked warily, not sure where Grandma was headed.

"I've never been prouder of any of my boys than I am of you, for choosing to become Superman."

Clark hadn't been expecting that and it took him a second to respond.

"Really?" he asked, incredulous.

"Of course," Grandma Tildy replied, as though it were the most obvious thing in all the world.

"Not even Chen? I mean, he stuck to his word. He'd helping you run the house and everything," Clark half protested.

"Clark, listen to me," Grandma said gently. "Yes, it's true. Chen *has* done what he's always said he would do. But it's what he's always *wanted* to do. None of it was a sacrifice for him. He's done what he always planned to do – he married Mina and they have a wonderful family together – a boy and a girl and another little girl on the way. You, on the other hand..."

"I'm doing what I've always wanted too," Clark interrupted quietly. "I've always wanted to be able to use these powers of mine to help people. It seems only right and...it feels good."

"That may be so, but you don't honestly expect me to believe that you haven't made sacrifices in the process. You're living two different lives, Clark. Your real life and this," she said, sweeping a hand up and down in front of his costume. "The fantasy. There are only so many hours in a day. You can't possibly do both without sacrificing things – a night out with friends, a date with Lois, even just a quiet night at home, alone." She gazed at him with eyes that seemed to pierce him through, all the way down to his very soul.

"Well...sure, I guess there have been times when I had to respond to a rescue instead of doing something I really wanted to. My relationship with Lois has been...strained...at times, due to my disappearances, like I mentioned. That's part of the reason why I'm looking forward to finally telling her my secret...even

though telling her is the one of most terrifying things I've ever had to do. Being homeless was a piece of cake compared to this." He cracked a wry smile.

"You see? Being Superman... your powers aside... it takes courage. I'm proud of you, for having that courage. And yes, I am also very, very proud of all the good you've managed to do in this world. It takes a special kind of person, with a special kind of heart, to be so giving of themselves."

Clark found himself humbled into speechlessness. He bowed his head, fighting off a blush. Grandma Tildy once more put her hand on his back.

"I always sensed you were meant for greatness," she said in a confidential tone. "I just had no idea *how* great you'd become."

"Thank you," Clark said, finally finding his voice. "Coming from you, that means the world to me."

"I wouldn't say it if it wasn't the God's honest truth," the woman replied.

Clark nodded. "I know."

When he left, about an hour later, Clark's heart felt lighter. He still burned with shame and guilt for having run away so long ago, but Grandma's pride in him and forgiveness of his actions had put to rest some of the questions and heartache he'd carried in his soul. For the first time, he could think of the halfway house without too much pain. He had a smile on his face as he flew back to Metropolis — at a much more leisurely pace than when he'd flown out to Kansas, in search of the escaped killer.

Was that really just a few hours ago? he wondered in awe. It feels like a week ago that I helped find Coleman.

He shook his head in disbelief. He felt like days should have passed in the intervening time, not mere hours. He certainly felt tired enough for it to have been more than a few measly hours. He covered his mouth with his hand as a yawn overtook him, and he found himself looking forward to a good night's sleep.

It was really great, seeing Grandma again, he thought as the rolling countryside slipped away beneath him as he let the stars guide him home to Metropolis. *I'll have to visit again soon, like I promised her.*

Perhaps he could even take Lois with him. The thought surprised him as soon as it entered his brain. Of course, she would need to know the full truth about himself before he flew her out to Kansas. *If* she took his secret well. But if she *did*, Clark knew that Lois would like Grandma Tildy. And Grandma would like Lois, he was sure of it. Suddenly, he was very aware of how important that was to him. Grandma had been his caretaker. Lois was the love of his life. It was vital to him that they approve of one another, just as it had been necessary that Bruce and Lois approved of each other. Bruce and Grandma were the only family he had left — a surrogate brother and grandmother the universe had given him in exchange for ripping his parents away from him.

They'll like each other, he assured himself. *Grandma and Lois are both such incredible women.*

There's nothing about either one of them that the other could possibly find fault with. Lois loves me, despite my awful past... though how she'll react to my secret identity still has yet to be seen. And Grandma... He shook his head in amusement. She's something else. She forgave me as easily as if all I'd done was knock over a vase or something. She really is a one of a kind woman.

Not long after, he arrived home. After a quick two-minute shower, Clark fell, exhausted, into his bed and slept deeply. For the most part, his sleep was dreamless, but, when he did dream, they were all pleasant ones.

Clark hung up the phone with a smile, then leaned back in his chair for a moment. He took in all the familiar sights and sounds of the bullpen, still riding the rush of warm peacefulness that had entered his heart the night before. For the first time in months, he

felt like everything was going right and he allowed himself to luxuriate in that feeling. He was only too aware how fleeting those moments could be — how fleeting his might very well be, once he came clean about himself to Lois. But for now, he couldn't afford to think about that. He didn't *want* to. He simply wanted to focus on all the good things that had happened lately.

"Hey, you're in a good mood today," Lois observed from across the aisle, where she sat at her desk studying him. "More than usual," she amended with a wry grin. She stood and crossed the scant few feet that separated their desks.

Clark chuckled and raised his coffee in a mock toast. "What's not to be happy about?" he responded. "After the evidence we got yesterday, we're going to nail Luthor for his role in the Planet bombing. *And*, we helped those two boys out. I'd say there's *plenty* to be in a good mood about."

Lois leaned a hip against his desk and studied his face for a moment, looking less than convinced. Clark squirmed a little internally under her gaze. She wasn't merely just looking at him. It felt like she was looking *through* him, with an X-ray vision of her own, searching through his thoughts. He wasn't fooling her in the least, he knew. He could sense a little unhappiness in her as she looked at him, and he wondered if this was it, the final lie that would push Lois over the edge and make her resent him.

"You weren't even this thrilled about it last night," she observed, looking him up and down with a critical eye. She crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. "What's going on, Clark? What happened? Last night you were excited about our evidence against Lex Luthor. But now? Now you look like an unsupervised kid in a candy store with a fistful of cash." Her eyes narrowed and he felt his throat tighten and go completely dry. "I *know* there's something you're not telling me. As usual. And to be honest, I'm getting a little tired of it."

"Lois...I..." he stammered.

"This has something to do with that mysterious talk you keep alluding to," she correctly accused. "The talk that, quite frankly, I'm wondering if we'll *ever* have."

"Lois, I know I," he sputtered before she cut him off.

"Yeah, I know. 'Soon,' right? 'We'll talk. I can explain.' Right?"

"Well, I..."

"That's what I thought. Yet here we are, again. You're acting stranger than usual and I'm still stuck in the dark about what's really going on in your head." Tight lines of worry stretched over her face and wrinkled the corners of her eyes. Clark knew that they were caused, in part, from Lois still being tired from the night before. But it was more than that. His secretiveness was hurting her heart and mind beyond words.

"I..." Clark stammered, his mind racing as she leveled her gaze at him, daring him to respond.

It was true. His good mood *wasn't* completely due to the videotape that would help convict Luthor of the plot to destroy the paper. It was his conversation with Grandma Tildy that had lightened his heart and put him in such high spirits. But how could he tell her that without incorporating Superman?

"Clark? Talk to me. You've been doing this *lot* lately. Being secretive. Dodging my questions. Running out on our conversations or investigations with little to no explanations. And I know, I know. I'm just your girlfriend and I have no right to pry into your private life but, this is driving me *crazy*. *Especially* since you promised you'd tell me why." She was half demanding, half pleading with him, he realized.

"I know," he said softly, with a sigh. "And I promise, it'll all make sense to you soon."

"Clark, I swear to God, if I hear that word one more time," she threatened, leaving the rest unsaid.

"I know, I know," he quickly amended. "Sorry." He sighed softly. "I know I haven't been the best about keeping my promise

to talk to you. You're right. I need to finally make time to sit down with you and explain myself. But not now, not in the newsroom."

"I've heard that one before," she crossly reminded him.

"I know that too," he said apologetically. "But, once we *do* talk, you'll understand why I can't do it here. Trust me. But... you're right. It's not just the prospect of sending Luthor to prison that's got me in a good mood." He paused and took a breath, ready to make the plunge, small as it was. "Something happened last night, after I went home."

"What?" she prodded, curiosity shining in her eyes. Her fingertips drummed on her upper arms as she waited for his answer.

"I...had a conversation. A really, *really* long overdue one. And, well...it was exactly what I needed."

"With who?"

Clark took another deep breath. "Grandma Tildy."

Lois gaped in surprise and she let her arms drop to her sides. "The woman who ran the halfway house you once lived in? *That* Grandma Tildy?"

Clark nodded, feeling more confident as he edited his story to leave out Superman completely. "Yeah. It was about time I cleared the air with her over what happened...with me running away. She's an incredible woman, Lois. One day, I hope I can bring you out there to meet her. She forgave me, even though she didn't have to. And it was good for me, to finally say I'm sorry for what I did."

Lois was smiling at him now. She leaned in and gave him a hug, then a kiss on his cheek. "That's really great, Clark! I'm really happy for you." She paused and looked at him, sizing up his story. "So, why, exactly, was that such a big secret?"

"Well," Clark replied, toeing the floor in embarrassment. "It just felt...a little private, that's all. But, I'm glad I told you."

"I'm glad too. I remember you telling me about how guilty you felt about leaving. I'm glad you got the chance to talk to her and get things off your chest."

"Me too. It's like...like a weight has been lifted from me," Clark admitted. "I feel...different now. I won't say the guilt is gone but...at least she knows now how sorry I am that I left. She did so much for me, when I was under her care. I've always hated how ungrateful I must have seemed, sneaking off in the night like I did." He took a sip of his coffee and frowned in displeasure. "Anyway, how was your night?"

Lois shrugged. "What night? I showered and went straight to bed once I got home. I was pretty tired. But, it was a good tired, you know? The kind that comes from having worked really hard to accomplish a goal."

Clark nodded, grinning in amusement. He loved watching Lois' face brighten whenever she got fired up about something. Her passion made his heart skip a beat. "I know the feeling." He drank again. "Actually, that reminds me. I need to talk to Perry."

"About the investigation?"

He shook his head. "About that kid, Jack. I was thinking, he's old enough to hold down a job. Maybe Perry can get him something here at the Planet. Jack's been dealt a rough hand...he needs someone to give him a real chance to turn his life around. Whether or not Jack will accept is a different matter, but I can at least try to help him get that chance."

Lois smiled tenderly and cupped Clark's cheek with one hand. "You're a very sweet guy, Clark. Go on. Go save the world, one kid at a time," she teased him, playing with his tie ever so slightly.

"Thanks. Hopefully, the Chief won't need too much convincing." He took her hand and kissed it, to distract her from his tie.

"You want me to come with you, as backup?" she offered.

Clark brightened even further. "Sure. You should be there, when he finds out that Jack provided us with the evidence we need to put a close to the Planet bombing." He took another sip and

wincing. "Ugh, who made the coffee this morning?"

"Tim. Which is why I went down to the newsstand to get mine," she replied, gesturing to the empty Styrofoam cup on her desk.

"Good call. I can't drink this," Clark said, setting down his mug with a mental note to discard the burnt tasting brew after their meeting with Perry. "Ready?" he asked.

Lois nodded just once. "Let's go," she smiled, and took his hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "Hey, no matter what Perry says, I'm proud of you for sticking up for Jack."

Clark smiled back. "Thanks. I appreciate that." He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "Okay. Let's go get Jack a job."

Together, they walked toward Perry's office, each stride nearly in sync as they went. When they arrived, Perry's door was slightly ajar. They could hear him talking on his phone as he paced slightly.

"Of course not, Alice! No, I'm not sure that's a good idea. Jerry needs to figure this one out on his own. Well, of course I love him, but this is the third time in ten years..." Perry stopped and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. Lois and Clark respectfully stepped back away from the door, but they could still hear him. "All right, yeah. I'll wire the money over this afternoon. Okay, honey. Love you too." Perry hung up the phone and sighed again.

Clark waited a few seconds, then knocked. "Perry?"

"Oh, Clark! Come on in, son," Perry beckoned.

"If this a bad time, we can come back," Clark replied, opening the door a little wider.

Perry waved off his concern. "No, no. It's fine. Come on in, you two."

"Is everything okay, Chief?" Lois ventured to ask.

Perry sighed. "Jerry's in trouble with the law. Again. Passing bad checks. *Again*." He rubbed at his eyes, looking tired beyond measure. "When will that kid *finally* shape up?"

"Sorry, Perry. I know you and Alice have dealt with a lot from him in the last few years," Lois offered.

Again, Perry waved absently, as though to dismiss the topic. "Never mind. What brings the two of you to my office? Please, tell me it's good news." He laughed ruefully.

"Actually," Clark said, "it *is* good news. We found out who was responsible for the hit on the Planet."

"And why," Lois added.

That perked Perry up. His eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "Oh?"

Clark nodded. "Lex Luthor."

Perry laughed heartily. It was obvious that he thought it was a joke.

"Lex...Luthor?" he asked between peals of laughter. "Kent, when I hired you, I had no idea you had such a sense of humor. That was a good one. Thanks for cheering me up some." He wiped a tear out of his eye and took a moment to control his laughter, while Lois and Clark exchanged a glance. "Now then. Who was it, *really*?"

"Uh, Chief? Clark isn't joking," Lois said gently. "We have proof – a tape showing his right-hand man giving the bomber money."

Perry instantly sobered. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack," Lois replied with a nod.

Clark nodded as well. "It fits with the story Mr. Stern told us too."

"What story?" Perry asked, his curiosity plainly written across his features.

Together, Lois and Clark rehashed the entire story – from meeting with Mr. Stern, to Bobby Bigmouth's tip, to tracking down Jack. When they got to the part about finding Jack and Denny in what had passed for their home, Clark took over, describing to Perry in detail just how desperate the boys' plight

was and how Jack had seemed willing to make a change.

"I see," Perry said, rubbing his chin, once the story was complete. "And this tape...?"

"Already with the police," Lois assured him. "It wouldn't surprise me if Lex is in custody before the day is out."

Perry shook his head, still in shock. "I don't believe it. I mean, I believe you two but...I don't believe it. Lex? He's always been so generous to the people of Metropolis."

Clark shrugged. "Some people are just really good at hiding who they really are."

Once more, Perry shook his head. "Well, good work, you two. I want you to follow this thing all the way through, you hear me?"

Clark nodded. "Of course, Chief."

Perry scowled. "Lex Luthor! All this time, he's pretended to be a friend to the paper." He took a deep breath to calm down and looked at Clark. "Anything else?"

"Well..." Clark hedged. "There was something I wanted to ask you about, but it can wait, if you'd like."

"No, I'm fine. Go ahead and ask," Perry encouraged.

"That boy? Jack? The one who gave us the tape? I was thinking...he could use a job. Make a little money. Get some experience. You know...the chance to completely turn his life around," Clark said, carefully choosing his words. "And I was thinking...maybe he could get that...here."

Perry appeared to mull it over, which Clark *had* to assume was a good thing. After all, the Chief hadn't immediately rejected the suggestion. Perry scratched his chin, then the top of his head.

"I don't know...it's a gamble," he said after an excruciatingly long minute. "You mentioned his, shall we say, *spotty* record with the law..."

"I know it looks bad," Clark admitted. "Jack knows it too. But I got the chance to really sit and talk with him yesterday. He wants a fresh start, Chief. He's had a rough life. All he needs is someone to take a chance on him."

"This means a lot to you, huh?" Perry asked.

"Yeah, it does," Clark confirmed softly with a nod. "Because I was just like him, once. Maybe I didn't steal to survive but..." He shrugged. "I got lucky. Someone took a gamble on me."

Perry hesitantly nodded. "Okay then. I think the mailroom might need to fill a few positions. I'll check around. If he proves himself, maybe we can move him up here, to the newsroom."

"He's a smart kid. He'd probably be a good researcher," Clark said, thinking aloud. "And he's good with electronics. The camera he used to tape Luthor's man and Joey Bermuda with was broken when he found it in a dumpster – or so he says. He got it up and running after a little tweaking, and wound up catching the exchange when he was testing it out to try and sell at a pawn shop."

"We'll see," was the most Perry would promise. "For now, I'll double check on the mailroom."

"Thanks, Chief," Clark said graciously. "That's all I ask."

Perry nodded gruffly. "Good. Now, while we wait to see if an arrest is made today, I need you both to get out there and find me something to print in the blank spaces of my paper."

Lois' grin rivaled the intensity of the sun. "Don't we always?"

Just a few short days later, Lois slowed her Jeep down as she approached the valet parking at Armand's Steakhouse. There were two cars ahead of them, and Lois put the car into park. She turned to Clark and gave him a nervous smile. He smiled back, trying to encourage her. He reached across and took her hand, running his thumb over her knuckles in a calming fashion. He wanted to say something to allay her worry, but he wasn't sure what actually *would* make Lois more comfortable with the dinner to come.

"Beautiful night," he quietly remarked instead, hoping he could at least draw her thoughts away from her mother.

Lois nodded as she looked out of the windshield. "It really is. I

wish we were doing...oh, just about anything else. Seems a shame to waste the night cooped up indoors."

The night sun was beginning to set, throwing brilliant shafts of light, gilding all the world in molten gold. The night was warm and rich with humidity – Clark could smell the rain that would roll in later that night. He loved this time of the year, when the world woke from its sleepy winter hibernation and burst forth with vibrant new life. Even here, in Metropolis, he enjoyed the sights of the early summer – skinny trees lining the streets, every limb heavy with bright green leaves, flowers blooming in planters on the sidewalks or in window boxes in countless apartments, birds that twittered on rooftops or pecked at scraps of food that had been dropped in the streets.

"Well, if we get out early enough, maybe we can take a walk in the park before heading back home," Clark offered.

"I'd like that," she said, brightening a little.

The valets took the cars ahead of them and Lois pulled up. Behind the Jeep, the valet line was growing ever longer. After a few quiet minutes, a cut-shaven young man with a mop of blonde hair approached the car. Lois opened the door and got out, handing him the keys.

"Ready for this?" Lois asked as Clark offered his arm to her. "There's still time to back out."

"And risk the indignant wrath of Ellen Lane?" Clark teased with mock fear, and giving her a smile. "It's probably best we don't."

"Ugh!" Lois teased back. "Such a goody two-shoes. Trying to rack up points with Mom, are you?"

"Well, she's not overly fond of me, is she?" Clark replied thoughtfully.

"No, she likes you. She's just...Mom." She shrugged, as if that statement alone explained everything. Clark gave her a quizzical, disbelieving look, that asked her without needing to speak if she was serious. "She's...a little...critical. Of everyone," Lois sighed. "Try not to take what she says too much to heart. Besides, she's been more lenient on you than anyone else I've ever seen her meet."

Clark shot her another look, complete with an arched eyebrow. He shook his head in incredulity as they walked. He opened the door to Armand's Steakhouse, where they were to meet Lois' mother and sister.

"I don't mind whatever she has to say about me," he said dismissively as they stepped into the lobby. "It's watching her criticize *you* that I have trouble with." He knew his mouth was turned down in a mild frown, but he didn't care. It took every bit of his restraint to not give Ellen a verbal lashing each time she criticized Lois.

Lois sighed again. "She means well. And I don't think she means to come off half as judgmental as she does. She thinks she's helping when she says things. And, honestly, ever since she started seeing a therapist a few years ago, she's been much more mindful of what she's saying. It's...a work in progress."

"If you say so," Clark allowed with a dubious look.

"She's still exhausting to deal with, but our relationship is in a much better place now than it used to be."

Clark stopped and faced her, putting his hands on her slender waist. He smiled and bent his neck to give her a light kiss. "And for that, I'm glad," he said with seriousness after he'd kissed her.

"Besides, Lucy really likes you," Lois reminded him with a grin as she gently and playfully bopped the tip of his nose with her finger.

He smiled again and his tone got lighter. "I like her too. She's a great person. I wish we had the chance to see her more often."

"You and me both," Lois said with a soft laugh. "When I talked to her the other night on the phone, she said she's considering moving back to Metropolis. She said she's thinking of going back to school and finishing her degree."

“Nice!” Clark said with approval. “What field?”

“Accounting. She was about halfway through when she dropped out of school to move across the country for her boyfriend at the time. Turned out the jerk was married and seeing five different women at the same time. She dumped him but the damage was done. She got derailed with her degree and never tried to get back into it. Until now. She’s finally getting her life back on track.” The pride in Lois’ voice was unmistakable.

“Good for her,” Clark said, grinning as he peered beyond the hostess stand. “And, speaking of, there they are now.” He nodded to where he could see Ellen and Lucy sitting at a table. Lucy was excitedly talking about something, it seemed. She was gesturing expansively as she spoke and Clark could only wonder what had the younger woman so worked up.

“Ready?” Lois asked him again.

“With you by my side? I can handle anything,” he said sincerely. He hugged her to his side for a moment, drawing strength and comfort from her and imparting what he could in return.

Lois took a step, then hesitated. “Thanks for coming with me,” she added.

“Hey, of course,” he said, smiling and cupping her cheek with his hand.

Lois smiled in return. “My very own superhero,” she murmured.

A chill ran down Clark’s spine. With Lex Luthor’s arrest and with the amount of dirt they’d been digging up on the disgraced billionaire’s other underhanded deeds, he and Lois had been kept far too busy for him to even *attempt* to tell her about Superman, despite the fact that, after talking to Grandma Tildy that one night, he was more resolved than ever to finally tell Lois the truth.

Maybe tonight, if this dinner doesn’t go too late, he told himself. After all, she has tomorrow off. It might be for the best. Although...is that really fair to Lois, to throw that at her after a dinner with her mother?

“I’m no hero,” he whispered, a little hoarsely. “I’m just a simple man who loves you and would do anything for you.”

No, I have to tell her tonight. It can’t wait any longer. I’ve been a coward for far too long about this.

“You’re sweet,” Lois said, her smile brightening even more. She stretched on her toes and gave him a quick kiss on his lips. “Well...into the lion’s den,” she muttered after they parted once more.

You have no idea, Lois, he thought with a mental sigh.

With that, they left the lobby of the restaurant and made their way over to the table where Ellen and Lucy sat waiting. Lois greeted them both with a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. Clark did the same. He’d learned, from previous meetings with the Lane women, that this was their preferred way to say hello, rather than something more stilted, like a handshake. It made him smile inside. His own parents – particularly his mother – had been much the same.

“Good to see you again, Ellen,” he said as the woman swept him up into a quick hug.

“You too, Clark,” she replied, smiling and patting his cheek affectionately. “You look well.”

“So do you,” Clark responded. He moved on to embrace Lucy. “Hi, Lucy. How are you doing?”

“I’m great. You?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Clark answered as they all sat down.

“How was your trip in?” Lois asked her mother as they each unfolded their napkins and draped them over their laps.

Ellen rolled her eyes.

So that’s where Lois learned that perfect eye roll, Clark thought with a mental laugh. He bit back the smile that threatened to turn up the corners of his mouth.

“Traffic was awful. Took me twice as long as usual getting

into this wretched city. Why you love it here is beyond me,” Ellen said with mild disgust.

“You used to love it here too, when Lucy and I were kids,” Lois pointed out.

Ellen nodded. “True. Then I divorced your father and wisened up.”

“Mother!” Lucy said sharply, looking up from her menu.

Ellen shrugged. “It’s the truth. Anyway, we’re not here to discuss your father. God only knows where that train of thought will crash.”

“No, we aren’t,” Lois agreed in a flat, but diplomatic tone.

The waiter appeared at their table then, filling their water glasses from a pitcher of ice water that he carried with him, and dropping off a generous basket of bread and butter. Clark caught the look of relief on Lois’ face as the conversation was disrupted, and he mentally bolstered the man’s tip for his excellent timing.

“Good evening,” he greeted them. “My name is Zander. I’ll be your waiter tonight. May I take your orders? Or do you need a few minutes?”

“I know what I want,” Lois said with a shrug as she closed her menu.

“Me too,” Lucy chimed in.

Ellen glanced at her menu. “I’m set.”

Clark nodded. “I’m ready.”

The truth was, he and Lois had been to Armand’s Steakhouse before, and always ordered the same things. Zander nodded, placed the pitcher of water down, and whipped out his notepad. Then he went around the table, taking everyone’s orders in turn – filet mignon medallions for Lucy and the steak and lobster combo for Lois, Clark, and Ellen. When he was finished, Zander retrieved his pitcher of water and quietly slipped away to put in their order, stopping only once to refill the drinks at a neighboring table.

“So, Lucy,” Clark said, looking to his left where Lois’ sister was sitting. “I heard you’re moving back to the city. Or, thinking about it, I guess is more accurate.” He fidgeted in his seat a little, trying to get more comfortable.

Lucy nodded, grinning. “Yeah. At least, that’s the plan. I still have to secure an apartment and everything, but, I’m looking. I was hoping to start classes in the fall but, it’s already early summer. I may have to wait until the next semester. We’ll see,” she said with a shrug, sounding unconcerned.

She’s a stark contrast to Lois. The thought flashed across Clark’s mind, quick as lightning. Lois would be nervous over not having a concrete plan.

It amused him. Lois could be impulsive sometimes – he’d seen her throw herself head first into more than one situation without checking the water level thoroughly. But something this big – moving to a new city, focusing on a new goal like a job or schooling — would have her on pins and needles, until she knew every last detail of how it was all going to work out. Lucy, on the other hand, seemed very casual about the whole thing, as though there was nothing to be worried about and if things worked out, they worked out.

“Well, if I hear of any apartments, I’ll let you know,” he promised, taking a sip of his water.

Lucy shrugged again. “Thanks, Clark. Lois said she has the classifieds guy keeping his eye out too. Something’ll turn up, eventually.” She gestured flippantly, as though it wasn’t a big deal at all.

Lois nodded. “Lance. He’s screening out ones he knows are in decent buildings for me.”

“So, what about you?” Lucy asked, changing the subject easily. She picked a piece of bread from the basket and a packet of butter. She put it on her plate and started to smear the butter across the bread. “You two put Lex Luthor behind bars. How does that feel?” She gestured subtly with her knife.

Clark stopped himself from smiling too broadly. Instead, he

allowed only a mild half-smile to twist up the corners of his mouth. “It feels... weird. Good, but weird.”

“You knew him, right?” Lucy went on, paying more attention to her task of buttering the bread than to him.

“Yeah. Not well, of course, but...” He let his voice trail off for a moment as he let his memories crash over him. He tried not to wince as he recalled shielding the bomb blast with his body. “I never once thought he’d be capable of something like hiring a bomber to try and destroy the Planet.” He shook his head sadly, then squared his shoulders in resolve. “It feels good to finally have the responsible party in jail, no matter who it is.”

“It’s a shame,” Ellen added, folding her hands on the tabletop and leaning slightly back in her chair. “When I worked at Metropolis General, he was always donating to the hospital. To this day, his contributions have made them one of the most advanced hospitals in the country. *The* most advanced on the East Coast, if I’m not mistaken.”

“No one’s denying that Lex did *some* good,” Lois countered, following Lucy’s lead and taking some bread. “But he’s done a *lot* of bad things too. Things we’re still learning about.”

“It’s like an iceberg,” Clark mused darkly. He gestured vaguely with one hand, the other on his drink. “Luthor showed what he wanted to the public – the part of the iceberg that sticks up above the water. But the part lurking below the surface? *That’s* the truly dangerous part. Like Lois said, we have *no idea* yet just how much evil he’s committed. We’ve already uncovered more than anyone dreamed was possible.”

“Evil is a little strong of a word, don’t you think?” Ellen asked, frowning, taking a sip of her water.

Clark shook his head confidently and let go of his glass. His fist tightened of its own accord. “Evil isn’t strong *enough* of a word,” he argued, his voice flinty and unyielding. “He’s not the person everyone thinks he is. He’s... got blood on his hands. A *lot* of it, from the look of things.” It hurt him to say such things. As much as he hated Lex Luthor, he was still a man Clark knew personally. He was a man Bruce had had a few, albeit small, business dealings with.

Ellen silently raised a skeptical eyebrow. The look was enough to convey all her thoughts on the matter. Lois glanced around quickly, as though expecting the other diners to be leaning in to listen.

“We can’t say much now,” Lois said in a hurried, hushed tone. “There’s still a lot we’re learning and trying to verify. But... Clark’s right. Lex had the world fooled.”

Ellen huffed for a moment and Clark thought she was on the verge of arguing things further. But then, to his surprise, she put her hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“If you say so,” she allowed and Clark felt the tension in his body draining away as he realized she wasn’t going to fight. “I guess I’ll have to wait and see what comes out in the expose.”

“Maybe we should talk about something else,” Lucy offered, just as their waiter returned with their drinks and the salads that accompanied each of their meals. “Looks good,” she said, once Zander vanished once again.

Lois chuckled. “You say that *every* time, Luce.”

Lucy shot back a grin. “Because it’s true *every* time.”

“So, Mom, how’s work?” Lois asked a minute later, as she buttered a second piece of the hot, flaky bread.

Ellen chewed for a moment, then swallowed the piece of tomato she’d been eating. “Could be better. The hospital is cutting our hours again. I’m fine, but the others...” She sighed and stabbed her pointer finger down onto the pristine white table cloth. “Those idiots in charge don’t realize how much manpower the nurses provide, around the clock, in keeping that hospital going.”

“You’re right,” Clark agreed whole-heartedly. “I’ve always heard it said that the nurses are the lifeblood of the hospital. Without them, the patients suffer.” In his mind, he immediately

pictured the team of nurses he’d met when his father had been in the hospital, the last time Clark had ever seen him. They had tried so hard to give Clark hope and assuage his fears. He’d always been grateful for their kindness and compassion.

Ellen gave him a look of approval. “Thank you! That’s exactly our point! We’re fighting but... if push comes to shove, a lot of the nurses are ready to go on strike.”

Lois visibly cringed. “That would be bad.”

Ellen nodded. “You’re telling me. We’re already shorthanded. I can’t imagine what a strike would do to us.”

“What about you?” Clark asked curiously, blindly poking at his salad. “Are you ready to strike too?”

Ellen appeared to think it over for a moment. “I’m not sure, to be honest. On the one hand, I’m starting to think a strike is the only way we’re going to be heard. On the other, I’m not sure I can leave the patients like that, knowing how much some of them depend on us.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully as he ate a bite of his salad. It was nice to see Ellen speak with such passion about her job. He knew, from Lois, how she’d always enjoyed her profession, and how it had devastated her to almost lose her medical license when she’d been at her lowest point during the divorce, when her alcoholism had spiraled out of control. It had taken her a long time and a *lot* of willpower, but she’d been able to seek help, sober up, and reenter the world of nursing, not to mention save her quickly deteriorating relationships with her daughters. It made him feel proud of the woman who, with any luck, would one day be his mother-in-law.

Mother-in-law.

Lois would never get to experience having his parents for her in-laws. His parents would never see their son pledge his life to the woman he loved. *If* Lois could forgive him his lies and accept his extraterrestrial origins.

He sighed softly, but the Lanes were so busy with their conversation that none of them noticed.

“We should talk to Perry,” Lois decided aloud. “See if he can get someone to cover what’s going on. The more press exposure, the better.”

“That’s a good idea,” Clark replied, nodding to himself and forcing his mind to focus on the conversation at hand. “We can drop him an email tonight, since we won’t be in tomorrow.”

“Well,” Ellen said slowly, as though mulling it over, “I can’t argue with that. Anything that might put pressure on management to come to the table and negotiate with us. I mean, *really* negotiate with us, not just sit down and try to bully us to get us to back down.”

“Of course,” Lois said, nodding.

Ellen cracked a tiny smile. “Thank you, sweetheart.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “If we can put this threat of a strike behind us, we can *finally* get back to focusing fully on our patients. Thank you, Lois.”

For the next few minutes, the four of them ate in silence. Clark was glad to have a break from the small talk. It wasn’t that he hated talking with Lucy and Ellen, but he wasn’t sure what else to say. Ellen was usually quite fond of trading stories and gossip with Lucy and Lois about people Clark didn’t know. And his mind was far too busy trying to come to terms with the fact that, before sunrise, Lois would know his true identity. She might not even be a part of his life anymore by the time the sun came up, though he hoped and prayed she would be.

Then, as the salads were finished, one by one, they each began to engage in small talk with one another. For a time, Clark spoke with Lucy about her school plans, until they were interrupted by Zander returning with their entrees. Clark cut into his steak first, and was pleased to see that it was a perfect medium rare. It tasted even better than it looked, as he took the first, much anticipated bite. For just a few heartbeats, he closed his eyes and savored the

glorious taste.

“So, what about you two?” Ellen asked a few minutes later, motioning to Lois and Clark with her fork.

“What about us?” Lois asked, and Clark could hear how guarded her voice sounded. He swallowed hard in nervousness.

“You’ve been going out a while now,” Ellen shrugged casually, as if she wasn’t prying into their private lives.

“Not quite a year yet,” Lois corrected her.

Ellen ignored the correction. “How are things going?”

“Really well,” Clark said, wiping the corner of his mouth with his napkin. When he was finished, he returned it to his lap. “Like Lois said, we haven’t been dating a year yet but, well, speaking for myself, I couldn’t be happier. Lois is an amazing woman.” He turned a little toward Lois and gave her a smile, which she gently returned. She took his hand and he gave it a light squeeze.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Ellen said approvingly, cutting her steak.

“I feel the same,” Lois replied with a quick glance at Clark. “Being with Clark...it’s the best relationship I’ve ever been in.”

Lucy beamed. “So...are you two...?”

“Are we *what*?” Lois prodded, in an almost daring manner.

“Well...do you see a...you know? A future? Together,” Lucy clarified, ignoring her sister’s pointed look. “Like...forever?”

Clark nearly choked on the piece of lobster he’d been chewing. He coughed and took a sip of his ice water. Lois thumped him on the back, in an effort to help. He felt his entire face, neck, and even his ears go hot in a blush. He’d known Lucy was brazen, but the question had caught him off guard nonetheless. She hadn’t ever pried so openly into the status of their relationship before.

“F...Forever?” he stammered. He gently thumped his own chest in an effort to dislodge the rest of the lobster in his throat and wondered how to answer Lucy without giving away his innermost feelings about Lois or the conversation he was to have with her that night.

Of course he saw a future with Lois. Not a day went by where he didn’t fantasize about being her husband and raising a family with her. But there was still the matter of his secret, and how it would either strengthen their relationship or tear it apart.

“It’s still early in our relationship,” Lois answered, swooping in to rescue him from Ellen’s and Lucy’s stares, and he sighed a little in gratitude as she fielded the question. Ellen’s expression shifted from interested and questioning to something more judgmental. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she pursed her lips, as though about to criticize her daughter. Lois must have seen the look. “Too early to be talking about things like that,” she quickly clarified.

“There’s still a lot to consider. And we still have a lot to learn about each other,” Clark supplied lamely, his mind lurching into motion, now trying to save Lois from her mother’s and her sister’s scrutiny.

“There’s no rush,” Lois continued, perhaps a little too hurriedly.

“Exactly,” Clark forced himself to say, though his heart yearned to already be engaged to her.

“I see,” Ellen muttered, raising an eyebrow. “So, then, what exactly *are* your intentions?”

Clark felt that the question was directed at him, though Ellen’s gaze was fixed on her meal, not on anyone in particular. He self-consciously rubbed at the back of his neck.

“Well, I can’t speak for Lois,” he began uncertainly, “but, my intention is to love your daughter with all my heart, for as long as she lets me.” He turned to face Lois and took her hand in his own. He gave her his most earnest look, hoping she would see how sincere he was. How much he loved her too. “There’s still a lot we need to talk about, before we begin planning too far into the future. And we will. I promise.”

Lois looked at him expectantly, and Clark knew she understood that he was ready to talk to her that very night. At least, she *hoped* she caught his meaning.

Ellen made a sound in her throat that might have been of approval. She nodded slightly as she took another bite of her steak. Lucy grinned at Lois, looking very much like she was happy with Clark’s answer. But, to her credit, she held her tongue. Silence fell again as they each ate their meals, for which Clark was relieved about. He was just finishing up the last of his lobster when his cell phone began to ring. He drew it out of his pocket and checked the number that came up on the screen; one could never rule out that Perry was calling them in on a big case. But not tonight. It wasn’t their boss. It was Bruce. And, apparently, he’d tried calling twice before, though Clark hadn’t heard it ring. He chalked it up to the spotty cell phone reception in Armand’s, but the fact that Bruce had tried to reach him more than once made his hackles rise in dread.

“Excuse me,” he offered, dabbing his mouth clean and putting the napkin on the table. “I’ll be right back.”

“Should I order you a dessert, if the waiter comes back?” Lois asked.

“Uh, I’m pretty full. If you want to split something, I’m fine with whatever you choose,” he replied as he stood up. He gave her a smile. “You always pick something delicious. I trust your judgement.”

“Okay,” Lois said with a contented nod. Then she eyed his phone. “Who?”

“Bruce,” he explained quickly. “Looks like he’s been trying to reach me.”

Lois frowned. “You think everything is okay?” she asked worriedly. Even she knew Bruce never called more than once unless something was going on.

“It’s probably nothing,” Clark tried to reassure her as his heart did little nervous flip-flops in his chest. “I won’t be long, I promise.” He placed a reverent kiss on the top of her head, then stepped away from the table. As he made his way through the throng of closely packed tables, his hearing tuning in on Lois and her family of its own accord.

“Did you hear that, Lois? *Planning the future!*” Lucy excitedly whispered. “Ten bucks says it isn’t Bruce at all and that it’s actually his jeweler on the phone, letting him know his engagement ring is ready to be picked up.”

Clark cringed as he walked. He would give anything for Lucy to be right. He wanted to be asking Lois to marry him, not preparing to tell her that he was an alien.

“Lucy!” Lois admonished, sounding both horrified at her sister’s boldness and maybe a little amused too.

“Oh, come on, Lois! Don’t tell me you don’t see it!” Lucy said with hushed enthusiasm.

“See what?” Lois asked, sounding a little exasperated.

“The way he looks at you. I’m surprised he hasn’t asked you to marry him already!” Lucy explained.

Clark severed the connection as he stepped outside into the cool evening air. He couldn’t bear to hear anymore, in light of what was to come that night. He took out his phone once again and dialed Bruce’s number from the speed dial. Bruce picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Bruce. You called?” Clark asked, getting straight to the point. He leaned his back against the cool red brick of the building.

“Yeah. Is this a good time?”

Clark’s blood froze in his veins. Bruce only began a conversation that way if either something very good happened or if something was horribly wrong. And from the lack of warmth in Bruce’s tone, something had to be terribly wrong.

“Uh...I guess. Lois and I are out to dinner with her mom and sister. But I can spare a few minutes. Why? What’s wrong?” he

elaborated as his stomach twisted into a knot.

Clark heard Bruce take a deep breath through his nose. Then the man sighed. “I just received some news that...you really need to know. Can you stop by after dinner?”

“I was actually planning on finally telling Lois about...you know,” Clark said vaguely, aware that he was in a public space. He turned around to shield his faces from passersby, as though someone would take one look at him and his secret would be exposed. He placed his free palm on the brick, supporting himself as he leaned forward, his face looking down at the cracked concrete sidewalk.

“I see,” was Bruce’s contemplative response.

“Bruce, you’ve got me worried now. Is everything okay? Are you okay? Is Alfred?” Panic bubbled up in Clark’s chest. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Alfred and I are both fine,” Bruce told him, and that allayed some of Clark’s fears. “But I just got off the phone with the head of Wayne Charities. Clark...I don’t know how to tell you this.” Regret flooded the billionaire’s voice.

Clark’s heart seized. “What?” he breathed and it felt like his lungs were collapsing under the weight of his worry.

“It’s Grandma Tildy. She’s dead, Clark.”

Grandma Tildy.

Dead.

She’s dead, Clark.

It’s Grandma Tildy.

She’s dead, Clark.

The world tilted on its axis and spun at a dizzying pace as the words whirled around in his mind, repeating over and over like an ominous whirlpool. Clark felt himself become disoriented and nauseous. He reached out blindly and felt his hand connect with the sturdy brick façade of Armand’s Steakhouse. His mouth went bone dry and he struggled not to throw up.

“Clark?” Bruce asked worriedly. “Clark? Are you there?”

“Dead?” Clark croaked out, his voice finally returning to him, even though it sounded broken in his ears. He had to ask, as if the simple act of asking again would somehow make it not true.

“I’m sorry,” was all Bruce would say.

“W...When?” he asked shakily.

“Two nights ago,” Bruce responded sadly.

How can that be? She was fine when I saw her last! She didn’t look or act sick, his mind screamed at him as his memories transported him back to that night, sitting out in the garden and pouring out his heart to her. She’d seemed so strong and to be the epitome of health. Nothing about her demeanor gave voice to an underlying issue. If anything, she’d appeared to be slightly older than he’d remembered her, but otherwise unchanged.

“Clark?” came Bruce’s voice, tearing through the fragile gossamer images in Clark’s mind. “Are you okay?”

A million questions raced through Clark’s mind, all of them demanding to be answered first. It felt like a swarm of maddened bees in his brain, and their clamors for attention were deafening.

“Two nights...but...I just talked to her just a few nights before that!” Clark protested, as though it couldn’t be true if he’d just recently talked to her. “She looked healthy as ever! I can’t believe...” His voice trailed off as he choked on his emotions. He shook his head. “How?” he asked again.

“An aneurysm burst in her brain,” Bruce said quietly. “No one knew it was there. Supposedly she was fine one minute and then...” He did not finish his statement. He didn’t have to.

Clark hung his head, his chin hitting his chest. For a moment, he was rendered completely speechless. Then, finally, in a croaking voice, he managed to get out, “Oh, God.”

“I’m so sorry, Clark,” Bruce offered sympathetically. “I know she was a big part of your life.” He paused. Then, “Did you say you spoke to her recently?”

Clark nodded, though Bruce couldn’t see it. “More than that. I

saw her, Bruce. I was there with her, not five feet away and never guessed anything was wrong with her. We talked for a while. She seemed perfectly fine.”

“What made you visit, after all this time?” Bruce wondered curiously.

“It wasn’t a conscious decision,” Clark admitted. “I happened to be in the neighborhood. It was the night Superman helped recapture Colin Coleman,” he said pointedly. “I wound up meeting a runaway from her house and I convinced him to return.”

“As Superman, I assume,” Bruce said knowingly.

“Yeah. But when I brought him back and saw Grandma...she *knew* me, Bruce.”

Knew me, forgave me, and embraced me, he thought with a deep sense of loss. *All that time I wasted, being afraid she’d be too angry to ever talk to me again. I wish I hadn’t wasted it.*

“How?” Clark could envision Bruce’s eyes narrowing in concern.

“She just...did. She said she figured it out the first time she saw me...you know.” His voice dropped lower and he tucked his chin down to his chest as he spoke, though there was no one near him at the moment.

“The bombing was televised,” Bruce replied slowly, putting things together.

“Exactly,” Clark confirmed. He took a shaking breath and was glad for the wall his hand was on. It prevented him from sinking to the ground as his knees began to feel weak, as though his grief was sapping all his strength. “I’m glad I got the chance to apologize. I just...I can’t believe this.”

“I am too. You always seemed bothered by how unresolved things had been.”

“Yeah, I was.” He cleared his throat and closed his eyes against the pain of his next question. “Do you have the information for the funeral?” He fumbled blindly in his sport coat’s breast pocket for a pen and pad of paper, but this wasn’t one of his work suits and of course he had nothing to write on or with. And in his shock and grief, he wasn’t sure he could trust his normally flawless mind to retain all of the information correctly.

“I do. I’ll email it to you. I just wanted to call first, so it didn’t come as such a shock and out of the blue,” Bruce responded gently, his tone the softest Clark had ever heard it. “I thought it would be better if you heard it from me, rather than some other source.”

Again, Clark took a shaky breath and nodded to himself. “Okay, thanks, Bruce. I...I really appreciate it.” He shook his head. “It might not sound like it but...I do. You’ve always looked out for me.”

“You’re welcome.” There was a slight, perhaps even brooding, pause. “I just wish I was calling with better news.”

Clark laughed ruefully. “Yeah, me too. I’ll call you in a few days. I need to make arrangements to get out there. Are you going?”

Bruce sighed noisily into the phone. Clark’s trained ear heard the regret in it. “I won’t be able to make it to the wake, but I’m shifting things around to try and make it to the burial. Do you want me to send a plane for you?”

Again, Clark shook his head, his heart heavy in his chest. Of course Bruce would make the offer, but something within Clark was hesitant to take his friend up on it. Perhaps being out on his own, making his own way, earning his own living had changed something inside of Clark. He felt too grown to need to rely on Bruce’s generosity. He was a man now, not a helpless kid. He was looking ahead to a marriage with Lois! If he couldn’t even handle getting to a funeral on his own, he had no business thinking about engagement rings *or* about telling Lois that he was Superman.

Superman.

Clark mentally sighed.

He couldn’t have that conversation tonight. His thoughts and

resolve had been shattered with the news of Grandma's passing. His heart had already been ripped out of his chest and torn apart. He couldn't risk it happening again if Lois took the news badly. And he did *not* want to tell Lois while he was so vulnerable in case the only reason she took the news gracefully was out of pity for him.

The conversation would have to wait. *Again.*

Clark cleared his throat as though it would clear his head too. "No, it's okay. I'll handle things. I appreciate the offer but... there's a part of me that just... feels like I need to do this on my own. No offense."

"None taken," Bruce said with understanding. "Talk to you soon, Clark. And, again, I'm truly sorry to have to give you this news."

"Thanks, Bruce. Bye." Clark didn't wait for a response. He hung up the phone, fighting back the tears which pricked mercilessly at his eyes.

Making sure no one was looking, he removed his glasses and used the back of his left hand to wipe at his eyes, hoping to chase away the water pooled there. Then he replaced the frames on his face, squared his shoulders, and went back inside, back to where Lois and her family were waiting for him. His heart was heavy as he went, feeling like a physical weight that slowed his movements, dragging him down to a sloth's pace. He tried his best to act natural – he didn't want to drag down Lois' evening, since all three of the Lane women seemed to be getting along rather well – but he knew he was doing a poor job of it. Lois studied his face as soon as he sat down.

"Clark?" she asked, concerned. "What's wrong?" She cupped his cheek in one hand, forcing him to look at her.

"It's nothing. We can talk about it later," he said in a near whisper.

Lois shook her head defiantly. "Clark, you look like you just saw a ghost. What's going on?" she demanded gently.

Clark looked down at the floor, acutely aware of Lucy's and Ellen's eyes on him. He cleared his throat, to banish the lump that had formed there. He took a breath to steel himself, lest he lose his tenuous grip on his emotions.

"That was Bruce who called," he began to explain. "He needed to... pass along some information."

"I'm guessing it wasn't good news," Lucy said, earning a hard frown from Lois.

"Grandma Tildy died the other night." He knew his voice was cracked and broken, but he was too emotionally drained to do anything about it. It still felt unreal that Grandma Tildy – always the very pillar of strength and goodness – could be gone.

Lois gasped, her hand flying up to her mouth in the same moment. "Oh, Clark! I'm so sorry!" She reached out to him and took his hand in her own.

"Who's Grandma Tildy?" Lucy asked, unable to hold back her curiosity.

"She's the woman who ran the halfway house where I was sent after my parents passed away," Clark replied. Inwardly, he cringed at how hollow his voice sounded in his own ears. "She took great care of me. She even helped me figure out that I was meant to get into journalism for my career."

"I'm so sorry," Lucy offered, almost in sync with Ellen.

"We can leave, if you want," Lois told him, scooting closer. She put her hand on his back and began to rub soothing circles there.

Clark shook his head. "No, I don't want to pull you away from your family. Besides, I'm guessing you ordered some kind of chocolate dessert." He mustered up a smile for her.

Lois chuckled and bit her lower lip to suppress a smile. "Guilty as charged."

That made Clark laugh – a genuine laugh that uplifted his bleeding heart. "I thought so." He paused a moment, then, "So...

what'd I miss, while I was outside?"

Lois gave him a tiny, half smile. "Not much. A little gossip about people you've never met."

He chuckled again. "Sounds fascinating."

"Yeah," Lois agreed sarcastically, grinning.

Her smile chased away some of the gloom in his heart. It *always* did, no matter the reason why he was upset. He wondered idly if she had any idea how good she was for his heart and mind. If she didn't, he vowed to himself that he would tell her.

The rest of the evening passed without any notable moments. Lois did her best to keep Clark's mind off his loss. For his part, he appreciated the effort, but the knowledge remained, lurking in the shadows of his mind, tinged the night with profound sadness. At one point, midway through dessert, Clark asked himself why losing Grandma felt almost like losing his parents all over again. And the only reason he could come up with was that, in her own, unique way, Grandma *had* been a parental figure. His teenaged self hadn't recognized her as such back then, when he'd come to her as a newly orphaned, lost, and lonely young man. But, looking back, Grandma had done her best to act as a parent, without trying to replace the mother and father he'd lost.

"So, do you want to talk about it?" Lois asked, later that night, after they'd said goodbye to Ellen and Lucy and returned to Lois' Jeep.

"I... I'm not even sure where to begin," Clark admitted as he buckled his seat belt. "Grandma... she was a good woman. And I... I wasted a lot of time when I could have apologized so much sooner for running away."

"We always think there's so much time," Lois nearly whispered. "We always assume tomorrow will come."

Clark nodded. "For so long, I was afraid of how she would react, if I suddenly called her or showed up on her doorstep again. I shouldn't have. I should have known she would forgive what I'd done. And now, because of that irrational fear..." He sighed.

Lois checked her mirrors and pulled away from the curb. "You got to make amends recently," she gently reminded him. "You made her *happy*, Clark. In the end, that's the important thing, isn't it?"

"It is," he agreed. "I just wish... I wish I'd known it was the last time I'd get to speak to her. There's more I would have said." He sighed bitterly. "The best I can do now is go book a flight and tell it to what's left of her."

"You and I *both* need to book a flight," Lois corrected him. "I'm going with you."

"Lois, you don't have to..." he began.

"It's not up for discussion," Lois gently cut him off with a gentle shake of her head. Her tone was soft and comforting, but also firm enough to let him know this was not a discussion he'd win. "Look, Clark. You're hurting. Okay, so maybe I never met Grandma Tildy, but, she helped you become the man you are. For that, I owe her my thanks, the same as I owe your parents for making sure you are the person you are." She looked over to him quickly and her voice grew almost reverently quiet. "Besides, I love you. I don't want you to have to go through this alone."

Clark managed a small, sad smile. "Thank you, Lois."

I don't deserve you. I never did and I never will.

She returned the smile just before blowing her horn at the driver ahead of her, who had stopped abruptly, though the light was green.

"Really," Clark continued hastily, but sincerely. "Lois... you're always there when I need you most. Words can't describe how much that means to me. No matter what happens... you're always there to make me feel better. I really appreciate that. I want you to know that, because I know that sometimes I might not say it, for whatever the reason." He looked away, a little embarrassed, and studied the dashboard before him.

I appreciate you so much that I've been lying to you for

months now.

“You’re welcome,” Lois replied, sounding humbled. “But, well, you’ve always done the same. Like tonight. Part of me really, *really* didn’t want to go to dinner. But having you by my side made it so much easier. I even enjoyed myself, because you were right there with me.”

“Happy to help,” he lightly joked, relieved that she’d taken his comments in stride.

“So, now...when do we leave?” she asked, bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand.

Clark shook his head, a fresh stab of pain lancing his heart. “I have no idea,” he admitted sheepishly. “Bruce is emailing me the details.”

“How come Bruce knew before you did?” she wondered aloud, curiosity in her voice.

Clark scratched his cheek, then rubbed the back of his neck as he began to explain. “After I moved into Wayne Manor, I felt an incredible amount of guilt. There I was, living in the lap of luxury,” he said, gesturing vaguely, as though ushering Lois into his memories. “I had a huge bedroom, a private bathroom, access to whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it. Bruce even gifted me a video game system before it was available for purchase in America. And we’re not talking weeks before. More like a year.” He sighed guiltily. “All I kept thinking about was the boys living at Grandma’s. They had everything they needed – food, water, shelter, love. And they had plenty of comforts – television, games, trips into town to go to the movies and the like. But...it was never enough. The sports equipment, for example, was functional, but shabby. Hockey sticks were held together with duct tape. Basketballs were worn down to the point of being almost completely smooth. Things like that.”

Distaste colored his words as he remembered the beaten-up condition the toys and sports equipment had been, compared to the unearned newness of what Bruce had provided him with. He looked down, studying his fingernails, because it burned him with shame to think back on how spoiled he’d been at Wayne Manor, compared to the boys he’d left at Grandma Tildy’s.

“I felt...almost dirty, in a way.” It was difficult to get the words out past the lump forming in his throat. “I’d done everything wrong – I’d run away without even leaving so much as a goodbye note, dodged all of society as much as possible so I wouldn’t be recognized and sent back – and suddenly it felt like I was being *rewarded* for that. I didn’t deserve what Bruce had given me. The boys at Grandma’s *did*. So, one night at dinner – I guess I’d been living there for a month – I asked Bruce if we could arrange for Grandma Tildy’s house to be a part of Wayne Charities. I told him I didn’t care if he used all the money he’d so generously set aside for me to use. I just wanted those boys to have nice things.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking back. He could see it like it had happened just the night before. Dinner had been shrimp scampi over angel hair pasta. Clark had been ravenous and eaten two platefuls. Bruce had chuckled over Clark’s appetite and Clark had made an off-handed comment about how great a cook Grandma had been. As the conversation had turned toward the subject of Grandma Tildy’s house, Clark had finally found the courage to ask Bruce if they could find a way to help the halfway house.

Use all the money you said you set aside for me, he’d offered, much to the amusement and silent approval of Bruce. Of course, Bruce *hadn’t* done so; he’d simply added on the halfway house as another part of Wayne Charities.

They need it way more than I do, Bruce.

Give me all the details, Clark. I’ll talk to Harriet in the morning about making sure Grandma’s house gets on the list. Then you and I can go shopping for what you think they are most in need of. We can have a truck heading their way by the end of

the week.

“That’s a really sweet gesture,” Lois commented, throwing a split-second glance at Clark while she navigated the Metropolis traffic, scattering his thoughts like a hand through a puff of smoke.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. “I guess Chen or someone contacted the charity about Grandma’s passing. The charity called Bruce, and he called me.” He looked up again and peered out the front windshield. “Hey...this isn’t the way back to my apartment,” he realized with a start.

“I know,” Lois said with a mischievous glint in her eye. “This is a shortcut back to my place. I want to grab my overnight bag before we head over to your place.” She bit her lower lip uncertainly and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with one hand. “I thought...maybe you shouldn’t be alone tonight. Is...is that okay?”

Clark felt his heart nearly bursting with love for her. “It’s more than okay, Lois. I think it’s a great idea, actually. Grandma...she wasn’t a blood relative but...she may as well have been. Thank you, Lois.”

“Hey,” she shrugged casually, “what’s a girlfriend for, right?”

It didn’t take long for them to reach Clark’s apartment. For once, the traffic in Metropolis had been light, and most of the drivers had been rather well-behaved on the roads, with the exception of one or two cabbies and one clueless student driver. But the easy ride home hadn’t done much to improve Clark’s mood. Heartbreak still weighed heavily on his mind, suffocating his thoughts and obliterating his usual optimism. He only nodded his greetings to the neighbors he saw as Lois parked the Jeep and they walked the half-block to Clark’s apartment. If he’d been paying attention, he would have seen a few concerned looks being sent his way as the neighbors noted his subdued attitude and the look of gloom on his face.

“You can take the bed,” Clark told Lois as he opened the door to his apartment. “I’ll take the couch.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t dream of kicking you out of your own bed. *I’ll* take the couch,” Lois replied.

“Not a chance,” Clark insisted good-naturedly, finally finding a smile crossing his lips. “Both my mother *and* Grandma Tildy would give me an earful if I even *entertained* the idea of making a woman sleep on the couch.”

“Fine,” Lois agreed, but he could tell she was merely humoring him.

She’s incredible, he thought in wonderment. It never ceased to astound him how amazing Lois was and how much she really did love him.

For how long though?

Clark stepped inside, then closed and locked the door. “The bathroom is yours, if you want to shower or change. I’m going to start checking flights,” he told her, forcing his thoughts to the back of his mind.

“Are you sure? I can help,” Lois offered, setting her purse and overnight bag down on the couch.

He shook his head. “I’ll be fine. Go ahead and get comfortable. You want some coffee for when you come out?” he asked.

“Only if you’re having some too,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“I’ll take that as a yes then,” he smiled encouragingly. “Go ahead. The bathroom’s all yours. I’ll have everything ready by the time you’re done.”

“Well...okay. Mind if I use your shower?” she asked with a blush. “It’s just...this new perfume. I can’t stand the smell of it. I need to get it off.”

Clark smiled. “Really? I thought it smelled nice. But sure, use whatever you need. There’s clean towels in the cabinet under the sink.”

She smiled back. “Thanks. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

He nodded and watched as she grabbed her bag and wandered toward his bathroom. He heard the door close, the lock snick into place, and the shower turn on. Then he focused on the tasks ahead, choosing to do the easiest ones first. The more difficult ones could wait. Besides, he’d promised Lois he would have coffee waiting for her when she was done in the shower. So he made his way to the kitchen and got his coffeemaker started. Then he changed into more comfortable clothing at superspeed, before booting up his laptop. He began to check flight times and prices, finding a few that might work. But first he needed Perry to okay a few days off. He grabbed the cordless phone from the side table and dialed the Chief’s office, since it was early enough that he might still be there. Sure enough, Perry picked up on the second ring.

“Perry White,” he said gruffly, sounding distracted.

“Hey, Chief. It’s Clark,” Clark replied, flopping onto his couch.

“Oh, hey there, son,” Perry said, snapping to attention.

“What’s going on?”

“I, uh...need a favor,” Clark hedged nervously, though he couldn’t exactly put his finger on *why* he was so nervous. Perry was the epitome of accommodating and understanding when it came to his employees’ personal lives. “I need to take a couple of days off, if possible.”

“Oh? What for?” Perry sounded curious, not nosy, to Clark’s trained ears.

“Someone I used to be close with died. I’d like to fly out to the funeral,” Clark explained quickly.

“Oh, Clark. I’m so sorry, son. Of course you take whatever time you need,” Perry said, his voice low and soft.

“It won’t be more than two or three days, depending on the flights,” Clark continued, just wanting to get the explanation over and done with. He felt tired. Tired of talking. Tired of thinking. Tired of *feeling*. It reminded him starkly of how emotionally draining his parents’ deaths and funeral had been. How much he’d wished he could have just a few minutes to stop hurting and feel nothing at all, just to recover some of his strength. “And, uh...Lois has offered to come with me. With your approval for time off, of course.”

Perry chuckled lightly in an almost fatherly way. “You’ve got yourself a good woman there, Clark. Tell her she’s more than welcome to take a few days too.”

“Thanks, Chief. She’s the best,” he agreed, relief flooding his heart, now that Perry had given them his blessing to take some time off. “We’re pretty caught up on all our investigations. We’re really just waiting for more information on the Luthor case. *Although*, there’s one thing we *did* want to talk to you about. An impending nurse strike...”

“Whoa, whoa! Hold on there for a second,” Perry replied, cutting Clark off gently. Clark could imagine Perry’s hands flying up in a “stop” gesture. “Don’t you worry about things. Just focus on yourself for a couple of days. The Planet will manage without you stressing about the stories you and Lois are pursuing.”

Clark felt another surge of relief. He hadn’t even realized he’d been so worried about their workload while they took a few personal days.

“Thanks, Perry. I really appreciate it.”

“Not a problem. You take care of yourself, you hear me?” Perry warned him, but there was warmth and a sense of familial love behind his words.

“Loud and clear, Chief. I’ll see you in a few days.”

He hung up the phone and turned back to his computer. First he emailed Perry the details about the strike that Ellen had told them about. Even if he and Lois weren’t assigned to the story – and Clark just assumed Perry would deem them to be too close to the story to allow them to handle it – Perry would have the information. Any of their coworkers would be more than able to

get the story the spotlight it deserved. Then he went through the rest of his emails, deleting a healthy amount of junk mail before coming to Bruce’s message. His friend had emailed him the funeral arrangements, as promised. The wake would be held for two days. Clark presumed it would be to give everyone a chance to fly in for it. After all, over the years, Grandma Tildy had touched the lives of hundreds of boys, if not thousands.

Clark went back into the airline website and started searching in earnest. He found a late flight for the following night. It would mean he and Lois would miss the first day of the wake, but it would give them plenty of time to be there for the second day and the burial.

“Any luck?” Lois asked, entering into the living room a short time later, now clad in an old maroon Daily Planet t-shirt and a pair of soft black pajama pants, her hair still damp from a shower.

But whether she’d been gone for five minutes or five hours, Clark didn’t know. Time had seemed irrelevant while he’d been comparing flight times and prices. He hadn’t even been aware that the coffeemaker was ready.

“Some,” Clark answered, getting up and stretching his back. He made his way to the kitchen and began to fix their cups of coffee in their preferred ways. “I found a flight out that looks promising. I haven’t really checked the return flights yet.” He turned to her, holding out her mug to her. “I did, however, clear it with Perry, so we’re good to take some time off.” He leaned back against the counter in a relaxed stance, though his heart was pounding hard.

What will it be like, he wondered, to go back and see all those people again? What will it be like to see Chen again, this time in plainclothes? It was awkward enough as Superman.

“Thanks. I was actually just thinking I should call him as I was getting changed.” She took the cup of coffee Clark offered her and nodded as she held it cradled in both hands, as if drawing strength from the warmth it exuded. “Thanks,” she said, taking a sip. Her eyes closed in bliss. “I don’t know how you do it, but you always manage to fix the perfect cup of coffee.”

“It’s a matter of survival,” quipped easily. “I’m too afraid to incur the wrath of Mad Dog Lane if I give her a subpar drink.” He grinned, letting her know he was teasing.

Lois snorted and almost choked on the sip she’d taken, and Clark only hoped that she hadn’t managed to burn the inside of her mouth in the process. Swallowing it down, she laughed out loud. “Well, so far, you’ve done well. Mad Dog Lane is very pleased with your offerings.” She held up the mug in a mock salute.

“Good,” Clark said with a semi-serious nod. “I’d hate to be planning my *own* funeral while I try to get out to Grandma’s.” The joke was weak, he knew, but it made Lois smile a little anyway and it made him feel a little better to make an attempt at humor. “Let’s go sit, shall we?” He gestured to the couch with his free hand.

“Sure,” Lois said with a nod.

She led him to the couch, then sat catty-corner on the cushion, so she could see both the computer and Clark with ease. She studied his face for a moment as he sat and put his coffee down on the table before them. He knew he had to look pained and probably weary as well and he wondered what Lois was thinking as she looked at him.

“Clark...do you want to talk?” she offered after a moment. “I know this is a hard time for you and...I just want you to know that my ear is open.”

Clark shrugged as a tiny smile ghosted across his lips.

“Thanks, Lois. I appreciate it. But the truth is...there’s not much more to say. I just...I want to say my final goodbyes and then maybe you and I can finally have some time to ourselves.”

So I can probably break your heart.

So I can probably destroy all the dreams and wishes and prayers I have about making a life together with you.

"You just...you seem a little nervous, that's all. As much as you seem upset, even," Lois clarified, setting down her mug on the coffee table.

Clark knew he had to put her mind at ease. And there was no harm in telling Lois the truth.

Well, the edited truth, at any rate, he admonished himself.

"Okay...yes. I *am* a little nervous. I...I left the halfway house without even saying goodbye. And while Grandma Tildy might have forgiven me, I'm not entirely sure the others have," he confessed quietly.

"Hey, who cares what they think?" Lois said, putting her hand on his back and rubbing it. "You aren't going for them."

"Yeah but..." Clark protested, "I still...I don't want to upset anyone, that's all."

"I'll be right there with you," Lois promised as she squeezed his body in a tight hug. "If things get too hard we can always step out for a few minutes, right?"

Clark smiled, just the barest curving of his lips, feeling better about things. Lois was right. How bad could it possibly be with her by his side?

"Right," he answered, squaring his shoulders and kissing the top of her head. "Okay, let's get things booked." He picked up his laptop from the table, scooted closer to Lois, and typed for a moment, bringing up return flights. "Are these flights okay?"

Lois scanned the screen in silence. "Looks good. Let's get the earlier flight back though," she said less than a minute later, pointing, her finger a hairsbreadth from the screen. "It gives us more time to relax and prepare to get back to work the next day. If you *want* to go back in the next day, that is," she amended swiftly.

Clark nodded. "I do. There's no sense in staying home. *Especially* not when we have the Luthor case going on," he pointed out. Seeing Luthor be put in jail for life would make Clark's world so much better. The multibillionaire would pay for every crime he'd ever committed, if Lois and Clark had any say in the matter. "We still have *plenty* to do before the case goes to trial. I think the police are relying on *us* as much as we're relying on *them* to uncover all of Luthor's crimes."

"Absolutely," Lois agreed with grim conviction.

"Okay, the earlier flight it is."

He selected the flights in question, chose two seats next to each other, then paid, shooing away Lois' offer to pay for her own fare. But Clark *couldn't* allow her to pay. After all, she wasn't going to this funeral for herself. She was going for him. It wouldn't be right to ask her to pay for things. Next, they searched for a hotel room. Clark knew of a small, cozy bed and breakfast style place right in town. He searched for it and frowned.

"Only one room available," he said, more to himself than to Lois.

"So?" Lois asked, shrugging, as she leaned against him comfortably. "Book it. We can share a room."

"Are you sure?" he replied, turning a little toward her, uncertainty in his features. "We've never...I mean...you know. We're only still dating and all..." He knew by the sudden heat in his neck that his entire face was scarlet in a blush.

Lois waved away his concerns. "I know. But it's not like we've never shared close quarters before. We've stayed together for stakeouts," she reasoned unperturbed.

"Yeah, but we didn't have a choice in that," Clark pointed out. "If you'd be more comfortable with your own room, we can try a different place."

"Seriously, I'm fine with sharing," Lois answered, a little more firmly, though still gently. "Just book it, before someone else grabs it."

"Okay," Clark said in surrender. With a barely perceptible shake in his hand, he moved his mouse over on the screen, clicked, and booked the room. "We're all set."

"Good," Lois said, snuggling deeper into his side as he shut

the lid of the laptop. "Let's just relax for the rest of the night, okay?"

"Sounds perfect," he agreed, leaning back into the back of the couch, luxuriating in the closeness to Lois.

Please, don't ever let me lose her, he pleaded silently to the universe. *You've taken almost everyone from me.*

Clark snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. He buried his lips in her hair and kissed the top of her head, breathing in the flowery scent of her conditioner. "Thank you, Lois. For all of this. I'm not sure I could do this alone."

"Clark, I love you. You'll never have to do anything alone, ever again," she murmured, stroking her fingers over the back of his hand.

"For a long time, I thought I'd be alone forever," Clark mused in a hushed tone. He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips, then kissed her knuckles in an almost worshipful manner. "The winter I spent by myself in an abandoned cabin...I wondered if that was my fate. To always be on my own. Even after I went to Gotham, met Bruce, and started traveling the world for the Gazette...I was alone. I wanted a real relationship, to be in love. But, until I met you, that didn't happen." He gave her body a gentle squeeze, as if afraid she would evaporate into nothing more than a gossamer wisp of a dream if her held her too loosely.

"You know, I wasn't much different," Lois said in a hushed, dreamy sounding voice. "I dated, sure. But fell in love? *That* was rare for me and every time I did, it got thrown in my face. You're the first man I've ever loved who hasn't hurt me."

A shot of guilt pierced his heart. "And I hope I never do."

I already have, his mind taunted in reply.

Clark squinted against the bright sunlight and adjusted the sun visor in the car he'd rented while he and Lois were in Kansas. It was a new car, perfectly comfortable and immaculately kept. It was almost odd, in a way, to have a car in such condition in this solidly middle-class town. Clark had never cared much about cars, but he'd spent a portion of his youth in this town. People's cars were what his dad had always referred to as "workhorses." People used them until they finally ran the machines into the ground, the cars and pickup trucks "old enough to drink" as Martha had once put it. It wasn't uncommon to see twenty-year-old cars rumbling down the streets riddled with dents and held together with generous amounts of Bondo. In these vast farmlands, people generally didn't have much money to spare, and so most people were reluctant to plunk down a sizable amount of money on a new vehicle.

At least, that's how Clark had remembered the place. Now it seemed like the place was slowly changing, moving from a lower middle-class neighborhood to a much higher middle-class area. As he drove along, he noted that most cars seemed newer and many of the old store fronts had either been well-renovated or changed over to slightly more higher-end retailers. While it was good to see the area being more prosperous, it made his heart hurt to see it changing so much. It hadn't seemed that way, when he'd been there during the night. Then, he'd been too busy searching for the escaped killer and helping that runaway boy to take notice of the background details of the town.

"Okay, turn here," Lois instructed as Clark once again fiddled with the sun visor. "And then a left at the end of the street."

"You've got it," he acknowledged, putting on his right turn signal and easing the car into a turn. He smiled grimly. "I haven't been here in ages," he commented, glancing around at the surrounding buildings. "It's changed a lot, from what I remember."

That much was true. Even when he'd brought Benji back to Grandma Tildy's home, not a week prior, he hadn't been to this part of the town. As a result, it felt only vaguely familiar and very foreign at the same time, almost like he was stepping into a dream only half remembered, especially given how much of it had

changed.

“How’d you sleep last night?” he asked as he drove on. “I didn’t realize the room only had one bed, by the way.”

“I know. And I slept just fine. You?”

A ghost of a smile passed over his lips. Falling asleep next to Lois – even without them being intimate – had been one of the greatest joys of his life. Now, more than ever, he could envision what it would be like to be her husband, if she would one day have him.

Waking up to find her in her arms had felt so natural, so right. He could still feel the warmth of her body as she lay pressed against him as she slept. He could still feel the way her chest rose and fell with steady, even, shallow breaths. He could still hear the way she’d murmured in contentment as he’d lovingly stroked her bare upper arm. He could still taste her on his lips as he’d kissed her shoulder, just next to the strap of her tank top. He was still *very* aware of how his body had longed to make love to her.

His heart rate spiked as the memories flashed through his mind – a perfect series of snapshots in his mind. He felt his throat go dry and his palms grow moist as he recalled *exactly* how much he’d wanted to be one with Lois that morning. It was an effort to force his mind to retreat from those thoughts and turn toward why they were *really* here in Kansas.

“Honestly? It was one of the greatest sleeps I’ve ever had,” he answered.

Lois smiled shyly. “It was nice, waking up in your arms,” she admitted.

Do you know what you do to me? Do you know what effect you have on me? How your smile lights up my world? How your voice makes my heart soar? How one touch from you sets my desires aflame?

Clark sighed softly as he smiled. “I was about to say the same.” He made the left turn Lois had instructed him to take.

“Okay, this is the right road,” Lois said, consulting her map again. “Just go straight for…” Her voice trailed off as she calculated. “Two and a quarter miles, give or take. It’s right after Hemlock.”

“Right,” Clark recalled with a nod, as they passed a gas station with a very cheery and very sun-bleached twelve-foot-tall sunflower out front. Seeing the flower jarred his memories further and flashes of his youth zipped before his waking eyes. “I remember that now. There used to be an old bowling alley on Hemlock. We’d go sometimes, when we had coupons for free games or at least a group discount. It was a lot of fun.”

“It *does* sound like fun,” Lois commented.

“It was,” Clark confirmed. “I was never very good at it but, but by the time I left, I’d improved quite a bit. Enough to give Chen a run for his money, most of the time.” He couldn’t help but to smile at the memory. “Then, we’d go across town and get pizza at Max’s. I wonder if they’re still around,” he mused. “If they are, we should think about grabbing some dinner there. It’s been a long time but, they used to have the best pizza. Other items too. Shrimp parm, all kinds of pasta dishes, you name it.”

“I’d like that,” Lois said. “In fact, you’ve got my stomach growling just thinking about it.”

He chuckled. “Mine too. I miss that place.”

“Is that it, right up there?” Lois asked a few minutes later. She pointed at the windshield.

“Looks like it,” Clark replied. “Wow, that is a *lot* of cars.”

In less than half a minute, they arrived at the old farmhouse that had long ago been converted into a funeral home. The gravel parking lot to the right of the building was completely full, with twenty-five or thirty densely packed vehicles all crowded in. To the left of the house, a large swath of field had been mowed down to accommodate the overspill from the actual parking lot. A fair number of vehicles were already parked there as well. Clark pulled into one of the open spots in the very back of the auxiliary lot and

turned off the car.

“Are you all right?” Lois asked, turning to him and placing her hand on his.

Clark took a deep breath before answering. This was it. The moment he’d been dreading since Bruce had called to tell him about Grandma’s passing. A lump formed in his throat, making it difficult to swallow. His lungs felt pressed in a vice and it was hard to breathe. His heart beat more quickly, the way it did whenever he was about to face a dangerous situation as Superman. His stomach knotted in anticipation and a little fear.

This is it, he thought as he shoved away the tears that were ready to leak from his eyes in his grief. I have to say goodbye to someone else I’ve loved. Everyone who’s ever had a hand in raising me is dead now. Jor-El and Lara. My parents. And now Grandma Tildy.

He couldn’t count Bruce and Alfred amongst those who’d raised him. Though the two had taken him in and loved him like he was a part of their family, Ooby then, Clark had been almost an adult. Neither Bruce nor Alfred had ever parented him. Bruce had been – would always be – his brother. And although Alfred could pass for Clark’s grandfather, the beloved old butler had never tried to act as Clark’s grandfather. Especially not with his continued insistence on calling Clark “master” and “sir” – a quirk that made Alfred endearing but that Clark *still* didn’t feel right about using.

Empty.

Clark felt empty, in a way. And even being with Lois couldn’t fully abate the loneliness in his heart as he realized his last caretaker had departed from the world.

He sighed heavily. “Yeah. It’s just… it feels more real, now that I’m here. With my parents, it was different. Them being gone forever was an immediate reality for me. Being so far removed from Grandma’s home for so long… I know it’s real, that she’s gone. But… before… it was abstract, in a way. Now that we’re about to go inside to the wake… it’s really *real* now. Everyone’s gone. My parents… Grandma… I can’t… it’s just a lot to take in, you know?”

“We don’t have to go in right now. We can hang out here, in the car, for a little bit if you want,” she offered, putting a supportive hand on his knee. “There’s no need to rush, if you aren’t ready.”

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “I’m okay. Really. Let’s go in.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“I am.”

They got out of the car and walked across the freshly mowed grass. Clark took a moment to savor the smell of the cut grass and the rich, freshly tilled soil. It brought his soul a sense of peace, to drink in the scents of the things that had once been a normal part of his life. He linked his arm with Lois’ and led her up the old farmhouse steps to the front door. It was slightly ajar, to welcome in anyone stopping by to offer their last respects to Grandma Tildy. Clark reached out and pulled it open, allowing Lois to step inside before he did.

Inside the house, a few new air conditioners pumped cool air into the rooms, to combat the heat generated by so many bodies in so small a space. Their rumbling sounds were nearly drowned out by the multitude of low conversations all around. It was hard to maneuver their way through the sea of gray and black clothed bodies, but, eventually, Lois and Clark made it to what had once been a living room, but was now the main sitting area. At the back of the room, a sleek walnut colored coffin was raised up on a platform. The lid was open, but Clark couldn’t see the body within from where he stood.

Lois squeezed his hand in support. He gave her a light squeeze in return before looking at her and nodding. Then he glanced around the room. The space was nearly packed with men – standing around, sitting on the few hard-looking couches or on the

wooden folding chairs, leaning against the wall, gawking at the coffin, talking to one another. Some women were there as well, but not as many. After all, the halfway house had only serviced boys, not girls. The women in attendance were either people from the town who'd known Grandma Tildy – Clark could point them out by how devastated they looked – or the wives or girlfriends of the men there. They were easy to pick out too, for their uncomfortable, but supportive, expressions.

"Grandma would have liked seeing all these people," Clark commented, as they joined the line of people waiting for their chance to view the body and say their farewells.

"Do you recognize anyone?" she asked curiously, perhaps to take his mind off what was to come. She nodded toward the rest of the room.

Clark looked around once more, his sharp vision scrutinizing every face. "Not yet. Grandma took care of a *lot* of boys in her time. It wouldn't surprise me if every single person here was a stranger. Plus...I haven't seen any of the boys I used to know in years. For all I know, half of the men here could be people I once knew but don't recognize. I mean, I hardly look like the fifteen-year-old I was when I left here." He shrugged, feeling a little self-conscious.

The fifteen-year-old who fled in terror that he might burn the place down and kill everyone inside.

Lois nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's true."

Clark continued to survey the room full of strangers. "It's nice to see so many here, even if I don't know them. Grandma Tildy was a great woman. It's good to see how loved she was."

She saved my life when I had nowhere to go. She showed me what career path I was meant to follow. She loved me like I was her own grandson.

"I'll bet. It sounds like she changed a lot of lives for the better."

Clark nodded. "Without her, I never would have considered journalism, at any rate."

She was proud of me. She was proud that I became Superman. She even wanted the best for you, Lois, when she warned me to tell you who I am. And I will, I promise.

"Clark? Clark Kent?"

Clark whipped his head around to see who was calling his name. A tall, lanky Asian man was striding toward him. Clark blinked in surprise, though, of course, it shouldn't have surprised him at all to see the man.

"Chen?" he asked, half in disbelief.

"Oh, so you remember me," Chen replied, his lips in a hard line. Perhaps he'd meant it as a question, but the flintiness of his voice turned it into a venomous accusation.

"Of course I remember you," Clark said warmly, extending a hand toward his friend. "How could I ever forget?"

Chen looked at Clark's hand with contempt written plainly on his face. He refused to shake it and Clark withdrew his hand, uncertain how to respond. He decided to let Chen take the lead on how to move forward. Clark would take his cues from Chen, much like Superman took his cues from the numerous people he'd talked down from suicide.

"Come with me," Chen said, motioning toward the front of the room, which was far less occupied than the space near Grandma's coffin.

Lois and Clark exchanged a look, then they both followed Chen as he made a beeline for the far wall.

"Chen, it's really good to see you," Clark offered after a couple of moments, figuring that it was an innocuous enough statement to make.

Chen whirled around, angry. "You've got a lot of nerve, showing up here, you know that? Why did you come?"

"I heard about Grandma. I wanted to come and say goodbye to her," Clark answered, shocked. "The same as everyone else here,"

he added more firmly.

"You had your chance to say goodbye, years ago," Chen told him, gesturing toward the coffin. "You had your chance, but instead, you chose to run away without saying a word, like a coward. Get lost, Kent. You aren't needed or wanted here."

"That's not fair!" Lois bristled. Clark saw the anger flash in her eyes like a building storm. "You can't punish him for a mistake he made a long time ago. You don't know why he left and you sure as hell don't know how much he's regretted that."

"Oh? And *you* do? Then enlighten me, Miss...?" Chen sneered, leaving the statement unfinished so Lois could introduce herself.

"Lois Lane," Lois snapped, stepping protectively forward, as though she could shield Clark from Chen's stormy, wrathful look.

"Ah, so *you're* the reporter Kent here hooked up with," Chen replied, giving her an unimpressed once over with his eyes.

"Leave Lois out of this," Clark heard himself growl protectively.

Chen ignored him, and kept his steely gaze locked on Lois. "Go on then, Miss Lane. Explain to me why he left in the middle of the night, without even a note. Tell me why he broke Grandma's heart, making her cry and wonder what it was that she'd done wrong to drive him to run away. Enlighten me as to why I wasn't a good enough friend for him to come to with whatever problem it was that made him sneak out like a thief. Give me the reason why I had to be the one to break the news to the other boys, and counsel them in their grief at losing one of their own." Each statement was a bigger, nastier challenge than the last, and Clark internally flinched at the razor sharp truth in each one. Chen's eyes slid coldly over to Clark. "And not even in a way to celebrate. We always felt a loss when a boy left to go to his new home, but runaways always hurt worse. So...why? Why did this *coward* flee?"

Chen's rant hit Clark like a bucket of ice water thrown onto his body. Each point he brought up slapped Clark directly in the face and bruised his already battered heart. He wanted to respond somehow, but what could he say, without either giving away the true reason or outright lying about it?

"I don't know," Lois admitted softly. Then, stronger, "But I *do* know Clark. Whatever his reason was, I know it made sense to him, even if only at the time."

"You're a fool," Chen spat.

"She's a better person than you're presenting yourself to be," Clark said through gritted teeth.

She's an incredible woman, standing up for me when she has no idea that you're at least partially right about me. I did handle the situation wrongly. But I only did it because I loved all of you too much to see you get accidentally hurt.

Lois took another pointed step forward, getting in Chen's face a little. "No. I'm someone who trusts Clark. I've seen the kind of man he is. Whatever the reason was for him to leave, I know it wasn't an easy decision for him to make."

Chen sidestepped her as though avoiding an annoying puppy. "You trust a man who won't tell you important things like why he ran away from people who cared about him? Fine. Enjoy it when he runs from you too." The sneer in Chen's voice caused Lois to flinch ever so slightly. It had almost sounded like the man *hoped* Clark would abandon her and break her heart too.

"Maybe it doesn't matter why he left," she shot back, undeterred. "He's here now. Here to say his final farewells."

"And to apologize to you," Clark offered, taking Lois' arm and gently guiding her back to his side, making them a united front.

Please, believe me, he thought miserably.

"I'm not interested."

Clark shook his head. "You *deserve* my apologies, even if they're inadequate," he pressed gently.

I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to damage our

friendship. *You were like a brother to me. And I thought I was one to you in return.*

“You don’t get it, do you? I don’t *want* your apologies. Not now. Not ever. You’re *years* too late,” Chen said, venom dripping from his words. He raised his hand and swept it toward the coffin. “*Grandma* is the one you *really* needed to apologize to. She drove herself crazy trying to find you. She worried herself sick – literally.” Here, Chen’s anger dropped almost microscopically, as difficult memories appeared to wash over him. But the change in him didn’t last more than two heartbeats before his wrath returned in full. “Then, next thing we know, we get notified that you’re living with Bruce Freakin’ Wayne, in the lap of luxury like some kind of Orphan King!” He snorted disdainfully. “Yeah, we got the call from the police. Grandma had begged them to keep her in the loop, even if you weren’t found again until you were fifty.”

“I know,” Clark said evenly, his voice barely audible over the constant buzz of the other conversations. “I spoke to Grandma, just this past week. She told me everything.”

“Bruce Wayne,” Chen repeated, crossing his arms before him, the name sounding like a curse on his tongue. “I *hate* that man, for taking you in. He should have left you to suffer on the streets.”

“And yet you’ve had *no* problem accepting his generosity as part of Wayne Charities,” Clark shot back, his voice like stone, his entire body bristling with anger. He could weather Chen’s anger, but attacks on either Bruce or Lois he would not stand for.

“Not out of choice,” Chen replied icily. “And now that Grandma is gone, your little pity charity donations to us are going to stop, just as soon as the funeral is over and I have time to make a phone call. I don’t want any part of you *or* Bruce Wayne.”

“So, what? You’re going to punish all the boys you’re supposedly looking after?” Lois growled, her eyes flashing dangerously. “Take away the funds they’ve been used to getting to have all the things they could ever want?”

“We’ll make do just fine without the Clark Kent pity money,” Chen hissed.

“Grandma wouldn’t want that,” Clark reminded him sternly, crossing his arms over his chest, taking a similar stance to the authoritative way Superman often dealt with criminals. “She’d hate what you’re planning.” He cut off his lecture there, choosing, instead, to take a deep, calming breath. He sighed sadly. “You should know... when I talked to Grandma, I apologized for my actions.”

“Well whoop-dee-doo for you,” Chen sarcastically replied.

“And now, I want to apologize to you,” Clark continued, ignoring the remark, as though Chen hadn’t spoken a word. “What I did was wrong. It felt... necessary... at the time, but I never once felt good about it.”

“Good. You *shouldn’t* have been okay with it,” Chen replied, his eyes narrowed in anger. He dropped his arms to gesture expansively. “You flat out lied to my face, that night. You acted like you’d be there in the morning when you had to have known full well that you were planning to leave that night.” He poked the air in front of him with one accusing finger, as if pushing his words directly into Clark’s already wounded heart. “No, *Kent*, I don’t want your excuses *or* your apologies. Go. Go back to Metropolis or Gotham or wherever it is you need to scurry off to, like the rat you are. You don’t belong here.”

“Let me just say goodbye to Grandma, one last time,” Clark said, his voice just short of pleading. He put his hands up in a gesture of pacification. “Then I’ll go, I promise.”

“He deserves at least that much courtesy,” Lois added, her hands on her hips like a disapproving mother.

“No,” Chen said flatly, using his arms to make a quick X in the air in front of him, like an umpire calling ‘out’ on a player. He turned to leave, then stopped and faced them again as some thought stuck him. Clark had the ludicrous, fleeting thought that perhaps his old friend might have thought better of his stance on

things. “You know... there was a time, once, when I understood why Grandma held out hope that you’d come back. But, as the years passed, and she followed you from afar – especially once you started working for newspapers – I hoped she would finally give up on you, and turn her back on you, the same as the other boys had done long ago.”

“That wasn’t her way,” Clark countered softly. He placed a hand on Lois’ shoulder, drawing calmness from her presence, even if he could feel how much she was seething and holding herself back from verbally tearing Chen to shreds.

“No, it wasn’t. We can agree on that, at least.” Chen sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, as though warding off a headache.

“And yet you still insist on acting like an arrogant jerk,” Lois shot back, her words sharp as arrows. She stepped forward and poked Chen directly in the center of his chest. “Nice way to honor her memory.”

Chen pushed her hand away with casual indifference, like she was no more than a bothersome fly. “*I’m* the one who’s carrying on Grandma’s legacy of caring for boys with nowhere else to go. I haven’t run away when times have gotten tough. Don’t talk to *me* about honor.”

“You wouldn’t know honor if it kicked you right in the...”

“Lois, please,” Clark gently interrupted her. He felt his body sag a little under his grief. It was becoming all too clear that he’d lost not only Grandma, but Chen as well.

“It’s the truth,” she sniffed indignantly, though her voice dropped to a level that was just above speaking under her breath.

“Chen... can’t we talk?” Clark asked after a few seconds, his heart beating so rapidly in his chest that he felt like it had to be physically bruised from smashing itself against his ribcage.

“I’ve got nothing else to say to you,” Chen said with icy dismissal.

“Chen?” a woman called, as she made her way over. “The minister wants to ask...” She stopped in midsentence as she caught sight of Clark. She blinked twice, as if in disbelief. “C... Clark Kent? Is that you?”

A bolt of recognition shot through Clark. “Mina?”

The woman nodded and embraced him enthusiastically. “Oh my God! How are you?”

“I’m okay,” he said as she let go again. “How are you?”

“Mina, please,” Chen said with a jerk of his head, motioning for her to step away from Clark. “Kent here was just leaving,” he added pointedly.

“I’m fine,” Mina replied, ignoring her husband. “A little tired lately but, what can you expect?” she said, affectionately patting the small bump of her stomach.

Clark mustered up a tiny smile. “I’d heard that you two got married and started a family. I’m really happy for you both. I’d like you to meet Lois Lane.” He put his arm around Lois’ waist.

“His girlfriend,” Lois interjected, a bit possessively, even though she had no reason to worry that Mina might hit on Clark. She pushed past Clark a little, keeping him firmly behind her.

“Nice to meet you,” Mina said, extending a hand.

Lois shook it. “Clark’s told me about you.”

Mina beamed a smile. “He’s a good man.”

Lois smiled in turn, but Clark saw that the smile didn’t quite make it into her eyes. “Agreed. I’m really lucky to have him.”

Mina chuckled lightly. “I’m sure he’s lucky to have you too.”

Lois nodded. “I like to think so.”

Chen scowled. “Mina...” he said, impatiently.

“Is he giving you a hard time?” Mina asked, once again refusing to address her husband. “Ignore it. He’s grieving. Grandma pretty much raised him.”

“I know,” Clark said respectfully, nodding his head. “How are you dealing with it? I know she was pretty special to you too.”

“I’m... hanging in there,” Mina confided. “The kids are taking

it hard. They've never known what it's like *not* having Grandma Tildy in their lives."

"I'm sure," Clark agreed.

"Will you stay for a while? I have a few people I need to talk to, but I'd love to catch up," Mina offered. She waved her hand toward the rest of the room.

"I...uh..." Clark stammered.

"He's leaving. He's not welcome here," Chen asserted, crossing his arms again. "If he doesn't leave on his own, right now, he'll be forcibly removed."

"Oh?" Lois challenged, her eyebrow raised skeptically.

"What? You're going to throw him out? Please, Clark could probably break you in half without trying. And he's not exactly Superman." She shot Clark an apologetic look. "No offense, Clark."

"You're right. He's *not* Superman." Chen practically spat out the words. "Superman treats strangers with more respect than Kent treats his so-called friends. And no, *I'm* not going to be the one to throw him out. But there *are* more than a few other guys here who are built like linebackers. *They* will throw him out, if I ask them to."

Clark was suddenly aware of how quiet the room had gotten. Many, though not all, of the people gathered there had broken off their conversations to watch the drama unfolding between the two former friends. In the guise of Superman, the stares wouldn't have bothered him. But, standing there as average Joe, not-at-all-special Clark Kent, the stares bored right through him, down to his soul. It unnerved him to the point where it took a Herculean effort not to squirm under their unforbearing gazes. Instead, he forced himself to adopt the stance of Superman — hard and immovable, unfazed by anyone's judgement. He stiffened his spine and stood even straighter.

"Chen, you and I used to be able to be completely honest with one another," Clark said evenly, internally wincing at the lie. After all, he'd never been honest about his powers. "So let me be honest with you now. You're being unreasonable. All I'm asking for is a few minutes to say goodbye to Grandma. Yeah, okay, I get it. You don't want to forgive me for what I did. That's fine. You're entitled to feel however you want to. But let me ask you something. This grudge you have...is this how you act toward all of the boys who run away? Do they return just to have you actively hate them? What kind of message are you sending them? They're watching you, you know. You and me, right now. Look around the room and you'll see I'm not lying. What will you say when little Be...Bernard," he said, catching himself before he could say Benji, the name of the boy Superman had helped get back to the halfway house, "when he gets brought back to the home after trying to run away? Will hold a grudge against him too? Or is your anger reserved just for me?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lois beaming with approval and defiance.

Chen, on the other hand, went scarlet with his fuming anger. Clark was fleetingly reminded of the way old cartoons would sometimes depict enraged characters as smoking from the ears or perhaps blowing the top of their head off like an erupting volcano, complete with a klaxon alarm sound.

"How *dare* you question my ability to head the halfway house," Chen growled through gritted teeth, and Clark had to give him credit for not yelling. "I was running that place with Grandma *well* before *you* ever showed up. I've forgiven everyone who's ever left. The boys know they can rely on me for that. No, I don't hold any anger for them. Because none of them ever had the audacity to pass themselves off as my best friend. *Former* best friend, at any rate."

The words punched a hole in Clark's heart. "I see," he managed to get out.

"Now, leave. *Don't* make me tell you again," Chen threatened.

"He has *every right* to be here!" Lois argued, her tone going dangerously sharp and loud.

"No, he *doesn't*," Chen shot back, matching her volume.

"Hey, Chen," a burly man said, coming over. Clark didn't recognize him. "There a problem over here?"

"I'm not sure yet, Jed." Chen crossed his arms with a smug look on his face. "It depends on if this *trespasser* leaves on his own or not." He gave Clark a withering look. "Jed here is in law enforcement. As are a few others in this room." The words were painfully spoken, as though Chen was talking to an idiot, incapable of understanding his threat by his words alone. "The choice is yours, Kent. Leave without a fuss or leave in handcuffs. I *really* don't care which it is."

With great effort, Clark bit back the retort on his tongue.

"Fine," he growled, forcing the words out. "You want to 'win' that badly? Fine," he repeated harshly. "You want to pretend like leaving wasn't hard for me? *Fine*. You want to prevent me from saying goodbye to Grandma? That's fine too. Just know that that wasn't her way. She would be *extremely* disappointed. She raised you to be a lot better than this." He turned to Lois and took her hand with a shake of his head. "Come on, Lois. Let's get out of here."

"Fine by me. This place is way too toxic," she commented.

Together, they started to leave. This time, the watching crowd parted for them, as though making way for a royal couple.

"Oh? And Kent?" Chen called after them. "Don't bother trying to show up to the cemetery either. I'll make *sure* you're arrested on sight if you do."

Clark didn't respond in any way. He made not a sound. He didn't even so much as pause in mid step. He and Lois simply kept walking until they reached the door and went back out into the all too cheery and bright sunlight. Down the steps they went, back onto the soft, springy grass that surrounded the property.

"Clark, wait!" Mina called after him.

He and Lois stopped and turned back.

"I'm so, so sorry about the way Chen treated you in there," she apologized. "I'm just *so* embarrassed. Believe me. My husband will be getting an earful tonight when we're alone."

Clark shook his head. "I appreciate that but, truth be told, I'm not surprised that he's still angry at me."

"He's a good man. Stubborn and hard-headed at times but..." Mina shrugged. "I'm sorry. I wish things had gone better. And I wish we could have reunited under happier circumstances."

"Me too," Clark replied. "Look, I don't want to give Chen any further reason to threaten myself or Lois. I think it's for the best if we don't hang around. I'm sorry, Mina. Take care of yourself, okay?"

"I will. You too." She hugged Clark tightly, then turned to Lois and gave her a quick hug. "Take care of him, okay? Despite what Chen may think, Clark's one of the best people you could ever hope to know."

"I know. And I will," Lois promised. "I'm so sorry about Grandma Tildy. From what Clark has told me about her, I know she was a very special woman to all of you."

"She was. Thank you, Lois."

"Bye, Mina," Clark said, knowing that it was likely the last time he would ever cross paths with her again as Clark, though he didn't rule out the possibility of Superman needing to return to the halfway house again in the future.

"Bye, Clark. Lois, it was nice meeting you."

"You too," Lois said softly.

With that, Mina turned and hurried back to the funeral home, while Lois and Clark continued on to their car.

"*That* was your best friend at one point?" Lois asked with disgust as she shut the door and buckled in.

Clark slid into the driver's seat and started the engine. "He was never like this, growing up. I've never, *ever* seen this side of

him before. He's just...so angry."

"He's a *jerk*," Lois insisted.

"Maybe but...I'm not sure I can really fault him for it."

"You're kidding me, right?" Lois replied, peering at his face to see if he was cracking a joke.

"No, I'm not," Clark said, adjusting the air in the car and backing out of the parking space.

"Clark, he ripped into you like a dog on a ham bone!"

"I know," Clark replied soothingly. "But...he and I were best friends. I let him down in a big way. I was supposed to be there for him. To support him when he was ready to propose to Mina. To be the best man at his wedding. To be available to talk if and when things got rough at the halfway house. They did, sometimes, you know. When the budget got tight, despite all the corners we were already cutting. When one of the boys we'd befriended had to leave the house – going to live with a family or aging out of the system and choosing to go out on their own to make their own life. But...I *wasn't* there. I ran. I didn't say goodbye."

"He would have tried to stop you. Whether or not that would have maybe been for the best doesn't matter. It was, for whatever reason, important for you to leave," Lois said gently.

Clark pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the road. "It was more than that, Lois. The night I left...Chen asked me if I would hang out and play a game in the rec room. I looked him in the eyes and flat out lied to him. I said I was tired but I'd be up for playing the next morning. I knew full well that I was going to leave that night. I'd already planned it all out in my mind. Chen was right when he said that I'd lied to his face."

"That doesn't give him the right to treat you worse than he'd treat a piece of trash," Lois said, fuming. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Maybe it's for the best that he's clearly burned the friendship bridge with you."

"Maybe. I mean, I was expecting him to be mad but...I didn't recognize the man he's become. It's...terrifying, to be honest. I...I never want to cause that much pain to anyone else, ever in my life. Especially not to you, Lois."

"You won't," Lois assured him confidently.

"Let's hope not," he said, unconvinced.

We'll see, his inner voice said despondently. *There's still the matter of my alien origins to address.*

"Are we still going to try to attend the burial?" Lois asked a few minutes later. "I know what Chen said but, he can't *really* stop us...can he?"

"No," Clark said, shaking his head. "We aren't going to tempt fate." He stopped for a stop sign, checked both ways, then continued on.

"That lets Chen win," Lois gently pointed out.

"Maybe," Clark conceded, "but...I know Chen. Or...used to, I guess. He keeps his word. His threat was real. If we step foot in that church or that cemetery, he'll have a state trooper or sheriff or whoever put us in handcuffs. I'm not willing to endure that. And I won't put you in that position either. It's not right."

"What's not right is denying you the ability to be there for Grandma Tildy's final send-off." She sighed. "I wish there was something I could do to help. Maybe I should go back...alone? Try to talk some sense into his thick skull?"

"No," Clark said with finality. "Chen's past the point of being reasonable. It wouldn't change his mind and would only make him furious with you too." He shook his head again. "I can be content with having spoken with Grandma earlier in the week. I basically told her all the things I've been holding inside all these years. We made our peace with each other. It's enough. It *has* to be."

"Well, I'm glad you got the chance to do that," Lois said softly, lightly touching the back of his hand as he drove.

"Not many people do," Clark agreed. "Everyone always thinks that there's always tomorrow, when it's never actually guaranteed."

"True," Lois said with a solemn nod.

A few more minutes passed in silence. Finally, Clark could stand the oppressive quiet no longer. He cleared his throat.

"Lois?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really sorry."

Lois blinked in surprise. "Sorry? For what?"

"For all of this. For dragging you out here to the middle of Kansas. For subjecting you to Chen's hatred. For making you miss work for no reason at all."

"Clark, you didn't do *any* of that!" Lois countered, shock in her voice. "I'm the one who insisted on coming with you. And you couldn't have known that Chen was going to act like a petulant child."

"Still...I feel bad," Clark replied. He beeped the horn at a driver who remained stationary long after the light changed to green. "I guess I'll call the airline and see if we can exchange our tickets for a flight out tomorrow. There's no reason to stay. Besides, we have a ton of work to do in Metropolis. The Luthor case is far from closed, at any rate."

"No," Lois decided.

"No? You don't want to go back?" She could not have surprised Clark more than if she announced that she was also Kryptonian.

"Not yet," Lois clarified. "Look. Perry's already approved for us to take a few days off. We're already out here, in Kansas. You said yourself that Smallville is only a few hours' drive from here. So...why don't we take a drive tomorrow instead? I think it'll be good for you. When was the last time you were there?"

Last month, visiting my parents' grave, he thought.

"The day I got sent to the halfway house," he said instead. "I know Bruce would have arranged for me to go out there for a visit if I'd wanted but...just like Grandma's, I wondered if I could ever really feel comfortable, going back, even if just for a day's visit."

At least as myself, at any rate.

"Oh...uh...did you not want to go? We don't have to," Lois quickly backpedaled.

Clark felt a rush of love surge through his heart. It still took him by surprise, sometimes, to see just how much Lois cared about him.

"No, I think it's a great idea," he said. "Thank you, Lois."

I never thought I'd be going home again, he thought to himself. *At least, not outside of the guise of Superman. But, is it really home anymore? The times I've flown out there, I've felt like a stranger. Like an outcast. Like I no longer belong there. Metropolis is my home now, because it's where Lois is.*

Lois.

He mentally sighed as he drove.

If she reacts to my secret the way Chen did to me showing up today, I don't know what I'll do.

He's not welcome here.

I've got nothing else to say to you.

Go back to Metropolis or Gotham or wherever it is you need to scurry off to, like the rat you are.

You don't belong here.

If he doesn't leave on his own, right now, he'll be forcibly removed.

Superman treats strangers with more respect than Kent treats his so-called friends.

Don't bother trying to show up to the cemetery either.

I've got nothing else to say to you.

I'll make sure you're arrested on sight if you do.

You don't belong here.

You don't belong here.

I've got nothing else to say to you.

You don't belong here.

You don't belong here.

The words slammed forcefully around in Clark's mind. No matter what he did, he couldn't forget how angry Chen had been with him. He couldn't forget the other man's venomous attitudes. The words still stuck his heart with cruel barbs, leaving him bleeding inside. As much as Clark felt he probably deserved a lot of what Chen had said, it still wounded him to know how much pain he'd caused a man he'd once considered his brother.

He wished Grandma Tildy had told him just how deep Chen's hurt had gone. He wished he'd been better able to anticipate the frigid reception he'd received. He wondered if she'd been trying to spare his feelings or if she simply hadn't known how much hatred Chen harbored toward him. Either way, he'd been completely blindsided at the wake the day before. Sure, a part of him had fully anticipated Chen giving him a cold reception. But Clark hadn't been prepared to see just how different Chen had seemed. He hadn't been recognizable as the same person.

I'm to blame for that, his mind admonished him.

No, another, smaller voice in his mind said. He chose his path, just as you chose yours. He could have chosen to let you try to explain things. He could have allowed you to apologize. He decided not to.

Clark sighed and looked again at the journal before him. He hadn't gotten far into putting his thoughts onto paper just yet, and he wasn't sure he was going to. He was too distracted and far too upset still. He still had too much guilt and grief to work through. Instead of writing being therapeutic, it was a chore of Herculean proportions. Still, he forced a few more sentences out, each of them a struggle to fully form in his tortured mind. He dropped the pen after a few minutes and put his head into his hands, his hands on either side of his skull, like he'd seen people with severe headaches do. But still the words would not come. Like a dammed up river, barely a trickle of inspiration made it past Chen's mocking, vengeful words.

"Hey? Are you coming to bed?" Lois asked gently.

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Clark replied distractedly. "I'll be right there."

He was grateful for the excuse to put the journal away, and for the way Lois took his mind off the mental replay of the wake. In fact, she'd managed to keep his mind off Chen and Grandma's funeral for most of the day. Clark had sorely needed the distraction. It had felt so good to focus on something else for the day.

He and Lois had driven out to Smallville and spent the better part of the day touring the town. He'd taken her everywhere – the old quarry where he used to swim during the summers, past his old schools, through the center of town, for an ice cream sundae at the General Store, which he'd been mildly shocked was still operated by the same family. They'd driven by the movie theater where Clark had gone as a child, when there had been money to spare. He'd taken her to lunch at Maisie's Diner, now under new management and – to Clark's memory – it hadn't been as tasty as it had once been. Clark hadn't been able to stop the thought that his mother would have been disappointed. Maisie's had been one of her favorites. For dinner, they'd gone to the Barbeque Pit – his father's personal favorite. They had also seemed to change some of their recipes, but this time, it had been for the better. Clark had rarely tasted barbeque food so good.

He'd also driven them both to his childhood home. They hadn't gotten out of the car, sitting parked on the side of the road, gazing at the house and land that had once been a part of his soul. That had been a strange experience for Clark. Even after he'd developed his powers, he'd never gone back to the farm. At first, it had been too painful. Now, it just felt foreign and he felt like an outsider looking in. In truth, he hardly even recognized the place. The siding of the house had been redone, changing it from a weather-beaten, but neat, white to the ominous gray of a storm

cloud. The tree in the yard which had once held his tree house was gone. Not even the stump remained that he could see. The barn was completely new. It was easily twice as large as it had been during Clark's youth. A stable with horses had appeared. And the crops, as far as he could tell, were all in the wrong places.

They didn't stay long. It was too depressing for Clark.

From the farm, they'd driven to the cemetery, after stopping once to pick up a bouquet of fresh flowers from the local florist. Clark had reverently placed the flowers on the grave before awkwardly introducing Lois to his deceased parents. It simply hadn't felt right to stand there in absolute silence, and it had always made him feel a little better to speak to his mother and father aloud, as though they could hear him that way. They'd stayed at the cemetery much longer than they had at the house, and Clark had recounted all kinds of stories about his parents to Lois. For the first time in his life, he'd felt like telling those stories had filled him with joy, and not abject grief.

It was a new experience, for him to be at the cemetery as himself in the middle of the day, rather than sneaking in at night while wearing his Superman disguise. He'd liked being free to be himself. It had felt good to be there legitimately, instead of flying in like a thief in the darkness, always on alert for any night guards who might be on patrol. He'd felt at peace and having Lois at his side had given him strength.

As they'd gone from place to place that day, Clark had run into a few people he'd once known. Lana Lang and her new husband. Pete Ross and his wife, out with their infant daughter. Chuck Freeman, walking his dog. Rachel Harris, dutifully patrolling the town, making sure peace and law reigned. Old Man Oscar, who still ran the General Store, even at the age of eighty-six, and who still made the best ice cream sundae Clark had ever known.

It had been good to see familiar faces. But it had been a distant familiarity. The long years since they'd last seen each other had turned once close friends into casual acquaintances. After quick catch-ups, there hadn't been much else to talk about, and the conversations had ended sooner rather than later. Clark had once again felt like an outsider – an alien in an alien world. But, at least none of his old friends seemed to hate him or blame him for losing contact with him, so he counted the day as a success.

Lois yawned, jerking him back to the present. "You know, I really enjoyed getting to see Smallville today," she said sleepily.

"Me too. Err... I mean, I liked getting to show you around. It... it was nice to go back, even after so long," Clark replied, finally setting aside his journal completely. Even now, he still remained faithful to Grandma Tildy's request that he write something each day. He clicked the pen closed, giving his surrender a sense of finality. "I wasn't sure what it was going to be like, going back. But... I needed that. Thank you for suggesting that we go."

Lois nodded as she climbed into the single king bed in the room and pulled the sheets up around her waist as she sat up, leaning against the headboard. "You would have done the same for me. Besides, I've always been curious about where you grew up. At least... once I let myself accept your friendship. Somehow, I feel like... like Smallville really suits you. Not that you should leave Metropolis I mean. But... that quaint, comfortable, welcoming, polite small-town atmosphere... I see it in you. I have, ever since the beginning, even when I didn't want to."

Clark shrugged. "I guess, maybe, it *did* impact how I grew up. Mostly, I watched how my parents were. I wanted to be just like them."

"I wish I could have met them, even just once," she said with quiet wistfulness. He could see the sadness in her features and it broke his heart with such love to see how much she cared for him and the family he'd lost.

"They would have loved you," he assured her with a sad smile

of his own. He didn't doubt the truth of those words, not for one second.

He crossed the room and got into the bed, still feeling awkward over sharing it with her, even if nothing had happened between them. He laid on his side, propped up on one elbow, looking at her. Lois mimicked his movements.

"You know," she said after a moment, reaching out to touch his upper arm, "I didn't really get a chance to say this yesterday. I was too upset over what happened with Chen to think straight. But...I was really impressed with how you handled things. You were calm and collected and, well, if that had been me in the direct line of fire, I can assure you that one of those police officers at the wake would have needed to forcibly remove me."

"There wasn't really a point in getting angry with him," Clark explained with a shrug. "It wasn't going to change his mind or make him want to salvage our friendship."

"Still...he had no right to treat you like that." Her face clouded over, reflecting the inner thunderstorm he knew was raging against such an injustice.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But going to his level...it's just not who I am."

"I know. But...still. When you challenged him and asked if that's how he'll treat other boys who run away and then return...I came close to cheering for you. I *was* on the inside. I mean, I've seen you challenge people we're investigating and everything but..." She shrugged a little, appearing to search for the right words. "I looked at you and I knew you weren't even thinking of yourself in that moment. You were challenging him on behalf of everyone else."

Clark sighed. "I *wasn't* thinking of my situation. "And, I'll confess...I might have cheated there, a little."

Lois furrowed her brow in confusion. "I don't understand."

"The night I spoke to Grandma...I saw Superman. He'd been there, to the halfway house, after bringing a runaway boy back. He'd convinced him that running away was the worst possible option. He told me that he briefly met Chen and Grandma. Both welcomed the boy back with great relief that he was safe and back home with them. When Chen was so unwilling to even give me the chance to apologize, all I could think of was that story."

Lois somberly nodded. "That makes a lot of sense. Do you think Chen was telling the truth? That he can forgive the other boys, if the need ever arises?"

Clark thought it over for a moment. "I really hope so," he finally declared. He sighed. "You know something, Lois? I expected Chen to resent me, even hate me. But I never once thought I would have to remind him that I won't be the only runaway he'll have to deal with, and that he can't hold grudges against them. That they deserve compassion and at least an attempt to understand their side of things. That they will need Chen to forgive them, because they're already beating themselves up about their decision. I don't care if he ever forgives me. I mean, it would have been nice, if we could have saved the friendship we once shared. But if he can't see past a mistake or two...he's in the wrong field. The boys in the halfway house need someone on their side, not someone to pass judgement."

"You think he's unfit to run the house?" Lois asked thoughtfully.

Clark shook his head. "The Chen I once knew was more than capable of taking things over. I think, maybe, he's still in there. Maybe I really *am* the only one he'll ever turn his back on. Maybe not. I don't know. He's got Mina...she's always been a level-headed voice of reason. She's good for him."

"Too good for him," Lois huffed. "I pity her, married to a man like that. She seemed like a sweet woman."

Clark smirked. "So sweet you seemed maybe a smidge jealous when she came over?"

Lois blushed slightly. "I was just...making sure she knew who

I was, that's all."

Clark laughed. "Lois, you were practically marking your territory."

Lois slapped his right pectoral muscle playfully. "I was not!" "Sure, Lois. Whatever you say," he grinned. "You didn't stress that you're my girlfriend *at all*."

Lois rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Well...can you really blame me?" she relented after a few seconds. "Chen really got under my skin, that's all. I guess it took me a minute or two to recognize that Mina wasn't going to crucify you the way her husband did. Anyway," she went on, waving the discussion away, "I just thought you should know how proud I am of you for standing up for those boys."

"Someone has to," Clark replied, shifting to lay on his back. He folded his hands behind his head. "They have enough to worry about without having to question Chen's ability to forgive their mistakes."

Lois nodded and fell silent. Before long, a yawn overtook her once again.

"Tired?" Clark asked, kissing the top of her forehead as she snuggled into his side.

"A little," Lois admitted, laying her head on his chest.

"Sorry it took us so long getting back from Smallville," he apologized.

"It's not your fault. No one could have foreseen that accident on the road," she said.

The fatal head-on collision had happened on a narrow stretch of road, just one lane in each direction. The two cars had wound up at awkward angles in the center of the road and had caused the entire road to shut down. Lois had considered themselves as lucky. When they had gotten stuck in traffic, the emergency personnel on scene had already been mostly finished. They had only wound up being stopped for forty minutes or so while they had waited on tow trucks to arrive and move the destroyed vehicles. Clark, on the other hand, had silently grieved the fact that Superman hadn't been in the area to help save lives.

"Why don't we get some rest," Clark offered, more than ready to end the conversation about Chen. It still stung badly that his once best friend had so completely rejected his attempt at reconciliation. "We have a pretty early flight tomorrow and the airport is kind of far."

"Even if it wasn't, I'm beat," Lois agreed. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Night, Lois. I love you. And I'm glad you were with me for this."

"I love you too, Clark." She yawned again. "Sorry," she apologized.

Clark chuckled. "It's okay. Get some sleep. See you in the morning."

Lois murmured a sound of contentment and, within minutes, she was sound asleep, her head still on his chest. Clark sighed, perfectly at peace, his heart no longer aching with hurt over his lost friendship, but with so much love for Lois that words utterly failed him.

And he wondered, for how much longer would this picture of perfection last?

Three swift weeks later, Clark munched contentedly on a glazed donut as he stood surveying the bullpen of the Daily Planet. Three weeks in which he and Lois had been kept dizzyingly busy with the Luthor case. Clark had been grateful for the constant work. It had kept his mind busy and hadn't allowed him to dwell on the events that had transpired in Kansas at Grandma's funeral. He hadn't had time to obsess over all the things he hadn't gotten to say to Grandma Tildy before her passing. And, though he'd grieved hard over her loss, his heart was starting to ever so slightly mend. She wouldn't want him to mourn for long, he knew. She'd believed in grieving, sure, but not to the exclusion of all else. She

would have wanted him to focus on gathering all the evidence he and Lois had been working on getting, to ensure that Luthor never again stepped foot outside of prison.

Clark was, perhaps, a bit more bothered by the way Chen had treated him. With Grandma, there had been a part of Clark that, although had been buried deep and never openly acknowledged, knew there would come a time in his life when Grandma would cease to be there to talk to. But Chen? Even though Clark had known it would be likely that his friend – *former friend*, his mind interjected, putting a screeching halt to Clark’s train of thought as the reality of his broken relationship with Chen once again slapped in him the face.

Former friend, his mind corrected him once again with weighty sadness.

Clark closed his eyes against the thought, trying to will away the pain it brought his heart.

In all the scenarios Clark had ever pictured in his mind as he’d prepared to return to Kansas and say goodbye to Grandma, he’d never once envisioned such a hostile response from Chen. He still couldn’t reconcile the cold, cruel, vicious man with the ever happy, quick with a smile, sensitive and caring young man Clark had once known. Clark shook his head to himself, wishing he could forget the look of absolute hatred on Chen’s face and the deadly cold fire that had burned in the man’s eyes. He felt a new hole being punched in his soul as he once more heard Chen’s condemnations in his mind.

You don’t belong here.

I’ve got nothing else to say to you.

Go back to Metropolis or Gotham or wherever it is you need to scurry off to, like the rat you are.

Clark had known his former friend would likely still harbor some resentment and anger, but he’d never imagined that his past transgressions would be so utterly unforgivable as to incite such a vile reaction from a boy who’d once been a brother to him.

Clark had been a fool to believe that an apology would be welcomed and accepted. And he’d spent the better part of the past three weeks regretting his decision to fly out to Kansas. He felt now that he should have been content to have spoken with Grandma just before she’d died. In trying to honor her by attending her funeral, he’d wound up causing more harm than good. He’d enraged Chen. He’d embarrassed Mina, simply by being the object of Chen’s verbal assault. And, worse, he’d put Lois in the line of fire too.

Three weeks.

Three weeks in which, in all other things, life had returned to a state of normalcy, especially when he was at work. And that was what put his mind at peace now as he let his eyes sweep over the bullpen. Phones rang, the fax machine beeped, and his friends and coworkers moved about the place, trading information, making small talk, rushing out to grab a story before any of their competitors could. Everything was perfectly as it should be, and it made Clark smile to himself. It hadn’t been so very long ago that he’d been an overseas reporter, lacking a place to call home, never feeling like he was a real part of a reporting team, and beyond lonely. Now his life had completely changed. Perry often called Lois and Clark his top reporters. Metropolis had become Clark’s home. More than that, Clark knew that Metropolis had *always* been his true home. It had just been a matter of finding it. And he was a man in love with the woman he knew he was destined to marry – the other half of his soul, the person he’d been searching his whole life for, the one woman in all the world he could never live without.

Clark sighed, his optimism clouding over.

Lois.

The woman he was still keeping secrets from, three weeks after he’d sworn to himself that he would finally summon up the courage to tell her the truth about himself.

Three weeks.

Three weeks since he’d received a phone call from Bruce, telling him that Grandma Tildy had died. Three weeks since he’d once again put that all-important conversation with Lois on the back burner.

“Morning, CK!” Jimmy beamed, breaking Clark out of his thoughts.

“Hey, Jimmy!” Clark grinned back.

“I’m working on those ATM robbery shots,” Jimmy informed him. “They’re supposed to arrive via courier sometime this afternoon, but…” He shrugged. “You know how it is.”

“Okay, thanks,” Clark replied. “I appreciate you tracking them down for us.”

“No problem,” Jimmy smiled.

Life had returned back to normal since Lois and Clark had flown out to Kansas, only to be thrown out of Grandma Tildy’s funeral. The first few days back had been hard for Clark. As much as he wanted to put everything behind him, Chen’s venomous words had rung in his ears. He’d kept seeing Chen’s face – so full of absolute hatred and disgust – every time he’d closed his eyes. So he’d tried to keep himself as busy as he could, between working for the paper and making rescues as Superman. Lois had mentioned it only once to him – pointing out how distant he’d been since they’d arrived back in Metropolis – but he’d passed it off as just needing some time to process losing not only Grandma Tildy, but any chance of reconciling with his former best friend. For her part, Lois had seemed to accept that explanation, and hadn’t mentioned it again.

But Clark had still felt guilty about lying to her, even a partial lie. So he gave himself only a week to grieve his losses. Then he forced himself to put it out of his mind and turn his attention back to Lois. He could see the relief in her features as she thought that he was feeling like his old self again. And, perhaps he *was*, he’d reasoned to himself. While he knew he could never forget what had happened, it had been a *long* time since he and Chen had interacted with one another. So, was it *really* as big of a loss as it felt, to know that the friendship had died, been buried, and rotted away to a tattered memory? The more he thought about it, the more the answer felt like a confident “no.”

Still, the encounter with Chen *had* impacted one major decision in Clark’s life.

He was too shaken by Chen’s vehement dismissal of him to tell Lois his secret, the way he’d been planning to.

Oh, he’d tried. Several times, in fact. But each time he’d begun, telling Lois that they needed to talk, he’d chickened out at the last moment and made up something else entirely to discuss. He still wanted to tell her, that much was true. But he couldn’t help but to remember how differently his former friend had treated him as Clark and as Superman. Each time he thought about telling Lois the truth about Superman, that memory would surface and he’d start to fear that she might act the same way.

He was stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

He could tell Lois and risk her completely rejecting him, permanently. Or he could keep his secrets and maintain the status quo, which he knew would eventually drive her away. She deserved – and needed, even if she wouldn’t admit it – his total commitment to their relationship. By withholding such vital information, he would eventually alienate her, simply because she would endure him running out on her without a plausible explanation one too many times.

He was trapped, and he knew it.

Of course, the answer was clear to him. He’d have to tell her, sooner or later. And, the sooner the better.

But, if she rejected him, he wasn’t sure what he would do. He certainly couldn’t remain working for The Daily Planet. Seeing her every day, even if Perry broke up their partnership, would be too hard for him to bear. In fact, he’d probably need to leave

Metropolis. Even the *chance* of running into her by accident on the streets would be too painful, he knew. There was always Gotham, but Clark wasn't so sure that would be a viable option either. In a lot of ways, he'd outgrown that city.

There was also always the chance that Lois would retaliate and publish the story about Superman's true identity. But Clark had to admit to himself that that possibility was almost nonexistent. He knew Lois too well. She had a strong set of morals and was she the smartest person he knew. She would understand why it would be a bad idea to publish that story. She would see how printing the story would destroy not only Clark's life, but paint targets on the backs of all the people he was close to.

No, she wouldn't go running to Perry with that sensitive information. She could be trusted to keep his secret.

And yet, the thought of losing her froze the marrow in his bones and turned the confessional words in his throat to dust.

"Hey, Jimmy? Has Lois come in yet today?" he asked, trying to steel his resolve to set a time to have that terrifying conversation with her.

"You guys didn't come in together?" Jimmy asked, surprised.

Clark shook his head. "No. She had to meet a source this morning, but they wouldn't meet with her if she wasn't alone."

"Oh," Jimmy nodded with understanding. "Makes sense. She's got a few that are skittish like that."

"Tell me about it. It makes me nervous every time," Clark sighed, his mouth turning down in a half-frown.

"She knows how to take care of herself," Jimmy assured him.

"Oh, believe me, I know," Clark replied with a small smile.

"But that doesn't mean I like it any better."

Jimmy chuckled. "Yeah, well, you can tell her that yourself. Here she comes."

True to word, Clark looked toward the elevators to find Lois making her way to the ramp that led down into the bullpen. He chuckled. "Hard pass. I've tried telling her that already."

"Got you nowhere?" Jimmy guessed.

"Made her even more determined than ever," Clark laughed.

Jimmy laughed too. "That's Lois for you," he shrugged, grinning broadly.

"No kidding," Clark agreed.

"Hey," Lois said, reaching them. She kissed Clark quickly on the lips. "Good morning."

"Good morning to you too," Clark murmured, taking the opportunity to kiss her once more.

"You guys need a room?" Jimmy teased. He mocked-saluted them with the slender folder he had gripped in one hand, taking a backwards step away from them.

Lois and Clark gave him a synchronized eye roll.

"How was your meeting?" Clark asked, as Jimmy moved off to his own desk, not far from Clark's.

Lois shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I didn't learn anything all that new. Which, honestly, is weird to me. Nick the Snitch is usually a lot more helpful."

"Maybe we're just that good and ahead of your sources, for once," Clark grinned.

Lois chuckled lightly. "Yeah, maybe. And maybe I have a lucrative career as a nun ahead of me. It's about the same probability."

"You think he's deliberately withholding information?" Clark asked, surprised.

"I think he's scared. Terrified, actually. You should have seen how jumpy he was. Way more than usual. I think he may have been threatened. Even with Lex behind bars, he's still got his hooks in the criminal element. It wouldn't be too difficult for him to issue threats to informants, even from jail," Lois reasoned.

"True," Clark agreed. "The good news is, in the last few weeks, we've connected a *lot* of crime to Luthor. And we have a decent inkling on what else he may have been involved with.

We'll get him."

"We always do," Lois enthusiastically grinned.

"As it is, we have enough to pin on him to keep him in jail for several lifetimes," Clark grinned.

"Let's make it several hundred more," Lois replied brightly, her eyes lighting up with a spark as her passion flared.

"I love the way you think," Clark beamed.

"But first, coffee," Lois said, grabbing his hand and pulling him toward the break area.

"Of course," he agreed with a nod. "What was I thinking?"

"You weren't," Lois teased. "Which is why you have me." She turned and grinned at him.

He laughed. "Absolutely. And, good news, I saw Perry setting up the coffeemaker earlier, so at least we'll know it's drinkable."

"Thank God. If I have to swallow down one more cup of mud, I'm going to scream," Lois said with relief.

"You and me both," Clark laughed. "Dish soap would have been more appetizing than yesterday afternoon's noxious brew. I *refuse* to even call it coffee."

Lois winced at the memory. "Worst one I've ever had, and I've been here for a long time."

They reached the break area and Clark immediately set to work fixing two cups of coffee, just the way they both liked it. He made Lois' first and handed it to her before adding the sugar and cream to his own. He sipped his, giving it just the smallest taste, and his eyes shot open. He coughed in surprise.

"How is it that Perry's coffee *still* takes me off guard with how strong it is?" he asked with a chuckle and another cough.

"I'm not sure anyone ever really gets used to it," Lois laughed in response. "At least, not those first few sips. It gets more tolerable after that."

"Hey, guys!" Jimmy called as he made a beeline for them, ducking around Lenny, who was carrying a stack of research in his arms. "Did you hear?"

"Hear what?" Lois and Clark asked, almost completely in sync.

"About the fight!" Jimmy elaborated enthusiastically.

Clark's muscles immediately tensed, ready to spring into action. His mind raced to concoct an excuse for ducking out, so that Superman could break up the fight. His heart rate jumped, anticipating the confrontation he was sure was coming – not that he was looking forward to it, but he knew how volatile fights could be, and how quickly things could turn dangerous.

"What fight?" Lois asked, looking ready to jump into action herself. Clark could see her making mental notes and going into reporter mode.

"It was just announced," Jimmy explained, gesturing wildly. "It's going to be on Pay Per View and everything!"

"Jimmy, what are you rambling about?" Lois asked, now looking annoyed.

Jimmy blushed and cleared his throat. "Sorry. It's Carmine Caneno and Tommy Garrison."

"The boxers?" Clark asked, his muscles uncoiling and relaxing. His inner tension deflated as he came to realize there was no immediate threat to attend to.

"Yeah, who else?" Jimmy asked, as though the answer had been obvious the whole time. "Caneno issued a challenge to Garrison. I mean, I don't really follow boxing or anything, but apparently, those two have been rivals ever since the Championship of 1990. They're set to fight this Saturday at one o'clock."

Lois' eyebrows were raised in interest. "That's a big deal," she acknowledged.

"Right?" Jimmy agreed, clasping his hands together in excitement. "You guys are gonna watch, right?"

"Yeah," Clark replied without hesitation. "I don't normally go for boxing either, but that's a match up I can't miss."

“Garrison’ll wipe the floor with Caneno,” Lois said with a confident nod.

“What? No way! Caneno is, by *far*, the better fighter!” Clark declared, shocked that anyone could back Garrison so easily. “You’re only saying that because Garrison’s a Metropolis native,” he teasingly accused.

“That and...my father was the one who did Garrison’s rotator cuff surgery after the 1990 fight,” Lois admitted. “As much as we might not get along, Dad *is* the best and whenever he works on an athlete, they always seem to be better than before. And Garrison was good before the surgery,” she pointed out proudly.

“Not a chance!” Clark argued good-naturedly. “Caneno’s won more fights *and* has better techniques.”

“Now who’s bias is showing, Farmboy?” Lois teased. “You only like him because he’s Gotham’s Golden Boy.”

“Not true,” Clark replied. “I used to watch at Grandma’s house. Not because I really cared about it, but some of the boys were really into it. Caneno always seemed like one of the more talented fighters. Although, I’ll confess, I met him a few times at events Bruce hosted. Nice guy. Very polite and down to Earth.”

“You’ve *met* Carmine Caneno?” Jimmy asked, his eyes wide with an almost hero worship look. “And you never told me? CK, you’ve *got* to hook me up. Any single supermodels that you know?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Don’t be one of *those* guys, Jimmy.”

“What? I’m just saying...best friends help each other out,” Jimmy replied innocently. “Uh...speaking of helping each other out...um...so, you two *are* going to watch the fight, yes?”

Clark shrugged and sipped his coffee. “Of course.”

Lois nodded. “Absolutely. I want to see Clark’s face when Caneno loses.”

“Um...so...can I come over and watch with you?” Jimmy asked haltingly. “I don’t want to intrude on your time together but...you guys know I just moved into my new apartment and everything. The cable company can’t come out until Monday to get me all hooked up. And I’d really rather *not* have to go to some bar to see the fight. I’ve done it before and people get a little too... shall we say...*spirited*.”

Clark looked to Lois, then back to Jimmy. “Sure, Jimmy. We can watch the game at my apartment. I’ll grab a few pizzas for us.”

“Thanks, CK! You rock! I’ll bring some drinks,” Jimmy babbled with a grin as he clapped Clark’s shoulder. “Oh, man! This is going to be great! You’re a lifesaver, you know that?”

He turned then and was off, leaving Lois and Clark shaking their heads in amusement.

“Well...everyone’s bringing food. So I’ll bring the chips and dip. There’s not much I’m good at making in the kitchen, but I *do* make a *killer* seven-layer cheese dip,” Lois said thoughtfully. “My grandma’s recipe. It’s the one recipe of hers that I haven’t managed to ruin beyond recognition.”

“It sounds delicious,” Clark encouraged her.

“That was nice of you, to invite Jimmy,” she said, taking his hand and leading him back to where their desks stood waiting.

“He’s my best friend,” Clark said, shrugging casually.

“Mmm, I thought *I* was your best friend,” she teased, turning and facing him.

“You are. But in a *very* different way,” he replied, kissing her gently on the lips.

“Mmm,” she murmured against his lips. “And don’t you forget it,” she whispered before kissing him once more.

“Never,” he swore.

They broke apart then, conscious of the fact that they were still at work. They resumed walking, going straight to Lois’ desk, where their stack of research on Lex Luthor was waiting, still only half checked from the night before.

“I was thinking,” Clark said, gathering his courage. “After the

fight is over...once Jimmy leaves...maybe you could stay. I still need to talk to you about some important, personal things. Things I let fall to the wayside after everything that happened in Kansas.”

“I’m here now,” Lois pointed out.

“I know. But...” He sighed.

“You can tell me anything, you know that.” She reached over and touched his arm in support. “There’s nothing to be nervous about,” she added as she appraised the slump of his shoulders.

“I know that too,” Clark said, his stomach knotted in worry.

“It’s just...after Kansas...”

“Hey, mail for ya,” a voice gruffly interrupted, even if it was friendly in the same moment.

Clark turned and his face split into a grin. “Jack!” he cried, grateful that, once again, the universe had spared him from Lois’ questions at work. “Perry gave you the job!”

“Yeah,” the teenage said with a nod. “Been here for...” He paused, calculating in his head. “Two weeks tomorrow.”

“Two weeks?” Clark gave a low, impressed whistle. “Gearing up for your first legitimate paycheck then, huh?”

Jack gave him a half smile. “First time getting ripped off by having to pay taxes too,” he replied with an eye roll.

Clark laughed. “You’ll get used to it,” he said, patting Jack on the shoulder. “Two weeks? And we haven’t run into you yet?”

Jack shrugged nonchalantly. “Not my fault you’re always out of the office. Sweet gig, by the way. I’m stuck in this building all day and make a lot less than you do.”

“The Luthor case,” Lois said with a nod, ignoring the rest.

“So I’ve heard. Looks like my tape really *did* help, huh?” he said with a little boastfulness.

“Jack,” Clark said, resting his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I am *not* exaggerating when I say our entire investigation could not have gotten off the ground without your help.”

“That why you got me this job?” Jack smirked. He gauged their reaction before adding, “Don’t act surprised. Perry told me everything when he hired me.”

“No,” Clark said truthfully. “If I asked Perry to give a job to everyone who helps our investigations, all of our sources would be working in the mailroom by now.”

Jack gave him a short laugh and he pushed a lock of his unruly hair out of his eyes. “I guess that’s true.”

“I just figured, with your fresh start, a job would help you get on your feet even faster,” Clark continued.

“How do you like it?” Lois asked, sipping her coffee.

Jack shrugged again. “It’s okay. Better than I thought it would be. The mailroom crew is nice enough. Been nice making steady money too. People aren’t throwing out as much stuff that I can sell as they used to.” He grinned impishly.

Clark laughed and shook his head. “I’m sure.”

“Look,” Jack said sounding uncertain. He looked down at his feet, as if he couldn’t meet Lois or Clark’s gaze. “This isn’t easy for me to say but, I owe you an apology. And a thank you. When you first came poking around the railyard, I acted like a jerk.”

“It was your way of surviving,” Clark pointed out.

“Maybe. But I gave you a hard time about the halfway house. Turns out, the place isn’t too bad after all. Better than always sleeping with one eye open and living with constantly looking over our shoulders, at any rate. Back where we were, I never slept more than a couple of hours at a time. I was always afraid someone might attack us and steal what little we had. At the house...it’s different.”

“I’m glad,” Clark beamed.

“I’m not saying I’ll stay forever,” Jack said, locking eyes with Clark as he smiled a little. “Sharing a bathroom with all those other guys gets old fast. In time, Denny and I will get an apartment somewhere, after I make enough money to be taken seriously.”

“I’m proud of you,” Clark said sincerely.

“How’s Denny feeling?” Lois asked.

“Better,” Jack said simply. “Just about back to his old, driving-me-crazy self.”

Lois laughed lightly. “Siblings will do that,” she acknowledged.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “So, uh... thanks. Both of you.”

“Happy to help,” Clark replied.

“Anyway, I gotta get going. This mail ain’t gonna deliver itself,” Jack grumbled good-naturedly.

“And Lex Luthor isn’t going to keep himself in jail,” Lois countered gently. “We still have a ton of work ahead of us.”

“Did he *really* do as much as the rumor mill is saying?” Jack wondered, pausing in midstep.

“*More* than what the rumor mill is saying,” Clark confirmed. “We just need to prove it.”

“Well, get to it then,” Jack replied playfully. “I didn’t give you that tape for you to drop the ball now.”

“Yes, sir!” Clark laughingly joked.

“Yep,” Jack went on, as if he hadn’t heard Clark at all.

“Handed that tape to you on a silver platter. And did I get a single word of acknowledgement in your articles? *Noooooo*.” Only the smirk on his face gave away the fact that he was being sarcastic.

But Clark wasn’t joking when he responded. “Sorry, Jack. But that was intentional. We think Luthor is still threatening people, even from jail. If he got wind of who filmed his henchman meeting with Joey Bermuda, chances are, you’d be dead by now.”

“Bull,” Jack said in defiant disbelief.

“Jack, have I lied to you yet?” Clark gently challenged.

The teenager hesitated and Clark saw the uncertainty in his eyes. “I... guess not,” he admitted after a moment.

“Hey, CK?” Jimmy called from across the room. “Perry wants you, me, and Lois to cover the DA’s statement on the Luthor case, now.”

Clark knew he was beaming at the news. He patted Jack’s shoulder. “Duty calls. See you around though.”

“Yeah, you too,” Jack said as he started to push his cart down the aisle. “Now go nail that son of a b...well, you know,” he corrected, glancing around, perhaps reminding himself that he was in a professional environment.

“Don’t worry, we will,” Lois grimly assured him.

Clark landed lightly on his terrace, three large pizzas in his hands. They were steaming hot and had his mouth watering, particularly the two plain cheese pizzas. The pineapple one made him shudder in horror – pineapple did *not* belong on a pizza, *ever*, as far as Clark was concerned — but it was Jimmy’s favorite. He supposed he could have gotten a small size of the pineapple, but he figured sending Jimmy home with the uneaten portion of the pizza would be an appropriate payment for when he needed to ask the younger man to leave so he and Lois could finally have some alone time to discuss his secret life as Superman.

He left himself into his apartment via the terrace door, and, still clad as Superman, he set the hot boxes of pizza down on the stove top. Then he spun out of his suit and straightened up his home at super speed, dusting the place until it gleamed with cleanliness and unlocking the door in readiness for Lois and Jimmy to arrive. He looked around with satisfaction, hands on his hips, and tried to see if there was anything else that needed to be done. Seeing nothing, he was about to turn on the television and set it to the station that was airing the fight, figuring that Lois and Jimmy might want to see the prefight programming, when the phone rang.

He picked it up before the second ring and brought the receiver to his ear. “Hello?” he said, tucking the headset in the crook of his neck.

“Master Clark?” came Alfred’s strained and slightly rushed voice over the phone.

“Hey, Alfred,” Clark said with a smile. “What’s up? Are you

guys going to watch the fight?”

“Actually,” Alfred said, and Clark’s blood ran cold at how scared his old friend sounded in that one, haltingly spoken word.

“Alfred? What’s wrong?” Clark asked, putting his back to the TV. A chill ran down his spine and goosebumps rose on his flesh. His smile disappeared and his brow furrowed in worry.

“It’s... I need your help, sir.”

“You know you never need to ask,” Clark assured him.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Master Bruce.”

“Bruce?” Clark froze in place, dread sitting like a cold, lead ball in the pit of his stomach. “Alfred, what happened?”

“He went out last night, patrolling, the way he usually does,” the old butler explained, and Clark could imagine how badly the man’s hands must have been shaking in his fright. “I lost contact with him, just before dawn. I thought, perhaps, it might have been an equipment malfunction. It’s rare, but it’s happened before.”

“Yeah, I think that happened twice when I used to go with him,” Clark agreed.

“Yes, sir. I remember those times well. I thought that might have been what happened this time, and I figured he’d show up back at home soon enough. Master Clark... he never came home.” Alfred’s voice was thick with panic.

“He... didn’t come home?” Clark asked, as though needing confirmation.

“It’s not like him at all,” Alfred agreed, in response to Clark’s unspoken thoughts.

“No, it’s not. What about the Batmobile? Were you able to call it back?” Clark asked, his thoughts racing.

“I can communicate with it, if that’s what you mean. I can communicate with all of Master Bruce’s gadgets. I just can’t reach *him*, and I’ve been trying ever since I lost contact with him.”

“Okay,” Clark said, feeling sick. He started to pace away from his living room, moving into his kitchen. Somehow, the tighter space in there felt more comforting than his open, more spacious living room.

“I tried reaching you earlier, but I saw on the news you were in Indonesia, assisting at a fire,” Alfred went on, as though explaining why this was the first time Clark was hearing about Bruce going missing.

“Yeah, sorry I wasn’t reachable. But that fire... I’m just glad everyone made it out alive,” Clark said, resting his hand against the countertop.

“Yes, it was well done,” Alfred agreed.

“Okay, listen. Meet me down in the Batcave,” he instructed the older man. “I’ll be right over. I just have to leave a note. God, Lois and Jimmy are going to *kill* me for bailing on them.” He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Don’t worry, Alfred. I’ll find Bruce.”

“Thank you, Master Clark.”

Clark hung up distractedly and spun back into his Superman costume. When he came to a complete stop, he found himself face to face with both Lois and Jimmy.

Lois’ mouth gaped and her hands let go of the ceramic dish she’d been holding. The ceramic shattered, sending sharp shards of the broken dish in every direction, and smearing seven-layer dip all over the floor. The two bags of chips she had dangling from her fingertips in the grocery store bag made a sick plopping sound as it landed in the middle of the thick dip. Jimmy, to his credit, managed to keep a firm grasp on the two six packs of beer he held. Both of them stood stock still and silent in their shock, their faces gone pale white and their mouths gaping open as they stared. Jimmy’s mouth was moving absently up and down, but no sound came out.

Lois remained still for another moment, and Clark saw an entire array of emotions flit across her features. Shock. Confusion. Surprise. Recognition. Hurt. Betrayal. Anger. Contempt. Self-

criticism. Clark watched them all, hardly daring to breathe, wondering which emotion would eventually come out on top, and not at all hopeful it would be one in his favor. His stomach twisted into a tight knot and he felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead and back. One of the beads rolled down his spine, down to his underwear, and he was once more grateful for the cape that covered his back. Guilt stabbed at his heart and he was tempted to say something – anything – to break Lois’ deadly silence. But he knew, on a primal level, that anything he could possibly say would only make matters worse.

As the precious seconds ticked by, Lois went beet red in anger. It was only a matter of time before the volcano within her would explode.

Here it comes, Clark thought with abject terror. He couldn’t help but to gulp hard as he waited for her reaction.

“How *dare* you lie to me!” she yelled slapping Clark across his face, as hard as she could muster. “You no-good, lying piece of...”

“C...CK?” Jimmy stammered in the same moment, cutting Lois off, much to Clark’s relief.

Clark sighed. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“But you’re...you’re...” Jimmy pressed, wide-eyed. Clark didn’t think the younger man had blinked yet.

“Superman. Yes,” Clark supplied. “So, uh...you two got here early,” he managed weakly.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, dazed. “We thought we’d stop by for the preflight program.” His voice was high and hollow sounding.

“Oh, don’t worry, Jimmy. There’s going to be a preflight alright,” Lois hissed venomously.

Clark sighed as he raked a hand through his hair. “I guessed as much. Now you know my deepest secret.” He turned to Lois, his head lowered in shame, and his enough body feeling like it had deflated somehow.

“All this time!” Lois continued to rant. “All the things we’ve shared. And you didn’t *tell* me? You lousy, good for nothing worm! You’ve been lying to me this *entire time!*” she raged at him. She shoved him in the chest, all her might going into it.

Clark closed his eyes, scrunching up his face in his mental anguish. “Lois...I...I tried to tell you. I was *going to*, so many times.”

“But you *didn’t*,” she said icily, crossing her arms over her chest. Her eyes flashed dangerously, in a way Clark had never quite seen before.

“You’re right. I didn’t,” he replied, his shoulders drooping. He no longer retained the strong, confident stance of Superman. He was very much a terrified, average man who had no idea how to rectify the disaster he’d caused. “I should have. I tried to. But things...kept getting in the way.”

“*That’s* your excuse?” Lois asked, blinking incredulously at the stupidity of his remark. “You...what? Got too busy? ‘Oops, better not tell Lois I’m Superman, there’s a cat stuck in a tree!’” she mocked.

“That’s not fair!” Clark protested mildly. “I wanted to tell you, honest.”

“Yeah, you wanted it so much that you *really* made it your priority to tell me,” she spat as she rolled her eyes.

“Lois, don’t you think you’re being a little harsh on CK?” Jimmy offered tremulously, coming to Clark’s aid.

Lois turned on the younger man like she might tear his head off his shoulders for daring to intrude on her anger. “A little harsh?” She shook her head in disbelief and returned her fiery gaze to Clark. “When were you planning on telling me? On our tenth anniversary?”

Clark withered under her stare. He swallowed hard, almost too afraid to answer. “I wanted to tell you, the night we had dinner with your mom and sister, until Bruce called to say that Grandma had died. And after Kansas...I lost my nerve.”

“Kansas was three weeks ago,” Lois challenged him, her eyes arched nearly up into her hair line.

Clark solemnly nodded once. “I know,” he offered quietly. He sighed, looking sheepishly down at the floor. “I...I was going to tell you tonight, after the fight, when it was just you and me again,” he explained, ashamed that he’d let his insecurities hold him back. Ashamed that his lack of nerve had forced Lois to discover his secret on her own.

“Why don’t I believe you?” Lois shot back.

“I...” Clark took a steadying breath as he sought to make her understand, and all the while still hyper-aware that time was ticking and that Bruce was still probably in great danger. “I know it sounds like a cop out. It’s not. I’m telling you the truth. I tried to tell you, the other day after the fight was first announced. And then Jack came by and Perry sent us to cover the DA’s statement on the Luthor case. I never got the chance to finish talking to you.”

“I remember. Convenient how every time you say you want to talk to me lately something comes up and you never get around to finishing.” Her words were clipped and each one stung Clark’s heart.

“I guess...I *have* chickened out, on more than one occasion,” he haltingly admitted. “I just...I wanted to give you the time and space you’d need. I knew you’d be mad at me. I *know* you’re mad at me right now and...I don’t blame you. I *want* you to be mad or upset or whatever you need to feel toward me.” He turned his eyes back up to meet her gaze, pleading with her. “But, please, Lois, yell at me later.”

“*Mad* is an *understatement*,” Lois snorted angrily, her eyes narrowing impossibly tighter. If she’d possessed heat vision, Clark knew he’d already be a smoldering pile of ash.

“I know,” he conceded with a nod. “And, I promise, you’ll have your chance to scream and question me later. But right now, I have a job to do.” He straightened up a bit, trying to mentally put himself back into his Superman persona and failing.

“Bruce,” she said flatly.

“So...you heard,” he stuttered fearfully, knowing full well that Bruce’s secret identity had been blown as well. “How much...?”

“How much did we hear? Enough,” Lois said in clipped tones, her eyes flashing with renewed anger.

“Bruce is the *Batman*,” Jimmy said in awe, shaking his head. “I mean, I’ve always kind of suspected. But to have it confirmed...whoa!” His hand flew up to his forehead, then raked through his hair.

“You...did?” Clark asked, blinking in surprise, knowing he shouldn’t go down that path but unable to squash the question down in his throat.

“I couldn’t be sure of it, of course. But it makes sense Batman would have to have ties to Wayne Enterprises. The kinds of gadgets he has don’t come easily...or cheaply.” Jimmy shrugged as he pointed out what he clearly thought were obvious things. He seemed blissfully unaware of Lois’ eyes boring holes into both Clark and himself.

“Look...feel free to watch the fight here, if you want,” Clark offered, gesturing to the living room, choosing not to examine the logic that Jimmy had followed to correctly surmise Bruce’s alternative identity. “I need to go. Bruce is in trouble and I’m...I’m really worried about him. He’s family, you know?”

“I get it,” Jimmy offered, nodding. “But...CK? Um...I *can* still call you CK, right?” he looked quizzically at Clark.

“Of course,” Clark said with a shallow nod of his head. “It’s who I am. This,” he said, looking down at his costume, “is nothing more than a disguise. Just, uh, you can’t call Superman ‘CK’ in public when I’m dressed like this.” He smiled slightly.

Jimmy laughed. “Of course.”

“I’m *not* watching the fight,” Lois put in firmly. She poked him in the center of the S on his chest with her index finger. “I’m going with you.”

“Lois...you can’t,” Clark protested, too quickly.

Lois’ already enraged features stormed over more fiercely. “Bruce is family, right? That’s what you just said.” She poked him once again for good measure. “In a weird way, because of his connection to you, he’s my family too, even though I’m *well beyond* furious with you right now. I’m going.” She dropped her arms to put her hands on her hips, the way she always did when she took a hard, immovable stance on something. “So you either take me with you or I’ll drive to Gotham myself. It might take me a while, but I’m *going* to be a part of this,” Lois said, her defiance blazing like a bonfire Clark could actually see.

“Me too,” Jimmy added with a stiff nod. He mimicked Lois’ stance, but on him, it was almost comical in Clark’s fear-drenched mind.

“Jimmy...” Clark tried to begin. He took one step toward his friend, but stopped before he could step in the mess of Lois’ dip.

Jimmy shook his head with a frown as he crossed his arms. “CK, Gotham is a big place. Bruce could be anywhere. I may not be able to fight, but you know I’m good with computers.”

“I know you are, but this is different,” Clark argued impatiently, but gently. He shook his head in turn. “I can’t ask you to get involved. Not after I’ve lied to the both of you about who I am.”

Lois rolled her eyes, hard. “Then it’s a good thing you’re *not* asking. We’re *telling you* that we’re helping, whether you like it or not,” she said brusquely, her tone brooking no arguments.

“Even Superman needs help sometimes, CK,” Jimmy told him, his voice considerably more sympathetic than Lois’.

Clark closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as he mentally raced through his options. Each one was worse than the last, he realized. After a moment, he opened his eyes again.

“Okay,” he relented. “I have no idea how I’m going to explain all of this to Bruce once I find him but...you’re right. I probably *could* use some help. Just...ah...one second.”

With that, he cleaned up the kitchen and put the surviving food and drinks away, and locked the door to his apartment. Then he ushered them both out to his terrace, scooped them up in his arms, and made a beeline for Gotham City and Wayne Manor.

“Alfred,” Clark called as he lightly landed in the tunnel that led into the Batcave. He gently set Lois and Jimmy both on their feet. “I’m here. Open up.”

“With guests, no less,” Alfred’s voice said, as the heavily armored door slid silently upward into the ceiling to allow them all entrance. He sounded less than enthusiastic to be seeing Lois and Jimmy, though he’d met them both before and had gotten along with them just fine. It stemmed, Clark knew, from Alfred’s overprotectiveness about Bruce’s secret identity.

“Long story, but Lois and Jimmy know about me...and Bruce,” Clark explained as they walked forward, into the Cave. “They’re here to help.”

“Master Bruce *isn’t* going to like that,” Alfred observed neutrally.

Clark shrugged. “He doesn’t really have a choice. Besides, as Jimmy pointed out, having some help on this isn’t the worst thing. Gotham is a big place, and we can’t afford to seek help from the authorities. There’s no way we could explain things without implicating Bruce, while making them care enough to make an effort to find Batman.”

“That’s true enough,” Alfred agreed. He sighed, then turned to Lois and Jimmy. “Please, excuse my earlier rudeness. But Master Bruce’s secrets are *not* something I take lightly. Having anyone else know is not something I’m typically comfortable with.”

“Understandable,” Jimmy offered. “But, Alfred, you *know* me. And Lois. We can keep his secret. CK’s too,” he said, giving Clark a meaningful look.

“I know you will, Jimmy,” Clark replied, giving his friend a

quick pat on the shoulder.

Alfred nodded. “If Master Clark trusts that you can, then I will too. I’ve known him a long time and he’s an excellent judge of character.”

Clark looked toward Lois. It wasn’t like her not to speak up, and her silence terrified him. She must have sensed his eyes shifting in her direction.

“*Of course* we’ll keep the knowledge to ourselves. I’m mad at Clark, but I’m not *stupid*. It would be catastrophic if the public found out what he and Bruce like to do in their spare time,” she said irately, resentful of Alfred’s insinuation that she might rush off and alert the presses that Bruce Wayne moonlit in a bat costume.

“I’m relieved, Miss Lane,” Alfred said, touching a hand to his chest. “I know what a story it is that you’re giving up, by keeping this knowledge in confidence.”

That softened her a little. “Yeah...well...” she stammered.

“Tell me everything you know,” Clark said after a moment, when it was clear that Lois wasn’t going to continue her train of thought.

“Very well. Come on over to the computer,” Alfred said, waving everyone to follow him into the very heart of the Batcave.

Clark let Alfred and Lois take the only two seats that sat before the massive computer monitor. Once, there had been three chairs there, back when he’d been Nightwing and had regularly been a part of patrolling Gotham and taking criminals off the street. He glanced around, and found the third across the room, before one of Bruce’s work benches. He zipped over and rolled it to the computer for Jimmy.

“Thanks, CK,” Jimmy acknowledged as he sat.

Clark nodded once at his friend, then stood next to Lois’ chair with his arms folded across his chest.

“Go ahead, Alfred,” he encouraged.

Alfred tapped the keyboard, bringing up an aerial map of the city. He zeroed in on one section, one of the shadier areas of Gotham.

“Master Bruce was in this area, the last I had contact with him,” he explained, his voice steady but intense. “He was checking into rumors that the Joker might have his headquarters in the vicinity.”

“Joker?” Clark asked in surprise. “We haven’t heard a peep out of him in a long time.”

Alfred nodded. “Indeed. But lately, he seems to have surfaced again, albeit subtly. Not at all like his usual...shall we say...more flamboyant self.”

Clark rubbed his chin in thought. “That’s a little more than suspicious,” he commented.

“Master Bruce thought so too. Then, there’s the issue of Intergang moving into the area.”

Clark’s eyes widened.

“Intergang?” Lois said in shock, taking the question out of his mouth. “In Gotham? They’ve only ever caused trouble in Metropolis before.”

“Corruption always spreads,” Clark replied, distaste in his mouth. Intergang had been a source of endless trouble for both Superman and the reporting team of Lane and Kent.

“Again, only rumors so far, but they’ve seemed fairly credible,” Alfred said with a shake of his head. “Master Bruce thinks the two might be related...Intergang and the Joker’s sudden reemergence.”

Clark blew out a controlled puff of air and ran his hand through the slicked down hairdo that he’d adopted for Superman. “If that’s true, that is a *very big* problem for this city.”

“No argument here,” Alfred agreed. He tapped the keyboard again, narrowing the view down once more. “Master Bruce was around here when I first noticed that the signal between our communication devices was failing. I tried every trick in the book

to boost the signal, but everything I tried failed. The signal continued to deteriorate, until I could no longer make out anything Master Bruce was saying. He was still speaking, but all that came through was half formed words that I couldn't decipher."

"And you're pretty skilled at figuring out what he's saying when the communicator signal is weak," Clark reminded him.

"Well, not to pat myself on the back, but...yes, I am," Alfred said with just the tiniest bit of pride showing in a barely-there smile. "In any case, the next thing I knew, the signal went completely dead. Usually, I can get at least some static or something. This...it's like the entire signal was shut off on both ends."

"What was he doing there? Was he about to enter any buildings? Was he sitting on a rooftop doing surveillance?" Clark asked, his mind a blur of thoughts. "Anything that we can use to narrow down his exact last location?"

"He'd only just arrived in the area when the signal started to fade," Alfred told him. "If he said what his next move was going to be, it got lost when the reception cut out," Alfred regretfully informed them all.

"Okay," Clark said with false calmness. "We at least have a start. I'll fly over and see if I can find anything to give us a clue about what happened."

"Very good, sir," Alfred said with approval. "What can I do to help?"

"I'll need a few things," Clark said slowly, thinking through what he might need. "Mind if I raid Bruce's gadgets?"

"You never need to ask," Alfred grinned. "You've more than earned unrestricted access to everything here. Everything is still in the same place, for the most part."

"Thanks, Alfred. It should only take me a second or two."

With a whoosh, Clark sped around the Cave at top speed, gathering the few items he thought he could use. It was tempting to take more, but Superman didn't need the gadgets and gizmos to do his work. All of that would only serve to hinder him, not help him.

"Okay," he said, coming to a stop, right back in the spot he'd been standing in a few heartbeats before. "Here. Lois? Jimmy? Take these."

"What are they?" Lois asked suspiciously, as she held out her hand.

Clark dropped the tiny micro headset in her hand. "It's a headset. Earpiece. Mouthpiece," he explained, pointing.

"It's so small," Jimmy replied in wonderment as Clark gave him one as well.

"It is," Clark agreed. "But it's very, very powerful. You won't have to speak any louder than normal, and I'll be able to hear you. I'd be able to anyway, even with just my enhanced hearing. But, with this, I'll at least be able to keep in contact with you. I hope. Whatever caused the signal outage might still be out there."

"What can we do to help, CK?" Jimmy asked.

"You said it yourself, you're the best I know when it comes to computers," Clark replied encouragingly. "Stay here, in the Cave. Help Alfred with the computer. See if you can pick up the signal that Bruce's earpiece should be putting out. In addition to my own earpiece, I've got a tiny body camera on. You should be able to see whatever I'm seeing." He pointed to what looked like a dirt smudge in the corner of the S on his chest. "It doesn't look like much, but trust me, just like the earpieces, it's pretty powerful. I can't record anything from my end. But you can, from what gets transmitted back here, to the computer. Just in case we need evidence to put someone in jail, of course. Better safe than sorry. Plus, if you can see what I'm seeing, you can pinpoint my location better."

"Got it, CK. You can count on me."

"I know I can, Jimmy. Thank you."

Inside, he smiled. It felt good, to see and hear Jimmy so

effortlessly calling him "CK," even while he stood there, completely dressed as Superman. And he knew how distracting the costume could be. He and Alfred had designed it that way, so that no one would even *think* about Superman having a normal identity.

But Lois...

She'd referred to him by his true name, but she hadn't yet addressed him as such. Did she see only the blue suit? He didn't think so, but it was hard to judge what was going on in her mind.

"What about me?" Lois asked, chin raised in defiance. "Are you going to sideline me too?"

"Lois..." Clark began uncertainly.

"You *are!*" she accused in disbelief that he would have the audacity to leave her behind after all his lies to her.

Clark motioned for her to walk with him. To his surprise, she silently followed his lead. He went halfway across the Cave and stopped near a workbench filled with Batman cowls, all in various stages of completion. He leaned against it, the high table pressing against his lower back, and crossed his arms over his chest self-consciously.

"Lois, I need you to stay here, with Jimmy and Alfred," he finally said.

"No."

"Please," he begged. "It's safer here, in the Cave."

"You just don't think I can contribute," she accused.

"Lois, that is the absolute *furthest* thing from the truth," he told her, his mouth open in shock that she would think such a thing. "I *know* you're more than capable of helping...if this was a normal circumstance. But if the Joker really *is* involved, it's not a normal situation *at all*. Insane doesn't even cover it with that guy."

"I've handled nutjobs before," Lois argued defiantly.

"Not like this one," Clark replied with a shake of his head.

"Joker is unlike anyone we've ever faced. If you so much as breathe wrong around him, he'll torture and kill you for giggles. I *wish* I was kidding."

"I'm not afraid of some weirdo in clown makeup," Lois challenged.

"Maybe not. But I *am*," Clark said firmly. Then, softer, "Look, Lois. I can't stand the thought of losing you. I know you're mad at me right now. And maybe my secret...the way you found out... maybe that makes you not love me anymore. Maybe it's a deal breaker and you can't bring yourself to be with me anymore. I'll understand if that's the case. But I still love *you*, more than *anything* on this Earth. If I couldn't protect you from Joker...or anyone else...I couldn't live with myself."

Lois peered at him closely, and Clark felt almost like he was the one under X-ray vision. "You're *scared*," she said, awe creeping into her features as she put the pieces together once the realization set in.

"Does that really surprise you?" he asked, taken aback.

"A...little," she haltingly admitted.

"Lois, I'm invulnerable to bullets, not to fear," he said gently.

He hesitantly reached out to cup her cheek with his hand. When she didn't flinch away, he figured it was safe to keep his hand there. "And my feelings for you...they make me the most vulnerable I've ever been in my entire life."

"In a bad way?" she asked in a small voice.

"In the *best* way," he corrected. "With you...feeling this way...loving you...it's made me the closest I will ever be to being a true human."

"Clark...you *are* a human," she reminded him, and he was never so happy to hear her use his name in the entire time he'd known her.

"No," he said with a single shake of his head, "I'm not. I'm Kryptonian, remember?" He smiled unsurely.

"It doesn't matter," Lois argued.

"Maybe not, but right now, my feelings toward you will get

you killed if we're not careful. I can't help it. I can't fully hide my love for you, not even when I'm in this suit pretending to be a friendly, but aloof, alien hero. And the second that happens, if Joker sees it, it'll be your death sentence. I can't take that risk. Please, Lois, stay here. Help Alfred and Jimmy." He was acutely aware that he was pleading with her, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was her safety.

She looked ready to continue to press the issue, but then, to Clark's amazement, all she said was, "You'd better get going. Bruce needs you."

He nodded. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She nodded in turn. "Just...do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Come back in one piece. You still have a *lot* of explaining to do."

Clark smiled. "I intend to." He straightened his shoulders in readiness to leave. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," she replied.

He went to kiss her, then stopped himself. He wasn't sure what he was allowed to do, and what was now off limits with her. He contented himself to inclining his head in acknowledgement, and gently resting his hand on her shoulder.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely, his voice cracking with how much his heart was hurting and how scared he was that once Bruce was found, Lois was going to walk out of his life forever.

"Testing," Clark called over the headset as he exited the hidden tunnel leading from the Batcave out into the bright sunshine. He soared straight upward, until the city of Gotham lay spread out beneath him like a model toy town. "Can you all hear me?"

"Loud and clear, CK," came Jimmy's reply.

"Roger that, sir," said Alfred.

"I hear you," Lois said distractedly.

"Okay, good. Jimmy? Is the body cam sending you back a signal as well?" Clark asked.

"Yeah. Geez, you're high up. It's hard to make out where in the city you actually *are*. Lucky I'm not afraid of heights," Jimmy said, only half-joking, from his tone of voice.

"Sorry. I figured this was a good place for me to get oriented," Clark explained. "I'm not sure the camera will be able to keep up with me when I fly at super speed, so don't be alarmed if it flickers in and out a bit as I search."

"Got, CK. You do what you need to."

"Thanks, Jimmy." He paused, looking out over the city he'd once called his home. It was eerily quiet in the streets. But the fight would be starting soon, so he guessed most people were indoors, glued to their televisions. "I'm going to head over to Bruce's last known position and see if I can find any clues."

"Okay, we're with you," Jimmy said, and Clark could imagine the younger man's glee at using such an incredible computer. It was easily more powerful than any computer Jimmy would have ever dreamed of, Clark knew.

"Great, hang on," Clark said, zipping away in the direction of the crumbling old, crime-ridden neighborhood.

The place had always given him the creeps, his invulnerability aside. In a lot of ways, it was a worse area than Hobbs Bay, back home in Metropolis. Crime and criminals never rested here. And the poor people that were forced to live in the area were mostly homeless drifters. Not even the Gotham PD liked going into the area. Too many of them had never come back out alive. But Bruce had been fearless. Cautious, whenever he needed to go to that part of town, but fearless nonetheless.

"Oh, God," Jimmy's voice whispered in his ear as the landscape blurred by beneath Clark as he flew. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Sorry," Clark reflexively apologized, but he could not bring

himself to fly any slower. Each second felt too valuable to waste.

In mere seconds, Clark landed at the intersection of Vernon and Bright Streets, which had seemed to be at least close to Bruce's last known position. That was where he began his search. He took his time, forcing himself to go slowly, to ensure that he didn't miss a single detail. But there was nothing to be found. He took to the air again, searching with every ability at his disposable.

Three blocks over, on Halabard Avenue, he found what he was looking for.

Batman's cowl, laying crushed and discarded on the ground next to a stinking dumpster, a bloodstained playing card next to it. It wasn't hard to see the image printed on it.

"Joker," Clark growled through gritted teeth.

Clark stared at the mocking Joker's face on the playing card for a long moment. It brought back a lot of memories for him, of nights spent prowling the shadows of Gotham with Bruce. Back then, he'd been known as Nightwing and had been recognized as Batman's sidekick, not a standalone hero in his own right. Now, Superman was recognized around the world. People looked to him to right every wrong, whereas Nightwing had been a local boy who'd been only human and who couldn't be expected to do everything. Clark mentally sighed. Superman was trusted to handle all kinds of delicate situations, like negotiate peace between warring countries, when, in truth, he couldn't even keep his own, personal life from falling into shambles. Lois' anger over having discovered his secret and deception was glaring proof of that. And with Bruce missing and Clark having no idea where to begin his search, Clark felt ill-equipped to be trusted with anything at all.

Joker.

That insane clown had been terrorizing the city for far too long. But no matter what he and Bruce had done, no matter how hard they tried, and despite having the advantage of Clark's super abilities, they'd never been able to take the psychopath down. And now, somehow, that monster had Bruce in his clutches. Clark knew he had to act fast, or risk losing Bruce completely.

A surge of anger welled up within Clark. He sent a stream of his most intense heat vision at the playing card and watched as it burst flame. It blazed only for a few heartbeats before it was reduced to ash, such was the power behind Clark's stare.

"Looks like the rumors were true," Alfred said worriedly over the headset, as Clark crushed the smoldering ash under his boot heel.

"Yeah," Clark agreed, swiveling his head from side to side, looking for further clues. "I don't see anything else in the area to tell me where Bats was taken though," he added after a moment, careful not to use Bruce's true name. He knelt down and picked up looked at the destroyed cowl. "Now we know why he's not answering though."

"Indeed."

"Jimmy? You pick up anything on your end?" Clark asked, though he knew the chance was slim.

"Sorry, CK," came the answer.

"Looks like we'll have to do it the old-fashioned way," Clark hesitantly decided as he stood again. He thought for a moment. "We're not far from an old shipping area. There's still docks there and some abandoned warehouses. Might be a good place to start searching," he said, more to solidify a plan in his own head than anything else.

"I see it on the map," Jimmy acknowledged. "Unfortunately, there doesn't appear to be any working surveillance cameras or anything useful that I can hack into."

Clark shook his head, though of course his friends couldn't see that. "There wouldn't be. The area hasn't been used in any legitimate business in about thirty years. Maybe longer."

He took to the sky again and rushed to the rotting docks and decrepit warehouses. He checked each of them, one by one,

finding broken windows or holes that had opened up in the sides of the buildings to enter inside. But each of them was empty, save for piles of trash – mostly empty liquor bottles and scattered drug paraphernalia. He was getting frustrated and felt the weight of every second as they ticked by without him getting any closer to finding Bruce.

“Nothing,” he said over the headset, though he didn’t really need to.

“I’m sorry, Clark.” That was Lois. Clark’s eyes widened to hear the sympathy in her voice.

Clark sighed. “Thanks, Lois. I just...I feel like there’s got to be *something*. They didn’t just fly off or vanish into thin air.” He exited the last warehouse as he spoke, his eyes scanning the entire area yet again, to look for anything he might have missed.

“Wait!” Lois called as Clark walked along. “Stop!”

Clark immediately went stock still. “What?”

“Is that an oil stain on the ground?” she asked. “To your left, maybe four feet ahead.”

“Lois, this place used to see a lot of traff...” he started to say, but cut off his words sharply. “You’re right. It’s still glossy and fresh.”

“Not a lot of vehicles come this way,” Alfred observed. “Even the drug dealers don’t trust their wheels in this area.”

Clark looked around again. “There’s no sign of any abandoned cars, vans, or even motorcycles,” he reported. “Whatever it was that was here, it probably made a drop off and left.” He thought for a moment. “But let’s assume a drop off was even made here... where would anyone go from here? There’s nothing around except the warehouses and the harb...” He stopped cold.

“The harbor?” Jimmy prompted. “You think they...dumped him?” The younger man swallowed hard.

“No. I don’t think they threw him in. At least, I hope not. But look out there,” Clark said, pointing.

“What *is* that?” Lois asked.

“My next place to check,” Clark said grimly. “The old Arkham Asylum.”

“No one’s been there in years, sir,” Alfred gently reminded him. “After the fire in ‘82, it shut down completely.”

“Which is *exactly* why it would be a perfect hideout,” Lois said, before Clark could say the same thing.

“I’m going in,” Clark said, half a heartbeat before he launched himself into the air and over the water.

He stayed high on purpose, hoping to avoid any watchful eyes. Unfortunately, the day was bright and sunny, without any cloud coverage to speak of, giving him nowhere to conceal himself. Instead, he had to rely solely on his speed to keep him moving too fast for anyone to see. He telescoped in and began to X-ray as he circled the crumbling old building. It didn’t take long before he saw the first signs of human life amid the wrecked hospital.

“There are definitely people in there,” he informed his friends. “And they appear to be armed.”

“Any idea how many?” Jimmy asked nervously.

“I’m not sure yet. I’ve counted at least twenty. But the asylum is old and there’s a fair bit of lead paint on the walls. I can’t X-ray as thoroughly as I’d like.”

“Okay. Be careful, CK.”

“I will, Jimmy.”

“You know...I was thinking. You have a superhero name. Bruce has one. I think maybe...I need one. Sure, I’m not out there fighting and stuff but...the tech stuff counts, right?”

That made Clark laugh. “Absolutely! Let me guess, you have a name in mind already?”

“Well,” Jimmy said, dragging the word out. “If you think about it, I can see more than you can at the moment. That means I can help guide you, right?”

“Right.”

“So, I’m kind of like an Oracle, from ancient times,” Jimmy

said, and Clark could hear the goofy grin on his face in his words.

Clark laughed hard. “You know, you’re right, Jimmy. Or, should I say...Oracle?”

Jimmy’s laughter rang over the earpiece. “See, I *knew* you’d understand!”

Clark laughed again. “Lois? You want a codename too?” he joked.

When she didn’t respond, he shrugged. It didn’t surprise him at all that she wouldn’t be in a joking mood. He let it go and didn’t force the issue.

“Okay...Oracle. I’m going in.”

“Good luck, CK.”

“Thanks.”

Wordlessly, Clark angled down sharply, making a beeline for the roof, careful not to break the sound barrier with his speed.

Four guards stood there, each one looking out over a different side of the building. Clark reached for the utility belt at his waist, which he’d taken from the Cave before he’d left. It felt oddly comforting, to wear that belt. It acutely reminded him of his years as Nightwing, back before Superman had ever even been a thought in his mind. He pulled out one of the small cylinders that hung there and popped it open as he once again changed his flight path. He bolted around the rooftop, passing by each guard close enough to give them a whiff of the potent gas that spilled from the cylinder. One by one, each of the armed men collapsed, rendered unconscious.

Satisfied, Clark snapped the steel container closed once more. Landing and working swiftly, he bound the four men with a few lengths of cable and ferried them to one of the warehouses for safe keeping. He couldn’t run the risk of any of them being found by their cohorts.

“Hey, Oracle?” Clark asked as he moved the still snoozing criminals.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“If anything happens...be sure to send the Gotham PD to this location to pick everyone up, okay?” Clark asked gravely. “I’ll let you know once I’ve gotten the majority of them cleared out. It might even be worth it to have the GPD pick them up while I’m still assisting Bruce. Just don’t tell them where the men came from. The last thing we need is for Commissioner Gordon or some other hotshot to come in, guns blazing, and possibly discover who Batman is when the sun is up.”

“You’ve got it, CK. My lips are sealed.”

“Good man.”

“Hey...CK?”

“Yes, Oracle?”

“What made you bring that stuff with you?” Jimmy asked casually.

“The knockout gas and whatnot?” Clark replied. “*Insurance*. With Joker, *anything* that can give you the advantage is necessary. I figured if I found his hideout, it’d be crawling with his henchmen. It’d be easier to knock them out to deal with later on.”

“Makes sense,” Jimmy allowed. “It’s just weird seeing Superman having gadgets, that’s all.”

“Believe me, Jimmy, it *feels* weird to be carrying this stuff,” Clark assured him. “But I’m glad to have it.”

As Clark flew back to the island where the asylum was located, four new guards came out of the door in the center of the rooftop. The shifts were changing, Clark realized with a grim smile. He could easily round up these four as well, taking out eight of the criminals in less than three minutes. He cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

“Hey,” one of the thugs called to the others. “Where’d everyone up here go?”

“Probably popped out early, like they always do,” one of the others sneered.

“Boss ain’t gonna like that,” the first one observed.

"You wanna tell the Boss? Go right ahead. Be my guest," said a third man. "I sure don't wanna be the one he gets pissed at."
"I never said I was gonna..."

That was all the first guard got out before Clark circled them with the knockout gas, the same as he had with the first set of guards. Like the others, he bound them with cable and left them in the warehouse across the harbor.

"Not bad, CK," Jimmy approved as Clark flew back to the asylum. "Is that some kind of record for you?"

"Nah," Clark said, brushing off the compliment. "I've probably taken out more criminals at a faster pace in the past. I've never stopped to think about it."

"Well, either way, that's eight less to worry about now," Jimmy said.

"True," Clark allowed.

He landed back on the roof. The door was still open and Clark cautiously ducked inside. It was quiet in the building – eerily so. He floated down the steps to the floor below, not trusting his footfalls to be silent enough to allow him to move undetected. He thoroughly checked each room on the floor, but found no one, so he moved on down to the next floor.

Two men were there, each of them on opposite sides of the floor. Clark knocked out the one in the eastern wing first, then deposited the man in the middle of the hall. The one in the western wing saw him coming – too late. Before he could raise the alarm, Clark had rendered him unconscious as well. He brought both out to the rooftop, then ferried them over the water to join their companions in the warehouse.

And so he worked, each passing second making him more and more nervous. As he made his way downward, clearing and rechecking each floor he'd already been on, the collection of assorted thugs in the warehouse grew. Some were already awake. Groggy and still incoherent, but awake. Many of them were still under the effects of the knockout gas, and Clark was only too grateful that the stuff didn't work on him at all.

"Okay, Jimmy, I'm through with the main part of the asylum," Clark declared in a whisper after he'd checked the building over one final time.

"Aww, CK! I thought you were playing along with the nicknames," Jimmy pouted.

Clark chuckled quietly. "Sorry. *Oracle*, the main building is clear," he repeated apologetically.

"Better," Jimmy decreed. "You want me to send the cops now?"

"Not yet. I'm going to start on the basement levels. I'm not sure the connection will hold. The earpieces are powerful, but, if I remember things correctly, the basement was fortified enough to withstand an atomic bomb strike."

"Really?" Jimmy asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Master Clark," Alfred said, startling Clark for a moment. The old butler had been quiet far too long. "You remember your Gotham history well." There was pride in his gravelly old voice.

"Thanks. Okay, I'm heading down now."

"Good luck, sir."

Clark froze in place, taking stock of the asylum, reaching out with all his senses. Fifteen floors, and not a single sign that Bruce was even there. He sighed softly. Bruce *had* to be there, somewhere. Clark had captured thirty of Joker's thugs, all of them patrolling or peering out through broken or grimy windows. He'd been in various hideouts for the Joker's minions before, during his Nightwing days. But none of those places had felt quite like the asylum did. This felt more like a compound than a convenient hideaway for a ragtag group of ruffians. Not to mention how creepy the place felt, given its shady history and rumors of how ill-treated the patients had been there.

Dread settled in the pit of his stomach as he looked at the open

elevator shaft before him. It was the only way to get down into the basement and sub-basement levels that he could see. The door appeared to have been forced open at one point and wedged to prevent it from shutting again. Of course, there wouldn't be any power to the elevator. There hadn't been, in over ten years. Even the wedge propping the door open was useless at this point, Clark noted. The metal had long since rusted completely over. There was no way that door would move again, without being cut away.

He carefully went to the edge of the open shaft and peered down.

No elevator car was to be seen.

He looked up. There, on the fifth floor, he could make out the rusted, rotted form of the car. Clark nodded to himself.

Good. One less obstacle to get around. But, if anyone is down there, how are they managing it? he wondered. *Unless they are somehow scaling the cable,* his mind added.

He stepped into the open shaft and drifted slowly downward, careful not to make a sound. He landed silently and began his search anew, but there was, remarkably, no one to be found on that level of the basement. He returned to the elevator shaft and descended to the next floor.

"Camera is still sending a signal, sir," Alfred whispered gently in his ear.

Clark didn't respond. Here, in the elevator shaft, even a whisper would echo.

There was no one on the next level either and Clark grew more and more uneasy as the minutes ticked by. Something was very, *very* wrong. The short hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention and his stomach twisted into a knot. He could taste the metallic tang of bile in the back of his throat. His heart beat faster, and he knew Alfred would be seeing that from the biometric readers he'd placed on his body before he'd left the Cave. That way, if anything happened to him, everyone else would know immediately. It was standard for both him and Bruce to wear them while patrolling Gotham, and he had to wonder what had happened to Bruce's. The signal had abruptly gone dead, just after the communicator signal had gone offline. But wasn't the same as if Bruce had suddenly been killed. There had been no flatlining, according to the display he'd seen on the computer in the Batcave. It had simply gone offline, as though someone – Bruce or not – had shut it off.

Clark was halfway down to Sub-Basement 3 when an emergency light flicked on, catching him off guard. He froze in place, still hidden in shadow, just out of reach of the hellish red glow of the light.

"What was that?" came a voice below him, with accompanying footsteps. "I heard something!"

"Another rat," said a woman's voice with disgust. "This place is filled with 'em."

"Gives me the creeps," replied the first gruff voice. Whoever it was cleared their throat and spat noisily.

"Better the rats than the Bat," the woman snorted.

The man laughed. "Got that right. Wonder how he likes it down here in the cold, dark, damp basement. Must not be too different from his usual habitat."

"Who cares?" the woman snapped. "The Boss is having his fun. Which gets him off our back for a bit."

"Got that right," the man agreed with a grunt. "Still, I wish he'd hurry up. This place is worse than any of the other ratholes he's dragged us to."

"All in good time," the woman replied, sounding bored.

Clark gently eased himself into a new position, flipping himself so that he hung suspended in the air upside down. Exercising every caution, he poked his head down into the open space where the elevator car should have been. Here there had never been a door, only a rusted gate that stood open. He peeked out, just quickly enough to ensure that the pair of guards was

looking in the opposite direction. They were walking slowly away, so Clark floated down, then sped to their location and knocked them out with the gas canister he held in his hand. He secured them and locked them in a storage room he found off to one side, not wishing to waste more time by ferrying them to the warehouse, now that he was certain Bruce was there, somewhere. He left the rusted key in the lock on the outside of the door for easy access later.

“Okay, CK. We’re still reading your information. Give us a thumbs-up if you can hear us,” Jimmy instructed.

Clark wordlessly held his hand before his chest and gave Jimmy a thumbs-up.

“Okay, cool,” Jimmy replied. “Looks like they have some kind of generator or something hooked up to give them some power. I’m wondering if they can still use the elevator on it. Doesn’t matter. Give me another thumbs-up if I should send Gotham PD to the warehouse.”

Clark silently gave his friend another thumbs-up sign.

“Will do. Good luck and be careful down there,” Jimmy replied.

A weight lifted from Clark’s heart to know that at least the thugs in the warehouse would be dealt with. No one would be able to potentially escape and make their way back to the asylum to surprise him. He made his silent, careful way down the hallway. At the far end, he could make out a light coming from the tiny windows of a set of double doors. When he reached them, he tried to peer inside, but the glass was grimy with abandonment and neglect that he could barely make out anything other than that there was light within.

He stretched out with his hearing and X-rayed the door, but the door had been made of a mixture of metals that included lead, and he could see nothing. He heard nothing as well, so he felt confident enough to try the doors. They weren’t locked and he – centimeter by centimeter – worked the right one open. He didn’t want to just barrel inside without knowing the entirety of the situation. That was how people got killed, he knew. He’d often chided Lois about that very same thing – both as Clark and as Superman.

Inside the room, the lighting was low. The stench of decay, however, was potent and nearly gagged him. Black patches of mold clung to the walls and floor. It appeared to have been a medical theater at one point, and Clark involuntarily shuddered to think of the types of human experiments that had likely taken place in that room. But all the evidence of what may have happened there was long gone now, save for whatever might have been in the scattered crates that lay haphazardly strewn throughout the space.

Clark took this all in in less than a heartbeat as he zipped behind one of the crates. He immediately crouched down low to give himself a better chance to take in his surroundings. He heard footsteps now and he held his breath as he listened.

“Well, well, well,” came the sound of a man’s voice. “Bruce Wayne. What a delightful surprise. I’m sorry I couldn’t see you earlier. Business to attend to and all of that. You know how it is.”

“Who are you?” Bruce’s strong voice rang out in defiance.

“Can it be that you *really* don’t remember me?” the man asked in awe.

Clark frowned. Whoever that was, it most definitely was *not* the Joker. Although, he had to admit, there was something about the man’s voice. It seemed almost like the man shared the Joker’s unique brand of insanity, or was at least trying to emulate it.

“Sorry,” Bruce spat.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” the man went on, and it sounded like he might be pacing. “After all, how long *has* it been? Twenty years? Twenty-five? I’ll admit that I lost count after that last time.”

Clark peeked around the crate. Bruce was shackled to an old

X-ray table that stood up almost completely vertically. Clark had never seen such old medical equipment outside of the occasional horror movie his college friends had forced him to watch with them. He could see his friend straining against his bonds, but making no progress. He was unmasked and a large bruise had sprouted on the right side of his head.

Probably took a blow there, which would explain the sudden loss of his communicator’s signal, Clark thought to himself.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bruce growled in his Batman voice.

The man before him put a hand to his heart, as though wounded. “All that time together? Did it all mean so little?” He mock sniffled and wiped away an imaginary tear.

Clark had seen enough. Whoever this man was, Bruce and Clark could find out later, once he was properly apprehended and secured. He stepped confidently out from his hiding place.

“I don’t know who you are either, but I’ve heard enough,” he said authoritatively. “Let him go and make this easy on all of us.”

The man slowly turned to face Clark. Clark did his best not to recoil in horror as he looked upon the man’s full face for the first time. It was a nightmare of old scars, including two thick lines of scar tissue running from the corners of his mouth, along his cheekbones, and stopping just short of his eyes. It looked if though the same pathway had been slashed into his flesh repeatedly, until the tissue had thickened to look like an exaggerated, clownish smile. His hair was the color of rust, unlike Joker’s more garish green. Clark couldn’t tell if the red was natural or enhanced with dye – not that it mattered much, he supposed. Like the Joker, the man was clad in a suit – this one a dark navy blue, as opposed to the purple Joker usually sported. A red carnation was pinned about the left breast pocket, where the barest hint of a white handkerchief poked up, making the get up look sophisticated, in a way.

“Ah, *Superman*,” the man greeted him in an exaggerated tone. “What a *lovely* surprise! I’m so *glad* you could make it to my private little party. Have you met Bruce Wayne? Or should I say... *Batman*?” He took a threatening step toward Clark.

“Stay where you are,” Clark commanded warily, sizing the man up.

“I’d rather shake the hand of the Man of Steel,” the other man taunted, steadily moving forward.

Clark took measured steps backward, hoping to lure whoever it was away from Bruce.

“Thanks, but I’d rather not,” Clark replied coolly.

“A shame,” came the mocking response. “And I did *so* want to show you what I have in my pocket.”

Clark felt the effects of the Kryptonite before he saw it. A thumb-sized shard of it hung from a slender silver chain, as if it was a gaudy necklace from some wealthy woman’s collection. Clark tried to fight the effects of it, but within mere heartbeats, his knees gave out. Holding his head against the agony inflicted by the deadly stone, he crashed to the tile floor. The man simply looked on with a murderous smile. After a moment, he snapped his fingers. A huge brute of a man appeared from a room off to the side.

“Bane,” the man said dismissively. “Be a dear and find a seat for our guest, would you?”

The monstrously proportioned Bane grunted and gave a half-nod. Then he lumbered off to the side room, returning with a similar X-ray table to the one Bruce was strapped to. Bane pulled it across the tiles, the metal scrapping noisily across the floor as he did so. He set it up next to Bruce’s table, with about three feet between the two. Then he reached down and grabbed Clark around the throat, choking off his air supply. Lifting Clark into the air a few inches, Bane brought Clark to the table, while the Joker Wannabe giggled evilly and almost danced his way over as well. Bane held Clark steady as the other man tightly shackled his

ankles and wrists to chains that allowed for no movement at all. Dark spots swam before Clark's eyes as he fought to stay conscious against Bane's iron grip on his windpipe.

He was just beginning to lose that fight when the behemoth suddenly let go. Clark choked, coughed, and sucked in a lungful of precious air. Even as foul as the air was in that moldering sub-basement, in that moment, Clark considered it some of the sweetest air he'd ever breathed.

"Thank you, Bane," the Joker Knockoff said with approval. You may go for now."

Bane made a gurgling sound that appeared to be of acknowledgement. He plodded his way over to the side room once again, disappearing from sight.

"What the hell was that thing?" Jimmy whispered in Clark's ear, but Clark was feeling too ill from the Kryptonite to answer, nor did he want to let on to the fact that he could communicate with others outside of the Arkham Asylum.

"Now, where *were* we, before we were so *rudely* interrupted?" the insane man crooned, looking first to Bruce, then to Clark. "Ah, yes, the matter of me." He grinned broadly as he gestured to himself. "Can it be that you really don't remember, Bruce?" He was clearly taunting Bruce at this point, Clark could tell.

"Remember *what*?" Bruce replied, exasperated.

"Your old partner, of course!" the other said with a flourish that made the Kryptonite necklace arc through the air before Clark. His voice lowered to a deadly pitch. "Or have you forgotten?"

"Jason?" Bruce asked, shocked, but hiding it well enough from the man before him. "It can't be." He snorted, dismissing the idea as ludicrous, just by his tone of voice. But Clark, even in his sick and hurting state, could tell that Bruce was at least a little unconvinced of his own words. The color had drained from the billionaire's face, and his eyes darted uncertainly at Clark, as though the injured Kryptonian held the truth of the matter. Clark knew that his friend didn't *want* it to be true.

Jason? Clark's mind echoed. *Jason Todd? Robin, from so long ago? But that would mean...*

"He's dead," Bruce went on, his voice hardening as his conviction grew. "He's *been* dead, for a long time now."

"Oh how wrong you are, Bruce," Jason – if it was truly him – said.

"I watched Joker murder Jason," Bruce said, moving his head to the side as much as the restraints allowed.

"No, Bruce. Think back to that night. We went out, following a tip about Joker's whereabouts, down by the old Carnival World. But he was prepared and waiting for us. I was captured," Jason explained, moving in close so that his face was mere inches from Bruce's. He gripped Bruce's cheeks with one hand, forcing Bruce to look him in the eyes. "You were wounded, but so was Joker. He fled, taking me with him. Days later, you went back to Carnival World, looking for clues. In the same spot where we'd confronted Joker, which, if memory serves, was in front of the Tilt-A-Whirl, you found a video tape – one that would *allegedly* show Joker killing me."

Bruce said nothing, but his eyes blazed in anger and self-loathing.

"What you didn't know was that the whole thing was staged," Jason continued, not bothered by Bruce's silence. "Well, my death, at any rate. The tape appeared to show my murder, but Joker kept me alive."

"I saw the knife," Bruce growled. "I saw the moment it..."

"A *prank* knife," Jason grinned dangerously. "Or do you know *nothing* about Joker?"

Clark saw Bruce's face fall as realization dawned.

"The body," Bruce protested, though it sounded weak to Clark's aching ears, like Bruce was trying to convince himself.

"A homeless drifter."

"The records..."

"Records can be falsified," Jason nearly purred in delight. "*Especially* for the right price."

"Joker's not a wealthy man," Bruce argued through gritted teeth.

"No," Jason allowed. "But let's just say his reach extended further than you and I ever dreamed back then."

Bruce hung his head in thought. Then, softly, "Let's pretend that I believe you. What happened to you?"

Jason's face darkened like a storm cloud rolling over the sun. "After you abandoned me to Joker, he spent *years* tormenting me. Clearly," he said, gesturing to his scarred and nearly unrecognizable face. "Day after day it was the same. Physical abuse. *Mental* abuse. While I sat there and waited for *you* to come rescue me. But you *never* did."

Bruce snorted. "Says you. You haven't proven anything to me yet, *Jason*," he said in defiance. "For all I know, you're just a delusional Joker Wannabe."

"You want proof? Fine. The old access code for the Batcave was 1279380. The wall panel sparked once, burning the tip of my left index finger." He lifted his hand and showed Bruce the finger in question, where a light scar still lingered. "You changed the panel that night and made the code 1933916."

Bruce's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. His skin went ashen and belief bloomed in his features.

"Ah, so you *do* believe me," Jason cooed.

"After the body was found and identified..." Bruce started, but seemed unable to finish. He cleared his throat and sighed. "I resigned myself to my failure. I had a funeral for you. I never imagined... I had tried so hard to find you, until that body was found. The body was burned beyond recognition. It... felt like Joker's style. Until it was confirmed that the body was yours, I didn't want to believe it. But when the official paperwork came back... I didn't question the results of the DNA match."

"Oh, poor little Brucie!" Jason mocked in a tone that might have otherwise been reserved for talking to an infant. "Did you lose sleep over leaving me to Joker's insane hands?" He slapped Bruce's cheeks in an almost playful manner. "Good. You *left me* at his mercy. For *years*."

"I had *no idea* you were alive," Bruce snapped in self-defense, though his words were pleading for forgiveness in the same moment.

Jason got right into Bruce's face, grabbing the front of the Batsuit in a tight fist. His face mere centimeters from Bruce's, Jason snarled malevolently. "For years I was locked away and tortured. My only thoughts were of one day getting free and paying you back for all I'd suffered," Jason went on, gesturing broadly with his free hand, his voice a sinister hiss that made Clark's hackles rise as he fought to stay conscious against the Kryptonite's relentless assault.

"You need a new hobby," Bruce quipped, echoing Clark's thoughts exactly.

Clark tried testing his bonds as Jason taunted Bruce. But the Kryptonite necklace was still out in the open, and Clark had no strength left in his body to fight. The metal held fast and Clark's head was swimming with pain.

"So where's your puppet master?" Bruce asked, and Clark realized he may have momentarily blacked out.

"Joker? Oh, I killed him years ago," Jason boasted, his chest puffed out with pride, waving the air dismissively. "He was cramping my style. And I never forgave him for these," he added, pointing to the curved lines of scar tissue that twisted up from the corners of his mouth. "He thought he had me completely broken. Thought I was one of his mindless minions. I showed him."

"I don't believe you," Bruce challenged.

Jason chuckled menacingly. "Oh, but you should. Perhaps, later, after I've begun to break you, I'll show you his body. It's

amazing, what was left in this place when it burnt down. The basement levels were barely scorched, and everything down here survived in impeccable condition...including all the formaldehyde I could wish for."

Bruce grimaced. "You preserved him? Sounds like a case of hero worship to me. More so than the actions of someone who claims to have hated him."

Jason grinned wildly, his eyes gleaming with insanity. "Quite the opposite. Preserving the body like that...it's worked wonders for striking fear into the hearts of my followers. Joker's old followers." He cackled with glee. "Between their fear of *me* and their hatred of *you*, it was easy to unite them under my cause."

"You want me?" Bruce said. "Fine. But let him go," he said, with a jerk of his head in Clark's direction.

"And *why* would I do that?" Jason asked, batting his eyelashes in an overly exaggerated, innocent manner. "I let him go and he just flies off to the Gotham PD with me in tow? Not a chance. Besides, Lex Luthor is willing to pay handsomely for proof that he's dead."

"Luthor?" Clark growled, summoning up the energy to speak.

"Ah, he *is* still with us," Jason grinned, showing a mouthful of teeth that had been filed to sharp points – either by choice or by force, it was impossible to tell.

"Luthor's in prison," Clark spat, his chest heaving with the effort of speaking.

"True. But, let's face it, that will never stop him," Jason said with a shrug. "The money is set aside. All I have to do is provide the proof. But first...we'll have a little fun." He cracked his fingers in anticipation.

"Won't Luthor want him unscathed? He's a trophy after all," Bruce said coolly.

"Well, well. I never knew you to have such a dark side, Batsy!" Jason clapped crazily. Then he turned and clucked his tongue at Clark. "Tsk, tsk, Superman! Throwing yourself into such danger to try and rescue a man who's more than ready to throw you to the wolves!" He turned back to Bruce. "Luthor needs only his head, not the rest of his corpse."

"Hey, Boss?" called a woman's irritatingly high-pitched voice. "We've got a problem."

"What *now*, Harley?" Jason called, annoyed.

"Our boys on the street say the Gotham PD is picking up all the guards we'd posted around the building. What do you wanna do about it?"

Jason huffed in annoyance. "Be right there." He smiled creepily at his hostages. "Forgive me for my rudeness. But I'll be back soon. Oh, I almost forgot. Here, Superman. Green is *definitely* your color." With that, he hung the Kryptonite necklace around Clark's neck.

For a moment, he admired how it hung there, and the way Clark feebly squirmed in agony. Then he lifted the radioactive stone and pressed it to the center of Clark's forehead. Immediately, the skin there blistered and burned. Clark screamed in some of the worst pain he'd ever felt. Even getting shot that one time – his first encounter with Kryptonite, years ago as Nightwing – hadn't hurt that badly. At least then he'd been lucky enough to pass out from the pain.

Jason chuckled. "Luthor wasn't kidding about this rock," he muttered to himself. "It's better than I ever *dreamed* it would be." He pressed the rock into the burn on Clark's head again, causing Clark to cry out in pain once more. A grin split his disfigured face as he admired the power of the Kryptonite. Then he let the chunk of deadly stone fall against Clark's chest. He patted it against the S for good measure and Clark was relieved that the man hadn't spotted the tiny body camera nestled amongst the red threads that outlined the symbol. "Try not to die on me before we get...acquainted," he said smoothly.

With another cackle, Jason walked off.

When he was out of earshot, Bruce looked over – as much as he could – to Clark. "What are you doing here?" he whispered.

Clark coughed harshly, every breath a torment with the Kryptonite hanging around his neck. "Saving you," he croaked out, unable to summon even the smallest wry smile. Instead, he wound up wheezing.

"Alfred called you, didn't he?" Bruce mused.

"Yes," was all Clark could say. He winced against the Kryptonite's assault and struggled not to pass out.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could reach the chain," Bruce apologized.

Clark weakly shook his head. An idea popped into his mind as he did so. He used his remaining strength to try to use his head and neck to manipulate the necklace. Moving his head to the right, he was able to capture the chain in his mouth. Slowly, he worked the chain upward until he was able to flick it up over his nose. In the process, the shard of glowing green stone whacked him in the chin, burning his flesh. Clark bit down on the chain, trying to stifle the scream that rose in his throat. He panted with the effort, feeling his energy flagging. But, at last, he had the chain up as high as he could manage. Then, flipping his head once more, he tried to send the offending piece of jewelry flying up and off his body. He tried repeatedly, failing each time, until he felt completely spent.

"You know," came a voice from behind him, "there's an easier way to do that. All you have to do is ask nicely."

"Lois?" he sputtered in disbelief, his drooping eyelids snapping wide open.

"I told you not to get yourself killed before I got a chance to yell at you," she quipped.

"Sorry," he apologized as she lifted the necklace from his tortured body. "Believe me, this was *not* on my 'To Do' list."

"I'll bet. Now be still."

Instant relief flooded his body as Lois removed the necklace, but it was only a fraction of what he needed.

"Get it away from him," Bruce instructed. "Just being near that stone is enough to kill him."

Lois took stock of the room, then stuffed the stone into the utility belt around her waist. As the pouch closed tightly over the rock, the assault of pain disappeared. Clark's body sagged against his bonds – only the short chains on his shackles kept him from sinking to the floor. He had no strength to attempt to keep himself upright.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely, his throat raw from the force of his earlier screams of agony.

"What...what was that?" she asked, patting the pouch where the necklace resided. She looked and sounded shaken.

"Kryptonite," Bruce supplied.

"It's real?" Lois sounded surprised. "I've heard of it spoken about only in rumors by nutjobs like Bureau 39...it's never been confirmed," she corrected herself.

"Oh, it's real," Clark said, "and as deadly as the rumors have said. I've only encountered it a couple of times but...it's been more than enough."

"Enough chit-chat," Bruce scolded. "Can you break the chains?" he asked Clark.

Clark struggled for a moment. "No," he finally said.

"But you're *Superman*," Lois reminded him.

"Not without sunlight I'm not. The Kryptonite saps my powers. Without the sun to recharge them, I'm as ordinary as the next guy," Clark hastily explained.

Lois appeared thoughtful, then she began to search the rest of the compartments on her belt. Clark watched as she did so, noting the slightly baggy, but very familiar, costume she was sporting. It was black, save for an icy blue, stylized bat on the chest, which spread to her shoulders. The mask she hid her identity behind was a similarly designed, sleek bat shape as well. Clark smiled. It was – if he wasn't mistaken – his very first Nightwing suit, from way

back when he'd been eighteen and still filling out.

"I think Alfred gave me something..." Lois mumbled as she searched. Then, "Aha! Got it!"

"Ssh!" Bruce admonished. "Bane's not far."

Jason's voice echoed in the room, coming closer. Harley Quinn's distinctive, grating voice followed.

"Lois! Hide," Clark hissed under his breath. "And..." he gulped in dread. "Put the necklace back. Jason *can't* know anyone else is here."

Lois reluctantly did as Clark asked, but it was clear she wasn't happy about it one bit. Then she darted away to find a place to hide. From Clark's position, he couldn't see where she went. He could only pray that Jason wouldn't get his hands on her. And even those hopeful thoughts lasted only a second or two before the pain overwhelmed him to the exclusion of all else.

"Oh, good! You haven't died just yet!" Jason announced gleefully as he caught sight of Clark. "It seems that you *can* do something right after all! Must feel good, after your laughably botched rescue of our dear Bruce!" He walked toward Clark and patted him on the head like a dog, then he slapped Clark's left cheek with all the force he could muster. "I have some things to take care of. Harley!" he barked sharply. "Be a dear and watch these two, would you?"

"Sure thing, Boss!" Harley piped up with a salute.

"Bane!" Jason called, ignoring the woman. "Come with me!"

The monstrous behemoth of a man lumbered to Jason's side. Without the brute's meaty hand wrapped around his throat, Clark was able to study the man, at least as much as the Kryptonite allowed him to. As he drank in the sight of that twisted, misshapen, grotesquely proportioned being, Clark felt a surge of revulsion rise up inside. There was a part of him that wondered if Bane had always looked that way or if he'd been the victim of some vile experiments that had given him his tortured form. Clark pitied the man, as much as he wanted to recoil from him. But it wasn't Bane's looks that struck fear into Clark's heart. He'd already seen, first hand, how immensely strong and powerful he was. It was a wonder to Clark how Bane hadn't snapped his neck like a twig earlier.

Bane grunted at Jason.

"Wait for me in the hall," Jason instructed him. Then, to Clark, "Oh, Superman, are you feeling ill? You're looking a bit *green* if I do say so myself." He laughed hard at his own joke as he once more fingered the chunk of Kryptonite hanging around Clark's neck. He turned to Bruce. "And as for you...I'm looking forward to getting *reacquainted* with you," he said in a menacing hiss. Then, brightening back to his more flamboyantly crazy self, he grinned. "Ta-ta for now! I won't be gone long!"

With a flourish, he made his way across the room and out the door.

Clark coughed, his head hanging to his chest. He forced himself to think through the haze of pain that clouded both his body and his mind. There *had* to be a way to get out of that situation, without putting Lois' life at risk.

"Harley," Bruce called, and the woman turned to him after picking up a discarded plank of wood. She put it over her shoulder like it was a baseball bat.

"No talking," she warned, eyeing him with cold disdain.

"I'm surprised to see you taking orders from Jason," Bruce continued, undeterred. "After all, he killed Joker. The love of your life, if I'm not mistaken."

"Shut up," she commanded.

"He stole away the one man you've ever truly loved. Cut his life short and left you here, alive, and all alone," Bruce taunted. "And you *willingly* follow your lover's murderer now?" He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "I thought you had more loyalty to Joker than that."

"I *hate* him," Harley shrieked. "But I'm also not ready to join

Mr. J on the Other Side either."

"So he's threatened you too," Clark growled, the words an absolute effort.

"Who cares?" Lois' voice came from behind Harley as she plunged a syringe full of a clear liquid into Harley's neck. "Take five. I'll handle it from here," she told Harley as the woman keeled over, the potent sedative taking immediate effect. "God," she said, looking icily down on Harley's unmoving form, "what an annoying voice on that woman."

She went to Clark first. "Let's get this off you," she said as she lifted the necklace from his neck once again and hid it away in one of her belt compartments.

Then she set to work on his shackles, pulling out the small rotary tool she'd had in her hands before Jason's return. She turned it on and carefully placed the spinning blade against the metal, expertly cutting through Clark's bonds, though Clark could see that she was nervous about the potential to hurt him.

"You're doing great," he encouraged her. He managed a weak smile as the first shackle fell away. "Does this mean you still love me?" he teased.

"It means I'm not done being mad at you," she snapped as she set to work on his other wrist bond.

"Nice work, Miss Lane," Alfred said over the earpieces.

In the heat of everything, Clark had nearly forgotten his friends in the Batcave.

"Alfred. Jimmy. Did you guys get everything Jason said?" he asked.

"Everything, CK. I'm editing together a video and audio clips to give to the police when you're ready. We've got everything we need to nail that creep to the wall." The excited, boyish grin on Jimmy's face shone through in his voice. "I'm just being cautious and going over it all again, to make sure there's nothing in there to give away Bruce's identity."

"Thanks, Ji...Oracle. You're the best," Clark praised him.

Lois stopped cutting and the shackle fell away. With the short chain no longer forcing his body to remain standing, Clark crumpled to the floor. His hands landed on some chipped and broken floor tiles, and his palms were pricked in several places, drawing tiny beads of blood. Lois knelt at his side and started to work on the shackle binding his right ankle.

"So, *Jimmy's* the best?" she asked, her eyebrow arched. Clark knew the tone. She was poking fun at him, but in a dangerous way that never panned out well for him.

"Only on the technological side of things," he offered, gathering strength and sitting up. "You, on the other hand, are the master of action rescues," he said sincerely.

"The master, huh?"

"The god?" Clark offered instead.

"Better," Lois replied.

"Get a room," Bruce muttered teasingly. "Is your strength returning at all yet?" he asked Clark, in an effort to bring the focus back to their escape.

"No," Clark said, testing it by trying to snap his leg restraints. "There's no sun. I can't recharge down here. Looks like we're stuck doing this the old-fashioned way."

"It's always worked well enough," Bruce grimly agreed.

"Should be fun," Clark replied.

Bruce laughed darkly. "Could be." He sighed. "So...no offense Lois but...how and why are you here?"

Lois didn't spare a glance for the billionaire. "Ask Clark," she snorted in anger.

Clark shrugged helplessly. "It's my fault. She and Jimmy came over to watch the fight. I wasn't thinking when Alfred called and I accidentally changed into my uniform where they could see. And, well, you know Lois. She insisted that I bring her to Gotham with me."

"Mmm," Bruce hummed in understanding. Either he

instinctively knew that Lois would have followed Clark to Gotham or if he just didn't want to press the issue right then and there, Clark couldn't tell.

"There's that's the last of it," Lois announced in a hushed voice as Clark was finally completely set free. She turned to Bruce and, since she was already kneeling, went to work on his ankle bonds first. "You don't have to worry, Bruce. Your secret's safe with me. Don't give me that look! I won't say a word about Clark's either...even if he *is* a walking dead man, as far as I'm concerned."

"He can make some pretty...dim-witted decisions, at times," Bruce agreed with a smirk.

"Hey!" Clark cried out in a weak protest.

"You're *really* going to argue this?" Lois asked, as the shackle broke and she began on the next one.

Clark went to make a reply, but stopped and swallowed down the retort that had been brewing. "Okay," he relented. "Maybe I *haven't* always made the best choices. But I've done the best I can," he insisted.

"That remains to be seen," Lois snapped.

The last of Bruce's bonds broke, releasing him. He stood and rubbed his aching wrists as Clark pushed himself off the floor. Finding the ability to stand once more possible, some of his worry fled. Bruce clapped him on the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Clark replied.

"Here," Lois said, tucking the tool away and pulling out an earpiece for Bruce. She placed it into his outstretched hand.

"Alfred sent this along. This too." She produced a thin latex cowl that Clark recognized as a base layer for the thicker one he usually wore. "This was the only one I could easily take along with me."

"Perfect," Bruce nodded. "I owe you one." With practiced grace, he inserted the earpiece. "Alfred? Are you there?"

An audible sigh of relief came across the earpieces. "Yes, sir. Reading you loud and clear."

"Good," Bruce said, his eyes already sweeping the area as he tugged on the cowl. He started to move.

"Uh? Bruce? Jason – and the exit – are that way," Clark reminded him cheekily, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

"I know. But my things are *that* way," Bruce said, pointing ahead to the room Jason had disappeared to right after Clark had been captured.

"Go. I'll keep watch," Clark said with a nod.

"Back in a minute," Bruce promised.

Lois made no motion to follow Bruce, but trailed Clark to the double doors leading into the room. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at Clark, her smoldering eyes boring a hole through his forehead.

"Lois, I..." he began, his words faltering.

"Save it," she commanded. "It's not the time or the place."

"You're right. It's not. But...it doesn't change the fact that I'm so, *so* sorry about what happened. I should have told you earlier," he pressed.

"Damn right you *should* have," Lois snapped angrily.

Clark bit back the rest of his apology. It was clear Lois wasn't ready to hear it yet, and, besides, Jimmy, Alfred, and Bruce were all listening in. He sighed to himself, wondering what he could say that would cut some of the tension between them. An idea formed in his mind as he looked at her.

"You know," Clark quipped dryly, breaking the silence, "when I imagined you borrowing my clothing, it was more along the lines of you swiping one of my sweatshirts. Not seeing you wearing my old Nightwing uniform."

Her eyes widened and she gaped. "This was *yours*?" she asked, pulling at the slightly baggy fabric. Then, narrowing her eyes, "You pictured me wearing your clothing?"

Clark risked a small smile. "Well, we *have* been dating nearly

a year. I'm surprised you haven't borrowed an old shirt yet to keep warm on a cold stakeout or something." He chuckled lightly. "But...to answer your question...yes, that's mine. I used to be Nightwing, a long time ago. Another lifetime ago, or so it feels. I'm actually surprised Alfred didn't tell you."

"Sorry, Master Clark, but I thought it best if *you* be the one to deliver that information," Alfred apologized before falling silent.

"He didn't say a word," Lois confirmed. Her voice was clipped, still fuming from all she hadn't been told. "Anything *else* I should know about? Do you also run around pretending to be Wonder Woman as well?"

Clark gave her another tiny smile. "No. Diana would *kill* me if I took one of her outfits. Besides, I could never work in heels that high," he jested.

His joked worked and Lois' stony face finally cracked to reveal the barest of smiles and warmth.

"That breastplate would look hideous on you," she replied.

"Probably," Clark agreed.

"You two! Stop fooling around," Bruce chided. "Clark? You have a body cam, yes?"

"Yeah, Bruce. What's up?"

"I found Joker."

"You found Joker?" Clark asked warily, in response to the odd tone in Bruce's voice.

"Well...what's left of him," came the response. "Jason destroyed my cam, and we'll need evidence, even before we bring the Gotham PD down here."

Clark grimaced. "Be right there." Then, to Lois, "It's probably for the best if you stay here," he said gently. "Please. You don't need to see...whatever it is Bruce has found. I know we've both seen dead bodies before but...I can't guarantee that this won't be...disturbing."

"Okay."

That one simple word shocked Clark more than anything else that had happened so far.

"Really?" he gaped, blinking.

"Really. You're probably right. Jason is a bit...*very*...insane," Lois said. She made a shooping motion at him. "Now go, before he decides to come back."

Clark nodded once in acknowledgement and picked his way across the room. He was still fighting off the remnants of the Kryptonite sickness, even though the rock was safely tucked away where it couldn't harm him. But the lack of sunlight meant he couldn't heal himself, leaving the effects of the poisoning to linger on. His head throbbed with a headache and the burn marks on his skin screamed in agony. He wished his speed was back – he wanted to have the evidence he was moving toward to be on tape so he could get Lois out of Arkham Asylum and back to the safety of Wayne Manor, if not Metropolis. Or, well, *relative safety* he supposed. After all, Lois was still mad at him.

It took him longer than he would have liked, but he was soon standing next to Bruce. A feeling of nausea washed over him. This time, it wasn't from the Kryptonite exposure. Instead, he was looking at a room full of grotesque body parts – all of them perfectly preserved in containers filled with formaldehyde and sitting neatly on shelves as though on exhibit. Clark made ready to go to each shelf so that the body cam got a clear image of each labeled jar.

"Hey...Oracle?" he called over the earpiece, before he began.

"Here, CK."

"Fair warning. This room...it's pretty morbid in here. You don't have to look at the images, if you don't want to," Clark cautioned.

"Thanks. I'll be okay though. I think." Jimmy was trying to sound brave, but Clark noted the hint of uncertainty in his friend's voice.

"Oracle?" Bruce asked idly, as he examined a jar with a pair of

plump eyeballs, complete with the optic nerves still attached.

"He sees and knows all, apparently," Clark replied casually, trying to distract himself from the sordid collection of body parts spread out before him. "So... what do you think?"

"I think Oracle is a stretch," Bruce quipped.

"Hey!" Jimmy protested.

"I meant about these jars," Clark clarified, looking at a jar with a crooked nose inside.

"I think they're trophies," Bruce replied immediately.

"I think so too," Clark agreed. "Look here. The label says 'Bane's Tongue.' You think he got a little mouthy against the new boss?"

"Could be," Bruce shrugged, peering at what appeared to be a thumb floating in another jar. "It would make sense though. Conquer someone and keep a reminder around to never cross him again."

"And you used to work with this guy?" Clark teased, as he held up a jar with a pair of ears in it.

"Clearly, I have questionable tastes in *sidekicks*," Bruce shot back.

"No kidding," Lois said over her own earpiece.

Clark finished his methodical taping of the small vessels and the minor trophies. Then he turned and faced the glass case in the center of the room. It looked like a glass coffin, or maybe an oversized fish tank. A single naked lightbulb was above the center of the tank, illuminating it like a demented shrine. And inside...

Clark shuddered.

The perfectly preserved corpse of Joker lay within. His hands were folded over his chest in his repose, looking for all the world like any other body in a casket would look like during a wake. But there were things that set him apart from a normal dead body. He still wore his infamous purple suit. Traces of the nightmarish clown makeup he'd always worn was still on his face, making Clark wonder if it hadn't been a layer of paint, rather than just an application of makeup. In his hands, instead of the usual rosary beads or flower that most corpses were posed with, Joker's prized gun was held tightly.

"I didn't think he could look any creepier than he did when he was alive," Clark commented softly. "This is worse. *Far* worse."

"I agree," Bruce said as he studied the body. "I hate to say it though," he continued, "but seeing the proof that he's dead... it's a relief."

"He's terrorized Gotham for a long time," Clark solemnly agreed. "Oracle? You have what we need?"

"More than enough," Jimmy answered.

"Do come back now," Alfred all but pleaded. "*Before* I need to send Master Jimmy out to collect you when you get caught again."

"Will do, Alfred, just as soon as Jason is in the police's hands," Clark replied for them both.

"Thank you, sir," was Alfred's relieved response.

"Hey, boys, I hate to agree with Alfred, but let's shake a leg," Lois called over the earpieces. "This place is giving me the creeps."

"What, the fearless Lois Lane is put off by an abandoned building?" Bruce teased dryly.

"I'm put off by two idiot superheroes almost getting themselves killed in an abandoned building," Lois retorted bitingly.

"Boy, is she mad at *you*," Bruce said, turning to Clark with a smirk.

Clark sighed. "Do you blame her?"

"Not in the least."

"Ladies, please," Lois said, clucking her tongue. "Stop chattering away and get out there. I hear someone coming."

"Okay, Lois, we'll be right there," Clark said, focusing on what was to come.

He gave the Joker one last look. It was odd, to see the maniac

clown so eerily still and quiet. For many long years, Clark had helped Bruce to fight against Joker and his minions. They'd worked tirelessly to try and bring the man to justice, but they had always seemed to be one step behind Joker. Clark sighed softly. He wasn't upset at all to know that the Clown Prince was dead, but even he had to admit that Joker had been a worthy opponent.

Clark squared his shoulders and put his back to the glass coffin. Then, without waiting for Bruce, he strode across the room, heading for the door. And, more importantly, to Lois.

"You know, guys," Jimmy said, his voice light, as if trying to break some of the tension in that gloomy, dank, rotting room.

"Lois is in there saving your butts. I think she deserves a superhero name too."

"Nice butt-kissing, *Oracle*," Lois said, her voice half teasing, "but I'm *not* setting you up on a date with my sister."

"A guy can dream, can't he?" Jimmy pouted. Then, brighter, "So, how about it? Batgirl? Supergirl? Nightwing Junior? She-wing? Nightingale?"

"We should change yours from Oracle to Dogmeat," Lois grumbled.

"More like Spitfire," Clark quipped.

"I like it," Bruce replied.

"Is this *really* what you should be focusing on?" Lois demanded. "That big goon is coming down the hall."

"Bane," Bruce spat.

That sobered Clark fully. He broke into a run, wishing his speed had returned. But, of course, in that room of eternal night, he couldn't recharge his abilities. And it made him profoundly sad, to know that, for some of the patients who'd once lived in the old asylum, this dark and cheerless sub-basement had been the very last thing they'd ever seen.

"Lois, take cover," he commanded as he ran. "I'm coming."

In less than half a minute, he was at Lois' side, where she was crouched behind a ransacked and rusted cabinet. He put his finger to his lips, indicating that she should remain quiet. She shook her head defiantly.

"Please," he whispered. "I can't risk you getting hurt."

"Says the man who was brought to his knees by a piece of jewelry," she said snippily.

"Oh children, I'm home!" Jason yelled out in a sing-song voice. Then, as he noticed the broken shackles and his missing hostages, his song became a primal growl of rage. "Where did you go?" he asked, twisting this way and that, searching. "Come out, come out, wherever you are! I know you're here somewhere!" Once again, his voice had returned to a mocking, almost singing voice, like a demonic child calling an end to a game of hide and seek.

"I'm right here, Jason," Bruce said, stepping out from the shadows of the doorway, where they'd found Joker's preserved corpse. "You want me? Come and get me."

"Ah, but where's your little boyfriend, Superman?" Jason wondered.

Ignoring the barb, Clark stepped forward. "You're outnumbered, Jason," he warned. "Come quietly. It'll go much easier on you."

"Now, where's the fun in *that*?" Jason asked with a deranged grin. "But, how, I wonder? How did the two of you get free? Who helped you? They must still be here. Come on out, whoever you are! There's no escape and I'll find you anyway."

"No one helped us," Clark lied, resisting the urge to check on Lois. He crossed his arms over his chest instead, hoping the movement would keep Jason's attention away from the rest of the room. "You just underestimated the two of us."

Jason's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I don't believe you, SuperLiar! Bane!" he snapped, his voice biting as a whip. "Search the room!"

The monstrous behemoth grunted and nodded once.

"You don't have to follow his orders," Clark called out to Bane. "He cut out your tongue, didn't he?" he pried. "Why would you follow someone who's taken a piece of you away?"

"Taken and stored in a jar as a grim trophy," Bruce added. "Placed on a shelf as a reminder of what he stole from you."

Bane roared wordlessly. Clark couldn't quite tell, but he thought he saw a look of uncertainty cross that ruinous face. But it lasted only a second before Bane cowed under Jason's murderous stare. He lumbered off to check the room, mercifully heading to the opposite end of the room from where Lois was. He seemed in no hurry, as if he knew he had all the time in the world.

"You see, Superman? No one dares to challenge me," Jason crowed.

"Well, I *do*," Clark said firmly.

"Oh, really?" Jason asked, arching an eyebrow. "When I have *this*?"

He pulled a tiny revolver from his pocket. Clark scoffed, hoping to appear unconcerned. If he was to survive, he could *not* afford to let Jason know his aura of invulnerability was gone. He had to bluff, and it was absolutely vital that he do it well.

"A gun?" Clark asked. "Please. I'm *Superman*, remember?"

"Rumor has it that stone makes you somewhat *less* than super," Jason said as he took aim. "Shall we test that theory?"

Bruce starting to sneak forward while Jason's attention was focused on Clark. Clark could see his friend carefully and silently inching his way closer.

"The stone isn't here anymore," Clark baited him.

"Maybe not," Jason shrugged, his gun still trained on Clark's forehead. "But you haven't even *tried* to use your powers against me. I'm more than willing to bet it's because you *can't*." His voice dropped to a low, menacing pitch.

"Shoot me and Luthor loses his trophy," Clark said. Though he was positive he wasn't outwardly showing it, having the gun aimed at his head sent a chill of fear down his spine.

Jason appeared to mull it over for several seconds. Then he shrugged again. "Point taken." A movement from Bruce caught his eye and Jason whirled on him, shooting wildly. "Oh, Batsy! Did you *really* think you could get the drop on *me*? I *invented* the move you're trying to pull off."

Clark saw his chance and dove forward, closing the distance between Jason and himself in a few bounding leaps. He tackled the insane Joker wannabe, diving directly into the man's midsection and toppling them both to the grimy floor. Bruce cried out as a stray bullet grazed his left forearm, a heartbeat before Clark reached Jason. The bullet just missed embedding itself into Bruce's flesh, but it *did* tear a nice hole in the Batman suit. In seconds, the fissure was filled with blood from the torn flesh that the bullet had kissed on its journey across the room. Bruce hissed in pain and reflexively put his other hand over the wound.

Clark saw it all from the corner of his eye as he made a grab for the gun. Jason was just distracted enough that Clark got a decent grip on the weapon. But Jason wasn't distracted enough. He still retained his own grip on the gun, and Clark wasn't able to easily wrest it from him. Jason struggled and tried to squeeze off another bullet, this one meant for Clark. Clark saw the man's intention and pushed the gun so that the round went into the ceiling rather than his skull. Bits of sheetrock rained down on them, coating them in dust and who knew what else. Clark wouldn't have been surprised to hear that asbestos was in the mix – the building had stood for nearly one hundred years.

A sizable chunk of the crumbling ceiling hit Jason's shoulder in a lucky break for Clark, and Clark was able to finally wrench the gun away. He wished he could squash the metal in his fist like he'd done so many times before when disarming criminals, but with his strength no more impressive than that of a normal man, he had to settle for flinging it across the room – away from Jason, away from Harley Quinn – still under the effects of the sedative

Lois had administered via needle – away even from Lois.

Lois!

Clark heard her yelp as Bane reached the place where she'd been hiding. But he couldn't afford to look at her, not yet. Enraged, Jason wrapped his now empty hands around Clark's neck, trying to crush his airway. Clark's hands went to Jason's hands and he worked at prying each surprisingly strong finger from his throat. Jason tried to maintain the hold that he had – Clark could feel the other man's muscles straining. But Clark was, perhaps, just a little stronger. He managed to break free of Jason's grasp, just before Jason smashed his head into Clark's. With Clark stunned for a moment, it was all Jason needed to gain the upper hand.

"Bane!" he called frantically. "Forget the girl! Superman! Get Superman!" he cried as he scuttled backwards and out of the way.

Bane grunted. Clark saw him drop Lois to the floor as he let go of her neck. She landed with a thud and curled into a fetal position as she coughed and tried to recover. Clark stood and faced Bane.

"Are you okay... Spitfire?" he asked, cautious not to use Lois' true name.

"I've been better," she wheezed.

Bane roared and sprinted forward. Clark mirrored the bestial man's movements. Behind him, he heard Bruce goading Jason into a fight, but he could not afford to pay it any mind. Bruce was a skilled fighter. He was more than capable of handling himself in a fight. And Clark had no doubt that against Jason, Bruce would be able to hold his own. Not that there was any choice in the matter. Clark had to devote all of his energy and attention to subduing Bane and keeping Lois safe.

Clark sidestepped at the last moment, and Bane went right past him, crashing into one of the X-ray tables Clark and Bruce had been strapped to. The table fell backward, taking the misshapen giant with it in a hideous clattering of metal. Clark rushed over, hoping to take advantage of Bane's prone position to tie the man up with a length of cable. But for a lumbering behemoth, Bane recovered too quickly. He grabbed Clark's leg as he approached and pulled hard, making Clark lose his balance. He fell to the floor and Bane's meaty hands went to his throat. Clark struggled, but the man's muscles were like steel and he had no hope of prying the murderous fingers from his flesh.

Bane made a gurgling sound that sent a chill down Clark's spine. The monstrosity – so easily forgettable as human – was *laughing*. Not just laughing, but he was truly *enjoying* Clark's plight. Clark tried to loosen the sausage-like fingers long enough to take a breath, but it was a futile effort. Bane gurgled again and smashed Clark's head onto the tile floor, hard enough to make stars and colors explode before Clark's eyes. But Bane was toying with Clark – it was more than obvious that he had the strength to bash Clark's head into the floor forcefully enough to crack or break his skull open.

Clark tried to fight back, grunting and straining with the effort to try and push the massive mountain of a man off of him. Instead, he was rewarded only with a pop of pain as his shoulder was dislocated. He hissed in pain, which came out more like a strangled cry as Bane once again smashed his head against the floor. Suddenly, Bane threw his head back as a pair of slender arms encircled his neck, trying to choke him.

Lois! Clark's mind screamed in recognition.

The distraction was all Clark needed. He pushed against Bane again, using his good arm, and managed to create an opening for himself to escape the giant's grasp. It lasted only a split second, but it was enough. Clark scrambled up off the floor and dashed to Lois' aid. She was already plunging a syringe into Bane's neck – the very same kind she'd used on Harley Quinn. But Bane was too big, too muscular. The liquid Lois injected didn't even make the behemoth flinch, let alone knock him out. Bane roared and

reached back, plucking Lois from his neck, but not before Lois managed to stick him with a second needle, though she didn't get the chance to fully inject the contents into him. Bane tossed her aside like she was no more than a ragdoll or bothersome flea. Lois hit the floor five feet away with a thud. But, to her credit, she got to her feet immediately. Bane turned to look at his handiwork and Clark saw his next lucky opportunity. He threw himself at Bane and injected the contents of the syringe into the monstrous man.

Clark retreated as soon as the plunger was depressed all the way. But he wasn't fast enough. Bane lashed out and caught Clark in the face with his fist. Clark had been hit by trains before, trying to stop them from colliding with stalled vehicles on the tracks. This felt much the same without his aura of invulnerability to protect him. He felt his eye swell – it would blacken shortly, he knew – and he could only feel gratitude that he didn't wind up spitting out any broken or loosened teeth. Bane grinned – a twisted, gruesome curving of his lips – and pushed with all his strength. His meaty hands slammed into Clark's chest and the force sent him flying into the wall behind him. The air whooshed out of his lungs and he couldn't be sure if some of his ribs had broken from the force. Bane took a menacing step forward...

And stopped.

He blinked slowly, then awkwardly fumbled around, trying to reach the middle of his back.

He took another step – this one stumbling, as if he was having a hard time supporting his own massive weight.

Another stumble.

Clark's mind started to run through a list of his – admittedly few – options of what he could do, especially with his injured arm.

Bane lifted his foot and crashed to the floor.

Behind him, with a triumphant grin, was Lois.

And sticking up out of Bane's back, up near his shoulder blades, were two more syringes.

Clark cautiously approached Bane, but the giant was out like a light. He even nudged Bane with his foot, but got no response.

"Good thing that worked," Lois said casually, looking down with disgust at the ruined figure of a man. "I'm all out of needles."

"Thanks, Spitfire," Clark said, nodding and trying to catch his breath. It hurt with each lungful of air he took in. "I owe you one."

"You owe me a lot more than *one*," she reminded him pointedly.

"And I promise I'll make good on it," he replied. "Just as soon as we're finished here. Speaking of...where's Batman?" he asked, looking around.

Lois shrugged. "No idea," she said, readjusting the mask around her eyes. "I wasn't exactly paying attention to him."

"In here," Bruce called from the morbid trophy room, sounding just as breathless as Clark felt. "I've got Jason subdued."

"Good. You need a hand?" Clark asked.

"No. I've got this," Bruce said. "Get 'Spitfire' out of the building, then we can deal with these three."

"Bane's down for the count. Spitfire saw to that," Clark informed his friend.

"Nice work," Bruce replied with approval, as he walked back into the room. Jason was bound with a length of cable. Bruce was pushing his former friend before him. "What's with the arm?" he asked, seeing the way Clark was cradling his injured limb.

"Shoulder popped out when I was fighting Bane," Clark explained.

"Need a hand?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Clark said with a grin.

Lois took hold of Jason's bonds to ensure that he didn't try to escape. Bruce grabbed Clark's wrist.

"Ready?" Bruce asked.

"Ready," Clark confidently confirmed.

Bruce yanked on his arm while Clark braced himself. The pain was blinding, but it lasted mere seconds until Clark felt his joint

return to its usual place. Still, he couldn't suppress the yelp of pain while Bruce set the shoulder back to normal.

"Okay," Clark cried out breathlessly, as soon as his shoulder was set once more.

Bruce immediately stopped tugging on the arm. He let go completely and Clark tested his shoulder, rotating it to its full range of motion. Clark nodded.

"Thanks," he said.

"Any time," was Bruce's stoic response.

"What do you say we get out of here?" Clark asked.

"I'd say it's about damn time," Lois replied grumpily.

"Agreed," Clark said. Then, remembering that Bruce had been injured in the fight, he looked to his friend. "How's the arm?"

"It's been better," Bruce admitted. "But I've had a lot worse too. The bullet only grazed my skin."

"It's a lucky break that it didn't do worse damage," Clark said with a nod.

"Speaking of, it looks like you're lucky to be in one piece,"

Bruce said, pointing to Clark's blackening eye.

Clark chuckled ruefully. "I've had worse too."

"You *will* have worse if we don't get out of here soon," Lois grumbled.

"She's right. We *should* get going. I need the sunlight while there's still enough left, and Harley's starting to stir," Clark acknowledged.

Bruce nodded. "Then what are we standing around here for?"

Clark nodded at Bruce and took a swift look around at the dank, dark medical theater. He was more than ready to leave the depressing and terrifying place. "I'll take L...Spitfire up first," he said, almost slipping and using Lois' name. He was desperate to keep her true identity hidden from Jason. "Hopefully a few minutes out in the sun will get me back up to snuff, then I can airlift Bane to Arkham Prison."

"I'll keep an eye on Harley, Jason, and Bane while you do so," Bruce agreed.

"You want me to knock Jason out?" Clark offered. "I should still have enough of that gas left over to do the trick."

Bruce shook his head. "No. In a way, he's been through enough at Joker's hands. I refuse to add to things."

Clark shrugged. "Suit yourself." He looked toward Lois and found her expression as heated as ever. He didn't blame her for her anger, but he'd hoped that, by working together as a team, she would have come to forgive him, at least a little bit. "Ready?"

"I've been ready since I first stepped foot on this God-forsaken little island," she replied darkly. She shuddered as she began walking to the door. "To think that people once lived here, year 'round." She shivered again, and rubbed her shoulders as if to rid herself of the dark images the place brought to mind.

"I know," Clark said softly, holding the door open for her to pass through first. "I hate to say it but...I'm glad the fire damage was too extensive to rebuild this place. The experiments and the 'treatments' they provided here..." He let his voice trail off. "And that's just what was proven to be *true*. If half of the *rumors* about this place are to be believed...the world is better off without places like this."

"I've heard the same rumors," Lois said, in a voice that matched Clark's. "And...I agree. It's better that this place was destroyed beyond repair." She frowned and her shoulders slumped a bit. "Those poor people. Basically imprisoned here. Experimented on. Never allowed to leave, except in a body bag. I feel like...and I know it sounds crazy but...it almost feels like their spirits haunt this place. I know it's probably just because this place is rundown and abandoned and almost falling apart around us. But..." She shrugged, leaving her statement hanging in the musty, damp air.

"It's not so crazy, Lois," Clark said as they reached the elevator. "In a way, I feel it too. I guess...I guess, for me, it's

different. How much different would my life have been, if I'd been discovered when my ship landed by some scientists instead of by my parents?"

Lois' frown deepened and she appeared thoughtful. "Maybe," she allowed.

"That was always my parents' worst fear," Clark continued, as he stepped into the elevator car. "That I'd be discovered as someone different, captured, and dissected in a lab like a frog." He paused as Lois stepped to his side. His finger hovered over the button that would bring them almost to the roof. "Let's hope this thing holds out," he said with a side glance at her.

"It better," Lois agreed. "I've already spent more time than I wanted to in here."

Clark pushed the button with his thumb. Mercifully, the elevator began to move. It was slow – painfully so – but it was moving. Clark dared to breathe a sigh of relief, despite the ominous, but subtle creaking as the car ascended.

"Finally, some luck," he mumbled.

Lois shrugged. "It worked well enough when I got here. But, with these old things, you never know."

"How *did* you get here?" Clark asked as the elevator made its molasses-like climb to the top floor. "I've been meaning to ask but, well, you know." He absently rubbed at his shoulder.

"That's on a need to know basis," Lois replied, looking at him to gauge his reaction.

"That's fine," Clark said coolly, as if it didn't matter. "I'll just ask Alfred."

"Cheater," Lois huffed. Then, "Fine. It was right after you figured out that Bruce was taken here, to Arkham Asylum. I was – and still am – mad about being lied to and then sidelined. I made Alfred give me a suit and whatever gadgets he thought I might need. He didn't want to but..."

"She threatened him," Jimmy helpfully piped up over the earpiece.

"You're dead meat, Olsen," Lois shot back. Then, off Clark's questioning look, "I didn't threaten him, per se. I just...persuaded him." She shrugged casually.

"Loudly and almost violently," Jimmy whispered conspiratorially.

"I'm sorry, Alfred," Clark apologized, but the older man chose not to answer.

Probably a wise move, his inner voice acknowledged.

"I grabbed a motorcycle and got over here as fast as I could," Lois continued. "It had this...converter thing on it that basically made it a jet ski when I got to the docks."

"Was it...black and icy blue?" Clark asked. "Like your outfit?"

"Actually...yes. Why?" she answered, suspicion in her words.

"I guess he decided to give you *all* of my old gear," Clark said with a chuckle. "Including my old bike. But, uh...I had no idea you knew how to drive a motorcycle."

Again, she shrugged. "I dated a guy in college for a semester. He owned a bike and taught me the basics, all while sleeping with my now ex-best friend."

"Ouch," Clark winced. Then he slapped his forehead. "Of course!" he groaned. "You didn't come in via the roof! You came in from the ground floor. I'm sorry. I guess I'm used to Superman coming in from above. As soon as my powers are functioning again, I'll bring you down to your vehicle if you want. Or I can fly you back to the manor, if you can stand the thought of me touching you."

"We'll see," she replied, her tone noncommittal. But, he reasoned, at least she wasn't being outwardly hostile toward him. That had to count for something.

A moment later, the elevator reached its destination. The rusty doors creaked open and let them off on the top floor. Clark stepped out into the hallway, which was flooded with light from the

numerous windows opposite the elevator. Almost entranced by the sunlight, he walked forward, toward the first broken window. It was further away than the others, but, because the glass was missing, it had the benefit of letting the light in without being filtered through years of caked on grime.

He stuck his head out through the opening and closed his eyes as the healing rays of light began to work their magic. He took a deep breath, trying to cleanse the foul stench of the building out of his lungs, but wound up coughing in pain from his battered ribcage. He leaned heavily on the windowsill, and allowed his head to hang down and rest on his chest. For a long moment he stayed like that, as still as a statue, just letting his battered body drink in the nourishing sunlight. He heard Lois' footsteps approaching behind him.

"Hey," she said a little uncertainly. "Are you okay?"

"I will be," Clark said, "after I get enough sunlight." He grimaced and involuntarily grunted.

"What's wrong?" Fear leaked into Lois' words.

"I think...Bane...broke a couple of...ribs. It...I can feel them...healing," Clark panted against the uncomfortable feeling in his chest. "Hurts a bit."

His body contorted in pain for a couple more minutes, then, slowly, the feeling dissipated. He sighed and his body sagged in relief, forcing him to rely on the windowsill to keep him standing. Then, by degrees, he straightened up, standing to his full height. Gently, he probed his chest with his fingers, exploring as he checked for any signs that he wasn't fully recovered. But he found nothing to suggest that his body wasn't whole again. Gingerly, he reached up to the eye Bane had blackened, and found the swelling to be much improved. His vision was clearer too.

"How's it going up there?" Bruce asked impatiently.

"Heading out to the roof now," Clark responded. "I just needed a minute to recover."

"And your powers?" Bruce inquired.

Clark paused and ran through them all.

"Coming back," he confirmed as his super hearing picked up the sound of a roach skittering down the hall a few floors beneath him. "Not completely yet. No heat vision, super breath, or flight yet. And I'm not entirely sure about my invulnerability. I'm not too eager to test that just yet," he weakly joked. "Hopefully, once I get outside, they'll start returning faster."

"Then what are you waiting for?" Bruce urged. "Get out there!"

"All right, all right, keep your utility belt on," Clark replied with a chuckle. "I'm going." He nodded in the direction of the stairs. "This way," he told Lois.

Side by side, they walked down the hall to the stairwell that would lead them to the roof. Lois was silent the entire time, and Clark grew more nervous with each second that ticked by. A silent Lois was the one thing on Earth he'd learned to fear more than Kryptonite. Twice, he tried to say something – anything – that would get her talking. But each time, the words died in his throat and he found himself unable to utter a word.

"Ladies first," he offered when they reached the narrow stairway.

Lois nodded and headed up the stairs, each footstep ringing in the empty space around her. Clark followed behind, eager to get out into the refreshing, energizing sunlight. When he finally did walk through that door and out into the fresh air, it was one of the greatest moments of relief for Clark. He breathed deeply, as if he couldn't get enough of the untainted air out there on the roof. The heat of the sun felt good on his body. He felt more alive than he had since he'd first stepped foot into that God-forsaken old asylum. Every cell in his body seemed to nearly vibrate with vitality and health.

He closed his eyes and spread his arms out, as if he could embrace all of the light and bring its healing essence into his body.

After two minutes, he felt his feet leaving the rooftop as he floated upwards. His eyes popped open and he grinned brightly.

"I'm back," he said, more to himself than to the others. "Bruce? Hang on, I'm heading down to you." He landed with whisper gentleness on the roof once more. "Lois?"

"Go," she said, waving him away. "Give him a hand and then we can figure out how I'm getting back to Wayne Manor."

Clark nodded unsurely. "If that's what you want," he allowed. "Go!" Lois said, this time a little more forcefully.

Clark nodded one more time, then took a step backwards. A heartbeat later, he used his speed to zip back down the steps and into the building. He felt revitalized, but like his speed was still suffering from his Kryptonite poisoning. No matter. He was fast enough, he reckoned. Still, it annoyed him to have to slow down to take the elevator into the basement, and he had to wonder why in the world no one had ever seen fit to put in a couple of flights of stairs to reach those levels. But even as he questioned the logic, the answer came to him.

Control. The basement levels can only be accessed if a key is inserted. Joker or Jason or whoever got the generator working had it hotwired to work without it. But back in the day, when patients were here, none of them would have been able to wander down here on their own.

"It was a prison," he said under his breath.

"What was that?" Lois asked.

"Oh, uh, nothing. Just lost in my own thoughts," he answered. "Never mind. Bruce, the elevator is on the way. Be there in a few seconds."

"Good. Harley is groggy, but awake," Bruce said.

"Can you handle both Harley and Jason?" Clark asked. "I can take Bane, now that my strength is back, but he's literally going to be a handful."

"I can take them," Bruce confirmed.

The elevator touched down on the sub-basement floor. Clark whooshed off the car and into the room where Bruce was waiting, the second the elevator was still. He came to a stop next to Bane's unconscious form.

"Are you sure you've got them both?" he asked Bruce.

"I'm fine."

"Okay. I'll take Bane directly over to Arkham Prison," Clark informed him. "Powers or not, I don't want to risk him waking up before he's safely behind bars again."

"Good idea," Bruce agreed.

"But... what about them?" Clark asked, rubbing his chin in thought. "Now that they know who you really are... how do we stop them from ratting out Batman's secret identity to the police?"

Bruce shook his head while Clark squatted down next to where Bane was sprawled on the floor. "Commissioner Gordon has always suspected me, I think. Worst comes to worst, I'll talk to him and see what he can do about keeping the secret. I doubt it'll work, but... if we play the insanity cards against these two, we might stand a chance of casting doubt on whatever claims they want to make against me."

"Doesn't sound promising, if you ask me," Clark complained.

"It's the best we've got," Bruce pointed out unhappily.

Clark lifted the behemoth man onto his shoulders. Even with his strength returned back to normal, Bane was shockingly heavy. Slowly, Clark stood up, lifting from his knees until he was stretched to his full height.

"Take the elevator," he told Bruce. "I'll follow behind you. The main floor's door is broken. I can get out of the elevator shaft that way, then use the stairwells. I'll wait until you're up near the top, to make sure our friend here doesn't get electrocuted or anything."

"Works for me," Bruce said. He turned to Harley. "Let's do this the easy way, shall we?"

Harley looked both drowsy and defeated. "Whatever."

"Good. On your feet," Bruce commanded.

In a few moments, they were all on their way. Once Clark got the all-clear from Bruce, he airlifted Bane up and out of the crumbling asylum. It felt just as good getting out into the sunlight a second time as it had the first. Clark felt himself recharging even as he flew above the harbor, heading to Arkham Prison. The officers on duty at the gate were more than shocked to see Superman descending from the sky with a man more than twice his size slung over his shoulders like a sack of flour.

"Officers," Clark greeted them cordially. "I have something that belongs to you."

"Bane! He's been missing for a month. We've exhausted every avenue looking for him," the lanky, dark-skinned R. Richards said. "Where'd you find him?"

Clark chuckled a little. "More like he found me, in a way. I was checking into a situation at the old Arkham Asylum. He made the mistake of attacking."

"Looks like he's out cold," the other man, W. Tomago, observed.

Clark nodded. "He's been given a couple of doses of a sedative. Honestly, I'm not sure how long it'll last. If you'll show me the cell where you'd like me to put him, I'd be happy to help you get him locked up."

"Can't argue with that offer. Thanks, Superman," Richards said with a nod. "Follow me. Tomago? You okay to hold things here on your own?"

"Sure thing, Boss," the younger man said with a solemn nod.

"New guy," Richards explained as he unlocked the door to the prison and led Clark inside. "I gotta ask one thing though, Superman. A sedative? I didn't think you were the type to need that on criminals."

"Usually, no. But it wasn't my handiwork. However, in this case, I'm very grateful for the assistance I was given in subduing Bane. He's... a handful, to say the least," Clark replied.

"You're welcome," he heard Lois say in his ear, sounding pleased and proud of herself.

"No kidding! So... the Asylum, huh?" Richards asked. "You wouldn't happen to be the one responsible for catching all those other bad guys at the warehouse on the docks, would you? I heard all about it over the radio. The other officers said it was like Christmas Eve, finding all those criminals trussed up and waiting like gifts under the tree."

Clark nodded. "The asylum was crawling with criminals. It seemed to be their headquarters."

"No one's been there in years," Richards said, stopping to unlock another door. He locked it again after Clark stepped through. "No wonder we couldn't find Bane."

"Even if anyone *had* been there, everything seems to have been kept to the sub-basement levels," Clark said.

"Makes sense," Richards agreed with a shrug. "Down this hall, Superman."

After a few more minutes, Bane was safely secured in a specialized cell that had been built to contain even his enormous strength. Clark was impressed with the design and said as much to Richards.

"It's worked well... until the last raid on the prison. Joker's handiwork," Richards sighed.

"No, it wasn't Joker," Clark informed him. "It was his successor. Joker's dead."

"You're serious?" the officer said as he led the way back out of the prison.

"I saw Joker's preserved body," Clark said with a nod. "From what I gather... he's been dead a while."

"So all the crimes being committed in his name..."

"Were ordered by another man who used Joker's identity," Clark finished for him. "You'll see for yourself when I bring him over. I'm heading back as soon as we get outside."

“Well, Joker or no Joker, whoever it is, I’ll be glad to see him taken off the streets.”

“On my way back,” Clark announced as he rocketed toward the Arkham Asylum, where Bruce and Lois waited, keeping watch over Jason Todd and Harley Quinn. “We need to move fast. Gotham PD is on alert and preparing to roll out and get the building processed.”

“Nothing yet that I can see,” Jimmy informed them all. “I’ll keep you in the loop though.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois replied.

“Oracle, please,” Jimmy quipped easily, sounding in high spirits now that the immediate danger was over.

“I’m maybe twenty seconds away,” Clark said as he tried to force himself to move faster, but he was already going as fast as he could without breaking the sound barrier. And that was only because he had no idea if he might blow out his friends’ eardrums accidentally if he created a sonic boom. “I can see the rooftop.”

“Good,” Bruce said.

A movement caught Clark’s eye. He zoomed in with his enhanced vision and stretched out his hearing. Harley Quinn, now bound with her hands behind her back, was standing shakily, partially leaning against the knee-high wall that surrounded the rooftop. Jason was scowling angrily.

“This is *your* fault,” Jason hissed at Harley. “If you’d done your job, Superman wouldn’t have gotten as far as he has.”

Harley said nothing, choosing, instead, to merely sulk. In fact, she seemed almost not to hear him, as if she was lost in thought.

“You’re *worthless*,” Jason spat at her. “I should have killed you along with that master of yours that you once fawned over like a dog!”

That snapped Harley out of her silence. With a roar, she lunged at Jason. Clark saw her intention a second before she moved. He cried out to Lois and Bruce and urged his speed to increase.

“Harley!” he yelled to them.

Bruce made a lunge for Jason. Lois threw herself at Harley. Both were a fraction of a second too late.

“This is for Mr. J!” Harley screamed as she slammed into Jason.

The force was enough to send Jason hurtling over the wall. But in a last-ditch effort to either save himself or take her down with him, he managed a grip on Harley’s shirt. As he fell, he dragged Harley down with him.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion as Clark raced to the asylum. He saw Lois just narrowly miss grabbing Harley’s shirt in an attempt to save her. He saw Bruce’s arms encircle nothing as he dove for Jason. He watched in horror as Jason and Harley plummeted to the rocky shore around the building.

“Earpieces! Out!” Clark commanded as he increased his speed again.

It was too late.

Jason’s body hit the spiked pole of the rusted barbed wire fence that stood sentinel around the asylum. The pointed top skewered Jason directly through his lower chest, tearing through his diaphragm. Immediately, Jason’s body went slack. A few gurgles escaped his damaged lungs as his last breath was expelled.

Harley was not so lucky to have a quick death. She fell awkwardly on top of Jason, and the spike went through her neck, cutting her carotid artery. Massive amounts of blood started to pump from her body with every faltering beat of her heart. Clark knew, even before he got to her, a scant three seconds later, there was no saving her. She was already becoming unresponsive and a death rattle had begun. He desperately wanted to save her, even if she *was* a criminal, but he feared to move her and do more damage to her already dying body. And there was no hope of her holding on until he could get an EMT to the scene, even if he flew one in

himself.

“I’m...coming...Mr. J.”

With those words, Harley Quinn — the woman who’d terrorized Gotham for years with the Joker — died.

“I...tried,” Clark told her unmoving form. He reached out and gently closed her eyes, which had been opened wide in shock and perhaps pain. “I hope you find some peace. Both of you.”

He turned and floated up to the roof, where Lois and Bruce were peering over the ledge down on the scene. He landed heavily, the weight of his failure to get to Jason and Harley crushing his heart. He knew, of course, that it wasn’t his fault. He’d done all he could to try to make it in time. And he knew that he should, perhaps, feel relief that Bruce’s identity was safe now. But all he felt was a sense of failure and personal responsibility for the two deaths.

“I...” he said, his mouth dry. He forced himself to try swallow and moisten his mouth before trying again. “I came as fast as I could.” He couldn’t meet their gazes.

“We know,” Bruce said, putting a hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture. “And we appreciate the warning to remove our earpieces. We got them out just in time, before you tore the sky apart.”

In his intense focus on the falling bodies, Clark hadn’t even realized he’d created a sonic boom. He mutely nodded at Bruce.

“Now that Bruce is done putting words in my mouth, can we go?” Lois asked impatiently. “I can hear police sirens and I don’t think any of us want to be here when the cops arrive.” She gave Clark a side glance. “Well, I guess *you* should be here. But Bruce’s mask is pretty flimsy.”

“Cowl,” Bruce and Clark reflexively corrected together.

“I don’t care if it’s a child’s Halloween prop. Bruce’s identity is still close to exposed.”

“You’re right,” Clark admitted.

“The Batwing is already on the way,” Alfred informed Clark. “If Master Jimmy ever stops having fun with the controls.”

“But it’s so *cool*!” Jimmy argued with a chuckle, and Clark motioned for Lois and Bruce to replace their ear pieces. “It’s like a real-life video game!” There was unabashed thrill in his voice.

“Jimmy,” Clark said, rolling his eyes and biting back a laugh.

“You break it, you bought it,” Bruce joked flatly.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s coming. Should be there in a minute or two.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark replied. “Okay, once it gets here, you two head back. I’ll stay put and show the officers to Jason’s ‘trophy room’ and the few thugs still inside. As soon as I can, I’ll meet everyone back at Wayne Manor. And then...I can finally apologize...the right way, to all of you.”

“Okay,” Bruce agreed. “But one thing first. Can you get me a sample of both Jason and Harley’s blood?”

“What for?” Clark asked, frowning at the morbid thought.

“That’s creepy,” Lois said at the same time.

“I took a sample of Joker’s blood years ago, to try and figure out if there was a cure for his insanity. I never found one, but the way Jason was acting...Joker tried to infect me with his blood once, to spread whatever it was that caused his madness. He failed but I’m starting to think he may have done it to Jason,” Bruce quickly explained. “Even with being tortured for years...Jason was never like this. I’m having a hard time believing he could have turned into such a madman without a little extra nudge. And Harley...I’ve never been sure about her mental state either.”

“So, you want to compare their blood to Joker’s,” Clark said with understanding. “Okay. You have something I can take a sample with?”

Bruce reached into his utility belt and produced two tiny, empty Petri dishes. “Here. It’s not ideal, but it’ll have to do.”

“What? You just carry this stuff around?” Clark teased, astonished that his friend had something like that on him.

“I started carrying them last year,” Bruce said as Clark took

the dishes. “They’ve been helpful on occasion for keeping evidence safe.”

“Okay,” Clark said with a shrug. “Be right back.”

He flew down to the bodies and began the grim task of collecting blood samples. Gingerly, he placed the first dish beneath Jason’s wound, letting the dripping blood fall into it. Once he thought he’d collected enough, he placed the lid on tightly and opened the second one. Harley was a little harder. She’d lost a considerable amount of blood in the seconds just after she’d received her fatal wound. He was able to collect a far less amount by pressing the plate to her neck and catching the small trickle of blood that slowly seeped from her body. He capped that dish as well, then brought them both to Bruce.

“Harley’s,” he said as he handed the dish with the smaller amount of blood over. “And Jason’s.”

“Perfect. This should be more than enough,” Bruce said approvingly as he inspected the Petri dishes. “Thanks.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, your ride awaits,” Jimmy announced as the Batwing came into view.

“Excellent timing,” Clark praised his friend.

The Batwing came in closer, then gently came in touch down on the rooftop. Bruce gestured to Lois. “After you.”

“See you in a bit,” Clark promised them both.

He stayed in place just long enough to watch Bruce climb into the pilot’s seat and Lois hoist herself up and into the passenger’s seat. He heard the thrum of the engine as Bruce took the controls and lifted off the roof. For a moment, the small plane dipped down, out of sight, only to reappear a minute later, with Clark’s old motorcycle securely gripped in the plane’s mechanical claw. Then it was off, vanishing into the bright blue sky. He only hoped that the Batwing would be silent and swift enough to not draw attention to itself. None of them could risk anyone trying to track the small plane, even if Clark knew that Bruce and Lois would be relatively safe. No one could breach the tunnels that led to the Batcave, and there were several checkpoints along the way that would stop anyone who happened to have the astronomical luck to make it past the heavily fortified and hidden doors that led into the tunnels.

Not waiting to watch the Batwing fly out of sight, Clark flew down from the roof and across the water to the docks. He could hear the first few police cruisers getting closer – their sirens became louder with every beat of his heart. He simply waited there, letting the officers come to him while he continued to let the sunlight fuel his powers. He thought that perhaps he might be fully recharged now, but he wasn’t completely sure – not after the close contact with the Kryptonite and the enormous speed he’d used in trying to save Jason and Harley. He figured it was safer to wait patiently for the police to arrive than to foolishly expend whatever energy he’d managed to regain.

It didn’t take too long. The first cruiser raced around the corner and skidded into a stop. The passenger side door opened almost before the vehicle had completely ceased movement. A short, blonde woman jumped out. She rushed to Clark’s side.

“Superman, glad to see you in Gotham,” she greeted him.

“Inspector Katrina Wales. I’m heading this case. Commissioner Gordon should be here soon.”

“Glad to meet you,” Clark offered, shaking her hand. Quickly, he filled her in on what he’d found in the abandoned asylum.

“There’s still a couple of Jason’s followers inside. I haven’t had the chance yet to bring them over. I can do it now, if you’d like.”

“Please,” Inspector Wales said with a nod. “Erickson! When Superman brings them over, take them to the station and get them processed.”

“Will do,” the man said obediently.

“Be right back,” Clark told them both. In a flash, he returned to the building and retrieved the man and woman he’d locked up earlier, while he’d attempted to free Bruce. He returned with them

both in tow and gently set them down on the dock.

“Well, well, well,” Wales said with a smirk. “Screwball and Lady Satan.” She clucked her tongue. “We’ve been looking for you for a while. Got a nice warrant for your arrest in connection to the murder of that priest a couple of months ago. Father Gerald Hommes. You two are in a whole lot of trouble.”

She watched as Erickson and another officer cuffed the suspects and read them their rights. Then she looked back to Clark.

“Thanks, Superman. We’ve been looking for these two. You really did us a favor just now.”

“Just happy to see justice prevail,” Clark replied. “I wish I’d been able to save Harley Quinn and Jason, so that they could have paid for their crimes.” He sighed. “If your team is ready, I can show you where Jason had his base.”

“Absolutely. Looks like the boats are arriving,” Wales said with a nod. “I think I can speak for all of us when I say we really appreciate what you’re doing.” She waved and gave a sharp whistle to the approaching boats. “Over here, boys! Hope you’re ready. Superman says we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Half an hour later, Jason’s trophy room – and indeed, all of the asylum – was being processed by a large, very hardworking group of police officers and forensics experts. After double checking that he was no longer needed, and after giving his detailed statement to both Inspector Wales and Commissioner Gordon, Clark finally left that depressing hellhole where he, Bruce, and Lois could have so easily lost their lives. It made him shudder to even think about it, and he looked forward to leaving the deteriorating building behind.

Once he was high above the asylum, he gave a warning for the others to remove their earpieces and then shot away at top speed, instantly tearing the air around him with a sonic boom. He made his way to Wayne Manor, his course as straight and unwavering as an arrow loosed from a bowstring. In less than a minute he arrived and headed directly to the Cave. He found Bruce already hard at work at one of the computers, the Petri dishes of Harley and Jason’s blood before him. Alfred bustled to and fro, serving sandwiches and drinks to everyone. Lois was picking at hers, clearly upset. That worried Clark. Lois’ appetite could sometimes rival his own when she was nervous or angry. He’d rarely seen her without an appetite, unless she was deep in thought.

Jimmy looked up from his work at the main computer and waved Clark over.

“CK! Here, I’ve got something for you.”

“Hey, Jimmy. What is it?”

“Evidence.” Jimmy waved a VHS tape aloft and wiggled it slightly in a victorious manner. “I had to heavily edit it, of course. I couldn’t have anything that showed Bruce’s face, Lois, or use any sound bytes that used anyone’s real name. But on here is enough audio and video to nail Jason and prove he was the one who did everything – including his confession.”

“Everything?” Clark asked incredulously.

“Everything. That he’s Jason Todd. That Joker used a decoy body and had the records falsified. That he killed Joker and took over, using his identity. It even has blurry footage of Harley attacking Jason on the rooftop. *Everything*,” Jimmy repeated with a smug smile.

“The footage from the roof...are you absolutely certain Bruce and Lois can’t be identified in it?” Clark asked, concerned.

“CK, I’ve never seen equipment as sophisticated as Bruce has here. I did everything imaginable to the film. You were way too far away for that little body cam to get a clear shot of them. Don’t worry. They’re safe.”

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. “If you say so, I believe it.”

“I promise. I wouldn’t have left it in if I had even a shadow of a doubt,” Jimmy assured him.

“Jimmy, you are amazing,” Clark said with a grin. He clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Oracle indeed!” he laughed.

“Thanks, CK,” Jimmy beamed proudly. “You want me to figure out a way to get this to the police anonymously or...” He let the question go unfinished.

Clark shook his head. “I’ll drop it off now at Inspector Wales’ precinct. The sooner we get all of this behind us, the better. I have more important things to worry about. Like making amends for my lies.”

“CK, look. As far as I’m concerned, you don’t need to apologize to me. Yeah, okay, I guess I was shocked when you... changed into Superman right in front of me. But...it’s okay. I get it. Everyone’s entitled to secrets and to live a normal life. It’s like when you see celebrities going undercover so they can go to the mall in peace and not get swarmed by rabid fans. I’ve never blamed them for wanting to be out of the spotlight from time to time. So why would I blame you?”

Clark looked down, humbled by how quickly his friend had forgiven his actions. “It’s a good analogy,” he said after a moment. “But for me, please understand that Clark *isn’t* the disguise. When I go out there as Superman, *that’s* when I’m undercover. This,” he said, sweeping a hand before his costume, “isn’t the real man. It’s how I can go out in public and use my powers to help, without giving up who I really am. If anyone found out that Clark Kent isn’t a regular, human man...I’d never be left alone. Everyone I care about would be a target. I wouldn’t be able to *be* Clark anymore.” He was looking at Jimmy, but he knew he was speaking more for Lois’ benefit than anyone else’s. He felt her eyes on his back and he chanced a side glance at her. “I’ve never wanted to be Superman full time. Clark...Clark is who I am. Maybe it wasn’t who I was born as...but neither was Superman. Clark is who I’ve been all my life. It’s who I was raised to be. Who I still *am*. Who I hope I get to die as one day.”

Jimmy nodded solemnly. Then, perhaps to lighten the mood, “I understand. But, um...just one thing?”

“Yeah?” Clark asked, hesitation and a little uncertainty tainting his voice.

“All those times we got together after work or on a weekend and we’d play basketball...did you...let me win?”

Clark laughed when he realized Jimmy was teasing him. “I swear to you, Jimmy, any loss or win I took was well deserved. I’ve never used my powers to cheat anyone, ever.”

“Never cheated? What about in our investigations?” Lois asked icily, narrowing her eyes, daring him to lie again. “All those front-page Superman exclusives you ‘happened’ to snag?”

Clark dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, I’ve used my powers to uncover leads. But never to get anything that we couldn’t have otherwise gotten through other means. And...at least in my mind, using my abilities to aid our investigations and put criminals behind bars...I feel like...like it’s a...justifiable use of my powers.” He felt his cheeks redden in embarrassment. “As for the articles...I didn’t write them for glory or recognition or journalism awards. But Perry expects a *lot* out of you and me. I want the paper to be the best, Lois. If I didn’t write the articles...or give you the information to write them...someone else would have. If I was wrong to do that, I apologize. But...I’ve *always* had the best interest of the Planet at heart.”

Lois nodded to herself, but said nothing.

An awkward silence filled the room until at last Clark couldn’t take it any longer. “Okay, let me drop this tape off. I’ll be back in a second.”

Without waiting for a response, he rocketed out of the Batcave and across Gotham to Precinct 12. There he left the precious VHS tape with the heavyset, dark skinned Officer Rawls. He gave the man a brief description of what the tape contained, and asked the policeman to please give it to Inspector Wales when she returned. Rawls promised he would personally ensure that it got into Wales’

hands. Relieved to finally have the matter settled, Clark took off back to the Cave.

“The police have the tape,” he announced as he stepped foot back inside.

“Good,” Bruce said without looking at Clark.

“Where’s Lois?” Clark asked, looking around.

“She went to change out of the Nightwing suit,” Bruce replied, still bent over his work. He waved vaguely at the ceiling and the manor above them.

Clark sauntered over. “Any luck on the blood?”

Bruce gave him a sour look. “Not all of us have super speed, you know.”

“Ah...sorry,” Clark apologized. “So...uh...how long before we know for sure if Joker infected Jason?”

Bruce sighed as he typed something up on the computer he sat at. “A while, unfortunately.” He rubbed at his tired looking eyes. “Honestly, I’m not sure which way I want this to turn out. I want there to be a reason for Jason’s madness. But I’m not sure if Joker infecting him makes the change in Jason more or less disturbing.”

“It’s not your fault either way,” Clark reassured him. “You told me what happened – how hard you looked. A body and records to ‘prove’ the owner’s identity...” He put his hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “Any person would have believed it was him and ended the search.”

“I know. But he was still *my* responsibility. I should have... done something. Been better. Instead, I let him down. And because of that, he was tortured for years and twisted into someone so evil, he no longer resembled the man he once was.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Bruce,” Clark said softly. “Jason was old enough to make his own decisions. He *chose* to fight alongside you. From what you told me, he was more than capable as a fighter. He knew the risks involved in being Robin...just like I did, when I took on the role of Nightwing. You can’t beat yourself up for not physically being able to save him.”

Bruce looked at him and his eyes seemed to bore into Clark’s soul. “And you don’t beat yourself up when Superman isn’t able to save someone?”

“Touché,” Clark replied with a shrug. “I do it all the time. It’s something I’ve really had to work on, since putting on the suit. It’s not easy, I’ll admit that.”

“No...it *isn’t* easy,” Bruce agreed.

Clark sighed. “Maybe...maybe it’s not supposed to be. Maybe it’s *supposed* to be hard, to keep us humble.” He paused for a moment, lost in thought. “Anyway...Bruce...about Lois and Jimmy...I never meant for them to find out...” Clark started, picking his words with care.

Bruce held his hand up in a “stop” gesture. “I know. They both explained what happened. I’m wasn’t thrilled when I first found out that they know but...I’d say we were both extremely lucky they were here and in on the secret today.”

“No kidding. If not for Lois, we’d be dead,” Clark agreed somberly. “Still...I wanted to apologize.”

“It’s not *me* that needs the apology. It’s something that couldn’t be helped and I’m okay with them knowing. Jimmy seems to be okay with our identities too. It’s *Lois* that needs the apology.”

“Believe me, I know,” Clark agreed.

“Lois?” Clark asked cautiously as he walked into the living room in Wayne Manor, fifteen minutes later.

He’d waited as long as he could, down in the Batcave, but Lois hadn’t returned from changing out of his old Nightwing costume. He’d changed back into his own normal clothing as he waited and talked a little with Jimmy and Bruce as he’d tried to pass the time. But his mind and heart had strayed back to Lois constantly. Finally unable to wait any longer, he’d excused himself and gone looking for her.

Lois looked up at the sound of her name, and Clark could see even from across the room that she'd been crying. He could see the redness of her eyes and smell the tang of salt from her tears. His heart sank.

I did this to her; he admonished himself. I'm the one who made her cry. I promised myself I'd never give her a reason to cry and look what I've done.

"Can..." He stopped and cleared his throat. "Can we talk?"

She shrugged and gestured silently to the opposite side of the couch. Clark took it as a "yes" and made his way over. He sat down gently, perhaps a little closer than Lois would have liked, but he wanted to be there for her. It pained him not to be able to reach out and make her tears vanish. It killed him inside to know that *he'd* hurt her, instead of being the one who took all her hurt away.

"Lois..." he began, looking for the right words. "I...I know there's nothing I can say right now that will fix all the wrong things that I've done. But...I want to try, if you'll let me. I want to make things right again. Even if you hate me, even if you never want to speak to me again after all is said and done...I want you to know how sorry I am."

"Sorry because you got caught in your lies," Lois threw back at him, anger and sadness dueling in her voice.

"No," he replied honestly. "No. I've never been happier in all my life to be caught in a lie. I've wanted you to know for a long time. I just...I hate the *way* you had to find out. It's not how I wanted you to discover the truth about me at all."

"You *lied* to me, Clark! Every single day, you *lied* to me," she said hollowly, her voice hoarse with raw emotion. "And I was dumb enough to just accept them all at face value, even when I *knew* something was going on. All these awful excuses. All the times you bailed on me. I just sat there and let you laugh at my stupidity."

"Lois!" Clark said, shocked she could ever think of herself as being anything but the brilliant, capable woman he'd come to know, respect, and love with all his heart over the last year. "You aren't stupid. You're the smartest woman I know. Which is why it was so difficult, keeping Superman as a separate person in your eyes."

Lois stared at him like he'd suddenly sprouted a second head. "Is that supposed to be an apology?" she asked incredulously, as if he was an idiot.

"No," Clark stammered, "it's not. That's not how I meant it at all. Let me start again." He sighed as he thought, running his hand through his hair. "Can we walk? Maybe sit outside? I just...I kind of feel like the walls are closing in on me."

"Whatever," Lois said, rolling her eyes and standing.

Clark gratefully led the way outside. A cooling breeze was sweeping away some of the day's heat, and he felt like he could breathe again. His mind felt a little calmer and a lot clearer.

"Thanks," he said as they sat by the pool. He watched the sunlight dance on the water's surface as the breeze made ripples on it. "Okay...what I meant to say was this. I've *hated* keeping Superman a secret from you. I've hated it since the very beginning. I've never laughed at you for not connecting me to the man in blue. In fact, when I first started out...when Superman first appeared...it was a relief that you believed the lie that Clark Kent and Superman are different men. It meant I was safe. You work alongside me every single day and you've interviewed Superman more than any other reporter on this planet. If you didn't see it, no one else would. And that's important to me, Lois. Like I told Jimmy, if people discover that I'm Superman, that's it." His hand sliced the air like an umpire calling 'out' on a baseball player. "There's no going back. I'd have to give up being who I am, because I wouldn't be able to have a normal life. And that's all I've ever wanted. To have a normal life, like any average man, and to maybe find a way to help people along the way."

He sighed. "I'm a selfish man, Lois. I'm not willing to give up my dreams just to play the part of Superman. But, at the same time, I also *need* to be Superman. I've wanted to have the best of both worlds, but I never stopped to consider the cost. I will *never* be willing to give up having a normal life. I will *never* be willing to give up *you*. Because you *are* my life, Lois. Superman...he's a recent invention. He pales in comparison to my real life – going to work at the Planet, spending the day with you, playing basketball with Jimmy." He shrugged defeatedly. "Maybe that makes me a bad person, but...I can't change how I feel. So, when you didn't make the connection between Superman and me, I was happy. Not because I wanted to trick you, but because I knew the Superman disguise was doing its job."

"Fine. Let's say I believe that. You still could have *told* me, Clark! Instead you kept up the lies. It's not like I would have run around telling people! Did you think I'd print the exclusive story that a reporter from Kansas flies around in tights?" Lois spat.

"No! I mean...I wasn't sure, at first," Clark admitted.

Lois shot him a dagger-like look.

"I'm sorry, Lois, but yes, I'll admit it. I was *terrified* that the possibility of winning a Pulitzer for exposing Superman's true identity would be too strong of a temptation." He couldn't meet her gaze. "We'd only really just learned how to be friends and partners. I worried that it wouldn't be enough to protect me, even though there was a part of me that was fairly sure you'd keep the knowledge to yourself."

"You should have trusted that part," Lois sneered harshly.

"I know. I wish I had."

A deadly silence fell and Clark could hear his heart thumping with anticipation. Dread was coiled in his guts and the coppery taste of fear was in his mouth and throat. Despite the heat of the day, a cold sweat beaded up on his back and every breath felt like it would bring about his doom.

"Okay, I can understand why you would have been nervous about that," Lois confessed after a moment. "But that was almost a year ago! You've had *more* than enough time to get over your fear of an exposé!"

"You're right," Clark agreed, looking down helplessly at his hands. "I have no excuse for that."

"So why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to. But I found that, as time went on and I knew for sure that my secret would be safe with you, I became afraid of other things. Your reaction to it being number one. I wasn't sure if you'd hate me for lying to you, even though I would be telling you the truth now. I wasn't sure you wouldn't be...disgusted with me." He shook his head. "I'm not actually human, Lois. I look like one but I'm not from this planet. It's a lot to take in...especially for the person who's dating the alien."

"You thought I couldn't handle that?" she accused.

"I...wasn't sure. And I was terrified to find out. Losing you...I couldn't bear the thought of it."

"So, instead, you figured...what? That you'd just never say anything and hope I'd never notice?" she asked sarcastically.

"Of course not!" He hung his head in shame. "I knew I'd have to tell you. And I *wanted* you to know. I just...it never felt like the right time." His hand flew nervously up to his hair and he dragged his fingers through it, an old habit of his whenever he felt ill at ease. "It's not a casual conversation you have in the car on the way to work. I did try, but something always happened. The night we went to Armand's with your mother and Lucy, I was going to tell you once dinner was over and we were back at either my place or yours. Then Bruce called to tell me Grandma Tildy had passed and I was too upset to even think about my secret that night. I figured, fine, I'd put the conversation off until we got back to Metropolis."

"Why didn't you? That was almost a month ago," Lois asked, her tone slightly softer but still mostly stony. She fiddled with her own hair, tucking a lock of it behind her right ear.

Clark sighed and sagged into the back of his chair. “Chen happened.”

Lois raised a skeptical eyebrow as she leaned forward, a look of utter disbelief on her face. “Chen? You’re going to blame this on that blowhard?”

Clark gestured helplessly as he sought the words to explain his inner struggle. “After he threatened me...threatened *us*,” he swiftly corrected, “and threw us out of Grandma’s funeral...after he rejected my attempt to apologize and turned his back on me...a lot of my old insecurities rose up again.” He stood up, needing to move to let out some of his nervous energy.

Go back to Metropolis or Gotham or wherever it is you need to scurry off to, like the rat you are.

He’s not welcome here.

I’ve got nothing else to say to you.

Chen’s words assaulted Clark’s mind again and it took all Clark’s willpower not to throw his hands up over his ears, as though that could block out his former friend’s condemnations.

“Insecurities? You?” Lois scoffed, blind to Clark’s internal pain. “The man who flies around in a semi-revealing pair of tights? Right.” She didn’t need to roll her eyes at him. Her voice did it for her.

If he doesn’t leave on his own, right now, he’ll be forcibly removed.

Superman treats strangers with more respect than Kent treats his so-called friends.

I’ve got nothing else to say to you.

He shook his head, trying to clear this mind, but the image of Chen’s enraged face lingered there like a scornful ghost. He wondered if he would ever be able to forget how much his actions had damaged such a once-loving man. He wondered if he even *deserved* to be free of such a painful memory.

He sighed heavily, the weight of his guilt for lying to Lois now mingled with his guilt for what he’d done to Chen. “Yes, Lois. I know I look confident out there as Superman. And I am. But my personal life?” He paced a little. “I’m not nearly as confident as I seem. Chen...” He stopped and sighed, rubbing the back of his neck in self-consciousness. “When I saw his reaction to me, it shook me up. I was prepared for him to be angry but he was almost violently hateful of me. Because he knew it was *me*, Clark. Meanwhile, just days before, Superman helped return a runaway boy to Grandma’s house. Chen was all smiles and gratitude to the Man of Steel. I hate using the phrase but... I saw a certain amount of hero worship in his eyes. I... I was terrified I might see the same thing from you – that moment when hatred and rejection would take over, and your attitude toward me would be irrevocably changed.”

“Chen’s lower than scum. I can’t *believe* you’d think I’m capable of becoming like him,” Lois hissed, sitting on the edge of her seat like she might fly into action at any moment. Clark couldn’t tell what that action might be though – if she would slap him again or if she would track down Chen and give him another large piece of her mind. “I *defended* you against that jerk!”

“Maybe it wasn’t the most rational thought,” Clark admitted, silently relieved she hadn’t risen from her chair to attack anyone. “But panic rarely allows logic to prevail.”

“So... what then? You figured you put off telling me until when? The night we got engaged? Maybe when we got married and wound up making love on the ceiling? Or maybe when our kids started to fly out of their cribs in the middle of the night?” she scoffed angrily.

Clark flinched at the venom in her words. “I was going to tell you today,” he said, fully aware that he’d told her as much earlier in the day. “After the fight, I was going to ask Jimmy to leave so that I could finally tell you everything.”

“After all that’s happened, why should I believe you?” she asked, her voice deflated, her eyes searching his for some

evidence that he spoke the truth.

He faced her and stood with his arms and legs spread slightly, like a specimen on display for her scrutiny. “Because I have no reason left to lie, Lois. You know the truth about me. I’m done with the half-truths and partial lies. I’m tired. Tired of being afraid. Tired of running from things. You *know* me, Lois. The Superman thing aside, you *know* me. I’ve never lied to you before. Omitted things that would connect me to Superman, yes — but never outright lied to you.”

You’ve seen every part of me. Things I’ve never let anyone else see. Things about myself I’ve kept hidden from Chen and Jimmy and even Bruce. Please, see the truth of my words. You know me, Lois.

“I used to *think* I knew you,” she corrected harshly, looking pointedly away from him, breaking Clark’s heart anew in the process. Then she gave a tired sounding sigh. She pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment. “Ugh! What else haven’t you bothered to share with me?”

“You know pretty much everything,” Clark said, with a shrug, trying to keep his misery out of his voice. He dared to move closer, kneeling on the paving stones before Lois’ chair, like a sinner asking for penance, though he wasn’t brave enough to take her hand, the way he wanted to. “Everything about me that you know already is true. I really was a founding child – only my parents saw my space ship crash land in Schuster’s Field, rather than find a baby in a basket on their doorstep. I grew up as Clark – I’ve never known any other identity than that. My parents died when I was thirteen, as you know. The courts decided I’d be better off if they shipped me off to live at Grandma Tildy’s halfway house, instead of staying with another family in Smallville. I lived there for a while and started to get comfortable with my new life, even if I didn’t completely love it – I was still an orphan, no matter how nice Grandma was. But I ran away and into a life of homelessness.”

“Why?” Lois interrupted, looking at him with curiosity, but still with blazing fury.

“Because I’m an alien with terrifying powers,” he said with a casual shrug. “Back then, my powers were still developing. It felt like new ones were cropping up all the time. I handled them all on my own, in secret, and did an okay job of it, if I say so myself. Until my heat vision kicked in, that is.” He gulped involuntarily as the memory rushed back, and all the feelings of helpless terror that had accompanied the incident. “I...set a tree on fire by accident,” he continued shakily, still haunted by the moment his world had changed and he’d made the necessary decision to vanish into the countryside, where he didn’t run the risk of accidentally hurting or killing others. “Not a big fire, mind you, but enough to scare the living daylights out of me. All I kept thinking was that if I did it again, I could kill someone. I didn’t know what else to do, other than to run as far away from other people as I possibly could.”

He watched as some of the ice within her cracked, and her expression softened by the slightest amount. He saw the dawning of realization in her eyes, as she learned just how much Clark had given up in his quest to appear as normal and non-threatening as possible. She reached out and covered his hand with her own. Overjoyed at the tiny gesture, he found the strength to continue, shoving aside his shame and self-loathing for having run away, even though he still thought of it as the only way to ensure the safety of the people he’d cared about.

“I stayed in wooded areas as much as possible...to avoid being found and returned back to the home,” he continued. “I even spent a while living in an abandoned cabin I stumbled across, as I’ve already told you. By the time I realized I was no longer a threat to others, it was too late to go back to Grandma’s. So I just kept running, until, eventually, I wound up in Gotham.” Here, he couldn’t hold back the embarrassed flush of warmth in his cheeks. “I lived in a few homeless shelters, ate in the soup kitchens, and

worked part time jobs that at least allowed me to replace my worn-out clothing. Until I unwittingly made friends with Bruce, that is.”

He looked up at the massive Wayne Manor, his home for nearly as long as Smallville had been. He nodded a bit, more to himself than to Lois – a silent acknowledgement of how lucky he’d been to befriend Bruce and of the life of privilege he’d come to know as a result.

Sheer dumb luck, his mind reminded him in a toneless whisper.

I know. I didn’t deserve it. But...I’m still grateful. I’ll always owe a debt of gratitude to Bruce for his kindness and willingness to give me a hand up in life.

“By then, I knew I couldn’t stay in the shelters anymore. Bruce offered his home to me but I didn’t accept right away...until an older, drunken man tried to sexually assault me.”

Rick! Get away from him!

Hold him down!

You okay, boy?

The police are on the way.

He knew the color must have rushed from his face as the assault was sharply brought back to his mind. Lois cupped his cheek in her hand and peered at him, concern written in her features. He could tell that she was at war with herself in that moment – concerned and appalled by what had happened in his past, and still reeling from his deception and the anger it had flared up in her heart. After a second, however, tenderness won out.

“Hey,” she breathed lightly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he answered in a light whisper. “It...it was a long time ago. I defended myself and he wound up in jail so...”

He shrugged, trying to pretend that it no longer bothered him. And it normally *didn’t* affect him that much. For a long time, it had made him wary of other people, especially in situations where liquor flowed freely, like at Bruce’s galas. But, over the years, he’d learned to put the incident firmly in the past, content in the knowledge that he’d testified in court against the man and helped the drunk receive a hefty jail sentence.

Lois dropped her hand from his face, but the concern still shone in her eyes. Clark stood up again and crossed the small space between her chair and his.

“Anyway,” he continued, wanting to push through the rehashing of his past and focus on what might or might not be left of his future with Lois, “that was the tipping point for me. I took Bruce up on his offer first thing the next day. After I discovered that he’s Batman, I decided to help him by becoming Nightwing. But hiding in the night wasn’t for me. I needed to be free to help people in broad daylight too, especially after Tiffany Bronson got trapped when the Majestic Theater was demolished, so... Superman was born, even if it took a couple of months to get the idea off the ground.”

He sat back down and looked at her, but her eyes had gone back to being flinty hard.

“And, before you ask,” he added with a wry smile, “Bruce found out about me by accident. He caught me floating in midair after I’d fallen asleep on the couch one night. Actually,” he said, scratching his chin, “he knew I could fly before I did. I’d never done that before.”

“So, you have a history of lying to people. Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Lois asked, crossing her arms over her chest in an almost protective manner. Her anger seemed to be slowly cracking to reveal the hurt and sadness beneath it.

Clark felt his heart throbbing with sadness for Lois as it hit him once more just how badly he’d messed up by not telling her the truth earlier. His shoulders slumped and his voice went soft and low. “It’s not supposed to *do* anything, Lois. Except to maybe illustrate how stressful and utterly terrifying my secret has been.” He sighed. “And...honestly, it hasn’t just been *my* safety I’ve always been worried about. It’s everyone’s. You saw what

happened today, with Jason. With all of us. He used the knowledge of Bruce’s identity and almost killed the three of us. Imagine if it got out that Lois Lane *might* know who Superman really is. A thousand Jasons would line up to torture or kill you to try to get that information out of you. If something happened to you on my behalf, I’d never be able to live with myself. Your safety is *the* most important thing to me, Lois.” He shivered involuntarily as he voiced his greatest fear.

“Oh, so you...lied to me to *protect* me?” she asked sarcastically, her tone of voice telling him she wasn’t buying his story.

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation, nodding firmly. “Not just you though. Everyone I care about would be a target if anyone ever suspects that Superman has an alter ego he slips into when he isn’t putting out fires and rescuing kittens out of trees.”

Lois seemed to mull it over and nodded after a moment. “I guess I can see that happening,” she grudgingly admitted. She looked less than thrilled to concede a point to him and she sat back in her chair. She crossed one leg over the other and appeared to appraise Clark, giving him a moment to elaborate.

Clark swiftly jumped on the opportunity to further illustrate his point. “Believe me, Lois. I’ve seen enough nutjobs like Joker and Harley and Jason pursuing Batman’s true identity over the years.” His eyes slid back to the Manor, as if it held the memories he sought. “It...hasn’t been without its casualties. Commissioner Gordon that Bruce mentioned? His daughter Barbara once helped Bruce out of a tight spot he was in. Two-Face thought she knew who Batman really is. He kidnapped her and brutally murdered her. I wasn’t around – I was stationed in Malaysia at the time – but Bruce told me about it. And Barbara didn’t even know it was Bruce under the mask. The association was all Two-Face needed to justify going after her.” He felt his palms moisten with the shame he felt for having been unable to prevent the young woman’s death, though he knew, logically, that there was no way any of them could have seen Two-Face’s dastardly plan coming. He absently wiped his hands on his pant legs, as if trying to wash off imaginary blood.

Lois’ eyes widened just the slightest bit in shock. “I...I read about the murder but I had no idea...” she stammered. “None of the news reports said that that was why she was killed.”

Clark nodded solemnly. “*No one* knew the reason why she was killed, except for Bruce and Two-Face. And me...too late. Everyone else assumed it was because he had a vendetta against her father. The Commissioner *still* thinks it was a vendetta, which, I suspect, is the only reason why he hasn’t put a price on Bruce’s head, so to speak.”

Lois looked troubled. Her brow was furrowed and her mouth was pointed down in a frown. Her shoulders dropped a little from their soldier-like stiffness and her arms unfolded to let her hands rest in her lap. “I guess...I guess you have a fair point with the protection thing.”

She fell silent for a few very long – in Clark’s mind – minutes. He wanted to beg and plead with her to speak – even it was to yell at him. But he bit his tongue, hard, and swallowed down each plea as it rose in his throat. Still, she did not speak. At one point, she looked at him, as though expecting him to break the ice, taking him off guard. He was prepared to take *her* lead, *not* to be the one she was looking to for the direction to continue in. He wasn’t sure what else he could say that would repair some of the immense damage that he’d done to their relationship. He didn’t know how to mend the wounds he’d caused her heart. But he was determined to try.

“Thank you, for saving my life today. Several times,” he finally said, knowing that it was, perhaps, too safe of a way to go, but needing to say it anyway. She *had* to know how much he appreciated what she’d done – not just for him, but for Bruce too. “I know I didn’t deserve it.”

"I couldn't just let Jason kill you," she said, appearing perhaps a little grateful to change the subject off his identity and lies. Clark thought he almost caught a hint of pride in her voice and a hint of a smile on her face.

"Still," Clark said with a shrug. He reached across the space between them and took her hand in his own. "You put your life on the line for me. That's not something I take lightly. It's not something I'll ever forget."

"You've saved me how many times? Dozens?" Lois replied, sounding flustered and taking her hand back.

"That's not the same," he gently argued, hiding his disappointment in losing that physical contact with her. "When Superman flies in to rescue you or anyone else, he's not really risking anything. Not usually. But you? You could have easily been hurt or killed. And you still went in there without a second thought." He shook his head, still in awe of how brave she'd been.

"Let me guess, this is where the 'you really need to check the water level before you dive in head first' lecture starts," Lois bristled defensively. Her arms went back to being crossed over her chest as she dared him to begin that lecture.

"What? No!" Clark sputtered, taken aback that she could think he would reprimand her, especially when he had done so much wrong to her. "This is where I wax poetic about how brave I thought you were. How much I admired how fearless you were. Lois... what you did today... it was heroic. *Truly* heroic. It's easy for me to swoop into a bad situation because I have a host of abilities on my side that give me *every* advantage."

He fidgeted nervously with his glasses. He'd put them back one once he'd changed back into his civilian clothing, in hopes it would help Lois see the man she knew and once trusted, but now he wasn't sure if that had been a good idea. After all, the glasses were yet another big, fat lie he told the world every day.

"You don't. Bruce doesn't," he went one, gently stressing the distinction in his mind between himself and his braver, power-free friends. "He's got his gadgets, sure, but he's a regular guy. And you... you didn't even have much in the way of gadgets to help you out. You were the most average out of all of us there – and I mean that in the best way, believe me – and you didn't hesitate to risk your life to save both Bruce and me. Two guys who – not to sound like a braggart or anything – have been doing the costumed hero thing for a long time now."

Once again, he rifled his hand through his hair. "If you hadn't shown up when you did, I'd be dead right now. Probably Bruce too."

"You're giving me a lot of credit here," Lois said warily, eyeing him in a way that let him know she was judging the truth of his words.

"Because it's *deserved*," Clark replied just as quickly as she'd objected, pouring his truth and passion into his words, hoping she'd start believing him. "When Jason hung that necklace around my neck... I could feel my life draining away," he said shakily, still reeling from yet another close encounter with the toxic rock. "Even if he hadn't put a bullet in my head, that stone would have bled the life out of me anyway."

"What was that, by the way?" she asked, sitting up a little straighter, her curiosity piqued. "I mean, I know you called it Kryptonite before but... what was it?"

"Kryptonite is the name Bruce and I came up with after my first run-in with it," Clark said, gesturing vaguely to the house. "As far as I can tell, when my birth world, Krypton, exploded, some of the rubble turned radioactive in the blast and was pulled along in the wake of my ship as it rocketed to Earth."

His gaze shifted to someplace far away and he no longer really saw the Manor before him. Flashes of the messages Jor-El had left for him flashed across his mind's eye. The explosion. His ship, zipping through space, undisturbed by the event that had left him an orphan for the first time. The pieces of the planet, now glinting

green, hurtling through the blackness of the universe. The crippling pain of his first encounter with the stone. The way the bullet had ripped through his Nightwing suit and into his surprisingly vulnerable body. The panic that had welled up inside when Jason had produced that necklace in the asylum.

"It's the only thing I've ever encountered that can rob me of my powers. Just being in close proximity to it sickens me and saps my strength to the point where I can't even stand. And the pain? It's like I'm being flayed alive inside of Hell's oven." His voice sounded far off and hollow in his own ears.

"How many 'run-ins' with it have you had?" Lois asked breathlessly.

"A few. Four I think. No, five, including today," he replied as he called the incidents to mind. "The first time, was back when I was Nightwing. I wasn't sure what happened, that time. I felt nauseous and weak, then I got shot and passed out. I didn't wake up until Bruce had us halfway back to the Batcave. It took *days* before my powers returned in full."

"You got them back pretty fast today, at least once we got out of that basement," Lois observed with a frown, clearly trying to make sense of the discrepancy.

"I've recovered faster and faster after each exposure," he explained quickly, so she wouldn't think he was hiding anything, or worse, lying to her again. He shrugged and shook his head. "I'm not sure why. It's almost like my body has created an immune system response to it. It can't heal itself while the exposure continues, and it needs the sunlight, but it's learned to recover faster, thankfully."

Lois appeared to think it over. She scratched an itch on the back of one hand, then ticked off her points on her fingers. "Okay, today and the first time aside, where did you run into Kryptonite three other times?"

Clark sighed, hating to think of all the times Kryptonite had come close to ending his life. "Trask had some," he admitted.

"Trask? Insane, fake government employee, Bureau 39, Superman hating Trask?" Lois asked, surprised. For just a moment, he saw her anger vanish in her astonishment.

Clark nodded. "Yeah," he said, a quaver in his voice. "He figured out where Superman's ship had to have landed and I guess that's where he found the Kryptonite. A good guess told him it might be something he could use as a weapon against the 'alien invader.' Unfortunately, he was right and I was lucky to escape with my life." His eyes closed as he fought down the bubble of panic that rose in him each time he thought of how badly the man had wanted him dead. "Ironically, during the first two encounters, he didn't even realize it, because he was confronting the two of *us*, not Superman. I faked being sick to get away from him, and he was none the wiser that Clark Kent was reacting to an extraterrestrial rock."

"I see," she said, crossing her arms, her expression unreadable.

He waved away the mental images the story had conjured up. "No offense, Lois, but talking about Trask... I'd rather not. I still fear that other members of the Bureau might be out there, just as deranged and murder-bent as Trask was."

"Fair enough," she replied emotionlessly. "Can't have them killing Superman, right?"

Clark's heart sank. Was Lois truly more concerned about the loss of the hero rather than the loss of the man? He said nothing and tried to nurse his battered feelings by telling himself that she was still very, very hurt over his deception. But the comment still stung.

You deserve it, his mind hissed.

"So, what *else* have you lied to me about?" she asked after a minute.

"Nothing," he immediately and sincerely answered.

"Everything I've ever told you has been the truth, with the exception of Superman. Every emotion you've ever seen me have

has been genuine. Every like or dislike I've ever expressed has been real. There hasn't been a single thing I've done or said that I haven't meant. Everything I've ever done to show you how much I love you has been the absolute truth."

You're my world, Lois. I would never do anything to jeopardize losing you. Except to be too much of a coward to tell you that I'm an alien with freakish powers, he thought glumly.

"How can I ever believe you? How can I ever trust you again?" Lois wondered.

"I don't know."

He spread his hands apart helplessly, ashamed that he had no good answer for her. He felt vulnerable in a way that was completely foreign to him. It wasn't the fact that someone else knew about his secret – he'd never felt this way when Bruce and Alfred had found out. It was that he was powerless to fix the hurts he'd caused her.

"There's nothing I can say or do that can fix what I've done. I know that. I accept that it's my fault."

Lois bit her lower lip, the way she always did when she was worried over something or holding back tears. Clark could see a glint of water pooled in her troubled chocolate eyes and what was left of his heart shattered. "After all the things I've told you about how other men have treated me...after all the assurances you ever gave me that 'I'm not like other men, Lois'...how could you *do* this?"

She blinked hard, keeping her tears at bay, refusing to allow them to fall.

"Lois, those men used you for their own gain. I have *never* taken advantage of you," he said, trying to bite back any defensiveness, feeling the need to stand up for himself, but very aware that Lois had every right to question how he could have lied to her for so long. He stood, unable to stay put in one place anymore, the need to move a primal, driving force. He started to pace. "And I have *no* problem owning up to the fact that I messed up. I'm not above begging for your forgiveness. But I'm also not egotistical enough to think that I deserve it. I won't blame you one bit if you refuse to ever talk to me again. But, if you do continue to let me be a part of your life, I promise – no more secrets. I'm done lying and hiding. I want to be honest with you – fully and completely transparent with you. If you can find it within you to give me another chance."

"I don't know," Lois said tiredly, sighing in a defeated manner. "I don't know what to think, how to feel, how to process everything that's happened today."

"Take all the time you need," he encouraged her. He stopped his pacing and shoved his hands into his pockets, like a schoolboy about to be chastised by the principal. "I know it's not something a person can just...get over." He looked out over the pool, watching the surface of the water as it changed colors as the sun dropped lower in the sky. "I wish I could take it all back. I wish I could start everything all over again and just be honest from the start. But I can't. I don't have a time machine. I don't have time traveling powers. The best I can do is say that I'm sorry, as inadequate as that is."

Lois sighed heavily but did not immediately speak. A silence fell – an uncomfortable quiet that made Clark's palms sweat, stomach churn, and heart race. He tried to keep his breathing calm and even, listening to the songs of the birds who made the grounds of Wayne Manor home. It was a familiar soundtrack to his life that had often brought him peace, but not this time. This time the birds felt mocking and cold, and robbed him of any comfort he had hoped to gain.

After what felt like a lifetime, she spoke again, her words thick and tired sounding. "I think...I think I want to go home. I need to be alone for a while."

"Of course," Clark replied with a single, serious nod, biting back his worry that she was choosing to be away from him, rather

than talk things out further. But he knew this wasn't something they could fix overnight, if they ever *did* recover from the wedge he'd driven between them with his lies. "We can leave as soon as you're ready."

"I need to speak with Bruce first," she decided after a couple of seconds of indecision, during which she studiously refused to look at him and chewed her lower lip.

"Absolutely," Clark agreed neutrally. He waited while she stood up, then trailed her as they crossed the paving stones around the pool area. He held the door open for her as they went back inside, into the living room. "He's in the kitchen," he said after listening for a couple of heartbeats.

Lois nodded and waved him away when he offered to lead the way, leaving him to stare helplessly and hopelessly as she walked away.

"Hey, CK," Jimmy said from the couch once Lois was out of earshot.

"Hey, Jimmy," Clark said, his voice sounding deflated to his own ears. Reluctantly, he turned to his friend.

"Please, tell me I just did the right thing," Jimmy said, and Clark noticed that his friend was staring blankly into space.

"What happened?" Clark asked, now concerned for the younger man.

"I just turned down a legitimate offer to go work for Wayne Tech," Jimmy answered, still not making eye contact.

"You...*what*? Bruce offered you a job?" Clark blinked, dumbfounded. Of all the things that had happened that day, this was not something he'd even had a passing thought about.

Jimmy met Clark's eyes now. "Yeah," he said, swallowing hard. "While I was down in the Cave, when you guys were all out there kicking bad guy butt, I noticed a few improvements that could be made on the computer. Some minor holes in the security that I could beef up. Some things I could consolidate to allow the computer to run faster and use up less memory. That kind of stuff. Nothing huge. I'm guessing it was all above the top of the line when Bruce created the system, but technology ages pretty fast. I just showed him while you and Lois were talking. He said he was impressed and offered me a job working with the Wayne Tech computers."

"Jimmy, that's fantastic!" Clark exclaimed, genuinely proud of his friend.

"Yeah, it is," Jimmy said with far less enthusiasm.

"But...you love computers," Clark said after a moment of thought. "Why'd you turn him down?"

"I *do* love computers...as a hobby," Jimmy explained. "I don't know if I could make a career out of it. I mean, I probably *could*, and the money would be fantastic! But I don't think I *want* to be a computer guy. I like what I'm doing at the Planet. Especially as a photographer. I don't want to give that up. I like helping put criminals behind bars with my photos or by researching stuff for you and Lois."

Clark sat down next to Jimmy on the couch. "You know what? If that's what your heart is telling you, then you made the right choice."

"Thanks, CK. I think I knew it, but it's good to hear someone else say it."

Clark clapped Jimmy on his shoulder. "Any time," he assured the younger man. "But...take my advice with a grain of salt. Clearly, I don't always make the best decisions." He glanced in the direction of the kitchen.

Jimmy winced. "How bad is she taking it?" he asked, more concern than curiosity tinging his words. "I mean...she didn't look happy just now but..." His voice trailed off as he shrugged softly.

"If I could drop every cent I have and buy a time machine, I'd do it in a heartbeat so I could go back and tell her from the beginning," Clark responded with a sigh. "I really messed up, Jimmy."

"I'm sorry, CK. I really am. And I wish I could help," Jimmy offered.

"Thanks, but I'm not sure I *deserve* help. I lied to you too. I'm still not sure why you seem to be taking this all so well." Clark chuckled ruefully. "And I really hope I don't regret putting that thought into your mind."

"Honestly? Yeah, okay, it *was* a shock, seeing you do that spin thing and change into Superman right in front of my eyes. But it's not a big deal. You're *Superman*, not a serial killer or some other horrible thing like that. You're still the same guy – the one who instantly befriended me when you started working at the Planet, the one who's helped me land dates, just by helping bolster my confidence, and the one who's never turned down a friendly game of basketball and a shared pizza. It literally doesn't matter to me that you're Superman. I think it's awesome – don't get me wrong. But it doesn't change our friendship at all." Jimmy smiled brightly. "Of course, you aren't dating me so..." His smile widened into an impish grin.

Clark couldn't help the chuckle that escaped his throat. "Thanks, Jimmy. It's...it's a big relief, knowing that my secret life doesn't affect our friendship."

"Why would it? You were cool before I knew you were Superman, and you're even a bit cooler now that I do know. Because, let's face it, every guy in the world wishes he was Superman, or at the very least *friends* with Superman." Jimmy shrugged nonchalantly.

"Maybe," Clark allowed. "It's just...nice, that's all. Not to have that judgement of 'oh, how can I use this person's abilities or status for my own benefit,' you know?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said with a nod. "I guess you get that a lot, as Superman."

But Clark shook his head. "Not as much as you'd think, mostly because I don't allow Superman to get close to many people. But when I was living here, in Wayne Manor? All the time. Women who would normally have turned their noses up at me in the streets would suddenly fawn over me because they assumed I was rich."

"Yeah, I can see how that would suck," Jimmy agreed. "That's why you didn't tell Lois right away, isn't it? Didn't want her to throw herself at you because of Superman?"

"In part," Clark admitted.

"You want me to talk with her?" Jimmy offered. "I'm not really sure what I can say to her, but I'm sure I can think of something."

Clark shook his head again. "I appreciate the offer, but this is something Lois and I need to figure out on our own. Mostly Lois. I'm not sure she'd welcome whatever you might say to her."

"Got it," Jimmy replied. "But, CK? One thing?"

"I'll say a prayer for you," Jimmy weakly joked. "Because with Mad Dog Lane?"

"I know, I know. I'm gonna need it."

Two days later, Clark was back in the newsroom. Everything was much the same as it had been before Bruce had been captured and Clark's secret had been exposed. Faxes still beeped. Phones still rang incessantly. The rest of the paper's staff hustled to and fro, exchanging information and gossip, rushing to the elevators in hot pursuit of a story, demanding answers from the people they spoke to over the phones. Nothing was out of place.

And yet, the place felt different.

Clark felt different.

Now that Jimmy and Lois both knew about his powers, he felt exposed, like if he so much as breathed wrongly, *everyone* would become privy to the fact that he moonlit in Spandex. And yet, he trusted them both completely. He knew his secret was safe with them and that they would protect his alternate identity with their lives.

With their lives, his mind echoed.

They shouldn't have to be in that position.

He shook his head slightly as he prepared a cup of coffee.

It was inevitable, with Lois. She caught me off-guard, the other day, when she found out. But, in retrospect, I'm surprised she didn't catch me slipping up earlier. I messed up, badly.

He frowned to himself. Messed up didn't even cover it. It was still possible that he'd wrecked every hope and dream he'd ever dared to have for himself. It all depended on what Lois would say to him, if and when she ever spoke to him again.

Two days.

Two days had gone by without so much as a whisper from her.

He sighed heavily. In all other things he could be patient. But the silence from Lois had him as anxious as a mouse in a house full of hungry cats, as his mother used to say. He'd literally spent part of the night before climbing the walls of his apartment and pacing the ceiling. It was an effort not to pace now, while he waited to see Lois in the bullpen.

He knew, however, that he couldn't spend the entire day waiting in the break area. He grabbed his coffee and a plain cake donut to munch, more to give himself something to do than because he was hungry. He was too nervous to want food.

"Morning, Chief," Clark greeted Perry as he made his way back to his desk from the break area. He raised his donut in a gesture of salute.

"Hey, Clark," the editor replied. "Catch the fight the other day?"

"On tape, yeah. Caneno really made quick work out of Garrison. I was surprised how fast everything was all over with."

After dropping Lois off at her place, Clark had returned to Wayne Manor, where he'd watched the fight on tape with Bruce and Jimmy, thanks to some forethought by Alfred. It had felt weird, watching without Lois, but Clark knew Lois needed time to be alone with her thoughts and emotions, more than anything else. And Jimmy had begged him to watch the fight before returning them to Metropolis. Clark had grudgingly agreed, if only to mollify his friend. He owed Jimmy at least that much. But he hadn't enjoyed the fight in the least. He'd barely even paid that much attention to the two boxers, his mind constantly straying to Lois and how precarious his relationship was with her now.

Perry nodded. "I thought it'd be a much closer match. Maybe Garrison was having an off day or something. Caneno hit him like a hurricane and that was the end of that." He sounded disappointed with the fight, and Clark couldn't blame him. For something that had been advertised and anticipated as heavily as the fight had been, it almost felt like the viewers had been cheated by the exceptionally quick match.

"Agreed," Clark said. Then, changing the subject, "Hey, Chief? Did Lois get in yet today?"

"She didn't tell you?" Perry asked, a quizzical look on his face.

"Tell me what?" Clark asked uneasily, a knot of dread forming in the pit of his stomach.

Did she quit? Is it really that bad that she can't bear to see me again?

"She called in yesterday, said she was gonna take a few personal days," Perry explained. "She really didn't let you know?"

"No," Clark said, shaking his head. "To be honest, I didn't talk to her at all yesterday."

No, she never would have quit. The Planet is her life. She'd never give that up. And she knows full well that I'd resign first, since everything is my fault to begin with.

His worry must have shone through. Perry cocked his head slightly, studying Clark. "Uh oh! Trouble in paradise? I thought you two were heading for...well...a happily ever after."

"It's a long story, Chief. But...it's entirely my fault. She found out something about me that I should have been upfront about and

she's rightfully angry with me," Clark confessed. There was something about his boss – something very paternal about the man – that made it easy to talk to him, even if he had to keep things vague.

"You wanna come to my office and chat about it?" Perry offered in his soft Southern drawl. He looked concerned.

"Uh... no, but thanks, Perry," Clark said, gently declining the offer. "Unfortunately, this is something I can't fix. I have to wait it out and see what Lois decides."

Perry frowned. "Let's hope she comes around. Aside from avoiding all the heartbreak, I'd hate to have my two best reporters at each other's throats – or worse, not speaking at all!"

"I'm really hoping it won't come to that, Chief," Clark said, his heart aching. It was killing him to not feel confident enough to pick up the phone and call Lois.

He'd spent the entire previous day keeping busy as Superman to avoid the temptation of going to Lois. He knew his presence would be unwanted if he were to show up on her doorstep. He'd even been tempted to leave a few dozen roses on her balcony, but he knew that would only fan the flames of her raging fury. As a result, he'd stayed out of Metropolis completely, choosing to tend to crises in other cities around the globe. But still, with each moment he was alone, flying from place to place, his thoughts had strayed ever back to Lois.

"Me too," Perry said gruffly. "The paper aside, you know I want things to work out for the two of you."

Clark inclined his head in thanks. "I appreciate that, Perry."

"Okay. Since Lois isn't here today, I thought you could go down to the prison. Travis Aserbacher is scheduled to be executed tomorrow morning and he's granted us the exclusive final interview. Think you're up for it?" Perry asked.

"Absolutely, Chief," Clark affirmed, steeling himself to the task ahead. "And thanks. I appreciate the assignment." He didn't relish the idea of a death row interview, but he was grateful for the distraction it would provide.

Death row. Is that where I'm sitting right now, waiting for the axe to fall?

"Don't thank me, son. I want the best on this interview. And you and Lois *are* the best. Now, get going and bring me back Kerth worthy material."

Clark couldn't help the tiny chuckle that escaped his throat. "Yes, sir!"

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad," Clark said, two nights later as he sat on the couch, his favorite photograph of his parents and himself in his hands. It had been taken at the Smallville Sunflower Festival, not long before both of them had been taken from him. Everyone was smiling brightly, clearly having the time of their lives. "I really messed up. I shouldn't have lied to Lois. I know that. I was too much of a coward to let her know the truth. Now, I'm terrified I might have lost her forever. It's been a couple of days now and I haven't heard a peep from her. I'm starting to think I never will."

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, which was still damp from the shower he'd taken after tending to an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"It's going to take a miracle for her to forgive me."

He fell silent as he gazed at the framed photograph, letting his mind wander back to that day. His father had had a blast in the dunk tank and Martha had spent her time shopping. She'd bought a ton of fabric to craft into clothing, with the intention of using the scraps for quilts. Clark had spent some of the day with his parents and some of the day with his friends. It had been a great day and, as a result, it had become a treasured memory. Clark remembered how it had been his friend, Pete, who'd insisted that he take the camera and snap a picture of the Kent family at the end of the day. Clark couldn't remember – had he ever thanked Pete for that? He'd have to remember to do so in the future, just in case he'd

never told his old friend how much that photo now meant to him, if Pete even remembered taking it for them.

He floated off the couch and replaced the frame back on the shelf, lingering for a moment while he sighed again. He missed his mother and father terribly. He had a feeling they would have known exactly what to say about the situation he now found himself in with Lois. What he wouldn't have given for their advice! He felt more lost and alone than he had in a long time.

"Please," he whispered. "Send me a sign of what I'm supposed to do."

"You can start by locking your door," Lois said from behind him, startling him so much that he lost his concentration and dropped out of the air like a stone. He hit the floor heavily, and rubbed his posterior, more in surprise than out of discomfort or pain.

"You know, for a man with super hearing, that's twice now that I've been able to enter your home and catch you using your powers without you knowing," she added a little smugly.

"Lois!" he gasped in disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you. You haven't answered your phone all evening."

"Oh! I was dealing with an oil spill," he hastily explained.

She gestured at him, as he still lay half-sprawled on the floor. "It's a good thing I've already walked in on your super activities," she added with a tight smile. "You should be more careful."

Clark blushed sheepishly. "Yeah," he agreed as he stood up. Then, "I guess I wasn't really expecting to hear from you any time soon," he confessed.

"To be honest, I wasn't sure you would either," Lois admitted softly. "But, I've been doing a lot of thinking these past few days. I'm still... conflicted, but... I was eating dinner tonight... this really awful Chinese food from across town... and it made me think of that amazing dinner you bought for us when we were working on that first story. I got to thinking that maybe, now that I've had a chance to process everything a little bit... that maybe I might be in a better place to talk about things with you."

"I'm happy to hear it," Clark replied sincerely. "I'm more than willing to talk about anything. Answer any question. It's all I've ever really wanted, from the moment I decided that I wanted to tell you that I'm Superman."

"Good. Because I still have a ton of questions. But first... that Chinese food. It wasn't from Metropolis, was it?" She gave him a timid, but teasing, grin. It was almost playful in a way, Clark thought.

He chuckled lightly. "No. I knew of a place in China from my days traveling for the Gotham Gazette. I went there because I wanted to impress you."

"I *knew* it! There's no one better at finding Chinese takeout in Metropolis than I am."

"I thought you found awful food tonight?" Clark dared to prod.

"They used to be good, last year," Lois said defensively. "They must have a different chef now."

"Fair enough," Clark allowed. "I, uh, could go get some food from my place, if you're hungry," he offered. "It won't take more than a few minutes."

"No, thanks," Lois said with a mild shake of her head. She wandered through his living room, looking at all the familiar mementos he'd collected from all around the world during his days with the Gazette. "I grabbed a sandwich from Martell's on the way over."

"Ah," Clark said with a nod. "Got it. Good pick. Can I get you a coffee at least?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Thanks." She gestured to the couch. "Can we sit and talk?"

"Absolutely. I'm just glad you *want* to talk at all."

Clark allowed Lois to choose her seat first. She opted to

command the high-backed armchair that had once been Jonathan Kent's favorite chair. Clark sat in the center of his couch, his hands clasped together in his lap as he waited for Lois to speak first.

"I guess," she began a few heartbeats later. "I guess I'm not really sure where to begin. I've been trying to figure it out all day and I still haven't...nothing has sounded right in my head. I suppose the first thing is...I'm sorry. The other day...I overreacted a bit."

"No, you didn't," Clark interrupted gently. "You were *well* within your rights to be as mad as you were."

"Maybe," Lois allowed with a shrug. "But I was so mad I wasn't really hearing you, I think. I wanted to find fault with everything and I...I wasn't very open-minded when you tried to explain things. I was just so mad I couldn't think straight. But it wasn't just *you* I was mad at. Make no mistake, I was – and still am – angry over the deception. But I was just as mad at *myself* as I was with you. I'm a damn good reporter! And I couldn't even figure out that I was *dating* Superman! I'm not used to seeing myself be so idiotically blind. It felt like...am I losing my touch? Am I not as good of a reporter as I've always believed I am?"

"Lois, look at me," Clark almost whispered when she finally let her voice trail off. "You are the *smartest* woman I know and the best reporter I've ever seen. Don't *ever* think otherwise. But people see only what they expect to see. That's why I created Superman the way that I did. It's deliberately hard to see past the bright, flashy suit and picture Superman as doing anything normal and mundane, like holding down a job, paying rent, and taking his girlfriend to the local sushi place for dinner. No one is supposed to think of him as needing to run to the grocery store for a fresh loaf of bread or calling his landlord when the toilet backs up."

"I know," Lois confessed, dropping her gaze to her hands. "But there's a part of me that still feels inadequate for not seeing what was literally staring me in the face every single day."

"Lois," he started to say but she cut him off again simply by raising her hand in a "stop" gesture.

"I know what you're going to say but it doesn't change how I feel," she said. "I'm not used to missing things like that. It doesn't matter if it's about your secret or if I'd failed to bring a serial killer to justice. I'm typically a lot more observant, and it bothers me that I wasn't in this case. And yes, I know. I wasn't *supposed* to see the clues. Doesn't change anything though." She clasped her hands in her lap. "That's not all either. I'm...I'm having a bit of a hard time with...*everything* about your secret."

Clark gulped as his stomach flipped into a knot and his heart dropped to the floor. "Oh?" was all he managed to squeak out.

"I mean, I get it. Why you're leading a double life. The fact that you have these abilities that you want to share with the world. The need to use them to help people. I get all that," Lois clarified. "But...and I may regret planting the idea in your mind...you can have literally *any* woman on this planet. I don't think any woman in their right mind would turn down Superman. So...why me?"

If Clark hadn't been so stunned, he would have laughed. But Lois' expression was not a joking one. She was dead serious, so he swallowed the laugh in his throat and killed his grin before it could blossom.

"Lois, are you serious?" he asked, his eyes wide. When she nodded ever so slightly, his face fell. "How could it *not* be you?" he replied. "Lois, I've been all over the world, to more countries than most people even know *exist*, both as Clark and as Superman. Not one person that I've met has *ever* compared to you. Your passion. Your intelligence. Your beauty. Your kind and loving heart. Your zest for life. Your dedication to justice. *None* of the things that make you *you*. You are so...singularly unique and perfect. How could I – powers or not – *ever* want anyone else?"

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?" Lois asked with a teasing smirk.

But Clark wasn't joking. He shook his head soberly. "Not nearly enough. I might make my living using words, but when it comes to all the reasons why I love you...the words all fail me because they are all so inadequate."

"So...you still love me, after how poorly I reacted the other day?" Again, he could tell she was half toying with him.

"Lois, you could have taken that shard of Kryptonite and plunged it straight into my heart. I still would have died loving you." Subconsciously, his right hand covered the space over his heart. "Even if you can't love me anymore, I'll always love you."

Lois sighed. "I still love you," she admitted, then groveled in frustration. "That's what makes this whole thing so damn *difficult*. Anyone else and I would have turned my back on them, figuring they aren't worth my time if they want to play games and hurt me. But you? You *really* hurt me, Clark. But I still want to fight for us. I'm just...not sure I can trust you not to do it again."

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Lois. Really. If I could go back in time and change how I handled this all straight from the beginning, I would, in a heartbeat, no matter what the cost. I hate myself for causing you pain and for shattering your trust. I don't blame you for wondering how trustworthy I'll be going forward. All I can promise is that I really *am* done keeping secrets from you, not that my word probably means all that much to you right now. And I know there's nothing I can do to make up for what I did. But if you give me another chance, I swear, I'll prove that I'm a changed man. No lies. No secrets. I'll answer even the most embarrassing questions, if you ask them of me. I want to fight for us too, Lois. Because you are the single best thing that's ever happened to me." His voice was low, thick, and husky with emotion. He rarely shed tears, but in this case, he was blinking them back, his heart breaking in two at the thought that Lois might walk out of his apartment right then and there, and never look back.

"I believe you."

Hope lit in his chest like an uncertain first ember of a campfire. He was afraid if he clung too tightly to it, that he'd smother it into non-existence. But he was also afraid to *not* shelter and nurture it as much as possible.

I believe you.

Three simple words, yet they were some of the most powerful he'd ever heard in all his life, save only for the times when Lois had said "I love you" to him.

"Really?" he asked, letting some of his hope show through in his tone.

"Maybe I'm crazy for it but...yes. I do." Lois gave him the tiniest smile as she hooked a strand of loose hair behind her left ear.

Clark expelled a shattering breath. "Thank you," he said with relief.

"But that still doesn't mean my heart isn't broken," she warned softly.

"I know," he said with a nod. "I promise, I'll be better from here on out."

"You'd better be. Because if you break my heart again..." She let her voice trail off, leaving her threat unvoiced. But it wasn't hard for Clark's mind to fill in the blanks.

"I won't," he vowed softly. "And if I do...Bruce has Kryptonite. I'd rather see my life end than ever see you hurt by my words or actions again."

"That's not something to joke about," Lois said, frowning.

"I'm *not* joking, Lois. I'm completely serious. Your happiness is worth more to me than anything. Knowing I've hurt you pains me more than exposure to Kryptonite ever could." He gambled standing up, going over to her chair, and kneeling before her. He took her hands in his own. "I hate myself for what I did."

"You're really serious," Lois replied, her eyes widening as his sincerity registered in her mind.

"Absolutely," he confirmed. "It's all I've thought about the

last couple of days. And I've been beating myself up over not telling you my secret for even longer."

Lois sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I guess we've both beaten ourselves up over this. This and...there's a part of me that's still reeling a bit from seeing you come so close to being killed out in the asylum. As furious as I was, if I'd lost you..." She shook her head. "I've had nightmares about it."

Clark's face fell and he had to look away for a moment. "I'm sorry, Lois. That's...one of the reasons why I didn't want you to come with me when I went to look for Bruce. Just in case either Bruce or I got ourselves killed. And...I was terrified for your safety. If I'd have lost you, I would have lost my reason for being Clark. You're the reason why I fight so hard every day to keep my identity a secret. Without the anonymity of my Clark self, I would never have a real life – one that includes you in every aspect of it. But if you were gone...what reason would I have to fight so hard to keep Superman at a distance?"

He looked up at her again, gazing straight into her eyes. "I've had nightmares too. Not just about how close Jason and Bane came to killing me. But how close I came to losing you. And those are *by far* the more terrifying ones. I'll never not be grateful that you decided to lend a hand, regardless of my request that you stay safe in the Batcave. You saved not just *my* life, but Bruce's as well. But I'll always have that chilling knowledge in me that you could have been hurt. I'll always fear in the future for your safety, like I always have."

"I guess I never pictured Superman as fearing anything," Lois confessed after a moment. "He's...you're...always so...so calm and confident and focused to the point of aloofness, no matter what the crisis is that you're facing. Part of me never recognized that Superman could be *capable* of being afraid. After all, with all those powers, what does he ever need to worry about?" She sighed heavily and shrugged. "It's not like I thought of him as a robot or anything. I've seen Superman laugh and joke around and show relief after a situation is under control. I've even seen him surprised...like when you threw yourself on top of that bomb outside of the Planet, when Superman made his debut."

"I *was* surprised. I had no idea if I would survive that. All I knew was that I had to do *something* to protect everyone out on that street," Clark admitted. He stood and went back to the couch after Lois made a motion that told him he didn't have to remain on his knees.

Lois nodded thoughtfully. "You've always put everyone else's needs ahead of your own. As Superman...and as Clark. Don't think I haven't noticed how you always do little things like fix my coffee and give it to me before you even pour your own."

Clark shrugged, embarrassed. "I like doing things for you."

Lois took a deep breath as she got up and joined him on the couch. "I know. And that's why...there's a part of me that can't blame you too much, for keeping your secret as long as you have. It's the one thing I've seen you do for yourself in the entire time I've known you. I mean, *really* done for yourself. I don't mean 'hey, I want to hang out with Jimmy and play ball' doing something for yourself."

"I had no choice but to be secretive," Clark said with another mild shrug. "If I didn't, not only would I have become a target, but you and Bruce and everyone else. But I still should have trusted you earlier."

"Yes, you should have," Lois agreed softly. "But, as mad as I was...as mad as part of me still is...I think...I want to get past it." Clark brightened visibly. "So...does that mean...?"

"I'm willing to give you...give *us*...a second chance at this. I don't want to lose what's been the best relationship I've ever had. I don't want to lose *you*. Because as flawed as you and I both are – and yes, I know I'm not perfect either – we have something between us. Your deception aside, you're the most decent, giving, wonderful man I've ever known. I want to be able to get that trust

back. And I'm working on it. Because I know that it's just as much my own internal trust issues at play here as it is that you deceived me. Please, don't make me regret this?"

It came out as a quavering question more than a statement, and that, more than anything, broke what was left of Clark's heart.

"Never," he swore in one breathy word. "Believe me, Lois, I *know* I don't deserve a second chance. I would *never* do *anything* to jeopardize that."

"Good," she said in a wobbly whisper.

Clark couldn't help it. After the torture of not speaking with Lois for days, and now with his undeserved second chance to be the man Lois deserved, he could no longer hold back. He gathered her in his arms and gently brought his lips to hers.

She responded immediately, matching his eagerness. She seemed almost hungry, in a way, as she kissed him back, as though she'd hurt being apart from him just as much as he had. Her hands flew up to the back of his head and her fingers raked through his hair. Electricity shot through Clark, sending shockwaves into his brain. He felt abuzz, as though he'd been struck by lightning – a sensation he was more than acquainted with as he flew around the world and through storms – or drunk on the love he had for the incredible woman in his arms. A part of him dimly wondered if he was dreaming, but if he was, it was the greatest dream of his life and he did not ever wish to wake from it.

She kissed him harder, deepening the once-chaste kiss and he was happy to oblige in matching her intensity. His right hand cupped her cheek and he reveled in the softness of her skin. His left hand snaked around her body, pulling her closer to him. She willingly snuggled in closer, her breasts pressing against his chest. He could all but feel her heart thudding against her ribcage. His own heart felt ready to burst right out of his chest in love and thankfulness that Lois had chosen to continue being a part of his life.

Her hands migrated to his back, running up and down his spine, sending shivers of desire through his soul. His own hands moved to her back as well, mimicking her movements. He dared to deepen their kiss more, and fireworks exploded behind his closed eyelids. Liquid fire raced through his veins. He leaned back, pulling Lois on top of his body. Without meaning to, he began to float, bringing Lois with him as he embraced her. But Lois clearly felt the movement and broke off their kiss with a slight laugh and a grin.

"Well, this is new," she teased. "Always did know it was easy to get a 'rise' out of you."

Clark chuckled, the last of his lingering doubts and fears melting away in that moment. "Would it be cliché if I said you make me float on Cloud 9?"

"Very," she laughed, biting her lower lip as her grin grew wider.

"So...does this mean you still love me?" Clark asked with an impish smile as he lowered them back down to the couch cushions.

"I already said I do," she replied, sliding off his body to sit next to him again, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "You're a lunkhead, Clark. But...you're a lovable lunkhead." She reached over and tousled his hair affectionately.

"Thanks...I think?" he lightly tossed back. "But...lunkhead?" He looked at her askance.

Lois nodded in mock seriousness. "Lunkhead – a man who is cute and loveable, but also kind of dopey sometimes."

Clark arched an eyebrow in his humor. "Dopey?"

Lois grinned. "You want to argue that what you did wasn't galactically dopey?"

Clark went to argue and stopped midway before changing his mind. "I...guess not," he said instead.

Lois laughed. "Good choice." She patted his cheek for good measure.

Clark captured her hand with his own and brought it to his lips to kiss. “I love you, Lois.”

“I love you too. That’s why I have to give us another chance. Because a life without you... isn’t much of a life,” she said, closing her eyes as Clark continued to rain feather-light kisses on each knuckle.

“I swear, Lois, I will make you the happiest woman on this – or any other – planet,” he said with a crooked grin. “And that starts right now. I owe you answers, Lois. As much as I can, anyway.”

“As much as you can?” she echoed, pulling away a little bit. “So... you *still* have things to hide?”

Clark shook his head, alarm bells ringing in his ears. “No... no!” he stammered. “That’s not what I meant! I mean... I want to tell you everything about my life. All the things I’ve withheld from you. I want to answer every question you have. But... there’s a part of my life – the first couple of months of my life, to be exact – that I just don’t really have any knowledge about. I know almost nothing about Jor-El and Lara, my biological parents. I know even less about Krypton. I still don’t know exactly *why* I have the powers that I do. I have guesses but... that’s about it. My parents – err, my *Kryptonian* parents – sent this globe to Earth with me. It contained a series of very brief messages that glossed over my origins – that the name they’d chosen for me was Kal-El, that Krypton was about to self-destruct, that they sent me away to save my life. But... it wasn’t enough. I still have more questions than I will ever have answers to. But the information I do have? I’m ready and eager to share it all with you.”

Lois smiled a wobbly little smile. “I’m ready to hear it all,” she encouraged him.

And so, Clark began at the beginning, with the information he’d learned years ago from the holographic image of his father. He only hoped Lois would believe that he was telling the truth as he recounted his life’s story to her.

Clark watched from his terrace as the darkness of the night sky was slowly, but surely, chased away by the first whispers of sunrise. He smiled as he leaned his back against the cool brick of the building, cradling a hot cup of oolong tea in his hands. Inside his apartment, Lois slept soundly on his bed. She’d fallen asleep on his couch while he’d tended to a rescue, long after he’d told her everything he could think of about his life and answered the numerous questions she’d had. At first, he had wanted to ignore the cry for help, but Lois had shooed him away, assuring him that he didn’t need to feel guilty about tending to his Superman duties. It had been a shooting just a few blocks over, and even she had been able to hear the gunshots that had captured his attention. He’d been gone a little longer than he would have liked – the old man that had been wounded had been in too precarious a state for Clark to feel confident in moving him. So he’d waited with the man until the ambulance had arrived and the paramedics had begun to stabilize him.

When he’d arrived back home, Clark had found Lois curled up on one end of the couch. Carefully, he’d picked her up and laid her down on his bed. The night had turned surprisingly cool, so he’d gently and lovingly tucked her in under his blankets, then he’d changed out of his Superman attire and stretched out on the couch. He’d slept for a little while, but only in fits and starts. He was still too excited to have Lois speaking to him again. Not only speaking to him, but willing to forgive his transgressions against her. He was still too giddy from receiving the invaluable and rare gift of a second chance to make things right with her.

The night had been fairly quiet. The few calls for help that he heard hadn’t required Superman’s attention, having been well in hand by the proper authorities, though he *had* made one quick patrol over the sleepy city. He’d reveled in that flight, drinking in all of the little details of his home.

Home.

He hadn’t truly felt at home in Metropolis while Lois had been mad at him. The city had felt cold, alien, and hostile without Lois’ love and acceptance to welcome him and keep him grounded. He’d wondered – more than once – if he could bear to remain in the city if Lois chose to utterly reject him. But where he would have gone, he still didn’t know. Metropolis had been the first place since Smallville where he’d felt like he truly belonged. Gotham had been great, and it would always hold a piece of Clark’s heart. But he’d always known Gotham – and Wayne Manor by extension – would be temporary for him. He’d been restless, even on those glorious nights when he’d helped defend Gotham from would-be evildoers dressed in the attire of Nightwing. Metropolis, on the other hand, had felt so right, straight from the beginning, before he’d had a chance to meet Lois and be completely and helplessly under the city’s spell.

Lois.

She really *was* the most amazing person he’d ever met. Why she tolerated him after all he’d done mystified him. How she could admit to still loving him was beyond his comprehension. But she did and Clark was grateful for it. He knew he’d never take her merciful second chance for granted. He’d *never* taken her for granted – not her friendship, not her partnership at work, and certainly not her love. He was excruciatingly aware of just *how* lucky he was to have her in his life. And he was devoted to making sure he never jeopardized that that ever again.

He thought that maybe he was off to a good start. The conversation they’d had that night had gone well. They’d talked for a long time, with him telling her everything he possibly could about himself. Lois had asked a lot of questions and he’d been thrilled to answer them all. Only, there were a few he hadn’t been able to, simply because he didn’t know the answers – things like why Krypton had exploded and why Jor-El and Lara hadn’t accompanied their infant son to Earth. She’d appeared to be interested and fully invested in learning about him, rather than skeptical or accusing, so he’d been greatly encouraged. Plus, nothing in his life had ever felt so good as it had to confide every last secret to Lois. He was fully hers now, in a way. She held not only his heart, but every bit of knowledge about him that it was possible to have. She could destroy him in an instant, if she so chose to. But he didn’t care. He wasn’t afraid. His unburdened heart felt lighter than it ever had and he was more confident than he’d been in his entire life.

“Hey,” came Lois’ sleepy voice from behind him. It was almost more of a yawn than a word.

“Hey,” he responded in a hushed voice as he looked over at her. “How’d you sleep?”

“Better than I have in a while,” she admitted, rubbing her eyes. She moved to his side and wrapped her arms around herself. “I thought I’d toss and turn after learning everything I did last night but... it put me at peace. At least... in a way. It’s still a lot to come to grips with but... at least I’m not wondering why you’re dashing off in mid-sentence anymore, leaving me to think that maybe you’re... I don’t know. Afraid of committing to a serious conversation or to our relationship.”

“I’ll never forgive myself for giving you any reason to doubt my commitment to you, Lois,” Clark regretfully whispered.

“I know. After last night... I think I can maybe start to trust you a little bit again.” She snuggled into his side. “So... what’re you doing out here?”

He shifted his mug to one hand and used his free arm to hug Lois to himself. “I couldn’t sleep much, so I came out here to think.”

“About what?” she asked curiously, though she was battling another yawn.

“About how incredible you are and how idiotically lucky I am,” he said, giving her a smile.

“An idiotically lucky lunkhead,” Lois declared with a laugh. She nudged him playfully with her shoulder.

Clark chuckled, feeling perfectly at ease. “So, is that my new nickname? Lunkhead?”

Lois grinned impishly. “We’ll see.”

Clark laughed again. “Fair enough.” He hesitated a moment, then, “So...are we...going to be okay?”

She took a deep breath before answering. “Yeah, I think we’re going to be just fine. Sure, this isn’t exactly where I planned our relationship to be right now but...I want to put the past behind us. I want to look forward to the future.”

“A new dawn for us, just like the one we’re watching now,” Clark replied quietly, his face to the growing light in the east. The corners of his mouth quirked up into a smile.

Lois saw and gave him a questioning look. “What?”

He shook his head. “It just occurred to me...up until now, I was living in the dark, in a way. I was alone, lonely, and, for a time, I rarely let myself use my powers. When I did, it was under the cover of darkness, for the most part – flying back to Smallville to visit my parents’ grave, protecting Gotham as Nightwing. Then, when I decided to create Superman, I *thought* I was stepping into the light, especially once you agreed to go out with me, Clark, not the flashy guy in the cape. But I wasn’t standing in the sunlight, the way I thought I was. More like...I was standing in the gleam of a spotlight or a lamp or something. It wasn’t *real* sunlight. But now? Now that you know everything and I can finally be honest with you, without having to be afraid or hide things? I’m *finally* living in the light. It’s still soft and it’s only just begun, just like the dawning of an actual new day, but it’s growing by the second. And it’s ridiculously beautiful and so full of promise. It’s so full of *hope*, Lois. Not just hope for our future together. But hope for a better Superman too.”

Lois looked puzzled. “A better Superman? How so? I mean...he’s been pretty fantastic, for a guy who doesn’t really exist.” She grinned playfully.

Clark’s smile didn’t do justice to the love in his heart. She really *did* get it! She truly understood that Superman wasn’t who he was, but what he could do – that Clark was the real man and that Superman was the puppet. But he chose not to comment on that, and, instead, answer Lois’ question.

“Because,” he said, turning away from the golden shafts of light in the sky and the scattered puffy pink clouds, “Superman can be free to do what he needs to do, without having to worry about keeping his identity secret from the woman he loves.”

“He never had to in the first place, but I can see what you mean.”

“And,” he continued, circling back to his original train of thought, “it means there’s hope for *me*, as a regular man. Hope that I can be better and give you the world, because you deserve it.”

“I don’t want the world,” Lois said quietly, with a shake of her head. “I don’t need dinners in Paris or sunset walks on Grecian beaches. I don’t need gelato from Italy or pearls from Japan. I just want us to make a good life for ourselves. I just want us to keep making a difference in the world. I need us to work out as a couple. Before you...I was lonely and bitter and miserable. But, for some reason, you never gave up on me. I’m a better person, because you make me happy. Maybe you feel like this is the first real moment in the light for you, but...it’s not all that different for me. I’m learning to be in the light too, in a lot of ways.”

Clark looked at her, his heart nearly bursting with love. “So...if you don’t need the world...does that mean you don’t need all those chocolates I usually pick up for you from Switzerland?”

Lois laughed and wagged her finger at him. “Don’t even joke about that. I’ll always need those.”

Clark chuckled. “Fair enough. Do you want some coffee or something? I could whip up some breakfast too.”

Lois’ stomach answered for her with a loud rumble. She

looked down at her waist for a moment, as though she was seeing a traitor. “Apparently, yes,” she said with a blush. “That’d be great.”

“Excellent,” Clark declared with a smile. “Come on in.”

They went back inside and Clark immediately got to work in the kitchen. He started the coffeemaker and dumped his now cold oolong tea out. It would have been nothing to reheat it with his heat vision, but there wasn’t much left in his mug. Then he set about making scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, sausage, and French Toast, all prepared in the way Martha had taught him once, long ago. It was ready within minutes, thanks, in no small part, to his super abilities. Lois sat at the table and looked on in what appeared to be amazement as he zipped about the kitchen.

“Voila!” he announced less than ten minutes later. “Breakfast is served, my lady.”

“Geez, eager to show off?” Lois teased softly.

“In a rush to tend to your needs,” he replied, grinning brightly. “Besides, what’s the point of having superpowers if you can’t use them to streamline things once in a while?”

Lois picked up a fork and speared a chunk of scrambled egg. She rolled her eyes blissfully at the first bite. “I’m not sure I’ll *ever* get used to having a man who can cook this well. Thank God! I’m such a disaster in the kitchen. I’d hate to starve both of us.”

“I can teach you, if you want,” Clark offered. “We can take it slow. A few simple recipes, like the eggs, for starters. We can work our way up from there. And I promise, no superpowers.” He quickly crossed his heart with his index finger.

Lois chuckled. “Now *there’s* a promise I never once imagined I’d ever hear coming from a normal man.”

A normal man.

Lois’ words rang in his ears. A normal man was all he’d ever wanted to be. She really saw him as nothing out of the ordinary, didn’t she? His heart leapt with joy. It didn’t mean she might not see him as someone special, but she wasn’t looking at him as the extraordinary being of Superman.

“So...deal?” he asked.

Lois regarded him skeptically for a few long heartbeats. “Only if we do it here. I’m afraid if I set off the fire alarms in my apartment one more time people are going to complain and get me kicked out of the building.” Her grin was as wide as the ocean.

Clark chuckled. “Deal,” he promised.

A companionable silence fell as they each focused on their breakfast. When they were finished, Clark cleaned at superspeed, then guided Lois to the couch. She sat reluctantly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, seeing her checking the clock on the wall.

“I should probably get going,” she replied.

“Oh...” Clark said, feeling disappointed. Now that Lois knew the truth, he didn’t want to be parted from her, especially since they’d made so much progress in mending the once impassible chasm of mistrust and hurt his secret’s exposure had caused. “Uh, sure. I mean...” he stammered, looking for the right words. “Did I do something to...?”

“No, lunkhead,” Lois interrupted, caressing his cheek. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just...we have to be at work in a couple of hours and I still need to shower and get dressed. While I’m sure Perry would *love* the vintage Planet shirt I’m wearing, it’s not exactly professional attire.”

Clark chuckled at his own insecurity. “I guess you’re right. Do you need a lift?” he offered.

She shook her head. “I drove over last night, but thanks. I’ll take the Jeep and meet you in the bullpen? I don’t want to hold you up in case I run late.”

“Sounds fine to me. Commuting has never been an issue for me,” he joked.

“I’ll bet,” Lois agreed, amused. She stood and went to retrieve her purse. “Oh, and one last thing? I meant to say it before but we

got kind of sidetracked. Thanks, for letting me crash here last night. You didn't need to give me the bed, you know. I would have been perfectly fine on the couch. But... I appreciate it."

Clark dipped his head in acknowledgement. "Believe me, it was my pleasure. Before you showed up last night, I was convinced I'd never be permitted to talk to you ever again, let alone see you. I would have slept on a bed of razor sharp Kryptonite shards and been happy, knowing you were here." A thought occurred to him. "Before you go, I have something for you."

Lois' eyebrow raised in curiosity. "What?"

"These," Clark said, moving to his bookshelf. He knelt down and plucked several leather-bound tomes from the bottom shelf.

"Books?" Lois questioned.

"Not just any books," Clark clarified. He dumped the contents of a heavy cardboard box onto the end of the couch. All his research on Lex Luthor's criminal dealings spilled out over the cushions. Clark reverently placed the books into the box and held it out to Lois. "These are my personal journals. I started them back when I was a kid living in the halfway house. Grandma Tildy bought the first one for me, after I expressed my desire to use my writing as a way to help people. She's the one who suggested journalism to me. She asked me to make a promise to her, that I would write something in the journal every day, no matter how long or short, no matter what the subject matter – how I was feeling, what I did or saw during the day, whatever I wanted. From that day until today, I've kept that promise."

"Why do you want me to have them? It sounds... pretty private," Lois asked. Clark could see she was touched by the gesture but reluctant to take the box.

"You should know everything about me," he said with an easy shrug. "There's a lot in there... things I've been able to express in writing that... that I was never comfortable saying out loud, not even to myself when I was living in that abandoned cabin in the middle of the woods. I know I've told you everything as best I can but... these journals might help. No one, other than myself, has ever read them. Not Grandma Tildy, not Chen, not even Alfred or Bruce. I hid the journals and their contents, the same as I hid my powers. I didn't want *anyone* to ever see the thoughts that were crowding my head. But you? You're different, Lois. I *want* you to know it all. My thoughts, my feelings, what my day to day life was like. You don't have to read them if you don't want to. But I want you to have that option. I trust you with the thoughts and memories contained within those pages. All of it is there, from that first night when I barely had any idea of what I should write, all the way through to tonight, and all the things I put into words when you were asleep."

"You really want me to have them, huh?"

Clark nodded confidently. "Yes."

"Okay, I'll take them," Lois said, putting her hand on the edge of the box. "Thank you, for entrusting them to me."

"No, thank *you*, for being the first person I've ever felt comfortable sharing them with," Clark said sincerely, reverence resounding in his voice.

"I'll see you at work then?" Lois said a moment later, hefting the box and leaning it against her hip.

"Absolutely," Clark replied. "And Lois? I love you."

She smiled tenderly and gave him a swift, light kiss on his cheek. "And I love you. I promise, we're going to be stronger after all of this, Clark."

"I know we will. Lane and Kent, right? Unstoppable in every way."

Two Years Later...

Candles twinkled in the warm evening breeze, beneath a canopy of white lights strung over the expansive, well-manicured lawn. A temporary dance floor had been set down before the sea of

tables, each cloaked in a pristine white tablecloth. Pale pink carnations and white roses with white tapered candles commanded the center of each table, scenting the air pleasantly to Clark's sensitive nose. To the left, the buffet station stood still serving a few people who were going back for more of the exquisite delicacies that the caterer had prepared. To the right, one of the bar stations that had been set up had a small line of laughing and chatting guests waiting their turn to taste the rare and vintage wines or the signature cocktails that had been created just for this one, perfect night. The orchestra played one lively tune after the other. On the dance floor, several couples danced the night away, with more joining them all the time.

Clark stood a little apart from the festivities, surveying the celebration like a benevolent king overseeing a festival in his kingdom. Once, not too long ago, this had been a foreign world to him – a world of wealthy people and extravagance, of decadent food and drink, of being the center of attention. He hadn't been comfortable with it then – a recently homeless teen thrust into the lap of luxury and excess. But he'd grown since then, in every way. Huge events like this were now old hat to him. He was now very comfortable in this world; this world of celebration and custom-tailored tuxedos and polite conversation with everyone from his friends from work to billionaires. He'd thought, by moving to Metropolis and working for the Daily Planet, that he'd firmly put this world behind him, save for the rare occasion where he might need to turn up to support Bruce. He'd imagined going back to events like this would be awkward. But the truth was, there was a warm and comforting familiarity to it all. He hadn't missed it, per se, but he found himself enjoying slipping back into that world, as brief as it would be. By morning, the impressive reception would be over and he would go back to being regular old Clark Kent, a humble reporter, a man who was firmly a part of the middle-class.

No, that's not quite right, he mused happily. I'm much more than that now.

"CK! Congrats, my man!" Jimmy gleefully declared, slapping Clark on the back, hard, as he came up from behind, breaking Clark from his thoughts. "I am *so* proud of you!"

Clark shook his head tolerantly. "A little drunk, are we?" he playfully inquired, as the unmistakable smell of alcohol wafted into his nose.

"Not yet. Maybe a little tipsy," Jimmy acquiesced. "How could I *not* be? Bruce has an *amazing* assortment of drinks! I've seen you tasting them. You're probably as buzzed as I am," his friend pointed out.

"I've been drinking, yes," Clark agreed. "But I'm *not* drunk." He patted his friend on the shoulder.

"Used to the expensive stuff?" Jimmy teased, his grin unbelievably huge.

"Nope. I just don't get drunk."

"Like it's that easy," Jimmy good-naturedly argued.

Clark shrugged. "It sure is. I'm not physically capable of getting drunk. I might as well be drinking water for all the effect alcohol has on me," he explained, thankful for the loud music which covered his words.

Jimmy's mouth opened as he pointed accusingly at Clark. He went to say something, then shook his head with a light chuckle. "That's *so* not fair, you know."

Clark laughed hard. "Maybe," he agreed. "Maybe." He patted Jimmy's shoulder again. "Enjoying the party?"

"You bet I am!" Jimmy exclaimed. "Bruce sure does know how to throw an event!"

"Maybe a little too well," Clark mused with a smile and a suppressed chuckle.

"What are you *talking* about?" Jimmy asked, exasperated.

"It's a little bit more than the simple affair I'd imagined. But... between you and me, I'm kind of glad Bruce went overboard. Lois deserves this."

"You *both* do, CK," Jimmy reminded him. "You guys are a great couple. You deserve to have the wedding of the century. And, between you and me, our resident society columnist has been acting like it actually *is* the wedding of the century."

Clark was a little surprised to hear that, since Cat was usually overly critical of even the fanciest of galas that she attended as the society page queen. And as for this wedding, she had expressed nothing short of extreme jealousy that Lois and Clark had continued to date and become engaged. And when they'd announced their wedding date and invited their coworkers to the ceremony and subsequent reception, Cat had avoided them for days before ultimately responding in the affirmative. He supposed it was just part of the weird game of a relationship she had with Lois that he still, to this day, didn't understand or even *want* to understand.

Married.

Clark could scarcely believe it.

He and Lois were husband and wife.

It hadn't been an easy road to the altar. After Lois had discovered his alter ego by accident that one, fateful afternoon, she'd chosen to give him a second chance – one he was *still* amazed she'd granted him. Though they'd both continued to profess their love for each other, they'd taken things very slowly, learning their relationship all over again, because this time, it included a third partner – Superman. Or, more accurately, this time, Superman was openly acknowledged as a third partner. It had taken time for Lois to fully build her trust back up in Clark, and he didn't blame her one single bit. He knew her trust had been broken too many times before. He understood why she'd been so cautious.

But as the months had passed, he'd earned her trust back in full. It was only then that he felt like maybe, just maybe, theirs was a relationship that would allowed to endure forever. For the first time in what had felt like eternity, he could finally breathe easy and believe that he'd done something right. He hadn't wanted to push things, so he'd let their relationship progress at a natural speed, though in his heart, he'd yearned to give Lois the ring he'd designed with his old friend, Maxwell, the jewelry designer Bruce had always used whenever he needed something ornate and elegant made up. For months, the ring had sat in the back of his sock drawer, buried beneath a pile of white cotton socks, where Lois wouldn't find it when she came to his apartment.

It wasn't until a year after he'd come clean to Lois about his powers that he'd finally screwed up the courage to ask her to marry him. He'd taken her for a moonlit outdoor dinner in Paris, at his favorite little bistro – one he'd discovered during his years traveling for the Gotham Gazette. Then they'd toured the city for a while before he'd eventually led her to a quiet little park where they'd talked for hours. Then, as the sun had begun to shyly peek over the horizon, he'd gone to one knee, told her how much he loved her, and asked her to marry him.

To his everlasting wonder, she'd said yes.

Later, when they'd flown to Wayne Manor to share their news with Bruce and Alfred, Bruce had immediately offered up his home to them as a place to have the ceremony and reception, if they wanted. Eventually, they'd gratefully accepted, thanks to several bad experiences with catering halls in Metropolis. Bruce had even go so far as to get ordained, so that he could perform the ceremony.

"I'm a lucky man, Jimmy," Clark agreed, pulling his thoughts from the past. "I could have lost her forever but, somehow, she still loves me."

"I hope, one day, I can find what you guys have together," Jimmy said, looking out over the lawn, where wedding guests danced under the stars and white party lights alike.

"That reminds me," Clark said with a cryptic grin. "I have someone I'd like you to meet."

"Who?"

"Ah, there she is!" Clark said, ignoring Jimmy's question. He waved over to someone in the crowd. "Barbara!"

A tall, slender, attractive strawberry blonde woman waved in turn and rushed over. "Hey, Clark! Congratulations!"

"Thank you," Clark said, embracing the woman for a quick hug. "How was the flight out here?"

She shrugged. "The usual. How are you?"

"On top of the world," Clark replied, smiling. "Tonight is a dream come true." He gestured to Jimmy. "Barbara, I'd like to introduce Jimmy. He's one of my closest friends. I think you two might find you have a lot in common. Jimmy, this is Barbara Wilson, Alfred's niece."

Jimmy's face went scarlet in a blush. "Hi. Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine," Barbara encouraged, shaking Jimmy's hand. "Say...you want to get a drink?"

"Oh...sure!" Jimmy exclaimed. He shot Clark a thankful look as Barbara led him off to one of the bar stations that stood around the lawn.

"Ever the hero, looking out for everyone," Lois said from behind Clark, making him jump just a little. He'd been focused on Jimmy and Barbara and hadn't heard her approach.

He shrugged. "She might be really good for him. They share a lot of the same interests and she's a really great person."

Lois laughed as she stepped in front of him, threaded her arms around his neck, and kissed his lips. "I always did know you were a hopeless romantic."

He smiled as he leaned in to kiss her again. "Is that such a bad thing?"

Lois stole another tiny peck on his lips. "Nope."

"Hey, you two lovebirds?" Bruce interrupted a moment later. "Can I intrude for a moment? I'd like to give you your wedding gift now, if I can."

"Bruce, haven't you done enough?" Clark asked, dazed that Bruce had *even* more to give them. "You've paid for the entire wedding. That's more than generous enough."

"Are you kidding? This party was cheap, compared to what it could have been, if you'd let me pull out all the stops," Bruce only half teased. "Besides, a party is just that. A party. It has no *real* value. I wanted to get you both something a little bit more...shall we say...practical."

"Bruce...really, Clark is right," Lois said. "You've already given us so much."

"So one more thing won't make a difference, will it?" Bruce countered with a grin. "Come on. I can't return it so you may as well let me give it to you."

Clark exchanged a look with Lois. She shrugged.

"All right, Bruce, you win," Clark said with a nod of his head.

"Of course I did," Bruce said with a smile. "Come on, let's break away from the party for a couple of minutes. Trust me, it's better if I give this to you in private."

"Lead the way," Clark said with a flourish of his arms.

Bruce took them a short distance away, by the pool. Lights around the area gave the placid water an ethereal aquamarine color. It was serene and much quieter than the section of the lawn that was besieged by the wedding reception. Bruce put his back to the peaceful pool, facing Lois and Clark. He reached into the inner breast pocket of his tuxedo and pulled out a slender envelope.

"Lois, Clark," he began, still holding the envelope, "the two of you are like family to me. It's always been my pleasure to know you both. Especially you, Clark, simply because of the way our lives have intertwined. The day I first met you, sitting on that park bench, I never suspected that we'd strike up a friendship, let alone become brothers. When I learned about your situation, it broke my heart. I've been so proud to share my home with you...and partner with you on our 'other' jobs. Seeing you succeed as a journalist and now, seeing you fulfill your dream of becoming Lois"

husband...I've never been so happy for you."

"Thank you," Clark said, truly touched.

"But the best is still to come," Bruce continued. "You have your lives to build, new traditions to start, maybe even children in your future. I hope so, anyway. And all of that...it's all putting down your roots. You should have a place to do that in. That's why I want you to have this." He handed Clark the envelope. "Go on, open it," he encouraged when Clark didn't immediately break the seal.

Clark nodded and eased the flap of the envelope open. He extracted some folded papers from within and opened them. He read the documents quickly and his mouth dropped open.

"You...you can't be serious!" he exclaimed, his mind numb.

"Clark? What is it?" Lois prompted, worriedly curious.

"He...he..." Clark stammered in shock. He swallowed, blinked, and tried again. "He...bought us a house."

"He...*what?*" Lois repeated. She grabbed the papers from Clark's hands and her eyes zipped back and forth as she scanned them.

"Bruce..." Clark started, at a loss for words.

Bruce put his hand up to stop him. "It's the least I could do, really."

"*Least* you could do? It's a *house!*" Clark stressed.

"It's a *great* house," Bruce insisted, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "Close to work. Great school district, you know, just in case. Lots of room. Even a secret, hidden closet, perfect for stashing your 'other' work suits. Lots of charm. Move in ready. And it's all yours."

"Bruce," Clark said, shaking his head. "I...I don't know what to say. Thank you. This is beyond anything...I can't believe you..."

Lois pressed a finger to his lips. "What my wordsmith husband means to say is, thank you, Bruce. We only wish would could repay your generosity."

"You both already have. Lois, you've made my little brother the happiest I've *ever* seen him. And, Clark, you gave me back a sense of family, in a way that's different from Alfred. Enjoy the house. Make all kinds of wonderful memories and traditions there."

"We will. We promise," Lois assured him. She threw her arms around Bruce in a hug, then kissed his cheek.

When she pulled away, Clark embraced his friend tightly, thanking him again.

"There's one other thing," Bruce said before Clark could suggest that they rejoin the reception. "I wondered if I should wait on it but now is as good a time as any. Here." He produced another envelope from his inner breast pocket, this one much thicker than the previous one containing the deed to the house.

"Bruce, please, we don't need a private jet to boot," Clark joked. "Where would we park it?"

Bruce laughed. "Very funny. But this...this is serious business."

Clark instantly wiped the grin off his face. "What is it, Bruce?"

"A copy of my will."

"Your...will?" Clark questioned. "Bruce, is anything..."

He didn't get to finish before Bruce spoke again. "No, everything's fine. I had my will updated just before our fight with Jason Todd. I just didn't say anything until now because...well, the timing never seemed right. But tonight? Tonight, you need to know the truth."

"What truth?"

"I'm the last Wayne," Bruce said, no hint of regret in his voice. "I have no heirs. I have no living blood-family left. I may never get married or sire children."

"Bruce, there's still plenty of time..." Clark argued.

"Maybe. But as it stands, right now, you and Alfred are my

only family. That's why, although I've ensured that Alfred will be well taken care of should he outlive me, I've officially named *you* as my heir. If something were to happen to me, *you* would be the one to inherit everything. The manor, my wealth, even the businesses, though, knowing you, you'd probably want to appoint someone to run things for you."

"Bruce, you *can't* be serious about this!" Clark exclaimed, flabbergasted.

Is this all a dream? Clark wondered, his mind hazy from how surreal it all felt.

"I am," Bruce replied with cool casualness, as though he'd simply given them a pair of movie tickets to use. "You've more than earned it, Clark."

"I really haven't though." Clark felt compelled to disagree.

"Of course you have! You've saved my life countless times, for starters."

"And you've saved mine as well."

Bruce put his hand up once more. "I won't entertain any discussion on the matter. My will is final. If I have no children, you inherit it all. If, by some chance, I *do* have a child – or children – the estate is to be split equally."

"You're insane," Clark said with an amused shake of his head. "You know that?"

Bruce laughed and shrugged. "I've been called a lot worse in my time." He patted Clark's shoulder.

"So...if I'm to inherit everything...does this mean I'll *finally* get to drive the Batmobile?" Clark jested, grinning.

"No," Bruce said in a flat deadpan.

"Eh you won't know the difference," Clark said mischievously. "You'll be dead."

"I left the car to Alfred," Bruce replied smoothly, and it made Clark wonder if that was, indeed, the truth. "Come on. I've monopolized enough of your time. Your guests will be looking for you. Let's get back to the party, shall we?"

"Oh, sure," Clark said teasingly. "Just go back and pretend like everything's normal and you didn't just completely turn the world upside down for us."

Bruce laughed. "Something like that. I thought one of your super powers was the hero's Poker face."

Clark chuckled. "You're completely unhunged, Bruce. Seriously though, thank you. For everything. It's not enough to say it, I know that. But it's all I have to offer." Once again, he drew Bruce in for a hug. He gently slapped the man on the back.

"Don't mention it," Bruce said reassuringly. "It's what I want. For you to finally have a family home again. And for you to live in the utmost comfort if something ever happens to me, because I know you'll be responsible with it all. Now, go. You have a lot of guests waiting for their chance to congratulate you on your marriage."

"Bruce...Clark's right. Saying 'thank you' isn't really enough here. What you've just given him...given *us*..." She shook her head. "We can never repay you for this."

"Just enjoy it and made a good life together. Maybe name a kid after me or let me be their godfather or something," Bruce teased with a wink. He started to walk, leading them back to the thick of the reception. "I'll catch up with you both later," he informed them as Alfred approached to speak with Bruce. "Enjoy!"

Lois took Clark's hand in hers and led him to the middle of the dance floor. She looped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder as his arms wrapped around her waist. He felt her sigh in contentment as they swayed to the soothingly slow music. He sighed in turn, feeling completely at peace in his soul.

He'd told Lois, on the night she'd come to him and told him that she'd chosen to give him a second chance, that he felt like they were stepping into the light of a new dawn. In his heart, back then, he'd anticipated that as time marched forward, he'd

eventually feel like they were standing in the light of the noonday sun. But the truth was, each day with Lois was a new dawn all over again – a dawn full of the brightest sunshine. Not because he felt like he was leaving the embrace of the shadows still, but because each day was full of the hope and promise of making a life with the other half of his soul. Each day was a chance to fall unbelievably deeper in love with Lois and to show that love to her in a million tiny ways. Each day brought them new adventures, new challenges, new ways to strengthen their relationship. Each day was a miracle in and of itself.

“Bruce did an amazing job with the reception,” he commented as the song ended and a new one began.

“He did. He’s a pretty incredible man. I see it more and more each time we spend time with him, why the two of you hit it off immediately and became so close. You’re a lot like each other, in a lot of ways. And I’m not talking about your penchant for dressing up in silly costumes.”

“You think mine is silly?” Clark said in mock horror.

“It’s...certainly colorful,” was all Lois would say on the matter. “My point is, you’re both the two most generous men I’ve ever known. What Bruce did tonight...”

“I know,” Clark murmured. “In all my life...in all my wildest dreams...I never once imagined my life would turn out this way. Not just what Bruce gave the two of us tonight. But *all* of it. Growing up, I had no reason to believe I had a soulmate out there. I was too different and my life was too shattered. Meeting you, loving you, marrying you...this is beyond what I ever could have hoped for myself.”

“You aren’t the only one. I guess, in a way, we’re not so different. After constantly finding the wrong guys, I’d started to give up hope that I’d ever meet anyone decent and worthy of getting to know. And then, just when I’d begun to give up on the notion of love in general, you waltzed into my life. I resisted at first because I was scared. Scared to get my heart broken again. Scared to be taken advantage of again, even on the level of friendship. I’m glad you never gave up on me.”

“Never. I fell in love with you the moment we met,” Clark said, his voice a reverent vow. “But...are you *sure* you’re okay with the reception? I know we talked about having a much smaller, less extravagant affair. I’m okay with the change but you’re the one who suggested we keep it simpler, when we first started planning.”

Lois laughed, her smile lighting up the night like fireworks. “I’m fine, really. I used to dream about weddings like this, when I was a kid. My ‘keep it simple’ approach was based on living off a reporter’s salary.”

“Even having Bruce officiate?” Clark teased. “I mean, it was an off-handed joke I once made to him and...he ran with it.”

Lois’ grin grew wolfish and she leaned in to whisper in Clark’s ear. “That’s my favorite detail about all the work he put into this.”

“Really?” Clark arched an amused, but skeptical, eyebrow.

“Of course. It amuses me to no end, knowing that, *technically* speaking, Batman married Superman.”

THE END