

# A Reconstructed Life: Memoirs of a Villain

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

Rated: PG-13

Submitted: March 2019

Summary: When the Kents fail to be the ones to find Kal-El's spaceship, the boy's entire fate changes.

Story Size: 106,883 words (596Kb as text)

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All Superman characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. I don't own anything from the Assassin's Creed franchise either. That all belongs to UbiSoft, Anvil Next, and was created by Patrice Désilets, Jade Raymond and Corey May. I also don't own any Batman characters, as they are owned by DC Comics, Warner Bros., and anyone else with a stake in that franchise.

Author's Note: Special thanks go to Val and Feli, my betas, who not only encouraged my evilness but goaded it on. Thanks for always being there for me to bounce ideas off of and for never telling me to stop as I rambled on about things from the games that were basically foreign to you!

Warning: I took my toys out of the box on this one and mangled them beyond belief. There's no putting them back in the box at the end of this tale.

\*\*\*

"No, no, no!" the man said irritably, reading over a stack of legal contracts. He smacked the page before him with the back of his hand as he ranted. "This will *never* do!"

"What's the matter, dear?" his wife asked tiredly from the seat across from him in the back of the modest limousine. She looked over, concerned.

"Eugene's contracts. He's making too many concessions. I know he's trying his best to make sure that the merger happens, but I never authorized half of these changes he's trying to make."

She arched her eyebrow. "You think he's trying to sabotage us?"

The man sighed and shook his head. "No. At least, not deliberately. But he's young and inexperienced – too hungry to get his first successful contract under his belt." He pinched the bridge of his nose as he fought down his annoyance. "I should have never hired him. I know he's George's son and all but... I'm starting to feel like it was a serious mistake, bringing him into the business."

"You need to talk to him," his wife said diplomatically.

"As soon as we get to a phone," he agreed with a stoic nod.

"When will that *be*, anyway?" whined their son. "I'm tired of driving around endlessly."

"Soon enough," the man said affectionately.

"I think you mean *not* soon eno..."

The boy's words cut off with a gasp as the entire sky lit up with a streak of light. The entire family scrambled to the left side of the car, pressing up against the tinted windows, following the light with their eyes. It seemed to be descending from the sky; on a crash course with the open field they were driving alongside.

"Stop! Stop the car!" the man commanded.

The car came to a crunching halt on the old dirt road. Puffs of

dust rose up from the parched earth, hardly visible in the darkening evening. The driver dutifully cut the engine as soon as he could and the world grew still and quiet. *Too* quiet. The few birds that had been chirping had grown still and quiet. No frogs croaked in the encroaching darkness. Even the insects had gone mute. It was as if the entire world had decided to hold its breath in watchful waiting, or if some mystical force had put a spell over everything. Even the occupants of the car didn't dare to speak right away, as if their tongues had suddenly ceased to function.

They got out of the car and stood motionless for a long moment. The humid May night air hung around them like a heavy, wet blanket, stifling them. Above, the sky was a deep navy, but not yet the black of the full dark. Thousands of stars had already come out to play, though more would come with the complete darkness. The silver moon smiled his broad, full face down on the land – a perfect silver coin hanging suspended and untouchable in the heavens.

Nothing stirred. Not even a breath of wind dared to break the perfect stillness of the world. The rich scent of the fertile farmlands filled their nostrils and the blades of ankle high grass tickled their skin. They looked to each other, then nodded as the words passed between them, unspoken. The driver tipped his hat to them; he would stay behind with the car.

The man and woman started off in the direction they'd seen the bright streak of light head. They could see the faint light of a fire in the distance. It would be enough to guide them in the right direction. But just a few steps later, they turned back, sensing that they were being followed.

"Stay here," the man said, frowning.

"But, I want to go with you," came the mild protest.

"No," the man said, shaking his head. "It may be dangerous."

"You're letting *her* go," the preteen said with a grunt, nodding toward the woman.

"You will *not* speak so condescendingly of your mother," warned the boy's father. "I need her with me. *You* will stay with Bernard. Understood?"

The boy narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Yes, father," he said with hollow obedience.

"Good. We won't be long," his father assured him.

"Why do you even *care* about whatever that light was?" the boy asked sulkily. "I just want to get *out* of this rathole countryside."

"Whatever that was, it was something out of the ordinary," his father patiently explained, putting his hand on his son's shoulder. "If that was a meteorite or something, it must be of a decent size to have not burned up in the Earth's atmosphere. Which means we can sell it to the highest bidder for a healthy price if it holds nothing of scientific importance."

The boy frowned as he thought it over. "I guess," he allowed.

"Good. Now, your mother and I will be back soon. And then we will be on our way to our associate's home and out of these backwoods farmlands." He turned from his son and took his wife's hand. "Come, dear."

Then they were off again, picking their way over the uneven ground of the field, toward the source of the streaking light they'd seen. They made their way carefully, but as speedily as they could. Fortunes could be made or lost in seconds. Each moment that passed brought a greater chance that someone else who may have seen the light could go, investigate, and lay first claim to whatever lay in the darkening distance. Minutes seemed to stretch out into days until, at last, they began to see churned up soil and charred grass in a long, fresh new scar in the earth. Small, inconsequential fires burned here and there, already flickering with the last bits of life as they died out.

"What *is* that?" the man asked, peering into the darkness and pointing.

"I'm not sure," the woman hesitantly replied, squinting in an

effort to see better.

They slowed their pace by some unspoken agreement, now exercising extreme caution. It was clear that they were not approaching a meteorite. In a pile of dirt and at a precarious angle, a small, shiny metal object had come to rest. What color the object truly was, neither of them could tell. It reflected back the orange glow of the dying fires around, but the top gleamed nearly silver from the moon and starlight above.

The man stopped at the edge of the shallow crater the impact had caused. He looked down on the sleek object, his eyes wide in surprise.

“This is no meteorite,” he whispered in an awed tone.

“Is that...” his wife asked, unable to finish.

“I think so.” He nodded uncertainly.

“A spacecraft,” the woman breathed in disbelief.

“Do you think we should...open it?” the man gulped in indecision. This was far beyond anything he’d anticipated.

“Of course!” his wife said, her voice both encouraging and trying to hurry him up. Her eyes sparkled and glee seemed to dance in those twin orbs. “The writing on this thing...it’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before. And I’m familiar with many languages.”

“You think it’s...alien?” There was no mocking in his voice, only interest.

“If I had to guess...yes. Now, quickly, let’s get this thing open. We could be on the verge of the discovery of the century! Imagine it. If this thing really is alien technology, and we can reverse engineer it, we’d be the richest people in the world, Lionel.”

Lionel’s eyes lit up. “We already *are* rather well off. However, what you say is very true. All right, let’s see what this is.” He squatted down, careful not to soil his suit with the dusty earth. “Lighter than it looks,” he commented in surprise as he pulled the craft out of the crater. He dragged it over to the side, onto the grass. “I wonder how this thing opens,” he whispered to himself as he searched for a door or window or some kind of mechanism to unlock the craft.

As if on command, the top of the tiny craft opened to expose the inner pod. A tiny infant, no older than two or three months old, lay nestled within, wrapped warmly in a dark blue blanket embroidered with a stylized S symbol inside of a diamond shape. The baby looked at them with curious, intelligent brown eyes and he smiled, reaching for them instinctively. He cooed gently at them, almost in expectation that he would soon be picked up and cradled in their arms.

“Oh my God! Lionel! It’s a baby,” the woman said in a gentle voice. She quickly swooped down and plucked the infant from his capsule. She cradled him to her chest and murmured soothing coos back to him.

“Letitia,” the man warned only half-heartedly.

“Lionel,” she replied, not taking her eyes off the child she held.

“Honey, I know what you’re thinking,” Lionel said, gently putting a hand on her shoulder. “But we can’t keep him. He’s...not...”

“He may not be from Earth,” Letitia said firmly, “but he’s...an answer to our prayers.”

“I know you might *think* that he is, but he’s not human. Taking him in won’t replace *her*.” His voice was soft and low, not wishing to upset his wife.

“I don’t want to *replace* Lena! I’ve spent the last year trying to make sense of why she passed away at only six months old! No one...nothing...could *ever* take her place, Lionel. But this little one...he needs a home. And maybe...maybe he can help our family heal.” Her voice never broke above a near whisper, but the intensity of it nearly staggered Lionel. He’d rarely ever seen his wife so passionate about anything.

“I don’t know,” he stammered, mentally running through the

pros and cons of taking in an alien foundling.

“Well, I *do*. He’s ours now, Lionel, whether you like it or not. I won’t leave him here to die of exposure. And I will *not* surrender him to some orphanage to live out his childhood waiting for a home. We have more than enough of everything to spare. He will have the best life imaginable living with us.”

Lionel looked at his wife, seeing once again how their infant daughter’s untimely death had aged her. Her once flawless features were now lined and tired looking. Though she regularly dyed her hair, Lionel knew that since Lena had been found dead in her crib one morning, gray hairs had plagued Letitia. He knew she hadn’t slept a full night since that awful morning. She often prowled their mansion all throughout the small hours of the night, clutching the stuffed elephant that had been Lena’s favorite toy. She was a woman tormented by a grief that seemed only to grow, not shrink, with the passage of time.

“All right,” he said, putting his arms around his wife and holding her closely. “All right. We will take him in. He’ll be our son.”

“Really?” Letitia asked, her eyes welling up as she gazed at the baby, who was sucking his thumb sleepily.

“Really,” he assured her, then affectionately stroked the baby’s soft hair. “It’ll take some paperwork, but I’ll have our lawyers on things in the morning. In the meantime, we’ll have to think of a name.”

“It has to be perfect,” Letitia mused.

They fell silent for a moment, both of them with their faces upturned to the universe from whence the child had fallen from, like an angel with a broken wing. But as blissful as Letitia looked, Lionel couldn’t help but worry. The child wasn’t human, even if, at first glance, he appeared to look exactly like one. What differences, if any, would this boy have that might set him apart from his peers? What would the fallout be for their family, if it was ever discovered that they had taken in an alien? Certainly, with their wealth and status, they could not afford to be known as a family with an extraterrestrial in their household. It could spell the absolute downfall and obliteration of their company.

A noise broke off his train of thought. A voice. For a moment, panic shot through him. They could *not* be seen at the sight of a crashed spacecraft! He looked this way and that, craning his neck, looking into the now fully dark night. But there was no one. And yet, the talking persisted.

The craft!

The voice was coming from the capsule the baby had been bundled into!

Lionel stepped away from his wife and squatted down beside the sleek metal ship. There, inside, was a small globe that glowed with a soft blue light. He plucked it out of the craft and held it up for inspection. It wasn’t a big object by any means. It fit neatly into the palm of his hand. The map face was strange though – it didn’t resemble the familiar continents of Earth. It had to be of whatever alien world this child had come from. Faint singing came from the globe in a woman’s voice. After a moment, the song ended, and the woman spoke.

“Sleep now, my dear Kal. Know that I am with you in your dreams, my beloved son.”

Then the voice resumed her singing; this time a different song that flowed as gently as any Earth-born lullaby. Lionel slipped the globe into his pocket, then grabbed hold of the ship. He stood and faced Letitia.

“I’ll carry the craft, you carry the baby.”

“Kal.”

“What?”

“The voice...it called him Kal. I think...I think that was his mother,” Letitia said thoughtfully.

“It could be the voice of God,” Lionel said, grunting as he lifted the capsule off the ground. Dragging it out of the shallow

crater hadn't been as difficult as lifting it high enough to carry it back to the car. "We can still name him whatever you wish."

"What do you think, little one?" Letitia asked the sleeping baby. She sighed. "I'm not sure why you're here. I don't know what happened to your parents. But your mother loved you enough to send you messages to last your journey, and lullabies to remind you of her voice. I will respect her by using the name she chose for you, my little Kal."

"Kal," Lionel said, turning the name over on his tongue. "A good, solid name. Well befitting of a Luthor. But come, let's hurry and get back to the car."

Letitia nodded as she started to walk. "Of course. Our new son will probably be hungry soon and need new diapers. There has to be a store *somewhere* around here where we can get what he needs."

Together, they once again picked their way across the field, this time guided by the beam of a flashlight that Bernard held, swinging the light across the field, searching for some sign that they were on their way back. The going was much slower this time. Letitia feared to startle the infant in her arms. And Lionel, though strong, struggled with the weight of the capsule Kal had arrived in. But, at last, they reached the car. Bernard breathed a sigh of relief when he saw them approaching. He started toward them, then stopped in confusion, while the couple's son sat sulking in the back seat of the car, the door open to let in what precious little breeze blew.

"Alex! Come here," Lionel called, and the preteen looked up sharply at the sound of his name.

"What?" Alex asked, moodily.

"Your mother and I want you to meet someone."

"Who? Some yokel farmer?" the boy asked with obvious distaste.

"No," Letitia said with a soft scold. "We want you to meet your new brother, Kal."

\*\*\*

Alexander Luthor was absolutely seething.

Five years.

Five years ago, his parents had found Kal laying in a spaceship and taken him home, adopting him like a foundling puppy. That was when the trouble had begun. Immediately, the family had needed to construct lies about the child. They couldn't admit that the baby had been found in the middle of a field in a tiny UFO. It would damage the family's reputation, if people knew they harbored an alien in their home. So his mother had made up a story about having found the baby in a basket on their doorstep one evening – an abandoned little boy who needed a home. The public had eaten the story up and even Alex – or Lex, as he continuously reminded people to call him – had to admit it had been a brilliant move. The whole country knew the sad story of how the billionaire family had lost their infant daughter to a cruel twist of fate. Support had poured in for the grieving family and it seemed only too perfect that a family who'd lost a child should find a child who'd lost his family.

For five years, the family had lived their lie and passed the alien off as a regular human. For five years, they had treated the boy like one of their own, giving him every advantage over the poorer masses. Every advantage that Lex felt only *he* was entitled to. *He* was a Luthor by blood! Not some orphaned alien that had been plucked from certain death because two soft-hearted philanthropists just hadn't been able to just keep driving and not stick their noses where they hadn't belonged. For five *excruciating* years, Lex had been forced to pretend he didn't loathe the "brother" he'd never asked for. A "brother" he tried – and failed – to kill numerous times, when his parents hadn't been there to see. A "brother" who appeared to be invulnerable to whatever Lex threw his way.

Getting rid of his little sister had been *far* easier. Staging the

little competition's death had been a simple matter, unlike anything he'd faced with his new "brother." With Lena, Lex had needed only to sneak into her nursery and place her elephant over her face and she'd passed on with barely a struggle. That had been that. A tragic accident. No one had ever questioned Lena Luthor's death and he – Alexander Luthor – had once again been the sole heir to his family's fortune.

But Kal was different. For the first three years, Letitia had insisted he sleep in the master bedroom with them. It made her feel better, to have him close, as though the close proximity could ward off death from stealing another child from her. And perhaps it had. By the time she felt ready to let Kal have his own room, his alien origins had begun to make themselves known. Lex could no more strangle his younger sibling than he could slash his throat or push him off the roof. Kal seemed invincible.

And he'd tried.

Oh, how he'd tried!

For the last two years, he'd tried all sorts of ways to rid himself of his unwanted younger sibling, most carried out while Kal and the rest of the Luthor household had slept. Nothing had worked, leaving Lex ever more frustrated. Just tonight, he'd tried once again to end Kal's miserable existence. Once again, the experiment had failed.

It was time to try a new tactic, Lex decided as he sat, fuming, in his bedroom, the first faint streaks of dawn creeping into the sky. If he couldn't exterminate the pest, he could perhaps, learn to accept Kal's uniqueness, and use it for his own benefit. *If you can't beat 'em, join 'em*, as the old saying went. Yes, if he couldn't kill Kal, he would find ways to break the boy's mind and use his invulnerability to his own purpose.

He would start tonight, and he knew just how to begin warping the kid's mind.

\*\*\*

"Psst! Kal! Are you asleep yet?" Lex whispered, sticking his head into Kal's room later that night.

"No," came his small voice in reply.

"Good," Lex said, grinning to himself. He opened the door wider and slipped into the room.

"I miss Mom and Dad," the boy replied sadly.

"I know. But they had the mayor's gala to attend. They'll be home before you wake up in the morning," Lex assured him, sitting down on the edge of Kal's bed.

"I know," Kal sniffled.

"But, hey, good news. *I'm* here," Lex said, biting back a smile. This was going to be almost too easy for him! "Besides, you shouldn't *really* mourn over them not being home you know."

"Why not?" Kal's eyes were wide with curiosity.

"Well," Lex hedged, making it appear that he was hesitant to divulge any further information.

"Please, Lex?"

"Fine. But you *cannot* tell Mom and Dad that I said anything, got it?"

"I promise," the boy said solemnly, and Lex believed him. For a five-year-old, Kal was surprisingly good at keeping his word.

"Okay...the thing is...Mom and Dad...never really wanted you. They found you and took you in out of pity."

"No...no...they love me," Kal countered quickly, his lower lip trembling.

"They *act* like they do," Lex said with practiced nonchalance. "It makes them look good to the public. The generous rich couple who took in a child no one else wanted. Such saints, to the eyes of the public. Meanwhile, they've never told you the truth. How your biological parents dumped you here on Earth because you were a burden to them."

"H...how?" Tears glistened in Kal's widened brown eyes. "It's not true!" A silver tear escaped and rolled down his cheek.

Pouring on the faux sympathy, Lex put his hand on Kal's

shoulder. “I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. When they found you, there was an object – a globe – with you. They...we all...saw the messages from your birth parents. They sent you into space because they didn’t want you.”

“No!” Kal cried out, sobbing heavily now.

“Mom and Dad felt bad for you when they found out. They kept you out of pity. They didn’t *want* another child, not after Lena died.”

“But...they always say they love me,” Kal pointed out.

“If they loved you, they would have been honest with you,” Lex told him with a heavy sigh.

“But they hug me and kiss me and take care of me...”

“It wouldn’t do if the public found out you were a case of pity,” Lex said with a shrug. “Trust me, Kal. I’m being honest with you. *I’m* the only one who truly cares. Put your faith and trust in me. I’ll never lie to you,” he said with casual encouragement.

Kal didn’t answer except to bury his head in Lex’s chest as his entire tiny body heaved with sobs. Lex said nothing further. He would have to break Kal’s mind little by little. Subtle damage was the best kind of damage. He needed Kal to unquestioningly trust him. So he let the wretched little alien child’s tears soak his shirt and he stroked the back of Kal’s head in feigned care.

*Tonight went better than I expected. It won’t be long before he’s totally under my control.*

\*\*\*

Sirens blared in the night, rending the quiet midnight hour apart. Lex Luthor stood in the dark, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, watching the hungry orange and red flames devour his childhood home. To the policemen and firefighters who swirled around him in a constant flow of dizzying movement, the young man appeared to be in shock as he watched the blaze with a blank look. But he wasn’t in shock. His features had been purposefully set in a hardened mask of neutrality. He watched dispassionately as the flames leaped higher, graceful as ballerinas, hungry and growling like a pack of starved wolves. Inwardly though, he was pleased. Everything had gone according to plan.

He’d waited, oh so patiently, for his parents to fall asleep. Then he’d lit a few candles and double checked that all of the windows and doors were locked tightly. Satisfied, he’d woken Kal. He’d hadn’t had a difficult time at all in goading the eight-year-old into a game of catch, right in the living room. Right where the candles had burned merrily. Letitia had a fondness for candles, so it hadn’t been out of the ordinary for some to be lit, and Kal hadn’t even blinked that some should be burning, even though the elder Luthors were asleep. Kal was getting faster – inhumanly so – and that was just fine with Lex. He encouraged the boy to run faster and faster to catch the balls that he threw, distracting Kal. It hadn’t been a stretch to make Kal hit into a side table full of the lit candles. The candles had toppled, one igniting the carpeting, another landing on the floor length drapes, instantly setting it afire.

Kal hadn’t immediately noticed, being too engrossed in their game. But after a few moments, he stopped, sniffing the air, with a cry of “Smoke!”

Lex had fairly oozed with concern, ushering Kal out of the house, telling him to run as fast as he could to the small cave he’d told Lex about just a week before in excitement, dreams of making it in his own tiny clubhouse filling the boy’s head. Lex swore to save their parents, but, once Kal was safely out of sight, Lex didn’t move. With the smoke alarms disabled – a point Lex was proud to have remembered – the fire began to rage, unchecked. Smoke billowed up the stairs, and Lex knew that it wouldn’t take long for it to overcome his mother and father, putting them into a deadly sleep.

Lex waited for as long as he could stand it, making sure his parents didn’t awaken and giving himself a fine coating of smoke and ash to collaborate his story that he’d roused from his sleep to

find the house on fire. Then, feigning panic, he called 911 and reported the fire before slipping out of the house to the safety of the cool, clean air outside.

Now he watched as the mansion collapsed under its own weight as the fire ate away at the structure. Perfect. The place was a total loss. He could file for the insurance money in a few days and his parents hadn’t yet filed their updated will which *would* have made Kal an official heir to their estate. Lex was now in sole control of the Luthor fortune, and one of the richest people in the world, head of one of the largest corporations on Earth.

Still, as added insurance, he’d asked his friend and co-conspirator, Nigel St. John, to find a boy Kal’s age and height. In the morning, the charred remains would be found along with Lionel and Letitia’s burned corpses. It would be assumed that the entire family, save for Lex, had tragically perished in the blaze. In the meanwhile, Lex would ensure that Kal stayed well hidden. As much as he’d once wished he could dispose of the alien foundling, as Kal grew older and gained abilities none of them had ever imagined he would have, he saw more and more potential in the boy. His powers would be useful if Lex played his cards right. As it stood, the years of breaking Kal to his will had been paying off so far, mostly in petty thefts to see if Kal would do as he was told.

“Mr. Luthor? The paramedics are ready to check you over,” a portly policeman said to him, pulling Lex out of his thoughts.

“Oh...yes,” he replied distractedly, finding it hard to drag his eyes from the inferno. But after a moment, he forced himself to be led away to one of the ambulances, where a team of paramedics were ready to examine him.

He submitted obediently to the examination, hardly even aware of what was happening. That seemed to concern the paramedics and Lex was forced to make small talk with them so they wouldn’t think he was going into shock and want to take him to the hospital. Eventually, they declared him to be well enough not to need further treatment, though they did keep him on a tank of oxygen for a short time, just to be on the safe side.

It took a few hours of tedium, but eventually, Lex was released from the scene. He’d given his story to the police of how he’d woken from his slumber only to realize the house was on fire. He talked about his panic and confusion, how he’d called 911 thinking that his poor parents and little brother had already escaped. He bit back tears as he recounted how he’d gotten outside, only to realize that they had never left the house. But by then, the flames were too intense, preventing him from going back inside to save them.

They bought his story hook, line, and sinker. He even saw one of the policemen tear up. He knew, right then, he would get away with what he’d done. For one searing second, he wondered about his lack of guilt. After all, his parents had always loved him and treated him well. But business was business, and Lex had to do something before his soft-hearted parents destroyed Luthor Industries, and there was no way that they would have simply handed over control to him.

“Mr. Luthor? You can go now if you wish,” one of the officers gently told him. “The firefighters say this might take them all night to get under control. And, uh, on a personal note, I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Thank you. I think...I think I *will* leave. It’s...too painful to stay,” Lex said smoothly, looking away from the fire as though it hurt him greatly.

“Do you need a lift anywhere?” the officer offered, nodding toward the massive garage, which was nothing more than a wall of flame now.

“No, thank you. I’ll call someone.”

The policeman nodded. “We will be in touch.”

Lex nodded solemnly. “Thank you, Officer. I appreciate all you’ve done tonight.”

He shook the policeman’s hand, then turned away from

burning wreckage of his childhood home. Then he started down the block, to the home of some old family friends. By then, the entire neighborhood was aware of what was going on. Gawkers lined the primly manicured lawns and pristine sidewalks, watching the mansion disintegrate before their very eyes. As Lex had expected, the Waltons were awake. They embraced him as soon as they saw him and offered up their home to him if he needed a place to stay. Lex thanked them graciously but declined the invitation gently. He already had a plan in mind – to go to Metropolis, to his father’s former office. The building had a penthouse, fully furnished and stocked with everything he could possibly need. His family had often made trips into Metropolis and stayed for days or weeks as his parents conducted their business.

Nigel had been awaiting his call. It took him only ten minutes to pick up Lex from the Walton’s doorstep. They rode in relative silence to where Kal was waiting for them. The boy was curled into a ball, his knees to his chest, shaking like a leaf. He looked up with tearful eyes once he heard Lex approach.

“Lex!” he cried out with obvious relief as he stood. He peered around behind Lex, confused. “Where...?” He swallowed hard and didn’t finish his question.

“They...they didn’t make it, Kal,” Lex said, letting his eyes mist with faux tears.

“W-what?” Kal gulped, going pale, tears spilling freely.

“I tried. But the fire...everyone tried so hard, Kal.”

“No...no!” Kal wailed as he flung himself into his brother’s arms. “They *can’t* be dead!”

“That’s not all, Kal,” Lex cautioned. “The firefighters...they said...the fire looked...*intentional*.” The lie rolled so easily off his tongue.

“But, but...it was an *accident*,” Kal insisted. “Did you tell them that I never meant for *any* of this to happen?”

“I did my best to protect you,” Lex continued. “They think...that you were caught inside when the house went up in flames.”

“But...but...”

“Shush now,” Lex said with forced care, stroking Kal’s black tresses. “I let them believe that. It was the *only* way to protect you. If they knew you’re alive, they’d haul you off to jail for the rest of your life.”

Kal’s eyes widened in terror and Lex knew his lies were working even better than he’d anticipated they would be.

“But...if I’m supposed to be dead...” Kal stammered, taking a staggered step backwards, and Lex could see him working things out in his mind.

“You’ll have to lay low for a while. Perhaps take on a new identity. Just until you aren’t recognizable as Kal Luthor anymore.”

“But...but...where will I go? How will I...?”

“Ssh,” Lex said gently, his finger pressed to his lips. “We’ll figure something out. For now, let’s get out of town before anyone can figure out that you aren’t dead.”

\*\*\*

A week passed, then another, without any suspicion that Kal had survived the fire that had claimed the lives of Lionel and Letitia Luthor and destroyed their home. Officially, the fire was deemed an accident; a freak event where Letitia had left some candles burning which had then toppled over. Lex was pleased. He’d purposefully used an unsteady candle holder that night, to ensure that it would go over at the slightest touch. He kept the news away from Kal, keeping the boy secured in the penthouse, away from prying eyes. He even went so far as to fire the staff his father had hired to maintain the place during the times when they were not living in the expansive space. He blamed the move on his grief, citing the need to be left completely alone to process the deaths of his entire family. He stopped appearing in public and refused to talk to the press, garnering much more sympathy for the lone, suffering survivor of such a devastating tragedy.

In the meantime, he continued to groom Kal subtly. Without Lionel and Letitia around, Kal was dependent on Lex, allowing Lex to brainwash the young boy. Lex knew it would be a long, slow process, but Kal already trusted him more than anyone else on Earth, even more than he’d trusted their parents once Lex had divulged the “truth” about his adoption. Lex grinned to himself as he sat at what was now *his* desk in *his* office. Yes, that little detail of Kal’s mistrust and disassociation from their parents had come in handy. It had been just enough to convince Kal that the police were sure he’d intentionally set the blaze.

But keeping Kal hidden wasn’t enough. Eventually, he’d likely have to rejoin society. He couldn’t remain a prisoner in a high tower forever...or could he? Lex would have to rebrand Kal with a new identity, a new backstory. The question was...who and what would Kal become?

Lex sighed and stood, pushing his chair back from the desk. Restlessly, he paced to the large windows and looked out, down at the city below him. From this high up, it was impossible not to feel like a god surveying his kingdom. From here, no one could look down on him. Everyone had to look up at the tallest building in Metropolis. It was only befitting of his station in life – sole heir to billions and head of the biggest company in the country. But even *that* would need work and rebranding. He needed to break away from the business model his parents had employed. He needed to be bolder, more ruthless, and get his hands into more areas – science, technology, medicine, anything where he could gain a foothold and profit. Of course, he needed to bide his time a bit. It would be suspicious if he changed the company from Luthor Industries to LexCorp before the dirt on his parents’ graves had even sprouted grass.

“The focus *has* to be on Kal right now,” he whispered to himself through gritted teeth. “He needs to be trained to only respond to whatever new identity I give him.”

It would need to be something mundane and completely unremarkable. But it couldn’t be common either. John Smiths tended to stick out in people’s minds just because of how ridiculously common of a name they had, as though they were making it up. On the flip side, the name couldn’t be too uncommon either. Extraordinary names grabbed people’s attention even more than the bland ones did. What he needed was a perfectly mediocre name for a kid who would learn to become a perfectly mediocre man.

Lex frowned as he turned and paced to the other side of the room. There, a set of double doors led out to the balcony. He went to them and opened them up, stepping outside. It felt good to be out in the sun after being cooped up in his office all day. He stood for a moment, just soaking up the sun. He grinned a private grin to himself. All of this was now *his*. He was lord and master of all he could see. And one day, the world would be his. Not through force, but through the power of his company. Although he had to admit to himself, if an opportunity presented itself for him to broach the world of politics, he might just take it up.

He let his eyes wander over his domain, and they lit upon a magazine he’d been idly thumbing through the day before. He’d set it down to take a phone call from his lawyer and had promptly forgotten the publication. Now he picked it back up, intending to throw it away. But he stopped cold as he caught sight of the two open pages before him. Each had a full-page advertisement on it. The first was for Clark bars. And the second was for Kent brand cigarettes.

“Hmmm,” Lex pondered, rubbing his chin with his free hand. “Clark...Kent. A perfectly forgettable name. Yes...yes. I think we have Kal’s new identity.”

\*\*\*

Eighteen-year-old Clark Kent entered into Lex’s private study. He stifled a yawn and rubbed at his tired eyes, wondering why in the world his brother needed to see him in the middle of the night.

Whatever it was, it couldn't be good, he knew. Nothing good ever happened in the middle of the night.

"You wanted to see me?" Clark asked tonelessly.

"Yes. Thank you for coming so quickly," Lex said, turning away from the merry blaze in his fireplace.

"In the middle of the night?" Clark pressed, irritable from being woken from his dreamless, satisfying sleep. He tried to stifle another yawn, but lost the battle.

"My apologies," Lex offered. He swept a hand toward the two armchairs sitting on either side of the fireplace. "Please, take a seat. Wine?"

"No, thank you," Clark replied as he sat. "What's on your mind, Lex? I assume you have a job for me," he said bluntly, unimpressed with Lex's offer.

Lex cracked a small smile as he sat and took a sip of dark red wine from a glass on the side table. "You always *do* like to cut straight to the chase, don't you?"

"Doesn't make much sense to shoot the breeze when we *both* know you wouldn't have called me in unless you had an assignment for me. Not in the middle of the night, anyway."

"So serious all the time!" Lex replied, swirling the wine in his glass. "We used to be so close and all."

"We're *brothers*," Clark said cagily, wondering where Lex was going with this. "You've always looked out for me, and I appreciate that. But...I've been locked up here in this penthouse for more than ten years...unless I'm running an 'errand' for you. I want to get out, explore the world. I'm eighteen, Lex. Even *if* the police were still looking for me, they'd never recognize me. I don't look like the same dumb kid who accidentally knocked over the candles that killed his parents."

Lex appeared conflicted for a moment. Then his entire face changed. "Indeed. And you shall have your freedom, soon, if all goes well."

"Soon isn't good enough, Lex. You've been promising 'soon' for a long time now." Clark frowned and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers. "I'll do... whatever the job is...and I get some freedom. You know I'm strong enough to take it anyway."

"All right," Lex said calmly. "Do the job and we'll talk about how best to slip you into the rest of society without raising any suspicions."

Clark nodded. "Deal. So, what's the target?"

"Arthur Chow."

"Him? Or his business?"

"Him. He's been poking around, trying to get a handhold into LexCorp. Out of the public view, of course."

"Of course," Clark allowed with a shrug. "You want me to scare him off or...?"

"I want you to eliminate the competition," Lex said with dark casualness.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night. My jet will fly you out to California. You'll do what you do best. And then we'll talk about getting you out into the world."

\*\*\*

Clark silently scaled the wall of Arthur Chow's sprawling mansion. He was dressed from head to toe in black, with only his eyes visible in the face mask that obscured his identity. He wasn't yet completely sure *how* he was going to carry out his orders, but he was no stranger to improvising. In a way, it made things more interesting to figure out his methods on the fly. He'd already scanned the mansion with his X-ray vision and listened closely with his enhanced hearing. But things could change in an instant, he knew, so he stayed sharp and always made sure he was willing and able to adapt to anything that might occur.

It was getting late and the activity inside the mansion was becoming more subdued. But it wasn't late enough to ensure that

the occupants of the massive home were all asleep in their beds. So Clark was cautious as he worked his way ever upward, finding the tiniest fingerholds possible in the otherwise well-fitted stone wall. His muscles strained in a good way as he used his upper body strength to pull himself up. Clark smiled to himself. He didn't relish being Lex's hitman, but the work allowed him to stretch his abilities in ways he never could at Lex Tower.

Finally, Clark reached the top of the wall. From there, he was high enough to leap to a low section of the roof about thirty feet across the neatly manicured and bedewed lawn. Clark landed as quietly as he could, but he knew it was just the roof of the impressively massive attached garage. The Spanish style home wouldn't allow for any handholds. The pristine white stucco exterior was simply too smooth for his fingers to find purchase. He opted to climb the drain pipe after gently testing it to see if it would hold his body weight. He wanted to get to the highest point of the roof, giving him an unmatched, eagle-eye view of the billionaire's compound.

Exercising every caution, he silently scaled the house, his movements painfully slow so as not to make a sound on the terracotta roof. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he sat perched on the chimney, looking down at the courtyard below, like a deadly gargoyle surveying his kingdom. Most of the lights were out in the house, but that didn't mean that the household was mostly asleep. Clark would have to keep his work as silent as possible to ensure that he wasn't caught. He smiled grimly. He was good at maintaining his stealth.

His target was in the hot tub, alone. A bottle of wine lay within an arm's reach. Clark telescoped in with his powerful vision. The bottle was nearly empty, like the wine glass that was next to it. All the better. Clark could drown the man and the death would be easily attributed to an unfortunate, intoxicated accident. He wouldn't even have to get blood on his hands.

Clark eased himself down off the chimney and to the edge of the roof. There he squatted down again and dangled his legs over the side of the roof. Using his powerful biceps and triceps, he lowered himself down until he hung by the very tips of his fingers. Only then did he let go, dropping quickly to the ground. The springy grass cushioned the sound of his fall, but he crouched stock-still in the shadows anyway, listening to see if anyone had heard him. But the relentless bubbling of the hot tub masked all else. No one stirred to check things out.

So far, he was safe.

He stood then and began to stealthily make his way across the moonlit courtyard. He dared to employ a fraction of his incredible speed, moving quickly enough to be no more than a blurred shadow in the night, but not quickly enough to cause an odd, out-of-place and unexplainable breeze. Clark would have preferred if the night sky had been heavy with clouds, darkening the yard more, but Lex had *insisted* that the job be done tonight. No matter. Clark was strong, fast, and young. He could avoid detection easily. Besides, with Arthur Chow outside, enjoying the clear, starry sky, Clark's job was easier in the long run since he didn't have to sneak inside the mansion.

Clark sped in a wide arc around the pool, ensuring that the billionaire didn't suspect that anything was amiss. He came up behind his target, kneeling behind the still-oblivious man. Arthur appeared to be well into his wine. Clark could smell the alcohol wafting up from each breath the man exhaled. And Arthur was drunkenly singing to himself in a low tone. Clark had to wonder how much the man had had to drink *before* bringing the current, nearly empty bottle of wine out to the hot tub. He smiled grimly. Toxicology reports would easily find Arthur's blood alcohol content to be well over the legal limit. It would be a no-brainer that he'd drunkenly drowned. No one would be searching for a killer.

Still, Clark took no glory, no satisfaction from what he was

about to do. It was necessary, that was all. Necessary to secure Lex's position as the most influential man in the world. Necessary to ensure that LexCorp remained the powerhouse that it was, in all areas. Clark closed his eyes for a brief second, took a deep breath, then took his right hand and pressed down on the top of Arthur's head. He kept pushing down firmly while Arthur thrashed under the water. But the sound of the struggle amounted to no more than a few extra splashes of water amid the tumultuous churning of the hot tub. Still, Clark kept pressing down, sinking his arm down into the hot, bubbling water until he was wet nearly up to his shoulder. He stayed for as long as he dared; well longer than any normal person could survive without oxygen, past the point where CPR would have any prayer of bringing the man back.

Clark withdrew his hand and gazed down at the dead man at the bottom of the hot tub. Then with a quick burst of his heat vision, he dried his clothing, leaving nothing to chance. It wouldn't do to leave a trail of water behind once he went to escape from the mansion's sprawling grounds.

He felt nothing inside. Not pity. Not pride in a job well done. Not horror at having taken another life. If he felt anything at all, it was an emptiness inside.

He was the perfect killing machine, he knew. He'd proven it over and over again as Lex had given his assignments. He was fast. He was strong. He could see in almost pitch-black conditions. He was invulnerable. He possessed x-ray vision and hearing so sensitive he could practically hear the grass growing at his feet. And that was just the tip of his powers.

He was, as Lex had often put it, the greatest assassin who'd ever drawn breath.

Perhaps that should have bothered Clark. Perhaps it should have terrified him, how efficient he was at killing people. But it didn't. Each new murder he committed only solidified the empty darkness in Clark's soul. How many had it been now, he wondered? Twenty? Thirty? A hundred? He'd long ago stopped keeping track, despite his flawless memory that would have allowed him to call forth a perfect movie in his mind, detailing every last minuscule aspect of the assassination. What did it matter, anyway? Lex had made it painfully clear that Clark's powers bound him to a bloody destiny full of violence and death. It was Clark's job to put an end to any and all threats against the empire Lex had built atop the minor kingdom Lionel and Letitia had begun.

No, the killing didn't scare Clark.

And yet, he didn't relish it either. He took no pride from a successful assassination. He didn't even share the details of how each death had occurred unless Lex specifically asked. "The job is done," was his most-used phrase when he returned back to Lex Tower after each assignment was completed, followed by the assurance that no one had seen him and that no one would ever suspect that Lex was behind the murder plot.

He just felt empty, like there had to be more to life than just skulking about Lex Tower, hiding from the public, and killing people – usually under the cover of darkness. He longed for the freedom to mingle with the public, like a normal person, enjoying the light of the sun and being able to make at least a few decisions for himself. After all, he was eighteen now. Either Lex would allow him to leave the confinement of Lex Tower, or Clark would take it by force. How could Lex stop the most powerful man on Earth?

*It's nothing personal, he thought, directing his mind back to the sunken corpse. It's just business.*

"Arthur? Are you still out here?" a woman's voice called from around the corner of the house. "The kids still won't settle, and I thought maybe you could talk to them."

Clark's spine immediately stiffened and he stood up tall again. With lightning speed, he zipped back across the courtyard and melted into the shadows. Dressed head to toe in black, he was no

more than a ghost in the thick shadows cast by the moon, but he didn't want to risk being caught. He reached the spot where he'd jumped down from the roof. Exerting barely the slightest effort, Clark jumped up, grabbed hold of the roofline, and deftly pulled himself up. Lightly, he crossed the terracotta shingles and crouched behind the chimney, just in time.

The woman he'd heard – presumably Arthur's wife, though Clark had never met her – came around the corner. She looked around, clearly expecting her husband to be in the hot tub. When she didn't immediately see him, she appeared to become agitated, which only increased when she spied the wine. She ran to the hot tub, screaming for Arthur. But it was too late. Her anguished screeching tore the otherwise peaceful night apart as she discovered his body on the bottom of the hot tub.

Still, Clark felt nothing inside. Not pity for the new widow. Not remorse for having left children fatherless. Not a sense of relief at having gotten away with murder. He was empty inside – a vast, yawning abyss existed where he was meant to have a soul. His heart was stony and unmoved.

He watched the woman frantically search the area, calling for someone, *anyone* to come help. But her gaze stayed at ground level. She never once looked up. She never once looked in Clark's direction. The butler came running and Clark heard the widow yell at the man to call 911, while she waded into the hot tub to pull out her deceased husband. As the butler rushed back into the house to make the call, Clark nodded to himself. It was time to leave. He didn't need to watch the scene unfold as the ambulances and police cars arrived. It was safer for him to slip off now, while the house was unwatched. He'd lingered too long already. He could hear the occupants of the house stirring, alerted by the woman's screams that something was amiss.

Without sparing another thought for the deed he'd done, Clark turned and made his silent escape from the crime scene.

\*\*\*

Clark knocked on the door to Lex's private study, still dressed from head to toe in the sleek black suit he always wore when completing an assignment. He *never* changed before letting his brother know how an assignment went. Not after the first time. Clark had felt dirty, the weight of his first kill pressing on him like a physical force. So he'd returned to Lex Tower, showered, shaved, and changed into his normal clothing. Then he'd went in search of Lex. His brother had taken one look at him and become livid. He'd demanded to know how long Clark had been back and why Clark hadn't come to the study immediately. He'd commanded Clark to recount the entire sordid affair and verify that he hadn't been spotted. Not once had Lex asked how Clark was handling having blood on his hands for the first time.

That had been the most eye-opening moment of the night for Clark. Lex hadn't asked if he'd been hurt or how he was dealing with his first murder. It had struck Clark as odd, at first. But, over the years, Clark had come to understand why. *Of course* Clark wouldn't be hurt. *Nothing* could hurt him. The deadliest bullets and sharpest blades shattered against his invulnerable flesh. So why would Lex bother to ask if Clark had suffered any injury? And *of course* Lex wouldn't ask how Clark was mentally coping with having taken a life. Lex was trying to toughen him up and prepare him for his destiny as an assassin. He couldn't afford to have Clark questioning what he was doing. Questions led to hesitation. Hesitation led to failed missions, sloppy work, or getting caught.

In time, Clark had come to mentally embrace and appreciate the cold, matter-of-fact, and stubborn dismissal of his feelings that Lex had approached Clark's first kill with. It had set him free of any lingering doubts or misgivings he may have had over murdering another man.

But his lesson had been learned nonetheless. Showers and clean clothing were only to be taken *after* he reported back to Lex.

“Come in,” Lex called distractedly as Clark’s knuckles left the cherry wood of the door.

Clark obediently opened the door, squared his shoulders, then entered into the darkened room. Lex was sitting before the cold, dark fireplace, lounging in the plush armchair, a glass of deep red wine in one hand and the stub of a Cuban cigar in his other hand. Only a few lamps were lit, giving out a weak, yellowish glow in the gloomy room. It was almost as if Lex were trying to mimic the glow of a lit hearth, without the resulting heat a fire would throw off into the already warm night air.

“Lex, I’ve returned,” Clark said stiffly, as he approached the armchair.

“And looking no worse for wear,” Lex commented, his eyes flickering over Clark’s body in a cursory manner, looking for obvious signs that his prized assassin had suffered any damage.

“Not a scratch on me,” Clark confirmed. He cleared his throat. “The job is done.”

“Were you seen?”

“Not even Arthur Chow himself saw me,” Clark replied, his voice hollow with disinterested calmness.

“Excellent,” Lex replied evenly, nodding thoughtfully to himself. “Tell me. How was my rival disposed of?”

“The police and medical reports will agree,” Clark said tonelessly. “In his drunken state, he slipped in his hot tub and drowned. A tragic, if not avoidable, accident brought about by a complete lack of good judgment.”

“Impressive,” Lex said approvingly. “You’ve gotten much more creative in your solutions to my problems. So much better than those blood-soaked days when you were just starting out.”

“I take only what opportunities I’m presented with,” Clark said, brushing off the compliment.

“Still, I always appreciate when you’re able to make a death look accidental,” Lex mused, stubbing out the smoldering butt of the cigar in a golden ashtray on the side table to his right. “But what of the rest of the Chow family?”

“The rest of them? I suspect the widow will deliver a very touching eulogy at the funeral. And I anticipate his children will weep when they learn of their father’s passing,” Clark replied wryly.

*Wrong answer*; he thought in the next second as Lex’s look of approval melted under the molten rage of his disappointment.

“You *what*? You let them *live*?” Lex’s serene face contorted into absolute hatred.

Clark shrugged and spoke in an even, unperturbed voice. “My orders were to kill Arthur Chow. Arthur Chow is dead. Nothing was said about the family.”

“It should have been implicit,” Lex growled, his face beet red with his rage.

“No, Lex,” Clark said, cutting off whatever else Lex was about to say. He held up a hand, annoyed that his judgment was being called into question. “Stop. Just stop. I’ve *always* done *exactly* what you tell me to do. *You* wanted *Arthur Chow* dead. If you wanted his entire family eliminated, you should have said so.”

Clark watched as Lex took a deep breath and steadied himself before speaking again. Some of the redness in his face had cooled, and Clark no longer felt like his brother was about to burst a blood vessel. When Lex spoke, the immediate anger was no longer at the forefront, but it was still there, thinly veiled and bubbling just beneath the fragile surface of his forced calmness.

“You don’t get it, do you? His widow? Their children? All of them are his *beneficiaries*. With Arthur dead, his wife inherits *everything*. His fortune. His business. *Everything*. His children, obviously, are next in line after the wife dies. By allowing them to live, you handed over his business to a woman who’s just as much of a ruthless threat to LexCorp as Arthur ever was.”

By the end, Lex’s voice had risen from the feigned, deadly calm it had been. He slapped his hand down on the side table,

hard, making the glass of wine topple over onto the floor and shatter. The deep red wine splattered, looking for all the world like blood strewn at a murder scene. Clark knew firsthand what that could look like, though he didn’t enjoy dwelling on the mental images that his mind refused to let go of.

“You’re *useless!*” Lex growled through gritted teeth.

Clark set his jaw in a thin, hard line. “*Useless?*” he asked in a sharp tone. “*Useless?*” he repeated for good measure, allowing a little anger to poke through his usual stoic manner when reporting on the outcome of a kill. “That’s rich, Lex. If I’m so *useless*,” he continued, stressing the word, “you can stop using me as your own, personal assassin. Oh, wait,” he said, pretending like an idea was just coming to him, “that’s right. I almost forgot. I’m the *only one* who can do the things I can do. The only one with a host of powers on his side. You *need* me, Lex. Never forget that.”

“Oh, no, Clark. *You need me*,” Lex said in a venomous hiss. “*I’m* the one who’s kept you safe all these years. Safe from the police, who would find a way to execute you for our parents’ deaths. Safe from scientists who would tear your alien body limb from limb studying you. Never forget *that*.”

“I haven’t,” Clark shot back. “Which is the reason why I’ve *constantly* bloodied my hands for you over the years. You think I *want* to see LexCorp fail?” He chuckled without mirth. “On the contrary, Lex. I want to see this company succeed far beyond anything our mother and father could have dreamed. I want it to reach heights even *you* haven’t fathomed.”

“Then why did you let the family live?” Lex said, obviously biting back a more scathing retort.

“Because their deaths are needless,” Clark explained. “Everything will be thrown out of whack with Arthur’s death. His widow won’t be thinking straight. There’s bound to be bad decisions made. An opening may come for any smart businessman to swoop in and bring ChowTech into the LexCorp fold.”

“That could have happened, regardless,” Lex reminded him, speaking as though to a painfully stupid, wayward child.

“Maybe,” Clark said with a dismissive shrug. He gestured vaguely. “*If* the family becomes a problem, I can always go finish the job. But right now, no one will ever suspect that Arthur’s death was more than an accident caused by mixing too much alcohol with an obvious drowning hazard. Kill the whole family, however, and suddenly it reeks of a murder plot. Let the dust settle on this one, Lex. It can only benefit you.”

“It had *better* benefit me, Clark,” Lex growled ominously. He looked Clark dead in the eyes, and Clark could see the fire still burning in those brown depths. “Get out of my sight.”

Clark wanted to argue about his promised freedom once the job was done, but he held his tongue. Now was not the time. Not when his brother was in such an enraged mood. Inwardly, he sighed, even as he forced himself to nod in acknowledgment of the dismissal and retreat from the study. He sulked on his way back to his room. Knowing Lex as well as he did, Clark figured it would take a minimum of a week before Lex would be calm enough to even entertain the conversation Clark wanted to have. More likely a few weeks. But Clark could wait, as much as he yearned to join the outside world, to mix with the rest of society and have the freedom to go wherever he chose, whenever he chose.

Yes, he could wait. He’d bide his time, do what Lex told him to do, and when the time was right, he’d broach the subject once more. In the meantime, he would have a chance to figure out, what, exactly, he wanted to do with his life once he was living out there, amongst the common folk of Metropolis, blending in as if he wasn’t an all-powerful alien assassin. He could do anything he wanted – become a police officer, a teacher, a professional athlete unlike any the world had ever known, a doctor, a well-renowned author. The world lay at his fingertips, just out of reach for the moment, but it was there, and Clark wanted to be ready when his prison door opened.

He knew, of course, that he could leave whenever he wanted to. Lex couldn't possibly hope to stop him. But Clark didn't want to forcibly take his freedom. He couldn't do that to the brother who'd cared for him all these years, ever since their parents had died in the house fire. The *accidental* fire. The fire that haunted Clark's dreams every night. Oh, he hadn't actually been there when the fire had gotten out of control. He hadn't witnessed Lionel and Letitia's deaths. But he *had* been the one to knock over the candle in the first place. Accident or not, he was still responsible for his parents' deaths.

*I owe Lex everything, he thought with a sad sigh as he entered his bedroom and sat down heavily on his bed. It's my fault he no longer has a mother and father. It's my fault he has to hide me here in Lex Tower. He's been risking everything by hiding me for the last ten years. If the police knew he was harboring a wanted man...*

He shook his head, trying to dispel the terrifying implications. *I owe him everything. But...I wonder...will he ever feel as if my debt is repaid? Will I?*

\*\*\*

After the hit on Arthur Chow, Lex raged for weeks. LexCorp was unable to acquire ChowTech, the way Clark had hoped they would, though it had seemed, for a little while, like things might go their way. But at the last moment, Bruce Wayne stepped in and made an offer that even Lex blanched at. Wayne Enterprises was simply too big, and too rich, to compete against. Even with the vast wealth Lex had both inherited and amassed from his own business empire, he could not match the bid Bruce Wayne made – not without putting LexCorp in a state of serious financial risk.

Clark's chance at earning his freedom died before it ever fully materialized. Lex would hear *nothing* about his request to be allowed even the smallest exposure to the world at large, let alone be allowed to live and work amongst the masses.

Instead of planning what to do with his freedom, Clark started looking ahead to what Lex might have him do next. He'd been certain – absolutely certain – that Lex would have him go after Bruce Wayne next.

He was right.

About six months after Wayne Enterprises welcomed ChowTech into its family, Lex called Clark into his study. Clark was ready and went to meet Lex already dressed in the somber black uniform he'd long ago adopted for his deadly work.

"Lex," Clark greeted his brother gravely, inclining his head slightly in respect and acknowledgment.

"Clark," Lex returned, nodding once. "I see you've anticipated the reason I've called you in here."

"You want me to kill Bruce Wayne," Clark said matter-of-factly. "I've been wondering when you'd decide to send me." He crossed the stately study and, with liquid grace, sat in the chair across from Lex, draping his left leg over the arm of the chair. "I'm curious, Lex. Why now? Why not six months ago?"

"Because six months ago, Bruce Wayne's sudden death would have looked too suspicious," Lex calmly replied, like a lion sizing up a passing herd of antelope. "By waiting, we can avoid having the authorities investigating it too deeply...especially if you can manage to make it appear to be accidental."

"I'll try," Clark responded with cool indifference. "No promises. I have to take whatever opportunity arises. Even if it *is* a bloody one."

Lex nodded in agreement. "Just make sure you do the job. The *whole* job this time."

Clark sat forward a little, interested now. "I thought Bruce has no living family."

"He doesn't," Lex confirmed, steepling his fingers. "But he *does* have a butler."

"You want me to kill the hired help?" Clark asked incredulously, arching his eyebrow, silently looking for Lex to

confirm it. He sat up straighter, removing his leg from the arm of the chair.

"He's more than *just* the hired help," Lex said, locking eyes with Clark. "From what I gather, the old man is practically a Wayne himself. Raised Bruce from the age of eight, when his parents were killed in front of him. Been with the Wayne family even longer than that – since Thomas Wayne's youth."

"So?"

"So," Lex replied slowly, as if Clark were too stupid to understand the coming explanation, "for all we know, Bruce has written Alfred Pennyworth into his will to inherit the company in the event of his untimely demise. You are not going to leave things to chance. You will kill the butler and ensure that Wayne Enterprise is thrown into turmoil when Bruce is found dead. Do you understand?"

Clark nodded solemnly. "Yes, Lex. No survivors. When do I leave?"

"Right now. Nigel is waiting to drive you into Gotham City."

Clark shook his head. "No."

"Excuse me?" Lex asked, his eyes blazing at Clark's defiance.

"Gotham is what? Two hours away by car? More if the traffic is heavy, which, let's face it, on a holiday weekend, is likely. I can run there in far less time."

"Run?" It was as though the idea was a foreign concept to Lex.

Clark shrugged. "You know how fast I am, Lex. And I won't be bound to the roadways. In fact, it's better if I avoid them completely, unless and until it becomes an absolute necessity. I can cut the commute down to probably a couple of minutes."

"And the bridge into Gotham?"

"Easy. I'll just stick to the pedestrian walkway. I'll be going too fast for anyone to have a prayer of seeing me. Especially dressed head to toe in black."

Lex didn't reply right away but appeared to be thinking things over.

"And there's the added bonus of not having any of the cars you own being seen in Gotham. *At all.*"

Lex gave him a disgusted eye roll. "Fine. But I *swear*, if you can't get over there..." he began to threaten.

"Oh, relax!" Clark replied, unperturbed by Lex's warning. "You have too little faith in me, brother."

"Considering how badly you let me down on the Chow assignment," Lex said with a shrug, "I'd say it's warranted."

It was Clark's turn to roll his eyes. He stood and turned his back on Lex. "It'll be done, I promise."

"Go," Lex said dismissively. "Get yourself ready for tonight."

"I'm already ready. I'll be leaving as soon as it's fully night," Clark said darkly. "Bruce Wayne won't know what hit him."

\*\*\*

Clark crouched in the shadows, just outside of the high wall and strong gates of Wayne Manor. They were certainly imposing, Clark thought to himself, at least, to *normal* people. But he *wasn't* normal. He was a super-powered alien and the world's most proficient assassin. The wall might as well have been made out of Lego bricks for all it would do to stop him from getting in. Of course, Clark wasn't *really* going to smash through the thick white stones. He didn't want to leave any trace that anyone had been there at all, especially not someone who possessed such incredible strength.

So, he jumped.

In a single, fluid motion, he stood up and leaped into the air, clearing the wall with ease. He landed nearly silently on the other side, once more in a crouch. He took a moment to listen to his immediate surroundings, but there was nothing to be heard. Still, he didn't want to take his chances. A light snow had begun, and the air had a heavy quality to it, so that sounds were muffled and muted as though heard through a veil of cotton.

Clark smiled to himself. This was to his advantage.

The snow hadn't yet begun to stick to the ground, which meant he wasn't in danger of leaving any footprints. And any sounds that he might inadvertently make – though he was always careful about making any unwanted, telltale noises – would be muffled to anyone who might be on the Manor grounds. Not that there would likely be any, Clark knew. On a night like tonight, anyone who didn't have to be outside wouldn't be. It was too cold for most regular people.

Clark dashed across the open lawn. It was expansive – the largest he'd ever seen. Barely any trees were permitted to sprout up from the richly fertilized soil and the few that were, were far apart and scrawny little decorative trees with spindly trunks that offered no concealment. Clark ignored them and made a beeline for the protective shadows of the manor itself. He breathed a little more confidently once he had the manor to shield him from prying eyes, at least in one direction. Though he knew it really wasn't much, it still felt better than being out in the open, regardless of the fact that he'd moved like a deadly black hurricane cloud.

There was a balcony above Clark, and once more, he launched himself into the air after a swift check of the area. He caught the railing and deftly pulled himself up. He tried the sliding door into the bedroom beyond. Locked. Clark shrugged and eased himself back onto the railing, standing on it and balancing precariously. Up he jumped again, to the balcony above the one he was on.

Clark peered inside. It appeared that the master bedroom was beyond the door. He tried the handle, not daring to hope it would be open. It wasn't. He nodded to himself. He'd keep the house locked up tight too if he were in Bruce Wayne's position of insane power and wealth. He paused momentarily at the thought. *He was* a part of that world of riches, in a way. True, Lex controlled the finances – he *was*, after all, the head of LexCorp – but Clark benefitted greatly from the vast wealth that Lex had acquired over the years. Still, his situation was much different from Bruce Wayne's. Whereas the entire world knew the billionaire's face, no one knew Clark's. He was the invisible side of LexCorp. No one knew his face. No one knew he was even alive, or that he'd once been known as Kal Luthor.

He kept moving, making his way to the roof. Once on top, he crouched down and stayed still, taking a few precious minutes to think about his next move and take stock of his surroundings. He supposed he could try the doors, but he wished to remain undetected. And although he possessed incredible speed, it would still look suspicious if the door suddenly appeared to open by itself. Besides, they likely had camera surveillance of the highest technology. For all Clark knew, the film could be shooting at a high enough frame-per-second rate to catch a good shot of him when slowed down far enough. No, he would avoid the doors at all costs.

He listened as he thought, tuning in his hearing and focusing it in on the inside of Wayne Manor. What he heard was disheartening. He heard voices. *Lots* of voices. And most of them belonged to children. He frowned. Bruce Wayne was Gotham's – indeed America's – staunchest bachelor. He had no children, let alone what sounded like a score of them. So what was going on?

A moment later, Clark had his answer. A deep “Ho! Ho! Ho!” resounded in Clark's ears as he began to X-ray through the manor. He could see dozens of children all rushing to see Santa, as he entered into the large living room. Santa was dressed head to toe in a plush red suit of what appeared to be crushed velvet, with a white fur trim. Clark idly wondered if the fur was real.

*Probably*, his mind said with a dismissive snort. *Bruce isn't exactly known to be a cheapskate.*

Santa proceeded to make his way over to a large armchair that had been pushed up in front of the huge Christmas tree in the room, right by the fireplace, where a merry blaze danced and twisted in the hearth. He sat down, setting down his heavy sack of

toys next to him, while the young boys and girls watched him with wide eyes and all pressed around in eager anticipation. Clark was unimpressed and X-rayed through the thick, but very fake, white beard on Santa.

“There you are, Bruce,” Clark said with the barest curving up of his lips. “Sorry to break it to you, but Lex found you to be on the naughty list this year, Santa.”

Creeping slowly and quietly, he severed his powers and started to search the rooftop, in hopes of finding a way inside. Then, as he crested the ridge of the roof and started on the other side, he found what he was looking for. A large skylight loomed above what appeared to be a library or a massive study. He checked it thoroughly and found it much easier to disable the alarm on this window than on the previous ones. He sent out a precise, thin beam of his heat vision into the wiring beneath the glass, making a pinpoint hole in the glass in the process. With one obstacle down, he focused on the window itself. With his heat vision, he broke the seal holding the glass in place. Then he gently removed it, floated through the fresh access point, and set the pane of glass aside. It was, unfortunately, a telling sign that no ordinary man had snuck his way into the manor, but it couldn't be helped.

Still, Clark smiled to himself. In the massive mansion, it would be easy to hide and bide his time until the moment was perfectly right to complete his assignment. He didn't even need to find a place to conceal himself. With all of the excitement happening on the main level of the manor, Clark could be fairly secure and hidden on the upper levels. He chose to stay in the study, though he tucked himself away in the darkest corner he could find, back behind a towering bookshelf.

For more than an hour, he stayed put, crouched in the shadows, listening to the event on the main floor. After a while, it became clear just what was going on. Bruce Wayne, the world's most famous orphan, was throwing his yearly Christmas party for Gotham's orphan boys and girls – kids that otherwise might have gone without a Christmas gift or a reason to celebrate at all. It was no secret that some of the city's orphanages were strapped for money and unable to provide “unnecessary” luxuries like holiday gifts. Clark frowned when he realized what was going on. Surely, a man who did things like throw parties and dress up like Santa for underprivileged kids couldn't be a bad guy. But orders were orders, and Bruce was Lex's biggest business rival.

*No hard feelings, Bruce*, Clark thought to himself as he waited for his chance to strike. *It's just business.*

Gradually, the party began to wind down. It seemed that groups of kids, from the various orphanages around town, packed up their gifts and boarded buses and vans that arrived to bring them back to their pauper's homes. Clark felt a certain empathy for them. If not for Lionel and Letitia Luthor, he probably would have grown up in an orphanage too, if being exposed to the elements hadn't killed his vulnerable infant self. If not for Lex, he could have easily wound up on the streets after the fire that had destroyed their home and killed his adoptive parents in the same blow.

*No kid deserves a life without parents to love them. No kid should ever have to wonder if some family will be kind enough to open their hearts and doors to them.*

But that glimmer of sympathy for the kids changed nothing. Though he knew Bruce himself had been orphaned at a young age, Clark felt nothing for his target. The billionaire would simply become one more meaningless notch on Clark's deadly belt.

Clark felt the weight of the hidden blade he wore on his right wrist, under the long black sleeves of his assassin's uniform. He always wore it when heading out to make a kill, but he seldom had to use it. That suited him just fine. He preferred to take lives without shedding blood as often as was possible. He didn't much care for the metallic stench of human blood as it assaulted his sensitive nostrils. He disliked how messy a spurting artery

became. Being covered in the sticky red life fluid of another revolted him in an abstract way. He felt nothing for his victims, but yet, he hated knowing that he'd been the one to end their life. Yes, he hated being Lex's messenger of death, but he owed his brother his life and so he swallowed down his feelings. He would kill for as long as he needed to, and force himself to feel nothing at all. Not horror over his actions. Not pride for a job done successfully. Neither pity nor remorse for the lives he took. Nothing but a deadly purposefulness that, perhaps one day, he'd be able to shed so that he could integrate himself into normal society.

Now he released the spring and let the blade shoot forth, out of his sleeve. He fingered the sleek, slender, razor-sharp metal, taking a certain bit of comfort in the blade. He'd been wearing the device for so long that he could scarcely recall what it was like to be a carefree child who didn't need to worry himself about slicing people's throats. He rarely had use for the hidden blade; he was almost always able to use his powers to kill his targets, and always strove to make it look like an accident, rather than a precisely carried out murder. But sometimes he found himself in situations where a sliced throat or stab through the heart got the job done easier. And, sometimes, Lex *demand*ed that a job be done in as brutal a manner as Clark could manage. It was rare, and the target usually had to have done something extraordinary to piss off Lex, but it had happened. Clark hated those jobs the most, but he did them without complaint. He would never show any weakness to Lex.

He retracted the blade and set the spring lock, wondering idly how things would go tonight. A thousand scenarios ran through Clark's mind. Perhaps Bruce would want to take in a few moments of fresh air. Clark could easily freeze the man with his icy breath and it would be assumed the billionaire fell and froze to death in the plummeting temperature. Or maybe he would take a bath and Clark could drown him, like he'd done to Arthur Chow. Perhaps Bruce would come into the study where Clark was hidden, and Clark would be forced to use the hidden blade. Maybe he would fall asleep in the armchair by the fire. Clark was already acutely aware of how one little stray spark could set a room ablaze and trap those within. Bruce could choose to take in some fresh air from his balcony and "slip" in the snow, tumbling over the railing to his tragic demise. It all depended on what Bruce would do. Clark didn't mind. He was flexible and quick to adapt to whatever situation presented itself.

"Okay, Alfred, that's the last of them. We can lock up the manor and get some rest," he heard Bruce say, thanks to his exceptional hearing.

"Very good, sir. What shall I have the caterers do with the leftovers?" came a lightly accented, British voice.

"Divide it up. Have them bring the leftovers to as many soup kitchens as they can manage."

"Anything you'd like to keep for yourself, Master Bruce?"

"Maybe one slice of cake. I spent so long playing the part of Santa, I didn't get a bite. But only one slice. The rest can go with the remaining dinner items," Bruce said dismissively, his voice thick with exhaustion.

"As you wish," the butler replied.

"Thanks, Alfred. I'm going to head upstairs. Everyone's been paid already. Once they're done, you can retire to your quarters if you'd like. I'm not planning on going out tonight."

"I'm not surprised," the older man said. "You've been out every night for the last two weeks. You need a break."

"I wish I *could* go out. But the weather is supposed to get bad, and, while I wouldn't normally worry about it, I'm pretty beat from tonight," Bruce replied, a heavy sigh in his voice. "It was worth it though."

"Yes, it was," Alfred replied in a soft tone. "The children seemed to have had a wonderful time tonight."

"They did," Bruce confirmed. He sighed again. "It always nice, to have the house filled with laughter."

"Indeed, sir." The butler paused. "Perhaps... if I may be so bold as to point out... you and Miss Vale..."

"No," Bruce said firmly. "That ship has sailed, Alfred. She's not able to accept who I really am, and I'm too set into my work to stop doing what I do."

"Of course, sir," came the disappointed reply. "I'll see to the cleanup. Have a good night, Master Bruce."

"Thanks, Alfred," Bruce said tiredly. "See you in the morning."

*So you think*, Clark's mind hissed dangerously as he readied himself to move on the kill, just as soon as he knew where Bruce was heading.

Of course, he had to exercise extreme caution. He couldn't make any noise – or allow Bruce to make any noise – that would attract the attention of the crew cleaning up from the party. Even if Bruce was in the perfect position for Clark to kill him, if there was *any* chance he might be seen, he would have to let the opportunity pass until he knew there was a zero percent chance of alerting the others to what was going on.

Footsteps.

Footsteps coming up the grand staircase of the manor.

Clark held his breath, waiting and listening.

Footsteps continuing to climb upward.

Clark stood in a half-crouch, ready to engage his hidden blade if it came to it.

Footsteps coming down the hallway.

The doorknob to the study turned. Clark heard a stifled yawn as the door silently swung open. In a flash, Clark was behind the door, a burst of his super speed getting him to his destination before it could fully swing open. The light switch was thrown to the 'on' position and the overhead lights brightened the darkened room.

"What the...?" the man said as he saw the glass from the skylight.

But that was all he got out before Clark was on him, the hidden blade being driven into the side of the man's skull, piercing the brain and killing him instantly. In less than two seconds from the time the lights had been turned on, it was over, and the lifeless body was slumped in Clark's arms. It happened so quickly and on such pure instinct, that it was only when Clark laid the body down that he realized it wasn't Bruce Wayne. It wasn't even the butler.

"Oh no," Clark whispered in horror as he gazed upon the young man – no older than himself.

"Hey, Jason," called Bruce's voice from down the hall and coming closer with every sickened beat of Clark's heart. "Did you find the book I left out on the desk for you?"

Clark knew he was about to be caught, but the sight of the dead teenager on the floor froze him in his tracks.

"What have I done?" he whispered in a choked voice.

This wasn't supposed to happen! Clark had been ordered to kill Bruce Wayne and Alfred Pennyworth. Not some random teenager. Not someone who was Clark's peer.

*What was he doing here?* his brain screamed in dismay. *He wasn't supposed to be here! He wasn't supposed to die!*

For the first time in a long time, Clark felt almost nauseous over his kill. Blood leaked from the hole in the young man's skull. Bits of brain matter and sticky red blood clung to Clark's hidden blade, revolting him down to his very core. He had to fight the urge to rip the damned blade from his arm and throw it across the room. But that would leave evidence behind. While Clark was a ghost in that not a single person outside of Lex and a scant few trusted personnel knew of his existence, the blade had his fingerprints on it. He always wore gloves on a mission, but he'd never felt the need to wear them back in the safety of Lex Tower when he cleaned and cared for his blade, nor did he ever put on his

gloves until after the apparatus keeping the blade hidden beneath his sleeves was strapped on tightly.

He had to move, he knew that. But he couldn't. He was transfixed by the awful thing he'd just done. For a moment, the body – still leaking blood and destroyed brain tissue – was all that mattered.

"Jason?" the voice called again, and Clark was dimly aware of how dangerously close to the study Bruce was now. "Jason?"

What happened next would forever embed itself into Clark's memory as fractured moments of single actions, like puzzle pieces too scattered and misshapen to fit together into one cohesive picture.

Footsteps, just outside the open door.

A strangled gasp of horror.

A body, throwing itself at Clark.

Clark's body, finally jolting into action.

Meaning to bolt away, out the door, and outside the manor at top speed.

His body leaving the floor as he levitated in midair.

A lightning strike of wonderment and fear in his mind as he realized he was floating.

The surge of adrenaline that sent Clark zooming upwards, out through the open skylight, into the thick snow-filled clouds above the manor.

Hovering there for a long minute, trying to catch his breath and attempting to wrap his head around what had just happened.

His emotions at war – his disgust at having killed someone who had never been meant to die that night mixed with his awe and elation at how natural it felt to be flying, and a healthy dose of fear that he'd been caught at the scene of a murder for the first time in his life.

Clark shook his head, trying to clear it so that he could think straight and plan his next move. He considered going back into the manor and finishing the job Lex had sent him to do, but he could already hear police sirens blaring in the night. A few flashes of red and blue lights were getting close to Wayne Manor. Clark knew he was fast and could probably finish the job before the police arrived, but he didn't want to risk having to needlessly kill other innocents that night. Once – mistake that it was – was enough for Clark. Though Bruce would be on high alert for a while, Clark would have to return at another time to complete his mission.

"Lex isn't going to be happy," he said to himself, his breath frosting out before him in a ghostly white puff.

But, as angry as Lex would be, Clark knew it was better if he didn't return to Wayne Manor. He swore to himself that he would make things right, somehow. And part of that was not allowing the police to see him there. He couldn't afford to possibly be identified and traced to Lex.

He was doing the only thing that he could. Lex would understand that, wouldn't he?

Clark took a moment to calm his racing thoughts, then grinned.

"I'm flying," he said in awe. "I'm actually *flying*."

His newest power delighted him. And he wondered, even if just for a moment if he should use it to his advantage. If things turned out badly when he reported back to Lex, he could perhaps rectify the situation by showing his brother how even more valuable he was now that he could defy gravity.

"And, if that doesn't work," Clark said to himself, "he can't stop me from flying off whenever I want. I can see the world each night when he sleeps. I could even vanish for good, if I wanted to."

The thought was intriguing. While he still felt like he owed Lex his life, killing the teenager tonight had Clark feeling like maybe some of his debt had been lifted. Clark had made Lex swear to him that he would never have to kill someone who didn't deserve to die, even though Clark acknowledged to himself that

Lex often played fast and loose with the "deserving" criteria.

The first police cruisers turned onto the Wayne estate now, and Clark – hidden as he was in the clouds – felt exposed. He angled himself toward Metropolis and flew through the storm, in as fast and straight a course as an arrow loosed from a bowstring. He paid careful attention to his speed, keeping it fast enough to be practically invisible to the naked eye but slow enough not to tear the air apart in a sonic boom. He made a beeline for Lex Tower and landed lightly on the balcony of his brother's office.

Lex was at work, reading over a pile of contracts, marking things he wanted to change or signing his name to ones he approved off. Clark watched for a couple of minutes, gathering his courage to give his brother the bad news. Then he gently rapped his knuckles against the door, startling Lex.

Lex dropped the paper in his hand in surprise, then swiveled around to investigate the source of the unexpected sound. A look of confusion overtook his surprise when he caught sight of Clark. He stood uncertainly, then went and opened the lock on the balcony doors. He watched mutely as Clark strode inside and took a seat. For his part, Clark delighted in seeing his brother speechless for once – especially knowing how likely it was that Lex would erupt with anger once he heard about the botched assassination attempt. Once Clark was settled, Lex closed and locked the doors again, then sat in his own chair. He folded his hands before him on the desk and stared, wide-eyed, at Clark, though he'd managed to bring his features back into a more overall neutral expression.

"I know, I know," Clark said after a moment of oppressive, expectant silence. "How did I get to the balcony, right?"

Lex nodded once. "An explanation *is* in order."

Clark shrugged. "Apparently, I can fly now."

"Fly?" Lex scoffed.

Instead of answering with words, Clark allowed himself to float up off the couch, around the room, and then lightly landed back in his seat.

"I see," Lex said tonelessly. "And this has been since...when, exactly?"

"Since tonight," Clark replied vaguely.

"I see," Lex repeated. He paused, then cut straight to the chase. "And I assume I'll be reading about Bruce Wayne's demise in the morning paper?"

"Uh...well..." Clark stammered, scratching at his left ear.

"You *did* kill him, didn't you?" Lex asked, his voice going deadly cold.

"Not exactly."

Lex's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What do you mean, 'not exactly?' Your mission was to kill him, as well as the butler?"

"I know. But it got...complicated," Clark tried to explain, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"Complicated? It should have been simple, for someone with your abilities," Lex challenged in a hiss.

Clark nodded in acknowledgment. "Under normal circumstances, yes. But his home was filled with kids when I arrived. I overheard it said that it was a Christmas party for all the orphaned kids in the city."

"And?" Lex asked, unfazed and unimpressed.

"So what was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to get the job done, no matter what," Lex said, his neck muscles bulging as he fought to keep from yelling.

"Bruce was dressed up like Santa Claus, handing out gifts, Lex! What was I supposed to do? Go in there and blast Santa to bits with my heat vision, in front of all the kids? For Christ's sake, Lex! I know I'm a killer, but I'm not sadistic!"

"No, you moron," Lex shot back. "You were supposed to wait until the coast was clear, *then* blast Bruce Wayne into oblivion."

"I tried that!" Clark replied heatedly. "I thought I had the drop on him. I wound up killing some kid about my age instead! Bruce

caught me red-handed. Maybe he couldn't see my face, but...I got out of there, as fast as I could. That's when I discovered that I can fly."

"You mean he was *right there in front of you* and you *still* managed not to kill him?" Lex erupted fiercely, ignoring Clark's obvious distress over having killed the wrong man.

Clark was struck incredulous. He knew his face mirrored his inner pain, and yet Lex only cared that Bruce had been allowed to live, not that an innocent man had died. But he dared not bring that up to Lex.

"I...I got a little...out of sorts, killing the wrong person," he admitted carefully. "By the time I'd calmed down, the police were turning onto the estate grounds. I didn't think it was smart to tempt fate. I mean, what if something happened and the police figured out who was behind the murder plot? What if they'd traced it to you? I couldn't risk it."

Lex pinched the bridge of his nose. "You are truly worthless, you know that? I could have done a hundred different things to get the police off my tracks. But now Bruce Wayne knows *someone* is after him. He'll disappear, mark my words. We may not get another shot to eliminate him."

"We'll find him again," Clark vowed. "Now that I can fly, I can search the entire globe if I have to."

"So you can do what, exactly? Let him go again after you kill the wrong person?" Lex taunted.

The words were a slap in Clark's face. But perhaps he deserved it. His hesitation had cost him valuable seconds. His inner turmoil had prevented him from making the most out of the time he'd had between the discovery of the murder and when the police had arrived at Wayne Manor. He should have gone back in and finished the job. He could have moved with a speed that would have prevented Bruce from ever knowing what had hit him. But...he hadn't. He'd hidden in a cloud like a coward, berating himself for killing that teenager.

"I'll make it right," Clark said in a near-whisper, more for his own benefit than Lex's.

"Damn right you will, *if* we can find Bruce Wayne again," Lex growled.

A knock sounded at the door. A look of annoyance crossed Lex's face as he glared at the door. But, after a moment, he called out.

"Come in!"

The door opened the tiniest crack. "I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but your package has arrived."

Some of Lex's irritation melted away. "Ah, Nigel, yes. Do come in."

"You want me to leave?" Clark asked, praying the answer was yes. He started to rise from his chair.

Lex gave him a withering look. "I'm not finished with you yet."

Clark sat back down, waiting silently. Nigel strode in confidently, holding a wooden box before him. Lex beckoned his old friend in, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Nigel quickened his pace only marginally, retaining a very proper walk as he made for Lex's desk.

"Thank you, Nigel," Lex said, eyeing the box greedily.

"My pleasure, sir."

"And the messenger?" Lex inquired.

"Already *paid*," Nigel said, in a way that suggested to Clark that death, rather than money, had been doled out.

"Excellent," Lex said with a satisfied nod. He reached for the box but didn't open it right away. Instead, he ran his hands over the varnished cherry colored surface, a look of triumph and expectancy in his features. "Have you opened it?" he asked Nigel.

The older man shook his head. "No, sir. I thought it best that *you* have that privilege." He produced a key from his pocket and handed it over to Lex.

Lex took it graciously and fit it into the inset lock on the box. "What's in there?" Clark asked, not bothering with his X-ray vision.

"A gem," Lex said, choosing to indulge Clark enough to answer his question.

"A...gem?" Clark almost laughed. "You're excited about a *gem*? Don't you own enough sparkly rocks, brother?"

Lex shook his head, still gazing at the box, his eyes not even flickering to Clark. "Not like this one."

"What does it do? Create a renewable energy source?" Clark jested cockily. "Cure cancer?"

"It's a rare find," Lex said seriously, pausing just long enough to give Clark a sour look. "It's an unknown rock, never before seen anywhere. Possibly the only one of its kind, though I have my contacts searching for more."

"You won't have many more contacts if you keep killing them," Clark smugly pointed out.

"That wasn't one of *my* contacts," Lex said flatly. "That was some street thug who thought he could extort a large sum of money from me."

"Ah," Clark said in mock understanding.

"You know, for someone who screwed up as badly as you did tonight, you've got a lot of nerve giving *me* lip," Lex growled dangerously.

"Okay, okay, sorry," Clark said throwing his hands up in surrender. "Go on, open the box. Let's see this mystery jewel of yours."

Lex eyed him for a long moment, as if daring Clark to say another word. Clark didn't give him the satisfaction of saying anything, robbing Lex of his excuse to rip into Clark a little more. Finally, Lex turned the key in the lock and opened the lid of the box. He reached in, eyes wide with glee, and lifted the glowing green stone from the crushed velvet cushioning within.

Instantly, Clark felt a brutally intense sensation of pain assault his entire body. It was like a thousand flaming knives thrust into his brain. It felt like his very flesh was being flayed away from his bones. It felt like every nerve ending was sent ablaze and like every organ in his body was being torn to shreds. His strength bled out of his body from a hundred unseen wounds. Nausea roiled in Clark's stomach and he pitched forward in his chair, wishing he could throw up but finding even that small task outside the realm of his abilities. The edges of his vision blackened, narrowing his field of view to something only slightly bigger than pinpricks.

"Lex!" he gasped as an invisible vice clamped shut around his lungs, squeezing the breath from him. "Close...box..."

As his body spasmed and curled involuntarily into a fetal position, Clark's world went black.

Lex looked down at Clark's unconscious body in surprise. Then he looked appraisingly at the chunk of rock he held in his hand. A grim smile contorted his face into a thrilled look of approval as a thought occurred to him.

"Nigel," he said at length, tucking the stone away again. "Find out everything you can on this rock. And get me as much of it as can be humanly found. Spare no expense."

\*\*\*

"Ugh," Clark said as he slowly floated back to consciousness. Everything hurt. His head was ringing so loudly that it drowned out any other sound. His vision was blurry and he feared that permanent damage had been done to his eyes. What would he do if he were to be blind now? He tried to move and his ribs exploded in pain as he tried to draw a deeper breath. His limbs refused to cooperate and lay unmoving, like dead things.

He closed his eyes and drifted away again before a sound jarred him back to the world around him. He creaked open his eyes again, noting with relief that he could actually see now. Dimly, he was aware that some of the buzzing haze of agony in his head had tapered off, though not completely. In the back of his

mind, even as disoriented and aching as he was, he was aware some time had passed, though he had no idea how long that might have been. A stab of pain lanced through his head and he gingerly reached up to cradle it with his hands.

“Oh, my head. What...what happened?”

“You passed out,” Lex said neutrally, looking down on him.

“You don’t say,” Clark quipped back sarcastically as he weakly pulled himself up to sit. “You opened that box and...” His eyes widened as the memory flashed back to him. The box had opened. The stone had been exposed. And he had felt the flaming fingers of death wrap around his entire body. “It was that stone!” He worriedly scooted back away from Lex’s desk as best he could, but he still felt like all his limbs had turned to jelly.

“It appears so,” Lex confirmed coolly. “And how do you feel now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Not sure?” Lex asked with a mocking frown.

“I...uh...” Clark stammered.

He didn’t want to admit how much the stone had injured him. Lex was brilliant about using people’s weaknesses against them. But he also knew how shrewd Lex was. If he didn’t admit *everything*, Lex would find out and punish him. Perhaps even experiment with that stone some more to figure out its *exact* effects on Clark’s body.

“Come now, Clark,” Lex cajoled. “Lying to me will get you nowhere.”

He swallowed hard before answering. “I feel...weak. Like... like something inside me is missing. I...think my powers are... gone.”

“I see,” was all Lex said. Then, a few seconds later, “Can you stand?”

“I...maybe,” Clark said uncertainly. He attempted to stand up and found it just barely within the realm of his abilities. He held on to the back of his chair to steady himself.

Lex eyed him with a steely look. “Go,” he finally said, dismissing Clark. “We’ll discuss your failure today at another time. I have pressing matters to attend to.”

Clark nodded once, eager to be out of the room, away from Lex’s ire and away from that deadly green rock. Carefully, he made his way back out of the office, taking it easy on his still sore and drained body. The walk back to his quarters seemed to take forever, but every step away from that accursed box was a relief to him. By then, he was feeling mildly stronger, so he stripped out of his assassin’s garb, cleaned the dried blood of the innocent boy from his hidden blade, set the entire bracer aside, showered as quickly as his body allowed him to, and dressed in fresh, clean clothing.

He lay down on his bed, stretched out on his back to his full length, and folded his hands beneath his head. He stared up at the ceiling for a long time, thinking about the strange green rock Lex had taken from that box. He needed to know more about it since it appeared to pose a deadly, poisonous threat to him. But Lex had said no one knew anything about it. Still, Clark knew his life could depend on learning what he could about it. Like why had it affected him, and not Lex or Nigel? Why had the stone seemed to glow? Where had it been found? Was it something from Earth, or did it come from somewhere else? Would it kill him, if he was exposed to it for too long? Would he ever get his powers back, or had the stone sapped them away forever?

Clark turned these questions over and over in his mind until he finally fell asleep. Even though he had no answers for any of them, it *did* accomplish at least one important goal. It kept his mind far too busy for him to brood over the innocent life he’d taken that night.

\*\*\*

Weeks went by. Though Lex gave Clark hell about the botched hit on Bruce Wayne at first, gradually, he went silent on the matter.

Clark was relieved beyond words. The less he heard about the job, the better, as far as he was concerned. The boy’s death still weighed heavily on his mind. He tried not to think about it, tried not to question why one stranger’s death should bother him more than all the other strangers he’d killed without a thought over the years. What he really wanted to focus on was that odd green rock Lex had, but Lex claimed he knew nothing much about it, and Clark was forced to remain in the dark, though it haunted him to know that something might have the potential to kill him.

Instead of getting answers, Clark was forced to prowl around Lex Tower in frustration. At first, his powers were gone, taking a couple of days to return in full. After that, Clark was a little nervous to even *attempt* to fly around the city, lest he somehow come across more of that weird rock and drop from the sky like a boulder.

“Clark?” Lex called out to him one evening, as a wicked snowstorm laid siege to the city, blanketing everything in frigid white, and driving even the most daring of people indoors.

Clark looked up from the book he was reading as he lay stretched out on the couch. “Yeah?”

“Come to my study, would you? I’ve had that rock tested. You remember? The one that weakened you?”

Clark perked up, shutting the book and placing it next to him on the couch cushions. “Yeah?” he repeated, this time with interest.

“I thought you might like to know what the results were,” Lex offered.

“Absolutely. I’ve never experienced anything like that before. It...it was terrifying.”

“I can imagine,” Lex said, the barest patina of sympathy in his voice. Then he turned and walked toward his study.

Clark scrambled off the couch and followed his brother.

“Sit,” Lex offered, sweeping his hand toward the chair where Clark usually sat when reporting on how a job went.

Clark sat uneasily, eyeing the lead box on the side table next to Lex’s chair. He waited for Lex to sit, but his brother remained standing, looking into the flames burning in the hearth.

“As you may have guessed by now,” Lex began, not turning away from the fire’s warmth and light, “that was no ordinary gem.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Clark allowed.

“In fact,” Lex continued, as though Clark hadn’t spoken, “it wasn’t a gem at all. It turns out, it was something not from this planet. From what my people at Lex Labs can tell, it’s a meteorite.”

“So...it’s a space rock?” Clark asked, arching an eyebrow.

Lex nodded and circled his chair, as if lost in thought. “In crude terms, yes. But it’s not like any meteorite that’s ever been found. For one, it’s not made of metals, but is, instead, stone. It’s also highly radioactive. But it seems to have no effect on humans at all. So far, *you’re* the only one it’s negatively affected.”

“Lucky me,” Clark said, sarcasm dripping heavily from his tongue.

“The makeup of the rock is all wrong,” Lex went on, gesturing vaguely, but expansively. “Their best guess is that it didn’t come from one of the normal meteors that pass through our atmosphere on occasion. They believe it could be from somewhere else.” He paced to the fireplace and looked into the cold, dead hearth. “Perhaps a dead world, from outside our solar system. They theorize that some alien planet may have been impacted by another, larger body of rock. Or perhaps it exploded for some reason. Perhaps it was a moon that collided with another. In any case, pieces of that world made their way here, to Earth, to get trapped in our gravitational pull.”

Clark swallowed down a lump of unease. “Okay,” he said, picturing pieces of green space rock hurtling through the universe to come down to Earth to wreak havoc on his life.

“Personally, I believe it may have been from your planet of origin,” Lex said coolly, looking back over his shoulder at Clark. “It would explain why it affects only you, at any rate.”

“Krypton,” Clark breathed, remembering the story he’d been told, of alien parents who’d shipped off an unwanted son to survive on his own on Earth.

Lex simply nodded as he turned back to fully face him again. “I’ve named the stone Kryptonite, for that reason. A piece of a far-off world come crashing down to Earth.” He started to move again, his movements quick and almost excited.

Clark should have questioned what had his brother so worked up. He should have been suspicious of Lex’s almost giddy excitement. But his mind was in another place.

He wasn’t sure how to react to the news about the stone. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be feeling. On the one hand, it was a piece of the world he’d been born on, a tangible piece of his origins, a piece of his history, perhaps holding on to secrets and answers to all the questions he’d ever had about the planet that had given him life. On the other hand, he couldn’t get near the rock without it poisoning him. He’d never be able to get close enough to study it, not without it being locked away from his touch.

Lex eyed him questioningly. “What?” he asked after a moment, still on the move, still circling in an almost predatory way. “I know that look. Something’s on your mind.”

“It’s just... a lot to take in. I finally have a piece of my origins and I can’t even get near it without it killing me,” Clark replied, his heart heavy.

Lex hummed in understanding. “It *is* unfortunate,” he said, in a way that made it sound like a blessing for himself. He stopped his aimless meandering and went, instead, to the box on the side table. He paused then and contemplated the lid for a moment. “And that’s why I’ve had this made up for you.”

He opened the lid and extracted a thick band of metal, a perfect circle with a hinge on one end to allow it to open. He held it before him, inspecting it with a critical eye. He took a step toward Clark, his eyes never leaving the shiny, polished silver surface.

“What is it?” Clark asked nervously standing. It took all his effort not to back away from his brother. But every cell of his body was screaming at him to do just that.

“Insurance,” Lex said with a twisted grin, closing the gap between himself and Clark.

Before Clark could register what was happening, Lex snapped the band of metal around Clark’s neck. From his pocket, he extracted a small remote, pressed a button, and, with a grin, locked the collar around Clark’s neck.

“Lex?” Clark asked, fighting down panic. “What is this?” He instinctively threw his hands up to the collar, ready to tear the metal away from his throat with his immense strength.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Lex said with a deadly calm voice.

Clark immediately stopped moving, but kept his hands on the metal. “What did you do to me?” he demanded.

Lex stepped up and backhanded Clark across his mouth. It had to have hurt him, but Lex didn’t even flinch.

“Don’t you *ever* talk back to me again,” Lex ordered in a half yell, half growl.

The stress of the botched assassination, the terror of being faced with his own mortality from the Kryptonite, and the frustration of being cooped up indoors for the past few weeks gave Clark courage. He bristled at Lex’s rebuke and puffed himself out to his full height and size.

“Let’s not forget, *brother*; that I’m the one with the powers here. And I’m getting *sick and tired* of you treating me the way you do,” Clark said, taking a threatening step toward Lex.

Lex deftly stepped back, remaining calm and collected,

frustrating Clark even more.

“No,” Lex said, “*you* are the one forgetting. I am the *only* reason you aren’t rotting in some prison for killing my parents! You don’t get to threaten me, *ever*.”

Clark tried to cool himself down and raked a hand through his hair. “Maybe it’s time we parted ways then, Lex. I can’t keep going like I am. Locked indoors. Sent on murder missions. Having these powers that I can only use to destroy people.” He sighed. “I know we talked about me getting a little more freedom. And I know, yes, I messed up at Wayne Manor. But maybe...” His voice trailed off, allowing Lex to fill in the rest himself.

Lex chuckled malevolently. “Don’t you understand, Clark? You will *never* be free.” He gestured to the collar around Clark’s neck. “That’s what this little beauty is. So long as you do what I want, the way I want it, when I want it, you’re safe. Displease me, like another Bruce Wayne debacle, and, well...”

He pressed a button on his remote and thin vents opened up all around the ring of the collar. Clark instantly felt the ravaging effects of Kryptonite, even before the vents were fully opened. He collapsed to the floor in abject agony. After a moment, Lex used the remote to close the vents again, ending the assault of pain.

“In case you haven’t guessed,” Lex said, squatting down beside Clark, grabbing his chin and forcing him to look at him, “the entire core of this collar is made up of Kryptonite. Try to tear it off, you’ll expose the stone. Try to run...or fly...away, I’ll open the vents and leave them open. Better to have a *dead* brother than a living threat. Fail to complete an assignment, I open the vents. Try to mess with the remote, and the satellites it is synced to will open the vents. Only my biometrics are programmed into it. Not even your precious heat vision can be used on the remote without it triggering the failsafe.”

Lex let go of Clark’s chin and stood to his full height again. “From now on, you will wear a camera and a headset whenever you step foot outside this penthouse. Fail to do so, and I will open the vents and let the Kryptonite kill you. I will watch every moment and every action you take when you are on a mission. Do I make myself perfectly clear?” The words came out as violent hisses punctuated by heavy pauses, as though each word were a different statement altogether.

It was all Clark could do to nod. “Crystal clear,” he said through gritted teeth – partly from the residual pain in his body, but mostly from the anger and hatred that had welled up in his heart.

“Good. Now, rest up. Pretty soon I’ll have jobs for you to complete,” Lex said, turning his back and leaving Clark crumpled in a heap on the floor, like a pile of discarded laundry.

\*\*\*

Days turned to months. Months turned to years. And still Clark found himself at his brother’s mercy - forced to wear that accursed collar, day in and day out, never getting a respite from it. He hardly noticed the weight of it anymore. It was no different to him than wearing a turtleneck sweater or a scarf around his neck. He barely even looked at it anymore. Not when he stood, fully naked, in front of his full-length mirror after a shower. Not when he checked his appearance when he dressed for the day. Not when he caught glimpses of his reflection in skyscraper windows as he flew off to make his next kill. He no longer took note of how hot or cold the metal became in the elements.

And yet, he was terrifyingly *aware* of the collar’s presence at all times. Each time he wondered if he could find a way to break free of Lex’s control, the memory of the Kryptonite’s deadly poison attacking his body would surface in his mind. Clark’s heart rate would spike, and a sheen of nervous sweat would pop up on his brow while a cold shiver ran down his spine. He dared not risk doing anything to expose the radioactive stone core of the collar.

Only once did that collar come off. As Clark grew from a gangly, but powerful, teen into a well-muscled and broader man,

Lex had a new collar made – this one bigger around so that it didn't choke Clark, though Clark suspected that Lex was more fearful that Clark's neck muscles would strain the steel ring too badly and accidentally expose the Kryptonite inside in the middle of an assassination. Clark didn't care what the reasoning was, so long as the metal wasn't pressing into his windpipe any longer. He even submitted himself to the rock's deadly effects on him while Lex opened the old collar, exposed the Kryptonite, and inserted the stone plus a little extra into the new collar. The transfer didn't last long, but, for Clark, the exchange felt like it lasted for eons. It had been almost a relief when the new collar was snapped shut around his neck – a new control method for Lex's personal slave. Slave.

Clark knew that was all he was. He was no longer Lex's little brother, if indeed he'd ever truly been – and Clark wondered daily if that had *ever* been the case. He was no longer a Luthor at all. He was a nobody, a nothing, a possession that Lex took a perverse thrill in owning and siccing on whoever he wished – even innocent people, just because Clark had no choice but to kill them, lest he be killed instead.

He hated it.

His very existence became a nightmare.

He still didn't allow himself to feel anything when making a kill. It was important that he didn't. Without that emotional block in place, he knew he would have gone insane long ago.

And yet, he dared not try and escape. He knew only too well that Lex would make good on his threat to open the vents on the collar and let the Kryptonite core do its deadly work. He didn't want to die – at least, *most of the time*. There were plenty of nights when Clark went to bed, hoping against hope that he would die in his sleep so that he would finally be free from his life as enslaved assassin. From time to time, he even half-contemplated doing something to make Lex follow through on his promise to kill him, but it was never a serious thought. He feared the Kryptonite with every fiber of his being. He *never* wanted to experience pain like that *ever* again. It terrified him beyond the point of words. No, he couldn't allow the radioactive piece of his home world to kill him. He wished he was more like a normal person and able to swallow down an entire bottle of pills, slip into a coma, and pass peacefully from this mortal realm. But, of course, his extraterrestrial roots denied him that. He was stuck, indefinitely, as Lex's personal assassin.

"Clark, I have an errand for you to run," Lex said, early one spring evening.

"An errand?" Clark replied, weary skepticism in his voice. He knew what Lex *really* meant. He wasn't being sent to pick up a gallon of milk at the store. It was time to murder someone.

Lex nodded calmly. "Yes."

"Who's the mark?" Clark asked with a tired sigh.

Lex eyed him critically. "Something the matter?" he asked, a hard edge to his words.

Clark sighed again. "Does it *really* matter?" he wondered aloud.

Lex's eyes narrowed. "Tell me," he commanded, folding his arms across his chest.

"It's nothing," Clark said sharply. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. "I'm just sick and tired of killing people for you. How many years has it been now? I'm *twenty-eight*, Lex! I've been your personal assassin my entire adult life *and* most of my teenage years."

"What's your point?" Lex asked, in a voice devoid of any compassion and almost daring Clark to answer.

Clark shook his head, toying with the idea of answering Lex's question or if he should try to let the subject die. But the expectant look on Lex's face squashed any hope he had that his "brother" would allow him to keep his silence. He saw the movement as Lex brushed a finger outside of the pocket where he kept the collar's

remote control. Clark slumped his shoulders a little, feeling defeated before he even began to respond. He took a steady breath and hoped his answer wouldn't anger Lex too badly.

"I'm just...mentally burned out," he admitted. "I've been killing for so long, Lex. How many more people can you *possibly* have a vendetta against?"

"That is *not* your concern," Lex growled back. "You are a *nobody*, do you understand? The *only* reason you're still alive is through *my* good graces."

"No, I'm alive because I'm *valuable* to you," Clark countered, his voice steely.

"Yes, you have certain *merits*," Lex allowed dangerously. "And the *second* you aren't useful anymore..." His voice trailed off, letting the implications and threat hang unvoiced in the air. "I suggest you continue being *useful*," Lex added after a moment.

"Who's the mark?" Clark asked again defeatedly, watching with nervous eyes as Lex felt for the remote to the collar, which never left his pocket.

"A doctor," Lex said simply, gauging Clark's level of compliance.

"A doctor?" Clark repeated, confused.

"Not just any doctor," Lex clarified. "Actually, a doctor and nurse team."

A thought occurred to Clark. He motioned to Lex. "You don't mean the ones responsible for..." He couldn't finish his statement as fear of Lex's temper froze his vocal chords.

"My permanent hair loss?" Lex supplied. "Yes."

"But...but...but," Clark stammered. "They *said* the treatment was experimental! They laid out all the risks to you. *Including* baldness. Lex...you had *cancer!* They *saved your life!*" Clark rambled on, desperately trying to talk some sense into the man who'd once been his brother.

Lex ignored the protest completely. "You will find and kill Dr. Samuel Lane. And his nurse, Ellen Lane. Or there won't be a treatment on Earth that will be able to save your pathetic excuse for a life."

"Lex, please," Clark began to beg. "Those people...you've been cured for three years now. Three years you may not have had, if not for their treatment. They took a chance on you when everyone else said your cancer was too advanced and spreading too quickly for them to treat it. So what if it left you permanently bald? You have your *life*, Lex. Isn't that more important?"

"Yes, I have my life. But my dignity?" Lex shot back, a dark look pinching his features tight.

"Dignity?" Clark asked quizzically. "Lex, no one thinks any less of you for being bald," he reasoned, wishing he could find a way to make Lex change his mind about the hit. "There are *plenty* of people out there who are bald – by choice or not – who people respect. You're no different. You're one of the richest people on this planet! People would give up anything to be you! There are women out there who would stop at nothing just to climb into your bed! No one cares if you have hair or not, Lex."

"I care," was the ice-cold response. "In a few week's time, I'm to announce my bid for the presidency. I need all of this taken care of before then. A tragic accident *before* I ask the country to rally around me and make me their leader."

"But, Lex..."

"Enough! One more word and I'll leave you writhing on the floor for the next half hour," Lex threatened. "It's all the same to me if you get a taste of the Kryptonite or not. You're still going to do what I've commanded if you don't want to wind up in a shallow grave somewhere."

Clark clenched his jaw so tightly it made his teeth ache and he thought that surely, he might pop a vein. But he forced himself to submit to his master's wishes.

"Fine," he growled through locked teeth. "When?"

"Tonight. My sources say the good doctor and his wife are

working a late shift at the hospital. Wait until they are alone, then eliminate them.” Lex turned to leave Clark to get himself ready for the night’s work. He took one step and stopped, but didn’t turn back. “Oh, and Clark?”

“Yes?” Clark forced himself to say.

“You’re going soft. The Clark I once knew was much tougher. He would have never hesitated to see a job done.” Cold criticism was in Lex’s voice. “He would not have dared to ask me to spare the lives of people who took something – *anything* – from me. See that the old Clark returns, or else…”

He let the rest go unfinished as he reached into his pocket. Clark saw his intentions too late. The vents on his collar opened up and he crashed to the floor in mind numbing agony. Nothing existed outside of the pain. No thoughts. No protests. No words of submission came to his lips. The only sound he was able to make were cries of agony – formless and unintelligible, yet full of meaning somehow, as though they themselves begged Lex to stop the assault. Lex was merciful this time. He shut the vents after only a few minutes, but it was enough to leave Clark groaning in residual pain, unable to stand or even sit up on his own. His chest felt as though molten lava ran through his lungs while he was being gradually let loose from the invisible vice that had been squeezing his torso during the Kryptonite’s poisoning. His head throbbed and his muscles were water. His brain was abuzz with pain, but his thoughts could come to him more clearly now. He coughed and new agony exploded in his chest and he prayed his still vulnerable body hadn’t just cracked a few ribs.

“Get yourself cleaned up and ready,” Lex snorted in disgust as he looked down on Clark. “You’re to leave at midnight.”

\*\*\*

“Status report,” Lex called over the headset Clark was required to wear whenever he left Lex Tower.

“This thing has a built-in camera,” Clark shot back angrily. “You can see for yourself.”

“From the clouds?” Lex prompted, his voice strained with the anger Clark knew he was holding back.

Clark sighed softly to himself. Lex was really worked up about this assignment. It had to be more than just his misplaced demand for “revenge” against the doctor and nurse who’d “robbed” him of his hair. But what other reason it could be, Clark simply didn’t know. He knew Dr. Lane was the go-to doctor for all of the athletes LexCorp sponsored. In fact, Dr. Lane was the *only* doctor allowed to work on repairing any of the athletes’ injuries. And they always came back stronger and better than before. It wasn’t like any of them had been on losing streaks that could have set off Lex’s ire.

*Maybe Dr. Lane has had enough of Lex, he thought to himself as he hovered in a bank of clouds. Maybe this is Lex’s way of firing the man.*

It didn’t matter. Lex had painted a bright red target on the man’s back, and Clark had to make the kill. If he didn’t, his own life would be forfeit.

Once again, Clark wondered if it might not be better if he just disobeyed and let Lex kill him. Once again, the idea of experiencing the effects of the Kryptonite squashed that notion before Clark could even truly consider it as a viable option. He was stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place, and he saw no hope of ever getting out again.

*I should have run when I was younger, before this damn collar, he thought miserably to himself. I just never thought Lex would be cruel enough to use that accursed stone against me. We were brothers!*

“Clark?” Lex impatiently prompted.

“Nothing to report yet,” Clark answered distractedly, as he scanned the hospital with his super senses once more. “They haven’t left the building yet. It’s too noisy in there for my hearing to pick them out and I can’t see them. Maybe they’re in surgery or

something? If there’s enough lead shielding where they are, it could block them from me. But the car you described to me is still in the lot. They’re in there, somewhere.”

“You’re *sure* it’s the correct vehicle?” Lex asked broodingly.

Clark rolled his eyes, hard. “Lex, I may not *like* being your hitman, but I’m not an idiot. It’s the right car. I checked the license plate. Several times. It’s theirs.”

“You’d do well to mind your tone with me,” Lex warned.

“Okay, okay,” Clark acquiesced without really meaning it, hoping only to smooth things over with Lex. He quickly checked his watch, pressing a button on the side that lit up the face of it with a dull blue light. “Lex, it’s almost three in the morning. I’ve been here since midnight. There’s been no change. Maybe we should try again another night.”

“No,” was the immediate, firm reply. “Keep watching.”

An airplane flew by overhead, the roar of the engines so loud that it drowned out all else. Clark wasn’t worried. The plane was well above where he was floating and the cloud he was in was so thick that it fully concealed him from all sides. Clark was glad for the noise. At least for the moment, Lex couldn’t issue any more commands or ask any more questions as the plane’s tremendous noise obliterated all other sounds.

Once the plane moved on, however, the feed on his headset remained silent. For another half hour, not a word passed between the two men, a fact that Clark silently gave thanks for. Then, just as he was about to once again suggest trying the hit another night, he saw movement in the parking lot.

“I may have a visual on them,” Clark said into the microphone by his mouth.

“*May* have?” Lex demanded to know.

Clark telescoped in with his enhanced vision. “I can confirm the visual. It’s them. They’re heading to the car.” He paused, double checking what he was seeing. “Oh no,” he whispered.

“What’s the problem *now*?” Lex snarled.

“They aren’t alone,” Clark responded as he watched. “There are two young women with them.”

“Other doctors?” Lex asked sharply.

Clark shook his head slightly, knowing the movement wouldn’t even show in the grey mist that surrounded him. “No, I don’t think so. There’s no trace of scrubs or anything. I’m guessing friends of Sam and Ellen Lane. Give me a second to listen in.”

He didn’t wait for a response, immediately tuning his hearing in on the foursome as they crossed the dark and quiet parking lot.

“I’m telling you, Mom, Nico is a good guy. Not at all like the others I’ve dated,” one of the young women said.

“Lucy, please,” the other admonished. “You’ve said that about the last *three* guys. Two of them had a criminal record and the last guy was married with a family.”

“Mind your own business, Lois,” the first woman said snapped.

“Girls, please,” Ellen grumbled exhaustedly.

The second woman – Lois – huffed in annoyance. “You know, sometimes I wonder why I’ve agreed to go on this vacation together. It’s clear we can’t all coexist in one place at the same time.”

Clark severed the connection. He’d heard all he needed.

“Lex? This might complicate things. It seems that the two women with the Lanes are their daughters,” he informed Lex in a neutral tone.

“Perfect,” Lex replied, and Clark could hear the demonic smile in his voice. “Take them all out.”

“But!” Clark sputtered, unsurprised by Lex’s command but still unable to reconcile killing people who were blameless. “Lex, please! They had nothing to do with your…unfortunate loss.”

“You really are stupid, aren’t you?” Lex said with a *tsk tsk* in his voice. “One of those two is a nosy reporter. Ensuring that she

dies as well will prevent her from digging too deeply into her parents' deaths."

"And the other? What has *she* done to deserve death?" Clark challenged.

"Nothing," Lex admitted, and Clark could imagine his shrug. "But her death bothers you, so I'm inclined to watch her die. Now, get to it. I'd like this job wrapped up neatly before sunrise. I have a midmorning meeting that I need to be alert and refreshed for."

"Ah, yes, wouldn't want to deprive you of your sleep," Clark retorted. He paused as the Lanes got into the car he'd been watching all evening. "They all got in the same vehicle," he informed Lex. "They're pulling out of the parking space now. I'll follow from above and behind until the right moment comes."

"Just make it look like an accident. I cannot afford to have this traced back to me in any way."

"Oh, come on, Lex," Clark grumbled. "There hasn't been an assignment yet that'd been traced back to you. Suspicions, maybe, but nothing anyone can prove," he continued as he began to fly after the Lanes' car, which had pulled out of the lot and onto the main road before the hospital.

"A trend that had *better* continue," Lex threw back. "Or else it will be the last thing you do."

"I've got it under control," Clark replied, rolling his eyes again. "I've been doing this a long, *long* time now."

"Yes, and yet you've still managed to screw up the occasional assignment," Lex said with reptilian coldness.

Clark ignored the barb, shutting Lex out of his ears and mind by focusing solely on the car he was following. For several long minutes, he simply followed the Lane family, well out of sight of any prying eyes, waiting for the opportune moment. At first, there were simply too many witnesses around. Metropolis was a city that never slept. Even as late as it was, people were out and about. He saw no less than five patrolling police cars, and dozens of trucks all rumbling down the streets on their way to making deliveries. Some of the bars he passed were still open, the patrons lingering about on the sidewalk in front. Couples walked along, some of them with their dogs. Homeless men and women huddled on benches or in doorways, trying to sleep or actively begging for spare change.

"What are you waiting for?" Lex hissed in his ear at one point.

"Too many witnesses," Clark replied. "Too many chances for someone to come along and try to save them. But don't worry. It looks like they're heading for the city limits and upstate New Troy. Once they get out on those less populated roads, I should be able to complete the job."

Sure enough, the car soon left the city behind. The bright, glaring lights that flooded Metropolis each night, turning the darkness into midday, vanished. Night time and darkness returned in force. Sam Lane switched his car's headlights from their normal setting to his high beams. There were, of course, still streetlights along those quieter stretches of road, but it appeared he wanted to take no chances, especially as the woods closed in around them and it became more likely that they would encounter animals in the road.

Clark saw his opportunity. They were less than twenty miles outside of the city limits, but the staging was perfect. Clark aimed a careful, precise, and thin beam of his heat vision at the front passenger tire of the car. He maintained a steady stream of heat until the tire burst. Not expecting this at all, Sam jerked the wheel too hard as the car swerved and he fought to retain control. The front end pointed off the road, directly at a massive, ancient oak tree. But they weren't going fast enough, Clark gauged. He dropped in elevation and used a blast of his super breath to send the car speeding into the tree.

The sound that followed was one that would come to haunt Clark later on. The brief screams of terror as the car picked up speed. The way those screams immediately died again as the car

contacted the tree. The *crack!* as the car met the solid trunk of the oak. The screeching, crunching, and tearing of metal. The groan as the giant tree lost bark. The *snap!* as rotting limbs were jolted loose from the behemoth they'd sprouted from. The shattering of the car's windshield and the tinkling as the glass flew through the air, clattered on the car's hood, and the soft *thunks* that only Clark could hear as they hit the soil.

The passenger side headlight flickered for a few fitful seconds, then went out, though the driver's side stayed lit. The engine sputtered but, miraculously, kept on going. No other sounds could be heard. Not a grunt of pain, not a gasp of horror, not a cough as the occupants struggled to gain their bearings. Cautiously, Clark descended fully, lightly letting his booted feet touch down on the asphalt of the road. With sure, steady steps, he approached the mangled vehicle. When he got to the driver's door, he didn't even need to open it. Sam Lane no longer had much of a face left, from slamming so hard into the steering wheel. There would be no miracle on Earth that could bring the oft-proclaimed "miracle-working surgeon" back.

Ellen was only slightly better off. Her face was a mask of blood and glass shards from the windshield, her features frozen in horror and fear. Clark didn't even need to search for a heartbeat with his super hearing. She, like her husband, had crossed over to the other side. Clark closed his eyes for just a moment, sighing heavily but softly enough so that Lex wouldn't hear it over the microphone. He made sure to give Lex a good view of the battered bodies over the body cam he wore.

"Both targets are deceased," he said, confirming his kills.

"And the daughters?" Lex inquired impatiently.

"Checking now."

Clark peered into the back seat. The window had turned into a spider's web of cracks, so he punched it in, the glass skipping harmlessly off his impervious flesh. He checked the first young woman and found no signs of life. An ugly wound on her head indicated that, even if she did, miraculously, come back with CPR attempts, she'd likely never leave a vegetative state. He noted that she hadn't been wearing her seatbelt and wondered briefly if it would have made a difference if she *had* been wearing it.

Clark went around to the other side. The other window had been rolled down before the car had careened off into the tree. He looked inside at the second young woman and judged her to be the older of the two. Her seatbelt was firmly in place, but she was still in bad shape. Her breaths were strangled sounding and her heartbeat – as Clark heard it with his super hearing – was weak and thready. Blood flowed from several injuries on her scalp, but as Clark X-rayed her, they were superficial at best. Some would require stitches, in all likelihood, but they didn't pose a threat to her health.

"Well?" Lex asked.

"One of the girls is dead, or close enough to it," Clark responded in a whisper.

"And the other?"

"Alive, but barely," Clark replied, and immediately wondered if he should have lied.

"Finish the job."

"Lex, no. She's as good as dead if I leave her," Clark argued back. "There's no sense in me killing her if we want to maintain the feel of this being nothing more insidious than an accident."

"Snap her neck," Lex demanded. "It will fit with the rest of her injuries."

"No!" Clark shot back. "I know what I'm doing, Lex!"

He turned away from the grisly sight of the car's interior as he spoke to Lex. He didn't want his master to see what he was up to. With his face held high to look at the stars, Clark reached behind him, in through the open window. He felt around for a moment, then his fingers touched what he'd been looking for. With his gloved hands, he blindly flipped open the woman's cell phone –

still clenched tightly in her hands – and fumbled for the numbers.

9

“Damn it, Clark! Do you have a death wish? You know I won’t hesitate to open the vents on your collar,” Lex ranted.

1

“Of course not, Lex,” he calmly replied. “I know perfectly well what you’re capable of. But she’s dying, Lex. There’s no need to muddy the work I’ve done with inconsistencies.”

“You forget your place!” Lex roared.

1

With that outburst, Clark heard the woman’s heartbeat go still.

“Lex? She’s dead,” he stoically reported.

“Good. Now get back here immediately, before anyone sees you,” Lex grumbled.

“Of course,” Clark complied.

*Send.*

Clark brought his hand back away from the phone and out of the window as the phone dialed softly. He trained his hearing on the phone as he lifted slowly off the ground and hoped the operator would be able to trace the call through global positioning systems. He thought that maybe, just maybe, if they got there fast enough, EMTs might be able to revive the woman.

His heart ached as he thought of her. Despite her wounds, she was a stunningly beautiful woman. He wasn’t sure he believed in love at all, let alone love at first sight. How could he? His entire existence was based on what he now recognized as slavery and torture. Had the elder Luthors ever truly loved him? Maybe, he admitted as he thought about it. They’d always *seemed* genuine in their affections. But so had Lex, once upon a time.

*No one can love someone like me, his mind sighed in remonstrance. I’m an alien freak. I’m a ruthless killer. I’d be better off dead, except I’m too much of a coward to let Lex kill me with that stone.*

Clark was halfway hidden in the clouds again when the gleam of headlights cut through the darkness, coming the opposite way the Lanes had been traveling. They must have seen the crash. Clark saw the lights come to a standstill, and his super hearing picked up the sound of a man calling 911. He smiled a private smile to himself. Even if his attempt to get paramedics to the scene failed, that man – whoever he was – would manage to get medical help to that woman. It was possible she wouldn’t make it, but Clark had to hope that she would.

*What’s wrong with me?* he asked himself, his heart racing faster than it ever had before. *I disobeyed a direct order. If Lex finds out...*

He shuddered. He’d taken a *huge* risk tonight – bigger and more terrifying than he’d ever taken before. He’d killed so many, and all of them with scarcely a thought. So why did the idea of this woman dying bother him so much? Sure, she was an innocent woman who’d happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But that shouldn’t have gotten under his skin as much as it had. He shook his head, trying to fling out the thoughts of that woman.

*Doesn’t matter anyway. Either she’ll die tonight or Lex will have me find her again to finish the job. Either way, I’ll never get to know her. I’ve only prolonged the inevitable. If she’s smart, she’ll get out of Metropolis and as far away as possible.* But even as the thought entered his mind, he wondered if there was any place that was out of Lex’s reach, and his heart sank with fear for the woman.

\*\*\*

Clark idly flipped through the television stations, dismissing each and every movie and show that appeared on the screen in his boredom. He wanted to be out in the world, doing things that normal people did. Maybe go to the movies. Maybe grab a bite to eat at one of the dive diners that were all the rage lately. Maybe stroll through the park, just enjoying the night. Maybe even meet

some people he could consider as friends.

He sighed at the idea. He would *never* have those opportunities. Not while he wore a collar of Kryptonite around his neck. Not while Lex was lord and master of the remote that operated the collar. Not while he was nothing more than an assassin slave with no say in his future. He would never amount to anything more than a soulless killer.

*Soulless?* his mind whispered wonderingly. *You tried to save the life of that young woman a few months ago.*

*Yeah, from a crash I caused, he dismissively snorted to himself.*

*True. But you still defied Lex’s orders. Maybe there’s more to you than you think.*

Mentally, Clark shrugged. *That was months ago. Yeah, I tried to save her. But I have no idea if I succeeded.*

But his inner voice wasn’t so easily silenced.

*Does it matter? The intent to save her life was there.*

*Yes, he realized with a start. Yes, it matters. I don’t know why. But it matters.*

He tried not to think about the crash that had killed Sam and Ellen Lane if he could avoid it. But the night still haunted him. He still had nightmares about Lex finding out that he’d tried to call for help so that the young woman in the backseat had a chance to survive her injuries. Of course, he *hoped* that he’d succeeded in doing so. Though he’d lost all signs of life in her as he’d departed, he’d managed to make that silent 911 call, which had, in turn, been backed up by the driver of the other vehicle that had come across the crash. There was a chance, however slight it might have been, that she had pulled through. He wanted that to be the case. He couldn’t get her beauty out of his mind. Not that he would ever see her again, unless she’d lived and Lex sent him to finish the job.

A part of him – a deep, deep part he tried not to acknowledge much for fear that Lex would find out – dreamed of what it would be like if he could only break free from his penthouse prison. He was the most powerful man on Earth. He could do *anything* he wanted. He could start a whole new life somewhere else. He could have friends. Maybe he could even find someone who loved him – *really* loved him, his strengths and flaws alike. Perhaps he could even – as so many of his dreams showed him in vivid detail – find that mysterious young woman. While he knew, logically, that he would never have a chance with her, her exquisite beauty refused to leave his mind and filled his dreams with longing and desire.

But for all he tried to block out the memories of that night, his mind kept circling back to it, especially in the cold, dark hours of the night when he was alone in his room, floating above his bed, his mind left to wander where it would. He knew it wasn’t the killing that tormented his mind. He was well past feeling anything for the lives he took, because remorse would make him look weak in Lex’s eyes. And weakness would cost him his life. It was that woman. He wanted to know more about her. Her name, for instance. He’d heard the two women being called Lois and Lucy, but he had no way to know which name belonged to the woman he’d stuck his neck out for. Lex had said that one of them had been a reporter. What if she’d lived? Did she know or suspect that there was more to the crash than met the eye, if indeed she’d survived? Would she investigate the crash? What if she discovered his role in things?

The fleeting pride he had in doing the one good deed in his entire murderous career died in his heart. What if it came back to haunt him in a more tangible way? What if she *had* survived and figured out that Lex had sent his personal assassin to do the job? If Lex found out that he was the subject of an investigation, Clark knew his life would be forfeit right then and there.

*I should have left things alone, he berated himself. I never should have stuck my neck out for her. I don’t even know her and I put my life on the line for her. Why? She won’t ever know who I*

*am. She won't ever know the risk I took for her. And even if she did find out all I did, what would she even think of me? The trained, enslaved killer who executed her entire family with barely any effort? The man who was crazy enough to defy his master to try to save her for no discernible reason at all?*

As a result, he kept to himself, only interacting with Lex when it was absolutely necessary. He didn't want to somehow betray his thoughts and actions to his former brother. If Lex knew that Clark had tried to call for help, he knew he would be sentenced to death – no trial, no jury, no appeals. Just the Kryptonite and its poisonous assault.

Of course, Clark's self-isolation was nothing new. Ever since Lex had crafted and implemented the collar Clark wore, Clark had kept to himself. Where he'd once regularly spoken to the man he'd called "brother," now Clark almost never spoke to Lex until the man called for him or addressed him in passing as Clark paced the walls of his lavish tower prison. And, as Lex was away more and more on business and with his presidential campaign, it had become almost too easy to avoid Lex. Clark had even been tempted on more than one occasion to use the times when Lex was away to try and break free from his miserable existence. But Mrs. Cox or Nigel were always around, almost like full-time babysitters. Clark would have to kill them to keep their mouths closed, but he just didn't have the heart to kill if he didn't need to. Besides, it would be in vain. Lex had added a feature to the second version of the collar – as soon as he got outside of a ten-foot radius of the tower, an alarm would be sent directly to Lex and the vents in the collar would open, even without Lex giving the command, unless of course, Lex disabled the feature when sending Clark out on a kill.

"Clark? Would you so good as to run an errand for me this evening?" Lex asked coming into the room, a mug of steaming coffee in his hands, his poise casual and relaxed, though Clark knew better for the flintiness in his "brother's" eyes.

Clark sighed and turned off the television, then tossed the remote to the side. "Yes, Lex?" he asked with a tired sigh. "Who's the mark this time?"

"Someone from your past," Lex said cryptically as he led Clark to his office.

Clark wasn't in the mood for guessing games. "I don't *have* a past, Lex," he sighed irritably as he followed the other man's footsteps.

But Lex wasn't paying him any mind. "Tonight, you're getting a second chance to correct a mistake you made years ago."

*My entire life is a mistake,* Clark thought with bitter hatred.

"What mistake would that be?" he forced himself to ask instead as Lex sat behind his massive desk.

"Bruce Wayne."

"*What?*" Clark gasped, despite himself.

Lex nodded calmly. "It seems he's finally come out from wherever he's been hiding these past ten years since you botched the attempt on his life."

Clark furrowed his brow, ignoring the deliberate barb. "Why? And why now?" he wondered.

Lex shifted in his seat, leaned forward, rested his elbows on his desk, and steepled his fingers. "It seems he's taken my presidential bid as a challenge. He's thrown his hat into the ring as well...of *course* on the same side of the political fence."

"He'd have a lot of support," Clark said, thinking aloud. "That is, if his disappearance for the last ten years hasn't shaken people's trust in him. If the people rally around him..."

"I'd be shut out of running at all," Lex finished for him. "No doubt which he intends for."

Clark nodded thoughtfully. "You think he stands a chance? I mean, you're just as well known and...trusted," he said, forcing the word out, "as he is. *And* you didn't take off to parts unknown for a decade. Even if he *was* still managing his businesses from

wherever he was."

Lex appeared to ponder the question for a moment.

"Unfortunately, people like him," he allowed. "So we're going to deny them the chance to flock to his campaign."

Clark's shoulders dropped. "I'll go get changed," he offered in submission.

"Do hurry," Lex said with a satisfied grin. "I'll give you the details of his whereabouts when you come back."

\*\*\*

An uneasy chill crept along Clark's spine as he rocketed through the cloudless sky, a dark silhouette swiftly blotting out the stars, so quickly no one would be able to see him. Something felt *wrong* about this. And not in an "I shouldn't be trying to kill Bruce Wayne" kind of way. He couldn't place his finger on exactly what it was that was making Klaxon alarms ring in his mind. Maybe it wasn't just one thing, he mused as dread coiled in his stomach. Maybe there was more than one thing that had him feeling so nervous.

"You sure he's there?" Clark asked uncertainly, as he flew through the dark midnight sky.

"My source is good," Lex said flatly.

"It's just...if it were *me*, I'd be hesitant to go back to the place where someone already attempted to kill me," Clark insisted over the headset. "Even a decade later."

"He's there," Lex replied evenly.

Clark couldn't help but to wonder why, all of a sudden Bruce Wayne had stepped back out of the shadows. He'd been a ghost ever since the night Clark had been sent to kill the billionaire, but had, instead, killed an innocent teenager and then discovered that he could, of all things, fly. Did Bruce think that he was safe now? Did he think that, since ten years had passed since the last attempt on his life, now he was miraculously safe from the forces that were bound – in one way or another – to kill him? Did Bruce think that now, a decade later, he would be free to continue on as though the intervening years had never happened – that people would just accept he'd decided to reappear and act like it didn't matter? Had Lex's bid for the presidency *really* hit such a sensitive note that Bruce thought it was in his – and everyone else's – best interest to emerge from his hiding spot?

Or was there some other, more sinister, explanation?

Every atom of Clark's body believed it to be the latter. Every frantic, terrified beat of his heart screamed that he was flying into a trap.

*So?* he forcibly asked himself. *He can't hurt me. Trap or no trap, I've got the advantage. I have super powers, he doesn't.*

Or!

Clark stopped in midair as a new thought struck him out of thin air.

Why hadn't he thought of that before now? The implications of such a notion made him tremble as though he'd been slapped across the face with a piece of Kryptonite.

*Could it be that I've been set up?* he wondered, forcing himself to give voice to the thought, if only internally. *Could Lex be sending me, head first, into a trap?*

He swallowed hard against the thought. He shook his head as if that would knock loose the idea and send it tumbling out of his mind.

*Why? Why would he do that?* he asked himself. *There's no reason for him to send me into a trap. If he wants me dead, all he has to do is press a button on that damn remote of his. There's no need to get others involved in my execution. Unless...maybe they're the ones he wants to dispose of my body?*

"You've stopped moving," Lex observed, his voice startling Clark out of his dark pondering. "Why?" he demanded.

"Lex...I'm not sure about this assignment," he said carefully.

"What's the problem *this* time?" Lex asked in a taunting tone.

"It doesn't feel right," Clark allowed.

He could practically hear Lex's eye roll. "You and your flimsy new-found morals," he muttered with disgust. He laughed derisively. "As if an assassin with as many confirmed kills as you could *ever* have the right to claim to have morals!"

"I'm making no such claim," Clark replied stoically. "It's just...all of this seems rather...convenient, don't you think? Bruce Wayne, suddenly reappearing after all this time, now that you've formally thrown your hat into the presidential candidate ring."

"I think it's our missed opportunity come back to give us a second chance," Lex replied, and Clark could envision the hungry gleam in Lex's eyes as he imagined his imminent victory over his life-long business foe.

That, more than anything, convinced Clark that Lex didn't have a gang of thugs waiting at Wayne Manor to kill him and bury his body in parts unknown.

He began to fly again. "It's just weird to me," Clark insisted. "He *saw* me last time, Lex. He *saw* me fly away. He *knows* it wasn't a regular nutcase looking to kill him for his fifteen minutes of fame. And now he's just...waiting around at his home, making it known publicly that he's back? The whole scenario *stinks*, Lex. And I'm, quite frankly, surprised you don't see it."

"Let's play a game and pretend you're not entirely wrong," Lex said after a few contemplative moments of silence. "You're leaving out *the* main factor. Only *I* know your weakness. He can't harm you. So why you're crying about this errand like a weak little infant is beyond me. Do your job."

Clark sighed audibly. "Yes, Lex."

He hated how compliant he was forced to be. Especially now, when every fiber of his being was crying out for him to stop and flee.

He got to Wayne Manor a minute later. He stopped directly above the center of the impressive manor, remembering a night long ago when he'd hovered above the house, tucked away in a cloud, watching as snow fell on the rooftop like a white blanket of innocence to cover the dead body of a boy no older than Clark himself had been. He remembered how heavy his heart had been back then. Instead of being elated to discover that he could fly, his guilt had weighed him down so heavily that it was a wonder it didn't pull him back down toward the ground, clipping his invisible wings.

There was no snow now. Instead, the night was hot and muggy and the trace scent of a rainstorm was in the air, though it was still far enough off that Clark gauged it would be midmorning before the first raindrops would hit the streets of Gotham. It would thunder and lightning too, Clark knew, from the way the fine hairs on his arms stood at attention in the air's electricity. A fat bead of sweat rolled down his back, but it wasn't from the oppressive heat or humidity.

"What's the holdup?" Lex called over the headset.

Clark swallowed down the protest he wanted to make. "Just taking stock of things." He zoomed in with his telescopic vision, sweeping his gaze over the estate grounds. "No guards on the grounds," he reported back, without needing to be told to do so. He moved on to the manor itself, then blinked in surprise.

"Lex?" he half said, half asked, drawing the word out in warning. "He's here."

"What are you waiting for then?" was the impatient response.

"Something's not right, Lex. He's out in the open. Alone. Almost like he's...waiting," Clark replied. "He's standing out on his balcony. Just...looking at the sky."

Lex laughed, deeply and hard, and that alone was enough to convey to Clark just how stupid he thought his private assassin was. "A man can't enjoy the fresh air without making the strongest, most invulnerable man on the planet shake in his boots?" Lex asked as he let out a fresh laugh.

"It's not like that!" Clark said, wishing he had a way to show Lex the look on Bruce's face. How determined he was. How deep

the lines of concentration cut his features. How his stance was rigid and ready for whatever might come, a far cry from the relaxed liquid movements of a man out taking the air and looking at the stars. "He looks like..."

"I don't *care* what he *looks like!*" Lex said, cutting him off in a low roar. "Get down there *now* and kill him!"

"I...fine," Clark said as the weight of the collar around his neck reminded him of the danger of arguing too hard with Lex. "A slip and fall off the balcony would do it, I suppose."

"Yes," Lex said in agreement. "But, Clark?"

"Yes, Lex?" he said, forcing the words out.

"Do it slowly. I want to savor his death."

Clark squeezed his eyes shut for a span of five rapid heartbeats, then he dropped into a descent, keeping his speed quick enough to avoid detection, but not so fast as to be anywhere near to breaking the sound barrier. He landed behind Bruce on the massive balcony, his feet touching down with whisper-softness. But Bruce appeared to have anticipated the move. Without turning, he spoke.

"It's about time you showed up," he said neutrally, his voice betraying none of his inner thoughts. "I was starting to wonder if I should go back inside and try this another night."

Clark crossed his arms and nodded, more for his own benefit than Bruce's. "You know why I'm here then," he replied, his own tone giving away nothing.

"Of course," Bruce replied, still staring off into the night sky. Perhaps he wanted his last view to be of the stars, rather than his killer, Clark mused darkly. "You're here to kill me, just like you tried to do ten years ago."

"Yes," Clark admitted, his voice firm. He took one confident step closer. "You knew I was there that night for you?"

"Who else?" Bruce asked in turn. "Come now, what are you waiting for?"

Clark knew Bruce's words echoed what Lex had to be thinking. But it was new and oddly intriguing to confront and speak with his target. None of them had ever known he was there, lurking in the shadows until it was too late. But Bruce *knew*, and Clark couldn't bring himself to make a swift strike and end it so quickly. He took three more steps forward.

"I know you've killed before," Bruce said. "Jason, for example. Don't tell me you're afraid now."

"No," Clark responded with a slight shake of his head. "You won't be the first. Or the last."

"How will you do it?" Bruce wondered. "Snap my neck? Stab me? Push me over the balcony railing? Slit my throat? Choke the air from me?"

*Why is he asking these questions?* Clark's mind shouted in panic. *Something's not right about this! Fly! Fly away! Before it's too late!*

But Lex would open the vents and expose the Kryptonite the moment Clark's feet left the balcony if he tried, so Clark swallowed down his misgivings and stayed rooted to the spot.

"Does it matter?" he asked in a gentler tone. "We both know how tonight will end."

"On the contrary," Bruce countered smoothly, "*you* don't have the faintest idea of how things will pan out."

Clark realized then that Bruce had had his hands in his pants pockets the entire time. Before he could fully react to the situation, Bruce brought out a small box, no larger than a ring box, and flipped open the lid. Clark felt the effects of the Kryptonite before he saw the shard of glowing green stone. His hands flew up to his head as pain exploded there, blinding him as it unexpectedly tore through his brain like a flaming hot poker. He cried out involuntarily and he fought to remain upright and standing. He failed. His knees gave way and he crashed to the ground, throwing his hands out before him to ensure that he didn't smash his face as he fell.

Bruce turned to him only then, when Clark was on his hands and knees, struggling not to succumb any further, but losing that battle by the second. The billionaire had a blank look about him, like he was neither horrified by Clark's agony nor pleased by the way he'd laid low the threat to his life. Clark found that unreadable expression terrifying in a vague, undefinable way. If he hadn't been in such excruciating pain, he might have recognized his fear as stemming from the fact that he had no idea what fresh torment might lay ahead for him, now that Bruce, somehow, knew about Kryptonite's power over him.

In his earpiece, Lex was ranting, but his voice was distorted by the cacophony of pain smashing through Clark's tortured brain. He grunted against the sensation – it felt like he was being torn apart, cell by cell, atom by atom. Vaguely, he was aware that he cried out the word "No!" once or twice, but he did not notice when Lex opened the vents on the collar, until he saw Bruce close the ring box and the pain failed to alleviate. Then his arm muscles gave out and he crumpled fully to the ground. He did not see the frown of confusion on Bruce's face; he was too busy feebly trying to tear the collar from his throat.

"Help me!" he wheezed out, to no one in particular, fully aware that he deserved no one's intervention to save his life. But the pain made him desperate enough to make the plea anyway. "Please."

His eyes squeezed shut as he gave it his every effort to try to stay conscious. He dared not slip into the void. If he did, he knew it was likely he'd never come back. The radioactivity would claim his life, worthless and bloody and miserable as it was. He didn't want to die. He wasn't ready to face whatever judgment might await him on the other side of death.

"What's going on?" Clark heard a female voice call out.

"I'm not sure. I closed the box," Bruce replied, his voice grave and concerned.

"Sir? What's that?" Clark had a hazy impression of an older gentleman pointing at him.

"Quick! Alfred! Give me the..."

"Already on it, Sir!"

"Thanks."

Clark was losing the battle against the darkness. Every part of him felt like it was aflame and all his body wanted to do was to close his eyes and let his life bleed away. But Clark's will was stronger than the desires of his body. He stayed awake and watched what was happening, though his vision was blurred and his head was swimming with pain. The older man – Alfred, Clark guessed – handed Bruce a small electronic device. Bruce, in turn, fiddled with it for a moment, then pressed it against the collar Clark wore. If Clark had had even a fraction of his strength, he could have reached up and snapped Bruce's neck to finish the job, so close was his target. But his strength had long since bled out of him, and Clark was weaker than a newborn baby. With the device pressed to the collar, Bruce tapped furiously at the screen, entering what had to be codes.

Then, to Clark's everlasting wonderment, the pain disappeared. The vents in the collar slid noiselessly shut, locking the evil stone away again. The tension he'd held in his body went slack and his breathing came easier, though he felt tired and weak and very, very sore still. He knew, from experience, it would lessen in time, though he wished the sun was up so that he could recharge his aching body faster. No matter. He was a patient man. He tried to stand, but found it still not possible.

"That should do it," he heard Bruce say to his companions.

"Brother?" Clark whispered in a barely-there voice, while Bruce and the others spoke quietly.

But there was no response. Clark frowned. He should have been able to hear Lex – yelling, screaming, ranting, swearing, telling him how worthless he was for screwing up yet another assassination. Instead, the silence was chilling.

"We have to move quickly," Bruce said to the woman. "I've overridden the signal on that collar and headset of his, but whoever he's been talking to knows his last position."

The woman nodded. "Agreed. Let's get out of here."

"Where to?" Alfred asked, by way of agreement.

Bruce smirked. "I know just the place." Then he punched Clark square in the face, and the world went dark.

\*\*\*

"Ugh," Clark grunted as the world slowly drifted back to him.

The sounds were the first thing to return as reality coalesced around him. Low voices. The scrape of a metal chair on a tile floor. Televisions, all tuned to various news stations. The relentless thrum of some air conditioning or air filtration unit. The whirr and beeps of a fax machine. The harsh ringing of a phone, just before someone picked it up to answer. The light tapping on a computer's keyboard.

All of it seemed too loud for his aching head.

After a few moments, he cracked one eye partly open. His vision was still fuzzy, but it too seemed to be swirling back into some semblance of normalcy. He risked opening the other, blinking in the too bright and too artificial light of the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling.

"Ugh," he groaned again, unsure if he should be glad to be alive or to rue that fact.

Gingerly, he pushed himself up off the hard cot he'd be laying on so that he could sit and take stock of his new surroundings. A few details jumped out at him immediately. The first was that he was still in one piece. A quick examination of his body showed that he'd suffered no injuries other than a black eye and a split lip from the punch Bruce had thrown. Somehow, luckily, his nose remained unbroken. The next thing he realized was that he still wore the Kryptonite-filled collar around his neck. It felt heavier than usual and Clark was suddenly compelled to try all of his powers.

Nothing.

*Crap*, he thought as a cold ripple of fear ran up his spine and he had to take a moment to fight down the bubble of panic that was rising in his chest.

*What else can I learn?* He forced himself to stop and focus on the rest of his surroundings.

He was in a cage, that much was obvious. And someone – probably Bruce, he figured – had relieved him of the body cam and earpiece he'd been wearing. His hidden blade was missing too. Clark absently rubbed the place on his wrist where the gauntlet should have resided. He felt oddly naked without it, being in this hostile new location. Even if he never got the chance to fight his way out, the weight and presence of the blade would have set his mind at ease, and he wondered where it had been taken to. Funny, how he missed it now, when all it had ever done was remind him of his immoral job and of mistakes he'd made.

The cell itself was fairly Spartan. A hard cot to sleep on, the mattress thin and covered in clean white sheets, over which a course brown blanket had been draped. The pillow was almost as hard as the bed, but Clark supposed it could have been worse. He could have been forced to sleep on the cold, hard floor. An exposed toilet to his right as he sat on the bed. A stainless-steel sink bolted to the wall directly next to the toilet. Across from him, stood a small plastic desk and a rolling computer chair – as basic as they came. Someone had left a tray of food there. Clark saw a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the plate, an apple, a banana, and a bottle of water. Beads of condensation on the plastic told him the water was still cold, which meant someone had delivered the food to his cell recently.

He wondered how long he'd been knocked out for. There were no windows anywhere that he could see. And no clocks – at least, none in his line of sight, though he figured there had to be some somewhere if the time couldn't be judged by looking out of the

window. He couldn't tell based on his own body – it didn't give off the same cues as a normal person's body would have. He was neither hungry nor was he *not* hungry. He had no urge to use the toilet. The Kryptonite induced pain in his body had subsided, but his head still throbbed from the force of Bruce's punch, though it was a dull ache, and not as acutely sharp as it otherwise might have been.

All in all, he decided his fate at the moment could have been worse. He was still alive and the vents in his collar were firmly sealed shut. That meant Bruce had to have control over the signal. If Lex still had control, Clark knew he'd be dead and rotting somewhere. Of course, he didn't know what Bruce's intentions with him were, but at least for right now they didn't seem to include a dead alien assassin. And his prison cell, sparse and uncomfortable as it was, afforded him at least the basics. Sure, it wasn't the luxury he'd known at Lex Tower – *relative luxury at any rate*, he reminded himself, knowing that Lex provided him with the cheapest finery he could get his hands on – but it would be enough. Just being *away from* Lex Tower was a luxury Clark had never dared to hope for.

*What's wrong with you?* his mind asked. *You seem almost glad to be a prisoner.*

*Not glad*, he corrected himself as he allowed his eyes to move past his cell bars and out into the area beyond – a large community area from the looks of it. *Not glad. Just...relieved to be beyond Lex's reach for the moment.*

*Bruce will kill you*, his mind sneered back.

*That might be a blessing in disguise*, Clark acknowledged back.

Deciding not to let the offering of food go to waste, and wanting to seem a little appreciative of the gesture, Clark gingerly rose from the cot and sat at the tiny desk. He sniffed the sandwich suspiciously, but without the aid of his super abilities, he couldn't detect if there was any poison in the meal. He took a bite regardless of that fact, figuring that his life was forfeit anyway. If he stayed here, unable to escape, Bruce would likely kill him, or have him killed. And if he *did* escape, he'd never have a life. Lex would hunt him down and kill him. But the sandwich didn't cause Clark to double over in pain, vomit blood, or foam at the mouth, so he took another bite. He ate without interest and without gusto. He did it mechanically, first swallowing down the sandwich, then the banana. The only thing he *did* finish with enthusiasm was the water. The cold liquid felt good in his throat and he downed it in five large gulps. He set the apple aside, figuring he could eat it later to give himself something to do.

"So, you've decided to rejoin the living," Bruce's stern voice said from behind Clark.

Clark stood and spun toward the threat reflexively, taking a defensive stance.

"No need for all of that," Bruce said, waving his hand in dismissal. He appeared to notice the apple Clark had put to the side. "Go ahead. Eat up. There's plenty more where that came from. You won't starve here. I know what was left for you probably didn't seem like much, but I was told it would be better if you ate lightly once you awoke."

Bruce clasped his arms behind his back, in a relaxed, yet attentive manner as he studied Clark.

"You aren't what I expected," he confessed after a few moments.

Clark gave him a questioning look, not trusting Bruce enough to speak just yet.

"No, that's not an insult," Bruce amended. "I'm actually a little impressed. You haven't yelled or raged inside your cell. You haven't cursed me out. You ate, rather than throw your meal in anger. It's...not often I...hear of such complacent prisoners."

"There's no point in it," Clark allowed himself to say. "It's a waste of time and energy, and accomplishes nothing."

Bruce nodded thoughtfully. "Agreed."

"Where am I?" Clark demanded to know. "What is this place? What did you do to this thing?" he continued, pulling gently on the steel collar around his neck. "What do you want from me? To kill me? Then do it!" he challenged. He stepped out from around the desk and went to the bars, gripping them as tightly as he could. He didn't reach for Bruce. That would have been pointless.

"I'm afraid there's a lot I can't tell you," Bruce said, unfazed by Clark's outburst. "But, I *will* say this. You're in a very, *very* secure underground facility, from which, there is no escaping. So don't get any ideas. Every inch of this place is covered with closed-circuit video recorders. As for the collar? I jammed the incoming signal. Whoever was controlling it before can't access it anymore. I can access it at any time, however. So, again, don't get any ideas."

"You want to kill me with it," Clark accused in a dead, cold voice.

"Not if I don't have to," Bruce countered amicably. "You see, I'm not like you. I don't kill people."

Clark snorted. "You know absolutely nothing."

"Then tell me," Bruce challenged.

"Nice try," Clark shot back. "But I've got no reason to trust you."

"I stopped whoever was controlling that collar from killing you," Bruce pointed out, his voice hardening in the slightest degree.

"Yes, how generous of you," Clark replied, the sarcasm dripping from his tongue, thick as honey. "You want me to trust you? Take this off of me. If you overrode the signal, then you have the power to open this thing up and take it from me."

Bruce smirked. "Nice try," he said, echoing Clark's earlier tone, smirking. "For the time being, it's in my best interest that you remain wearing it. In the future...? Who knows?"

Clark snorted again. "I'll believe that when pigs start to fly."

"Suit yourself," Bruce said with a shrug. "Let's talk about other things, shall we?"

Clark set his jaw in a hard line. "Actually, I'm a bit tired of talking. In the future...? Who knows," he said, deliberating using Bruce's own words against him.

Bruce clenched his jaw tightly. Clark could see the muscle ticking there. One hand curled into a fist. "That's only fair," he replied, but his words sounded forced. "I'll be back later."

"Take your time," Clark coldly retorted.

As Bruce's back stiffened and he strode confidently away from Clark's cell, Clark watched, his knuckles turning white from how hard he was gripping the bars. He wished with all his might that his strength would return. He longed to feel the steel buckle and bend beneath the pressure of his fingers like sticks of softened butter, but he was no more powerful than a normal man, and the metal retained its shape. After Bruce disappeared from his sight, Clark retreated back to his cot. All around him, people moved to and fro, rushing off to whatever tasks demanded their attention. None paid him any mind. Even the armed guards stationed about the large communal room ignored the man in the cell, their eyes sweeping the area constantly for real threats, unlike the caged alien in their midst.

Clark laid back on his pauper's bed and folded his hands behind his head. He sighed heavily. If what Bruce had said was true, that they were in an underground facility, it was possible that his powers might never return. He knew, from experience, that his abilities needed sunlight in order to recharge. And that sunlight was never more crucial to him as it was after being exposed to Kryptonite. While his health would – and had, for the most part – return in full, his powers would remain missing until he could charge them by soaking up the sun.

*I've exchanged one prison cell for another*, he thought miserably. *And I'm not sure which one is worse. A luxury cell in a*

*penthouse, controlled by a madman, or a tiny hole in the wall, deep below ground with barely serviceable amenities, and under the whim of a man I've tried to kill twice now. At least Bruce doesn't appear to be insane. I guess that's at least one positive. But I know only too well how quickly things can change.*

\*\*\*

Bruce wasn't lying when he'd told Clark there would be plenty more food. Three times a day – or at least Clark *assumed* the meals were coming at normal mealtimes within twenty-four-hour periods – meals were brought to him. They were nothing to brag about, in terms of how basic they were, but they were flavorful and filling, and Clark couldn't care less that they weren't the extravagant meals he'd been afforded back in Lex Tower. He didn't *need* cocktail shrimp or filet mignon. He didn't *need* lobster ravioli or gelato imported from Italy. He didn't *need* specialty teas or sodas. He barely even needed food at all, at least, not when he had regular access to sunshine. But down in this underground area which had never known natural light, Clark needed whatever food he could get to maintain his energy and not starve to death. So he gratefully accepted the bagels, scrambled eggs, toast, bland tea, sandwiches, hamburgers, bottles of water, bags of chips, overcooked vegetables, tepid soups, and whatever else was given to him. He ate every bite at every meal, wasting nothing, even when the food was less than enjoyable.

He didn't see Bruce again for days. Or, he assumed it was days. It might have been as much as two weeks. At first, Clark had tried to gauge the passage of time by the meals he was given, but it all soon began to blur into one never-ending, timeless existence. He could have been there a year and it all would have felt the same to him. Sporadically, he was let out of his cell, shackled, and led off to another area to shower, change clothing, and be shaved of the stubble that cropped up on his cheeks and chin. In the beginning, it had felt dehumanizing and humiliating to have someone watch as he cleansed himself and then be robbed of his ability to even shave. But, gradually, he learned to look forward to those precious moments where he was free of his cage, even if the freedom was no more than an illusion.

As time passed, he found himself going almost stir crazy from the sheer boredom of hours upon hours, days upon days with nothing to occupy his mind and time with. He would have cut off his left arm for even a single book to read. But more than that, he wanted human interaction and conversation again. The men and women who brought his meals and escorted him to the shower never spoke a word to him. Clark figured they were under strict orders not to interact with the prisoner more than they absolutely needed to. Bruce's idea, probably, he'd come to surmise. He knew the billionaire wasn't stupid. He would want to break Clark's mind and spirit so that Clark would be more cooperative when Bruce finally rematerialized to ask him questions.

Clark tried to thwart that plan. While he dutifully cooperated with all that was demanded of him – not resisting his shackles, making no move to attempt escape when let out of his cell, handing over his empty food trays whenever someone came by to collect them – he always tried speaking with whoever showed up at his cell. He'd attempt to make small talk, to ask questions, to make observations, to make requests for a different type of fruit at his next meal, or a book to read, or a new roll of toilet paper. But each attempt failed. Not a single one of them so much as nodded in acknowledgment, let alone spoke a single audible word to him.

*This is worse than being in Lex Tower; he would sometimes decide. At least there people acted like I existed. Kind of. At least...I existed to Lex and Mrs. Cox and Nigel, if not to the world at large. Here though? I'm almost a ghost.*

He slept a lot, in order to combat the oppressive boredom that he felt and to try to retain his sanity. But he simply didn't need as much sleep as a regular person, and he couldn't force himself to burn as many idle hours as he would have liked in this manner. He

spent some of his time doing pushups and sit-ups, simply to keep his muscles toned. Of course, his attempts weren't perfect. His strength and muscles had never been something he'd needed to work on. All of it had been naturally gifted to him through his powers. So he stumbled his way through the limited exercises he could do in his cramped little cell. But at least it gave him the sense that he was doing something mildly productive.

And still, Bruce did not come to see him.

Clark was beginning to give up all hope that the billionaire would ever reappear. Perhaps his fate was to grow old and die in that cell, forgotten by the world. Not that the world had ever known he'd existed. He'd left no lasting impact on the world. He'd never touched a life in a positive way. He'd been nothing more than a Shade of Death, flitting in and out of the shadows, bringing the gift – or curse – of oblivion to all he came across. No one would remember him, outside of three people. Four, if he counted Bruce, but he wasn't sure he could. It almost felt like he'd been completely forgotten as he rotted away in his cell, though he knew, logically, that wasn't the case. And yet, Clark refused to ask for the man. Of all the things he tried asking his jailors for, he never once asked to see Bruce. He wouldn't give the billionaire the satisfaction of that. When Bruce was ready to come to him, Clark would be ready and waiting.

It happened one afternoon – Clark *assumed* it was the afternoon since a lunch styled meal had been served to him. He'd just gotten back from a typical shower and shave. His hair hadn't even fully dried yet. He heard footsteps coming toward him as he sat on the cot, his head hanging down to study the floor, chin resting on his chest. That was odd. Typically, he was left completely alone after a trip to the shower, at least until someone got around to bringing him his dinner. But, as curious as he was to know who was approaching, he waited until the footsteps stopped before he looked up. And when he did, he did it slowly, feigning disinterest.

"Perhaps you're ready to talk now?" Bruce Wayne asked, standing in a relaxed way, his hands behind his back.

It felt so surreal to have someone speaking to him that for a moment, Clark felt like he was in some kind of dream. He almost nodded in enthusiasm, but he held himself in check at the last possible moment.

"H...how long have I been in here?" Clark asked, his tongue heavy with disuse. For all that he'd tried to speak with his guards, he'd long since stopped *really* trying to get an answer out of them.

"Not quite two months," Bruce replied, his voice giving away no emotion.

*Two months?! Clark's mind screeched. How can that be?*

He didn't know whether to feel like two months was too long of a time to have been down below the Earth's surface or if two months was too short. In some ways, it felt like one nightmarishly unending day that he'd been in his cell. And in other ways, he felt like years should have passed by while he paced his tiny prison and suffered almost complete isolation.

"You don't believe me," Bruce offered after a moment, during which, he'd appeared to be studying the confusion Clark knew was showing on his face.

"I'm...not sure," Clark admitted.

"This will help," Bruce said, producing a rolled copy of The Daily Planet from behind his back. He crossed the distance and slid the newspaper through the cell bars. "Go on, take it. Check the date."

Clark warily did as he was bid and cautiously accepted the paper. He unrolled it and read the date on the front page. Bruce wasn't joking. It was just shy of two months since he'd left Lex Tower on his mission to find and assassinate Bruce. He made a move to hand the paper back, but Bruce shook his head.

"Keep it," the man told him with a wave of his hand, almost like a shooing motion. "It must be getting awfully boring in there."

Clark wanted to make a retort more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. But he bit his tongue and swallowed down the sarcastic reply that was dancing in his throat.

"I've managed so far," he said instead.

Bruce nodded. "Indeed. Still, it might do you some good to read about what's going on up there, above us." He pointed to the ceiling, indicating whatever it was that lay above ground level.

Clark looked at the paper, then set it aside on the desk, careful to maintain a neutral expression. He refused to let on to Bruce how thrilled he was to have something – *anything* – to read. For a couple of seconds, he even debated if he should thank the man for the paper at all.

"What do you want with me?" he finally decided on instead.

"To talk."

"We're already doing that," Clark pointed out sarcastically. "Or am I imagining this conversation?"

Bruce smirked in a way that Clark didn't like. "Sit," he commanded his prisoner.

Clark didn't budge, but Bruce disappeared for a moment, only to return with a rolling computer chair – this one much plusher and more comfortable than the one Clark's cell had been so generously furnished with. Bruce pulled it up to the cell, leaving a four or five-foot gap between his body and the bars. Then he sat down.

"Sit," he told Clark again.

"I'd rather stand," Clark replied hostilely.

Bruce shrugged as if it didn't bother him either way. "Suit yourself."

"What do you want with me?" Clark repeated, his voice stony.

"Information," Bruce answered after a moment.

"Take off the collar first," Clark volleyed back.

Bruce shook his head. "Now why would I do that? I have no reason to trust you."

"And I have no reason to trust *you*," Clark replied sharply, "but yet you want me to give you exactly what you want."

"Touché," Bruce allowed. "But you forget that *I'm* not the one in the cage. Now, unless you fancy a year or more of absolute silence before I allow anyone to speak with you again, you'll drop the attitude and talk to me."

"Yes, you're so tough," Clark shot back. "You think I can't see through the façade you're wearing? You think I can't see under that mask? You're *scared* of me. Of whatever connections I might have on the surface. You know an attempt was made on your life – twice now. You don't know who else is lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike. And you're *scared*. You don't give a flying rat's..."

"Ah, ah, ah," Bruce cautioned, wagging his finger at Clark. "Remember which of us can access the vents on that collar of yours."

"You wouldn't dare. You won't kill me so long as I have the answers to your questions. Without me, you're back to square one, aren't you? Don't deny it," Clark challenged.

"You sure are cocky for a man at the mercy of his jailors," Bruce replied with calm collectedness. "How willing are you to test your theory, *really*?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, slender device.

Despite his show of bravado, Clark involuntarily flinched at the sight of the remote. Bruce grinned in a grave manner and nodded his head slightly.

"I thought so," he continued, seeing Clark's reaction. "So why don't you knock off the attitude with me." It wasn't a question, nor was it a request.

"You lock me up for two months," Clark began, ticking off his points on his fingers. "You refuse to allow *anyone* to speak to me. You wouldn't even allow me so much as a comic book to read. *And* you insist on keeping this damn collar on me!" Clark hit one of the cell bars hard with the palm of his hand. "But you want me

to be your meek and willing prisoner?" he scoffed in disbelief.

"Tell me," Bruce said without rising to Clark's challenge. "If *you* were in my position, with a dangerous assassin in your custody, how would you proceed?"

"I..." Clark paused, at a loss. "I don't..." he stammered.

Bruce shrugged nonchalantly. "I see."

Clark forced himself to take a calming breath. "Okay, fine. I see your point. But that doesn't mean I'm suddenly okay with being forced to wear this collar, like I'm a damned animal!"

Bruce shrugged again. "In time, we'll see about that. But for now, we have more important things to discuss." His eyes narrowed and a flintiness came into them. "Who are you? Who sent you to kill me?"

Clark ignored the questions. "Take the collar off me first!" he insisted.

"No!"

Bruce didn't quite yell the word, but it was loud and forceful enough to sound like a gunshot. All around them, the underground world came to standstill. People stopped what they were doing and looked at the two men. It lasted only a few heartbeats before everything seemed to lurch back into motion.

"Then you're no better than..." Clark swallowed down Lex's name, unwilling to reveal his master, not out of loyalty to his brother but through the uncertainty of how much of a madman Bruce Wayne might well turn out to be. "My employer," he finished lamely.

"Who *is* your employer?"

Again, Clark ignored the question. "Ten years now. Ten years I've been forced to wear a collar that can be used to execute me whenever the mood strikes the master of the remote. Ten years I've borne this weight around my neck and on my mind. Ever since I botched that attempt on your life the first time."

"When you murdered my friend, Jason," Bruce nearly sneered.

"He wasn't meant to die!" Clark swiftly defended himself. He looked away from Bruce, still feeling the shame of his mistake, still hating himself for stealing away the wrong life that night. "I was too quick, too sure of myself, and I struck without double checking my target. I've regretted that night every single day since it happened. I'm...I'm truly sorry for what I did that night."

"Why don't I believe you?" Bruce shot back, his voice hard and unyielding as stone.

"I don't expect that you would," Clark replied in a quiet voice. "But it *is* the truth. When I was sent to kill you, I was told only you and your butler would be in the house. Instead, I waited for hours until those kids were gone. I had no idea one of them stayed behind."

"Jason *wasn't* one of the kids from the party," Bruce growled through gritted teeth. "He was living there, at the house. He...he was my partner."

"He was a little young to be your lover, don't you think?"

Clark taunted. "Was he even of legal age? *Tsk tsk!* We had no idea your tastes ran so...fresh and young."

"My *business* partner," Bruce snapped.

There was honesty in Bruce's words and written across his face. Clark found himself believing the billionaire.

"Sorry," he apologized, without entirely meaning it.

Bruce's demeanor softened by the most minuscule of degrees. He nodded once. But the moment passed like a summer sun-shower, and the man's face soon became stormy again.

"Who is your employer?" he demanded again.

"I...can't. I won't give him up."

"Your loyalty is misplaced," Bruce warned him.

Clark laughed, hard. "Loyalty? You think *loyalty* has anything to do with this? *Loyalty* to a man who collared me like a dog, threatened my life *repeatedly*, and subjected me to the contents of this collar on more occasions than I care to admit? *Loyalty*? Pah!" He spit the words out like poison.

“Then why are you protecting him?” Bruce demanded.

“Protecting him? No. Protecting *myself*,” Clark clarified. “As soon as you get what you want from me, you’ll kill me. You don’t think I’m smart enough to know that?”

“I have no interest in killing you,” Bruce replied, leaning back in his chair.

Clark snorted. “Of course you do. You’ll deem me too dangerous to be allowed to live and you’ll open the vents on my collar or take out that box of yours, and let the Kryptonite do its job.”

“Kryptonite? You mean the piece of meteor my source discovered.”

Mentally, Clark kicked himself. He’d let that slip too easily. He’d have to be more guarded in the future. But, for now, maybe giving away the name of the rock wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Perhaps he could use it to gather his own information.

“Yes,” he admitted, taking pains to make it look like he was ashamed of himself for letting the information slip. “At least, that’s what we’ve been calling it since we discovered that it can hurt me.”

Bruce nodded. “My source...he claims it’s a space rock. Something never before seen on Earth.”

“How does he know, for sure?” Clark pried.

Bruce hesitated, clearly aware of Clark’s game, but choosing to play it after a moment. “He’s a government man, special ops. He’s been involved in all things extraterrestrial for years. Alien abduction stories. UFO sightings. Examining any reported meteorite crashes.”

“Sounds like a nutcase,” Clark replied smugly.

“Not really,” Bruce said with a shrug. He spread his hands.

“I’ve known Trask for years. He’s about as bright as they come.” He studied Clark for a long moment. “That rock. It’s radioactive.”

“I know.”

“And you’re the only person it’s been known to affect,” Bruce continued. “You aren’t from Earth, are you?”

Clark looked away, as though if he didn’t look at Bruce, the billionaire would cease to see him in return. “I don’t know,” he settled on as a response. “I’ve been told that I’m not.” Shame burned him to admit that he wasn’t human. He wasn’t even sure why he was admitting it at all.

“Of course you aren’t human,” Bruce mused, almost to himself. “I watched you fly.”

Clark nodded. “Yeah,” was all he could offer.

“Kryptonite? Krypton...ite,” Bruce said, pondering the word. “Krypton. That’s where you’re from?”

Clark took a deep breath before replying. “Supposedly.”

“I see.” Bruce frowned. “Are there more of you out there? More alien assassins, ready to prey on unsuspecting humans?”

Clark flinched at Bruce’s emphasis on humans versus aliens. He’d always known he wasn’t an Earthling, but he’d rarely viewed himself as alien, save for at his darkest moments. His powers aside, he didn’t feel like he was all that different from regular human beings.

“It’s just me. And trust me, that’s more than enough,” Clark responded, finding his spirit again and wanting to fight.

“Clearly,” Bruce said, a hint of amusement in his voice as he gestured to the bars that imprisoned Clark. He stood up and paced a little before the cage. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves though. You know who I am, but you still have yet to extend the same courtesy to me. Who are you?”

“Does it matter?” Clark replied with disgust. “When you kill me, are you going to erect a headstone with my name on it?” He sneered. “You’ll throw me into some shallow, unmarked grave just the same as my employer would have.”

Bruce frowned. “Perhaps two months of isolation wasn’t enough.” He made to move off. “We’ll try again when you’re in more of a mood to have a civil conversation.”

“Fine. Go. Run away,” Clark growled.

He would have said more, but a set of hurried footsteps caught his attention. From around a corner, a woman emerged, moving quickly, making a beeline for Bruce. Clark blinked, wondering if he was seeing a vision, and his breath caught in his throat. He pressed himself up against the bars, trying in vain to get a closer look at her face.

“Bruce! Jimmy needs you for something,” she called out as she got closer.

Bruce nodded as he turned to her. “Thanks, Lois. I’ll be right there. It seems our *guest* needs some time to reflect on how much he wants to continue to rage against us and what the consequences are.”

“He says it’s urgent,” she countered.

“It’s *always* urgent with him,” Bruce chuckled.

The woman shrugged. “You know he’s risking a lot, helping you with things. If Perry found out he was ditching his responsibilities at the Planet...”

“Not so different from you,” Bruce pointed out gently.

The woman huffed. “If Perry had his way, I’d be wrapped in bubble wrap and fitted for a bulletproof vest every time I got out to chase a story. That’s why I didn’t tell him anything about what’s *really* going on with us.”

“He still thinks you’re just covering Bruce Wayne, presidential candidate, huh?” he asked, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

She shrugged. “Better than admitting that I’m helping said presidential candidate with his amateur investigation into an assassination attempt.”

“Good point. Okay, let’s go find Jimmy,” Bruce offered, and they both started away.

“Wait!” Clark called out, unable to stop himself. He reached out toward the woman.

Both she and Bruce stopped and turned back to look at Clark.

“Yes?” they asked together.

“Who are you?” he asked, his eyes locked on Lois.

“The woman who brought down the man who tried to assassinate the next President of the United States,” she said disdainfully.

“You were there, that night?” Clark asked in disbelief. He vaguely remembered a woman’s voice through the blinding, blistering pain of the Kryptonite poisoning.

“Who do you think set the whole thing up?” she shot back. “The Easter Bunny?”

“I...I...just assumed...Bruce...” Clark stammered, taken aback. “What’s your name?”

“Lois Lane,” she declared with obvious pride. “I’d say you’ll read all about how I’ll win the Pulitzer for my eventual expose on you, but, well, tomorrow is never guaranteed,” she said in a dangerous tone that sent a lance of fear tearing through Clark.

“What? Are *you* going to be the one to kill me?” Clark asked with a snort.

“No. Unlike *you*, I don’t believe in murdering people. And while Bruce may have other plans for you, I’ll be happy to cover your trial, conviction, and execution in a court of law,” she replied icily.

“You think I *like* killing? Oh, if only you knew,” Clark chuckled darkly as he rolled his head back to look up at the ceiling.

“We’d know more if you’d simply talk to us,” Bruce countered stonily.

“Lois Lane,” Clark said, testing the name on his tongue. He shook his head. “I can’t believe you’re alive.”

“What do you mean?” Lois asked in a guarded way. “Did you screw up a hit on me too?”

“Not...exactly,” Clark admitted. “But, I *do* know you,” Clark breathed, tamping down his relief at seeing the woman. “Oh yes, I know you.”

"I doubt that," Lois replied.

"It's true," Clark insisted.

"What did you mean just now, that you're surprised to see me alive?" Lois asked, dragging the conversation back to where she wanted it. "Answer me!"

"I...know there was a car accident, back in the spring," he confessed, deliberately keeping his words vague.

"So what?" Lois snapped. "Everyone knows that. It was on the news and in the papers, *despite* me telling Perry to keep it under wraps," she added as a grumbled aside meant for Bruce. "But so was the fact that I survived."

"My...master...didn't allow the news to reach me," Clark explained. "He controlled what came into...the place where he held me captive. He even soundproofed the place, so unless I was out on the balcony, I couldn't hear anything from the outside world. I guess I never thought to use my..." He clamped his mouth shut.

"Your what?" Bruce asked threateningly, clenching the remote that controlled Clark's collar.

A bead of sweat popped up on Clark's brow and cold terror ran down his spine. He'd decided that Bruce might just be insane enough to use the Kryptonite to punish him.

"Let's just say flight isn't my only *inhuman* ability," he spat. "There are others. Among them, super hearing."

Bruce's grip on the remote relaxed slightly. "How many more?" he demanded.

Clark sighed heavily. "A lot more."

"You will disclose them *all* to me," Bruce warned him.

"Later," Lois said, securitizing Clark so thoroughly that he felt naked before her gaze. "You said no news was allowed into wherever it was that you were at the time. So *how* did you know about the crash?"

Clark squirmed under her intense gaze. "I just...do."

"Bull," Lois shot back, crossing her arms. "Your 'super hearing?'" she scoffed, her voice making air quotes around the words *super hearing*. "I'm not buying it. How did you know?" she pressed again.

"Because...I was there," he relented, wishing she would just leave him alone.

"No one was there, that night," she retorted. "Just some guy named Steve, who happened across the wreck and called 911. And I met him. You're not Steve. So, again, *how* did you know?"

Clark gulped and found himself pressed up against the metaphorical wall. He didn't know what to say that could get him out of the corner he was in. No lie he could think of made sense, but if he owned up to his part in the crash, what would happen to him?

"I've had enough of this," Bruce growled in frustration. With a flick of his finger, the vents on the Kryptonite collar slid open.

Instantly, Clark was hobbled to his knees, gripping the bars of his cell so tightly that his knuckles were white. He threw his head back and cried out in agony, his howl echoing in the vast underground space.

"Answer Lois' question!" Bruce commanded.

"I was there!" Clark bellowed through his pain, ready to do anything that would end his suffering. "I was there! I'm the one who caused the crash!"

The woman – Lois – stiffened. Hatred and anger flashed in her eyes. Clark had the impression of a thunderstorm rolling in, black clouds billowing and lightning cracking within, just waiting to be unleashed on the world. But her wrath was the least of his worries. The pain from the Kryptonite was unreal, especially since he was already stripped of his powers from the last exposure he'd suffered through, followed by two months without a single shaft of sunlight.

"Please!" he pleaded. "Stop!"

"Let him die," Lois told Bruce in a hollow tone.

"I can explain!" Clark cried.

"This had better be good," Bruce said after a moment. He touched the remote again, and the vents snapped shut.

Clark collapsed against the bars of the cage, his entire body sagging with relief. He coughed harshly, gasping for breath and panting with the effort of expanding his lungs to their full capacity. His neck muscles – which had been taut against the agony of the radioactive stone – slowly went slack. For half a minute, he didn't move from his spot on the floor, his head hanging down – too heavy for him to look up just yet. Then, by degrees, he forced himself to look up, though his legs still felt like jelly and he didn't want to chance trying to stand.

"Did that make you feel better?" he asked, locking his burning gaze on Bruce. "Did it make you feel like a big man, a hero, to cripple me with that rock? You're just as sick as my employer. You're not any better than him at all! And to think! I was foolish enough to hope you wouldn't be."

"The fact that he let you live is more than you deserve," Lois hissed.

"I thought you didn't believe in murder, Miss Lane," Clark shot back, a light, but tired, veneer of sarcasm coating his words.

"That was before I knew you murdered my family," she shot back venomously.

"That wasn't my decision!"

"Yeah? Well, you sure as hell did it anyway!"

Clark flinched at the hatred in her voice, but he couldn't blame her for her vehemence. He'd killed people she'd loved.

"I didn't want to...I had no choice!" he tried to defend himself.

"There's *always* a choice," Bruce interrupted in a firm voice.

"I...not for me, there wasn't. Never has been. Not really," Clark replied wearily, wanting Lois to see how sincere he was being.

Bruce must have seen something in Clark's features, or maybe it was in the way Clark was looking at Lois. He touched Lois' shoulder briefly, drawing her attention to him, rather than Clark. She turned to him with a look at would wilt flowers and curdle milk.

"What?" she asked, clearly upset with his interruption, as though he'd stopped her from flaying Clark alive with her words.

"Why don't *you* talk with him?" he suggested, his voice a whisper that Clark barely caught as he pulled himself up to stand.

"Why me?" she asked back, in a similar tone. "*You're* the one with the remote."

"He doesn't trust me," Bruce replied back. "But the way he's looking at you..." He shrugged slightly.

"You think he...*trusts* me?" she asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"No. I think our dear killer is quite taken with you," Bruce corrected with a conspiratorial smile and a side glance at Clark.

Lois made a face as though she'd just caught of whiff of Bruce's sweaty gym socks. "No thanks."

"Come on, Lois. This is your chance. Call it...an interview," he prodded her, while Clark acted like he was oblivious as to what was being said. "You need answers. So do I. But we won't be getting them if I stay here. Let me go talk to Jimmy. And *you* talk to the assassin. He seems...eager, to let you know he didn't want to kill your family. Listen to what he has to say. Find out whatever you can. You could be the one to help us take down whoever is ordering him to kill."

Lois sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose, then appeared to mull things over. "Okay, but give me the remote. If I don't get answers..."

"No." Bruce cut her off with one sharp word.

"Bruce..."

"Not a chance, Lois. He killed your family. I won't give you easy access to the one thing we know could kill him," Bruce

explained quickly.

“You don’t trust me,” Lois accused.

“No, I don’t,” Bruce confirmed firmly. “We need him alive. I can’t risk your anger getting the better of you.”

Lois scowled. “Like *you* did, when he wouldn’t answer your question?”

“That was different. If I need to prod him into a more cooperative direction...”

“That’s all I’m asking for. A tool to motivate him to speak,” Lois interrupted with a casual wave of her hand.

“No. That’s my final decision,” Bruce said with finality. He stalked off before she could argue the point further.

For a moment, Lois watched him go, her face a mask of anger and disbelief that he’d shut her down so thoroughly. Clark studied her as she stood there, looking torn as to whether or not she should chase Bruce down and give him a piece of her mind. He smiled to himself. She was giving away so much about herself that it was almost laughable. Clark knew he wasn’t the wisest person out there – his near-imprisonment in Lex Tower with limited access to news events and the like left him stunted in a number of ways. But he *was* shrewd in reading other people. It was a natural gift of his, though he knew it wasn’t one of his powers. And, in that moment, he could read Lois like a book.

This was a woman who was unused to people standing in her way. She was someone who barreled over other people to get what she wanted, knocking down walls if she had to in order to reach her goal. She was a natural leader in her own right, and backing down to Bruce’s commands wasn’t something she was comfortable with. And yet, for all of her bravado and stony exterior, Clark sensed a vulnerability, deep within her. Perhaps it was because of how troubled her eyes looked. Maybe it was in the way her brow furrowed in what appeared to be worry. Whatever it was, it was there, and it was real. And Clark, for the first time in his life, found himself unsure of what to do with the knowledge of someone else’s weakness. He knew he didn’t want to exploit it. And yet, if he *did*, maybe he could use it to his advantage in order to break free of his tiny, underground prison.

*Do you really deserve freedom?* his mind whispered in the Devil’s voice. *You’ve killed so many.*

*I had no choice*, he replied with a mental sigh, guilt tugging at his heart. *I had to kill, or be killed.* It wasn’t an excuse, he knew, but for him, it had been the one guiding truth that he’d been forced to live by.

Lois turned her fiery gaze at him, and Clark found himself withering under her hatred. She stormed her way over to the cage and brazenly grabbed a fistful of Clark’s shirt. She yanked it forward and Clark smashed his forehead into the cell bars.

“I should strangle you where you stand,” she hissed.

“Go on then,” Clark replied, challenging her. Whatever he might feel about deserving punishment for his crimes, he refused to go down without a fight. “I’m right here. Vulnerable. Unprotected. No one is watching.” He shrugged as if it didn’t matter to him what she chose to do. “Kill me. Take your revenge.”

“Don’t tempt me,” she growled in a deadly tone.

“It’s true, what they say. It gets easier after the first kill. Kill me. Then go and kill anyone else who’s wronged you,” he continued in a nearly gravelly tone of voice.

Lightning crackled in Lois’ eyes and, for a moment, Clark was sure she’d actually go and do it. He wondered if he’d gone too far in taunting her. But a second later, the lightning subsided and she let go of his shirt, shoving him in the chest and away from her. Clark stumbled back a step, then rubbed the spot where his head had contacted the bars of his cell.

“You deserve to die,” she announced harshly. “But I won’t be the one to do it.” It seemed she was speaking more for her benefit than his.

Clark gave her a lingering once-over with his eyes. “No, I

suppose you won’t,” he decided. “We can’t all be strong enough to do what’s necessary.”

“*Strong?*” she scoffed. “Only cowards take lives.”

Clark knew she was baiting him, but he wasn’t going to play her game. Instead, he would make *her* play *his* game. “Is that why Bruce won’t give you the remote? He doesn’t trust you, you know. He probably knows you’ll be too tempted to hit that button. Maybe keep the vents open just a little too long. Hmm?” He raised his head a bit and jutted his chin out in defiance. “If I’m such a coward for taking lives, then what would that make you?”

Lois reached back through the bars to grab him again, but this time Clark was ready for her. He ducked back as she huffed angrily. “Why you little...”

“Temper, temper,” he chastised, wagging a finger at her like a disappointed parent or teacher. His tone was more condescending than was necessary, but he wasn’t going to hold back, not against his jailors, even if one of them *did* happen to be an attractive woman. He grabbed her wrist tightly, refusing to let go when she tried to tug herself free.

“Hey! Let go!” she shouted at him.

He grinned menacingly at her before pulling her in closely to whisper in her ear. “You’re no different than me. Don’t pretend that, if given the same choices and circumstances, you wouldn’t have done *exactly* what you needed to do in order to survive. It’s instinct – the drive to survive – and it’s inescapable.” He let go of her then, just as she gave her arm a particularly hard yank to try and break away from his grasp.

“Survival instincts are ingrained in all of us, Miss Lane. I’m sure you’ve been confronted with them before, chasing down stories in bad neighborhoods, tracking down criminals, busting drug dealers. The desire to stay alive...it can make a man do... well, just about anything.” He let his eyes rake over her in a way that made her squirm. “And,” he added with a smirk, “it can make a woman do things she’d never even thought of in her worst nightmares...until pushed.”

“You have no *idea* what you’re talking about you smarmy, arrogant, self-centered, self-righteous...”

“Ah, ah, ah,” he warned her coldly. “There’s that temper again. I wonder...do you *ever* shut up? *How* Bruce puts up with you is beyond a mystery to me. Unless your mouth has *other* talents, other than issuing forth a constant stream of words.”

“How dare you!” she thundered.

“I know his type. Rich. Powerful. Famous. And I know they don’t typically go for members of the press unless there’s something in it for them. He wagged his eyebrows in a lecherous manner. “How many ‘exclusives’ did you let him give you, before he let you play with the big boys?”

She rolled her eyes. “Pig.”

Clark put his hands up in a gesture of pacification. “Okay, okay. We won’t discuss your...professional relationships.”

“We won’t be discussing *me* at all,” Lois countered harshly. Then she stopped, her features softening a bit as she appeared to contemplate something. Perhaps she was remembering Bruce’s words to her. Perhaps she was switching to a different tried-and-true reporting technique. He wasn’t sure which it was, but the change in her face was astounding. He’d recognized that she was attractive while she’d been busy yelling at him. But this softer look made her look radiant, almost like a benevolent angel. “After all, I’m at the disadvantage here.”

“Oh really?” Clark said, biting back a laugh. He spread his arms wide to gesture to the bars around him. “I’m stuck in a *cage*, in case your powers of observation are a bit duller than I’d expect from a reporter.”

Lois’ eyes gleamed with some inner amusement. “Perhaps. But you know *my* name. And you’ve yet to offer yours.” She almost purred the statements, and Clark felt his heart skip a beat, though he knew it was simply her way of trying to entice

information out of him.

He swallowed hard. "I'm no one."

"Right," she said sarcastically, drawing the word out longer than was necessary. "Try again."

He shook his head. "What does it matter? Are you going to engrave it on a tombstone for me?" He shook his head again. "No, it *doesn't* matter. It *never* did. It never will." He paused for the span of five heartbeats. "Tell me, Miss Lane, if you hadn't so eagerly given up your name earlier, and I had asked for it, would you have told me?"

"I've got nothing to hide," she responded guardedly, putting her hands on her hips. "What's your excuse?"

"You didn't answer my question," Clark said, trying to deflect the spotlight off of himself.

"I don't need to. *I'm* not the prisoner here," she threw back in defiance, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her left ear. "So start talking."

"I...I'm no one. My name means nothing. It's...a label I was slapped with, nothing more," he said bitterly, looking down at the tile floor.

Lois rolled her eyes in a way that was supposed to get her irritation across but which Clark found somehow endearing. "Cut the crap, you psychopath. Bruce may not have given me his remote, but I know where he keeps the piece of space rock that brought you to your knees with that night on the balcony. *And* I have ways to get it."

Her voice was so devoid of emotion that he found himself believing every word of what she was saying. He took a deep breath, then sighed nosily.

"You want the truth?"

"No, I want you to make up some happy little fairytale," she retorted, gesturing broadly.

There was something about the way she was looking at him that went straight to his heart. There was so much fire in her. But not in the same way that Lex had always seemed to be a volcano, laying dormant, just waiting to erupt at the slightest provocation. Instead, Lois' fire was made up of passion, of wanting to get to the truth, of wanting to pursue justice. True, he could see that she was furious with him as well, but he couldn't blame her for that. Still, her ire put fear into his heart. He wanted to prove to her that he wasn't as bad a person as he appeared to be. He didn't *want* her to hate him, though she had every right to be. For the first time in his life, it mattered to him what someone thought of him. With Lex, he'd long ago given up caring what the billionaire felt toward him, so long as he wasn't angry enough to use the Kryptonite collar. But with Lois...

*Her opinion matters*, he realized as his heart skipped a beat.

But trust wasn't something he was accustomed to simply just dole out. He couldn't afford to let down his guard.

*Would it kill me, really, to give her a tiny morsel of information?* he wondered while she looked expectantly at him.

*Take a leap of faith*, he tried to encourage himself.

*Okay, but just a small piece of information*, he decided.

"The truth is...I don't even know who I am anymore. I...the name that was given to me, the identity I've assumed for the past twenty-plus years...I'm not sure if I'm that man or the one I used to be or if I've *ever* had a true identity."

"Stop talking in circles," she commanded. "What did your master call you?"

He took another deep breath before taking the plunge. "Clark. Clark Kent."

"And before then?" Lois demanded.

"My name was Kal," he confessed in a small voice.

"Kal Kent?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Kal what then?" She took a threatening step forward.

"I...can't. If he found out I told you..." he protested in sudden

terror.

"Who? Bruce?" she snapped.

He shook his head again, this time mutely.

"Who?" she demanded again, her anger rising like a volcano about to erupt.

"*I can't!* He'll *kill me* and all of you too, if he knows I revealed who I am!" He couldn't stop the fear from ripping through his words like a tornado. He once again gripped the bars of his cell. "Please, don't make me say it."

Lois' frown deepened and ice settled into her eyes. "And Bruce can kill you if you *don't* reveal who you are."

"Please," he pleaded softly. "It doesn't matter. I haven't gone by my old name in decades. It doesn't matter. Who I was...he's long dead and buried. I'll never be him again."

"Fine, have it your way. Bruce will get it out of you, one way or another," she threatened as she turned to storm away.

"Wait!" Clark reached out toward her, as if he could halt her footsteps somehow. "There's one thing..."

"What? What could you *possibly* have to say to me?" she asked over her shoulder.

Clark sighed heavily. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your family." He looked away, ashamed of his actions.

But Lois didn't respond. She simply kept walking, ignoring his words as if they were the buzzing of a bothersome fly. And once again, Clark was left all alone.

\*\*\*

Isolated.

Clark was used to being alone, but not quite like this. The silence around him was deafening. In Lex Tower, he could usually find something to do. He could raid the library for books to read. He could watch as much television as he could stomach. He had access to virtually any music he wanted. He even had every up-to-date and out-of-date video game system imaginable. It was *never* silent in Lex Tower unless he wished it to be.

But here?

Here, he had *nothing* except his own thoughts to occupy his time with. That was a truly terrifying thought for him. His mind had never been a pleasant place. His thoughts were usually dark and his dreams filled with murder. He was desperate for any distraction he could get. And yet, he was denied that. Already, his mind had turned to unpleasant thoughts. Already he wondered if he would die in this cage like a beast deemed too unfit to be showcased in the zoo.

Clark figured it would be days or weeks before he saw Lois or Bruce again. He wouldn't have even blamed them for leaving him in isolation. He'd confessed his involvement in the murder of the Lane family, and he'd been difficult about giving up his name. A name he knew would turn up no results if and when Lois used her reporter's resources to look into him. He didn't care that it would keep Lex safe. He wanted to see that sociopath taken down one day, ripped from his pedestal of prestige and cast down lower than the lowliest of people. He wanted to see LexCorp topple to the ground, smashed into dust, and utterly forgotten by the populace at large.

And yet, there was no way he was going to work with his captors. They were no better than Lex. They'd poisoned him with Kryptonite. They'd locked him in a jail cell, this one smaller and shabbier than he'd experienced in Lex Tower. They looked down their noses at him, like he was a caged animal, unworthy of human compassion. And maybe, just maybe, he wasn't. He'd killed a lot of people over the years. Too many to recall. He'd killed people they'd cared about. He'd been nothing more than an instrument of death. He wasn't human. Not in his actions, and certainly not in his DNA.

He went to sleep that night brooding over his captivity and wondering why Lois had such a profound effect on him. Why did she make his pulse rise? Why did his heart race in her presence?

Why did he have the urge to take her into his bed? Though he'd never known a woman's touch — Lex had never gifted him with so much as a streetwalker or the previous night's conquest — he knew what transpired between men and women in the bedroom. Despite being locked away from the world, he'd had access to Lex's massive library and *all* of the premium cable channels. And while he'd hoped one day to experience the pleasures of the flesh for himself, he'd forced the idea from his mind, knowing it would never happen, not while Lex controlled him.

But Lois suddenly made those desires come to the forefront of his mind, and he found himself having very vivid dreams about her.

"Clark?" she called to him in his dreams.

He smiled in his sleep, and hugged the thin pillow to himself even tighter.

"Clark!"

The sharpness in the tone jolted him awake. He bolted upright and blinked rapidly, trying to figure out where he was and dimly wondering what time it was.

*Probably the middle of the night*, he guessed, still half asleep.

He yawned as his surroundings coalesced around him. He was still locked in his underground prison. He was still Bruce Wayne's captive. But Bruce was nowhere to be seen, he realized, as his vision cleared and he saw Lois standing alone in front of his cell.

"About time," she grumbled.

"Are you my conjugal visit?" he snapped, half in jest, half with a sharp edge of spitefulness. He sent up a silent thanks for the ruffled blankets that concealed his lap.

"Funny," she deadpanned, her eyes hard as glaciers. "We need to talk."

"Didn't we already *do* that?" he teased maliciously. He made a show of looking around. "So, where's your boyfriend?"

"Bruce is a colleague, nothing more," she bristled, rising to his bait. "And, if it were up to him, I wouldn't even be here right now. So, unless you enjoyed his refusal to let anyone talk to you, you'll answer my questions, right now."

"I'd rather sleep."

"For a man who's lost everything, you seem to have this ridiculous notion that you're in control of the situation, don't you?" she asked in a patronizing way.

"You wake me up in the middle of the night and want me to worship at your feet like a loyal dog?" he shot back, incredulous.

"All I want is answers! You killed my family! I think I deserve them."

"Trust me," Clark said, getting up out of his bed, now that the effects his dreams had caused in his body had subsided. "There's nothing to be gained, asking me about it."

"*Everything* is to be gained," she argued.

He shook his head. "You won't like the answers. Nor, do I think, will you believe half of them." He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to will away the mental images of the car crash that had killed them woman's family, and not succeeding in the least. "Leave it alone, Miss Lane. For your own good, let it alone."

Determination settled into her features. "Trust you? Trust a low-life *murderer*? I don't think so." Her brow furrowed and her lips pursed into a thin, hard line. "I'll get those answers from you... without Bruce's intervention or *with* it. You've already seen that he's not afraid to do whatever he needs to, to get what he wants."

Mentally, Clark had to acknowledge that she was right. Bruce had used the Kryptonite against him once. There was no doubt in his mind that the man would do it again, if need be. But he still wasn't sure talking about the crash was a good idea. Even if he told Lois the truth, there was always the chance that she would turn around and ask Bruce to use the Kryptonite anyway, as her own brand of vigilante justice.

"I'll make you a deal," he finally answered her. "I'll answer

your questions *if* you talk to Bruce about taking this collar off me. You have *no* idea what it's like, carrying this *thing* around, like an animal."

"I don't make deals with monsters," she said crossly, her patience already appearing to wear thin.

"I'm not..." Clark protested but clamped his mouth shut before he could finish. How could he argue with her assessment? In her eyes — to everyone's eyes — he would appear to be the monster she'd called him.

"You're not...what?" she prodded. "Not a monster? Not a psychopath? Not an inhumane piece of garbage?" Each accusation was louder and more defiant than the last. "Please, argue this point with me," she challenged.

"I'm..." Clark paused, scrambling for an answer while his heart raced at the mere sight of her, angry as she was. "I'm not... what you think I am. I never wanted to be an assassin."

"Not many of us do, yet here you are," she retorted, her eyes flashing.

"We're all a product of circumstance, Miss Lane," he said as he leaned a hip against the bars of his cell. "You. Me. Bruce. We all have to use the cards life deals us in the best way we can."

"Your 'best way' was to kill people?" She shook her head in disbelief, as though Clark were the biggest idiot she'd ever met.

He shrugged. "It kept a roof over my head, food in my stomach. It kept me... safe... from people who... didn't have my best interests at heart. Or... so I thought. By the time I realized my master didn't have my best interests in mind — *at all* — it was too late."

"Sound to me like you're deflecting the blame. Refusing to take personal responsibility," Lois said, putting her hands on her hips like a disapproving mother.

He shook his head. "You don't understand."

"I would if you'd just stop speaking in riddles," she pointed out sharply.

He had to acknowledge that was true, but staying ambiguous and hiding in the shadows was too deeply ingrained in him. Coming clean, in a direct, straight-forward, manner wasn't something that he was comfortable with. It went against his very nature.

"Let me ask you something. Miss Lane. If you suddenly woke up one morning, and learned that everything you'd ever known was wrong, what would you do?" He spread his arms wide, as if alluding to the entire world beyond the bars of his cell. "That being a reporter wasn't in your best interest, but was being used to advance your boss' position in the world? That by exposing corrupt politicians and criminal masterminds, you were *hurting* society, rather than helping it?" He saw the minutest flinch in her eyes and decided to press things further. "That by putting people in jail, you were only making your boss richer and more powerful, regardless of if the people you put in jail 'deserved' it or not?" He looked away, knowing he appeared snobbish, but in reality, unable to meet her gaze. He'd meant to wound her with his words, but had, instead, stirred up the bitterness he felt toward himself.

"I'd still know right from wrong," she immediately countered, crossing her arms. "I'd still know that criminals belong in jail. I'd still know that it's wrong to kill people, no matter what the reason is. I wouldn't call being a puppet an excuse. I'd acknowledge that, willingly or not, I'd made the decision to do evil things."

"Easy to say until you've walked that path," Clark argued, though gently.

"And easy enough to make assumptions about people you don't even know," she volleyed back. "But philosophical debates *aren't* the reason why I'm here."

A retort started to form on Clark's tongue, but he swallowed it down. He was too tired for this verbal sparring. "No, you aren't," he allowed stifling a yawn behind one hand and knowing his was failing to hide it.

“Awww, is the poor big man sleepy?” she mocked in a sing-song voice that should have been reserved for a baby. “Am I interrupting his murder-filled dreams?”

“You know what? Maybe I’ll just climb back into bed and leave you wondering at the answers to your questions,” Clark replied, as though coming to a sudden decision.

“I’ll make your life a living hell,” she swore.

Clark chuckled darkly. “Oh please. You can’t make things any worse for me than they already are.”

“I’ll get the Kryptonite,” she vowed.

“You know something? At this point, you’d be doing me a *favor* by killing me,” he tossed back with indifference. “At least I wouldn’t have to put up with your constant badgering.”

“You touch that bed,” she growled, “and I’ll make you *beg* for death.”

“I’ll bet you make a lot of men beg. Come on in. I’m willing if you are,” he offered, giving her a lustful look.

Lois gave him a look of disgust that told him *exactly* how pathetic she thought he was. “That’s how you want to play? Fine. Bruce and I will see you in the morning. *With* the Kryptonite.”

Clark involuntarily gulped. The threat in her voice let him know that she wasn’t bluffing. He could see it in her eyes. She was not a woman to be trifled with.

*Perhaps I’ve poked this bear once too many times*, he thought to himself.

Lois was oblivious to his worry. She was still making her threats. “And believe me, I’ll make you scream like you never have before,” she promised him in a deadly voice. She turned to leave and Clark battled with himself for a moment.

*Do something!* his mind screamed in terror that she would make good on her threat to torture the answers out of him with the Kryptonite.

What could he do? He could *not* allow her to know how scared he was of that rock.

*Feign defeat!* his mind clamored. *Make it look like you’re tired of fighting!*

He sighed. “Wait,” he called softly, making the word sound heavy.

“What? You want to make another lewd comment? You need me to stay for another minute so you can undress me with your eyes? Not interested,” she called back over her shoulder.

“No,” he forced himself to say. Then he sighed heavily, rubbing at his tired eyes. “Go ahead. Ask your questions. But, I’m warning you, I won’t sugar coat things for your benefit. You’d better be *sure* you want to know the answers to your questions.”

Lois stopped but didn’t turn around right away. Maybe she was thinking things over. Maybe she was formulating another biting retort. Clark couldn’t tell, so he waited quietly, trying to judge her reactions based on the way she held herself. Finally, she made a movement, after what felt like centuries, but was, at the most, five long seconds. “Why?” she asked sharply, whirling back around to face him. “What did we *ever* do to you? My father? My mother? My *sister*?” Her breath hitched and Clark could see a glimmer of a tear in her eye. “What did *I* ever do to you?”

Clark spread his hands helplessly. “Nothing.”

“Then why did you *murder* them?” she practically screamed.

“I...was...told to. My boss...he had a...a vendetta, against your parents,” Clark replied, choosing his words carefully. “You and your sister...you weren’t supposed to be a part of things. But when I got there and found you two with your parents...I didn’t want to go through with the kill. But L...my employer...insisted.” It brought an unexpected lump to Clark’s throat to admit these things to Lois.

“So, like a good little lap dog, you did exactly what you were told,” Lois supplied with disgust.

“It’s not like that! I had no choice!”

“I saw you fly, that night when you tried to kill Bruce. Don’t

tell me you couldn’t have walked – or flown – away from your boss,” Lois thundered back, pacing toward his cell, just out of his reach if he should put out an arm toward her.

“No,” Clark confessed, tugging at the steel ring around his neck. “If I had, he could have killed me on the spot.”

“I’m not buying it.”

“It’s the truth,” he said, hanging his head a little. “You’ve seen what this *thing* can do to me. My master...he’s used it against me. A lot. I didn’t want to lose my life.”

“So you traded my family’s life for your own?” she yelled.

“What would *you* have done?” Clark threw back at her, just as loudly. “Gun to your head.” He held his hand in front of himself, in the shape of a gun, like a child playing at cops and robbers. He pointed the imaginary weapon at her head. “You have to execute the person in front of you, or be killed, all the while knowing that you aren’t saving their life at all, that the gunman will just find someone else to do the deed. What would *you* do?” he repeated bitterly, spitting the words at her.

“I’d rather die than kill an innocent person,” she sneered in a self-assured way.

“You say that now,” Clark replied with cool dismissal, turning partly away from her.

“Unlike you, I have morals.”

“Morals?” He snorted a dark laugh. “Morals mean *nothing* when your life is on the line. Believe me, I know.”

“A life as a hired assassin isn’t much of a life,” she responded, crossing her arms again and raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“It’s better than no life at all.” He dragged his hand through his hair, ill at ease with telling Lois these things. He sighed again and decided to make the final plunge. “Not that it probably means much to you, but...I did try to save you. And your sister.”

Lois snorted in disbelief. “And I’m Santa Claus.”

“No, really,” he insisted. He gestured vaguely, as though the destroyed car were right in front of Lois. “After I popped the tire and sent the car into that tree, I went down to check on everyone. Your parents were already beyond help. But there was a chance that you and your sister could be saved.” He paused for a moment, seeing the events unfolding before his waking eyes.

He hung his head a little, embarrassed and still shaken by how he’d defied Lex that night. “I took your phone. I dialed 911, hoping the operator would get a fix on the signal. I...I couldn’t risk speaking. My boss...he made me wear a headset whenever I went out to...complete an assignment.” His hands shook with residual dread that Lex would one day find out how he’d disobeyed such a direct order. “I managed to do it without him seeing or hearing what I was up to. I wanted to help you, but I didn’t want to risk my own life. After I left, I looked back and saw that other car stop where the crash was, and I knew that, even if my effort had failed, you and your sister would get help.”

“*Help?*” Lois asked, nearly laughing in hysteria. She stormed over to his cage, reached in, and grabbed a fistful of his shirt, pulling him in closely. “*Help?* Help would have been in leaving us alone! My sister...the doctors said her brain damage was too great. I was forced to make the decision to turn off her life support! I had to plan a funeral for my parents *and* my sister! Help! Pah!” Her words were poison and Clark felt the sting of each one as they slapped him across his face. She let go of his shirt abruptly, and he staggered back a step as he half-heartedly fought to escape her grasp.

“I...I...I’m sorry,” he said softly, pangs of guilt stabbing his heart.

“No, you aren’t,” Lois decided. “Unless you’re sorry that I survived.”

“No!” He closed his eyes and sighed. “I know you have no reason to believe me. But it’s true. I never meant for her to die. I never meant for you to be hurt.”

“No, of course not. You just meant for my parents to die,

right?” She set her lips into a hard line, jutting her chin out, defying him to deny the accusation.

“It was my job,” he weakly defended himself.

“Maybe instead of killing innocent people, you should have killed your boss,” she said, rolling her eyes at his defense. Then, before he could respond, “You can hold whatever excuses you have. I’m not interested in hearing them.”

Clark racked his brain, trying to think of something – anything – he could say that would make this woman believe that he was sincere in his apology to her. He didn’t even know *why* it felt so important to him. But it was. For whatever reason, her hatred of him hurt him more than anything ever had. Bruce’s scorn he could endure. Lex’s dismissal of him and treatment of him as something less than human, something to be owned and enslaved had been depressing, but bearable. Knowing that the world would never know he existed had barely phased him. The fact that even his victims didn’t know he was present and responsible for their deaths, not even at the last possible second, had been a relief, not a burden.

But Lois’ rejection and outright, blazing hate? It broke what was left of Clark’s heart.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled humbly once again.

“Sorry you got caught,” she blazed. “You’re pathetic, you know that?” She shook her head. “I’ll be sitting front and center when the judge passes your sentence. And if it’s the death penalty, I’ll be the last person you see, sitting right in the front row, glad to see your final breath.”

She spun on her heel and stomped away, before he could think of anything else to say. For a long time, he watched the direction in which she’d gone, guilt twisting his soul and knotting his guts. He didn’t hope for Lois to return – he knew it was better for them both if she didn’t confront him again that night. But a part of him wished he could apologize for his involvement in her family’s deaths, and have her believe him. He didn’t want forgiveness. He knew what he’d done was completely unforgivable. He couldn’t fault her for hating him for causing that crash.

After a while, he retreated to his cot and stretched out on his stomach, folding his hands under his chin in thought. He’d always heard that confession was good for the soul. Wasn’t that the reason why religious folks sought out priests or rabbis or reverends or whatever titles their spiritual leaders boasted? To admit their sins and be told that their god or goddess or alien overlord understood and forgave them? It had always seemed like an absurd ritual to Clark. God or no God, shouldn’t a person confess their wrongdoing straight to the person or people it most directly affected? He’d done that, tonight, by telling Lois the truth. And yet, he didn’t feel relief. He didn’t feel unburdened. He didn’t feel the phantom blood on his hands lift away to make him squeaky clean once again. He still felt dirty. Still felt like the killer he was. Still felt the shame and guilt of his assassin’s career, orchestrated by Lex.

“Waste of my time,” he mumbled to himself. “She didn’t need to know.”

But she *did* and he knew it.

“What good did it do?” he asked himself in a whisper.

*It’ll give her peace of mind*, his inner voice told him in a baby-soft voice.

*Peace? Pah! It’ll give her nightmares, to put a face and a limp excuse to the reason why her parents had to die.*

“Did I expect redemption?” he continued, his voice low enough to barely be heard, not that anyone was around at this late hour.

*I don’t deserve redemption.*

\*\*\*

“Good morning, sunshine,” Bruce sarcastically greeted Clark the next morning. “I heard Lois came to visit you during the night.”

Clark shrugged casually, not looking up from the paper Bruce had furnished him with the previous day. “Well, if you aren’t man enough to fill her nights, someone has to.” He turned the page and began to skim the headlines there.

“It seems you told her quite a lot, last night,” Bruce continued, ignoring the barb.

Clark rolled his eyes and closed the paper. He folded it in half and set it down, then turned to Bruce, his hands in his lap in a relaxed pose. He didn’t speak, giving Bruce the chance to guide the conversation. He was still too confused over the feelings Lois was giving him. On the one hand, he’d never desired anyone so strongly before. On the other, she infuriated him. But Bruce remained quiet, leaving Clark to fill the void.

“She’s got a big mouth, that one. Or don’t you already know that?” he offered bitingly.

“She said you willingly...or willingly enough...answered her questions about the crash that killed her family.”

“So?”

“So...why? All that bravado and bluster you’ve been giving off? Is it all an act?” he wondered aloud. “Or what?”

“Is that all you want to know? The details about my personality?” Clark asked, his eyebrow arched in mocking disbelief. “Not buying it.”

“Just wondering, that’s all. So, why *did* you give Lois the information she sought?”

“I told her I’d give her answers, in exchange for her talking to you about getting this collar off my neck,” he said pointedly.

Bruce nodded, unfazed. “She told me that you asked about that. *And* she told me that she denied your request.”

Clark growled in frustration. “What will it *take* to be free of this? Or,” he asked, boring his gaze into Bruce as if he could burn a hole through him down to his very soul, “are you going to use this thing to control me? To get me to do your bidding, just like my former master did?” He grinned a grim, evil smile at Bruce. “Oh, I know! You want me to go out and kill for *you* now, is that it? Send the flying assassin to take out the people you hate? Kill the people who pose a threat to you? Even the score with your elementary school bullies? What are you waiting for? Send me out, right now, and I’ll be forced to be your own, private vigilante. It always brought my master joy to see one of his rivals fall. Don’t deny it – you want to taste that same sweetness too.”

Bruce stormed over to the cage. “I’m not like your former master. I don’t kill people to get what I want.”

“No, of *course* not,” Clark said with an indifferent shrug. “You just wrongfully and *illegally* imprison people and keep collars full of poison around their necks.”

“I’m *protecting* people against a threat!”

“Tsk, tsk! What a temper,” Clark replied coolly, staying just beyond Bruce’s reach, should he stick his arm inside the bars. “Did Miss Lane pass that to you? What else has she...furnished you with?”

“Lois is a good woman,” Bruce said defensively. “A lot better person that you could ever dream of being.”

“Dreams are for the weak!” Clark spat, though, deep inside, he wished he had the luxury of dreaming about a life lived under his own command.

“And what? You’re strong? Because you kill people?” Bruce fired back.

“I’m strong because I’ve walked through hell and back and survived. Of all the things that could have destroyed me...I’m still here. Things that would make you shiver in the dark, cry for your mommy, and make you soil your boxers,” Clark taunted him. “My soul might be black as night, but my instinct to survive is as tough as they come.”

“Yes, such a thing to be proud of,” Bruce taunted back, stepping away from the bars once more. “Of all the lunatics I’ve ever come across...I’ve never *once* heard *any* of them boast about

how evil they are. Except for the criminally insane. And, try as you might, you haven't convinced me that you're certifiable."

"Oh?" Clark raised his eyebrow. "Deal with many crazy people, do you?"

"If only you knew," Bruce snorted in dismissal. "You're a sick, soulless ba..."

"Ah, ah, ah," Clark warned. "We've established that my soul is tainted, but I *do* have one, you know."

Bruce regarded him for a moment. "We'll see about that. But, for now, let's pretend you're right and you *do* actually have a soul. After all, Lois told me that you claim to have tried to save her and her sister." His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. "Why?"

Clark chuckled. "Why, Bruce! You almost appear to be disappointed by that news! Got a bit of a dark side yourself, do you?"

"Just trying to understand why a man who prides himself on *taking* lives would stop to try and help the very people he'd just made a hit on."

Bruce was trying to tease information out of him; Clark wasn't naïve enough to miss that fact.

"Does it really matter?" Clark replied, sitting back down and leaning back in his chair as if *he* were the one in control of the situation. "What's done is done. And I'm guessing she won't be back after the things I told her."

"You're...intrigued by her, aren't you?" Bruce asked, a hint of a smile curving the corners of his lips in a nearly invisible way.

"No," Clark lied.

*I'm not sure*, his mind said.

"What she said about the rescue attempt?" Bruce continued. "Is that true?"

"Yeah, it is. So what?" he bristled, feeling like he was being forced into some intangible trap.

"Why? If your job was to make the kill, why did you try to help?"

"Why do you care so much? It's clear you and Lois view me as not much more than an animal. For God's sake, I haven't even seen a single ray of sunlight in two months!" Clark exploded, leaping up out of his chair once again. He gripped the bars, pressing his face behind the rods of cold steel. "You make me out to be a villain, when I was just following orders so that my boss didn't kill *me* instead. Now it's almost like you want to find fault with the one good deed I've had the opportunity to do in ages!" He hurled the words at Bruce with all the force he had, each one of them barbed and tipped with poison that Clark only hoped would wound the billionaire.

"I never said I fault you for it," Bruce responded calmly. "But I *do* want to understand. Lois does too."

"It doesn't matter," Clark insisted, turning away from Bruce. "It only half worked. Her sister still died, didn't she?" he mocked, but the mocking was born out of self-loathing, rather than directed at Bruce.

"It matters," Bruce corrected. "To Lois, it matters."

He wheeled back on his captor, seething with self-loathing that he poured into outright rage against Bruce. "I can't see how! I killed her family! I followed my orders and killed Sam and Ellen Lane." Clark looked up toward the ceiling, reliving that night once more in his mind. He chuckled darkly, a sound born out of how easily he'd made a mess of his life. "And I did it well. The doctor and his wife died. Anyone who came across the wreck or investigated it would rule it an accident. It's not uncommon for tires to blow out. Nor is it rare for an overworked and tired driver to perhaps nod off at the wheel and swerve off the road, especially not if the wheels were compromised."

"Sounds like you had it all planned out," Bruce commented sarcastically.

"The daughters weren't supposed to be a part of things," Clark continued, his voice flinty. His fist tightened as he fought to

control this volume and not scream out his frustration. But deep down, he kept seeing the injured women in his mind's eye. He kept feeling the oppressive need to defy Lex's orders to kill such beautiful, innocent creatures. "He told me to kill them anyway. But, I couldn't. They had no part in the reason why my master wanted Sam and Ellen dead."

"Your boss must have been terribly angry at you," Bruce calmly prodded, pulling a chair over and sitting down.

"He didn't know. I made sure he neither saw nor heard me attempt to contact 911," Clark responded, puffing out his chest a little in pride that he'd managed to go against Lex's command without putting himself in harm's way. He knew he should have stopped talking long ago, but he was too entrapped in his own memories to shut his mouth.

"I see," Bruce said thoughtfully. He leaned forward in his seat, just a little, to give the illusion of having great interest in Clark's words.

"Not that it did any good," Clark added after a moment's reflection. He shook his head, disgusted with himself. "It didn't save Miss Lane's sister. And she doesn't even believe that I tried to help."

"It is important to you, that she believes your story?" He steeped his fingers as he continued to study Clark.

Clark stood and paced his tiny cell, feeling like Bruce had him under a microscope. He felt exposed in an intangible, indescribable, and very unsettling way. "No," was his instinctive reply. "Yes," he corrected a second later. "I don't know," he finally settled on.

Bruce arched his eyebrow. "Which is it?" he asked in a curious way.

"I...I'm not sure," Clark admitted after a moment, pausing in mid-step. He looked sharply at Bruce. "I know what I look like. An inhuman monster who just flies around killing people. And I am. I've done what I was told to do for years now. I've hardly ever thought twice about what I was doing." There was no pride in his voice, only emotionless truth. He shrugged, trying to play off his inner turmoil.

"I don't revel in the kill. I don't recoil in horror from what I've done. It's as mundane a task as it is for you to open up the paper to read while sipping coffee and eating a Danish. But I'm *not* this inherently evil person. I guess...I guess I just wanted her to see that." He made a pained face of disgust that he was baring his soul to his captor. "I don't know why I'm even discussing this with you. Just...leave me alone. Unless you want to free me from this collar, I've got nothing else to say." He made a show of sitting down on his cot, firmly putting the discussion at an end.

"So be it," Bruce said dismissively, waving his hand as if dispelling a plume of smoke. Then he walked off, leaving Clark feeling more conflicted in his soul than ever before.

\*\*\*

Clark paced his cell with a relentlessness that matched his racing thoughts. He needed to get out, to be free, to bask in some sunlight and have his powers restored. He needed more room to move around than the cramped cell he was caged in. He would have even considered a cell twice the size to be a palace by comparison. Or, barring that, more mental stimulation would have been invaluable. A jigsaw puzzle. Some books to read. Art supplies, though he'd never been interested in drawing or painting before, but at least it would have given him something to do. Even just a rubber handball to bounce off the floor would have been welcome. But he was given no such things.

He'd wanted to bring up the point with Bruce, but after he'd admitted to his part in both killing Lois' family and trying to save her in the same night, Bruce did not return, nor did Lois. The old routine of isolation returned, with Clark's only human interactions being when he was served meals or forced to shower before the hard, hate-filled eyes of a guard who securitized his every

movement. He found himself wondering if he'd done something wrong. And then he'd immediately remind himself that his entire *life* had consisted of doing things that were wrong. This time, he didn't try to speak much to his guards, unless he truly needed something. He knew it would be a wasted effort. They would no more speak to him now than they had during Clark's first period of isolation. He wasn't going to spare a breath for those who would ignore him. So he let his voice rust away, unused.

And yet, for all that period of isolation felt like the first one, there were marked differences. Clark was now given a copy of *The Daily Planet* each morning with his breakfast. He savored each word of that paper, reading them as slowly as he could, to really let each letter sink in. Often, he would read the paper again in the evening, to stave off boredom. And as he poured over the newsprint a second time, he would stop and wonder – what had he done, to be gifted something so precious as the news? Bruce or Lois could have ordered him to be given anything else to read – non-fiction books about the most tedious and mundane of subjects, science-fiction books of literally no consequence to him, comic books to fill his head with tales of heroes with godlike abilities, which, of course, made him chuckle a private laugh to himself.

But no.

He was being given the *news*.

And not just *any* news. *The Daily Planet*, of all the papers out there.

It felt very deliberate to him.

Lois worked for the *Daily Planet*. Was she trying to prove how much better she was than him? Was she trying to tell him something? Each day, he studiously scrutinized every article in the paper, expecting to see some kind of deliberate message to him. But nothing was ever highlighted. Nothing was ever circled or starred for him to pay special attention to. No pages were ever dog-eared to direct him to any specific page or article. No sticky notes ever accompanied the paper demanding that he “check out the article on page 3!” Nothing was ever out of the ordinary. It was simply a crisp, new, unmarked newspaper every single day.

No one even bothered to take any of the sections out of it either. He was being given an unedited source of news. He could read about a carjacking if he chose to, or he could skip to see how his favorite sports teams were faring, or he could read the critics' reviews of brand-new movies he knew he would likely never see.

It baffled him and made his mind consider as many real or imagined scenarios as it could possibly concoct.

Was he being given the paper because he'd mentioned how Lex had forbade him from being exposed to the news? Was Bruce trying to fill in the gaps in Clark's societal knowledge? Was he trying to set himself apart from Clark's former jailor? Was he doing it to gain Clark's trust? Was he trying to make a subtle point with all the articles detailing every day, average Joe heroes and tales of evildoers being brought to justice? Or was he...just being nice?

The first time that thought crossed Clark's mind, it froze him dead in his tracks. Why would Bruce...or Lois, for that matter, want to be *nice* to him? He'd been rude, crude, and downright mean to them both. Sure, he'd told Lois that he'd tried to save her and her sister, but there was no way that could account for the simple act of kindness that they'd shown him in giving him the mental stimulation of having something to read. No, it couldn't be that. No one had ever been nice to him in his whole life. Even Lionel and Letitia Luthor hadn't been kind to him...had they?

Clark had to admit to himself that his memories of those early years were muddled and murky. He remembered that they were kind, caring, sincere people, but he also remembered only too well the things Lex had told him. How they'd pitied the orphaned space child they'd found. How he'd been nothing more than an act of charity, a prop to use so the world would love the Luthor family even more, how he'd been a stand-in for the daughter they'd lost,

but never really loved the way she'd been. He remembered Lex telling him to confide in him, that he would always keep Clark safe and be honest with him.

Had Lionel and Letitia's affection all been lies?

Or had Lex been grooming him, even at that early age, for the role he'd wanted Clark to play – as an obedient servant trusting only in his “older brother?”

“No,” he said to himself, his voice soft as a baby's sigh. “No. He took care of me. He told me the truth. He kept me safe.”

*I'll make sure the police never find you*, he heard Lex tell him after the fire had claimed the lives of their parents. Clark remembered how silky smooth and detached his brother's voice had been. *You'll need to stay hidden, but you'll be safe. An involuntary shudder ran down Clark's spine. Stick with me.*

“He did what he had to do,” he tried to convince himself, but his conviction was lacking.

*He despises you and you know it! his mind hissed in a cold, reptilian voice. He fears your powers. That's why he collared you. He has no respect for you. How often has he insulted you?*

*You're weak!* he heard Lex roar in disgust.

“No...”

*You're an idiot!* Lex snapped a second later.

“I'm not...”

*You're useless! Worse than useless! A burden!*

“I...” he stammered, his mouth going dry.

*You see?* Clark's inner voice cooed at him victoriously.

Clark was desperate for it not to be true. “But...he...tried to keep me safe when I was younger...”

*No, fool. He put you into his debt and made you do despicable things to pay it off. Only, you never could pay it off, could you?*

*Stick with me.*

Clark felt dizzy as the information swirled in his head like a whirlpool. The world turned upside down and he was thrown off balance. Blindly, he put the paper down and backed away from the cramped desk, knocking the chair over in his disoriented scrambling. Bile rose in his throat and his stomach churned violently. He staggered his way across the tiny cell and heaved into the toilet, the entire contents of his breakfast ripping up his throat to splatter the inside of the toilet bowl. Every time Clark thought he was done, more vomit miraculously bubbled up in his throat. He retched until his ribs, diaphragm, and stomach ached from the effort. When he was done, he stuck his entire head into his tiny sink and rinsed his mouth until he could no longer taste that vile, acidic vomit. Tears stung his eyes from how hard he'd been getting sick, so he splashed some of the cool, clean water onto his face as well. Finally feeling almost normal again, he flushed away the evidence of his revelation.

“He used me,” he croaked into a harsh, agonized whisper. He shook his head. “My whole life has been a setup.”

He'd known that Lex had been using him for years, ever since his powers had set him apart as a perfect assassin. But to realize that his supposed brother had been twisting him since practically his babyhood was a wound too deep for Clark to bear. He roared out his frustration to the empty cell around him.

“I *never* had a chance!”

The guards down the hall glanced in his direction as Clark flung himself against the bars, over and over in a futile effort to break free. He knew the effort was wasted, but he couldn't help it. He had to try. He had to get back to the sunlight. He had to recharge his missing powers and fill the void in his soul that their absence had created. He had to feel like a complete person again. And, when all of that was in place, he knew who his next and final assassination target would be.

“He's a dead man,” he growled under his breath as he grabbed the bars and tried to shake them loose. “His death will *not* look like an accident. For the first time, I will be *happy* to torment my victim before slashing his throat. I will revel in his hot blood

washing over me as the light in his eyes dims and snuffs out completely.”

He let go of the bars and banged on them with the palms of his hands until they stung with pain and began to go numb. “Let me out of here!” he roared, his voice echoing off the bare walls and high ceiling. “I’m gonna kill him!”

Of course, there was part of him, way in the back of his mind, that acknowledged how it would look to everyone else. They would think this isolation had finally broken his mind. They would nod sadly, but knowingly, to themselves about the savage, inhuman creature inside that cage. They would shrink away from his words, thinking he was out for Bruce’s blood.

“Let me go!”

\*\*\*

It took days for Clark’s boiling rage to calm enough for him to start thinking rationally. For once, he was glad to be alone. It gave him time to think, to process everything that had happened in his life; all the flat out lies and partial truths that had made up his world. He wasn’t even sure what emotion he felt the most – the abject misery in knowing his life had never been his own, the deep sense of betrayal Lex’s actions had caused, the blistering anger, the intense need to kill Lex for what he’d done, the profound sadness and loneliness that went soul-deep as he realized he’d never once had anyone in his life been on his side. He wasn’t sure what to make of his ever-changing emotions either. Hardening himself to making kill after kill had left him with precious little desire to stop and examine his feelings; in a way, he felt emotionally stunted. It was odd for him to feel one way in one breath, then feel another in the next breath.

He tried to steel himself against what he was feeling. He tried to force it out of his mind. But he couldn’t. He was nothing more than a broken tree branch in a flood, tumbling through his emotions, bumping harshly against what he knew in his heart were truths, nearly drowning in his own thoughts, powerless to control the way he was spinning through it all, powerless to stop and grab hold of a rock to gather his strength, even for just a moment’s breath. And when the waters finally receded, he found himself bruised, battered, more broken than before, filthy from his journey, but still standing with a new resolve.

When Lois finally appeared at his cell, he felt almost like he was a new person. Certainly, he had a new resolve and fresh perspective on things. He was ready for them, ready for their questions, ready to test them.

“You lied to me,” Lois accused him, without greeting him in any way.

Startled, Clark looked up from his paper. “What?” he asked, taken a little off guard. Silently, he cursed his missing powers. If he’d had them, he would have heard her coming a mile off.

“You lied to me,” she repeated crossly.

Clark scanned his brain, trying to figure out what she was referring to. “I beg your pardon,” he huffed. “I might be many things, but a liar is *not* one of them.” He set down the paper, crossed his arms, and put his feet up on the desk in a relaxed way.

“I told you who I was,” Lois continued. “I thought you’d extend the same courtesy to me. I guess I shouldn’t have expected a murderer to tell the truth.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “What *are* you blabbering on about?”

“Clark Kent. That’s the name you gave to me, yes?”

He nodded confidently, but slowly, trying to figure out her train of thought. “Yes.”

“There’s no such person. I checked. I ran that name through every database I could think of. There’s no such person as Clark Kent.” She folded her arms, triumphantly.

Clark chuckled. “So, just because *you* can’t find anything connected to that name – no social security card, no credit cards, no bank accounts, no outstanding parking tickets – that must make *me* a liar, is that right?” He arched an eyebrow at her, daring her to

respond. “I told you, that was the label I was slapped with, it wasn’t the name I was given at birth.”

“I found no records of any name changes either,” she retorted.

“Miss Lane,” Clark said teasingly, “I have spent my whole life living outside the law. Why would you assume I’ve done anything legally, including a name change? Or, might I say, *especially* a name change. I’m an assassin. Why would I ever want to leave a paper trail behind?”

She shrugged easily. “I had to try. Just in case you were as dumb as you look.”

“Oh, ouch,” Clark winced sarcastically, holding his hand to his heart as if wounded. “Now you’ve gone and done it. Cut me straight to the core.”

“Quit playing mind games,” Lois snapped irritably. “What was your name, *before* it was Clark Kent?”

“You know what? I’m rather bored in this tiny cell. A game sounds like an excellent idea,” he replied, his eyes gleaming bright. He hopped up out of his seat and went to the bars. “I’ll give you a hint. I already told you my name was once Kal. As for my last name? Well, you already know that. *Everyone* knows that.”

“I swear...if you don’t give me some straight answers,” Lois threatened, leaving the consequences unvoiced.

“Think, Miss Lane,” he interrupted. “Use those *rich* reporter’s instincts. Newspapers don’t grow to be *empires* without good reporters. I’ve read your articles, you know. In these papers, which Bruce has so generously had delivered with my morning meals. You’re good, Miss Lane. Even *I* have to admit that. You must be proud of your success. Like you’re on *top of the world* even. So, figuring out my former last name should be a cinch for you.”

“You’re talking gibberish,” she snarled back in annoyance.

“I’m speaking the truth,” he corrected gently.

“Just tell me who you are!”

“I’ve given you more hints that you deserve,” he said with a grin. “Think about what I’ve said. It should be an easy enough puzzle for you to solve.”

“I don’t have time for this,” she huffed.

“You know my name. You’ve probably lusted after that name since you first cut your teeth on some puff piece article,” he goaded her. “Not mine specifically, of course. But my family’s name. And yet, it’s always remained, just out of reach, hasn’t it? Too elusive for even the great Lois Lane to snag. Go,” he said, making a shooing motion with his hands. “Come back when you’ve figured it out. Not that it means much to you, but...I promise, if you’ve gotten it right, I’ll let you know.”

She shook her head in disbelief, but she backed up a couple of steps.

“Oh, and Miss Lane? Lois? When you return, would it be possible for me to get a pen? I’d like to do the puzzles in the newspaper.”

As she left, he settled down in his chair and watched her go, feeling a certain satisfaction in making her work for the answers he was providing. And he wondered how long it would take Lois to figure out his clues.

\*\*\*

Calvin and Hobbs were getting into another round of mischief when Clark heard Lois coming down the hall. He pulled his attention from the paper, listening to her approach, but he did not look up. It seemed the safer option than engaging Lois, if her brisk and heavy-footed, nearly stomping pace were any indicator of her mood. Each click of her heels on the concrete floor echoed like gunshots.

Still, he had to admit that he was a little impressed. It appeared Lois was swifter on the uptake than he’d imagined she’d be. She hadn’t even been gone an hour, he reckoned. He waited until she was nearly at his cell before he looked up and acknowledged that she was there. A look of determination and unhappiness was scrunched up on her face.

“Luthor,” she spat.

“What about it?” he baited her.

“Kal Luthor. That’s who you really are, isn’t it?”

“It was who I was, a long time ago,” he snapped in confession, loathing to hear that name again. “But, *very* good! I thought it would take you *much* longer to piece things together.”

“I knew before I left you,” she nearly purred as she sauntered ever closer.

A lump rose in Clark’s throat as he once more realized how much he desired her. “Oh?” he squeaked out. He cleared his throat to regain his composure. “Then why didn’t you say anything?” he taunted.

She gave him a smug look. “A good reporter always checks her facts first. You’re lying to me, again.” Her eyes narrowed dangerously, daring him to argue with her assessment.

Clark jutted his chin out in defiance. “Why would I be lying?”

She turned in a circle, hands up in a half shrug as if gesturing to the world around them. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe you think that you’re impressing me. Maybe you think that by lying and pretending to be someone important, you’re saving your worthless hide. I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“I’m *not* lying to you,” he said, trying to bite back some of the anger that rose in his chest, speaking the words through gritted teeth.

“Yes, you are!” she yelled.

“How are you so sure?” he growled in a dull roar, forgetting, for a moment, that he wanted to keep his temper in check.

“Because Kal Luthor is dead!”

Her words brought the world to a screeching halt for Clark. Without a conscious decision to do so, he brought his hand to his forehead. How could he be so stupid? *Of course*, Lois would investigate his claim! And *of course*, she would discover that Kal Luthor had supposedly died at a young age.

“He died in a fire, which also claimed the lives of Lionel and Letitia Luthor, and destroyed their home. Only the older son, Lex, survived.” She crossed her eyes and fixed him with a self-satisfied look.

“I never died,” Clark said in a quiet voice, all the horror and terror of that night rushing back to him.

“I have the news reports that say otherwise,” Lois retorted with a snort of disgust.

“They were wrong. I was too young to question it when it happened,” Clark continued, mentally questioning why he was telling her so much. “Lex...he said...oh, God, what he told me.” He looked away as an involuntary shudder took him.

“What did he tell you?” she prodded him in a soft tone, trying to draw out information. He could tell she didn’t believe a word of what he was saying but was trying to get at the truth.

“He said I was responsible for the fire. We’d been playing catch. A candle got knocked over. He told me to run, that he would take care of things. I guess the fire spread too quickly. It already was, when I left.”

“Nice try, but they found Kal’s body.” She put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

“It wasn’t mine. I guess Lex or one of his friends did it. He was trying to protect me.”

“Protect you? That’s a good one,” Lois countered.

“The police determined that the fire was intentional. They wanted me for murder. Lex must have planted false evidence for them to find. He changed my name, kept me under the radar. He said if anyone knew I was still alive...” He was babbling and he knew it. With an effort, he clamped his mouth shut.

“You really *do* have quite the active, *lying* imagination, don’t you?” she accused, almost in amusement. “The records proved it was Kal.”

“Don’t be stupid!” he shot at her, his distress taking over, though he regretted his choice in words later. “Records can be

falsified! Lex isn’t exactly a pauper, you know!”

“Lex wouldn’t *do* something like that,” she said in an eerily calm voice. “He’s...a good man, a philanthropist, one of the few billionaires who’s given as much as he has to charities.”

“He’s also the one who ordered me to kill your parents!” Clark roared in frustration.

Too late, he realized his mistake. He’d never meant to give away that information so easily. He’d planned on making Bruce and Lois earn any information he’d give them.

Lois looked like he’d slapped her with a piece of ice. Her mouth moved without issuing forth any sound. Her eyes bulged in shock. The color drained from her face. She looked frozen in time, like a broken robot forever damned to loop her repetitive movements over and over again. But, eventually, she seemed to break free of the spell that had entrapped her.

“Liar!” she accused, but it sounded more like it was born out of habit, not because she didn’t believe him. “*Liar!*”

Clark spread his hands helplessly, allowing his shame to burn his cheeks, neck, and ears red with embarrassment. “I wish I was.”

“Why? Why would he do that? My parents worked for him. They *saved his life!* Why?” Her voice was strangled in horror and grief.

“Oh, *now* you believe me? *Piss off!*” he dismissed her, hoping against hope that she would leave him alone, but knowing it would make her hound him for information all the harder. “I’m a *liar*, remember?”

“I didn’t say I believe you,” she threw back at him, but her voice belied her words. “I’m just curious as to what excuse you’ve got.”

“Now who’s the liar, *Lois?* Hmmm?”

She didn’t even flinch at the use of her first name, the way he’d envisioned she would.

“Just answer the question, you piece of sh...”

“Sure, go ahead. Make your threats,” he interrupted smoothly.

“I didn’t *make* any threats,” she replied smugly.

“Oh, weren’t you about to? Threaten to go running to dear Bruce? Tell him the mean assassin isn’t sharing his knowledge? Bring out that rock to cripple me into submission?”

“No.”

That single word was a gunshot, tearing through the bitter, sarcastic response he had brewing in his throat.

“Yeah, right,” he said instead, trying to save face and maintain his tough exterior. He wasn’t comfortable showing anything other than a stony façade. He didn’t understand how people could regularly show vulnerability to others.

“I’m serious,” she maintained. She sighed, and Clark thought it sounded tired and wounded. “Just tell me why Lex Luthor would want to kill the *only* two people who were willing to help him. And I’ll put in a good word about you to Bruce.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “And just why would you do that?”

“Because I want answers,” she said firmly. “My parents are *dead*, can’t you understand that? *My sister is dead*. I deserve to know *why* that is!”

Clark raked a hand through his hair as he formulated his response. “You wouldn’t believe me, even if I told you,” he finally whispered. His head drooped and his gaze went to the floor.

Lois stepped up to his cell bars and reached inside, grabbing his chin and forcing him to look at her. But her touch wasn’t rough or demanding. It was firm and let him know that she was in charge, but it was almost encouraging in a way. Clark felt a piece of his blackened soul and frozen heart thaw just the slightest bit. He was powerless under her touch, and he found himself gulping hard and taking a deep breath.

“Because,” he offered up slowly, like a man stuck in a dream, “he didn’t like what the treatment did to him.”

“It cured his cancer,” Lois said, not letting go, leveling him with her unrelenting gaze.

"It left him *bald*," Clark corrected her.

Lois' brow scrunched up in confusion, anger, and an unwillingness to accept the truth. "My family *died*...because he lost his *hair*?" she asked, and Clark heard the wobble in her voice as she sought to maintain a neutral tone.

"He..." Clark paused, gulping again as his mouth went dry as the Sahara at the sensation of her flesh on his own. He licked his lips, trying to moisten them. "Whatever mask he may wear in the public's eye, he's a vain man. Losing his hair made him... insecure, I think. He said it would hurt his chances as a presidential candidate. I tried to persuade him otherwise."

"My parents...they would have informed him of any side effects..." she replied numbly, dazed, and letting her statement go unfinished.

"They did," Clark confirmed. "But try explaining that to Lex."

She withdrew her hand then, and Clark's skin felt aflame where she'd touched him, but cold and lonely at the same time. His heart was hammering so hard it was a wonder it didn't pop right out of his chest to sputter and spasm on the floor. His head was swimming, the way he'd heard drunkenness be described as. His knees were weak, but pleasantly so, not at all like the degrading weakness Kryptonite caused.

"You don't believe me," he gently accused when she continued to simply stare at him like he'd suddenly sprouted another head.

"I'm...not sure," she shakily admitted as she backed away from him. She didn't stop until she was well away from his cage. Then she turned and almost ran from the area, leaving Clark wondering if she would ever trust that he was telling the truth.

\*\*\*

"There you are, *Clark!*" Lex crooned dangerously as he approached the cell where Clark was being held against his will. He glanced over his shoulder at the five massive brutes behind him. "Kill them all."

The biggest one, a man with biceps that made even Clark feel puny by comparison, nodded and grunted in response. He made a few hand signals and the others went their separate ways. Half a minute later, he heard screams as Bruce's guards were slaughtered. Clark winced and cringed as he heard the gun shots and soft *thunks* as knives stabbed into fresh bodies. The meaty brute leading the rest reemerged with Lois in his monstrous hands. She looked so small and helpless in his grasp, though she was struggling mightily to escape.

"Hey, boss!" the big man said in a voice that sounded like granite being dragged along a concrete floor. "What do you want with her?"

"I *said* 'kill them all,' or are you too stupid to handle that?" Lex snarled.

The brute shrugged, then, as easily as he would snap a pencil, he broke Lois' neck. Clark cried out in horror as her body went limp. The brute tossed her aside like a piece of trash before joining Lex at his side. Together, the two men approached Clark's cell.

How they'd gotten ahold of the key, Clark didn't know. All he knew was mind-numbing fear as the thug entered his cell. With steel-like strength, the man grabbed Clark and wrenched his arms behind his back, rendering Clark helpless to escape. Lex came at him with measured steps. When he was mere inches from Clark, he pulled a syringe out of the inner pocket of his suit jacket. Clark's heart nearly froze in terror as he caught sight of the glowing green liquid inside, ready to be injected into his bloodstream.

"Goodbye, traitor," Lex whispered in his ear.

Then, without any further ado, he plunged the needle deep into Clark's neck, into the artery there, and depressed the syringe. Liquid Kryptonite flooded his system and Clark instantly felt his death coming for him. The brute released Clark as his body lost the ability to stand upright. Clark crumbled to the floor in a fetal

position, screaming in the greatest agony of his life, while Lex and his goon left the cell and locked the door behind them, leaving Clark to pray for death to finally put an end to his suffering.

Clark screamed out as he woke, uncertain if it had been his nightmare that had roused him from his sleep or if some other external noise had done the job. He rubbed his eyes against the sudden onslaught of light. Locked in his cage, Clark hadn't seen darkness since before his capture. Here, it was always bright with the flood of artificial light, robbing his body of its internal clock that knew if it was day or night, despite not having seen the sun, stars, or a puff of cloud in months, though he felt like it was probably the middle of the night.

"Bad dream?" Lois asked smugly as she watched him struggle to finally break free of the last gossamer remnants of his dreams.

Clark scowled at her. "What do you want?"

"To talk."

"You know," he said, sitting up and dangling his feet over the side of the cot, though he did not make an effort to stand, "this is the second time you've visited me in what I can only guess is the middle of the night." He wagged his eyebrows at her. "If you're that in need of company at night, all you need to do is ask one of the guards to let you in here. I'll make sure you aren't... neglected."

Lois rolled her eyes. "In your dreams."

"I wish that were true," he replied with a lustful smile.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but I've got...*bigger* things on my mind. Like what you said earlier."

Clark scratched his chin, which was rough with a fine layer of stubble. He was almost looking forward to being shackled and shaved once again. "And what was it that I said? Our chats are so *riveting* after all." He tried to stifle a yawn and lost.

She ignored his needling. "You said Kal Luthor was a murder and arson suspect, so he was hidden away by Lex Luthor?"

Clark put up his hand to halt her. "You still don't get it, do you? I'm not lying when I say I *am* Kal Luthor. Or was, once upon a time."

"Fine, for argument's sake, let's say you really are Kal," came Bruce's voice, coming up from behind Lois.

"*Used to be*," Clark stressed, balling up his fists.

"Fine. *Used to be*," Bruce humored him.

"You lied again," Lois continued. "Kal Luthor was *never* suspected of plotting to kill his family."

"You're wrong," he said, hopping to his feet. "Lex told me everything. He told me if I was discovered alive, I'd be carted off to jail, tried, found guilty, and likely executed."

"That's not what these say," Lois retorted, walking briskly to his bars. She dropped a pile of printed sheets of paper on his desk.

"What are those?" he asked warily, eying her every movement.

"See for yourself," she replied.

Haltingly, suspecting a trap, he crossed the few steps to his desk and picked up the pile of papers. He shifted through the stack quickly. It was a selection of old archived newspapers. Some were the front page, others had been further into the paper. Clark could see the page numbers and the headers announcing which paper they had come from. And he could see the date. On every single one, he could see the date. The day after the fire had claimed his parents' lives and devoured his childhood home.

He skimmed the headlines. Each article that Lois had left for him was about the fire. He looked up questioningly.

"Read them," Bruce gently commanded, in a tone of voice that Clark hadn't heard from the other man before.

"What..." he started to ask.

"Just read them," Bruce repeated softly.

What other choice did he have? He started to read them. One by one, he read them all, while Bruce and Lois watched from a distance. And as he read, he felt his entire life come crashing

down. The fire in his gut died. His ego deflated. His heart ached. His mind spun as the words in the articles repeated in a loop in his brain.

*City Mourns The Loss Of The Luthor Family  
Arson Ruled Out In Luthor Family Blaze  
Accidental Fire Claims Luthor Family  
Sole Survivor: Alexander Luthor  
A Tragic Loss: Accidental Fire Kills Three At Luthor Family Estate  
What's Next For Alexander Luthor After Accidental Fire Kills Family  
Memorial Service Planned For Luthor Family After Accidental Blaze Claims Parents, Young Son  
Officials Call Luthor Estate Fire a "Tragic Accident"  
Fire At Luthor Family Home Brings Fire Safety In Sharp Focus  
Candles Blamed For Tragic Fire*

He'd never been accused of killing his parents. There was no charge of arson. Every investigation pointed to the fire being an accident. Warnings had been printed not to leave exposed flames unattended. There was an underlying sadness to the reports about the fire, not anger or revenge against any kind of suspect, let alone the mere child Clark had been at the time.

"These..." Clark choked out, his mouth gone dry and his stomach heaving as though he might vomit again as a sense of vertigo hit him. "These...are...real?" He had to force every last syllable out, with the greatest effort he'd ever known.

Lois simply nodded.

"I...I..." Clark stammered, speaking without knowing what he wanted to say.

"You believe us now?" Bruce asked.

Lois turned to the billionaire, a funny look on her face that Clark couldn't quite place. "He believes us. He...he truly didn't know. Did you?" she asked softly, turning back to Clark.

"No..." His voice shook with the power of having the last bit of his reality being torn down to reveal that everything he'd ever been told was a lie. The entire basis of his life and trust in Lex had been a sham. He shook his head. "No. Lex...I had no reason to question what he told me. I was so young..."

"I believe you."

Lois' words stopped Clark's heart for a moment. His tattered spirit rallied for just a moment. He looked into her warm brown eyes, trying to judge if she was messing with him or not. But he found no evidence that she was humoring him. She really *did* believe what he was saying. For the first time in his life, he saw a hint of compassion in someone's eyes when they looked at him.

"Th...thank you," he stammered, his heart speeding up now, his pulse skyrocketing, his world still reeling.

"I think you'd better start at the beginning. The *very* beginning," Bruce prompted him, striding across the room and pulling over two rolling chairs.

Clark watched as the billionaire and the reporter sat down. He nervously raked his fingers through his hair and paced, arguing with himself. He'd planned to make Bruce and Lois fight for every shred of information he gave them. But he was tired. Not from being awoken in the middle of the night. He was tired of fighting. Tired of his cage. Tired of the collar around his neck. Tired of hiding Lex's misdeeds simply because he wanted to play mind games with the people who'd captured him. He just wanted to be free of all the guilt, shame, and terror that he had inside. He may not have understood how to let himself lose his sharp, jaded mindset and personality, but he was exhausted from carrying so much vehemence inside.

"I...I'm not sure where to start," he finally said, the words tumbling from his lips without a conscious decision to speak them. "I was an orphaned infant that the Luthors adopted. Err...well...I guess that's not completely accurate. They found me. In a field. In

a wrecked spaceship. It didn't matter. Lionel and Letitia raised me as their own son. But Lex...I don't know why. He told me awful things about them. About how they hated me. How they pitied the squalling alien baby. How I was nothing more to them than a prop, used to gain the public's adoration and cement them as philanthropists." He sighed heavily, leaning his entire right side against the cold steel bars.

"Then, one night, Lex woke me up to play catch. I was too young to question why. I just...I went along with it. He'd groomed me to trust him implicitly. Before I knew it, a candle got knocked over and the fire happened. As I said before, he told me that we had to change my identity and fake my death so that the police couldn't charge me with arson and murder. I was young, but I understood what would happen if that happened. I was scared almost to the point of being unable to function. So, I listened to him."

"Go on," Bruce urged.

"I..." Clark paused. "I'm not even sure why I'm telling you any of this, if we're being completely honest here."

"Because you have nothing left to lose?" Bruce asked with cool indifference.

"I still don't know that I can trust you not to kill me once you have your information," he pointed out.

"No, you don't," Lois conceded. "But has he threatened to kill you yet?"

"Not in so many words," Clark admitted. "Unlike *you*." His usual sharp barb was missing this time, making his words more gently teasing.

Lois didn't even flinch. "Let's not forget that you *earned* those threats." She crossed her arms and settled back into the chair.

"And when Bruce tortured me, using the Kryptonite?" Clark asked, raising an eyebrow, crossing his own arms, daring them to respond.

"You needed to learn your place," Bruce said, his voice flat, his volume unchanging.

"You know something? You not only *act* like Lex, using that stone to 'punish' me, but you're also you're starting to *sound* a lot like him too. I think we're done here for the night."

"No, we aren't," the billionaire replied firmly, his lines drawn into a tight line. The muscle in his jaw ticked and Clark could see the effort it was taking him not to be drawn into another verbal sparring match.

"What guarantee do I have, huh?" Clark goaded him. "I'm still locked up. I still have my collar. I still haven't been given so much as one lungful of fresh air or a single minute of real sunlight. I'm still being treated as something less than human." He gestured broadly. "How long *have* I been down here?"

"Four and a half months," Lois supplied when it appeared that Bruce wasn't going to answer.

"Four and a half..." Clark muttered in disbelief. "You're going to make this place my tomb, aren't you?" he said, this time louder, letting them know the words were intended for them.

"That depends on you," Bruce countered without batting an eyelash.

"Not for nothing," Clark interrupted, holding his hand up, palm outward, like a crossing guard calling for traffic to stop, "but you keep demanding that I blindly trust you. And you haven't given me a single reason *why* I should do that."

"You've been provided for," the other man answered.

"Kept prisoner and treated like a child!"

"The Kryptonite has only been used once," Bruce offered.

"You still used it to take what you wanted from me!"

"We've provided you with something you said you never really had," Lois calmly cut in.

"Oh?"

She nodded. "A regular and reliable source of news." She gestured to the paper laying on his desk.

“A *limited* source of news, regardless of how reliable,” he said instead. “From what I understand, the Daily Planet publishes both a morning *and* an evening edition. You’ve been giving me only half the news, Lois. Tsk, tsk!” He wagged a finger at her in a chastising manner.

“That’s *Miss Lane* to you,” Bruce said, coming to Lois’ defense, stressing her name.

“Oh, Bruce, we’re *long* past the stage of formalities, wouldn’t you agree? After all, we’ve had more than four months of illegal imprisonment under our belts,” Clark threw back easily, getting a thrill when he saw the other man bristle slightly.

“It’s fine, Bruce,” Lois said irritably. “I don’t care if he calls me Darth Vader. It isn’t important.” She fixed her unwavering gaze on Clark. “You said Lex convinced you that you were a murder suspect at a young age. What happened next?”

“You know what? I’m suddenly getting a little too tired to talk.” He deliberately yawned as loudly and widely as he could.

“You can sleep after you finish your story,” Bruce growled.

“No. You want answers so badly? You need to *earn* them,” Clark snarled. He thought about flipping the billionaire off but restrained himself at the last moment. He’d already seen that Bruce could be pushed too far, making him use the Kryptonite embedded within Clark’s collar.

“You want to play *hardball*?” Bruce asked with a calm voice that made Clark’s hackles rise. “Bring it on.”

\*\*\*

When Clark’s breakfast was delivered the following morning, he was surprised to see a steaming mug of coffee on his tray, along with an egg, bacon, and cheese bagel. A bowl of fresh strawberries was with his meal, as well as a tall glass of orange juice. Up until that moment, water was the only thing he’d been given to drink. He’d almost forgotten the sweet caffeine rush from a good cup of coffee. And to have orange juice too? It seemed a veritable royal feast!

His stomach growled and he dug into the breakfast sandwich first, devouring it swiftly. Then he made quick work of the strawberries. He couldn’t even force himself to stop and savor their bright, sweet flavor. He took a sip of his orange juice, this time finally able to slow down a little. He swished the sweet, sticky juice around in his mouth for a moment, appraising it like he would have appraised a fine wine. He took four tiny sips, then turned his attention to the coffee.

He cradled the hot mug in both hands, in near worship of the drink. That long-deprived, simple pleasure made him smile a little. It was funny, how much something small like that could bring back a little sense of normalcy, even while he was still locked up against his will. He brought the mug close to his face and inhaled the intoxicating scent of the brew. But what was this? The coffee was black and the tray housed neither milk, nor sugar, nor creamer. He frowned. What kind of barbarians *were* these people?

Still, he wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Bitter as the coffee was without his usual heavy-handed additions of milk and sugar, he drank down every last drop, nearly scalding his mouth and throat as he did so. He knew he should take it slower, but it had been too long since his last taste of coffee, and he was eager to have that wonderful rush of caffeine in his system. He washed down the lingering bitter taste on his tongue with the remainder of his orange juice, then focused on the morning’s paper.

He was done reading and contemplating what to do next when Bruce appeared. He gestured to Clark’s now empty desk; someone had been by not long before to take the empty tray and used dishes away.

“How was breakfast?” he smirked.

What Clark wouldn’t have given to be able to slap that self-satisfied look off Bruce’s face. “Not quite the luxury meals of Lex Tower, but it will do. The coffee was interesting. Your chef forgot

the milk and sugar though,” he said, making the criticism seem casual.

Bruce’s smirk got impossibly bigger. “Oh? Didn’t anyone tell you? You want amenities? You have to *earn* them.”

Then he turned on his heel and strode away.

*Touché*, whispered a small voice in Clark’s mind.

\*\*\*

By the end of that week – or close enough, as Clark could keep track of time in that dungeon of eternal, phony brightness – he was deliberately messing with Bruce. Every time they would ask a question, he would spoon feed them very limited, but specific, information. He was being mildly compliant with their demands and requests, and in turn, he was receiving slight compensations. Soon enough, he’d secured a second pillow, soft drinks, coffee and tea *with* milk and sugar, the morning and evening editions of the Daily Planet, a couple of pencils to do the crossword puzzles with, an extra blanket, even extra food at his once meager meals.

What was more, was that he was enjoying gaming the system Bruce had set up. It made him feel superior to his captor. But, as much fun as he was having, he knew that, at some point, he would run out of information to trade. And then Bruce’s true colors would be shown. Clark would be either executed in private by the deadly green piece of his birth world, or Bruce would hand him over to the authorities with tales of how mentally unstable Clark was to discredit the claims Clark would make about being held against his will for so long.

And, Clark had to admit to himself, there were still some things he was just too ashamed to own up to. Chief among them, how many deaths he was responsible for.

“Okay,” Bruce said one afternoon, as he settled into his customary chair. “Let’s talk about Lex today, shall we?”

“I’m rather not,” was Clark’s immediate response.

“Aww, too bad,” Bruce goaded him, but the jab was lacking the venom of their previous encounters. “Let’s bring it back to where we were the other night. You said Lex forced you to take a new name, to bury the identity of Kal Luthor in the ashes of the house.”

“Yeah...” Clark haltingly and warily confirmed.

“What happened next?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Bruce said, leaning back and crossing his left leg over his right so that the left ankle rested on his right knee. He steepled his fingers in a relaxed way. “What did he do next? Did he threaten you? Lock you in a cage? Shower you with toys? I mean, you *were* quite young when it happened.”

“None of that. Lex...he’s a bit more...subtle, than you, Bruce,” Clark said, taking satisfaction in throwing his situation in the billionaire’s face again. He thought for a moment, taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly again. “He...almost acted like nothing had changed. He kept me indoors, inside Lex Tower, at all times, reminding me that no one could see me and know I was alive. He...everything he did...it was a slow, deliberate brainwash that I was too young to pick up on. And by the time I was old enough to understand what he was doing, it was too late. He had me too mentally entrapped. I was under his control, completely. Maybe I argued with him occasionally about a job, but...” he shrugged.

“When did he start making you kill for him? Was I the first assignment? Was Jason’s death nothing more than the sloppy work of the...inexperienced?”

Clark laughed bitterly. “If only that was the case.”

“Explain,” Bruce prompted when Clark failed to continue.

“I was...I dunno. Fifteen? Sixteen? When he sent me on my first job.”

“You’ve been killing since you were *fifteen*?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“You look surprised,” Clark neutrally observed.

“Luthor sent a *child* to go kill people?” Bruce asked as if needing clarification.

Clark shrugged. “It made sense, to him. If anyone caught sight of me, I’d appear to be nothing more than young kid. Not that anyone ever did. By then, I was able to move so quickly that I would be no more than a blur and an out of place breeze.”

“You sound proud of that,” Bruce pointed out with a frown.

“In a weird way, I was. I was the best assassin the world had never even seen.” He shrugged again, casting his gaze up to the ceiling.

Bruce’s frown deepened and his brow furrowed in concern. “Oh?” was all he asked.

“I didn’t love it. Err...not the killing, mind you. But the praise Lex would give me, each time an assignment was done well. It was the one time he showed real emotion around me. Joy. Joy and pride.”

“So, you kept killing because he patted you on the shoulder once in a while and said ‘Good job?’ I’m not buying that,” Bruce said, shaking his head.

“I kept killing because I thought I owed him my life! Are you *that* dense, Bruce?” Clark snapped irately. He started to pace. “Do you *know* what it is, to go through life, and have the only people who know you exist despise you because you are gifted with incredible powers? Do you know what it’s like, to be brainwashed? Even now, I’m struggling. I know Lex is evil. I know he’s the Devil Incarnate. But there’s a part of me that still can’t bring myself to disobey him. If he walked right in this room and told me to snap your neck like a brittle twig, I’m not sure I’d be able to defy him.” Subconsciously, he tugged at the ring of metal around his neck.

“That’s not loyalty,” Bruce said calmly as he observed the movement. “That’s instilled fear. Like when a dog’s been beaten so many times he cowers when someone tries to pet him. He put that collar around your neck to control you, to hold your death over your head, but not anymore.”

“You’re right. He doesn’t. For now,” Clark argued pointedly. “Until he figures out a way to reclaim the signal used to open the vents and take back control. What then?”

“That will never happen. You don’t need to worry about that,” Bruce assured him.

Clark stopped pacing and gave him a wild-eyed, disbelieving look. “Bruce, I have spent the last *ten years* of my life worrying about the moment he’s pushed too far and ends me. And yeah,” he spat venomously, “I probably deserve to die. I’ve killed more people than I care to recall. And I’ve felt absolutely nothing as I’ve watched them die.”

Bruce appraised him for a long time before he spoke again. “I don’t believe you. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Then you need glasses,” Clark hurled back sharply. But, as he looked at Bruce, he could see that the other man truly didn’t understand. “But I guess it makes sense. You’ve never wanted for anything, have you? Everything in your life has been handed to you on a diamond-encrusted platter, hasn’t it? You’ve *never* struggled. You’ve *never* had a gun to your head, an axe hanging over you, a debt so heavy you can never repay it.”

Bruce started to protest, blinking in disbelief at Clark’s accusations. But Clark would not be interrupted. He steamrolled right over the other man, almost as though ignoring that Bruce was even there.

“Oh, poor little rich boy, lost his parents at a young age,” Clark sneered. “I get that part. So did I. But the difference? You weren’t mentally twisted into the image your butler wanted you to be. *You* were *his* master, not the other way around. You *never* had to deal with him reminding you of how much you owed him. How you wouldn’t be alive if not for him.”

Clark ran a hand through his hair as he fought back his inner

demons; all of them clamoring to be let out in a futile tirade against the billionaire. He tried not to pay any mind to the hard set to Bruce’s features, giving silent voice to the argument Clark knew was brewing on his tongue. And yet, a vague part of Clark was mildly impressed that Bruce was holding his tongue. But he was too wrapped up in his own thoughts to acknowledge any of that properly.

“Assume what you will, Bruce. But I trained myself not to feel *anything* at all. It was too dangerous. I never felt anything but numb or indifferent when I took a life. Not pride in getting the job done. Not relief that the assignment was over. Not remorse for having stolen a life. Not pity for the poor fool who’d wound up in Lex’s crosshairs. Not disgust for getting blood on my hands, both literally and figuratively speaking...as much as I used my powers to aid me, my hidden blade wasn’t just for fun. I felt *nothing*.”

“And now?” Bruce asked peacefully, no emotion showing in his features as his withheld argument appeared to die in his throat.

“Now?” Clark chuckled darkly, shaking his head. “Now I *wish* that fire really *had* killed me, like everyone thought it did. It would have been a kinder fate than being Lex’s personal slave. Especially once he sent me after you.”

“Let’s talk about that, shall we?” Bruce asked, crossing his arms casually. “The kid I saw in my house that night, looking at Jason’s body...he didn’t seem *numb* to me. Horrified, more like it.” He used one hand to scratch at the light stubble in his chin.

Clark closed his eyes against the images that sprung, unbidden and unwelcome, to mind. He sighed heavily and squashed down the lump forming in his throat. “I...He was never supposed to die. Lex wanted you and your butler dead. Don’t ask why. You can probably figure it out on your own. How much of a business rival and threat you were to him...still are. When I thought Jason was you...when I realized the mistake I’d made...” He let his voice trail off.

“What?” Bruce prompted, a sour look on his face.

“I’d never killed an innocent person before,” Clark finished lamely.

“From what I gather, *all* of your assassinations were committed against innocent people,” Bruce said, his voice harsh and unyielding as granite. He set his lips in a thin, hard line.

“They were different,” Clark insisted, leaning a hip against his cell bars and crossing his arms in a mockery of Bruce’s stance.

“I fail to see a difference.”

Clark sighed again, looking away from Bruce and ransacking his brain for the right words that would make the other man understand the gray line of distinction in his mind. “The rest...I was told to kill them. I was told they presented a threat. I was made to believe I was serving some kind of greater good by killing them. Jason...was none of those things. He was blameless and I was reckless. And I’ve never forgiven myself for acting without checking that night. Not that it makes any difference to you, I suppose.”

He brought his piercing gaze back to Bruce and unfolded his arms once again. He gestured vaguely, knowing it wouldn’t help Bruce to see the past the way he could. “When I went to escape, I discovered I could fly. Lex’s response was to collar me and tether me to Lex Tower with invisible chains.” He tugged on his collar for emphasis. “For the first time, I realized how much of a threat I could be to him if I just up and left. It’s no surprise he clipped my wings, so to speak.” He grinned darkly at Bruce. “Since then, it’s been one miserable existence consisting of being Lex’s slave. Of ‘kill or be killed.’ Of never having more than a day in between reminders of how he can murder me with the flick of a button. Of being tortured with that damn green rock – sometimes for daring to speak up against him, sometimes for not doing a job to his standard of perfection, sometimes just so he can have a laugh.”

He gestured to Bruce. “The same power you now wield. Not much has changed for me, I guess. A smaller, less comfortable

cell, but a prison with my personal death hanging around my neck just the same.”

“A power I haven’t used,” Bruce pointedly reminded him, sweeping a hand before him, palm up, as though smoothing over his transgressions.

“Yes, you have,” Clark corrected him, rolling his eyes. “Not as often as Lex did, but you used it to torture information out of me.” He fixed Bruce with a look of hatred mixed with sarcasm. “Yeah, you’re a true gentleman, Bruce.”

“If you’re going to get petulant about it...” Bruce began, but Clark cut him off.

“Petulant? Here’s a thought, *Bruce*.” He launched himself away from the bars so that he no longer leaned against them. Then he gripped the bars in both hands and pressed his face into the space in between them. He leveled a rage-filled gaze at Bruce, locking eyes with him. “Go hang a loaded gun around your neck. Rig it up so that you never know if it’s going to go off and kill you at any moment. Walk around like that for a good ten years or so. Then come back and let me know what *your* mental state and attitude are like.”

For a long moment, Bruce just frowned at him. Then, blessedly, he rose from his seat and walked off without a word. But, to Clark, it seemed like perhaps his words had made some kind of an impact. Bruce appeared to be deep in thought. At least, Clark wanted to believe that.

\*\*\*

*Fifty.*

*Fifty-one.*

*Fifty-two.*

The jangling of keys and the sound of heavy-booted footsteps echoed toward Clark even before he could see the guards approaching. He ignored it. Half the time, the guards weren’t even bothering with him, just passing by on their way to some other task.

*Fifty-three.*

*Fifty-four.*

*Fifty-five.*

“On your feet!”

Clark stopped in mid pushup and looked up quizzically at the owner of the voice. It was one of Bruce’s lackeys, though Clark hadn’t ever learned the man’s name. He’d tried to learn as much as he could about *all* of his jailors, but none of them had been forthcoming with any information. He still only knew Bruce and Lois, and some guy he’d never ever seen, named Jimmy, who seemed to be a co-worker of Lois’, rather than one of Bruce’s underlings. He pushed himself into a sitting position but did not comply with the command to stand.

“Are my pushups annoying Bruce?” he questioned the man, as well as the other two brutes standing with him. “Or maybe he’s upset that I’m doing something other than staring at the ceiling. Is he finally coming back to kill me? Maybe he’s ready to turn me into the police? Hmmm?”

“I said stand,” the man said emotionlessly.

Clark rolled his eyes and stood, though he was more than a little confused. He’d been taken for a shave and shower just after breakfast, and he hadn’t even had dinner yet. Something was going on, and it made Clark more than a little skittish. He looked with untrusting eyes at the men before his cell.

“You know the drill,” the leader said.

Clark nodded shallowly. “I do. But I also know I already had some of your men watch me as I stood, naked, in the shower today. By the way, how many of them actually *enjoy* their voyeuristic duties?”

“Non-compliance,” one of the men noted in a tone that Clark didn’t like.

“It appears so.”

A chill ran down Clark’s spine as the leader – a man maybe a

scant five years older than he was – reached for his keys to unlock Clark’s cell. The other two men reached for the police-style nightsticks they wore at their waists. Involuntarily, he backed away, but there was nowhere to go. His backside bumped against his cot and he fell back onto the hard, thin mattress. The two men advanced on him and Clark tried to scramble his way away from them. He managed to get off the bed and made a desperate dash for the open door. But the leader was there, anticipating the dive for escape. His own nightstick crashed into the left side of Clark’s head, bringing the blackness of unconsciousness with it.

\*\*\*

Clark woke to find his head throbbing with pain. It was so bad he didn’t dare open his eyes for a long time, until the ache died down a little. He tried not to think as much as possible, but it was impossible to keep his mind blank. Eventually, he gave up and cracked one eye open, testing to see if the harsh overhead lighting would be too much for his sensitive head. But, to his confusion, he found only dim lighting. In fact, the only source of light seemed to be coming from his right. He closed his eyes for a moment, wondering if the blow to the side of his head had somehow cost him his eyesight.

After a moment, he tried again, finding the world around him still only barely lit. What was going on? He’d been living for more than five months in the land of eternal light. The darkness – once an old friend that had hidden him from the eyes of his victims – was now a stranger to him. He almost didn’t remember what it was like, to have such a respite for his eyes, to open them and not be immediately assaulted with an influx of brightness. For one terrifying moment, he wondered if he was dead. But no, this was too peaceful. He expected that, if an afterlife did indeed exist, he was bound for the flames, screams, and eternal torment of Hell.

He opened his eyes fully and instinctively turned his head toward the source of the light, trying to get his bearings. But nothing made sense. This wasn’t his cramped little cage. This place was different. It looked almost like a studio apartment, and the light came from where the door should have been. Only, it wasn’t there. What should have been made of solid wood was nothing more than a set of steel bars, the same as the door to his cell had been. He gingerly eased himself upright, so that he could sit on the much more comfortable bed. He rubbed his sore head absently, wincing at the spark of pain that resulted.

“So, you’re still alive.”

“L...Lois?” he croaked out, his voice cracking a bit, and he wondered how long he’d been unconscious for.

“And not brain-damaged I see,” she continued, shutting her book where she’d been reading it in an overstuffed armchair.

“Where...where am I?” he asked, ignoring her sarcasm. “Is this a sick bay?”

“No,” Lois said, unfolding her legs from where they’d been tucked up underneath her body. “This,” she said, spreading her arms out to the sides as if to encompass the entire room, “is your new home.”

“My...what now?”

“Your new home.” She smirked and drew the next words out deliberately, as though to tease him. “Unless, of course, you *miss* your cell? I could arrange to have Bruce bring you back there, if that’s the case.”

“No,” he said, a little too quickly. “I just...I’m a bit... confused.” He went to shake his head and thought better of it. “What...none of this makes any sense. The guards whacked me upside the head...”

“Because you tried to escape,” Lois interrupted.

“...and I wake up in an apartment? With bars on the door. And, for some reason, you...inside...with me?” He scratched his neck as he tried to piece it all together.

“The guards were trying to bring you here, to your new living quarters, idiot,” Lois said, but her ribbing wasn’t vicious. It was

soft, in a way he'd rarely heard her speak to him. "Those morons weren't supposed to harm you, your lamebrained attempt to escape aside. They could have killed you. Bruce didn't want me in here with you, but you weren't exactly a threat being out cold. I took his key." She held up the key triumphantly and with no small amount of pride.

"Why? Why would you care if I live or die? I'm not exactly a good person. I've done awful things. I've...I've done the unspeakable to you...robbed you of your family." He wasn't entirely sure why he was making an argument against himself, but he couldn't stop the words from tumbling past his lips either. "It probably would have been for the best if they *had* killed me."

"Maybe," Lois allowed. "But if that happens, it'll be done the right way. A court-ordered death sentence."

"Right. Can't deny you your article, right?" he asked bitterly.

"You want to go back to your little animal cage?" she bristled angrily. "I can arrange it. *I'm* the one who suggested that Bruce move you into this place. I can just as easily convince him to send you back to where you came from," she snapped.

Clark instantly squashed the biting remark he'd been formulating. "Sorry," he apologized. "The truth is...I'm not used to people doing things for me. At least, not without asking me to do...terrible things for them in return. So...why *did* you ask Bruce to let me stay here? Not that I'm complaining. But it's a far cry from where I was a few hours ago. Uh, or however long it's been since that guard walloped me in the head. This place..." He sat up straighter and swung his feet over the side of the bed, but he did not even think about standing up. "It looks...stocked. There's furniture. Lamps. Books on the shelves. What do you want from me?" he asked, his suspicion rising once more.

Lois shrugged. "Nothing. You've earned this."

Clark chuckled without mirth. "Earned? How?"

"You've been honest with us," Lois said, standing and placing her hands on her hips. "You've lost a great deal of the miserable attitude you started out with. You've offered up information without being prodded to. You're...changing." Was it his imagination, or did she seem compassionate toward him?

"Maybe," he allowed. "Maybe I was never supposed to be... who I am. Maybe in another life, I was someone capable of doing some good in this world. Maybe I could have saved lives, instead of taking them. But...I'm not that guy. I never will be. How you can even stand to talk to me...I'm not sure I'll ever understand that."

Lois took a deep, thoughtful breath before answering. "I hate you for what you stole from me. But, at the same time, from everything you've told us, I...I've come to...understand...a little...why you felt trapped enough to do it. And, I'll admit...after you told me that you made that phone call...I did a little digging."

"Digging?" he questioned.

She nodded just once. "I needed to know if it was true. I thought...I started to remember the vague outline of a person outside the car window." She shook her head, lost to the images playing out in her own eyes, that only she could see. "It was like a dream only half remembered and I wasn't sure if it was real or just some random image my mind concocted based on your story."

"And, what did you find?" he prodded, half afraid of her answer.

"That it's more than likely that you *did* try to help. My phone...there was a record of it dialing 911, for starters. And Steve...the guy who stopped and called for the ambulance...he swore up and down that he'd used his own phone, not mine. My phone was also found outside of the car, on the ground. I couldn't have dialed it on my own and thrown it out the window. It doesn't make any sense. Unless you were telling the truth."

Clark nodded silently, letting her tell her story.

"I guess...at the time...there was so much going on, I didn't stop to think about these things or question the things that didn't

add up," she continued. "I'm not sure I can say that I owe you my life, but...I can accept that you *did* try to help. And as much as you're at fault for the crash, I can't forget that you tried to save me." Her voice hitched for a moment, and Clark could see, even as dimly lit as his new apartment was, that she had tears in her eyes. "I can't forgive you for killing my family. I can't forget what you took from me. But, I *can* accept that you acted under the fear of being killed." One silver tear made it past her eyelashes.

Clark rose from his bed and instinctively reached out. With a trembling hand, he cupped her cheek and used his thumb to wipe the tear away, wondering when he'd become so brazen as to touch her in a way that felt oddly intimate.

"I'll go to my grave regretting the lives I've taken. The families I've destroyed. And there are many."

"How many?" she asked in a wobbly voice, as yet another tear fell.

He wiped that one away too before looking away from her. "I'm not even sure anymore. A lot. Lex had me kill *anyone* he thought was a rival, or threat, or who had crossed him in some way, even if it was unintentional, like your parents, who'd meant well and cured him of a disease I wish had killed him, but left him permanently bald." He looked away for a moment, burning with shame. "You could probably name a hundred people who have died mysteriously or suspiciously or who have been outright murdered in the last nearly fifteen years, and, chances are, if they've been rich or have been associated with Lex, I'm more than likely the person who's caused them to die."

He sighed heavily as his head throbbed anew. "I'm probably the most prolific assassin who's ever lived."

Once, he would have said the words with such violent, but false, pride as to drive Lois and Bruce crazy with disgust and ire. Now, however, the words broke what was left of his shriveled, blackened, worthless soul to pieces with the weight of his shame, self-loathing, and utter regret that he carried.

"I'm sorry," he told her in a tremulous voice.

For half a heart-stopping minute, she let him continue to cup her cheek. She even almost seemed to nuzzle into his palm a little, but Clark knew that had to be a figment of his imagination. Then, too soon, she moved away, using her hands to remove his hand from her face.

"I know," she said in a whisper-soft voice.

"So...you're not...afraid of me?" he choked out, feeling a rush of emotions swirl inside him.

"No," she replied without hesitation. "Do you *want* me to be?"

"No," Clark said, hardly daring to breathe. He sat back down on the bed, his head still aching. "If I'm being honest...you're the first person who's ever done anything nice for me. Ever. It's nice to have a fri...an almost friend," he said, correcting himself before she could protest. He'd killed her family. He had no right to think of her as a friend, or even dream that they could *ever* be friends.

"An almost friend," Lois repeated, giving him a tentative smile.

"Well," he clarified, though she hadn't actually said the words as a question. "I've done...horrible things to you. And yet...you've been...understanding. You got Bruce to let me stay in an actual apartment. You've been nice to me, despite the times I've been...despicable toward you." He scrunched up his brow in thought. "Why is that?"

Lois sat back down, sitting on the edge of the seat uncomfortably, with her hands tucked between her knees. "I don't know. I guess, I just see how much Lex Luthor has tortured you. After thinking about how you tried to help Lucy and me, and after hearing about how you had to kill or be murdered yourself, it...it altered the way I see you. And maybe I was too stubborn before to admit it, but...maybe you were right."

"About what?" he asked, blinking in surprise. He wasn't used to people giving him credit for things.

"In extreme circumstances, even the most mild-mannered and meek person can be forced to do things they've never dreamed they could do."

His eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "Oh? Speaking from experience?" he asked, only half joking.

"Nothing like what you've done," she automatically retorted, shutting down the response he was formulating, "but, as a reporter? I've had to do some wild things to get the story, even just to undercover a lead."

"Like what?" he needed, relaxing a little and starting to really enjoy her company.

"Why so interested?" she asked, mischief dancing in her eyes.

He shrugged. "Well, *you're* the one who brought it up. Can you blame me for wanting to know more? I'm an alien orphan who's spent literally his whole life locked away from the real world." He wagged his eyebrows just a bit.

*Oh, God, am I flirting with her?* he realized in horror a moment later.

*Stockholm Syndrome*, the sinister voice of Lex hissed gleefully in his mind.

*No*, he argued back. *That's not it at all.*

*You're not capable of loving anyone*, Lex's voice sneered at him. *You only think you're attracted to her because she's chosen to show you an iota of compassion. Compassion and kindness you don't deserve. You can't possibly love your captors. You're not even human.*

*If it was Stockholm, I'd probably find myself attracted to Bruce, not Lois*, he continued to argue. He wished he could kill Lex's hold on his mind as easily as he'd assassinated his victims, once upon a time. *He's my true captor, not Lois. She just...got caught up in all this, simply because she wanted to help him catch the man who'd tried to kill him.*

*Liar!* the Lex voice snarled. *Poor little dog, wanting your lady-master to rub your tummy and give you a treat!*

*It's not like that! There's something about her...something I can't pinpoint...but she's the most amazing woman I've ever...*

*What? Met? You've never met anyone else!* The Lex voice cackled with such malevolence that Clark nearly screamed out in frustration.

*It's your fault!* he mentally hurled back, visualizing punching Lex in the face as he did so, trying to destroy his influence in his mind. *You took everything from me! I won't let you take this too! For the first time, I actually feel like a true human man. I don't know if this is what love is or not, but I know it's real, not conjured up in my head as a result of my imprisonment. Now leave me alone!*

His mental scream was so loud it felt like everyone in the world should have heard it. And as the dust settled in his mind from the force of his declaration, he found that, for once, Lex had nothing to say. But Clark wasn't deluded enough to believe that his former slaver would be silenced forever that easily.

She either didn't notice Clark's potential flirting or didn't mind. She ignored the bait and answered his question. "Fine. A few examples. I once posed as a waitress in a strip joint to investigate a mob boss. And no, before you ask, the waitresses didn't disrobe. Another time, I posed as a man to gain access to a men's club because the owner was using it as a front for selling underage girls as what he called 'pleasure partners.' And this," she said, gesturing around vaguely again. "My boss thinks I'm just hanging around Bruce to cover his campaign trail as a presidential candidate. I hate lying to him like that, but he doesn't need to know about all of this. About *you*."

"Speaking of," Clark said thoughtfully, as he looked around his new living quarters, "we're in Metropolis, aren't we?"

"What...makes you say that?" she asked haltingly, trying to keep it casual, but her eyes gave her away.

"I was just thinking. I remember reading about the

underground city in Metropolis. It was built as a fallout shelter in case of war or a nuclear attack. From what I remember, it was the size of midtown, and several rich and famous people bought apartments in it as an insurance policy. If my memory serves, the Wayne family owned one of the largest apartments. But, after a while, the project was abandoned. So it would make sense that he chose this place. It's not far from Gotham. It's abandoned. Relatively few people ever knew about its existence, and those who did would have no reason to come here. And it's got everything you need, including a cell to put troublemakers in and apartments for those who need to stay for...well, whatever reason."

He chuckled. "Bruce, you sly dog," he said to no one in particular. "Keeping me practically right under Lex's nose."

"I didn't say you were right," Lois reminded him brusquely.

But Clark couldn't stop laughing. "You don't have to, Lois. I can read it in your eyes. I'm right. Oh, this is too good. Lex will have his underlings looking everywhere for his prized assassin when I've been under his feet this whole time! For the first time, I'm *glad* to be underground."

She regarded him for a moment with an unreadable expression and, for a fleeting few seconds, Clark thought she was going to deny the truth. Then she nodded, almost absently.

"You know something? If things had turned out differently, you might have made a decent reporter," she informed him with what sounded suspiciously like a little pride.

Clark sighed softly. "Maybe. It would have been nice, to have chosen a career. To use my powers to help people, rather than destroy them."

"You could have changed the world," Lois reflected.

"For the better, at any rate. I've already changed the world for the worse. Like your parents." He shook his head sadly. "They should be helping so many more people. But, because of me..." He couldn't force the rest of his sentence out.

Lois simply nodded. "Yeah, they should be. But Lex is really to blame. And with your help, we can expose what he's been doing."

"With *my* help? You mean hand me over to a jury and let them call for the death penalty," he snorted, all traces of his earlier relaxed attitude and the warmth of his almost friendship with Lois vanishing quicker than mist in sunlight.

"There are ways to...reduce your punishment. Maybe even protect you completely. That's up to Bruce," she answered cagily.

"I'd rather just be given ten minutes of freedom to kill Lex," Clark grumpily argued. "Just ten minutes to fly up to Lex Tower and do to him what he made me do to so many others. After that... Bruce can do with me as he will."

"No," Lois replied icily. "That isn't who you are anymore. *Is it?*" she pressed. "You aren't the remorseless killer you once deluded yourself into thinking you are. He's still in your head, isn't he? Whispering things to you. Putting you down. Trying to rouse your anger. Stamping out whatever hope and happiness slips into your heart. Am I right? You hear his criticisms, don't you? You still fear disappointing him. Right?"

"You know *nothing* about what my head is like!" Clark roared, throwing his hands up to his ears to drown out Lex's voice.

*She's right. I'll always be here. You'll never be rid of me.*

"Just leave me alone!" Clark howled at the top of his lungs.

Lois shrank back in her chair, a look of alarm on her face. She scrambled to her feet and backed up toward the cell door of his apartment. Blindly, she groped behind her, trying to fit the key into the lock to get away from him.

"Wait," Clark pleaded, reaching out to her, but not moving from his spot on the bed. "Don't leave. I wasn't...that wasn't... meant for you. The truth is...you're right. He's there, in my head." He gingerly touched his fingertips to his scalp. "I just want him gone. Look, I know my days are limited. There's no way any

judge or jury would ever be lenient on me. I just want whatever time I have left to be lived...free from Lex. Not just simply in a place where he can't find me, but without having his sneers in my head all the time."

"You can't kill him," Lois said, fitting the key into the lock at last. She let herself out and locked the door shut again. "He has to be exposed to the world for what he's done. If you kill him, his supporters will hail him as a martyr. Destroy him in a court of law, and you topple everything he's ever worked for."

"He doesn't deserve to live! Not after all he's done," Clark countered firmly.

"Maybe not," Lois appeared to hesitantly agree. "Believe me, I want to see him pay for his crimes just as much as you do. He stole your life. He stole my family. But justice has to be served the right way, or all we'll wind up doing is aiding him, not hurting him."

Clark sighed, trying to calm the surging tide of hatred crashing in his chest like waves on jagged rocks. "I've never taken joy in killing. But I want nothing more than to see life leave his body forever. I need to be the one to do it."

"Then you're no better than he is!" Lois snapped. "Killing because someone once hurt you in some way!"

"He didn't *just* hurt me!" Clark snarled heatedly. "He destroyed everything about me! Who I was, who I could have been. Because of him my soul is so black it makes midnight look like full daylight! Because of him, I'm a monster. I have blood on my hands that I will *never* be able to wash off." He forced himself to pause for a moment to collect himself a bit. "I don't expect you to understand. He...I...took away your family, *not* your future."

Flashes of anger still flickered in Lois' eyes. "No, I guess I *don't* understand what it's like to be in your shoes. But I *do* know what it's like to pursue justice against criminals. You called me an 'almost friend' before. Now act like one and trust me!"

"Trust?" Clark rolled the word out in disbelief, as if it was foreign. "Trust?" he repeated. He shook his head. "I wish I could." Trust.

How could he trust this woman? How could he trust *anyone*, for that matter? Not one single person in his life had ever had his best interests at heart. Why did Lois think it would be so easy for him just to forget all the hurts in his life and just take her word for things?

Lois shook her head as she stepped back from the cell bars. "Just think it over," she said in a calm voice. "You'll see. Killing Lex does nothing to right all the wrongs he's committed."

With that, she turned and walked briskly off, leaving Clark alone with his conflicted heart.

\*\*\*

Clark didn't move from his spot on the bed for a long time after Lois left. He didn't think about what she'd said. He didn't want to. Every fiber of his being was calling for him to kill Lex. A thousand scenarios whirled like dancers through his head in a macabre waltz.

Wrapping his hands around Lex's scrawny throat until his eyes bulged from their sockets and his flesh went purple. Strangling him with one of his overly expensive ties. Throwing him off the balcony of Lex Tower. Slashing Lex's throat with his hidden blade, the billionaire's warm, sticky blood gushing over Clark's hands like a baptism into his new life of freedom from his former master. Burning Lex with his heat vision until his flesh melted and sloughed off Lex's body while his "brother" writhed in agony. Freezing him solid with his icy breath. Flying up into the stratosphere with Lex, higher and higher until the air was too thin for Lex's fragile, human body to survive. Zooming Lex up into space so quickly that the vacuum of space caused the billionaire's body to implode. Ripping off an arm or leg and letting him bleed out, soaking into the obscenely expensive carpets in Lex Tower. Punching a hole through the man's chest with his fist and ripping

out his still beating heart, only to crush it in his iron grip.

Clark grinned and let his imagination get as gory as it wanted to.

Using his incredible strength to snap Lex's neck like a dry twig. Dunking the man in the harbor and then using his icy breath to freeze the man solid, bit by excruciating bit, so that the ice squeezed the life out of him as it crept up his body from his toes to his head. Grabbing that bald head and exerting just enough pressure to slowly and painfully crack and crush the bones of his skull. Methodically breaking every last bone in Lex's body over the course of weeks or months, until his body could no longer hold out against the torture. Using his hidden blade to cut the man daily, and refusing to let the wound heal, until his former slave master bled out completely. Hanging him from the balcony of Lex Tower with the laces from his imported shoes. Flying with Lex fast enough to break the sound barrier, watching as the man's internal organs burst and his body was shredded by the air molecules he was traveling through, leaving nothing but a spray of blood and microscopic pieces of flesh and bone to rain down over the land beneath them.

Each new scenario that popped into his mind fueled his need to kill Lex even further. He wouldn't relish it, he knew. That wasn't who he was. He was an experienced killer, but he had never once enjoyed his career. However, with Lex...was it possible that he might glean a glimmer of satisfaction from a job well – and likely bloodily – done? But...no. None of his progressively more twisted musings felt right. None of them felt like they were painful enough to even make a dent in repaying the decades of emotional, psychological, and physical abuse Lex had heaped on him. None of them came close to paying Lex back for all the lives he'd so effortlessly ordered cut short.

Clark frowned. It would only be too fitting if Lex himself were to be collared like an animal, tormented with the ever-present threat of death, and forced to do things that went against his very nature. But that would mean the multibillionaire would have to be allowed to live. And Clark wasn't convinced that Lex deserved to draw so much as one more breath.

"Lois is wrong," he whispered to himself. "There's no justice in letting a person like Lex live. All he'll do in jail is waste taxpayer dollars on appeal after appeal, all while living in some penthouse-style prison cell, getting his free 'three hots and a cot,' as Nigel once put it."

But there was nothing he could do for the moment, locked up and bereft of the sunlight that would restore his powers and allow him to break free of his own tidy little prison. He sighed and let his eyes sweep over his new apartment. He had to admit – even if only in the confines of his heart – it wasn't a bad upgrade from his exposed little cell. It had an open floor plan – really just one big space that served as a living room, bedroom, kitchen, and dining room – with the exception of one door that led to the bathroom.

The bathroom.

Clark smiled to himself.

Gone were the days of having to use the toilet in full view of anyone who happened by. Gone were the days of having to shower with an audience. He stood up and padded softly over to the bathroom, his curiosity getting the best of him. The door was slightly ajar and Clark gently pushed it open. He let out a low whistle as the door swung open. White and gray marble greeted him as the vanity came into view. He entered into the room and went to the sink. His fingers caressed the silver faucet knobs and he turned the tap on, just for a moment, as if needing to test it to make sure this was all really his. Then he turned his attention to the shower. Instead of the stark stall he'd been forced to use before, this bathroom had a shower in a bathtub. A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. It had been too long since he'd last been able to soak in a bathtub. He tried the water here too and found it also functional. He made a mental note to take a nice long

bath later on, perhaps after his dinner was served.

A linen closet was built into the wall and he checked it, finding a small assortment of towels and a few basic necessities, like soap, shampoo, and conditioner. He checked the cabinet under the sink and found a bottle of bubble bath and a container of bath salts. He opened the container and took a sniff. Peppermint. It smelled like heaven to him. He checked the medicine cabinet. That was empty.

“They still don’t trust me with a razor,” he mused darkly, but unsurprised.

He shrugged. He could live without that simple luxury, especially when he’d been given this magnificent kingdom to call his own. No, it wasn’t on par with what Lex Tower had boasted, but here, prisoner though he still was, he’d never been forced to do anyone’s bidding and kill people. He left the bathroom and went back into his living room. Finding a light switch on the wall, he turned on the lights, then turned his attention to investigating the rest of the space. Right off the bat, he could see a bookshelf in the living room, with two or three dozen books lining the shelves. Clark could have cried at the sight. For too long, he’d been denied the simple pleasure of losing himself in a story. It had been his one method of escape while he’d been imprisoned in Lex Tower. But he didn’t investigate what titles he’d been supplied with. Not yet. There would be more than enough time for that. Instead, he turned his attention to his neat, tidy, tiny kitchen.

He went immediately to the cabinets and found them to be stocked with non-perishable food items – mostly snacks. It appeared he wasn’t going to be allowed to cook. There were no pots and pans. But he did have a tea kettle and a selection of tea bags, so there was at least that small concession to enjoy. And there was instant coffee. That wasn’t nearly as good as fresh ground beans in Clark’s opinion, but, over the months of having only instant to drink, it was more than good enough.

Likewise, the fridge was stocked with a few essentials too. Milk and cream for his hot beverages, some perishable fruits and vegetables, some blocks of pre-sliced cheese to go with the crackers he’d found in the cabinets, even a few cans of soda. The freezer was bare, save for a few lonely ice cubes in a plastic tray. He found no sharp utensils anywhere. The most he found was a couple of blunt butter knives.

*They still don’t trust me not to take my own life*, he thought to himself. He paused in mid-step as he left the kitchen area to investigate the closet. *Would I even do it, if I had the opportunity?*

The thought horrified him as much as it left him questioning his ability to end things, if push came to shove.

*Could I kill myself?*

The more he pondered the question, the more unsure of the answer he became. His life was so different as Bruce Wayne’s prisoner, as opposed to Lex’s. He was no longer being lied to, ordered around, threatened with death, and manipulated on a daily basis. But he still had the weight of his guilty conscious resting on his shoulders.

*So many dead bodies*, he thought with a mental sigh.

Perhaps it would be for the best if he died before he could be tried for his crimes. It would save a lot of time, by cutting straight to the inevitable death sentence he would receive, and at least he would die on his own terms. His life had never been his own, shouldn’t he exercise what little control he had over how and when he died? But, then again, if he lived, he could at least testify against Lex and make sure that, if the billionaire lived to see the inside of a courtroom, he would be firmly nailed to the wall for all the atrocities he’d ordered.

He shook his head. Why was he worried about something that was out of his control? He forced himself to resume walking across the apartment, to the closet near the bed. He opened the shutter-style doors and found several changes of shirts and pants hanging there, as well as a short chest of drawers containing socks

and underwear. He recognized the clothing. It was all stuff he’d been wearing, the entire duration of his captivity – things that had been taken from him over and over during his supervised showers to be washed and returned days later during another shower as his change of fresh clothing. His eyes lit upon a pair of slippers. Clark blinked in surprise. No longer would he be forced to wear his sneakers or go in just socks. It was a small measure of comfort, but it struck a deep chord with him just the same. If it weren’t for his collar, he’d feel almost like he was at home.

*My collar and the bars on my apartment door*, he mentally corrected himself.

He took the slippers over to the chair and put them on his feet, enjoying the plush luxury of them. As he sat there, he looked around his living space with a certain amount of satisfaction. He wasn’t a free man, but he could almost pretend he was, here in this small, private place of his own. He made a mental note to thank Bruce and Lois when he saw them again. Perhaps Bruce would even remove his collar if he asked nicely enough.

*Yeah, and maybe he’ll let me fly off to go live alone in the Alps and escape from the criminal justice system*, he thought sourly.

When dinner came, Clark wolfed it all down, his appetite stirred up by the change in his environment. That, and he was eager to be finished so he could to utilize his new bathroom by soaking in a hot tub of water. He selected a soft maroon T-shirt and a pair of black sweatpants, enjoying that he could exercise a certain amount of choice in what clothing he would be wearing from that moment on, instead of having Bruce’s men just hand him a stack of clothing. He grabbed a new pair of white socks and a pair of red plaid boxers and brought them to the bathroom. Then, as he ran the water and filled the tub – tossing in a handful of the peppermint bath salts – he went back into the living room and stood before the bookshelves. A random assortment of titles greeted him, both fiction and non-fiction alike. He ignored the non-fiction for the time being. He wanted to lose himself to a world of myth and legend, of hobbits destroying rings, of sword-swinging gladiators, of magic carpets, of pirate treasures – *anything* that didn’t resemble the real world as he knew it. He found a crisp new copy of Homer’s *The Odyssey* and selected it. He’d read it before, but it had been a few years ago, and it was as good a book as any. Besides, Greek mythology – most mythology in fact – had always fascinated him. He took it to the bathroom as well.

By then, the tub was quite full, so he shut the tap off and disrobed. There was a laundry chute built into the wall next to the vanity, so he stuffed his clothing in. Taking the book in one hand, he stepped into the steaming water. A moan of pleasure escaped him as he let his body sink into the hot water. It felt so good, so relaxing, that he could almost forget for an instant how miserable it was to be a prisoner. He leaned back, enjoying the bath, then cracked open his book. It wasn’t long before he was lost to a world of heroes, vengeful gods, adventures at sea, and a man desperate to get home.

Home.

The thought made Clark pause and his heart ache. He’d never had a home. Not really. Sure, he’d lived in a massive mansion when he was younger and the elder Luthors had still been alive. And they *had* been good to him. Perhaps that had been a real home. But Clark wasn’t sure. Lex’s voice still hissed in his mind repeating all of the vile things he’d filled Clark’s head with all his life, leaving Clark conflicted. Had Lionel and Letitia ever really loved him? Or had it all been a publicity stunt, the way Lex had said it had been?

He shook his head. It didn’t matter. His parents had died more than twenty years ago. Their love – real or feigned – didn’t change anything. The home they had provided him was long gone.

And then, after that, his “home” had never truly been a home. It hadn’t been provided out of love. It hadn’t been a sanctuary

where Clark could escape the evils of the world. It hadn't been a place where love and support had flowed in abundance. It had been an elaborate – and plush – prison cell, where any freedom and care Clark had thought he had had been nothing more than a mirage. Even this apartment, as comfortable and homey as it was, was a jail.

"I'll never be free," Clark thought with a depressed sigh. "I'll always live in a cage. Lex Tower. Here. In an *actual* prison facility. Even if I were to escape, I'd have to hide in isolation, which is nothing but a jail without the bars." He sighed again. "I'll *never* have a real home." He looked at the book thoughtfully. "What must it be like, to have a place hold your heart so much that you spend a decade trying to get back there? To go through Hell and back to return to one specific place, because it's there that your heart resides?" He shook his head sadly. "You know something, Odysseus? I envy you, even in your most harrowing moments. I would do *anything* for a home to love and fight for."

He set the book down on the floor next to the tub, and noticed, for the first time, that the water had grown pretty cold. Reflexively, he went to use his heat vision to warm the water back up, but as he reached for his powers, he felt the all too devastating emptiness that sat where his powers had once been. It snapped him out of his bleak musings about the concept of home, dragging his depression over the subject to a different, but just as difficult, topic. Without his powers, he felt like half of himself was missing. Ever since he was a kid, his powers had been there – growing and developing, getting stronger by the day. Rarely had he ever been without them, and then only when he was recovering from Kryptonite exposure. And even then, they were quick to return under the sun's powerful rays. Never had he been without them for more than a couple of days, at best, when he was first learning how to recover from the deadly green stone's radiation. Being without them for so long made Clark feel lost and unsure about himself. For the most part, it was true that he was getting along well enough as a normal, powerless man. But in the times when he still instinctively reached for them for some menial task, he was suddenly slapped in the face with how incomplete he felt. Normal had never been normal for him. Normal was all wrong.

With another heavy sigh, he pulled the drain plug, then stood, turned the shower on, and rinsed off. He didn't bother washing his hair. He'd already done that under the watchful eyes of Bruce's men earlier that day. He dried off with a thick, soft dark blue towel, then dressed swiftly. Turning out the lights, he left the bathroom, book in hand.

Bruce was waiting for him at the small round dining table that stood just on the far side of the kitchen counter. In the center of the table, an insulated carafe of coffee stood, and a plate of bakery-made cookies. He gestured for Clark to sit. Warily, Clark went to the table, deposited his book to one side, then sat down as he'd been bidden.

"I hope you sprayed some air freshener in there," Bruce quipped easily, gesturing to the bathroom. He looked at the book. "*The Odyssey*. Nice choice."

"I've read it before," Clark replied, feeling the need to prove that he was more educated than Bruce might think he was. "And I wasn't...doing that," he bristled defensively.

Bruce chuckled. "I know. I was joking."

"I...oh," Clark allowed. "I guess I'm not really used to that. Lex isn't much of a jokester. I'm not even sure he *has* a sense of humor. At least, not a normal one."

Bruce nodded thoughtfully. "I guess you have a lot to learn, Clark."

"Maybe," Clark replied with a single, shallow nod of his own.

"And yet, you've learned a lot in your time with us," Bruce continued, steepling his fingers and continuing to bob his head. "You're almost a different man completely, from the one we captured and brought here."

"I haven't exactly had much choice."

"Maybe not," Bruce said, cracking a small smile, as though amused by Clark's words.

"Speaking of...I guess I should thank you," Clark said after a moment. "This apartment is...well...pretty great."

Bruce reached for the carafe and poured them each a mug of strong-smelling coffee. Clark took his gratefully, fixed it with the creamer and sugar Bruce had taken out, and then cradled the hot mug in both hands on the table. Bruce fixed his own cup, then sat back and regarded Clark for a moment before speaking.

"You've earned it," he said finally, after Clark was certain the man wasn't going to respond at all.

"Lois said the same thing," Clark replied softly.

Bruce nodded. "Can I be frank with you?"

Clark chuckled without mirth. "You mean you haven't been so far?"

"I need your help."

The rest of Clark's retort died on his tongue. "Um...what?"

"Lois and I are building a case against your former master," Bruce continued, elaborating. "But we need your testimonial to place the final nails in it."

"You mean, you want to parade me before a courtroom," Clark nearly spat defensively. "Then, when you're all done with Lex, it gets to be my turn, right? My turn to be put on trial and all my misdeeds laid bare for a jury to decide what to do with me. Life in a jail cell or an execution people around the world will cheer for."

"Don't you *want* to see him get his just desserts?" Bruce asked calmly.

"More than you can imagine. However, a country club jail isn't justice," Clark tossed back with a restrained sneer. He leaned forward and grinned dangerously at Bruce. "The same kind of posh prison you'll be seeing, after word gets out that you unlawfully kept me imprisoned for...oh...it had to be what? Close to six months now?" He casually took a sip of his coffee. "My, my, my! What a lovely couple of presidential candidates the American people have to choose from! A sociopath with a super assassin or a vigilante who locks people up without due process."

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "You didn't hear the rest of what I was going to say."

Clark shrugged and sipped his coffee. "Does it matter?"

"I know people in law enforcement. Lois does too. Between the two of us, we should be able to get a good deal for you."

"Ah yes, how much better to be locked up for life rather than just be killed outright," Clark snorted. "Hard pass."

"I was actually thinking along the lines of a reduced sentence, if not immunity," Bruce replied. He spread his hands, palms upward. "Of course, if you rather not work with me..."

The implication hung in the air, unvoiced.

"Why should I trust you?" Clark asked venomously.

"What do you have to lose?" Bruce countered, calmly sipping his drink.

"Even if I help you...even if you got immunity for me...what then?" Clark asked, a sharp edge to his voice. "It's not like I'll be free to walk the streets. Everyone will know me. Everyone will know that I'm...not like them. That I'm a killer. And they'd be right."

"People can change," Bruce offered simply. "*You* have. As I said before, you aren't the same man you were when you got here. If you were to be given your freedom, you wouldn't return to your old ways. You wouldn't keep killing."

"That's where you're wrong, Bruce," Clark said gravely. "I would absolutely make one, final kill. Nothing in this world would stop me from killing Lex."

"I don't believe you," Bruce replied, unmoved.

"Then you're a bigger fool than I pegged you to be," Clark shot back, his words coming out in a low growl.

"You'd throw away your one chance to live a normal life?"

Bruce snorted in disbelief. “I doubt that very much. Just...consider my offer. Lois and I have enough to connect Lex to a hefty amount of crime, with or without you. But if you testify against him, there’s not a force in Heaven or on Earth that will allow him to escape justice.”

“And what of the forces of Hell?” Clark asked smugly. “Because that’s what we’re dealing with here, Bruce.”

“Maybe,” the other man allowed. “Think about my offer,” he repeated.

He stood up and went around the table to where Clark sat. Clark shifted uneasily in his seat at the close proximity to a man who he still considered to mostly be his enemy. Bruce reached into his pocket and Clark reflexively winced. This was it. Bruce was going for the remote control that was connected to his collar. He would torture Clark into agreeing to go along with his insane plan.

“As a gesture of my sincerity, here,” Bruce said as the remote left his pocket.

Clark shut his eyes as the billionaire pressed one of the buttons, anticipating the painful assault the Kryptonite would bring as the vents in his collar opened. The pain *did* come, but it lasted only seconds before it disappeared again. Clark’s eyes popped open in surprise and confusion. Then, suddenly, he was aware of a new sensation.

His hands flew to his neck where the collar was located and his fingers met flesh for the first time in a decade, rather than the cool metal band. He felt different, now that the slight physical weight of the collar was gone. He looked to Bruce, who was straightening up as he picked the collar up off the floor and checking to make certain that the metal ring was tightly locked into one continuous circle. What Clark had thought was the vents opening had been the collar itself, unlocked for the first time in years. When Bruce had closed the circle once more, the Kryptonite had been safely tucked away behind the metal, shielding Clark from its deadly influence once more.

He rubbed his neck in awe that the collar was gone. He was at a loss for words. What could he *possibly* say to Bruce? A mere “thank you” wouldn’t suffice. And what if this was part of some kind of elaborate ruse Bruce was setting up, meant to lure Clark into a false sense of security and even into agreeing to go along with Bruce’s request to testify against Lex?

“How does that feel?” Bruce asked, the collar gripped loosely in one hand.

“I...I...” Clark stammered. He swallowed against his surging emotions, mastering his words before he spoke again. “It feels... incredible. But, uh...why? After all this time, why now? Do you think this will buy you my loyalty?”

“No,” Bruce said with a light shake of his head. “In fact, I expect that it will make you more suspicious of me than ever.”

“Then...why?” Clark asked, half fearing the answer.

“Because, after all of this, despite the things you’ve done... you’ve earned at least this much. I’m not saying you should trust me. And I’m not even sure I trust you yet. But...you’re right. All the things that you’ve said about living in fear of having someone out there with a remote that can end your life at any moment... you’re right. It’s no way to live, not even for someone with as much blood on their hands as you.”

“Gee, Bruce, that was really touching,” Clark smirked, a sarcastic hand to his heart. “You know, you should give a speech like that at one of your debates. You’ll *really* win over the hearts of the voters.”

“I *can* put this back on,” Bruce deadpanned, holding the collar out slightly toward Clark.

Clark shrank away, despite himself.

“I thought so,” Bruce replied tonelessly. Then he gestured to the unfinished coffee. “Drink up. And think about what I’ve said.”

Then he turned and let himself out of Clark’s apartment.

\*\*\*

Weeks passed and Clark fell into a new routine. Despite the fact that he was still a prisoner, he got comfortable in his apartment. For the first time in his life, he was making – albeit, limited – decisions on his own, without the fear of retribution. No one grew angry with him if he chose to sleep in. No one cursed at him if he chose to do nothing but read all day long. No one threatened him with death if he didn’t comply with their wishes.

He was almost happy.

He *would* have been happy, if he’d been allowed to go up to the surface and spend even just a few minutes in the sunlight. His missing powers aside, he needed a change of scenery and to pretend, just for a minute, that he was completely free. But that was denied him, no matter how many times he pleaded for it.

Lois visited him often, typically in the evenings, after work – or so Clark assumed, since she never outright said so. He looked forward to those visits, more than he wanted to admit. It was odd, how much of a tentative near-friendship had sprung up between them. Clark wasn’t delusional. He knew she would probably never fully trust or even like him, not after the things he’d done. But he couldn’t help liking her anyway. No, liking wasn’t a strong enough word.

But what *was* this new feeling inside of him?

*Lust*, the voice of Lex sneered at him. *Simple lust, nothing more.*

He shook his head against the ghost of his “brother’s” voice. He’d known lust for a long time. Locked up in Lex Tower, he’d had no shortage of adult content on the premium stations. He was no stranger to lusting after and fantasizing about those women in the videos. His feelings for Lois were *nothing* like *those* feelings had *ever* been. Not even close.

So, then, what *was* he feeling?

*Infatuation?* his mind wondered.

But that didn’t quite fit either. His feelings for Lois were more than just desiring her body. He wanted more than just meaningless sex with her. He craved *more*. What he’d mistaken for primal lust in the beginning was more than just the fantasy of physical intimacy with her. His dreams and daydreams often centered around building a life with her. Living with her. Cooking meals with her. Sharing stories about their day. Settling down in front of the television to watch a movie with her. Taking long, aimless evening walks with her through the park. Slipping into bed alongside her as the stars came out to play – even when they didn’t wind up making love. In short, all the things he’d ever heard tale of loving, married couples doing together.

*Married couples are in love though*, he sighed to himself.

It was as if his mind threw on the emergency brakes. All his thoughts came to a screeching halt. He was pretty sure actual sparks were involved, like a train suddenly stopping short on its tracks.

*Love?* he tentatively wondered.

No, it *couldn’t* be. He was a hardened killer. He wasn’t meant for love...was he?

*Love*, his mind confirmed with dawning realization and sudden confidence.

*Is this what love is like?* His eyes widened as he turned this new notion over in his mind. *I would do anything for her. I want her...more than anything I’ve ever desired in my whole life. More than I want revenge on Lex for keeping me collared. More than I want revenge on Bruce for becoming my new jailor. I want her more than I’ve ever even wanted my freedom. I don’t want her for a day or a week or a year. I want to be with her forever. I want to give myself to her in every way, to submit to her needs and desires, to support her when she needs it, to give her the entire world. I want to build a life with her. I would do everything and anything to make her happy.*

He paused for a moment, staggered by the weight of his internal confessions. His hand flew up to his head in surprise and

his fingers raked through his hair as he tried to process everything he was allowing himself to admit to for the very first time. His heart was hammering in his chest and he felt almost queasy, but in a good way. He was terrified by these new feelings and what they could mean for him. A part of him wished he could just turn off his emotions for a little while, so he could deal with them little by little. But the excited butterflies in his stomach would not be calmed and he was forced to make sense of his feelings right then and there.

*Huh, he thought as he mulled over what his heart had just admitted. I guess...it is love after all.*

A tentative smile crossed his lips and grew into a grin as he made peace with the new knowledge he held in his heart.

*I'm in love with Lois Lane.*

What he wouldn't have done to ensure that his hidden desires came true. He would have given *anything* to have a normal life and a real chance to make a fresh start. He would have done everything in his power to prove to Lois that he was someone worth getting to know. Maybe then he would have a real chance to bring his new dream of being with her come true.

But those were just fantasies. They weren't grounded in real life. Even if Bruce made good on his promise to try and help Clark escape legal repercussions for all the lives he'd taken at Lex's command, he stood no real chance with Lois. He'd killed her family, and she knew it. He'd crossed a line he'd never even known was there when he'd done Lex's bidding, and there was no going back from that, ever. And it broke his heart to know that he'd destroyed his chance with her forever, before he'd even met her. Had he but known how much he would come to love this woman, he would have stood up to Lex, refused to make the kill, and happily suffered the consequences.

He would have to content himself to simply being her friend. Or...almost friend. Or...he paused for a moment, wondering what exactly he *was* to her. Did she consider him a friend? Would she *ever*? He certainly thought of her as his friend...his *only* friend. Could she ever see past all the crimes and bloodshed he'd committed, and see his heart? Would it even matter, in the long run?

He decided to broach the subject one night when she came to visit. By now, he knew exactly how she took her coffee, and he prepared her mug before she could even let herself into his apartment. She raised her eyebrows in surprise as he left the kitchen and brought both his mug and hers to the table. She sat down after placing a brown paper bag on the table. Clark set her mug before her, noting how limp and wet her hair was.

"Raining?" he asked as he took a seat.

Instinctively, she reached up to her damp hair. "Oh...no. Snow."

Clark nodded thoughtfully. "Has it started to stick to the ground yet?"

"Just a dusting, but yeah. They're calling for two to three inches by morning."

Clark smiled to himself, recalling memories of watching the snow fall. "I wish I could see that," he murmured softly, more to himself than to Lois. "I miss it."

"Why? All it does is...mess up traffic, make the sidewalks treacherous, even shut down the city on occasion," Lois grumbled.

"Well...yeah," Clark had to allow. "But it's also just so peaceful. Did you ever notice how, even in the city, the sounds are muted when the snow is falling? How much brighter the lights seem? How clean and pure everything looks, coated in fresh snow?"

"Until the plows come and turn it into piles of black slush so high you have to practically jump over them to get onto or off of the sidewalks," Lois pointed out sourly.

Clark ignored the jab. "Everyone gets cozy indoors. Hot chocolate tastes better than ever before. It's nice. It even *smells*

good. The sharpness of the cold. The crispness of the wind. It's... intoxicating, in a way that's different from, say, a sunny fall day or a dry, hot summer day." He shrugged when he caught sight of the incredulous way she was looking at him. "I...uh...super sense of smell," he hastily explained. He turned his attention to the bag on the table. "So...what'd you bring with you?"

Lois gave him a playful look. "I thought you just said you have a super nose," she teased.

Clark chuckled. "Well...I do. When my powers are functional."

She laughed a little too, the sound as angelic and beautiful as all the choirs of angels in Heaven. She pushed the bag toward him. "Chocolate croissants. Go on, have one."

Clark reached for the bag, opened it, then extracted the two croissants. He placed one on the plate before Lois before serving the other one to himself. "Thank you," he said sincerely.

She smiled slightly. "You're welcome." She tore a dainty piece from her croissant and ate it. Then she took a sip of her coffee. She set it back down in surprise, looking at Clark. "This is perfect! How did you...?"

"How did I know how to make it?" he finished for her.

"Simple. I watched you make it before, when you've visited. I..." He blushed a little. "I have kind of a photographic memory. Once I see something it's not easy for me to forget it. Kind of a blessing and a curse, all rolled into one."

"Well...thanks," she replied a little uncertainly at his confession. "You know, it's funny. I've been frequenting the same coffee places for years now and they *still* don't get it right. I've had to resort to telling them not to add anything, that I'll do it myself. But you? You see me make my coffee...what? Half a dozen times? And you nail it?" She shook her head in amusement.

"Well, it's what friends do, right?" Clark ventured. "Uh...I mean...we *are* friends, aren't we? You keep visiting me and all and...well, I can't speak for you but...I consider you a friend. My only friend, to be honest."

"Bruce is your friend," Lois said carefully.

Clark shook his head. "I'm...not sure about that."

"He is. It might not seem like it at times but...trust me. He's on your side," Lois pressed.

"Either way...what about us?" Clark asked again, shoving aside the matter of Bruce.

Lois sighed noisily as she thought. "I'm not sure," she finally confessed. "I've seen this whole new side of you. But..."

"But I ruined my chance to befriend you when I killed... completed the mission Lex sent me on," Clark supplied with a heavy heart. He looked down at the table, unable to meet the hurt in her gaze.

She swallowed hard, her eyes misting over slightly as she looked away to study the wall. "I wish I could forget that," Lois replied in a barely audible whisper. "It would make things so much easier."

"I don't blame you for holding a grudge against me," Clark gently said in support.

"That's the thing!" Lois said with sudden animation in her voice. She slapped her palms down on the table and jumped up out of her chair, like the piece of furniture had bitten her. She began to pace in front of the small table, shaking her head in the process. "I'm not sure if I do or not! You're the one who actually went out there and caused the car accident. But you only did what you were ordered to, under the threat of death. Should you have stood up to Lex and *not* killed my family? Absolutely! And yet...I can't say I would have had the guts to do that, if I'd been in your shoes."

She sighed again, this time in frustration. She halted her pacing and looked him square in the eyes. "I hated you, when you first admitted that you killed my family. But once I learned your story, about how Lex manipulated you and threatened you...I came to pity you. Now? Now I see this new side of you. My heart

hurts for what you stole from me, but it also aches for what Lex put you through, emotionally, physically, psychologically. And I see this...this eagerness in you to get as far away from your old life as you can and...I can admire that.”

“Thank you,” Clark said modestly, tamping down a blush, his words gossamer thin and soft. He dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“You’re the kind of person I might have become fast friends with, under different circumstances.”

“So...that’s a no?” Clark asked, hiding how crushed he was.

“No.” She shook her head, sat back down, and took a sip of her coffee. “It means...I’ve had to work a *lot* harder to get to a point where I can feel like I can trust you.”

“You...*trust* me?” Clark sputtered, blinking in disbelief.

“Not the old you, who tried to kill Bruce,” she said, wagging a warning finger at him. “But this new you? The one who’s admitted his faults and who isn’t recognizable as the man I met six months ago? Yes. And, weirdly enough, we *do* seem to...connect, don’t we?”

“I like to think so,” he confessed, swallowing hard around the nervous lump in his throat.

“I guess...I guess we really *are* friends then, huh?” she mused.

“I guess so,” Clark replied cautiously. He grinned happily. “Friends.”

\*\*\*

“Clark! Clark! Get up! We need to move!”

Clark was torn from the pleasant dream he’d been having – about walking on a beach in broad daylight, Lois by his side, holding his hand, looking at him with love in her eyes. Regretfully, he cracked his eyes open, and then, only because of how urgent Lois’ voice sounded. With a yawn, he sat up, instinctively facing the door.

“Huh?” he mumbled, still half asleep.

“It’s Lex. We think he knows you’re here,” Lois explained breathlessly, as she opened the lock to his door.

That snapped him fully awake. “What?”

“We know he’s had people out for a while, looking for you,” she elaborated, as the lock gave way and she opened the door.

“Bruce has done his best to keep Lex’s eyes elsewhere, but either he’s not being fooled anymore or he’s gotten lucky. Word is, he’s going to check the underground bunkers for you. We need to get you out of here, fast.”

Clark swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “No offense, but I would think Bruce would be handling this, not you.”

“He’s waiting for us at his private jet. He didn’t want to draw more attention to this place by coming down to get you. So come on. Get dressed and let’s move.”

“Great,” Clark mumbled irritably. “Should I pack anything?”

“Bruce has everything all taken care of,” Lois replied, ignoring his sarcasm. “Hurry.”

“What’s it like out?” he asked conversationally as he went to his closet.

“Cold. So bundle up,” Lois replied, turning her back to him.

“Bruce didn’t exactly stock my closet with a coat and hat,” Clark teased back as he grabbed a thick black sweatshirt and a matching pair of sweatpants. He draped them over his left arm, then grabbed some socks and a fresh pair of underwear.

“Don’t worry. There’s stuff waiting for you by the elevator,” Lois replied as Clark crossed the room to change in the bathroom.

“Okay, just give me a few minutes,” he answered as he gently shut the door.

Once inside, he splashed some water on his face in order to wake himself up further, then he used the toilet and changed his clothing as swiftly as he could. Less than three minutes later, he emerged, ready to follow Lois. But he hesitated for a moment before he could bring himself to leave. He simply stood in the

middle of his apartment, taking one last, long look around the place. It seemed surreal that he was leaving, after all those long months of living underground. Had he even had his apartment for a month yet, he wondered. He shook his head, clearing his mind. What did it matter? Lex might know he was here, and that was the most important thing. He had to get out of there, to safety. Without his powers, he wasn’t sure he was ready to take on his “brother” just yet. He probably *could*, he reasoned. He’d fought and killed some of his targets without using his abilities. But he’d been invulnerable back then. If Lex had a knife or gun, it could be disastrous for Clark. For everyone else too, he suddenly realized. Lex would kill everyone and anyone he suspected of harboring Clark in secret all these months.

*Including Lois*, he thought with a shudder. *I can’t let that happen.*

“You okay?” Lois asked in a gentle, concerned tone as she tugged on his arm to get him to start moving.

“I...yeah,” he lied. “You’re right. We need to get going.”

Lois nodded once, then led him out of his apartment and through a complex series of corridors until they reached an elevator bank. There, armed guards stood waiting for them. Lois gestured to a heap of clothing on the floor. Clark immediately went to investigate it.

“That should all fit you,” she explained. “Put it on, now, before we get to the surface. And make sure to cover up your face as much as possible,” she instructed.

Clark did as he was told. While Lois called the elevator with the button, he slipped the olive green, puffy winter coat on and zipped it up. It was a bit snug on him, but it would suffice. A black wool hat was next; Clark pulled it as far down on his head as he could. Then he wound the matching scarf around his neck and up over his nose and mouth, so that only his eyes could be seen. The elevator door opened before he could pull on his black leather gloves, so he did that once he and Lois were on their way up to the surface.

In the meanwhile, Lois had donned a long gray coat of her own, ear muffs, a hat with a faux fur trim, and gloves that looked very much like Clark’s. Her own scarf hung loosely around her throat, giving her a natural, casual appearance. She turned to Clark after pressing the elevator button they needed and gave him a once over with her eyes.

“Not bad. You’ll look just like half the miserable commuters in the city,” she declared approvingly.

“Really? I don’t look...conspicuous?” he asked, feeling very self-conscious.

“You’ll be fine. Don’t worry. The good news is, it’s still early enough that most people are still asleep. Hopefully that includes Lex’s henchmen.”

Clark snorted a laugh. “You don’t know Lex that well. If he thinks he’s close to his goal, he’ll have his thugs out day and night looking for me.”

“Then we’d better keep a low profile,” Lois said with a wry smile. “And it’s probably better if you don’t speak at all when we’re topside.” She paused, thinking. “I think maybe we shouldn’t be seen together either. But...”

“But you don’t trust me not to run away on you, right?” He hated that the scarf muffled his words so that the full effect of his tone of voice was lost.

“Well...” Lois answered, drawing the word out a little longer than was necessary.

“I’m not going to run, Lois. You have my word,” he vowed.

“I’m not sure...” she stammered.

“What isn’t there to be sure of? That you can trust the word of an assassin?” he scoffed, hiding his hurt.

“What if you’re spotted?” Lois retorted.

“I can handle myself,” Clark said with more conviction than he felt. Then, softer, “Lois, look. I can’t risk you being hurt if

Lex's thugs *do* find me. I swear, I'll meet up with you... wherever it is that you want me to. I know what it probably sounds like, but I know I'm not ready to face Lex. Not like this. Not without my powers. And I know you and Bruce need me to testify against him. I'm *not* interested in running away."

He could read the indecision in her eyes as she studied him. Then, slowly, she nodded. "Okay. Maybe I'm crazy but... can you get to the private strip at the Metropolis airport?" she asked, digging through her purse. She handed him a slim stack of bills. "This should be enough for a cab. Stay out of crowded places. Don't take the bus or the subway anywhere. Got it?"

"Your wish is my command," he said with a stiff nod. He took the money and pocketed it.

"Good," she replied as the elevator slowed, came to a stop, and the doors opened with a soft *ding!* "Don't let me down, Clark."

"Lois, I would rather die than disappoint the one friend I have in the entire world," he said, his voice as grave as though he were swearing a solemn oath.

"Good luck," she told him as they exited the elevator car. She turned to him and offered her hand.

"You too," he said, taking her hand and kissing it through the material of his scarf. "I'll see you soon."

"You'd better," she responded with a warning wag of her finger. "Stay here for a few minutes. It's better if we each leave this place alone."

"Got it," Clark agreed, looking around at the uncared for, deteriorating building around them. It seemed that the elevator had once been housed in a small, unmarked and unused, little building that was meant *only* for the elevators that would bring people down into the underground city.

He waited a solid ten minutes, then carefully checked his surroundings to the best of his abilities before slipping outside. Not wanting to stay so close to the entrance to the underground bunkers, he jogged a few blocks in no particular direction, just wanting to put some distance behind him. Finally, a good twelve blocks later, he stopped and took stock of where he was. Just one block up, he could see the globe on the Daily Planet building. That seemed as good a place to hail a cab as any, so he crossed the street and made a beeline for the newspaper building. Now that he was moving at a slower pace, he noticed that the first tinges of pink were lightening the sky overhead. Dawn was breaking over Metropolis. He stopped once he reached his destination and put his face up to the sky, wishing the healing sunlight was able to reach him. But the sun was still too low and he was far too bundled up against the chilling, below freezing temperature.

*I've waited this long for my chance to recharge my powers, what's another hour or two?* he told himself.

A cab let two passengers out right in front of the Daily Planet, so Clark took the opportunity to snag his ride to the airport. The driver barely spoke two words to Clark during the trip; Clark chalked it up to the extreme cold and early hour of the morning. Whatever the reason, he was glad for it. He didn't want to have to carry on a conversation. All he wanted was to get out of Metropolis. He tipped the driver well for his silence and his quick, but safe, drive to the airport. It had cost him most of Lois' money, but he pocketed the rest with the intention to give her what remained. Then he made his way to where she and Bruce awaited him.

By then, the sun was a little higher in the sky, and Clark wondered how long it would be before he was fully recharged. He'd never spent so much time in between Kryptonite exposure and healing in the sun's light. He sighed to himself as he walked, resigning himself to what would likely be a long wait. He remembered going a couple of days before his powers had returned after the first time Lex had subjected him to the deadly rock.

*Probably won't be myself for days, at the minimum,* he thought to himself. *Hopefully Bruce hasn't figured out that sunlight is the key to restoring my abilities. If I can manage to stay out of another underground prison cell, maybe I'll get my chance to get away after all.*

\*\*\*

Clark could see Lois impatiently looking around, checking her watch, and bouncing on the balls of her feet in anxious anticipation. He knew automatically that she was worried that he'd chosen to bolt, rather than honor his promise to meet her. She kept checking this way and that, sizing up the desolate private tarmac. Behind her, the small plane's door was open and the stairway was down, inviting her to go inside. As Clark watched, Bruce emerged from inside the plane, speaking to Lois, though Clark couldn't hear the exchange from where he was, even if the plane's engines hadn't been idling. The billionaire pointed to his watch and Lois shrugged helplessly.

A pang of guilt shot through Clark. He'd never meant for Lois to think he was incapable of sticking to his rendezvous with her. He stepped out from behind the corner of the building where he'd been hidden in shadow, and confidently began to cross the tarmac with long, self-assured strides. As he neared her, he could see the lines of worry leave Lois, leaving a trail of relief in their wake. She eagerly waved him over and Clark quickened his step in compliance.

"About time," Lois said with only mocking sarcasm when he reached her side.

"Aww, miss me?" he replied, pulling down his scarf so she could hear him better. He batted his eyelashes seductively at her.

"What took you so long?" she prompted.

"How'd *you* get here so fast? Teleporter?" he lightly tossed back. Then he shrugged. "I told you I'd be here. I may be a killer, Lois, but I *am* a man of my word."

She eyed him uncertainly for a moment, as if the reminder of his assassin's career had jolted her into remembering what an awful person he'd once been. And he had to wonder if maybe he shouldn't have said anything at all. But then, the clouds in her expression parted and she nodded briskly.

"Thank you," she said instead of making some biting remark or another. "I... I don't trust people easily... especially not ones in, well, your situation... so this means a lot, that you kept your word."

"Come on, you two! Get on the plane already!" Bruce shouted as he mounted the steps back inside.

"I hate to say it, but... he's right," Clark acknowledged. He swept a hand toward the stairs. "Ladies first."

Lois nodded once, then went up the steps into the plane. Clark lingered for a moment, appreciating the view of her as she climbed inside the aircraft. What he wouldn't have done for her to see him in a romantic light! He might have been a skilled assassin, but her body and looks alone could kill. He groaned as he willed his body not to react to her. He had to do that often, he realized. Practically every time he saw her.

Once she was securely inside, he followed. The interior of the small plane was lavish and plush, but he'd expected nothing different, considering that it was Bruce's private jet. Bruce was already seated and talking to an older man. Clark vaguely recognized the older gentleman as Alfred, Bruce's butler. The two were having a heated, but hushed, discussion that Clark paid no mind to. He decided to sit in the seat across from Lois. It meant he'd be traveling backwards, but that didn't bother him at all.

He slipped into his seat while she was buckling in. "Mind if I sit?" he asked as he sat.

"I think you already are," she replied, softly teasing.

The door to the cabin was shut and the pilot made a quick announcement that they were about to take off, and to buckle their seat belts. Clark did as he was told and braced himself as the plane

began to taxi down the runway. Lois noticed him tense up as the plane's wheels left the tarmac and the aircraft angled into a steep incline. She sat forward and reached out, taking his hand.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked, concern shimmering in her gentle brown eyes.

He gripped her hand a little firmer, careful not to harm her. "Yeah. I, uh, I guess I'm not used to flying this way. You know, with someone else at the controls, not under my own power." He grinned, but it was a sickly, not at all at ease grin. "At least, not for a good ten or so years now. I guess I'd kind of forgotten with it feels like, to be seated inside a metal tube on takeoff."

"Isn't it scary, having nothing between you and...well... everything else, when you fly?" Lois wondered, her eyes searching his as though looking for the answers to all her questions.

He shook his head. "No," he said in a confident, but quiet, voice. "It's..." he shook his head again. "It's the greatest feeling in all the world. I've never felt so free as I have darting amongst the clouds, racing the wind, seeing the world spread out and speeding by underneath me. It's like...like I was *born* to be doing it. It's as natural to me as breathing."

"Sounds wonderful," Lois said almost dreamily.

"It is. Maybe one day...I can...show you?" he ventured timidly, very aware that he was almost asking her on a date, in a way.

To his everlasting surprise, she nodded. "Maybe," she replied in a non-committal way. But he could see the thinly veiled eagerness she harbored.

"It's a date then," he pressed, feeling a little bolder.

"I never said it's a date," she tossed back, rolling her eyes in a good-natured way.

"It's a date," he repeated, grinning impishly.

"I'm surprised Lex let you fly around at all," Lois said a few minutes later, in a quiet, contemplative tone. "Seems risky."

Clark sighed. "Once he had the collar on me, it was easy for him to track me. A headset let him order me around and a camera let him see what I was seeing. At the first sign of 'disobedience,' he could have any one of his satellites open the vents to expose the Kryptonite. I...never dared to disobey him, not with that kind of threat hanging over me. At least, not until I tried to save you that night."

"So...have you ever been on a plane then?" Lois asked after another short silence.

"I used to fly on Lex's private plane all the time," Clark said as the ghosts of his memories passed before his waking eyes. "I was younger then. Blinder to what he was really doing to me. I didn't gain the ability to fly until I was eighteen. By then, I'd been on Lex's plane dozens of times. Never for pleasure. Always to make – or return from – a kill." He looked away, ashamed.

"No wonder you hate being on this plane now," Lois replied, her voice just barely breaking a whisper.

Clark nodded shallowly. "I've never once been on an airplane when I haven't needed to kill someone. This...not knowing where we're headed, not knowing what Bruce has planned...I'm not used to this."

Lois squeezed his hand in support. "It's okay. You'll never need to kill again," she vowed.

"What about you?" Clark asked, deflecting her promise. "You seem pretty at ease with flying."

She shrugged. "I've had to do a bit of traveling with the Daily Planet, at least in my first couple of years with the paper, before Perry decided to keep me in Metropolis."

"Let me guess," Clark interrupted, wagging his eyebrows. "His decision was based on you demanding to be kept in the city or he'd lose his top reporter?"

Lois' eyes widened and her brows shot up into her hairline. "How did you...?"

"It makes sense," Clark explained. "Ever since Bruce started supplying me with the paper, you've almost always had the front-page article. You don't get stories like that by bouncing around from place to place. And you don't get the front-page unless you're the best."

She withdrew her hand as the plane reached its cruising altitude and leveled out. "Very astute," she praised him. She crossed her arms. "I still think you'd make a decent reporter."

"Maybe," he allowed, sitting back into his seat as deeply into the seat cushions as was possible. He folded his hands behind his head and tilted his head toward the window and the small pool of sunlight it allowed in. He didn't know what else to say, so he simply didn't speak.

Luckily, Lois seemed to get the hint. She chose not to continue the conversation. Or perhaps she was just tired. In no time at all, she was dozing in her seat. Clark shut his eyes too, but found sleep elusive. He was too worked up and anxious over their unknown destination. For a little while, he floated in that gray realm between asleep and awake, before deciding to call it quits. He opened his eyes and looked around the cabin. Alfred had since left Bruce's side, and was in the back fiddling with something. Clark saw the quick flash of an electric tea kettle. Bruce noticed he was awake and waved Clark over to the seat Alfred had been in earlier. Figuring that he might get some answers as to their whereabouts or destination, Clark unclipped his seatbelt and crossed the tiny cabin.

"Nice plane," Clark commented conversationally as he sat down.

"You did a good thing today," Bruce said, choosing to overlook the comment.

"What? Get on the plane? It's not like I had much of a choice," Clark said dismissively.

"Yes, you did. You could have run away," Bruce pointed out, a little gruffly. "You could have disappeared off the face of the Earth. Who could stop you, if and when your powers return? Not even Lex Luthor can control you, not without that collar." He paused and shook his head, as if clearing his thoughts. "But, that isn't exactly what I meant."

"Oh?" Clark asked curiously, sitting back in his chair, a smug poise to his body.

"You kept your word to Lois."

"I..." He sighed. "How could I not?"

"Maybe you don't realize it, but that means the world to her. When she told me that she'd set you free in the city with nothing but a promise to meet up with us at the airport, I thought she was crazy. I understood why she'd done it – trying to keep a low profile and all – but I was furious that she'd let you go. I was sure we'd never see you again."

"She mentioned that she doesn't trust people easily," Clark hedged, ill at ease with the conversation centering on what a good deed he'd done.

Bruce nodded. "Nor do I. You proved me wrong today, Clark. And I...I appreciate that, as much as Lois does."

Clark looked over to where Lois slept and his heart throbbed with a longing to be worthy of her love. "I..." he stammered before clearing his throat and starting over. "The truth is, I couldn't let her down."

*She's...changed me*, he thought to himself as his heart panged with both longing and a sense of almost hopelessness that she could ever love a monster like him. *Because I love her.*

"Love will do that to a man," Bruce quietly said, his voice not much higher than a baby's sigh. "It changes him. Even you."

Clark was about to lie through his teeth and claim that Bruce was wrong about his feelings toward Lois, but stopped himself before the words could spill from his lips. What was the point in denying it?

*Love*, his mind echoed. *Is it really that obvious? It must be, if*

even Bruce can see it.

It was as if a bolt of lightning struck him, freezing him in place, leaving him unable to decide if he should be relieved or petrified that his feelings were so apparent. If Bruce could see the love he harbored in his heart, could Lois? Suddenly, he recalled an old fable he'd heard as a child, back before he'd been enslaved and forced to commit atrocities beyond counting. For the first time, he noticed the way the story seemed to parallel his own life.

*And so the Beast came to love the Beauty.*

"Maybe," he grudgingly agreed.

Maybe? his mind snorted at him.

Then, before he could stop himself, he asked, "Hey Bruce? Can I ask you something? You know...man to man."

"Yeah, sure."

"Do you think I can ever...be redeemed...for the things I've done?"

His voice trembled slightly and went whisper-soft. He looked out the plane's windows, scanning the tops of the clouds, a simple pleasure he'd been denied for too long. But in that moment, he couldn't even bring himself to miss his powers. He was solely fixated on the love he had for Lois. He forced himself to look back at Bruce, noting the contemplative expression on the other man's face. It almost looked like Bruce was struggling to answer him, and Clark's heart sank a little at that idea. If Bruce didn't know how to answer him, what hope was there that Lois herself would be able to look past his former life of bloodshed? But he forced himself to continue with his question.

"Do you think I'll ever be...worthy...of having a real life? Someone to love? A family?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, his snapped his jaw shut and looked away again, embarrassed and ashamed of himself.

*I never should have said anything, he berated himself. It's not like a deserve a second chance. It's not like a deserve Lois' love. I've ruined any chance I might have had with her when I killed her family. What am I thinking? I don't even deserve her friendship, let alone her love.*

"I can't comment on how Lois might view you in the future," Bruce replied diplomatically. "But I can say this – you've already started on the path to redemption."

"Why doesn't it feel like I have?" Clark wondered, but the question was directed more at himself than to Bruce.

Bruce folded his hands in his lap, relaxed. "Guilt does strange things to people. The world could call you a national hero for helping to bring down Lex Luthor, but, unless you come to terms with how little choice you had in helping him, you might never feel like the blood has been washed from your hands."

"Because it never will be," Clark insisted. "Slave to Lex or not, I'm still the one who went out killing people." He shook his head sadly. "I can't just make excuses for my actions."

"Maybe not," Bruce allowed. "But in accepting what was done and expressing remorse for it...you're a different man than the braggart who flew to my house that night to kill me."

"I...yeah," Clark stuttered, blushing. "I guess I never apologized for that. I'm sorry about that. I wish...things hadn't gone the way they did. I wish I'd never gone to your home when I was younger. I wish I'd never acted without checking my target. Maybe then your friend would still be alive. I wish I'd broken free of Lex's control on my own, before I made a second attempt on your life. Although," he said, unable to hide the slight mischievous grin that popped up on his face, "I guess, if I *hadn't* tried to kill you twice, I never would have met Lois. So...maybe I owe you one after all."

Bruce cracked the barest of smiles, though it seemed a bit tight. "You have an odd way of looking at the world," he accused, but his tone wasn't harsh. It was almost amused, but not fully.

Clark shrugged casually. "Oh, I'm completely warped. Comes

with the territory of being raised by Lex." He wiggled his eyebrows playfully, hoping to at least annoy Bruce a little bit.

Bruce looked like he was about to respond when Alfred interrupted them. The old man was carrying a tray with hot tea and coffee cake.

"Sir?" he asked as he approached.

"Good timing, Alfred," Clark laughed. "You've spared our dear Bruce from needing to figure out how to respond to me." He looked at Bruce, a devilish grin on his face. "You really ought to give the man a raise for that, Bruce."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Alfred. How long before we land? I lost track of the time."

"I believe we're roughly an hour from beginning our descent," the butler replied with obvious paternal affection.

"Good. And the rental car?"

"All set up and waiting," was the old man's answer.

"Perfect. Thank you."

Alfred dipped his head in acknowledgement. "If you don't mind, sir, I'll be taking my own tea now."

Bruce nodded once in return. "Go on. Make yourself comfortable."

The other man shuffled back off to the rear of the plane, to the tiny kitchenette area, wobbling slightly as the jet hit a small pocket of turbulence. Bruce watched, concerned, until the plane evened out again. Then he turned back to Clark and poured two mugs of steaming hot tea.

"I have a question for you," Bruce said as he poured in the creamer and added two spoonfuls of sugar.

"Shoot," Clark encouraged, distracted by fixing his own drink.

"Let's say I'm successful."

"Why, Bruce," Clark interrupted, teasingly. "I thought being a multimillionaire meant you *are* successful."

Bruce frowned and continued. "Let's say I'm successful," he started anew. "And I'm able to ensure that you get immunity when you testify against Lex."

"If I testify," Clark correctly with a sharp lash of his tongue. "I haven't agreed to do it yet."

"Okay, fine. *If* you testify," Bruce said, his voice hardening at Clark's obstinance. "You'll be free to do whatever you want. Have you given any idea to what that might be?"

Clark didn't reply right away. Instead, he eyed Bruce up and down as he sipped his tea, trying to gauge where he was going with this. He certainly wasn't asking out of curiosity – that much was painfully obvious from his stoic tone of voice. But he didn't look like he was about to launch into one of his "fatherly lectures" as Clark had come to cynically dub them in his mind.

"I'm not sure," Clark carefully said after a moment. "Lois thinks I'd make a good reporter."

"Did she?" Bruce asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

*You know something? If things had turned out differently, you might have made a decent reporter, she'd told him, when he'd used his powers of observation to correctly infer that his apartment had been in the fall-out shelter beneath midtown Metropolis.*

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, she did. But it's a bit far down the road. I'm still not sure I want to take the stand, and, even if I *do*, there's no guarantee I'll be granted immunity. For all I know, I'll be killed for my involvement with Lex's crimes."

"Journalism is a noble profession," Bruce noted. "You could do a lot of good as a reporter. You talked about earning redemption. That might be a way to do it. Uncover evil and set it right through the power of investigation and your words."

"Maybe. I'm not exactly much of a writer. I never really did much of it at Lex Tower. At least, nothing like what I'd have to do as a reporter. I'm not sure any editor would waste their time on me."

"So, then you *are* interested in journalism?" Bruce asked neutrally.

Clark shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess I *could* possibly be good at it. At the very least, I’d probably be able to use my powers to aid in an investigation. But I could also use them in other professions too. I don’t know. I’ve never had a choice in my career before. I’d rather not rush into the first suggestion someone tosses at me, even if it comes from someone I trust.” He glanced over at Lois for a brief second. “All of this assuming, of course, that I’m allowed to even *have* a future.” He gave Bruce a very pointed look over the rim of his mug.

“As I said, I’ll lobby as hard as I can to make sure that happens,” he replied blandly, not rising to Clark’s bait.

“When?” Clark asked, just the barest hint of a challenge in the word.

“As soon as Lois and I finish gathering all of the evidence we need against Lex Luthor,” Bruce answered, sweeping his hand, palm up, before him, as if gesturing to encompass the entire future. “We’re getting close, but we’re not quite there yet.”

“I see,” was all Clark would comment as he drank another sip of his tea. “A word of caution though. Lex has some of the best lawyers on the planet working for him. Make sure anything you find – or *think* you’ve found – is well beyond iron-clad.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Bruce replied darkly.

\*\*\*

Clark looked out the small round window of the plane, squinting against the sunlight. He’d been watching the landscape growing larger and larger as they began their descent. From what he could tell, it was flat and uninteresting, all insipid brown fields as far as the eye could see, save for where patches of half-melted, dirty snow still clung to the grass and occasional weather-beaten roof.

“Okay, where in the hell did you bring us?” he finally asked as the plane taxied down the runway, slowing as it drew closer to the terminal. “It looks like *Little House on the Prairie* around here.” He pointed as he looked out the windows. “Are those...*actual* corn fields?” he asked, flabbergasted.

“Welcome to Kansas,” Bruce replied with a cheeky grin, patting Clark’s shoulder. “Hey, Lois? Time to wake up. We’re here,” he continued, ignoring the blistering look on Clark’s face.

“Great,” Clark mumbled under his breath. “We couldn’t have gone someplace where we could blend into the crowd. No, we’re in the middle of Nowheresville, where we’re gonna stick out like a couple of sore thumbs!”

“I have a friend out here,” Bruce explained, rolling his eyes as Lois finally woke up and yawned. “Out in the farmlands. Trust me, we’ll be safer there than in any city. Luthor probably expects us to try our luck hiding out in New York City, or Vegas, or Los Angeles and the like.”

“Yeah, but there are millions of people in those places,” Clark pointed out. “What are the odds he’d actually succeed in finding us there?”

“Higher than they are out here,” Bruce said firmly.

“He’s right,” Lois said, looking at Clark. “From what I’ve been gathering, Lex has people in all the major cities. He’s the head of an organized crime syndicate, the likes of which we’ve rarely seen before.”

Clark nodded slowly. “Could be.”

“You lived with him, don’t you know for sure?” Lois asked, but there was no accusation in her voice.

He shook his head even more slowly. “Lex never conducted his business outside of his office. And I mean *all* of his business.”

“Don’t you have super hearing?” Bruce asked, and this time, there *was* some accusation in the question.

The plane came to a complete stop and Clark stood, eager to be off the jet, regardless of what backwoods, hick place they were in. He shrugged at the question.

“That doesn’t help when the office is sound-proof.”

Lois blinked in shock. “He sound-proofed his office?”

Again, Clark shrugged. “He sound-proofed the entire penthouse, to keep me from hearing things he didn’t want me to hear. Besides, if you were plotting multimillion-dollar business deals and ordering the assassinations of your rivals, wouldn’t you take that precaution too?”

Lois opened her mouth to say something, her finger pointed outward like a lecturing teacher, but she said nothing, and closed her mouth a moment later. “I...guess so,” she allowed, her finger drooping as she lost the point against him.

The pilot made a brief announcement, and a few minutes later the cabin door was opened. Lois exited first, then Clark, and Alfred, with Bruce bringing up the rear. He pointed to the charcoal gray Jeep waiting at in the distance.

“That’s us,” he yelled over the whine of the plane’s engines, which hadn’t been shut down yet. “Let’s move. The plane needs to leave so it doesn’t attract any attention.”

Lois and Clark both nodded, then everyone began to move, making a beeline for the car. The frigid wind bit at them as it whipped around them, threatening to freeze them in place. It was colder here than in Metropolis, Clark thought.

*Probably because of all these wide-open spaces*, he thought sourly. His mind sarcastically started to sing. *Home, home on the range. Where the deer and the antelope play...*

He wished he had a pair of sunglasses as his eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight. The plane had been surprisingly light colored and airy, done in tasteful creams, light browns, and blonde wood tones. But half of the shades had been drawn, leaving the cabin comfortably subdued. Now, in the full force of the sunlight, Clark’s eyes were watering. Still, he could see well enough to follow the group as they set out across the tarmac and to the rental car, all of them staggering a bit as the arctic wind buffeted them.

Once everyone piled in to the Jeep and shut the doors, Clark finally felt relief on his ears. Even without his powers making his hearing extra sensitive, the noise of the plane’s engines and angry wind had been a bit much.

“So...what now?” he ventured to ask as Alfred consulted a map.

“First...we go into town,” Bruce replied. “Stock up on essentials. Food. Clothing. Toiletries. That kind of stuff.”

“I thought you said we were going to a friend’s house?” Clark tossed back, just the slightest barb to his words.

“We are. But we aren’t rude. We’ll bring what we need, and a little extra too,” Bruce chastised sharply. He took the map from Alfred. “I’ll navigate,” he offered gently.

“Much appreciated, Master Bruce,” the butler smiled back. He chuckled. “It’s been a while since *you’ve* done the navigating,” he added cryptically.

Bruce laughed. “True enough. Okay, head north.”

“Roger that, sir.”

\*\*\*

Half an hour later, Clark saw the first road sign indicating where on Earth they were. *Welcome to Smallville!* it boasted in fading red and blue paint, with weather-beaten looking sunflowers below the too-neat script.

*So, Nowheresville has a name*, Clark thought sourly as the Jeep bounced over the worn, cracked asphalt of the road.

The town they rolled into surprised Clark as they drove slowly down the sleepy little streets. It was quaint, in a way that charmed even *his* too-cynical heart. Everything was neat and tidy looking, clean and well looked after, unlike the poor sign they had passed a few miles back. He wondered why that was, but it was only a passing thought. He watched from the tinted windows as families strolled down the streets, even in such cold weather. The lights were on in every store, welcoming people inside. In the distance, a church bell rang, marking the hour with its cheerful, yet resonant knells. Instinctively, Clark shot a look at the car’s dashboard, as if needing to confirm the hour. The church bell had been correct, he

saw, and for some reason, he took great satisfaction in that. He let his imagination take over for a moment as they drove, trying to picture what the town would look like in the summer, when the spindly trees and concrete planters lining the sidewalks would be brimming with deep green leaves and bright flowers. He liked the mental picture he concocted, but he suppressed the smile that wanted to break free.

They passed a large park as they went, the once lush and inviting green grass now brown and dead until the spring thawed the world once more. Clark imagined that all kinds of country fair-type events probably took place there.

*Probably hoedowns and carnivals and vegetable worship,* he thought to himself smarmily.

And yet, even his mental put-down lacked the vehemence it once would have contained. Instead, he found the idea of rustic traditions charming in a way, and it almost made him wish they could participate in one, even for just an hour, just so he could experience it for himself.

"There," Bruce said, pointing up ahead as Alfred made a left turn. "At the end of the block. Let's park around the corner."

"As you wish, sir."

"I hope you mean *Maisie's Diner*," Clark quipped as his stomach grumbled. "I'm starving."

"We aren't here to eat," Bruce admonished.

"What? Because it isn't a multimillion-dollar chain place?" Clark said, clucking his tongue like a disappointed mother. "Too good to support a local Mom and Pop shop?"

"We can't afford extra delays," Bruce replied evenly. "What if someone recognizes us?"

Clark couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up out of his throat at the mere absurdity of the idea that anyone would recognize them way out here in the middle of nowhere. It earned him a sour look from both Bruce and Alfred, but that wasn't enough to squash down his laughter.

"Who, Bruce?" he scoffed once he caught his breath. "Who on God's green Earth is going to recognize us out here? I thought that's why we came to hide out here in East BumbleFu..."

"He's right, Bruce," Lois interrupted. "Besides, I'm hungry too." She shook her head. "I don't know how far away your friend lives, but we still have to pick up clothing and essentials *and* go food shopping to boot. I'd rather eat first."

Bruce turned in his seat and rolled his eyes. "Really?" he asked, incredulous, as if Lois had suddenly announced that she was going to run for the presidency. "Alfred?" he asked, not needing to elaborate.

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything, sir, but, I could do with something to eat as well."

Bruce sighed in defeat. "Fine. Park the car. We'll go to the diner first."

Alfred did as he was told and less than ten minutes later, the group was seated in the diner, though Bruce insisted on keeping his baseball cap on to try to keep his identity under wraps. If anything, it made the billionaire stick out all the more, but either the locals didn't care who he was and ignored him, or they were completely ignorant about the rich man in their midst.

"Come on, take the hat off," Clark prodded him again, just after the waitress brought their drinks to the table, making a half-hearted grab for the cap.

"No." Bruce ducked out of the way, and Clark missed his mark.

"You look ridiculous," Clark pressed in a harsh whisper, leaning forward in his seat, as though confiding a secret.

"It gives me a bit of cover," Bruce replied with a frown.

"Oh, yeah. You're freakin' invisible," Clark mockingly responded. He snapped his fingers as an idea popped into his mind. "I know! We should give you a code name too! Can't have us saying your real name, right? So, how about it? B-Man? The

Waynester? B-Dawg? B-Money? Waynerooski? Cash Money?" He bit his lower lip to prevent himself from bursting out into laughter as Bruce's face clouded over with irritation.

"Is this funny to you?" he asked, verbally slapping Clark in the face. "Is this all a game to you? Do you *realize* how serious things could get, if word gets back to your brother?"

The grin melted right off Clark's face as the embers of his own anger were stirred and flared into life. "You think I'm stupid? *Of course* I understand what's at stake. But, look around you! Who's gonna blow our cover? A cow? We're in the middle of nowhere, Bruce," he hissed through gritted teeth.

"Quit it you two!" Alfred chastised them, sharply enough that the two men quit glaring at each other and turned their attention to him. "The more you bicker, the more attention you'll bring to us."

"He's right," Lois said with a mild shrug. "Plus, it's downright annoying watching you two men-babies constantly going at it. Clark, without Bruce, you'd be completely screwed right now, so you'd better start giving him a little respect. And Bruce, what the hell are you trying to do? Drive Clark – *and his help with our investigation* – away? Now, play nice, the both of you!"

"I...sorry," Clark mumbled at Lois' scolding remarks. "You're right. I lost my temper for a moment. I shouldn't have." He meant the words for Lois, but he deliberately made them vague enough to apply to all three of the others as they sat at the table. "So... what's the plan, anyway? Won't people notice that Bruce has taken off to parts unknown?"

"Yes," Bruce supplied, nodding. "It's only a problem if it takes a long time for us to finish building our case against your brother though. If it starts to take a while, I may have to leave from time to time, do the campaign trail stuff, check in at Wayne Enterprises and the like.

"You mean go to the grand openings of hospitals, show up to festivals, shake hands and kiss babies," Clark clarified.

Bruce nodded again. "Pretty much. And, of course, I'll have to attend debates...and soon."

Clark nodded in turn. "Of course," he agreed with a gesture of his hand, indicating that such a thing would be a given. A thought occurred to him. "And Lois? Won't work be missing her?"

"Perry's given me pretty much free reign to cover Bruce's campaign," Lois said in hushed way. "It won't be a problem."

"Okay. Sounds good to me. Just uh...are you going to lock me up in a fruit cellar or storm shelter or something? Or do I get to see the daylight this time?" He grinned, letting them know he was only half serious.

"Let's see how you behave," Lois replied, cutting Bruce off. She gave Clark a smirk, making him laugh.

"I'll behave. Scout's honor," he promised, making a clumsy Scout sign with his fingers.

"Somehow, I doubt you were ever a scout," Lois teased back with a chuckle.

"You two want a room or something?" Bruce tossed in with a restrained smile.

*If only,* Clark's heart whispered.

The waitress appeared just then, breaking the conversation. She took a pen and pad of paper out of her apron.

"What can I get for you today?" she asked. "Or do you still need another minute?" she offered.

A murmur went around the table, everyone voicing their readiness to order, even if it was all spoken in half-questions as they looked to each other to determine if they were the only one ready with their order in mind. Then, by some unspoken agreement, they placed their orders. Bruce was last.

"I'll have a double bacon cheeseburger, please," he said, closing his menu. "The steak fries with that. And is it possible for me to get an extra pickle?" he asked, pouring on the charm and making the waitress blush.

"Sure thing, sugar," she replied, biting her lower lip like a

school girl trying to hide her crush on him. “Anything else?”

Clark thought for a few seconds. “How about a house salad to start? Balsamic dressing, if you have it, please.”

“I’ll get right on that,” she said with a bright smile, before collecting the menus and swishing away to put in their order.

Lois waited until the waitress retreated behind the swinging door leading into the kitchen. The she turned to Clark.

“Really?” she asked, eyebrow arched.

“What?” he asked innocently, figuring she was going to give him grief for flirting with the waitress.

*Or are you hoping she does, because that means she’s interested in you?* his mind wondered.

“It’s mid-morning,” Lois clarified. “All that food?”

He grinned and shrugged. “I’m hungry. And Bruce is buying. So why not?” he shot Bruce a glance, but the billionaire’s face was unreadable.

Lois didn’t seem to have an answer for that, and he had to squash down his disappointment that she *hadn’t* mentioned smiling his way into an extra pickle. Bruce flipped over his paper placemat and looked to Lois.

“Do you have a pen on you? I think we should make a list of what we’ll need to pick up.”

“Um, yeah, just a second,” Lois answered. She picked up her purse and set it on her lap. Clark watched as she rummaged around in its seemingly bottomless depths before her hand reemerged, clutching a black ballpoint pen. She reached across the table to Bruce. “Here.”

“Thank you.” He opened the cap and set the pen to the paper. Immediately, he started to jot down items, mumbling them aloud as he wrote, but for who’s benefit – his own or the rest of the table – Clark couldn’t tell. “Eggs...milk...bread...peanut butter...butter...jelly...”

“Ok, I get that we’re trying to be nice and not intrude and eat all your friend’s food and all but...really? Butter and jelly and the like?” Clark asked after a moment, as the waitress returned with Clark’s salad and a carafe of soda to refill their drinks.

“I got a message from Lucius while we were on the plane. His daughter went into early labor. He’s heading out to Wyoming to be with her and he’s not sure when he’ll be back,” Bruce explained. “We can still use his place, but we’re pretty much on our own. And it’s a good half hour drive in each direction to get into town. May as well stock up on everything we need, even if there’s only a slight chance we’ll actually need it.”

Clark nodded as he ate a forkful of his salad. “Well, when you put it that way...it makes sense,” he grudgingly admitted.

“If there’s anything you want – within reason – let me know. I’ll add it to the list.”

For the next ten minutes, they each took turns adding ideas to the grocery list, until they were fairly certain there was nothing else they could possibly need. They were about to turn their attention to a separate list for their non-food needs when the waitress came back, balancing a tray of food. She set their dishes before them, and Clark’s mouth began to water just looking at the plump, juicy, slightly greasy burger. He thanked the woman as she set his meal down before him and cleared away the empty salad bowl. Then, as soon as she left, he took the top off his burger, plopped on a generous dollop of ketchup, replaced the top bun, and took a big bite. His eyes rolled up blissfully at the first steaming mouthful. It tasted even better than it looked.

“Gotta hand it to them,” he said after swallowing it down. “The food is good.”

Lois nodded around a mouthful of Southwestern omelet. She swallowed. “It really is.”

Bruce chewed his pancakes thoughtfully, then added a few more items to his list. “Very good,” he agreed. “But, unfortunately, this needs to be a working brunch.”

“You must be *fun* at parties,” Clark quipped. “Okay, okay,

sheesh,” he added at a stern look from Bruce. “I’m cooperating! Uh...toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, razors, shaving cream...” he listed, ticking off the points on his fingers.

Bruce hummed his acknowledgement as he jotted everything down and Clark couldn’t help but to feel a little pride at being part of what felt like a team. Sure, they weren’t acting together by any real choice; they’d been forced together to overcome a common and very dangerous enemy. But still, Clark had never had an experience quite like this before. Even in his earliest days, when he’d still had a heavy sense of hero-worship toward Lex, he’d never really been part of Lex’s team. He’d been Lex’s hitman, working alone in the shadows to achieve a goal no one could ever find out about.

*This*, he thought as he sat silently eating his meal and watching the others interact, *is different. This is an actual team. We may not all get along or even like each other all that much, but we’re all working together. No one’s sitting back, running the show, refusing to get his hands dirty. I don’t think Lex could do what Bruce is doing. He’d never stoop to taking suggestions and help from others.*

Clark froze. A bolt of realization shot through him like a surge of adrenaline. Every nerve tingled and goosebumps rose on his arms. The short hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention and his stomach flipped, forcing him to stop eating. All thoughts vanished, save for one.

*Bruce is a pain in the ass but he’s...humble, he thought in wonderment. He’s...a decent leader. He might even actually make a good president, if he wins. Oh, God, it’s happened, hasn’t it? I’m starting to actually kind of respect this guy.*

He would have laughed, if it hadn’t meant he’d need to explain himself to the group. But it still amused him in a morbid way, to know he’d grown to grudgingly respect a man who’d kept him prisoner, held Kryptonite over him, and had denied him the sunlight he needed to heal himself with for a solid half a year. He kept his mouth shut and simply watched, particularly the way in which Bruce interacted with Alfred. It absolutely awed Clark.

Theirs was not the typical master/servant relationship Clark had always known. And not just in the way Lex had always treated him, but in the way he’d treated *anyone* who’d worked for him, including Mrs. Cox and – to a lesser extent – Nigel. No. What Clark saw before him now was a more familial relationship, as though Alfred were a doting grandfather and Bruce was the respectful, but sometimes head-strong, grandson. When Alfred offered to take over the list writing once his meal was finished so that Bruce could focus on eating, the billionaire gently refused and kept writing, smiling easily and chuckling as Alfred and Lois tossed out suggestions. The three almost seemed like a little family.

*And I’m the homeless stranger on the outside looking in, he mentally sighed.*

Lois touched his shoulder then, shattering his thoughts and making him jump slightly. She looked at him and frowned a little.

“Everything okay? You’ve barely touched your food and you’ve been quiet for a bit.”

“Okay, yeah, just...lost in my own thoughts,” he admitted sheepishly. “Sorry.” He made a point of taking another generous bite out of his burger. “Let me look over the list?”

Bruce immediately handed the placemat over and Clark read the items listed on it. He nodded and handed it back to Bruce. “Thanks.”

“Anything you can think of to add?” Alfred prodded.

“I’m not sure,” he replied carefully. “I’ve never had the freedom to go furnish my own living space. If it helps though, nothing stands out at me as being blatantly obviously missing.”

“Same,” Lois concurred.

“We can always make a trip back into town if need be,” Alfred

added.

“Okay,” Bruce said with a nod that somehow felt final to Clark, as though it signified that the conversation was now over.

“How do we want to divvy the list up?” Lois asked.

“We don’t,” Alfred answered her. “You three will low lay in the car while I do the shopping.”

“No way,” Clark argued with a shake of his head. “That’ll take forever. Give Lois and me some of the items.”

“You need to stay out of sight,” Bruce reminded him.

“Why? I’m already out in public, right here, right now as we sit having lunch,” he argued, stabbing a finger down on the table while he bit into one of his pickles.

“He’s got a point, Bruce,” Lois said, defending Clark before Bruce could argue with him. “It’ll be faster if Alfred gets the groceries and I get the rest of what we need.”

“I’ll go with you,” Clark offered, perhaps a little too quickly, but Lois didn’t seem to mind.

“There’s no reason for you to go,” Bruce stubbornly insisted.

“Many hands make light work, isn’t that how the saying goes?” Clark inquired innocently, spreading his hands apart.

“Besides, I want to pick out my own stuff for a change and not have to rely on others to choose my toothbrush and wardrobe. Not that I think Lois would do a bad job at it. I’m sure she has lovely taste in clothing.”

“No offense, but I don’t want people picking out clothes for me either,” Lois said. “The last time I let that happen, my sister had me going out to a club looking like a street walker. And a cheap one at that.” The ghost of a wistful smile crossed her lips at the memory, sending an avalanche of guilt crashing down inside of Clark.

“I wouldn’t mind the help,” Alfred said with a shrug.

“I...guess I’m out voted then,” Bruce said with a forced chuckle. “Okay, Alfred, I can help you with the groceries.”

“I don’t think that’s wise, sir. After all, of the four of us, *you* are the most recognizable,” the kindly old butler said apologetically, but firmly. “I think it best if you wait with the car. It shouldn’t take us too long, I hope.”

Bruce thought it over, frowning, but at last he nodded his assent. “Okay, have it your way. But I’ll take over the driving once we’re done.”

“Complaints with my driving, sir?” Alfred teased, his eyes twinkling.

“More like complaints with how little I’m getting to do here,” Bruce laughed, this time in a genuine manner. “Here. These are the sizes Alfred and I will need,” he added, making a couple of quick notes. “And,” he said, furtively glancing around the diner, but no one was paying them any mind, “some money. It should be more than enough to cover what we need. If you need more, you know where to find me. You too, Alfred,” he said, reaching into his pocket and retrieving his wallet. He handed first Lois, then Alfred, a stack of crisp new hundred-dollar bills.

Clark stuck out his hand too, needling Bruce. Bruce rolled his eyes and put his wallet away while they finished their meal.

“Not gonna happen,” he told Clark coolly.

Clark shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”

\*\*\*

Twenty minutes later, they were done eating and the bill had been paid. Bruce headed back to the car, while Alfred ambled down to the far corner to the grocery store. Clark pointed across the street and looked at Lois.

“Maybe we should start there?”

“Jonathan’s General Store?” Lois asked, looking for confirmation.

Clark nodded. “Aside from the clothing, we can probably knock out everything on our list in there. Then we can drop it all off in the car and get the rest of what we need.”

“Sure, why not?” Lois agreed, already on the move. Clark

watched her go before hurrying to catch up.

No traffic was in sight, so they made their way across the street to the General Store. Clark opened the door and held it for Lois to pass through. She nodded her thanks and Clark’s heart fluttered in his chest, even if he would not allow himself to harbor any real hope she could ever come to love him. Then he stepped inside and was instantly brought to a halt as he took in the neatly stocked shelves and all the choices they held.

“Wow,” he breathed.

“What?” Lois asked, giving him a funny look. “It’s just a store.”

“It’s...freedom,” he murmured softly. “The choices...”

Lois’ funny look grew. “Haven’t you ever been to a store before...oh,” she said, catching herself before she could finish the question.

“Never. I...wasn’t allowed to be seen outside of...you know. A job and my ‘home,’” he replied, nearly spitting the word ‘home’ out in disgust.

“I’m sorry,” she told him, grabbing his hand and giving it a squeeze.

“I...uh...may need a little help. I have no idea what to pick,” he admitted a minute later as they perused the toothbrush display.

“Hmmm...these,” Lois said decisively. “Good brand and a good price.” She selected four of them – steel gray, purple, teal blue, and orange. “And this is my personal favorite toothpaste,” she added, picking up a box of Aquafresh. “Do you have a preference?”

“Anything but that God-awful stuff Bruce supplied me with in Metropolis,” he said in a near-whisper. “I guess I’ll try yours...uh...I mean not *yours* of course. But your brand,” he continued, tripping over his own words and going scarlet in a blush.

Lois laughed and patted his chest. “I’ll get you the Aquafresh.” She quickly grabbed a couple of boxes of toothpaste and put them in the cart Clark was pushing, along with the toothbrushes. “Okay, what’s next?”

“May as well get the shaving items and soap,” Clark said, scanning the list and wondering for how long he would even need a razor. He looked forward to getting his powers back and being able to use his heat vision to sear away the stubble he woke up with each morning. “I’m not picky. Just choose what you think is best,” he added as Lois began to compare the prices on the soap, eventually picking up a multipack of Dove. “Bruce didn’t indicate what kind of razor he wants. Do you think he’d mind the kind he, uh, *provided* me with back in the city?”

Lois shrugged. “That’s probably fine.”

They put their items in the cart, then Clark pushed it along to the next aisle.

“This is nice,” he said after a few minutes, as they worked in relative silence to complete their list. Soft country music played over the store’s speaker system, but low enough that Clark could almost ignore it as he focused on his tasks.

“What’s nice?” Lois asked, reaching up to grab a box of laundry soap.

Clark moved to her side and grabbed the box for her, as it was just out of her reach. “*This*,” he repeated, as if it explained everything. “Getting to go out. Shop. Choose things for myself. Be seen by people other than my former brother and his cohorts. Is this what it’s like, having a normal life?”

“Well...yeah,” Lois said softly.

“All these years,” he whispered tremulously, shaking his head. He looked at Lois and gently took both of her shoulders in his hands. “I don’t want to lose this, Lois. I can’t...I can’t be sent to jail. To be cooped up in a tiny little cell again. To have life ripped away from me. To be told what to eat, when to eat it, when to sleep. To be told when I’ll take my final breath.”

“Hey,” she told him, gently reaching up to stroke his cheek once. “Bruce and I are going to do everything in our power to

make sure you get your chance to live a normal life. Okay?"

"I wish I could be as confident as you seem to be about it," he replied, breaking eye contact to look away.

Lois appeared to be at a loss as to what to say to him. She gave him a weak smile, then slipped out his grasp. Wordlessly, they got back to their shopping, and, before long, they had every item they needed. Clark pushed the cart up to the register and started putting the items up on the counter. The cashier – a big bear of a man with a drum of a belly, a quick smile, and a happy gleam in his eye – was already occupied with helping an elderly man who was buying just a few items.

"How's it going, Reggie?" the cashier asked.

"Can't complain," Reggie replied. "How are you, Jonathan? How's the back?"

"About as well as can be expected," the cashier – Jonathan answered, and Clark wondered if this was *the* Jonathan of Jonathan's General Store. "How's Laura been feeling?"

"She has her good days and her bad days," Reggie replied, his shoulders slumping a bit. "But the doctors say her treatment is working. The tumor is shrinking."

Jonathan's face burst into a radiant smile. "That's wonderful news! I'm happy for her. Martha will be too." He punched in the price of the last item and bagged it. "Thirty-nine seventy-two," he proclaimed.

Reggie took out his wallet and counted out a few bills. "Here you go. How are you liking the store? Big change from running a farm, huh?"

"It's been five years but, boy I'll tell you, I miss that farm," Jonathan admitted as he opened the cash register and counted out the man's change. "I still miss the early mornings out in the fields. But with my back...this is better. Martha is still enjoying living in town. And she's been having a blast selling her art and clothing creations."

"She's very skilled," Reggie said. "A few weeks ago, I bought one of her knitted caps for Laura to keep her head warm before her hair can grow back. I don't think she's taken it off yet. She says it's so soft and warm." He chuckled.

So did Jonathan. "Glad to hear it. I'll pass the information along to Martha."

"Thanks. I'll tell Laura you were asking about her. I'll see you around, Jonathan."

"Bye, Reggie," Jonathan said, waving as the older man ambled off. Then he turned to Lois and Clark. "How can I help you folks today?"

"Just this stuff, thanks," Lois said, nodding at the pile of products on the counter.

Jonathan appraised them for a moment, but not in an unkind way. "Haven't seen you in town before. Are you new around here?"

"Just passing through," Clark answered for her. Then, feeling self-conscious about all the things they were buying, he continued. "The, uh, airline lost our luggage." He wasn't sure if he should be horrified or proud of how easily the lie slipped off his tongue.

"Sorry to hear that," the man replied. He began to ring up their items. "I do hope it turns up for you. In the meantime, this town has pretty much anything you need to replace what you lost."

"Good to know," Clark politely chatted. "Any place you'd recommend for us to pick up some new clothing?"

Lois shot him a "what are you doing?" look and he responded with a look of his own that he hoped she would understand. *Blending in, being a normal, friendly person with nothing to hide*, he tried to make it say. She rolled her eyes and gave him a new, exasperated look, but he shrugged it off.

"Well, we have a few good places, depending on your needs," Jonathan said, stopping his work for a moment and rubbing at his chin. "Of course, I'm a little biased when I say that my wife's store would be my first choice."

"Which one is that?" Lois asked, appearing to appreciate the information.

"Martha's Closet. Just on the other side of the street and in the middle of the block."

"Thanks, we'll check it out," Clark thanked the man.

"Of course, if you need fancier duds, there's Lana's store. Luxurious Lang, over on the other side of town," Jonathan added, continuing to punch in prices on the old cash register.

"Thanks," Lois said, though she and Clark knew they wouldn't be checking that store out at all. Their needs were simple ones.

They continued to politely chat with the store owner as he rang up their purchases and bagged them. Lois paid the man with the cash Bruce had given then, then Clark gathered up the bags, refusing to allow Lois to carry any. Jonathan smiled at the act.

"You've got a nice young man there," Clark heard him tell Lois in a confidential tone that Clark just barely caught. "It's not too often I see city boys with such manners."

"How did you know he's from the city?" Lois asked, taken aback. "And he's not my...we're not together. Just traveling together."

Jonathan chuckled. "Your accents gave you away. And you may not be an item with him, but, mark my words...the way he looks at you. That boy is carrying a torch for you."

"I...uh..." Lois stammered. "Thanks...I think."

The store owner chuckled again. "You have a great day now." "Oh...you too."

Clark pretended not to have heard the exchange as he and Lois left the store and dropped off the bags in the car where Bruce sat waiting. Alfred hadn't returned yet, but that wasn't much of a surprise. The grocery list had been far more extensive than the one they had taken into the General Store. With the bags safely tucked away, Lois and Clark turned their attention to the clothing they so desperately needed.

"Martha's Closet?" Clark asked simply.

Lois nodded. "It's as good a place as any to start."

She led the way, Clark trailing behind at first but swiftly closing the gap between them. Side by side, they walked to the little shop. It was an old building, the wooden façade stained by years of facing the elements. But, somehow, instead of it looking dirty and poor as a result, the weather-beaten look gave the place a charming, even quirky, personality. The gold cursive-style letters proclaiming the store's name looked new and well cared for. They caught the weak winter sunlight and gleamed proudly. In the window, a few headless dress forms modeled some of the shop's wares.

*I like it*, Clark realized, as he stood on the sidewalk, gazing at the place. *Looks...homey and comfortable*.

"After you," he offered, holding the door open for Lois.

A tiny bell rang as the door opened, alerting the owner to their presence. In seconds, a spritely older woman appeared from behind the giant stack of fabric on the counter. The store's bright overhead lights reflected off her glasses as she grinned at them, making her eyes seem to sparkle and masking the laugh lines around the edges of them.

"Welcome to Martha's Closet," she greeted them. "Is there anything I can help you find?"

"Oh, uh, just browsing at the moment," Lois replied politely.

"Okay," the woman said in turn. "Let me know if you need help. I'll be back here at the sewing machine. Don't hesitate to call for me though. The Lord only knows I'm a bit stalled for ideas today."

"Thanks. We will," Clark assured her.

"Men's clothing is on the left, ladies' to the right. Anything else you need – belts, socks, undergarments, and the like are upstairs on the second floor," the woman said, gesturing as she spoke. "And I'm Martha if you have any questions."

“Thank you, Martha,” Clark said, favoring her with a reserved smile.

“You’re welcome, honey. Go on, I’ll be right over here,” she told him affectionately, waving him toward the men’s clothing.

“You want a hand with this too?” Lois teased him in a friendly way, nudging him with her shoulder as he looked out over the racks of clothing.

“Maybe with the stuff for Bruce and Alfred. I’ll let you know. In the meantime, you pick out what you need,” he encouraged her. “Well...okay,” she hesitantly agreed.

What the hesitation was, Clark wasn’t sure. Perhaps she didn’t trust him to be able to pick out his own clothing like a big boy. Perhaps she worried that his taste in clothing would be God awful. Perhaps she wanted to nip any indecision he might have in the bud so they could get out of the town faster. Or perhaps...

*Could it be that she just wants to have an excuse to be near me?*

The thought lightened his heart a little, even if he wasn’t sure he believed that to be the case. Still, he was nearly floating with that tiny flicker of hope sparking in his chest as he moved toward the racks of pants. He easily picked what was probably more than he needed, then whittled down the choices until he had a few sturdy pairs of jeans, a few comfortable pairs of sweat pants, and several choices in pajama pants. Then he turned his attention to the shirts, selecting several warm sweatshirts, thinner long sleeve shirts, sweaters, and things he could pair with his pajama pants. He brought them all to the counter, then began to look for clothing for Bruce and Alfred.

By then, Lois had deposited her choices in clothing as well and moved to join him. She went to his side and started searching through the racks with him, pulling out things she thought might be good for the billionaire and his butler. She smirked as she pulled out a pair of sweats to examine.

“Well, this is new,” she said in a low, confidential tone she knew would not reach Martha’s ears.

“What’s that?” Clark asked in the same tone.

“Picking out clothes for a man who can afford to spend more on one dinner than I make in an entire month,” she replied, appearing to be holding back a laugh.

Clark snorted a laugh. “It’s weird, huh? The twists and turns life can bring.”

“Mmm,” she hummed in agreement.

“You think we should mess with him, just a bit?” Clark asked, half a minute later, giving her a mischievous look.

“What do you mean?” she responded guardedly.

“Nothing major. Just buy a few things he’d never wear in a million years and show them to him first. Just to get a rise out of him.” He knew his grin made him look like the cat who’d eaten the canary, but he didn’t care. The thought was far too amusing to him.

Lois wasn’t able to contain her chuckle this time. “Better not,” she said, once she stopped laughing enough to talk. “While he *might* find it funny, I can’t guarantee that the joke will go the way you hope it will.”

“He’s kind of a stick-in-the-mud, isn’t he?” Clark offered.

“I wouldn’t put it *quite* like that. But he can be a bit... brooding, sometimes,” she answered, selecting a few pairs of pants and motioning for Clark to move over to the shirt racks.

“How well do you know him, really?” Clark wondered.

“Oh, I guess it’s been...about five years. I met him at one of your former brother’s White Orchid balls. I was a much greener reporter then, so when Bruce offered to allow me to interview him, I jumped at the chance. We became...friendly after that.”

“Can I ask *how* friendly?” Clark prodded, half fearing the answer. “Or is that off-limits?”

“Just friendly. Not quite true friends; we’ve never had more than a professional relationship and respect for each other. Until

recently. I’ve gotten to know him a bit better, ever since, well, *you* arrived on the scene,” she said, deliberately keeping her words cryptic, it seemed. But Clark knew what she meant anyway. She’d gotten to know Bruce on a more personal level ever since they’d worked together to capture him and keep him hidden away from Lex.

“So...no dates with Mr. Suave?” he teased.

“Why so interested?” Lois tossed back, smirking a little, like she’d scored some kind of point against him.

“I’m not. Just...making conversation,” he easily lied.

“Mmm,” she hummed again. This time, it was ambiguous enough to leave Clark wondering if she believed the lie or not.

“So, uh, think he’d wear this one?” he asked instead, holding up a navy sweater.

Lois nodded. “Yeah, add it to the pile. Good find.”

“Thanks.”

Soon they had all they could picture Bruce and Alfred needing. The pile of clothing had now completely engulfed what had been the one clear spot on Martha’s counter. But with them being the only two people in the shop that morning, it didn’t bother Clark at all that they’d commandeered what little clear space the woman had had on the counter. He jerked a thumb toward the stairs.

“Time to get the rest,” he said.

“Right.”

Lois followed his lead up the stairs to the second floor.

“You thought picking out shirts and pants for Bruce was bad,” he quipped as they reached the landing. “I have to go pick out *underwear* for my jailor.” He smirked sardonically.

“I’ll tell him to give you an extra helping of dessert,” Lois said, rolling her eyes in a good-natured fashion.

“I’ll take that promise as a blood-oath,” he joked easily.

That earned him another eye roll before Lois walked away to choose her own intimate apparel. Clark chuckled to himself and grabbed one of the handbaskets by the steps. He made quick work of choosing packages of boxers and undershirts, then moved on to the socks. That was also settled in a matter of moments, so Clark investigated the shoes. On a whim, he threw in slippers for them as well, though it hadn’t been on the list, and he only hoped Bruce had given Lois enough money to cover what had grown to be quite the sizable order.

He met Lois a few minutes later, and she added her items to his basket, hastily hiding them under the packages of socks he’d picked up. He noticed her cheeks redden slightly at the embarrassment – real or imagined – that he might see her underwear. He pretended not to notice, and, instead, swept a hand toward the shoes.

“Might as well pick up some boots, sneakers, and the like,” he told her.

“Let me guess...because Bruce is buying?” She arched a questioning eyebrow.

“Because we have no idea what the weather will be like out here,” he countered smoothly. “I mean, once I’m myself again...truly myself...I won’t feel the cold, no matter how much the temperature plummets. But *you* may want to get things that will keep you warm and toasty. After all, we have no idea how long we might have to lay low for out here.”

“Well,” she stammered, appearing to think it over, “I guess that *does* make sense. Okay, let’s see what they have.”

Ten minutes later, and she had a pair of warm boots, a new pair of sneakers, and had swapped the pair of gray slippers Clark had chosen for her in favor of a pair of fluffy pink ones. Clark quickly chose footwear for the men, then ushered her down the steps, a sudden thought occurring to him.

“Go on, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay, but make it quick. We’ve been in here almost forty minutes. Alfred *has* to be done shopping by now,” she warned.

"I'll be less than two minutes," he promised.

"Okay, I'll get started downstairs with checking out and everything. Hurry though, okay?"

"You have my word." He placed a hand to his heart as if making a solemn pledge.

Once she started down the stairs, he set the basket down and made a beeline for the rack that had caught his eye. He grinned to himself as he touched the super thick, super plush bathrobes. He snickered to himself as he chose the colors.

*Gray for the butler, he mentally tallied. Nothing short of pure black for Mr. Tall, Dark, and Brooding. Lois picked pink slippers. This is just about the same shade, I think. And for me...the red?* He shook his head, imagining the garment on him. *Too close to all those times I came home covered in someone else's blood. The blue. Much better,* he thought, selecting the dark, but vibrant blue robe and checking the size. *Perfect.*

Then he was grabbing his basket again and heading down to meet up with Lois. She looked up at him as she heard his approach down the squeaky wooden steps. Her eyes narrowed and her brow furrowed as she eyed the colorful, fleecy cloth draped over his left arm. His only answer to her was an impish grin. The furrow in her brow only deepened in her confusion.

"Here, let's add this stuff," he said as he brought the basket to the counter.

Martha was already halfway done ringing up the assorted pants and shirts they'd chosen. He laid the bathrobes down first and waited until Martha could clear some more space before laying the contents of the basket down on the counter.

"What did you pick up?" Lois asked, peering at the bundle of fabric.

"Bathrobes," he shrugged. "Figured we may as well be as comfortable as possible."

"Did you find everything you need?" Martha asked idly as she continued to ring up their order.

"Sure did," Clark confirmed sweetly.

"Looks like you bought out the store," Martha joked with a laugh.

"Our luggage got lost on the way here," Lois supplied, giving Clark a conspiratorial wink.

Martha paused in her work for a moment, giving them a pitying look. "What a shame! I always did say the airlines need a better system to handle all those suitcases. I'll tell you what. Since you've bought more in one order than I typically sell in a week, I'll knock twenty-five percent off the total."

"Oh...you don't need to do that," Lois stammered, her face flushing in embarrassment. "We didn't mean it to sound like that..."

"Nonsense," the older woman said, clucking her tongue to dismiss Lois' concern. "I'm happy to do it."

Clark put the rest of the items on the counter, then took the basket to the stack by the door and set it down with its brethren. He let his eyes wander about the shop as he made his way back to the counter, leaning one hip against it in a relaxed, casual stance. He hadn't really taken the time earlier to soak up the atmosphere of the place. He'd been too focused on the task at hand, feeling the pressure of every second as he and Lois raced to buy what they needed. Although, he had to wonder why that was. Neither Bruce nor Alfred had admonished them to do their shopping in record time. He supposed there was just a part of him that hadn't wanted to waste anyone's time. He was used to working quickly, slipping in and out of the shadows at a breakneck pace, making the kill, then zipping away before he could be caught. It was ingrained in him, and he wondered idly if he'd ever be free of that instinct to go as fast as possible.

"Interesting artwork you have," he commented as he forced himself to take a moment to slow down and appreciate his surroundings.

The walls boasted a collection of odd, mostly abstract, paintings. Most of them had price tags affixed to them. One of them might have been a blue horse running through a field of sunflowers...or were they windmills? Another looked like a melting crescent moon amid a sea of diamond stars, into...was that a soup pot? One was a patchwork of red and blue stripes running diagonal down the canvas, left to right. Another was a swirl of pastel colors with no particular order or shape held within it. Yet another looked like a series of yellow and orange curly springs in various stages of compression.

"Thank you," Martha acknowledged, bagging some of the clothes. "I make them all myself."

But that wasn't all of the artwork. Here and there, up on the floor displays, in between the mannequins and dress forms, bizarre statues stood tall and proud under the store's fluorescent lighting. Some of them looked vaguely humanoid and Clark got the impression that the forms were naked. Some of them were merely sinuous shapes that looked like nothing in particular to him, but, nevertheless, held fluid movement and liquid grace, like the ever-gentle flowing of a swift, peaceful river. One of the sculptures caught his eye more than the rest.

It was a vaguely shaped woman, but half of her was missing, as though someone had cut her in half, head to toe. And that wasn't all that was missing either. A hole went straight through her heart, while another opened up a window through her abdomen, clear through to the other side. Her head was down, as though weeping. It filled Clark with a profound sense of sadness. Wordlessly, he went to the sculpture to read the tag that was looped through the hole in her stomach. "Barrenness" it said simply, just above the price. As the realization hit, Clark dropped the tag as though it burned his fingers. This wasn't just any statue. It probably represented Martha herself, because only a woman without a child could create such a devastating piece of art.

When he walked back to the counter, Martha was watching him intently.

"It's hauntingly beautiful," he told her after a moment. "And, uh...I mean that as nicely as possible," he amended.

"Thank you," she replied, her voice choking up a little. "That one is near and dear to me."

"Mmm," Clark hummed as he nodded.

He let his eyes continue their tour of the cramped, but homey, space. Near the counter, he spied a rack with various, brightly colored costumes. He pointed to them.

"A little early for Halloween though, isn't it?" he joked lightly.

Martha chuckled as she checked the price tag on one of Bruce's pairs of pants. "I'm costuming the Smallville Community Theater's spring show," she explained, without even looking over to the rack. "Believe it or not, I'm not even half done yet."

"Ah," Clark said, without elaborating.

Martha finished tallying the last few items, then punched in the promised discount into the register. Clark drifted away from the counter as Lois paid the woman so that he could get a better look at the costumes. They appeared well-made, to the point of looking professionally done. He was duly impressed. But, then again, he realized it shouldn't have surprised him. A number of the shirts and pants he'd chosen for himself had been branded with Martha's Closet tags, not big-name brands.

He went back to the counter and scooped up as many of the over-laden bags as he could possibly take without it looking suspicious. Again, he thanked the kind woman for everything, then he headed out the door, Lois following. Once outside, he held the door open for her with his body, letting her take the lead as they walked back to the car.

"About time," Bruce dryly needled as they climbed into the back seat after placing their packages in the trunk.

"Hey, we could always go back and return your stuff," Clark shot back, but the words lacked any real venom. "And after all that

time I spent making sure your clothing was comfortable and stylish too.” He clucked his tongue like a disapproving mother.

“Don’t mind Master Bruce,” Alfred told them, shooting a look at them over his shoulder. “I just got back not five minutes before you did. He’s just jesting with you. I’m sure Master Bruce *appreciates* what you’ve chosen for him.” This time, the butler gave Bruce a meaningful look.

“Okay, yes, I do. God forbid I should have a sense of humor,” Bruce grumbled, crossing his arms.

“A pretty warped one,” Clark muttered under his breath.

“Shall we go then?” Alfred inquired.

Bruce nodded and put the car into gear. He pulled away from the curb and slowly drove through the sleepy little town. Clark yawned as they wove their way down the streets. He leaned back in his seat, resting his head against the headrest, soaking up the weak winter sun, wishing it was summer. Not only would the sunlight be stronger, but he’d always enjoyed how lush and green and full of life the world was in the summer. All the fields of brown, withered grass and empty, desolate patches where crops would soon be sown was depressing. He closed his eyes and wound up drifting into a light sleep.

Too soon, he was awoken by Lois gently shaking his shoulder.

“We’re here,” she said as his eyes creaked open.

“Oh, joy. Is it time to milk the cows yet, Maw?” he asked in an exaggerated drawl.

Lois huffed and turned away, climbing out of the car and slamming the door shut. Clark stretched and yawned, then exited the vehicle as well. He stood outside for a moment, just taking in everything. The weather-beaten old farmhouse gleamed white in the sunlight, despite the chipped and scratched paint from years of riding out the harsh Kansas storms. The fields around it lay fallow – perhaps Bruce’s old friend had liked the *idea* of living on a farm without doing the actual work. Or maybe the fields just needed to rest before being used again. Or perhaps Bruce’s friend hadn’t lived here long enough to start the process of farming the land.

Still, he had to admit that the house, at least, had a bit of charm. Weathered as it was, it was still well kept looking, even from the outside. He tried to X-ray through the building to take a peek inside, but his powers hadn’t yet returned. He growled lowly in frustration and impatience. No one appeared to have heard it, so he turned his attention to helping them unload the car. Even with the four of them helping, it would take them a few trips. Alfred had bought enough food to feed a small army, and he and Lois had bought more than they truly needed to get them each through a week. They could go at least two weeks, if they wanted to, without running loads of laundry. And, based on the amount of detergent and fabric softener they’d purchased, Clark imagined that at least a few loads would be run per week. The thought made him wonder just how long they’d be hiding out for.

No matter. He was in it too deeply now. Even if he got his powers back before nightfall, he felt like he was in it for the long haul. Regardless of if he took the stand when Lex would eventually be brought to trial, regardless of if he was given immunity for his part in things...Lois was counting on him to stay here, at this isolated farmhouse. She was trusting him not to run away. They *all* were, he realized, absently touching the empty space on his neck where the Kryptonite-filled collar had once resided. He blinked and took a moment to reflect on that notion. Granted, he doubted that Bruce had really *wanted* to be trusting Clark not to run – or fly – off. It was more of the chance of circumstances that had led to Clark being freed from his prison without the deadly collar tethering him to Bruce’s will. But the billionaire seemed to be...almost at ease, with the fact that Clark was walking around completely unrestrained.

*He’s a jerk, but he’s so easily trusting me with this freedom,* Clark realized in wonderment. He mentally grinned to himself – not in happiness, but in an ironic way. *Now I guess I really do*

*have to stick around.*

\*\*\*

Later that evening, after the early sunset had painted the sky a brilliant shade of orange and full dark had settled over the eerily silent farmlands, the four refugees – as Clark had dubbed them in his mind – turned their attention to their growling stomachs.

Alfred rose from his seat in the living room.

“Any particular requests for dinner?” he asked as he stood.

“Something simple and easy,” Bruce immediately responded. “It’s been a busy day for us all.”

“I could do a baked ziti,” the older man replied slowly as he thought. “I’ve even got a couple of loaves of fresh Italian bread.”

“Perfect,” Bruce said, standing up. “What can I do?”

“Nothing, sir. I’ll take care of it.”

“No way, Alfred. You did more running around today than I did. You just tell me what you need me to do,” Bruce protested, waving away the retort Alfred was clearly building.

“I’m not much of a cook,” Lois added, also standing.

“Actually...I can burn water. But if you have some kind of non-cooking related task, I can handle that.”

“Well, if we’re playing *Little House on the Prairie*, count me in too,” Clark interjected. “What can I do?”

Alfred thought some more. “Miss Lane?”

“Lois,” she corrected.

“Miss Lane,” Alfred repeated, looking uncomfortable at the idea of using her first name. “Perhaps you’d be more comfortable setting the table than in the kitchen?”

Lois nodded, brightening in relief that she wouldn’t be required to cook. “Perfect.”

“Master Bruce? If you would be so kind as to dice the mozzarella into small cubes.”

“On it,” Bruce replied, already heading for the kitchen.

“I can cut the bread,” Clark offered helpfully. “Do we want it cold and in slices to be buttered by ourselves or hot and buttered in the oven?”

“Oven,” Lois immediately responded.

“I was leaning that way myself,” Clark said.

“Fine by me,” Bruce called from the other room.

Alfred shrugged. “I always did prefer hot bread.”

“Garlic?” Clark asked, striding toward the kitchen now.

There was a murmur of general consent.

“Uh, question?” Lois piped up. “I know I’m not exactly one to talk, but...have you ever actually...you know...*cooked* before?”

“Here and there. Nothing too fancy,” Clark admitted. “Lex had his hired chef, but, being stuck in Lex Tower all the time, I spent a fair amount of time watching television. Sometimes, I watched cooking programs and, every once in a while, I’d try my hand at replicating what I’d seen. My memory is pretty good, and it usually turned out alright.”

Lois peered at him in a way that suggested she was weighing how true or not that statement had been. Clark snapped his fingers.

“Tell you what. One of these nights, I’ll cook. Everything. Start to finish. I’ll prove to you that I can do it.”

“You’re on,” Lois said, sealing the deal. “But it has to be something more complicated than baked ziti.”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” he replied with a wink. “I wasn’t planning on skimping out.”

“Good.”

With that, the matter was settled and Lois went to gather the plates and utensils. Clark turned his attention to the two loaves of Italian bread Alfred had bought. He grabbed a cutting board and serrated knife, then started to cut the bread lengthwise down the middle, to expose the soft inside. But he’d overestimated how much healing the sun had done that day. As he held the bread in his hand and chatted with Alfred, he cut too far. The jagged, unbelievably sharp blade slipped and sliced the palm of his hand. Clark yelped in surprise and pain, dropping the bread on the table.

The knife hit the edge of the table and clattered off the side, to the floor, where it missed his slippered right foot by mere inches.

"Damn it!" he hissed as he inspected the bloody wound on his hand.

"What happened?" the three asked as one.

"The knife slipped," he admitted. "I cut myself."

Lois strode over, a look of concern on her face. "That looks bad. Let's get it bandaged. Follow me."

Clark did as he was told, cradling his injured left hand in his right. Lois took him straight to the upstairs hallway bathroom. He sat on the closed toilet seat as he waited to see what she would do. For her part, Lois spent a long minute rummaging through the medicine cabinet, then under the sink. She emerged with a triumphant look on her face.

"Lucky for us, Lucius seems to be pretty stocked up on first aid stuff," she told him. "Come here, let's wash that cut off."

Clark stood and allowed Lois to take his hand and gently wash the blood away. He hissed in pain as the water hit the open wound, but it was a minor sting compared to the agony he'd experienced in the presence of Kryptonite. She helped him to dry the area, then applied a healthy layer of antibiotic ointment to the wound.

"This will keep it from getting infected," she explained as she worked. "I'm guessing you don't have much experience with this stuff."

"Nope." He sighed and raked his uninjured right hand through his hair. "I'm so embarrassed. I've never slipped with the knife before. And even if I'd done so, I would have been invulnerable. I guess I'd hoped I was getting closer to...being whole again."

"I guess I can understand that," she said softly as she plastered a gauze pad over the cut, then wound a longer strip around this palm, tacking it in place with some surgical tape. She kept her eyes on her work as she patched him up. "Sorry, I'm not too great at this. My parents were the gifted healers. Not me. Which is odd. I mean, for the amount of scrapes I've been in and injuries – usually minor, thankfully – I've suffered from...the burns I've gotten from trying to cook...I should be better at this."

"You're doing great. It already hurts less," Clark encouraged her. He wasn't lying either. The pressure from the bandage felt good and distracted him from the fact that he'd managed to slice open his own flesh.

She placed the last piece of tape, then stood back a step and admired her handiwork, her hands on her hips. "Well, it's not pretty, but it should do the trick."

"It's perfect," Clark assured her. "Thank you, Lois."

With his good hand, he took one of her hands and brought it to his lips, placing a reverent kiss there. To his surprise, she didn't immediately draw her hand back and away from him. He *had* to take that as a good sign, he told himself.

"You're the best doctor I've ever had," he told her, giving her a lopsided grin.

She laughed a little. "Well, you're the best patient I've ever had."

"Have you had many?" he teased gently.

Lois laughed too. "Just my sister. Growing up, our parents worked a lot. I mean, a *lot*. We understood, as much as it was possible for us to understand at that age, that it couldn't be helped much. They were very in-demand, and they had a lot of high-profile patients. But still, a lot of times it was just Lucy and me. I practically raised her. Cooked for her – as much as you can call heating up TV dinners cooking. Bandaged her cuts and scrapes. Counseled her through drama with her friends and her first few breakups."

"I...see," Clark said awkwardly, once more trying to fight back the crushing knowledge that he'd taken all of that away from Lois.

She cleared her throat and inspected the bandage one last time. "Anyway, that should hold," she declared a second time. "How

long do you usually take to...recover your...abilities?"

"I...don't know," he stuttered. "I've never gone this long without...being able to recharge my powers. Hopefully they'll come back within the next day or two. I...I hate this. Clearly," he said, looking at his wounded hand.

"They'll be back," she said confidently, and he had to wonder why she felt so secure in that knowledge.

"I know. In the meantime, however..." He shrugged and let his voice trail off. "It...doesn't matter," he decided. "There's nothing I can do about it anyway. I just have to let my body do its thing and keep my fingers crossed that all that Kryptonite exposure and lack of sunlight didn't do any permanent damage."

"You ready to go back downstairs?" Lois asked.

*No*, his mind screamed, his heart aching to be alone with her as much as possible.

"Sure," he said coolly, not allowing his heart's desire to show on his face.

Lois favored him with a bright smile. Then she held up a warning finger. "Just...no more knife work for you tonight. I'd hate to have to bandage up your *other* hand," she ribbed him.

He chuckled. "That's fine by me. With my luck, I'll lose a finger next."

\*\*\*

Three days passed as Clark and the others settled into a new, far from comfortable, normal routine. Everyone pitched in with what little chores needed to be done around the farm. Mostly, it centered on cooking, cleaning up after cooking, the odd load of laundry, and generally just trying to stay out of each other's way so as not to have tempers flare in the close quarters. That went double when it came to Bruce, as far as Clark was concerned. The billionaire still had a presidential campaign to spearhead, and, as much as Clark hated to admit it, he wanted to see the man win, simply because his win would prevent Lex from being on the ballot when it came time for the people to vote.

Instead, he spent as much time as he could outdoors, breathing in the clean, cold air, and luxuriating in the sun's weak, but healing, light. It left him feeling refreshed and invigorated, but he wondered how much of that was a figment of his imagination, since none of his powers had returned and his wound still hadn't healed. Regardless, he wasn't about to spend any more time than was necessary indoors. He tried to get up with the sun and only retire to the house once the sky grew dark and the stars shyly peeked out to play. Lois joined him some of the time, and Clark was grateful for her company. And yet, the time he spent alone was precious to him in its own right. The solitude allowed him to reflect on his situation and his uncertain, but potential, future.

*What's next?* he asked himself near sunset of the third day. *Do I help them put Lex in jail for several consecutive lifetimes? Do I dare gamble my one chance at freedom? Bruce may be obscenely rich, but how can I trust him to get immunity for me if I take the stand? Do I even want to do that and have my face out there, for all the world to see? How can I possibly make a normal life for myself then? But...if I don't help them...what will Lois think of me?*

He sighed and kicked a clod of dirt as he walked through one of the fields, envisioning tall cornstalks that had possibly once grown there, towering up above his head.

*Let's pretend I could actually go on and make my own life. What then? Who would I be? What would I do? Could I bear to keep this moniker of Clark Kent? The name so thoughtlessly thrust upon me by Lex, thanks to a couple of advertisements that were in front of him at the moment he decided to rebrand me for his own purposes? Could I be a reporter, like Lois has suggested? Could I work for the same paper, see her every day, maybe even work on a story or two with her? Would she even want that? Does she really have any interest in me? Or is she using me, just as Lex did, to get what she wants? Why does that thought feel like that would hurt*

*so much more than anything Lex ever did to me?*

He sighed, squinting up into the western sky, watching as the bright orb of the sun dipped lower in the blindingly colorful red and orange, cloudless sky. He stopped walking for a moment as he looked up. He looked back over his shoulder, toward the east, where the sky was already growing darker.

*Darkness and light, he thought to himself. Both existing together. Is it possible that I'm the same way?*

The thought troubled him more than he wanted to admit. Not the fact that he could possibly change for the better. He *wanted* to be better, for Lois. He wanted, more than anything, to be worthy of her love someday. But the idea that there would always be some darkness within him scared him. He already knew he could easily kill Lex someday, if given the opportunity. He wanted his former jailor to die by his hand, not by some state-appointed executioner, his life snuffed out in a calm, controlled, supposedly pain-free manner as a chemical cocktail was injected into his system, spreading and shutting down his organs bit by bit until his lungs went still and his heart froze in mid-beat.

Shaking his head, but unable to clear his thoughts, he went back into the house and straight back up to the bedroom he'd been using the last few nights. It was a small room, but he didn't need much. The best feature was that he could easily climb out the oversized window and walk right out onto the roof. He did so now, stopping only to respond to Bruce's call for everyone to come get dinner. Clark wasn't hungry, not now, not when he had so much weighing on his mind.

He climbed all the way to the highest point on the roof. For a moment, he crouched down, the movement coming with such fluid naturalness that he did it without even thinking. A dozen memories flashed through his mind of crouching in the night on other rooftops, waiting for the right moment to make his move and mindlessly, obediently take life. On those nights, he'd been poised, calm, collected. Now, the memories made him shudder and his hands tremble. He wished he could forget the details of those assignments. He wished he could forget the names, the faces, the way they'd looked as death had stolen them away from the world of life.

Feeling weak with his guilt, Clark sat on the rooftop and, for the first time in his life, he let his grief wash over him like a turbulent ocean. Wave after wave of emotion crashed over him, drowning him. His chest tightened. His heart pounded. His mind screamed in agony. Tears – once an almost foreign concept to him – pricked at his eyes before rolling down his cheeks, salty and hot and cleansing as he tried to purge his soul from all the feelings that were threatening to bury him alive right then and there.

For how long he wept, he wasn't sure. When he next looked up, drying his eyes on his sleeve, no trace of the sunset was to be seen. The sky above was pure black velvet. There was no moon, only a scattering of trillions of stars, more than Clark had ever seen in his lifetime, and it left him feeling so tiny and insignificant in the infinite vastness of the universe. He wasn't used to that feeling either. Sure, he'd known what it was like to be powerless and irrelevant, but this was on a whole different scale. He was used to feeling like a very big, very valuable part of his demented little microcosm back in Lex Tower. Granted, Lex had been at the center and held all the power, but Clark had always been accurately aware of how much of Lex's success had hinged upon his successful assassinations. Lex had never openly acknowledged it, but Clark was now certain that the billionaire *had* to have at least been aware of it in the back of his mind.

Clark lay down on the roof, stretching out to his full length, and grateful for the fact that his missing powers hadn't affected his inability to be bothered by the cold. He lay on his back, his hands folded beneath his head, staring up at the countless points of light above him – some faint and some so bright it was hard to imagine how many billions of miles away they were. He traced out familiar

constellations in his mind, learned from the pages of books when he'd been much younger. As always, he picked out Orion, the hunter, first. Not only was it the easiest winter constellation to find, thanks to the distinctive three stars of his belt, but he'd always been Clark's favorite. Orion had been a hunter, like Clark had once been. True, the man in the myth had hunted animals, as opposed to the human prey Clark had stalked and killed, but Clark had still come to find a certain kinship with the celestial hunter. Of course, the myth had gone on to say that Orion had died from the sting of a scorpion – the summer's Scorpio constellation – because he'd been too arrogant to take note of the tiny arachnid. Clark smirked sardonically to himself. Had he been so different? Too self-assured to think that his prey would ever be capable of taking down such a mighty hunter of the night.

For the first time, seeing the familiar constellation brought no comfort to him. He felt only cold detachment from everything. A band of whitish light ran through the sky. Clark knew it as the Milky Way – or at least a small portion of the spiral that was visible from Earth. He'd seen it only a scant few times before. Less than a handful, if he remembered correctly. It never failed to humble him, just how minuscule the world was in the grand scheme of the endless universe.

"I mean less than nothing," he whispered to himself, his breath a puff of white smoke that disappeared almost instantly. "If I were to die, right now, there's not a single person on this planet who would mourn for me. Not that I need anyone to, but... it would be nice, to have even one person to remember me fondly." He sighed but did not get up.

For a long while, he remained out on the roof, watching without really seeing as the stars moved across the sky and a few meteorites streaked by overhead. Most of them were so faint it would have been easy for the average skywatcher to miss them, but a couple of them blazed brilliantly by, so fast and bright that Clark half imagined he could hear them hurtling through the atmosphere.

Eventually, he got up and stretched. Just being outside, alone, had cleared his head a little. But his heart was still heavy and conflicted. Carefully, he let himself back in through his bedroom window, all the while very aware that a fall from this height, without his invulnerability, would definitely result in injury, if not kill him, if he landed the wrong way on his neck. Inside, the room was toasty warm, and although Clark hadn't been cold outside, it still felt inviting and wonderful. He glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. Somehow, it had become eleven at night while he'd been staring up into the night sky. He decided on taking a shower and quickly gathered together a change of clothing before heading to the shared bathroom. No one was using it, so he swiftly showered, dried, and dressed.

He towel-dried his hair and then put his slippers and bathrobe on, wondering what to do next. He wasn't tired just yet and knew sleep would not come for a while. But the question was soon put to rest by his growling stomach. He decided to slip downstairs and see if there were any leftovers he could heat up for his late dinner. He was midway down the stairs when he heard the soft, low sounds of the television. His curiosity piqued, he went to investigate. Maybe Lois was still awake.

He was met with no such luck. It was Bruce, sitting alone in the living room, idly watching a movie, though he appeared to be distracted and not all that absorbed in the images on the screen. The man must have heard Clark's approach, despite the fact that Clark had tried to make no noise. He looked up as Clark reached the doorway.

"Where have you been?" Bruce asked, but the question lacked the accusation and suspicion it might have once had.

"Outside," Clark replied.

Bruce studied him, seemingly weighing if Clark was being truthful. "You came in, but I never saw you go back out."

"My window gives me access to the roof," Clark explained hesitantly, leaning against the doorframe with his right shoulder.

"You were... on the roof?" Bruce asked, silently requiring Clark to explain himself.

Clark shrugged. "Why not? The view of the night sky is pretty amazing here. You know. A view I was denied for half the year being underground," he added, unable to resist the barb.

But the statement hadn't been made to make Bruce feel guilty, Clark realized. It just seemed to come naturally, despite how much he'd worked to restrain at least some of his cynicism and sarcasm around the group.

"And," he continued after a few heartbeats, "truth be told, I rarely got to see views like this *before* you captured me. My missions almost always took me into heavily populated areas with a lot of light pollution. And when I was in Lex Tower, Lex didn't like me being outside much, even if there was no way anyone not in a helicopter could have seen me if I'd been up on the roof."

Clark shrugged, trying to shed some of the loathing he still felt toward his former life and failing to succeed. He didn't think he'd *ever* heal from the mental scars Lex had caused him. He sighed and dragged his fingers through his hair.

His voice grew softer. "The only times I got to see night skies like this were the few times I got to go out in between Lex discovering that Kryptonite can hurt me and him clapping that accursed collar around my neck."

"Hmm," Bruce hummed in acknowledgment.

Another complaint from Clark's stomach drew his attention back to why he'd come downstairs in the first place. "Any dinner left?" he inquired.

Bruce nodded just once. "Alfred set aside a bowl of stew for you. It's in the refrigerator."

"Thanks."

Clark pushed himself away from the door, went into the kitchen, and carefully heated up the bowl of stew until it was steaming hot and delicious smells wafted up into his nostrils. He inhaled deeply, his mouth watering. He could scarcely wait to try it. He grabbed a can of soda while he was there, then, having had enough time by himself that night, he took everything to the living room and joined Bruce, though he chose the armchair to sit in rather than the couch where Bruce sat.

"So...what're we watching?" Clark asked, since the movie had switched to a commercial break for Tide laundry detergent.

"*Young Frankenstein*," the billionaire stoically replied, his eyes never leaving the screen, though Clark was convinced the man wasn't really seeing it at all.

"Cool," he replied, taking a bite of his dinner. The stew was good. Meaty and hearty and just hot enough not to burn the inside of his mouth. He savored the flavors of the beef, peas, carrots, and potatoes before swallowing and taking another bite. "I love Mel Brooks movies," he added as he swallowed his second bite. Then, a few minutes later he looked up. "This is good. I'll have to tell Alfred."

"He'd appreciate that, yeah," Bruce nodded. He pulled his eyes from the screen. "So...the roof?"

"I just needed some time alone," Clark answered warily and a little defensively.

"Uh-huh," Bruce said in mock agreement.

"Oh, come on, Bruce! Don't sit there and tell me *you* don't need some time alone every now and again! Just because we're all camped out here in the middle of nowhere in this farmhouse like the damn *Brady Bunch* doesn't mean we're all going to get along like a nice, happy little family," Clark pointed out harshly.

"Are you complaining? Because camping out here is keeping Lex Luthor from finding you."

"No!" Clark cried in exasperation. "Look, I'm grateful to be off of Lex's radar for the time being. But you've had me locked up for *six months*, Bruce. Six months where I didn't see a shred of

sunlight or a single star. Where every time I needed something, I had to rely on others to get it. *Excuse me* if I wanted some time alone, left to my own devices, left to ponder my own thoughts. *Especially* now that I *might* have a future to consider," he spat acidly.

"So, you're going to allow me to work on getting you immunity?" Bruce asked carefully.

Clark threw up his one free hand, holding his bowl with the other. "I don't know, Bruce."

"You can trust me, you know," he said evenly.

"Yeah, and you have an ocean in Indiana to sell me," Clark shot back.

Bruce was silent a moment. Then, "Why do you always do that?"

"Do *what*?" Clark asked, taking another bite.

"Automatically resort to sarcasm and insults."

"It's who I am, remember? The useless assassin who grew up under the tutelage of a psychopath," he replied mockingly, though it was aimed more at himself than to Bruce.

"You know something?" Bruce asked, as a Papa John's commercial began. "I don't believe that." He muted the television then steepled his fingers together as he turned to sit catty corner to better see Clark.

"You should," Clark countered bitterly, eating another spoonful of stew.

"I don't," Bruce repeated. "No, this isn't who you are. It has nothing to do with who raised you." He shook his head firmly.

"No. Under all that brashness and bravado and phony tough-guy exterior, you're just really, really insecure, aren't you?"

Clark went to protest but Bruce spoke right over him, killing his retort before it even had a chance to grow.

"Not that I blame you," Bruce continued, "being raised in isolation, taught to fear being seen by anyone. But that's not what 'real men' are supposed to be like, right? So you put on a tough act, pretend to be hardened to any emotion, put people at a distance by wounding them with your words so that they never want to get too close."

"Now, wait just a minute," Clark said crossly.

Bruce acted as though he hadn't heard him. "You make sure they never see the man behind the curtain, just the jerk who calls himself Oz the Great and Powerful. It's safer for you, so you think. Safer to allow yourself to automatically revert to being a jerk and a bully, than it is to let people know how uncomfortable you are in your own skin."

Clark put the mostly empty bowl of stew aside. He gripped the arms of the chair with such force, that if his strength had returned, they would have been in splinters. "Oh ho ho! That's rich!" he fairly roared. "You think you have me all figured out, don't you? Oh, the evil assassin must be hiding some pain so he lashes out at others! No, it's can't *possibly* stem from living a life of isolation, being twisted into a killer, always having the threat of death hanging over his head, right? You know nothing!"

"I know a hell of a lot more than you think!" Bruce shot back, his anger flaring. "After my parents died, I did the same thing. Retreated into myself. Took to being short with everyone.

Developed a dark sense of humor. Until Alfred called me out on it. He made me be honest with myself. So, I'm asking you now, to be honest with yourself. Are you *really* the person you present yourself to be? I don't believe it. If you were, you never would have...had the conversation with me that you did on the plane." His voice dropped in volume, as if trying to ensure that no one overheard him. It was an oddly respectful move that Clark found himself appreciating.

He took a deep, calming breath before answering. "I...don't know. I've been this way my entire life."

"Well, maybe next time you spend all night on the roof, you can reflect on it," Bruce said, a hint to a hard edge to his words.

“You know what? Suddenly, I think I’m done with dinner,” Clark replied angrily, standing. “Enjoy the movie, Bruce.” The words were loaded with poison, but Bruce appeared unfazed.

Clark took his bowl into the kitchen and washed it out, then retreated back to his bedroom. There he paced for a while, muttering under his breath. “He’s wrong. He knows nothing about me. He’s wrong,” he kept repeating as he racked up the miles.

But, after a while, he felt his defensiveness wavering. An annoying little voice in the back of his mind started to wonder if Bruce wasn’t completely wrong. What if he actually *had* made himself this way? Not because of any personal insecurity, but as a matter of survival? Especially once he’d been collared like a dog, he’d been afraid of Lex. That had also marked the height of Clark’s cynicism and sarcasm. He hadn’t wanted Lex to know he was afraid, because Lex would have used that fear against him.

“Son of a…” he murmured, rolling his eyes.

\*\*\*

The entire farmhouse was quiet. Clark cautiously crept down the stairs, only to find the living room dark and empty. He switched on one table lamp. The weak orange glow illuminated the room just enough for him to find what he was looking for. He grabbed two of the blank journals from a nearby bookshelf and sat down at the rolltop desk in the corner of the room. The first pen he tried didn’t work, but the second one did. For a moment, he just sat there, staring at the blank page before him, then, tentatively, he set the pen to the paper and began to write with bold, sure strokes.

He kept on writing for hours, only pausing here and there to collect his thoughts as he went along. Finally, half of the first journal was filled. He closed the book, clicked the pen shut, then slipped everything into one of the drawers, hiding it all under a yellow legal pad. He shut the rolltop on the desk, switched off the light, and headed back upstairs in the dark. At least his exceptional night vision had been left unaffected by the loss of his powers, he mused as he easily maneuvered in the dark. He stopped to use the bathroom, getting himself ready for bed, then headed to his bedroom. It was now almost four in the morning, he saw, reading the red numbers on the digital clock. He slipped beneath the warm, heavy blankets, and was almost instantly asleep, his mind calmed by the work he’d done.

\*\*\*

Clark yawned and stretched as he slowly left the warm, comfortable embrace of sleep. He rolled over from his back to his left side, then grudgingly opened his eyes. Even before he looked at the clock, he was vaguely aware that he’d overslept. Normally, he would have been up with the sun, to take advantage of its healing rays. But his room was bathed in golden light anyway, leaving him to sleep in a bright pool of it. And perhaps he’d needed the rest. Already, he felt stronger than he had the night before, and not just because of the writing he’d done. He yawned again and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, then checked the clock. It was already ten in the morning.

He stood up and stretched again, rolling his neck to work out a kink that had formed while he’d been sleeping. He was about to get started on picking out clothing for the day when his ears exploded with an unexpected sound.

“Was that…a sneeze?” he wondered aloud. Then, realization kicked in. “I’m back!” He grinned so wide it felt unreal that his face didn’t crack right in two.

He ran through his powers, one by one, careful to make sure they were controlled, and found them all functioning as they once had. Then he unwrapped the bandage on his hand. His wound was still there, and he wondered if that was because the sunlight hadn’t been able to reach it. He hurried to the window, holding his wrist with his good hand, as if it was more injured than it really was, his palm up. He stuck his hand in the brightest area of light and waited. In seconds, the cut fully healed, leaving smooth, unblemished, unscarred skin behind. He laughed gleefully, then

used his blistering speed to dress for the day.

He was in such high spirits that instead of walking down the stairs, he sat sideways on the banister and slid all the way down. Lois saw and gave him a confused look.

“Well, um, you’re in a good mood this morning,” she observed.

“I’m back!” he announced, practically floating in his exuberance. “See?” He held up his freshly healed hand for her inspection.

Lois took his hand in her own, and ran her thumb over the area where he’d been sporting a wound just the night before. A look of awe was on her face, as well as a healthy amount of disbelief.

“Wow,” she breathed. “I…can’t…if I wasn’t seeing this with my own two eyes…” she stammered. “This is incredible.”

“That’s not all,” he proudly beamed. “Everything is back. I’m finally…whole again.” He took her hand in his, very gently so as not to hurt or scare her. “If you let me, I can make good on my promise now.”

“Your…promise?” She scrunched up her brow in thought. He couldn’t help the dreamy smile that lit up his face.

“To take you flying.”

She gave him a coy smile. “I’d like that.”

Bruce looked up from his newspaper. “I’m not sure that’s the best idea,” he said with a frown.

“All due respect, Bruce, but unless you’re gonna poison me with Kryptonite again, there’s nothing you can do to stop me,” Clark told him flatly. He looked back to Lois. “You just tell me where you want to go. Your wish is my command.”

She looked a little uncertain. “I’ll think about it,” she told him. “In the meantime, eat something.”

“As you wish,” he told her with a short bow at his waist. Then, as he entered the kitchen and spied Alfred preparing a fresh pot of coffee in the coffeemaker, “Alfred! Dinner was delicious. I’m sorry I didn’t have a better appetite at dinner time last night. But you’re taking the night off tonight. I promised I’d show Lois that I can cook, and I intend on making good on it.”

“Are you *sure* that’s a wise idea?” the old man asked, playfully arching an eyebrow. “Given your prior attempt the other night, that is.”

Clark waved away his concern. “Unless the knives are made of Kryptonite, I can’t possibly cut myself wide open again,” he replied with a giddy grin. He patted the man on his shoulder. “Relax. I’ll be fine.” He grabbed a box of Cheerios and poured himself a bowl. “Besides, don’t you ever get *tired* of catering to Bruce’s needs? Why not jump at the chance to have someone else do some work for a change?”

He went to the fridge and retrieved the milk and orange juice. He poured himself a tall glass of the orange juice and added a splash of the milk to his cereal. But before he could put things away, Alfred had already busied himself with cleaning things up, so Clark grabbed a spoon and a banana and brought his breakfast to the dining room table. Bruce went into the kitchen and Clark’s super hearing picked up their whispers.

“What’s gotten into *him*?” Alfred wondered.

“If I’d have known the return of his powers would so drastically change his attitude, I would have let him heal just enough back in Metropolis to make him more compliant,” Bruce mused.

“Mmm,” Alfred agreed. “Just be careful now, sir. With his abilities returned, who knows if he might try and finish the job to kill you.”

“He won’t,” Bruce said confidently. “He’s had ample opportunity to do so already, and my guess is that, with or without his powers, he’d be more than capable of making an attempt.”

Alfred chuckled. “An attempt only? Not succeed?”

Bruce chuckled in turn. “Look who you’re talking about,” was his cryptic reply.

“True,” the butler continued to laugh.

Clark had heard enough. He inhaled his breakfast in the blink of an eye, then brought his used bowl, glass, and spoon into the kitchen. Deliberately moving slowly, he washed everything and set it to dry in the drain board. Then he walked back out and into the living room.

“Ready?” he asked Lois.

“Oh, uh, that was fast,” she said, sounding flustered.

He chuckled lightly. “I can move pretty fast when I want to.”

“Let’s hope you slow up a bit as we fly,” Lois teased as she bent to pick up her sneakers. “I want to enjoy the sights.”

“But of course,” Clark grinned with a playful bow. “You’ll want your coat either way. It can get kind of cold, the higher up you get.”

Lois nodded. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Oh...sure,” Clark said as he pulled on his sneakers and laced them up. “I just want you to be comfortable.”

“What about you?” Lois asked once she realized he wasn’t putting on his coat.

“I don’t really need it,” he replied, feeling his ears heat in a blush. “I don’t feel the cold...or the heat. At least, not the way you do,” he explained hastily. “I’m aware of it, but it doesn’t affect me. I could probably walk right through the heart of a fire and I wouldn’t even break a sweat. And yes, I know I’ve been wearing my coat outside but...it’s nothing more than keeping up appearances.”

“Your life is so strange,” Lois said with a shake of her head as she pulled on her coat.

“You have no idea.” He gave her his best grin, then opened the door for her.

“You’d better bring her back here,” Bruce warned him, walking into the living room.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll bring her home in time for dinner, okay, Dad?” With that, Clark shut the door.

He walked Lois to the middle of the front yard, then he turned to face her. She nodded wordlessly, as if she could read the question in his mind.

“Are you sure?” He hated to ask but he had to know for certain.

“I trust you,” she answered.

“Okay. Hold on tight then,” he instructed as he scooped her up into his arms.

Instantly, her arms flew up to encircle his neck. She snuggled in, burying her body into his, seeking out his warmth and the security of his chest. Or so Clark imagined were her reasons. He held her close, enjoying having her in his arms, and wanting her to feel safe.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” she confirmed.

Gently, slowly, he lifted off into the sky. He kept his eyes riveted to her face, watching the excitement, wonderment, and awe that played across her features as they rose ever higher off the ground. He admired the fact that she seemed to have no fear as he flew with her. She was totally relaxed in his arms as if she alone had been born to fly with him. Her heartbeat was steady and only slightly elevated in her excitement. Her breathing was deep and even, not even a hitch of nervousness to be heard. She even laughed as they ascended into the heavens, looking down on the world, which, from this height, looked more like a child’s toy than an actual countryside.

“You okay so far?” he asked, wanting to make absolutely certain she was comfortable.

“More than okay,” she told him breathlessly. “This...this is fantastic! I can see why you were missing it.”

“And the best is yet to come,” he assured her as they reached their flying altitude. It was lower than he could have gone, but he wanted to make sure she neither got too cold nor had difficulty

breathing in the thinner air. He smiled at her. “So...where to? What do you want to see?”

“Everything,” she breathed.

\*\*\*

They spent the remainder of the day seeing as much of the world as they could. For Clark, it was just as freeing and wonderous to him as it was to Lois. He hadn’t been permitted to see most of the world, except as pictures in books and images on the History Channel. It was just as thrilling for him to see the pyramids in Egypt, the Eiffel Tower, the London Bridge, the Toyko skyline, the beaches of Mykonos, the volcanos in Hawaii, the African savannah, and the peak of Mount Everest as it was for Lois. Perhaps even more so. Not only was he experiencing the world for the very first time, but he was doing so as a man in love, even if Lois didn’t feel the same toward him. The thought gnawed at the back of his mind all day until he could stand it no longer.

“Lois?” he tentatively broached the subject as they strolled down a section of the Great Wall of China.

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead,” she said, gesturing that she was open to his inquiry.

“If I’m a free man, once the dust has settled from all of this,” he said, gesturing vaguely to get his point across without the need to elaborate with words. But he couldn’t stop his face from reddening in a blush. “Do you see...any kind of a future...for...us?” He looked away for a few erratic heartbeats, embarrassed, then swiveled his gaze back to her. “I mean, I really like you. But I’m afraid that after all I’ve...”

“Shh,” she shushed him quietly, taking his hand in hers. “You don’t need to explain.”

“But I...” He shoved his hands into his pockets like a kid admitting to stealing a piece of candy.

“No,” she interrupted again. “I know what you’re going to say. You don’t need to say it. I like you too, Clark.”

His heart was beating impossibly fast and, at first, he wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard her correctly. His head was swimming and he was sweating in nervousness. He’d never been this vulnerable before. His normally iron stomach was churning with his unease. It wasn’t because he was afraid to let Lois know how he felt about her. It was simply because he wasn’t used to allowing people into his heart. His fear was of the unknown, not of Lois’ reaction. Up until now, he’d been a remorseless killer. But now he was laying his heart and soul bare and *that* scared him. He’d changed more than words could say in the short time he’d known and loved Lois. “I...what?” he stammered in disbelief.

She gave him a shy smile and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. Then she nodded. “As crazy as it sounds, spending as much time around you as I have...the past doesn’t matter to me as much as maybe it should. I won’t ever stop missing my parents and sister. But I blame *Lex*, not you.”

“I’m still the one who...”

“You had no choice,” she said firmly, cutting off his argument. “Now, I don’t want to hear any more about that. You’ve changed, Clark. You’ve reformed. You can go out and do great things, if you want to. As for me...I want to be there to witness it.”

“So, does that mean you love me?” he boldly teased, holding his breath in nervousness as he awaited her response.

She didn’t answer right away, as though she was searching for the right words. Then, “I don’t love the man you used to be, the man who was Lex’s plaything doing his dirty work for him. But the Clark standing here now with me? Yes. I love you.”

Clark’s breath came out in a rush. “Really?” He stopped walking and turned to her, taking her hands in his. “Because I love you too.” He shook his head in utter awe that she loved him. “I didn’t really understand what I was feeling at first. I just knew there was *something* about you. Something that...that broke

through my inner darkness to touch my heart in a way I'd never even known was possible. Something that made me trust you and hated seeing you leave every time you had to walk away from my cell. Something that made me yearn to be better, even when I was still...acting out and saying things that I fully regret."

"To be worthy?" she asked wryly.

Clark's heart nearly stopped beating. "What...what makes you use that term? Did you...uh...hear something...?"

"Only you and Bruce whispering about me on the plane ride," she confirmed with a sly grin.

Clark's face went hot in a blush and he looked down at the ground. "Oh boy," he muttered in a self-deprecating way.

She reached over and cupped his cheek, making him look her in the eye. "You don't have to feel like you need to be worthy of me. You already are, simply by being who you are – the man beneath all his former toughness, the man with the soft heart."

"Soft heart, huh?" he asked, goading her playfully.

"Yes, lunkhead. Don't deny it. Only a soft-hearted man would stop to buy bathrobes for his former jailors," she teased as she started walking again.

"I..." That was all the argument he could think of.

She pulled him to the side, up against one of the walls of the walkway, in a spot that was miraculously devoid of gawking tourists. "Only a soft-hearted man would care about proving his worth to the woman he cares about."

"Loves," he corrected, his voice husky as she pressed her body into his.

"Loves," she echoed.

Desire flooded him. He could no longer hold back any restraint. He leaned forward and captured her lips in his. Fireworks exploded behind his closed eyelids. Fire ignited in his bloodstream. The world faded away, leaving him alone with Lois. Every nerve was abuzz from the sensation of kissing the woman who had stolen his heart. The last shreds of his brusque cynicism melted away, and like the mythical phoenix, he felt himself reborn from the ashes of his old life in the fire of his passion, rising again as a new person completely.

His heart was beating almost too fast to stay confined inside his ribcage. His breathing went ragged as he felt her responding. She was actively kissing him back, at first gently and almost tentatively, as though trying to find her level of comfort, but now just as hard and hungrily as he was. Her fingers played across his back as his fingers raked through her hair. He felt his body beginning to respond as well, and knew Lois could likely feel what effect she was having on him as well.

She did. He felt, rather than saw, her smile as she kissed him. Then her tongue was in his mouth, probing and caressing his own. He groaned into her mouth before breaking off their kiss.

"Maybe we should go someplace a little more private," he suggested. "I'd rather not get arrested for indecent activities on my first real day of freedom," he joked.

"Who says I'd let you do anything *indecent*?" she nearly purred.

"Lo-is," he pleaded, dragging her name out just a little.

She laughed. "Okay, let's find a good place to take off from. We still have time before Alfred will be expecting you to make dinner," she reminded him.

\*\*\*

Clark gently came into a landing in front of the large barn on Lucius' farm. The sky was just beginning to darken as night rolled in. He turned to Lois, took her hands in his, and reverently kissed them.

"Thank you," he told her in a thick, emotional voice.

"For what? I should be thanking *you* for a wonderful day," she replied, confused.

"For today," he explained. "I've never had a day like today in all my life. Doing what I want. Having someone to do it with.

Just...being a regular man...in love with a wonderful woman."

She smiled at that. "Truth be told, I've never had a day quite like today either. And I don't mean seeing the world like we did. I mean...being with you. Being with someone so...genuinely pleasant to be around. Someone who...isn't trying to use me for their own gain."

"I would never do that to you. I swear it," he vowed.

She looked him up and down for a moment. "I believe you. That's part of the reason why I've...allowed myself to fall for you the way I have. Anyone else and I would have put the brakes on my feelings already."

"Maybe *we both* need to leave our pasts *in* our pasts," he said thoughtfully.

"Maybe we do."

He reached over then and cupped her cheek with his hand. Her skin was cold to the touch, thanks to the falling temperature and the threat of snow that now hung in the air. He gestured to the barn.

"Let's go inside. The barn has heat; I was in here the other day. You'll be more comfortable and we won't have the threat of Bruce listening in on us," he suggested.

Lois nodded. "Sounds good. It's freezing out here."

"Come on, let's get you warm," he offered, opening the door for her and flicking on the light switch.

Inside the barn, it was cold, but at least they were sheltered from the wind that was steadily kicking up outside. Clark fiddled with the thermostat on the wall next to the light switch. Then he turned to Lois.

"Here," he said, stilling her movement with a touch of his hand. "Let me help." Carefully, he used a fraction of his heat vision, sweeping it over and over her body until she sighed in contentment.

"Thanks," she said gratefully. Then, smirking, "Is there any power you *don't* have?"

"The power to read minds," he immediately answered with a grin. "Believe me, it would have made life so much easier if I'd been able to see what Lex's intentions really were. But," he added after a moment, "let's not go down that path."

"Agreed."

"So, uh, did you enjoy your first *real* flight?" he asked, feeling the heat beginning to seep into the air around them.

"Enjoy it? It was *incredible*," she answered dreamily. "And to think that you can just...do that whenever you want!"

"Well, *now* I can," he gently corrected. He headed for the ladder for the loft. "There's not a lot of room down here to sit. But the loft is pretty empty."

That was the truth. The main floor of the barn was a mess of half-finished projects, disassembled machinery, and abandoned wood carvings. But the loft barely had anything in it, other than piles of soft, dry, fresh hay. He grabbed a couple of old woolen blankets on his way up the ladder, figuring he could spread them out as a makeshift picnic blanket so Lois would be comfortable.

"Sure," she agreed, following him.

He took her hand as she neared the top, helping her up into the loft. She silently thanked him with a nod of her head.

"Much better," she declared, looking around, her hands on her hips. She spied the blankets and smiled before sitting down on the worn red plaid one, leaving Clark to settle down on the equally worn black plaid blanket. "I really enjoyed today," she said again. "Thanks for taking me out flying."

"Thanks for wanting to come with me," he replied softly.

"You're a brave woman, Lois. So many other people probably would have been terrified of being up in the clouds with really no protection at all against falling."

"I had *you*," she said, taking off her sneakers and rubbing her feet for a moment, as if relieving some soreness. "Why should I have been afraid?"

“Well, like I said. Not a lot of people would trust one, admittedly strong, flying alien to keep them safe from plummeting to the ground. There’s not the same illusion of protection that they’d have being in an airplane.”

“I know you, Clark. I know you wouldn’t allow anything to happen to me. I trust you.”

Love.

Trust.

Two things he never thought anyone in the world would ever have for him. Two things he’d prayed Lois would come to have since he’d first pinpointed that the weird new feelings that had him feeling butterflies in his heart had been love. Two things he could have sworn he’d destroyed when he’d murdered her family.

Yet Lois felt both.

He didn’t think he’d ever understand why that was, but he was grateful for it.

He gave her his brightest smile. “It’s nice to be trusted,” he admitted. He cleared his throat and followed her lead in putting his own sneakers to the side, so as not to dirty the blankets they were sitting on. “So, uh, maybe we can go out again tomorrow? See some of the things we didn’t get to see today? I’ve always wanted to see Niagara Falls,” he mused.

“I’d love that,” she confirmed, scooting over to be closer to him.

She pressed her body into his, leaning on him in a relaxed way that both spoke of her comfort in being around him and of her tiredness. His arms immediately encircled her, bringing her closer and silently encouraging her to allow herself to lean all of her body weight into him. He wanted to support her completely and loved that she was so trusting and comfortable to make herself so vulnerable with him. He kissed the top of her head and breathed in the scent of her freesia-scented conditioner. He made his way to her neck and placed a kiss there on the delicate skin above her jugular vein. A shudder ran through her body and she groaned in pleasure.

Clark froze, needing to make sure she wanted him to continue. He couldn’t risk misreading her signals. If he lost her trust in him now that they were so close to becoming a real couple, he didn’t know what he’d do. It was a very real, almost paralyzing fear for him. He was terrified of doing anything that would push her away. If she walked away from him, he would have no reason to fight for his continued freedom and the pursuit of a normal life. But Lois twisted a little in his arms, arching her neck and kissing his cheek. That silent signal was Clark needed to propel him back into motion.

He kissed the same spot again, then nuzzled her ear with his nose before gently nibbling at her earlobe. She groaned again, this time louder and more lustful sounding. It sent a bolt of desire blitzing through him. His body responded and this time, there was no hiding it from Lois. She grinned and ground her body into his, purposefully making contact with his groin. This time, the moan came from his throat. He laid Lois down on the blanket, then leaned over her, kissing her hard and full on the lips. Her hands went to his hair, her fingers running through his short black locks, setting every nerve in his scalp tingling with the need for more contact.

He kissed her deeply, and she returned them with kisses of her own that more than matched his. As she’d done to him in China, he poked his tongue into her mouth, exploring and dueling with her tongue in a sensual dance. His need was unchecked and he shifted his body, straddling her now as he continued kissing her. Lois broke from the kiss first and smirked as she maneuvered her body slightly, so that they met, groin to groin.

“Are you *sure* you want this?” he asked, his head swimming with the urge to make love to her.

“More than I’ve ever been about anything,” she replied, her eyes darkening with her own desire.

She unzipped her coat – the barn toasty warm and comfortable now – and slipped it off, tossing it to the side. But Clark grabbed it up, rolled it up into a pillow, and gently tucked it under Lois’ head to make her as comfortable as possible. Then he turned his attention back to kissing her. He teased her lips first, then rained a trail of kisses down her jawline and neck, to the top button of her cream-colored blouse. He gazed down at her for just a few heartbeats, then gently undid the line of buttons going all the way down the front of her shirt.

“Your turn,” she purred.

Wordlessly, he complied and helped her to tear his pullover maroon sweater and accompanying undershirt up over his head. She gave him an appreciative look as she ran her hands over his well-defined, muscular chest and stomach, leaving a trail of fire in her wake. He felt a pang in his heart as her eyes wandered over his exposed body, her gaze lingering over every square inch of him. Every atom of his body wanted to be with her. Every cell that went untouched by her cried out for attention.

“Nice. Very nice,” Lois growled as she eyed the thin line of dark hair that ran down from his belly button to disappear into his jeans. She ran her index finger down it as she spoke, sending shivers of pleasure rippling through him.

“And you’re beautiful,” he responded, just before claiming her lips with his.

\*\*\*

The echoes from Lois’ cries of pleasure mingled with his own teased Clark’s mind as he held her to him. His entire body felt relaxed and warm, buzzing with adrenaline as if every single nerve was drunk on the love he had for Lois. He felt her sigh in contentment, her head resting on his chest, her right leg draped languidly over his. He nuzzled her hair and placed a reverent kiss on the top of her head. He sighed in turn and a new sensation washed over him.

Home.

In that moment, as not only their bodies merged in the most intimate of ways, he felt their hearts become one. And, for the first time in his life, he felt like he was home.

Home.

It wasn’t a place. It wasn’t four walls and a roof over his head. It wasn’t a location – the bustling city of Metropolis or the unnerving quiet of the open, rolling Kansas farmlands. It was a person. It was Lois. She was everything he’d ever longed for in his whole life. She was his acceptance and forgiveness. She was safety from all the hurts and evils of the world. She was tenderness and would never let his heart be hurt again. She was the future – bright and shining and worth living and fighting for. He only hoped he was good enough to be all those things and more for her.

Home.

With Lois, it would never matter where they were, what they were doing, or what they did or did not have to call their own. With Lois, he would always be comfortable and at home.

He lay on his back, panting from the lingering, tingly feeling buzzing through his entire body. Beside him, Lois’s breathing was ragged and her heart was still racing, though it was starting to slow and go back to normal, just a bit.

“Lois...that was...” he said, gulping for air and at a loss as to describe how incredible the experience had been.

“I know,” she replied with a wolfish grin.

“You’re amazing,” he complimented her, not meaning their hayloft tryst, but everything about her. “I’ve never known that love could...be like this. That I could feel...this good about something.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, rolling to her side and propping herself up on her elbow.

Clark did the same so he could look at her. “I mean, I love you. And...with you I feel like...like I’m home, for the first time in my life. I feel safe with you, Lois. Like I can see this wonderful

life and future in front of me, simply because I have you in my life.”

She leaned over and kissed him with butterfly lightness on his lips. “I love you,” she assured him.

“And I love you,” he echoed, reaching over with his left arm and stroking her right shoulder. “I always will.”

“You talk about feeling a sense of home,” she mused after half a minute of silence. “But, that’s not all that far off from how I feel too. I can’t explain it, not even to myself. But, even though I feel like, in a lot of ways, we’re just starting to *really* get to know each other, I *know* you. I feel like I can trust you with my heart. And that’s something that I don’t do easily. I’ve been hurt too many times to count. But with you? Everything’s different. Despite the circumstances under which we met,” she added, giving him a playful smirk.

“I promise, I will *never* do anything to hurt you ever again,” he solemnly vowed.

She leaned ready to say something, but a low growl from her stomach interrupted, making them both laugh.

“I guess we should head inside,” Clark reluctantly said. “I promised Alfred I’d make dinner after all.”

“And I’ve afraid if we stay out here much longer, Bruce will send out a search party,” Lois joked, beginning to get dressed. She laughed a little harder.

“You laugh, but I wouldn’t put it past him,” Clark said soberly, shaking his head. “He doesn’t trust me at all. Not that I blame him. But...still.”

She stifled her laughter and sighed. “Then let’s not give him a reason to. And, if it makes you feel any better, his mistrust has nothing to do with *you*, per se. It’s just...who he is. His friendship doesn’t come easily, at least, most of the time.”

“You don’t have to defend him to me, Lois. I’m okay with the fact that he’ll probably never trust me or even like me all that much,” Clark said, zipping his jeans up and grabbing for his undershirt.

“I’m not defending,” she began, but then abruptly stopped. “Okay, maybe I *am*, a little,” she admitted a few seconds later. “It’s just...I’ve known him a long time and I guess I have certain loyalties to him. But I’m more than ready and willing to defend you against him too.”

He gave her a tender smile as he pulled on his shirt over his undershirt. Lois, in the meanwhile, was buttoning her blouse. He cupped her cheek affectionately. “I appreciate that, Lois. But it doesn’t matter to me if Bruce and I ever come to see eye to eye. I don’t really care if we ever become friends or not. I just...*you’re* the *only* one that matters to me.”

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head, his heart soaring with the love he felt for her. “I love you, Lois. That’s all I care about. Not Bruce, not what the world might think about me if they were to find out about me, not what my future might look like – the job I might take, where I might live. All I care about is making you happy.”

She smiled lovingly at him, then her stomach growled again. “Well...dinner would, apparently, make me happy,” she laughed.

Clark laughed too. “Right away. Your wish is my command.”

They stayed only long enough to get their shoes on. Lois threw on her coat but didn’t bother to zip it shut. After all, they were only crossing the yard to get to the house. Clark shut off the heat and the lights as they left, then shut the door tightly behind them. He took Lois’ arm in his as they walked to the house. Alfred and Bruce were in the living room when they went inside. Alfred looked up from his crossword puzzle book at the sound of the door and Bruce stopped his pacing.

“About time,” he snapped. “I was wondering if you’d decided to fly off and never return.”

“Oh keep your boxers on,” Clark shot back, already irritated by the accusation. “I *told* you I’d be back. And here I am. Lois too.

You *really* need to start trusting me a little. Or put that damned collar back on me if you feel so insecure about my ability to keep my promises,” he challenged.

Bruce set his lips in a thin, hard line. Then, slowly, he brought his gaze to Lois. Clark could just see her out of the corner of his eye. She appeared to be silently pleading with her friend not to start a fight. He nodded almost to himself.

“Sorry. I guess I just expected you home a little earlier,” he said, still locking eyes with Lois.

“You don’t need to babysit me, Bruce,” she informed him, a little colder than Clark had expected her to be. “I had a perfectly lovely time with Clark today.”

“And now that I fulfilled my promise to bring Lois back safely, I’ll go and make good on my *other* promise of making dinner,” Clark said flatly.

He stalked off to the kitchen, leaving Lois, Bruce, and Alfred in the living room after toeing off his shoes and slipping into his slippers. He started to gather the ingredients he needed but couldn’t resist tuning in to the conversation in the living room. He felt guilty about eavesdropping, but he felt powerless to resist.

“You’re falling for him, aren’t you?” Bruce asked Lois.

“Maybe. Why?” she asked warily.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt, Lois,” Bruce insisted.

“I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself,” she informed him.

“I know that. But...”

“So, were you lying to him then?”

“What?” Bruce sounded confused.

“On the plane. I heard the two of you talking. He asked you if he could ever be ‘worthy’ of me. And you gave him encouragement,” she clarified, her voice taking on a hard edge.

“What was I supposed to say? That I have no idea? That if it was me, I’m not sure I could ever be with the person who murdered my family?”

Clark winced at the venom in Bruce’s words.

*I deserve it though.*

“How *dare* you!” Lois nearly roared, and Clark pictured her making ready to rip Bruce’s head off his shoulders.

“It’s true, isn’t it? He’s the reason why...”

“You know what?” Lois cut in. “Sometimes, you can be a real piece of...”

Now it was Bruce’s moment to interrupt. “Realism, Lois. Clark’s past...it worries me. And you getting mixed up with that worries me even more.”

“He wants to make things right, Bruce! He’s trying so hard to be a better person.”

“So, is that what this is? You’re being kind to him out of pity? Do you think that by being with him, you can magically transform him into a saint?” His voice was nearly mocking, but fell just short of it.

“No, Bruce,” she snapped in a way Clark had never heard coming from her before. “I’ve made my peace with who he used to be and what he’s done. And I see who he is now and what he’s trying to do to atone. It might not make any sense to you, but it doesn’t have to.”

“So, you *have* fallen for him?” Was Clark imagining it, or was Bruce almost gloating that he’d been right from the start?

“You want me to say it? Fine. I love him, Bruce. He’s a good man, despite all the things Lex forced him to do,” Lois said, her tone suggesting that she was done discussing the matter.

Bruce was silent for a good ten seconds, during which time, Clark finished finding all of the ingredients for dinner.

“Wait a minute,” Bruce said in a scrutinizing tone. “When you two were out...did you...”

“What, Bruce?” Lois was *definitely* annoyed.

“Ah...you know,” Bruce stammered awkwardly. “Do things.”

“You’re asking if I *slept* with him?” Lois whisper-yelled in incredulity. “I don’t *believe* you’re prying into my personal life

like this! That's *none* of your damn business, Bruce! Maybe I did. Maybe I didn't. I don't need or want your approval on the matter."

"I never said anything about approval," he replied evenly. "I just want to make sure you're being safe. I've been there for a couple of your heartbreaks. And while I don't mind being a shoulder for you to cry on, I hate seeing you get hurt. And Clark? He might be the greatest guy in all the world, or he might be the one to hurt you the most."

Lois didn't reply right away, but when she did, her voice was much softer. "Thanks for the concern, Bruce. I mean it. But, I know what I'm doing."

"If you say so...then...I trust your judgment," Bruce conceded. "But if there is *anything* you need me to do..." He left the statement hanging unfinished in the air.

"There is. Start trusting Clark more," Lois said stiffly. "And stop acting like a spoiled teenager. Just because I've turned down dates with you doesn't mean you get to dictate my love life. And it sure as hell doesn't mean I want you playing the part of the overprotective big brother."

\*\*\*

Clark pulled his attention away from washing the mushrooms when he heard Lois leave the living room and ascend the stairs up to the bedrooms, her footsteps falling somewhere between normal and stomping. He winced as he heard her slam her bedroom door shut, then severed the connection and turned his full attention back to his cooking. He sliced the thick boneless chicken breasts into thin cutlets, and silently pondered over the conversation he'd just overheard. On the one hand, he was livid with Bruce for trying to dissuade Lois from being with him. On the other, he wasn't sure he expected anything different. After all, the two *were* friends and friends should try to keep each other from being hurt. And Clark certainly *had* already hurt Lois in ways that still made him shudder.

But all of that paled in comparison to the fact that Lois had defended him. Defended him and stuck by him in a way that he'd never anticipated. Lex...Lex had *never* done anything like that, ever. Used him, yes. Manipulated him, yes. Muttered under his breath about the responsibility of caring for a super-powered individual, yes. Made it known how much Clark was often a burden to him, when he wasn't using Clark's powers to his own advantage, yes. But came to his defense about anything, even when Clark wasn't listening in...never.

He nearly sank to his knees in humility. In all his life, he'd never done anything to warrant such a passionate, stoic defense as the one Lois had given him. A lump formed in his throat and he swallowed hard, trying to get rid of it. He silently vowed to himself that he would prove to Lois a thousand times over that she was right to trust him.

"Sir? Was that *truly* necessary?" he heard Alfred ask as his super hearing tuned in of its own accord. Disappointment oozed from the elderly man's words.

"I'm just trying..." Bruce started to argue, but there was less fire in his voice now.

Clark heard a dismissive snorting grunt come from Alfred. Clearly, the old butler was fed up with Bruce's attitude as well. He cut the billionaire off. "Trying to *what*, Master Bruce? I'm afraid I agree with Miss Lane here. While Mr. Kent may or may not be the most reliable and trustworthy person, Miss Lane needs to be free to discover that on her own. *Without* comments from – forgive me – the peanut gallery."

Bruce sighed. "Yeah, okay," he finally relented. "I'll talk to her later. I think it's for the best if I don't attempt anything right now."

"That's the most sensible thing you've said thus far, sir," the old man affectionately teased.

Clark smiled to himself. It felt good to have the aging butler on his – well, *Lois'* – side. He once more cut the connection off

and focused on his work, speeding through the rest of the meal prep. As the food simmered in the various pots and pans on the stove, he set the table in the blink of an eye, finding Lucius' fancy china in the china cabinet in the corner of the dining room.

Within half an hour, he had a feast on the table. Chicken marsala, glazed carrots, a tomato and mozzarella caprese salad, roasted red potatoes, garlic bread, green beans with almond slices, and a fresh apple pie for dessert. True, he'd used his heat vision to get some of the components ready faster, but everything looked and smelled good, as far as he could tell. The true test would be to see how the others liked it. Still, he was proud of what he'd accomplished and how quickly he'd been able to pull the meal together.

Lois still hadn't returned from the second floor, so Clark zipped up the steps to let her know dinner was ready. Her bedroom door was shut tight, so he gently rapped his knuckles against the scratched and fading paint.

"What?" she snapped from within.

"Hey, it's me. Dinner's ready," he softly told her.

"Oh." After a moment, he heard the lock *snick* as she opened it. "Thanks," she said.

Her eyes were a little red and puffy. She'd been crying, he realized. The thought was like a punch to his gut.

"Hey, don't let Bruce get to you," he told her in a near whisper as he drew her into his arms in a hug.

"You...heard?" she asked, her face half-buried into his chest.

"Oh...uh...super hearing and all," he explained with a blush as she looked up at him. He hoped she'd take it at face value and not ask if he'd deliberately listened in or not.

She shook her head and pulled back a little. "He's been a good friend to me but sometimes? Sometimes he can be a real pain in the rear end."

"It's okay. He's got good reason not to trust me. It doesn't bother me. But...thank you. For standing up for me. No one's ever done that for me before."

She stretched up on her toes and kissed his cheek – just a barely-there peck on his skin. "I'll always stick up for you," she promised, resting a hand on his chest. "Now...whatever you made smells incredible. Let's eat, shall we?"

"After you," he grinned, sweeping his hand before him, inviting her to take the lead.

She nodded, then silently led the way downstairs and into the dining room. Clark had already laid out the entire meal on the table. In his mind, it looked as glorious and "shiny" as any Thanksgiving meal he'd ever seen in any movie, complete with the sparkle effects he'd seen used in cartoons to depict things in an immaculate condition. Pride swelled up in his chest as he watched Lois, Alfred, and Bruce ogle the feast in wonderment as they found their places around the table.

"Wow, Clark, this all looks amazing," Lois complimented him as she sat.

"Indeed," Alfred agreed.

"If it tastes half as good as it looks, you may have found your calling," Bruce added, and Clark wasn't sure if it was a genuine compliment or if the man was just making an effort to be nice for Lois' benefit.

"Here," Clark offered, "let me serve everyone."

Before anyone could protest, he was portioning out the chicken onto everyone's plates. It took only a couple of minutes before everyone had a little taste of each item before them. Lois wasted no time in digging right in. At the first bite of the chicken marsala, she smiled.

"Wow! That is *good*," she praised.

"Thanks. I'm glad you like it. I, uh, haven't tried this recipe before," he stammered, rubbing the back of his neck subconsciously.

"You...haven't?" Alfred asked in disbelief.

"I never got the chance to," Clark explained as he cut his chicken. "I saw something on TV about making it just before Lex sent me to try and kill Bruce. As I've mentioned before, my memory is pretty good, and the recipe jumped into my head when I realized we had all the right ingredients for it. So, I figured I'd give it a shot."

"Well, it's very good," Bruce said. "On par with some of the best I've had, honestly."

"Thanks," Clark said, nodding once.

A companionable silence fell for a few minutes, then Alfred broached the quiet. Easy, if not mundane, conversation began. Clark was pleased to see every plate cleaned, even after everyone went back for seconds. Once dinner was finished, Clark packed up the leftovers and put them in the fridge before washing the dishes. With the help of his super speed, he was done in less than two minutes. By then it was getting late, so he immediately set to work prepping the table for dessert.

As with dinner, the apple pie – which he served a la mode – was a hit. Half the pie was devoured before they all declared that they were too full to take another bite. Alfred offered to clean up after dessert, but Clark declined the help. In half a minute he was done and had joined everyone in the living room. He claimed the open space on the couch next to Lois and prepared to get engrossed in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Immediately – and perhaps even a bit pointedly – Lois snuggled into his side. He didn't care. He wrapped his arms around her and his entire body flooded with peace. Nothing in the world could possibly be wrong so long as he felt the comforting sensation of Lois' body weight against him. His pulse slowed a little and his breathing went deep and even as he relaxed, though he was *very* aware that Bruce was sitting not five feet away, likely judging the whole scenario in his mind. Clark simply did not care. He kissed the top of Lois' head and felt her sigh in contentment.

When the credits rolled some time later, Lois got up and stretched. "I'm heading upstairs," she announced. "See you in the morning."

"Me too," Alfred said, seconding Lois' notion. He yawned.

Bruce checked the clock on the wall. "I've got some speeches to work on," he decided. "There's only a couple of weeks before the first debates start." He took a couple of steps toward the stairs.

"Clark?" Lois asked.

"Yeah," he hesitantly said, thinking of the journals he'd hidden away. "I may as well head up too."

Single file, they all ascended the steps to the second floor, where they parted ways, each of them retreating to their own bedroom. For a moment, Clark wasn't sure what to do. Then he gathered up his clothing and headed into the shower. Three minutes later, he was clean and in his pajamas. Then he floated down the steps, back to the living room, to avoid hitting any of the creaky spots on the staircase. As he'd done the night before, he set himself up at the rolltop desk. Thumbing through what he'd already written, he took up his pen and picked up right where he'd left off. This time, however, he felt a little more comfortable in his writing, despite the subject matter. He employed a bit of his speed and wrote at a pace no mere human could ever match. Within an hour, he'd filled the rest of the first journal, before deciding to call it quits for the night.

Above him, as he'd worked, he'd heard each of the others taking turns using the hallway bathroom shower. Each time, he'd frozen in his writing, listening intently, ensuring that none of them would make their way down the stairs and catch him writing. But none of them did and he was left in peace to continue his work.

With the first journal filled, he set everything aside again. He could pick up with the rest the following night, he reasoned. Once everything was away and he was sure no one would notice anything out of place, he stood in the middle of the living room, running his hand through his hair. He was so close to finishing his

work. Just another night or two, if he could continue to manage sneaking down and having some uninterrupted time to work. But now, he was feeling the exertion of the day. He supposed he'd done a bit too much in flying around the world with his powers only so newly restored. But the thought honestly hadn't even entered his mind. He'd been entirely focused on giving Lois the best day of her life.

He smiled to himself. Of course, he couldn't speak on her behalf, but he thought he'd succeeded on that front.

But now he yawned. He was ready to relax and perhaps do some reading before going to sleep. As tired as he was, he was still too hyped up from the day to rest just yet. He'd had his first date with Lois – his first date *ever*, to be precise – and it had gone amazingly well. So well that they'd wound up making love before the date was even over.

He shook his head in disbelief. How had his life gotten to this point? How had a ruthless assassin become an ordinary man in love? How had his future gone from wondering who his next target would be to wondering what career he should pursue? How had he gone from being isolated, alone, abused, and unable – or perhaps just unwilling – to feel anything but numb emptiness to contemplating a future with Lois and wondering if she would one day be his wife? How had Lex gone from being the center of his world to becoming the object of Clark's hatred and the target he was most interested in taking down – one way or another?

He lifted up off the floor and floated back up the steps, down the hall, and into his bedroom. He floated to his bed, stretching out and hovering just an inch over the comforter. His book was on the nightstand, so he picked up it and opened it to where he'd stuck a gas station receipt he'd found lying around in as a makeshift bookmark. But his mind and body were still way too abuzz from having been intimate with Lois to allow him to concentrate. After a while, he gave up on trying to read, when he'd failed to comprehend more than two sentences on the page.

He was just about ready to climb under the blankets and try to sleep when a faint knock sounded at his door. Lowering himself to sit on the bed, he X-rayed through the door. Wordlessly, he got up and crossed the room.

"Lois," he breathed as he opened the door.

"Hi. Can I come in?" she asked, looking uncertain as she stood there in soft lavender fleece pajamas.

"Of course," he replied, stepping aside to let her in.

"Did I wake you?" she asked, either not seeing or not recognizing that the bed was still perfectly made, not rumpled from a sleeping body.

"No," he answered, shutting the door soundlessly behind him. He gestured for her to sit on the bed. "I was up. To be honest, I'm still a bit...buzzed, I guess is the right word. From today I mean. I...I had a really great time with you, Lois. Best day of my life. Even without what happened in the barn."

"Me too," she said with a shy smile. "I don't...I can't believe how...easy this is. It's like...like I've known you forever." She gently reached over and cupped his cheek and he found himself melting under that feather-soft touch. Her eyes shimmered with love for him and he once again wondered how this could all be real. He wasn't supposed to find love, yet here Lois stood before him, trusting him not to hurt her, showing him in a million little ways that she loved him. "The *real* you. Not that...imposter I first met six-ish months ago."

"I feel the same way. Ever since we really started talking, I mean *really* started talking, it's like...like I found the missing piece of my life. Like I should have known you my whole life. I feel...complete now that I know you."

"You're a pretty great guy, Clark. Aren't you?" she haltingly asked.

"Bruce really got in your head, huh?" he offered. "I promise. I will *never* hurt you. And if I do...Bruce has Kryptonite," he half-

teased with a grin.

“Mmm,” she hummed, patting the bed, wanting him to sit.

He did as he was bid, his arms immediately encircling her. “I’d rather die than ever hurt the woman I love,” he swore in a feather-light voice.

She didn’t say anything to that. But she did stretch her neck up to kiss his lips. Clark lost himself to the feel of her lips on his. He wasn’t even aware of her pushing him backwards. He didn’t feel his head touch his pillow. He was only abstractly aware of her body weight pressing down on his until she broke their kiss. He was about to say something to her when he noticed the look she was giving him. Part love, part lust, and all need, it sent a bolt of desire through him.

“Here?” he squeaked.

“Oh yeah,” she purred.

“But the others…” he weakly protested.

“Hopefully asleep,” she flippantly replied. “And if not…who cares? If they get jealous…they both have hands.”

The remark should have made Clark laugh, but her boldness and fierce disregard for Bruce and Alfred’s close proximity to them only hastened his desire.

“God, you’re amazing,” he declared in response to her.

He tried to lift Lois’ shirt off, but she stilled his movements with a gentle touch to his wrists.

“No,” she told him.

“But, I thought…”

“What you did in the barn to me was incredible,” she clarified. “Now it’s my turn to return the favor.”

She kissed him again, cutting off any thought of responding to what she’d said.

\*\*\*

*Love. So this is what love is, Clark mused after he and Lois had both reached their pleasure. All those times I dismissed the concept as a myth...all those times I scoffed at the notion of anyone wanting to bind themselves to someone else forever...*

He mentally sighed in contentment.

*I was wrong. I’m thrilled to know I was wrong. Love is real. And it’s...so incredibly powerful...more than I ever could have imagined. It’s...it’s the most powerful force on Earth. It’s stronger than I am. I’m...helpless against it. And what’s more...I want to be helpless against it. I want it to wash over me and carry me away in its current and drown me in its healing power. I should be terrified of how much it’s changed me, but I’m not. I’ve never felt this good, this connected to the world in all my life. And I have Lois to thank for that.*

Lois laid next to him on the bed, her breathing ragged, one arm thrown across her stomach in a comfortable way. Clark gasped for breath. He hadn’t realized he’d been breathing so fast or so heavily as Lois had worked her magic. His entire body was flying with the lingering haze of his pleasure and he chuckled a little to himself.

“What?” Lois gently asked.

“Nothing,” he immediately answered. “It’s just...you make me feel so good. Not just the sex but...everything. It just doesn’t feel right to not laugh, you know? It’s like...it just feels weird not to be flying up into the heavens and shouting to the world about how happy you make me and how in love I am with you.”

Lois chuckled in turn, then turned and faced him. Clark did the same, propping himself up on his elbow. “I understand that perfectly,” she told him.

“You make me feel things I thought only existed in movies,” he told her. “Before you, love was a foreign concept to me. I didn’t understand it in the least. But now, with you, everything’s different. It’s like the entire world has changed. Colors seem brighter. Sounds are more sensual and complex. Things even taste different. You’ve...opened up a part of me that I never would have imagined I had.”

“As much as I’d love to take the credit for all of that,” she said softly, stroking his upper arm tenderly, “you made the choice to change and to open up your heart enough to let me in.”

“Well, so did you,” he pointed out. “You made the choice to forgive me and to accept my apologies, as inadequate as they were and still are. You made the decision to let me into your life. Thank you.”

Lois’ face was a little flushed. “Well...you’re welcome,” she haltingly said, as if uncomfortable taking any credit for his transformation. Then, “I guess...I really should get cleaned up.” She chuckled almost nervously.

Clark laughed too. “Yeah, me too, I guess. After you, of course.”

Lois got up from the bed and crossed the room, while Clark appreciated a nice, uninterrupted view of her backside. She cracked the door open a smidge, listening. Clark took a second to scan the house with his superior hearing.

“They’re asleep,” he informed her. “Alfred really should see a doctor about his snoring,” he added with a slight wince as a particularly loud snore threatened to deafen him.

Lois nodded, then bounded out of the room and down the hall, naked as the day she was born. Clark heard the bathroom light switch flick on, then the water in the sink start to flow. A few moments later, he heard the toilet flush, then the sound of Lois washing her hands, turning out the light, and finally the soft, barely-audible sound of her footsteps as she returned to his room. Clark stood up then, striding proudly toward the door, his body still half alert from the close proximity to Lois’ unclothed beauty. He took his time in cleaning up, brushing his teeth, and using the toilet, then he returned to his room. To his surprise, Lois was still there and still naked, only this time, she was laying under his blankets.

“Can I stay?” she asked as he entered the room.

“Of course,” he answered, perhaps too quickly, as he soundlessly shut the door behind him.

He crossed the space and slipped under the covers on the unoccupied side of the queen bed. Instantly, Lois was in his arms as he laid back against the pillows, resting her head on his broad chest, listening to his heartbeat. But tiredness had replaced all of her raw, sexual energy and she yawned mightily.

“You sound sleepy,” Clark whispered after a moment.

Lois stifled another yawn. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Seeing the world will do that to a person,” Clark gently joked, hugging her just a little tighter, afraid that, somehow, if he let go, this would all just be a dream and he’d find himself back in his cell, collar around his neck, and the object of Lois’ contempt.

“I guess so,” she laughed sleepily.

“Good night, Lois,” Clark whispered into her hair as he buried a kiss amongst her perfect dark tresses.

“Good night, Clark,” she murmured, her eyes already shutting. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Just like that, and he felt her body relax fully and her breathing change. She was asleep. But, tired as he was, he fought sleep off, drinking in the feeling of having her naked, vulnerable body curled up against his equally nude and vulnerable – albeit in a different way – body. It should have scared him, to be so exposed – in every way – but it didn’t. Instead, he felt the most confident and the least afraid he’d ever felt in his life. He felt like he could take on the entire world if he needed to.

When sleep at last claimed him, Clark’s dreams were bright, happy, and inspiring. In them, Lois was his wife and they worked side by side to destroy Lex and to reshape the world into a peaceful utopia where no one ever had to fear the things that had haunted his entire life.

\*\*\*

For two weeks, Clark found something that he’d never

experienced before: peace. Not *just* the kind that came from being out in the country, away from his Metropolis prisons – both the one in Lex Tower, overlooking the city like a castle in the clouds, and the one beneath midtown like a hoodlum’s den. Of course, being free to roam around outside in the sunlight, unrestricted by the collar that had dictated his every move for a decade, was wonderful beyond words. It put his mind at ease, knowing that no one on the farm was going to kill him for merely breathing the wrong way.

No, that wasn’t the source of his peace.

It was the love that had flooded his heart. It brought him peace in his mind, his heart, and his very soul. For the first time in his life, Clark no longer felt tossed about in a violent, unending storm. Now, the skies had cleared, the wind had died down, and he no longer felt afraid of the thunder and lightning that had raged for his entire life. Now, he could see blues skies, lazy clouds, and hear the sweet sound of birdsongs. He felt...serene...like nothing in the world could ever go wrong again.

He had Lois to thank for that. It was she – and she alone – who had kindled the flame of love in his heart. And it was that love which had truly set him free. Even caged in the fallout shelter, his love for Lois had unlocked the chains he’d always needed to keep around his heart. It had demolished the walls he’d built up inside to protect himself. It had allowed him to be vulnerable for the first time in his life, in a way that was profoundly different than when Kryptonite had weakened him and left him powerless.

He owed her *everything* and wondered sometimes if he could ever repay her for all the things she’d done for him. But he was determined to try.

He spent almost every waking moment with Lois. Together, they would walk the expanse of Lucius’ farm on nice days. On cold, overcast days, Clark would find warm, sunny places for them to visit. He’d never been to the beach before meeting Lois, but those coastal paradises soon became his addiction. Whenever possible, they would spend at least the afternoon on some isolated, deserted beach, skinny-dipping in the clear, pleasant ocean waves or laying on the hot sand, sometimes making love right there, with nothing between the silky soft sand and their bodies. Some days, they spent sight-seeing, keeping as low a profile as they could, seeing the wonders of the world hand in hand, heart to heart. One day, Clark spent the hours with Lois in his arms, chasing the sunset in an endless loop of majestic red and brilliant orange painted across the skies.

Another day, it had snowed heavily in Kansas. Lois insisted they stay on the farm and had proceeded to show him all the things he’d only seen on television and in books. They built a snowman first, and Clark had so much fun he took the next ten minutes to build Lois an entire army of snowmen that stretched across the entire barren crop fields. He didn’t think he would ever forget how her eyes had absolutely sparkled as she’d laughed, her breath misting in the air before her. In his mind, she’d looked like some kind of joyful snow spirit come to Earth to mingle with the common mortals. And then, she’d scooped up a handful of snow, patted it quickly, and hit him in the chest with a snowball. Clark had never laughed so much in his entire life as he had that afternoon, as they’d traded snowballs, made snow angels, and kissed in the still slightly snowy air. He’d made hot chocolate for them to share once they’d retreated to the warmth of the house and changed into their soft, dry pajamas and fluffy bathrobes. He’d even used his heat vision to get a fire going in the fireplace, and the roaring blaze had seemed more cheerful than any he’d seen in Lex Tower. They’d made love in front of that fire and afterward, Clark had wrapped Lois in a blanket and sat her on the couch.

“Lois,” he’d begun, taking her hand in his and studying how perfect each finger was. “I have to ask you something. When all of this is said and done, if I’m still a free man, would you...make a

life with me? I know it’s sudden and I know we haven’t been together all that long. But...I can’t live my life without you. Would you...marry me?”

“Clark...I...” she’d stammered, the shock of his question registering clearly in her features.

“I know. It’s too early,” he’d chastised himself.

“That’s not what I meant,” she’d corrected him. “I love you. I guess...you’re right. It *is* soon. But...yes. I will marry you. Maybe I’m crazy...my sister always said I tend to jump into things without checking the water level first. And she was right. But this? This is right. It’s scary because it’s so fast but...it’s a *good* scary. Like ‘my first solo assignment at the Planet’ scared. Or ‘leaving home to get my first apartment’ scared. And...look at me. Sucking the romance out of this.” She’d smiled nervously.

Clark had chuckled and cupped her cheek with his hand. “I love you, Lois. Even your babbling,” he’d teased with a soft smile. “And I promise. Once Lex is in jail, I’ll get you the ring you deserve.”

She’d shaken her head. “The ring doesn’t matter to me.”

“It does to *me*,” he’d admitted. “Lois, I’ve never done one single good thing in my life. I want to do everything perfectly by you.”

“That’s not true and you know it! You saved my life that night in the car. You’ve been trustworthy and not run from here now that your powers are back. And you’ve made me insanely happy!” she’d pressed.

“Still, you deserve a beautiful ring to compliment your extraordinary beauty,” he’d asserted. “And I’ll get it for you, somehow.”

“You don’t need to,” she’d told him again.

But Clark would not entertain the idea of getting her anything less than a perfectly flawless, large diamond to adorn her finger with. He’d shaken his head.

“Lois, there isn’t a force in Heaven or in Hell that will stop me from getting the ring you deserve. I’ll find a job...even if it’s cleaning every single toilet in every Wayne Enterprises building across the globe,” he’d resolved.

“You want a job? Let me talk to Perry once this is over and done with,” Lois had replied softly.

“Why would he consider someone with no experience whatsoever?” Clark had questioned. “He’s got a world class paper to run. Not some gossip rag like the *Dirt Digger*. I’d be a liability to him, not an asset.”

“You could learn. I could teach you. Take you under my wing, so to speak. You’re a smart guy, Clark,” she’d told him. “You could be churning out award-worthy articles *within* a month.”

“I’m not sure,” he’d hesitated. “Even if I *could* learn that fast...and maybe I could...I’ve still got no work experience whatsoever under my belt. Unless you consider being a professional assassin to be something Perry would value.” He laughed bitterly. “I don’t even technically *exist*. I have no birth certificate, no history, no work experience, no college degree, not even a GED. Everything I *could* have had, Lex took from me. The only birth certificate I ever had has been linked to a death certificate for over twenty years now. Kal Luthor is dead. And that’s for the better. Clark Kent doesn’t exist...for better or worse.”

Lois had looked thoughtful for a moment before replying. “I guess I hadn’t thought about that. But, you’re forgetting one thing.”

Intrigued, he’d looked at her. “What’s that?”

“Bruce.”

“Bruce?”

She’d nodded. “Regardless of what happens with your testimony at Lex Luthor’s trial once we expose what he’s been up to, he owes you, big time.”

He’d furrowed his brow in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He’s rich. And I know people,” she’d begun, rather cryptically, in Clark’s mind.

“I’m not entirely sure I’m following,” he’d sheepishly admitted.

She’d given him a conspiratorial smile. “He imprisoned you for six months. He can certainly pay my people to get you a set of...papers. Birth certificate, driver’s license, the works. Make you a legitimate Metropolis denizen.”

The thought had frozen him in his tracks. He’d blinked as the implications unrolled right before his mind. He’d cleared his throat before attempting to respond.

“You...could do that?”

“Yes,” Lois had confidently assured him. “It might take a week or two for them to get everything ready – their work is top notch. But it’ll be worth it, I promise.”

Clark had nodded. “I look forward to it.”

After they’d gone to bed that night, Clark had tossed and turned, until he’d finally gotten up and floated down to the living room. Hurriedly, as though the Devil himself were breathing down his neck, Clark had finished writing in the second journal. But he wasn’t satisfied even then. There was still more to write. He’d found a third journal and filled every square inch of blank space, then a fourth. Finding a Sharpie marker, he’d noted on the front cover of each book exactly what was contained within, before taking the lot of them up to his bedroom and hiding them in his underwear drawer. Finally, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, he’d been able to slip into an uneasy sleep.

\*\*\*

Two days later, Bruce came into the living room, and Clark became instantly concerned at the business-like look on the billionaire’s face. The man sat in one of the armchairs and folded his hands in his lap, looking Lois and Clark in the eyes. Clark sat up a little straighter. Bruce hadn’t had much to say to them both since Lois had announced their engagement the morning before. But now, as the snow softly and lazily fell beyond the windows, he looked ready to talk. It made Clark nervous.

“What’s up, Bruce?” Lois asked, before he could say anything.

“The first debate is tomorrow night,” he said, jumping right to the heart of the matter. “I’m flying out tonight, provided the snow passes in time.”

Clark shrugged. “Worst comes to worst, I can fly you where you need to get to. Just tell me where.”

“No,” Bruce immediately declined. “While the gesture is appreciated, it would look suspicious if my plane wasn’t spotted landing at the airport,” he tightly added.

“Suit yourself,” Clark said with a shrug, not taking offense to Bruce’s refusal to fly with him.

While Bruce hadn’t had to say much about their engagement, when he *had* spoken to them, he’d taken pains to be civil to Clark. Clark thought the whole thing was hilarious. It was clear that Bruce was trying way too hard and that he wasn’t exactly thrilled to learn that Lois had said “yes” to marrying the man who’d killed her family. The billionaire was definitely out of his comfort zone. It had been one thing when Clark had first started to open up and join their side of the fight against Lex. But Clark cozying up to Lois wasn’t something Bruce was comfortable with *at all*, as evidenced by his interrogation of Lois after she’d gone flying with Clark the first time.

“Lois, you should come with me, to cover the debate,” Bruce continued. “Again, it would be suspicious if you weren’t in attendance. Certainly, Perry would notice and might start questioning what’s *really* going on.”

“Right,” Lois said with a nod.

“Alfred will stay here with you,” Bruce continued, swiveling his eyes to Clark.

“What?” Clark questioned, caught off guard. “You’re...

leaving him to...*babysit* me?”

Bruce shook his head. “No. I already know that there’s nothing within my power that I can do to ensure that you stay put. As much as I hate it, I’ve come to accept that fact. But there’s also no reason to drag him with us, only to fly back the following day.”

“You still don’t trust me, do you?” Clark accused in disbelief.

“You need to lay low. I’m sure Lex Luthor will have plenty of his underlings scanning the audience for you,” Bruce went on.

“And if he’s already ordered a hit on both Alfred *and* me... twice...there’s no sense in putting Alfred in unnecessary danger.”

From the doorway, Alfred nodded, then entered the room. “It’s true. Unfortunately, I’m not as spry as I once was. If I were to be targeted, I might not be able to get away in time.”

Clark had to admit that there was a certain amount of sense to that and he nodded thoughtfully.

“Fine,” he relented after a moment. “I guess I can hang back. But...what about *you*?” he asked, looking at Bruce. “You don’t think his goons might try a hit on you?”

“He may well try, but I think it’ll be unlikely,” Bruce replied evenly, almost too-calmly. “There should be too much security for him to even *imagine* having someone take me out.”

“Don’t underestimate him, Bruce,” Clark warned.

“I’m not.”

“And don’t *overestimate* your faith in the security. For all you know, Lex owns half the security guards at the debate,” Clark continued. He shook his head and leaned forward in his seat on the couch. “He’s not stupid and he’s not reckless, but he *is* powerful and cocky. You and I have our differences for sure, but I *don’t* want to see you get killed.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to *be* killed,” Bruce said flatly.

“Then let me come along,” Clark insisted, deftly changing his stance on the subject. “Believe me, Bruce, I have a *ton* of experience in staying out of sight when need to.”

“No, and that’s final. I don’t need to be distracted wondering where you are and if Luthor’s minions have discovered if you’re there or not.”

“I hate to say it,” Lois piped up, “but I agree with Bruce. Stay here, please?”

Clark scowled. “For you...okay. But if you sense *anything* is off, you call me and I’ll be there in seconds.”

“Deal,” Lois agreed.

“Good. Now, there’s one other thing. Lois, we’ve talked about the case against Lex,” Bruce began, changing the subject.

Lois nodded. “We’re just about set on that front. All we need to know now is if we can cut a deal for Clark.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about that,” Clark interjected. “And...I’m sorry, Lois. I just *can’t* take the stand. Regardless of if I can walk away from the trial as a free man, I don’t know if I can face Lex in a courtroom. He’s still in my head. I still hear him berating the things I do. I can’t...sit there and listen to him try and weasel his way out of justice.”

“You’re still afraid of him,” Bruce observed neutrally.

Clark took a breath and slowly blew it back out again before answering. “Yes,” he shamefully admitted. “He tortured me for *years*. I’m...in his presence, I’m a broken man.” He shook his head, trying to throw off how ashamed he felt. “If I show up there, I don’t know if I’ll have the strength to testify. And, for all I know, if he finds out that I’ll be there, taking the stand, who’s to say he won’t plant Nigel or Mrs. Cox in the court room with Kryptonite? Yes, Bruce, I’m still *terrified* of the things he could do to me.”

“But...your testimony...it’s critical,” Lois stammered, sounding shattered.

“I won’t take the stand,” Clark said, a little more forcefully, “but I *will* testify.”

“How...exactly?” Alfred asked, confused.

“With these.”

Clark zipped up the stairs, retrieved the journals, and went

back down the stairs. All in all, he was gone for less than two seconds. He handed them to Lois, who looked a little lost as he pressed them into her open hands.

“What are these?” she asked, clearing her throat first.

Clark sighed as he made ready to take the plunge. “Journals.”

“Clearly,” she replied, arching one perfect eyebrow. “What *are* they though?”

“My testimony,” he said, uncomfortably looking at the floor.

“I *can't* take the stand. But that *doesn't* mean that I can't expose to the world all of Lex's evil deeds. So...everything is in there. These two,” he said, tapping the two books on the top of the stack, “cover everything about my life and what Lex said and did to me. I tried to think of anything that indicated his other criminal dealings, but, as I said, a lot of his ‘business’ was handled behind closed doors in a sound-proof office. I don't know if it will help or not, but it *will* explain the other two journals.”

“What's in *those*?” Lois asked tremulously, looking half-scared of the answer.

Clark looked up and locked his gaze with her. “The full details of every single assassination I carried out on his behalf.”

Lois turned pale and green all in the same moment. She queasily eyed the journals. “All of them?” she squeaked.

“All of them,” he confirmed. “You...may not want to read them. Or, at least...avoid certain entries.” He closed his eyes, feeling both relieved and terrified to have handed over such incriminating evidence.

But Lois was made of sterner stuff than he was, and she cracked open the first book and leafed through. She stopped toward the end of the book.

“You sank the Mayor's yacht?” she asked, blinking in surprise.

“I had no choice,” he half-whined in a mild protest.

“On the night of his birthday gala?” she continued, scanning his tight, neat handwriting.

“I didn't want to. All those people aboard...” Clark weakly defended himself.

“A...co-worker of mine died when the yacht went down,”

Lois continued, sounding like she was in a daze, and definitely more to herself than to anyone else. She shook her head. “Cat and I never got along but...the Planet lost some subscriptions once Cat's Corner ended.”

Clark nodded. “I didn't realize Cat Grant was someone you knew. I guess I should have put it together. But Lex? He was *thrilled* she was one of the ones who didn't make it. She, apparently, had a few...less than favorable articles on him that she'd written.”

“She...was a hard woman to impress,” Lois offered with a shrug.

“I'm...I'm sorry...how can you even stand me?” he asked, repulsed by his own actions. “First you find out I took your family away and almost killed you, now you find out I killed your friend.”

Lois leveled a gaze at him. “I said Cat was a co-worker. She was *never* a friend.”

“Still...”

“No, Clark. That's all I want to discuss. These journals...they're going to be invaluable,” she told him, putting the books aside and taking his hands in hers. “Thank you for them.”

Even Bruce looked at him with approval in his eyes. “I agree. Thank you. It may not be the testimony we'd hoped for, but these journals should be the final nail in Luthor's coffin.”

“You know what, Bruce? I sincerely hope so,” Clark said darkly.

\*\*\*

The farmhouse was eerily quiet with Bruce and Lois gone. Clark felt uneasy, like a thief or other intruder, like he wasn't supposed to be there at all. Alfred did his best to cheer Clark up, but as the hours passed between when Lois had left and when he

could expect to have her back in his arms, he grew listless. Still, he tried to be as sociable and friendly as he could to the old man. Despite what lingering mistrust Clark and Bruce reserved for each other, Clark rather liked the aging butler. For the hundredth time, Clark sent up a silent prayer of thanks that he hadn't succeeded in killing Alfred on either one of his assignments.

Yet, for all the conversation Alfred attempted to strike up with him, Clark was restless and on edge. He ate the tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches Alfred made for lunch out of politeness, and choked down the – delicious, even if he had no appetite – rare roast beef and vegetables the man cooked for dinner only through sheer effort. His gut was telling him that something was very, very wrong, though he didn't have a clue as to what it could possibly be.

He whittled away what hours he could trying to keep himself busy. The weather, though cold – was bright and clear, and warmer than it had been in weeks. Clark found a list of “To Do” items around the farm that Lucius had begun but had clearly never finished, as evidenced by the fact that he found all the items he needed to complete the list within the barn. Clark wasn't a handyman by any stretch of the imagination, but, after reading *through The Idiot's Guide To Home Repairs*, he felt confident enough to try and tackle the list. Before long, he'd replaced the leaky bathroom faucet, retiled the bathroom floor, sheetrocked and painted the basement, fixed the squeaky staircase leading to the second floor, and fixed the loose shingles on the barn roof. No one had asked him to do such chores, but he felt compelled to do *something* in exchange for Lucius allowing them all to hide out at his house. It was true that Clark had never met the man – only seen the pictures of him with his family hanging in the house – but he was grateful for the farmhouse haven where he'd been allowed to escape Lex's efforts to find him, as well as the place where he and Lois had been able to explore their blossoming relationship in depth.

So, it was with thankfulness in his heart that Clark set himself to his tasks. But once he was finished with the list, he felt no better. In fact, his dread had only grown worse. He flew up into the sky, breaking through the Earth's atmosphere to hang motionless in that space between the world he knew and the vast, cold, impersonal universe. He stayed for as long as he could, until his lungs were on fire for want of a fresh breath of air. But while he was up there, he let his mind wander. He found himself praying, in a fashion, for forgiveness for his tortured, misguided past and all the murders he'd committed in Lex's name. He wasn't entirely sure if he believed in a higher power or not, but he supposed it could well be that some unearthly force out there might hear his thoughts and grant him absolution. Not that he deserved it, he knew. But he was making an honest attempt to turn his life around, thanks to Lois. Shouldn't that alone earn him at least a *little* slack?

*For Lois, I would do anything*, his mind whispered in a contented sigh. *I'll never understand why she loves me, but I will do anything to make certain I'm worthy of her love.*

Then he was dropping from the sky, too fast for any mortal person to hope to see, breathing in deeply and assuaging his burning lungs with sweet, fresh, cool air. By then, it was dinner time, and he made a sham of enjoying the meal. If he fooled Alfred or not, he wasn't sure. The old man never let on if he suspected that Clark's heart and stomach weren't in the right place to delight in the food.

“It's nearly time for the debate,” Alfred said a little while later, pulling Clark away from the book he was distractedly trying – and failing – to read.

“Oh. Thanks, Alfred,” he said, shutting the book without marking his place in it. It was a futile gesture anyway. He'd retained nothing of which his eyes had glossed over.

He set the book aside and grabbed the TV remote, which was

next to him as he lay sprawled on the couch. He sat up, making room for the kind butler, and turned on the television. Alfred nodded his thanks, then sat down on the opposite side of the couch.

“Coffee?” the man asked.

Clark shook his head. “No, but thanks for the offer. I’m a bit too worked up to drink anything.”

“It’s just a simple debate,” Alfred gently reminded him.

But Clark frowned and shook his head again. “I know. But I can’t help feeling like something isn’t right. I had the same gut feeling the night Bruce captured me when I went to Wayne Manor. I’m worried, Alfred.”

“Master Bruce has taken every precaution. He’s got more than a few of his own security guards manning the debate. He’s as safe as he can get.”

“Not safe enough,” Clark muttered.

Alfred turned to him, tight lines of worry showing around his eyes. “Truth be told, I’m not thrilled he’s there tonight either. But Lex Luthor does *not* know Master Bruce has been in contact with you. He has no reason to go after him.”

“You’re wrong, Alfred,” Clark said, his stomach roiling. “He’s already got a grudge against Bruce. He sent me to kill him – and you – twice. While he may not be stupid enough to try something at the debate, there’s no guarantee. As the years have gone by, Lex has gotten more and more unstable. Having me there as his personal assassin only helped to distort his mind and inflate his own sense of invulnerability.”

“You really think he’ll attempt something tonight?” Alfred asked, chewing his lower lip.

Clark sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know. And it’s the not knowing that has my nerves on edge.”

He busied himself with finding the correct channel to watch the debate, but he could not stop the black cloud of despair and apprehension from hanging over his head. He tried to focus on the television screen. The MCs were already talking, but Clark tuned them out as the camera made a sweeping pan over the gathered crowd, every one of their faces showing excitement for the debate, which was mere moments away. A cheer went up as the candidates took to the stage, but just before the camera cut away from the crowd, Clark caught a glimpse of Nigel St. John, Lex’s trusted old friend and underling, whose hands were, perhaps, even bloodier than Clark’s.

Clark felt his stomach bottom out as he stood. Alfred scrambled to his feet in alarm, peering at Clark’s face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nigel,” Clark said through gritted teeth. “Lex is up to something.”

Before Alfred could respond in any way, Clark was off. The living room door slammed shut in his wake, pulled closed by the slipstream Clark left behind. As soon as he’d cleared the porch, Clark shot up into the sky and tore through the darkness, racing the wind and mocking the stars with his speed. Faster and faster he flew, urging himself to move with a speed greater than he’d ever attempted before. He felt the air’s resistance against his body, like he was flying through layers of plastic wrap, all of it trying to hold him back. He forced another burst of speed, and felt the air around him tear asunder. A second later, he heard the fading remains of a sonic boom far to his rear, but he had already put a considerable distance behind him when it sounded.

He flew in a straight, unwavering course to where the debate was being held. As he grew closer, he stretched out with his senses, searching for any clue as to if there was an imminent danger for him to ward off. But the crowd in the outdoor arena was too large and too noisy for Clark to get much more than a disjointed, jumbled mess of sound that was more confusing and disorienting than anything else. He scanned the ocean of faces, trying to guess as to where the camera had been pointed when

he’d glimpsed Nigel, but there were too many cameras to narrow down his search, and it was entirely possible that Nigel had already moved his position.

*He’ll want to be close enough to the front, but not so crowded in as to be left without an escape*, Clark reasoned, his mind automatically slipping back to the thoughts that had been foremost in his mind during his earliest days as an assassin.

Swiftly, he pinpointed a few key areas where he would have wanted to be, if he were the one doing the killing. But, before he could check them thoroughly, a crack sounded out.

*Gunshot!* his brain screamed.

“Bruce!” he bellowed, instinctively altering his course to shield the billionaire.

He was half a second too late. The bullet struck Bruce in his left shoulder. As if in slow motion, blood exploded from the wound, arcing and splattering in a red mist, while the front of Bruce’s pristine white Oxford shirt grew red with a rapidly spreading stain. Bits of bone were mingled in the spray of red – the bullet appeared to have struck Bruce in the shoulder near his collarbone – a potentially fatal strike, but at least it hadn’t been the man’s heart.

Bruce cried out in pain and shock as the bullet tore through his flesh. Clark saw the billionaire’s left arm immediately go limp, even before Bruce’s knees gave out and he crashed to the stage floor. Clark slipped into his X-ray vision. Bruce’s artery had been nicked, but had, thankfully, not been severed. Still, with each beat of the man’s heart, blood spurted from the wound, making a puddle on the stage.

In the next heartbeat, Clark was kneeling by Bruce’s side, ripping off a section of the billionaire’s expensive, custom tailored suit, pressing the navy-blue fabric to the wound. Even if he couldn’t completely stop the flow of blood, it had to be at least a little helpful, he reasoned. He had to try everything and anything to save Bruce’s life.

“It’s okay, Bruce. I’ve got you,” he told the man as he quickly worked to stem the flow of blood. Then, looking to the guards, “Find the shooter!”

One of the guards spoke rapidly into his walkie talkie. It appeared he was requesting medical help. But Clark wasn’t willing to wait. He gently and carefully lifted Bruce in his arms, then he rose into the sky, while the audience screamed and pointed at the flying man, making a beeline for the nearest hospital.

“Looks like you’re flying with me anyway,” he joked, looking down at Bruce.

Bruce gave him a weak laugh. “Is this where you say ‘I told you so?’” he tossed back with a cough.

Clark shook his head. “No. I’ll leave that to Lois. She can out-argue me any time. She’ll do the perfect job in telling you that you should have listened to me.” He grinned to let the man know he was only half-serious.

As soon as a hospital came into view, Clark angled down and flew right through the emergency room doors, alighting on the floor only once he was inside. He immediately called for aid.

“Help! He’s been shot!”

A doctor and three nurses came running, one of them pushing a gurney. Clark gently laid Bruce down on it, then took the man’s good hand in a gesture of support and strength. The other arm, he noted with a sick feeling in his stomach, had already gone cold and purple, and Clark only hoped Bruce would retain the limb and have function to it restored.

“Take care of him,” he warned the medical staff. Then, to Bruce, “I have to go and make sure Lex doesn’t get away with this. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Then, before anyone could react, he was gone again. In a flash, he was back at the staging ground for the debate. Less than three minutes had gone by since he’d arrived – too late – to save Bruce. People were still in a panic and the guards were having a

difficult time keeping the rioting crowd in check while they searched for Nigel. But Clark's sharp eyes spotted the man trying to weasel his way out of an emergency exit off to the left. He swooped over, grabbed Nigel by the front of his shirt, and flew him over to one of the guards on the stage.

"Here's your shooter," he boldly told the guard, pulling the gun from Nigel's waistband and crushing the barrel enough so that it would never fire again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed other members of the security detail ushering the candidates off stage. He zipped over to them and planted his body directly in front of Lex.

"Not so fast, 'brother,'" he taunted. He took Lex by the arm and half-dragged him back over to center stage. The microphones were still live, so Clark grabbed one off its stand. Grabbing a handful of Lex's black jacket in his free hand, Clark floated them a good five feet off the stage, so he could get everyone's attention, while the guards all murmured to each other uncertainly, none of them willing to risk hitting Lex by firing at the inhuman threat flying above them.

"Excuse me, everyone! May I have your attention, please?" he asked into the microphone, not much hope in his heart that anyone would pay him any mind. But, to his eternal surprise, people stopped in their tracks and looked in awe and terror at the flying man before them. "There's no need to panic. The man who shot Bruce Wayne is in custody. You're all safe now."

A surprised and disbelieving murmur rolled through the crowd like the distant sound of thunder. But people listened and stilled their once erratic, panicky movements. Clark felt confident enough to keep speaking.

"The shooter is a man by the name of Nigel St. John," Clark continued in a clear, steady, bold voice. He wondered at the fact that he was not nervous to address the thousands upon thousands of onlookers. "He works for this man before you. Lex Luthor."

"He's a madman!" Lex cried, loudly enough for the microphone to pick up his voice.

Clark floated them both down to the stage, now that all eyes were on him and he didn't need to resort to theatrics to grab people's attention.

"Lex hired Nigel to make the hit on Bruce tonight," Clark asserted confidently.

"What proof do you have?" Lex taunted. "Without proof, all you are is a flying freak of nature. An *alien*, incapable of relating to humans!" He craned his neck out to make his voice better heard in the microphone. "Who will the people believe, *alien*? Some weirdo who happens to appear just when Bruce Wayne was shot? Or me? A man who has *always* provided reliable goods and services to them, who's dedicated billions to charities and scientific research into things like curing cancer."

A grumble swept through the crowd, and Clark knew he was losing ground with them.

"Maybe *you* are the one who shot Bruce Wayne!" Lex accused evenly.

The crowd didn't seem to know how to react to them. Most stood in silence, others nodded to themselves, others growled in contempt of Clark.

"I know his words *seem* to make sense," Clark addressed the crowd. "But I know what I'm talking about. My name... was once Kal Luthor, Lex's adopted younger brother. He faked my death, gave me a new identity, and hid me away from the world. He had me... commit numerous crimes on his behalf. Believe me when I say ordering a hit on Bruce Wayne tonight is consistent with the kind of man Lex is."

"Lies! Unsubstantiated lies!" Lex spat.

"He's not lying!" That was Lois, who'd fought her way to the front of the audience. She clambered up the staircase to the stage and stood just to Clark's left, on the side opposite from where he held Lex. She stayed back, assessing the situation as Clark silently

and subtly shook his head no.

"This is ridiculous! Guards! Get them!" Lex barked.

But even the security detail that Lex had hired were wary of the man they'd just seen fly above the stage. They looked from one to another uncertainly, shaking their heads and muttering to themselves. Not one of them rushed forward to help.

"Lex Luthor is a psychopath," Clark continued, his eyes pleading with the crowd to listen to him. "This is *not* a man you want running and ruining this great country. He cares only for his own self interests. Soon, thanks to Lois Lane and Bruce Wayne, his deeds will be exposed for all the world to see. I've been working closely with them for half a year now, of my own free will, to prove to the world, once and for all, that Lex Luthor is a criminal mastermind."

He'd felt compelled to lie to the world, making it seem like all those months he'd been locked away under the Metropolis city streets in the old abandoned fallout shelter had been by choice. He didn't want Bruce to come under fire for falsely imprisoning a man, even if that man had been a ruthless, remorseless assassin at the time. And he certainly did not want Lois to be in the crosshairs of any investigations.

"It's over, Lex," Clark said in a lower, but deathly firm, voice that the microphone only just barely picked up. "You've lost. It's over. Your reign of terror. Your empire. Your bid to become one of the most powerful people in the world."

"Are you going to kill me?" Lex spat out, taunting him with a snort of disbelief, challenging him before the entire world as the cameras kept rolling.

In his mind's eye, Clark saw that night, so long ago, when Lex had pulled the Kryptonite collar out from a box. Once again, he saw the sneer and superiority in Lex's features, the way the man had enjoyed every moment of Clark's pain. He remembered how much Lex had loved having such incredible power, the way he'd relished crippling the most powerful man in the world. He remembered how mentally crushing it was to become Lex's slave.

Clark took a long time to answer, enjoying the flickers of heavily masked uncertainty that raced across Lex's features, despite his show of bravado.

"No, Lex," Clark finally answered.

"Coward," Lex shot back. Clark recognized the tone. Lex was trying to get into his mind, and Clark was not going to allow that.

In his head, he heard himself begging Bruce and Lois for the chance to kill Lex. He heard his arguments for how only an agonizing death befit the multitudinous crimes Lex had committed. He felt the righteous rage building in his heart and it was an effort to tamp it down and retain his composure. If Lex only knew how much hate was in Clark's heart, he would know he'd won, regardless of if Clark snapped his miserable neck or not.

"For a long time, I fantasized about taking your life," Clark admitted in a whisper. "It seemed only right and fair. But someone recently made me see that killing you only lowers me to your level. So, *no*, I'm not going to give you the release of death. You'll be very much alive to watch as you lose *everything* you ever held dear."

"I always knew you were *weak*," Lex snapped.

*Weak.*

*Pathetic.*

*Useless.*

*Burden.*

All the old terms Lex had hurled at him over the years came back to assault Clark's mind. He gritted his teeth against screaming out against them and fought to master his emotions.

Clark shook his head. "No, Lex. I'm stronger than I ever was, even in your worst nightmares."

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Lex growled lowly, twisting in Clark's grasp so that he could look him in the eyes. He moved his face directly into Clark's, challenging

him, unflinching in the presence of the super powers he knew lurked beneath Clark's calm, but stern, appearance. "You've just made a serious mistake."

How many times had Lex come close to ending Clark's life over the years? How many times had he exposed him to Kryptonite, leaving Clark in writhing agony, torturing him over the tiniest perceived slights or failures? How many times had Clark been left gasping for breath, too weak to stand or even sit, when his punishment was over? How many nightmares had he suffered as a direct result?

"No, Lex," Clark said, his voice as unyielding as granite, "*you* are the one who made the mistake. You tried to take my life from me, in every way imaginable. But you don't have any power over me anymore."

"Oh? Don't I?" Lex taunted, his eyes lighting up at some internal joke that only he knew the punchline to. "I said I should have killed you long ago. But tonight will work just fine."

At first, the words didn't really register with Clark. They felt too empty, too out-of-habit for them to really mean anything to him. It wasn't until Lex tore himself from Clark's distracted grip and stuck his hand into his pocket that Clark realized the gravity of the situation. He tried to react, but he was still stuck in his painful memories and was already too late. Lex whipped out a thin, pencil-like object from the inner breast pocket of his coat and flicked a button on the side. Instantly, a sharp, slender rod of Kryptonite coated metal shot out from within. Fully extended, the weapon was nearly a foot long.

As soon as the Kryptonite was exposed, Clark felt the too-familiar sickening effects of the stone. His entire body felt aflame, his head pounded, his muscles grew weak, and he felt nauseous. With his reflexes seized in pain, he could not stop what came next.

Grinning like the Devil himself, Lex took a half step forward and used that momentum to stab the razor-sharp point of the metal rod into Clark's abdomen. A scream ripped from Clark's throat, loud enough to practically shake the foundation of the arena the debate was supposed to have taken place in. An evil light danced in Lex's eyes as he twisted the rod. Clark felt every tear as Lex shredded his intestines. Then Lex withdrew the rod before stabbing him again, this time puncturing Clark's stomach. He screamed again as the acids housed within his stomach gushed out, burning his body with invisible flames, in a way that was almost more intense than the pain from the Kryptonite. Clark felt blood rushing into his abdomen as he started to bleed out. A trickle of blood bubbled up in his throat and dribbled out between his lips.

"Clark!" Lois screamed in terror and anger.

"Enjoy Hell," Lex whispered in Clark's ear as he twisted the Kryptonite coated metal hard enough to break off a good four-inch-long section, leaving it embedded in Clark's guts.

"Drop the weapon!" a man's voice called out.

Clark's vision had narrowed to pinpricks of haze, but he was vaguely aware of the fact that the voice belonged to a uniformed police officer. From the tone of his command, it was evident that the man was *not* one of the ones on Lex's payroll. Then he crashed to the floor, sprawled on his side. With a grunt of effort, he rolled to his back, to alleviate the pressure on his wound.

"Drop the weapon now!" the officer repeated.

Lois was at Clark's side now. He could see the fearful tears in her eyes. She gave his wound a panicked look, her hands shaking and hovering above the bloody holes in his body. A pool of blood began to spread beneath Clark's body; he could feel its warmth as his body started to go cold. He was in shock as much as he was losing his tenuous grip on life.

"Lois," he gasped in a whisper, lacking the strength to make his voice heard any better than that.

"Get away from him!" he heard Lex sneer, trying to pull Lois away.

"Back away!" the cop yelled.

Clark saw the rest of the metal rod in Lex's hand and the look of rage on his "brother's" face. Lex raised the rod, ready to strike once more with the jagged, broken end of it. Clark closed his eyes, waiting for the terminal blow. But it never came. A shot rang out and Lex gave a strangled cry before slumping to the ground. If he was dead, Clark wasn't sure. He felt only relief that Lex had been stopped.

"Lois," he rasped again.

In the background, he heard someone calling for the paramedics.

"I'm here," Lois told him, taking his hand in hers.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "For everything. I tried so hard..."

"Ssh," she shushed him, fighting back her tears, though a few made it past her defenses and slipped down her cheeks. "Save your strength. Help is on the way. Just hold on, Clark."

"Trying..."

She switched her hands then, taking his hand in her left and using her right to gently, lovingly cup his cheek in the way he always did to her.

"Please, fight," she whispered, choking on her emotions.

"Expose...Lex. Even if...dead," Clark croaked. "Must...bring justice."

"I will, I promise." She kissed his hand and he felt the wetness from her tears on his skin.

"Never...forget. I...love...you," he gasped as his vision faded and his pulse weakened.

"I love you too," she sobbed, as realization dawned in her features. For just a moment, she pressed her lips to his in a kiss.

Clark felt his breathing slow and become shallower. A tiredness settled over him. It became too hard to keep his eyes open, so he let them shut. He tried to listen to the comforting sound of Lois' heartbeat, but his powers were gone, thanks to the radioactive stone lodged within him. He could only hear Lois' unchecked sobbing and he tried to will his love to seep into her and take away her pain.

Then, before he could repeat his declaration of his undying love, the world slipped away.

\*\*\*

The world of the mid 1990s faded away. A brief blackness followed, then the familiar world of 2128 slowly coalesced around Clark Kent the Fourth, affectionately known around the halls of the Abstergo Corporation as "CK." He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the harsh fluorescent lighting in the room as the virtual display before his eyes automatically turned off, leaving his glasses unobstructed again. He yawned broadly, exhausted beyond measure, mentally, physically, and emotionally from the ordeal he'd just been through. He could scarcely wait to lay down and get a well-deserved sleep.

"How was it?" his boss asked, stepping into the room from the smaller observation area to the side.

"Brutal," he answered, slipping his hands out of the haptic gloves he'd been using. "I didn't expect it to be so...draining," he continued.

Dr. Kenneth Klein nodded. "It's exhausting for *everyone* the first few times. But, the good news is, after a few more trips into the Animus, you'll get used to it."

But Clark shook his head. "That's not it though. Yeah, I'm *physically* tired but...I didn't...I never expected it to be so... *emotional*."

Dr. Klein nodded once again. "Of course, every trip is different. But, for some, the trips into their ancestors' memories isn't bad. Even though they are actually 'living' through the events, they can disassociate themselves from what they're experiencing. For others...it's harder."

"I knew about my great-great-great grandfather's past," Clark said, unstrapping himself and stepping down out of the gyrospheric apparatus that had allowed his body to move and twist

as he'd digitally inhabited the body of his ancestor. He shook his head. "I just never realized how hellish his life really was. He truly was a tortured soul."

"I tried to warn you," his boss said sympathetically, putting a hand on the young man's shoulder.

Clark sighed wearily as he shuffled across the room and sat down heavily in the armchair the Abstergo company provided in each room where its employees entered into the Animus. He hung his head and rested his chin on his chest, catching his breath and gathering his strength.

"We can debrief tomorrow," Dr. Klein offered kindly.

"No, I can do it. Over dinner," he added with a wry grin. "I'm starving."

"The cafeteria is still open. I hear it's surf and turf night," the older man informed him.

"Perfect." But he didn't get up right away.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just...it's weird to me, that's all."

"What is?"

Clark shrugged. "*Everything*. The original Clark. My great-great-great grandfather. He was twisted and manipulated into becoming this...this truly *awful* person. But from him...from his undying love for Lois Lane...all of *this* happened."

"Utopia," Dr. Klein said with a knowing nod.

But Clark shook his head and scratched his ear. "Not *just* utopia. Because of him, I'm *alive*. It's incredible, you know?" He shook his head again, this time sadly as a great heaviness settled in his heart. "He had this...horrific life. His mind was warped at a young age. He was manipulated and forced to kill *so* many people. He was a slave to the man who should have been his brother. He was tortured with Kryptonite too many times to count. *Everything* was stacked against him." His voice was strained with the swirling emotions that being in the Animus, living the first Clark's life through his memories, had stirred up. A lump was in his throat as he fought back tears born from the hopelessness he'd felt emanating from his ancestor as he'd been forced to kill and know there would be no other life for him.

"But?" Dr. Klein prompted, as Clark fell silent to collect his thoughts.

"But...he changed. He risked everything for a woman he didn't even know. He allowed love to slip into his heart. He sacrificed everything to keep her safe."

"Love is the most powerful force in the universe," his boss remarked thoughtfully.

Clark nodded and looked at the painting on the wall, depicting the first Clark. It had been commissioned by Lois shortly after the man's death. How Abstergo had gotten hold of it, Clark didn't know. It should have been in a museum somewhere. But he rather liked the fact that it adorned the room where, day after day, week after week, Clark had relived the memories of his great-great-great grandfather. It had helped him to feel connected to his ancestor well before he'd ever climbed up into the Animus, strapped on the haptic gear, and allowed his mind to be transported to the far less civilized mid 1990s and experience the life Clark Kent the First had lived.

Clark pulled his gaze away to look at his boss. "You can say that again." He gestured to the painting. "My great-great-great grandfather should have become the world's most devastating villain. He should have destroyed this planet. He *could* have. He had more than enough power to, once he escaped from Lex Luthor's influence." He made a fist in his passion, then relaxed once more as images of his great-great-great grandmother flashed in his mind. He could see her gentle smile. It was no wonder why the first Clark had fallen so hard and fast for her.

He shook his head to dispel the images lingering in his mind. "But he found love instead. My great-great-great grandmother. Lois Lane. She saved the world, simply by returning his love. If

she hadn't...I hate to think of the consequences."

He let out an involuntary shuddering sigh, doubting he would ever be brave enough to let his mind wander down the dark paths of 'what if.' What if the original Clark hadn't been captured and held prisoner by Bruce Wayne? What if he'd never met Lois? What if Clark *had* met her, but *hadn't* been strong enough to let love into his life? What if Lois had never been able to see past the fact that Clark had been an assassin? What if she'd never forgiven him for killing her parents and sister?

What if?

What if?

What if?

Clark shook his head again. The 'what ifs' didn't matter. His great-great-great grandfather *had* changed, thanks to Lois Lane and none of the morbid possible futures had come to pass. A smile crossed his face and his eyes sparkled in wonderment.

"But she *did* love him," he continued after a moment of collecting his thoughts. "And that made all the difference. He spent his final days, his final moments, as a force for good. He laid the groundwork to expose the horrors Lex Luthor had committed. His journals and testimonials toppled one of the largest crime organizations in the country."

"Four generations born from him," Dr. Klein agreed in awe.

"All of them making a difference in the world. All of them changing our world for the better. And all because one couple fell in love."

Clark nodded, his voice going soft with awe and reverence for his ancestors. "A couple that, for all intents and purposes, never should have been. They had *everything* working against them."

Dr. Klein smiled at him and patted his shoulder in understanding. "And that, my boy, is exactly *why* their love story is so timeless. It's why families *still* recount the tale to their children, time and time again, why children ask for it as a bedtime story, why so many still visit the museums dedicated to Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

"And yet, Clark isn't always viewed in the best light," Clark pointed out with a soft sigh. "Not that I can blame them too much. People don't know his whole story. How can they? They haven't lived the horrors he did. They never *will*, thanks to the work his descendants have done in making the world safer and more peaceful."

"And that's why I felt it was so important to send you into the Animus," Dr. Klein reminded him with a kindly look. "His story has never been properly told. Oh, your great-great-great grandmother did a commendable job of it, based on what he'd told her and what he'd written in his journals. But to *experience* his full life? What you learned in there," he said, gesturing to the now-silent machine behind them, "it's going to utterly reshape the way people look at your great-great-great grandfather."

Clark nodded as he recalled the stories he'd been told all throughout his childhood, at bedtime when his father would tuck him in, at his grandfather's knee in front of the cozy fireplace on cold winter nights, at the hospital bedside of his great grandfather, who, though suffering from dementia, could recount the story of Lois and Clark with crystal-sharp clarity. A wistful smile touched his lips, even as he fought to reconcile the tamed-down stories he'd been told with the violent truth of what the first Clark's life had been like.

He looked to the large, glossy, framed photograph of Lois Lane that hung next to the painting of his great-great-great grandfather. In it, she held two laughing toddlers in her arms — Clark Kent the Second and Samuel Kent. She was smiling, but it wasn't the same smile Clark had seen while in the Animus. This smile, though lovingly directed at her sons, was tinged with a sadness that Clark had seen in *every* "post-Clark" photograph, as he'd dubbed them in his mind.

"It's a shame," he said finally, looking away and down at his

hands, which lay nestled in his lap. “After such a tortured life, Clark barely got to experience any happiness, at least, not for very long. Two weeks. That’s all he had. Two weeks of freedom. Two weeks of being in love with Lois.” Another heavy sigh escaped his lips, his chest heaving with the weight of it. “He never even knew he was going to be a father.” He paused for a moment as the tiniest smile curved his lips upward in a reflective way. “Of course, neither did Lois.”

Silently, he recounted the story he’d been told by his family all his life. It hadn’t been until two months after his great-great-grandfather’s funeral that Lois Lane had even discovered that she was pregnant. And that had only been because of Bruce Wayne.

“What woman would?” Dr. Klein mused. “She would have been too newly-pregnant to know before Clark’s murder.”

Clark the Fourth nodded sadly, thinking back over the story. No matter how many times he’d heard it, it had never ceased to bring him both a pang of sadness and amused disbelief. How anyone could go nearly three months without knowing they were pregnant still baffled him. He’d witnessed enough family members expand their families. His own aunt had endured the most grueling first trimester he could imagine, and though he’d been a mere seven years old at the time, the images of how sick she’d been still stuck with him to this day. And now that his own wife was expecting their first child, he was even *more* hyper-aware of the changes pregnancy made to a woman’s body.

And yet...now that he’d been through the Animus, he thought he understood it a little better. In living through the first Clark’s memories, he’d learned just how powerful love was. Loving his own wife was easy. Lois and Clark had needed to fight for every last iota of their happiness together, which had brought their love to unparalleled heights.

Unbidden, the image of the heartbroken, agonized, soul-shattered expression on his great-great-grandmother’s young face as she cradled Clark’s dying body in her arms popped into his mind, chilling him to the bone. It was a look he knew he would never forget. It would haunt him for the rest of his life. He’d never seen anything like it before and doubted he ever would, even though he’d long ago taken up the role of a super-protector of the world, as had his father before him, and his father before him, and his father before him, following in the steps Clark Kent the Second had laid down, starting in his late-twenties.

A lump formed in Clark’s throat and he swallowed hard, trying to remove it while his eyes misted over. Quickly, he scrubbed his eyes with his sleeve, ridding himself of the evidence of the forceful emotions swirling within him, threatening to bring him to his knees.

Finally, after a long few moments, he felt confident enough to speak. “After the funeral, she kind of fell apart,” he explained softly.

Dr. Klein looked at him with quizzical expression. Clark knew the story of how Lois Lane had discovered her pregnancy was knowledge kept only within the family.

“At least, that’s what I’ve always been told,” Clark quickly elaborated with a shrug. The story poured out of him with ease as he recounted the tale for his boss. “She was tired all the time and was barely able to keep anything down.” He sighed again, for the first time appreciating how much his great-great-grandmother had suffered. “Even water.”

Dr. Klein’s eyebrows raised in a silent “yikes” and Clark nodded in acknowledgment. Once again, Lois’ mournful, terrified cries as she realized the love of her life was dying rang in his ears, as clearly as if he were back in the Animus, watching it happen all over again. He heard her screams as she realized that there was nothing she could do to save him. He shuddered again as his heart broke anew for the woman he’d never gotten to meet in real life.

Shakily, he continued. “Bruce took her to the hospital, afraid for her life. He thought she was dying. At least, that’s how I’ve

always heard it told by Bruce’s great grandson, William. Bruce thought that she’d given up the will to live with her fiancé dead.” A wistful smile crossed his lips as he remembered the fiercely strong woman he’d gotten to know through the original Clark’s memories. “But she wasn’t dying. She was pregnant...with twins no less.”

“That had to have been quite the shock,” Dr. Klein remarked, shaking his head awe.

“I’m sure it was,” Clark confirmed, absentmindedly wiping his hands on his pant legs. “It wound up being a blessing in disguise though. I was told that the news brought her back from the edge. In a way, Bruce hadn’t been completely wrong. While she hadn’t given up her will to live, she was certainly detached from the world around her. Those babies of hers gave her a reason to live, to fight, to become a force for good, to finish the work Clark had started.”

He smiled distractedly, so bound up in the memories of the stories he’d grown up hearing that he no longer saw the room in Abstergo anymore. Instead, the ghostly images of his great-great-grandparents floated before his waking eyes, rendering him blind to all else. But they comforted him, rather than disturbed him, like benevolent angels sent to watch over him.

Once again, he heard his great-great-grandfather’s vows to Lois and remembered the way the man had sworn to himself in his heart and mind that he would one day be worthy of her love. He recalled Clark’s solemn oath to be a better man and to make a life for both of them, and it resonated deeply with him. And while Clark the First hadn’t been able to marry Lois Lane and start a new life with her in which they raised their family as husband and wife, he *had* made good on all the rest of his promises. Clark the Fourth smiled again as he thought about all the good that had come from the changes his great-great-grandfather had made.

He’d saved Bruce Wayne’s life, though he’d never much cared for the man. Sure, Bruce hadn’t won the election – the public had re-elected President Garner rather than the billionaire who’d survived three assassination attempts – but he’d gone on to help Lois ensure that the world never forgot Clark Kent, the man who’d been instrumental in taking down Lex Luthor. Clark the Fourth chuckled to himself. Not only had Clark saved Bruce’s life, by taking him to the hospital he’d chosen, he’d also inadvertently helped Bruce to meet his future wife – the surgeon who’d removed the bullet from his shoulder and repaired the damage it had done, though Bruce had never regained the full use of his arm again. Bruce had gone from being mistrustful and half-loathing Clark the First to becoming one of his biggest supporters, lauding Clark’s sacrifices and building museums around the country dedicated to both Lois and Clark in his later years, once Clark’s sons had begun the process of bringing the once-impossible notion of a utopian society closer to reality.

All because he’d come to understand how deeply Clark Kent’s love for Lois Lane had forever changed the former assassin.

Between Lois’ efforts and Bruce’s financing, the world had come to know the Father of Utopia.

But Clark had cemented his own immortality in his own right as well. The journals detailing all of Lex Luthor’s evil deeds had been instrumental – indeed, absolutely vital – in bringing the disgraced billionaire to justice. Clark the Fourth had seen the old film reels of Lex Luthor’s trial. He’d listened as his great-great-grandmother had read the words written by his great-great-grandfather, chronicling the way Lex had brainwashed him into becoming a super assassin and recounting, in minute detail, each murder he’d been forced to commit. He still felt a chill run down his spine as he recalled Lois Lane’s voice – strong and clear, though plainly biting back tears as she read the journals for the jury, lawyers, and the world at large.

Those journals had secured a verdict of ‘guilty’ and had

pushed the presiding judge firmly in the direction of the death penalty. Lex Luthor – paralyzed from the waist down from the bullet that had stopped him from dealing the killing blow to Clark the First – had been denied any appeals and had, instead, faced a brief stay on death row and a swift execution. Afterwards, the journals had been donated to the Smithsonian Museum and considered as important a piece of history as the diary of Anne Frank or the death camps of Nazi Germany. Even now, four – soon to be five – generations later, every high school student in the country studied those journals as part of their history classes.

“Clark?” Dr. Klein prodded worriedly, peering at the far-off look in the younger man’s eyes.

“Oh, sorry,” Clark replied, clearing his throat, pulling himself out of his thoughts.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Clark affirmed. “I was just...thinking. It’s pretty incredible, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“Everything. Once my great-great-great grandmother discovered that she was carrying Clark’s sons, it pulled her out that dark, isolated place she’d slipped in after his death. It propelled her into motion and made her more determined than ever to honor Clark’s memory and take down the man who’d imprisoned, brainwashed, and tortured him for most of his life.” Clark’s voice was soft with respect for the amazing woman Lois Lane had been. It was humbling, when he thought about it, to know that he was descended from her as much as the first Clark.

“She brought Lex Luthor’s misdeeds to light and utterly destroyed both him and everything he’d ever built. She made absolutely certain history would remember him with the same disdain it does for Hitler and Stalin.”

“She raised her boys well,” Dr. Klein added after a moment, after Clark grew silent and contemplative.

He nodded gently. “She did. Those two boys grew up to be great men who helped usher in utopia. Because of them we now have a perfect world; peaceful and safe, in a way that the first Clark never got to experience for himself.” He sighed heavily, wishing the reformed assassin could have lived to see such greatness come to pass. “And yet, the world is still split on their opinion of Clark. For every person who sees him as a beacon of hope, there are a dozen others who still view him as a villain. They can’t see past the forced misdeeds he’d been coerced to commit. They don’t understand how much it hurt him to make all those kills, despite how much he’d tried to numb himself to the atrocities he was committing.”

“A view you’re going to help us change,” Dr. Klein confidently assured him. “With the knowledge you gained in there, we’ll be able to bring your great-great-great grandfather’s story to life. His life’s story will be turned into movies and holograms, taught in schools alongside his journals, turned into museum exhibits, featured on the news. The whole nine yards,” he vowed.

Clark nodded gravely. “I guess the saying is true. Post tenebras lux. Light from darkness.”

“All great and beautiful work has come of first gazing without shrinking into the darkness,” Dr. Klein quoted in turn.

“Who’s that from?” Clark said, looking up with interest. “I don’t recognize it.”

“John Ruskin,” his boss replied.

Clark nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll have to add him to my list of authors to read.”

“I think you’ll enjoy his works,” Dr. Klein said with a slight smile. “I’ll give you some time to recuperate and meet you downstairs?”

Clark pushed himself up out of the chair with a strength that went beyond the super powers he’d inherited through his Kryptonian genes. He squared his shoulders and gave his boss a

tired, but content, smile. He shook his head.

“No, I’m okay. I’m actually really excited to share what I’ve learned. I think it’s going to revolutionize the way people look at the man who gave the Mother of Utopia her family back, and, in so doing, changed the world.”

THE END