

Vagrant

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Summary: Fifteen-year-old Alt-Clark runs away from his foster home and has to make it on his own on the streets of Metropolis.

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He listened for the police, gathering his belongings as quickly as he could. Shame made his hands tremble. It wasn't at all like it was in the movies, and Clark couldn't get the sound out of his head.

He'd had run-ins with the law in the past, of course. Setting fires was frowned on, even if the fires were accidental, and no one had believed him.

No one had ever believed him, and they weren't going to believe him about this. For all he knew, this could be something worse than a few broken ribs. A punctured lung, a blood clot... anything could go wrong, and if it did, it would all be laid at his feet.

At the very least, his time at this foster home was done. At the most, he'd be tried as an adult and spend years in jail.

He packed faster. In jail, it would only be a matter of time before they discovered just how different he was. His father had warned him before he died about being dissected like a frog. What use were human rights if you weren't even human?

The last of his possessions fit in his school backpack; it was a depressingly small amount, but he'd learned to pack light over the last five years. He never knew when something would happen and force him to leave yet another foster family.

It was better to never get attached. He should have learned by now, but he'd let his guard down here of all places. These were good people, and he'd let himself relax.

He zipped the backpack and looked around the spare room to see if there was anything he'd missed.

This was the first room he'd had to himself in five years, and Clark was surprised at the pang of regret as he looked over the small room. He'd miss this place, these people. They'd treated him like a human being, which was more than he could say of most.

Shouldering his backpack, he glanced outside. A Wichita police cruiser was pulling up to the front of the house, and while its lights were not running, Clark stiffened. The familiar Child Protective Services sedan was pulling up behind.

This incident wouldn't just get Clark incarcerated. It would trigger an investigation of the Goodman family. Clark felt another wave of shame and guilt wash over him.

The thought of turning himself in flashed through his mind, but it was overcome by the thought of being dissected. While it was reasonable that he should pay for his crime, it wasn't fair for him to have to give up his entire life.

Clark turned and stepped out onto the landing. He could hear the door to the police cruiser open even as he took the stairs two at a time.

He had been faster than a normal person even at ten; by the time the two policemen reached the front door, he was already through the gate leading into the alley.

He had to get out of the city. Even with his abilities, he

doubted he could outrun a police cruiser, and he knew he wouldn't be able to outrun a police helicopter. While Wichita had more than a quarter-million people, it wouldn't be hard to find a fifteen-year-old during the school day. Despite his experiences in the foster care system, Clark didn't know all that much about being homeless.

It'd be easy for the police to find him at a homeless shelter or a bread line. Clark hadn't exactly made friends in his previous foster placements, and even if he had, those were the first places the police would look.

He had to go where no one knew him.

He couldn't go back to Smallville. He hadn't been there in five years, but it was a small town. People would remember him, and it would only be a matter of time before someone called Child Protective Services. It wouldn't take long after that for the police to show up.

He had to go to a large city, where homelessness was common and no one cared about people on the streets. Once he was a little older, he'd be able to get work and start a life for himself on his own. Assuming no one had died, the statute of limitations would pass in a few years and he'd be able to stop looking over his shoulder.

In the meantime, he had to keep his head low.

Thirty dollars wasn't going to get him far. The police would be looking at the bus stations anyway, even if he'd been able to afford a bus ticket.

It occurred to him that maybe he was exaggerating the extent of the manhunt that would be after him. Maybe not every police cruiser would be out there looking for him. Maybe the injuries were less severe than he'd thought and no one would recognize him.

He paused for a moment; he wasn't sure how far he'd run, but the dogs barking in the distance behind him, upset by the sounds of his passage through the alley, were a sign that he had to get out of residential areas.

Gasping for breath, he shook his head. He couldn't afford to believe the best-case scenario. If he stayed in town, he'd never be able to relax again; if he was wrong, he'd be easy to catch.

Hitching a ride in town would get him caught. He didn't have the money for a bus. He felt trapped. It wasn't like he could run hundreds of miles without being caught sooner or later.

He started at the low, mournful sound of a train whistle in the distance. He turned his head, and for the first time this evening, he found himself relaxing.

It was odd, but he felt even more exposed here than he had back home. At least in the residential districts he could have made an excuse — his house was around the corner, or he was going to visit a friend.

Here, though, was a neighborhood where no one had an excuse to be out after dark. In many ways, it looked like a place where no one had been in a long time. The buildings were old and ramshackle. Paint was faded and the streetlights weren't well maintained. There were large swathes of darkness which could hide anything.

It wasn't just the police Clark had to worry about anymore, and he felt himself tensing. The thought of confronting someone — anyone — was terrifying.

He'd already hurt one person tonight; the thought of hurting anyone else was overwhelming.

Luckily, he could hear the train engines in the distance. They wouldn't have been audible to anyone with normal human hearing, but they were only three blocks away, and to him, they were as clear as though he'd been standing next to them.

He almost didn't hear the three men coming up the alley; he was so relieved to hear the trains. He retreated into the darkness, his heart pounding as they carried something under a tarp to a

waiting pickup truck.

Clark froze, hardly breathing as one of the men opened the cab of the vehicle. The additional light from the cab might make it easier for the men to see him.

He stepped backward and stumbled on a can.

One of the men looked up sharply. “Did you hear something, Marco?”

The second man peered into the darkness, blinking. The light had apparently ruined his night vision, though, and Clark remained completely still until the man finally turned away.

Clark could tell from their body language that they weren’t supposed to be here. His conscience pricked at him; his parents would have been ashamed of him for letting criminals get away. In Smallville, neighbors helped neighbors, even if that wasn’t true in the rest of the world.

There wasn’t anything he could do about it; he didn’t dare risk confronting them. Letting a thief get away was better than hurting or even killing one.

Still...

Clark stared at the tires of the pickup, and a moment later the first tire blew. A moment after that, the second tire blew as well. It was likely that the men only had one spare, so Clark felt safe with the idea they weren’t going anywhere for a while.

By the time they all pulled out of the truck, he was already long gone.

It was an open, empty flatcar, and the wind whipped past Clark at sixty miles an hour as he huddled on the cold floor of the car. He would have been in serious trouble if he’d been merely human; the night was already cold, and with the wind pulling away any heat that he generated, even he found himself shivering a little.

Some of it wasn’t physical. Clark stared sightlessly out into the darkness, the lights of one community off into the darkness to the right.

Clark’s geography wasn’t the best, but he suspected that he was seeing the lights of Smallville in the distance. He’d been so numb when he left that he hadn’t really appreciated everything he’d lost.

It wasn’t just his parents; Smallville was a community, a place where people cared about and took care of each other.

Foster care was just a place where children went to be warehoused until they turned eighteen. If they were lucky, they found moments of affection; more typically, they did not.

Clark couldn’t remember the last time anyone had touched him in an affectionate way. Even the Goodman family, as wonderful as they had been, had been careful to avoid casual touch. Too many of their charges had issues with being touched. Too many had been abused in ways that didn’t go away.

He didn’t know where he was going, and he didn’t really care. Huddling in the dark, he felt truly lost. He was fifteen years old, but it felt like his life was already over.

The wind took his tears as quickly as they were formed.

Jerking awake, Clark realized that he was shivering. His clothes were damp from a light mist, and the wind was pulling heat away from his body.

He could see frost beginning to form, and he knew that any normal person would have been in serious trouble instead of only chilled. Grimacing, he narrowed his eyes and he relaxed at the feeling of warmth as the heat rose from his body in a cloud of steam.

A moment later he found himself slapping at his pants as they caught fire.

He still didn’t have complete control of his abilities, and he couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. He only had two other pairs of pants, and these were now scorched. He couldn’t afford

to draw any more attention to himself than absolutely necessary.

His eyes felt gritty, proof he hadn’t had enough sleep, even for him. The fact that he only needed four hours of sleep a night had alienated him from more than one foster family. It hadn’t been as bad at first; at the age of ten he’d needed almost as much sleep as any other children, though he’d had problems sleeping due to the nightmares.

Even now, the sounds of squealing tires, breaking glass and twisted metal sometimes echoed in his dreams.

But as he got older, he’d slept less and less despite any sleeping medications he was prescribed. He’d learned to pretend to be asleep, and to be very quiet as he left rooms that he inevitably shared with other foster children.

It left him a lot of time to read and to dream about finding a place he could call his own. He wanted the kind of home his parents had made: a stable, loving household where everyone felt safe.

He blindly reached out for his backpack, and he slipped a second, and then a third shirt on. He had a pair of pants that was too large — hand-me-downs — but they’d fit over the pair he was wearing.

He felt warmer immediately, now that he was no longer soaked, but staying out in the wind probably wasn’t safe. He might have been able to break a lock and slip inside a boxcar, but residual shame prevented him from vandalizing the property of others.

A jacket would have helped, but he’d outgrown his last one and new clothes were few and far between. He’d given his jacket to one of his foster brothers, confident that his own resistance to cold would make it unnecessary.

Of course, there was a huge difference between ordinary springtime Kansas weather and being in a cold snap, wet in a sixty-mile-an-hour wind.

He had no idea why he was so different, but all he knew was that his differences were growing. This was the first time he’d felt cold in two years, but he could remember a couple of times in his early foster homes when he thought he’d never get warm.

Getting removed from those placements hadn’t been his fault, and turned out to be a blessing. One couple had been earnest, but poor enough that they couldn’t afford to replace their heater when it stopped working. The floor heaters they’d replaced it with had been unsafe.

He’d never been fostered by a wealthy family, although that had never really mattered to him; his own parents hadn’t been wealthy. He’d learned as a child, it was love that made a home. Still, there was a stigma in being a foster child. The other students had sniggered and whispered, and as his hearing became more acute, Clark became deeply aware of just what they were saying.

Some hadn’t even bothered to hide what they were saying.

Newly warmed by his clothes, Clark found himself staring up at the stars using his backpack as a pillow. Snow was starting to fall and he could see the moon full on the horizon. Under other circumstances, it might even have been beautiful.

He woke, feeling the sun on his face. A layer of snow had covered his body and melted into ice. With the sun on his face, however, he didn’t feel as cold as he had.

It took him a moment to realize that the train was slowing. From the position of the sun in the sky, he’d slept a lot longer than he’d expected — more than his usual four hours.

Cautiously, he sat up. In the distance he could see a city. Squinting a little, he could see signs at the edge of town, even though it was miles away.

Columbus, Ohio. He knew vaguely where Ohio was, but he didn’t know anything about Columbus. If this was where the train stopped, it would likely be where he was going to stay for a

while.

He was almost disappointed when the train sped up as it left town.

Clark grimaced as he fumbled with his pants, balancing himself as the ground flashed by underneath him at a speed that seemed faster the closer he got to it.

The train hadn't stopped at all, and the call of nature was the one thing he still shared with real human beings.

He was thirsty, but eating snow had helped, even though he'd once read something about it being risky because it lowered the core body temperature. There was nothing he could do about his growing hunger, although being in the sun seemed to help.

He didn't need to eat as often as the other kids, which was helpful, although when he did eat, he ate as much as they did. He was still growing, and he hadn't exactly had time to grab snacks on his way out.

Unless he wanted to see if he was tough enough to survive a jump at sixty miles an hour, he was stuck until the next time the train slowed down, which it only seemed to do in the larger cities.

His foot slipped and he grabbed rusty metal on his way down. His heart raced. It was bad enough that he was a runaway and possibly a murderer; the thought that he'd be found dead from peeing off the side of a train, his pants unzipped, was mortifying.

He found a more secure foothold and arranged his clothes, zipping all three pairs of pants even as he hauled himself back up onto the platform.

He could have peed off the side of the platform, but the thought of being seen doing that was even more humiliating. There were cars driving by on a highway in the distance, although he doubted they'd be able to see much with regular human eyes.

Still, he was cold and hungry and soul-sick; stuck on the train, there was nothing for him to do but sit and dwell on everything that had gone wrong.

Thoughts of what he could have done differently overwhelmed him; he tried to think of something else, anything else, but it was difficult. The future was a scary, black mass on the horizon, and the more he thought about it, the more anxious he became.

He was a minor with no driver's license and no identification other than his Social Security card, which he couldn't use because it might raise suspicions. He couldn't own property and he couldn't hold down a job. He had thirty dollars to his name.

He'd never felt this helpless, except on the night his parents had died, and at least then he'd mostly felt numb. This was scary because his mind wasn't insulating him from it. Just thinking about the future made his breathing quicken and his heart race.

Thinking about the past made his heart hurt. All he could do was wish that he'd wake up and find that it had all been a dream. That he'd wake up and find that he was still living with the Goodman family and everything was as it had been for the past three months.

It had been a better place than he'd seen in a long time.

He'd learned long ago not to fantasize about a life where his parents hadn't died. Those thoughts were well worn; his parents would have gently guided him through the hard times with each ability as it had appeared. They'd started the process with his strength and his hearing, and there wasn't any reason they couldn't have done something similar with his other abilities.

Instead he'd been forced to lie, shifted from family to family as a new, unwelcome ability appeared and caused some sort of problem.

He'd heard things that he shouldn't have heard and been accused of spying. He'd destroyed things because of his strength. He'd set fires; this had gotten him trips to a psychiatrist.

Dr. Moon had been nice, but the medications he prescribed

hadn't affected Clark at all, and because Clark couldn't be open or honest about the real sources of his problem, Dr. Moon hadn't been able to help much. He'd learned to fake improvement at the same time he'd learned to control his heat vision, even if only clumsily. He hadn't gotten a lot of time to himself to practice using it.

They thought he had ADHD because he couldn't focus on classes; being able to see through walls and hear everything that was going on in a five-block-radius of the school had made concentration difficult. Having x-ray vision kick in while he was trying to take a test didn't help.

Those medications hadn't affected him either. Clark refused to sell them, despite being pressured by foster brothers, because he'd been raised better than that.

A small part of him wondered if he'd have more than thirty dollars to his name if he'd just bent the rules a little. Unfortunately, he'd seen what happened to his foster brothers and sisters when they'd bent the rules. The system didn't have much mercy.

Foster kids didn't have wealthy parents to hire lawyers to get them acquitted, or get them a slap on the wrist. They were unwanted, the detritus of society, and without a family to speak up for them, they sometimes received harsh sentences.

Clark had overheard one social worker talking about the statistics: forty to fifty percent wouldn't complete high school. Sixty-six percent of them would be homeless, go to jail or die within one year of leaving the foster care system at eighteen. Thirty-five percent would go to jail while still in foster care.

Seventy-five to eighty percent of the youthful prison population had once been in foster care.

Clark had been determined to beat the odds; instead, here he was.

He sighed and stared off into the distance, where the snow was falling even harder.

During the day the cold didn't bother him much, but if the train hadn't slowed down by nightfall, he'd have to think of something else, even if he had to break into a car. He was colder at night, more than could be attributed to the simple lack of heat from the sun.

He ignored the growling of his stomach.

He'd learned long ago that missing a meal of two wasn't going to kill him.

The sun had set as the train began to slow again. Clark squinted, and miles ahead he could see a sign. Metropolis... that was on the coast and probably was going to be the end of the line. Metropolis was a huge city and it'd be easier to lose himself in the crowds than it would in a small town. He'd always imagined himself moving to a place like this anyway — Washington, New York, maybe Los Angeles.

Hunger was deciding factor. Whether this was the final destination of the train or not, Metropolis was going to be his home.

Clark found himself relaxing now that the decision was made. The future, although still dark and scary, felt a little more secure.

The train slowed and Clark could see the train yard up ahead. It wasn't well maintained and there were weeds all along the perimeter, but there were also men working, so he crouched low between the cars. It would be easy to be thrown under the wheels and turned into a red stain, and although Clark knew he was tougher than an ordinary human, he hadn't had many chances to test out his limits. He'd survived being trampled by a bull without a scratch, but he doubted he could survive being run over by a fifty-ton sidecar, much less thirty of them.

Even if he could, it would probably derail the train, which

would potentially injure or kill even more people. Clark had enough on his conscience without adding to it.

Most of the men up ahead were to the right of the train, so Clark moved to the other side, hoping to put the mass of the train between himself and the workers. He didn't want to get any closer to the workers than he had to, so he had to leave while the train was still moving.

He waited until the train slowed further before he stepped off. He was struck in the shoulder by the edge of one car and found himself flying forward onto his hands and knees in the snow.

Grimacing, Clark pulled himself out of the snow and reached for his backpack, which he'd dropped. His shoulder didn't even sting, really, but a human would have been badly injured.

There were dozens of sets of tracks, with another train to his left sitting motionless. Clark cautiously crouched and moved toward the other train, uncomfortably aware of his tracks in the snow behind him. It was the work of a moment to duck between the cars of the other train.

He slipped around the side of the car and was startled to see two men walking along the side of the train.

"Hey! You aren't supposed to be here!" the first man shouted, even as the other man pulled out his walkie-talkie.

Clark ran, sprinting as best as he could through the snow without revealing his special abilities.

He heard the sound of a vehicle in the distance and saw a white pickup truck heading in his direction.

Clark dashed into the underbrush on the side of the tracks. Using his special vision, he could see that there was a break in the chain-link fence on the other side of the underbrush. He was barely small enough to slip through, and he could feel the fence tear at his clothing.

A moment later he was through.

Metropolis wasn't much to look at, at least so far. This neighborhood wasn't any better than the one he'd left in Wichita; in many ways, it seemed even more desolate and broken down.

There was graffiti on the walls and old vehicles lining the streets, but there wasn't anyone in sight.

Hearing the sound of tires on the snow behind him, Clark decided to keep moving.

Clark felt guilty even as he bit into his Big Belly burger. Five dollars gone out of his thirty, and he hadn't even gotten dessert. Food was more expensive here than back home, something he hadn't realized when he'd been thinking about the big city.

He closed his eyes as he bit into the burger; it really was everything it was advertised to be. Still, at this rate he'd be out of money in just two days.

He had to plan better, budget his money, and find some way to make money that didn't get him thrown in jail or force him to do things that would make him feel bad about himself later.

Clark finished his food quickly. It was a habit he'd learned in foster families, where food was important and food left on the plate was food that was quickly snatched up. Some of his foster brothers and sisters had been deprived of food, which had led to odd behaviors like hoarding food. He'd seen food stashed away in holes in walls, under beds and in closets, none of which had been well received by the foster parents.

Clark had never had that problem, although he wished now he'd stashed at least some snacks for the road. As expensive as everything was, he'd have to learn to make do with less. Quickly.

As he put his trash in the provided containers, Clark hesitantly walked up to the counter.

"Um...do you have any job openings?"

The teenager at the counter didn't look any older than he did. Barely looking at him, the boy pulled an application from behind the counter and handed it to him.

"Fill out the paperwork and bring it back in. The manager

will see you in a day or two."

Clark sat down and looked over the application, his heart sinking. There was a lot of information required — they wanted his birth date, which was a problem as he wasn't old enough to work, technically. They wanted his address, a telephone number, his Social Security number, and there were questions about whether he'd been convicted of a felony.

They wanted references, an employment history, even his driver's license, which of course he didn't have.

Clark crumpled the application and left without saying another word.

If he'd been completely human, instead of a freak, Clark suspected his feet would have been hurting. He'd walked miles through the snow, and only now did he find his goal.

It had been hard enough finding a phone book in town. Finding the library, even knowing the address, had been difficult. Clark had backtracked several times and become lost in a seemingly endless maze of streets, all of which seemed the same to him.

The inside of the library was warm, and Clark let himself close his eyes for a moment as he soaked in the warmth. It was chilly outside even for him, and he could see that people were bundled up, their faces flushed and red.

Realizing that he might draw attention to himself as the only one without a hat, Clark hunched his shoulders and went to work.

It took almost thirty minutes to find the location of the closest shelter that provided food. His parents had raised him to not accept charity, but Clark didn't see that he had any other choice. If he spent all his money on food, then he wouldn't have anything left.

Printing out a map cost precious change, but he was soon on his way.

It occurred to Clark as he saw a bus passing by that he might need to learn to navigate the bus routes; it was taking him forever to walk everywhere. Unfortunately, he didn't have the money now.

Walking the route took almost an hour, and as he turned the last corner, Clark could smell the scent of food in the distance. His stomach growled.

His heart sank as he turned the corner and saw a line of waiting men, stretched almost around the block. Clark counted quickly and whistled under his breath. There were almost three hundred men standing outside, waiting in the cold for doors which had apparently not even opened yet.

Clark found his way to the back of the line and resolved to wait.

"That's it," the man said. "We're full up. You can try the shelter down on 23rd street."

Clark stared. He'd been waiting for more than two hours in the snow, and if he wasn't as cold or desperate as the others, he was irritated.

"I've been waiting a long time—" he began. If he could even get a hot meal, he'd be satisfied, even if there wasn't a bed for him. Clark had slept on the floor before and it didn't bother him.

"You want to be sure of getting a spot, you need to be here by four-thirty," the man said. He looked at Clark. "If you can't be bothered to work, you might as well try to be on time."

The look the man gave him made Clark want to cringe. It said that Clark looked perfectly healthy and able to work, so why was he trying to take the spot of people who needed it? Of course, that might have been Clark's own sense of shame.

Before Clark could argue, the door was shut in his face.

With night, the temperatures had dropped even further. Without the sixty-mile-an-hour wind from the train, and sporting

several layers of clothing, Clark thought he might be able to survive the night. He wouldn't be comfortable, but he'd survive.

His feet and lower legs were wet, though, and he'd had to dry them carefully with his heat vision several times.

Stumbling, Clark almost fell at the entrance to an alley. He froze as he put his hand on the brick wall of the alley.

He could see two figures huddled together, covered in snow, motionless.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked, kneeling. He could hear the sounds of two heartbeats, one fast and the other erratic and slow.

A growling noise was his only warning as a muzzle snapped at him. He felt teeth on his hand, but it didn't hurt.

A large dog stood up slowly from where it had been laying on its owner, keeping him warm with its body. It was brown and white, a Saint Bernard, and it probably weighed more than Clark did. It had a heavy coat of fur that doubtless kept it warm, although Clark could see old scars on its face.

"I'm not going to hurt him," Clark said, his voice calm and soothing. In his foster families, he'd had to deal with strange dogs more than he would have had to admit. He turned his body to the side and didn't look the dog straight in the eyes, but he kept himself loose and didn't become tense. Body language carried a lot of weight with dogs.

He slowly put his hand out for the dog to smell. They could sense fear, and sometimes his alien smell confused them, yet another reason for him to have trouble fitting into families. He always won them over in the end, though, because he genuinely liked dogs.

"I'm here to help," he said. He smiled without showing his teeth.

The dog allowed him to slowly pet it as he got a better look at the man on the ground.

The man was older, in his sixties, heavily bundled in multiple layers of clothing, a heavy beard on his face, cap on his head and his clothing obviously stuffed with newspapers. He was black, but his hair and beard were salt-and-pepper and graying.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked, even though he knew the man wasn't from the sound of his heart. He carefully reached out to shake the man.

"Wake up!"

He shook the man, but the man didn't wake up.

Clark stood up. "Help! This man needs help!"

The street was deserted; they were in a business district in a bad neighborhood after dark. With the snow, even the people who normally would have been likely to be out were staying in.

There wasn't even anyone living close enough to hear them.

If Clark didn't do something, the man would be frozen dead by morning. He grimaced; he'd heard something about not putting frostbitten people in hot water, but he didn't know what frostbite looked like, or even if the cold was the man's main problem. He didn't smell drunk, although he could have had a heart attack or something worse.

Clark was afraid of setting the man on fire with his vision; if he set himself on fire, all he'd lose was a set of clothes. Set a normal person on fire, and he'd have to have scars, skin grafts, or even worse.

Clark didn't see any other choice. He used his heat vision as carefully as he could, fearful of hurting the man. It seemed to be forever before the man woke, but his heart remained unsteady, skipping beats.

"Wha..."

"We need to get you some help," Clark said. "Can you stand up?"

"Rufus?" the man asked, reaching out.

The dog pricked its ears and shoved its face under the man's hand.

No matter what Clark did, he couldn't get the man to wake

up.

Reluctantly, he bent down and picked the man up. Clark only weighed one hundred and fifty pounds, and this was a large man, probably weighing over two hundred pounds.

Despite Clark's strength, leverage should have been a problem, but for some reason, in this the laws of physics had never been an issue for Clark.

He picked the man up and cradled him in his arms. He could have put him over his shoulders in a fireman's carry, but he didn't know what kind of injuries the man might have, and he didn't want to risk injuring him any more than he had to. Besides, Clark was wearing his backpack.

Moving him at all was a risk, but Clark wasn't sure how much time the man had left.

He started out at a jog and he could hear the dog leaping up to follow him with an anxious whine.

"Try to keep up," Clark said.

The man opened his eyes and stared up at him. "Are you an angel?"

Before Clark could reply, he was passed out again.

"This man needs help!" Clark shouted as he entered the emergency room. He'd entered through the Ambulance entrance instead of the general entrance.

"You can't bring that dog in here!" a man in blue scrubs snapped, but several people moved to take the man out of his arms.

Two orderlies grunted as they put the unconscious man on a gurney. One of them glanced back at him, an assessing look in his eyes. They rushed the man through a set of metal doors directly in front of him.

Clark looked away, uncomfortably aware that he shouldn't have been able to lift someone that heavy.

He turned to leave when someone grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Hold on," said an older black woman.

"They said I couldn't keep the dog in here," Clark mumbled. He was suddenly exhausted, tired not from the effort of carrying a two-hundred-pound man for thirty minutes, but from the emotional stress. A man's life had been in his hands, and all he could think was to wonder if he'd done the right things or if he'd made things worse.

"We can worry about that in a moment," she said. She looked at him with a piercing, intelligent expression that made Clark suspect she knew exactly how old he was. "There's paperwork to be filled out."

"I don't have any money," Clark said quickly. "I don't even know the guy. I just found him lying out by an alley."

"How'd you get him here?" she asked.

Clark's mind raced. "I put him in my car and I turned the heater up. I didn't know where the hospital was, and it took a while."

Her hand on his shoulder was reassuring. "I'm sure you did your best. Why don't you sit down? Maybe I can get you something warm to drink."

She led him through a hallway to the right and into a small lounge area.

"This is the paramedics lounge," she said. "Why don't you take a seat and I'll get you something to drink."

It had been almost twelve hours since he'd eaten, and Clark realized suddenly that he was hungry and thirsty as well.

Clark sat down blindly, absently petting the dog's head as he stared into space.

He felt overwhelmed, not just from the close call, but from his whole life. In the space of twenty-four hours, his life had collapsed entirely and he'd become the one thing he'd always sworn he'd never be: a runaway, a statistic.

The other kids had made fun of him for his ambitions. He'd planned to make something of himself. He'd wanted to go to college and become someone who made the world a better place, instead of someone who made everything worse.

Maybe he'd become a policeman, or a fireman. Given his special abilities, he'd have been good at those professions.

They'd tried to convince him that being in foster care meant that every door was closed. No one cared, really, and the odds of becoming adopted dropped exponentially after someone was out of the cute baby stage. Foster kids had too many problems for most people.

At the time, he hadn't recognized the expressions in their eyes as they'd taunted him. It was only later that what he'd seen in their eyes hadn't been mockery. It had been a hollow sort of fear as they'd confronted their own view of the future.

A lifetime of minimum wage jobs while being labeled white trash had been Clark's worst nightmare. It only went to show that as worldly as Clark thought he'd been, he hadn't known anything.

His worst nightmare had changed. He was now living it.

Rufus leaned against his leg and looked up at him mournfully. He could almost imagine he saw a question in the canine's eyes.

"I don't know what's going to happen," he admitted in a small voice. He couldn't be sure

whether he was talking about what was going to happen to the dog's master, or what was going to happen to him.

Yet despite himself, as he stroked the dog's fur, he found himself relaxing.

"You look like you haven't had anything to eat in a while," the nurse said. She handed him a mug of hot chocolate and a candy bar. "It's the most filling thing in the vending machine."

He stared at her for a long moment, then looked at the food and drink she was carrying.

Clark's eyes felt blurry and odd, and it took him a moment to realize that what he felt was tears. He felt ashamed and he quickly looked away, blinking his eyes.

He hadn't cried since the death of his parents, and now all it took was a Snickers bar and a cup of hot chocolate? He owed his parents more than that.

"Thank you," he said. His voice was rougher than he would have liked, but he took the offerings thankfully.

It wasn't the food that made him cry. It was the kindness.

Despite everything he'd heard about hospital food, it was the best chocolate he'd ever had in his life.

She left him alone, and before he knew it, for the second time in twenty-four hours he fell asleep.

"Hey! You can't be in here!"

Clark woke suddenly to the sound of Rufus growling. Two men in paramedic uniforms were standing by the door.

"I'm sorry," he said. He felt groggy and wondered how long he had slept. "The nurse said I could stay."

"Well, we just had shift change, and we aren't running a shelter," the first paramedic said. "And even if we were, you can't keep a dog here."

"This isn't my dog," Clark said. At the skeptical expressions on their faces, he forced himself to stand up. He grabbed his backpack. "Okay. I'm out of here."

He stepped past the two men and stopped. At the end of the hall, he could see the nurse talking quietly with two men. He didn't have to use his special hearing abilities; he knew what the men were at a glance. He'd seen too many truant officers and social workers over the last five years not to know.

He ducked around to the side as the woman looked up, and Rufus followed him. Clark scowled; he'd be able to escape notice much more easily on his own without a two-hundred-pound dog

following him everywhere he went.

Nevertheless, he didn't have much choice. Being caught by Social Services would result in questions he didn't want to answer. Metropolis was far enough away from Kansas that the interstate agencies might not cooperate, but Clark couldn't take that chance.

He slipped through the sliding doors and into the night.

It was getting harder to feel clean; Clark had done his best to wash himself in a McDonald's restroom, but it wasn't the same as having a real shower. He'd changed clothes as well, getting rid of the multiple layers. That was fine for being out in the cold, but it was a dead giveaway that he was homeless.

Nonetheless, he walked through the lobby entrance with his head held high. The sun was shining and he knew the hospital had been through shift change. No one would know him, and if he was careful, he wouldn't reveal his homelessness to anyone.

"Ahem." He approached the information desk. It was important to look confident, as though you belonged where you were.

"Can I help you?"

"I brought a man in last night to the emergency room," Clark said. "And I was wondering if you could help me find out what happened to him."

"Do you have a name?" the woman asked.

Clark shook his head. "I brought him in around ten o'clock last night; I found him by the side of the road."

"If you don't have a name, I can't help you," the woman said, looking down.

"The thing is," Clark said, "he left his dog with me. I've got it tied out in the front. It's a big dog and I can't take it, but I don't want to send it to a pound either."

The woman smiled sympathetically. "I wish I could help you, but I would need more information. Maybe you could speak to someone on the night staff."

Clark scowled. He'd been hoping to get in line at the shelter in time for a meal and a shower. It was the thought of being clean more than anything that made him want to go. Whatever he did, he barely had enough money to feed himself. He'd bought some meat and bread with his dwindling money, and the dog had eaten most of it before he could stop it.

He suspected that he could survive cold weather better than the dog also, despite it being a cold-weather breed. It had huddled against him the previous night as they'd slept in a storm drain, and it was big enough to have kept him reasonably warm, although he doubted he'd been as much consolation to it.

However, to a homeless man, losing a source of warmth, companionship, and protection would be a horrible loss.

The woman looked at him for a moment and her expression softened. "I could make a call to the Emergency room. I can't promise anything, but if the patient is awake and agrees to see you, I can send you up."

Clark smiled and leaned forward. "That would be great."

Over the past year or so, since he'd grown four inches and filled out, he'd noticed that women seemed to respond better when he smiled, even if it was only to give him grandmotherly pats on the cheek.

She spoke quietly on the telephone. Clark didn't listen; instead, he looked back toward the entrance, worried that Rufus would get free of the bush he'd been tied to. Clark had left him with a bone he'd found in the trash behind a steakhouse.

His vision blurred and a moment later he found himself looking through the wall. This was another of his abilities that had been an unwelcome reminder he was a freak. It had taken him months to control, and his grades had plummeted. It was difficult to finish a test when you were looking through the page, the desk, and even the floor.

He was glad of it now. Rufus was contentedly gnawing on the bone, although some passersby were looking at him. He couldn't leave him there for long; even if Rufus hadn't managed to gnaw his way free, someone would call Animal Control.

"He's being released," the woman said after a moment. "If you'd like to wait, they'll be coming through the lobby in about forty-five minutes."

Clark stared at the woman. The man had been lying unconscious in the snow the night before and he was already being released? Maybe it hadn't been anything serious.

Of course, the man didn't look like the kind of person who had insurance. Hospital beds were expensive; he'd heard enough foster parents complaining in his time to know.

He nodded and forced a smile at the woman. He should feel a sense of relief; Rufus was a responsibility that would have been hard enough when he was in a foster home. Now that he was on his own, he didn't know how he was going to manage to feed himself, much less a dog that doubtless ate three times as much as he did.

Still, he couldn't help but remember how comforting it had been having someone else there with him in the storm drain, even if it was just a dog to keep him warm.

It surprised him to realize that he'd miss the big dog when he was gone.

"You've been a good boy," Clark said. He squatted beside Rufus, who'd chewed through the rope Clark had found and tied around his neck. He stroked the fur on the dog's head. Rufus had finished his bone thirty minutes before and gotten restless.

Petting the dog didn't just calm Rufus; it helped Clark try not to think about what was going to happen in the evening and the evenings to come.

"Rufus!" The cry came from the entrance to the hospital where an elderly African-American man was struggling to stand up from a wheelchair.

The big dog jerked under Clark's hand and a moment later he was running across the expanse of pavement leading toward the entrance. Clark took a quick look across the road to make sure the dog wasn't about to get hit; he'd worked hard to get the dog back to his owner and he wasn't about to let him die now.

The dog almost knocked the man over even as he managed to get to his feet. It barked frantically at him and the man cursed at the dog in an affectionate tone of voice.

Clark approached them, even as the man managed to get the dog settled. The orderlies were already re-entering the building without a backward glance.

The man was leaning over the dog, but he looked up and smiled. He was missing three teeth, but his smile was infectious, and his expression was open.

Growing up in the foster system, Clark couldn't remember seeing anyone smiling in such an open manner. He hadn't seen smiles like that since before his parents had died.

"I hear you just about saved my life," the man said.

"You can thank Rufus. If he hadn't covered you up and kept you warm..."

"I thank Rufus every day that he's in my life," the man said. "But Rufus didn't carry me more than a mile to the hospital."

"I just got you in my car," Clark said uncomfortably. Asking how someone of his size could have carried someone of this man's size would bring up questions he wasn't prepared to answer.

"Most people wouldn't have stopped," the man said, but there was something in his expression, a narrowing of his eyes, the way he was tilting his head, that said he knew more than he was letting on.

"I'd like to think they would," Clark said. "If they'd seen you."

"They don't see people like me," the man said. "In any case, I owe you."

Clark nodded, unsure how to respond. The man held out his hand and Clark forced himself not to flinch. The man smelled somewhat better than he had the night before, but Clark's senses were better than human.

He shook the man's hand.

"Charles King," the man said. "But everybody calls me Charlie."

"Clark Kent," Clark said without thinking. He winced as he realized that he should have thought up another name. Some forms of lying had become second nature to him, while others would never be comfortable. "What happened?" he asked.

"There's this thing with my heart," the man said. "It flares up from time to time. It's not too serious unless you pass out in a snowstorm. Course, it meant I couldn't drive a taxi anymore either...the law doesn't take kindly to drivers passing out in the middle of the rush hour."

"I wasn't asking," Clark said quickly, although he'd wondered.

Surely there were other things the man could do that didn't involve driving. Clark had never had a job, but he couldn't imagine getting a job would be that hard, even if it was in a completely new field.

On the other hand, he'd had one foster father who'd been out of work for a year. He'd taken to drinking and had gotten mean. As soon as Social Services had found out, that had been the end of his time there. Clark hadn't minded leaving that house.

The man said, "Well, I'd like to sit and chat, but I've got a bus to catch."

Clark looked down at the big dog. "You can take Rufus on the bus?"

"Not legally," the old man admitted, "but I've made friends with a lot of the drivers and they look the other way as long as there aren't any problems."

He glanced down at the dog. In a stern voice, he said, "And there's not going to be any more problems, are there? Not even if the lady is carrying a cooked chicken in a shopping bag."

The dog glanced up with a guilty look, although Clark suspected that the look wasn't sincere.

"Are you going to be all right?" Clark asked. "It's pretty cold out still."

"I've got a place," the man said. "I'll be fine as long as I can stay on my feet."

Clark wished he could ask the man exactly where he was staying, but he didn't know how to ask without making the man suspicious of his motives. If he had a place to stay, he wouldn't want anyone to know where it was either.

"A shelter?" he asked. It would be embarrassing to end up in the same line as the man.

"You don't want to go to those places," the man said. Again, the look he gave Clark was knowing, as though he'd taken one look at Clark and realized he was just as homeless as the man was, even if only recently.

With the sound of the bus coming down the street, the man started walking quickly toward the bus stop.

A few moments later, he boarded the bus with his dog and he was gone.

Regardless of what the man said, Clark needed a hot meal and a shower. He didn't have a bus pass, he didn't know where to get one, and it was a long walk if he was to get back to the shelter in time to line up at four-thirty.

As he started walking, he found his shoulders drooping a little.

He missed the dog.

Clark's face felt warm; he wasn't sure whether it was from

embarrassment or anger. After waiting in the cold for two hours, he'd had to answer humiliating questions in order to be admitted. The examiner had simply assumed that he used drugs and alcohol. He'd suggested that Clark was gay and asked if he had a boyfriend he could stay the night with.

Although his parents hadn't raised him to be prejudiced toward anyone, there had been something about the questioner's attitude that bothered Clark. He hadn't said anything outright, but there was a certain feeling of condescension. He'd labeled Clark as something he wasn't, and looked down on him for it.

Clark was sure that if he had been gay it would have bothered him even worse. If the man had known that Clark wasn't even a human being...

Without any identification, the man had been reluctant to let him in. Clark had lied and said his had been stolen. He'd had to sign an agreement to a long list of rules, including no weapons, no sex, and maintaining minimum hygiene.

Finally, he'd been allowed in, even as dozens of men behind him were turned away. Clark felt guilty taking a bed from someone who wasn't resistant to the cold, but a certain selfishness made him keep quiet. He was getting hungry and he needed a shower. Part of him wanted to collapse because he didn't know what to do. Sleeping under a roof sounded so much better than out in a ditch again, this time without even a large dog to keep him company.

"When do we eat?" he asked one of the two large men who were helping to control the crowd. He hadn't eaten since the night before, and even though he didn't get hungry as fast as other teenagers, he hadn't eaten in almost twenty hours.

"Not yet," the man said. "You've got to feed your soul before you feed your body."

They were in an open room with a large number of metal folding chairs. Almost a hundred men grumbled and settled into the chairs. Clark was sure that the smell would have bothered even a normal nose. To his nose, it was a terrible reek, that of dozens of unwashed bodies wearing rarely-washed clothes. Some of them had a sickly smell about them. Others smelled of urine, or vomit.

Clark felt horribly out of place in the middle of a crowd of older men.

A man in an unfamiliar clerical outfit moved to the front of the room. He waited a moment until the crowd settled, the murmur of voices faded, and all that was left was the sound of uncomfortable rustling bodies fidgeting in the silence.

"A man reaps what he sows," the preacher said. "The path to eternal life is narrow and difficult. Some of you may have known Big Jim; he died last night. We all know that Jim strayed from the path on a daily basis. Hear this as a warning. You do NOT want to join Jim in the depths of hell. I'm telling you here and right now that you have to confess your sinfulness and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior! It is the only way to escape the fires of hell, before it is everlastingly too late."

The men around him were silent, and Clark felt like sinking down in his chair. This wasn't the loving church his parents had taken him to, or even some of the more quiet churches he'd been to in a few of his foster homes.

For the next hour, Clark listened as he was told repeatedly that he was a sinner and that he was destined to hell.

After what he'd done, Clark already knew that.

Showering in front of one hundred other men was humiliating, but Clark had been forced to do the same in gym class, and it didn't bother him so much. They were only allowed five minutes to shower, when he would have taken more time to enjoy the hot water washing away several days of grime.

The water was warm even for him, and he could hear several men screaming; the water was apparently scalding hot in places,

even though it didn't really bother Clark.

At least he felt cleaner and the smell wasn't as bad. He had clean clothing in his backpack, and for the first time in two or three days, he felt cleaner and relaxed.

Dinner was greasy chicken, bread, and green salad, with milk or juice. When he'd been living with his parents, he would have looked down on the food. The quality wasn't that good, and the food was only lukewarm. Clark couldn't help but resentfully think that it would have been hot during the sermon.

His years in the foster system, however, had gotten him used to mediocre food. As hungry as he was, it didn't seem all that bad, although he'd have preferred it warmer. With the other men sitting so close to him, he didn't dare use his vision to heat his food, so he ate it as it was.

The men around him were hunched over, their arms wrapped protectively around their plates as though they were waiting for someone to take the food from them. Clark had been in foster homes with some children who ate the same way, usually those who had been in juvenile detention.

Clark ate as quickly as the men around him did; he was hungry. Dinner didn't take long, and the utensils were soon dispensed with. Clark helped fold the long white tables and place them in stacks inside a closet.

The two large men began handing out pads and blankets; apparently most of the men were going to sleep on the floor although there were a few cots. The men had a list and called out names; those lucky few got access to the cots, while Clark had to make do with a blanket.

His blanket was clean, but Clark could see movement on one of the cots. A closer look with his special vision showed a familiar insect.

Lice!

"Um," Clark said. He gestured to one of the orderlies, who scowled. "Do you see that?"

"What?"

"If those spread they'll get over everything," Clark said. "You might even take them home with you."

The orderly stared, and then cursed. He returned with gloves and a large plastic bag. He removed the cot, and the man who had been designated the cot glared at Clark.

Clark shrugged. At least lice didn't jump. An unfortunate experience in one foster home had taught him more than he wanted to about lice. Although they couldn't penetrate his skin, he'd been able to feel them. He still shuddered every time he thought about it.

Clark found a spot on the floor even as the other men staked out their own areas. Shortly afterwards most of the men stepped outside to smoke; Clark remained inside.

A television was wheeled out on a cart that reminded Clark of those that had been used at his school. By consensus, they watched Jeopardy until lights out at 9:00 PM.

It was three hours before Clark was able to fall asleep. The sound of a hundred men snoring and rustling in their sleep was punctuated with the occasional sounds of explosive flatulence. Some of the men talked in their sleep and one man stared at Clark suspiciously. Clark felt the man's eyes on him and he turned over, facing the wall, his head on his backpack as a pillow.

If it hadn't been for the food and the shower, Clark would have been more comfortable out in the open. The cold didn't bother him much and he would have slept better without all the noise.

In the distance he could hear one man retching. Earlier he'd seen one man coughing into a tissue and he'd thought he'd seen blood.

Clark had never been sick in his life and as far as he knew, he couldn't get sick with any kind of human disease. Still, having

this many people this close together for an extended time seemed like a recipe for disaster.

They were awakened at five-twenty in the morning by a new set of staff members. The others had apparently left sometime in the night.

Coffee was passed around, but for some reason the showers weren't ready until six-thirty. The men gathered their bedding and placed them in large gray thirty-gallon trash cans, presumably to be washed.

Some of the men slipped bourbon from a hidden flask into the coffee; Clark refused. He did accept coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. He'd never really learned to like coffee, and it never really affected him, but it was a warm drink and better than nothing.

It was good to feel clean again. Clark saw that his backpack was still in its place and he pulled out another set of clothes. He'd have to find a laundromat somewhere and clean them. It wasn't as though he could afford to keep buying new clothes whenever the old ones got dirty.

He slipped on a pair of jeans that was mildly dirty, and a clean shirt. It was only as he slipped on his socks that he realized his shoes were gone.

The men around him were filing out of the building quickly. According to the signs, the building would be closed and locked in five minutes.

Clark looked around, assuming that someone had simply kicked his shoes out of place as they were walking by.

No matter how hard he looked, he couldn't find any sign of them. By the time he thought to look and see if someone had stolen them, the men were already out of the building.

If it hadn't been for his abilities, being without shoes in the cold would be deadly. As it was, it was going to draw attention. Clark wasn't sure what he was going to do.

He stepped outside, looking quickly at the rapidly dispersing group of men, hoping that he could find the person who had taken his shoes.

Hope faded as the crowd continued to disperse and he heard the door lock behind him. He doubted that the staff had even noticed his problem.

"Hey, kid!"

The voice that called out was familiar and welcome.

The crowd parted and Clark saw Charlie King and Rufus standing on the other side of the street.

Charlie was holding a scuffed pair of hiking boots in one hand even as he grinned.

"I told you it wasn't a good place," Charlie said. He held up the boots. "You look like a size eleven."

For the first time in days Clark felt a sense of relief.

"I don't know how I'll pay you back for this," Clark said as he slipped on the shoes. He found it hard to look up at the older man. He was still angry and embarrassed about having his shoes stolen, but his sense of relief and gratitude toward the man made him just as uncomfortable.

"If you bought these—" Clark said. "I don't have enough money..."

He wasn't used to owing anyone anything. Even his foster parents had all been paid by the state.

"Saving my life not enough?" Charlie asked. "Then this is payment for taking care of Rufus while I was laid up in the hospital." The older man grinned. "Besides, I didn't buy these. There's places where you can get clothes if you need them."

At Clark's look, he said, "Don't worry. They're clean. I know the good places."

"I don't know much of anything," Clark admitted. He'd felt

lost for the previous two days and knew he was deeply out of his element.

"I thought you looked new," Charlie said. "When I saw you go in there, I was sure of it."

"How'd you know they'd steal my shoes?"

The older man chuckled. "When you live on the streets, your feet are the most valuable thing you've got. You've got to take care of them. You hurt your feet and you can't get to where you need to go. You can't make money, you can't eat...you can't even run away when things get bad."

"I can't do any of that now," Clark admitted. "Except for the running part."

"I'll show you," Charlie said. "Let's start with the clothes. You look like you could use a good jacket."

"I don't know why you made me get the whole outfit," Clark said.

He'd gotten a good denim jacket and two pairs of heavy blue jeans, a knitted cap that covered his head and would roll down over his ears, and gloves. Clark had also gotten a pair of heavy long-sleeved shirts and a third pair of torn jeans.

He was a little worried that his backpack wouldn't hold all of the clothes.

"You wear layers, you don't get frostbite," Charlie said. "But you need a bad set of clothes sometimes too."

"Why?" Clark asked.

"How are you going to get breakfast in your good clothes?" Charlie asked as they stepped into the alley.

At Clark's stare, Charlie tapped the dumpster meaningfully.

Clark flinched. "You've got to be kidding me."

"You know what they call people with too much pride?" Charlie asked. When Clark shook his head, Charlie said, "They call them hungry."

Despite being raised in foster homes, Clark had never been forced to dig around in the trash for food like some kind of— he flushed as he realized he was being judgmental.

"Isn't this like stealing?"

The older man shook his head. "They threw it away in a public area. There's places with specific laws against diving, but it's legal here."

"Still," Clark said reluctantly, "don't you get sick?"

"I threw my guts up for two days once," Charlie admitted. "You learn to be careful about what kind of food you get.

Supermarkets throw away a lot of perfectly good food — fruit that's a little bruised, cans of food that are just barely past their expiration date."

"So..." Clark said. "You want me to climb in there?"

"The collection truck comes in forty-five minutes," Charlie said. "You don't want to be inside when that happens...it's a good way to get yourself killed."

"How do you know the schedule?"

"This place has a service that comes an hour before they open in the morning. There's other places that come an hour after they close. You live out here long enough and you find out the best places, then you learn the schedule. If you don't, you end up a red smear inside the trashman's truck."

Clark couldn't help the look of distaste that crossed his face. Crawling around in dumpsters was something that rats did. He'd always considered himself a little better than that.

At his look, Charlie said, "I can do it, but if I do, I'm not sharing any. Rufus eats enough for any three people on his own. You need to learn this."

"Couldn't I just earn some money and buy food?" Clark asked. Even stale convenience store food would be better than something out of the trash.

"Where are you going to cook it?" the older man asked. "I don't suppose you're carrying a stove or a refrigerator in that coat

of yours?”

Clark shook his head. “I could buy bread and peanut butter.”

“Sure,” the older man said. “There’s a few things that’ll keep in your backpack, but how much room do you have? You’ve got to carry everything you own with you; if you leave it, somebody will take it or throw it away.”

It wouldn’t take long to get sick of peanut butter, either. Clark scowled as he realized what he was about to do.

Reluctantly he climbed into the dumpster.

In addition to the food, Charlie had insisted that Clark gather every aluminum can he could find.

It had gotten easier when it occurred to Clark to use his special vision, but he’d still come out covered in coffee grinds and old pasta. Charlie had insisted that they re-bag everything and keep the area around the dumpster clean.

“The stores turn a blind eye, but if we make a nuisance or a mess they’ll start calling the cops. They might start putting locks on the dumpster.”

Clark could see the wisdom in that, although he had trouble believing some of the men he’d seen at the shelter the night were as far-sighted.

“It would have been better if we’d gone to a place that picks up after the place closes,” Charlie admitted. “Everything wouldn’t be mostly frozen.”

After they’d left the scene, Charlie had gone into a small corner store and come out with a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a roll of toilet paper. It had taken a while to find an out-of-the-way place where nobody was likely to find them, ending up in a small loading dock behind a warehouse in an industrial district.

It amazed Clark how far they’d walked carrying a trash bag of stolen food without anyone asking any questions. When he’d asked Charlie, the older man had simply responded, “People don’t look at us if they can help it. Sometimes that’s hard; other times, it can be useful.”

The older man had insisted that Clark find a coffee can. He’d cleaned it out, stuffed the toilet paper inside and filled the can with rubbing alcohol.

“Always use at least 70 percent,” he said. “Ninety will burn hotter, but it’s a little more expensive. The cheaper stuff will go out too fast.”

The can provided a surprising amount of heat, and it had already burned for more than forty-five minutes.

“Don’t do this inside,” Charlie said. “At least not without good ventilation or you’ll suffocate. Probably not a good idea to fall asleep next to it in a tent either...you’ll burn to death.”

“Is this legal?”

“Setting a fire in town? Strictly speaking, no. The cops take a dim view of people setting fires.”

Clark looked around. They were on a loading dock leading down into locked metal doors large enough to drive several vehicles.

“Aren’t you worried somebody will show up?”

Charlie shook his head. “This is a CostMart warehouse, they don’t do any loading until nighttime. Nobody comes here during the day either, as long as you don’t try to break in.”

“I’m surprised they don’t have a gate,” Clark said. The area they were in was secluded, and he didn’t see any cameras, for which he was grateful.

Charlie looked serious suddenly. “They don’t need a gate. Nobody steals from CostMart.”

“I don’t understand,” Clark said. “How would they know?”

“They’d know.” The older man leaned forward. “Don’t even think about taking as much as a stick of gum from them.”

There was something almost frantic about the expression in the older man’s face, and Clark wondered if this was the first sign he’d seen that the man was crazy. He didn’t run around talking to

unseen figures like some of the men Clark had seen in the shelters, but there were other, more hidden kinds of crazy.

“It’s not like CostMart is the mafia,” Clark said. He laughed uneasily, eyeing the older man and wondering if this was the moment he’d show how crazy he really was.

“They’ve got ties to some really dangerous people,” Charlie said. “People on the street know not to mess with them. It’s a good way to disappear permanently.”

The older man didn’t speak for a long time, and Clark decided to let him have his delusions. If believing that CostMart was a front for the mafia was the extent of his craziness, Clark would just avoid the subject altogether.

“This isn’t bad,” Clark had to admit. On his own he could have used his heat vision to heat some of the cans, but he wouldn’t have had the cooking skill Charlie showed. His mother had planned on showing him how to cook, but she hadn’t gotten around to it before she’d died.

Life in foster care wasn’t about home-cooked meals, either. The one family he’d lived with where the mother had actually cooked hadn’t been interested in letting him in the kitchen, especially since he’d had a record of setting things on fire.

It was a simple meal — ranch-style beans, corn, some three-day-old tortillas and some slightly outdated Spam in a can, cooked in the can.

“You get more fresh stuff when everything isn’t frozen,” Charlie said. “Stale bread, fruit that’s misshapen or imperfect, stuff like that. Summertime is bad though...everything goes bad quick when the heat gets up and you have to go back to buying everything.”

The older man relaxed, warming his hands over the fire. Even though the toilet paper had begun to char in the middle, Clark could see that it still had quite a ways to go before it burned out. It had already been more than an hour.

“You don’t put this hot in the trash,” Charlie said. “Unless you want to start a fire. Relax. That’s the thing about being on the streets. You’ve got nothing but time.”

Clark felt better after eating, even if he still felt a little queasy about where the food had come from, as well as seeing Charlie use his fingers to pull food out of the can. At least there had been enough for them each to have their own cans, even if it had taken forever to cook.

Still, he was beginning to feel a little more confident that he was going to be able to make it. He’d learn everything he could, and unlike the thousands of other teenagers who were in his situation, he had special gifts that would make life easier.

Life was looking brighter than it had at any time in the last forty-eight hours, and that was something.

“All we get is five dollars for the whole bag?” Clark asked.

Crawling through the dumpster had involved spilling warm beer on himself and getting wet cigarette butts on his hands. He’d carried the bag more than three miles, as far as he could tell. He even thought he’d felt something moving near the bottom of the bin. All of that for five dollars didn’t seem worth it.

“Five dollars will get you a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter,” Charlie said. “You can get pork and beans in a can...even a cheap fast-food meal, if you’re careful.”

“I thought you got your food out of the trash,” Clark said.

“It goes bad quick in the summer. And it freezes in the winter... You can’t always depend on diving for food, but cash can save your life.”

Clark nodded slowly. His store of cash was dropping despite his best efforts and this was the first income that he’d had. He clutched the bill, then sighed and slowly offered it to the older man.

Charlie chuckled. “It’s tough trying to be fair when you’ve

got nothing. You did the digging, you keep it. Besides, you're about to need it."

Clark blinked as he saw the complex of buildings they were approaching.

"The bus depot?"

"You can get a week pass for ten dollars," Charlie said.

"Covers the bus and the subway. There's discounts for veterans and students, but you'd have to show some ID."

"I can't really afford—"

"We've been walking for miles," Charlie said. "My feet hurt."

Clark's feet didn't. Physically, he wasn't tired at all.

At Clark's look, the older man said, "The bus can save your life. On a cold day, you can ride the line, even sleep for a while and stay warm. The bus runs until midnight, and the subways run twenty-four hours a day."

Clark wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep on a bus or subway train that was constantly stopping to unload and reload passengers, but he supposed if he was exhausted enough, he wouldn't have any other choice.

"Besides, how are you ever going to get from place to place before they close? Are you going to walk everywhere?"

It wasn't like Clark could run everywhere without being noticed.

At Clark's continued stubborn look, Charlie said, "I'm tired. Me and Rufus are riding the bus back. You coming?"

Clark scowled and pulled a five-dollar bill from his rapidly dwindling stash to match the money he'd gotten from collecting the cans.

At this rate he'd be eating out of dumpsters for the rest of his life.

As he stepped off the bus, Clark had to admit that it had been quicker and much more pleasant to ride rather than walk all the way back. The smell of urine and body odor from some of the other passengers wasn't nearly as bad as what he'd smelled in the shelter, even though the bus had been crowded.

He was glad that Charlie had warned him to keep his hand on his wallet. He'd felt someone brushing by, but hadn't confronted them.

Charlie, true to his word, had been allowed to bring Rufus on the bus, although he'd had to sit in the front near the driver and Clark hadn't gotten to talk to him. He'd been separated by the press of numerous passengers and he'd stood to allow an elderly woman his seat.

It made him feel better, in a way. Although he was in the worst place in his life, he hadn't forgotten what his parents had taught him. Being kind to others didn't cost much, and if it brought goodness to their lives, it was worth the effort.

The bus had two doors, one in the front and one in the back. Clark was relieved to see Charlie and Rufus stepping off the front of the bus. Charlie had told him the name of their stop, but he hadn't been sure he'd heard right.

As the bus lurched off in a cloud of smoke and the crowd began to disperse, Clark approached the older man.

"Where are we now?" he asked.

"It's time for lunch," Charlie said. He gestured toward a nondescript building on the other side of the street.

"I don't have a lot of money," Clark said uneasily. The place obviously wasn't a restaurant and he wasn't sure he was up for another round of dumpster diving.

"And I look like I do?" Charlie asked. He grinned. "And here I am in my Armani suit."

Clark followed the older man dubiously, stopping when he saw a small sign over the door.

"You want us to go to church?"

After his experience the night before, he didn't feel like

listening any more about what a sinner he was or how he'd failed in the eyes of God and man.

"Don't worry," Charlie said. "Food's good here, and they even let old Rufus in."

A stocky black man in a dark gray suit opened the door. He was an older man, balding with graying hair. He smiled warmly and said, "Brother King, it's good to see you again."

Charlie smiled. "I swear Rufus is going to be good this time."

"It's better to take the temptation away," the man said.

"We've got some bones we used in the broth that we saved up special for him."

He looked behind Charlie and saw Clark. His smile widened. "Who is this?"

"This is Clark Kent," Charlie said. "I had another episode and he found me in the snow. He carried me to the hospital. I'm showing him around."

Charlie turned to Clark. "This is Brother Wayman. I wasn't always the charming levelheaded person I am now. This man is part of the reason I'm alive today."

Brother Wayman smiled and he extended his hand. Clark took it reluctantly, but found that the man's handshake was firm.

"I'm glad you're here," the man said. "And I'm glad you were able to help Brother King."

Clark couldn't help but feel warm and contented. Unlike the shelter, here the food came before the sermon, and he hadn't tasted anything like it since his mother had died.

He'd stuffed himself, once he realized that there was going to be more than enough.

Apparently the food had been prepared by members of the congregation.

It was warm, and he'd relaxed as he realized that he didn't see condemnation in the eyes of Wayman or any of the other church workers.

He was skittish at first, but after the meal he'd just had, Clark felt he could sit through almost any sermon.

Now he was sitting in a pew along with approximately thirty other men, some of whom he recognized from the night before. While the outside of the church was simple brick, the inside had the familiar church smell, clean and pure.

The decorations were simple; this obviously wasn't a wealthy church that spent vast amounts of money on the building, but it was clean.

Wayman stood at the front of the room and he began to speak.

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Wayman's voice was rich and full, but there was something gentle and reassuring about it.

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"

Clark looked around at the men he was sitting with. Last night they had been inattentive and restless. They'd been forced to be there and it showed. Now, though, they at least seemed to be more attentive. While it was possibly because they were distracted by hunger, Clark suspected that the men respected the preacher. They at least seemed to be willing to listen to what he had to say.

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

Clark found himself straightening. The sermon was beginning very differently than the one he'd heard last night.

Wayman said, "Our Jewish brothers like to say that whoever saves a life, it's like they've saved a whole world. It always surprises me how easy it is to save a life. Sometimes all it takes is a smile, a pat on the back, a willingness to listen when someone is in their darkest moment."

The sermon, as it turned out was very different.

It reminded him, if anything, of the church his parents had attended. In a way, it felt a little like home.

"It's so much nicer here than the shelter," Clark said. He felt embarrassed even admitting that he'd been in the shelter, but the preacher's expression wasn't judgmental. "It's hard to understand how they can be so..."

Brother Wayman had asked them to stay while women from the church packed up some bones for Rufus.

"Cold?" Wayman said. "It's a hard job, protecting people from each other and from themselves. It's easy to get burned out."

"How do you all stay so positive?"

"You have to have passion," Wayman said. "Also, it helps that we get to go home to our families."

Clark couldn't help himself; he had pent-up anger and he had to complain. "They kept acting like I was gay."

"Clark," Wayman said. "About four in ten young people in your situation are gay. Why do you think they are homeless in the first place?"

"Because their families can't accept them for being different," Clark said slowly. He'd had his own fears about being different and not being accepted. He'd had nightmares for years that someone would discover just how inhuman he was.

"There are services out there to help," Wayman said. "You don't have to do it alone."

"Isn't that kind of what your sermon was about? Helping each other?" Clark asked. He smiled slightly, then shook his head. "I can't..."

"I can't make you do anything," Wayman said. "But the least I can do is let you know what's available."

"Charlie is helping me," Clark said stubbornly. He stared at the floor. The more official services he got involved in, the more likely someone would make a connection between the teenager in Metropolis and the crime back in Kansas, no matter how tenuous.

However, he felt comfortable around this man; he was the first person, not homeless himself, not to look down on Clark.

"But okay...I'll listen."

"I'm never doing that again," Clark said, staring at the thirteen dollars he held in his hand.

"It's not for everybody," Charlie admitted. "Personally I hate panhandling. It offends my pride in ways that digging through a dumpster doesn't."

"Then why did you make me..." Clark asked. It had been humiliating asking people for money; in five hours he'd only gathered thirteen dollars. That was less than minimum wage.

He'd seen others making more money, but they were much more aggressive, and he'd seen them telling what seemed to be different lies to different people.

Charlie carefully folded the cardboard sign and put it in the trash. "You never know what's going to happen in life. Any skills you develop can make the difference between being hungry and being safe."

"Safe?" Clark asked as the older man picked up his pack and absently petted Rufus.

"You get too hungry, you get weak. You get weak, you get slow. Slow is never safe." Charlie stared off into the distance, and then shook his head. "Even if you never use it for yourself, you

might be able to help someone else.

Clark shoved the money in his pocket. "I'm never doing this for myself again," he said, knowing that he'd be willing to beg if it was for someone else.

"You don't have to. Let's go."

"Where now?"

"Dinner."

It was good that the snow was finally melting, although Clark could tell from the reactions of the people around him that it was still cold.

Dinner apparently consisted of slightly stale bread and donuts.

"They just throw this out?" Clark asked.

"Bakeries are great places to get food," Charlie said. "They have to have everything fresh or people won't buy it."

Clark found himself particularly enjoying the jelly-filled donuts. The fact that they were slightly stale barely registered.

"There are a few places where the employees cover everything in bleach so nobody can do this," Charlie continued. "Usually places where people keep making messes, or they're afraid somebody will get sick and sue. That's one of the reasons it's important to make as little mess and fuss as possible."

"Some of the guys panhandling got pretty aggressive," Clark said.

When he'd been younger, he would have been intimidated by some of the tactics he'd seen. He'd almost been tempted to intervene a couple of times.

"Guys on drugs start getting twitchy and desperate, they can get pretty aggressive," Charlie said. "They're worse than the crazy ones."

Charlie had room to talk, what with his paranoia about CostMart. But maybe that was what he meant. Maybe you could talk to some people and they'd seem totally normal until you hit the one area of their delusion.

"A lot of the crazy guys see things and hear voices," Charlie said. "Schizophrenia. They can get pretty paranoid. There's medications now, but sometimes they aren't pretty."

He sped up a little, and Clark could hear that the older man sounded a little winded. Clark had no problem keeping up with him, and doubted that he'd have had a problem even if he hadn't been different from other fifteen year olds.

"Ten years ago you didn't see any of those guys," Charlie continued. "It used to be that if somebody thought you were crazy, they'd lock you up and throw away the key and nobody would ever see you again. I hear some of those places were the closest thing you could find to hell on earth."

Clark shuddered. He'd heard stories from some of the other foster kids that had given him nightmares.

"Things are better now, and they keep getting better, but when they let everybody out they didn't exactly set them up with a house and a job. Still, at least they get a chance to have some kind of life now that they've changed the laws."

Clark found that he suddenly didn't want to talk about being locked away for life. It was too much like the warnings his father had given him all throughout his childhood.

If anyone discovered his true nature, they wouldn't hesitate to lock him away, assuming they didn't just cut him open.

"So why do people get hooked in the first place?" Clark asked.

"Wasn't so long ago lots of people thought drugs were fine.

Tune in, turn out, whatever," Charlie said. He scowled. "You live out here long enough, you'll see people waste away to practically nothing."

"So why start?" Clark asked again.

"You've been pretty busy since you left...wherever you came from, right?" Charlie asked.

Clark nodded. Survival hadn't left him much time to sit around and think, and learning from Charlie had been like going back to school, a school he needed if he was going to survive.

"Thing is, it's not going to take you long to learn your way around," Charlie said. "Surviving will get to be old hat, and it really won't take a lot of your day. Then what will you do?"

"I'll pick up jobs at the Home Depot or CostMart parking lot," Clark said.

"There'll be twenty guys from Mexico waiting for the job, and even if you get it, it won't happen every day. What will you do with the rest of your time?"

"I...don't know." Clark said. He'd never really had any choice in what he'd do with his time, not since his parents had died at least. His life had revolved around schoolwork, chores and sleep.

"And that's the problem for a lot of guys," Charlie said. "What are you going to do? You don't have a TV. You don't have board games. You don't have one of those newfangled Atari thingamajigs. You can't invite friends over."

The streets were getting deserted, and the sun was setting. Charlie stopped to catch his breath. He pulled a cap from his pack and slipped it over his head.

"If you live in a shelter, it's hard to keep a job because they want you in line by four-thirty. If you don't live in a shelter, it's hard to keep a job because it's hard to shower and keep clean. If you don't work or go to school, that's a lot of hours to fill."

Clark nodded. School had at least been a shelter for him; he'd enjoyed learning, and even when things weren't good at home, teachers appreciated and encouraged bright students. At times, those strokes to his ego had been the only affection he'd had.

At least he hadn't acted out like a lot of his foster brothers and sisters.

"A lot of guys go stir-crazy," Charlie said, panting. "They get so stressed out by having nothing to do that they try a little something. About half the guys on the streets end up on drugs."

"I thought the drugs were why they were on the street in the first place," Clark said.

"Some of them, I guess," Charlie said. He looked distracted, peering up and down the street.

"What's going on?" Clark asked.

He didn't hear anything nearby, other than some cats in the alley up ahead, but he wondered what had the older man so spooked.

The fact that the sun was setting might have had something to do with it. It was twilight, and the streetlights hadn't yet come on.

Charlie stepped into an empty lot overgrown with weeds. Old tires could be seen piled in a corner of the lot. Glancing behind him one final time, Charlie disappeared behind the clump of tires, pulling out two shopping carts.

"Don't those belong to the store?" Clark asked.

Charlie shook his head. "Got these off a guy who died. I usually can't handle more than one at a time. I tried tying Rufus to the other one, but he kept knocking it over. He may be the size of a horse, but he doesn't like doing a lick of work."

He gestured, and Clark reluctantly took one of the carts.

He hoped the next lesson wasn't as humiliating as the last one.

It seemed as though they had been walking forever, pushing the carts through the deserted streets. To Clark's ears, the sound of the wheels seemed thunderous, echoing in the distance. The streetlights in this area were infrequent, and often dark.

Occasionally they saw figures moving in the darkness, hunched over the doors of parked cars with flashlights. Clark felt outraged, sure that they were up to no good, but he felt helpless. He couldn't be sure that they weren't locked out of their own cars. If he burned out the tires on someone's car and stranded

them in this kind of neighborhood, he'd feel terrible, especially if something happened to them.

Still, it felt like the kind of rationalization people used so they didn't have to do anything when they saw something wrong. His parents hadn't raised him that way.

He was indecisive, but each time he'd had to hurry to catch up with Charlie and the moment was lost.

Clark could see fairly well despite the darkness, although there were places that were too dark even for him to see. Charlie seemed to move as much by memory as by sight, and Rufus had a sense of smell to guide him.

"Where are we going?" he asked finally.

"To the promised land," Charlie said, a gleam in his eye.

In the distance as they turned the corner Clark could see lights. He could hear the sounds of loud music.

"I'm too young to go to a bar," Clark said.

"We're not going to the bar," Charlie said. "We're going behind it."

Collecting five dollars' worth of cans earlier in the day had taken almost thirty minutes even using Clark's x-ray vision. He'd had to wade through spoiled food, coffee grinds and one bottle even seemed like it was filled with urine.

This was something else entirely.

In less than five minutes they'd filled both the shopping carts with what had to be forty dollars' worth of cans each, piled high. He could smell beer.

"I'd say to collect the bottles, if we had the time," Charlie said. "You can get a nickel apiece for them."

"Are we in a hurry?" Clark asked.

"We've got to get out of here," Charlie said. "You think we're the only ones who know about this?"

They both rolled their carts down the darkened alley as quickly as they could. Before they could turn the corner, though, Clark could see lights behind them as a truck turned into the alley.

"Go," Charlie said urgently. He began to jog with the cart. Clark turned the corner, but he could hear angry shouts from behind him.

"Do these belong to those guys?"

Charlie wheezed and said, "There's a Mexican gang that rides around in trucks grabbing the easy pickings and pushing the rest of us around." They reached the next intersection. "Turn!"

It was too late. As Clark turned the corner, the lights of the vehicle were already all around them.

The truck behind them accelerated, its engine roaring to life as the men in the vehicle tried to run them down.

Although Clark had no doubt that he could have gotten away, even pushing the basket, he knew that Charlie wouldn't be nearly as lucky.

As Charlie stopped, gasping and puffing, Clark could almost hear the older man's heart beating irregularly, skipping a beat.

Clark forced himself to stop, turning to face the truck, tires squealing as it rounded the corner. Clark grimaced from the glare of the truck's headlights, covering both him and Charlie in beams set on bright.

The truck stopped and for a long moment the only sounds were those of the engine as it roared.

Clark wondered if they were planning on running them both down. He wasn't particularly worried about himself, but Charlie would never survive something like that.

A moment later, dark silhouettes dropped from the back of the pickup bed.

"Hey, pendejo," the lead figure said quietly as it stopped into the light. "It looks like you've got something that belongs to us."

"It's not yours," Charlie muttered under his breath. He was panting, holding on to the shopping cart to hold himself up.

“What did you say?” the man asked, stepping forward.

It surprised Clark how young the man looked. He must have been in his early twenties. He had a wisp of a goatee and moustache, one which looked as though he was trying too hard. However, there was a hard look in his eyes.

The four men surrounding him were larger, but just as young.

Clark glanced at Charlie, who looked pale despite his dark skin. He was having trouble breathing, and there was a resigned look in his expression. “Just let them have it,” Charlie said. “It’s not worth it.”

Losing his life over forty dollars’ worth of trash probably didn’t seem like a good deal to Charlie. Even if the men didn’t kill him, they might injure him badly enough that he might not be able to survive the next cold snap.

Still, the look on his face made Clark’s gut clench. It was as though a little part of Charlie was dying inside as Clark watched. He’d seen that look countless times on the faces of his foster brothers and sisters as they were bullied and degraded as human beings.

Clark hesitated, conflicted. Was Charlie’s pride worth the risk that he might get hurt? Stepping into a fight like this one had been what caused Clark’s life to collapse in the first place.

There was no way he could fight these people without risking their lives. Clark felt frozen at the thought of stepping forward. Human bones were fragile, and it was getting harder and harder to judge how much force to use. His strength was growing every day, and the same effort that would have been appropriate last week would be enough to kill a man now.

It wasn’t worth it.

“Fine,” Clark said, stepping away from his cart. He slung his backpack over his shoulder. There would be other bars with cans; the men in the trucks couldn’t get to them all.

“That’s what I thought,” the man said. He gestured toward the others who stepped forward to grab the bags out of the carts. He grinned, the expression on his face nasty.

Clark stepped backward toward Charlie, who was also slowly moving away. Clark slowly began to turn away — as much as it galled him to be bullied by these men, the thought of what would happen if he tried to fight back made his heart race.

“Did I say you could go?” The man’s voice was taunting now. “It seems to me that you owe us a little something for trying to take our stuff.”

“We don’t have anything,” Clark said. It was hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“You’ve got whatever is in those packs, and whatever is in your pockets.”

Clark closed his eyes. What he had on him was everything he owned. Charlie’s possessions were even more valuable; he didn’t have Clark’s gifts. A few dollars might mean the difference between life and death to the older man.

“No,” Charlie said. His breathing had slowed, and there was a sudden look of determination in his eyes. “It’s not yours.”

“Don’t be stupid, ese,” the man said. “What you got in those packs worth your life?”

The door to the cab of the truck opened and the last occupant stepped out. He was carrying a crowbar. The other men threw the bags in the back of the truck and pulled out baseball bats.

“There are six of us and two of you,” the man said. “What are you going to do?”

Clark felt frozen, but Charlie stepped forward. “Whoever said there’s just two of us?”

The growling from the darkness was the first warning the men had as Rufus came from out of the darkness, his lips pulled back in a snarl. Clark had forgotten just how big the dog was, and his eyes gleamed, reflecting the truck’s headlights.

“You think we’re afraid of Cujo here?” The man’s voice wasn’t nearly as confident as it had been. “There’s still six of us.”

As big as the dog was, it wouldn’t last long against six men with bats.

Clark slowly set his pack down. “You’ve got what you came for. There’s no reason for this to get ugly.”

“All you’ve got is a big-assed dog,” the man said, his eyes never leaving Rufus. “Otherwise you’ve got nothing.”

“I’m warning you,” Clark said. He felt the old, familiar anger rising, the anger that he’d only dared to give in to once. Every act of bullying, every act of indifference, every feeling of being powerless to change the injustices he’d seen on a daily basis had fanned the flames.

He lived in a world of glass, where the slightest wrong move would mean that things would be forever broken, but there were times where he wished he could simply let loose.

“What are you going to do?” the thug asked again.

Clark felt the fire rising in his eyes and he quickly looked away from the men to the only target he could feel safe in focusing on.

The truck’s right headlight exploded. The men turned and a moment later the left headlight exploded.

“What makes you think there’s just three of us?” Clark asked.

The sudden darkness left everyone night blind. Clark’s vision recovered almost instantly, but he knew it would be several minutes before the men were able to see. They’d assume that Clark and Charlie had at least one more accomplice behind them.

Charlie was just as night blind as the others; more so as he’d been looking into the light.

Clark quietly slipped around the men, who’d huddled together, flinching involuntarily as Rufus growled from a different position. The dog was suddenly a much bigger threat and the men knew it. Although they were unable to see, Rufus had better night vision and a keener sense of smell.

“Maybe we ought to go,” one of the men said quietly in Spanish.

Clark only knew schoolroom Spanish, although he’d always had a knack for languages, but it was enough to understand the whispered comments they were making.

If he let them go, they’d just keep doing what they were doing. Yet it wasn’t safe for him to hit them, or even grab them.

The truck was still running. Clark looked at it and grinned. Maybe if he dented their truck they’d think twice the next time they came across somebody they thought was helpless.

He ran toward the truck and kicked at the door as hard as he could. He hadn’t been alone often enough to really gauge his strength, but he knew he was strong enough to make a big dent.

It was only as his foot connected that he realized just how much of a world of glass he lived in.

“Any idea how that happened?” Charlie asked, his head craned upward.

“No idea,” Clark said, feeling stunned.

The men had all fled, and the bags of cans — both those he’d and Charlie had collected and those the men had already had in the pickup — were scattered everywhere.

The truck was upside down a hundred feet away, caught atop two huge oak trees.

“You don’t think they’ll be needin’ their cans, do you?” Charlie asked.

Clark glanced at the older man and couldn’t help but grin. In the face of what had to look like a miracle, Charlie kept his mind on the practicalities of the situation.

“We’ll have to hurry before the cops get here,” Clark said.

The men had already crushed their cans and Clark found that he could fit three times as many in the cart. At the sound of distant sirens, he said, “We’d better get going.”

Charlie nodded and grinned, his teeth white in the darkness.

At first all Clark saw was a pile of trash; Charlie had led him to an isolated area and they'd had to push aside what had looked like a solid piece of wire fencing. They'd pushed their carts inside and replaced the fence.

They were in a small loading area.

"This warehouse is abandoned," Charlie said.

He fiddled with the trash pile and a moment later Clark realized that the light cardboard was covering a tarp. A little fiddling, and the tarp became a tent.

"Hey, this is warm," Clark said.

"The warehouse next door isn't abandoned," Charlie said.

It took Clark a moment to realize that the older man had built his tent over a heat duct. Despite the ice and snow, the inside of the tent was somewhat warmer.

"It stays warmer if I leave most of it lying flat," Charlie said.

"With just enough room for me and Rufus. But I can expand it for tonight."

He did something else and soon there was enough room for the three of them, Clark, the old man, and the giant dog between them.

The incident with the truck had frightened him, but there was a sense of exhilaration in stopping those men from doing what they'd done.

He'd never had time enough alone to practice using his strength, which made him more dangerous than a freight train in a china shop. Yet he was able to pick up eggs without breaking them. It was only when he got excited, or tried to use more than a certain level of strength that he got in trouble.

Well, he had nothing but time now.

He'd practice with his abilities, and he'd go back to school; he'd find a way. He'd go to college and eventually he'd have the kind of home his parents had. He'd have the stable, loving home that he deserved, and he'd find a way to protect people.

Life wasn't good, but it would be.

THE END