

# Gotham Nights

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Summary: In this next installment of the “Dawn of Discovery” series, red kryptonite finds its way to Gotham City, wreaking havoc with the resident superheroes, just as a big movie about the Man of Steel is released. Meanwhile, Laura Kent is confronted by growing feelings for her best friend and questions about how he might react if he knew her darkest secrets.

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Thanks go to my loving and patient family for putting up with me while writing this. This story is dedicated to my dad, who died in 2012. Much to my embarrassment, he read my fic shortly after I started writing, and even though I’m pretty sure he never saw an episode of the show, he encouraged me in my writing and was proud. But that was the kind of dad he was — kind of like my personal Superman.

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This story is part of the author’s “Dawn of Discovery” series, which includes [“The Dawn of Discovery,”](#) [“How I Spent My Summer Vacation,”](#) [“Professional Loyalties,”](#) [“Personal Loyalties,”](#) [“It Runs in the Family,”](#) [“I’ll Be You For Christmas,”](#) [“Meet Sam Wayne,”](#) and [“Gotham Nights.”](#)

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The Gotham Theater was the jewel of old downtown Gotham, a relic from the days of vaudeville acts and gas lamps, a stately reminder of a time long past. Throughout the years the neighborhood around the theater had morphed into a modern arts and entertainment district, a bustling place with a half dozen more venues, but none with the prestige of the Gotham. The bright sign out front was two stories tall, blazing with the incandescent glow of hundreds of light bulbs, the marquee below announcing the charity showing of the new Superman movie that night.

Across the country, the movie had opened to limited engagements in a new city every night, starting in Metropolis. The premiere had been a spectacular affair, attended by the usual host of stars, producers, and Hollywood elite. Swooping down from the sky and landing in the middle of the red carpet had been the guest of honor, Superman himself, accompanied by his wife Ultra Woman. She had only been revealed to the world a couple years earlier, although the fact that Superman did, in fact, have a wife had been assumed once the Crimson Superman showed up in the skies of Metropolis. She was fairly enigmatic as far as heroes went, only actively performing rescues around the time she was formally introduced, though she still flew in with her husband to the occasional charity outing or public appearance. On this night, she and her husband were given prominent seats in one of the loges, and by all reports they enjoyed the movie, as did the other critics in attendance.

Tonight, the moneyed class of Gotham streamed in the doors, forking over \$1,000 per ticket for the privilege of being among the

first to screen the movie, and garnering an invitation to a reception later that evening hosted by the Superman foundation. Among the crowd at the Gotham Theater were Sam Wayne and his very pregnant wife Jennifer. This was one of their rare evenings out together, their social schedule taking a large hit when their son Adam came around three years earlier. Between the baby and Sam’s nighttime activities as part of the “other family business,” sometimes it felt like they hardly got any time alone anymore, but this was an opportunity they couldn’t pass up. Sam was always game for a good laugh, and this movie promised him more bang for his comedy buck than he figured he would get for a long time. To all appearances, this would be a straightforward superhero movie, a live-action comic book based on a fictionalized version of the life of Metropolis’s Man of Steel. But Sam Wayne, the adopted son of Bruce Wayne and former CJ Kent, had spent 18 years under the roof of the actual Man of Steel, and he doubted that anything in the real life of Superman would be all that compelling on the silver screen. Sure, there was the flying, the life saving, the adoring crowds, and the occasional foiled evil plot. But there was also the spectacle of putting three kids to bed every night, helping with housework, paying bills, and the threat of a home cooked meal by Lois Lane, surely the stuff that horror movies were made of.

Sam and Jenny hadn’t been disappointed. In trying to imagine the life of the Last Son of Krypton, the writers had taken certain liberties that had left the couple giggling in their seats, drawing dirty stares from the surrounding moviegoers. Of course nobody outside of the Kent family could imagine Superman starting out as a baby in a spaceship, spending his formative years in America’s heartland. As far as the world knew, Superman arrived in Metropolis as a full grown man, straight off his spacecraft sporting a well-rounded vocabulary, 100% authentic American accent, and full knowledge of society’s conventions. According to the movie, this was all thanks to some sort of Kryptonian computer and incubation chamber that could immerse him in Earth culture as he passed the years away, isolated, in his arctic Fortress of Solitude.

“All the boring old poems and stuffy literature, and the place didn’t even have cable,” CJ whispered.

“Can you imagine a Superman indoctrinated on celebrity gossip, sports, and old Mork & Mindy reruns?”

“Just look at my brother,” CJ replied. Jenny snorted a little as they both snickered a little too loudly.

The main plot of the movie involved some alien invader trying to conquer Earth, massive destruction of Metropolis... standard comic book superhero stuff, and not all that interesting. The interesting part was the introduction of Ultra Woman, here envisioned as another of the New Kryptonians, ushered to Earth in advance of the others and finding a kindred spirit, a soulmate. Jenny thought the intimacy scene, imagining the two together on the ceiling of the Fortress of Solitude bedroom, was worthy of a chuckle, but when she turned to discuss it with CJ, she could see the crimson burning in his cheeks even through the darkness of the theater.

“What...?” she asked.

“A little too on the nose with that one,” he whispered. At her questioning look he continued. “Please don’t ask me how I know that.”

In all, the movie was about what they expected, and none of it seemed to hit too close to home, or at least not close enough to be of concern. It would be interesting to get Clark’s take on it, and Lois’s take, since a character with her name had actually had a small but important role in the film. The crowd had an excited buzz to it as the house lights went up, and CJ couldn’t help but overhear random comments speculating about the plot line of a sequel, and of the potential inclusion of children like the Crimson Superman. It sounded like the potential for more unintentionally hilarious stories, though most people believed it would be based

on the Ridley Davenport Superboy books from a decade earlier.

Jenny and CJ trailed the crowd out of the theater, choosing to wait until the ending of the credits before leaving their seats. The hour wasn't especially late, but the sky was dark and the crowds had grown sparse. They had parked their car in a parking ramp several blocks away, and the shortest route there led through a dark, lonely alleyway adjacent to the theater. CJ and Jenny exited the side door, pulling their coats somewhat tighter around themselves as they meet the cool evening air. Out of habit, CJ scanned the alley, sighing as he saw the stereotypical setting for practically every movie mugging ever put on film. A lone lightbulb over the door provided the only illumination for the better part of a block, and dumpsters and boxes abutted the building as far as he could see. Rusty fire escapes clung to the walls, leading up to darkened windows high above street level. Atop the building opposite the theater, two security cameras were perched on the roof, one pointing toward the entrance of the alley, the other facing the door the couple found themselves in.

"Twenty bucks says some bad guy is hiding halfway down the alley waiting to jump us as soon as we hit the shadows," CJ said as they turned toward the darkness.

"No bet," Jenny said, her sensitive ears picking up movement in front of them. One of the many blessings of pregnancy, at least for her, was the fact that the baby fueled the return of superpowers that she had gained one Christmas several years ago, then gradually lost. Under normal circumstances she would probably get a little nervous heading down a dark and deserted alleyway, even with her capable husband at her side. But right now she knew there probably wasn't much that could harm her, evidenced by what had happened when she had a little slip up cutting an apple for her son over lunch that day. The knife definitely got the worst of the deal, a little thumb-shaped dent in the blade leaving no doubt.

The two walked along in silence for a minute, before a man dressed in black jumped out from behind a neighboring dumpster wielding a gun. Jenny could practically hear CJ's eyes roll as the man asked for their money and valuables.

"Come on, man," CJ said, exasperated. "You really don't want to do this." Neither he nor Jenny made any move to put their hands up, instead choosing to give the man their most annoyed looks.

"No, your money!" the man shouted back, raising the gun. "You must have loads of it. And a guy like me deserves it way more than some rich snob like you."

Jenny quickly suppressed a sigh, though it only served to antagonize the man with the gun. The two of them certainly looked the part of the moneyed elite, CJ in an expensive shirt and coat, Jenny in a nice dress and somewhat gaudy jewelry. It was the wardrobe expected of members of the Wayne family, especially when on their way to a charity social, but it was more of a disguise than anything. Even though the two of them had technically been part of the moneyed class for a few years now, they still considered themselves very middle class and privately tried to live their lives that way. Not that the robber knew that.

CJ looked at Jenny. "Nine o' clock," he said, squinting his eyes at her. Jenny got his meaning right away, looking over her left shoulder toward the security camera above. Whenever he was in public, Sam Wayne sported a pair of glasses, which made it difficult to utilize his heat vision in a pinch. Jenny zeroed in on the wiring and gave the camera a zap, causing a small spark and further startling the robber. Jenny looked back just in time to see the man tense his finger over the trigger. CJ lunged forward and put his hand over the end of the barrel just as the bullet was fired. As that hand squeezed down and distorted the barrel, the other swung around and connected with the man's jaw. The robber staggered for a moment before Jenny cocked her arm back and got a punch in of her own, finally knocking him out.

The sound of the gunshot reverberated off the surrounding buildings. "That was kinda fun," Jenny said, rubbing her fist absently, expecting a stinger to come that never did. "Though I hate that I only have the talents to be a badass when I'm pregnant."

"Still, nice work," CJ said, bringing up the hand that he had used to stop the bullet into a high five which Jenny quickly returned. They both groaned, though, as they realized that the hand had been coated with gunpowder. CJ held his hand out for a moment, then absently went to wipe it on his pants before Jenny stopped him.

"That would've been a fun one to explain to the dry cleaners," she said, then held up a finger before rooting around in her cavernous purse with her clean hand. After a moment she produced a packet of baby wipes, getting one for each of them.

As CJ wiped his hand off, a smile spread across his face. "Is there anything these things won't get out?" he marveled. Jenny could only shrug. In her experience, emanations from a baby or any other toxic substance, gunpowder included, could be removed from any clothing, upholstery, floor coverings, or any surface imaginable simply through use of a baby wipes. Truly, they were one of the wonders of the modern world.

"If there is I haven't found it," she said, her sentence interrupted by the sound of a thud behind them. They both quickly turned, then smiled as they saw who it was. Their visitor's expression morphed from concern to borderline annoyance as he saw his charges.

"You are aware of the tragic story of the death of Bruce's parents, aren't you?" Nightwing asked after a moment as he surveyed the scene. During CJ's tenure in Gotham, Nightwing had been his partner in crime fighting, taking over on the nights when CJ was unavailable due to a sick kid, date night, or business reasons. They worked together on the more expansive investigations, and had started hanging out more during the daytime hours, though CJ still got the feeling that Dick wasn't especially comfortable being under the same roof as Bruce Wayne. In all he had become a good friend, and had even developed the ability to tease, though it still didn't come naturally to him.

"I believe I've heard the story one or two hundred times," CJ answered. Jenny nodded. "A dark alley after a family outing to the movies..."

"You wound up a little less dead than they did," Nightwing said, then approached the incapacitated robber.

CJ shrugged. "Guess now I don't have the required tragic backstory to become a superhero," he said, then stuck out a thumb toward the camera. "The wife took care of the camera, so we're in the clear."

"You just can't stand to have a night off, admit it," Nightwing said, restraining the robber's hands and feet.

"I think he just likes to show off," Jenny said, wrapping her hands around CJ's arm and winking at Nightwing. "Though I finished him off, so..."

"Chivalry really is dead," Nightwing said, straightening up, a twinkle in his eye.

"So you're going to take the credit for this one, I suppose." CJ said. "And as much as I'd like to stay and give an official explanation to the cops... maybe join in on some of the fun..."

"Go," Nightwing said. He was well aware of the plans for the evening, of the reason for their presence at the theater. "I know you have a soiree to get to. Give my best to your Dad."

The rest of the walk to the parking garage was incident-free, and the two walked together in companionable silence, something that was all too rare anymore. It hadn't been just banter when Jenny told Dick that CJ was probably showing off for her. And she suspected that the shortcut through the dark alley was in hopes of getting a little action. Their late night rooftop rendezvous were getting further behind them with every passing day. Life for them

had settled into comfortable domesticity — CJ headed into the office everyday and Jenny usually worked from home while watching Adam. CJ would generally be around in the evening for family time, though he prowled rooftops about every other night after their son was in bed. Every now and then some big case would come around and she wouldn't see much of him — those were the tough times. Going to sleep alone in a cold bed was hard, but it made the times he was there all the more special. As she walked, she leaned up against him, and he wrapped his strong arm around her waist. Intentional or not, their alley diversion had provided a little spark in the evening, and it felt like old times, at least for a moment.

They were at the car a few moments later. The reception they were headed to was being held in the restaurant at the top of Wayne Tower, the tallest skyscraper in town. It would be filled with the crème of Gotham society, along with Superman, of course. CJ and his father had been two ships passing in the night in recent months, and hadn't even managed a phone call in that time. Jenny knew that CJ was itching to talk with Clark, but tonight they had to be strangers, and conversation limited to generalities and topics acceptable for public consumption. If they were meeting in costume, at least they could acknowledge their connection. Batman's outfit has a symbol of his heritage on it, an S-shield embroidered black-on-black, in full view for anyone who bothered to look, but not obvious enough to glimpse if you weren't looking for it. Batman had also taken to doing the occasional rescue, and to publicly performing deeds that wouldn't be possible for a normal, non superpowered person. Sam Wayne, though, had never officially met Superman.

CJ piloted the car into the Wayne Tower parking ramp, expertly avoiding what he referred to as the world's most interesting pothole, an out-of-place crater of broken concrete created one fateful night when his alter ego wanted to quickly get from the roof to street level. While in costume, CJ routinely leapt off of shorter buildings, able to take off at full sprint from jumps of 10 stories or so. 85 stories, however, plus or minus the mechanical rooms, lead to a lot more force on the landing, and the pavement definitely wasn't designed for the stress. It took a second after hitting the ground to catch his bearings and absorb the impact from the shifting pavement before he was able to sprint away. He supposed that the experiment had been a relative success, since the jump ended up being quicker than taking the elevator or stairs. Still, for the sake of the Gotham public works crew, he didn't think he would be doing that again anytime soon.

They parked the car and headed toward the elevator, which lead them to a reception area. A second elevator would take them directly to the top floor, and as they stepped in, they paid no attention to the other couple that had gotten on before them. As the elevator doors closed and the cab began to ascend, though, Jenny felt CJ tense up beside her. Looking at his face, she saw him staring wide-eyed at their companions, before turning his face away from them, taking up the most awkward "nonchalant" pose possible. He never was a very good actor, Jenny thought as she turned to get a look at the other couple.

In their three years in high society, Jenny had gotten to know a lot of the big-money types in Gotham. A lot of times the wives would gather while the men conducted business or played golf. She was on friendly terms with the wives of the mayor, district attorney, Gotham State's chancellor, and some of the more influential bankers and businessmen in town. Even some of the more famous Hollywood actors and actresses would come through town on show tours and whatnot, but this couple wasn't familiar to her. As if on cue, the man turned toward her and flashed a smile. CJ tried his hardest to act distracted.

"Hey, I'm Dax Springfield," he said with a wave. "Going to the Superman party?"

Jenny put on her most cordial smile. "Wouldn't miss it," she

said. She glanced up at her husband's face to see almost a look of panic in his eyes. She squeezed his hand and turned back to their companions. "You?"

"Oh, of course! I'm a big fan from way back. Went to school at Metropolis University — I was actually on the same field as him once. Used to see him flying around town...kind of miss that."

Jenny nodded and tried her best to look impressed. "So, what do you do these days, Mr. Springfield?" she asked.

"I play for the Knights," he said, puffing out his chest ever so slightly. CJ gave a half grin for show, though he still averted his eyes. Springfield's grin faded slightly and he leaned forward, trying to get a look at CJ. "I'm sorry, but you look so familiar," he said after a moment. "Have we met before?"

CJ's face set into a neutral expression, though Jenny could still see something in his eyes. "I'm Sam Wayne," he said, his voice a little too deep. "And this is my wife Jennifer. She went to school at Metropolis University, too," he said. Springfield looked at her for a moment, then slowly nodded. "My, uh, father owns the Knights, or at least a stake in the Knights. We go to games upon occasion... maybe we've seen each other on the sidelines, or at a meeting or something." At this point, CJ would normally give his self-effacing smile, but his face was still neutral, the usual twinkle in his eyes gone. Jenny frowned slightly.

Dax Springfield nodded more vigorously, but his eyes stayed on CJ's face, and Jenny could tell that he was not convinced. Before they were able to continue the conversation, though, the elevator reached its destination and the doors opened with a chime. "Enjoy the party," Jenny said with a wave as the other couple walked out, and then she nudged CJ ahead. As they left the elevator, instead of crossing the lobby to the restaurant and the assembled crowd, he turned and led her the other way, down a deserted hallway toward the restrooms. As soon as they were out of sight of the rest of the partygoers, CJ leaned up against the wall, took his glasses off, and ran his hand across his face.

"Holy crap was that close," he said, taking a couple deep breaths. Jenny didn't say anything, instead looking at him expectantly. After a moment to get his composure, he slipped his glasses back on and straightened up. "We played together on the same football team in college for three years."

Jenny felt a shiver pass over her. "Oh, wow."

"He was a receiver, I was a D-lineman. We never had to scrimmage against each other or anything, and we practiced with different units. There are a hundred something people on a football team, so it's impossible to be friends with everyone, but you know of them, especially the good players, and we were both good players."

"I don't remember seeing him at your service, after you 'died'," Jenny said, using her fingers to put quotation marks around the final word.

"Well, he was already pro by then," CJ replied. "Good thing, too, because if he recognized you, too..."

"I don't think he did." Jenny shook her head and gave him a wry smile. "Anyway, since when did you become the negative type? I thought you were mister confident all the time."

He looked at her questioningly, though his good humor seemed to be creeping back into his features. "Since a former teammate threatened to expose my carefully crafted persona. A couple fewer concussions and maybe we're having a different conversation."

"Oh, your persona would've been fine either way. Have some faith. Heck, I hardly recognized the new you when we first met. There's just something about a change in wardrobe, a new look..."

"Ugh, glasses..." CJ said. The grinned at each other for a second, then kissed.

"Come on, this is supposed to be a party, and I am looking forward to having some fun," she said. With that, they walked

back past the elevators and into the crowd. The restaurant was roomy and intimate at the same time, the high tables lit by candles and the overhead lights turned down such that they were barely on at all. The windows around the exterior were devoid of shades, allowing a full, stunning view of Gotham City. The streets beyond spread out like a spiderweb, the shorter building all around jutting into the sky, the widows lit up in random colors and patterns. The city seemed to stretch on into infinity, and the lights from distant cars on the streets and highways made it appear alive.

A waiter greeted them upon entry, offering champagne. CJ gladly took a glass, while Jenny put her hand over her belly and shook her head. Once upon a time, the pair would've split up and worked the room separately, but given that this was an official date night, they decided to stick together. They located Bruce in a dark corner of the room, standing back and observing, no doubt keeping an eye on the interactions of the politically powerful. CJ and Jenny gave a wave, but didn't stop to chat. CJ and Bruce met quite often back at the mansion, discussing the business and city politics, sometime holding animated discussions about the role of the Batman in Gotham. Bruce came from a time of supervillains and dangerous maniacs, a time that had long ago given way to the modern white collar criminals and street gangs. CJ felt that the police were more than capable of handling the vast majority of cases out there, and that it was presumptuous to think that some vigilante who operated without rules and without subpoena power could come by and solve cases without, or in spite of, them. He found himself angling toward the cases that had gone cold due to lack of evidence, cases that could be helped with a little super-powered assistance. He wanted to be a hero that inspired others, that could be trusted, not one that struck fear into criminals and average citizen alike. Bruce didn't necessarily agree, but he couldn't argue results, and CJ tried to keep him in the loop to the extent possible, because he knew how much it was killing Bruce not to be in on the action. Jenny would classify their relationship as familial — CJ's patience and positive outlook were a good counterweight to Bruce's stubbornness, and his intelligence was such that Bruce couldn't help but respect him. There was also some affection, at least toward the rest of the family, and Jenny could see that Bruce enjoyed having Adam around. In a life that had been so filled with darkness, it was nice to have a little someone around to remind him that there was innocence and love in the world, too.

In the back corner of the room was the guest of honor, Superman. A large crowd was gathered around him, but his eyes locked onto Jenny and CJ almost before they even entered the room. In the name of keeping up appearances, they made their way slowly around the room from couple to couple, eventually winding up on the outskirts of the crowd, waiting patiently for an audience with the Man of Steel. As expected, it was an almost painfully public setting, with other partygoers gathered closely around as they finally met him face-to-face.

"Ah, the infamous Sam Wayne and his lovely bride," Superman said, shaking CJ's hand and kissing the back of Jenny's. "So, what did you think of the movie?"

CJ took a sip of his champagne and arched an eyebrow. "It was educational," he said after a moment. "I mean, I never would've guessed that the paragon of truth, justice, and the American way is actually Canadian. Or is it Russian? Who controls the Arctic?"

"Greenland?" Jenny chipped in.

Superman crossed his arms across his chest. He had spent enough years at the receiving end of CJ's shtick to grow immune to it, though the familiar dancing in his eyes told them loud and clear that he was enjoying the exchange. "Santa and I take turns being supreme leader of our little patch of the ice flow," he said.

"Though I'm not sure you came to talk politics."

"Santa never struck me as the type to be a dictator," CJ mused.

"Are you kidding me? He must have hundreds of elves up

there working as slaves," Jenny replied. "Not to mention sentient reindeer."

"Where do they get all the food to feed all those elves and reindeer anyway?" CJ turned toward Superman. "And Ultra Woman probably needs a constant supply of Double Fudge Crunch Bars."

"Well, we just got a Sam's club, so there's that." Superman's mouth turned up ever so slightly, then he gave a quick exhale and cocked his head to the side. "So, uh, Sam. I just read an article talking about one of your new technological breakthroughs."

CJ smiled and took another sip of his drink. It was safe to say that he had found his niche at Wayne Enterprises, and it all started one lunch hour when he made a friend in the engineering division. What started out as mere spitballing led to a more active interest, and he started to get more involved in the day-to-day management of project development. With Bruce's blessing, his role in the company shifted to finding innovative solutions to everyday problems, developing products that would change the way people lived their lives. He liked to think that he fit in the same mold as Elon Musk, though Bruce wasn't going to let him burn through the kinds of cash it would take to actually compete with Mr. Musk. There had been successes and failures, and CJ had learned enough through it all that now even the negative experiences led to the positive, and more importantly led to a profit. And just maybe a little bit of publicity.

"As much as I'd like to take the credit, it was actually one of our employee's breakthroughs. I just applied it in a way he hadn't considered," CJ answered.

"And changed the whole conversation on energy supply in the process," Superman answered with a smile. "In a few years we're going to look back and see it as something that took us out of the relative stone age and ushered in a new future. Bet your father was proud; I know I would be in his shoes."

Jenny blushed, but CJ didn't outwardly react to the comment. Clark was always quick with a compliment, especially to his children, and he'd probably been wanting to say that since the news of the discovery broke. "Well, maybe next I'll turn my efforts to reverse engineering some of those Kryptonian crystals. Those things can do anything — grow a fortress, supply the furnishings, and fly a spaceship. Amazing!" CJ said, softening the sentiment with the interjection of some humor.

"Or maybe turn toward innovations in construction. I hear there's a very interesting pothole outside the building, here," Superman said.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," CJ said, trying to hide a grin.

"Riiight," Superman said under his breath, then thrust out his hand. "Well, it was good finally getting to meet you, Sam," he said. Jenny suspected that further conversation would only lead Superman to say some un-Supermanlike things, and that's why their meeting was being concluded. It's not like they wouldn't be seeing each other again soon. "And good to see you again, Jen."

With that, they stepped away and let another partygoer have their turn with the guest of honor. Jenny led CJ over to the large bank of windows, and together they took a few quiet moments to appreciate the view. She knew CJ was probably immune to it by now, having spent more nights that he would care to count observing it from one skyscraper or another. Although, she supposed as she observed the city, it was possible that he missed the forest through the trees. His sensitive hearing and vision, which she now shared, let him see the finest details at street level, even several miles away. Even now she could look toward the housing projects off the edge of downtown and see drug deals going down in the relative shadows. She winced at the distant sound of gunshots, and quickly located the sound, from a police operation in a shady neighborhood to the south. At hundreds of locations around the city came the sights and sounds of a vibrant

city: passion, anger, joy, sadness. It could be overwhelming, but, she thought as she pulled back her senses, that was only true if she let it be.

“Do you two have a standing bet on whether or not you can make him laugh in the suit?” Jenny asked, drawing a chuckle from CJ.

“That would seem horribly one sided. The bet is actually between Jon and me.”

“Good to know.” As she said the words, a distant rumble began to echo over the city. At first she almost had to strain to hear it, but it quickly grew in intensity until it attracted the attention of others around them. After a moment, a large orange fireball rose up from a residential district not terribly far away, punctuating the rumble with a loud blast. An audible gasp went through the room.

“Damn,” CJ said, then downed the remainder of his champagne. A whooshing sound announced that Superman was on the case, and Jenny was sure that CJ wasn’t far behind. After rooting through his pocket for a moment, he pressed the car keys into Jenny’s hand, then gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “You can get yourself home okay?” he asked. At her reassuring nod, he smiled, then strode across and out of the room, fighting against the crowd that was now rushing toward the windows. After a moment, Jenny was surprised to hear a voice from the roof, audible only to the sensitive ears of superpowered individuals. Looking up, she saw Clark standing above them, his gaze following CJ as he made his way to the staircase.

“You don’t mind me helping out with this one?” Clark asked.

“No, go save people. That’s your thing,” CJ answered. “I’ll be there in a bit to clean up.”

“Need a lift?”

“I have a motorcycle downstairs. Go, don’t worry about me.”

“You’re not going to take a flying leap of the roof again, are you?” Clark’s smile was almost painfully wide.

CJ’s chuckle reverberated in the stairwell. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

With that, Superman was off, and all eyes turned toward the now raging fire.

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It took CJ around 10 minutes to change clothes and get to the scene. The explosion had set off an inferno that had engulfed several blocks around the initial blast site. Superman had been hard at work tending to the injured and the dying, gently shepherding them to hospitals, and later to the waiting paramedics. While freeing some of those trapped by the flames, he had attempted to tackle the fire, though the smell in the air made it clear that a gas leak somewhere in the vicinity was fueling the flames, and his firefighting efforts wouldn’t get very far without first tackling that. His focus had instead stayed on the human casualties.

Batman parked his motorcycle in an alley near the site. People were gathered around the edge of the destruction, reporters setting up cameras, survivors straining to see what had happened to their neighborhood. Normally CJ would try to avoid the crowds by traversing the rooftops, though the fire made that impossible this night. The flames also left precious few shadows to hide in, so he fought back any lingering shyness and confidently made his way out into the middle of the street. There were a few gasps and surprised murmurs as he strode past the onlookers, toward the inferno.

The first order of business for Batman would need to be stopping the gas leak, then he could worry about containing the fire. There were still enough of the wounded to keep his father busy for at least the next few minutes. And although stopping the leak would be a task unique to someone in possession of superpowers, it wasn’t as if Batman had been a stranger to such things in the last couple years, nor had he tried to hide what he could do. The genie had been out of the bottle almost as long as CJ

had been in Gotham, though his superhuman feats tended to have few witnesses and were more the stuff of urban legend. As far as he was aware, the only pictures of his exploits were grainy at best, and the video was nonexistent, though it was probably only a matter of time before that changed. There were certainly a lot of people watching tonight, and as he reached the epicenter of destruction, he heard helicopters reach the scene and begin to circle overhead.

In front of him was a crater where a row house used to be. The homes on each side of it were about half gone, the brick walls standing like skeletons, the interiors collapsed in upon themselves. The street in front of the crater had largely been rubblized, and it was through a rift in the pavement that the most intense flames were shooting through. CJ knew that the older portions of town such as this were underlain with ancient utilities, including 100 year old gas mains made of brittle ductile iron. It only took a brief glimpse with X-ray vision to locate the crack in the pipe causing the problem, and he quickly made his way toward the spot, taking his cape and utility belt off as he went. Only something absolutely skintight would survive the intense heat he was about to experience, and he hoped to hell that the cowl would stand up. Before jumping into the schism, he looked down the block and found Superman, locked eyes with him, and nodded. Then he leapt.

It was safe to say that his time in Gotham had been filled with new experiences. In addition to his skyscraper leap, there had been the time a skyscraper collapsed on him, his extended trip to the bottom of the harbor to gather evidence, a few assorted bomb blasts, fatherhood.... Now he could add natural gas-fueled inferno to that list. Although the heat was no doubt intense, it didn’t feel uncomfortable. The pipe itself was white-hot, and quick poke with his finger showed that it easily deformed, though it wasn’t so hot that it had liquefied. Steeling himself, CJ put his hands on either side of the crack, crimping the pipe shut, then rubbing his thumb over the ends smooth out any holes and ensure a complete closure. He then took a deep breath and blew cold air over everything, serving to stiffen the metal and deprive the remaining flames of oxygen.

A cheer went out from the surrounding area as the fire died and CJ climbed back to the surface. In the distance he could hear the clicking of camera shutters, and his skin practically crawled with the feeling of being watched. In quick succession, he picked up his discarded cape and belt, put them on, then checked the integrity of his cowl. It was a little charred and melted around the edges, but otherwise intact. With a quick sigh of relief, he then started going building to building, squelching the last of the fires, and putting out the hotspots. After finishing up with the injured, his father did the same near where he was. Gradually, the emergency responders began to filter into the area, going building to building, slowly making their way toward the initial blast location. Within a matter of minutes, the site was secure, and the emergency was over.

Superman landed next to Batman. “Thanks for the assist,” CJ said, surveying the scene.

“De nada,” Superman answered. “I was looking for an excuse to get out of that party, anyway. There’s only so much small talk in the world, and I think I wore most of it out two charity parties ago.”

“You should make Jon take a few of the parties. Ooh, or better yet, make Mom.” CJ knew as well as anyone that inserting the costumed version of his mother into a party with vapid celebrities and millionaires would probably result in some unpleasant scenes, or at least a lot of pointed stares and muttering. Probably not the best thing for a charity trying to bring in generous donations, but high entertainment as far as he was concerned.

Superman made a face. “For the good of my marriage, my sanity, party attendees, and the people of Metropolis in general, I

graciously offered to let your mom sit these out. As for your brother, he's on the hook once a movie comes out that he's actually in."

CJ looked back toward Wayne tower, and could see his wife still standing next to the window, looking toward him. He held up his hand ever so slightly in greeting, and she returned the gesture in kind with a weak smile. "Looks like the party is still on. Are you going back? I have some more work to do around here, so..."

Superman followed his gaze, gave Jenny a smile of his own, then looked down at his chest. "Between the blood and the fire, I think I'm a little too grimy for the jet set right now." He cocked an eyebrow and regarded CJ's cowl. "You're looking a little worse for the wear yourself."

CJ shrugged. "I'm just happy it's still in one piece. Putting my face in a blast furnace is a new one for me, and it's not exactly something I contemplated when we designed the suit." He looked down at his hands and noticed that his gloves had some metal bits on them, cooled remnants of the pipe he had crushed. "Maybe a somewhat singed Batman will be more intimidating or something. Management thinks I need a little more of that." The refrain was actually starting to grate on CJ a little. It was hard for Bruce to let go of the image and persona he had created, that he still felt ownership over. CJ was patient, as always, but he was beginning to question its limits.

"Intimidation doesn't stop fires or save lives," Superman said, parroting an argument that CJ has used many times. "Anyway, I think management would find your party repartee more frightening than that mask. He never could take a joke."

"Tell me about it," CJ muttered. He noticed that the emergency workers moving ever closer to their location. Very soon they would be within earshot, and the conversation would have to fall back to generalities...again. "Say, maybe we can fit in a lunch next week sometime? We can finally have a good conversation without any pretense," CJ said, pointing a thumb at Superman's chest. "Plus, I have two months worth of witty banter built up and there's nobody around here I can dish it out on. Dick's trying, but it's just not the same."

"It's a date." Superman's expression said that he noticed the impending company, too. He clapped CJ on the shoulder, gave a half smile, then took off. CJ sighed, and turned his attention to the epicenter of destruction. Might as well get to work, he thought, sauntering over to the pit that was once a townhouse basement.

By all appearances, this was the scene of a tragic accident. But he would be remiss if he didn't at least do a cursory review to determine if there was something else going on, and his gut was practically screaming at him that it was. Almost immediately, he noticed that the gas supply meter to the townhouse didn't look right. The damage on it appeared more consistent with tampering than with an explosion, though there was certainly some of that, too. Couplings don't just unscrew themselves. Circling closer, he started to scan the rubble in the middle of the basement. Assuming someone intentionally started a gas leak, then they intended for the resulting explosion, but to what end? Insurance fraud was one angle, but surely the vandalized meter was enough of a giveaway that the scheme could never work. There must be something more sinister at play. Almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind, he found what he was looking for.

"Chief!" he called over his shoulder, getting the attention of the fire chief. He then gestured toward the basement, and jumped in. He used his meager levitation powers to keep his feet above the unstable pile of rubble, then used his hands to dig. He tossed aside charred beams, mattress springs, a bathtub...he probably dug through three feet of rubble before finally reaching what he had picked up with his x-ray vision.

"Batman?" the fire chief said from up top, leaning gingerly over the edge.

"Fetch the medical examiner. We have a body," he said,

gesturing to the charred remains. He let himself drop onto the basement floor as the fire chief nodded and disappeared. CJ regarded the body for a second, then knelt down next to it. Given its state, it was almost impossible to tell if it was male or female, young or old. Nothing on the ground around the body seemed remarkable, and there were no identifying marks or unique features. "Who are you?" he whispered, reaching out to touch it.

Almost immediately, his hand began to tingle. He pulled it back quickly, but he was already beginning to feel dizzy, his mouth dry. Before he could even stand up, his vision began to restrict. It was then that all conscious thought ceased.

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Laura Kent liked to think of herself as a normal, run-of-the-mill college student, and from all outward appearances she was. She had recently started her junior year at Gotham State, studying biology and chemistry, living in a studio apartment near campus, and working at the student newspaper. Her parents had tried to talk her into majoring in journalism, because there was no denying she had a knack for it. It wasn't just anyone who could boast of having been published in the Daily Planet at the tender age of 15, after all. But there was a stubborn streak within her, one that wasn't willing to let her settle for the same career as her parents, her brother, and her sister-in-law. Besides, she was pretty sure that print media was on the wane. All the overheard grumblings at family outings told her that even the vaunted Daily Planet, the most respected newspaper in the world, had fallen on hard times, and if the Planet was in trouble, then what hope was there for the rest of the industry? Plus, it's not like she needed a degree in journalism to be a writer — anyone could write. And in these days of blogs and social media, a lot of people out there took it upon themselves to write, whether they had any actual talent for it or not. She felt her time in school was better spent learning about things with which she was not already intimately familiar.

Her friends were mostly people she met at the newspaper, their friendship forged through many evenings and late nights spent putting the paper together. In their free time, they liked to hang out, go to movies and campus events, play games, and generally do the types of things that college students do. There was a core group of 6 or 7 friends that stuck together, though Laura had to admit that she spent more time with her friend Matt than with anyone else. She supposed that she considered him her best friend, though that was as far as it went. Matt liked all the same shows and music that she did, seemed to have a similar sense of humor, and was possibly the most genuinely nice person she'd met at Gotham State. She supposed that he wasn't bad on the eyes, not that she ever looked, and had a certain charm that came from growing up in a smallish town in Ohio. It also helped that he was willing to put up with her, because Laura had to admit that she was not the easiest person to get to know.

Her stubbornness led her to be a bit of a contrarian, and she found herself arguing the opposite side of issues from her friends just for sport. She also had a low tolerance for political correctness, preferring to tell people the simple truth whether they liked it or not. Because of that, some viewed her as stuck up or self-important, but she preferred to think of herself as honest. Anyway, she really didn't care what most people thought of her. She knew who she was, and that was someone who had profound respect for life and the law, who wanted the world to be a better place, and who was intensely loyal to those who were loyal to her. She tended to be an optimist, to always expect the best out of people, but she also liked to challenge people to step away from their preconceived ideas and see the world from different perspectives. Her father liked to tease that she was essentially a younger version of her mother, a fact that used to bother her when she was in high school. These days, however, she figured that there were worse people to emulate.

Contributing to the puzzle of her personality, of course, was

her Super heritage and all that imparted upon her. The powers were an important part of who she was, helped to shape her perspectives on life, but she hid that part of herself away from her friends. It made for a lonely existence at times, but the powers also gave her the ability to chase that loneliness away. Many was the night that she took it upon herself to travel to some exotic location for a solitary evening away, feeling alive amongst the crowds of Hong Kong or Berlin, feeling at one with the wide open spaces of the Midwest or in the mountains of Tibet. She wasn't quite sure how much her family knew of her wanderlust, though based on the stories that her dad told of his younger days, she knew that he would understand. Then he would tell her to get back to her homework.

One of her other hobbies, if you could call it that, was playing Robin to her brother's Batman. It started out as a fun way to spend her summers, then once she started at Gotham State, she started to regard it as...less fun. She didn't mind the companionship or the action, but what CJ did was fundamentally different from what her dad and Jon did, and she mostly didn't have the patience anymore for the type of investigations that Batman got involved with, especially with so many other things going on in her life. It also got old being second banana. Still, she still played along on the rare occasions she was asked, the positive side of her regarding it as a type of remedial superhero training. At some point she would have to set out and be her own hero, and it helped to see how different people got the job done.

Tonight she had embarked upon what she jokingly called her part-time job, babysitting her nephew Adam. A big part of her decision to go to school in Gotham had been the opportunity to spend time with him, and she had let it be known that she was available for babysitting duty whenever they needed her. In the first year or so, the calls were basically nonexistent. On a few occasions that year, her parents had come into town just to gift CJ and Jenny a night of uninterrupted sleep. Though Laura felt somewhat offended that she hadn't been called, her mother waived off her concern.

"Patience. They're first-time parents. Dr. Spock himself wouldn't be a good enough babysitter right now," her mom had said.

Laura had to think about that for a second. "The guy from Star Trek?" she had asked, eliciting a sigh from her mom.

"Nevermind," she had said. Laura still wasn't sure what that exchange meant, exactly, except that maybe it was too soon to worry. Even though she didn't get to babysit that year, she still got to see him frequently, during weekend visits or trips to the park.

The second year things had picked up, with Batman assuming a few more complicated cases, Jenny putting more time in at the magazine, and the two of them rediscovering their libidos. Laura hadn't been especially good at changing diapers at first, being the youngest child and lacking in practical experience, but she got better. She also found herself enjoying the babysitting trips more as Adam developed a personality. She told her friends that she was looking after her brother's kid, but she didn't ever broach to them the subject of who exactly her brother was...or wasn't, technically. Fortunately none of her friends were all that curious, and fortunately Sam Wayne's celebrity didn't rate high enough that he had paparazzi following him around all the time. It meant a semi-private life for her brother, and more opportunities for Laura to enjoy their company without anyone the wiser.

Tonight had been on her calendar for a long time — the big Superman movie premiere. The movie itself had been in development for years, and even before leaving home for college, she had seen the script that her Dad had brought home from the Foundation. And she knew what lengths her parents had gone to in offering notes to the screenwriter, deliberately leading them away from anything resembling the truth such that the result was rather...comic. Laura really had no desire to watch the movie,

except maybe to observe the actors that they cast in the parts of her parents. But the silliness of the script was right up CJ's alley — the chance to snicker at all the outrageous locations and scenes that the movie had dreamt up, and of the wooden characterization of their family members. It was comedic gold to him, which she could appreciate, since the truth was actually kind of bland, at least in her mind. Of course, after the movie was the fancy reception, which gave CJ the chance to torture their father while he was in his other guise. That dumb bet that her brothers had...CJ took it very seriously. Jon would undoubtedly roll his eyes at the spectacle of the richest 20-something in Gotham publicly inundating the Man of Steel with puns and non-sequiturs, probably because a similar thing happened at practically every Kent family gathering. Her Dad was a pretty tough nut to crack when he was in superhero mode, plus he let it be known that he had mastered CJ's act before any of them were even a twinkle in his eye.

It was entirely possible that the public confrontation never happened, though, judging by the giant explosion she had heard about an hour before Jenny arrived back at the mansion. Pictures from the late news had shown Batman and Superman at the scene, battling a giant fire and, later, talking. After saying good night to Jenny, Laura had taken a zip over the explosion scene, and it was impressive. There was also quite the buzz about how the fire had been extinguished, which probably meant that the way Batman was viewed by the public was about to be changed forever. It had been around midnight when she had finally arrived back at her apartment.

She had contemplated getting out of town for a couple hours, just for the heck of it, but she decided that some of her chemistry texts required her attention and spent a couple hours on those, instead. Studying on a Saturday night was usually against her personal code, somewhere after "Be true to yourself at all times" but before "No snacks after midnight." But that also assumed that she would be hanging out with friends instead, and the babysitting gig had meant no friends tonight. It was around 2 AM when she finally made her way to bed. And at 3 AM her phone rang.

"Hmm," she said sleepily into the receiver. She wasn't quite sure she wasn't currently dreaming.

"It's me," came the voice from the other end, and instantly she was awake. That was unmistakably Dick Grayson, Nightwing, and although he was one of her close friends, he very rarely called her. They met from time to time on lonely rooftops on dark nights and discussed life; every now and then he would run into her when she was having lunch alone at a campus town restaurant, though she knew the meetings were never coincidence. It was a different kind of friendship than what she had with her college buddies, mostly because Dick was one of the only people alive that knew everything about her who wasn't also related to her. But Nightwing worked with Batman, and if there was trouble, the two of them could usually handle it. If they needed help, CJ would be the one to call Laura in to the action, because he and their Dad had long ago agreed that Laura was to be kept away from anything too gruesome. "I need you to come down here," he continued.

"What's wrong? Where are you?" She sat up in bed and switched her grip on the phone, her heart beginning to pound.

"Pier 39. It's your brother...something's wrong."

Almost before he could complete the sentence, she changed into her Shadow Woman / Robin outfit and was at his side. Pier 39 was located in Suicide Slum, a place that was so violent it had been deemed un-policeable in the past. It was home to numerous street gangs, who were constantly fighting over turf, and flooding the area with drugs and guns. There were those in Gotham society that were content to let the neighborhood kill itself off, but innocent people also lived there, people who were too poor to get out. Batman had made a concentrated effort in recent years to try and straighten the neighborhood out, if only to give some hope to the generation of children that were growing up there. Being a

parent had given CJ new perspective, and he wanted all the children in Gotham to feel safe, and to know that society had not forgotten about them. The time spent was beginning to make a difference, but it was going to take time before the city would be able to get away from the grip of crime.

Right now, a fire raged in a warehouse just off the pier; other fires also burned in houses throughout Suicide Slum. The surrounding streets were littered with guns, spent ammunition, and bodies, all still alive, most hogtied or otherwise restrained. Some people with dazed expressions loitered around the fires or in the streets, and the police presence was heavy. The firefighters battling the house fires hadn't yet made it to the warehouse, though other curious people had. Laura was fairly certain that a reporter or two was among the crowd, and it probably wouldn't be long before a television crew showed up the photograph the devastation, regardless of the reputation of the neighborhood.

Laura gave a questioning look toward Nightwing, and he pointed to the top of an abandoned building two piers down. There in a dark shadow lit only by the flickering of the warehouse fire was Batman, one foot on the ledge, staring intently at a ship docked nearby. "He's been a one man wrecking crew," Nightwing said. "I think he took down an entire street gang and a half dozen drug houses. But he won't talk to me, won't even acknowledge my presence."

"And the warehouse?" Laura asked.

"Operational headquarters of the gang. I've seen military installations that were less well armed." At the words, Laura looked closer at the surrounding streets and saw evidence that a gunfight had taken place there, small craters in the surrounding walls speaking to the sheer volume of shots fired, and the absence of blood on the pavement proving that the intended target couldn't be stopped by mere bullets. The gunmen were now restrained at the foot of the building Laura and Nightwing stood atop. The warehouse fire had only grown in the moments that Laura had been there, fueled by the centuries-old wood beams supporting the roof. Every now and then, the flames were punctuated by a sound like popcorn, the sound of the ammunition inside exploding. Laura was actually surprised that a stray bullet hadn't yet taken out an innocent bystander.

"Let me take care of this quick," she said, then jumped down to tackle the fire. She wasn't used to performing truly super feats such as this, with most of her time in Gotham spent on observation or minor rescues. As she took a deep breath and doused the flames, she thought of how good it felt exploring the limits of her powers, to push herself to do all that she was capable of. The fire didn't take long to succumb, and she took a second to enjoy the achievement before turning her sights to her brother.

CJ hadn't seemed to take any notice of what she had done. In fact, he seemed almost ready to move into action himself, his hand moving toward the grappling hook on his utility belt. In the blink of an eye, Laura was on the roof beside him. "Hey," she said, expecting him to turn toward her and give her that little smile that always seemed to be just a word away. But he just kept looking off into the distance, and she felt a shiver begin to work its way up the back for her neck. "Batman?" she asked, taking a step closer. Her eyes locked onto his face, and she noticed the frown played across his lips. Even in his darkest hours, CJ always seemed to find life amusing, and Laura wasn't sure she's ever seen him frown. She was really starting to get scared now. She looked around to make sure nobody was in immediate earshot, then put her hand on his shoulder. "Sam?" she whispered.

The blow was unexpected, and knocked her about half way across the roof. Nightwing let out a curse, and out of the corner of her eye she could see him moving to come her way, but she put out a hand to stop him. She kept her gaze locked on the man who was ostensibly her brother, his fist still in the air from where it had contacted her. It was a pulled punch, she knew, the kind that

shouldn't hurt a normal human being, at least not too badly, and that certainly wouldn't have done anything to her if she hadn't been caught off-guard. As she watched, he turned to look her way, and she gasped as she finally caught sight of his eyes. They were utterly lifeless, devoid of any recognition or intelligence; they looked like the eyes of a feral animal.

Laura stood up slowly, squaring her shoulders, clenching her fists. Based on everything she'd seen in the few short minutes she'd been on site, the man in front of her had been an army of one, setting fires, doling out justice, being the vigilante that Batman had long been known to be, the persona that CJ had been trying hard to make into nothing but a distant memory. He needed to be stopped, if only for the sake of the progress that he'd already made, and she was more than capable of the task. Despite her smaller stature, she was just as strong as he was, and better, she had the speed and flight abilities that he lacked. Although she had never actually fought either of her brothers while they were all at full strength, she couldn't think of any reason why she couldn't win, given her advantages. Setting her jaw, she took a breath and went toward her brother at full speed.

Almost in slow motion, she saw him gracefully turn, one arm blocking her outstretched hands, the other flying toward her midsection. Before she knew what happened, she was flying backward through the air, eventually crashing onto the roof of a building about a block away, crumbling the knee wall around the roof edge and almost falling to the ground below. Her hand clutched her chest, which now ached from the full force of a superpowered punch. "Robin!" Nightwing yelled from his perch, and she knew he was headed her way. Standing slowly, an involuntary groan escaped her lips. She had underestimated his speed, especially when paired with his martial arts skills.

In the distance, Batman turned back toward the boat as if nothing had happened, then leapt off the roof and took off at a dead run toward the water. As he approached the end of the wharf, he shot off a line and swung onto the boat deck, taking out the guards before quickly disappearing below deck. The muffled sound of gunshots could be heard after a few moments, then a small explosion. Laura considered going over there to stop CJ from doing any more damage, but she was still feeling a little dazed. Besides, her brother had just bested her twice, and she wasn't all that confident at this point that the third time would be a charm. As Nightwing reached the roof of the building she was on, a loud bang came from the ship, and a portion of the hull above the waterline bulged out as if hit by a giant hammer. A second bang split the bulge wide open, and the next moment men were flying out the hole and into the bay. Laura looked on in horror as she observed the rage on Batman's face as he manhandled the men, the charred mask on his face making him appear demonic. Behind him, cowering against an interior wall of the ship, were women and children, some looking on in awe, others covering their faces. And then, just like that, the fight was over, and Batman disappeared into the bowels of the ship once again.

"He's completely lost it," Nightwing said, shaking his head. His expression was more that of disgust, and Laura supposed she could understand. Dick was not shy about trying to impart upon her the lessons he learned the hard way under Bruce Wayne. And one of those lessons was that someone with darkness in his heart will never be able to completely embrace the light, that the darkness will always come calling. It was cynicism that he came by honestly, and it made him unable to truly trust anyone, even those who had never given him any reason not to. "I can't believe he hit you."

"That's not my brother," Laura said, her voice surprisingly shaky. "I mean, it looks like him, does all the things he can do, but it's not him. His eyes... it's like they're dead inside." They stared at each other for a few seconds, then she took a deep breath and felt a tear begin to form in her eye. "He's in there somewhere,

though, he has to be. We have to figure out a way not just to stop him, but to get him back.”

Nightwing put his hand on her shoulder. “Maybe we need to call in the big guns,” he said, raising his eyebrows, simultaneously trying to comfort her and give her strength. “Go get your dad, and we can figure out what to do from there.”

Laura nodded once, looked at the ship, then took off into the air, quickly heading toward Metropolis after making a quick stop at her apartment to grab her keys. In a matter of seconds she landed in the backyard of her childhood home. It took a little bit of fumbling with the lock before getting inside, then she hurried upstairs. The door to her parents’ room was closed, and although it would be easy enough to look inside and assess the situation, she knew better than to x-ray into their room. There had been too many awkward moments throughout the years created by her or her brothers doing just that. Instead, she knocked gently.

“Dad?” she whispered. He might have super hearing, but he could be a very deep sleeper. She knocked again, a little louder this time.

“Your turn with the baby,” her mom mumbled, shifting in bed. Laura could hear a deep intake of breath, and assumed her dad was now awake.

“Dad?” she said again.

“Yeah,” he answered, his voice heavy with sleep. She let herself look into the room, and as the wall melted away in front of her, she saw her folks laying together, her dad propped up on his elbow looking toward her.

“CJ’s in trouble. We need your help.”

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Laura filled Clark in on the situation during the flight to Gotham. Once they arrived in town, Laura quickly found Nightwing where she had left him and dropped down next to him. Clark stayed in the air for a few additional moments, surveying the scene.

If anything, it was worse than Laura had said. The boldness of Batman’s actions, the sheer destruction and message it was meant to convey, it was vintage Batman, only on steroids. Historically, the attitude behind those actions conveyed a lack of respect for the law, and a lack of empathy for the people of Gotham, who might end up more terrified of their vigilante protector than they ever were of the street gangs. It made it infinitely worse now that he had God-like powers that his predecessor didn’t, and the result was startling, to say the least.

One of the hardest parts about being an empty nester, apart from missing the daily interactions with the kids, was realizing that he and Lois were not the most important people in their children’s life anymore. But with that went the pride in seeing the kids’ accomplishments and knowing that they did something right in guiding them along the correct path. And Clark was certainly proud of CJ; he had said as much when they met earlier in the evening. Even more than that, though, he was proud of how CJ had approached his after hours job, and the work he had done to turn Batman into a hero worth cheering for. The destruction he was now seeing throughout Gotham wasn’t anything that he would’ve ever expected from CJ, and he would have a hard time believing that CJ was even capable of such a thing except for the inescapable fact that no ordinary human could’ve caused it. It had only been a few hours earlier that Superman had been joking with CJ, working alongside him, acutely aware of how much he missed their interactions. What could’ve possibly happened between then and now to make this possible?

Clark landed on the roof next to Laura. “Nightwing,” he said, nodding to Dick.

“Superman,” Dick said, nodding back. He extended his arm and waived it toward the neighborhood. “It’s been rather interesting around here since you left.”

“So I see.” In the minutes since Laura had left, the criminals,

far from being intimidated by the Batman, had gotten bolder. Their latest attempt to thwart their nemesis involved trying to run him down, despite ample evidence harsher measures had no effect on him. As the trio watched, Batman walked slowly out into the center of the street about a block from their location and stood calmly, relaxed, as a car wove dangerously through the city streets and approached at highway speeds. A second later came the crash and the horrible sound of the car collapsing in upon itself. In the middle of it all, Batman remained completely unfazed, still standing tall as the engine wrapped around his body. The two passengers, obviously not wearing their seatbelts, crashed forward through the windshield, and Batman snatched them out of the air, one in each hand. The men went limp with the sheer shock of the moment, and Batman dropped them like rag dolls onto the street in front of him before freeing himself from the crumpled vehicle and calmly walking away.

Clark balled his hands into fists and set his jaw as the bile rose in his throat. There were people on the sidewalks at the accident site, people that had either come to observe what had been happening or were driven from their homes by the destruction, and had ended up being inundated with debris. Screams echoed up from the street, and the crowd began to turn toward the assembled heroes.

“Daddy!” Laura whispered urgently.

Clark unballing his fists and sighed. “Okay,” he said, taking a step away from the edge of the building, his mind processing the possibilities. “Whatever did this to him is not on him, right?” He looked at Laura “You didn’t feel any adverse effects from being near him, did you?”

“Besides a bruise on my chest, no,” Laura answered flatly. “But I wouldn’t recommend getting close unless you’re up for a fight. He’s a little...punchy.”

Clark shook his head, letting the pun slide. “I have no desire to throw punches at him, no matter how much trouble he’s causing. Besides, I don’t think a fight between Batman and Superman would make good press for either of us. And the people down there have been through enough without us getting into it and making things worse.”

“There’s always kryptonite,” Dick said, his voice soft.

Clark blanched slightly at the thought. There might be a fair amount of destruction throughout the area, but as far as he knew, nobody had died as a result of it. “Things would have to be much worse before we even considered that. We don’t want to hurt him, we just want to shock him back to normal.”

Clark allowed himself the barest of smiles as idea suddenly occurred to him. “I’m going to try something,” he said to Dick. “If it works, I’m going to take him home, and Robin will come back and get you up to speed.” Clark stopped and allowed himself a moment to regard Nightwing. He was the other half of the tandem that protected Gotham, and he was just as much responsible for the new direction that crime fighting had taken in Gotham as CJ was. “I appreciate your keeping an eye on him tonight,” Clark said, then turned toward Laura, pointing wordlessly up into the air. She nodded and they took off, then looped around, getting several miles away and out of super hearing range before stopping and turning back.

“So what’s the plan?” Laura asked, equal parts confident and apprehensive.

“Basically, we’re going to give him a cold bath,” Clark replied. “The trick is going to be to break the sound barrier before getting to CJ so he won’t be able to hear us, and can’t prepare a defense. I’ll grab one arm if you grab the other, and we’ll take off over the bay and dump him in the water. Let’s get a few miles out before we drop him, just to make sure we’re away from prying eyes.”

Laura nodded. They had flown together often, and he knew she was up to the speed. It was a simple plan, but even if it didn’t

work, it got CJ away from the people and into a situation they could control. With a gesture they were off. They actually flew in behind his back, snatching him quicker than the human eye could see, and were a couple miles out to sea before Batman recognized the situation he found himself in. He let out a growl and started to squirm, but at that point they were far enough out, so Clark told Laura to let him go. Batman thrashed around in the water for a few moments, then seemed to recognize that it wasn't getting him anywhere, so he spread his arms out into a back float and was calm. After a moment he blinked a few times, and the blank expression of his face morphed into something more familiar. Then recognition seemed to come.

"Dad?!" he said. Clark and Laura let out a cheer, which only seemed to confuse him. He attempted to sit up, then realized he was in the water and laid back again to float. "What's going on? What am I doing here?"

Clark told Laura to debrief Nightwing and head back home, and she left, a smile on her face. Then he flew down and extended a hand toward CJ. "How much of tonight do you remember?" he asked.

CJ reached up and took his hand, and they took off into the air. "Well, after you left from helping with that fire, I found a body at its epicenter, then... I'm here in the water." As they headed back toward the city, CJ seemed to notice the smoldering fires, the police presence, and the relative crowds of people that had gathered in Suicide Slum. "What happened over there?"

Clark's expression was grim. "I'll tell you after we get you home."

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"Hey Laura! Wait up!"

Matt Owens was exiting the Gotham State journalism building, having submitted his story for the Monday paper a few minutes earlier. Laura Kent was a few steps ahead of him, dressed in jeans and a form fitting t-shirt, her black hair in a loose braid that reached to her mid-back. She had also submitted her story, something about a dispute between landlord and tenants at an off-campus apartment building. At the sound of his voice, she turned and, upon catching glimpse of his face, gave a stunning smile. When she smiled, she was by far the most beautiful girl on campus.

That smile was the first thing he noticed about her when they first met two years prior, inside the offices of the student newspaper. It was the Friday before classes started, and he had been a sophomore, manning a cubicle close to the entrance, working away at some story that he couldn't even remember now. She was a freshman, brand new to campus, brimming with confidence, and just wanting to work on whatever stories they were willing to give her. It was a bold move on her part, walking into the office and demanding a job — usually freshmen came into the program after classes started with the guidance of the journalism faculty — but Laura had no intention of majoring in journalism. What she did have was a pedigree, and, amazingly, a portfolio that included work from the Daily Planet. And that smile, which she flashed when the faculty advisor accepted her into the paper on the spot. He remembered her looking him in the eye at that moment, and all he could think about was how insignificant he felt next to her beauty, drive, and obvious talent. It made him determined to get to know her, even if she probably was out of his league.

He introduced himself the next day, and far from being the intimidating juggernaut that he assumed she would be, she came off as sweet and intelligent, confident yet unsure in a way that belied the fact that she was still a freshman. In the beginning she largely came to him for advice and to tap his experience, though the more they got to talking, the more they realized they had in common. What started out as advice on the workings of the newspaper or who to talk to within university administration

morphed into advice on what movie to see or what music to listen to while doing certain types of homework, until eventually they just did those things together. With other friends around, of course. Lurking beneath it all, though, was the growing realization that his initial crush on her had morphed into something much stronger, something that he dared not act on. Her looks and charm had summoned similar feelings from other guys, too, guys who were more attractive with more going for them than he had — varsity football players, fraternity members, big wigs from exclusive campus clubs, guys from rich families who could have anyone they wanted. But Laura wasn't accepting any suitors, and she wasn't shy about letting those guys know what they could do with themselves after their declarations of undying love. She didn't want to be anyone's arm candy, and wasn't willing to spend time in relationships with people who only valued her for her looks or connections. So Matt kept his feelings to himself, content to have a platonic relationship with her. Even if it meant never taking their relationship to the next step, she was an interesting enough person that it was worth staying her friend.

And they'd had some interesting times over the last couple years. Their group of friends all had student sports passes, and they went to football and basketball games together. Laura cheered the Gotham State teams as loudly as any of them, except possibly when they were playing Metropolis. Too much history there, she had said. Last year, they had all taken a road trip to Metropolis when the football team played there, and Laura had volunteered her parents' basement for overnight accommodations. Her parents were journalistic royalty as far as Matt was concerned, and meeting them had been one of the highlights of the trip. Her father was engaging and funny, relaying stories about past investigations before asking them all about themselves and their big stories. Her mother was quick to give hints and advice. Laura seemed almost annoyed at the reception her parents received from her friends, probably because all the anecdotes and advice was old hat to her, and Matt found himself disengaging from the discussion to give her some attention, a move that earned her gratitude and brought them a little closer. The next day, at the game, she showed him the banner in the Metropolis University stadium dedicated to her brother, a former member of the football team, an all-conference performer, who died within weeks of graduation. Her soft spot for Metropolis University made complete sense in that context, and he supposed that it also explained why she seemed so guarded sometimes.

As time went by, they began to have some fun together away from their other friends. There were the festivals on campus and around Gotham, a play here or there, movies. They started going over to each others' apartments for movie nights or just to hang out. Through it all, the feelings that he had buried early on had never gone away — if anything they had grown, and he started to wonder if maybe she wasn't feeling the same thing, and if maybe they were both too comfortable with the status quo to say anything. Over the summer months, they never seemed to go more than a few days without a phone call, and she had even come out to visit him once, flying rather than driving, even though it must have cost her a small fortune. She had met his parents, and even they had to ask if the two were an item, though honestly he didn't know what to say. This was his final year in school, and when it was done he would be moving on to a job in the real world, most likely somewhere away from Gotham, and the prospect of going away and not having her to hang around with or to talk to filled him with dread. He was tired of being too scared to take that next step, of worrying that she would reject his advances like she rejected those from every other beau over the years. It might make things weird between them, but they were close enough that he couldn't imagine it ruining their friendship if, God forbid, something went wrong. At this point it was a matter of finding the right time, the right setting, and taking the plunge.

He jogged a little to catch up with her, and soon they were in step next to each other. “Did you catch the news about last night?” Matt asked.

“What part? The fire or the mess in Suicide Slum?”

“Both, I guess. Batman was a busy guy.”

“Yeah.” Laura seemed to want to say something, but stayed silent for a few long seconds. “What did you think about what he did?”

Matt liked to think of himself as the Gotham State News superhero reporter, covering the activities of Batman whenever he could. There were other heroes around town, too — Nightwing, most notably, and sometimes a shadowy companion calling herself Robin. He kept track of their activities, too, but they tended to keep to shadow more often than not, which didn’t lead to a whole lot of witnesses or sightings. Even Batman was fairly camera shy, though it wasn’t from lack of trying on the part of the press. But last night everything was laid out in front of the cameras, the helicopters in the air over the scene of a large fire giving all of Gotham a good look at their main protector. And what it revealed wasn’t what Matt had expected.

“I think there’s something to the rumor linking Batman to Superman. I mean, he’s apparently fireproof and bulletproof, and people swore he set the fires around Suicide Slum. Plus I heard some people actually saw Superman around last night.”

Laura waved her hand, apparently not all that interested in the fairly sizable revelation. “Yeah, there was that movie premiere and reception he was at. And the rumor’s been out there for a long time. What I meant was, what do you think about the things he did? Going on the offensive...hurting people.”

“Hurting bad guys,” Matt clarified. “Isn’t that kind of his thing?”

“Not recently,” Laura said, and he could tell by her tone that something about this subject was bothering her. It was true that Batman had been...different in the last couple years, almost like a totally different person. It had been a long time since he had dangled a bad guy off a roof, at least before last night. And it was a couple years ago that the strange sightings had started — Batman leaping off tall buildings, Batman rescuing people from fires, Batman with superhuman strength. Batman had been a fixture in Gotham since the 1960’s, meaning the person behind the cowl would almost surely have to be different now, just due to age. And the new guy seemed less violent, more heroic somehow. Or he had.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Matt conceded.

“Anyway, how can someone rightfully call themselves a hero if they’re going out and willingly destroying property and putting people in the hospital?”

Matt pondered that for a moment. “I suppose there are different kinds of heroes. Some would say that if the end result is stopping crime and making the city safer, there’s no problem.”

“It just bothers me that people on TV are applauding what Batman did last night, like it’s a good thing that he punched a hole in the side of a boat, for goodness sakes. Or how great it was that he endangered the whole neighborhood by lighting a portion of it on fire. You can’t stop lawbreakers by becoming one.”

Matt sighed — he was getting the distinct impression that this wasn’t meant to be a conversation so much as an opportunity for her to vent. Maybe it was time to pull one of her tricks and turn the subject around on her. “I thought you didn’t care about superheroes.”

She gave him a sideways glance, a hint of amusement in her eyes as she recognized his ploy, then shrugged. “I’m just not excited about whatever fantastic things they are up to on a given day. I get it — Superman is strong and fast and can fly. That story is, what, 25 years old? I just don’t get the endless fascination. Now the ethics behind what they do, that’s fair game, especially when they seem to be out of whack.”

“People are fascinated because it’s a fantasy.”

“It’s a reality,” Laura said. “Those are real people.” She acted like there was something else she wanted to say, but she stopped herself.

“Well, the rest of us can’t help but dream about what it would be like to do what they can do. And anyway, Superman or Crimson Superman saving someone is never old news, because that someone would be dead if not for them. Just because it happens all the time doesn’t mean it’s not heroic. I don’t think I want to live in a world where the Supermen are ho-hum.” The last line was meant as a verbal poke at her. It was a variation on a conversation that they’d had dozens of times before, though both of them were too stubborn to change their minds, no matter how good the argument was on the other side.

“You’re cute when you’re being naive,” Laura said with a wrinkle of her nose.

“Well you’re too cute to be so cynical,” Matt replied. The personal endearments had been added to their banter as a bit of friendly ribbing long ago. It was little wonder that most of their friends thought they were already an item.

They walked in silence across the campus green for a few moments. “So, big plans for tonight?” Matt asked.

Laura shook her head. “I’ve been working my way through my grandma’s recipe box. I was going to try my hand at shepherd’s pie tonight. Maybe throw together some biscuits. It’ll be nice to have a quiet evening at home after last night.”

Matt raised his eyebrows. He knew she had spent last night babysitting her nephew. “Rough night?” he asked. He didn’t have a whole lot of experience with kids, but could imagine how chasing around a 3-year-old or dealing with potty training could lead to a few headaches.

Her expression was hard to read, almost conflicted. “Oh, my brother wasn’t quite himself after his party. Made for a kinda long night.” She shook her head and smiled. “He’s okay now, though. So how about you? Studying hard tonight?”

Matt shook his head. “It’s amazing how much you can get done on a Saturday night with no friends around. I am looking forward to being bored on a Sunday for once. Can’t say my dinner is going to be anywhere as good as yours — I’ll probably grab fast food or something on the way home.”

“You should join me,” Laura said, and Matt felt a little smile start to reach his lips, his heart beating a little faster than it had a moment ago. This could be the opening he was looking for. “I’d probably eat the whole meal myself without some company,” she continued, then her eyes got wide for a moment. “As, uh, leftovers, I mean. Obviously.”

It was one of those things that she said from time to time that seemed ironic, but he couldn’t quite tell if it was on purpose. “Is this a date?” he asked, his voice clearly teasing, although the words were serious.

She looked at him, sporting an expression that was outwardly indignant. “Only if you think that a woman should have to cook for herself on a date. If that’s the case, then we’re really going to have to reexamine our friendship.”

“You could’ve just said no,” Matt said with a chuckle.

“Well what fun would that be?”

Their conversation continued on to other topics as they made their way to her apartment, which was only a couple of blocks off campus. He had been there before several other times, mostly to watch movies or play games, but she had never cooked for him before. As they reached her apartment, she opened the door and held up a finger as she looked inside. “Just a sec. Let me make sure the place is presentable,” she said, closing the door behind her. A brief gust of wind blew into the hallway from under the door, then, moments later, the door opened, and Laura gave a quick smile. “Had to pick up the unmentionables.”

He smirked at her, then followed her inside, dropping his

backpack just inside the door. She headed straight for the kitchen, but he took a second to look around. It was a studio, with a U-shaped kitchen to the left of the door, a sitting area in the middle, and bed to the right behind a screen. A bathroom and closet were on the far right wall, out of his line of sight. The apartment was very neat and uncluttered, the decorations somewhat minimal, though they seemed very much her style. A side table next to the couch held some photos of her family along with a couple textbooks and a notebook. On the wall next to the door was a television stand, a bookcase next to that. Her taste in books was eclectic to say the least — old Calvin and Hobbes comics occupied shelf space next to calculus texts and the works of Homer.

“You coming?” she asked, and he joined her in the kitchen. They got to work, Laura taking the lead, Matt following her directions. Eventually the dish came together, then it needed to be put into the oven for an hour, which gave them time to talk. The intimate setting, the two of them inside her small kitchen, led him to ask more personal questions than he had before, and Laura played along.

“Cooking was one of those special things that my Dad and I did together after my brothers were out of the house,” she said.

“What, your Mom didn’t cook?”

“Oh, she did. You just didn’t usually want to eat it, unless you’re fond of heartburn.” She smiled, a faraway look in her eyes. “Anyway, my grandma was the real chef in the family, and when she died we took her recipes and tried our hands at duplicating them. I think it helped Dad keep her memory alive, and it helped me get to know her better when he told me the stories of the time he helped her make this dish or what special occasion was happening when she served that dish. Sometimes our results were spectacular, sometimes we were dismal failures. Sometimes we cheated, which was kind of fun, especially when we got away with it.”

“Cheated how? Substituted ingredients?”

Her expression was sly. “It’s a trade secret. If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

He raised his eyebrows in amusement and gestured toward the oven. “Should I not have helped you make this meal? I kinda had some plans for tomorrow that I would like to live to see.”

“Nah, I didn’t cheat with this one,” she said, though again it felt like she was holding something back. Rather than press her on it, he offered his own family anecdote. His parents were the outdoors-y types, and many childhood weekends were spent in campgrounds or on a trail somewhere. He was an expert at cooking over a campfire, and had helped his dad with grilling duty enough that he considered himself pretty good at that, too. Although he had fond memories of his family’s epic camping trips, as he got older he found himself not as enthralled with nature as he used to be. And when it came time to leave home and go to college, he headed to Gotham City, where the trees were few and far between and wildlife had a whole different meaning.

“I guess I ran away from home, in a way,” he said, giving her a knowing look. “You probably know how that feels.” She had given hints in the past that Metropolis felt like a place where she would never be able to control her own destiny, and he had taken those hints in concert with the fact that her brother passed away and assumed that they were alike in this respect, too.

She seemed somewhat surprised for a moment, confirming his suspicion, but quickly recovered. “It wasn’t that I was running away from anything,” she said. “It’s more like running toward something new and exciting, seizing a new opportunity. And watching my nephew grow up.”

“I meant to ask you,” Matt said, leaning casually against the counter. “You have two brothers, right?” He asked, purposely using the present tense, since she always seemed to for both of them, as well. At her nodding, he continued. “But one died, and

the other works at the Planet in Metropolis. So who is the brother in Gotham that you’ve been referring to? The one your nephew lives with?”

A fleeting look of panic crossed her face, coming and going so quickly that it would be easy to believe that he had been mistaken. With a deep breath, she gave him a smile, no doubt trying to disarm him, and doing a pretty good job of it. “Oh, it’s an interesting situation. When CJ died, his wife was pregnant, and after she moved to Gotham she got remarried to Sam. I suppose he’s my brother-in-law squared, if that makes any sense. It’s just a lot easier to refer to him as my brother.” Her chuckle seemed a little forced, and Matt made a mental note, cataloging the exchange in his mental encyclopedia of interesting little quirks about Laura, things that he was determined to sort out.

Their discussion was interrupted by the ringing of the timer, and a quick check revealed that their meal was ready, so Laura directed Matt to set the table while she took the casserole out of the oven. At one point it occurred to him that something seemed out-of-place, missing maybe, but he couldn’t put his finger on what. It didn’t matter, he thought, as they finally sat down to eat. Everything smelled delicious, and they had made a pretty decent team in putting it together.

“My compliments to the chef,” he said, raising his water glass in salute. “Quite a tantalizing meal for a not-date.”

“Well the chef was only as good as her assistant,” she said, raising her glass in return and lightly tapping it against his. She looked around a little and turned back to him. “This is about as not-date-like as it gets, isn’t it?”

“I can’t argue the company. Isn’t that the most important part of any date?” he said, and she blushed lightly. It was always interesting to see when his compliments hit their target and didn’t just pass as friendly banter. She was a pro at deflecting them, though, and tonight was no different.

“Oh, I don’t know. I mean, it’s part of it, sure, but there’s also the ambience, the nice outfits and expensive food....”

“Ah, so you’re the formal date type.”

That seemed to spark something. “I’m not any type,” she said, a hint of fire in her voice. “But if you’re going to do it, you might as well do it the right way.”

“What’s the right way, then?” he asked.

“Well, you get into a smart suit,” she started, gesturing toward him, and Matt had to force the smile to stay on his face. She probably had no idea what she had just said, but to him it meant the world. It was an acknowledgement, however unintentional, that he viewed him as date material, that she had thought about him in that way. “And I put on a nice dress... maybe even some heels if you can believe it,” she continued, not noticing his distraction. “Then we go to one of those expensive restaurants that Sam goes to all the time, sit down at a table with a candle on it.”

“Do you sit next to me or across from me?”

“Ugh, across from you,” she said with a roll of the eyes. “I don’t understand those couples that sit next to each other in a booth when they’re out without any company. How do you talk to each other that way?” Matt shrugged. Laura continued, “Anyway, there would be dessert after an incredibly expensive and probably not fully satisfying meal, and then...” she stopped and looked at him and squinted. “A movie, I guess?”

“And what, sit in a dark theater together for a couple hours, avoiding any and all conversation? An uncomfortable plastic armrest between us blocking any hope of physical contact or snuggling?” His eyes danced. This conversation was fun, and he could tell she felt the same way.

“Okay, no movie. I would say that we could go dancing, but the only dancing going on these days outside of zumba classes is at nightclubs, and that kinda goes against the whole formal date thing.”

“I can’t argue with you on that one.”

“Maybe go to one of the art galleries?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t enjoy it, I think. My eyes would be locked on my date, who I am sure would be much better to look at than any of those overrated paintings.” She blushed again, more heavily this time. “See, I think the formal date is overrated,” he continued lightly, hoping that he hadn’t been too heavy-handed. “How about, normal clothes, comfortable shoes, and a walk in Centennial Park? Maybe a lovely meal from the local hot dog cart? It’s the budget date.”

“Oooh, romantic,” she said with a chuckle.

“Or maybe the fun date. A gimmicky restaurant like Medieval Times and go kart racing or something.”

“You’re getting into dangerous territory there,” she said, and Matt arched an eyebrow. “I get competitive. It’s not pretty.” He recalled how worked up she got just as a fan at school sporting contests and decided that was probably true.

“So what’s your backup choice?”

She took a bite and thought for a second, her eyes focused past him, then gave a small smile. “The fantasy date,” she said. “Dinner at some bistro in Paris, a walk along the Seine, maybe a little boat ride, and a kiss atop the Eiffel Tower.”

“Nice,” Matt said. “But I think the airfare alone would buy a semester of tuition.”

“I have some connections,” Laura said, and couldn’t tell if she was teasing or serious. Probably teasing, he thought, judging by the expression on her face. “But there’s a reason it’s the fantasy date.”

“A very pleasant fantasy,” he agreed, and with that the conversation moved on to other topics. All too soon, the meal was finished and they cleared the table before moving toward the seating area to catch an episode of one of the shows their friends had all been streaming.

Her couch was only nominally bigger than a love seat, so they sat very near to each other, separated by a small gap. It wasn’t the first time they had found themselves in this position, though the atmosphere tonight was a little different, and they both felt it. Neither said much during the show, and a little past the mid-point, Matt finally worked up the courage to slide his hand into hers. She looked down at their intertwined fingers, then looked back at him, wide-eyed. His smile was reassuring, and after a few long moments she seemed to relax. On the screen in front of them were pictures of soaring vistas, the music measured but building. Matt really didn’t notice, though, preferring to search Laura’s dark eyes, silently asking permission to take the next step, his heart soaring as he felt her hand gently squeeze his. Slowly he leaned forward, tilting his head slightly and closing his eyes as his lips ever so lightly brushed against hers. The music on the show built to a crescendo, and he felt her react, her other hand reaching up toward him as they deepened their kiss. It was at that point that time itself seemed to cease, and the world all around became nothing. There was only their kiss, and the incredible sense of rightness. And though he had half expected a timid response, she seemed to be feeling it as intensely as he was. At some point his hand cupped the back of her head, and they moved closer to each other on the couch, closing the gap between them so that their bodies were pressed together. He didn’t know how long the kiss lasted, but he began to become aware that the music on the television had become almost nervous, tentative, and his hand, the one still clasped in hers, was beginning to ache from the strain of her grip. Reluctantly, he pulled away, resting his forehead against hers, taking heavy breaths. Laura, too, was breathing deeply, and he could practically feel her smile next to him.

“If you ever want to experience one of those dates we talked about,” he said heavily, giving her a quick peck on her cheek, “just say the word. I could go formal or fun, or whatever you want. I don’t care what we do, as long as I do it with you.”

She captured his lips, and they lost themselves for a few long

seconds in another deep kiss. It was as if the time that they had spent denying their feelings had only heightened the experience when they finally allowed themselves to indulge in them, and now they couldn’t get enough of each other. All too soon it was over again, and she sat up, distancing herself from him and breaking the spell. Suddenly the rest of the world seemed to come back into focus, and he found himself disappointed that the moment had passed. Judging by Laura’s expression, apparently he wasn’t the only one. As he watched, a shadow seemed to cross her face, chasing away the pleasant satisfaction and leaving her with a little frown on her lips. Her eyes looked down to the floor, and her hand, formerly clasped tightly to his, pulled away and grabbed absently at her arm. It had been too much at once, he realized, forcing himself to look away from her. He had pushed too hard, and now....

“I... don’t know if that a good idea right now,” she said.

Matt exhaled, an almost physical pain hitting him at the sound of her words. On impulse he stood, keeping his eyes looking anywhere but at her. “Maybe I should go,” he said, taking a step toward the door.

“Matt, no, you don’t have to...”

“No, I think I should,” he answered, and despite his best attempt to keep the tone confident, it sounded a little emotional, even to him. With that, he walked quickly toward the door, grabbing his backpack as he went. “Thank you for dinner. It was... amazing,” he said as he pulled the door open. He forced himself to look at her, so she knew he sincerely meant what he was saying, and what he saw made him pause momentarily. Laura seemed conflicted, like a dozen emotions were warring within her, but most of all she seemed regretful, and that gave him a spark of hope. “Goodnight,” he said softly, and left.

As he left her building, he noted that it was just past dusk, the sky above a cloudless black, only the brightest stars visible through the glow of city lights. Even so, from somewhere very close came a rumble of thunder, though it couldn’t possibly be that. He puzzled over that for a moment, but kept walking, and pondering what had just happened. It wasn’t that his advances had been unwanted, and it wasn’t as if she didn’t return them in kind. He had instigated the kiss, yes, but she had been an equal and eager participant. So it was possible, maybe even probable, that she felt the same way as he did. But what if...? What if she had never been kissed before? What if she had never experienced the surge of emotions that she felt tonight? She was nothing if not logical, and though she could be headstrong, she was rarely impulsive. What if the events of tonight somehow challenged her carefully constructed plans — what if she had never expected to fall for someone? And what if all these things had scared her? Maybe he just needed to wait for her to decide what she wanted. He just hoped that she had felt what he did, and was willing to give him the chance to prove that their kiss was no fluke.

It was going to be tough waiting, but he was nothing if not patient. And she was most definitely worth it.

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A series of sights and sound passed in front of CJ, and though he knew the images should illicit some sort of emotion, he instead felt nothing. No, he decided, that wasn’t exactly true. He felt... powerful. Vengeful. Righteous. And these were new emotions for him. A dozen gunmen fired automatic weapons at him, the bullets tickling his skin, bouncing off him and embedding themselves in surrounding buildings. Casually he walked toward each man, destroying each gun, the ricocheting bullets causing yet more collateral damage, though he didn’t care. And after each man was subdued, he walked toward the large warehouse next to him, setting it alight with one burst of heat vision, the ancient rafters immediately going from small spark to blazing fire. His subconscious mind screamed to himself that he had been taught better than that, that property destruction was a crime as surely as

firing a gun at someone, that the fire might harm innocent people, but he found that his conscious self didn't care.

Several pictures passed his vision rapidly — a drug house, where meth was being manufactured in a room adjacent to where filthy-looking children were sleeping. Then that meth house in flames, the children screaming while he carried them outside. A drive-by shooting, then the vehicle used in the shooting turned into a crumpled hunk of metal. A group of kids, probably no older than 14 or 15, picking on an elderly couple, then those kids dangling from the edge of a 4-story apartment building. A woman, dressed all in dark-colored, form-fitting spandex, coming at him in a blur before she was sent flying through the air.

He gasped, and suddenly the images faded away, the darkness replaced with a bright glow, and realized that he was lying in his bed, the room lit with the early morning sun. Next to him, he could hear Jenny's deep and even breathing, telling him that she was still asleep. He put his arm over his eyes and stifled a groan, shuddering slightly at the horror of what he had just seen passed over him. This was the second morning of waking up to images that he had hoped to never see, vignettes from the 6 hours of his life that had been lost to the effects of red kryptonite.

It had been much the same yesterday, Sunday, though it hadn't been the dreams that had awoken him that morning but the gentle tapping of a little hand. Adam had rescued him from unwanted memories then, and CJ couldn't recall ever being happier to have been awoken by his son's inability to sleep past dawn. It had been hard to be the fun dad that morning, to keep a smile on his face and the cheer in his voice when interacting with Adam, just because he was still coming to grips with everything that had happened. None if it felt real, and it would be easy to believe that none of it had happened, but it had all been captured by the media. There, staring at him from his television screen, was the aftermath of a night of raw power and intimidation. And grainy video of him, unmistakably him, at the center of it all. He struggled to understand how it could've happened, but his dad had given him the answer shortly after bringing him home. A scan of the body CJ had touched prior to blacking out had revealed a necklace with a red kryptonite stone in the corpse's stomach, swallowed no doubt to keep someone from it.

"I think Batman's kinda mean," Adam had said while CJ was watching the morning news, and CJ couldn't disagree. He forced himself to change the channel shortly thereafter, to try and interject some cheeriness to what truly was a beautiful morning and to stop himself from brooding over something that was now history. Adam had certainly helped to lift his spirits, and after a shared bowl of cereal and the construction of a couple intricate sets of wooden train tracks, he felt his smile come more naturally, his laugh unprompted. Jenny came in and joined them a couple hours after Adam had summoned him out of bed, and after giving each of them a quick kiss, she had sat back and watched the two of them play, and he could see contentedness behind her eyes.

As bad as the evening had been for him, at least he had the benefit of not remembering, at least not outside of a few haunting dreams. She had experienced the whole thing as it happened, her borrowed powers allowing her to hear the police chatter, to hear the screams from across town, to hear the chatter of those caught in the crossfire, but she had been stuck in the house, unable to do anything except watch and worry. When his Dad had dropped him off in the cave, she had been down there waiting for him, immediately throwing her arms around him even though he was covered in soot and seawater, and despite all the damage that had been caused by his hands. He had argued that she should stay away from him until they were sure that the effects of the kryptonite were gone, but she was having none of it. She stayed by his side, quietly bolstering his shattered confidence, and most of all, giving her support and love.

His parents had stopped by to check on him after lunch that

day. CJ had to insist several times over that he felt fine, at least physically, though he could tell his mom wasn't buying it. It was nothing a little bit of quality time with his family and a few good laughs couldn't cure, and he went about demonstrating that by having a long play time with Adam and Clark in the palatial playhouse that had been erected on the Wayne Manor grounds. Lois and Jenny sat off to the side and talked, and CJ could feel their eyes on him, knowing full well what they were saying without having to listen in. They thought he was burying his feelings, avoiding facing the problem, putting on a happy face for their benefit, but as far as he was concerned he was just trying to move on, which was what was important.

Their play session wore Adam out, and as he went down for a nap, CJ took the opportunity to quiz his parents on everything there was to know about red kryptonite. It was a rather short history, as it turned out, but certainly interesting. It had been responsible for the creation of Ultra Woman, had caused some chaos during his parents' dating years, and had lead Superman to wreak some unintended destruction upon Metropolis (and their brownstone). All previous red kryptonite experiences could be traced back to a geologist named Newtrich, or to his family or acquaintances. Newtrich and most of his immediate family wound up in jail, none had any children, and red kryptonite had been all but forgotten over the last couple decades. It helped that all previous specimens were now in orbit, so as far as they knew, there was no more red kryptonite around, at least until they found the stone in the corpse. The question became, who would know about its existence and effects, and what were they planning to do with it? The list of enemies of Superman was rather expansive, the list of enemies of Batman was probably more so. But there was very little common knowledge of the link between Batman and Superman before the previous night, and the red kryptonite wasn't exactly wielded by a criminal with malicious intent. It was an odd case, and one that would be very difficult to solve until the body was identified.

After a nice dinner in, CJ thanked his parents for coming, and they went on their way, leaving him alone with Jenny and Adam. It really had been a pleasant day, and it felt like he had been able to get the anxiety out of his system. Jenny helped further that cause later in the evening, and he had been at peace before going to bed. But then the dreams came, and more memories had surfaced. Why hadn't they told him, he thought as he sat up, almost feeling sick to his stomach. The last vision, the one that had awoken him unexpectedly, had been of Laura, and a punch so vicious that it had thrown her at least a block. And nobody had said a word to him about it. Abruptly, CJ got out of bed, sleep now a very far away thought. He needed to clear his head, and the room suddenly felt a little too close.

A quick peek at his son's room told him that he wasn't about to have a small visitor, which was probably for the best, given his current mood. He made his way down the long corridor toward the center of the house, passing the library on the way. A quick glance inside showed Bruce, sitting at his desk in the center of the room, engrossed in some files. CJ had always suspected that Bruce never slept, and this was just more proof. After a moment of hesitation, CJ entered the library, and Bruce held up a hand in greeting, motioning for him to come join him.

CJ sat down in his usual chair in front of the desk. There was a short silence as Bruce looked up and regarded him. "I just wanted to let you know how impressed I was with the work you did the other night," Bruce said.

"Well, that makes one of us," CJ answered, his disgust for his actions reflected heavily in his voice. Bruce didn't seem to notice.

"It was bold, it was forceful, it was a statement. They fear you now, and that's a good thing."

CJ frowned. "I fear me now," he answered. "And I can't sleep at night because of it."

“Why?” Bruce asked. There was an uncomfortable moment of silence, then Bruce leaned forward. “You weren’t yourself, I understand that. But you also managed to take a huge bite out of the crime organization in the slums, and you did it without killing anyone or injuring any bystanders.” He waved his hand in the air. “So your ethics are still intact, as far as that goes.”

“I laid out my sister, for goodness sakes,” CJ said, the words a little too loud, a little too forceful. He closed his eyes and took a breath, then continued. “And I don’t want to be feared because I intimidate people, I want to be respected because I help people.”

“Fear is respect,” Bruce said with a steely look in his eyes. “The rest is semantics.”

CJ felt anger rising within himself. “It’s not, though. When the average resident of Gotham looks at me and wonders if I’m going to punch him or help him, there’s a problem. When I’m the one causing property damage and filling the emergency rooms, there’s a problem. My ethics go beyond killing or not killing, harming or not harming. There’s more to it than that.”

Bruce leaned back and clasped his hands together, relaxed, a sly smile spreading across his lips. He was never one to shy away from a spirited discussion, and he seemed to be enjoying this one. CJ sometimes wondered if he approached conversations like this with the intent of getting some sort of reaction from him, to see how far he could push him. “I bet your actions from that night make them think the next time they contemplate breaking the law.” CJ opened his mouth to say something, but Bruce held up a hand. “Look, son, reasonable people can disagree on this. If I look amused, it’s because I’ve had this same argument dozens of times over the years with Clark, and God knows you have a lot of him in you. But I don’t think you need to apologize for anything you did out there.”

“I need to apologize to Laura. She didn’t deserve that,” CJ said quietly, and Bruce bobbed his head, conceding the point.

“Fine. But the rest of them? Are you going to, what, run toward the media and give mea culpas to the criminals and thieves? Since when did you start caring about what the perception of Batman is? Since when did that ever factor into the work you do?” CJ’s hand reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes clamped shut. Bruce had a point, of course. He was annoying that way. CJ’s confidence never came from what the press said, and frankly the reputation of Batman was such that the events from the other night would only reinforce what it had been for years. “There’s something else going on,” Bruce said, his eyes seeming to bore right through CJ and into his soul.

CJ dropped his hand and looked absently toward the window, and the heavy drapes that were mostly closed, letting in only a few rays of sunlight. There was something else, something that he hadn’t been able to pinpoint until Bruce helped to clear away the clutter. He supposed that if he thought about it, his actions weren’t causing his sleepless nights so much as what they meant about who he was. Bruce wasn’t exactly the first person he would normally approach to discuss psychological matters, given his track record, but at this moment, CJ couldn’t stop himself, and the words came out before he even really had a chance to think them through. “I wonder if maybe all the red kryptonite did was flip a switch inside my head and turn off my conscience.” CJ said heavily. “Maybe the person you saw out there is a reflection of who I really am deep down inside.”

Bruce gaped at him, the look of incredulity almost comical. He let out a laugh then shook his head. “That is absolutely preposterous and you know it,” he said. “Do you honestly think that, what, you have a well of darkness simmering beneath the surface just waiting to be tapped into? Maybe it’s a result of your horribly tragic upbringing.”

CJ couldn’t help but smile crookedly. “Is that sarcasm?”

“It’s me trying to speak your language,” Bruce said wryly.

“Touché,” CJ answered with a duck of the head. He was quite

an expert at dishing out sarcasm, though his most strenuous efforts at using it to coax a laugh or even a smile out of Bruce were usually dismal failures. It was just shocking enough hearing it come out of Bruce’s mouth that he had to pause and actually consider the underlying message. Sure, his untimely “death” could be considered tragic, but even he had to admit that the end result was more positive than he could ever imagine. He was a person who generally saw the world in its most positive light, and he had always been that way. So if his response to the kryptonite wasn’t a reflection of some underlying psychological damage, what was it? What if it wasn’t anything? What if it was just some random reaction? That prospect was almost scarier than the alternative. Almost. “And, message received,” CJ continued softly after a moment, and all of a sudden he felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Good. Now, about that kryptonite....”

“Dad spoke with you then, I take it?” Bruce nodded. “It needs to disappear,” CJ said. “I know it’s usually my plan to let these cases play out at the Gotham PD before I stick my nose in, but I’m going to make an exception this time. Someone is looking for that kryptonite, and they’re willing to kill to get it. Once the coroner finds it inside that body, and those findings are made public, then that person will know exactly where to find what they’re looking for. That puts those cops in danger, but more importantly it potentially puts me and my family in danger.”

“You can use the backdoor into the GPD computer system to find out when the autopsy is complete and the body is identified,” Bruce said.

“Then I’m going to go straight to the Chief to let him know in no uncertain terms that the necklace is disappearing, probably while it’s happening so that he doesn’t have a chance to protest.”

“I like this new non-nonsense Batman.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it,” CJ said, though his humor had managed to find its way back into his voice. “Anyway, I’ll need someone to burgle the morgue for me. You’re a little too visible, and Dick... I hate having to lean on him all the time.”

“You probably don’t have a choice,” Bruce said, “though it would be fun to break out an old disguise and do it myself.” He was looking past CJ now, a funny expression on his face.

CJ stood up and clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll let you know when we’re ready,” he said with a smile, then left.

As CJ exited the library, he replayed the conversation in his head a few times, chewing over everything that it meant. He held himself to a high standard as Batman, but his actions from Saturday night weren’t necessarily incompatible with the standards at the heart of who Batman was, at least not on a fundamental level, and Bruce helped him see that. He could still work toward his goals of a kinder, gentler Batman going forward, and that gave him a measure of comfort. And now that he was able to see that there was nothing he could’ve done to influence his actions while under the effect of the kryptonite, he was able to afford himself some forgiveness for the damage he had done. But he needed his sister’s forgiveness before he would be completely comfortable. And he would seek that forgiveness later today.

For now, though, he headed back toward his bedroom, then climbed into bed, snuggling up to his wife and draping an arm over her shoulder, placing a gentle kiss on the back of her head. “Hmm,” she said, arching her back into him. “What’s that for?”

“Do I need a reason?” CJ asked.

Jenny put her hand over his and turned her head, engaging him in a deep kiss. “I suppose not,” she said with a smile. He eyes found his, and her smile faded ever so slightly. “You’re okay right?”

“I am now,” he answered, and it was true. Her smile finally reached her eyes, and CJ knew for the first time in the last few days that he didn’t need to worry anymore.

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A knock at her apartment door interrupted Laura's concentration, pulling her attention away from a history text and back to the present. It was a sunny Monday afternoon, an hour or so after lunch, and she was seated at her kitchen table, studying. She supposed that she could just as easily be reading under a tree on campus or at the library, or maybe at some other little private place that only she could get to, but she always enjoyed hanging around her own place. And she had probably done enough traveling recently.

The previous night had seen a fantastic meal followed by an even more fantastic kiss. For once in her life she had let her heart control her actions, and in the few moments that she had given in to her desires, she had felt things that she had only read about. It had been a flood of emotions so strong that she couldn't think straight, and for a while she let herself drown in them. Then she had realized that prominent among the emotions she felt was love, something that she had refused to acknowledge as her friendship with Matt had grown, but had been there all along. That revelation, along with the mention of going on a date, seemed to re-activate her brain, which decided to put a halt to the festivities. Love, no matter how intoxicating and attractive it was, was not part of her plan. Love had its own set of issues, its own set of expectations, and probably wouldn't survive once all cards were on the table. So she had put the brakes on it, but she didn't anticipate his reaction, although in retrospect it was perfectly reasonable. He had been hurt, and he had left, and she had no idea if their friendship would ever be the same.

In the muddled aftermath, she had taken off for her thinking spot, a large overgrown oak tree jutting out of a lonely patch of grass about a mile from the house where her grandparents had lived in Kansas. The sun was still just above the horizon when she had arrived, and as she watched, it distorted into an increasingly large ball of fire before finally slipping away, blanketing the sky in an array that faded from yellow to orange to pink to purple. The distant trees to her west silhouetted against the color gradient, and she couldn't help but smile at the beauty of it all. Sunsets in Kansas really were the best. It was so peaceful there, with no traffic noise or crowds, no sirens, no distractions. Just the rustling of the wind in the tree above her and in the wheat fields surrounding her. She could understand why her father loved this place. She had stayed for probably an hour, thinking about everything and nothing at once, trying to reconcile her conflicted emotions, but not having much luck. She was no clearer now, a day later, than she was when she left, but at least the panic that had led to the words that forced Matt away in the first place was gone. That was something.

She felt some apprehension as she looked toward the door, expecting to see Matt's confused and broken-hearted face, and dreading the inevitable confrontation. As she watched, the door dissolved in front of her, and standing there instead she saw her brother, dressed as if he had just come over from a meeting at the office. He was watching her through the door, too, and as soon as he saw the recognition on her face, he waved, and instantly relief washed over her. If there was anyone out there who could lift her spirits and help her forget about the previous night, it was CJ. She rose from the chair and took a couple strides toward the door, quickly unlocking and opening it.

"Hey!" she said, motioning for him to come inside. He hesitated for a moment, though her smile seemed to coax a similar one from him. "I'm glad you came."

That seemed to do the trick. He stepped into the apartment, and she shut the door behind him. "I kinda wondered if you would be," he said, then brought a hand from behind his back. Dangling from it was a grocery sack, its shape unmistakably betraying its contents. "So I brought a peace offering. Hope you like rocky road."

Like he even had to ask. "Let me get some spoons," she said,

but before she could move, he put a hand on her shoulder.

"I would never purposely hurt you. You know that, right?" There was something dark lurking behind his eyes, and she realized that his expression wasn't as congenial as she had initially thought. As vacant as he had been that night, she had wondered what if anything he would remember. The way he looked at her now, though, anxious and ashamed, told her that he remembered enough.

"Of course I do," she said softly, giving him her most supportive expression, then she wrapped him in a spontaneous hug. He brought his free arm around her, a quick outrush of breath signaling that his most charming smile was probably now plastered on his face. "You obviously weren't yourself. No hard feelings, huh?"

They pulled apart, and she saw she was right. When he looked at her like that, she could forgive him almost anything, not that he really needed to be forgiven in the first place. Without any further conversation she retrieved the spoons, and they sat down in adjacent chairs at the kitchen table, a half gallon of rocky road between them. "Even so," he said, peeling off the lid, "I wanted to apologize, and to give you a chance to, ah, return the favor."

Laura eagerly shoved her spoon into the top of the ice cream, but hesitated at his words. "What?"

"I am offering you the full Houdini." He balled up his fist and feigned a boxer's punch. "The opportunity to give me a real, one hundred percent super-powered punch to the gut. It's only fair."

She looked at him incredulously. "What makes you think I'd want to do that?"

He looked at her, opened his mouth, then closed it again. He grabbed his spoon and took a quick bite of the rocky road, giving her a crooked stare as he did. It was so seldom that CJ was caught without words, that it struck her as rather funny. "Why WOULDN'T you want to?" he asked eventually. "I mean, how often do you get to really reach back and go at someone full-strength? Jon and I used to do it all the time back in high school, and I can tell you it's a blast."

This was the first time that she had heard about their little fight club. Their relationship with each other was so different than what she had with them. "Ugh, you're such a boy," she said. CJ seemed proud of that statement. "What if I watch you and Jon beat the crap out of each other instead?"

"It's non-transferrable. Jon doesn't get the pleasure of socking me just because you won't."

She rolled her eyes. He was trying hard to sell her on taking a shot at him. In a way, it was almost charming. "Fine," she said with exaggerated annoyance. "But I think I deserve something else, too. Something that's MY idea."

"Like?"

She thought for a second, savoring another bite of the ice cream. This could be fun, if she chose right. For maximum effect, it would have to be something that would make him squirm, something that would put him out of his element. And, she decided after a moment, she had the perfect idea. "The Gotham State — Metropolis football game is in two weeks." His smile faded. "My friends and I were going to go, of course, but it sure would be nice to have some company. Maybe someone who knows a thing or two about the game."

"I don't like where this is going."

"I'm thinking maybe you use your connections to get us some better seats, then attend the game with us, wearing a Gotham State t-shirt. If you're coming with us, then I expect you to cheer for the home team with us."

He shook his head, though his expression told her that he could appreciate her approach. "You're just mean."

"Well YOU punched ME," she said with a laugh.

"Fine. It's a deal." He extended his hand, and they shook on it. They ate in comfortable silence for a moment, then he looked at

her again. “How come we never get a chance to talk like this? Not on some rooftop, not about work, not surrounded by other family. Just two siblings, mano a mano, over a tub of creamy goodness?”

Laura shrugged. “Just busy, I guess. I mean, I’m pretty sure you’re the busiest guy I know, outside of Dad. And I’m, you know, trying to make sure my tuition money’s not wasted, I guess. Plus...let’s face it, we’ve never been super close.” It wasn’t exactly a secret that, due to the age difference, she never really got to know either of her brothers as well as she would have liked. She was only 11 when Jon had left for college, and 13 when CJ left. During her formative years, they were off doing their own things, often doing super things completely without her knowledge. Sometimes it felt like she only knew caricatures of them, and she wondered if they didn’t feel the same about her. It sounded harsh when the words were said aloud, but it didn’t make them any less true.

“Yeah,” CJ said slowly. “But I’m here now, and nobody is expecting me back at the office for the rest of the day. And there’s a whole lot of ice cream left to eat.”

“You know I could finish it off in, like, two seconds if I wanted to,” Laura quipped.

“Won’t that give you a stomach ache?” he asked. She made a face and shook her head. “Don’t you want to talk? Expose some deep dark secrets? Have us get blackmail material on each other?”

She couldn’t say no to him when he put it like that. “So you’re going to be my new best girlfriend, then?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Well, you know, without the jealousy and girl drama and secret crush on your boyfriend.” The last word made her flinch ever so slightly, which she covered by adjusting in her seat. CJ immediately seized on the reaction. “So you, uh, have a boyfriend?”

Laura took a large bite and considered just what she wanted to tell him. On the one hand, it was really weird to have a deeply personal conversation with her brother, the one who never seemed to have taken anything all that seriously for the majority of her life. On the other hand, how many people could she talk candidly with who knew everything about her? Her mother? That wasn’t happening. Dick? He was good for a conversation about a lot of things, but she certainly wasn’t talking with him about her love life. What the heck, she thought. Maybe CJ would surprise her. “Here’s the thing,” she said. “Dating for me is different than it was for you and Jon.”

“Why is that?” CJ asked, settling back in his chair.

“Because of the way that society views men and women. The man is supposed to be the strong one, the women is supposed to be the one in need of protection. I’m the strongest woman in the world, that’s just a fact. I’m never going to date someone stronger than me, and I’m okay with that, though a part of me kind of wishes that I knew what that felt like, to be the one who was rescued, to have some knight in shining armor to fawn over.”

CJ gave her a sympathetic smile. “There is more than just physical strength,” he said. “Emotional strength, mental strength, uh, strength of will...”

“I know, believe me,” Laura said. “But see, none of that bothers me. Men on the other hand, seem to put a lot more stock in that stuff.” She looked at him and waited for him to defend the honor of his sex, to state that she was being too harsh and that not all men were like that. But he had hung around with the jock set enough that he probably knew darn well that she was right. “Something about your masculinity gets threatened when you realize that the little woman can maybe beat you in an arm wrestling match, or, heaven forbid, be able to bench press more than you.”

“I don’t know. I think there are probably some guys out there that would get a kick out of something like that. And, you know, every person is different. Maybe there is some cultural standard

about the roles of men and women, but those things change. And I would think that at a University of all places you would be able to find someone who places physical strength pretty far down on the list of things that are important to them in a relationship.”

“You’d think so,” Laura said softly. “But I have a little firsthand experience with this one.” CJ gave her a confused and slightly concerned look, which she returned with a cocked eyebrow and a sly smile. “I’m competitive, remember? I was having fun with some friends in high school one afternoon — I think we were playing football or something — and I showed off a little, letting it be known to a guy I liked that I was quite a bit stronger than I let on. Anyway, after that he looked at me differently, and we didn’t really talk anymore. I could just see it in his eyes, like I was a threat...or a freak.”

CJ narrowed his eyes. “So, what, one bad reaction, in high school no less, put you off men forever? Now you’ve sworn off dating?”

Laura stuck her spoon back in the ice cream rather than immediately answer the question. “No. I mean, it’s not as simple as that,” she said, a little flustered. His rather direct question had interrupted her train of thought, and now she had to figure out where to start again. “I’d like to meet the perfect person, who won’t be disturbed by all that I can do but...” She sighed and quickly took another bite. She’d never really put her feelings into words, and it was hard to frame them in a way that he would understand. “What if I invest a lot of time in a relationship, and I find the person who I think is just right for me, then the time comes for me to tell them the truth, and they react...poorly? Then what? I’ve gotten my hopes up, I’ve allowed myself to envision a future with this person, I’ve let myself believe that they love me, and then it turns out that it was all an illusion. There will be hurt feelings, heartbreak, maybe worse? I don’t want any part of that.”

CJ scoffed. “OK, fine, then let’s take the reverse. Let’s say you fly up to someone in full costume, cape billowing behind you...”

“Yeah, no cape.”

“Whatever. Spandex, a big S somewhere in the chest region.” He waved his hand in a circular motion around his chest. “And you make a connection then and there, boom, love at first sight. Then what? Sure, they know and admire the powers, probably even think they’re cool and sexy. But they know absolutely nothing about you, and what follows is its own horror show. Ask Dad. Ask Jon.”

“But how is that any different that someone asking me, the real me, out because they like how I look? Or because they saw me at a party or something? It’s all based on the superficial, not on who I really am, and hiding at the center of it all is a big giant secret just waiting to destroy everything!”

“What do you think dating is?” CJ asked, incredulous. “It’s two strangers trying to get to know each other to see if they want to take the next step. You don’t go into it knowing everything about the other person, nor should you be expected to — I think that would take some of the fun out of it. Everybody has secrets, little things about themselves that they keep hidden from their significant other because they’re scared of what the reaction might be. Yours is just a little bigger than most peoples’.”

Laura found herself growing frustrated. She had bared her soul and CJ had thoroughly poked holes in all her arguments. “Okay, then what do you suggest?” Her words came out a little more abruptly than she had planned.

Far from returning her consternation, CJ gave her a little smile and sat up a bit. “Stop over thinking things,” he said with humor in his voice. “Hey, I get it. When you let someone into your heart, you are opening up yourself to all sorts of potentially terrible things. It’s scary, and it’s a lot easier to just not bother, because then you know for sure that you’ll be free of the pain that comes when things go bad. But the thing is, you’re also closing yourself off from some wonderful things, too. Maybe you will never meet

the jerk you regret hooking up with, but maybe you'll never end up meeting the person who ends up being your best friend, either."

As he spoke, she felt her emotions welling up, and at his last sentence, she couldn't help but think of Matt. But as convincing as his words were, that rational part within her, the one that had persuaded her for years to avoid the potential pain that came with dating, refused to give up. "I just have this picture in my mind, of Dad flying with Mom," she said. "And I remember the stories they told me, of how he would come into her apartment window even before they were dating, and he would flirt with her in a way that he never could as himself. Then I mentally reverse the roles. Could you see Mom carrying Dad the way he cradles her? Could you see him worshipping a super-powered woman and ignoring her soft spoken alter ego? Would it not seem embarrassing for the man in that position, or at the very least odd?"

CJ just looked at her for a moment with that goofy crooked smile of his. "If flying is the problem, I'm sure you can find a different way to carry your mystery man. Not that I'm any expert on that." The corners of her mouth began to tug up on their own. "And I don't see you putting up with the hero-worshipping type... or being particularly soft spoken or mild-mannered." She wanted to reach out and slug him, but was afraid it would invalidate his offer, so she refrained. Instead, they smiled at each other for a moment, then he dove back into the container, finding it quite a bit emptier than when he had last taken a bite. As if to make up for lost time, he shoveled a few spoonfuls quickly into his mouth while she watched, then stopped, apparently satisfied for the time being. Then he turned back toward her, his eyes calculating.

"Why do have the distinct impression that I'm the first person you've ever talked to about this stuff?" It wasn't an accusation, and he wasn't teasing. Instead, he seemed genuinely curious, maybe a bit surprised, and she felt herself start to blush.

"Who COULD I talk to?" she asked quietly, feeling suddenly shy.

His expression softened. "You know, I've always thought you were pretty lucky. You were the beneficiary of all the lessons learned the hard way when Jon and I were kids. You never had to guess about how to handle certain situations or when certain things would happen to you. Mom and Dad surely were the ideal parents after having to deal with us, and you would surely be viewed as the perfect angel thanks to Jon and I being such little twerps. I mean, you are the one person out of all of us who was actually told the family secret, and that's huge. But now I think that there was something that I had never considered." He turned his head sideways, and she could see in his eyes that he was now completely serious. "Even if Jon and I didn't always get along that well, we at least had each other to talk to. And even after Jon moved out, he was at least still around, and I had Jen to talk with by then, too. You really don't have anyone to share things with?" She looked away and shrugged. "I thought maybe you and Dad shared deep thoughts on late nights atop the local skyscrapers when I wasn't around."

"I know you have me pegged as a Daddy's girl, and I suppose I am, but we really don't talk much anymore. The late nights watching over the city — those happened when I was in high school." She couldn't help but sigh as the memories came. Those were good times, and she learned a lot under her father's watch. "And, see, the thing about being a Daddy's girl is that I'm always striving to make him proud. The things I do, the things I say... I never want him to think badly of me, because I hate that look he gets in his eyes when he's disappointed. And I certainly don't talk to him about anyone who might make it so that I am no longer HIS little girl. So I can talk to Daddy about how classes are going, what's in the news, what interesting stories I'm working on at the paper. But I'm not talking to him about my love life, or dating, or my philosophy on either of those things."

CJ seemed fascinated. He put his elbow on the table and

propped his head in his hand. "What about Mom?"

"Mom wouldn't understand. Anyway, when we talk, it feels like she gets all judgmental."

CJ looked around her apartment appraisingly. "It just seems like your life is so...lonely."

Laura sat up and gave herself a mental shake. Things had gotten deep, and that was not something either of them had sought or was particularly comfortable with. It was time to turn around the conversation. "I'm not lonely," she said, putting some lightness into her voice. "I have friends, and we have fun. And although I might not have anyone to share my deepest, darkest secrets with, that doesn't mean that I don't have my ways of coping."

"Oh?" CJ said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

"If things get me stressed out, I take a quick jaunt to the Himalayas and deliver a punch to a mountain. Unlike some of us here, I like to deliver my blows to inanimate objects."

CJ laughed. It was a nice sound, and Laura laughed lightly despite herself. "So you're the cause of the earthquakes they've had over in that part of the world lately."

"That area has earthquakes. You can't prove it was me.

Anyway, if I need to think, there are all sorts of beautiful thinking spots out there to settle into for a little while. Cloudy day gets me down? Pop up into the air a few thousand feet and the sun is shining brightly."

"So, you run away to deal with the bad things in your life," CJ said, and Laura gave him a dirty look. They had been joking and having a little fun, and he had to go ruin it with a perfectly true, perfectly concise statement. He probably didn't even know how on-the-money his words had been, and Laura found her smile fading.

"I don't see it as running away," she said a little defensively. "It's about getting perspective."

He held up his hands. "I'm not knocking it. I think I might be a little jealous."

"You should be," Laura said.

"Maybe, in the future, instead of exploring the world when something's bothering you, you could take a little trip to the manor so we can talk. I know you think I'm super busy, but I always have time for my little sister." He gave her his most devastating grin, and she felt her heart melt. She had an inkling that CJ had this side to him, she supposed, but this was the first time she had been fully exposed to it. And she really liked what she saw. He wasn't just the funny guy or the detective/boss/occasional slave driver that she had gotten to know so well since she had come to Gotham. He had a big, squishy inside that seemed so out of character for someone who was also the dark and mysterious Batman. Without another thought she turned and gave him another hug.

"I really am glad we got a chance to talk," she said after they pulled apart, and it was true. Just being able to discuss her long-held insecurities with someone who had a totally different perspective but could still appreciate her feelings was like a breath of fresh air. "I feel a lot clearer now. But I was promised blackmail material..." CJ rolled his eyes. He then glanced toward the remaining ice cream, but Laura pulled it in front of her possessively. "Come on, spill it."

He proceeded to tell her the story of his freshman year of college. The upperclassmen on the football team made sure that the cocky, 18-year-old CJ was taken down a peg, and though his ego was bruised, it didn't mean that he suffered too much. He made up for it by leaving behind a string of broken hearts, something that had fairly scandalized his much more conservative brother. Laura listened intently, trying to remember what she could from that time, but mostly coming up empty. It was entertaining to hear his stories, but all too soon he was done, and out the door.

It was not the afternoon she had pictured, she thought after he had left. But it had given her something to think about, and maybe

a new perspective on how she should proceed.

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CJ whistled tunelessly as he made his way toward the living area of Wayne Manor from the garage. Even though it was still relatively early in the afternoon, he felt like forgoing the remainder of the work day and spending it with his family instead. As anticipated, he found Jenny in the little study that she had set up in their wing of the house. She sat at an L-shaped table, some notes spread out around a laptop computer, working on a story for Gotham Magazine. CJ did a quick scan to confirm that Adam was down for his nap, then, with a spring in his step, made his way toward his wife, embracing her from behind and planting a kiss on the top of his head.

“Hey,” she said, nuzzling into him. “You’re in a good mood. Why aren’t you at the office?”

He loosened his embrace and shifted his hand so that it was on top of hers, then he tugged lightly, indicating that he wanted her to come with him. She rose and followed him over to the small couch on the other side of the room, where they sat together. “Oh I took the afternoon to visit Laura. She kinda got the worst of things the other night, when that red K turned me into Zombie Batman. So I went to apologize, and we ended up having a really good conversation.”

Jenny leaned against him, and he put his hand on her belly. “The baby’s been busy this afternoon,” she said as she repositioned his hand to feel the movements. They could both take a peek whenever they wanted, to check on the baby or just for the fun of it, but they preferred to experience the pregnancy in the most normal way possible, just as every other couple did. “I thought you guys got to talk all the time,” Jenny said.

“There’s talking and then there’s TALKING. I don’t think we’ve ever had a real heart to heart before today. It was weird — I gave love advice.”

Jenny raised her eyebrows and looked at him. “You? Should I call you Doctor Ruth now?”

He chuckled. “Not hardly. But she was trying really hard to talk herself out of dating, which tells me there’s someone waiting in the wings. Thanks to my stellar advice, I expect to be introduced to a new boyfriend in a week.”

The baby picked that moment to give a big kick, and they both let out an exclamation. “I have to admit that you do know a thing or two about successful relationships,” she said, leaning in to give him a quick kiss. “I look forward to meeting her mystery man.”

“Yeah, me too. Oh, and I had to promise a couple things to her to atone for the other night. Want to go watch the alma mater play Gotham State in a couple weeks?”

“What, in Bruce’s box?”

“No, down in the stands with Laura and her friends. I promised her that I’d root for the home team, but you don’t have to.”

Jenny cringed a little and looked down at her feet. “I know I’m super-ish at the moment, but between the heat and the sun and the swollen ankles and fun-house mirror body... I think I’ll pass.” Her voice sounded a little glum, and he couldn’t quite tell if it was insecurity about her present body shape or the fact that they had still never actually gone to a Metropolis football game together.

“I still think you’re beautiful,” he said, eliciting a grateful smile from her. “You know, all this dating talk with my sister got me thinking about how lucky I am to have you. And how wonderful it is to have someone to come home to on the bad nights who provides unconditional love and support.”

The baby kicked just then. “Junior agrees,” Jenny said with a chuckle. She rubbed her belly and leaned down as if talking to the baby. “Daddy’s pretty sweet, isn’t he?” she said, and was rewarded with a long scrape of the baby’s elbow along her belly.

“Wow,” CJ said with a laugh.

“Probably just as well that I’m super-ish or we’d be having an

‘Alien’ moment right about now,” she said, and CJ ducked his head appreciatively. She turned to look back at him. “I love you despite the bad nights and the worry, because I know you’ll always come back, and that deep down inside you’ll always be the fun guy I married twice, no matter what. Just please promise me that you’ll get rid of that red kryptonite, so we don’t HAVE to go through that again.”

He couldn’t resist giving her a long kiss at that moment, and she certainly didn’t protest. “About that,” he said with a smile, sitting up. “The big computer got a ping today. The medical examiner has finished his autopsy, so Bruce and I are going to go liberate the red K tonight. Hopefully we can get an ID on the body, too, so we can wrap up the investigation and not have that hanging over us when the big day comes.”

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh of relief. “Wonderful news,” she said, opening her eyes. “But I’m not going to relax until this actually gets finished. You know how these things go — it always seems so simple when you start out, then you get the twists and turns and nuance, and several months later...”

“Oh ye of little faith,” CJ said somewhat jokingly, eliciting a long suffering look from Jenny.

“Faith never plays into it, Clark. I have all the faith in the world in you. But part of doing a good job is digging into the details, and that’s where things can get crazy.”

“I have some incentive here,” he said more softly, sincerely. “I promise that we’ll get done in plenty of time.”

She patted his leg. “Then go get ‘em,” she said, then scooted away from him and braced herself against the couch so she could stand. “In the meantime, my editor is expecting this article by the end of the day, and I’m not quite there yet. It needs a little... something.”

CJ stood and offered her his hand, which she gratefully took. “Inspiration?” he said with a wiggle of the eyebrows.

“YOU are a distraction,” she said. “Now shoo. Naptime is a-wasting. Once Adam gets up, I think my writing time is probably done.”

“I’ll get him,” CJ said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You don’t need to... work?” she said as she re-situated herself in front of the computer.

“Bats are night creatures,” he said. “It can wait. But... I may not be around much tonight.”

“That’s fair,” she said with a grin. “Now, seriously...”

“Got it,” CJ said, putting up his hands and exiting the room.

It was probably an hour later that Adam woke up, but in that time he was able to take care of a couple of the maintenance issues around the manor that seemed to pile up when he got busy with his night job. Since CJ and the family lived in the manor rent-free, he sometimes felt obligated to do something to show his gratitude, though Bruce insisted that he could call a handyman instead, CJ was having none of it. The housekeeping service, however, he gladly kept.

As the afternoon turned to evening, CJ put together dinner with the “help” of his son. Bruce showed up just as the meal was coming out of the oven, and CJ made sure he knew that he was welcome as always to join them for dinner. Rare was the time that Bruce actually took CJ up on his offer, but Adam worked his magic on this night.

“Come on, Grampa Bruce,” Adam said, leading him to the table. While CJ finished putting things together, Adam was kept entertained by stories and magic tricks from Bruce Wayne, reclusive billionaire, known playboy, former Batman, and apparently a whiz with the kids. Jenny arrived a few minutes later, observed their interaction with amusement, then exchanged a knowing glance with CJ before settling down at the table.

After dinner, CJ retreated downstairs, parking himself in front of the computer and pulling up the GCPD files related to the autopsy of the corpse he found. The body was burned to the point

that a determination of the exact cause of death was hard to know. Dental records had been obtained, although the police didn't have time yet to compare them to the database and find the actual identity of the deceased. CJ went ahead and started that process, and at the same time pulled up a list of people reported missing in the last few days. Within a matter of minutes a name popped up, one that matched the dental records and also appeared on the missing persons list: Catherine Schuster Willey.

"Who are you, Ms. Willey?" CJ whispered, entering her name into a different search program that accessed public documents from around the country. Within a matter of moments he had her addresses going back decades, her jobs, marriages, her children's names and birthdays, and more. And another nugget of information that was somewhat startling. After staring at the screen for a few moments, he reached for the phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Hey, Dad," CJ said after his father picked up. "Does the name Catherine Schuster ring a bell?"

"Uhhh," Clark said, thinking for a few moments. "Yeah. I know her from Smallville. We went to grade school together. Why?"

"She was the corpse with the kryptonite necklace in her stomach," he said.

Clark whistled. "Small world."

"What else can you tell me?"

"Not a whole lot. The farm crisis hit her family hard, and by the time I entered middle school, they had moved off to the city." He paused, thinking. "You know, the field where my folks found me was owned by her father."

"If I had to guess, I'd say that's where the kryptonite originally came from."

"Yeah," Clark said slowly. "Maybe they found some in the field and kept it, thinking it was just another good looking rock."

"I sometimes wonder how you got out of that town alive," CJ said, eliciting a chuckle from Clark. The two chatted for a few more minutes before hanging up.

CJ drummed his fingers on the desk for a few moments, staring past the screen in front of him, trying to decide how to approach that night. The kryptonite was most definitely going to disappear, and he was going to take the occasion to make an appearance in front of the commissioner. But before then, it would probably be best to get as smart as he could about the case. Because the GCPD had yet to identify the body, they wouldn't have even started their investigation, which means that he could get a leg up on them. A plan was beginning to form, an outline for what he hoped to accomplish that evening before meeting up with the GCPD. Resolved, he gave Bruce a buzz to discuss when and where to meet, gathered a few things, suited up, and took off.

It was around 11 o'clock when CJ and Bruce met up atop the building across from the police station. It had been a productive night for CJ so far. He had visited Catherine Willey's apartment and thoroughly scanned it from afar, netting him information on her family, accounts, all aspects of her financial portfolio, communications, details on her jobs, and enough other little useful things to fill a small notebook. Then he had disguised himself and conducted interviews with the neighbors, though as far as they knew, they were just talking with a friendly co-worker of hers who was concerned about her safety. What he had managed to find out was that Ms. Willey was deep in debt, and might have been trying to find creative ways to raise money. She had apparently argued with a strange man a couple of times in the previous week, the arguments getting vicious enough that the neighbors had considered calling the police, although none actually had. She had a son and a daughter, and while the son had seemingly been gone for a few years, the daughter was a student at Gotham State. What CJ didn't find in his searching, however, was any more red

kryptonite, or any idea of who might want it and why.

Now CJ stared into the police station, making note of personnel and their locations, and quickly locating the necklace. Beside him, Bruce was dressed in a lab coat and slacks, a dark-colored wig on his head and products applied to tighten up the skin on his face seeming to take twenty years off his age.

"In addition to the Commissioner, there's the overnight skeleton crew at the booking desk, and another couple cops around the building, one by the holding cell and another currently at her desk doing some paperwork. The basement is deserted," CJ said.

"Does the morgue still have that old keypad lock?" Bruce asked, pulling open the lab coat and opening a pouch that contained several electronic gadgets. CJ had been trained on all those gadgets and what they did, though he found that he typically didn't need such sophisticated methods to enter closed rooms.

CJ nodded in response to Bruce's question. "Once you get inside, there are a series of filing cabinets on the far wall. The red K is in the third from the left, top drawer. There's a rudimentary lock on the cabinet."

"A three-year-old could pick that thing. In fact, Adam and I have been playing with sleight-of-hand..."

"You're not... oh, nevermind," CJ said, deciding that it was a discussion for another time.

"It'll be a five minute job, tops," Bruce said, closing the pouch and walking toward the stairwell. "I'll let you know when I'm done."

"Make it something audible," CJ said to his retreating form. He wasn't going to be watching Bruce work while talking with the commissioner — it would be too suspicious.

Bruce shot CJ a look, then pulled open the stairwell door and disappeared. CJ sighed and walked over to the edge of the roof, planning his course of action. There were enough cops around that he couldn't exactly walk in the front door of the police station, but because it was, in fact, a police station, it meant that he wouldn't be able to easily slip into one of the windows, either. The roof, though, was generally a good bet, and the lock on the stairwell door wasn't exactly sophisticated. The police station was just a hair shorter than the building he currently found himself on, so one good leap should get him across the fairly narrow street right-of-way quickly. He waited until he saw Bruce on the street below before backing up to the opposite side of the roof, then took off at a flat-out sprint and launched himself into the air. He tried to soften the landing so as to retain some of the element of surprise, and used his momentum to carry himself quickly to the stairwell.

He pulled out a tool from his belt to pick the lock, then stopped with his hand on the door knob, closing his eyes and clearing his thoughts. Most of the time he didn't have to say more than a couple of words to anyone when wearing the cowl, and now he would be carrying on a conversation with someone savvy enough to ferret out clues accidentally dropped or sense any dichotomy in his character that might lead to the truth. He couldn't tease, he couldn't speak in puns, he couldn't make any quips; he had to be focused and serious, which didn't come naturally to him at all. At times like this, he tried to cue up some death metal in his head to put him in the right mood, to ramp up his intensity, and chase away any levity. With a few deep breaths and a shake, he found himself focused, and proceeded into the police station, scanning the hallways as he went.

The police commissioner was a notorious night owl, and tonight was no different. He worked at a desk in his office facing the door, making it somewhat tricky to try and sneak in that way. CJ didn't necessarily see the point in being stealthy about entering the office at this hour, though, especially since nobody was working immediately outside the office. Instead he opted for the bold approach, though he killed some of the lights on the way in order to maintain his shadowy image. Reaching the door, he flung it open, the breeze from the action causing his cape to flutter out,

which made for the desired appearance. The commissioner looked up, startled, though his eyes narrowed and he turned back to his work once he caught sight of his guest.

“Batman,” he said in a businesslike tone, writing a few things down before returning his gaze to CJ. “I didn’t expect to see you around here anytime soon after what happened Saturday night. What was that, anyway?”

“Nostalgia,” CJ said in a gravelly voice. “A little reminder of what can happen to those who get sideways with the law, especially if I’m in a bad mood.”

“Yeah, well it was hell on my budget. You know how much overtime I had to pay out to clean up that mess? Next time you want to go on a rampage, how about giving me a heads up so I can try to change your mind.”

“It wasn’t exactly planned,” CJ conceded. “And that’s why I’m here. There was a body found Saturday night at the explosion west of downtown. Inside the body was a necklace, currently located in the evidence locker of your morgue. That necklace, while outwardly harmless, contains a stone that has...adverse affects on some people.”

“What kind of stone? What are you talking about?” the commissioner asked.

“It’s not important, just know that it’s dangerous. And I will be taking it off your hands tonight.”

“Now wait a second...” the commissioner said, but CJ held up a hand and took a step forward, standing up straighter, trying make his form more imposing.

“I will also personally be assisting in the investigation of the person who died to hide that necklace, whether you like it or not.”

The commissioner gave a humorless laugh. “So, what, you’re in charge of the place now? I have never complained about you offering a little free help around here to clean up the tough cases, but I draw the line at removal of evidence,” he said firmly, pushing his chair back and standing up. “You obviously have some sort of stake in the outcome of this one. Tell me, how can you possibly expect anyone to be prosecuted without it?” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless you are planning to take justice into your own hands.”

CJ allowed himself the barest of smiles. “If that were the case, then I wouldn’t bother helping you at all. You evidence is logged, it’s not like my actions will deny its existence. I am merely taking care of something that has the potential, in the wrong hands, to cause more destruction than you can imagine. And though I am sure that your officers have no idea what exactly is in their possession, I am equally confident that whoever was looking for that rock in the first place knows exactly what it is and where to find it, and has no qualms on doing whatever it takes to get it.”

The commissioner sighed and put his hands on the desk, looking down for a long moment before turning his attention back to Batman. “Okay, let’s cut through the crap and the high-minded excuses. This isn’t about the safety of my officers or vague notions of impending danger. This is about you. I’ve been watching you these last few years, following your actions, hearing about all you have done when you didn’t think anyone was watching. I know about the leaps off of skyscrapers, the fire rescues and feats of strength. I also can see how you have tried to conduct yourself with integrity in stark contrast with your predecessor. All this in combination with your concern about this rock tells me two things: that you are one of the Supermen, and that your show of force on Saturday was related to whatever that rock is.”

CJ crossed his arms over his chest and regarded the commissioner, pondering what to say next. This was far from the first time that he had stood in this office, discussing a case, though usually the discussions were rather one-sided and involved him dropping a bunch of evidence that would lead to a breakthrough in some high-profile case. There was no chit chat or exchanging of pleasantries, and CJ was under no illusions that theirs was

anything other than a working relationship conducted at arm’s length. But he also knew better than to think that the commissioner didn’t control their interactions in his own way, or that he wouldn’t vet the man whose help he was unquestioningly accepting. Of course he knew that his computer systems were being tapped and exploited by Batman, but he made no move to correct the backdoor that allowed the access. And of course he controlled the conversation on what cases were pursued within the department, sometimes asking about cold cases for the express purpose of activating the files within the system, making it so that Batman could find them and work his own magic. This arrangement had a mutual benefit, and it served him well. But he wouldn’t be a man in his position if he relied blindly on information supplied by a man who hid behind a mask, so naturally he made it his business to find out as much about him as he could. It was hardly surprising then, CJ supposed, that he knew as much as he did. Absent the red kryptonite scare, he very well might have sat on that information for an infinite amount of time, but tonight he put all the cards on the table, because tonight that knowledge mattered. Tonight, CJ’s familial relations made a difference in how he approached a case, and led him to demand something of the commissioner that he wouldn’t otherwise. The commissioner was savvy enough so see through the thin, though not untrue, excuses, and he made damn sure Batman knew it.

Now that the cat was out of the bag, CJ decided that he was probably best served by acknowledging the truth. That could best be done through demonstration, he decided, looking around the room, absorbing a hundred little details that no normal human should be able to know. “In your wallet is \$52 in paper money — a twenty, three tens and two ones. One of the ones has a mustache drawn onto George Washington’s face and the word ‘savage’ written on it.” He tipped his head toward the commissioner’s desk. “You keep a gun in the top drawer of your desk, to your right, though curiously you don’t store the clip fully loaded. I would invite you to try your luck and take a shot at me, if I didn’t think it would bring too much unwanted attention.” He reached toward the small table beside him, picking up a piece of paper, regarding its contents, then squinting at it, causing it to burst into flames. A quick shot of cooling breath squelched the flames, though the point was made. As he looked back at the commissioner, CJ could see that he was a little wide-eyed at the demonstration of power, the latent knowledge of what he could do apparently a poor substitute for seeing it first hand. “I’m not trying to hide anything, and I don’t deny that Superman and I have a lot in common — I’m proud to call him my father.” CJ rubbed his thumb and forefinger over the ashes of the burnt paper, then brushed them across the raised stitching on his costume, making the S shield stand out against its black background. “I suppose you could say that I’m a Superman, if you want to use that word like a surname” he said. “But I am Batman. And I care about this city and the people in it.”

“And what did that rock do to you?”

Although CJ had made peace with his actions, he still felt a mild amount of fear at the ease in which the kryptonite short circuited his mind, and the possibilities of what could happen if he ever did come in contact with it again. He didn’t let that fear control his actions, but right now, in this moment, he grasped onto it, letting the intensity seep into his voice. “It took away my conscious mind,” he said. “All I know of my actions on that night are from what I’ve seen in news reports and remembered in dreams. I became a being of pure instinct, emulating the behavior that the wearer of this costume has long been known for, magnifying those actions with the power at my disposal. I was a monster, but it could’ve been far worse — nobody died by my hand that night. I can’t guarantee the same will be true if I’m ever exposed to it again.” He let silence settle over the room for a moment as the commissioner absorbed his words.

“This honestly isn’t about me,” CJ continued, gesturing at

himself. “I suffer no lasting effects from exposure to that rock. This is about the safety of this entire city. The things I am capable of while under its influence...that damage might not be able to be undone. For all these reasons, that rock is going to disappear, and that is not negotiable.”

The commissioner nodded and sat down slowly. “Fine. I won’t stop you,” he said. After a moment, he raised his eyebrows and sighed. “Can you at least give me a little something to prove that you’re willing to cooperate in the investigation?”

“I have a name,” CJ said. “Catherine Schuster Willey, of Gotham City by way of Iowa and Kansas. I can tell you that her apartment shows no traces of any more of the offending rock, though there should be plenty of other information in there to get us started. And I can tell you that the building she was found in was some place that she had no business being.”

At that moment, the sound of an engine revving reverberated through the nearly empty streets outside the building. CJ turned toward the source of the sound, and saw a disguised Bruce on a motorcycle, holding up his hand. “It’s done,” he said conversationally, barely loud enough to be heard over the engine noise, then shot off into the night.

It was time for CJ to wind up his conversation, he decided. “You now know as much as I do. I’ll keep in touch,” he said, then nodded once and backed out of the office. He could hear the commissioner sigh as he left, and hid a small smile as he turned to look back in the room and saw him pulling out his wallet and checking to confirm what CJ had said was true. “I’ll be damned,” the commissioner muttered after finding the proof. Showing off had been fun, and if it had shown the commissioner that he could trust him, then it had been successful, too. Now it was time to really get down to work.

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Laura sat under a tree outside the building that housed the student newspaper. She had been staring through the walls for about twenty minutes now, mostly just watching Matt work, trying to gather up the courage to do what needed to be done. She had also watched the comings and goings of other student writers, waiting until the time that Matt was alone, so they could talk with some semblance of privacy.

After CJ’s talk with her, she had forced herself to confront the tough questions. What did Matt mean to her? What did she want him to mean to her? He was her best friend, and she had to admit that her feelings for him had been growing deeper than that for some time. As much had she had been telling herself she wanted to stay platonic friends with him, her actions had betrayed that. They flirted with each other constantly, said affectionate things jokingly, went out of their way to see each other when they didn’t have to. They acted like they were dating, even though the subject had never been so much as uttered until their dinner the other night, a dinner that had been planned without being planned at all, an opportunity that had presented itself that she never would’ve bothered to pursue if she hadn’t been sure of what was going to come out of it. Sure, her conscious mind had tried to tell her that the dinner was just two friends hanging out in an oddly intimate way, but she had to admit that she would’ve been disappointed if the evening hadn’t ended with that kiss. So why did she retreat from him after it happened? Why was she so afraid to let him into her heart? Her talk with CJ had laid those answers bare. It was all about expectations, and fear of rejection. And, she decided, maybe it was time to stop being afraid and start being honest with herself, and with Matt.

With a deep breath, Laura stood and walked slowly toward the building, then into the office. She stopped briefly at her own desk to drop off her things, then made her way to Matt. Their desks were in different pods of cubicles, out of eyesight of each other, and his was situated so that he looked toward that back of the office, such that he wasn’t bothered by the comings and goings

toward the front. It would be easy to sneak up on him, catch him off guard, so that he couldn’t run away from their impending conversation, but she was pretty sure he wouldn’t do that even if given the opportunity. Even if she had hurt his feelings that night, she seriously doubted he would greet her approach with anything less than a smile, and that thought gave her courage.

Laura slowly approached his desk from behind, slipping in next to him and leaning her hip against the desktop. It only took a moment for him to sense her presence, and when turned toward her, she could see that she had been right, though his smile seemed to be tinged with relief. “Hey,” she said, absently moving her hand up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“Hi,” he answered softly.

“So, a funny thing happened the other night,” she said, pausing to look at him, feeling a little flutter in her stomach. She had spent so long running from her feelings, running from the truth, that saying it aloud seemed very scary all of a sudden. “I was having a really great homemade dinner with this guy, and we talked about all sorts of interesting things.”

“Oooh, sounds fun. Do I know this guy?” His expression was teasing, and she tried not to give him a look that expressed her mild annoyance at the question, though she was pretty sure that she failed. And that apparently just made him more amused. It was hard not to smile when he looked at her like that.

“You could practically be brothers,” she said, deciding to play along. “Anyway, apparently shepherd’s pie has some sort of aphrodisiac quality, because we found ourselves a little too close together on the sofa.”

“And by close together, you mean...?”

The blush rose in her cheeks. “Locked together in the type of kiss that would make romance writers stop and take notes.”

“Wow,” said Matt, playing it cool, though she could see that he was hanging on her words a little too closely.

“Yeah, wow. It was...,” she sighed contentedly, but then her smile started to fade, though she never broke eye contact with him. “But then I went and did something dumb.” Her hands started playing with each other, and she had to look away from him before she lost her nerve. “See, I’m the type of person who prides herself on being in control at all times. Control of what I do and when, control of who I am and what I believe. My emotions had always been just another one of those things that needed to be controlled — something that could be put in a box so they didn’t get in the way of what I thought was important in life. But apparently they had other ideas.”

“Emotions are funny that way,” Matt said.

Laura forced her hands apart, placing them behind her on his desk and leaning back. She sought his eyes again, then took a deep breath. “I felt things during that kiss, wonderful things, things that I can’t describe adequately without sounding totally sappy. And at some point I realized that I liked it, and maybe I wanted to feel more, and that made my conscious mind kinda...freak out. And I think maybe it came off as rejection, which I suppose it sort of was, but that was never my intention.” She opened her mouth to say more, but he had brought his hand up to cover hers, and he was smiling at her, understanding in his eyes. All of a sudden, a lump formed in her throat, and she found that further speech was rendered impossible.

“So you came to apologize, then?” he asked, coaxing her hand off the table so he could kiss it gently. She nodded mutely as the forbidden emotions began to bubble again beneath the surface. “I suppose I could forgive you, but...” he said, his smile becoming sly, his thumb now absently massaging her palm, “I might need some sort of demonstration of your seriousness.”

She gave a quick outburst of breath and a smile, realizing as she did so that it was the exact same reaction she saw so often from her dad. “I imagine you have something in mind?” she said.

He tried to act coy, but he seemed to be struggling to keep a

straight face. “Well, we had a perfectly good non-date going there before civil war broke out between your heart and your head,” he said, and she couldn’t help but admire again how good he was at boiling things down to their essence. “I say that maybe we pick that up where we left off, starting with desserts and going from there.”

“That sounds nice,” she said softly.

“Then, maybe we can talk about doing the real thing. A real date, formal, fun, or otherwise.”

A few days ago, the prospect would’ve frightened her. Talking about dates, joking about proper dating etiquette, making fun of those hapless couples they saw out there having miserable or disastrous dates, that was all she had ever been willing to do, but actually experiencing one, opening herself up to the possibilities that came with one, that was not happening. But now, she was excited at the prospect. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

She wasn’t quite sure how long they stared contentedly at each other, but after a short time, he seemed to become aware of his computer screen, and the spell was broken. He let go of her hand, then pointed at the screen. “I, ah, have a deadline, unfortunately,” he said. “And this week alone I have a couple exams and a paper due.” He appeared to be disappointed, and she couldn’t blame him.

“Maybe this weekend? I mean, if you don’t have anything else planned,” she said, and he nodded. With a sigh, she took her weight off the desk and stepped away. “I look forward to it.”

“Impatiently?” he asked, and she just smiled.

“Hungry. I love dessert,” she said, then turned from him and walked away, putting a little swing in her step that she knew he would appreciate. She could hear his breath catch in his throat, and she knew her mission had been accomplished. Grabbing her things from her desk, she exited the building and traversed the green.

It was as she was about halfway across that her phone began to ring. She wasn’t disappointed, exactly, to see that it was CJ, but if he was calling her now, there was likely only one thing it could be.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hi,” he said in that cheery voice he always used when he wanted something. “I need your help.”

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Coincidence was a funny thing, Laura thought as she drummed her fingers on her table.

When CJ had called, his task for her had been to seek out and talk to another Gotham State student, the daughter of the dead woman found with a kryptonite necklace in her stomach. At a university of over 30,000 students, that seemed like a tall order — say she did manage to find her target, why would this person even want to talk to her? Of course, CJ had been one step ahead of her, locating her class schedule and reading it off to Laura. As he did, she briefly wondered if there was any piece of information on the planet that the computer in the Batcave couldn’t get to, but then she heard something that interrupted her musings. Apparently, the student and Laura actually had a class together, one of those giant lectures that it seemed like half the university attended. It was an amazing coincidence for sure, but one that made her job infinitely easier.

Laura took a seat near the door and looked around, locating her target, a sophomore named Anne Willey. Her hair was a little shorter than the picture that CJ had messaged her, but there was no mistaking the face. CJ had wanted her to wait to approach Anne until news of her mother’s death and identity were made public, and that particular item of information had been all over the evening news the night before. It was a bit surprising that Anne had even gone to classes today, given the circumstances, and she did look a little worse for the wear. But Laura wasn’t about to question her good luck on this day, and as the class came to a close, she rose and fell into step next to Anne when she came

down the aisle past her.

“Anne? Anne Willey?” Laura said, holding open the lecture hall door. Anne looked at her skeptically, but Laura gave her most reassuring smile. “I’m Laura Kent. I just wanted to ask, and I’m sorry if I’m being too forward, but... was that your Mom that I heard about on the news?”

Anne’s eyes watered up a little bit, and she looked away and nodded wordlessly. “Oh, hey, I don’t mean to upset you. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry to hear about it, and to let you know that if you need anything at all, even just to talk, I’m available.”

Anne stared at the sidewalk and picked up her pace a little. “Thanks for the offer, but I don’t even know you.”

Laura put her hand on Anne’s arm. “It’s just that I know what you’re going through. I lost someone close to me, too, not all that long ago — my brother. It was a plane crash, and it was... pretty rough.”

Anne stopped walking and looked at Laura. “Yeah?” she said, and Laura smiled sadly.

“Yeah, but I know it helped me a lot to talk about it.” Laura felt a little dirty, taking advantage of this poor girl’s emotions, but the words she spoke weren’t necessarily untrue, just maybe embellished a little. It wasn’t so bad then, she reasoned, and at least the intention was pure — she wanted to help find whoever it was that killed her mother.

Anne looked at her for a moment, seemingly indecisive then nodded once. “Yeah, I think talking would help,” she said with a weak smile, and gestured toward a bench off the walkway. Laura followed her, aware for the first time that she felt a little funny somehow. Not in a bad way, exactly, but... fuzzy, maybe. Like it was getting harder to keep her train of thought.

“Tell me about her,” Laura said as they sat down. “What was she like? Were you close?”

Anne proceeded to talk about her mother, describing some of their fun times and talking about what she would miss most. She asked Laura about her brother, and Laura gave a watered down version of the official story, interjecting some memories. “It’s strange how unreal it is,” Laura said, feeling a little lightheaded now. “They are there one day, and the next they’re gone, just like that, with no warning.”

“It’s strange you said that,” Anne said. “I get the feeling that my mom knew something was going to happen to her. The day before she died, she came to my apartment and gave me something.” She reached up and brushed her hair behind her ear, and Laura saw it, an earring, with a medium-sized red stone set in a silver teardrop. Laura’s eyes went wide with surprise as it dawned on her that the earring she was looking at was probably the twin to the necklace Anne’s mother swallowed. She was staring down a piece of red kryptonite, but somehow she didn’t feel alarmed. In fact, it almost seemed funny. “She gave me these,” Anne continued, oblivious to Laura’s reaction. “Told me that if anything happened to her, at least these were safe. They’re family heirlooms, you know.”

Laura swallowed hard, trying to push away a completely inappropriate desire to laugh hysterically, then nodded. “They’re... beautiful,” she said, her voice as steady as it could be under the circumstances. It occurred to her that maybe the earrings were causing her strange symptoms, and it might be best if she just left, even if a large part of herself was beginning to like the pleasant buzz that was beginning to envelop her consciousness. She tried to smile again, if only for the sake of appearances, then stood, staggering backward slightly as she got to her feet. “I, uh, I’m so sorry about your Mom. I hope they find whoever did that to her.”

Anne looked at her with confusion and concern. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Laura took a wobbly step back. “Fine, really, I just have to get to my next class.” With that, she raised her hand, turned, and

walked as quickly as she could away. She had to contact CJ, the part of her brain that was still thinking rationally said, and she reached for her cell phone. But the other, larger, part of her brain that wasn't thinking rationally at all pointed out that she had come face-to-face with red kryptonite, and was still conscious, and not in the mood to punch anyone or wipe out whole street gangs. In fact, she thought, lowering her cell phone, she felt fantastic. The sun shining down on her bathed her in warmth and happiness, and if she had been alone instead of in the middle of campus, she might have jumped into the sky and turned a few lazy loops. A mood like this was too good to be wasted talking to her brother about a case, or having him or any other family member fret over her. No, her current state of mind had to be shared with someone who could always make her smile, who always seemed to lift even her best moods.

Putting the cell phone back in her bag, she smiled and started to skip toward her apartment, not caring about the strange looks she was getting. She needed to give Matt a little demonstration of her feelings toward him, and she needed to do it now. Anyway, he also promised her dessert, and she had an idea of what to offer.

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Matt stared blankly at his computer monitor, his mind churning over how to present the information he needed to type out, none of the dozen or so different ideas particularly willing to assert itself. This wasn't a problem he generally had when typing up a story for the newspaper, because the news was at least interesting. This paper, however, was for a required elective that he found about as interesting as watching grass grow. In fact, he thought as he stared out the window toward a green space beyond, at this point the grass really was more exciting. With a frustrated sigh, he banged his forehead lightly against the table in front of the keyboard, but a knock on the door interrupted his misery.

He thought about ignoring the knocking, since he wasn't expecting anyone and he had work to do, but at this point he figured a break might be the best thing to kick his creative juices into gear. "I'm coming," he said, then stood and approached the door.

As he opened it, he saw Laura standing on the other side, wearing a lacy tank top and a pair of jean shorts that were entirely too skimpy. Normally she was a fairly conservative dresser, and more than once told him that she didn't believe that a wardrobe should be the one thing that defines a person. That outfit could easily define her as...something other than the intelligent, thoughtful person that she usually was, and he found himself staring. It didn't help that she had her weight shifted to one leg, the other crossed in front of it, her arm stretched up to brace against the doorframe. The stance was sultry and she knew it, judging by the expression on her face. He forced his eyes up to hers, and what he saw caught him off guard. Her pupils seemed a little too large, the intelligence that was usually burning in them seemed dulled. There was also a little too much makeup there, enhancing the appearance of impropriety.

"Hey there, handsome," she said, then lunged toward him, her hands cupping his face, and before he knew it her lips had found his. At first he was completely shocked, but after a moment he found himself acquiescing, despite the vaguely unsettled feelings that were coming from his subconscious. The kiss was hungry, intense, and most definitely mutual. And although the situation very much resembled something out of one of the fantasies that ran through his mind on lonely nights — his scantily-clad dream girl rescuing him from a boring study session and showering him with affection — something about it just didn't seem right. And he soon found himself breaking off the kiss.

Laura groaned and leaned into him, causing him to stagger backwards. He wrapped his arms around her out of instinct, which caused her to start giggling. "You're happy to see me, right?" she asked. "Because you said the other day that you were looking

forward to some...dessert. So I brought myself. You get to supply the chocolate sauce." She giggled again, and Matt found himself at a loss for words. The person in front of him looked like Laura, sounded like Laura, but the Laura he knew wouldn't act this way. The moment of passion that they had shared last weekend in her apartment had been brief, but she had been the one to cool things down. And while she had admitted that maybe she would like a chance to try it again, that was in no way a declaration that she wanted to skip straight to...dessert.

Matt gave her a nervous smile and dropped his arms, stepping away from her. "I AM happy to see you," he said, "but I have to ask — are you feeling okay?" He tried to capture her eyes with his, but she didn't seem to want to. Instead, she turned toward the bookcase in his living room and started inspecting the contents, dropping her purse by the door as she did.

"I feel absolutely fantastic," she said, running her finger along the spines of his books. "Oooh, I didn't know you read comic books. You know the most interesting thing about these books? The fact that most of those guys aren't anything like the comics would have you believe in real life. I've met a bunch of them."

Like so many of the things she said, he couldn't tell if she was making an outrageous joke or giving some sort of commentary that went over his head. "You've met the Flash?" he asked, pointing to the book where her finger came to rest.

"Yeah. And his nephew, Kid Flash? Ugh, he's obnoxious." Her eyes went wide as she seemed to catch what she was saying, then her face contorted into a grimace and she turned toward him. "I think I wasn't supposed to tell you that," she said, then shrugged. She turned to wander over and look at something else, but staggered slightly at the movement. After recovering, she started singing softly. Matt furrowed his brow and tried to capture a thought that was lurking in the recesses of his mind. Between the stumbling and uncharacteristic singing, along with the very slight slurring of her words, it almost seemed like she was drunk, though she didn't have that smell around her that drunks usually did. At the very least, she wasn't herself, and he was starting to become concerned. It wasn't that he thought that she would harm herself or anyone else, but it was getting hard to predict what might happen next. He may need some backup, he thought, glancing at her purse. And her cell phone may provide the solution, along with a phone book full of names to contact if things got too bad.

"Is this your bedroom?" he heard her ask. "Your bed looks pretty cozy. I think I need to go see for myself."

"It's really not," he said, then sighed. He looked back at the purse and pondered for a second, then quickly bent down and opened it, pulling out her cell phone and shoving it in his pocket. It was just in case of emergency, he told himself, and he could always put it back if nothing happened. Now he needed to get her far away from his bedroom, and quickly turn her mind away from any notions of activities that happened there. Taking a few long strides down the hallway and stepping into the doorway, he saw that she had hastily made the bed, then climbed in. She now laid in his bed in a position that he would best describe as torturous, at least to him. She was on her side, her head propped in her hand, one of her shirt straps pushed off her shoulder and hanging against her arm, and her free hand tracing the pattern of the sheets. She smiled seductively as she saw him, and he had to remind himself to breathe. It also suddenly got very hard to form coherent thoughts.

"Two people can definitely fit comfortably over here," she said, patting the mattress next to her. Without any conscious thought, Matt found himself moving toward her and sitting down in the spot indicated, and almost before he was fully seated, she had pushed herself up and was engaging him in another deep kiss. This was better than his fantasies, he decided as he found himself tumbling over on top of her. He had always imagined her as demure, shy, never one to make the first move, and when the time

came to run the bases, as it were, he would have to coax her along and work hard to win her approval every step of the way. But now she was instigating things, she was in charge and had no qualms about pushing him further than he had ever been brave enough to even imagine. It was wonderful, glorious, a dream come true, and...completely wrong.

He planted his hands on the bed and pushed himself up, breaking the kiss. Her arms snaked around him and pulled him back toward her, and he indulged in one last kiss before forcing himself up again and out of her grip. "This is not right," he panted, backing away from her.

"It sure feels right," she said huskily, but he shook his head. Her expression morphed quickly, and suddenly it looked like she was about to cry. It made his heart want to shatter into a million pieces. "Don't you want me?" she asked.

"More than you know," he replied softly, his words seeming to chase away her impending tears. "But this just doesn't seem like the right time. This should be something we earn, something that happens after we've actually gone on a real date and gotten to know each other. Otherwise we might end up regretting it, and that's the last thing I want." His words seemed to placate her for the time being, and he felt a massive sense of relief. But it was apparent now that he was going to need to call in the cavalry. She had a way of short circuiting his defenses, coaxing him to do things that he wouldn't otherwise, and he was worried that he couldn't fend her off if she tried to seduce him again.

He stood up and straightened his clothing, trying to keep his eyes averted from her lacy tank top with the drooping strap. "I have an idea," he said, offering his hand to her. "Let's go back out in the living room and start the right way, with a little appetizer. Put on some music, maybe something we can dance to..."

She seemed disappointed, but not unresponsive to the idea. "But we've never danced before," she said hesitantly.

"What better time to start? Besides, I can't think of anyone else I would rather do it with," he replied with a smile. After a moment she took his hand, and he pulled her up to a standing position. They walked hand-in-hand back to the living room, and he led her to the couch area, picking up the remote on the way and turning on the stereo, which was currently tuned to his favorite radio station. His phone was sitting on the coffee table in front of them, and he unlocked it, bringing up the music player, then handed it to her. "Pick out a few songs you want to hear, and we can listen to those," he said. "In the meantime, I'm going to go take care of something. Be right back."

He kept a reassuring smile on his face until he turned the corner into the hallway, then proceeded to the bathroom, pulling her phone out of his pocket after closing the door. He seemed to recall that her brother-in-law was named Sam, and that he was the closest family that she had in town. He was a relative, but not an especially close one, not someone like her parents, who would surely not find her presence at his apartment to be humorous. He was older, but not too old, and probably close enough to college to remember some wild times had while ingesting not entirely legal substances. Or at least Matt hoped that was the case. Fortunately her phone wasn't password protected, so he was able to access her contacts fairly easily, though he felt guilty doing it. Thumbing through the list, he only found one Sam that wasn't a Samantha, though he had to blink a few times as he opened up the entry. The full name showed as Sam Wayne, who Matt assumed was the same Sam Wayne that was the son of billionaire businessman Bruce Wayne and local celebrity. THAT was her brother-in-law... squared? Maybe he just had the same name and was an entirely different Sam Wayne. Wayne was a common last name, right? With a shake of his head, he pushed the questions out of his head and dialed the cell phone number shown. It was answered after two rings.

"Laura, hey!" Sam Wayne said quickly, good humor in his

voice. "Did you finish that job for me?"

Matt held his breath for a moment, closed his eyes, and spoke in a stage whisper. "Actually, uh, my name is Matt Owens and I'm a friend of Laura's. I don't have a lot of time, but...she's not acting like herself. I think something's wrong with her."

"Wrong how?" Sam asked, all humor gone.

"It's hard to explain. She acts drunk, like she's not in control of her actions. But she's also very, let's say, amorous, and determined, and I'm doing my best to fend her off, but I don't know how long I can keep it up. She's very...persuasive."

Sam Wayne exhaled quickly. "I believe that."

"She's mentioned your name before, and I was hoping you could come help. Please."

"What's your address?"

Matt told him, and Sam promised he would get there as soon as he could. He mentioned that he would be coming from downtown, so it might take a while, depending on traffic. Matt gave a sigh of relief and hung up the phone, though it meant that he would now have to go back out there and face Laura. He flushed the toilet to complete the ruse, just in case she was listening for it, then briefly ran the tap.

Returning to the living room, Laura was clicking intently through the list songs on his phone. "You have a very interesting collection of music," she said.

"Thank you," he replied, drawing a small smile from her in response. He picked up the stereo remote and changed the input, then gestured for his phone, added a few songs to the playlist, and started the music. "Music is one of those things that you can't get too much of," he said, putting the phone down and stepping toward her. "If you're sad, the right song can cheer you up. If you're worked up, it can mellow you out. It gives life context, colors your moods, opens your mind." He gathered her up, intertwining one hand with hers and putting his other behind her back, swaying softly as the music came.

"It gives you a reason to be close to someone," Laura chimed in, and he couldn't argue that.

The song that was playing was a pop ballad that was a couple years old. It wasn't his favorite song, probably because it had been overplayed on the radio at the time it came out, but it wasn't a bad song either. In fact, he remembered it fondly, if only for one reason. "I like how a song can make you remember what you were doing the first time you heard it — where you were or how you felt." He regarded her. "Where were you when you first heard this?"

She seemed thoughtful for a moment, then looked toward him, her eyes far away. "I was driving up here from Metropolis before starting classes freshman year. It was playing on the radio as I passed through a big stretch of nothingness on the interstate, watching cows and horses pass by. I remember being excited and scared at the same time, because I had no idea what the future held."

They danced in silence for a few long moments before Matt spoke. "It was after I came back from summer break but before classes started. I was hanging out with friends, partying a little while I still could, and this came on. I remember the one image that came to my mind the first time I heard it. I had only met you once at that point...actually, I think I hadn't even spoken to you yet, but this made me think of you. I don't know why."

"Because I'm awesome," Laura said, and he laughed gently. The banter continued as the song played, then another couple of the same vintage, and Matt found himself inserting questions into their conversation to try to help him understand how she came to be at his apartment in the state she was in. What did she do today? Who did she meet? Where did she go? If she caught on to his questioning, she didn't show it, but she also didn't give him any information that would solve the puzzle. Eventually the song changed again, this time to the soulful tones of Ray Charles'

‘Georgia.’

“I was at a wedding the first time I heard this one,” Matt said, bringing back their earlier conversation. “I was the awkward teenager in ill-fitting clothes, too old to hang out with the kids but too young to enjoy the open bar with the adults. It was my cousin getting married, and we never really visited with that branch of the family much prior to that, or really since then, either. I wasn’t having a good time, but I thought this song was fantastic.”

Laura was leaning into him more heavily now, the music apparently having an effect on her. It also occurred to Matt that she might be entering the sleepy phase of drunkenness, but that seemed to fade as she started speaking. “My mom always had a thing for the jazz and blues standards — Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday. . . Ray Charles fit the bill, too. She would sing their songs around the house when she was working, when she didn’t think anyone was watching, or just to calm us down. So I knew this song from when I was too young to know what music was. But the first time I really heard this arrangement I was probably 5 or so, and I snuck out of bed one night. When I got to the living room, this was playing over the stereo, and my folks were dancing, not unlike we are now.” She adjusted her arm behind his back and sighed. “My parents were always very close, very affectionate, but this was different. You could see it on their faces — in that moment they were two people completely and utterly in love. It gave me such a warm feeling, made me want more than anything to be able to have someone feel that way about me at least once in my life.”

He gathered her tighter, almost protectively. Sometimes the truth came out when your defenses were down. He wanted to give her a bold declaration that he would be that person for her, but now was not the time for that, not with the state that she was currently in. It was still a sweet story, though, and he let it hang over them as the music continued. Eventually her head found its way to his shoulder, and he couldn’t resist putting his cheek on her forehead, breathing in the gentle scent of her shampoo. He didn’t know whether to thank or curse whatever caused her ailment — thank it for making this moment possible, or curse it for possibly showing him everything he couldn’t have. Almost-dating didn’t offer any guarantees, only possibilities, and it was still possible that she wouldn’t be interested in him after getting a good look. He may never actually get the chance to get this close again, but he vowed to do everything in his control to try, and that was all he could do. That, and just be a friend, the type of friend that didn’t take advantage of her when she was vulnerable.

The music changed again, this time to a Van Morrison song, and he made a mental note of time. If it took twenty minutes to get between his apartment and downtown, her brother-in-law should be getting close. “I think I like this song,” Laura said, her voice starting to become heavy.

“I don’t have an interesting story for this one,” Matt said. “I think I picked up this CD at the library and listened to it for the first time while reading.”

“Well, this is my first time hearing it,” Laura said, bringing her head up, a surprised smile slowly spreading across her lips. “You will be my memory of this song.”

“I sure hope so,” he said softly, and couldn’t resist kissing her lightly.

She chuckled gently, then put her head back on his shoulder and they danced wordlessly for a few minutes while the song played behind them. “You are the most romantic person I’ve ever met, Matt Owens,” she said, before letting out a yawn.

“Your parents sound pretty romantic,” he said, deflecting the compliment that he didn’t think he deserved.

“Well now you’re just ruining it,” she muttered, and he smiled. Almost before she finished her sentence, there was a knocking at the door.

Laura lifted her head up again, turned toward the door and

squinted perceptibly. “CJ? What are you doing here?” she asked, then raised her eyebrows. “Don’t give me that look,” she said, a little of her usual fire finally making an appearance. Confused, Matt followed her gaze to try and figure out what she was saying or who she was talking to, but there was only the door. “What?” she said, then looked quickly between Matt and the door a couple times, then recognition of some sort seemed to dawn on her. “Ohhhhh,” she said softly, then turned toward Matt, a very exaggerated expression of calm on her face. “You should probably see who’s at the door,” she said. Matt could only look at her for a moment, not sure what to make of this particular act, but then decided that he probably shouldn’t keep whoever it was waiting any longer.

Laura trailed closely behind him as he made his way to the door. Opening it, he saw a man, a couple inches shorter than himself, dressed in a white button-up shirt and tie, although the tie was tucked into his shirt between the second and third buttons, and the shirt sleeves were rolled up. His hair was styled neatly, and on his face were a pair of glasses. He appeared to be a few years older than Laura, though, oddly, he also looked a lot like her. And he looked familiar in a way that Matt couldn’t quite put his finger on. He was smiling gently, which seemed like a perfectly natural expression for him, though Matt could see a little concern there, too.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Sam.”

“My brother-in-law,” Laura said quickly, almost too loudly. “Who I never met before coming to Gotham City and wouldn’t know at all if he hadn’t married my sister-in-law.”

Sam cringed and brought his fingers up to rub his temples. “Uh, I’m Matt. Please, come on in,” Matt answered, stepping aside to let his guest by. Sam dropped his hand and gave an expression that tried to come off as friendly, though he mostly just seemed embarrassed. It was a charming look on him, Matt thought, but Sam seemed like the type of person who could be charming in about any situation. For his part, Matt was aware that Laura’s hand was still in his, and he caught Sam regarding them curiously.

“So, SAM, why are you here?” Laura asked, her voice indicating that she wasn’t overly pleased to have a visitor.

“Actually, I called him here,” Matt said, pulling her cell phone out of his pocket and handing it to her. “I was concerned about you. I mean, you have to admit, you’re not acting like yourself this afternoon.”

She seemed hurt, and he couldn’t blame her. “I thought you said that you liked having me around,” she said to him, her voice small.

He grabbed their clasped hands with his free hand. “I do,” he said. “You make life interesting, that’s for sure.” That coaxed a little smile back onto her face. “But, you, ah, have an effect on me that I can’t entirely control. And I thought it would be good to bring Sam here over before we did something that we regretted.”

“Which is entirely sensible,” Sam interjected, though Laura seemed to ignore him.

Laura put her hand on Matt’s chest. “Are you saying I’m a bad influence?” she asked slyly.

Matt arched an eyebrow. “That is exactly what I’m saying.” She giggled a little at that.

Sam cleared his throat, drawing their attention. “Laura, I think maybe we should go back to the house, maybe let Matt here get back to. . . whatever he was doing when you showed up.”

“Writing a paper,” Matt chipped in, releasing Laura’s hand. “It’s due tomorrow and I’m seriously behind.”

“See, he’s a busy guy,” Sam said, gesturing toward Matt, and Laura just rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” she said. She gave a long look back at Matt, then leaned over to pick up her purse. “We’ll always have ‘Tupelo Honey,’” she said, and he nodded.

“It’ll be our song,” he answered.

“Why don’t you come with us out to the car,” she said, bringing an audible sigh from Sam. Matt nodded, and together they exited the apartment. They walked in relative silence until they reached the stairwell.

“So, Sam,” Matt said, trailing the other two down the steps. “Laura never told me that your last name was Wayne. Are you the same Sam Wayne that’s been on the news lately?”

“That’s me,” he said evenly.

“As in, son of billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne?”

“Yup,” Sam said. This time it was Laura’s turn to sigh.

“This is why I never tell anyone,” she said, looking over her shoulder toward Matt. “People get all star struck around minor celebrities. He’s just my dumb brother.”

“In-law,” Sam said.

“I’m not star-struck, it’s just interesting, that’s all,” Matt said. “He probably has a lot of fascinating stories to tell.”

“Well actually,” Laura said, and Sam elbowed her. “Ow! What’s with you assaulting me?”

Sam shoved his hands in his pockets. “You’re getting your payback later. But I reserve the right to nullify the deal if you don’t behave.” His voice was almost teasing, and Matt watched, fascinated, as Laura lightly nudged him. They actually did act like honest-to-God siblings. Observing them side-by-side also reinforced his initial thought that there was a decent resemblance between them.

After a moment they reached the door to the exterior and exited, making a beeline for a white Jaguar sitting in the corner of the lot. It was a statement car that spoke to the wealth of the owner, but it wasn’t overly ostentatious. It was the type of car that he would imagine Sam Wayne driving. “Nice,” Matt said, and Sam shrugged.

“If I wanted to really impress...well, there’s a garage full of much more interesting cars back home.” Sam looked back toward Matt with a twinkle in his eye. “But I don’t like to brag.”

“Lies!” Laura said, opening the door. She looked back at Matt and put a hand up. “Have fun studying. Come see me when you’re done.”

“Okay,” Matt said, then watched as Sam Wayne and Laura Kent drove off together, waiting until the car was out of sight before making his way back to his apartment. He sat down at his computer and attempted to get back down to work, but too many thoughts were going through his head. Laura and her actions would live in his dreams for a long time, he was sure, but what was really occupying his mind was Sam Wayne. It finally occurred to Matt why his face looked so familiar, and it wasn’t because it was plastered all over the news, because he really wasn’t. Sam Wayne might have been mentioned by name a few times, and there were several articles about him in prominent magazines, but Matt wasn’t sure that he had actually seen a picture of his face before. But he’d seen pictures of Laura’s dead brother more than once, on the banner at the stadium and in photographs at her parents’ house. His hair was a lot shorter in those, his face unobscured by glasses, but if Matt closed his eyes and brought up those images, they sure matched the face of the man he met today.

As he stared at the blinking cursor in the word processing program on his computer, Matt knew that he wouldn’t be able to do any work unless he confirmed his suspicions. It felt wrong, he thought as he brought up a search engine and typed Sam Wayne’s name into it. This was Laura’s family, and he trusted her implicitly. But if Matt’s suspicions were true, it also meant that this man held a secret, something that could have wide-ranging implications, something that could be a story that every journalist in town would kill to know. Educating himself using information available to anyone with an internet connection was hardly a betrayal of Laura’s friendship; that would only come if Matt did something with whatever knowledge he ended up acquiring, and he had no intention of doing that.

The search engine returned a host of news articles and coverage that Matt was familiar with. There weren’t many photos of Mr. Wayne available, which was curious, and those that were mostly came from tabloids or were somewhat blurry. Matt was mostly interested in his biography, though — where did he grow up? Go to school? What was in his past? The answer was, nobody really knew. Sam Wayne was a person who only really showed up three years earlier, whose past was alluded to by anecdotes from interviews, but without anything concrete that connected him to his life before meeting Bruce Wayne. A meeting that just so happened to occur at almost the exact same time an airplane crashed into the ocean between Metropolis and Gotham.

In a separate window, Matt opened up another search engine and typed in the name of Laura’s brother, S. Clark Kent. Immediately a host of articles about the plane crash came up. There was even a passenger manifest for the flight, available as an Acrobat file, with his name among the other passengers. One hit that came back was for a YouTube video of him proposing to his girlfriend at a football game, taken from some ESPN highlights from around 5 years earlier. Matt clicked on the link and watched the video, fascinated. There were plenty of sports articles from his days as a football player, mentioning some of his feats and accolades. And because of his status as a division one athlete, there were plenty of pictures of him available, mostly from the media guides or university marketing that came out during his playing days. Sam Wayne and CJ Kent shared the same smile, Matt noticed as he went through the photos and watched the video. Their eyes and face shape were the same, too. It didn’t take a genius to see that, though it probably wouldn’t be something that anyone would notice just by doing an internet search, not unless they had also personally met Sam Wayne. He really was Laura’s brother, her actual, not-dead brother. So...what did that mean?

Matt leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, a thousand thoughts surging through his brain. If Laura’s brother wasn’t dead, then why deceive everyone into thinking he was someone else? And, backing up a bit, why was his name on a list of passengers for a plane that he obviously never got onto? Was he trying to cover up for or run from some sort of crime? Was he trying to pull something over on Gotham? Whatever it was, Laura’s whole family had to be in on it, as did Bruce Wayne. Matt couldn’t imagine any scenario where someone like Bruce Wayne would willingly sign over his inheritance to some sort of con artist. Something wasn’t right about this. He had to be missing something.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, something else occurred to him. They lived in a world of superheroes, indestructible beings who did the impossible every day. Laura, someone who was apparently in on Sam Wayne’s deception, had also been ambivalent about the fact that superheroes were people, just like everyone else. They had to do something, go somewhere when they weren’t saving the world. If you removed the gaudy outfits and ostentatious powers, they really didn’t look any different from anyone else. They could be anybody, live anywhere, and if the misdirection were good enough, nobody would have any idea. What if...?

Matt opened a third browser window and brought up the search engine. He stared at the screen, tapping his fingers on the desk a few times, then took a deep breath and positioned his fingers over the keyboard, typing ‘Superman’ into the prompt. After a moment, a host of articles and images popped up. If he filtered through the noise relating to the movie and the comic books, he could get right down to the real photographs, and what he saw made him gasp. Superman didn’t necessarily bear much resemblance to Laura’s brother on his own, but bringing up photos that also had Ultra Woman, seeing the two of them together, made the likeness unmistakable. But there was something else, too. Closing his eyes and bringing up her face, he realized that Laura

also bore a striking resemblance to the famous hero. There was only one answer to all his questions, and it was staring him right there in the face.

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CJ stood at the mouth of the Batcave, regarding the outcropping of rock as his balled-up fist rested against his side. Laura had mentioned something when they spoke a few days earlier about how she liked to go to desolate places and relieve stress by beating on some mountain ranges. At this moment he was quite envious of her for that, because he thought that giving a thrashing to a hunk of granite would greatly improve his mood. As it was, he had a lot of pent up anger and he doubted the limestone surrounding the cave would be able to take any sort of force without bringing the whole place down. He contemplated taking out his aggression on the little stone outcropping he now stood in front of, a knob of rock jutting out from the main formation that wouldn't be missed if it were to be beaten into sand. But there were logistical problems — if he hit it from the side, would the rock become a projectile, hurtling into the city and hurting other people or property? If he punched it from the top, what kind of crater would it create as it hit the ground? Would it make the cave entrance unusable?

With a sigh, CJ unballing his fist and walked slowly back into the cave. There wouldn't be any rock punching tonight, especially since there was no guarantee that would've helped his mood anyway. Stupid kryptonite, he thought, choosing instead to hit his fist against his hand. Stupid plan, he thought, changing hands. Oh, it had seemed like a great idea at the time, having Laura talk with the daughter of the murder victim. After all, she was just a grieving college student — what could possibly happen? Well, as it turned out, kryptonite could happen, and it was just fortunate that Laura's reaction had been that of a lovelorn drunk girl instead of fighting zombie, or her poor boyfriend might have been in trouble.

That thought caused a small smile to form on CJ's lips. The one ray of sunshine in today's brush with kryptonite had been meeting the mystery man behind their earlier conversation. CJ hadn't been quite sure what to expect out of the man that Laura had given her heart to, but he supposed it would be someone that was a lot like their father, since that was supposedly the type of man that girls usually went for. At least as far as appearances went, Matt Owens was pretty far from type. He was fairly tall but very skinny, not what CJ would call athletic. His blond hair was a little on the long side, but not unkempt. It was hard to judge what kind of kid he was, since they hadn't said more than a couple sentences to each other, but he seemed nice enough, CJ supposed. Plus he must be pretty smart if he knew to call Sam Wayne when it was obvious that Laura was not herself. CJ gave him a lot of credit for not taking advantage of her in that situation, and could tell that Matt cared for her just by the way he looked at her, almost as if he was protective of her. It was kind of sweet, actually, and CJ made a mental note to reach out to him again sometime to try and get to know him better. But that would have to come later, after all this was wrapped up.

CJ sighed again as he flopped down in the chair in front of the big computer. As nice as it was to think about future social engagements, with the incident today the murder case had become even more pressing, if that was possible. Now that he knew there was more red kryptonite out there, it was probably only a matter of time before the murderer found out, too. He needed to be smart and try to get to the murderer fast, or there could be trouble for the victim's daughter. Getting there was the hard part, though, and right now it felt as if there weren't enough hours in the day to get through just the research alone, not to mention actually going out and doing field work. The police department had dedicated a dozen officers to the case, and they were out interviewing witnesses and trying to make connections. Every evening, CJ

found their reports and read through them, though that by itself usually took an hour or two. There were interviews with co-workers, neighbors, people that the victim associated with such as the local coffeehouse barista and branch librarian, managers at local businesses that the victim had frequented such as the grocery store and the local pawn shop. The last one had potential, especially since the victim had been arguing about money before her death, but at this point there just wasn't enough data to establish a very firm connection.

CJ's own research had taken him in a different direction, and it, too, had been time consuming. His parents had sent him a declassified report that they had acquired some time back from a quasi-governmental agency called Bureau 39. Back in the 1990's, some nutjob named Trask has started looking into alien threats, and one of the things that had caught his attention had been a chunk of meteorite that had been sent in to a Federal lab in Kansas for testing. Convinced that it had some sort of national security value and a connection to Superman, he had taken over Smallville, CJ's Dad's hometown, looking for more. CJ's folks had filled in the gaps in the report, and told him about their dealings with the man, and about Clark's first encounter with the rock. But what his folks hadn't said, and maybe what they had missed in the report, was the fact that Trask had also been aware of red kryptonite from the same area, through separate specimens that had reached him from the Schuster farm. Although intrigued, he had focused on the green kryptonite instead, since it had a stronger radioactive signature. So Bureau 39 knew about red kryptonite, and thanks to the declassification of the files, the world now knew about it, too. It had only taken a brief search for CJ to find the report separately on his own, and if he could find it, so could anyone with a few resources at their fingertips.

He supposed that the availability of that report could help to explain the "how" of the case. If the world knew that the Schusters had been in possession of the red kryptonite, then all someone had to do to get some of their own was find a family member. For the fun of it, CJ also dove into Smallville land records, trying to see what happened to the tracts of land where the kryptonite, both red and green, had been found. The Irig farm, where the green kryptonite came from, had remained in the family, but Schuster's field had changed hands several times, most recently to some holding company with a long and confusing name. That was another possible clue, one which required yet more digging. So far CJ had yet to get to the person behind the lawyers who signed all the paperwork, and it might take more on-site research to get there. He also didn't know yet why anyone was interested in kryptonite, since so far no threats had been made to the super beings of Gotham or Metropolis, and as far as he knew nobody was committing crimes using kryptonite for protection. CJ got the feeling if he could figure out the "why" of the case, the rest would come together fairly easily.

The real question lurking in the background was, if the murderer didn't necessarily want kryptonite for Superman-related reason, then what did they want it for? What else could it be used for? Jewelry, obviously, but nobody seemed to be beating down Katherine Schuster Willey's door for that particular item, judging by the interview with the pawn shop manager. His parents hadn't alluded to any other uses for it, but what if something slipped their minds? CJ wasn't normally one to second guess his folks or their memories, especially concerning a subject this important to them, but... With a small frown, he typed 'kryptonite' into his computer's powerful search utility, and the usual host of articles came up, at least half of which were written by his parents. But as he scrolled through them, something caught his eye. It was an article about a man who was made into a cyborg, dubbed "Metallo" by the press, though his name was originally Johnny Corbin. And he had been powered by kryptonite.

So there was another potential use for the rock. Intrigued, CJ

searched for more information on Metallo and his creator, Rollie Vale. The records were a little more sparse there, but as CJ read through them, something began to tickle the back of his mind. Kryptonite gave off a radioactive signature, but was stable and completely harmless to humans. Its half life was a relatively long time, making it a perfect energy source if you're looking to power something portable over a long period. It could be a revolution in energy, if it could be studied further....

All of a sudden CJ's eyes went wide. "Holy crap," he muttered under his breath, then shot out of his chair and made a beeline for the stairs. He had a pretty good idea of who might be behind this now, and he had to get back to his office to confirm his suspicion.

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How did he never notice this before, CJ wondered as he stared at a nondescript lab contained within the bowels of Wayne Enterprises. Outwardly, the lab was like any of dozens throughout the building, set up to work on projects covering a wide range of subjects that were under development at the company. But unlike any of the other labs that CJ knew about, this one had a lining of lead on the walls, floor, ceiling, and door. That made it impossible to peek inside, to get a concrete idea of what was waiting for him behind that door, though he had an inkling.

One of his ongoing projects had been to look into developing different energy sources, and CJ had had some success with that, thanks to the Wayne Enterprises brain trust. It had led to some recognition for him, magazine articles and other press that his Dad had alluded to when they met at the movie party, but CJ never felt deserving of the accolades. His main contribution had been to foster an atmosphere of innovation, and he did it by challenging the Wayne Enterprises employees into a competition of sorts. He gave the research teams some time to look into ideas, developing them beyond the superficial into viable projects, then had the teams pitch him their ideas. The winner would be given the full backing and resources of the company, and the idea developed to fruition. The members of the winning team would also be given bonuses, as well as a greater stake in the outcome of the project, and in this case the outcome had been spectacular. The projects that didn't make the cut had been shelved, though some people had banked considerable time and effort into those projects, and there were some hurt feelings, but nobody lost their job because of not having their project chosen.

CJ had vague memories of the projects that didn't make the cut, and one had been a portable energy source that relied on crystals of some sort. The presentation had been based on theory and math, without any actual crystals being produced, and never had there been any discussion of what exactly the crystal was. But with the benefit of hindsight and his new knowledge about past uses of kryptonite, CJ had a strong suspicion that this could be connected to his case. Upon arriving at his office, he dug through his files and found the information that had been submitted as part of that project, and it only strengthened his suspicions. Now he found himself in front of the lab used by the design team, staring down the unknown. Inside there was the potential proof of his theory, in the form of a rock that could potentially kill him or do any number of other horrible things. It would be completely idiotic to go in there alone, knowing what could happen if he was right about the lab's contents, so he had called one of the two people he trusted who didn't have superpowers and therefore couldn't be harmed by the contents of the lab to come help him.

"This is either really dumb or really brave on your part," Dick said from next to him. "But I'm leaning toward dumb."

"I was just congratulating myself for being smart enough to grab you to help," CJ answered. "I was going to do it myself, but I'm not suicidal. Anyway, I'm the boss, and this is kind of my responsibility."

Dick glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. "You could've grabbed the big boss," he said. This was his stab at humor, and CJ

tried to appreciate it for what it was, but the thought of phoning in Bruce caused an involuntary shudder.

"And be faced with a litany of I-told-you-so's and that stare — you know the one. The I'm-terribly-disappointed-in-you stare. All things being equal, I'd rather take a hit of kryptonite."

That brought a smile from Dick, who knew the feeling all too well. CJ shoved his hands in his pants pocket and pulled out a keychain containing the master key to the building. Placing it in Dick's hand, CJ took a step back and waved his arm toward the door. "You can do the honors," he said. "If you don't mind, I'll just position myself behind the door for the time being."

Dick took the key and quickly undid the lock, giving CJ a small nod before yanking open the door. CJ held his breath as the hall began to glow green, though the intense pain he expected to feel didn't come. "Well?" he asked.

"Lots of vials along the wall here, glowing green," Dick said. CJ could hear his footsteps as Dick walked around and inspected the lab. "We have a row of filing cabinets that we can get into later. The workbench has some chemicals and some files, but I don't see any rocks."

Cautiously, CJ stepped around the door and poked his head inside. It was as Dick had described, he supposed. Suddenly bold, CJ straightened up and stepped into the room, though it caused a dull ache to course through his body. It wasn't the stabbing pain he had experienced when exposed to Kryptonite in the past, though it wasn't exactly pleasant, either. He could live with it, though, so he started to poke through the files that were already out. "This says the research is to create synthetic kryptonite," CJ said. "Obviously it's not very successful, since I'm able to stand here."

"Is that a complaint?" Dick asked.

"I'm conflicted," CJ answered. "On the one hand, yes, it's a good thing that they weren't able to synthesize something that could kill me and my family. On the other, I'm paying for this research, darn it, and I expected a little better return on investment."

"Spoken like a Wayne," Dick said dryly.

"The fact that I'm actually good at my job helps with the disguise," CJ said, straightening up and looking around. "So, okay, here's the deal. Researching kryptonite isn't exactly illegal. To make a case against this guy, I'm looking for any mention of our victim by name, of any real estate deals in Smallville, Kansas, and anything else that may be personal or incriminating."

Dick gestured toward the filing cabinets. "Want to help a guy out and give these a quick scan? Might help us know where to start."

CJ squinted at the cabinets, but instead of the metal dissolving in front of his gaze, he just got a headache. "Sorry, but this stuff is getting to me."

Dick's gaze stayed on CJ a little too long, a look of concern evident, but CJ ignored it. There was work to do. With a sigh, Dick opened the first file drawer and started leafing through folders, and CJ did the same with the desk drawers. He was actually kind of impressed that the research team managed to develop something with at least some of the pop of the real thing, he thought as he opened up the first drawer, which contained nothing but office supplies. Doubly impressed, he thought, if they're basing it only on those Bureau 39 reports. He would think that it would take a piece of the real thing to really get the research rolling. As he opened the second drawer, a wave of pain seemed to course over him, and with a groan, he collapsed onto his knees, all strength in his legs gone.

"And there it is," he said under his breath, quickly shoving the drawer shut and bracing himself to keep from completely falling over.

Seconds later, he felt Dick's hand on his arms, tugging him up. CJ gave his best embarrassed chuckle, but Dick apparently was immune to his charms. "Come on, you're done in here," he said,

keeping the pressure as CJ pulled himself up again. “You’re going to hole up in the conference room down the hall, and then, if we find anything incriminating, I’m putting you on copier duty.” Dick’s tone left no room for argument. CJ thought about making a quip, something about being the boss here, but at the moment he was expending a lot of energy just to walk a straight line out of the room. With Dick providing a steady hand, the two made their way out of the lab and down the hall, entering a small conference room at the end. For a moment Dick disappeared, then he was back with two armloads of files, setting them roughly on the table before settling into a chair opposite CJ.

The two of them dug into the files, furiously flipping pages, separating things into two piles — relevant information and irrelevant information. Every now and then CJ would grab an armload of the relevant files and walk stiffly down toward the copier at the end of the hall, and with each trip he felt a little stronger. Through their united efforts, the stack of evidence grew, and after an hour and a half or so, they had enough information to piece together a damning story. Dick still brought in files, though at that point CJ found that his x-ray vision had returned, and they were able to go through things a lot more quickly than before. By the time the file cabinets and desk drawers had been completely sorted through, CJ was confident that their case was made.

He leaned back in his chair and chuckled lightly as he looked at the pile of evidence they had accumulated. “I shouldn’t laugh, but... I was joking with my Dad the other night, after Jen and I saw the new Superman movie. Kryptonian crystals do some absolutely insane things in that movie — a single one grows into a furnished fortress, provides records and acts as an entertainment system... silly stuff, really. So Dad’s there in the suit at the after party, and I start giving him crap about this, and how I need to start studying kryptonian crystals, ha-ha, since apparently they are capable of anything. Not realizing, of course, that I got a little too close to the truth on that one.”

“I have to see this movie,” Dick said.

“You do,” CJ said. “It’s the real and true fake story of his life, you know. And how he met Mom. I’m not mentioned, and I’m not sure if I should be offended or thankful.”

“Well if I don’t have to see your fake mug there, I guess there’s no reason not to go.” They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, surveying the scene, decompressing. It gave all the research some time to sink in and come together in his head. Combined with everything else he had seen and read in the preceding days, it made a fairly clear picture, though he wanted to make sure Dick saw the same thing he did.

“So, correct me if I’m wrong, but here’s what I’ve got,” CJ started, pulling over their evidence. “The lead researcher on this project is a guy named John Faulkner. He was a new employee when my little energy competition started up, but he had an idea based on an old news story he heard early in his career.” CJ held up a copy of the Daily Planet Metallo story, found in the background research files.

“A cyborg powered by kryptonite, a rock whose entire supply has been under lock and key exclusively at STAR labs for decades,” Dick said.

“That’s not exactly true,” CJ said. “Every now and then a piece makes it into circulation from Lex Luthor’s old stash, like that time 5 years ago when the Zarates tried to take over Metropolis.” Dick gave him a questioning glance. Apparently that wasn’t big news in Gotham, and the kryptonite element of the story never actually made it to the news in Metropolis, either, now that he thought about it. CJ waved his hand. “I’ll tell you that one later. The point is, kryptonite is nearly impossible to get a hold of. Which would seemingly mean the death knell of Faulkner’s idea, but having previously worked for Federal government laboratories around the time that Jason Trask was terrorizing my grandparents and their neighbors, he was aware of Bureau 39 and the fact that

the first kryptonite specimens came from Smallville. So that meant he knew where to find more.”

“Or he would, if other people hadn’t beaten him to the punch. Bureau 39 found plenty there, Lex Luthor found more, and STAR labs quietly cleaned up the area a long time ago, though apparently he was still able to get his hands on that sliver you encountered in the desk.”

“Sliver?” CJ said. “How big are we talking?” Dick held up his fingers about an inch apart, then looped his forefinger around into the crook of his thumb so that the inside diameter was only a fraction of an inch. CJ made a face. “Guess I’m a lightweight.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” Dick said, and CJ nodded. “But as much as that little piece bothered you, the vials of it along the wall didn’t seem to do all that much.”

“Because it’s synthetic,” CJ said. He leafed through the evidence stack and found the notes summarizing the research goals. “They recreated the molecular structure, got something that was chemically the same as the real stuff, but there’s just something about traveling through the depths of space, gathering up cosmic rays and whatnot, that gives the real stuff its kick. And you can’t synthesize that in a lab. But I don’t think he knew that.”

Dick picked up the journal they found. “Between that and the fact that you didn’t carry the project forward, the crazy really starts to seep into the margins of this thing. If I read this right, the idea of drawing power from kryptonite had been knocking around in his head since he first saw that Metallo story, and by the time you actually let him explore it, it had become an obsession. That the project was a bust probably set him off.”

“It’s not that his theory failed, it’s more that he couldn’t get the right materials. So the Bureau 39 report gave him the idea to look for the next best thing: red kryptonite. It might not be as potent as the green, but it had to be better than the synthetic. By the way, did you know that Laura got a shot of the red stuff earlier today?”

Dick put down the journal and gave CJ a concerned gaze. “I didn’t hear about any destruction near the University,” he said.

“It wasn’t like that, thank goodness,” CJ said, smiling with amusement. “She was, ah, let’s say drunk. And VERY affectionate toward her poor boyfriend.”

“Time out,” Dick said, leaning forward in his chair.

“Boyfriend? This is a new one.”

“Right? I’m actually proud of her for letting her defenses come down and taking the chance on love. I like to think I had something to do with it, but the red kryptonite might end up helping the cause.”

Dick narrowed his eyes. “Who is it? That skinny kid with the mop?”

CJ’s smile became lopsided, and he crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Why Dick, it’s almost as if you’ve been keeping an eye on her. I couldn’t even tell you if she has any friends, much less describe them, but you seem to know exactly who he is.”

Dick shrugged and tried his best to appear nonchalant, but CJ wasn’t fooled. “I like to make sure she’s okay. Sue me.”

“I think she can probably take care of herself. And...” CJ gestured toward Dick. “It gives you a little bit of the Creepy Uncle vibe, if I’m honest.” CJ’s smile made it clear he was kidding, but Dick had a tendency to take his teasing too literally. This time, though, he just smiled and shook his head, taking the ribbing in stride.

“It just means I care enough to check up on her. You could try it,” he said.

“I care,” CJ said with mock offense. “But I respect her enough to let her live her life without my breathing over her shoulder. But I keep an eye on her sometimes — I mean, she’s my babysitter, for one. I lose that and my social calendar gets even smaller than it is right now.”

Dick laughed lightly. “Can we get back to where we were, please? Red kryptonite.”

“Right,” CJ said. “So, the known specimens of red kryptonite have all been put into orbit by my dad, but there hasn’t been a whole lot of effort made into locating more. Enter John Faulkner and a book on setting up shell companies. Which he did on my company’s dime, might I add.”

“So here’s your Smallville connection. His shell company...”

“Which will be mine once I get this to the lawyers,” CJ muttered.

“... bought a plot of land out there, the one where your Dad was found. And that land will end up being Bruce’s, just watch.” At CJ’s heavy sigh, he continued. “But it didn’t pay off, because no red kryptonite was found. And the crazy increases.”

“So he figures the next thing to do is find the people that sent in the original sample. And, surprise surprise, finds one of them right here in Gotham.”

Dick taps on the journal. “Catherine Schuster Willey. The smoking gun is right here.”

“If I had to guess, she was rather attached to her red K, which had been turned into jewelry a long time ago. And despite the fact that she had been pawning most of her other jewelry to pay off debts, no amount of money was making her sell those, so our man snapped.”

“Going to the cops with this stuff yet tonight?” Dick asked, and CJ hazarded a glance at his watch. It was after 3 AM now. The commissioner would be long gone, and he wasn’t sure that he necessarily trusted the overnight crew to keep it safe until he came in. Besides, CJ wanted to put it directly into the commissioner’s hands himself. And he would like to get a little more information on his erstwhile employee in the meantime.

“I have a little more digging to do,” he said. “I don’t know as much about this guy as I’d like. Tomorrow, I think.” CJ gathered up the evidence pile, then pushed his chair away from the table and stood with a slight groan. “I kinda want to be back to 100 percent before suiting up again, too,” he said, garnering an appreciative nod from Dick, who also stood. “Thanks for helping me tonight,” CJ said.

Dick smiled as he walked around the table and gave CJ a clap on the shoulder. “My pleasure,” he said. “It’s nice having someone to talk to sometimes.”

“Once this gets wrapped up, I think Batman’s going to take some time off. Hope you don’t mind. I know it puts a lot on you, but with the baby due in a couple weeks...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dick said, his smile soft and sincere. “Just... I take gratitude payments in the form of dinner.”

“Jen will be glad to see you again. Stop by anytime.” CJ smiled, and together they walked out of the room and turned off the lights. They parted company at the elevators, Dick leaving the building quietly through secret channels that he had been shown decades ago, CJ detouring to the security office. He wanted to make sure that if Mr. Faulkner came into work that day, he wouldn’t be allowed to access his office or any company files. In a perfect world, he would be detained, but there was no warrant out for him yet. But soon, very soon, there would be, and the red kryptonite saga would be put behind him once and for all.

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Laura stood on the green in front of the building where Matt was currently attending class, wondering how the previous week had become an apology tour for her. First she had apologized to Matt for chasing him off after they finally had their first kiss, now she was getting ready to apologize for accosting him at his apartment, and for basically begging him to sleep with her. Given the decidedly mixed signals she had been sending out lately, she wouldn’t blame him if he told her to take a hike and decided that he didn’t want anything to do with her. He had no way of knowing that her actions the day before had been out of her control, and

there was no way of telling him without either revealing too much or inventing some story that was decidedly embarrassing. But she cared enough about him to at least extend the olive branch, try to repair the damage and get things back to where they were before she ran into red kryptonite.

A part of her was angry with her brother for giving her the assignment that led to her exposure, but there had been no way for him to know that Anne Willey was in possession of kryptonite. It was also hard to be too mad at him when he took time off work the day before to rescue her from further embarrassment and look after her until the effects of the rock wore off. After driving her to the manor, he had decided that she should hang out with him down in the Batcave until she sobered up, not wanting her to be around Jenny and Adam if there was even a small possibility that the kryptonite could cause her to become violent. It turned out that there had been no reason to worry, and they had passed the time playing board games and telling stories, and she was pretty sure she told him some things that she hadn’t intended to, and she wondered if those things would wind up as fodder for some future ribbing on his part. After the effects of the rock wore off, she spent some time in the mansion with her favorite nephew, taking up CJ’s offer of supper, before finally heading back to her apartment and attempting to get some studying done.

Now here she was, waiting for Matt to finish up his first class, hoping that her actions from the day before hadn’t scared him away. It only took a few moments for the class to get out, and soon Matt was walking out of the building. She walked swiftly to intercept him, and couldn’t help but be heartened by his expression as he finally caught sight of her.

“Laura Kent, is that really you?” he asked, locking eyes with her and searching them for a long moment before nodding with satisfaction. “You’re back.”

“I’m back. Not that I ever went anywhere. I just... wasn’t entirely in control. Sorry for making an ass of myself yesterday.”

He chuckled lightly and ducked his head. “Don’t apologize. I could tell something wasn’t right. What was that anyway?”

She shrugged. “An... allergic reaction, let’s say, to something I ran into yesterday.”

“That’s some allergic reaction,” he said, and she made a face and shrugged again, trying to downplay it. He didn’t pursue the issue, and they fell into step together. “Do you remember much? You seemed a little drunk, and I know I tend to miss a lot from the nights when I have a little too much to drink.”

She thought for a moment, summoning images from the night before. It was hard to remember what she had said exactly or how he had reacted. Mostly she remembered what she had felt, what she had seen, and the music. There was something about that music that imprinted on her brain, making the memories from when it was playing more tangible. She could still smell him, feel him pressed against her, and feel his cheek on her head. It just felt right in way she couldn’t explain to be with him like that, listening to her songs and his, and she was grateful that those memories survived. “I remember our song,” she said with a smile, and she could tell that he was almost relieved at that. “I remember dancing,” she said, resisting the urge to reach out and grab his hand. She sighed. “I also remember throwing myself at you, and the fact that you were enough of a gentleman to not take advantage of that. So, thanks.”

He blushed lightly. She could tell that he wanted to say something, but wasn’t quite willing to get the words out. “Honestly, even after all the weirdness and,” he took a deep breath, “the close call, it actually was nice to spend an afternoon with you. I had a pretty good time, all things considered. It was also... educational.”

She looked at him curiously as they continued to walk along the sidewalk. What could he mean by that, she wondered, but she didn’t have time to dwell on the thought. All of a sudden, the

sounds of screams punctuated the air around them, and a rush of people started running toward them from the opposite direction. Laura and Matt stopped, looked at each other, then started fighting through the crowd to see what was going on. Soon enough, they could see an older man standing near the entrance to the building in front of them. Clutched in his hand and pointing toward the ground was a gun, the sun glinting off its polished steel. People were running frantically in all directions away from him, but Laura and Matt stood rooted in their spots. She knew he wouldn't flee from what could be one of the biggest stories to hit campus, and he would probably be protective of her, which meant that she had to be an observer in this, at least for the moment. The man in front of them walked slowly, as if in a trance, toward the building, raising the gun as he went. He was muttering something, and Laura cocked her head to the side and listened intently to what it was, her eyes growing wide as she heard him say the name of Anne Willey. Laura looked frantically into the building, noticing Anne in the hallway just inside the door, apparently oblivious to what was going on outside.

Laura bit her lip and looked around. She assumed that this was the man who killed Anne's mother, and that he knew about the earrings. She had no doubt that he would kill again to get what he wanted, and a quick glance told her that Anne wouldn't be able to give him that, at least not right away. Which meant that there could possibly be blood, and at the moment there was no way for her to stop it. There were enough people around that someone would notice if she just disappeared, and with Matt nearby, she couldn't do anything anyway, not without somehow distracting him. She stared at the ground and frantically went through a dozen scenarios, the world around her fading from consciousness as she did.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a hand coming up and resting on her shoulder. Startled, she saw Matt standing there, his expression calm and gentle. "Go," he said, causing her eyebrows to knit together.

"Go?" she rasped. He probably wanted her to get to safety, and she couldn't blame him. It might actually be best to take his advice, she thought, since it might mean that she could get somewhere that could allow her to disappear unseen. Matt nodded and gave the barest of smiles, and what he said next caused sheer horror to knife through her.

"Save the day," he said simply. There was no accusation or anger in his voice, just steady intensity, but the shock coursed through her all the same, keeping her from doing anything. "The cops won't be able to get here in time to stop him, and neither will Batman. But you can."

Laura was aware that her eyes had grown entirely too wide, her breathing ragged, as she gaped at him. Maybe he wasn't saying what she thought he was, maybe there was some way to convince him that he was wrong, that she was entirely unable to do whatever it was he thought she could do. "I...can't," she managed to say, and his other hand came up and grabbed her other shoulder.

"Be the hero you're destined to be," he said.

She looked at him for what seemed like forever before it dawned on her that there would be no talking him out of this. He knew, somehow he knew, and he wasn't running away. He wasn't condemning her, wasn't angry at her, wasn't recoiling from her touch. Instead he was trying to spur her to action, but she could only think of one thing.

"How...?" she asked, which only caused his smile to widen.

"You had a conversation with your dead brother through the wall of my apartment," he said, and the hazy memory from the day before finally made its way back into her conscious. She cringed slightly, but the sound of a scream very nearby jarred her out of her introspection, and she knew it was time to act. Without another thought, she looked at Matt and gave him a nonverbal

apology. Notch another one for the apology tour, she thought dryly, hoping that he understood. Then she jogged toward the darkened gap between buildings and took off.

In a split second she had changed and was at the gunman's side, snatching the gun out of his hand and crushing it. She took a moment to look back toward Matt, taking note of the stunned expression on his face, before roughly picking up the criminal and hauling him away from campus and toward the nearest police precinct. Then, after depositing him with the cops and quickly explaining who the man was and what he'd done, she shot into the sky. The earth had shifted under her feet, and she needed to get as far away from Gotham City as she could.

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At first Matt could not move. Even though he knew who Laura was, even though he had told her to be a hero, he hadn't been prepared for what he had seen. One second she was jogging to the darkened area between two buildings, the next she was standing next to the gunman, dressed all in black and wearing a mask, her hair pulled up neatly on her head. Then the gun, solid steel, was crushed with minimal effort. Her presence had stopped all other activity in the area, and people stilled and stared, gasping, uttering words of shock. He could understand, he thought, taking note of how her presence and demonstration of power was affecting him. It was all he could do to stay standing, and he was aware that he was holding his breath. Then she looked back at him, something unreadable in her gaze, and was gone, along with the gunman, before anyone could even pull out their phones and take a picture.

The calm persisted for a moment, then the chatter began, the muttered comments about what had just been witnessed and who had saved them. Some people had questions — who was that? Where did they come from? Others had exclamations of relief and gratitude, while still more speculated about what it meant to have another person who could fly. It was the speculation that finally spurred Matt into motion, because he knew the answers. He had spent all night researching, watching videos and reading articles, finding out everything there was to know about the resident superheroes of Metropolis and Gotham, and by extension their alter egos. There were still some questions, holes in the narrative that he couldn't quite put together — was Laura the Shadow Woman from 4 or so years ago in Metropolis? Who was the shadowy hero that worked alongside Batman in Gotham? If Laura was the current Robin, which was still a bit of an unanswered question in its own right, then who were the other Robins from throughout the years? These were all things that he could ask about later, of course, but for now it was enough to know the basics: Laura's father was Superman, her oldest brother was the Crimson Superman, and CJ, the dead brother, had to be the latest incarnation of Batman. And although he knew this, he couldn't let on that he did. It made the prospect of reporting about the incident he had just witnessed rather daunting, the danger of letting something slip very real. It occurred to him that Laura's folks had faced this for the better part of three decades and still managed to keep up the ruse, but that didn't make it any easier.

The narrative of the story, the words explaining what had happened, would be much safer coming from the mouths of others, so Matt began to work the crowd, making his way from person to person, gathering quotes, gaining perspective, filling out the story. Laura's reception was overwhelmingly positive, which made him proud, though the speculation bordered on the silly at times. But he took it all down nevertheless, eventually getting in contact with the campus police once they arrived on scene. After a while he made his way back to the campus newspaper office to write the story. Even though it was a Friday, and the story likely wouldn't see print until Monday, he could still publish it on the paper's website, and maybe it could garner enough attention to help his future job prospects. After all, he hadn't noticed any other

press on the scene, at least not while he was there, and this was a fairly large story, especially considering the way campus security had become a political issue across the country.

The words flowed rather quickly once he settled down to write. The resulting story was concise and thorough, though he wished he knew more about the man who Laura captured. A few calls to local police precincts revealed a name, and an internet search filled out his background. There were still plenty of unanswered questions — why was this man on campus with a gun anyway? — but it could take days for those questions to be answered. Filling in the gaps and polishing it up, he sent the story to his editor, then took off, deciding that his next task was to find Laura. The university had cancelled classes for the remainder of the day, so he figured his best bet was her apartment. He quickly found that she wasn't there, though, so he decided to wait, settling onto a bench across the street and in full view of her window.

Minutes turned into hours as he waited, and still there was no sign of her. It gave him time to think, which, he supposed, was both good and bad. He thought about Robin, the sidekick to Batman, and how she had been portrayed in the press. Given that Batman on his own was a somewhat shadowy figure, his sidekick was even more so. She had been seen with him, and there were plenty of stories from witnesses of her cleaning up after Batman, of her doing a little bit of crime fighting herself, but never on her own. There were some very sketchy reports of her doing super things, but most people didn't believe it, since there was no proof. But today she had done things that only Superman could do, in full daylight and in sight of others. The more he thought about it, the more Matt realized what he had asked of her today, and what it meant for her other identity. It was no small thing for her feats to be witnessed, for her relationship to Superman and family to be revealed. Maybe she would've been her own hero at some point, but now her hand was forced, and she was out there, even if people weren't quite sure what to make of her. And that was partially his fault.

Matt wondered if it would've been different if he had just told her the moment he saw her what he had figured out the night before. Then maybe she could've been more cautious, maybe somehow they could've figured out what to do together. As it was, there had been no time, so she had no choice but to act as she did. But... who could've known that there would be a shooter on campus today? And when exactly would he have had time to confront her with his knowledge? They had only been talking for a minute or two when the action started. Matt shook his head and berated himself for taking the blame for something out of his control. Anyway, he couldn't feel guilty for keeping a secret, not when Laura was equally at fault. His secret paled next to hers, and he supposed that, in the absence of the emergency today, he would've held on to it for as long as she felt necessary to hang onto hers. Maybe she would've told him eventually, maybe after they actually started dating, maybe when it came time for him to get a job and move away. But maybe not. Not that it mattered now.

Laura was a Super... girl? Person? Able to bench press asteroids, to walk away from bomb blasts unscathed, and to fly... she was one of the most powerful people in the world. Yet her touch was so soft and she seemed so outwardly normal in all other ways. It was an interesting dichotomy. It occurred to Matt that, if he had previously thought that he wasn't good enough for her, it seemed doubly true now. But at the same time, who would be good enough for someone like her? Even the most decorated sports hero or male model would still only be human, and in that respect he was on the same level as all the rest of them. No, he would never fly, but neither would any other man on this planet who wasn't related to her. Maybe that meant that there was still hope for them, but... maybe he needed to give her a reason to respect him, to prove his worth and try to get them on somewhat equal footing.

As afternoon transitioned into evening with no sight of Laura, Matt decided that it was time for him to take the initiative and seek her out... after some supper. He quickly made his way back to his apartment and had a bite to eat, then contemplated his next step. Where did the resident superhero and sidekick usually hang out? Probably the place with the best vantage point in town: the top of Wayne Tower. Batman had been seen up there many times, so that seemed like the best place to start. And if Matt didn't end up finding Laura there, then at least he could have a real conversation with her brother. Getting up there wouldn't be easy, but at least he wasn't intimidated by heights. He had plenty of experience with rock climbing, ascending some pretty tall cliffs in his high school days. The equipment had followed him to Gotham, and was currently residing in a box in his closet. Determined, Matt changed into a black shirt and jeans, put some of his climbing equipment onto his belt and shoved the rest into a backpack. Getting downtown might take some time, especially if he took public transportation, but he didn't have anywhere else to be. A half hour later, he exited the subway station in front of Wayne tower, craning his neck up to see the top. He swallowed stiffly as he contemplated the way up there, then decided that if he could get most of the way there via elevator, the rest would be a cinch.

Matt entered the tower through the front doors, noting that the lobby was mostly deserted, with a security crew at the front desk. Since the restaurant at the upper reaches of the tower was open for business, it was enough for him to say that he was meeting someone there for drinks, and they waived him through. An express elevator took him to the lounge, then once he exited the elevator he was able to locate a maintenance stairwell that would presumably take him the rest of the way up. He had to elude some guards to get there, but was disappointed to see that even the upper reaches of the stairwell didn't quite get him up to the spire on top of the building. It was time to use his climbing equipment. Looking around to make sure he was unobserved, Matt swung up a hook, made sure it was securely anchored, then climbed up the remainder of the way.

Once Matt reached the top of the building, he coiled his rope, put his climbing equipment away and made himself comfortable on the ledge adjacent to the spire. Gotham wasn't so bad from up here, he supposed, though he barely had time to enjoy the view when he heard the sound of someone clearing their throat. Startled, but not surprised, he turned to its source and saw Batman standing there in full regalia, cape flapping gently behind him in the cool evening breeze, his arms crossed across his chest. He looked quite imposing especially when viewed from a sitting position, though Matt was aware that he would probably be an inch or two taller than the Caped Crusader if they stood side by side.

"Who are you and what are you doing up here?" Batman asked in his most raspy, Batman-like voice. Again, it added to the dark and mysterious aura, but knowing what Matt knew, the whole package seemed a little... comical.

"You can drop the act," Matt replied, looking away and trying not to smile. "Between finally meeting you yesterday and witnessing Laura's one-sided conversation through my wall, I had most of this figured out last night. Then today she actually SHOWED me I was right, so that sealed it." Matt looked back him with a crooked eyebrow. "CJ, right? Her brother-in-law squared who is actually her dead brother?"

Batman's stern demeanor dropped, and his arms unfolded, his posture much more relaxed. "Not dead, obviously. But also not undead," he said in a normal voice, holding up a finger, the edges of his mouth curling up ever so slightly.

Matt sighed, letting the quip slide. "I spent half the day sitting in front of her apartment building, waiting for her to show up, but she never did. So I came out here, figuring I would run into her and we would talk, or maybe I would run into you and we would

talk, or I would go and do something stupid to try and prove that I'm worthy of belonging to the club or something."

"She dropped someone off at the police station this afternoon," Batman, Sam, said, walking over and sitting down next to Matt. "This was a guy that we had been looking for to close out another case, so that was fortunate. She didn't stick around long enough to give too much detail, though, and I just got done trying to get the whole thing straightened up with the commissioner." He gestured toward the street. "The cops will probably be stopping by any time now to execute a search warrant."

"As for Laura, I haven't seen her either. If it was an emotional thing that happened, and I'm guessing that it was if it involved her revealing her, ah, talents to you, then I would imagine that she's currently somewhere gaining perspective," Batman said, using air quotes for the last two words. He turned and looked at Matt, a hint of something in his eyes. "You didn't seek me out for dating advice, did you?"

Matt was caught off guard momentarily by the abrupt shift in topic, and he couldn't help but smile despite the heaviness that he had been feeling all evening. "No. Maybe. I don't think advice is the right word."

"Because I would have to recues myself if you were, since I've been offering my services to the other side. You're welcome, by the way."

Matt chuckled, though he found himself keeping his gaze turned away from the man who played Batman, because it was just odd trying to reconcile his words and levity with the image of Batman that he had held until just moments ago. "For what?"

"For getting her straightened out. When she and I talked, I assumed that there was someone waiting for her to decide what she wanted, now here you are, atop my building. I'm assuming you're wanting a little insight or some tips, maybe words of encouragement...."

"I think I just want to know what I've gotten myself into," Matt said, then finally looked toward Laura's brother. He had a mischievous smile on his face, one that wasn't muted at all by the costume, and suddenly Matt knew that he was in way deeper than he had originally thought.

"Then let's really make this a party. Hold on a sec." With that, Sam rooted around in his utility belt and took out a cell phone, quickly dialing a number, then holding the phone out in front of him as it rang. "Blue tooth," he mouthed, pointing toward the ear on his cowl. After a moment, he started a conversation with whoever was on the other end. "Hey, it's me. You busy? Ah, great. So, guess who I ran into on top of Wayne Tower? Laura's boyfriend!"

"I wouldn't say I'm her boyfriend," Matt interjected. "I mean, we haven't done anything official yet..."

"Okay, Laura's... good friend who just happens to be male. And who is officially in the know, if you catch my drift. I thought it would be fun if we all hung out and chatted... Well, it doesn't have to take all night. Yes, I am quite aware of that look she's giving you — I think I've been at the receiving end of it once or twice. I think she taught it to Jen, too, because... what? Oh, great! Yeah, and bring snacks, I'm starving. See you." Batman hung up the phone and put it back in his belt, then held out a hand with 5 fingers sticking out. With each passing second he pulled one finger in. "My brother and his wife have four month old twins," he said as he did this. "And she doesn't let him out of the house unless it is for work or an emergency." Once all his fingers were pulled in, he pointed at the sky, and at that moment Crimson Superman appeared on the ledge next to them, brandishing a pack of Oreos.

"If I'm not back in a half hour, I will be in the deepest, darkest part of Diane's doghouse," he said, his gaze locked onto Batman, as he settled onto the ledge on the other side of his brother. "And why am I always the one bringing food? You're the rich guy." He passed the cookies to Batman, who shrugged and smirked in

response to the question. The scene was doubly odd, Matt thought as he watched the two of them interacting. Crimson Superman then leaned forward and thrust out his right hand toward Matt. "Jon Kent," he said. "Good to meet you."

"Matt Owens," Matt said, shaking the offered hand.

Batman took of a glove and opened the package of Oreos, wiggling his fingers happily, then taking a couple out before offering them to Jon and Matt. "Okay kid, I assume you know the basic facts about us, now we need to know about you," Sam said. "Where are you from?"

"Ohio."

"Family?"

"Just me and my folks — I'm an only child."

"I'm guessing you go to Gotham State. What's your major?" Crimson Superman asked.

"Yeah, it's journalism. I graduate in June."

Crimson Superman shook his head. "Rough time to be starting in that. The Planet has been cutting the fat lately, and I can't tell you how many friends or former colleagues I know out there looking for jobs."

"I know Laura said that's why she's not going into it, which is a shame because I think she's an amazing writer," Matt said thoughtfully, taking a bite of his cookie, watching as the other two nodded appreciatively. "But I guess I was thinking of going non-traditional. Work for an online only company or something."

"You could travel," Batman said. "If you're dating my sister..."

"That's a big if right now," Matt said.

"Then it's not like you have to stick around here to see each other."

Matt nodded and pondered the possibilities, but his thoughts were interrupted by another question. "What's your favorite football team? I ask because this is an important consideration around our house," Jon said.

"What, besides Gotham State?"

"I don't think we can be friends," Batman muttered, and Jon laughed.

"Pro team, let's say," Jon said.

"I'd say one of the Ohio teams, but they are all too terrible to follow seriously."

"Ooh, good answer," said Sam.

"I don't know. Chicago? I don't have any strong feelings on this." Matt said. The other two nodded.

"Okay, here's another one," Sam said. "You need to settle an argument between us. Which would be a cooler fictional superpower to have: psychic ability like Professor X, or shape-shifting ability, like Mystique? I mean, on the one hand, Professor X can read peoples' minds and ferret out their deepest secrets. He can make people do whatever he wants, AND he can stop time. You would be the most powerful person in the world with abilities like that."

"Yeah, but you need this really dorky hat to do all the most powerful things, and that is decidedly un-cool," Jon said, looking directly at Matt to make his case. "Mystique can be anyone she wants, walk into other peoples' lives, and she doesn't have to worry about where to keep her other set of clothing."

"You don't need to be a shape shifter to be good at disguises," Batman said. "And honestly, I think anyone in this family can write volumes about slipping into secret lives."

The fact that two of the four beings on the planet who actually possessed the kind of superpowers that normal people only dreamt about were arguing over this topic was quite humorous to Matt, though he supposed that even superheroes pondered what it might be like to be someone else even more fantastic than themselves. "What about being invisible?" he added. "You could be a fly on the wall of any conversation, see things that nobody is supposed to see, go places nobody is supposed to go."

"I would think that at some point it would get old. If nobody can see you or interact with you, and nobody really knows you exist, wouldn't it almost seem like you cease to be a person?" Jon said, then shook his head once and raised his eyebrows, as if shaking himself out of a heavy mood. "And, by the way, you're not answering the question." Batman nodded.

"I would settle for just one of things you guys can do," Matt said, but he was greeted with two sets of eyes that seemed to be awaiting another answer. He smiled self consciously. "Okay, I'm going with psychic ability, I guess. Definitely cooler, plus you don't have to start out by being blue."

"Ha," Sam said with a grin, pointing a finger at his brother, who just groaned and leaned his head back. "I guess we CAN be friends," he said to Matt. Some gloating followed, and Matt took the opportunity to grab another Oreo, lean back, and watch. In the few minutes that he had been perched at the top of the tallest building in town, something truly interesting had happened. The heroes that he has spent so much time covering, people who he had respected and admired and held up above himself, because they were superheroes after all, had almost ceased to be. In front of him were two people who looked for all the world like those heroes, who could do all the things that those heroes could do, but they were just people. Interesting people, somewhat quirky people, but certainly not the Gods on Earth that he had always assumed Superman and sons to be. It was truly eye opening, but if he thought about it, it shouldn't be. Because he knew their sister, and she had never been anything more than who she appeared to be — a college student, a friend, a good writer, someone with hang-ups and a temper, normal in every way except for one thing. But that one thing didn't change who she was; it could only do that if he let it. Tonight, the conversation with her brothers, was a gift to him from them, the gift of perspective, delivered ironically enough from the top of a skyscraper.

He found himself relaxing and enjoying the conversation, interjecting where he might not have before, even drawing a laugh at one point. Jon kept looking at his watch, the half hour window passing much more quickly than any of them wanted. At a lull in the conversation, Matt finally decided to posit the one question that had been nagging at the edge of his conscience ever since he found out Laura's secret.

"There's something I need to ask you guys," he said. "Your dad, he's not the...overprotective type is he?"

"Why? You're not planning on doing something you shouldn't, are you?" Jon asked, his face becoming very Superman-like for a moment.

Matt's eyes went wide and his hands flew up. "No, of course not. It's just that, if I'm going to date Laura, it could be viewed as me taking her away from him, I guess, and I can understand how a dad might get upset about that. But I REALLY don't want to get on his bad side if I can avoid it."

Jon and Sam looked at each other, then began to laugh. "There's a mental image," Sam said. "Dad threatening to launch Matt here into space if he and Laura had a bad date."

Matt gave a nervous laugh, not wanting to admit to them that the quip had pretty accurately described one of his nightmares from the night before. They didn't seem to notice, though. "As if Laura would even let him do that," Jon said, shaking his head.

"Look, kid," Sam said, turning to Matt. "I know what the comic books and news media might have you believe about Superman being all stoic and serious, but my dad is really the nicest, least threatening person you're even going to meet, especially to friends of ours."

"You should ask Laura to bring you back home so can meet him, and my mom, who incidentally is WAY more intimidating," Jon said, and Sam nodded.

"We actually did meet once," Matt said. "But that was before Laura and I were a thing."

"So, see, no problem," Sam said. Matt smiled and nodded, his fears eased, though he didn't have much time to enjoy the moment. Something seemed to draw the attention of his companions, and the next moment both of them were looking off at some distant location. "So, you wanted some excitement?" Sam asked, regarding Matt again. Matt was aware that his eyes were a little wide, and he couldn't speak for a long moment. Sam gave a little smile and gestured with his head toward where he had recently been looking. "There's a bank robbery about a mile away, and my sidekick is out of town at the moment."

Matt's mouth was dry. "I, uh, am not sure I have the necessary...equipment?"

"I think I have one of Bruce's old armored vests in the storage room downstairs. And maybe we can get you a helmet or something to cover your face." Matt felt himself getting excited at the idea, and his expression must've given that away, since Sam was now positively beaming. He then looked toward his brother. "You mind giving us a lift down there before you go? I kinda promised I wouldn't jump off this building again. They still haven't fixed the street."

"I thought that was an urban legend?" Matt said, and he should know. In his job on the Superhero beat, it was one of the rumors that he had been trying to confirm for a long time, though he had eventually decided that there was nothing to it.

"It was the fastest way down," Sam said defensively. Matt looked toward Jon and could see a smug look on his face.

"Come on," Jon said, standing up. Matt and Sam stood, too, and the next thing Matt knew, he was in a darkened room somewhere, a light switch being flipped on as he tried to catch his bearings. It must be the storage room Sam had mentioned, he realized as he got a chance to look around. All manner of objects were stored on shelves and in open boxes around the room: weapons, gadgets, clothing, costumes, communications equipment. The room, more of a garage, really, also held two nondescript motorcycles. Jon stood immediately next to Matt, while Sam went to rummage around in what looked like a changing area.

"I think I'm going to take off. My parole will be revoked in a minute or two," Jon said.

"Why do you make having kids sound like jail?" Sam's muffled voice came from the depths of the closet.

"Isn't it? Both are the result of a spontaneous night of passion, and end in a loss of freedom for many years," Jon answered, eliciting a chuckle from his brother.

"It gets better," Sam answered.

"God, I hope so. I really miss sleep." Jon clapped Matt on the shoulder and gave him a smile. "It was good to meet you. Be good to my sister." And with that, he was gone. Matt stared at the spot that he had just occupied, blinking a few times, wondering if he could ever get used to that. He didn't have long to ponder, though, because the next moment, Sam made an exclamation and stepped back to the center of the room. In his hands were a piece of sculpted body armor and a black helmet with stylized bat ears on the side. Over each piece was a fine layer of dust, which Sam was blowing on lightly to try and dislodge.

"Some of the boss's old things," Sam said. "You don't quite have the build that he did, but it will do the job either way." He thrust them toward Matt, who shrugged off his backpack then reached to put them on. The body armor was quite large in the chest, but the helmet fit fine. Sam regarded him with a smirk, then nodded and turned toward the motorcycle. "You know how to tie a knot, right?" He propped up the motorcycle and raised the kickstand.

"After six years of boy scouts I would hope so," Matt replied, leaning over stiffly to collect his back pack. If this was the type of armor that Batman Classic wore, Matt had to wonder how he was able to fight at all. It had almost no give and practically forced his

back to stay straight.

Sam pushed a button on the bike and a door at the side of the room opened up, larger than a typical door but not as large as a single garage. He walked the bike toward the opening and climbed on once he got it out of the room. “Good. Hop on,” he said, then started the bike. Matt hesitated for a moment, then did as instructed. Things had taken a turn for a surreal, he thought as he sat down behind Sam Wayne, Robin to his Batman for the night. He had never been in a fight, never even thought of throwing a punch, and here he was, off to go fight some crime. This was that kind of stupid act that supposed he had been looking to do, but now that the wheels were in motion, now that it was real, a small part of him was terrified. A larger part of him was absolutely giddy.

On the drive over, Sam explained to him that Batman would confront the robbers and incapacitate them. Matt’s job would be to restrain them with some rope. It only took a couple of minutes to get to the bank, though they parked about a block away to preserve the element of surprise. Matt hung back in the shadows while Sam went to work, and it was a thing of beauty to behold. His Batman stood tall and moved confidently, first approaching the getaway vehicle and pulling out the driver, taking care of him in one fluid motion. He then entered the bank, allowing Matt to slink toward the car and perform his task. From his vantage point, he could see in the bank doors, and under the gentle flickering of fluorescent lights he watched as Batman confronted each criminal in turn. He was able to get in front of the ones who tried to run, using speed that was fast enough to be impressive, and was able to stop those with guns or explosives in only a way that Superman should be able to do. It was fascinating, Matt thought as he continued to watch. Laura’s brother was, from the hour or so Matt had spent with him, obviously a warm, generous, funny person, someone who would be fun to know, and who probably made life interesting for those close to him. In that way he was the complete opposite of the dark, brooding hero he portrayed, or probably inherited. At the same time, though, the efficiency and skill in his movements, the sheer force of power available to him and used in small doses with the implication that more was available to be tapped into if necessary, made him a terrifying sight for anyone who crossed him. Put a neutral expression on his face and he really was absolutely convincing as the Caped Crusader. It was like two people inhabiting the same body, but it also seemed so natural and right. Matt wanted to see more, to know Sam Wayne better, and he was very grateful to be given the chance to experience this, even if it was only for a night.

After a few long moments, Batman moved back toward the doors and motioned for Matt to come inside. Once there, Matt could see the deformed guns and scattered flattened bullets, along with what looked like an exploded pipe bomb, though the pile of nails and shrapnel seemed to be set all around the device, and the bank itself appeared completely undamaged.

Matt restrained the robbers while CJ made sure nothing was missing, and soon the two were on the motorcycle again, making their way along the streets of Gotham. It only took a few moments for Matt to realize that they were heading in the general direction Wayne Manor. The ride went by in silence and soon they were ascending a hill, though instead of using the main drive, they cut over to a darkened path that wound through the trees, one that could only be found if you were looking for it. The path led toward a cliff, and just when Matt was sure that they were going to crash, a hidden door opened, and they were inside a large cave, one that seemed to open wider the further they moved inside. Eventually they came to a stop in the middle portion of the vast space, next to a black car and several other motorcycles. Matt took off his helmet and whistled as he took in the machinery, computer equipment, and mementos.

“Not what you were expecting?” Sam said with a smile as he

finally took off his cowl and walked toward what looked like a vault off to the side of the cave.

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Matt said, soaking in the details. Along one wall were mannequins wearing different bat suits from throughout the years. Along another were apparent souvenirs from conquests past, things Matt could identify from comic books that he had never even considered could be based on reality — some odd looking umbrellas, some bizarre-looking toys, a scarecrow mask. And in one corner was a giant penny. “I guess I figured that Batman worked out of someone’s garage or something. This is...way more impressive than that.”

“Yeah I know I had the same reaction the first time I saw it, too,” Sam said from inside the vault. Matt walked toward it, trying to get an angle to see inside. “I mean, my dad keeps a couple suits in a compartment in the back of his closet at home. I lived under the same roof for 14 years before I even knew it was there, that’s how low rent his operation is. I knew Bruce was rich and could probably afford some interesting equipment, but I thought maybe he kept it in one of dozens of unused rooms in the mansion. All this, in a giant cave, no less, just blew my mind.” Sam walked out of the vault, which Matt realized was a large walk-in closet, wearing a t-shirt and jeans, working a comb through his hair, which had a healthy dose of helmet head going right after he had taken the cowl off.

“And now it’s yours,” Matt said. Sam walked toward a large wall of computer screens behind a long desk, and motioned for Matt to follow him.

“Don’t kid yourself, these are all Bruce’s toys, I’m just the guy he allows to use them,” Sam said. As he reached the table, he hit a button, and the monitors flicked on. “I have a little corner that’s mine, and the rest I don’t dare touch. Well, I guess I got rid of the bats, because they liked leaving piles of guano all over the place, but besides that....” He shrugged and looked around for a moment, lost in a thought. He then sighed and looked at Matt, seeming to remember what he was going to do. “So, I brought you here for two reasons. One, I thought it would probably be better if I dropped you off at your apartment under a little more normal circumstances.” He gestured at himself as if to indicate his wardrobe.

“I could’ve taken the subway back. That’s how I got downtown to begin with,” Matt answered, but Sam dismissed the thought with a wave.

“I’ll take one of the sports cars. You’ll want to accept the ride, trust me,” he said, causing Matt to arch his eyebrows. “And anyway, you’re basically family now, and that’s what family does.” That sentiment caused a twinge in Matt’s heart. He wasn’t usually an emotional person, but the casualness of the statement, as if it wasn’t really a question that he was a part of the family now, caused a wave of warmth to wash over him. In his mind, he wasn’t worthy of that honor, but maybe Sam and Jon felt that if Laura accepted him, if she felt he was worthy of knowing the family secrets, then that was good enough for them. She had opened the door to a whole new world of experiences, a whole new perspective on life, and it made him love her more.

He was aware after a moment that he was staring at the floor and perhaps smiling a little too widely, and with a start, he looked back toward Sam, who had an amused expression on his face, one that was so much more dynamic when not muted by the mask. “Uh, the second reason I brought you here was to give you an opportunity to earn your official membership in the sidekick club. It comes with a pin and a certificate, even — they’re pretty snazzy” he said, turning toward the computer. A picture of a familiar looking girl appeared on the screen, along with a name and address. “The afternoon we met, when Laura acted drunk? Well, she was under the influence of a rock called red kryptonite. It’s the same thing that caused me to go a little haywire a few days before that.”

“Oh, you mean the night Suicide Slum went up in flames?” Sam’s smile faded and he nodded. This was probably a bit of a sore subject, Matt decided. “I thought that seemed a little... out of character, but not, if you look at your — BATMAN’S history.”

“Well, let’s say I wasn’t myself. I still don’t remember most of that night. Anyway, the rock is actually a remnant of my father’s home planet that followed him to earth, and it affects us in a different way each time we encounter it. Usually it’s not very pleasant. Laura was exposed when she was talking to this girl at my request as part of a case I was working on,” he said, pointing to the screen. “She had the kryptonite built into a jewelry set, in this case a pair of earrings, though we didn’t know that at the time. Now I don’t have any reason to believe that she would use the kryptonite for, shall we say, nefarious purposes, but at the same time she DID almost get killed by someone who was trying to get it for himself.”

Matt nodded slowly. “Lucky we were there,” he said softly, his mind replaying the scene from earlier that day for the umpteenth time.

“Very. The other issue is the collateral damage this stuff causes. I’m afraid of what my sister or I might do if we were to be exposed to it again, so it needs to go away. This is where you come in.”

“You want me to grab it for you,” Matt said, fully seeing for the first time where this was going. Sam walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a small metal box, then handed it to Matt.

“Laura can help you locate it and make sure the coast is clear, but you’re going to have to be the one to grab it. This little box is made of lead, so once it’s in there, it won’t be able to hurt us again.”

Matt turned the box over in his hands. The chance to team up with Laura and do a little good for the world sounded exciting, although the fact that it probably involved breaking and entering left him a little leery. “What about the whole stealing thing?”

Sam pointed toward the box. “Open it up — I put a replacement set in there. Swap out what she has now with this, and hopefully she won’t even notice the difference.” Matt did as instructed, and inside was a set of earrings with red stones. He closed the box, tapped it against the palm of his hand, then slipped it into his backpack. He was contemplating telling Sam that he kind of needed to find Laura again and get things straightened out with her before he could make any promises, but he didn’t get the chance. “Don’t hold that night against Laura, when she was under the influence of that stuff,” Sam said, the levity gone from his voice. “She couldn’t control her actions. It’s my fault she was anywhere near it in the first place, and I feel bad about that. It’s probably lucky that her reaction was what it was and not something more...negative.”

“I can’t say that I viewed the whole experience as a bad thing, per se.” Matt blushed somewhat, remembering how her actions affected him, too. “It was a little weird, I admit, but a guy can do worse than to have his almost-girlfriend become REALLY affectionate toward him.”

“You are a stronger man than I would be in the same situation,” Sam said, his humor returning. With that, they chatted for a few more minutes, then Sam led him up a rather long staircase to a higher subbasement, which led out to a garage. Inside was an impressive collection of cars. Near the garage door were the ones that looked more appropriate for everyday use: a non-descript sedan, the Jaguar he had seen the other day, and, completely out of place among the vintage sports cars and other expensive toys, a newer minivan. Sam followed his gaze and cringed a little. “The wife had to have that once we found out that number two was on the way. Driving that home was not my proudest moment.” He waved his arm in a grand gesture. “What say we take something a little more fun tonight? What’s your

pleasure?”

“Am I driving?” Matt asked, a twinkle in his eye.

Sam glanced askance at him. “You can drive stick, right?”

“The SLR McLaren,” Matt said as he pointed to the car, fairly bouncing on his toes as he did. He felt like a kid with a new toy, and Sam grinned at his excitement. Who wouldn’t want to drive that car if given the opportunity? Although, really, the batmobile probably would attract less attention. Sam went and grabbed the keys, ushering the car out of the garage before ceding the wheel to Matt. On the drive back to his apartment, Matt quizzed Sam about how he became Sam Wayne, and Sam quizzed Matt how he met Laura. He also offered a few handy tips about being in a relationship with a supergirl, like how he should remove his screens if he expected her to stop by after a night out. As they approached Matt’s apartment, he felt the desire to circle the block a few times to prolong the fun, but the ride had to come to an end eventually.

Matt parked the car in the lot next to the apartment, then looked toward Sam with a genuine smile. “I want to thank you for everything,” Matt said. “It was all so unexpected, but it was definitely fun.”

“Well, you just got let in on the big secret, and that’s something that can change your perspective on a lot of things. In my experience, it’s better to work through that with the help of people who have been there before. It’s certainly more enjoyable that way. Holding on to a secret can be a burden sometimes, and can feel like it’s about as fun as a root canal, but it doesn’t have to. You’re a member of an exclusive club now, but you’re far from alone — you might be surprised how not alone you are.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and we each have our own story. And trust me, they are all way more interesting than that cheesy movie.”

“How was that?” Matt asked. “I’ve been wanting to see it, but now I think I have extra incentive.”

Sam brightened at the question. “It’s a scream, you should go. I’d offer to go with and give an MST3K-type narration, but I really think that’s more of a date movie.”

Matt’s smile started to fade, and it occurred to him that even after all the fun he’d had that night, after his new forced perspective and interesting conversations and experiences, he still hadn’t gotten the opportunity to talk with Laura. He had experienced a night in the life of her family, but he hadn’t done it with her. They had so much to discuss, so much to get out in the open, and they hadn’t even gone on an official date yet. “I don’t know if I’ll even get the chance to go on that date,” he said with a sigh, then looked out the side window, toward the last place he saw her.

“You love my sister, right?” Sam asked, and Matt’s eyes diverted downward. Love was a word that he had never allowed himself to seriously attach to his relationship with Laura, just because it had a whole host of heavy expectations attached to it. But it was very hard to deny its presence, especially after finally putting together all the missing pieces of her personality.

“Yeah, I do,” Matt said, looking back toward Sam. “And that probably means I’m completely doomed.”

Sam chuckled. “Just be patient. She’ll come back, she always does. Then just be honest with her, maybe make her feel special, and hopefully all will be right with the world.”

“You understand we’re talking about Laura, right?” Matt asked, and Sam rolled his eyes.

“You’ll be fine. You got this far together, and now that everything is out in the open there shouldn’t be any more cause for anxiety.” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless you’re harboring a deep, dark secret.”

Matt gave a sly smile and popped open the gull-wing door of the car. “I didn’t before tonight,” he said, then climbed out. Sam climbed out of the passenger side, sticking out his right hand as he

approached Matt.

“You’re all right kid,” Sam said, shaking Matt’s hand. “I look forward to hanging out with you again sometime, though hopefully it will be under more normal circumstances.”

“I’d like that. Goodnight.” Matt gave a wave, then started toward the building. Sam Wayne climbed into the car, revved the engine once, and took off with a screech of tires. Matt laughed lightly and shook his head, and tried to plan his next move. Almost immediately he yawned, and realized that it was probably later than he thought. Any plan to try and reconnect with Laura would have to wait until tomorrow, he supposed, but an idea was forming. And with any luck it would result in that first date that had been so long in coming.

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It had been a long day of anticipation, of thinking through all the possible outcomes and reactions to Matt’s meeting with Laura. He had overanalyzed everything he was sure, and he had tried to keep himself occupied with other things just to keep from going crazy. But as the sun went down and the time to put his plan into motion came near, he felt an overwhelming sense of calm, and any nervousness went away.

After taking the screens off the living room and bedroom windows and then cracking them open, Matt made his way to his closet and pulled a large, black case out of the back. Inside was his most prized possession, a guitar that his dad had gotten him for his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. Gently setting the case on the ground, he opened it and pulled out the guitar, then made his way to the living room couch. He took a second to tune the strings, then started randomly playing songs that he had been playing for years — songs from Green Day, Bob Dylan, and Pearl Jam, among others — humming softly in place of singing the lyrics. After he was satisfied that he was sufficiently warmed up, he cleared his throat, took a long look at the window, then turned back toward the guitar.

“Laura, I don’t know if you can hear me, or if you’re even listening, but this is for you. If you want to come over and talk, I’ve removed my window screens, so…” He stopped, squinting slightly then continued. “And, um, if any criminals are listening, I know Batman, so don’t try anything.”

He then began to strum the guitar strings, starting a song that seemed to have been written just for him, in this very moment.

*I am no Superman, I have no reasons for you  
I am no hero, aw that’s for sure  
But I do know one thing  
Where you are is where I belong  
I do know, where you go, is where I wanna be  
Where are you going? Where do you go?  
Are you lookin’ for answers to questions under the stars?  
Well, if along the way you are growing weary  
You can rest with me until a brighter day you’re okay  
I am no Superman, I have no answers for you  
I am no hero, aw that’s for sure  
But I do know one thing  
Where you are is where I belong  
I do know, where you go, is where I wanna be*

As he reached the bridge of the song, he felt a gust of wind, but he dared not look up. His fingers kept confidently picking out the chords, and he found that he wasn’t shy now that he was fairly certain that he had an audience. He repeated the chorus one more time, then finished the song, letting the last note reverberate before finally stilling the strings. Only then did he look up, and he couldn’t help but smile as he saw her standing there, clapping lightly, a vision in dark-colored spandex.

The previous time he had seen her in this outfit, it had been so brief that he had barely been able to absorb what he was seeing. He had assumed her outfit was all black, but in the lights of his apartment he could see swirls of dark purple and maroon within the fabric. She didn’t wear a cape, high heels, or any frilly

adornments, just a plain black mask over her eyes, which she casually removed from her face as he watched. Her hair was pulled up tightly onto her head, held into place with a hair clip. He had never seen her hair up like that outside of uniform, and it was amazing how it changed the shape of her face. As she stood like this, the resemblance to her famous father was unmistakable, but the more he thought about it, the less surreal it seemed. It was just Laura in a silly costume, standing in his living room like she had dozens of times before.

“Bet you didn’t know that I had this hidden talent,” Matt said, eliciting a smile from her.

“I would’ve never guessed. You seem so mild mannered,” Laura answered. Matt gestured to the couch next to him, and Laura crossed the room and sat down.

“Well I don’t do it for the fame or the chicks.” He glanced at her. “Well, maybe a little bit for the chicks. But mostly it’s a stress reliever. Been getting a LOT of practice in the last week or so.” His fingers began to absently strum a different Dave Matthews Band song. “So, I’ve showed you mine. It’s time for you to show me yours.”

She gave one quick laugh and leaned forward. “Excuse me?”

“The special talent that you’ve kept hidden from the world. I don’t imagine you can play bass — we could set up a little band…”

Her expression became one of long-suffering amusement. “I played a little bit of trumpet in high school, but I was always too shy to do solos. And I am NOT joining a band.”

Matt kept playing, though he glanced appreciatively at her outfit. “Shy, huh?” She crossed her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow, causing Matt to chuckle lightly. “So, come on, let’s have it. I want to see what you can do.”

Laura looked around the apartment and bit her lip. “Uh, I can tell you how much change is in your pocket.”

“Yawn.”

“Light a candle on the other side of the room?”

“Eh. Kinda seems like a parlor trick.”

“Yeah.” She uncrossed her arms and stood. “I mean, the stuff that can be done inside the confines of an apartment, honestly, is not going to be very impressive.”

“So think bigger,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes, and she began to smile as the possibilities occurred to her.

“Do you like wine?” she asked, and Matt also smiled with the possibilities.

“You’re not 21 yet, are you?”

“Well, the drinking age is lower in most of the world. What if I get you a little something that you can’t get around Gotham?”

“I think I might be impressed,” he answered, and with that she disappeared. It was somewhat disconcerting, to see her literally vanish in front of him. His playing faltered for a moment, but then he continued, softly singing the song lyrics after a few seconds.

About 30 seconds after she left, she was back, standing just where she had been before she left, still wearing her outfit sans mask, this time with a bottle in her hand. The writing on it was oriental, though he didn’t know his languages well enough to determine which country it came from. He stopped playing and looked at her in anticipation, the back of his neck tingling a little at what he had just witnessed. He knew academically about what she could do, and he was trying hard to keep perspective. It was just Laura, after all, and up to this point, the little glimpses of what she could do were impressive but brief. As he witnessed her powers on a larger scale, it was a lot easier to see her as Superman’s little girl and get a little bit overwhelmed. But in keeping a dialogue with her, joking with her, teasing her, he reminded himself that she wasn’t some fantasy character, larger than life, that she was first and foremost who she had always been, just with extra talents.

“This is rice wine from Japan,” she said, holding up the bottle.

“A type of sake. That’s what this says.” she said, pointing to the symbols on the bottle. “I even have a receipt, proving its origin.” She held up a small paper with unintelligible writing and gave a triumphant smile.

Matt put down the guitar. “I’m...impressed,” he said, wishing he could think of a more adequate word. After a second, something occurred to him. “Wait, you know Japanese?”

She shrugged. “I know enough to be passable. If you’re going to travel, you better know the language.”

“Another secret talent.” He gave a half smile and moved to stand. “Let me get some glasses.”

“No,” Laura said, quickly moving next to him and putting a hand on his chest. He sat back down, and she sat next to him, not too close, placing the bottle on the coffee table in front of them. “I think we need to talk, and we should probably both have clear heads when we do.”

He sighed and nodded. For a moment they just looked at each other, then they both turned their gazes to the floor, fidgeting slightly, neither particularly willing to say the first scary words.

“Hold on,” Matt said, quickly standing and closing the windows that he had left open for her. While he was fine with his music drifting out to the listening ears of everyone within a certain radius of his apartment, they certainly didn’t want the neighbors hearing this part of their conversation. The act of moving seemed to get his blood flowing and clear up the mental block that had come over him a few moments earlier. Instead of sitting back on the couch, he decided to remain standing, peripherally aware of how it changed the dynamic. “This is the part where you point out to me in the most direct way possible that you do, in fact, have superpowers. Am I right?”

“Yeah. We seem to dance around the emotional conversations all the time, like we’re afraid to confront things head on.” He nodded in agreement, though it wasn’t fear that was driving that bus, at least not on his end. Life was too short to spend analyzing the meaning behind everything, getting worked up over what may or may not be. He didn’t like to confront the deeper emotions because he preferred to just enjoy the ride, but sometimes it couldn’t be helped. “This isn’t something I want to talk about in coded conversations or allusions. Doesn’t all this...intimidate you?” Laura asked, gesturing toward her outfit.

Matt gave a rueful laugh. “You were intimidating enough to me the first time I saw you, without knowing about any of that. You were so far out of my league, if felt like climbing Mt. Everest just to go talk to you.”

Laura scoffed. “What does that even mean, out of your league?”

She honestly had no idea, he realized. All that she was, how she affected other people, even without anyone knowing all the other remarkable things she could do. She was truly extraordinary, worthy of attention from much better men than him, and he had to make her understand that. “It means that you are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen, and it’s not even close. It means that you are so confident and smart and accomplished... you’re the whole package. You light up any room you walk into, you elevate any conversation you’re in. You care about what happens to the people in your life and you do what you can to make sure that they are always at their best. You can tell a joke with the best of them, and you use that humor to take away the pain when the bad times come. Because of all this, you could have anyone you want, and I do mean anyone.” A sweet, almost sad smile spread across her face, and his voice lowered. “I’m just some skinny nerd who happens to be lucky enough to know you. Girls don’t give me a second look, and nobody’s ever going to accuse me of being the most dynamic person around. I’m not particularly talented at anything, really, and there is nothing about me that stands out above anyone else around here. Why would you want me? What could you possibly see in me that you couldn’t

find in any number of other men out there who have other, better, qualities that I just don’t?”

Laura scooted forward, her eyes soft, comforting. “Give yourself some credit,” she said gently. “When I first got to campus, I thought you were the smartest guy around, and even as I got pretty smart myself, I still considered you the one person with all the answers to any question I might have, be it about the school or politics or entertainment. You’re thoughtful, you’re compassionate, you make me laugh and most importantly, you’re my friend. I can talk to you about anything and you won’t judge. You’re not some schlub with bad habits and no future prospects, who my parents are going to disapprove of. You have a talent for whatever you do, be it music or writing or other academic pursuits. I know that you don’t believe that, but it’s true. And as for looks, well...maybe I have a thing for skinny nerds.” They smiled at each other for a few moments, then she looked down at her feet again. “As for me, well, I’m a giant mess of insecurities. I’ve talked myself out of dating for years because I was afraid that whoever I gave my heart to would hate me once they found out about everything. That they would feel threatened by what I can do.”

Matt took a couple steps toward her, then reached out and cupped her chin in his hand, drawing it up so that she was looking at him. “I could never hate you for what you can do. These powers, your special talents, they’re a part of what makes you who you are, who you always have been. The way I see it, you’re no different now than you were two days ago, before I knew about all of it. You’re just more complete, I guess, and the sum of the parts makes for an incredible whole.”

“Yeah?” she asked, a tear welling up in the corner of her eye.

He removed his hand from her chin and sat down next to her. “I admit that it’s a lot to take in. But given everything else I mentioned, threatening or intimidating are not words that I would use for your talents,” he said with a grin. “In fact, I think they’re pretty cool. The fantasy date...it’s back on the table.”

She gave an outburst of breath and her most charming smile. “I suppose it is, if you’re good. But you understand that it won’t be just a fantasy, right? You strip away the exotic location and gourmet food and it will just be you and me?”

“I understand,” he said, remembering what she had said the other day about how superheroes were reality, their lives far from fantasy. What she had really meant was that there were people underneath those costumes, and once the crises were over and the costumes came off, they had lives to live, in the same world that everyone else inhabited. That they were just people, not really much different than anyone else, with real problems, real feelings, and real experiences. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, to be with you, wherever that may be.”

Her eyes showed genuine affection, though she appeared to be trying to not let her feelings get the better of her. “Okay then. But maybe we start out smaller. Semi-formal date? Next weekend?”

He had to hold back letting out a shout of joy as he realized what she was saying. It was acceptance, affirmation that she wanted this just as much as he did. He had wondered if she would ever really feel that way, and after the revelation the day before, he worried she would stay away out of fear or embarrassment. But it ended up drawing them closer together, leading to the discussion that might never had happened otherwise. Without any more thought, he leaned in and kissed her, and this time, in addition to the passion that their first kiss held, there was something else, something that spoke of a new understanding. There were no secrets between them, no insecurities, no reason to hold back, and the result was spectacular. He could get lost in a kiss like that, and he was pretty sure that they did, at least for a while. And this time when they pulled apart, there was unquestionably the promise of more to come, hopefully very soon.

“So what’s the semi-formal date?” he asked after a moment.

She sat up and looked at him thoughtfully.

“You know, nice clothes but not a suit. Maybe a dress for me, but not a super expensive dress.”

“Not spandex — that’s kinky date territory,” he said, and had to laugh at her expression, which was half scandalized and half sly. She narrowed her eyes and pointed at him, then smiled in a way that made him appreciate her even more.

“Doubly kinky,” she said in a sultry voice, “If you’re also in spandex. That could also be called a working date — not in THAT way, get your mind out of the gutter — with rooftop views, a little action, maybe a visit to see Gotham’s finest. We could do dinner in a nice, damp, cave with some interesting artifacts. And it can all be arranged, if you’re up for it.”

“Actually,” he said, ducking his head. “I think I already had that date last night with your brothers. No dinner was served, but we did finish a pack of cookies.” She looked surprised, so he told her all about his adventures from the previous evening. Just a look in her eyes told him that she was plotting revenge, but he suggested that it might be a lot more fun if she joined them next time, assuming there was a next time.

“The fact that you decided that you still wanted to enter into a relationship with me after meeting them tells me that you’re braver than I thought,” Laura said with a twinkle in her eye. “CJ... Sam, by himself, is bad enough. You put the two of them together and you have the dictionary definition of the word incorrigible.” She pointed to his bookcase, which contained a sizable dictionary. “Go ahead, open it up, I dare you. Their pictures will be in there.”

“I had a good time,” Matt said. “They made me feel welcome. Plus they allowed me a little perspective about all this,” he said, gesturing toward her suit. “I mean, when you spend the night chumming around with costumed superheroes atop a skyscraper, it’s hard to get too flustered the next time you’re faced with someone in spandex.”

“You’re saying I should thank them?” she asked, incredulous.

“All I’m saying is that maybe we should all hang out sometime. It would be fun.”

“Getting Jon out of the house isn’t that easy these days,” Laura muttered. “I’m actually kind of impressed that you guys were able to get together.”

“So have him bring the family, too,” Matt said, but Laura shook her head. She seemed like she was going to say something, but then took a deep breath and smiled.

“So our double kinky date, let’s put the kibosh on that for the time being. The lonely skyscraper scene has lost some of its allure now, for whatever reason. How about I let you choose our semi-formal date setting?”

“Okay. What about a movie? I’ve been wanting to see the new Superman one once that opens.”

She put her head back and sighed. “Uhhhhgh. I think I would rather be buried alive.” She turned toward him, and judging from her expression, he was pretty sure she was serious. “I read the manuscript, you know. Back when they were developing the movie, Dad brought it home from the Foundation and we all got a good laugh out of it. He thought the Fortress of Solitude thing was genius, I saw it more as a load of crap. It was absurd enough that of course everyone would believe Superman lived there, and it was iconic enough that it’s now become part of the lore and taken as truth.” She gestured at him. “I bet you believed it, right?”

He shrugged. “Maybe, but what else was I supposed to think? The truth is so simple as to be almost unbelievable, and for most people it would take a stretch of logic or a complete reexamination of their beliefs to get there. You can’t fault people for believing what they’ve been told. I mean, I’ve been to your house. So no, I know the truth now.” He put his hand on her knee and gave her his most charming smile. “I was actually kinda thinking that the movie would be fun. Get a laugh at the absurdity of it all...you could whisper secret truths into my ear.”

She looked conflicted, but after a moment she seemed to acquiesce. “Well, Sam thought it was a scream... but he would find the humor in a slasher flick, so...”

“I need to watch some movies with him,” Matt muttered thoughtfully.

“I’m sure you’ll get your chance. Anyway,” she said, putting her hand on his. “I think your time is better spent with me.” With that, she regarded the bottle of wine she had picked up from Japan, “I think it’s time we opened this up,” she said, taking it off the table and turning it over in her hands. He reached for his guitar and started strumming a few chords, intending to play another song for her. “It says serve cold, so...” She puckered her lips and blew, sending a shot of freezing air toward the bottle, bathing it in frost. With a satisfied grin, she set the bottle down again and stood.

“So, when should I expect you to hit it big time with your act?” she asked, pointing to his guitar.

“Oh no, that’s not happening. Only you and my neighbors know about my awesome talents, and that’s the way it’s going to stay,” he said with a self-effacing grin. “It really is just something that I do for myself. I tried the garage band thing in high school, but...that didn’t work out. Some things were said by people I thought were my friends, and so when I got out here, I kept it to myself. And I honestly didn’t think I’d have an audience tonight.” He kept strumming, getting ready to start singing, as Laura walked toward his kitchen to fetch some glasses. As he watched, though, her figure became a blur for a second, then she was wearing her normal clothes, not missing a stride as she continued toward the kitchen.

He immediately stilled his hands. “Wait a second,” he said, which stopped her motion. “Did you just take your clothes off in my living room?”

Her smile became sly. “Maybe.”

“You were naked in my apartment,” he said teasingly, which only increased her grin.

“What, you think I go commando? I wasn’t naked.”

“Then you were MOSTLY naked in my apartment,” he said, and she just smiled at him, then continued toward the kitchen, quickly grabbing a couple of glasses. She shouldn’t know where they were, but, he realized, she could probably look right into the cabinets and find what she was looking for in a fraction of a second. Must be nice, he thought, then poised his hands over the guitar again. “Okay, I’m going to give this a try. I’ve never played this before, but...”

He started playing again, the song instantly recognizable. He played the opening chords and sang the first verse of, “Let’s Get It On,” trying to channel his inner Marvin Gaye, but missing quite a few chords along the way.

Laura arched an eyebrow at him. “Smooth,” she said, keeping her face straight for a few moments before finally breaking down into a fit of laughter after another missed chord. She set the glasses down on the table in front of him and joined him on the couch again, still laughing.

He stopped playing after getting through the chorus the first time, since he really didn’t know any more of the song. Smiling, he looked at her. “My sexy voice doing anything for you?” he asked, still in character.

“You are just an adorable, dorky teddy bear,” she said with a laugh.

“Thanks?” he said, earning a kiss from her. When they pulled apart, she leaned into him, then sat up, opened the wine, and poured it out. “It works for you, though,” she said. From that point on they chatted like the old friends that they were, only there was something new now, a relaxed manner about Laura that had never been there before. Now that he was able to witness it, Matt couldn’t help but realize in retrospect how guarded she had been in the past, even when he thought she had been comfortable and

honest with him. Seeing her this way, hearing her voice when she talked, knowing that she didn't have to hold anything back, made her seem that much more vibrant, and that much more beautiful, if it was possible. And now the stories that she told, the things that she said, didn't have that cryptic quality to them, and all the odd little things that she had let slip over the years made perfect sense. So he took the opportunity to question her about those, to try and get the whole picture of who Laura Kent and her family were.

"Cheating while cooking?" he asked.

"Heat vision, obviously," she said. "Why cook a roast for 2 hours when you can zap it for 20 seconds?"

"Bet it doesn't taste the same," he said, pondering what that would be like.

"Well, we have our hits and misses. I think mostly we try to do it the right way, but if time gets short, it's handy for getting the pink out of the middle. Which, might I add, I can see without needing to poke a meat thermometer in. Our roasts always end up very juicy."

"Handy," Matt said with an appreciative nod. "Okay, this one I'm really interested in. You said the other day that you met the Flash."

"Ohhh I did say that, didn't I?" she said, looking slightly embarrassed. She took a few seconds to collect her thoughts, then started. "So, every summer our family packed up the car and took a road trip to see my grandparents in Kansas."

"Couldn't you just fly? I mean, road trips are notorious for, shall we say, interesting family moments."

"The thing is, none of us knew about Dad being Superman until we reached that magic age, around 14 or so, and started developing our own powers. And even when my brothers found out they didn't tell me. So throughout my childhood we played the normal family, packed up the car, and suffered through several days on the road. And our car trips had their own share of interesting moments." Matt briefly thought about asking her to elaborate, but he was too interested in hearing where this story went, and anyway he was pretty sure he would have plenty of time to hear more in the future.

"Central City is more or less on the way out to Smallville, so we would stop there every time we went that way, ostensibly to meet up with an old colleague of my folks, and of course to get some of their famous barbeque. Flash's wife is a journalist, see, so they could play that card and none of us would be any the wiser, not that we cared that much anyway. Sometimes when we stopped by, his nephew Wally was there—"

"Wally? There's a name."

"Yeah I think I'd have taken on a secret identity as a kid if I had that name, too," Laura said with a slight laugh. "Because I was the youngest, he was usually pawned off on me, and he was very much the attention hound. He also thought he was God's gift to the ladies, like I was supposed to be impressed with him or something. But, see I didn't know back then that he was Kid Flash, or that Dad's buddy Barry was Flash, or any of that."

"Would it have made any difference if you did? I mean, would you have thought, hey, it's Kid Flash, he must be pretty cool?"

Laura smiled that playful smile of hers. "An annoying twerp who can run fast is still an annoying twerp. Anyway, my point is that the first several times I met Flash and Kid Flash, I met their real selves, and they really aren't people that you would pick out in a crowd. Barry is a nice enough guy, a little bland, and he always, and I do mean always, brought potato salad to every potluck I'd ever seen him at. And I'm not talking about German potato salad or that really nice stuff you get at a good deli. I mean the Betty Crocker recipe that you find at every church potluck across the Midwest."

"Hey, I can make that stuff." At that, Laura made a face that revealed her true thoughts on potato salad, and Matt decided that maybe he wouldn't be making that for her anytime soon. "Heroes

are normal people who sometimes have bad taste in side dishes. I get that, really I do. And you believe that your family is nothing special, too."

"Also with bad taste in potluck food sometimes. My mom makes this jello salad that I'm pretty sure has been declared a crime against humanity if fed to someone unsuspecting. Though I think that applies to most of Mom's cooking...."

Matt laughed lightly. Even the new Laura said things that he wasn't quite sure how to take, he supposed. She smiled at her joke, and for a moment Matt got lost in that smile and forgot the point he was going to make. But soon enough his mind kicked back into gear. "I wonder, though, if you understand what heroes like Flash and Superman and Batman mean to everyone else out there who doesn't hold your unique perspective. Heroism isn't just about being able to do extraordinary things, it's about being an example to others and making a difference in the world. I know that you see the ordinariness in people and use it to dismiss them as something less than the perfect heroes that the world sees. But when I see their ordinariness it just makes me respect them more, because I know just what it is that they are sacrificing to do what they do. They sacrifice time with friends and loving family, time that could be spent earning a living, and they potentially sacrifice their very identities, their lives, if the wrong person were to find out about them. It takes a special kind of person to do that." He brought his hand up to her face, stroking her cheek. "Someone like you."

She closed her eyes and turned away from him, out of his soft touch. "You assume I'm going to follow in the footsteps of my Dad and my brothers. I wish I could say that I will, but I can't." Matt dropped his hand and regarded her curiously, though he didn't interrupt. He had a hard time believing what she was saying, and he suspected that she did, too. She seemed introspective for a long moment, then began to speak again, quietly but intently. "My hearing — I can't turn it off, you know. The sounds of the city, they are everywhere, all the time. Sounds of crime and violence, screams and laughter, joy and pain. I HEAR it, day in and day out, good times and bad. Yet I sit and do my homework, go to lectures, write articles for the paper and hang out with friends. I ignore it all, because I have to. There aren't enough hours in the day, even for someone who can move as fast as I can, to fix all the problems in the world, get an education, and be myself, so I have to choose. I tell myself it's for the best, that my life is first and foremost mine, that I won't be able to have any kind of future without an education and that life would be awfully hollow without friends and family. And anyway, I'm probably not ready to see all that's out there waiting for me, the gruesome crime scenes, the death and whatever other terrible things. Jon didn't go out until he was basically done with college, CJ did the sidekick thing at my age, but didn't become Batman until after that plane crash. Dad was several years out of college before Superman was created, so there's no hurry for me, not now."

"But the time will come, after I've established my life, when those excuses for inaction will go away, and it will be my turn to take up the family business. And I would be lying if I said that it didn't scare me, because I've seen what comes with it. Fame, groupies, expectations. I saw my brother on the cover of one of those Teen Beat — type magazines before I even knew it was him in the spandex. All my girlfriends had a crush on him. You know how weird that was for me when I found out?"

"It was probably twice as weird for him," Matt said with a small smile.

Laura bobbed her head in agreement, and sighed. "I see the press critiquing him and my Dad, talking about what they do and how they act, analyzing what they wear, trying to figure out our family dynamic. At some point they also start to ask why — why don't they help everyone? Why do they go to this disaster and not that one, why did this person have to die while someone else was

saved? Who is worthy of their time, and what could possibly be so important that it keeps them away from all these terrible things going on in the world? Guilt seeps in around your conscience, and what started as something that you did out of the goodness of your heart, because of some naive sense of hope and optimism, becomes an obligation. Something that's expected of you.

"All the powers, all the things I can do, can be absolutely exhilarating. How it feels to fly, to really let loose the speed, to put all my strength into something — lifting a cruise ship, say — just makes you feel alive. It's joyous, it's wonderful. The day that becomes an obligation, the day that the sacrifices I make in my life to help others becomes compulsion is the day I don't want to do it anymore."

Matt snaked his arm around her shoulder and gathered her in to a protective hug. "I don't believe that you would turn a blind eye to the suffering of others. You're too good of a person for that. I also don't believe that you would ever care about what some anonymous journalists or busybodies who don't know you and have never met you say. You're Laura Kent, for goodness sakes! You routinely make fun of people who put too much stock in the opinions of others — why would you ever fall into that trap?" She smiled crookedly, and Matt could tell that he was hitting a nerve. "The Laura I know would go out there and give those people something to talk about. Wear outrageous outfits, maybe, or do things with your hair. Save someone while singing a Taylor Swift song, I don't know." She was laughing lightly now. "You would make it fun, because as long as you love what you're doing, it can never be an obligation."

"I never thought of it that way, I guess," she said, thoughtful. "I could do stuff like that and still be ethical, professional, but in a fun kind of way."

"You get to control the conversation," Matt said. "And make the professionally offended squirm. It's a win-win."

She looked at him with a new respect, her expression reflecting what he liked to interpret as burning desire, though it could just be wishful thinking on his part. She reached a hand over and started absently playing with his shirt, causing a wave of warmth to wash over his body. "So, uh, when I become famous, it sure would be nice to not have to do it alone. You sure you don't want to take your act to the big leagues? I think you have the chops for it, but I'm probably biased."

"Yes I'm sure. I do passable covers of other people's songs. That's hardly the road to stardom." He picked up the guitar again, and he saw her pout slightly as he started to pick at the strings. "But I'd be willing to give you a private concert."

She put her chin on his shoulder and wrapped an arm around him. "Opening at the Gotham Forum, Matt Owens and the band that helps him write cool songs. One night only. Has a nice ring, huh?"

He laughed. "Yeah, no," he said, then started singing. His song of choice this time was the acoustic version of Eric Clapton's "Layla," only he replaced "Layla" with "Laura." She seemed a little embarrassed at that, but at the same time she also appeared to be drinking in the attention. After the song wrapped up, he put the guitar away once and for all, and they just enjoyed each other's company until it was late enough that he wondered if they would be able to watch the sunrise together. In the end, Laura decided it was best to leave while they could still get some meaningful sleep, and she kissed him before promising to stop by the next weekend for a real, honest-to-goodness date. And he couldn't wait.

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Laura and Matt's first real, semi-formal date started pretty normally. Laura put on a nice dress, not too revealing but not too conservative, something that was simple but flattering. Her hair was partially gathered up atop her head with a nice clip, and she allowed herself to indulge some nice jewelry, a necklace and bracelet borrowed from her mother. For a brief moment she

wished that she was able to wear earrings, real ones, not the lame clip-ons that inevitably came on in styles favored by those old enough for membership in AARP. A pair of heels, which she had to dig out of the back of her closet where they had long been neglected, rounded out the ensemble. When Matt had arrived at her door, she had pleasantly noted that he appeared to have gone the extra mile for her, cutting off his longish hair to a more conservative style, shaving off his persistent stubble, and putting on a liberal dose of aftershave. His clothing she recognized as the interview clothes that his parents had foisted upon him to much grousing on his part, although she couldn't understand why he would complain — the outfit flattered his body type and was a vast improvement over his usual t-shirt and cargo shorts. The total picture was somewhat breathtaking, if she did say so herself. There was just something about a clean cut man that sparked something inside her, and she was aware that she had an appreciative expression on her face as she looked him over. Never one to give him the upper hand, though, she decided to start things off with a little fun.

"The employment office is closed now," she said after a moment, which brought a familiar smirk from him.

"Well if I was looking for a job, I would've worn a tie," he said, holding out his arm. Laura reached down to grab her purse, then followed him out the door, locking it behind her.

"My mistake," she said with a smile, glancing down toward his collar. Yes, the tie was absent, the top button undone, but he was still wearing a suit coat and slacks, and she was pretty sure that was a first for him, at least in Gotham. "You look nice either way. So where are we going?"

"There's this little café down by the theater that I thought we could try out. The reviews are pretty good, and best of all, I'll only have to pay for parking once." They took the stairs down to the first floor, then exited toward his car. She had been expecting him to borrow something from CJ, since the two had gotten pretty chummy in the week or so since Matt had ascended to the top of Wayne Tower looking for her. It was actually a bit of a relief to see that he had decided to use his own. "You look fantastic, by the way," he said, opening the door for her like a gentleman.

She gave him a sly glance and put one leg into the car, striking a sultry pose. The action had the intended affect on him, judging by his expression. "I wondered if you would notice," she said.

Matt cocked an eyebrow and with apparent effort shifted his gaze toward her face. "I'd have to be blind not to," he said, then shook himself back to reality and made his way around to the driver's side.

Their flirtations had taken on a more intimate quality of late, the words and implications from before transitioning into touches and suggestive poses. Laura liked to think of it as a sign of how close they had become, but she had to admit that they were also an expression of how her attitude toward him had changed. She had had a crush on him for a long time, it was true, and that had slowly built into something more, even before that first kiss. But after the night spent dancing, after his new knowledge of her and acceptance of it, she had realized that her smoldering crush had blossomed into real love. She loved him, completely, undeniably, and it was fun to tease him with it, to give him glimpses of her real feelings, and watch as they were mirrored in his eyes.

She had to admit that prospect of him being in on her secret had initially terrified her, and even after spending hours losing herself in the most beautiful and exotic places on earth, she hadn't stand the idea that he would look at her differently now, and lamented the fact that they weren't able to build their romance on a stronger foundation before introducing the one force that could utterly ruin it. And she had managed to stay away for a whole day after the revelation, but then he sang to her. She couldn't explain how or why she heard him from the other side of campus, why her

hearing had picked out his voice above the rest of the city, but if she were honest with herself, she would admit that she had been listening for him, hoping that he would reach out to her. So he had, and in the most patient and understanding way possible. Far from hating her, or being scared by her, he had accepted her with humor and grace, choosing to share his secrets with her to put them on more even footing. Rather than being the end of their relationship, the revelation of her big secret proved to be the beginning.

The drive across town was relaxed, casual, and their conversation started as it always did, soon becoming animated and covering a wide range of completely unrelated topics. When they reached the little café, she found herself sprinkling the little clues and non-sequiturs about her other identity into their discussions like she had before, alluding to things she could do and secrets she knew in a way that was still appropriate for public consumption. But unlike before, when all those references had gone over his head, Matt understood and played along. It made her feel more relaxed than she could ever remember, and that came through in the way she joked with him, teased him, and laughed when he did the same to her. Even though she would've sworn that she had been happy before, it seemed to her that she hadn't really known what happiness was, not really. But now she did, and that was all because of Matt.

It was almost a shame that the movie had to interrupt their evening. As much as Matt had tried to sell her on how much fun it would be to watch the big screen exploits of Superman, she still wasn't excited to be there. But once the movie started, it was hard not to get caught up in the sheer cheesiness of it all. Plus it didn't hurt that the guy that had cast to play her dad wasn't bad to look at, although it felt extremely odd to feel even a little bit of attraction toward someone portraying her father. She confessed this to Matt, and he ended up laughing hard enough to garner some dirty looks from around them. As the movie continued, she had to admit that her dad was probably right about the way it changed the narrative about Superman. She had read the reviews, browsed the online forums, and one thing that was crystal clear was that, while aware of the fact that the movie was fiction, most people figured it was more or less based on truth. People believed that the Fortress of Solitude was real, that Superman and Ultra Woman came to Earth as adults, and that their hero was exactly who he presented himself as. The movie Superman had none of the qualities that made her Dad who he was, the humor and intelligence, the quick smile or dogged tenacity. He was a caricature in every way, and that served to distance him from her family. Most people would probably openly scoff at the idea that Superman could have a normal job, could even exist in the real world as a relatable person, and that was the movie's genius. Of course, Laura made sure to whisper enough to Matt to set him straight, although she was pretty sure that he didn't need the reminders.

Once the movie was over, they hung around until most of the crowd thinned out, then made their way to the side exit. Perched on the building across the alley was a newly-installed security camera, pointed at the door. Laura led Matt into the depths of the alley, then turned back over her shoulder and zapped the camera while he wasn't looking. She was planning to surprise him with a little jaunt back to Metropolis, and it wouldn't do to have their departure caught on camera. As they became enveloped by the darkness, she contemplated how she could get herself positioned so they could take off without him suspecting, but Matt unwittingly solved the problem as he slipped in behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist before bending down and trailing some kisses down her neck. "So, after all your protests, you really seemed to enjoy the movie," he said.

Laura turned her head and met his lips with hers, indulging in a deep kiss. "I have to admit, I did," she said. "So, yes, it is possible for me to change my mind about something."

He gave an exaggerated gasp, then pulled her tighter. "Must be

some strange new side to you that you've hidden from the world. Tell me, what other deep, dark secrets do you possess?"

She gave him a wicked grin, then covered his arms with her hands and clamped down tightly. Before he had time to process what she was doing, she shot up into the air, and he let out a loud scream of pure shock. The city spread out below them as she climbed, and eventually she set her course toward her hometown. After a few moments, his scream transitioned into nervous laughter. "Where are we going?" he asked breathlessly.

"Dessert," she said simply, though that wasn't the total truth. "And my favorite ice cream place is in Metropolis."

Matt breathed heavily behind her, still recovering from the surprise of finding himself in the air. They flew in silence for a minute, then he spoke again. "It feels like I'm hugging a ballistic missile," he muttered, which made her laugh.

"You think this is fast?" she asked. At his emphatic nod, she continued. "This isn't fast. I can usually make this trip in a couple seconds. For you, I'm making this more like a Sunday drive." She tried to imagine what it was like for him, seeing the world from this vantage point for the first time. Sure, he had probably flown over in an airplane a time or two, but it wasn't the same. Flying like this was freedom; an airplane felt more like a prison. Out here she could feel the wind in her hair, interact with currents and the winged wildlife, and control her own destiny. Of course, he was at her mercy on this trip, but he didn't seem to be complaining. As if in response to her thoughts, she could feel him begin to relax, the death grip that he had on her midsection loosening ever so slightly.

"Well," he said, bringing his lips back toward her neck. "I have to admit that the view is spectacular. And kissing you up here sure beats kissing you on my couch." She could feel his breath tickling her skin, his lips tracing her jawline and eventually moving up toward her ear lobe. She closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath, eliciting a smile from him.

"You better knock that off if you don't want me to crash into something," she said, nudging him with her shoulder. He laughed gently, then stilled behind her. After a couple more minutes, the familiar skyline of Metropolis appeared before them, and the scenery on the ground below rapidly transitioned from rural to suburban.

"Aren't you worried about flying around up here while wearing a dress?" Matt asked as Laura located her destination and began to descend. "I mean, I know you're pretty open about changing clothing in strange guys' living rooms, but we're talking about having the whole city look up your skirt."

She gave a single, shocked laugh, then turned her head to glance at him. "I keep telling you, the subject is covered. You've heard of underwear, right?"

Even in the relative darkness, she could see his eyes twinkling. "You keep saying that, but I have yet to see them. Much like the Loch Ness Monster and Sasquatch, the absence of any solid proof leads me to believe that these underwear might just be the thing of legend." One of his hands came free and made its way to her thigh.

She let out another gasp. "I'd smack you if I didn't think I'd drop you," she said, though her voice made the humor evident.

"We're in Metropolis now. I think I might just be able to find another flying superhero to rescue me."

"Yeah, but they probably know where that hand has been, and might just be willing to let you drop... or at least would make sure you got a good scare before catching you." She had slowed her descent as she realized that they were probably within ear shot of her dad, and she wasn't too keen to have him listening in at the moment.

Matt brought his mouth close to her ear and spoke, sending a shot of hot air down her neck. "Then I guess it will have to be our secret," he said softly, giving her thigh a squeeze before returning his hand to her waist. A shiver worked its way down her spine, and

she took a deep breath and squeezed his arms, the moment getting a little more intimate than she had anticipated. A few seconds later, they landed in the back yard of her parents' house, and the spell was broken as she released Matt and stepped away from him.

Her parents had been aware that Matt knew the big family secret, even before she had gotten a chance to talk to them, thanks to Jon. When she had finally gotten around to calling them after she was able to sort out everything with Matt, far from being upset that they had to hear the news secondhand, her parents had just wanted to make sure she was okay, which was sweet. She actually had to talk them out of stopping by to visit, though the cost was a promise that she would stop by Metropolis before too long, and bring the guest of honor so he could be properly welcomed into the family. Since Jon had undoubtedly told them the whole tale from the night on the Wayne Tower, they were aware that he had already met the unofficial welcoming committee, and had been properly introduced to the family business, but her dad insisted all the same.

Under normal circumstances the invitation would entail having her and Matt stop by for a little gathering of the whole family, but between dealing with babies, secret identities, jobs, and busy lives, those meetings weren't as easy to arrange as they used to be. The next available opportunity was probably Thanksgiving, which was still a couple months away, so they would have to settle for something impromptu in the meantime, though that wasn't entirely why she wanted to meet tonight. Taking a few precious minutes out of their date to chat with her folks wasn't ideal, and would probably end up being the equivalent of pouring a giant bucket of cold water on them right as the fire between them started growing, but Laura thought it was important to provide an immediate counterpoint to the movie, to show Matt in the most direct way possible that it was complete fiction.

"This doesn't look like an ice cream parlor," Matt said with a hint of humor. Laura shook her head and looked up into the tree she had landed next to, at the treehouse perched about half way up.

"I want to show you something," she said, zipping to the garage to turn on the exterior light before working her way up the wood boards nailed to the tree trunk and pointing at the sign displayed over the door. The sign announced that this was, in fact, the authentic Fortress of Solitude. Laura climbed into the treehouse and gestured for Matt to follow, which he did in short order.

"This is the real deal, huh?" he said, looking around as he crawled inside. The treehouse was definitely kid-sized, and she had been too big to stand in it since she had reached double digits in age, but that also meant that her brothers had been too big to fit comfortably in there for a good five years prior to that. For her, it really was a sanctuary, a brother-free place she could retreat to with her other friends, or, more frequently, alone. Her own Fortress of Solitude. "I know some well paid reporters who would kill to find this place."

"I think they would be a little underwhelmed," she said, her eyes catching sight of the crayon drawings doodled on the walls long ago. Pictures of robots and princesses, famous movie and cartoon characters, and plenty of scribbled notes and names, remembrances of good times that were now just pleasant memories.

"It's a little less...arctic than I was lead to believe," Matt said, though a little smile spread across his face as he drank in all the little details that had been added over the years. He pointed toward one of the drawings on the wall. "Is this yours?" The drawing was a rather elaborate landscape with colorful flowers, birds, and bushes.

"No, that's Jon's. He's actually a pretty decent artist. He did make it for me, though, after a string of rainy, depressing days made it a little miserable to be outside." She pointed up to the

ceiling. "The Sistine Chapel up there is mine." She had drawn clouds and birds, airplanes and satellites. And, of course, Superman.

He pointed at the painted superhero streaking across the treehouse sky. "You painted this before you found out?"

She nodded, the corners of her mouth turning upwards. "It's hard to explain, but I guess it made me feel safer having him up there." Matt took his hand in hers and they looked at each other in silence, before the sound of her dad saying her name made her look toward the house. Glancing inside, she could see him standing in the archway between the living room and kitchen, looking toward her expectantly. "We'll be there in a sec," she said.

Matt was looking at her questioningly, though after a moment recognition came. He pointed toward the house. "Your dad?"

Laura nodded. "Mom hates it when we talk through the walls," she said, scooting toward the door.

"I can understand," Matt said, turning toward the house and waving blindly to their audience. Laura rolled her eyes.

"He's not looking anymore," she said as she descended the ladder, though inside the house, her father let her know that it was just wishful thinking on her part. "Shush," she whispered, giving him an annoyed look, and she was greeted with Matt and her dad laughing in stereo.

Entering the house, they found that her mom had joined her dad in the kitchen, the light now on and the table in the process of being cleared off. Her parents greeted Matt warmly, making it clear that they remembered him from his last visit. The four of them seated themselves at the table and made conversation, keeping the discussion topics rather generic at first, before transitioning into more specific topics, including things that could never be discussed in front of someone unfamiliar with their secrets. Clark asked Laura about how she was dealing with her instant fame, and Laura let him know that it was hard to be famous if she never appeared in public. Discussions about her coming out prompted mention of Matt's article, which had made a big splash in social media, and had ended up reposted on several national and international websites that aggregated news stories. Of course Laura's parents had read it, but they had given it a second look once they found out who the author was, and made sure to let it be known to Matt that they thought it was well done. The story had been followed with a couple of related pieces on the man who had been stopped by Gotham's mysterious new hero, stories built off a couple of hints that CJ had dropped to Matt the night of the skyscraper conference, though Matt had been careful to back up his insider knowledge with publicly available sources. In all, it had gotten him quite a bit of notice from people who could be rather important to any future employment prospects.

As the conversation continued, Matt let it slip that they had just watched the Superman movie, which brought a mischievous grin to Clark's face. He got up from the table and returned a moment later, brandishing the manuscript for the sequel. Matt was excited to see it, though Laura found that her unimpressed reaction was mirrored in her mother's expression.

"So the way these things work is that the second movie always seems to build on the first. If there was one villain in the first, well, the second needs two. Two heroes in the first? The second needs four. For this movie, the producers thought that Superman needed to team up with someone else to fight the extra villain. Check it out." Flipping through the document, Clark found the page he was looking for, then set it on the table between Matt and Laura. They crowded together above it to read the page, and Laura found her disinterest fading away as she read the scene, and she couldn't suppress the laugh that came.

"Batman? You team up with CJ?" She laughed again. Her dad just raised his eyebrows and nodded once, and she was pretty sure that he saw the possibilities.

"It will be nice to have a partner on the celebrity spokesman

circuit next time around.”

“CJ trying to keep a solemn, serious face for more than a couple minutes at a stretch will probably kill him,” Laura said, laughing again at the mental image. It was fun to ponder what that would be like, though she seriously doubted that CJ or Bruce would ever show their costumed faces to the moneyed elite, seeing as they were both rather familiar to that crowd in their normal guises.

Sighing, and suddenly curious, Laura looked back toward the manuscript. “Who else is in this? Jon?”

Clark gestured to her that the document was hers to peruse, so she took a few seconds to speed read it. She had to admit, the sequel sounded... fun, though she would never admit that to him. Jon was indeed in the sequel, but only as a baby. She wasn't mentioned anywhere, which was fine with her.

As she put the manuscript back on the table, she noticed Matt looking at her with mild surprise. “Did you just read that whole thing?” She shrugged. “Not fair,” he said, then turned toward her mom. “Do you ever feel a little...behind on things when you're around these guys?” he asked her.

Lois smiled and stood, patting his arm as she passed by him. “Think if it this way, with all the time they save on reading, it leaves them plenty of free time to do other things while you catch up.” She leaned in and whispered to him, “You'll never have to do dishes again.” She stood up straighter and continued toward the kitchen. “Now, who wants to play some hearts?” A deck of cards was procured from the kitchen drawer before she returned to the table.

The conversation transitioned to other topics, and Laura found that she was glad she came. She had worried that her mom would go into reporter mode and try to dig into Matt's past, like he had anything worth digging up, but she was pleasant and personable. And she had worried that her dad would play the Superman card and make thinly veiled threats toward her beau, as if Matt dating her made him the second coming of Lex Luthor, but he was plain old goofy Dad, and she was greatly relieved about that. It was a good time, all told, but she knew that they would need to be moving on before it got too late. Apparently she wasn't the only one with that thought, because a short time later she could see something familiar appear in her dad's expression, and she knew before he did it that he was going to break out one of his jokes, probably the most embarrassing one he could think of. She mentally kicked herself for not warning Matt beforehand that it was probably coming.

“Okay, so, there were two sausages sitting in a frying pan,” Clark said.

“Ugh, Dad!” Laura said. Her mom was smiling, recognizing the ploy for what it was.

“The first one said, ‘Man it's hot in here,’ and the second one said, ‘Oh my God, a talking sausage!’”

Matt laughed, and not a hollow or fake laugh. Never let it be said that he didn't appreciate a cheesy joke. “Have you ever heard of a dad joke?” Laura asked her dad, and Clark shook his head a shrugged. “They are the groaners that dads torture their kids with. I think that one is the textbook example.”

“Well, I did get it from my Dad,” he said.

“I rest my case,” Laura answered smugly.

“But I wore it out in college. My friends all thought it was funny.”

“Apparently the 80's were a simpler time,” Laura answered.

“I have a million of them,” Clark said, opening his mouth to say another one, but Laura shot up out of her chair before he could start, pulling Matt up as she did. “So we probably need to get going,” she said, looking pleadingly at Matt, who seemed to catch on rather quickly.

“Yeah, I was promised dessert,” he said, looking back at her parents with a smile and an apology in his eyes as she tugged him

out of the room and toward the door.

“Well, thanks for stopping by,” her mom said with a wave.

“Good to see you again Mom, Dad,” Laura said, exiting the house. As she closed the door behind her, she heard her dad say, “Mission accomplished,” under his breath to her mom.

“Subtle,” her Mom said, patting his leg. “You could've done the normal thing and politely shooed them out of the house.”

“What fun is that?” he answered. “I thought for sure she'd have grown out of the parental embarrassment stage by now. Nice to know I still have the touch.”

“You always did wield bad jokes like deadly weapons,” her mom said with a chuckle.

“I'll stop doing it when it stops working,” Clark said with a grin, then looked directly through the wall at Laura, who was silently fuming in the back yard, next to her somewhat confused boyfriend. Who knew her embarrassment could be so embarrassing? “Anyway, I would wager that they weren't in Metropolis just for a social call. They needed to get back to their date.”

Lois stood and slid into his lap. “It's been so long since one of the kids brought home a date, I almost forgot about that look, you know? The one that a new couple has, when their relationship is still fresh and exciting,” she said, leaning in to give Clark a kiss.

“Mmm, I remember that feeling.” He regarded her for a second. “Is it still exciting for you, even if it hasn't been new in a long time?”

Lois put her arms around his neck and smiled. “Clark, as long as I'm with you it will always be exciting.”

“That gives me an idea, though. When was the last time we went on an honest-to-God date?”

“What, where we both put on something special, spend the night making thinly veiled innuendo and end up making out in public?” Clark nodded. “What day is it?” she asked, and they both laughed.

Laura forced herself to turn away and tune out, because she knew what came next. With a sigh, she looked toward Matt, then gestured toward the house. “You don't want to know,” she said, then walked up next to him. “So the place where I want to go next is a couple miles away, and I figured we would, you know,” she said, holding her hand up in a flying motion.

“You want me to...?” Matt asked, moving around behind her.

“No, that was kind of a spur of the moment thing,” she said. “Though it worked pretty well...maybe too well.” She blushed, causing a little smile to form on his face. “I've actually thought a lot about other ways to fly together, it's just that a lot of them seemed...”

“Awkward, yeah,” Matt said, apparently visualizing different potential positions himself. After a moment, the faraway look in his eyes cleared, and he slid in next to her, draping an arm over her shoulders. Reflexively, she brought her arm up around his waist, and he nodded. “Let's give this one a try.”

She looked at him, then took off. This time, there was no surprised yelp, though she could hear his breath catch in his throat. This was certainly a different way to fly together, though admittedly she didn't have much experience with carrying other people. When her dad flew with her mom, she was always cradled in his arms, but when he carried CJ, it was always with arms around the waist. This way was more intimate than that, but it also put Matt into a position where he was on equal footing with her. And, as they flew across town, she had to admit that it didn't feel awkward at all.

It only took a few seconds to reach a darkened alley near the ice cream parlor that Laura had been dying to bring him to. This place was uniquely Metropolis, the type of place that people took special trips just to visit. The shop made their own hard-packed ice cream in a wide range of flavors, and offered many types of toppings, including liqueurs. Matt took a while to peruse the menu

and take in all the possibilities, but Laura knew what she wanted, what she had, in fact, been aching for ever since the idea of visiting Metropolis had popped into her head. She ordered a double scoop of their signature triple fudge ice cream, with extra chocolate sauce on top, though she could've easily gone for more than that. Matt had a single scoop of raspberry ripple, joking that he had his girlish figure to think of. They settled into an empty two person bench on the patio and dug in, their conversation picking up where it had left off at dinner, though there was one thing Laura felt compelled to ask.

"So, you seemed kinda eager for my dad to break into the world's lamest comedy routine back there," Laura said, causing Matt to wrinkle his nose.

"Oh, go easy on him. My dad doesn't tell jokes at all. Consider yourself lucky — there are way worse things that a dad can be than embarrassing. Though I have no idea why you would think he is."

Laura sighed. "Years of experience," she muttered, though he only smiled, his expression thoughtful.

"You have to admit, though, it's kind of funny if you think about it." He leaned in toward her, his voice barely a whisper. "Superman's secret weapon, that he uses to chase us out of the house and rescue our date from the clutches of bad conversation and parental scrutiny, isn't super strength or x-ray vision or cooling breath or any of those other things, it's the power of the dad joke."

"You met my bothers right? You're surprised by this? Where do you think they got their sense of humor? This is, like, every holiday at our house. Except most of those I can't escape so easily."

Matt's eye twinkled, and Laura realized something: Matt's personality actually was a good match to the other men in her family. Legend said that girls were destined to end up with men who reminded them of their fathers, and if she stripped away the powers and the general air of dad-liness, her dad and Matt were actually a lot alike. Heck, they even both came from the Midwest, had similar value sets, and apparently shared the same sense of humor. It was enough to make her eyes go a little wider, to make her want to take a step back and reevaluate things, but she forced herself to calm down. Underneath it all, the things that her dad had in common with her boyfriend were the things that she loved about him, despite her grousing. And, she realized, the ultimate thing that tied the two of them together was the fact that they both loved her, and she certainly couldn't hold that against either one of them.

Matt seemed oblivious to her internal discussion, taking a long moment to clear away some potential drips from his cone. After a while he started speaking again, and she couldn't help but smile. "You know, I get what you were trying to accomplish by bringing me there tonight. You wanted me to get my head right after watching that movie, but the movie was the farthest thing from my mind while we were talking. That guy on screen was so devoid of anything resembling a personality that there's no way the thought of him would ever occur to you when talking with a normal person."

"Well, yeah, that's the point," Laura said, then taking out a large bite of her cone.

"Before we went in, though, I was actually worried about getting pulled aside and given the old, 'be good to my daughter or else' spiel, with the 'or else' part being implied banishment to the moon or something."

Laura laughed at that. "He would never do that. Mom might, if you get her in the wrong mood. I'm pretty sure she actually did threaten me with that exact punishment once, when she was... empowered. I wasn't dumb enough to see if she would follow through."

"Your brothers said something similar when I mentioned that

particular fear to them," Matt answered, and Laura found herself shaking her head. She really wished now that she had been at their little meeting. What else did they talk about? With a sigh, she banished those thoughts and transitioned their conversation to other topics. Laura managed to finish her treat before he did, even though she had twice as much, and Matt wound up with more than a few raspberry-flavored drips on his nice semi-formal clothes.

"So," Laura said as they left the ice cream shop. It was starting to get a little late now, though Metropolis being the city it was, the sidewalks were still teeming with people. "What do you want to do now?"

Matt took her hand in his as they strolled along the sidewalk. "Well, this is my first visit to Metropolis. Why don't you show me your favorite part?"

She slowed down a little, then looked toward the alley they had arrived in. He didn't need to be told what she was up to, and followed gladly. Once they were fully in shadows and out of sight from the street, she grabbed his waist and took him up to the top of the Metropolis Trade Tower, about a mile away.

The top of the Trade Tower, like many skyscrapers, had a large spire jutting from it, but it also had mechanicals and other equipment scrawled across the rather large expanse of roof, and the only real comfortable places for relaxing were right around the edges, which was fine for a superpowered individual, but potentially hazardous for someone like Matt. It gave Laura a good reason to keep his hand tightly gripped in hers as they made their way around the perimeter of the roof, Laura pointing out all there was to know and see in Metropolis — the Daily Planet building, Centennial Park, Metropolis University, her brother's place, among others — while Matt stayed prudently silent. After a showing him the sights, she gestured for him to sit down with her, their feet dangling over the edge, and their backs resting against an air conditioning unit.

"I used to spend a lot of time up here," she said softly. "Even well before I could fly, my dad would bring me up here and we would talk, or I would watch him work. At first it was exciting, but even after that wore off, I still looked forward to coming up here, our own secret place where we could talk about anything and do whatever and just enjoy being ourselves." She sighed. "Not that we hid ourselves at home, but there were neighbors, and you could only do so much within the confines of a house. But up here, decked out in the uniform, you could be free. And the whole city felt like a playground."

"You love this place," Matt said with a little bit of surprise in his voice, waving his hand toward the great open space before them. "This is your home. I know you said you came to Gotham to explore new opportunities, but I can't help but think that there's more to it than that."

She took a shuddering breath, taking in the majesty that was Metropolis, fighting back tears that threatened to come at any second. She did love this place, deeply. But she also knew that there was more to the world than Metropolis. "I'm redundant here," she said, trying to smile. "Metropolis doesn't need three super people. And I don't need to be constantly compared to the two that came before me. There are plenty of other places that could use my services, when the time comes." His hand came up to her cheek and wiped a rogue tear away, his other arm snaking over her shoulders and pulling her into him. Despite all the powers available to her, all the strength she possessed, at that moment she was reliant on him for support. She rested her head on his shoulder. "I will always love this place, but it's a memory. It's my past."

"And the future?" The hand that had been touching her face rested on her thigh, but this time there was nothing suggestive in his touch. "You never have told me what exactly your plans are for a career after graduation, except that you don't want to be a reporter."

She gave a single chuckle. “Because it was hard to explain before you knew.” She pointed toward the dark swath of ocean that spread out beyond the city. “The majority of the Earth is covered with water, yet only something like one percent of the ocean floor has been mapped. Can you imagine what kinds of things could be hidden beneath the water — shipwrecks, creatures we could only imagine, maybe the secrets to plate tectonics or to life itself. Likewise, there are things hidden beneath the ground, lakes of magma, for example, or deposits of minerals, or fossils and other keys to the history of this planet.” She sat up straighter as she began to become more animated. “My Dad and my brothers use their powers to save people or fight crime, occasionally take out megalomaniacs or stop a stray asteroid. I’m not saying that’s a bad thing, but there’s so much more we could do if we applied ourselves. I could look down through a mile of water and tell you what’s sitting on the floor of the ocean. I actually went out and took a good look at the Titanic one time after watching that movie on cable. I can look through the crust of the Earth, so long as there’s not too much lead in the ground, and see where volcanoes are forming, or find old impact craters. Imagine the advancements in the natural sciences I can make just by using my powers. It’s exciting, actually.”

“But...how? Sure, you can do those things, but nobody else knows that.”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” she said, sighing and settling against him again. There was relative silence for a few moments, then he started speaking.

“I know this is kind of out there, but...what if your other persona went to college? If you can be openly super, then you can study as fast as you want, get a doctorate in geology or something in a matter of weeks, then go off and be a famous explorer of the unknown, advancing the body of knowledge, writing papers, and nobody would bat an eyelash.”

“But then what’s left for Laura Kent?” she asked.

“You become a reclusive novelist?” he said, though his voice said that he wasn’t sold on the idea.

“I can’t live two separate lives like that. It’s one thing to moonlight as a superhero, it’s quite another to walk away from my life to live full-time as the superhero. I would have to have two separate jobs, two separate groups of friends, you name it, and would have to keep them secret from each other. What happens if I get pregnant, or even cut my hair? There would be a lot of tracks to cover, a lot of explanations to be made. It sounds like a good way to go crazy.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I never thought about it that way.”

“I have,” she said quietly. Many a late night had been spent staring up at the ceiling, pondering similar scenarios. She had even gone so far as to research ways that someone without a past could get into college. But just the idea of spending the majority of her life as the caricature was enough to make her rethink her priorities, and give reporting a second look. But there were still ways that she could do what she wanted without sacrificing her identity. “The way I see it, maybe I can use my other self, or Dad or Jon, in a consulting role. Maybe a superpowered individual observes something interesting in a place that no normal person can reach, and gives me a tip that I can follow up on. I might need to partner up with someone to get the technology to expose the discovery to the rest of the world...fortunately I know someone doing research and development at a technology company.” She smiled weakly and looked into Matt’s eyes. “I just need my other identity for that first tip, that first discovery, and everything else can be accomplished by the real me. Because, really, the discovery is somewhat hollow without the analysis, without the ‘why’ behind it.”

He grinned at her, then leaned over and kissed her. “Beautiful AND brilliant. But...” his smile faded somewhat, his getting distant. She remembered what he said, about how he considered

himself beneath her, and she wondered if her ambition to make scientific breakthroughs, probably accomplished after earning an advanced degree or two, brought that fear back. “Is there room in this future of yours for a normal guy like me who just wants to tell a good story?”

“Is that really all you want?” she asked in a playful tone, putting her hand on top of his. She hoped the action answered his question.

His eyes got that look in them, and she knew that the seriousness had passed, and it was time to begin to have a little fun again. “Well, you know, a little adventure every now and then would be nice.”

“I think I can help you with that one.”

“I’m beginning to appreciate these rooftop rendezvous, and why your family seems so intent on having them.” He turned his hand over and intertwined his fingers with hers. “I think I also want to know what this mile high club thing is all about,” he said with a grin, leaning in for a kiss. She obliged, deepening it enough that the rest of the world began to fade away. As they pulled apart, the arm that had been over her shoulder dropped down to her waist, and he pulled her onto his lap.

“That seems like a third or fourth date thing,” she said with a small laugh.

“How high up are we here? Maybe we need to work our way up to it,” he said, kissing her again.

Even after they parted, he trailed kisses down her neck. “Uhhh, 1,500 feet or so I think. That’s maybe a quarter mile.”

“So, four times up here and you earn your membership,” he said, earning another little giggle from her. He let go of her hand and moved that arm under her legs, moving his other arm behind her back, then grunted as he stood while holding her. He looked around for a path toward the center of the roof, though nothing seemed to present itself. Laura had to admit that she enjoyed his modest little show of strength, cradling her in the same way that she had seen her dad carry her mom, though she could tell from his twitching muscles that it wasn’t going to last very long. “Assuming there’s a flat space up here where we can go,” he mumbled, taking a few steps to the side.

Laura wrapped her arms around his neck and nuzzled his ear. “Maybe we should wait on that, and just enjoy this...enjoy just having fun and torturing each other for a while.”

His progress halted and he braced against the equipment, taking a deep breath and giving a pained smile. “You say that, but your actions are stoking the fire,” he said, closing his eyes and devouring her mouth. “And on the edge of a skyscraper, no less. 110 stories up,” he said as they pulled apart.

She trailed her fingers along his jaw, dropping little kisses along his hair line. “Oh, this?” she said between kisses. “This is payback for you distracting me while I was flying. Did I mention that I play dirty?”

“I had that figured out a long time ago,” he said breathlessly, kissing her again. “And what happens if I lose my balance?”

If she didn’t stop soon, she would probably push him a little farther than she intended. Taking pity on him, she backed off, resting her forehead on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you,” she said softly, feeling his arms tighten under her, drawing her into a closer embrace. Looking at him, feeling his barely contained desire, knowing how her touch could elicit such deep emotions, she felt very loved, very content. It didn’t take much for her mind to conjure images of him returning the favor, summoning feelings within her that she hadn’t even realized she was capable of. It would be easy to take the next step, to give each other the ultimate acknowledgement of their desire for each other. But something was missing, something was still left unsaid.

“Do you love me?” Laura whispered into his ear. He looked at her with momentary surprise, then gave his most devastating smile.

“Utterly. Completely.”

“Then say it,” she said softly, intently.

“Laura Kent, I am in love with you. Man, that feels great to say.”

She gripped his neck more tightly and leaned in for another kiss, although this one was cut short as his grip began to falter. “Come on, stud, let’s take this back home.” As he put her down next to him, she leaned over and whispered into his ear. “We might not be as alone up here as you think.” Her eyes focused on the horizon, at the gathering of police vehicles that had completely escaped her attention as she had gotten lost in Matt’s charms. It was a big enough operation to warrant the attention of the Crimson Superman, though at this point he seemed to have done what he came to do, and was now chatting with the cops on-site. Even as she watched, he tried to act nonchalant, as if he hadn’t been surreptitiously looking her way, but she knew better.

“Fine, but you need to say it, too,” he said, and she sighed theatrically.

“Matt Owens, the day you found out about me was the happiest day of my life, at least before today. I spent so much time denying my feelings, wrapping myself up in my insecurities, that I never thought it would be possible to open my heart to love, or that I could even find someone who would want me for who I am. But I have, and you have made it so easy to fall for you. And I do love you, with all my heart.” She kissed him again, tenderly, sweetly, then looked toward the police operation across town. “You get that?” she asked.

“Nicely put,” she heard her brother say, though she was pretty sure that there was more he would’ve said if he wasn’t in earshot of Metropolis’s finest. She arched an eyebrow at him, gave him her most sisterly expression, then took off with Matt toward Gotham, and the future.

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### Epilogue

The day of the big Metropolis — Gotham State football game had arrived, and CJ found himself excited as game time approached. It wasn’t that he was looking forward to cheering for his hated rival Gotham State, because he was pretty sure that it would leave him feeling dirty enough that he would need to come home and take a long, hot shower after the game. He also wasn’t looking forward to going off and leaving Jenny at home again, though it was her choice to stay away, and he couldn’t say that he blamed her for that. The big day was rapidly approaching, and he could tell that she felt generally uncomfortable most of the time, and while he would prefer to spend his time trying to help her chase that discomfort away, she had given him her blessing to go out and have some fun. CJ had to admit, though, that the prospect of going back to a college stadium on game day, even if it was a rival team’s stadium, made his heart pump a little harder. Football was such a huge part of his life for so long that once it was over, it was like a large part of himself was missing. Of course, it was only a couple months after his football career was done that he ‘died’ and officially had other things to worry about and much bigger holes in his past to try and patch, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t still miss it. It would be different to come back as a spectator, to not be part of the action, but he would be back, and that was all that counted.

On the plus side, it meant that he would be able to spend some time with Laura and with Matt, who was quickly becoming a friend. CJ had wanted to take them and their friends tailgating before the game, like he had done with his family at Metropolis football games before he joined the team, but he was aware that the game day atmosphere was a little different in Gotham. Instead of large expanses of concrete parking lot around the stadium, Gotham State had a few parking garages, and on-street, neighborhood parking for as far as the eye could see, which was hardly enough to provide adequate space for the 40,000

anticipated spectators to park. Most of the Gotham State fans rode in on public transportation instead, which was fine, but it wasn’t conducive to tailgating, so CJ figured he could have the tailgate at the mansion instead. That way Jenny and Adam could take part in the fun, and it kept them out of the public eye, freeing them to discuss any topic that they wanted, including some that weren’t fit for public consumption.

Laura and Matt arrived at the mansion’s front door around four hours before game time. CJ answered the door accompanied by his son, who was decked out in a kid-sized Metropolis University football jersey. Adam fairly launched himself at Laura once he saw her, and Matt watched the scene with an amused grin, finally introducing himself once Adam noticed his presence.

“What are you wearing there, pal?” Matt asked, following Laura and Adam into the mansion.

“Um, my daddy played football,” Adam answered, rushing through the hallway. “And Grandpa Clark played football. So that means I’m a football player, too.”

“And who do we root for?” CJ asked.

Adam stopped and turned toward them, thrusting his hands up into the air. “Go, Lions!” he said, eliciting laughter from the three of them, then turned back to hurry down the hall.

“They’re easy to train at this age,” CJ said, pointing his thumb at his son.

“Isn’t Bruce on the Board of Regents for Gotham State? Doesn’t he have something to say about this?” Laura asked. “Hey Adam,” she said loud enough for him to hear as he hustled along. “What do you think about Gotham State?”

“Boooooo Knights!” he said with a shake of his head, his progress unimpeded.

“Told ya,” CJ said. Laura appeared outwardly disappointed, but he could see in her eyes that she found the situation amusing. As much as she tried to play the part of faithful fan to the school she attended, he knew that she was loyal to Metropolis University first, that there would always be some fondness there after all the good times from when he and Jon were there.

CJ led them toward the kitchen area and out onto the covered patio on the back lawn of the house, where the grill and picnic table were set up, along with a couple tailgate games, Adirondack chairs, and his lovely wife. Laura and Adam continued out to the patio, but CJ stopped Matt before leaving the kitchen. “You have something for me?” he asked, holding out his hand. Matt reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small silver box, handing it to CJ. “How was your first try at being a cat burglar?” he asked.

Matt smiled somewhat awkwardly, grabbing the back of his neck. “Uncomfortable. I got in and out of there as fast as I could and felt horrible the whole time.”

CJ clapped his shoulder. “What, it wasn’t fun making a little mischief with my sister?” he asked.

“Well, you know, I guess it was cool getting to be an active part of the team. But if we really want to make mischief, there are a lot of things we could do that are a heck of a lot more fun.” The twinkle in his eye gave his words a suggestive context.

CJ held up a hand and turned his head. “Yeah, I don’t need to know.” He laughed lightly at the mental image. Apparently all his sister needed was a little push and a shot of courage, and she became quite a wildcat. Holding up the box, he focused his thoughts again on the task at hand. “This was a big help,” he said, then moved toward the counter and picked up Matt’s reward, handing it to him. “A token of my appreciation,” he said.

The reward was a certificate proclaiming Matt an official sidekick, and it had the words, “BAM,” “POW,” and “BIFF” in starbursts around the edge, and was officially signed with a Bat-symbol. It was something that could never be taken seriously by any observer who didn’t know the truth, but at the same time it actually was authentic, and CJ could tell by Matt’s expression that he appreciated it. “Never let it be said you aren’t a man of your

word,” Matt said with a chuckle. “Though I think I was also promised a pin.”

“The pin’s on backorder,” CJ answered with a smirk. “I’m going to run this downstairs. Go on outside, I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he said, pointing the way toward the patio door. With that, CJ made his way down toward the cave to squirrel away to red kryptonite, or at least put it somewhere safe until one of his family members could launch it into space. He intended to quickly drop the box off and head back upstairs, but his progress was halted by a gust of air and loud whooshing sound, followed by the sudden appearance of his brother, Diane, and two baby carriers.

“Hey!” CJ said, changing course to approach them. “What are you guys doing here?” He gave Diane a one-armed hug before squatting down in front of one of the baby carriers. He hadn’t seen his niece and nephew since shortly after they were born, and they had certainly grown a lot in that time. In front of him was Ellie, decked out in pink and flowers, sleeping peacefully. He moved his attention to the other carrier, where Eddie squirmed happily, giving CJ a smile and reaching for him.

“Jen called me a little while back and said you were going to the game today and leaving her home alone, you jerk,” Jon said, his smirk evident in his voice.

CJ wanted to look offended, but he had Eddie’s captive attention, so he went with an exaggerated smile instead, grabbing at his little hand. “I am being altruistic, I assure you,” he said, his voice taking the affectation that it always seemed to when he talked to babies, and Eddie was eating it up. “The football game is my penance for launching Laura a city block during that whole red kryptonite fiasco.”

“Some punishment. You love watching football, especially when Metropolis is playing.”

CJ made one more face at his nephew, then stood, regarding his brother. “As the t-shirt will tell you, today I have promised to root for the other side. And that will be slow torture. Anyway...”

Jon seemed to only notice his shirt at that moment, and raised an eyebrow in appreciation. “Anyway, Jen thought it would be fun to have some company, and we’ve gotten pretty tired of spending long weekends at home.”

CJ was aware that Diane had gone back to work a month or so ago, which seemed to work wonders for her sanity, but it still meant all time outside of working hours was spent tending to babies, and left little time for any relaxation. Add to it that they were still getting their footing as far as taking the twins out in public went, and it made for a pretty isolating experience.

“When you’ve spent years going off to exotic locations at the drop of a hat, you get pretty spoiled. Man, what I wouldn’t give to be able to take off somewhere nice right now,” Diane said wistfully, leaning into Jon.

“Vegas,” he said bringing a knowing smile from her.

“Greece,” she countered.

“Hawaii.”

Her eyes got a faraway look. “Oooh, Hawaii.”

“Pretty sure that’s where these guys came from,” Jon said with a gesture toward the baby carriers. It was beginning to get a bit... private, so CJ cleared his throat, drawing them out their little conversation. “Anyway, as soon as the twins outgrow the carriers, we won’t even be able to fly as a family anymore, so it’ll be long trips in the car if we want to go anywhere.” That statement brought frowns from both of them, though CJ wasn’t going to shed any tears for their inconvenience. Maybe it was a bit of jealousy, but it would gratifying to have his brother on the level and CJ and all other non-flying mortals. “So here we are at stately Wayne Manor, taking advantage of it while we can, and we’re damn happy to be here,” Jon said.

CJ gestured toward the stairs, then picked up the carrier containing his nephew and started climbing. “Have you heard about Laura’s new boyfriend?” he asked, glancing at Diane. She

fell into step behind CJ while Jon took a moment to change, then Jon picked up his daughter’s carrier and followed.

“I have,” she said. “I guess they were up on the Trade Tower the other night making bold proclamations of love while getting rather heated. Jon was still blushing when he got home after seeing that.”

“Serves you right for spying,” CJ said with a laugh.

They soon emerged into the house and went directly to the yard, where Matt and Laura were playing with Adam. Jenny and Diane squealed at each other and embraced, and the party was on. At some point, Diane managed to corner Matt and interrogate him in a way that only a cop could, joined after a few moments by Jenny and the reporter’s questions. Matt’s eyes pleaded to Jon and CJ for rescue, but in this instance, they could only look on in sympathy. CJ eventually fired up the grill, bringing out hamburgers and sausages, making sure to point out to his brother that he was, in fact, supplying all the food this time around. As they ate, stories from tailgates and football parties past were told. CJ was content to listen, since he hadn’t been an active participant in most of the stories. Jenny couldn’t resist telling about the time they flew down to Arkansas when CJ’s team had played there, and how much different the tailgating had been down south than it was anywhere in the northeast. “Clark had the foresight to grab a 12 pack of beer, and we wandered around the parking lots, talking with people, trading beers for food. It was like a giant party that just happened to have a football game at the end. I wanted to write a story about that experience to tell the folks in Metropolis what they were missing, but...” she shrugged. The family was only there thanks to Superman, which meant that, officially, she wasn’t there at all. That was true for a lot of the vacations that they had gone on over the years, but that didn’t make them any less fun.

After eating, the babies woke up, so they were passed around, happy for the attention and the new faces to look at. CJ noted with amusement that even Matt seemed to get in on it, though the apprehensive look on his face as he held Ellie was priceless. The tailgate games were also played, the competitive natures of most of the family members becoming immediately evident. Superpowers weren’t much of an advantage when it came to playing bags, though, and Matt and Jenny paired up to become a formidable force. When the time came for CJ, Matt, and Laura to leave, Matt and Jenny were thick as thieves, and CJ wasn’t sure if that should be gratifying or scary. In any case, Laura and Matt promised to return after the game, if only to watch the twins and give Jon and Diane some much earned alone time. Jon stated that most of that alone time would be spent taking a nap in one of the spare bedrooms, and CJ was pretty sure that he was entirely serious.

CJ parked his car at Laura’s apartment and they walked the rest of the way to the stadium, gathering the rest of her friends as they went. CJ was introduced as Laura’s brother-in-law, though his last name was never given. Her friends quizzed him about the fact that he was wearing a Metropolis University hat in contrast to his Gotham State t-shirt, but he only replied that his loyalties were split, and let it go at that. Laura had objected to the hat at first, too, but he reminded her that the agreement between them only involved his t-shirt, and it never said that he couldn’t root for his team, too. Which he fully intended to do.

The seats that CJ had gotten for Laura and her friends were near mid-field on the shady side of the stadium, behind the visitor’s bench. He made sure that the seats were decently high up in the stands, so that he would be comfortably out of sight of the Metropolis University team and coaches, most of whom were also there when CJ had been on the team. Matt had inserted himself between CJ and Laura, explaining that the two of them were a little too friendly with each other, and looked a little too similar for their own good. CJ had never thought of himself as looking all that much like either of his siblings, but he took Matt’s word for it,

since Matt had, in fact, found everything out after viewing the two of them together, though it was under different circumstances. Besides, he couldn't object too much to standing next to his new buddy who, unlike Laura, found CJ's commentary on the game and the plays that were being run to be endlessly fascinating.

At the first quarter break, CJ decided that it was a good time for some snacks, and being the generous brother that he was, he wanted to treat them. He brought Matt with him for the extra hands, and settled into the nearest concession line, which was rather lengthy. CJ and Matt elaborated on one of the discussions they had been involved in about the sequence of plays just prior to the break, when suddenly he caught a glimpse of a face that he'd seen once before in Gotham. He silently willed the individual to keep walking, to not notice him in the crowd, but the other man stopped, looked at CJ from afar for a long moment, before heading right toward him. "Kent?" he asked as he approached. "Clark Kent!"

CJ resisted the urge to utter a curse. It would figure that today of all days, when he was basically without a disguise, essentially wearing his usual college attire plus sunglasses, this would be the day when his past came back to haunt him. Plastering a smile on his face, he turned toward his nemesis for the day. "Dax Springfield," he said, taking off his sunglasses, then thrusting out his hand. This was it, the day that everything went to hell. Might as well go down gracefully.

"Man, I haven't seen you in forever," Dax said, shaking the offered hand. "What happened to you after graduation, anyway? It's almost like you fell off the face of the Earth."

CJ opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, regarding his tormenter quizzically. He had joked with Jenny last time they met that maybe Dax had taken a few too many knocks to the head, but like so many things from that night, it was entirely possible that the joke hit a little too close to home. It was possible that Dax really didn't have any idea, that he hadn't heard about the plane crash or read the releases that university put out. He had always been a bit of a partier, sometimes living in his own universe...which meant that maybe there was hope after all. CJ decided to proceed cautiously, not letting on that anything happened, hoping that he was right and Dax really was that clueless. "I, uh, got out of town, took a job in the family business," he said.

"I'm surprised you didn't try to go pro or something. Man, you were a brick wall back in the day."

"Well, I uh..."

"Hey man, is that a Gotham State shirt you have on? What gives?"

CJ pointed his thumb in the general direction of their seats. "My sister goes here, so I thought..."

Dax slapped his shoulder. "No problem, man, I get it. Say, you should come down to the locker room after the game, say hi to Coach. I know I'm going to."

"I don't think that's a good idea..."

"Yeah, fine, but wait until I tell him I saw you here today."

CJ felt goosebumps rise on his arm as a new minefield presented itself. If Coach had an inkling that CJ was here, even if it came from someone as flaky as Dax, he might not dismiss it offhand, might put out feelers, because CJ had always been very close with him. Plane crash deaths were pretty definitive, but at the same time, CJ's body had never been found, even though quite a few from the wreck had. The possibility that CJ could still be alive, no matter how improbable, was still very real, and that was a problem. Giving Dax a little half smile, he pondered for a moment what he would say, when Matt, who to this point had watched the exchange silently, chimed in. "Uh, Clark?" he said, drawing the attention of both CJ and Dax. It briefly occurred to CJ that, even though his friends routinely called him that when he was in college, nobody but his wife had referred to him as Clark for

years. It seemed extremely odd to be called that by someone he barely knew, though he tried not to let that show in his expression. "I thought you had a falling out with your football coach from Metropolis University."

CJ mutely looked at Matt, whose eyebrows were raised in anticipation, his expression completely sincere, then said a little prayer of thanks for his quick thinking. With those simple words, he had his out. Turning back toward Dax, CJ cleared his throat, then shook his head. "Yeah, Coach threw me out of the locker room after that last practice, said he never wanted to see me again. Man, I thought he was going to have a heart attack right there, as red as he got. I wouldn't want you to ruin his day by mentioning my name in there."

Dax cringed. "Jeez, what did you do? Oh, never mind, I don't want to know. Well, hey, it was good seeing you again," he said, then squinted at CJ. "Did you know you have a double out there? I swear I saw a guy who looked just like you a while back, though I'll be darned if I can remember where."

"I've heard that, yeah," CJ said with a half smile, his voice not as strong as he would've liked. With a nod and a thumbs up, Dax turned around and left, and CJ let out a long breath.

After watching him walk away, CJ blinked a couple times, turned toward Matt, and smiled. He was not aware of ever having been rescued before. Ever since he could remember, he had been physically tough, and though he had run-ins with glowing rocks that had required assistance, he wouldn't deem that help a rescue in the traditional sense. And his wife had no doubt saved him from embarrassment on more than one occasion, but this was something different, something bigger. This had literally saved his life. "If I said I loved you in a completely platonic, man-crush kind of way, would it be weird?"

Matt laughed once. "Yeah, a bit," he said. "And if you did it within earshot of your sister, you'd probably have to fight her off."

"I'm talking bro love. And anyway, it's a little late for that," CJ said. At Matt's confused look, CJ waived his hand. "I'll tell you that one later." He let out a sigh, slipped his sunglasses back on, and felt all the tension drain out of his body. "That was a rescue that even Superman would be proud of."

Matt beamed. "Glad to be of service." He was quiet for a moment, then looked around once before speaking again in a lowered voice. "I don't know how close you were with your coach, but if I had to guess, I'd say that he probably wouldn't have believed that guy when he said he saw a ghost at the concession stand."

CJ shrugged. "Probably not, but you never know. And it plants that seed of doubt, which is all it takes to make everything come crashing down. So, thanks."

Matt blushed lightly and looked away, then a sly smile spread over his face. "You realize, of course, that you owe me now."

CJ smiled and draped his arm over Matt's shoulder. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe we're even now, what with ... the other night, and all my sage advice to you and you're lovely date."

Matt laughed lightly, but he didn't shrink away from CJ. That night atop the skyscraper, Matt had been somewhat tentative, maybe a little reticent, mostly hanging back and observing, though never shy, and never filled with that slightly wide-eyed awe that always made CJ feel self-conscious. As the weeks had gone by and Laura had welcomed him into all aspects of her life, Matt had come out of shell, and CJ could see his humor, his intelligence, and all the other personality quirks that drew Laura to him. He actually reminded him a bit of himself, and CJ decided that he liked having someone after his own heart to hang around with.

"Hey, you gave that up out of the kindness of your heart, as I recall," Matt said, giving as good as he got. "Anyway, it's kinda nice having a little leverage over the guy with the biggest trust fund in town." There was a gleam in his eye and a teasing quality in his voice that CJ could appreciate. Matt knew he was dealing

with the most powerful guy in town in more ways than one, but he wasn't intimidated. Yes, CJ had a man crush, and it was fun. He would have to give Laura a hug and thank her for coming to Gotham State, for finding someone worthy to bring into the family...for being herself. Life was good, even if he was cheering for Gotham State today. And the future, well, it was still a fascinating place, and getting more so every day.

THE END