

Fear

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Summary: An incident during Clark's youth makes a lasting impression.

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"Watch where you're going, you four-eyed freak!" John Parker said as he purposefully slammed into Vinny Marone, his massive, powerful hands smashing the bespectacled boy hard in the chest.

"Sorry," the smaller boy mumbled under his breath. He shrank down, as though trying to disappear.

"What's that?" John put a hand up to his ear, cupping it, as if to amplify the sound of Vinny's voice. "You're gonna speak to me? Then speak up," he demanded.

Vinny swallowed hard. "Sorry," he repeated, eyes downcast. His voice was louder this time but still it trembled violently.

"You better be," John said smugly. "Now, get out of my way, weirdo." He shoved the smaller boy again for good measure.

"Hey! Leave him alone!"

Clark couldn't stop the defiant words from spilling out of his throat. Anger surged inside him at the older boy's cruel treatment of Vinny. It wasn't right. Just because John was a senior and Vinny was a freshman didn't give him the right to treat Vinny so poorly. Clark himself was a junior at Smallville High, but he knew better than to treat anyone like they were beneath him. Unfortunately, he also knew John fairly well. John was sort of a legend in their old elementary school. After all, he was the first person in nearly fifty years to have repeated the eighth grade three times. And he'd always been the school's biggest bully. Moving into high school hadn't changed that at all. If anything, John had only gotten meaner.

John whirled on Clark, forgetting Vinny for the moment. Vinny took his opportunity to scramble away to a safe distance to watch the exchange. But Clark caught the relieved, grateful look the other boy shot him.

"What'd you say to me, Kent?" The venom in John's voice was real.

"You heard me," Clark said resolutely. "Vinny did nothing wrong. Leave him alone."

"Why, you little twerp!" John replied, his hand balling into a fist. "You've got some nerve. This doesn't concern you at all. So butt out."

"Yes, it does," Clark said, unmoved. "Vinny's a good guy."

"I'm gonna pound you into chop meat," John said, making a threatening step forward. He cracked his knuckles. "But don't worry. No one will mourn for you. No one cares about you, you adopted little freak. Not even your real mother wanted to be bothered with you."

Clark forced his features to stay neutral, though the barb hit its mark, wounding his heart. He'd known all his life that his parents were his parents through adoption, not biology. And that had never bothered him before. It still didn't. He loved his parents more than

anything, and had never doubted their love for him. But not knowing why he'd been abandoned at or shortly after his birth had always haunted him, especially considering the fact that he would never be able to track down his roots to find out. He'd been left with no identifying information at all — not a name to call him by, not any indication of who'd given birth to him, not a shred of evidence to point out where he'd come from.

With an effort, he forced the remark away. "Just leave him alone from now on, got it?"

"Or else what?"

"You'll answer to me," Clark vowed.

"Ooh, I'm so scared," John taunted, with a mock tremor running through his body. One sausage-like finger poked Clark in the center of his chest. "Let's face it. You're nothing but a pauper farmer who happens to be mediocre at football, amongst a whole town of pathetic losers."

Clark smirked. "You know, when you call Smallville a group of losers, you're including yourself," he pointed out. "Your family has lived in Smallville for what? Seven generations now?"

"At least I *have* a family history!" John flung back. "You don't belong *anywhere*, orphan-boy!"

Clark took a deep breath, briefly closing his eyes against the fury building up inside him over John's ignorant remarks. He had to remind himself that the older bully would say and do anything to get under his skin. The important thing was not to give in, not to react at all. Bullies lost their power if you didn't let them get to you, or so he'd always heard it said.

He simply shook his head and started to turn away.

"Hey! I wasn't done with you yet!" John spat as Clark began to move. He reached out with one meaty hand and grabbed Clark's shoulder. He yanked hard, forcing Clark to spin around to face him. In a show of intimidation, he got directly in Clark's face. "You don't leave unless I tell you that you can go, loser."

"Let go, John," Clark warned.

"You're dead meat, freak."

"John, I won't warn you again."

John didn't answer with words. He lashed out and punched Clark in the gut. Clark pretended to be stunned, though the blow didn't bother him in the least. John, however, howled in pain as his fist collided with Clark's toned, steel-like body. Cradling his hand, John took a step back and appraised Clark.

"I always knew there was something wrong with you," he said, his voice betraying his pain and his confusion. Clark knew that John had never once been stood up to or lost a fight. He stepped back as he spoke, but the motion was deliberately aimed toward Vinny. "You aren't the one I wanted anyway," John said to Clark with a growl, in an effort to retain his tough act.

Without warning, John struck out with his fist. Clark was a second too slow to realize what was happening. The blow caught Vinny in the face. The right lens of his glasses shattered upon the impact. The force pushed the metal frames into the other boy's skin, cutting him enough to make him bleed. Clark knew that the eye would blacken soon. The punch had been a savage one.

It was enough to bring Clark's blood to a boil. With a roar of anger, he sprang at John, tackling the bully to the tiled floor of the hallway. He made ready to hold down John's arms to pin him against the floor. But the other boy was thrashing around too much and Clark feared hurting him if John struggled too hard. It would be all too easy to snap one of the bones in the bully's arms if he twisted his body the wrong way at the wrong moment. So Clark restrained himself from using his powers.

"Get off of me!" John screamed in demand as he threw his body from side to side.

"No," Clark replied sternly. "Not until you give up, John."

"I'll kill you, Kent!" The threat wasn't spoken. It was roared.

John swung his fist again, but Clark easily dodged it. It hit the art teacher, Mr. Garibaldi, who'd stepped in to break up the

burgeoning fight. The man stumbled back at the unexpected blow, holding his bloodied nose. Shouts began to ring out as the on-looking students started to cheer for the combatants, hoping for a good fight to break up the monotony of the day.

“Enough!” Clark yelled, as much to John as to the students lining the hallway. “If I let you up, you’re going to walk away from this,” he warned John.

Slowly, Clark let the other boy up, hoping that John would see how hopeless it was for him to keep fighting. He should have known better. As soon as John gained his feet, he rushed at Clark. Clark sidestepped before John could hit into him, using a fraction of his speed to ensure that John missed him and, instead, smashed into the lockers that lined the hall. John recovered quickly and put his fists up. Clark did the same, to maintain the illusion that he was wary of another punch landing on his body. John swung. Clark ducked and hopped back a step, out of reach. John swung again, and Clark managed to grab him around the waist. Using his momentum, he pushed John back against the lockers again.

Now Clark felt the press of the others as they came closer, all wanting a piece of John. Clark knew most, if not all of them, had been teased, picked on, or beaten black and blue—if not bloody—by the bully. With Clark holding John at bay, they all felt as though their time for retribution had come. Clark arched his back, trying to keep as much space between the classmates at his back and the bully in his grasp. He kept his gaze locked with John, and some part of him noted how the anger in the boy’s eyes softened into fear as he realized that there was no way he could escape Clark’s iron grasp. If Clark had wanted to beat him senseless, there was nothing John could do about it.

Clark felt hands on his back. People were going to try to pull him off of John so that they could get close. Clark pushed back, knocking a couple of people over. New hands grabbed him—firm, muscular hands pulled at him with authority. But Clark was only mildly aware of the difference in the way those hands grabbed him. He was too focused on trying to subdue John without anyone getting hurt. John continued to struggle. With a savage roar, he smashed his head into Clark’s, earning John a huge bump on his forehead. Clark hadn’t been expecting the move and he flinched enough to loosen his grasp just a little. Why he’d flinched, he was never really sure, and assumed it was just a built-in instinct to make him appear human. A strong arm locked around his right arm and Clark instinctually fought to get free. But when he heard the snap of a bone, he instantly froze and let go of John.

Mr. Wasserman, the gym teacher, held his broken arm cradled to his body, a look of shock, horror, and even fear written over his face.

“I...I...I...” Clark stammered, scared that he’d hurt someone and scared that he might have just blown his cover.

“Principal’s office. *Now.* Both of you,” Mr. Wasserman ordered in a thunderous tone before John could slink away.

“God, Kent, you really *are* a freak,” John muttered as they both turned tail and headed toward the front of the school, where Mrs. Quinn’s office was located. Clark chose to keep his jaw locked tight against any retort he might be tempted to make.

It was almost surreal, the way the ruckus in the hallway had instantaneously died and been replaced with a tomb-like silence. Clark couldn’t meet the eyes of his classmates, though, out of the corners of his eyes, he saw looks of approval amid the fear on those familiar faces. He closed his eyes as he took a steadying breath, then opened them again on the exhale. He turned his gaze downward, in an effort to block out the judgmental stares—both positive and negative—of his peers.

Afraid.

The raw, gnawing fear ate away at his insides. How badly had he given away the fact that he wasn’t normal? How much did everyone now suspect that there was more to him than met the eye? How disappointed would his parents be in him? Had he just

blown his academic career? Would he be thrown out of school for hurting a teacher?

Two teachers, he reminded himself. If he’d taken that punch, John would never have bloodied Mr. Garibaldi’s nose.

A sudden thought occurred to him.

Even if the school decided to keep him as a student, would they take football away from him? Clark was a straight A student, but he knew, without a doubt, that football would be what would open college doors to him. At least, it would make college affordable for his family if academic and athletic scholarships were offered to him.

And now, with this fight, he had potentially ruined it all.

He barely heard Mrs. Quinn’s lecture as he sat on the hard wooden bench in the main office, waiting for his father to show up to the school. But he didn’t need to listen to the woman’s words. Her tone of voice was enough. And Clark’s own inner thoughts were more than condemning enough. No one could possibly rebuke him harsher than he was already doing to himself.

“Come on, son,” Jonathan said after an eternity, after Mrs. Quinn pulled him into her office upon his arrival.

Clark looked up from the floor, but his father’s voice and expression were unreadable.

“Let’s go home,” Jonathan said, touching his shoulder briefly. This time, Clark detected a faint note of tiredness in his father’s words.

Clark nodded wordlessly and obediently stood. Neither one spoke as they left the building and crossed the parking lot to Jonathan’s battered old pickup truck. Clark walked around the vehicle and climbed up into the front passenger seat. Jonathan took a moment to fiddle with the heat in the vehicle and to turn the radio off. Clark forced himself to break his straightforward stare out of the windshield to look at his father.

“Dad, I...I can explain,” he began.

“A fight, Clark?” Jonathan asked quietly, in disbelief. “That’s not like you, son.”

“I know. But...something happened and I couldn’t let it go.”

“Tell me what happened,” his father quietly encouraged as he released the parking brake.

“Mrs. Quinn didn’t tell you?” Clark was surprised.

“Oh, she told me. At least, she told me what she knew. I want to hear it from *you*, what exactly happened in that hallway.”

Trust.

His father was trusting Clark to tell the truth of what had transpired. More than that, he was showing Clark that he respected him enough to give him the chance to give his side of the story.

Clark took a deep breath before starting his tale. “John Parker was harassing Vinny Marone. He pushed him in the hall and I just...I got mad. Vinny didn’t do anything wrong and John just went off on him. Vinny’s been through enough lately, with his dad passing away a couple of months ago and everything. I just...I couldn’t stand by and allow it. I told John to leave him alone. But, well, you know John. He took it as a challenge and attacked Vinny. I was just trying to keep Vinny—or anyone else—from getting hurt, that’s all. That’s why I had to try and subdue him. I swear, Dad, I never threw a punch or anything like that.”

“Two of your teachers got hurt,” Jonathan commented.

Clark hung his head in shame. “Yeah, I know. I should have taken the punch that hit Mr. Garibaldi. And as for Mr. Wasserman? I wasn’t paying attention when I tried to break away from his grasp. His arm is broken because of me,” he lamented. “I really messed up, Dad.” He paused a moment, bracing himself. “So...how bad is it?”

“Is what?” Jonathan asked, glancing over for a heartbeat.

“Am I expelled?” he asked with a wince, as though he’d been physically struck.

Jonathan chuckled lightly. “No. Ms. Nash saw what happened and must have spoken up on your behalf. Mrs. Quinn knew you

didn't start the fight, that you were only trying to help. You're a good kid, Clark. Everyone knows that. I guess it wasn't hard for her to realize that everything was an unfortunate accident. Still, two teachers were hurt in the fight. So...you've been suspended for a week."

Clark winced again. A week wasn't a harsh punishment at all, but it still stung to be punished for what had been good intentions.

"And..." he gulped. "And football?"

"You'll need to sit out for the rest of the season. Which is what? Two games?" Jonathan's tone was apologetic.

"But...but they're *important* games!" Clark protested, panicking. "If we lose them, we lose our shot at the championship!"

"Yes, they *are* important," Jonathan patiently agreed. "And I hate that you won't be able to play. But fair is fair, Clark. Mrs. Quinn could have been a lot harder on you."

"Yeah, I guess," Clark reluctantly agreed, slouching in his seat. "We're a good team," he decided. "We'll do fine. We've had a great year so far. It'll be hard to sit out for the games but...Greg will fill in and lead them to victory. I'm sure of it."

He meant every word. He wasn't arrogant enough to believe that victory rested solely on his shoulders. If anything, he routinely played at only a fraction of his ability, in order to appear as normal and human as possible. He only allowed himself to play well enough to make himself eligible for the scholarships that would open up pathways to the colleges he was interested in potentially attending.

"And," he added after a moment, "there's always next year, right?"

"Right," Jonathan agreed, reaching over to affectionately ruffle Clark's hair. "That's my boy."

"What about John?" Clark asked a few minutes later, after mindlessly watching the scenery as they navigated through the town and out into the farmlands where they lived.

"I don't know," his father said, shaking his head. "I thought I heard three weeks' suspension, but I might be wrong."

"They didn't kick him out?" For some reason, it made Clark feel a bit better to know that his actions hadn't cost John his enrollment in the school.

"Doesn't seem like it," Jonathan said, once again shaking his head.

"That's good," Clark said, nodding to himself. "He's a jerk and all, but..." He shrugged. "I guess I egged him on a little. I just...I couldn't stand by and *not* do something, Dad."

"I know," Jonathan said softly. "Like I said, you're a good kid, Clark. I know it's not in you to stand by and watch someone else get hurt in any way. It's one of the things your mother and I have always noticed about you and one of the things we are so proud of. You have an amazing set of morals, Clark. You always have. Even when you were a toddler, you could never stand to see one of your peers upset."

He paused in memory, then smiled. "I remember one time, you were, oh, maybe eighteen months old, give or take. It was a nice day out, so we took you to the park and ran into Pete's parents. While we were talking, Pete managed to tear his teddy bear. He started to cry and you hugged him and gave him your stuffed elephant, even though you usually had an iron grip on that thing. Just like that, Pete stopped crying and smiled. You and he were best friends from that moment on. And your mother and I knew that you were a rare child indeed. We were so proud of you."

Jonathan cleared his throat and glanced over again. "I'm proud of you today, too."

Clark looked up sharply, confused. "Proud? Dad, I got in a *fight*. People are *hurt* because of me."

"Not intentionally," his father reminded him gently. "And yes, I *am* proud of you. You saw someone in need and you did what you could to help. That's the man your mother and I hoped to raise

you to be."

"Well, that may be, Dad, but...*I'm not* proud of me."

Jonathan pulled over to the side of the dirt road they were traveling on. To their left lay Schuster's Field, the very same place Clark's ship had landed, delivering him into the Kent family. He arched an eyebrow at Clark.

"Why not?" he asked curiously.

Clark felt a blush begin to creep up his neck and blossom over his cheeks. "You didn't see their faces, Dad. What I did today...everyone looked so...so *afraid* of me. I..." He shook his head, trying to clear the haunting images of the raw, naked fear he'd seen from his memory. "I never want to see that look again."

"Then don't," Jonathan replied, as though it were a simple matter. "Listen, Clark. I know what you're thinking. You can't control how people think and feel. But you *can* choose how you conduct yourself. And that determines how people perceive you. I know sometimes it's difficult, even now, to keep your powers under as tight a rein as they need to be. Truth be told, you do a better job of keeping control than I suspect I'd be able to."

"It *is* hard," Clark agreed. "I'm constantly torn between wanting to help and wanting to keep my abilities a secret. Like last week when Mr. Brenner's truck slid down into that ditch. I could have lifted it with one hand tied behind my back. But I didn't. And it killed me to stand there and watch and pretend that I couldn't do anything to help, especially with him hurt inside and needing to get to the hospital. I mean, what if his injuries had been worse, Dad? What if he'd died? I would have been responsible. No one would have known that I could have helped and didn't, but I would have."

Jonathan didn't answer right away. He took a moment and pulled off his glasses. Using the end of his shirt, he cleaned a spot from the left lens. He took a deep breath and let it slowly out again.

"It never would have been your fault," he finally said, breaking the sudden silence. "There are no easy answers, Clark. You know that as well as I do. Your safety is of paramount importance."

"Why?" Clark questioned. "Why is my life worth more than anyone else's?"

"It's not," Jonathan countered. "But not everyone can do the things you can. And if word of it got out...I don't want to see you taken away and experimented on by some deranged government official or mad scientist or the like."

It was a familiar argument. Clark had heard it all his life. The fear his parents held for him was nearly crippling. He couldn't fault them, of course. He knew they were right. People tended to be terrified of things they didn't understand. And that led them to destroy what was different. Clark was in no hurry to be tortured or killed, if indeed he even *could* be killed.

"Like anyone can hold me against my will," Clark huffed sullenly. "I'd run away at top speed before they even got close."

"Yes," Jonathan agreed. "And you'd be hunted for the rest of your life. You'd never be able to have a normal life."

"I guess," he hesitantly admitted.

"Clark, your mother and I love you more than you know. If something ever happened to you..." His father appeared unable to finish that train of thought.

"I know, Dad. I know. Why do you think I made the decision to never use my powers in front of people? I don't want you and mom to have to worry about me. Still," Clark said, letting the word hang in the air as he tried to find the right words. "Still," he repeated, "it doesn't seem right, does it? For some reason, I have all these powers. If I wanted to, I could do a lot of good with them, couldn't I? But instead, I have to hide what I can do, or risk my life." He sighed. "It seems like such a waste."

"Well," Jonathan said, scratching his chin in thought, "there *are* plenty of other ways to help people, you know."

Clark nodded gravely. “I know. It’s why I’ve always wanted to be a journalist. I love writing and I think I can do a lot of good, uncovering crimes and the like with my investigations. I know I could probably do more, at least directly, for people if I was, say, a policeman or a fireman, even an EMT, but...it’s a lot less risky to be a journalist. It’s way more unlikely that my abilities will be discovered.”

“You’ll be great at it too,” Jonathan said proudly, clasping his shoulder. “I know I’m a bit biased, but, well, I’ve always thought your writing is top notch.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Clark said, the warm feeling of pride spreading throughout his chest. “Dad? Do you...do you think that people...” He could hardly get the words out. “Do you think people are still going to be afraid of me, as a journalist?”

“Only the ones who will have something to hide from you,” Jonathan smiled, giving him a wink. “The ones who will know that their misdeeds are about to be uncovered by a great journalist.”

That made Clark smile a bit. Though he hated the idea of anyone fearing him, he could be at peace with it if it meant that they feared the justice he would bring. In the meantime, however, he had to do something to allay the fear he’d seen in the faces of his classmates. That meant starting with the person he thought might be the most afraid of him now.

“Hey, Dad?” he asked as Jonathan took the truck out of park and pulled it back onto the road.

“Yeah?”

“Could we turn around and head back to town for a bit? There’s something I need to do.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I want to check on John. I need to make sure he’s okay and to apologize. Not for stepping in for Vinny, but for the fight and for helping get him in trouble. I know it’s not completely my fault, but...it’s something I need to do for *me*.”

Jonathan looked over and beamed a proud smile. “Of course, son.”

Clark settled back into the worn leather seats, feeling like a weight had been lifted off his heart. It was true that John probably wouldn’t accept his apology, and seeing Clark might even make the other boy madder than he probably already was, but it would set Clark’s mind at ease to do so anyway. He would do what he could to erase the fear he’d caused amongst his friends and schoolmates. And, he swore to himself, he would never intentionally cause people to fear him again. Not *without* the use of his powers and certainly not *with* them.

THE END