

Embracing the Darkness

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Summary: Sometimes, life forces us to take a lot of detours before we finally find the path we are meant to take.

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"Clark Kent, please come to the main office."

Krista Chaddington's voice was crackly and tinny sounding over the loudspeaker system. It made the usually cheerful, bubbly young office secretary sound almost robotic.

"Sorry, Pete," Clark apologized. He shrugged and slung his backpack over his shoulder. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Then we can go over this stuff," he said, gesturing to his friend's math book.

Pete shook his head. "No big deal. We can get to it tomorrow. The test isn't until Friday." He stifled a yawn. "Thanks for looking over my essay though."

Clark smiled. "No problem. I guess I'll see you in the morning then," he said, hooking his jacket over one arm.

"See you then," Pete replied, closing the textbook before him and stuffing it into his school bag. He raised his hand in an unmoving gesture of goodbye.

Clark did the same, then put his back to his friend. He grabbed the strap of his backpack and held onto it as he walked down the hall, heading to the front office. As he steadily made his way through the school, he couldn't help but wonder why he'd been called there. He knew he wasn't in any kind of trouble. He'd always worked hard to be a model student. His parents had raised him that way. And, besides, he didn't want to jeopardize his ability to play football. Though he was only a freshman at Smallville High, he had his eyes firmly fixed on college. But he was the son of farmers, not rich people. His only chance to attend the colleges he had in mind was to be able to get an athletic scholarship. If he played ball, he could feasibly be granted a full scholarship, including his room and board, as opposed to an academic scholarship, which would only pay for his studies. Of course, he wanted to do well enough to have a shot at an academic scholarship as well, in case the football thing didn't pan out.

No, he assured himself. He was most definitely not in trouble.

So what could it be? He ran down a list of potential options in his mind. He still needed to hand in the money for the class trip, that was true. But the money wasn't due for another week. His parents had promised him they would give him the check that night so he could hand it in the next morning. No, he didn't think that was the reason either. He had no overdue library books, had no outstanding lunchroom tabs, hadn't even been out sick at all that year — mostly because he never *got* sick, which was just one

of the things that set him apart from his peers.

Well, whatever it was, he would take care of it quickly, then get started on his way home. For the past three years, since he'd turned ten years old, he'd steadily become faster and stronger. He liked his walks home, which gave him the chance to use his extraordinary speed, as he raced alongside the train tracks — careful not to do so when a train was passing by. He usually liked to time his runs, from the moment he left the crowded center of town behind and entered into the sprawling farmlands, until the moment he reached the front door of his home. He was thrilled to see his time drop lower and lower, though the manifestation of such other-worldly powers still scared him.

He smiled to himself. His speed wasn't the only thing that was increasing. His strength was as well. Perhaps he'd even test his strength out when he got home — he hadn't done that in a few days. He was getting close to being able to lift his father's combine machine. Last week, he'd nearly gotten the wheels off the ground, but his muscles had failed at the last moment. Maybe this week he would succeed. Of course, he still had no idea *why* he had such incredible abilities, but now that he could control them — for the most part — he kind of liked that he could do things no one else could. Although, when he was alone, he had to wonder if speed and strength were the extent of his abilities or if any other weird powers would make their presence known in time. A small part of him found the prospect interesting. The overwhelmingly large part of him was terrified at the thought.

When he got to the office, fear froze him in place.

"Mom?" he asked, catching sight of Martha. "What's going on?"

For a moment, she couldn't speak. But her reddened eyes and the soggy, scrunched-up handkerchief in her hands gave evidence to the fact that she'd been crying — hard and recently. She stood from the hard wooden bench and half stumbled her way to him, engulfing him in a hug as soon as she reached him.

"Oh, Clark," she murmured in a shuddering breath.

"Mom, what's wrong?" he pressed, pulling back to study her face.

Fresh tears welled up in her eyes and she had to look away. "It's Dad," she said softly.

Clark's heart skipped a beat. "What happened? Is he okay?"

"He—" she said, swallowing hard. Clark noticed her hands were shaking. "He had a heart attack. A bad one. He's in the hospital."

"Is...is he going to be all right?" He could hardly get the words out, too afraid of the answer.

Martha shook her head. "We just don't know yet. The doctors were still performing tests when I came to get you. I...I didn't want you going home to an empty house."

"Can we see him?" Clark asked.

Martha nodded. "We should be able to. But..." She hesitated, as if looking for the right words. "He's heavily sedated, Clark. The doctors said he's really weak. I just...don't be alarmed, when he isn't awake."

Clark nodded in turn. "I understand," he managed to get out, his throat going as dry as a desert in the summer. "I, uh, just need a couple of things from my locker."

"Go on," his mother encouraged.

His locker was just down the hall from the office and he was there in a matter of moments. Blindly, he grabbed the few things he needed, then shut and locked the door again. He thought he might have heard one of his fellow teammates from the football team calling him, but he wasn't completely sure. All he could hear was the sound of his pulse rushing in his ears as panic bubbled up within him.

His dad had always been so healthy and strong! How could he have suffered from a heart attack?

Clark couldn't lose him. Jonathan Kent was the best father he

could have ever hoped for. He was so patient and understanding as Clark continued to grow in strength and speed. Both of his parents were. Jonathan was a hardworking, kind man, the type who'd give the shirt off his back to a stranger in need. The kind of man who hadn't even blinked at the prospect of adopting a baby he and his wife had found in a wrecked spacecraft in the middle of a field one May evening.

It wasn't fair, plain and simple.

He'll be okay, Clark told himself in his mind, but it was more of a reflex than something he actually believed. He *couldn't* believe it, until he saw his dad.

Silently, he walked with his mother out to their beat-up old truck and climbed into the passenger seat after flinging his backpack into the backseat. As though on autopilot, he buckled himself in and stared blankly at the road before them as his mother pulled away from the school and onto the road.

"Mom?" he finally forced himself to say, prying his tongue loose from where it felt cemented to the roof of his mouth.

"Hmm?" she responded, checking both ways at a stop sign.

"Are...are you okay?" he asked.

A tender look came over his mother's face. "Yeah, honey," she said softly. "I'm afraid, but we'll be okay, no matter what happens."

"But Dad..." he started to protest, but couldn't finish. "I'm scared, Mom," he said instead.

"I know," she said, her voice nearly a whisper. "But your father is a strong man. He'll fight, I know it."

"Did the doctors say how long before we know anything?"

Martha shook her head slightly. "Not yet, but they were hoping to have some more answers for us when we get back there."

"That's good," Clark said numbly, still trying to process the shock of his father's heart attack. Then, "I wish I could do something to help him."

A trembling smile stretched across his mother's face. "Me too, sweetie."

For the rest of his life, Clark could only remember bits and pieces of what followed.

One moment they were traveling through the solid green light of an intersection, only five or so miles away from the hospital, and the next moment there was a jarring impact and the sickening crunch of metal. The car was pushed sideways for several feet. The windshield broke into a spiderweb of cracks a heartbeat before it shattered completely. At some point, the car flipped over, rolling onto the roof.

Light, sound, and sensation ruled supreme. Everything existed in flashes of color, or jarring feelings, or bursts of sound. Nothing felt connected. It was just a series of heartbeats strung together in a haphazard fashion. Clark had no time to process what was happening or even form a single, coherent thought.

And then, just as suddenly as it had all begun, it stopped. The world screeched to a halt. The flashes ceased. The world seemed to stream along in normal fashion, just as it always had.

Clark had remained conscious throughout the entire ordeal, thanks, mostly, to his apparent invulnerability, which he'd possessed since his toddlerhood. But that didn't shield him from being completely disoriented by the accident. For long minutes, he dangled there, suspended upside down in his seat by his seat belt, dazed and trying to get his bearings. Gradually, his wits returned and he became aware of what had taken place.

He'd been in a car accident.

A bad one.

Panic gripped him.

"Mom?" he shouted over the ringing in his ears. "*Mom?*"

No response.

"*MOM!*" he called, even louder.

But Martha was silent.

Gingerly, still afraid that perhaps his invulnerability hadn't protected him against internal injuries, he looked to his left. He immediately wished he hadn't.

Martha was a mess of blood and eerily still. Her eyes were wide open, unblinking. Her mouth was open in a small O of surprise. Her chest did not rise and fall with breath. Clark knew, in that exact moment, that she was dead. But that didn't stop him. He carefully tried to work his seat belt free, but either it was stuck or his hands were trembling too much — he was never quite certain which it was. Terrified of losing precious time, he tore the seat belt in half, close to the buckle, and flipped himself so that he was right side up again. His knees on the ceiling, he reached out to his mother, checking for signs of life, all the while calling her name over and over in the vain hope she would answer.

There was no pulse. There was no breath.

His mother was gone.

Sick with that knowledge, Clark turned away and vomited.

Using his extraordinary strength, he began to work the passenger door open. He didn't care if it looked suspicious when the car was later inspected. He had to get out of there, now. It felt like the walls were closing in on him and the proximity to his mother's unmoving form was making him claustrophobic. Little by grudgingly little, he got the door open enough to feel the cool breeze on his face.

By then, he could hear sirens in the distance.

Slowly, he became aware of others there, trying to help, fear on their faces and care in their movements so as not to make matters worse inadvertently. He saw Wayne Irig there, his faded blue overalls unmistakable even in all of the confusion and terror flooding Clark's mind. Nick Astor, the big gruff-but-lovable town grocer was there as well, helping Wayne try to open Martha's door. Father John was there too, the local pastor, using his strong muscles to help Clark make progress with his door — or, at least, Clark knew that man would believe that was the case. It was a sharp reminder, however, to him to keep his abilities hidden.

"Clark?" Father John called out. "Are you hurt, son?"

"I'm...not sure," he managed to respond.

He was pretty sure he was physically unscathed. But his heart felt like it had had a hole ripped right through it.

"Well, don't worry. We'll have you out of there in no time," the kindly, middle-aged preacher assured him.

"My mom," Clark said, choking back tears. "She...I think she's dead."

"It's okay," Father John said soothingly. "Everything is going to be okay. The paramedics will be here soon to help."

Clark nodded, but in his heart he knew it was already too late for her. Still, he sent up a silent prayer for a miracle that by some chance she could be brought back.

The sirens grew closer and within minutes Clark could see police cars and fire trucks arriving on the scene. The men who'd been trying to rescue the inhabitants of both vehicles stepped back and let the professionals use their equipment to free those who were trapped. Mere moments later, Clark saw a pair of ambulances come screeching to a halt, out of the way but still close. As soon as the vehicles stopped, the back doors flew open and teams of paramedics rushed out.

Things moved quickly from that moment on. The car doors were pried off and he was helped out by a baby-faced young policeman. Two others pulled Martha's lifeless body from the wreck and the medical professionals started working on her right away. The man from the other vehicle that had hit them was freed from his own twisted metal deathtrap. Clark didn't have to look hard to see that there was no saving the man. His head had gone through his windshield it seemed, and his skull was battered beyond repair.

"Clark," one of the paramedics said, snapping his attention away from the grisly accident before him. Later, he would wonder

how the man had known his name — if perhaps Wayne or Father John had told the kind stranger what it was.

“Huh?” He blinked, trying to dispel the lingering images of blood and death from his mind.

“Come with me. Let’s get you checked out, okay?” the man said.

Every fiber of his being should have screamed at him not to let anyone check him out, lest they discover he was different from regular boys and girls his age. But his mind wasn’t focusing on that. He was still dazed — shuffling along as if trapped in a nightmare he couldn’t figure out how to escape from. So he simply nodded, his mind in a fog, and allowed the man to lead him toward one of the ambulances.

Jimenez — that was the name Clark could see on the paramedic’s lapel — gave him a quick, but thorough, check. While he did so, he did his best to keep Clark distracted from everything else that was happening around them. Even in his foggy state of mind, Clark recognized this. He felt guilty knowing that it wasn’t working. After what felt like a lifetime, Jimenez gave him a small smile.

“You’re a very lucky young man,” he said, though as he said the words, Clark saw a grimace streak across his face. “I mean... you don’t appear to be injured at all. I’m surprised.”

“My mom...?” Clark inquired, rather than acknowledge his unscathed body. “Is she...?”

As he asked the question, he already knew the answer. There was no rushing about to get Martha to the hospital. There would be no miracle there that day. Her spirit was gone. He was now a boy without a mother.

“I’m sorry,” a different paramedic said, her hand on Clark’s shoulder. Kensington, her badge declared.

“She’s...she’s really gone?” Clark sniffled.

“I’m so sorry. Her injuries were too severe,” Kensington said. “I wish I had better news for you. I’m so, so sorry.”

“What am I going to do?” Clark whispered, more to himself than to anyone else.

“Hey, son.”

Clark looked up, wiping away the tears that had welled up in his eyes.

“Sheriff Harris,” he acknowledged.

“Let me take you home,” the sheriff offered. “I’m going to need to let your father know what happened.”

Clark shook his head. “There’s no one there. Dad had a heart attack this morning. My mom and I were on the way to the hospital when we were hit by the other car.”

“Oh, Clark! I’m so sorry,” the man said, his entire demeanor going somehow softer and more pained. He gave the boy a quick, supportive hug.

“Can you take me there instead?” Clark asked, unsure where else he could go or what to do.

“Sure thing, son. I just have to square away a few things with the other officers, then we’ll be on our way.”

Clark nodded and watched Sheriff Harris move away to speak with a deeply tanned officer. He saw the paramedics who’d been working on his mother pull a clean white sheet over her body and load the gurney she was strapped to into the back of the ambulance. The doors shut with two solid thumps, then the vehicle slowly pulled away, with no sense of urgency. Clark finally let the first of his tears fall.

He gathered later, after speaking with the police and giving his own account of what had happened, that the driver of the other truck had been drunk and fleeing from Sheriff Harris when the accident had happened. He’d torn through the red light, going more than eighty miles an hour, and had smashed squarely into the driver’s door, killing Martha on impact and sending the pickup into a roll. The other man — a William Bartlett by name — hadn’t bothered to buckle his seat belt when he’d stolen the vehicle after

a botched robbery at the liquor store. The impact had sent him crashing through his windshield and had killed him instantly.

By the time Clark made it to the hospital to see his father, he was exhausted — mentally, physically, and emotionally. Jonathan was still sedated when Clark was ushered into his room. That was just fine with him. He felt like he barely had the strength to speak. But he forced himself to talk to his father for at least a few minutes.

“Hi, Dad,” he said as he walked to the bedside. “I’m here. Mom told me what happened.” Here, his voice cracked as he tried to bite back his tears. He didn’t want Jonathan to know that his wife was gone, not while he was still so weak. “You have to fight, Dad. You have to get better. You’re the strongest man I know. You can get through this.”

Clark pulled up the chair in the room so as to be right next to his father. He took one of Jonathan’s big, callused hands in his own. For a few minutes, all he did was study that hand — the rich soil that was under his nails from working the farm, the tanned skin from days spent out in the sun, the small cuts and scrapes earned from the hard labor he did each day. Hands that, for all their roughness and hard appearance, were gentle and loving — a quick, reassuring squeeze on Clark’s shoulder when he was having a bad day, the deft, agile movements that had repaired more snapped kite strings than Clark could recount, the solid pats on Clark’s back when he accomplished some goal, the butterfly-light touches of his fingers as he’d wiped away tears throughout Clark’s life.

“You *have* to get better,” Clark whispered, but it was more a plea to the universe than anything else.

I don’t know what I’ll do if you leave me too, his broken heart added bleakly.

But the universe wasn’t listening that day. Jonathan did not get any better and the doctors kept him fast asleep as they ran more tests and gave him time to recover. Visiting hours at the hospital ended and Clark was forced to leave. Without anyone at home and without knowing what else to do, he accepted Sheriff Harris’ invitation and stayed the night at the officer’s home. It was an awkward situation to be sure. Since they’d been in kindergarten together, the sheriff’s daughter, Rachel, had had a crush on Clark. But Clark saw her as nothing more than a good friend, a fact he often felt guilty about, though he and Rachel had long since gotten their feelings about one another out into the open. She respected his feelings and had not pressed the issue any further, but still Clark felt bad that he could never give her what she wanted.

“With Joshua off at college, we have a spare room for as long as you might need, until your pa gets well enough to come home,” Sheriff Harris assured Clark as they drove through the darkening night.

“Thank you,” Clark said in a subdued tone.

“Look, Clark, about today...”

“No, don’t say it. Please,” Clark interrupted. He was barely holding his emotions together as he sat in the squad car.

“All right,” was the other man’s only reply. “We’ll stop by your house first so you can pick up some spare changes of clothing and the like, okay?”

“That would be great,” Clark said without enthusiasm. “I really appreciate all you’ve already done for me. I know my dad will too, once he’s well again.”

“It’s the least I could do. Why, when my shed burnt down three years ago, he was there the next day with his tools, some extra lumber he had laying around, and a box of nails. With his help, we had a new, bigger, better shed up in no time at all,” Sheriff Harris said, smiling a little at the memory.

Clark managed a small smile too. “I remember that. He really enjoyed getting to help your family out.”

“Ah, here we are.”

They pulled up to the Kent family farmhouse. Clark hopped

out of the cruiser and let himself in with his key. He hurried to his room and stuffed whatever he could grab into a duffel bag, not wanting to keep the sheriff waiting. He took another brief moment to grab his toothbrush from the bathroom and then headed back down the stairs.

“That was quick,” the sheriff remarked, though not unkindly, when Clark opened the back door of the car and tossed his bag on the seat. “There’s no rush. If there’s anything else you want to grab...”

“No, thanks. I’m fine,” Clark said, shutting the door before opening the front door and letting himself inside. “Thanks.”

“Okay then. If you’re sure...”

The car reversed, turned, then headed back out to the main road. A profound sense of loss settled over Clark as his childhood home — now dark and lifeless — grew smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror.

That night, as he lay on his back in a bed that wasn’t his own, blankets and pillows that were also not his own surrounding him, he finally let his tears fall. He cried until he had nothing left, then fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep. Yet when he awoke the next morning, he felt anything but rested. He shuffled down to the Harris’ kitchen, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. But the somber looks on the family’s faces snapped him to full alertness.

“What?” he breathed, fearing the answer.

“Clark...” Sheriff Harris began, clearing his throat and pulling at his shirt collar.

Clark felt his stomach turn to lead and his pulse skyrocket. “What’s going on?”

“I...uh...” the sheriff stammered and Rachel looked away from Clark.

“Is it Dad? Did something happen?” Clark half demanded in a panic.

“I...I’m afraid so. The hospital...they just called. Your dad... he had another heart attack during the night.”

“They tried, Clark,” added Betty, the sheriff’s gentle wife. “They tried so hard. But...” She seemed unable to finish her statement.

“He didn’t make it, son.”

Sheriff Harris’ words hit Clark like a physical blow. He recoiled in horror.

“No!” he said, defying the universe. “No, he *can’t* be dead! He’s my *dad!* He *can’t* be gone!”

“I’m so sorry, Clark,” Rachel said, getting up from her seat and approaching him.

Clark flinched away from her as she tried to put her hand on his shoulder. “No...” he said as he pulled away. “No!”

Then he turned and ran.

Out of the house. Across the yard. Down to the road.

He had to put as much distance as he could between the house and himself as he could.

A left at the road. Down the cracked asphalt. Away. Away. Away.

It wasn’t the Harris’ fault that Jonathan had died. But Clark couldn’t be anywhere near them right now.

A mile now. Then another. Past the familiar houses and fields he’d known all his life.

Why wasn’t the running clearing his head, the way it usually did?

Abandoning the road. Slicing across Shuster’s Field. Into the seclusion of Rocky Cove.

Once there, although he wasn’t winded, Clark collapsed on a large rock, his legs turning to rubber and giving way beneath him, though he knew he could normally go many, many more miles before running out of steam.

All around him, peace reigned. Birds chirped in the sunlight. Tendrils of mist were burning away as the day grew slightly warmer. Bugs flitted through the air or crawled by on the ground.

The buds on the trees lay still in readiness for the proper time to burst into bloom. A rabbit scampered by in the underbrush — Clark more heard it than saw it.

In that perfect stillness, Clark began to scream.

He screamed out his heartbreak, his fears for the future, the way he missed his parents. He screamed for how unfair it all was — his parents had been the best people he’d known and now they were simply gone, their lives snuffed out at far too young an age. He screamed as he recognized that he was an orphan.

When he finally wore his voice hoarse, the tears came. Hot and fast, they spilled down his cheeks. They splattered the ground at his feet and the soaked shirt he was wearing. As he cried out his loneliness and his anguish, his tears came all the harder and his breathing grew ragged until he felt light-headed, as though he wasn’t getting quite enough oxygen.

For a long time, that was all he could do. Then, gradually, his tears dried. He got a handle on his breathing and forced himself to take deep, albeit shaky, breaths. Silence came back over the woods. He wiped away the remnants of the salt and water from his cheeks and then sat still. It was an effort to move, to speak, to even think.

All day long, he just sat there, too dazed to do anything else. The sun began to go down and it grew cold out. Clark didn’t notice. He, of course, could feel the differences in temperature, but no matter how extreme the cold or heat he was exposed to, it couldn’t hurt him or make him feel uncomfortable in any way. He just continued to sit there, lost in his own thoughts, memories, and grief.

When the search party found him, his skin was far too cold to be healthy for a normal person, and his rescuers feared he was catatonic until he finally moved and acknowledged their presence.

He never heard what they said to him that night — not their relief at finding him safe and sound enough, not their expressions of condolences, not their offers to be there for him if he needed anything. Only one thought was in his mind. And that thought was all encompassing, blinding him to all else, muting all else around him.

He was now completely alone in the world.

He was an orphan.

The following days were a blur for Clark. In the span of twelve hours, he’d gone from a happy thirteen-year-old with a wonderful family to an orphan. He’d had to instantly grow up and start making adult decisions, and those decisions started with the arrangements for his parents’ funeral.

The community took pity on him and donations quickly poured in to help him cover the cost of the burial plots, caskets, and the burial itself. Mr. Lister, the owner of the Smallville Funeral Parlor, even went so far as to waive his fee for the wake, donating his time and space so that the community could have a chance to say their final farewells to the Kents. Clark was humbled. It seemed like everyone in town had known and loved his parents. Of course, he’d known that his mom and dad had always been there to lend a hand when it was needed, no matter how they and the farm might have been struggling. Whether it had been helping with building a new barn or cooking up a large quantity of food to serve at the local soup kitchen, his mother and father had always gone the extra mile to help others. Clark had such vivid memories of those moments — his father grabbing his tool belt to help a neighbor with a broken fence, his mother baking pies for the local church bake sale — with all the proceeds going to charity — and his father heading into town in the middle of the night to buy baby formula for a neighbor who’d run out and couldn’t get out with their newborn. Those were just a few, fleeting examples of his parents’ generosity. Now, it appeared that everyone in Smallville wanted to be a part of sending Jonathan and Martha into the hereafter, though they had all helped the Kents

in their own ways, Clark knew.

The gratitude Clark felt for the town and people he'd known all his life made his heart soar. He only wished his parents could have somehow seen the outpouring of love. But, for all of that, his heart still ached more than it ever had in his life. Despite being surrounded by friends and people who cared about him, he felt all alone and lost. He felt small and insignificant in the world.

It isn't fair, he thought to himself as he tackled each task in turn.

It wasn't fair that he had to pick out caskets for his mother and father — a task he'd never once imagined he'd need to do. It wasn't fair that he had to pick out outfits for the funeral home to dress his parents in. It wasn't fair that, at thirteen, he had to pick out flower arrangements for the grave. It wasn't fair that he'd needed to choose the spot in the cemetery where his parents would be laid to rest. It wasn't fair that it was his responsibility to pick the inscriptions for the back of those little laminated cards the funeral home set out for people to take as they said their final goodbyes. It wasn't fair that, once the funeral was over, he had to face an uncertain future where he didn't even know where he would live. It wasn't fair that his parents would never see their son grow to be a man. It wasn't fair that he would never again hear their voices, hug them, talk to them, get their advice and perspective on things.

It just wasn't fair.

And he was sure now that he would have needed them for their advice on his strange abilities. As he stood talking to various people who stopped by the wake to pay their respects, he began to become more and more aware that something was going on with his hearing. At first, he wasn't sure what was going on. He kept hearing things, and, after looking around, expecting to see the speaker standing nearby, he'd find them on the other side of the room. After the fifth such event, he knew it wasn't mere coincidence. Another power had manifested, and he was catching bits and pieces of private conversations he wasn't meant to hear. Two of his teachers, discussing their summer vacation plans. The local barber, recounting stories of his parents with several other men. Lana Lang, talking to several of their schoolmates, wondering if Clark would stay in Smallville, now that he had no family there. His friend, Pete, scolding his younger brother after the five-year-old started whining about wanting to go home. And, of course, endless comments expressing pity for Clark.

It was another power. Somehow or another, his ears had the ability to hear over great distances — he even caught a few snippets of the preacher's homily at the church several miles down the road. Later, when things had settled down a bit and he'd had the chance to think about and test out his newest power, he supposed it should have scared him, at least a little, to find out that there was yet another way in which he was set apart from the rest of the world. But at the time he simply didn't have enough focus or desire to think too hard about his changing hearing. All he knew was that each unexpectedly eavesdropped-on conversation had torn new wounds into his heart. It wasn't that he resented the pity people were expressing, but rather that it just made him feel more depressed about his new status as an orphan.

Still, all the comings and goings of the funeral kept him busy and distracted him from what lay ahead — when he was truly on his own, with more than enough time to brood over his losses.

There were offers to take him in, of course, from friends in Smallville — people Clark had known and loved all his life, people who were family by choice instead of by blood. But it wasn't that simple. Instead, he found himself placed in a group home for boys, while the courts tried to find him a more permanent foster home. He arrived with a few bags stuffed with his things — clothing and a few keepsakes he couldn't bear to be parted with. A blanket his mother had made in preparation for a baby, before she'd gotten the devastating news that she would

never conceive a biological child. His dad's favorite winter coat, warm and soft, lined with sheep's wool and several sizes too big for Clark. But when he wore it, it almost felt like being in his father's embrace. A manila envelope, found in the cedar chest at the foot of his parents' bed, stashed with the baby blanket he'd been wrapped in when they'd found him. A mysterious globe of the Earth, which somehow drew him in and nagged at his mind until he felt compelled to take it with him.

There were, of course, some other odds and ends that he'd taken with him. The rest of the things he'd wanted to keep had been stored in Wayne Irig's shed. It hadn't been much, but Clark hadn't been able to part with it yet. He wished he could have left everything in the house he'd grown up in. But the house was to be taken by the bank and sold — the house had a second mortgage, which his parents had taken out of necessity, after a harsh winter and exceedingly dry summer had all but destroyed their crops. Clark had been six at the time, but still remembered it well. His parents had been forced to take a loan against the house in order to keep food on the table and the family afloat. Though the farm had picked up after that, a couple of recent years of less-than-stellar crop yields had left the Kents' bank accounts fairly lean again, leaving Clark with no way to pay off the balance, even if he'd been old enough to.

It hurt Clark deeply, to see his childhood home yanked away from him. It was the final nail in his past, driving home the point that he could never return to the way things had once been.

But there was nothing he could do, except to try and accept the upheaval in his life. So he bit back the tears until he was alone, and put on his bravest face for the world to see, wearing it like a mask to hide his heart from everyone.

He arrived at the home for boys one dark, overcast evening. The air was heavy and damp — rain would come pouring down before long, he knew. He could feel electricity in it too, indicating that the night would be wild with thunder and lightning. It felt only right, somehow, that the weather reflected his mood — somber on the outside and raging within. He didn't want to be there, in that place, as pristine and inviting as the large, old house looked.

A grandmotherly old woman greeted him mere moments after the court liaison rang the doorbell. Instantly, a smile was on her face and she was beckoning them both inside.

"Come, come," she urged, waving them indoors. "Come on in out of that dreadful weather."

"Thanks," the man said. "Julian Marsh, from the Smallville court. We spoke on the phone this morning."

The woman nodded. "Yes, yes. I remember. Nice to meet you." She turned to Clark. "And you must be..."

She left the statement open, unfinished, beckoning for him to speak up.

"Clark," he said obligingly. "Clark Kent."

"I'm Alice Tillerson. But everyone just calls me Grandma Tildy," she said pleasantly. "I hope you'll be comfortable here, Clark."

Clark bit back the urge to express his doubtfulness about that.

"Thank you, Mrs. Tillerson," he said instead.

She clucked her tongue. "None of that Mrs. Tillerson stuff, young man. Grandma Tildy or Alice, if you please. Or even just Grandma, if you'd like."

She'd probably meant the admonishment as lighthearted and friendly, but it made Clark feel self-conscious.

"Okay... Grandma Tildy," he said quietly.

She favored him with a bright smile. "I'll show you to your room in just a few minutes," she promised. "I just need to speak with Mr. Marsh first."

"Sure," Clark said with a shallow nod.

He wandered across the sizable living room and looked out the

tall windows into the deepening night. A few splashes of wetness on the panes of glass told him that the rain was already beginning to fall. He allowed himself to get lost in his own thoughts while Grandma Tildy and Julian spoke in hushed tones. He knew he could attempt to use his budding hearing powers to listen in, but he was beyond the point of caring. Besides, he reasoned, what good would it do him? He was stuck in this place for however long it took the courts to decide who, if anyone, would be taking him in as a foster child until he turned eighteen. And he knew it would be a case of being just a foster child. He was far too old for most people to consider adopting, his heart told him.

That was just fine with him. He didn't want to be part of a family that wasn't the Kents.

"Clark?"

He started a bit at the sound of his name. Apparently, he'd gotten a little *too* lost in his thoughts.

"Huh?" he asked, purely by reflex.

Grandma Tildy smiled. "Would you like to see your room, and meet the other boys?"

"Oh, uh, sure."

"I'll give you the grand tour," she announced happily. "Grab your things. We'll start with where you'll be sleeping."

"All right," Clark said agreeably. He picked up his bags. Even Grandma Tildy grabbed one to help. "Oh! I can get those," he said, remembering his manners.

Grandma Tildy chuckled. "Well, aren't you the perfect gentleman! Don't worry, Clark, I don't mind helping. I'm younger and tougher than I look." She winked and then gestured to the staircase. "Right this way."

She led him up to the second floor and down a long hall to the room on the end. She opened the door with her free hand and let Clark walk in first. The room was painted a pale, but bright, blue. Two identical beds sat on opposite sides of the room, beside which stood matching wooden dressers. The beds were made up with dark blue sheets and fluffy pillows. It was both cozy looking and desolate.

"Kevin just left two days ago," Grandma Tildy explained, though Clark didn't know who Kevin was. "So, for now, you have the room to yourself."

"Do boys often come here?" he asked, looking at the plump older woman.

"Depends," Grandma Tildy said, shrugging. "Sometimes we get a lot of boys and all at once. Usually after a big storm or accident or the like. But for the most part, it gets pretty quiet around here. You're the first new boy we've had in...oh, I guess it's six or seven months now."

Clark nodded. "Oh." He moved to the bed on the left, the one that sat beneath the room's large window, and set down his belongings.

The woman did the same, putting the bag she carried down on the bed. "Look," she began, her voice soft and gentle. "I know this is hard for you. To lose your family. To be shipped off to a place you don't know, full of people you don't know. I know you'll need some time to make your peace with everything. So...if you aren't up to meeting everyone else tonight, none of us will blame you. A lot of boys are too overwhelmed to do much the first day they're here."

"Thanks," Clark said, touched. He hesitated as he mulled over her offer. "But...I think I'd like to at least give it a try, meeting everyone and seeing the house tonight...if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind!" Grandma Tildy said, laughing a little. "But if it gets to be too much, you let me know and we'll take a break until you're ready to do more."

"Okay," Clark agreed. "And...thanks. You know...for taking me in for however long it's going to be. Uh...do boys...stay here for long?" He dreaded the answer, but a part of him had to know.

"It depends," Grandma Tildy said with a soft sigh. "Some are

here for a few weeks. Others for a few months. And we've had a few who have been with us until they were old enough to get a job and a place of their own."

Clark nodded in understanding, but his heart was conflicted. Part of him wanted to be out of this orphanage as quickly as was humanly possible. He already missed Smallville and all of the friends he'd been forced to leave behind. He craved the normalcy that went along with living in the town he'd known for all his life. On the other hand, a part of him could be at peace with not returning to Smallville. The place was a painful reminder of all that he'd lost. He'd felt like an intruder the days and nights he'd spent living at the Harris' house. His own childhood home was already up for sale. There was nothing to return to, if he went back to Smallville.

"Ready?"

"Huh? Oh...yeah," Clark said, coming out of his thoughts. Grandma Tildy was looking at him expectantly. "Let's do it," he said with more conviction as he stood from the bed.

They began on the second floor, which was where all the boys' bedrooms were located. Clark learned that he was one of twelve boys living in the house at the moment, but up to three more could be accommodated, should the need arise. He prayed silently in his heart that no other boys would need to live in that place. They did not go into the other rooms unless the door was open, figuring that those with closed doors might well be asleep at that late hour, or at the very least want some privacy.

Then they moved down to the first floor again. Grandma Tildy showed Clark the living room — though he'd been there before — first. The den was next, where a small knot of boys were engrossed in watching a hockey game on the television. There was a sizable rec room next to the den, with a stack of old board games neatly sitting on one shelf, and a worn, but serviceable, billiards table. Two boys were sitting at the coffee table in the room, engaged in a furious game of knock hockey. They stopped and looked up when Clark and Grandma Tildy walked into the room. Alan and Jared, they introduced themselves, and Clark shook their proffered hands. They were just about his age, and seemed to be genuinely open and friendly. They went back to their game as Clark's tour continued.

There was a large dining room that could seat everyone in the house, even if the place was at maximum capacity, with a couple of extra chairs to spare for guests. It had old, well-cared-for furniture that Clark was sure Martha would have loved. The kitchen was right next door, and the pantry was filled with snacks that Clark was encouraged to take if he ever felt hungry. Off the other side of the kitchen was a large all-season room with huge windows that Grandma Tildy said overlooked the garden, though there was not much to be seen in the stormy black night. Some padded patio chairs and glass-topped tables were there as well, so that the boys could sit, eat, talk, and enjoy the view if they so chose.

There was a large library room on that floor as well, stocked with books of every sort. That lifted Clark's spirits a little. He'd always been an avid reader, and lately he'd noticed that he could read faster than anyone else he knew. That allowed him to practically devour books overnight and his appetite for knowledge on any and all subjects was insatiable. He made a mental note to really check out the selection later on that night, or at the very least in the morning.

The only other room on the first floor was Grandma Tildy's bedroom. She merely pointed out where her room was, but they had no need to go inside. And, of course, both floors were equipped with a few bathrooms each, to accommodate the large number of people that were living there at any given time.

At the end of the tour, Grandma Tildy sat with Clark in the living room. He took up a spot on the couch, while Grandma Tildy sat, hands neatly folded in her lap, on one of the plush armchairs.

She smiled warmly.

“So? How do you like the place?” she asked kindly.

“It’s beautiful,” Clark complimented. “I’ve never seen a house so large before. It’s at least...I don’t know. Four times bigger than the farmhouse I grew up in, back in Smallville.”

“But?” she asked knowingly.

Clark sighed. “It’s not home. I don’t mean to sound rude or ungrateful, but...” He left the statement hanging.

“Believe me, I understand,” the older woman said with a shallow nod. “I was once in your shoes. My father left home when I was six months old. We never heard from him again. Then Mama took sick when I was seven. After she died, I was sent off to a home like this, for girls. Only it wasn’t nearly so nice a place to live as I’ve tried to make it here. I might have been young, but I remember exactly how I felt the morning I arrived at that place. The despair. The yearning for home and what had once been. The way I was grateful for a roof over my head and food in my belly, but how, no matter how much time had passed, it still wasn’t home.”

“Really?” Clark blinked, surprised.

Grandma Tildy nodded, her gaze far off in her memories.

“There was nothing *wrong* with that place. Most of the girls were friendly enough. Some were mean-spirited and catty. The woman who ran the place — Mrs. Fitzpatrick — was a gentle, caring woman. But...something about the house itself felt...cold. Uninviting. Uncomfortable. That’s why my husband and I put so much effort into turning this place into a home that was as comfortable as possible. A place where the boys who came to us could feel safe and loved, not just simply taken care of.”

“Your husband?” Clark asked.

Grandman Tildy nodded. “The boys called him Grandpa Rudy while he was alive. He’s gone two years last Wednesday.” For a moment, her expression changed. The smile she wore wavered and her eyes misted over before she mastered her emotions once again.

“I’m sorry,” Clark said, feeling sad for the woman sitting before him.

Grandma Tildy shook her head, as if clearing away the memories. “He was the one who suggested that we build a home for boys in need. It was to honor his troubled, late younger brother. That’s why we opted for boys, rather than girls.”

“I see,” Clark said kindly.

The woman sighed sadly. “He was so proud of this place.”

“He should have been. It’s beautiful,” Clark replied.

“Thank you.” She paused, then smiled. “Anyway, did you have any questions for me?”

Clark thought for a moment. “I guess...what kind of rules do you have here?”

Grandma Tildy chuckled lightly. “Well now, aren’t you polite and well-raised! I was just about to get into all of that with you.”

He nodded once. “My parents always told me how important rules are,” he said with a shrug.

She nodded in turn, then began to tell him the rules of the house, which weren’t as many as Clark would have thought. For the most part, the boys could do as they wished. They could grab a snack whenever they were hungry. They could go outside whenever the mood struck them. They could, within reason, watch what they wanted on the television. They could quietly read in bed after lights-out. But, as Clark had anticipated, there were *some* restrictions. All the boys had to finish their schooling. Homework had to be completed — and Grandma Tildy would check! — before they did anything else, like playing games or watching television. All of the boys were expected to do chores around the house — helping with the cooking and cleaning, folding laundry, tending to the younger kids, as much as was age appropriate. Lights out meant that the boys had to be in their bedrooms, even if they weren’t yet asleep, and they had to be quiet out of respect for those who *were* asleep.

There were other rules too, but nothing that Clark hadn’t really anticipated on some level. Everything made sense to him, and actually felt close to the way his parents had raised him. In a way, it was nice. It almost felt like his normal routine was coming back. He immediately agreed to follow the rules of the house and swore to not cause any trouble. Grandma Tildy looked relieved that he was being so compliant with the rules. She smiled and clasped him on the shoulder once she stood.

“Thank you, Clark,” she said. “I know this is hard on you, to be here, to follow rules that weren’t set down by your family. I appreciate that you’ve agreed to respect them.”

“It’s your home,” Clark replied. “I wish I didn’t have to be here,” he admitted. “But I’m glad to have a place to go to. And as much as I wish I was still at my home, well, I appreciate how nice a place it is here. Agreeing to your rules is the least I can do.”

“Thank you. And try not to worry. Everything will work out in time,” Grandma Tildy assured him. “It may not feel like it now, but I’ve always believed that everything in life happens for a reason.”

“What reason could there be for my parents dying?” Clark said, recoiling from Grandma Tildy’s words.

“I don’t know,” the woman said, sighing. “But...I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry if it seemed like I meant it like that. I meant...perhaps there’s a reason why you were sent here, instead of a different home.”

“No one else had room to take me?” Clark offered as a weak explanation. He wasn’t sure he believed in some cosmic reasoning behind him landing in this particular orphanage.

Grandma Tildy shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Time will tell. For me, though, I believe you’re here for a reason. Maybe there’s something we can learn from you. Maybe...” Her voice trailed off for a moment. “Maybe there’s something you need to learn about yourself, while you’re here. I know this place isn’t where you really want to be. I know you’d rather be back in your own home. But maybe, in time, you’ll grow to be comfortable here, if nothing else. At least, I hope you will.”

“Maybe,” was the best Clark could offer in response.

Clark watched as Grandma Tildy walked off. A couple of the younger boys — one appeared to be about seven and the other maybe nine — ran up to her, excitedly calling to her and begging her to teach them how to play poker. Grandma Tildy laughed deeply and allowed them to pull her down the hall to the rec room. He watched as she disappeared from sight, leaving him all alone to contemplate his own thoughts and feelings about what was now his new residence. He dared not call it “home” in his mind. That would take time, and a willingness to embrace his lot in life. He simply wasn’t ready for that. His heart still hurt far too much.

Still, he had to admit, he could have wound up in a lot worse of a situation. The house itself was gorgeous and spacious. He could easily find someone to talk to and hang out with to chase away the suffocating loneliness he felt, if he wanted to. Or he could just as easily find ways — he hoped — to be alone if he wished. That was important. As an only child, he’d grown accustomed to having his own space, and having the freedom to work on his burgeoning powers whenever he wanted. Now, in this orphanage, he would have to work harder than ever before to keep his abilities both under control and hidden from everyone else.

He thought about Grandma Tildy too, deciding that, despite the circumstances that had led to him meeting her, he liked her. She was quick to smile and laugh. She spoke easily, in a manner that was inviting and encouraging, and put him on a level that felt like he was nearly her equal, not just some teenaged kid. She seemed very open — refusing to hide any part of herself. He wasn’t sure how he knew that — after all, he’d only known her for a couple of short hours. But his instincts told him to trust her, that she was a genuine and lovable woman.

Mom and Dad would have liked her, he decided.

Unsure of what to do with himself, he made his way back upstairs to his bedroom, and unpacked the small collection of his belongings. He took the blanket his mother had made and placed it on top of the comforter on the bed, but he took care to hide away the blanket and manila envelope that were connected to the night he'd entered the Kents' lives. The strange globe he'd been found with he hid as well, wrapping it in the folds of the deep-blue blanket that had fended off the cool night air before he'd been found and instantly become a Kent.

With all of his possessions unpacked, he went back down the stairs. His sensitive nose could smell chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven. He'd been aware of their mouthwatering scent for a while now — they had to be close to finished, he reckoned. Never one to resist a treat, he allowed his nose to direct his footsteps, half expecting to see Grandma Tildy taking a tray of cookies out of the oven.

Someone *was* there in the kitchen, bent over and extracting a cookie sheet from the oven when he arrived, but it wasn't Grandma Tildy.

It was one of the boys, a tall, scrawny Asian youth. He looked to be fifteen or sixteen. He eyed Clark for barely three seconds.

"You're new," he said as he turned his attention back to the cookies.

"Yeah. Just got in tonight. My name's Clark," Clark offered in a friendly tone.

The other boy gave him a half smile and a nod of acknowledgement. "Chen. Chen Chow. Welcome to Grandma's, Clark."

Clark managed a small smile. "Thanks." He gestured at the cookies. "Those smell great, by the way."

Chen smiled. "Thanks. My grandpa's recipe." He began to remove the cookies from the metal sheet with a black plastic spatula. "So, where are you from?" he asked casually as he worked.

"Smallville," Clark said. "You?"

"Kansas City," he said with a near-sneer in his voice. Clark was curious, but chose not to ask. "Here, have one while they're still hot," Chen said, pushing the plate of chocolate chip cookies toward Clark.

"Thanks." He took one and blew on it before biting in.

"Wow!" he said after the first bite. "This is delicious!"

Chen's smile widened. "Glad you like them."

Clark merely nodded as he chewed. Silently, he appraised the young man before him. Chen looked genuinely happy and welcoming. Clark already liked him, and could see them forging a true friendship. He wondered if Chen might feel the same. God knew, Clark was desperate for a friend. Everyone he'd ever known had been left behind when he'd been forced to leave his home.

Chen said nothing as he got to work prepping a new batch of cookie dough to put into the oven. He moved with fluid grace around the kitchen, like some kind of good spirit brought to life. He worked with practiced efficiency too — no movement seemed wasted. Everything he did seemed purposeful. It was somehow calming to watch him work.

"Need lots of cookies to keep everyone happy," he explained, his back to Clark, as he put two more cookie sheets into the oven.

"I can imagine," Clark said with a slight nod. "Need a hand?"

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks though."

Chen closed the oven door and rested his elbows on the high marble-topped kitchen island. Clark pulled up one of the stools and sat on the opposite side. He noted, briefly, the scars that covered the other boy's arms. He tried to be discreet, but Chen noticed. He laid his arms down, showing Clark the extent of the damage.

"My dad," Chen explained. "He's a mean drunk. Most of these? Cigar burns."

"I didn't mean to look..." Clark tried to apologize.

Chen shook his head. "I don't mind. And I don't blame you. They're kind of hard to ignore."

"Your father did that?" Clark asked, incredulously. "How can anyone do that to their kid?"

"I've asked myself that same question a thousand times. Best I can come up with is that Dad always had a short temper. Turns out it's even shorter when he's drunk." Chen shrugged. "Mom tried to get us out. Dad found out and snapped. Beat the living hell out of her before he turned on my sister and me. When he finally left to go down to the local bar, I called 9-1-1." Here, Chen's face contorted in pain. "There was nothing they could do for my sister — she was already gone before the ambulance arrived. Mom died three days later from her injuries. Dad was arrested and once I was healed enough, my grandpa took me in. I was six at the time, and for a while, things were good. But when I was eight an aneurysm burst in his brain, killing him. There wasn't anyone else to take me in, so I was sent here. Been here ever since."

"I'm so sorry," Clark said sympathetically.

Chen shrugged again. "Don't be. This place is like Heaven compared to what I lived through as a kid. Grandma's even been training me to eventually help run this place."

"That's great," Clark said. Chen seemed enthusiastic at the prospect of one day becoming the one to run that home for boys. "I guess that answers my question of how you like the place," he added wryly.

Chen chuckled. "Yeah. Safe to say I like it here. Hope you will too."

"Thanks."

"So, what's your story?" Chen asked. It was blunt, but casual. Curious, but not rude.

"My mom died in a car accident while we were driving to see my dad at the hospital. I was lucky to escape unhurt, but my mom...she died instantly, at the moment of impact, or so they said. My dad...I overheard people at the funeral saying that even though he never knew about Mom's death — he was heavily sedated after a bad heart attack — that he somehow knew and lost the will to live. He had another heart attack that night and didn't make it."

Chen snorted. "You really believe that? That he lost the will to live?"

Clark shook his head. "No. He loved my mom, but I know he would have fought to stay alive for me. It was just...bad timing, is all. His heart had been weak for a couple of years. I just never really thought I'd lose him. The people who said he'd lost the will to live...I think they just wanted some...I don't know. Some romanticized reason for his death. Something other than the fact that his body hadn't been able to take the strain of two massive heart attacks so close together like that."

Chen appeared to soften a bit. "Yeah...well...either way, I'm sorry. Losing your family stinks."

"Yeah, it does," Clark agreed. He took another cookie and fidgeted with it for a moment before biting into it.

"You know what? I like you, Clark," Chen said after a moment, during which he checked on the timer to see how long he had before the newest batch of cookies needed to come out of the oven. "You seem like a cool guy. Friends?"

"Friends," Clark said, extending a hand and shaking with Chen.

"Cool," Chen said, smiling again. "Listen, it's almost time for lights out. I need to finish up here, but you should get some rest. Move-in is never easy, no matter how few possessions we get to bring with us. See you in the morning? You shoot pool at all?"

"Once or twice," Clark replied. "I can't say I'm any good at it."

That made Chen laugh. "All the better! After breakfast, let's play a few rounds. What do you say?"

“I say I’m looking forward to it.”

“Perfect. See you in the morning then.”

“Night, Chen. Thanks for the cookies.”

The other boy nodded and made a sound of agreement in his throat, then turned his attention to the oven as the timer rang. Clark headed back to his room and got himself ready for bed. He changed into pajamas, then padded down the hall to brush his teeth. When he laid down in his bed, however, sleep would not come to him. The room was too foreign for him, too different from his comfortable farmhouse. It was true that he’d been staying at other people’s homes up until now, but those had typically been places he’d known — close friends of the family and places he’d slept over before, for the most part. But this was different

This place was different. It looked and smelled so completely *wrong*. Not in a bad way, he acknowledged to himself. Just not what he was so used to. Grandma Tildy’s house smelled of citrus cleaner products and lavender and the perfume she wore. It wasn’t an unpleasant smell — it was, in some ways, actually quite nice. But Clark yearned for the scent of fertile earth, growing crops, the cedar furniture of the room he’d grown up in. He wanted to smell his mother’s chocolate chip cookies baking, or her apple pie, rather than Chen’s — admittedly delicious — cookies.

After a while, Clark stopped trying to sleep, and, instead, turned to toying with his newly-enhanced hearing ability. He’d been working hard on it, ever since he’d first realized that he could hear things he shouldn’t have been able to. In his mind, he tried to imagine how his parents would have walked him through the process of refining his powers. Slowly, he tuned his hearing in and out — gradually going from the realm of normal hearing to as far as he could stretch it.

He heard a lot of soft snoring and even breathing in the house. It seemed that nearly everyone was asleep at that hour. Someone was snoring loudly — for a moment, the unexpected sound deafened Clark and he reflexively threw his hands over his ears. One or two of the boys were reading — he could hear the soft whispers of pages turning, uncovering whatever new facts were being discovered or new adventure the story’s hero was facing. In the kitchen, the faucet was idly dripping. Whoever had been in there last — *probably Chen*, Clark thought — hadn’t completely tightened the knobs. Someone was coughing and someone else sneezed. Two of the older boys were talking together — Clark quickly tuned out when he realized what, exactly, he was overhearing. Whoever the boys were, they were confessing their secret feelings for one another. Clark flushed with embarrassment, feeling the heat creep up his neck and spill into his cheeks, even as he aimed his hearing elsewhere. He didn’t care that it was two boys and not a boy and girl who were admitting their love for one another. It just didn’t feel right to eavesdrop on a private conversation like that. He’d been taught to respect people’s privacy, especially when it came to matters of the heart. But still, he could not stop himself from scanning the rest of the house with his enhanced hearing. Part of him hoped he’d find something, some sound, that would put his aching heart at ease.

He heard Grandma Tildy as he searched for that phantom ointment for his grief. The older woman was awake and talking to herself. It sounded like she was going through paperwork. Bills, if Clark was guessing correctly. She sounded a bit stressed out. She was muttering to herself even as Clark heard her uncapping a pen. A moment later, he heard the pen scratching against paper. There was a sound of paper tearing along a perforated line. Clark realized that she was writing out checks. He hoped she was okay. She sounded so upset as she worked. He wondered if he could help at all, but of course he couldn’t ask. That would only spawn uncomfortable questions about why he was inquiring about such things. He would have no answer for that, without revealing the abilities that set him apart from his peers. And he had already decided long ago that no one should ever know about the things he

could do. His parents had always feared for his life — that if anyone should know of his differences, he would be taken from them, locked in a lab, and dissected like a frog.

Clark abruptly severed the connection he’d made with his hearing and retreated from the window back to his bed. This time, when he closed his eyes, exhaustion overtook him. Sleep came and whisked him off to a dark, dreamless void.

When he awoke, he was feeling only slightly less bleak than he had the night before. There was still a lot to get used to in this new place. For example, the moment he’d uttered the word “orphanage” while in a private conversation with Chen, the older boy immediately corrected him.

“That’s not a word we use here,” he told Clark as they finished up their breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, fruit, and chocolate milk. “We prefer the term ‘halfway house’ instead.”

“Halfway house?” Clark asked, chewing a bite of toast thoughtfully. “Can’t say I’ve heard that word before.”

“Yeah,” Chen said, nodding and draining the last sip of his drink. “This place...it’s not just for kids whose parents have died. Like Nicholas over there, in the red shirt. He’s here while his parents serve a prison term for petty theft, if the courts decide they’re fit to be parents when they get out. Keith? The one laughing too loudly in the corner? His dad ran off with another woman and his mom had a psychotic break. So the word ‘orphanage’ is all wrong in situations like that. ‘Halfway house’ though? It works for all of us. We’re all at this halfway point...this transitional stage from the homes we knew and whatever lies ahead for us. For some, it might be a foster home. For others, we’re just waiting out our time until we’re legal adults and can make our own way in the world.”

Clark mulled it over as he finished his bacon, then his drink. “Makes sense,” he admitted. “And I have to say, it *does* sound a whole lot better than ‘orphanage’ ever did.”

He wasn’t lying. It *did* feel a little better to think of Grandma Tildy’s house as a halfway house, rather than an orphanage. It didn’t change Clark’s status as a parentless child, but at least by using the term halfway house, it wouldn’t be a constant reminder that he’d never see his parents again.

Chen grinned. “See, you’re learning the ropes already. Stick with me, Clark, and you’ll have it made around here.”

Clark laughed a little. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“What are friends for?”

Clark nodded. “It’s good to have a friend. When I was told I was going to be sent here, there was a part of me that thought...I don’t know. That I’d be completely on my own.”

“When I first came here,” Chen replied, slipping into his memories, “I didn’t know *what* to expect. I made friends with everyone. Back then, we had a lot of...turnover. New boys coming in. Other boys moving out. A couple of runaways. It hurt, every time I had to say goodbye to someone I’d gotten close to. For a while, I kind of shut down. I tried not to make friends with anyone who came in. I thought I was protecting myself that way. It only made me feel worse because now I was lonely. So I made the decision to start making friends again, no matter how long or short the others might be here. I’m glad I did. I’ve kept in touch with a few who have moved on.”

“It’s better not to be alone,” Clark agreed.

“Much.” Chen picked up his plate and glass, then started for the kitchen sink. Clark followed. “That said, not everyone here feels the same, you know? There’s a couple of other guys you probably want to stay away from. They pretty much hate this place and everyone in it. It’s their way of dealing with their issues. I don’t want to see them hurt you.”

Clark gave him a wry grin. “I can handle myself.”

Chen gave him a skeptical once-over with his eyes. “Sure thing, Clark,” he said, his voice hinting at his disbelief.

“No, really,” Clark insisted. “I’m tougher than I look. That being said, I’m not eager to make enemies. So...who do I avoid?”

“Luis Martinez for one. Guy’s nothing but trouble. He’s been in and out of foster homes...oh...I guess it’s four times now. Randy Dawson’s another one. Grandma nearly threw him out last year for stealing from her. He gave back what he took and there haven’t been any other incidents, but he’s definitely not what I would call trustworthy, or friendly. You won’t have to worry about him for long. His aunt finally got on her feet and he’s set to go live with her at the end of next month.”

“Good to know,” Clark said. “Anyone else?”

Chen paused, thinking. “I guess that’s about it, for now. Unless someone decides they don’t like you for some reason.”

“Thanks, Chen.”

“Any time. Listen, I’m pretty much second in command around here, what with me planning on running things once Grandma retires. If anyone gives you a hard time, you let me know. Grandma and I will set things straight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now, let’s go see if the pool table is free. What you do say?”

“Let’s go,” Clark said brightly.

As they went down the hall toward the rec room, Clark found his heart feeling just the slightest bit lighter. Some of the gloom and doom had dissipated with Chen’s infectious grin and easy laugh. Though Clark didn’t know Chen for long, it wasn’t hard to see how genuinely good-natured the other boy was. For the first time, Clark thought he could learn to be content there, in that halfway house, if not ever completely happy. Maybe that would change, he mused, but for the time being, merely being content felt like a huge victory.

It was more than he ever could have hoped for.

Still, his heart was restless and he had his reservations about Grandma Tildy’s home.

Chief among his concerns were his powers. On his farm, he had had all the space he could ever want or need to work on his abilities without running the risk of being seen. But here things were different. Though he had the bedroom all to himself at the moment, he had no idea how long that might last. At any time, he could wind up with a roommate. And even if he didn’t, there was always someone around. There were always eyes that could catch him if he slipped up with his speed or strength. What then?

His lightened mood vanished as a little fear set in. He tried to banish such concerns from his mind but they lingered there, gnawing at the back of his brain, demanding that he figure something out. But no matter how hard he tried, he remained unable to come up with any real answers.

As he spent time with Chen, however, Clark found himself forgetting, at least a little, some of his worries. Day by day, he grew more and more relaxed in his new surroundings. He’d always had a knack for making friends easily, and before the week was out he was on good terms with just about every boy in the place, with the few exceptions Chen had warned him about. Though his heart never stopped longing for the life he’d once known, Clark grew to be at peace with his situation. He forgot, for a time, that his living arrangement could change at any time, if the courts decided he should be moved into a foster home. The small part of him that *did* remember it from time to time hoped that wouldn’t be the case. The friends he’d made at Grandma Tildy’s house were not people he wanted to lose.

So, each day, week, and month that went by without word from the courts made Clark breathe a little easier.

He never forgot, however, the way he’d heard Grandma Tildy fretting over the bills that first night. From the beginning, he did whatever he could to help out. During the warm weather, he organized a few of the other boys to tend to the yard work — weeding, cutting the lawn, trimming the bushes, hauling off any

dead branches that came down off the trees — effectively eliminating the need for paying the landscaping service she’d been using for the past three years. He and Chen got into the habit of clipping coupons for the local stores. Grandma Tildy did a fair amount of it herself, but it never hurt to have extra hands and eyes helping. Though Clark wasn’t particularly crafty, some of the other boys were, so he and one of the other boys, Quincy, organized some craft sales in town. The boys made whatever it was they were skilled in — some painted, some were woodworkers, one of them even enjoyed knitting — in large batches and sold them, putting all of the proceeds to the halfway house and into getting more supplies. Chen’s chocolate chip cookies were a particularly huge hit.

It made him glad, to be able to help out, even in small ways. He promised himself that, for as long as he lived, he would always do what he could to help people. His parents had instilled that in him — the desire to do good. In their memory, he would do everything within his power to be a force for goodness and justice.

The question was — how?

What career could he pursue which allowed him to help others, with minimal risk to himself? After all, he dared not let anyone even *suspect* him of being different from everyone else, let alone gather proof of it.

Joining the armed forces wasn’t an option. If he saw combat, he would almost certainly put his secret in jeopardy. The same was true if he became a police officer or firefighter. One wrong encounter, one moment where he should have been killed but wasn’t, and he would be exposed. He supposed he could be a doctor and help people, but medicine held no interest for him. And besides, that wasn’t *really* the way he wanted to help.

It came to him one afternoon while he, Chen, Grandma Tildy, and the others went into town. There were errands to run, so the older boys had been split up into teams, each of them looking out for the younger ones. Clark and Grandma Tildy wound up with the task of grocery shopping. He’d swapped with Chen, giving his friend a chance to stop by the library, where his girlfriend, Mina, worked.

“So, it’s been a couple of months,” Grandma Tildy said as they entered into Docker’s Groceries. “How are things going for you?”

“Good,” Clark immediately replied.

“Are you happy at the home?” she asked, grabbing a shopping cart.

Clark grabbed a second one. “More than I imagined I would ever be,” he said. “When I first came to the house, I think a part of me expected to hate it, no offense. It just wasn’t home, not by a long shot. But everyone’s been so nice and welcoming. It’s been nice to make such good friends. It’s...it’s made losing my folks...I don’t want to say easier but...maybe a little easier?”

Grandma Tildy hummed her understanding. “I’m glad you’ve found a little peace here. Really, I am.”

“I know. Hey, Grandma Tildy?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you. You know. For taking me in and all. I guess maybe you didn’t really have a choice. That some official or another just shipped me off your way whether or not you liked it. But...thanks. I know there are a lot worse places to wind up in. I’m glad you’ve made such a nice home for all of us.”

Grandma Tildy smiled, looking touched. “Well, thank you, Clark! It’s nice to hear that you like it here.”

“You haven’t...that is...the courts aren’t going to make me leave...are they?” he asked nervously. He’d never before had the heart to venture the question, but now he felt he needed to know. Grandma’s questions felt more than a little suspicious, in his mind.

She shook her graying head. “No. In fact, I heard from the court liaison this morning. You are to remain here. They think it’s in your best interest, what with there being no immediate family and all. And not enough foster homes to go around, I’m afraid.”

“So *that’s* why you asked me how I like the home?” he asked, keeping any accusations out of his voice.

“In part,” she admitted, pushing her shopping cart toward the produce section. She stopped by the first display and began to select which Empire apples she wanted. “I wanted to know how you felt, before I told you the news. But I *always* check in with the boys and see how they are feeling, even the long-term residents, like your friend, Chen.”

“I...I guess that’s true,” Clark admitted from the other side of the display, where he hefted a bag of lemons up to inspect them for signs of rot. He *had* seen Grandma Tildy chat with each boy from time to time, checking in with them.

“You two have gotten pretty close, huh?”

“Who? Chen and me? Yeah,” Clark said happily. “It’s weird. Almost as soon as I met him, I felt like I’d known him my whole life.”

She chuckled. “You’re both good kids. It makes my heart happy to see you two become such great friends. It’s done him a world of good to have you around. He’s always been such a serious boy. Not that it’s a bad thing, mind you. But in a lot of ways, he’s had to grow up far faster than he ever should have needed to. And that started well before things went so badly with his parents...with losing them the way he did. He told me not too long after he arrived at the house...oh, maybe a year after he arrived, I guess it was...that he wanted to learn everything about running the halfway house. He said he wanted to take over one day, if and when I was unable to run things. Or, barring that, open one of his very own, so that he could help kids the way he’d been helped.”

“So you took him under your wing,” Clark supplied.

Grandma Tildy nodded. “He was adamant about it, so, after a time, I agreed. I’ll admit, he’s made things run a lot more smoothly. I’m glad to have his help. But the responsibility he wanted to take on...it’s left him friendly but without a best friend. Until you arrived, that is. You don’t know how good it is to see him finally letting loose a bit and having more fun than I’ve ever seen him have. So, thank you, Clark.”

Clark smiled. “Glad to help. He’s a great guy.”

They moved in silence for a moment before Clark spoke again.

“Oh, watermelon! I have a coupon for that. Um...let’s see.” He flipped through the stack of coupons he’d stashed in his back pocket. “Ah, here it is. Forty cents off per pound.”

“Well, we can hardly pass up a deal like that!” Grandma Tildy said with a grin. She hesitated a moment though before selecting a melon. “Clark...what made you decide to organize all of the...well...all of the ways for us to save or make money?”

“Oh.” He blushed, his mind racing. He couldn’t tell her about the super-powered hearing he had that had let him listen in on her that first night. “I’m a farm kid,” he said after a moment. “We had our good years, but we had our lean years too. We were forever finding ways to cut costs and save money.” It wasn’t a lie, even if it wasn’t the reason why he’d started doing such things at the halfway house. “I guess it’s just sort of ingrained in me.”

Grandma nodded, easily accepting his explanation. “Your parents must have been some amazing people.”

“They were,” he agreed wistfully. “I wasn’t even theirs by blood. They found me on their doorstep one night,” he said, using the “official” story the Kents had been using since the beginning. “They didn’t have to take me in. They didn’t have to love me. But they did. They never hesitated to take in the abandoned infant they’d found. They loved me like I was their own flesh and blood.”

“It’s not hard to see why. You’re a pretty amazing kid, Clark.”

“Thanks,” he replied, fighting back an embarrassed blush. He knew he’d lost as soon as he felt even his ears go hot.

“And they raised you well. They’d be so proud of you.”

“They were,” he affirmed with a nod.

“I think they’d love how helpful you’ve been around the house,” Grandma Tildy continued, examining ears of corn for the barbecue they were planning for the next night.

“I like helping,” he said with a shrug. “I’d like to find a way to help people for the rest of my life. I just...I haven’t figured out *how* yet.”

“Well,” Grandma Tildy said, dismissing the corn she had in her hand and picking up a new one. “You should love the career you pursue. So, what are the things you like to do best?”

“Writing,” was his immediate answer. “I’ve always loved writing. Or did...before. Aside from my school work, I haven’t really done much writing since...since that day.” He didn’t need to specify what day he meant.

Grandma Tildy nodded. “Maybe it’s time to try writing again.”

“I don’t know,” he hesitated. “I haven’t exactly been...inspired lately.”

“All the more reason to try,” she gently argued back. “If writing is important to you, don’t let it get away from you.”

“I guess. But I don’t see how writing can help anyone. And I want to help people.”

“Writing can do plenty of good!” Grandma Tildy said, sounding a little surprised that Clark didn’t see whatever angle she did.

“How?”

“Well, for one thing, journalism! Investigative journalists help people all the time by uncovering corrupt politicians, or awful landlords, or how a proposed law might hurt the poor. They help put away drug lords and criminals. They protect the people, Clark.”

It was like a light bulb went off in Clark’s mind. Grandma Tildy was right! He *could* combine his desire to help people with his love of writing! And the best part was, he ran little to no risk of exposing his secret in doing so.

“You’re right,” he said, even as those thoughts whizzed through his mind. “It’s a perfect idea! Thanks, Grandma. I think, maybe, I’ll look into it more.”

The older woman smiled affectionately at him. “Glad to help.”

That night, after dinner was eaten and cleaned up, many of the boys turned in early for the night. The younger ones, in particular, had been exhausted after their day in town, and all the errands and fun they’d had. Even the older boys were subdued, drained from watching the younger ones all day long. No one complained — everyone had seemed more than willing and happy to lend a hand. But it did make for a very quiet evening overall.

“How’s Mina?” Clark asked Chen as they sat playing a hand of gin on Clark’s bed.

“Good,” Chen said, rearranging the worn cards in his hand. “She said to say hi to you.”

“Sorry I missed her today,” Clark replied as he looked over his cards. He’d met Chen’s girlfriend a couple of times before and liked her.

“No problem. Next time maybe we can grab an ice cream or something with her,” Chen said, the ever-present smile on his lips broadening.

“That would be great,” Clark agreed.

“In a couple of years, I’ll be able to access the money Grandpa set aside for me,” Chen continued dreamily. “The first thing I’m gonna do? Buy Mina a ring and ask her to marry me.”

Clark’s eyes widened and he nearly dropped his playing cards in surprise. He’d known the two were serious, but he’d never imagined that his friend had started planning for a wedding already.

“Wow!” he said. “That’s great, Chen! You two are really great together. And Mina is wonderful. But...are you sure she’s on the same page as you? I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Chen nodded. “We’ve talked about it a little. I know we’re young and I know that we’ll have to see how things are at that point, before I actually do it.”

“Then I wish you two a lifetime of happiness.” Clark grinned.

“You’ll be my best man, right?” Chen asked, all seriousness in his voice.

“Just you try and stop me,” Clark said, extending a hand and shaking on his promise.

A knock at the door cut their conversation short. Clark looked over and saw Grandma Tildy standing in the doorway. Her hands were clasped behind her back, a common stance of hers as she observed things or waited to speak with someone.

“Evening, Grandma,” Chen said respectfully as Clark echoed him.

“Hi, boys. Clark? Can I have a minute alone with you?”

Clark exchanged a look with his friend. Chen shrugged.

“Fine by me. I’m tired of losing to you tonight anyway, Clark.”

Clark chuckled. “Aww, you didn’t do too badly tonight,” he pointed out. “You won almost as many rounds as I did.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chen teased. “See you in the morning.”

“Night, Chen.”

Grandma Tildy waited until the older boy left the room with the deck of cards, promising to return them to the rec room before lights out. Then she came into the room and sat down on the foot of Clark’s bed.

“Is there something I can do for you?” Clark asked.

She smiled and shook her head. “No. I just wanted to give you this,” she said, pulling her right hand out from behind her back.

She held a black, leather-bound journal out to him. Clark took it, eying her with a small dose of confusion.

“I want you to get back to writing,” she said gently. “When we talked today at the grocery store, I saw a fire in your eyes as we discussed your writing and a potential career in journalism. So, when you and the others were at the playground with the younger kids, I stopped into the bookstore and got you this.”

“I can’t. . . it’s too much,” Clark protested.

“Nonsense,” she lightly chided. “Clark, you’re a very bright young man. I’d hate to see any talent of yours go wasted. Take the journal. Write. Every day.” She tapped a finger on the pristine black cover of the book. “Put down whatever it is you want. Random musings. Details about your days. Poems. Bits of fiction stories. Document the news. Whatever moves you. Just promise me that you’ll never lose your passion.”

Clark clutched the book to his chest, moved by the woman’s gesture.

“I promise,” he vowed.

The seasons changed. Spring gave way to summer. Summer faded into autumn. Autumn died in winter’s grasp. Winter yielded and fled before spring. Boys came into the halfway house. Others left — some to Clark’s great relief and others who left sadness in the wake of their departure. Not much changed in the house. There was always some chore to be done. There was school to attend. Homework to help the others with. Meals to cook. Errands to run.

It left Clark busy but content. He used his unnatural speed to get through what he could as fast as he could, but only when he was sure no one would catch him. He took to doing his homework alone in his room, right after school, while the others were typically grabbing a snack to tide themselves over until dinner. But he was bored with his classes. They offered him no challenge, so he begged and pleaded with the school to let him advance. With great reluctance, they agreed and after he’d proven that he could handle himself in the advanced classes, they allowed him to skip a grade level. It made Clark happy because it allowed him to be one step closer to his goal of becoming an investigative reporter.

As he’d promised Grandma Tildy, he kept writing. Every

night, after lights out, he would sit in his room and write — even if it was only a few sentences. Some nights he wrote in the dark, having discovered that his night vision was getting better and better all the time. So long as there was moonlight or starlight coming in through the windows, it was enough to let him see almost effortlessly in the dark room.

For the first time, he felt like the power he was gaining wasn’t a threat. He couldn’t accidentally hurt anyone with enhanced night vision. It was nice, to not have to worry about an emerging ability. And even though he was still growing stronger and faster as well, he’d long since developed a tight rein on his abilities. He only very rarely lost that tight control and broke something accidentally.

It was all too good to be true.

He should have known it wouldn’t last.

His powers — dormant for over a year — began to emerge once again.

It started late one night. Clark was helping Chen in the kitchen, as they prepared lunches for the other boys to take to school the following morning. They’d boiled up a large pot of eggs for egg salad sandwiches. Clark helped his friend peel the eggs and dice them up. As Chen went to the fridge for the mayonnaise, Clark grabbed the black pepper. The little glass shaker was nearly empty, so Clark went to the cupboard to get the large container of pepper they’d recently purchased. Carefully, he began to pour the pepper into the smaller vessel, but some spilled out, making a little cloud that tickled his nose. He sneezed, hard.

The blast that came shooting out of his mouth sent the pepper shaker flying clear across the kitchen. Chen had his back to Clark, so Clark chanced using a burst of his extraordinary speed. He plucked the pepper shaker out of the air just centimeters from where it would have smashed into the wall and broken. He sneezed again, just as hard, but managed to catch this one in his elbow, stopping it from causing any other potential disasters.

“Bless you,” Chen said, blissfully unaware of what was happening at his back.

Clark sped back over to his place at the kitchen island. “Thanks.”

No other incidents happened that night, but it was enough to put his nerves on edge. Every move he made for the rest of the night was made with fear and the utmost care. It took a long, long time for him to fall asleep, his mind spinning with fresh worries. What if Chen had seen something? What if he couldn’t hide it next time? His roommate’s snoring didn’t help matters either. In fact, it only made Clark’s worries deepen. What if he snored so harshly the bed fell apart?

When sleep came, it was plagued with bad dreams and he woke more exhausted than he’d been before his eyes had finally slid shut of their own accord.

For weeks, Clark walked on eggshells, careful not to breathe too hard or sigh too deeply, lest there be a repeat of the incident with the pepper shaker. Nothing happened. Gradually, he grew somewhat more relaxed. But people noticed — Grandma Tildy and Chen in particular. He brushed off their concerns and made excuses that he knew they only mostly bought. After a while, they stopped prying, especially once he started to feel more confident and began to act more like his old self.

Things settled back down for a while, but Clark had learned his lesson. He tried to stay hyper-vigilant about any signs that there might be more powers to come.

When it did happen, it caught him unaware, with no warning signs, as all the others before had done.

Clark had been living at Grandma Tildy’s for a little over two years. Everything had been going well for him. He hadn’t even had any further incidents with his breath, like he had that one scary night in the kitchen. Oh, he’d privately worked on it when he could, blowing leaves and the like across the large pond on the

very edge of the property. As he'd worked on controlling it, he'd learned that not only could he blow gale-force winds if he wanted to, he could also freeze things and hold his breath for a good twenty minutes at a time. The more he learned about this new power, the more at ease he grew. He came to accept it as just a part of who he was, that it was just another thing that set him apart as unique from everyone else.

He'd slipped back into his normal habits, his normal personality, more and more as each new day put the kitchen incident further and further behind him. He focused on his studies, easily passing even the accelerated classes he was in. He helped the others with their own schoolwork, even those who were older than he was. He kept up with his writing, filling the original book Grandma Tildy had given him and two others she gave him as replacements. He devised new ways for the halfway house to bring in money to help offset the costs of running the place. For two Christmases, he saw the other kids beam with delight over the gifts Grandma Tildy was now able to afford for them. He felt like he was really making a difference, and could scarcely wait for school to begin again in the fall, though the summer had only just begun. With his advanced classes, he would be considered a senior, and would have his diploma at the end of the school year.

It was an exciting prospect for him. He could hardly wait to have the freedom to pursue journalism as his career. He couldn't wait for the challenge of college. The only problem was money. He was only just fifteen now, and would be sixteen when he attained his high school diploma. He couldn't yet access the bank accounts left behind when his parents had passed away. And, at only fifteen, he had limited options for working. He needed to do better than unpaid internships and minimum wage jobs.

Of course, there was the chance he could get a scholarship, based on his academics or his sports prowess. But it was still a bit too early to tell and that worried him. He really, really wanted to get started on his college degree. He could scarcely wait to have his degree and have the freedom to start really making a difference in the world.

All of his plans shattered one bright, hot afternoon.

Clark woke up early that morning feeling good. He was well rested and didn't even entertain the notion of trying to go back to sleep. No one else was awake yet in the house — a quick scan with his enhanced hearing told him that. He slipped quietly out of his bed and dressed swiftly, careful not to wake Doug, his new roommate for the last three weeks. Then he went downstairs and fixed himself a bowl of cereal and a grapefruit after retrieving the paper from the front stoop. He read the paper as he ate, using his super speed to read every last word of it in less than the ten minutes it took him to finish his breakfast.

He sped through his chores as well, then fixed a lunch to take out to the pond. Grandma Tildy's husband had been an avid fisherman, so there were several rods and reels out in the shed that the boys could use if they wished. Clark selected his favorite rod — a black-and-icy-blue one — and got to work digging up worms, which he placed in a well-worn old butter tub. He grabbed a small tackle box of lures as well, and set off for the pond. He planned to catch and release the fish, so he didn't bother taking a bucket with him.

He got to the pond within minutes. Usually, he came with Chen or one of the others, but today it was nice to be alone. He'd grown up as an only child. It was what he was used to, even after two years of living at Grandma Tildy's house. Sometimes, he still got overwhelmed by the sheer amount of noise and people that were all under one roof. It made him savor the moments when he could just be alone all the more.

"This is more like it," he said to himself as he settled down on his favorite rock.

It was a large, flat stone that stuck straight out over the water, about four feet above the surface. A lot of the boys liked to use it

as a place to jump out into the water when they went swimming. For Clark, it was a perfect place to settle down with his fishing gear.

"You'd like this place, Dad," he said to himself. "It's teeming with fish. You know, I miss that...going fishing with you. We had some great times...and some great talks, all those times we'd go down to the creek for the day."

Clark sighed. If only he could see his parents one last time. If only he could hear one last piece of imparted wisdom from them. If only he could hug them once more, and tell them how much he loved them, and hear it in return. He thought it was supposed to get easier, as time passed, not harder. Oh, the grief in his heart was more bearable now, but he missed them more and more as time went on, not less.

"Well," he said, in an effort to pull his mind away from his sad thoughts, "let's see what we can catch today."

He busied himself with choosing a lure, then carefully knotting it on the line. He'd never been fond of the floating bobbers that would alert him to any nibbles at his bait — his hypersensitive body would do that job for him — so he opted not to attach one to his line. He chose the biggest, fattest worm he'd found and deftly set it on the hook. Cautiously holding back his strength, he cast the line out as far as he dared. Then he simply waited.

Nothing happened, so he reeled in a bit, jerking the line to try and mimic natural movements of the worm in the water. It didn't work. Nothing was attracted to his bait. He kept at it, until the line was completely reeled in. Then he repeated the process, sending the line out slightly more to the right, a little closer to a natural pile of rocks that stuck up out of the water like a barren little island. He had better luck there. Within seconds of the lure hitting the water, he felt something nibbling at the bait, but not enough to even attempt to set the hook in the fish's mouth. He tried reeling in a bit, but once the hook was out of the water he saw that whatever had been sampling his bait had eaten almost all of the worm. Only one tiny piece was left on the hook.

"Well played," he said lightly, as if the fish could hear him.

He reached into the old butter tub that was serving as his bait bucket and selected a huge, fat grub he'd come across. He easily baited the hook again and cast off, trying the opposite side of the miniature rock island. He got a solid hit this time. With a swift jerk of the rod, he set the hook and started to reel in. The fish felt big, and it was definitely a fighter. Clark was forced to carefully wrestle with it, ensuring that he steadily drew his catch in without over-stressing the fishing line, lest it break and lose both the fish and the lure in one fell swoop.

It took nearly five nerve-wracking minutes before the fish was finally just below the rock where Clark was sitting. Quickly, he laid down flat on his stomach and, using his hands, pulled the line up out of the water until he could reach the fish. Hooking his fingers into the gills, he hoisted his prize up onto the rock. He gave a low whistle as he finally got the fish completely onto the rock and got a good look at how large it really was.

"Wow," he breathed in awe. Then, upon a second glance, "Roy? Is that you?"

Clark inspected the fish a little closer. Yes, he was certain of it. The distinctive flare of red on the dorsal fin meant that this was a fish Clark knew. He'd caught this particular fish four times now. The first time, Zack had been with him, and had affectionately named the fish Roy, though Clark had never found out where the name had come from.

"Wow, you've really grown since last summer," Clark commented, eying the fish. "I can't wait to tell Zack later...maybe at dinner. But for now, let's get you back in the water."

With nimble fingers, he removed the hook from Roy's mouth. Then he gently released the fish back into the water, feeling satisfied as the huge fish darted away once he realized he was free.

Clark watched, a smile ghosting over his lips. It was kind of fun, seeing how much Roy had grown since he'd last caught him. And it was thrilling to have the kind of dumb luck it took to catch the same fish multiple times.

He prepped the hook again with another grub and cast out. As the morning wore on, he had five more hits. He hauled each one up onto the rock, looked his catch over, and released it again. After a while, he ran out of bait, but he wasn't yet ready to leave the pond. He merely sat on the rock, enjoying the warm sunshine and the calm quiet that encircled him. He let his mind wander as he sat, not realizing that his gaze was fixed on a maple tree about thirty feet away.

Suddenly, he smelled smoke. It pulled him out of his thoughts immediately, though it confused him. Why was he smelling smoke? Then, as his eyes swept the area, he saw it. Two smoldering holes in the bark of the maple tree. Panicked, Clark looked around. All he had that could help was the small butter tub he'd had his bait in. It was good enough. He rushed to fill it and flung the water at the tree, extinguishing the heat and smoke. To be on the safe side, he doused the entire area several times, then used his icy breath to ensure that the danger was truly snuffed out.

Standing back, looking at what he'd done, he began to tremble.

He knew he'd caused the blaze, even though he didn't recall exactly how it had happened. He knew he'd been looking at the tree, without really even seeing it, and somehow it had begun to smoke. It terrified him to his very core. What if he'd been in the house when it had happened? What if he'd actually harmed one of the other boys, or Grandma Tildy? And how? How had he summoned up heat — presumably from his eyes — like that? Could he do it at will? Was it a random fluke? Was it something that would happen without warning from now on?

"Oh God," he moaned, placing his head into his hands. He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes until he saw flashes of color. "Why is this happening to me?"

For a long time, his thoughts kept running in turbulent circles. Eventually, however, he came to one blinding conclusion, though he was loathe to make it.

"I can't stay here," he whispered, as if saying it with actual words somehow made it more real. "It's too dangerous."

This time, he knew it really was true. This wasn't a case of just getting caught and having his secret exposed. This was a matter of safety for everyone else in the halfway house. He couldn't trust himself not to burn down the place without meaning to. Leaving was the best way, in his mind, to ensure that everyone else stayed safe. He didn't want to leave — he'd grown to like it at Grandma Tildy's house — but he saw no other way.

"Tonight," he whispered into the light breeze, letting it bear away his promise, even if it couldn't take away his regret.

It was an effort to get through the rest of the day without raising anyone's suspicions. He lingered at the pond as long as he could, but slipped off when he heard a group of the older boys making their way over for a mid-afternoon swim. He met Zack at the shed as he was putting away the fishing gear he'd borrowed. As he'd promised the fish, he told the other boy about catching Roy and of how big the fish had grown. Zack looked and sounded excited, and babbled on about maybe trying to catch Roy again in another week or two. Clark stayed mute, but the other boy didn't notice.

When it was time for dinner, Clark savored every last bite of Grandma Tildy's cooking. The woman was a talented chef; he would truly miss the meals she prepared. And, he thought to himself with a mental sigh, he did not know when he might eat again. So he devoured everything, even going back for seconds, once he saw some of the others doing so. He made pleasant small talk with his friends, forcing himself to keep a feigned veneer of happiness in his words and over his features. But he pretended

tiredness when they invited him to play some games afterward, saying that he was going to turn in early for the night.

"Awww, come on, Clark," Chen pressed. "Just a couple of knock hockey games."

He shook his head. "Maybe another time," he forced himself to say. "I think I was out in the sun too long today. I'm beat."

Chen nodded slowly. "Yeah...I guess. That usually makes me tired too. And gives me a headache. Probably not the best combo for playing knock hockey with." He shrugged easily. "Okay, feel better."

"Thanks, Chen. Goodnight," Clark said as they parted ways at the stairs which led up to the bedrooms.

"Night," Chen said over his shoulder as he continued on to the rec room.

Clark sighed deeply as he watched his friend's retreating form. This was going to be a lot more painful than he'd bargained for, he knew. And yet, he'd always known that, even if everything had worked out with his powers, he couldn't stay in the halfway house forever. Sooner or later, it would be time to move on. He just wished it would have come later, rather than sooner.

He ascended the steps, steadily making his way to his bedroom. Doug was still downstairs; he'd overheard the other boy talking about watching a new game show that was airing on television that night. Not willing to take any chances though, Clark allowed himself to pack up his things at super speed. He stashed everything under his bed, letting the overhang of the comforter hide it all from view. He thought about writing for a while as he waited for lights out, but his heart was hammering too fast in his chest and his hands were shaking as the enormity of what he was about to do set in. He considered at least writing a note to leave behind, but he was at a loss for words.

He laid down and stretched out under his blankets, trying to will the time to pass by. He kept his eyes studiously shut, in case the weird heat ability should kick in and set the ceiling ablaze. After a while, he must have dozed off. The next thing he knew, the room was completely dark and he could hear Doug snoring lightly. A glance at the clock told him it was five after two in the morning; well past the time when he'd planned on being out of the house.

He slipped out of bed and tugged on his sneakers. He'd never bothered to change into pajamas when he'd gone up to his bed. Laying on the floor, he retrieved his bags, taking a moment to double-check that he had everything. Quietly, he went to the door and opened it, listening with his powerful hearing. No one was awake, much to his relief, though it came as no real surprise. He slipped out of the room and shut the door behind him.

With infinite care, he crept down the steps, stopping every couple of feet to listen and ensure that he hadn't woken anyone up. He made it down to the first floor without incident and left his bags on the floor by the stairs before darting to the kitchen. There was no need for him to turn on any lights as he rummaged around, grabbing what he could and shoving it all in couple of plastic bags. He didn't know where he was going and when he would find food, and didn't want to take any chances of starving to death, though there was a part of him that recognized that he didn't require food in the same desperate way that normal people did. Clark didn't take too much of any one item, not wishing to deplete Grandma Tildy's stock too badly.

When he thought he had enough — or, at least had taken as much as he dared — he went back to the living room and gathered his things. For one heart-stopping moment, he froze in place, fearing he'd been caught as he heard footsteps overhead. But as he listened, he realized that it was just Reggie shuffling off to the bathroom, yawning sleepily as he did so. Less than two minutes later, Clark heard the toilet flush, even without the use of his powers. The footsteps followed their path back to bed and Clark felt himself relaxing a bit. But he remained still, just to be sure.

Five minutes passed and Clark heard no more noises. He slung

his backpack over his shoulder and inched his careful way across the room to the door. With glacial speed, he unlocked the door, pulled it open, and slipped out into the night. He still had his key, so he gently locked it again before he melted into the shadows and walked into homelessness.

At the end of the long driveway, he stopped and turned back for one last, lingering look at the place that had been his home for two years. It stood silent, dark, and lifeless in the moonlight. Nothing stirred within. Night insects and frogs gave voice to the night. Nearby, an owl hooted, making Clark jump and his heart thump even more wildly. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention and he nervously chuckled to himself.

“Just an owl,” he admonished himself in a whisper. He turned his attention back to the house and sighed sadly. “I’m sorry,” he whispered again, this time to the occupants of the halfway house. “I really am. But I can’t risk hurting you. Still...I won’t forget any of you. I’ll find a way to make it up to you all. Somehow.”

His heart breaking, he put his back to the house and began to walk.

At first, all he could do was walk, his heart too heavy to let him do much else. But as the night grew old and Clark realized how little distance he was putting between himself and the house, he began to jog, then run. He knew he had to find a place to lay low during the day. He knew Grandma Tildy would be worried and look for him. He knew a search party would be formed, police and all. And if he was found, he would be brought back to the halfway house. Grandma Tildy would be angry with him and would keep a close eye on him to ensure that he didn’t sneak off again. That was something he couldn’t risk.

So he ran through the night.

By dawn, he was at least half a day’s journey by car away from the halfway house. There was little to no chance that a search party on foot would be able to find him. He found a wooded area with a little stream running through it and figured it was a good place to pass the daylight hours in. A shallow, natural cave in the cliff near the water’s edge would screen him from sight from the north, east, and south. The stream would allow him to drink his fill, and after running all night long, he was parched.

When he was done drinking, he unwrapped a Twinkie and ate it silently, watching the sky grow ever lighter. He wondered where he was. He hadn’t thought to take a map with him, not that it mattered much. He’d neither taken the time to take note of what direction he’d raced during the night, nor had he counted the miles as he’d blindly fled from the halfway house. In the end, Clark admitted that it probably didn’t matter much where he was. He could never go back, lest he put Grandma Tildy and the others in harm’s way. And when he’d left, he’d had no particular destination in mind.

Once he was done eating, he drank a bit more from the stream and splashed some cool water on his face and neck, not because he was sweaty — he was never sweaty, he’d come to realize the summer before when it had rarely dropped below ninety degrees each day — but because it felt refreshing, like it revitalized him somehow. Then he retreated back to the cave, stretched out on a blanket, and slept in a pool of sunlight.

It was late afternoon when he woke. Clark pulled out an apple and ate it slowly, along with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The meager meal somehow left him feeling emptier than before, mostly because he was already feeling homesick, though he wasn’t just longing for the halfway house and all of his friends. He missed Smallville terribly, but even if he’d known how to get there, he knew in his heart that he couldn’t go back there. He had to avoid anywhere he might be recognized, lest he be forced to return to the halfway house.

“Maybe east,” he said to himself as he nibbled the last bite of his sandwich. “Lose myself in a big city somewhere. Yeah,” he said with a nod. “East.”

Clark steadily made his way eastward, just as he’d promised himself, but not at the pace he’d initially imagined he would have. Instead of rushing into things, he took it slowly, cautiously. During the summer, he camped out in wooded areas as much as he could, always by rivers or streams where he could drink and catch fish for his meals. He tried his hand at hunting small game — rabbits, pheasants, and the like — but was largely unsuccessful. He found nuts, berries, and mushrooms to supplement his diet, knowing from his farmland upbringing which were fit for human consumption and which were poisonous, though a part of him wondered if the poisonous ones would have any effect on him if he *did* partake of them.

For his shelters, he tried to find uninhabited caves, overhanging rocks, or built lean-tos from the forest brush and dead tree limbs. Once, he came across a broken tent some camper had abandoned. He discarded the busted poles and, instead, used tree branches he found to fix it as best he could. It sufficed, and it was nice to be protected from the rain that poured down in buckets for the following week, until the wind tore it loose one night and it flew into a thorny bush, tearing beyond repair.

Summer gradually faded into autumn. Clark was thankful that it was a fairly mild autumn and that he could continue to camp in relative peace and comfort. But the autumn did bring a new challenge — hunters. Some of the forested areas he wound his way through were crawling with hunters in camouflage greens and browns, with blaze orange vests or hats. Some carried rifles, others bows and arrows. Clark remained extra vigilant to avoid being seen by them. He neither wanted to run the risk of being recognized as a runaway nor did he want to be accidentally shot at, not that it would have made a difference, with his impervious flesh.

Winter was the biggest challenge. As the temperature dropped and the snow fell, Clark was at a loss as to what to do. The freezing temperatures didn’t bother him — he’d never been bothered by extreme heat or cold, though he *did* wear his father’s warm coat that he’d brought with him to Grandma Tildy’s. But that didn’t detract from the fact that he was tired of wandering. He just wanted to stay put in one place for a while, at least until the spring when traveling would be considerably easier. By January he’d already been stuck in three blizzards, and had trudged through snow in some places that had reached halfway up his thighs.

But he couldn’t find a suitable spot, so he kept moving, until one evening just as the sun was going down. He wasn’t exactly sure what state he was in, but after a week of making his way through open spaces and bustling suburbs, he was once again in the mountains and forest. He’d been traveling for nearly twenty-four hours, and was reaching the limit of even his incredible endurance. He was in desperate need of a place to settle down and rest for a while, but so far, he’d remained unsuccessful. He wanted a warm, dry, protected place where he could hunker down for at least a couple of days; his enhanced sense of smell told him that another snowstorm was on the way.

He was hiking alongside a swift-running, icy stream that flowed too fast to allow it to freeze solid. Up ahead, somewhere in the near distance, he could hear the tumultuous rumble of a waterfall. Suddenly, out of the growing gloom, a cabin appeared before him. At first, Clark was cautious, in case anyone was inside. But he heard nothing as he listened outside of the normal forest noises — a deer stalking through the trees, looking for food, a squirrel chattering angrily at his passage, a fox chasing after some small prey, a couple of winter birds tweeting to each other. Boldly, he got closer, using his newly discovered x-ray vision to scan the building for signs of life.

He found nothing.

Clark approached the door and it swung open beneath his hand

as his palm met the wood. He stepped inside after stomping the snow off his shoes.

“Hello?” he called out, even though he knew the place was empty.

It didn’t take much for him to realize that the cabin was completely abandoned. The place reeked of disuse and disrepair. Even the mouse droppings he found were stale, old, and white with age. He could smell the rot in the wood, deep-set and unrelenting. It wasn’t an ideal place to camp out for the winter, but it would do. At the very least, Clark didn’t have to fear that someone would come along and take offense to the squatter that had taken over the place.

There wasn’t much to the cabin. Just a main living space, two small bedrooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen. As Clark poked around, he realized that the place had once used a generator to run the few sparse lights, fridge, and running water. But the generator was rusted into oblivion, not that Clark had fuel to run it with anyway. It didn’t matter. He would make do without the comforts of modern society, just as he had since he’d fled Grandma Tildy’s house.

In one of the bedrooms, he found a plastic bin and investigated the contents. Somehow, against all odds, the bin had stayed dry and undisturbed by insects or rodents. In the dying sunlight, he took stock of what was inside, finding a few useful items. A dark green sleeping bag which was thick and waterproof. A rusted, but serviceable, hiking frame backpack, which would come in handy once the spring came and thawed the land, allowing Clark to continue on. A pocketknife, still sharp enough to be of use. A couple of flashlights and extra batteries. Clark tried them, but found them to be dead, so he set them aside. A box of matches. A first-aid kit, not that he would need it. And a pair of glasses.

He tried the glasses on first, drawn to them in some inexplicable way. A thought formed in the back of his mind. He could use them to his advantage. Oh, too be sure, they were slightly ill-fitting, but he could make them work. The lenses were too strong to see clearly out of — Clark figured he could pop them out and perhaps cut new ones from an old, broken pane of glass that had been replaced in the bedroom window but never discarded. Instead, it stood forsaken in the corner of the room, so dingy it was nearly opaque. He smiled to himself.

“Perfect,” he said in a near whisper.

The weight of the glasses would be a constant reminder to him to ensure that he kept tight control over his newer abilities, particularly his heat vision. And if he *did* accidentally use his powers while wearing the glasses, the melting frames and lenses would alert him to what was happening before things could get completely out of control. Satisfied, he laid them aside, planning to make the new lenses the next day if he got the chance.

Clark opened up the sleeping bag next and inspected it carefully, but it was in perfect condition. Not a spot of mold or tear in the fabric could be detected. He laid it out in the living room, before the stone-cold fireplace. There was no wood at hand to make a fire with, and he was too tired to be bothered with it anyway. He climbed into the sleeping bag, closed his eyes, and was asleep in mere moments.

The morning dawned bleak and frigid. Clark headed out early, sweeping the woods immediately outside the cabin for broken limbs and dry brush he could use for fires. Feeling refreshed from so many hours of sleep, he worked at super speed, and before noon, he had a pile of wood stacked up outside the cabin large enough to last a month or more. He wanted to expand the stockpile even more, but knew that it was more important to turn his attention to food. The obvious choice was the stream. It wasn’t very wide, but it was fairly deep — at least up to his waist, as he ventured into the icy waters. Using his hands, he caught several large fish — enough to last him a couple of days, so long as he buried them in the snow to stave off spoilage.

With some fish at hand and wood to cook it over, Clark finally felt like he could breathe a sigh of relief. That didn’t however, give him an excuse to rest. He stopped to change into dry pants, then headed back outside. He searched around, looking for fallen nuts from the trees. He found more than he’d hoped to, and used one of his t-shirts as a makeshift sack to carry them in. There were a few game trails around and Clark set some simple snares.

Before he knew it, the winter sun was already setting, so Clark headed back to the cabin. He took an armload of wood inside with him, enough to last the night at least, and set them in the fireplace. He attempted to use his heat vision to start the blaze. He’d been working on it, little by little, almost every day. It was still fairly unreliable, but at least he hadn’t accidentally started any more fires. Today, however, the ability failed him, and he was forced to use one of the matches he’d found the night before. They were cheap matches, he saw, and the first two he tried refused to light, no matter how many times he struck them on the side of the box.

“Third time’s the charm,” he muttered to himself as he took out another match.

This one lit easily, and Clark strategically placed it against the wood, setting it ablaze in a few spots. Within minutes, he had a cozy fire going, which threw much-needed light and much-appreciated heat to the darkening room. Swiftly, he prepared the fish, skewered it with a thin piece of wood, and roasted it over the flames until it was hot and flaky. He ate it slowly, savoring each morsel, and allowed himself a handful of the acorns he’d found. It was a veritable feast; his last meal had been more than a week before.

Sated, he cut the lenses for his glasses — thankful that this time his heat vision had decided to cooperate, even if it had been in fits and starts — and then slept again, thankful for the roof above his head as the snow began to fall.

It was a particularly rough winter. Snow fell more often than not. The temperature felt like it rarely broke above freezing. Clark kept himself as busy as he could, finding firewood, foraging for nuts, fishing with his bare hands, checking his snares. It paid off; he ate well enough that winter, even if he longed for variety in his food. He missed fresh fruits and vegetables fiercely. But mostly, he was bored and lonely. And despite how often he was outside, he was stir-crazy.

When he wasn’t actively tending to his few needs, he worked on his powers. Before the winter was out, he finally felt like he had mastered his heat vision. In a way, out on his own, in the middle of the forest and away from people, it was almost kind of fun to perfect his ability. It was true that he had to be careful about setting the trees on fire, but with the stream at hand, as well as all the snow, he felt confident he could snuff out any blaze long before it could pose a threat to anything. He made a fun game of it — sitting up in a tree and melting his name into the snow below with his eyes, lighting his nightly fire in the cabin’s hearth, melting blocks of ice in the stream, even reheating leftover food in the mornings for a hot meal to start the day.

Despite his loneliness, he was content enough.

Still, when spring finally broke, he was more than eager to move on. He was thankful for the protection the cabin had given him during the long, cold winter, and he would even kind of miss the place. But he wanted to keep going, to find somewhere in the world where he could start building a life, even if it meant exposing himself to the possibility that he would be recognized as a runaway and returned to the halfway house. Although, he had to admit, that was becoming more and more unlikely by the day.

“I’m too fast for them to catch,” he told himself as he walked, the salvaged hiking frame on his back, packed with the sleeping bag and as much dried meat and nuts as he could fit inside. “I’m too strong to be held.”

He knew he’d never hurt anyone in an attempt to stay free, but

he also trusted himself enough by then to know he could defend himself without running that risk.

"I'm in control," he assured himself. "I'm not a danger. Not anymore."

He stopped dead in his tracks, thunderstruck, as the revelation crashed over him.

"I'm not a danger anymore," he repeated in a low, awed voice.

He hadn't thought of himself that way before, not really. He'd known he was in control of his powers. He'd known he was comfortable now with the changes that had been taking place in his body since he was about ten years old. But he simply hadn't stopped to consider if his newfound control over some of his more frightening and deadly powers rendered him safe to be around people yet. But now, standing beneath the spreading, still-naked branches of a birch tree, he knew it was true.

"Wow," he breathed in wonder.

But what did that really *mean*? And did he *really* want to delve into all the terrifying implications?

He had no choice. His mind whirled into motion.

"I don't have to hide anymore," he whispered as he forced himself to keep walking. "I could go back."

But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, I can't. It's too late. And what excuse can I give for my disappearance, if they would even take me back?" He sighed. "No. Going back isn't an option. I have to look ahead."

By the late spring, he found himself in Gotham City. He was now sixteen. He still couldn't do much better than minimum-wage jobs, but more places seemed willing to hire a sixteen-year-old, as opposed to someone who was just fifteen. He really wished he could just finish up his high school degree, but it was more immediately important to secure food, new clothing, and a place to sleep at night. So he took a job bagging groceries at one of the local supermarkets. It was a simple "mom and pop" shop, so they couldn't offer him much money, but the owners were able to pay slightly more than the minimum wage. On the downside, there weren't many hours that they could offer him, so he looked for another job.

Before a month was out, he was working three part-time jobs — bagging groceries, unloading shipments off trucks for a local furniture store, and stocking the shelves of a large craft store in the early morning hours. The work left him tired, but happy. He was making steady money, even if it wasn't much. But it was enough to allow him to replace his worn clothing, and buy some food for himself every now and again. It wasn't truly enough to live on, and he found himself partaking of the meals served at one of the city's soup kitchens more often than not.

And there was still the problem of housing. At only sixteen, he was too young to rent an apartment. He tried a few of the homeless shelters, and had nothing but trouble. A couple of times, he'd fallen too deeply asleep, so that even his powers didn't pick up on the fact that his money was being stolen. He was more cautious after that, but he was too young still to open a bank account. And he didn't really want his identity out there, in case he was still being looked for as a runaway. That was at the first shelter. At the second one he stayed at, a drunkard tried to pick a fight with him. The man had punched him in the gut, unprovoked, and screamed in pain as his fist smashed into Clark's steel-hard body. Clark had needed to feign getting the wind knocked out of him, but the ordeal had unnerved him and he hadn't returned to that shelter again.

At the third one, one of the people who worked there took an immediate disliking to him — for what reason, he never discovered — and actively worked to make Clark's life a living hell. He thought about fighting against it, but, for all his extraordinary powers, he felt completely powerless in the

situation. He hated running away from his problems — it brought back all too vivid memories of fleeing Grandma Tildy's house — but he didn't see another option. Besides, it was no great loss to him. The shelter wasn't well cared for, and gave him the creeps. He went across town to another shelter, even though it put him at a commute time of over half an hour to get to his jobs.

The last place wasn't too bad. The staff mostly left everyone alone, unless there was a problem. Clark kept his wits about him and kept as low a profile as he could. He spent every available moment hoping to find an opportunity to better his life though. But fate wasn't so kind. After a mere two months on the job, the grocery store shut down. It simply couldn't compete with the big chain stores that were popping up all over the place. And the furniture store cut his hours after the boss' nephew was hired on for the summer.

Things were spiraling downward for Clark, and he began to think about where he might want to try next.

He was sitting in one of the parks one afternoon, on one of his days off. He was at one end of a bench, in front of a sizeable pond, idly crumbling the remnants of a sandwich he'd bought for himself. He tossed the crumbs to the ducks that were swimming by and roaming around on the grass. It was a simple pleasure and Clark almost felt like things were okay in his tumultuous little world. For the moment, he could set his troubles aside and focus only on the serenity of the present.

And yet, even as he watched the ducks, there was a small part of his mind that was devoted to his situation. He was aware of the things he would need to replace if he was to take to the road again. His shoes, for one thing. They were getting a bit tight on his feet and the soles, though still sturdy, were wearing down. He had enough saved up, he knew, to get the things he needed, if he shopped smartly and found things on sale. Or even, he mused, found discarded by those who could afford to dispose of still-serviceable goods.

"This seat taken?"

"Huh?" Clark snapped out of his thoughts. Then, as his mind caught up, "Uh, no. It's all yours."

"Thanks," the man said as he gracefully sat at the far end of the bench.

Clark looked around. The other benches were full of people out enjoying the warm sunshine after a week of dreary, rainy weather. He couldn't blame them all for swarming the park like they were. Most of them were men and women in business suits, all of them out enjoying their lunch hour out in the pleasant outdoors. Clark craned his neck up, looking at the impressive glass and steel buildings all around. The shortest of them had to be twenty floors, he thought without really counting.

"Nice day," the man commented.

"Sure is," Clark said politely.

"So much rain lately. It's nice to get outside," the newcomer mused.

Clark nodded. "I was just thinking the same thing."

A silence fell, for which Clark was glad. He didn't feel much like making small talk with a stranger. He threw the last few crumbs of bread to the ducks, then wiped his hands on his pant legs.

"Sorry, guys," he told the ducks as a couple of them approached, quacking. "That's all I have. Maybe next time."

"Have I seen you around, somewhere?" the stranger asked, studying Clark a little.

Panic shot through Clark. "I... don't think so?" he ventured, his voice more of a question than anything else.

The stranger nodded. "Yes, I remember now. I saw you the other day, at the craft store. You were stocking the shelves with yarn."

"I... uh..." Clark stammered. It was true he'd recently helped stocking the yarn section, but that had been before the store had

been opened for the day. How had this stranger seen him?
“How...?”

The stranger chuckled. “I know. It was early, before the store was open. I was there on business, and it was easier to get it out of the way before the doors opened to the public.”

Clark nodded. It made sense. Investors or representatives trying to get the store to sell new products sometimes came in before the place opened. He barely ever paid them any mind though, choosing, instead, to focus on his work.

“Can I ask you something?” the man continued.

“Uh...sure?” Clark replied warily.

“Do you like it? The store, I mean. The managers. The business model.”

“Why?” he asked, eyeing the stranger a bit suspiciously now.

The man chuckled a bit. “Sorry. I’m not trying to be a creep or anything. I’m genuinely curious. My company is looking to affiliate itself with the store and I’m just looking for a little honest feedback from some of the people who work there. People like you. Because if the little guys — and I don’t mean that offensively at all — aren’t being treated well, then maybe my company needs to implement some changes if we decide to get involved. Or maybe we take our business elsewhere.”

That relaxed Clark a little bit, though he retained a healthy dose of skepticism.

“The managers are really nice,” he said after a moment of thought. “They expect a lot out of the people who work for them, but I can’t blame them. They want their business to run smoothly. Who wouldn’t want that?” He shrugged. “They’ve been more than fair to me. I can’t speak for the others, of course, but I’ve never heard any complaints. They’ve given me a chance to make something of myself. I’m grateful to them.”

The stranger nodded thoughtfully. “I see. How so?”

Clark shrugged again. “I came to the city, alone, without any real work experience and without any real reason for anyone to hire me, but they took a chance on me anyway. I’ve learned a lot from them.”

“So, they’ve been good to you?”

“Yes,” Clark said without hesitation. “More than I ever had the right to imagine they would be.”

The stranger appraised him for a moment before speaking again.

“What makes you say that?” he asked.

“I...” Clark stammered. “I’m not sure I want to get into it with a stranger. No offense.”

The stranger laughed. “Fair enough!” He stood. “As it is, I need to be getting back to work. Look...uh...”

“Clark,” Clark supplied.

“Clark.” The man nodded. “Thanks for the insight. It’s much appreciated.”

“Happy to help. Good luck with your business dealings, if you choose to pursue them. Tabitha and Paul are great managers. Your company will have an easy time, working with them.”

“Good to know. And good luck to you, Clark.”

“Thanks.”

With that, the stranger moved on. Clark sat back into the bench, stretching his legs out before him, his hands behind his head. He looked up into the sky, putting the encounter with the pleasant stranger behind him. He still had a few hours before he needed to be back at the shelter, so he lingered in the park for a while. Then, as the sky started to turn orange and pink, he made his way back, forgoing the opportunity to grab a meal at the soup kitchen he had to pass by. He simply wasn’t hungry. But he was looking forward to his early shift at the craft store. Somehow, giving his positive feedback to the stranger in the park had heightened his pride in working for the place.

As the summer progressed, Clark found himself frequenting

the little park more and more often, when he had some free time in between his jobs. He kept looking for another job to fill the void that had formed when the grocery store had gone out of business, but remained unsuccessful. There was simply too much competition with all of the students looking for work on their summer break. He wasn’t happy about the situation, but was grateful he had the jobs he did. He worked hard and never complained. Of course, his powers gave him a leg up, he knew. He didn’t tire as easily as a regular person, and he could lift things with ease. He could even forgo food and water for much, much longer than anyone else, making it a simple thing to work through a break or through lunch if he needed to.

His managers noticed his dedication, and rewarded him by increasing his hours when he asked, though it wasn’t by much. They simply couldn’t offer more than a few extra hours a week. Clark understood. The work just wasn’t there. Perhaps it would change, come the fall, when students returned back to school, but in the meantime, Clark took what he could, in terms of hours and covering shifts for those who couldn’t make it to work.

It was the housing issue that worried him the most. He hated staying at the homeless shelter. He didn’t like the environment, nor did he like having to fear if one of the others living there would steal from him or try to pick a fight with him. He knew he appeared to be an easy target. Though he was lean and muscular, he was young. And that made others think that he was unable to defend himself or stand up for himself. But he was still too young to be taken seriously to rent an apartment, even if he had the money to. The situation worried him endlessly, but he saw no clear answers.

He did know that he preferred the shelter to the streets. At least at the shelter he had a roof over his head.

But for how long? he wondered. Most of the shelters had a time limit on how long any one person could stay there, regardless of how well behaved they were.

He thought about trying to find someone with an apartment, who needed a roommate. It was a good compromise, he told himself. He could chip into the rent, as much as his paychecks allowed. The trade-off would be the loss of what little privacy he had. What if his powers flared up unexpectedly? On the other hand, wasn’t he already tempting fate by staying in a shelter, which was *always* full of other people?

Clark squinted up at the sky, judging the time. His watch had long since been stolen, at the first shelter he’d stayed at. It hadn’t been too great a loss — at the time, he’d known the battery was winding down and he hadn’t had the money to spare to get it replaced. It was a bit late in the day to start his roommate search in earnest; he would start fresh in the morning. He had no work scheduled for the next day, so he could dedicate the entire day to his search.

“Hi, Clark.”

Clark looked over at the now-familiar voice.

“Hey,” he replied, by way of greeting.

Over the weeks since he’d first met the stranger in the park, who’d asked him about his experience working for the craft store, he’d seen the man many more times. They’d talked often, and struck up a friendship of sorts, though Clark had never even asked the man his name. Now, like always, the man gestured to the empty side of the park bench.

“May I?”

Clark nodded. “Of course.”

“How’s everything going?”

“Can’t complain,” Clark said, watching the ducks swimming in the pond. “You?”

“Can’t complain,” came the response. It was accompanied by an amused smile. “What’s new?”

Clark shrugged. “I’m going to be looking for an apartment,” he offered.

The man arched an eyebrow. "Aren't you a bit young to rent a place?"

Clark gave him a half smile. "Well, okay. I'm in the market to find someone who needs a roommate. Someone who has a place already, that is."

"Ah," the man said in understanding.

"It needs to be soon," Clark said, more thinking aloud than as something meant for the other man to hear.

"In a rush to move out?" the other man joked.

He shook his head. "It's not like that." He sighed.

"Sorry," was the apology. "Is everything alright?"

Clark hesitated. Though this man was someone he'd been talking to for weeks, did Clark really want to get into such personal things with him?

"Look, I'm not trying to pry," the other said. "You're entitled to your privacy."

"It's...not that," Clark said, choosing his words carefully. "It's just...it's kind of embarrassing, I guess."

The man gave him an understanding nod.

"I...uh...I don't think someone like you would understand. Not really," Clark said, blushing a bit. "No offense."

The other man looked at him thoughtfully. "What makes you say that?"

"Well," Clark replied, clearing his throat a bit. "Look at you. I mean, I don't know much about you, mister, but we've been talking for weeks now. And I've learned some things about you. You're a successful business man. It doesn't take much to see that. Those shoes alone probably cost more than I could make in a year at my part time jobs. You've talked about I don't even know how many business deals...or, I guess alluded to them, is the correct wording. The day I met you, you were trying to decide if your company should have dealings with the craft store I work at. I may not have a business degree, but I can read between the lines well enough. Your company, whatever it is, was looking to take the store over. You didn't, but still." He shrugged. "I understood what you meant."

Clark paused for a moment and looked away, watching the families that were walking together through the park, and a stab of longing pierced his heart. He would have given anything to have his parents back.

"But me? I'm nothing. A nobody. I work part-time jobs just to scrape up enough to be able to afford food and the occasional new shirt or pair of shoes as I outgrow the things I have. I'm not even sure I have enough to really even offer much to a potential roommate, but I have to try because I'm getting close to the time limit at the shelter and I don't want to be sleeping on this park bench at night."

He clamped his mouth shut against the emotional monologue that had sprung, unbidden, from his throat. He'd never in a million years wanted to divulge such personal information to this stranger, as friendly as the two had become.

The man's face softened and turned sad. "Oh, Clark. I'm so sorry. I never realized..."

"No, it's fine," Clark interrupted.

"No, it isn't," the other said with conviction.

"Really. I'm fine on my own," Clark said.

"Isn't there someone...?"

He shook his head. "It's just me. My folks died when I was thirteen. I've got no other family." He shrugged again, as though it wasn't a big deal. "I'm fine."

The other man shook his head. "I'm so sorry. I know what that's like. To lose your family, I mean."

"You do?" That perked up Clark's interest.

"I do," the man said, with a nod. "I lost my parents when I was younger than you. I was eight. There was...an incident with a mugger. We just happened to be in wrong place at the wrong time. They gave the man what he asked for but...I think the mugger was

scared. He had a gun..." His voice trailed off.

Clark found his heart hurting for the man. "I'm sorry, mister. My parents...I lost them together too. Well...my mom first. We were in a car accident. She was killed instantly. And my dad... he'd had a heart attack that day, so he was already in bad shape. He had another that night and his body just couldn't handle the two, back-to-back like that."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "I'm so sorry, Clark. Have you've been on the streets since then?"

Clark hesitated, but something told him to trust this stranger, just as he had all the other times they'd spoken. "Not quite. I was in a halfway house for a while."

"And you...what? Aged out?"

"Um...not quite."

"Ah. You left."

Clark nodded, feeling ashamed. "Yeah."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to run off to the police and report you as a runaway or anything. Although I'm sure someone at the halfway house is looking for you. And I'm also sure you had your reasons for feeling like you needed to leave."

"I did. Or thought I did. It doesn't matter much anymore, really. I would have aged out this winter anyway. I don't think I would have been thrown out on the streets but..." He shrugged, leaving the statement unfinished.

The stranger was silent for a moment. He seemed lost in thought. Then, "I might know of a place, since you're looking."

"Oh?" Hope flared in Clark's heart.

"I don't mean this to sound...creepy or anything. But I have plenty of room to spare, in my house."

"Thanks, but you don't need to..." Clark began to almost protest.

"Look, I understand your hesitation. I get it. You and I have talked, but we don't truly know one another. So I don't expect an answer right now. But my offer stands," the man said. "In fact, if I were you, I'd probably be wondering what a stranger's motivation and intentions were, with such an offer. But, I assure you, my intentions are pure. I just don't like seeing good people like you in such tough spots."

"Well...you're right, if you don't mind me saying so, mister. I am a little...suspicious, I guess," he admitted.

The man laughed. "Smart of you. Look, why don't we grab some dinner together? We'll talk, get to know each other a little better. If anything, I promise that I'll foot your share of the rent if you decide you'd rather find a roommate."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch, honest to God."

Again, Clark hesitated. But his growling stomach made the decision for him.

"Well...I guess dinner couldn't hurt," he conceded.

"Great!" the man said, his face lighting up with a grin. He fumbled around in his pocket for a moment, and found a scrap of paper and a pen. He quickly jotted down an address and handed it to Clark. "Marrick's, six o'clock."

"Marrick's?"

Clark couldn't conceal the surprise in his voice. He knew Marrick's only by reputation. It wasn't *the* ritziest place in town, but it was certainly *one* of the most expensive restaurants around, not to mention one of the hardest to get a reservation at.

"Are you sure?" he asked, just to be certain he was hearing it right.

The man nodded once. "Marrick's," he confirmed.

"Uh...okay," Clark agreed. "I...uh...how fancy is the dress code?" he asked, painfully aware of his pauper's clothing.

"Don't worry about it. You'll be with me. No one will dare to question you," the man assured him.

"If you say so, mister," Clark said dubiously.

"See you at six then," said the other man, standing.

“Wait,” Clark said as the man began to walk away. “After all this time...I just realized I never got your name.”

The man chuckled. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I hadn’t given it. I’m Bruce.”

And with that, he walked off.

Clark arrived at the restaurant with five minutes to spare. He still didn’t completely know his way around town, and he got a little turned around twice as he made his way to his dinner meeting. He’d changed into the best clothing he owned, but he still felt shabby and unworthy of walking through the door of such an expensive and exclusive place. But he couldn’t skip out on dinner. He’d promised the man — Bruce — that he would be there. And Clark was loathe to break any kind of promise.

“Your word is one of the most valuable things you can give another person,” his father had once told him, when Clark had been feeling shy and anxious about going through with taking Rachel Harris to a school dance, like he’d promised. “And if you break your word, it can take a very long time for it to ever have any value to that person ever again. Sometimes, if the offense is big enough to that person, your word may lose all of its value to them for good.”

Clark had taken his father’s comment to heart, and, as a result, had always striven to keep his word, no matter what it took.

So he’d summoned up his courage and made his way to Marrick’s, butterflies swarming in his stomach the entire time.

He wasn’t sure if he should wait outside or if Bruce might already be inside. He could see his reflection in the large glass windows in the front of the imposing corner restaurant. So he took a moment to check his appearance, smoothing down a wayward lock of hair. Then he peered inside, trying to see if he could spot Bruce, ignoring the disgusted stares of the upper-class men and women watching the poor youth ogling a lifestyle he could only dream about. He thought he saw Bruce toward the far right, near the back, so he took a steadying breath, then went inside.

“May I help you?” the snooty-sounding host said, as soon as Clark stepped foot in the door.

“Yes, I’m supposed to be meeting someone here,” Clark explained politely. “I thought he might already be here.”

“Young man, I assure you that you must have the wrong place. Someone like you...”

“Clark?”

Clark looked over at the sound of his name. There was Bruce, striding forward from where Clark had thought he’d seen the man.

“Bruce,” Clark said, nodding at the man, relieved and grateful for the rescue.

“Is there a problem here, Nicodemus?” Bruce asked the host, his poise and bearing daring the man to challenge him, but also conveying a sense of familiarity with the snooty man.

Nicodemus blanched. “Uh, no, sir. It’s just that this young man here...”

“Is here to have dinner with me,” Bruce said, his tone firm and unyielding.

“Yes, sir. Of course,” Nicodemus said humbly.

“Come on, Clark. This way,” Bruce said pleasantly, leading the way.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Clark said, once they were seated at the table, which was comfortably set apart from any other occupied tables. “I’m not suited for a place like this.”

“Nonsense,” Bruce said with a slight frown.

“No, it’s true. Look at me. Then look at everyone else here.”

Bruce casually looked around the restaurant, his eyes ghosting over the other patrons. Then he turned his gaze back to Clark.

“You know what I see?”

“What?”

“I see a lot of people here with money. Some have broken their backs to earn what they have. Some were more than likely

born with the proverbial silver spoon in their mouth. Some are probably spending outside their means to have a nice meal here, for any number of reasons — an anniversary, a first date, a milestone birthday. And then I see a young man who’s been dealt a rough hand in life. A young man who probably deserves a luxury meal more than anyone else in this building.”

“I don’t know about that,” Clark said, blushing a little. “I mean, okay, not everything that’s happened has been my fault, but at least half of my troubles are of my own making.”

Bruce chuckled a little. “You know something? I like that about you. So willing to own up to what you feel like is your fault. It’s an admirable quality, Clark.”

“My parents always stressed taking ownership of your own mistakes,” Clark said quietly.

“Smart folks you had,” was the gentle reply.

“Yeah, they were full of good advice and strong in their morals,” he agreed with a small smile.

“Ah, good evening, Bertrand!” Bruce said, as the waiter approached their table.

“Good evening, Mr. Wayne!” the older white-haired man said, his smile a mile wide. “What can I do for you this evening?”

“Nothing but the best!” Bruce replied in a playful tone. “I have a guest with me this evening, and I want him to experience the finest your restaurant has to offer.”

“But of course!” the other said, filling their glasses with ice water with a speed and grace that belied his age. “Have you decided on your orders?”

“Not yet,” Bruce said. “But I *would* enjoy a glass of your finest merlot. And you, Clark?”

“Uh, just a regular soda would be great,” Clark said, his mind whirring.

Mr. Wayne.

Bruce.

Bruce Wayne.

Gotham’s resident multi-billionaire.

The richest man on the planet, followed closely only by Arthur Chow and Lex Luthor.

Why hadn’t he seen it before?

This was embarrassing. He’d been completely oblivious to the fact that the stranger he’d come to befriend was the most famous man in the city, and one of the most famous people in all the world. How could Clark ever hope to pursue a career in journalism if the obvious so completely escaped his detection? On the other hand, he reasoned to himself, he’d only been in the city a short while. And he’d tried to keep himself busy. He hadn’t exactly had the chance to keep up with the news or the “who’s who” of the city’s elite residents.

“B...Bruce?” he stammered, his mouth acting independently from his brain. “Bruce...Wayne? You’re Bruce Wayne?”

The man nodded solemnly.

“I...I...I didn’t realize...” Clark continued.

Mr. Wayne chuckled. “It’s not a big deal. If anything, it was *nice* to go unrecognized. I don’t get that all that often. But I like when it does happen. Most people usually put on airs and pretend to be what they aren’t in order to impress me or get on my good side or what have you. But when people *don’t* recognize me, all of that falls away and I get to see who they really, truly are.”

“It’s just...I’m so embarrassed,” Clark tried to explain.

“Don’t be.”

“It’s just that...before all of this,” Clark said, gesturing vaguely, “the running away and living on the streets and everything...I thought I’d become a journalist. But if I can’t even identify someone as famous as you...” He deliberately let his voice trail off. “Maybe I should rethink things.”

Mr. Wayne shook his head. “No. Clark, let me tell you something. You’re what...seventeen you said?”

Clark nodded once. “Yes.”

“So, you’re seventeen and fairly new to Gotham, right?”

Again, Clark nodded.

“There are some lifetime residents of the city who couldn’t pick me out of a police lineup.” He shrugged. “It has nothing to do with observational skills. They simply have other priorities. Something tells me that if you were to become a reporter, you’d be great at picking out the important details.”

“I, uh...thanks.”

The billionaire gestured to their menus. “Please, order whatever you’d like.”

Clark nodded in acknowledgement and opened the menu. It was overwhelming, not in size — there was actually a very small selection to choose from — but in the sheer decadence of the meals. Clark hadn’t even heard of most of the things listed. It was way outside of anything he’d ever experienced in Smallville or at Grandma Tildy’s house. Mr. Wayne must have seen Clark’s hesitation and confusion as he perused the menu.

“Is everything okay?”

Clark nodded slowly. “Just a bit...overwhelming. I’ve never heard of most of these dishes. What would you recommend, Mr. Wayne?”

Mr. Wayne shook his head and held up his hand. “Bruce, please.”

“Oh. Okay. Uh...Bruce.”

“Thank you.” He smiled. “Well, to answer your question, everything is fantastic here. I’m partial to the Kobe beef and Maine lobster though.”

Clark’s eyes scanned the menu again, looking for the dish in question. He found it and blanched a little at the price. Mr. Wayne — Bruce — saw and gave him a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry about the price,” he said gently.

“It’s just...I can’t...I’ve never ordered a meal like that...” Clark stammered.

Bruce chuckled. “It’s okay, really. I’m not judging you.”

“I...uh...okay,” Clark allowed himself to say. He dared not risk making Bruce angry, if he turned down his generous offer. “If you recommend it...”

“Trust me, you’ll love it,” Bruce said, just as the waiter returned. “We’ll both have the Kobe beef and lobster, Bertrand,” he told the man. “Medium for me on the steak, and grilled for the lobster. Mashed potatoes and gravy for the side, please.”

“Excellent choice, sir,” the waiter replied as he jotted down the order. “And for you, sir? How would you like your steak prepared?”

Clark wasn’t used to people calling him ‘sir,’ and it took him a second to process that Bertrand was addressing him. “Oh, uh, medium rare for the beef. I guess grilled lobster. And uh...” He swiftly scanned the sides with his super speed. “The vegetable medley for the side, please.”

“Very good, sir. Can I get either of you anything else? A salad or cup of soup for starters?”

Both declined and Bertrand scurried away to put their order in.

“Thank you for this,” Clark said after a moment of taking in the warm dark browns and brighter tans of the restaurant’s interior. “I just don’t understand why. I mean, if anything, I would have been just as fine with eating a burger.” He smiled a bit, letting Bruce know he was at least partially joking.

Bruce laughed a little. “I’m sure that’s true. But it’s a bit more private here. A place we can really talk. I meant what I said in the park. My offer stands. If you want, and feel comfortable with it, you can stay at my place, for as long as you need or want.”

“That’s a very generous offer, Mr...uh, Bruce. But, uh...why? Why would you offer up your home to a perfect stranger?”

Bruce took a deep breath, perhaps contemplating his words. “Because I see a bit of myself in you. You lost your parents at far too young an age. So did I. But I was lucky. I had someone to care for me and I didn’t have to lose my home. It bothers me to see a

kid like you trying to scrape by with part-time jobs and living in a homeless shelter.”

“I’m not the only one,” Clark said, thinking of all the other “regulars” he saw at the shelter night after night.

“You’re right. You aren’t. But I can’t explain it. There’s something unique that I see in you.”

“Me? I’m nothing special,” Clark reflexively said, deflecting attention from himself sticking out in any way.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Bruce said as Bertrand returned with a basket of bread, a dish with butter packets, and a dish with seasoned olive oil in it. “Ah, thank you, Bertrand.” He took a piece of bread and appeared to study it as he spoke his next words. “And something tells me you really don’t believe that either.”

Clark took a piece of bread himself and looked down at it to avoid Bruce’s gaze. “I’m not really sure *what* I believe anymore. So much has happened in my life. I’ve made some hard choices and not all of them have turned out as well as I’d imagined. I was on track to do so much...to get ahead in my schooling and be that much closer to having my career and being able to make a difference in the world...” He sighed.

“You can still have that. I’m offering you that chance. To not have to worry about where you’ll sleep at night or where your next meal is coming from. To go to school, get your degrees, follow your dreams,” Bruce said, deciding on the dipping oil for his bread. He took a bite and chewed slowly. “But, as I said, I’m not forcing anything on you. It’s your choice. And we don’t even have to think about it tonight if you’d rather not do so.”

“Won’t it look weird, to the public? That you plucked some random young guy off the street to come live with you?” Clark asked, arching an eyebrow.

Bruce gave him a half smile. “Oh, I’m sure some of my critics — and yes, I have my share of people who don’t like me — will have some lewd comments and speculations. But the truth is, I don’t care. And you won’t be the first kid I’ve taken in. There was another, before you. Like you, he had no family left. His story touched me, and I opened my home to him. We were great friends, for many years.”

“Where is he now?” Clark asked.

“He died, about...oh...six years ago now,” Bruce said, his face clouding over with pain.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Clark swiftly apologized.

“He died doing what he loved,” Bruce said, as if to mask his pain. “Anyway,” he continued after a moment, “don’t worry. I’ll handle the details if you decide to accept my offer.”

Clark mutely nodded, unsure of what to say. A silence descended on the table, until, at last, Bruce broke it.

“So...is there anything you’d like to know? About me? About the city? Anything at all. After all, that *is* part of the reason why we’re here. That and this place has *incredible* food,” he added with a twinkle in his eye.

“Well...sure,” Clark said, a thousand questions already springing to mind. “Let me just figure out where to begin.”

Clark stood before the imposing Wayne Manor, Bruce’s business card in his hand, where the older man had, in painstakingly neat handwriting, written down his home address. For a long time, all he did was stare through the security fence, down the long driveway, at the mansion, standing tall and dark against the gray, cloud-filled sky. He felt more insignificant and tiny as he looked at that pristine building than he ever had, even while craning his neck to see the tops of the city’s skyscrapers.

Three days.

Three days had passed since Clark had dined with Bruce Wayne.

Three days since the offer had been made for Clark to come live at Wayne Manor.

Three days where Clark had constantly been torn — ready to

leave for Wayne Manor in one moment, and ready to flee Gotham in the next.

The dinner itself had gone remarkably well. As Bruce had promised, the food had been exquisite. And, Clark had to admit, so had the company. As they'd talked, Clark had felt more and more at ease. He forgot, after a while, the obvious age difference between them. He forgot how much of a class difference existed between them — that Bruce had always been, and always would be, rich beyond reasoning and that Clark had grown up not quite poor, but close enough to it.

He'd found Bruce to be friendly and honest, but shrewd in his observations. He was remarkably intelligent, and came off as a regular guy, despite the fact that he was the richest man on the planet. But what surprised Clark the most was how much Bruce spoke to him as an equal. He didn't speak down to the dirt-poor commoner that Clark was. He didn't talk down to the relative child that Clark was, compared to Bruce himself. He treated Clark with respect and understanding. When they'd spoken of Clark's parents, he'd empathized with Clark's loss but hadn't pitied him or played what Chen had called the "pain Olympics" — that age-old game of one-upping one another to see who'd had things worse, as though it was some kind of twisted competition.

In turn, Clark had found himself opening up to the man, and talking to him with ease. Oh, Clark still held his little secrets close, that was true. But for the first time since meeting Chen back at Grandma Tildy's house, Clark felt like he'd found a true friend in Bruce. He knew in his heart that he could trust the billionaire — that the man's intentions were pure and good in offering Clark his home. But Clark's old fears had never truly died. He still worried about his ability to keep his secrets safe, and to keep his powers from accidentally causing harm.

It had been a long, sleepless three days as he'd grappled with the choice before him.

But then, unfortunately, the choice had been made for Clark last night.

He'd been just about to get settled down to try and get a little sleep for the night — though he'd doubted he could, with his indecision refusing to allow his mind to be still long enough for sleep to claim him — when it happened. A very drunk, very aggressive older man had tried to force himself on Clark.

Clark had done everything in his power to get away from the man, while ensuring that he didn't hurt him. Some small part of Clark was aware of the fact that he wouldn't be completely responsible if the man was injured. Some people would even argue that the man had it coming, for attacking a young man the way he had. But not Clark. He was far too aware of the immense powers he possessed. It would be a simple thing to miscalculate his strength and accidentally do something that could prove fatal to the man. The wrong flick of Clark's wrist could easily snap the man's neck. But, no matter how wrong the drunk was, no one deserved to be killed like that.

So he'd been forced to reign in his strength, and that had given the drunk the upper hand. Clark had felt himself pushed up against the cinder block wall. A beefy hand had gone around Clark's throat, though the pressure hadn't been enough to choke off Clark's air. The other hand had gone to Clark's crotch, groping, squeezing, and fumbling for the zipper of his jeans, though the man had been too intoxicated to properly work the device. The smell of cheap booze wafting off the man's breath had made Clark's eyes water as the man brought his head close to Clark's.

There had been only one avenue Clark could see that could save him from his predator. He brought up his knee, hard. The man's eyes had rolled upward and he'd wheezed out a hiss of pain as Clark's knee crashed into his nether region. The hand had released itself from Clark's throat and flown to protect the drunk's injured area. Clark took the opportunity to scream out for help.

That had alerted the shelter's staff. They'd come running and

immobilized the man. Jake and Dirk — each of them built like a linebacker — had grabbed the man's arms and held him until the Gotham Police Department could dispatch a couple of officers to the shelter. The man had been arrested and taken away to jail. Clark had given his statement, and luckily, there had been a couple of witnesses who'd given their statements as well. Clark thought that there might have been more witnesses than just the two who'd stepped forward, but he understood the fear of making waves at the shelter. He couldn't blame them.

But the incident had sealed the deal for Clark. Risk of discovery be damned; he needed to get off the streets and accept Bruce Wayne's generous offer. He'd spent the rest of the night awake and vigilant, lest anything else happen to him or anyone else. Thankfully, nothing else had transpired, but Clark was left shaken and more than resolute to move into Wayne Manor that day.

So now, here he was, standing just outside the gate, looking at the home of Bruce Wayne, trembling with anticipation and fear.

He knew it would be a world totally alien to him. He was a regular guy. He wasn't cut out for the world that the insanely rich lived in. But he felt trapped — he couldn't continue living on the streets anymore. Besides, if he lived with Bruce, he could at least stop worrying about his safety and where his next meal was coming from, and go back to focusing on his studies. His time as a homeless youth had served to steel his will more than ever to become an investigative journalist. He'd seen the kinds of problems and corruption that most people weren't aware of, and he hungered to rectify that problem.

Clark closed his eyes for a moment, gathering up his courage to approach the gate and request entrance. He'd promised himself that there would be no turning back once he crossed over onto the property. There could be no running away this time. He *had* to make this work. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out again before opening his eyes.

His mom's old trick had worked. He *did* feel a little calmer.

Thunder rumbled in the far distance. Clark inhaled through his nose, smelling the storm. It was a long way off, but the wind was picking up, hastening the thunderclouds on their way closer. In a way, it seemed fitting that it should storm by the day's end. He remembered only too vividly how it had stormed the night he'd been dropped off at Grandma Tildy's. It somehow felt like things had come full circle.

Feeling a bit more emboldened, he approached the gate.

There must have been a sensor that he tripped as he stepped closer. Before he knew it, a video screen on his left flickered into life. An older gentleman appeared on the screen.

"May I help you?" he asked, in a mild British accent.

"Uh...hi. My name is Clark Kent..." Clark said, feeling like he was being silently judged. "I...uh...I was told to come here..."

The other man's features softened a bit as Clark struggled to introduce himself and explain his presence. "Ah, yes. Master Bruce has been anticipating you. I'll bring the car down to pick you up at once."

"Oh...no...I can walk," Clark said, already feeling out of place in this world of money and influence.

"Nonsense," the man replied. "It's no trouble, Master Clark." *Master?!*

"No, really. I like walking," was all he could manage to get out.

The man shrugged a bit. "As you wish, sir."

The gate swung open inwardly on silent hinges. Clark hefted the hiking frame on his back, settling it more comfortably on his shoulders. Then he picked up his other bags — now far less than what he'd had when he'd first fled from the halfway house — and started down the long driveway. It wasn't a completely straight road. In a couple of spots it became ever so slightly serpentine, to accommodate the land around it. Clark walked at a brisk, but

casual pace. He didn't want to dawdle and keep Bruce waiting, but he also didn't want to get to the door too quickly either. He looked around as he walked, but there wasn't much to see; just an immaculately-kept lawn and the occasional tree.

Before long, Clark found himself at the very foot of Wayne Manor. He took another deep breath, then screwed up his courage once more and rang the doorbell. Almost instantly, the older gentleman from the video screen at the gates appeared, opening the doors and ushering him inside.

"Come in, come in," the man said, waving him in. "Welcome home, Master Clark." There was nothing but a smile on his face and eagerness in his voice.

"I...uh...just Clark is fine," Clark stammered.

"You'll never change his mind about calling you 'Master,'" came Bruce Wayne's amused voice as he stepped into the large living space. "Alfred's a bit...old school with the formalities."

"I guess I have a lot to get used to," Clark said with a shrug, though he doubted he ever would.

"May I take your bags, Master Clark?" Alfred asked.

"Oh...um...sure?" It came out more as a question than anything else.

"Come on in," Bruce encouraged. "Can I offer you anything? Something to eat or drink?"

"Oh, no. I had lunch at the soup kitchen before I came here," Clark said, blushing in embarrassment. Here he was, in a multi-million dollar home, talking about a soup kitchen, of all things!

"You sure?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks."

"You want to relax a bit, or get the grand tour?" Bruce asked.

Clark hesitated. "Um...whatever you think is best. I...uh...this is all a bit overwhelming," he admitted.

Bruce chuckled a little. "I expect that it is. Maybe once you see the place you'll feel a bit more at home and comfortable."

Clark shrugged. "Sure."

"We'll start with your room," Bruce said, leading the way.

"You know, I was really hoping you'd take me up on my offer," he admitted as they wound their way through Wayne Manor. "But you should have called. I would have picked you up, instead of you needing to make your way here on your own."

"Oh, it's okay," Clark said, brushing off Bruce's concerns. "I didn't mind walking here. It gave me some time to clear my head of a few things. But...I guess I *should* have called. I didn't mean to drop in unannounced. It's just...there was an incident at the shelter this morning and I wasn't really thinking straight."

Come here, you hot young stud.

Clark flinched at the unbidden memory.

Bruce stopped in his tracks and faced Clark. "Don't apologize. I meant it when I said my doors were open, day or night, once you made your decision." He frowned. "What happened at the shelter?"

Let me show you a good time.

"A drunk man thought I was...available to him," Clark said simply, trying to will the flashbacks away.

Rick! Get away from him!

Hold him down!

You okay, boy?

The police are on the way.

Bruce scowled. "I don't blame you for leaving at all." He kept walking as he continued. "Did you file a police report?"

Young man, can you tell us, in your own words, what happened here? Let's start with your name and date of birth.

Someone get this guy out of here! I don't want him within a thousand feet of this kid!

Do you understand that you'll be required to appear in court, should you choose to press charges?

"Yeah." He nodded, swallowing around the panic that was building inside of him.

"Good."

"They came and arrested him. There were witnesses, so..." He shrugged.

Bruce nodded gravely, his mouth a tight line. "Good." He stopped outside of a closed door. "If you press charges — and I would, if I were you — you'll have whatever resources you need from me to make sure he goes to jail. Ah, here we are. Your room." He gestured. "Go on, open the door."

Clark took a deep breath, feeling inexplicably nervous, the same as he had at Grandma Tildy's, that very first night. He reached out and touched the shining golden doorknob and turned it slowly. He pushed the door opened and sucked in a breath. Of course he'd known that Bruce was rich, but he hadn't expected the extravagance of the room.

Everything was done in shades of white, blue, and gray, with dark cherry furniture. And it was massive — far bigger than even the living room in the quaint farmhouse Clark had grown up in. A king-sized bed was against the wall on the left. On an entertainment center, Clark could see a sizable television. Hooked up to it was some kind of strange gray box. Clark saw the words "Nintendo Entertainment System" written on it. Next to it was a stack of plastic cartridges. Bruce saw him looking questioningly at it.

"It's a gaming system," Bruce explained, walking over to the unit. "I have a friend in Japan who was able to get me one. It won't be released here in the States for a while yet. Probably another year or two. But he owed me a favor..." He shrugged.

"A...gaming system?"

Bruce nodded. "You open the hatch like this," he said, demonstrating. "And insert the cartridge like this. Go to channel three and press the power button on the console. These are the controllers. It's the future of game playing," he said proudly.

"That's awfully nice of you," Clark replied, feeling more and more unworthy of this new chapter of his life.

"I'll give you some time to check things out, get your stuff put away. In a little bit, I'll show you the rest of the house. There's no rush. And tomorrow we'll head out and get you a new wardrobe. Unless...do you have enough, for the night? I don't mean to presume but, I want you to be comfortable here," Bruce continued.

"Oh, I have enough for a couple of days," he said, nodding absently, his head still spinning.

"Well, in any case, there are a few things in the dresser that Alfred picked up once I described you to him. Hopefully they'll fit. It's not much, but I didn't want to have too much, in case the size was wrong." He paused a moment before speaking again. "All right then. I'll leave you be. Dinner is at six. Down the stairs and to the left. You can't miss the dining room."

The billionaire turned to leave, Alfred just steps behind him.

"Hey, Bruce?" Clark ventured.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. Thank you for all of this. I'm...I can't believe how generous all of this is."

"You're welcome."

And with that, Clark was left alone in his new room.

He immediately took off his shoes and set to exploring everything. Aside from the bed and the entertainment center, there was a large dresser and a walk-in closet to check out. A desk was in the corner of the room — Clark could just imagine himself settling down to his studies there, and a smile ghosted over his lips. He could scarcely wait to dive back into schoolwork. Not only would it get him closer to his goal of becoming a journalist, but it would also bring back a sense of normalcy to his life.

There were bookshelves too — empty for the time being, but Clark looked forward to filling them. He'd always been an avid reader, and deeply missed the simple pleasure of buying a new — or even secondhand — book and spending an evening immersed in the world contained within its pages. There was a bathroom on

his right, and Clark ducked inside to check it out. He was mildly surprised to find it fully stocked with all the essentials a young man would need — toilet paper, plush gray towels, shampoo and conditioner, razors and shaving cream, even a toothbrush, toothpaste, and dental floss.

Seeing it all made Clark feel grimy. Before he could do anything else, he felt compelled to wash off the smell and feel of the streets. He padded back to the bedroom door, enjoying the feel of the navy-blue carpet beneath his feet. He closed and locked the door, then stripped out of his dirty clothing. The hot shower he took was one of the most luxurious he'd ever taken, simply because he felt safe in doing so. At the shelter, the showers were often tepid and rushed, and always filled with fear. Fear that someone would steal from you when you were otherwise occupied. Fear that you might be attacked while your guard was down. But this time Clark could make the water as hot as he desired and linger under the spray of the showerhead for as long as it suited him.

He made a point of soaping down every last inch of his body and scrubbed his hair thoroughly. That was the other fear in the shelter. You never knew what kinds of creepy, crawly things people might track in with them. It had only been sheer luck that he hadn't come down with a case of lice, or worse. Finally, he felt clean and shut off the water. He dried swiftly. He knew he couldn't shave with a traditional razor — he'd learned that long ago when he'd first noticed hair sprouting above his upper lip. So he used the mirror to bounce thin beams of his heat vision back onto his skin, searing the stubble away into nonexistence.

Satisfied, he returned to the bedroom and investigated what clothing had been left in the dresser for him. He knew he could always wear something he already owned. After all, just the day before he'd spent a few of his hard-earned dollars washing and drying the few outfits he owned at a rundown little laundromat. But he was curious to see what had been left for him. So he went and opened the top drawer of the dresser. Clean pairs of white socks and a package of boxers that looked like they might fit greeted him. The next drawer down had a few plain t-shirts. After that was a drawer with a couple pairs of shorts and lightweight pants. The bottom drawer had a small selection of pajamas.

Clark selected a fresh white shirt, a pair of black basketball shorts, and a pair of socks, as well as a pair of the boxers. Everything fit well enough, and he was grateful for the garments. The truth was, even though his own items were clean, some of them were already showing signs of wear and tear, from being worn so often.

New clothes.

It was a simple pleasure, but one Clark had not often gotten to enjoy since fleeing the halfway house. Sure, he'd been able to buy *some* new things, once in a while, now that he had a job, but it was usually the cheapest things he could find. And that meant what he'd bought hadn't always been the most comfortable things to wear.

He checked his appearance in the full-length mirror, then went and lay down on the bed. He sighed in contentment as he sank into the soft blankets covering it. He could get used to such luxuries. The beds at the shelter had been little more than hard cots or a clear space on the concrete floor. And even his comfortable bed at Grandma Tildy's hadn't been nearly this plush. Or this large.

He didn't mean to, but before he knew it, he was asleep. The combination of not sleeping the night before and all the restlessness he'd experienced while he'd been trying to decide whether or not to take up Bruce's offer had exhausted him. He didn't sleep long — just an hour or so — but he felt much refreshed when he next opened his eyes. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and for a half a second he was disoriented, not knowing where he was right away. But in a heartbeat it all came back to him.

There was still some time before dinner, so Clark put on his glasses and unpacked his meager belongings. His mother's knitted blanket went on top of the comforter on the bed, as it always had. His clothing went into the dresser. The globe his parents had found with him went onto the top shelf of the bookshelf where it would be safe. The manila envelope he had with him went into the hidden compartment built into the seat of the reading nook in the window.

Belatedly, Clark realized he hadn't even looked out the windows to see the view. There were two large windows and double doors leading out to a balcony. The storm was about to hit — lightning flashed in the sky and thunder boomed. But the rain hadn't yet begun, so Clark stepped out onto the balcony. His room overlooked a large pool in the backyard. It would be nice, he mused, to lay out in the sun back there, diving into the pool to cool off. He'd need to remember to pick up some swim trunks while he added to his wardrobe.

The first raindrops hit him in the head and he reluctantly headed back inside. As a farm kid, he was used to spending as much time as possible outdoors. He didn't mind being indoors, but he preferred to be out in the fresh air whenever he could. He closed and locked the door behind him, then pulled the curtain against the darkening sky.

It was nearly time for dinner by then anyway, as Clark's complaining stomach helpfully pointed out. He left the bedroom and went down to the living room. Alfred was there, as though waiting for him. He stood from his seat as he greeted Clark.

"Ah, Master Clark. Right this way for dinner."

"Oh... thanks," Clark said. He wasn't sure he would *ever* get used to having someone wait on him. It didn't feel right in the least.

"Follow me," the butler said pleasantly.

"Sure. So... how long have you been working here?" Clark asked, making small talk as the followed behind the older man.

"Oh, since before Master Bruce was born. I worked for his parents for many years," the man replied with a fond smile. "It's been an honor and a privilege, working for the Wayne family." He paused for a moment, then said, "If I may say so, sir, I hope you'll be comfortable here. Master Bruce is a good man."

"Yeah, he seems like it," Clark agreed. "But, Alfred? You don't really need all the 'Master Clark' and 'sir' stuff with me. I'm just a kid that Bruce plucked off the streets. There's nothing special that warrants such, well... formality."

Alfred smiled gently. "You may feel that way, Master Clark, but you'll have to excuse me. I could no more drop the formality than a man could fly. Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Clark shook his head, unconvinced. "I'm not entirely sure that's true."

Alfred chuckled lightly. "Perhaps, Master Clark. Perhaps." A moment later, he stopped. "And here is the dining room," he announced.

"Thanks for showing Clark the way, Alfred," Bruce said, standing from his seat.

"Of course, sir," the butler said, dipping his head in acknowledgment. "Enjoy your meal."

"Come, sit," Bruce encouraged, waving Clark forward.

Clark sat across the table from him. "Your home is beautiful," he complimented Bruce.

"I'll take you on the full tour after dinner, so you know where everything is," Bruce promised. "Is everything in your room okay? Anything you need or want?"

"Oh... everything is great," Clark said. "Truthfully, it's a bit... overwhelming." He felt his cheeks heat in embarrassment.

Bruce merely chuckled. "I suppose it would be. But if there is anything you need, just let Alfred or myself know and you'll get it."

"Thank you. That's very generous," Clark said.

“Relax,” Bruce said, perhaps noting Clark’s lingering doubts about living in such an extravagant place. “You seem nervous. I assure you, I have no ulterior motives, if that’s what’s bothering you.”

That made Clark chuckle, and some of his unease bled out with it. “Oh, that’s not it. It’s just...this is a *completely* new world for me. Being called ‘sir’ and ‘master.’ Having a bedroom bigger than my living room, back home before my parents died. Being told I can have whatever I want or need. Having technology that won’t even be available in this country for another year or two. I’m grateful for it all, Bruce. Please don’t think I’m not. But in my head, I’m still a poor, homeless runaway. I still feel like...like the police will find out that I’m a runaway and bring me back to the halfway house.”

“About that...” Bruce began uncomfortably.

Clark felt his blood draining away from his face as he went pale. “What?”

“I spoke with the police commissioner. He’s an old friend of mine. I explained the situation and that you’d be staying here. Just to make sure everything is on the level, you understand?”

“Wh...what’d he say?” He almost dared not to ask it.

Bruce cracked a small smile. “Everything’s been cleared. The fortunate thing is that you’ve almost aged out of the foster system. They aren’t going to care so much about dragging you back to a place where you’d really only have about half a year left before you could be legally kicked out onto the streets. It’s terrible, really, to think about getting kicked out of the system, but in this case, it actually helps you.” Though he’d begun talking with a tiny smile, by the end, Bruce’s voice was sorrowful and apologetic.

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad. I don’t think I could show my face back there, after running off without an explanation.”

“Why *did* you run away, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I...I...” Clark stuttered, trying to come up with a plausible explanation. “It doesn’t matter. I got this idea in my head about getting out on my own and it didn’t pan out the way I’d hoped. It’s true that I miss some of the people I knew back there, at the halfway house.”

“You could visit, if you’d like. I can send you there on one of my planes.”

“That’s a kind offer, but I’d rather not. Yeah, I miss them, but I’m really not sure they’d be willing to forgive and forget my sudden departure.”

Bruce merely nodded. “I see.”

“Especially now,” Clark continued, speaking his train of thought aloud. “I mean, this place is incredible. If anyone deserves to live in the lap of luxury, it’s the guys I left behind. Grandma Tildy’s was a really, really nice place, but, well, halfway houses aren’t exactly rich. Corners had to be cut when we could. We did what we could to raise funds, to help pay the bills and make sure that no one had to go without a birthday gift or Christmas present. But despite all of that, almost everyone was happy there. Oh, we had some guys who were just so angry at the situation they were in that they wouldn’t allow themselves to take any joy in anything we did there. But for the most part, it was a good place to be.”

“Sounds like you miss it a bit,” Bruce observed.

Clark shook his head. “No...yes...I don’t know. I miss my friends there, but chances are, if I was still living there, at least half of them would be gone — moved into foster homes or to relatives that were finally ready to take them in. Except my friend, Chen. He was training with Grandma Tildy to eventually take over the day-to-day running of the place. Anyway,” he said, cutting off whatever Bruce was going to say, “it’s all behind me now. I really do just want to make a fresh start here.”

“And what kind of start do you want?” Bruce asked.

“I just...I want to get back to school. Finish up my high school diploma. Get into a good college, even if I have to pay my way

through. I probably destroyed my hopes of getting a scholarship with the gaps in my education, even though I was in an accelerated program at my last high school. I want to get a job at a good, well-respected newspaper someday. I want to be able to help people. To give back to the community somehow, even if it’s just in donations of canned goods to a soup kitchen or something. I want to make a difference.”

“All noble goals,” Bruce pointed out, as Alfred appeared with platters of food. He effortlessly switched topics. “I hope you don’t mind roast duck. Alfred makes it quite excellently. Particularly the pomegranate sauce.”

Clark nodded. “My dad used to cook duck sometimes, but with an orange and ginger glaze. He was a great cook. My mom too.”

A brief silence fell as the two selected pieces of meat, garlic potatoes, and glazed carrots. There was plenty of hot, fresh bread and butter to go with it, and more than enough options to choose from to drink. Clark opted simply for an ice water.

“In a few days we can talk to one of the administrators at the high school,” Bruce said after pouring himself a fresh drink. “See what they can do for you, in terms of getting your credits transferred and enrolled for the fall.”

“That would be great,” Clark replied gratefully. “Just...um... I’m not sure how to ask this.”

“What?”

“It’ll be a regular high school, right? I don’t think I could ever fit in, in one of the, uh, *fancier* schools.”

Bruce chuckled. “If that’s what you’d be comfortable with, that’s what we’ll do.”

“Thanks.”

“Let’s see. Today is Sunday...how about Wednesday?” Bruce asked, thinking aloud.

Clark shook his head. “I’m supposed to cover my co-worker’s shift at the furniture store on Wednesday.”

“Clark, you know you don’t *have* to keep working, right? I’ve got money set aside for you, so that you can buy whatever you want or need.” The billionaire seemed surprised by the fact that Clark was still looking ahead to going to work.

He shook his head again. “I appreciate that, but I gave my word. Not just to RJ, but to the store owner too. If it’s all the same, I’d like to keep working, at least until school starts up in September. It feels good, to be doing something with my time, learning new skills, even if I might never need them in my professional life.”

Pride beamed in Bruce’s eyes. Pride and maybe even a little amusement. “You are one rare young man, Clark. Of course you can keep working, if that’s what makes you happy. I admire your work ethic and dedication.”

“Thanks.”

Clark stopped to take a bite to eat. Bruce was right. The duck was excellent. But it made Clark’s heart ache as he missed his parents. His dad would have loved the dish, he was sure of it. His mom had never really liked pomegranates, but she would have enjoyed everything else, he knew.

“Clark? Are you okay?”

Apparently, his sorrow had shown on his face.

“Uh, yeah,” he said quickly. “The food is really good. My dad would have asked for the recipe in a heartbeat,” he added.

“Well, eat up. You never have to worry about going hungry again,” Bruce assured him.

The months passed by in a blur for Clark. He slipped easily into his new routine of working when he could and returning to Wayne Manor at night. He grew more comfortable and accustomed to the luxuries that surrounded him every day, though he never once took them for granted. He’d lived on the streets. He’d gone to bed hungry more times than he cared to admit, even

to himself. He'd lived in fear of being robbed or assaulted. He'd become too familiar with what it was like to sleep on the ground. He'd grown to accept that, to most people, he was invisible, simply because they chose to turn a blind eye to the poor and suffering people in their midst.

Once a week, he got into the habit of preparing food and other essential items, and making runs into the city during the night. He would distribute everything to the homeless — sandwiches to ensure that they had nourishment, bottles of water to keep them hydrated, fresh socks — a simple luxury many of them had not seen in years — and warm blankets to protect them from the cold. He worked with Bruce too, as the man donated some of his time and wealth toward overhauling the city's shelters and soup kitchens so they could accommodate more people in need, and making them safer. It was a start, Clark thought, knowing it would take years — if ever — before some of the more severe problems could be eradicated. Still, it felt good, to be working on solutions, and giving back in what ways he could.

At home, he had the run of Wayne Manor, and Bruce's full support in whatever he chose to pursue. When he could, Bruce even accompanied Clark on his midnight runs into the heart of Gotham, but not always. On most nights, once the sun had set and full darkness had taken hold of the city, Clark didn't see Bruce. It was almost like the man became a ghost on those nights. Clark sometimes wondered what the man was up to, but he never asked, and tried to put the question out of his mind.

That was the one thing Bruce had asked of Clark — that Clark leave him be at night.

Clark was determined to honor his friend's wishes.

"I tend to pull late hours," Bruce had told him, that first night, when the ground rules had been established. "Unless you see me out and about — in the living room, swimming in the pool, grabbing a snack from the kitchen or the like — I ask that my privacy be respected."

"Oh, no problem," Clark had said. "No rest for the wealthy, huh?" he'd joked.

Bruce had chuckled. "Something like that. I just...tend to do some of my best work at night."

"Well, don't worry about me," Clark had assured him. "I won't be a problem."

"Alfred will see to anything you might need while I'm working," Bruce had continued. "Don't be shy to call on him if you need something."

"Oh, well...I'm pretty self-sufficient," Clark had said hesitantly. He'd sighed. "To be honest, I'm not really all that comfortable, having someone...wait on me like that."

"Clark, let me tell you something about Alfred," Bruce had said in a quiet voice. "I've known him my entire life. I've seen him interact with others who have lived under this roof — people who were not blood relatives. Anyone who comes to live here, for no matter how long or short a time — they become family. And Alfred is always willing to go above and beyond for family. You are not a burden to him, if that's what you're worried about."

"I...if you say so," Clark had allowed.

"Trust me. Get to know him a bit and you'll see the same for yourself."

Clark hadn't had a response for that, so he'd merely nodded and taken a bite of the crême brûlée that had been set down before him.

Now, almost a full year had passed since Clark had come to live at Wayne Manor. He was comfortable with his new life — something he hadn't been sure would ever happen, that first night. But now he was getting used to things. He no longer shied away from asking Alfred if he needed something. Of course, he still asked politely and thanked the man profusely when he required Alfred's assistance. He no longer felt ashamed to be living in such opulence — like he was just the object of Bruce's pity. Instead, he

felt proud to know Bruce, and to have earned his friendship. He no longer felt like a useless waste of a person. Now, he felt like he had real worth — as a star student, as a regular benefactor to the city's homeless population, as an equal to Bruce as they worked to revamp the city's services to the poor.

He felt like a completely different man.

And then, one day, his world almost came crashing down.

Summer had come once again. Clark was a few weeks shy of his first anniversary as a resident of Wayne Manor. As usual, Bruce had vanished once the night had taken hold of the world. Clark was more than used to it. He had still never questioned it. It simply wasn't his place to pry. After all, everyone was entitled to privacy. And everyone's schedule was different. He remembered that Jonathan had done his best work in the late morning and early afternoon, and typically worked on his most difficult tasks then. Martha, on the other hand, had liked working on her own hobbies in the evenings, after dinner was eaten and the dishes were washed and put away. So what if Bruce preferred to work on the inventions that made his company so vast and wealthy in the middle of the night? It wasn't hurting anyone, so he could be content to let the man be.

It was a hot, muggy night, when even the air conditioning felt like it was barely making a difference. Of course, that didn't bother Clark, just as staying in a rickety, drafty cabin in the woods in the middle of winter hadn't phased him in any way. But Clark wasn't able to sleep anyway — whether it was due to the sticky weather or the fact that he was still euphoric over having been accepted as a late admission to a great college, right in Gotham, he wasn't sure. Oh, it wasn't his dream school, but as he'd worried, his spotty high school record had hurt him. But the way he figured it, he could always do a year or two at this school and, if he still wanted to attend another school after that, he could always attempt to transfer his credits to where he wanted to go.

Whatever the case was, after tossing and turning in his bed for over three hours, Clark abandoned it. He stripped out of his clothing and pulled on his swim trunks. Perhaps a late swim was what he needed, he mused. A slow grin spread over his features. He could just imagine the cool water against his skin, and the way a contentedness usually crept over him after a dip in the pool. He padded over to the bathroom and grabbed a towel, slinging it over one shoulder as he made his way through the dark and quiet Wayne Manor. Just the barest minimum of lights were on, which was more than adequate for Clark's superior night vision.

The lights around the pool were on when he went outside, as they usually were. He draped the towel over the back of a lounge chair and dove into the pool. The cool water was almost a shock to his body, simply because it was such a stark contrast to the muggy night air around him. He immediately began to swim laps, cutting through the water with his powerful arms. He never bothered to count his laps when he swam. He simply let his mind wander wherever it felt like going. Sometimes, that was all he needed in order to calm his thoughts enough to sleep or get focused enough to write something.

Writing.

He was still writing every night, just as he'd promised Grandma Tildy he would. He now had two and a half more journals filled with his writings. It felt good, to honor her request. It made him feel like he hadn't completely failed her by running away. He wondered sometimes, if he would ever find the courage to go back there, to thank her for all she'd done for him, and to let her know that he was well. He wondered if he could ever explain how his sudden departure from the halfway house hadn't been her fault, and if she would believe him.

He swam on, endless laps in the clean, cool water. Then, after maybe an hour or hour and a half, he slowed and stopped. He stayed in the water and draped his arms over the side of the pool, on the surrounding concrete. He let himself half float in the water

as he leaned back and looked up at the stars. He felt inexplicably drawn to the night sky and the heavenly points of light that dotted it. He always had been, for as long as he could remember. Somehow, it had always seemed that all the answers to who he was and why he had such extraordinary powers were out there, somewhere, amongst the endless darkness of the universe.

"Mom. Dad," he whispered aloud, as he scanned the familiar constellations above him. "I miss you. I wish you were here, with me, to see everything I've managed to do. Maybe it isn't much, and I've taken a lot of wrong turns. But I'm on the right path now. I'm on track to go to college. Like you always knew I would. I've got my eyes on my career. I'm living a life I never dreamed possible, here at Wayne Manor. I don't know if you set Bruce to cross paths with me, but... I'm thankful for that first, fateful conversation with him. Thanks to him, I've bettered my life. I've been able to help so many people. But... it's not enough. I want to help *more* people. I want to make you proud of the man I've become."

He fell silent then as his heart seized up with grief.
Five years.

It had been five years since he'd lost his parents. He hadn't even been given a chance to say goodbye to his mother. She'd died instantly in the crash that had sent his life into a tailspin. And as for his father — well, that hadn't been a proper goodbye either. Yes, he'd said the actual word "goodbye" to Jonathan Kent, but it had been the kind of "goodbye" that had meant "goodbye until tomorrow when I return to the hospital," rather than "goodbye forever." And, because of that, he'd never truly gotten closure from their deaths. Yes, he'd said his final farewells at their joint funeral, but it wasn't the same. He wished they could have heard him say that he loved them one final time.

His heart now heavy, Clark hoisted himself out of the pool. Distractedly, he toweled off enough so as to not leave a trail of wet droplets on the floor once he went back inside. He knew Alfred wouldn't mind the wet footprints, but he didn't want to make more work for the kind, elderly man, who'd become as much a friend as he was a member of the hired household staff. The hot, humid air around him felt more tolerable now against his skin, cool as it was from his swim. He sat in the lounge chair, not yet ready to head back inside for the night. For a little while, he lay back, his eyes closed, listening to the chorus of crickets that was chirping its unending songs.

But after a bit he grew weary of being outside. He draped his towel over both of his shoulders, like a cape, and slipped back inside the house. Back up to his room he went, heading straight for the shower to rinse the chlorine from his body. The laps he'd done had worked up an appetite, so once he was dressed, he went back downstairs. He grabbed a quick snack — just an ice cream sandwich, and was about to head back to his room to attempt to sleep when he heard voices. He stopped dead in his tracks, as though he was ashamed of being in the kitchen for a middle-of-the-night snack. Something about the tone of voices sent the hairs on the back of his neck straight up. He stood still, trying not to listen, but failing.

"Give me a hand, would you, Alfred?"

"Of course, sir."

There was a hiss of pain.

"Sorry, sir. Let me take a look at your arm."

"All right."

There was a moment of silence, though Clark's sensitive hearing detected the sound of clothing shifting.

"Oh, sir! How in the world did you manage that?" Alfred asked, sounding aghast.

"One of them had a hunting knife," Bruce replied, his voice betraying a slight shrug.

A hunting knife? Clark mouthed to himself in shock.

Just *what* was Bruce doing at night that entailed him meeting

up with people carrying hunting knives? People who, apparently, had used such items against him.

"But... the suit. It should have withstood a slash from a knife," Alfred replied, a frown in his voice. "That new armor is top of the line! Unless... do you think we need to take it back to the drawing board, Master Bruce?"

"No, I don't think so. We're not going to get much better protection in the suit right now than what we've already got. You're right about one thing though, it should have stood up to a slash from a knife," Bruce said in a thoughtful way. "But, you have to admit, it's taken a lot of damage lately. It's my own fault really. I should have used the spare tonight."

The suit?

"Well," Alfred said with a soft sigh. Clark decided to x-ray through the walls to see what was going on, even though every part of him was telling him it wasn't his business. "The good news is, this wound isn't too bad. I don't think I'll need to stitch it."

Clark saw Bruce sitting on the couch. A long, bloody gash ran down the length of his upper left arm. Alfred disappeared for a couple of moments and returned with a first aid kit. Clark watched as the butler carefully disinfected the wound and wrapped Bruce's arm in a layer of gauze. Then he bandaged the whole thing tightly. He used several strips of medical tape to secure it all in place.

"If anyone asks, I slipped and cut myself while I was working out," Bruce told the man.

"Of course, sir. It has nothing to do whatsoever with running around Gotham City at all hours of the night." The tone was light, teasing, familiar.

Bruce chuckled. "Right. Just a normal occupational hazard for a billionaire."

"May I ask, Master Bruce? How? How did it happen? You're not usually one to be taken so... off guard."

Bruce shook his head. "There were just too many this time. I'm lucky that knife wound was all that I got. Crime seems to be getting worse in this city, not better, despite my best efforts."

"You're only one man," Alfred said, sympathetically. "But, despite the police's denunciation of Batman, the majority of the people support what you're doing. You've done a *lot* of good out there."

"A lot, but not enough." It didn't take a genius to know that Bruce was brooding.

Wait! Clark's brain screamed at him. *Did Alfred just call Bruce the Batman?*

He lost the thread of the conversation as his mind lurched and spun in a dizzying swirl of thoughts. Could it be really true? Was Bruce Wayne actually Batman? It would explain a *lot*, Clark had to admit. The late hours he claimed to pull. The reason why he'd given Clark the explicit request to be left alone at night — so that he wouldn't be discovered as completely missing from Wayne Manor, as Clark now understood it. The fact that Bruce had claimed that his "best work" was often accomplished when the world grew dark. He wasn't sitting in his own quarters inventing things! He was out there, on the city streets, fighting crime as a masked force for good.

"It's true," Clark whispered to himself, convinced.

He heard Bruce getting up off the couch now.

"Alfred? Do we have any of that chocolate mousse left?" he asked, his voice drifting closer. He sounded more tired than Clark had ever heard him sound before.

"Yes, sir. Shall I bring you a bowl?"

"No, no. I'll grab it myself. Thanks, Alfred."

"Will you be needing anything else this evening?"

"No, I'm heading to bed after the mousse. I'm not even going to attempt to fix the suit tonight. It can wait until tomorrow night."

"Very good, Master Bruce. If I'm not needed, I think I shall retire to my room as well."

"Night, Alfred."

“Goodnight, Master Bruce.”

Clark zipped upstairs at super speed, using the back staircase. He didn't usually use the old servants' passage, but he knew his way around like the back of his hand. He'd learned all the routes through the vast mansion within his first week of living there.

By going that way, he was able to avoid being seen by Bruce. And, even if their paths had crossed, it was unlikely Bruce would have even noticed him. Clark could now move so quickly he was not much more than a blur of color, if he moved at top speed. And that was what he now employed. He didn't stop until he was safely tucked away in his room, the door locked behind him. He stopped with his back against the solid wood of the door, his heart hammering in his chest so violently it was a wonder neither Bruce nor Alfred could hear it slamming against his ribcage.

“He's Batman,” he whispered to himself.

Somehow, it felt more real saying it aloud, than just within the confines of his own brain.

He tuned in with his super hearing. He heard Bruce puttering about in the kitchen, then making his way to his bedroom. Not long after, soft snores could be heard. Clark severed the connection, then silently slipped back down to the main floor. He'd never been tempted to x-ray the house before — why would he have? — but now he carefully examined the place. There was a hollow space behind the grandfather clock, and a staircase leading down. Clark looked for the mechanism that would allow him to access the doorway beyond. It turned out to be as simple as a hidden switch on the very back of the right side, so expertly placed it was all but invisible to the naked eye.

He brushed a fingertip against the switch with a feather-light touch, and the clock silently swung forward, allowing him entrance beyond. Gulping hard and trying to will his heart to beat more slowly, Clark descended the steps until he reached the bottom.

A thick steel door awaited him. It was locked, and a keypad was built into the wall to the right. Clark didn't dare touch the keypad. Bruce probably had the thing wired to an alarm if the wrong code was punched in, and Clark couldn't even begin to fathom what the code might be. He x-rayed through the door instead. Or, at least, he tried to. There must have been a layer of lead shielding. Clark frowned. He stretched out with his super hearing, but everything was quiet. Defeated for the moment, he retreated back up the stairs, then swiftly zipped back to his room.

He did not sleep for the rest of the night, as his mind worked to process what he'd learned.

Bruce Wayne — the kind, hardworking benefactor who'd plucked Clark from the streets at his lowest point — was Batman.

It was the following night, and Clark had decided not to let on that he knew Bruce's secret. He still felt guilty about having overheard Bruce and Alfred talking. Clark knew that Bruce didn't suspect that his secret was out. He'd been treading on eggshells the entire day, trying to gauge if the man had any idea that Clark had overheard the conversation. But Bruce hadn't mentioned anything. And Clark knew that Bruce was a straightforward guy. He wouldn't drop subtle hints. He would just come out and confront Clark with his suspicions, if he had any. Bruce's silence on the whole Batman thing was proof to Clark that he had no idea that Clark knew.

“Clark Kent, I'd like to introduce you to a dear friend of mine, Vicki Vale,” Bruce said to him that evening, just before dinner time. He gestured to the woman Alfred ushered into the living room.

“Vicki Vale?” Clark asked excitedly, standing from his seat. “*The Vicki Vale, of the Gotham Gazette?*”

“That's right,” Bruce said proudly.

“It's an honor,” Clark said, extending a hand. She took it and

gave him a firm, friendly handshake.

“It's nice to meet you, Clark. Bruce has told me so much about you,” she replied with a genuine smile.

“I thought you might be interested in meeting her, since you plan to go into the journalism field yourself,” Bruce explained, leading the way to the dining room. “I think dinner is just about ready.”

“Sounds great. I'm dying for a good, home-cooked meal,” Vicki said. “After being on assignment in Tokyo for the last year, it'll be nice to have a little taste of home.”

“I thought so,” Bruce said with a nod. “But we're having Japanese food tonight.”

Vicki and Clark both saw the slight smile that appeared, letting on that Bruce was joking.

“If that's the case, I need to be going,” Vicki replied, pointing to the door.

Bruce chuckled lightly. “I see your sense of humor hasn't changed a bit.”

Vicki's eyes twinkled in amusement. “Neither has yours.”

“I had no idea Bruce knew you,” Clark stammered in awe after a moment, once the two old friends grew quiet. He could hardly believe that he was in the presence of such a journalistic legend.

“Oh, we've known each other for years,” Vicki said with a light shrug. “We've even dated here and there.”

“It's been a long time,” Bruce countered.

“Mmm,” Vicki hummed in agreement.

“Would you mind if I asked you some questions?” Clark asked.

“Go for it!” Vicki encouraged.

And so Clark picked her brain as they dined on filet mignon and grilled prawns, a mixed vegetable medley, baked potatoes, and flaky, hot bread. Clark found that he enjoyed her company, and loved how smart and focused she was. It was little wonder why she and Bruce had sometimes dated, though Clark wondered why the two weren't together now. They seemed a good match as they sat and spoke with each other.

“You know something, Clark?” Vicki said toward the end of the night. “After you get some college credits under you, when it comes time for you to do an internship, I'll make certain my editor gives you one, if you'd like.”

Clark blinked as he wondered if he'd heard correctly. “You... you would?”

“Absolutely,” Vicki replied with a nod. “Everything that you asked tonight, the discussions we had... you'll make an excellent reporter, some day.”

“Thank you,” Clark responded, fighting down a blush. “That means the world to me.”

“I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true,” she assured him.

Later that night, when he was alone in his room, laying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, he felt like his life could get no better.

“No, no, no! Shoot the ball! What are you *doing?*” Clark yelled at the television screen in the mansion's vast living room. He threw his head back in frustration. “Looks like it's gonna be another loss,” he said to himself.

Three minutes later, the basketball game he was watching ended, with his favorite team taking a loss by a measly three points. Three points which Clark thought they could have easily gotten, if only they'd tried to make the shot when they'd had the chance.

Clark clicked the television off and went back to reading his textbook. His freshman year of college was now underway, and although he was bored with the standard classes that everyone had to take, he loved that he was moving forward with his education. By the spring semester, he could start taking his Introduction to Journalism classes, and be well on his way to taking up Vicki

Vale's generous offer to secure him an internship.

But for all of that, he just couldn't get all that excited about the math he was reading about, and, after a while, he dozed off.

He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, only that one moment he was reading and the next moment, he heard ceramic shattering. He awoke with a start, not understanding what had happened. He blinked rapidly, trying to banish the sleep from his brain and focus on his surroundings. After a moment, he saw that Alfred was there, staring at him, white-faced and with his mouth open in shock.

"Alfred? Is everything okay?" Bruce called from the hallway as he approached.

"I'm...not entirely sure," the butler managed to squeak out, in a tone that was so unlike his usual calm collectedness.

"What do you...*Clark*?" Bruce asked, stepping into the room.

"What?" Clark asked, wanting to shrink away from everyone's stares. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Wrong...isn't exactly the word I'd use," Bruce replied. "You're...floating."

"Float...?" Clark asked, the word only half formed in his confusion.

Then, suddenly, he became aware that the comfortable couch he'd been lying on wasn't beneath him. He looked down fearfully, feeling around as he did so. The couch was a good ten inches below where he was. As Bruce had said, he was, apparently, floating in mid-air.

"What...?" he asked, more to himself than to the others.

Another power, his mind eventually inferred. *I thought I was done with having new ones manifest. It's...it's been so long now. I would have bet my life on being done with new abilities. Looks like I was dead wrong.*

"Clark, I want an explanation, *now*," Bruce said, his voice going hard. Clark had rarely heard him use that tone before, and then it had only been reserved for some of the people who worked for him.

"I...uh..." Clark stuttered, trying to buy himself some time to think. He was caught — there was no getting around that fact. Bruce now knew he wasn't a normal person. He sighed, slumping his shoulders in defeat. "I...I don't really know what's going on... just yet. But...I guess you deserve to know the truth. The *full* truth...about me. I have these abilities," he began. "I always have, ever since I was a kid. For the last eight years or so, more and more have manifested. This one though? This one is new." He gestured vaguely, as though it would help him to explain himself. With some effort, he managed to land on the couch with feather-lightness.

"Abilities? You mean powers."

Again, Clark shrugged. "Same difference."

Bruce appeared to concede the point. "What kinds of powers?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me." Once again, his voice was hard, commanding.

"Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you," Clark said. He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "Where to start? I don't get sick. I can't get hurt. I can outrun anything on this planet, as far as I've been able to test it, anyway. My strength...I haven't found a limit to it yet. My glasses? A complete ruse. My vision is actually fine. I just wear them as a reminder not to accidentally use my other powers. I, uh...I have x-ray vision," he said, clarifying as Bruce's features took on a questioning look. "I can set fires with my eyes too, and even telescope in and out to see things that are really far away. If I stood on top of Wayne Tower and you placed a penny on the ground, I could read off the year stamped on it, no problem. But...that's not all," he sighed. "I can hold my breath for twenty minutes at a time, and blow out my breath cold as ice and with hurricane force, if I so choose. I can hear things I shouldn't be able to. And now, apparently, I can fly."

Bruce arched an eyebrow. "Is that all?"

Clark sighed heavily. "Does it really matter? I've just divulged that I am a giant freak of nature."

For a long, terrifying moment, Bruce was silent. Clark scarcely breathed while his heart beat wildly in his chest. What would Bruce say? What would he do? Would he kick him out of the manor? Would he hand him off to the Wayne Tech scientists to experiment on?

Finally, after an eternity, Bruce spoke. His voice was flat, emotionless.

"And when were you planning on telling me all of this?"

A sudden defensiveness rose in Clark and his voice took on a hard edge. "I don't know, Bruce," he countered. "When were *you* going to tell me that you're Batman?"

Dead silence echoed in the room.

"Don't try to deny it," Clark said, softer this time. "I heard you and Alfred talking that night, when some criminal or another slashed your arm with a knife. I...I didn't mean to. I couldn't sleep and was in the kitchen getting a snack. I overheard it all by accident. Sometimes my hearing kicks in when I don't necessarily want it to. And...I found the passage behind the clock." He pointed toward the grandfather clock, which now softly chimed the hour. "I probably shouldn't have but...I went down the passageway stairs."

"What else did you see?"

It wasn't what Clark had expected the man to say.

"Nothing," Clark admitted, hoping Bruce believed the truth of what he was saying. "I don't know the passcode to open the door and I'm guessing there's a layer of lead lining whatever is down there. I couldn't x-ray through it."

Bruce sighed noisily and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Look, Bruce, I'm not going to tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me." Clark paused for a moment before adding, "Just as I hope mine is."

"Of course it is," Bruce said without hesitation. He shook his head. "Well, I never imagined this. I guess the next question is... what now?"

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "Just so you know, though...I admire what you do as Batman. I always have, ever since I first heard about the mysterious nighttime hero of Gotham."

Bruce nodded once in acknowledgment. "It's good to have a fan," he joked weakly. "The Gotham PD doesn't always appreciate my efforts."

"I want to help," Clark said, coming to a sudden, instantaneous decision, before he was even aware of the fact that he was speaking.

"No."

There had been exactly zero hesitation before Bruce's response.

"Why not?" Clark asked, his voice daring Bruce to deny him.

"It's too dangerous."

"No, it isn't."

"Look, Clark, I appreciate the offer, but I already lost one partner doing what I do. I'm not going to put your life at risk as well. My answer is no."

"Robin?" Clark asked in understanding. He'd heard about Batman, then the Dynamic Duo — as some in the media had branded the team of Batman and Robin — and finally just Batman again.

"Yeah, Robin," Bruce said, his entire demeanor changing.

"What happened?"

Bruce looked away as pain pinched his features tightly. "Remember how I told you that I'd once opened my home to someone else?"

"You said he'd died," Clark said with a slight nod.

Bruce walked over to the couch and sat down. "His name was Jason. Jason Todd. For several years, we worked together as a team, going out and delivering justice where it was needed. And

then...Joker. Jason was captured and murdered...and all because I'd been foolish enough to agree to let him help me."

There was no masking the hurt in Bruce's voice — the way Jason's death had heaped guilt and grief on the man's heart.

"I'm not Jason," Clark said with confidence. "What happened to him wasn't your fault. And besides, I've already told you — I can't be hurt."

"No."

"You want proof?" Clark challenged. "I can give you proof."

He zipped off to the kitchen in the blink of an eye and returned with the longest, sharpest knife he could find.

"You know how sharp this is," Clark said evenly.

"Clark, what are you...?"

He didn't get a chance to finish before Clark stabbed himself in the chest, right over his heart. The sturdy metal bent and finally snapped straight off the handle, leaving Clark completely unharmed.

"You're crazy," Bruce said, staring aghast at the broken blade on the floor.

"As crazy as a man who runs around the city at night, dressed up like a bat?" Clark countered, his eyebrows arched in amusement. He folded his arms over his chest.

"Touché," Bruce admitted.

"So, when can I get my own suit?" Clark asked, taking advantage of the fact that he'd made such a point against Bruce.

"You don't," was the immediate response.

"Bruce, let me ask you something," Clark said, not budging at all in where he stood on the matter. "What made you decide to become Batman?"

That appeared to take the billionaire aback for a heartbeat or two. "I watched my parents die in front of me. I was too young and too scared to do anything to help. As I got older, I realized that I can make a difference — so no other child has to lose their parents needlessly."

"And you don't think I have that same motivation? Bruce, a drunk driver who was fleeing the scene of a crime killed my mother. Maybe not in cold blood — I doubt he meant to take a life when he got behind the wheel of that car — but I still had to come to terms with the fact that, in an instant, my mother was taken from me, well before her time. I want to be out there, on the streets, doing what I can do to help. Why do you think I want to get into journalism? To help. But something like what you've figured out? A secret identity to use in order to *directly* make a difference in life? I *need* to be a part of that. And I *will*, whether or not you approve of it." He hadn't particularly planned on it, but his tone of voice had become commanding and somehow different sounding than his usual voice, at least in his own ears. It was like, in that moment, he'd become another person altogether.

"Clark..."

"No, Bruce. Don't. I won't change my mind about it."

Without giving Bruce the chance to make a retort, Clark simply walked away. And to his eternal amazement, Bruce didn't follow.

A month passed since Clark discovered that, of all the crazy things in the world, he could fly. He dedicated every free moment to honing his new skill, but the truth of the matter was, it was the easiest of his powers to control. It was nearly effortless for him to float and then land again, change direction at the spur of the moment, simply hover, even to fly at his maximum speed.

But the freedom!

Clark had never felt so free in all his life.

He did not forget his conversation with Bruce, but, for the time being, he let the subject matter drop. Clark could be patient. He would wait until he saw the right opportunity to approach the subject again. In the meantime, he would fly — always at night, for fear of discovery — and see the world. He didn't tell anyone

what he was doing. While Alfred pattered around the house and Bruce either slept or was out fighting crime, Clark would take off from his balcony and set off in any direction that struck his fancy.

The first week, he didn't stray far. He mainly just circled Gotham. Once, he even saw Bruce, crouched on a rooftop, vigilantly watching the city he loved. Clark let him be, purposely flying into a cloud bank to remain shielded from Bruce's eyes in case the man should look up. After the first week, however, Clark grew bolder and he started to travel further, flying across state lines. The first place he went to was the cemetery in Smallville, alighting before the plot of land where his parents had been buried together.

It was strange, being there. He hadn't been back to the place since the day his mother and father had been committed to the earth. He'd thrown the first two handfuls of soft, black, rich soil on top of each of the caskets. But that was the last he'd seen of his parents' final resting place — an ugly dark hole in the ground, within which his parents had been laid, nestled in wooden boxes. Now, the scar in the land had healed. The ground was smooth and a healthy layer of grass had grown. Aside from the granite headstone that marked where Jonathan and Martha Kent had been laid to rest, there was nothing to show that the ground had ever undergone such upheaval.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," Clark whispered into the light wind.

"Sorry it's taken me so long to come visit. Part of it was that I couldn't — I had no way to get here, at least until I met Bruce. There's no doubt he would have had me flown out here, if I'd asked. But the greater part of it is — and I'm ashamed to admit it — I was *afraid* to come back here. Afraid that...I don't know. That seeing your grave like this...with the headstone and the grass and everything...that it would...I don't know. Make it more real? As if *not* coming here and seeing this could make it hurt any less, or make it all just a nightmare."

He knelt down and laid a bouquet of flowers down on the gravesite — flowers he'd picked in a meadow, high in the mountains before he'd gone ahead to the cemetery.

"But, I can fly now. It's unbelievable, but true. I can actually fly, like I'm Peter Pan or something. It's crazy. But...well...now that I can get out here whenever I want, I promise, I'll come more often. I miss you guys."

He stayed for roughly an hour, a silent figure bathed in silver moonlight, unmoving as he stood in vigil over the people who'd loved him more than anything on Earth.

It was only when he heard the approach of a night guard on patrol that he lifted up off the ground and shot away, at somewhat less than his full speed. He'd learned already that he could tear the very air apart in a sonic boom if he moved too quickly. So he was sure to always travel at a speed that didn't threaten to accidentally reveal his location. He dared not go anywhere else that night, and retreated back to Wayne Manor, his heart bleeding anew in his grief.

But that experimental flight to Smallville bolstered Clark's confidence. He went out for longer periods of time, going farther and farther each time, until he'd traversed the globe, albeit only from the air. It was a dream come true, to see the sights he'd always looked at in books — the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China, the Great Barrier Reef, the vast nothingness of the Antarctic, Mount Fuji — all of it made his heart ache with sheer wonderment.

Of course, he couldn't go out every night. As the months passed, he found himself faced with more and more obligations. School work and football practice took up a lot of his time, as did the college newspaper, which he'd immediately joined. There were social events to attend on campus as well, and even the occasional date, though none of those potential romances ever went further than a handful of dates. It was frustrating to Clark. As much as he wanted to help the world as a reporter and perhaps

even as a costumed hero, the way Bruce did, he desperately wanted to eventually find a woman to share his life with. He wanted to settle down, get married, and to have a family of his own.

There were other obligations as well. Parties were thrown at Wayne Manor, and, as one of the residents of the house, Clark felt that he should be present at as many of them as possible. It was no secret that Bruce Wayne had opened up his home to a homeless teen he'd found on the streets, and Bruce himself had encouraged Clark to be as visible as possible when public events were held. Who was Clark to deny him that? After all, he owed everything to the billionaire.

Of course, the parties were nothing new. Bruce was one of the wealthiest men on the planet. It was expected that he would host a certain number of events in his lavish home. Most of them, of course, were charity events. Every charity in existence appeared to want Bruce to endorse them, and he was more than happy to support as many as he could. Of course, there were those he couldn't support — through lack of time or from not agreeing with the group's mission. But the events he *did* host were nothing short of extravagant.

Alcohol of every type flowed freely. The foods served were always of the "rare and expensive" type, not to mention prepared to perfection. There was always music during those parties — usually live orchestral bands that played softly in the background, lending elegance to the affair at hand. Clark had been shy at first, wishing he could melt away into the background and merely observe what was going on around him, but of course that hadn't been an option. Some of the events — in particular, the ones focused on helping the hungry and homeless in Gotham — had been things he and Bruce had worked on jointly, forcing Clark to be front and center for the duration of the event.

As time passed, Clark grew more confident in his ability to mingle with the highest members of society. He grew more comfortable being an active participant in the events, and found himself making his presence at such events more known. If nothing else, he knew that interacting with the rich and powerful would be valuable experience to have, once he became a journalist. There was no reason to fear these people. They were just like him, just without the powers that set him apart from normal people. He could handle himself professionally, and often made a personal game of seeing how well he could get information out of the people he was speaking with. Of course, he never pried for anything that was too personal. After all, he wasn't trying to do an expose on them. He found himself with mixed success, and vowed to work on his skills even harder.

There was one major drawback to the events, as he soon found out. He usually had to shoo away one or more intoxicated women. The first time, he'd ducked into his bedroom for a moment to collect himself and found two fully disrobed women lounging on his bed. After that, he'd learned to lock his door before joining the party, but that didn't discourage some of the women. A number of times, he'd found himself somehow cornered during the parties, with women trying to seduce him away from the event and into a private area. Clark always gently rebuffed their advances. He'd long ago vowed to keep himself saved for his soul mate — whoever she was — because he could not imagine giving himself over to anyone who didn't know the full truth about who he was. And being approached by random women, just because he was a friend of Bruce Wayne, added a very creepy vibe to the whole thing.

He hated it.

Each time it happened, he was instantly brought back to his near-rape at the homeless shelter, the night before he'd fled to the safety of Wayne Manor. He'd feel his body break out in a cold sweat and his heart would race. It would become difficult to retain his composure, though he always did his best to adopt a neutral

expression that hid his inner turmoil, or even a forced smile to mask how much he wanted to get away.

But, no matter how hard the struggle to hide his discomfort was, he somehow always managed to keep up his ever-cheerful, friendly personality. He still graciously greeted the guests at each affair. He maintained polite conversation. And all the while, he kept his thoughts focused on helping the people of the world.

"Stop right there!" Bruce commanded, his voice deliberately pitched lower and more gravelly via the device pressed against his throat, hidden beneath the cowl he wore when out as Batman. "I don't think that car belongs to you."

"Ooh, lookie, boys! It's the *Batman*," the leader of the small group of thugs said. He smacked his crowbar into his empty palm as he spoke, sarcasm dripping heavily from his words. "We're so scared, aren't we, boys?"

"Hehe, yeah," snickered the man on the leader's left. His beady eyes flickered around, as if sizing up the situation.

"Terrified," said the other, a man in a black woolen ski cap. He grinned, showing a mouth full of broken, rotted teeth.

"I would be, if I were you," Clark said, stepping out of the shadows.

Only, he didn't look like himself, he knew. He was dressed all in black — the outfit tight, sleek, purposeful. There were some accents of icy blue as well — most notably, the bat symbol which stretched across his broad, muscled chest and which extended out onto his shoulders. His identity — his most precious possession — was carefully concealed behind a mask, the shape of which also resembled a slightly more stylized bat. The suit had some built-in padding and protection, but it was minimal, and meant more as a ruse to fool any criminals Clark might come across. It would not do to have none at all, and expose him for the invulnerable being that he was in reality.

A hardened look flashed in Bruce's eyes. Clark's disguise wasn't fooling him, at the very least. He looked *mad*, if anything.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, never taking his gaze from the three would-be car thieves.

"Helping you," Clark replied with a small shrug.

"I don't need any help. I work alone."

"Yeah, so you've said," Clark said, advancing to Bruce's side. "You want to go first or...?" he offered, a light, joking tone to his voice.

Bruce responded by flinging a small, bat-shaped object at the leader. It expanded a bit in mid-air and its flight path curved. In seconds, the leader was wrapped in a length of sturdy, slender cable. The man struggled for a moment, then stumbled and crashed to the ground on his stomach.

"Get them!" he yelled to his two cohorts.

Clark saw Wool Hat reaching for a gun, before Bruce was even aware that the man was moving. He shoved Bruce out of the way and deflected the bullet with the back of his hand, as though he was swatting away a fly. To the naked eye, he knew he'd moved his hand fast enough so as to appear motionless, and that Wool Hat would think he'd simply missed his target.

As the sound of the gunshot faded, even Bruce had to offer up a "Thanks."

Clark nodded his acknowledgment. "I'll take care of Wool Hat, you take Mohawk Man."

"Works for me."

Careful not to move with inhuman speed, Clark rushed at Wool Hat. The man shot wildly at Clark. He was obviously not used to firing a gun. His bullets hit everything but Clark. One even went so far off course as to pierce the bulb of the streetlight behind Clark. There was a pop, then a tinkling sound of shattered glass as the street darkened by several degrees. Clark heard the young man gulp as he realized he wasn't going to win this fight. Undeterred, Clark kept advancing until he was directly before Wool Hat. He

grabbed the thief's shirt, bunching up the black material in his fist.

"Hey...man. Don't hurt me," Wool Hat pleaded. "I ain't never done this before and I won't again."

"No, you won't," Clark agreed. "The police will see to that."

As he spoke, he took the gun from the man's hand. He thought about crushing the barrel of it down so that it could not be used again, but then thought better of it. Firstly, he didn't want to show off his strength. And secondly, he thought the police might want it for evidence. He tucked the gun into the belt around his waist and then took out a length of the same cable Bruce had used to tie up the leader. Swiftly, he bound Wool Hat's hands behind his back.

By then, Bruce had subdued Mohawk Man. The young man was slumped over, out cold. Bruce shrugged as Clark looked over. Clark supposed he must have looked a little surprised at his friend's speed in disabling the thug.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Clark said, meaning it. "You want to phone these guys into the police or you want me to drop them off?"

"We'll drop them off," Bruce said. He went to where the leader and Wool Hat were and popped open a small canister. In an instant, both of the men were knocked out.

"What'd you just do?" Clark demanded.

"It's just a light sedative. In fifteen minutes, they'll come to. Just enough time to get them over to the police station," Bruce explained, replacing the canister in his utility belt. "We need to hurry."

"I'll take them," Clark offered. "I can be there and back in seconds."

Bruce appeared to mull it over. "Too dangerous. What if someone sees you?"

"I've been flying around for months now. No one's caught me yet. I know how to keep myself safe, you know."

Bruce sighed, knowing he'd just lost the argument. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"I'll be right back," Clark inclined his head in respect and acknowledgement. "Meet you back here?"

"No. Not here," Bruce said, shaking his head.

Clark hesitated and then agreed. "Yeah, okay." He glanced around and pointed to the tallest building surrounding them. "The roof?"

"Good enough for me," Bruce said with a nod.

Clark didn't answer. Instead, he turned his attention to the three unconscious thugs. He used another bit of cable to bind the three together. Then he effortlessly lifted them all and flew into the air. He flew to the nearest police station, twelve blocks uptown and seven over, and dropped his bundle off in front of the door. No one was around — not a single cop on a smoke break or citizen out walking their dog. Clark used a bit of super speed to tether the bundle to a light pole. He fished around for a bit of paper and a small stub of a pencil that he'd had Alfred stash in his belt.

Found these three attempting to steal a car on Xavier Street.

He didn't sign the note, figuring he didn't have to. The bold black bat symbol at the header would give the police all the information they needed. He left the gun on Wool Hat's chest. It was empty — Clark made sure to check it. Wool Hat must have spent every last bullet with his wild shooting when Clark had approached.

"There," he told the three still forms before him. "All wrapped up, neat and tidy for the police. And just in time too. I think I hear one of the cruisers approaching."

He telescoped in down the street. Sure enough, a patrol car was headed back to the station. Clark silently lifted off into the sky and returned to where Bruce was waiting. All the while, he wondered how mad the older man was going to be. Not that it mattered. Clark was more than old enough to make his own decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions. And this was something he wanted to do.

No. Not want. Need, he told himself.

"That was fast," Bruce remarked as Clark alighted down on the rooftop behind him. He didn't turn around, but kept his vigil over the city.

Clark shrugged, though he knew Bruce couldn't see it. "I told you so."

"Mmm," Bruce hummed in response. A minute passed without either one of them speaking. Then, "So how long ago did Alfred make your suit?"

"A few weeks ago," Clark admitted, unsurprised that Bruce had instantly recognized that Alfred had been involved. "Are you mad?" He walked up next to Bruce and leaned his back against the high wall that ran along the roof's edge.

Another pause. "I should be. But part of me saw it coming. I think. I still wish you hadn't decided to do this."

"I'm not going to end up like Jason. I can protect myself. Geez, Bruce, I mean I caught a bullet on the back of my hand tonight, so it wouldn't hit you." Clark folded his arms over his chest, not defensively, but in a relaxed way.

"The armor in my suit would have deflected it," Bruce countered halfheartedly.

"Maybe so," Clark allowed. "But this is *my* decision. I *need* to do this."

Bruce sighed noisily. "I know. But that doesn't mean that I'm not worried."

Clark sighed in turn. "I get it. But this will be different, I promise. You don't have to worry about me getting captured or killed."

Bruce didn't reply to that. Once again, silence fell. Only the night sounds of the city broke the quiet — a distant car horn, the wail of an ambulance, raucous laughter from a knot of drunks out in front of a bar on the next block over.

"So, what do I call you now?" Bruce asked, looking over at Clark for the first time.

Clark chuckled. "Alfred sort of dubbed the suit 'Nightwing.' So, I guess that's as good a name as any."

"Nightwing," Bruce said it in such a way that it seemed like he was rolling it around in his mind and on his tongue as he spoke, testing it out. "Nightwing. I like it."

But Clark was no longer listening. His head was cocked to one side, his super hearing engaged of its own accord.

"Clark?" Bruce asked, concerned. "Everything okay?"

"No," he said slowly, still listening. "There's a shootout on Vine and Kensington. Two officers down. We need to go and help them."

Bruce nodded stiffly. "Let's get to the car."

Clark shook his head. "Alfred made me a motorcycle. Said it would be a better cover than me flying around. I'll see you there."

As Clark flew down to the street to retrieve his bike, he heard Bruce muttering to himself as he grappled down the building.

"A bike! Does that kid even have his license?"

"So?" Clark asked, once they were in the privacy of the Batcave.

"So, what?" Bruce asked, pulling off his cowl.

"So...what'd you think? About tonight?" Clark asked, removing his face mask. "Us, out there? Working together as a team," he elaborated.

Bruce paused after placing the cowl on its stand. "I hate to admit it, but, you did good out there."

Clark let the compliment sink in for a moment. "It felt good, Bruce, to be out there, helping. I'm going to keep doing it."

"I know. And, as much as I was afraid of you going out there, you proved that you *can* handle yourself. I don't just mean with your powers and your restraint in using them. You've got good instincts and a way of putting people at ease. That five-year-old that you calmed down in that car wreck...you were a complete,

masked stranger to her but she instantly trusted you to keep her safe.” There was a mild tone of awe in Bruce’s voice.

“And her seven-year-old sister did the same with you,” Clark offered.

Bruce shook his head as he started to walk behind a privacy screen to get out of his suit. “That’s different. Batman’s an established figure. People know him. You, on the other hand, are someone brand new. Aside from the three of us,” he said, nodding toward Alfred, “not a soul knows who Nightwing is.” He gave Clark a wry grin. “At least until tomorrow when the *Gotham Gazette* prints the story about a new hero in town.”

That stopped Clark as he, too, stepped behind his changing screen. “I guess that’s true. I just did what I thought was right, and it worked.”

“Well, don’t get too cocky,” Bruce replied, but his voice betrayed a hint of teasing. “This was an easy night.”

“So,” Clark said, already done changing back into his civilian clothes, “does that mean I can continue to work with you? Rather than go off on my own?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said, sounding like he was surrendering. “For the time being, you can keep working with me. Except, your outfit...”

“What? I thought it looked pretty good,” Clark said, hanging it up. “I would have even gone so far as to call it ‘dashing.’ What? Too much?” he asked off Bruce’s shaking head.

“That’s not what I meant. It’s fine. Just not complete. You’ll be needing this.”

Bruce came around from behind his screen, dressed now in his usual evening attire of cotton pants and a t-shirt. He rummaged in a drawer and then tossed a small device at Clark. Clark deftly caught the tiny item and peered at it.

“What is it?” he asked, still examining it.

“An earpiece. You may be able to hear me sneeze from clear across the city, but I can’t hear you. We’ll need a way to communicate reliably while we’re out there. Place it in your ear like this,” he said, demonstrating. “This piece here is a microphone. It’s powerful — I’ll be able to hear your voice even in the midst of battle. It’s also connected back here, to the cave. Alfred is usually standing by to help, if need be.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks, Bruce.” He carefully put the miniature earpiece with the rest of his costume. “For all of this. I won’t let you down out there, I swear it.”

Bruce put his back to Clark in readiness to leave the Batcave. “I know.”

Clark retired to his bedroom that night, ecstatic over how well the night had gone. He’d done what he’d sworn to do. He’d donned the costume Alfred had painstakingly created for him. He’d gone out there, into the streets, and actually made a difference in the world. Oh, sure, maybe it wasn’t anything major. He hadn’t taken down an entire crime circuit or put a criminal mastermind behind bars. But for the people who were actually affected by his actions — whether or not they knew what he’d done for them — he’d truly made a difference in their lives.

Someone would wake up in the morning and find their car exactly where it had been parked the night before. Two police officers — though in critical condition — were still alive, thanks to his efforts. The rest of the officers on the scene were safe and unharmed. Perhaps they would have been perfectly fine without Batman and Nightwing stepping in to lend their aid. But Clark couldn’t help but feel like maybe the two costumed characters had played a role in ensuring that the shooters had been subdued without further incident, and that maybe — just maybe — without their help, more officers might have been injured. And that family in the car wreck...

That memory made Clark smile. He and Bruce had been patrolling the city when they’d happened upon a car accident. It

had been a recent accident, they could tell. The occupants of the car were still a bit dazed when Clark had insisted they stop and lend a hand. It wasn’t a usual incident for Batman to become involved with, but Bruce had been willing to go along with Clark’s need to help. Clark had immediately swerved his motorcycle toward the accident and skidded to a halt just behind the wrecked SUV. As he dismounted the bike, Clark used his speedy vision to survey the scene of the accident in less than a heartbeat. It had been a single car crash. There was no evidence of any other vehicle being involved in the crash. The front of the SUV was badly mangled and dented where it had impacted a streetlight.

He was moving immediately, his heart seizing up in his chest. He only hoped the occupants of the SUV were alive.

“Sir?” he’d asked as he reached the driver’s side door. He’d pulled the door open, giving him access to the man behind the wheel. “Sir?”

Incomprehensible moaning had been the only response, but even that simple sound had been a relief to Clark’s ears. The driver was alive.

Clark had swept his eyes over the rest of the vehicle’s occupants. Everyone had survived the accident, much to Clark’s relief. The mother had been unconscious, but had clearly shown signs of breathing. The two girls in the back seat had been crying and clutching stuffed animals to themselves — a panda bear in the five-year-old’s arms and a white unicorn with a rainbow mane in the seven-year-old’s embrace. Between the girls — and faring the best of them all — a ten-month-old baby boy had been wailing in fright, though his car seat had kept him from coming to any harm.

Making a split-second decision, Clark had helped the children’s father first. He opened the door and helped the man unbuckle his seat belt. Fully coming to, the father had staggered out of the car with Clark’s help. Clark helped the man limp over to a safe distance from the car and from any other cars that might come down the street. Then he went back to the vehicle and helped the children get out. He brought the infant to his father first, then picked up the girls and brought them over as well. By then, the father had been able to express his gratitude and care for his children while Clark turned his attention to the wife.

“Ma’am?” Clark had asked, going around to the passenger side. “Ma’am? Can you hear me?”

“Huh?” the woman asked, her eyes fluttering open. “What...?”

“Easy,” Clark had said, trying to still her movements. “I’m here to help you. Are you hurt at all?” As he’d asked, he’d used his x-ray vision to look for obvious signs of injury, but he’d found none.

“I...I’m not sure,” the woman had responded. “What happened? Who are you?”

“My name is Nightwing,” Clark had said, helping her undo her seat belt. He’d then extended a hand to help her stand. “You were in a car accident. Your husband and children are fine. They’re just over there, waiting for you.” He’d indicated the direction with a nod of his head.

In the meantime, Bruce had called for an ambulance, carefully changing his voice again so that it neither resembled Batman’s voice nor Bruce Wayne’s voice. Clark had heard snippets of the conversation with his super hearing, as he’d tended to the family. He’d heard Bruce end the 9-1-1 call as he’d half-walked, half-carried, the woman over to her husband and children.

“Here you go,” he’d said as he’d helped the woman sit on the stairs of an apartment building.

“Thank you, Nightwing,” the woman had said, mustering up a weak smile.

“Paramedics should be here soon,” he’d assured her.

“Thank you,” the man had said. “I...I’m not sure what we would have done without you.”

“What happened?” Bruce had asked as he’d approached.

"I...I'm not sure," the man had stuttered. "I was driving and the next thing I knew, he was there," he'd said, indicating Clark. "I guess...I may have drifted off for a second. We've been driving all night, trying to get home. Oh God, I'm so embarrassed. And so sorry. I thought I could make it home. We were so close..." He'd buried his head in his hands, shaking and sobbing with guilt.

"Mister?" the five-year-old had said, coming up to Clark and tugging at his hand.

Clark had looked down and smiled at the wide-eyed little girl. "Hey there. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she'd replied shyly. "Thank you for helping us."

"Aww, it was my pleasure."

"Stay?"

Clark had smiled warmly. "Sure thing. I'll stay with you until the ambulance arrives. How does that sound?"

The girl's eyes had lit up. "Yay! Thank you!" And then she'd flung herself at him, hugging him around the waist.

Cautiously, Clark had given her a quick hug in return, but only after he'd looked to her parents for their nod of approval. "My pleasure," he'd told her. Then, to distract her from the wait for the paramedics, he sat down on the cold concrete sidewalk, next to where she'd been sitting on the steps. She'd followed his lead and sat down again. "What's your name?" he'd asked.

"Danielle," she'd said with a shy smile.

"Danielle. That's a pretty name. And what about him? Does he have a name too?" He'd pointed to the stuffed panda she'd been clutching.

"This is WaWa," Danielle had said, stroking the bear's ratty, somewhat dingy-looking fur. It had been more than clear that WaWa was a favorite toy that had been dragged along everywhere Danielle went. "Kim's unicorn is StarFire."

Clark hadn't been able to stop his smile. "Those are some really nice names."

"Kimmy gave me WaWa when I was a baby," Danielle had proudly declared, holding up the panda for inspection.

"Well, that was very nice of her," Clark had said. "He's a special bear then, huh?"

"He's my favorite toy ever."

"When I was a little boy, I had a stuffed dog," Clark had offered. "His name was Rexy."

"Do you still have him?" Danielle's eyes had gone wide with interest.

Clark had to shake his head. "No. But I wish I did."

That had made his heart a little sad. Not that he needed his old stuffed toy. But it was another reminder of how much of his life had been left behind so suddenly when his parents had died. He wondered if his old things were still stored at the Irig farm, and had made a mental note to get in touch with Wayne when he had the chance. Perhaps he could fly out at some point and pick through everything and bring some of it back to Wayne Manor.

"Oh," Danielle had said sadly. "I'm sorry you don't have your doggy anymore."

Clark had chuckled a little. "It's okay." He glanced over at Bruce, and found him talking to Danielle's older sister.

Danielle noticed. "Kimmy loves Batman. She says she wants to marry him someday."

Kim had overheard the exchange. "Dani!" she'd admonished, clearly embarrassed. "Be quiet!"

"Girls! That's enough!" their mother had sternly, but kindly, told them.

"Batman?" Kim had ventured, now that her secret was out. "Can I have your autograph?"

Bruce had cracked a small smile. He was always careful to keep Batman as a more serious persona than his true self. "Sure thing." He'd fumbled for something to write on. After a moment, he pulled out a dull Batarang from his utility belt. "Sorry, it's all I have," he'd apologized to the kids' parents as he'd signed his

name with a marker that the mother had produced from her purse.

"Me too! Me too!" Danielle had cried, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "I want Nightwing's autograph!"

Secretly, Clark doubted she understood what an autograph was, but she was so adorable in trying to emulate her sister that he had to smile. And part of him had been — and still was — flattered that she'd chosen him over Bruce. But, in the end, he and Bruce had both signed each of the Batarangs they'd given to the girls.

It had only been right as the ambulances were approaching that he and Bruce had taken their leave of the family. The girls had hugged them both and the parents had shaken hands with them, thanking them both over and over for their help. As the paramedics had turned onto the block where the family was, the nighttime crusaders had melted into the shadows. They'd waited on a nearby rooftop until the coast was clear, then decided that it was getting late and that they should head back to the house for the night. Clark hadn't really wanted to return just yet — he was still riding the adrenaline rush from helping that family — but he'd had to admit that Bruce was right. It truly was late and they'd been out for hours already. It had been time to call it quits and get some rest.

Now, as Clark lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling in the darkness, he smiled to himself. He'd made a difference to that family. He felt surer than ever that this was his calling in life. No matter what else happened in his life, he would dedicate himself to helping others, not just as a reporter, but as a force for justice in a more direct manner as well.

"This is who I am," he said to himself, just before he drifted off to sleep.

The remainder of the summer blitzed past, faster than any Clark could ever remember. He went out every night, with or without Bruce, doing what he could to help the people of Gotham. He took pains to keep his powers under wraps. He wanted people to think he was just another average man who'd chosen to embrace the night, helping the city's citizens under the cover of darkness, the same as Batman. It was difficult, but he managed. And when he *did* need to rely on his powers to give him the upper hand in a situation, he took great care to ensure that no one noticed what he was doing — either using his powers out of sight or by disguising them somehow.

Autumn rolled in, gentle and mild. Clark's college life began anew. He liked his classes, especially now that some of the core requirements were behind him, and he could focus on only those that counted toward his major, as well as a few interesting elective courses. His days were full, between his time in the classrooms, studying, spending time with some of the friends he'd made, and extracurricular activities, including football. His nights were spent doing homework and projects in a flash, eating dinner, and hitting the streets as Nightwing, once the sun went down.

Before he knew it, winter was coming to a close and the first thawing of spring was upon them. His sophomore year of college was nearly complete. He felt on top of the world. Nothing could stop him. Already, he was on track to complete slightly more than half of the credits he would need to graduate. If he kept pushing himself, he could finish school an entire semester early, giving him a jump on the job market. He wished he could take even more credits than he was, but the school wouldn't allow it and it would have forced him to take too many night classes, limiting what he could accomplish as Nightwing.

To keep himself busy during the summer, he worked at Wayne Tower, which was the main corporate office for Wayne Enterprises. Of course, there were satellite offices in several other major cities around the globe, but Wayne Tower was the shining central hub where Bruce oversaw his empire. Clark was nothing more than a gofer, but it provided a steady paycheck — not that he

needed the money, living in Wayne Manor — and it gave him plenty of time out in the sunshine. It also allowed him a lot of freedom. He could get an errand across town done in seconds, but since he had to appear as a normal man, he often found himself with time to spare, which he utilized in a number of ways. Some days, he would sit in a park and relax. Other days he would go to the library and read up on any number of subjects — everything from fighting techniques he could employ as Nightwing to old newspaper articles as he studied the style of writing specific to the news. As a result, he grew to be an adept fighter and honed his writing skills to a professional level.

One day, toward the end of August, he was sent across town to pick up a few things at a jewelry store that Wayne Enterprises often did business with. Clark headed out into the blistering heat with a smile on his face and a thick, sturdy briefcase in his hand. He was grateful that extreme heat didn't affect him. It was a truly sweltering, humid day. Barely anyone was out on the streets at all. And those who were looked miserable and sluggish, save for a pair of skateboarders rolling easily down the sidewalk, outside of Clark's favorite sandwich shop. The thought of a sandwich from the place was too tempting to resist, so Clark ducked inside.

The air conditioning was on full blast, but it barely made a dent in the heat. Too many hot sandwiches had to be prepared, so the ovens were on. Clark decided on his absolute favorite from the place — a grilled chicken sandwich with their signature barbecue sauce, a thick slice of fresh mozzarella on top, all on a round roll. He chose a cold lemonade to wash it down with. The place made its own lemonade, and it was the perfect balance of sour tartness from the hand-squeezed lemons and sweetness from the added sugar. He sat at a little table in the corner, keeping to himself, and soon finished his lunch.

His stomach full and happy, he headed back out into the heat. He decided to grab a cab across town to his destination. He could have walked it, or flown, but he was determined to fit in and do everything as normal as possible. For once, the cabbie wasn't overly chatty, nor was the music in the vehicle blasting. It was as though the heat had leeches the energy out of everyone in every way. Even the man's driving was subdued, rather than the chaotic driving that passed for normal in Gotham. Clark tipped the man generously once they reached their destination.

He went right in to the jewelry store and was greeted by Maxwell, the owner. The two knew each other from other errands Clark had run for various members of the board of directors. Max was finishing up with another customer, so Clark patiently waited. He happened to be standing before the store's display of engagement rings, so he idly eyed them as he waited. There were a number of rings that he found to be beautiful, but nothing extra special. Besides, he reasoned, it wasn't like he was even dating anyone at the moment, let alone thinking ahead to a proposal. He'd just broken up with Nadia back in May, after he'd discovered that she'd only gone out with him because he was rich. Or, at least, *perceived* to be rich. Though he lived in Wayne Manor and had all his needs taken care of — food, shelter, his education, and the like — he paid for as much as he could with the money he earned from working. He hated relying on Bruce to pay for things like new clothing, shoes, or a ticket to the movies. It didn't seem right to him. He was a responsible young man, capable of holding down a job and paying for his own things.

"Thank you, ma'am. You have a great afternoon now," Max said as the elderly woman strode out with a small bag in her hands. He turned to Clark. "Kent? They sent you in here again?" he joked.

Clark chuckled and shrugged. "Yeah, you know me. Always ready to run an errand."

"In this heat? That's cruel and unusual punishment, my friend."

"It's not so bad, once you get used to it," Clark replied with an

easy smile.

"Ha! Maybe for you. Me? I'm getting too old for heat like this. I'm ready to move to a cooler climate," Max said with a shake of his head.

"You know, it's usually the opposite way around," Clark joked. "And too old? What are you, forty, tops?"

"I wish!" Max laughed. "Gonna be fifty-nine this November. I'm ready to retire to the mountains. Maybe in Canada."

"Sure," Clark humored him. "And you'd be back here at the first sign of a blizzard."

Max roared a laugh. Clark knew the man despised the snow, no matter how much he might grumble about the oppressive heat of the day. "True!" He continued laughing for another long moment, then he wiped at his eyes. "You know me too well, Kent. Now then, what can I do for you today?"

"Just a couple of pickups. Bruce said his watch you were repairing is ready?" Max nodded. "Lucius asked me to pick up the cufflinks he ordered. Then there's the awards for the Cancer Research Fund dinner. And...I think that was all," he said, checking his pocket for the invoices for each of the items he'd mentioned.

His flawless memory assured him that was everything, but the farce of uncertainty was part of the act put on to be just like everyone else, though he was toying with the idea of letting that part of his "costume" — as he saw it — slide away. It was exhausting to try to hide every single detail about himself!

Max checked the slips of paper, ensuring that Clark had been listed as an authorized person to pick up the items in question.

"Back in a jiff," the man said as he moved toward the locked door to his private office, where he usually kept anything meant for Bruce or his associates.

"Take your time," Clark replied. "I'm in no hurry to get back outside."

"No blame there," Max chuckled.

Clark continued to study the other pieces of jewelry in the glass display cases while he waited. It wasn't a long wait. Not three minutes later, Max returned with the watch and the cufflinks. Clark looked them over while Max went back to his office. When he came back this time, his arms were laden with a cardboard box. He set the box on the countertop and lifted out the first golden medallion that was one of the Cancer Research Fund awards. He handed it to Clark.

"Max, these are gorgeous!" Clark exclaimed, truly impressed with the design. "You really outdid yourself on these!"

"Thanks, Clark. That means a lot to me." He sounded deeply humbled.

"Bruce is going to love them," Clark continued.

"Here, let me help you get them all in your briefcase," Max offered, dipping his head in acknowledgment.

"Thanks, Max."

Together, they transferred everything to Clark's briefcase, nestling it all in amongst cushioning foam, just to be overly protective of the contents. When they were finished, Clark snapped the case shut and locked it tight against would-be thieves. Not that anyone would stand a chance of wresting the case away from him. His grip was steel. No one would get it unless he wanted them to.

Clark gave his company-issued credit card to Max to pay off the balance of what was owed. The jeweler ran the card and Clark signed for the items after pocketing the card again. Clark added the receipt to his pocket and thanked Max again.

"Anytime! Good luck out there in the heat, my friend."

"Ha! Stay cool, Max," he replied as he headed back outdoors.

If anything, it seemed to have gotten even *more* stifling out while Clark had been in the jewelry store. He had trouble flagging down a cab — every one he saw was either off duty or had already picked up a fare. Shrugging to himself, he kept walking, keeping

an eye peeled for a cab, but by the time he reached the subway station, he gave up and went down the steps. As humid as it was above ground, it was worse under it. The humidity had seeped down the stairs and was now mixed with the crowd standing around on the tracks, waiting for the next train. Clark's sensitive nose was assaulted with the stench of sweat and body odor.

It was a relief when the train pulled into the station just a few mercifully short minutes later. The doors slid open and a press of people exited before those waiting on the platform clamored inside. Clark was glad to see it was a newer train, outfitted with a strong air conditioning unit. He kept to himself, keeping his briefcase protectively close to his body. No one said a word as they crossed the city — a rare event to be sure.

When they finally reached Wayne Tower, Clark got off the train. It didn't let off directly in front of the building, so he walked the three blocks back. There was a little shop on the corner that sold ice cream and Italian ices. Clark stopped and bought a small lemon ice before continuing on his way. It was unbelievably refreshing in the heat and Clark was more than glad he'd decided to buy it. Still, the air conditioning felt amazing once he walked into Wayne Tower. For whatever reason — and he knew full well that it could have solely been his imagination — the air conditioning felt stronger and more pleasant than it had in any of the other places he'd been during the afternoon.

By then, his ice was finished, so he stopped to toss the paper cup into a wastepaper basket. The first one he came to happened to be just outside one of the conference rooms. He could overhear a few people talking in the next room. Normally, he would have deliberately tuned his hearing elsewhere. He hated eavesdropping. But he heard Bruce's name come up in a whispered tone.

"I'm telling you. This idea of an interconnected web of computers? This so-called 'internet' Bruce keeps going on about..." That was George, Clark could hear. It wasn't hard to picture the air-quotes he would have made with his fingers during the word 'internet.' "It's absurd, is what it is."

"You don't think it has merit?" Andrew asked.

"Digitizing all the world's information and putting it into some vast, endless, intangible...*thing*?" George scoffed. "It'll never be more than an idiot's folly. And for Bruce to be so willing to jump in on something so...so unstable sounding...he's going to lead this company to ruin, gentlemen."

"I don't know, George," Bradley said, sounding dubious. "Bruce usually picks winning ideas to pursue..."

"Oh please!" This time, it was Roger. "Half of his latest investments have failed miserably! If he keeps this up, he'll destroy the company!"

Normally, Clark wouldn't continue to eavesdrop on a private conversation, but this sounded ominous. He kept moving, tuning his super hearing in on the meeting. He was worried, and justified his invasion of privacy in the name of that same worry.

"And the other investments have more than made up for those losses," Tabitha bluntly protested.

Clark smiled to himself. He'd always liked Tabitha. She was a force of nature, that woman. She was definitely the kind of woman who could silence a room with one word.

"Made up? *Made up*? Are you insane? We could have been twice as profitable if we'd put our money into other projects!" George said in a hushed roar. "More than twice even!"

"So, what are you suggesting?" Tim asked pointedly.

"I'm thinking it may be time for Bruce to step down out of his role. Retire and just reap the rewards of his company while us smarter guys..." Here Tabitha cleared her throat, annoyed. "And girls," George quickly amended, "take over the running of this company."

"Take over?" Tim replied. "And how do you propose doing that?"

"Talk to the other members of the board," Roger explained.

"Feel them out and see what they think. We have a meeting scheduled for next Tuesday. George or I can start the motion to remove Bruce from the board. All we have to do is vote him out and take control."

"I'm not entirely sure that's going to work..." Tabitha replied in halting tones.

"Just...think about it," Roger encouraged. "You don't have to decide now."

"Hush!" warned Jeffrey, who'd remained silent until that moment. "Someone's coming."

Clark heard Lucius whistling softly to himself as he went about his business. Once he was well past the room where the mutineers — as Clark now saw them — were plotting, they dispersed. Clark severed the connection to their conversation. He picked up his pace as he wound his way through the halls. He'd intended to go straight to Bruce with the briefcase, but now it was even *more* imperative that he get to the man's office with all haste.

"Hey, Clark! Back already?" Bruce joked as Clark knocked on his door.

"Even grabbed a bite to eat," he responded with a grin. "I think you'll like what Max created for the fundraiser awards."

Bruce beckoned him further into his expansive, plush office. Clark made certain to shut the door behind him before taking any further steps. With long strides, he approached the mahogany desk and set down the briefcase carefully. Bruce took over opening the lock and snapped the case open. Ignoring his watch completely, the man went directly to the award medallions and lifted one out for inspection.

"You're right," he declared after a moment. "Max went above and beyond expectation, as usual."

"Agreed," Clark said, with a nod of his head. "Hey, listen, Bruce? We need to talk. Privately."

Bruce put the medallion down and put his arms out, as if to gesture to the entire office. "This isn't private?" he asked in a teasing manner.

Clark shook his head. "Not here. Back at the manor is better. Those walls don't have ears."

Bruce appeared to take Clark's obvious unease seriously. He checked the time. "I have a phone conference in fifteen minutes. I'm guessing it will be about an hour. We can head back home then and discuss whatever it is you need to talk to me about."

"Perfect. Thanks. And, Bruce? Whatever your conference is about? I would keep it just between you and whoever is on the other end, until we get a chance to talk."

Bruce nodded. "Okay."

"I have a few things to do before I leave for the day," Clark said. "I'll make my own way back home."

Another nod. "Thanks for swinging by Max's place to pick this stuff up." He motioned to the briefcase.

"No problem. But that reminds me, I have to give these to Lucius." Clark grabbed the box with the cufflinks.

He left the office and went looking for Lucius. He caught the older man by the elevators and delivered the cufflinks. Lucius thanked Clark profusely, then Clark went back to his own desk. He completed the few easy tasks he needed to, then clocked out for the night. He'd gotten a ride into work with Bruce that morning, so he didn't have his motorcycle with him — his civilian bike which was distinctly different from the one he rode as Nightwing. But the alley behind Wayne Tower was deserted, so, after a careful, thorough check, Clark ducked into it and took off into the sky. He went straight back to Wayne Manor. He was simply too anxious to do anything else.

There was still time to kill before Bruce would be back, so Clark took the opportunity to shower and shave, bouncing a thin, precise, concentrated line of heat vision over the barely-there stubble on his cheeks and chin. He changed into his favorite pair of shorts and his favorite t-shirt, then went down to the living

room to wait. He turned on the television and skimmed through the channels, but found nothing of interest. His roiling stomach made it impossible to concentrate on anything as it was.

He didn't have to wait too long. Bruce came striding through the door sooner than expected. He shrugged off Clark's questioning look.

"My phone conference ended sooner than I'd anticipated. We came to an agreement much easier than I'd dared hope for," he explained. "Now, you sounded a little panicked in my office. What's going on?"

"Well," Clark started, clearing his throat. "Maybe you'd better sit, Bruce."

The billionaire did as Clark asked.

"Okay, I'm not proud of this," Clark tried again. "But today, when I got back from picking up the stuff at Max's? I overheard something I wasn't supposed to. I think...I *know*...some of the board members are looking to vote you out. They want to force you into retirement, while they take over the company."

Bruce's mouth hardened into a thin line. "What?"

Clark nodded. "It's true. There was some talk about not trusting your judgment, given how some of your most recent investments have turned out...or, rather, haven't turned out, I guess. They're worried about this internet thing you're pursuing."

Bruce went quiet for a moment, worrying Clark. When he finally spoke, it wasn't quite what Clark had anticipated. "Who? Who did you overhear?"

"George," Clark immediately responded. "And Roger. They seemed to be the ringleaders. Especially George. Andrew, Tim, Bradley, and Tabitha too. George was trying to convince them to go along with filing a motion to remove you as the head of Wayne Enterprises. I don't think the others are completely on board, at least, not yet. Tabitha, at the very least, seemed unconvinced."

"I see," Bruce said, steeping his fingers. "Well, I still have a few days before the next meeting. I can still run damage control. Thank you, Clark."

Clark shrugged, feeling embarrassed. "Glad I could help. But, I have to be honest, listening in like that...I feel...*dirty*, for doing it. These powers I have...I should only be using them to *help*."

"You *did* help," Bruce reminded him.

"That's not what I mean. I mean, I should be using them to help those who need help fighting injustice. This? This was just...I don't want to say 'wrong,' but..." His voice trailed off as he sought to put his feelings into words.

Bruce sighed. "I understand. But, for what it's worth, I'm grateful you *did* listen in. Now I have time to fix this mess." He paused, then, "You did good, Clark."

Clark nodded distractedly. "Yeah, I guess. Listen, I...uh...I think I need to get out for a bit. Get some air. Besides, I'm sure you have phone calls to make."

"By all means," Bruce nodded.

"I'm not sure when I'll be back," Clark said, in response to Bruce's unvoiced question.

Then he was gone, out the front door — just a blur of colors and an unexplained, out-of-place breeze marking his passing. There was nowhere he felt like going, so he flew straight up into the sky, tearing holes in the clouds and breaking free of the atmosphere to hover in that space between the Earth and the rest of the universe. He sometimes went to that place, when things on Earth became a little overwhelming. Out there, floating freely, unattached to the world, but not part of the stars, it was peaceful. It gave him a place of solitude, a place where he could collect his thoughts, far from the usual distractions of life.

But this time, he wasn't comforted. He still felt guilty over using his powers the way he had.

It's no different than if I were using them to uncover a criminal as a reporter; he told himself in his mind. And maybe, just maybe, I've finally found a way to start repaying Bruce for

everything he's done for me these past couple of years, plucking me off the streets and all like he did.

That thought made him feel a little better. It was true that he felt more than indebted to Bruce.

For what felt like the billionth time, he wondered why he had the powers he did. And, more importantly, he wondered if he would ever have a concrete answer. His parents had always assured him that he was exactly as God intended him to be, but that didn't satisfy Clark. While it was all well and good to believe that he had his powers for a reason, he still wanted to know *why*. Was he some kind of science experiment? Was he even a human being? Was he some kind of advanced robot — a cyborg, he'd heard it called, when flesh and machine comprised a sentient being?

"Who am I?" he shouted into the nothingness of space, his voice nothing more than a ghost in that perfect vacuum of sound.

In the days that followed, Clark felt more and more comfortable with his decision to eavesdrop on the conversation he'd heard in Wayne Tower. Without giving away that the plot to overthrow him had been heard, Bruce managed to meet with the board members who *hadn't* been in that room that day. Subtly, he convinced them to remain on his side, and to be open to taking chances on the ventures Bruce decided to pursue. When the motion was raised to vote Bruce out of his spot on the board, it was overwhelmingly snuffed out. George quit soon after, too embarrassed by his failed venture to continue on with the company. Word had spread quickly about what he'd tried to do and pressure mounted from the rest of the board for George to hand in his resignation.

It made Clark glad to know he'd done something important for Bruce. It didn't erase all the guilt, but it *did* make it easier to bear. After all, George had lost his job in the process. But, Clark reasoned, that was George's own fault, not his. He hadn't been the one to whisper in George's ear about trying to push Bruce out of his own company.

About a month after the incident, Clark was getting himself ready for bed after another long night of patrolling Gotham in the guise of Nightwing. He'd already showered and changed into a pair of boxers and an old t-shirt and was just tidying up a few things he'd left out in his rush to hit the streets that night, when suddenly, the globe he'd had all his life — and which he'd been careful to always keep hidden and safe during his turbulent, homeless years — began to glow. At first, the light was dim — hardly even noticeable, unless one looked directly at the globe. But the illumination steadily began to grow ever more intense and bright.

Clark stopped what he was doing as soon as he noticed the light.

"What the heck?" he whispered to himself as he padded over to the bookshelf, where the globe had sat collecting dust. He picked it up and peered at it closely. "You've never done this before," he said to the globe.

He brought it over to his bed and sat down, cross-legged on the comforter, to continue to study the light coming from it. After a moment, the light became almost blinding in his nearly dark room. A second later, the image of a man appeared, floating in mid-air. The image was extraordinarily lifelike, but translucent.

Hologram, his mind said with wonder.

"I am Jor-El," the man said, in a clear, deep, somehow affectionate voice. "And you are Kal-El, my son."

"Son?" Clark asked aloud, though of course the hologram couldn't hear or respond to him.

The man — Jor-El — continued. "The object you hold has been attuned to you. That you now hear these words is proof that you survived the journey in space and have reached your full maturity. Now it is time for you to learn our heritage. To that end,

I will appear to you five times. Watch for the light, listen, and learn.”

It sounded like an ending to Clark, and his heart silently begged the image of his biological father not to go just yet. But, as chance had it, Jor-El was not finished speaking. He continued on, and Clark saw a woman, Lara, with Jor-El. His father didn't even need to say the words — as soon as Clark saw her, he knew her to be his mother.

Jor-El spoke about how short their time was, before some kind of impending disaster. But what that disaster was, he did not yet reveal it, leaving Clark more curious than ever. Whatever it was, Clark could feel the sense of urgency as his birth parents moved about the room, checking flashing monitors, holding on to things as the entire image began to violently shake. He heard the fear in Jor-El's voice as he spoke about trying to find a suitable place.

Suitable? For what? For me? For all of them? What happened? What happened to them? If he's talking about sending me to Earth, his mind shot out in rapid thoughts, for it was now clear that wherever Jor-El and Lara were in the hologram, it was definitely not Earth, then why didn't they come with me? Or did they? Did they...not survive the trip? No, it can't be. Mom and Dad always said that they found me alone, in a tiny capsule in Shuster's Field.

Then, suddenly, he saw himself, lying nestled in the capsule his parents had always described to him. It became painfully clear that Jor-El and Lara were preparing to send him off, alone, into space. Their sense of despair and heartbreak was palpable. And something else too. Hope, Clark thought. Hope that they might save their infant from some terrible fate.

Too soon, the message was over. The image of his parents faded into nothingness. The light in the globe snapped off, as though the power suddenly died. Clark was left alone in the near-dark, more questions than ever flooding his mind. A sense of loneliness and grief flooded him. His heart ached for the family he'd been denied knowing, and somehow, he missed them terribly.

When he laid down to sleep, he found himself constantly thinking back to the strangers in the message, who looked like him, but whom he had never truly known. And he wished, in vain, that he could have had just one clear, true memory of them.

But, he reasoned, he *did* have some new knowledge. His parents had loved him. They'd had a reason for sending him off on his own, though he still wondered why they hadn't come to Earth with him. He was not an Earthling. He wasn't some science experiment that the Kents had found crash-landed in a field one night. He'd heard the globe whisper the word *Krypton* in his mind as the map face on the globe had changed from that of Earth to some otherworldly place.

Krypton.

He turned the word over and over in his mind.

Krypton.

That was where he was from.

He was an alien.

Suddenly, he felt very alone in the world.

“Who am I? Where do I fit in?” he asked the darkness.

More time passed, the months and seasons blending into each other in one long blur. Clark finished his degree early, just as he'd intended. As promised, Vicki Vale helped him secure an internship with the *Gotham Gazette*, and then — by extension — a job offer. There were no available positions open for reporters within the city, but they *did* give him a job as an overseas reporter. Clark didn't mind. He was free to see the world, covering events in countries all over the globe. Of course, he could tour the world whenever he wanted — and indeed, he *had* — but the job gave him a legitimate excuse to be in various countries. And, he had to admit, it was nice to be seen walking around in broad daylight, rather than hiding in the shadows of night for fear that someone

would see him and question why he was there.

The only drawback to traveling for his job was that he had to fly on airplanes. He had no fear of them, but they were *extremely* inefficient, in Clark's eyes. Flying under his own power was faster, more comfortable, and a *lot* more fun. But it was only a minor inconvenience, in the grand scheme of things. He woke up every day thankful for his job. He'd done it. He was a real reporter, just like he'd once dreamed of becoming.

And yet, something was missing.

He was lonely.

Profoundly lonely.

Everywhere he went, he saw happy couples walking hand in hand, embracing, kissing, laughing together. Everywhere he went, he saw families. And it drove home the fact that he had no one. He wasn't even human, he knew, thanks to the messages Jor-El had left for him in the globe. He was the last surviving Kryptonian, sent off to Earth in a tiny capsule in order to escape the planet's demise. What, exactly, had caused the planet's death, he still didn't know, but he'd seen his birth world torn apart in a violent explosion seconds after his ship had cleared the atmosphere.

His heart ached for someone to share his life with. A woman he could share himself with — *all* of himself, super abilities included.

How likely he was to find such a woman, however, felt more than daunting. Whoever it was would have to be a rare woman indeed, to be able to accept the fact that he wasn't even truly human, despite the fact that he looked exactly like one. And, really, if he were to be honest with himself, what woman would *really* be okay with that?

Still, he couldn't just give up all hope of ever finding someone to love. He kept the embers of hope alive in his heart while he focused on his work.

He still visited Gotham as much as he could. When he wasn't actively covering a story, he would fly back to the city under the cover of darkness. Then he would join forces with Bruce, and Batman and Nightwing would do their part to make Gotham a little safer by putting criminals behind bars. Clark reveled in those nights, when he got to take a hands-on approach to bettering the world. It was a stark contrast to what he could do as a reporter.

That wasn't to say that he disliked his “civilian” work — as he sometimes called it in his own head. He loved being a reporter. Nothing felt quite as good as exposing a story for all the world to see. But traveling the world soon lost its novelty. After a couple of years of moving from place to place, never having one steady address to call home, he began to grow restless. He was reminded constantly of the upheaval in his life after his parents had died — of bouncing around to friends' homes before being shuttled off to the halfway house, and of his life on the streets and in homeless shelters after he'd fled from Grandma Tildy's.

He wanted to go home.

But where that home was, he wasn't sure.

He knew he couldn't spend the rest of his life living at Wayne Manor. He and Bruce got along just fine; Clark considered the billionaire to be one of his closest friends. But he was a grown man now, and needed to get out on his own if he ever returned back to America permanently. But did he want to stay in Gotham? Clark wasn't sure about that. He loved the city and loved protecting it as Nightwing. But he felt like perhaps there was more out there. Like his true home was still out there, as yet undiscovered.

Then there was the work itself. Clark liked it well enough, but it wasn't exactly what he'd always dreamed about. He was a reporter all right, and that made him proud. But he was simply reporting on events that were happening. He wasn't doing any real investigating, because he was constantly on the move. He had no time to dig into the meat of things and uncover how deep a story might go. That was left up to others. He was merely a vessel

through which the world heard about overseas events.

So, while he was happy to be working in his chosen career, he wasn't *completely* happy. But the experience he was garnering was invaluable, he knew. Even his puff pieces were better than nothing at all, or so he hoped. Because, he vowed to himself, one day — soon, with any luck — he would leave the *Gazette* and become the kind of reporter he truly desired to be.

"So, how's the job going?" Bruce asked as he and Clark sat on a rooftop overlooking the field where the Gotham Goliaths played baseball, though the field was cold and dark at that hour of the night.

It was nearly two in the morning, and freezing out. White snowflakes danced in the air, and Clark could smell the storm brewing even worse. By morning, there would be at least a couple of inches of snow on the ground.

"It's good," Clark said in a noncommittal tone.

"What's wrong?" Bruce asked, giving him a side glance.

"Nothing," Clark replied, brushing it off.

"Yeah, right. You know you can tell me."

Clark hesitated. "I'm grateful to Vicki for helping me get the job, really. And I love that I'm doing what I set out to do. I *am* a reporter. But...it's been a few years now. And I'm still not doing *exactly* what I'd hoped to. I'm still being bounced around from country to country. I'm still not *investigating*, not the way I want to. And, no matter how many times I try to get reassigned back to Gotham — or anywhere permanent — I get told that there's nothing for me. I guess...I guess I'm a bit frustrated, that's all. I mean, it's 1993 now. Well, for the last two hours, at any rate. I thought I'd be...doing more important work as a reporter by now. Uncovering corrupt politicians. Breaking up crime circuits. That kind of stuff. Not reporting on brush fires caused by heatwaves."

"Do you want me to say something to Vicki?" Bruce offered.

"I've already spoken to her, but there's not a lot she can do. Thanks anyway. I need to figure this out on my own, even if it means leaving the *Gazette* at some point." Clark sighed. "In any case, there's not much to be done about it now. I'm off for the week and I intend to enjoy myself."

Bruce grunted his consent. "Fine by me."

"It's quiet tonight," Clark observed after a few minutes.

"Surprisingly so. I figured there'd be people out, celebrating New Year's Eve. Either everyone is still indoors partying, or they fell asleep right after midnight," he joked.

"Let's hope it stays that way," Bruce agreed.

After a few minutes, Clark sighed, his breath misting white in the frigid air. "I miss it here, sometimes. I have the world at my fingertips but..." He sighed again.

"There's no place like home, huh?"

"It's strange," Clark answered, evading the statement. "When I first found myself here, in Gotham, I figured I'd stay for a week or two, or maybe just the summer, get my bearings, and move on again. I wasn't sure where I'd go, but I was convinced I wasn't going to stay here. Now...this city is a part of me. And maybe one day, I might have to move on, maybe work for another paper, if things don't change at the *Gazette*. But Gotham runs in my blood now. All of this," he said, gesturing vaguely to his costume, "is a part of me."

Bruce simply nodded.

"How's the new insulation Alfred added to your suit?" Clark asked a little while later.

As usual, Bruce sat exposed to the elements, without the benefit of a cloak, coat, or even a blanket to stave off the cold. He showed no outward signs of distress from the freezing temperatures, but Clark was worried about him nonetheless.

"Much better than what we've used in the past," Bruce replied, his eyes never leaving their sweeping vigil over the city. "The new micro-heaters we've been working on are better than I'd

hoped."

Clark nodded. "Good to hear."

"It's still so strange to me that you don't need them in the Nightwing suit," Bruce admitted a minute later.

Clark chuckled lightly. "Jealous?"

"You wish."

Another hour passed, with Clark periodically scanning the city with his enhanced hearing, but all was quiet. They were both getting a bit stiff and cramped from being still for so long when they decided to call it a night. Surely if nothing had happened by now, it was bound to be quiet for the rest of the night. They stood and stretched.

"Nice to have a quiet night for a change," Clark said, rolling his neck from side to side, popping the muscles there.

"Mmm," Bruce muttered. "Surprising though."

"Maybe the criminal element got too drunk to knock over more than their living room lamp," Clark joked.

But the joke died as soon as it left his lips. His super hearing kicked in and his head cocked to one side, toward the sound he was picking up, independent of a conscious thought to do so.

"What?" Bruce asked, his voice immediately going to the hard, flat tone of Batman.

"Trouble," Clark said, only half paying attention to Bruce as he tried to pinpoint what, exactly, he was hearing. "The museum. I heard a security guard call for help, then...nothing."

"Then let's go," Bruce said.

"I'll meet you there," Clark said, frowning. "I didn't like the sound of that call. I'm worried about that guard."

"Meet you there," Bruce agreed. "Be careful."

"You too," Clark replied over his shoulder as he started to lift off from the ground.

Of course, the warning to Clark was merely a formality. Clark was invulnerable. But it was a nice gesture nonetheless, and Clark appreciated that the billionaire cared about his well-being. It was nice to have someone — anyone — care about him.

Clark made a beeline for the museum. It wasn't far — just ten blocks north of where he and Bruce had been keeping their vigil over the city. He crossed the distance in seconds and landed lightly in the courtyard before the building. He stretched out his senses to the immediate area, but found nothing. The cry for help had not come from outside. Clark mounted the steps and found the front door lock had been broken. Gently, quietly, he pulled the heavy door open just enough to slip inside.

The lobby was deathly silent and dark, the only light being that which filtered in through the large windows from the surrounding streetlights. Clark cautiously stepped forward, his eyes sweeping the place. In the center of the room, a large cherry-colored wooden information desk commanded the space, the wall behind it lined with the nearly-identical admission desk. Clark went to the information desk first, feeling as though there should be at least one night guard on duty to oversee things in the lobby.

He found the guard behind the information desk, lying on the cold marble floor.

Clark knelt down by the unmoving body. He pressed his fingers to the man's neck, searching for a pulse, all the while training his hearing on the body, hoping — in vain — to find any sign of life. He spent precious minutes trying to will some life into the man. Borges, the man's name badge proclaimed. S. Borges.

"He's dead," Clark told Bruce, barely even glancing at the shadows where he knew the man was standing. "I was too late."

Bruce stepped forward, into the weak light. "He was gone as soon as you heard the cry for help, in all likelihood."

"Looks like he was strangled," Clark said, pointing to the red line running around the man's thin neck. "From the way the marks look, it might have been a length of chain."

"I think you may be right about that."

"I'm sorry," Clark whispered to the dead man, gently closing

the man's eyelids. The open eyes, bulging from the guard's final struggle, unnerved Clark. He stood. "Okay, where are you?" he quietly asked, as if the murderers were right there. He stretched out his senses, listening to the empty museum. "Got you," he said after a moment, a grim smile ghosting over his lips.

"Where?"

"The gems and meteorites wing."

"Then let's go crash the party," Bruce said, no trace of humor in his voice.

Bruce led the way through the darkness while Clark followed behind, his super hearing on alert for danger, his eyes x-raying everything, wary of traps or ambushes. But nothing stood in their way. Swiftly, they raced through the museum, silent as shadows, passing fossilized dinosaur bones, skeletal remains of early humans, and primitive tools as they went. Clark was barely aware of the things they were running past, so focused he was on his ultimate destination.

They stopped outside the gem and meteorite wing, sticking to the shadows of the hallway. Clark stood to the left of the door, Bruce to the right. Clark x-rayed through the closed door.

How many? Bruce mouthed.

Clark held up one hand, all five fingers outstretched.

Bruce nodded. *Easy*, he wordlessly responded.

Clark nodded stiffly, just once. He gave the other man a thumbs up, indicating that he was ready. Bruce shot one back, then, together, they approached the door. Bruce placed a small electronic square on the keypad that locked the room. In seconds, the device flashed the code on screen — 231973. Bruce punched the numbers in and the lock ever so softly clicked as it opened. He pulled the door open a crack. Clark slipped inside first.

Five masked men, dressed head-to-toe in black, were loading sacks with gems. Most of the display cases had been smashed open. Glass littered the floor. The alarm had clearly been cut — how that had been accomplished Clark neither knew nor cared about at the moment. He was only concerned with the thieves. Lights from the broken cases gave the room just enough illumination to let him see that all of the burglars had their backs to him as they worked.

"If you wanted to see the exhibit, you should have waited until the morning," Clark said, causing them all to whip around to face him.

"Much better this way," one of them said, pulling a switchblade out as he squared off against Clark. "Just you tonight, Nightbird? No little Bat to keep you safe?"

"Nightwing," Clark automatically corrected. "And believe me, I'm more than a match for the five of you."

Switchblade snickered. "Boys, let's teach Nightbaby that it's not nice to show up to a party uninvited."

"With pleasure," sneered the man to Switchblade's right. He picked up a crowbar that had been laying on the floor by his feet.

"Absolutely," agreed the one to Switchblade's left. He smacked a billy club into the palm of his hand, over and over again. Clark could tell from the sound it made that it was made of a solid, heavy wood.

"You don't want to do that," came the low, threatening tone of Batman as Bruce stepped out of the shadows and made his presence known. "He's right, you know. He could flatten you all in a heartbeat, if he wanted to."

"We can do this the easy way, or the hard way," Clark said.

"Kill them," commanded one of the two men who were still loading jewels into the sacks.

The attack began all at once. Switchblade and Billy Club went for Clark. Crowbar and the fourth man — Steel Chain, as Clark dubbed him in his mind, noting that he was likely the one who'd killed the guard in the lobby — went for Bruce. Clark easily disarmed Billy Club, but not before he took a hard blow to his lower back, as the man slipped around while Clark was occupied

with Switchblade. Clark spun on his heel and grabbed the club while the thief looked in on in surprise that the blow hadn't crippled — or even appeared to injure — Clark. His grip was loose on the club in his shock and Clark easily snatched it from its wielder. He used the club to block an attempt to have his face torn open by Switchblade. Switchblade's wrist hit the solid length of wood, hard. Clark heard a snap as a bone must have broken. The blade fell from nerveless fingers while Switchblade stood stock still, clutching his wrist, his mouth open in a noiseless O of pain.

Clark took advantage of the man's pain. With a booted foot, he stomped on the knife, breaking the metal blade from the handle. He kicked it to one side, safely out of the thief's reach. Billy Club lunged in a desperate attempt to take his weapon back. Clark caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and deftly blocked the man's attempt. He grabbed Billy Club by the front of his shirt and easily — though gently — tossed him to the floor, just a couple of feet away. The man hit the marble floor with a grunt and Clark looked around for something to tie the criminal up with.

By then, Bruce had subdued Steel Chain. The man was laying on the floor, out cold, while the length of chain he'd been using as a weapon lay nearby. Clark scooped up the chain and wrapped it around Billy Club and Switchblade before either one could come around and make a run for it. He stuck the knife handle between two links to serve as a makeshift lock, just to give himself enough time to take out the thief still loading the jewels into sacks.

"Enough!" Clark commanded. "You've lost. Come quietly. It'll be easier on all of us."

"And if I refuse?"

"You want the same as your friends just got?" Clark asked. As he spoke, he heard Bruce throw a punch that knocked the wind out of Crowbar.

"I'll take my chances," the leader said, pulling a gun from his jacket pocket.

Clark bit back a laugh. He'd been shot at plenty of times before, and the bullets never did any harm to him. They skipped harmlessly off his body, the same as drops of rain. Although, he had to admit, Bruce was not so lucky as to be invulnerable. Clark had to stay on alert, lest his friend be wounded or killed.

"Back up, Nightwuss," the gunman commanded. "Or I'll turn you into Swiss cheese."

"Put the gun down," Clark instructed, his voice hard and unyielding.

The man fired, but too quickly. His aim was off and the bullet struck one of the still intact display cases lining the walls of the room. The glass shattered, exposing the priceless gems within, including a strange green stone that appeared to glow with some inner light, rather than just the lights in the case. As soon as the glass was broken, Clark began to feel oddly.

A wave of nausea washed over him. Weakness suffused his body as his strength bled out through some invisible wound. His muscles went to water and he felt himself falling to the floor. His head pounded, as if his very brain was going to rupture in his skull. Pain lanced every atom of his body. He felt consciousness slipping away.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he knew everything was happening fast, but in his sickened state, every moment seemed to play out in slow motion. Every second felt like an eternity.

A moment later, as his knees fully gave out, the leader managed to squeeze off another shot. Clark felt the projectile tear through flesh and muscle in a searing line of fire. He crashed to the floor, in agony so great he had no words for it, and passed out.

"Nightwing!" Bruce cried, but received no response.

"Nightwing!"

The leader turned his gun on Bruce.

"Nighty night, Batjerk!"

Bruce flung himself to one side, half a heartbeat before the

gunman finished pulling the trigger. At the same time, he tossed a Batarang at the thief. A minor jolt of electricity paralyzed the man and Bruce disarmed him without further incident. But the bullet that had been fired *had* found a mark. Switchblade was dead, the bullet tearing off the right side of his head. Bruce made short work of securing the gunman, leaving all five of the thieves tied up in a bundle in the center of the room. Then he was kneeling down at Clark's side.

"Nightwing?" He shook Clark's unmoving form. "Hey, you still with me?"

Clark made no response. Bruce checked for signs of life, and found Clark's pulse to be weak and thready.

"Is he dead?" the gunman taunted. "I hope I killed him, like I promised him I would."

"He's alive," Bruce snapped, keeping his concern out of his voice, while the pool of Clark's blood grew larger with every feeble beat of his heart. Bruce smirked, putting on a show for the gunman. "You're a terrible shot."

The gunman glowered but said nothing.

"Let's get you out of here," Bruce told Clark, knowing his voice would go unheard.

With infinite care, he dragged Clark's body out into the hallway, knowing that time was short before any of the remaining guards came running. The shots that had been fired would have echoed through the vast rooms of the museum. But, more importantly, Clark's life hung in the balance. He needed to get him out of there, and get the bullet out of his chest.

But before he could get them both out of the museum, he needed to do one last thing. With Clark safely around the corner from the room of gems, Bruce purposefully strode back inside. Before he did anything else, Bruce cracked open a vial of sedative. The gas filled the air beneath each criminal's nostrils, rendering them unconscious. Once they were all completely out, Bruce took a glance at the case that had been blasted open, figuring that something inside had to have been what had caused Clark to lose his invulnerability. Everything in the case looked normal. There were everyday gems of every kind — emeralds, rubies, sapphires, diamonds of various shades, a couple of opals, and some amethysts. Nothing out of the ordinary, except...

The green stone in the middle, simply marked as a newly-discovered, unknown crystal.

Bruce reached in and extracted the mystery rock. Then, carefully, he used a small electronic saw to slice off a sample from the very bottom of the stone. It was just a thin slice, and wouldn't be noticeable at all. Then he placed the stone back in the case, exactly as it had been. Satisfied that no one would see where it had been cut, Bruce stepped away. He tucked the sample away, deep into one of the compartments on his belt, hoping that whatever it was that had affected Clark would be blocked by the material and padding.

He left the room again, going back to Clark, who was just starting to come to. Clark moaned in pain, still not fully conscious, but coming closer to it with every passing second.

"Wha..." he managed, as the fuzzy but recognizable figure of Batman stepped into his returning field of view.

"Don't talk. You've been shot," Bruce instructed.

"How? I can't..."

Bruce shook his head. "Doesn't matter. We need to get you out of here and patched up. Hold still."

Before Clark could even make an attempt to respond, Bruce was pressing something against where the bullet had torn open his flesh. Clark unashamedly screamed in agony. For what seemed like several lifetimes, pain was all Clark knew. In reality, only a second or two elapsed before Clark blacked out from the pain.

When he came to, he was in the Batmobile, laying down in the very back, where Bruce sometimes held the very worst criminals while he drove them to the closest police station. He took a

moment to make sure he was still in one piece. For the first time, he was thankful for the nearly blinding pain that raced through his body from the bullet that was still entombed in his chest. It was the one thing that convinced him that he was still alive. If he could feel pain, it stood to reason that he hadn't yet died.

Though he couldn't see anything outside — the back where he was laying had no windows, nor did he have the strength to sit up even if he wanted to — he could still tell that Bruce was driving *fast*. That worried him. Of course, he knew he was hurt — and hurt badly — but perhaps he was worse off than he thought.

"Bruce?" he asked, via the earpiece and microphone they both wore.

"Clark. Thank God." Relief was evident in Bruce's voice.

"What happened?"

"You tell me. One moment you were fine, and the next, you'd been shot...despite the fact that you're usually a bit more invulnerable."

"Yeah," Clark admitted, closing his eyes against the pain for just a moment, "it was weird. The gunman hit the glass case and suddenly, I felt strangely. I got weak and sick feeling. I've never felt like that before in my life. I don't know what caused it."

"I have a theory," Bruce offered. "But we can talk more about it once we've gotten you patched up."

"A theory?" Clark asked, then winced as a spasm of pain lanced his chest.

"Yeah."

Bruce was being deliberately cryptic, Clark knew. He also knew better than to press the billionaire when he wanted to keep something to himself. Perhaps he wasn't quite convinced of whatever his theory consisted of. Clark let the subject drop, at least for the moment.

"You taking me to the hospital?" he asked instead, half fearing the answer.

"No. We're heading back home. We can't risk going to the hospital."

Clark nodded to himself, feeling relieved. Even with his powers gone, Clark knew his biology was different from human beings. He was, after all, an alien. A Kryptonian, as he now knew, thanks to the messages Jor-El had left for him in his globe. It was a fact he'd had years to turn over in his mind and grow comfortable with, even if the fact that his biological parents had needed to die in order to save his life still haunted him when he thought about it.

"You sure you can get this thing out of me?" he teased.

He heard Bruce snort a laugh, feigning indignance. "Alfred's pulled a couple out of me before."

"You'll have to tell me those stories sometime," Clark goaded him through a haze of pain. He couldn't keep the hurt out of his voice though.

"Dream on," Bruce shot back, and Clark could just envision the smirk on his face. "Now lie still and quiet. You sound like you're in bad shape."

"Thanks, Bruce. That's very comforting," Clark volleyed back through gritted teeth. "I hope Alfred has a lot better bedside manner than you do."

"Well, you'll find out in a couple of minutes," Bruce said. "We're just about there."

Clark felt the car slow as Bruce approached the secret entrance that led below ground. Clark knew, from experience, that the underground tunnel went on for several miles before it ended in the Batcave, buried deep below Wayne Manor. After a couple of seconds, the car once again picked up speed, eating up the distance as swiftly as Bruce dared.

Before long, Clark felt the car slow again and come to a stop. A few heartbeats later, the back opened and Bruce appeared. Clark tried to push himself up, but failed as agony shot from his wound down through his arms, turning the muscles into jelly.

"I can't get up," Clark said, before Bruce could say a word. "I don't have the strength."

He blinked at the enormity of that statement hit him. For the first time in his life, Clark had no strength. He was used to being able to lift cars with one hand if he felt so inclined. Not having the strength to even sit up on his own was terrifying.

"That's fine. I'd rather you be still," Bruce replied, either not seeing the fear that Clark knew had spread over his features or choosing to ignore it.

He climbed into the back and went to where Clark's head was. He grabbed the edges of a blanket that Clark hadn't realized he'd been laying on. At Clark's feet, Alfred stood ready, his aged hands already gripping the blanket in readiness to move Clark.

"Ready?" Bruce asked.

"Ready, sir," Alfred responded with a stiff nod.

"On three. One...two...three."

Clark cried out as his body was jostled, bringing fresh waves of pain and some nausea to him. He fought hard to stay conscious and succeeded.

Between Bruce and Alfred, they — grunting all the way — managed to get Clark out of the Batmobile, across the room, and onto a metal table. Clark realized that Bruce must have called Alfred while Clark had been passed out in the car. Another smaller, metal table stood by, covered with medical instruments that the butler might need as he worked. Clark was thankful for that. He could scarcely wait for the bit of metal in his chest to be removed so he could begin to heal.

"I'm sorry, Master Clark," Alfred apologized as he got to work undressing the wound from the quick patch job Bruce had done in the field. "I wish I knew how much anesthetic to give you, to numb the area while I work."

"It's okay, Alfred," Clark assured him. "I'm not even human. Chances are that nothing will work on me anyway."

"I can still try," Alfred offered.

Clark nodded. "Please. I'm more than willing to be your guinea pig. Anything's got to be better than this pain."

On the edges of his vision, he watched as Alfred drew up a syringe full of a clear liquid. He closed his eyes as the man injected the anesthetic into his body. Then the butler went back to checking Clark's body, after cutting away the torn, ragged top of Nightwing's signature costume.

"No evidence of an exit wound," Alfred mumbled, more to himself than to either his patient or his boss. "Looks like the bullet is still in there."

Clark shut his eyes and tried to ready himself for what he knew was to come. But nothing could have prepared him for the shock when Alfred began to extract the bullet, though he'd given the medicine more than enough time to render Clark's body numb. A cry escaped him at the first feeling of contact. Alfred immediately stopped and took his hands away again.

"That should have been enough time," Alfred said to himself, worriedly.

"It's okay. I doubted it would be effective," Clark said. "I just...I wasn't quite expecting it to hurt like that."

"Here," Bruce said, stepping away for a moment and returning with a piece of thick wood. "Open your mouth and bite on this."

"Okay," Clark agreed. He'd heard of the technique being used in ancient times, as a way to distract the mind from the pain of the wound. He thought some less medically advanced areas of the world might still use it as well.

Bruce carefully situated the wood between Clark's teeth. Clark gently bit down to keep the wood in place and once more tried to prepare himself.

"Okay," he said again, around the wood, the word sounding muffled. "Ready."

It hurt just as much the second time around as it did the first. Clark bit down even harder, and could feel the wood splintering

under the immense pressure of his bite, the lack of his super strength he damned. He almost felt like he might bite right through the wood completely. But, as if in defiance to his thoughts, the wood held firm and did not break.

Alfred worked swiftly, with deft hands that knew their task all too well. In mere moments, he held the bullet up for inspection, the metal held tightly between the long, skinny prongs of a pair of medical pliers. Clark felt an instant sense of relief in his mind as he looked at the metal fragment. The bullet was out of his body. And, despite how intense the pain was at the moment, he knew he would heal. He was barely even aware of it when Alfred gave the wound another check, to ensure that nothing had been left behind. His body was already aflame; it seemed incapable of registering any further hurt.

"I'll need to place some stitches," the butler said to Bruce.

"We don't know what his healing process might be like. For all we know, he may take as long as a regular man before his wound is fully closed. Or he may be healed come the morning. But I need to stop it from bleeding."

"Do it," Bruce said with approval. "If need be, we can take the stitches back out."

"You were very lucky, Master Clark," Alfred went on, setting aside the tools he'd been using and readying a needle and thread. "The bullet missed hitting anything vital. And, thanks to Master Bruce, the way your wound was bandaged out there prevented too much blood loss. Still, I dare say you'll be hurting for a few days, at the least."

"I can deal with the pain," Clark said, taking the wood from his mouth as Alfred began to suture his wound. Compared to the pain involved in taking the bullet out of his chest, the stitches felt like butterfly tickles. "It's my missing powers that has me the most worried."

"They're *all* gone?" Bruce asked worriedly.

If he'd have been able to, Clark would have shrugged. "As far as I can tell, yeah. I've tried my hearing, the various abilities my eyes have...I can't even float. I'm...I'm completely...*normal*."

"No, you aren't," Bruce said, with a shake of his head.

"Normal for you is super. Being powerless...that's *abnormal*."

"Maybe, but there's not much I can do about it," Clark said, trying to keep calm, when, inwardly, he was terrified of being without his powers. "I don't understand what happened out there. You said you might have a theory though?"

Bruce nodded absently. "I think so, yeah. I won't know more until I run some tests but..." He shrugged. "I think one of the gems on display did this to you."

"What?"

"After I dragged you out of that room, I looked at the gems in the case that got broken just before you were shot. There was nothing out of the ordinary, except for one green rock. A green rock that glowed, even without the display case lights to illuminate it. A rock that the description said was found in Kansas.

Smallville, Kansas. Isn't that where you're originally from?"

"Yeah..." Clark said, as a chill ran down his spine. "But no stone has ever done this me before. Not even when I was living in Smallville."

"Maybe you were just never exposed to it before. Whatever this rock is, exactly."

"Okay..." Clark said, dragging the word out as he thought it over. "Let's say that's what actually happened. The stones are all at the museum. We'll never know for certain if that green rock is to blame or not."

"Actually, we can and we will," Bruce said with a smirk, as he pulled off his cowl. In his concern for Clark, he'd ignored the fact that he was still fully costumed, and, instead, focused on the procedure at hand. "I took a tiny sample before I left."

"You have it here, with you?" Clark asked in disbelief.

"It wouldn't do us much good behind glass," Bruce replied

with a shrug. “And I couldn’t be sure the museum would let a curious benefactor just borrow the stone for the hell of it.” He gave Clark a wry grin, letting him know he was only half joking.

“Can I see it?”

“That might not be wise,” Bruce said hesitantly. “If I’m right, who knows what this thing might be able to do to you.”

“I was fine while it was under glass,” Clark offered. “Can’t you just...put it in something?”

Bruce thought it over. “A Petri dish,” he decided. “Hang on a second. Let me get one.”

He moved to a workstation a few feet away and rummaged around under some loose pages of notes. In the meantime, Alfred finished his work. He tied off the last suture and placed a clean, fresh bandage over the wound. Clark thought he was being overly cautious, but he appreciated Alfred’s help nonetheless.

“How do you feel, Master Clark?” the man asked as he extended a hand to help Clark sit up.

“Okay, I think,” Clark replied. “Weak and in pain, but otherwise okay.”

In the next heartbeat, he was far from okay again. Bruce had removed the small shard of green stone from his belt to transfer it into the Petri dish. Clark cried out in pain as his head began to throb. He felt what little strength he had left drain out of his body.

“Gah!” he cried, clutching his head as he doubled over in pain. Only Alfred’s gentle hands prevented Clark from tumbling right off the table.

Bruce snapped the lid of the Petri dish on, sealing away the piece of rock. Instantly, Clark felt relief. He gasped for breath, as the invisible vise that had tightened around his chest dissipated.

“Okay,” he coughed after a moment. “It’s *definitely* the rock.”

“Are you okay?” Bruce asked again, eyeing him for outward signs of injury.

“Now that the rock isn’t out in the open anymore, yeah, I think so.” Clark gestured. “Let me see it?”

Bruce hesitated for half a second, then dutifully brought it over to Clark. Clark took the circular glass dish and peered inside. As he gazed at the rock, it dawned on him.

“I’ve seen this before,” he said aloud, though he was really talking to himself.

“You have?” Bruce asked in surprise, one eyebrow arching.

“Yeah. In the messages Jor-El left for me in the globe.” He spoke casually of his birth father, since he’d long ago told Bruce of the messages that had appeared to him over the course of five nights. “Remember how I told you about seeing Krypton explode as my ship left the planet’s atmosphere?”

“Yeah...”

“I saw pieces of the planet fly off in every direction,” Clark clarified. “I never really thought too much about it. I mean, Krypton had *exploded*. Of *course* debris would go hurtling through space. But now...now that I think about it, some of the rocks had a green tint to them. It was hard to see in the message, but yeah. Some of them definitely seemed to gleam green.”

“So it’s not a gem at all, but a piece of Krypton,” Bruce said, mulling over the information over.

“Some of it must have been pulled along in my ship’s wake,” Clark went on, his mind racing. “It crashed on Earth when I did. It’s a meteorite, not a gem.” He handed Bruce back the Petri dish. “I guess...I guess we could call it Kryptonite, since it’s a meteorite of Kryptonian rock.”

“And it’s highly radioactive,” Bruce said as he waved a radiation dosimeter near the dish.

“It didn’t affect you at all, did it?” Clark asked, worried now.

“No. It appeared to just affect you. My guess is that it only reacts with your particular body chemistry.”

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. I’d hate for the rest of the world to be at risk.”

“Clark? You know this is poison to you. I can’t guarantee that

prolonged exposure to it might not kill you.”

Clark nodded gravely. “I know. I knew it was killing me the moment I first felt its effects.” His voice went softer. “All my life, I’ve never been able to be hurt. Part of me wondered if I might be...immortal. How could I not, with all these powers and my invulnerability and everything? The thought of living forever was terrifying — to see loved ones grow old and die while I lingered on was too depressing a thought. But now? It’s terrifying that Kryptonite exists but...I finally have my answer. I’m *not* immortal. And *that* is a relief.”

It took two full days before Clark’s abilities returned in full. During those days, he spent as much time as he could relaxing in patches of the weak winter sunlight. He felt helpless — not because of his missing powers, but for the way the pain of his gunshot wound restricted his movement, and by the lingering tiredness and weakness that the trauma of being shot had caused. And yet, despite how tired he felt, he was restless. He hated being sidelined when there were people out there who needed his help and criminals who needed to be put behind bars.

But, he had to admit, the sunlight did him a world of wonders. By the end of the first day, his pain was less than half of what it had been. By noon of the second day, some of his super abilities had returned, though he still wasn’t able to fly. And by dinner, his wound had completely healed, the torn flesh knitted back together without any evidence of what had happened — not a scab or a scar to be seen. Alfred worked quickly to remove the sutures before Clark once more became invulnerable. It was late that night when Clark found that his powers were fully restored, when he accidentally crushed the handle of the refrigerator door when he was looking for a snack. At first, there was a moment of shock, which swiftly changed into gleeful laughter.

Before long, Clark’s break was over and he was forced to return overseas for his job. He checked back every night with Bruce in Gotham though, either by phone or by flying in. Bruce had scrutinized the sample of Kryptonite in every conceivable way, but they were no closer to figuring out *why* Clark reacted so extremely in its presence.

That scared Clark.

That, and the fact that he had no idea how much Kryptonite might be out there in the world.

“Happy birthday, Clark,” Bruce said, clapping Clark firmly on his shoulder.

“Thanks, Bruce.”

“So, you have any ideas what you might want to do for your birthday?”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m twenty-eight now. It’s not like when I was a kid, hoping to get a couple of hours at the local bowling alley or something. It’s not a big deal.”

“Come on, there has to be something,” Bruce countered, leaning against the doorway of the kitchen and folding his arms over his chest.

“Really, I’m fine. Maybe we can head over to Oliver’s Seafood for dinner but that’s about it. I’m just glad to be in town for a few days.”

“Still disliking the overseas reporting thing, huh?”

“That’s an understatement. I’ve been at this for years now. It was exhausting back then, to never have a permanent home.” He shook his head. “But now?” He sighed. “Now I wake up every day with every intention of quitting. And the only thing that stops me is the hope that the experience I’m gaining will help me land the job I really want.”

“You can always stay here while you look for a new job. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll talk to my editor tomorrow. See what he has to say. I’d hate to

leave the paper but, if something doesn't change soon, I'll have to hand in my two weeks' notice."

Bruce nodded approvingly. "Do you have any idea where you might send your resume?"

"Everywhere, I guess. At least, to all the major papers in the country."

"You can always ask Vicki if she has connections," Bruce reminded him.

But Clark shook his head. "Not this time. I'm grateful for her help in getting my foot in the door at the *Gazette*, but I want to earn whatever comes next on my own."

Bruce cracked a tiny smile. "I can respect that. I've always respected that about you, ever since I first met you. You were always so determined to make it on your own steam, even at seventeen and all on your own in the world. So, then...say six o'clock at Oliver's?"

Clark chuckled. "Yeah, that sounds fine. And then...well, maybe we can go out tonight."

"Where to?"

Clark grinned. "Wherever Gotham needs us to be."

"Shoot-out," Clark said, via his headset, as he raced down the streets of Gotham on his motorcycle.

"Where?"

"Parsons Boulevard. I heard one of them say something about the video store. I'm about nine blocks away."

"On my way," Bruce said, and Clark could hear the Batmobile's engine picking up speed.

He didn't reply — there wasn't any need to. He and Bruce would make their separate ways to Parsons and do whatever needed to be done. They'd been working together like this for years — there was hardly any need to communicate in situations like these. At the corner of Ferndale, Clark made a sharp left turn and gave the bike some gas, goading it to move faster. If he was correct, once he hit Parsons, he should be right there at the scene of the shootout.

Down the streets he zoomed, cutting across town at a blistering speed. When he hit Westlake Avenue, he slowed and found a dark alley to park his bike in. He supposed he could just burst onto the scene in a blaze of speed and glory, but that approach could get Bruce killed when he joined up with him, even if Clark himself couldn't be hurt by regular bullets. So he opted for stealth.

Two rival gangs were fighting in the middle of the street when Clark made it to the corner. He could see bodies on the ground in the weak light of the streetlamps — some groaning in pain while others were eerily still. Many more, however, were on their feet. Some had guns drawn in stalemates. Others had knives in their hands or were simply using their fists to beat their rivals into submission. Clark checked the area, but Bruce was nowhere to be seen yet. Another shot rang out in the cold night air. A car window shattered, the sound of the glass tinkling as it hit the ground, just before the car's alarm began to blare.

Clark made the instant decision to step into the brawl, without waiting for Bruce.

He knew Bruce liked to take the lead. After all, he'd been prowling the night and taking down criminals as Batman for much longer than Clark had been Nightwing. Bruce knew what he was doing. But for years now, Clark had watched and learned. He felt confident that he could handle the situation on his own, even without his super abilities. Still, he thought it prudent to see where his friend was.

"Hey, Bats?" he asked into his headpiece, careful not to use Bruce's true name. "What's your ETA? The situation here isn't good."

A burst of static and what may have been garbled words was the only response he got.

"Must be in one of the tunnels," Clark said to himself. Bruce was still working on that particular problem — the way the tunnels blocked the headset signals from getting through.

A scream broke him from his thoughts as one of the men slashed the other across the arm.

"No time to wait," he said, assuring himself that it was the right thing to do, to step into the thick of things without backup.

He strode out onto Parsons, calm and confident. One of the gang members stood before him, his back to Clark. Clark disarmed the man in seconds, before the man really even knew what was happening. Another man saw Clark and ran at him, full speed. Clark easily sidestepped out of the way, plucking the man's knife from his hand in the same fluid motion. The two gang members crashed into one another, hard enough to stun them for a couple of seconds. Clark saw his opportunity and tied the two up with a quick flick of a Batarang. Then he was on to the next person, a tall, skinny youth who looked terrified as he held a gun up in a stalemate with another, older gunman.

Both saw Clark coming and ended their stalemate to face him. The other gunman fired, but Clark anticipated the move. He ducked behind a truck before the bullet could reach him, since he had to keep up the illusion that bullets could wound him. The younger man saw an opening. He shot his rival. Clark heard the scream and he raced to the source. The older of the two was laying on the ground, writhing in pain, his shoulder bleeding profusely. Clark ignored him for the moment. The youth looked stunned — it was clear he'd never shot anyone before, despite his gang affiliation. His hands shook and his face had gone ashen at the sight of blood.

"You really shouldn't have done that," Clark said calmly. "Now the police will charge you with attempted murder."

"But...but...but..." the youth babbled in shock.

"Yeah, I know. You didn't mean it," Clark replied. "It's amazing how many times I've heard that line."

He wasn't trying to be mean or mocking. But he *was* weary of every criminal trying to excuse their actions and put an innocent spin on things.

Clark grabbed the gun from the boy's relaxed grip. In anger, he tossed the weapon clear across the street. He heard it hit the brick wall of an ice cream shop where it may have broken. Clark wasn't sure and he wasn't about to take his eyes off the men in front of him. He quickly subdued the boy before checking on the man who'd been shot. Tearing a piece of the man's shirt, he helped the gunshot victim to apply pressure to the wound. Then he took that man's gun as well, and threw it to rest with the other one he'd discarded.

"Never thought the Night Bird would be helping me," the man grunted. "But don't expect me to thank you."

"I don't," Clark said evenly. "But I *do* expect you to repay your debt to society once the police arrest you."

Before the man could respond, Clark was already on his way to the next gang member.

And so he continued, for the next ten or fifteen minutes. When he thought he was finished, he used the pay phone on the corner to call the police to report the incident and request ambulances. He hung up after giving the operator his location, rather than staying on the line as he'd been instructed to. Seconds after, three more gang members burst onto the scene, attracted, apparently, by the sounds of the fight. Clark easily took care of them — not one of them was armed with anything more insidious than a lead pipe. He was in the middle of tying them up for the police when Bruce arrived. Clark finished tying off the knot and stood, brushing half-imagined dirt from his knees.

"Hey," Clark said, nodding at his friend.

"Hey," came the response, but Bruce wasn't looking at him. He was surveying the scene. "You did all this?"

Clark shrugged. "I couldn't wait. Things were bad. Where

were you?"

"All the way across town. I got here as soon as I could."

Clark nodded in acceptance. "I called 9-1-1. The police and EMS should be here soon. I think it's best if we leave."

Of course they wouldn't *really* leave the scene until they knew the area was secured, the criminals placed under arrest, and the wounded were receiving the medical care they needed. But they couldn't risk being caught there either. The first responders of Gotham City were very much split on whether or not Batman and Nightwing were a threat to be arrested on site or benevolent, helpful vigilantes who deserved praise rather than scorn. It was always best not to tempt fate, however, so Bruce and Clark were always careful not to be spotted once the authorities arrived on the scene.

"Good idea," Bruce conceded, and they both hastily melted into the shadows. Clark flew up to the roof of a nearby building, where he could easily watch the scene unfolding below. Bruce followed, using his grappling line launcher to join Clark in his vigil. Though Clark had offered in the past to fly Bruce wherever he was needed, Bruce had politely declined.

"No offense, Clark," he'd said the first time Clark had offered, "but I think I'll stick to my tried-and-true methods."

"Your loss," Clark had shrugged.

Sirens rent the still night air. Clark didn't need the use of his super senses to know they were headed in their direction.

"I hate leaving those people down there," Clark muttered, half to himself, half to Bruce. "There's just too many to bring to the hospital, without knocking the whole lot of them out so they don't see me fly off."

"The EMS will take care of them," Bruce assured him.

"Yeah, but..." Clark protested, leaving his statement unfinished.

"You did more than enough," Bruce pressed.

"I'm not sure I did," Clark admitted, never taking his eyes off the street below.

Half a minute passed, and the first ambulances arrived on the scene, followed closely by police cars. Clark kept his eyes trained on the EMTs as they went about checking on the dead and wounded. He felt some of his tension melting as more EMTs arrived on the scene, lending their aid as the police began systematically arresting those who'd made it through the ordeal unscathed.

"Let's go," Bruce said after a few minutes of watching. But his tone was more than just bored with keeping tabs on the arrests. He sounded almost a little angry, to Clark's trained ears.

Clark hesitated then sighed as he allowed himself to come to terms with the fact that there was nothing more he could do there that night. "Fine. I guess I can always swing by the..."

"No," Bruce said, cutting him off. "We're done tonight. The sun'll be up in a couple of hours."

"There's still plenty of time..." Clark began.

"I said no." And with that, Bruce was away, grappling over the side of the roof and down the building to the ground.

Clark grit his teeth and followed. All the way back to the Batcave, Clark held his tongue, wondering what had gotten under Bruce's skin so badly. Had something else happened that night, that Clark didn't know about? For his part, Bruce said nothing over the earpiece either. They both simply raced through the waning night, back to the privacy of the Batcave and home.

"Okay, what was that all about?" Clark asked, as soon as they were safely tucked away in the Batcave, not twenty minutes later. He hadn't even dismounted from his bike yet.

"What were you thinking out there?" Bruce asked, getting out of the Batmobile.

"Excuse me?" Clark blinked, not sure he'd heard correctly.

"You heard me. What were you thinking, rushing into a gang shoot-out like that? *Alone*."

"I was thinking that I could stop anyone else from getting killed," Clark retorted, anger flaring now that his judgment was being called into question. "I was thinking that there wasn't any time to lose."

"You know the rule. We work *together*," Bruce replied, pulling off his cowl. He shoved it onto a mannequin head. "What if you'd gotten hurt? Huh? Then what? What if you'd been *killed*?"

Clark nearly laughed. "Killed? Come on, Bruce. It's *me* we're talking about. If anything, *you're* the one at risk every time we go out there and do what we do."

"Exactly. It's *you* we're talking about," Bruce said, ignoring the remark about his own mortality. "I'm responsible for keeping you safe. If something had happened, I never would have forgiven myself."

"But nothing did."

"Not tonight, no. But every single time you do something like that, I flash back to that night at the museum," Bruce admitted.

"You could have easily been killed that night."

Clark's anger died down as he realized why Bruce was so agitated. He supposed he could scarcely blame his friend for his concern. His voice softened. "That was a fluke, Bruce. None of us knew that Kryptonite existed. Or that it could do what it can do. But these guys tonight? They were a bunch of idiots with guns. No one out there knows about Kryptonite or its effect on me. I'm as safe as I can possibly be."

"Maybe so, but I hate running that risk."

"Bruce, look. I know you feel responsible for me. I know you're still beating yourself up over Jason's death. But I'm not that same helpless seventeen year old you plucked off the streets. I'm twenty-eight years old. I can handle myself out there. *I have been able to, for a long time now.*"

"I know," Bruce sighed, putting his earpiece away. "It's just... I still have nightmares about Jason."

Clark nodded in understanding. "I get it. But the Kryptonite incident was well over a year ago. And you still treat me like every thug we come across is going to use it to kill me. You need to trust me to make my own decisions out there, the same as you always trusted me when it came to going out in the world as a reporter, or in helping you out at Wayne Enterprises."

"I *do* trust you," Bruce said.

"No, you don't."

"It's everyone else out there that I don't trust."

"Bruce, stop. Please," Clark said, holding up a hand. He ducked behind a changing screen and spun out of his Nightwing attire and into his normal clothing. He sighed. "I can't keep doing this. If you can't let me operate independently when I need to, then I think it's time I moved on. Completely. Find a new city. Stop being Nightwing."

"Clark, I didn't mean to make you feel like you're being kicked out," Bruce apologized.

But Clark shook his head. "You didn't. It's just... this is something I need to do. I need to step out of the shadows and into the light. If I do continue to use my powers to help people — and I think I want to — it can't be under the cover of darkness anymore. I'm tired of people being afraid of me as often as they appreciate what you and I do out there during the night."

"If you start flying around out there in broad daylight, you might scare people anyway," Bruce gently countered as he ducked behind a changing screen in turn.

"Maybe," Clark allowed. "And that's why I'm not sure what I want to do about that yet. All I know for sure is that I need to move on. I've actually been thinking about it a lot lately. It's been what? Six months since I left the *Gazette*? I need to get out there and work again. I need a change in scenery. I'm going stir-crazy, Bruce."

Bruce stepped out from behind the screen, dressed in his normal clothes. He hung up his Batman suit and together, the two

men mounted the stairs up into Wayne Manor, leaving the Batcave behind.

“Where will you go?” he asked once they were back in the living room.

“I’m not sure,” Clark said, shaking his head. “I’m glad I took some time off after quitting the *Gazette*. Even with my powers, going from place to place like that, never settling anywhere for more than a few weeks or months at a time...it was exhausting. But I’m ready to get back to it now.”

He plopped onto the couch, starting to feel a bit tired from the night’s work of fighting crime. He was more than ready for a good night’s sleep, though he doubted his churning mind would allow him a quick send-off to dreamland. With the question of where to go next, he had far too much weighing on his mind.

“There’s plenty of respected papers in this country,” Bruce offered with a shrug. “While I’ll be sorry to see you leave, and while I know the *Gazette* is poorer for having you gone, any of those papers would be lucky to have you on their staff.”

“Thanks, Bruce. I appreciate that.”

“I mean it. All you have to do is figure out which one *you* want to work for.”

“Actually,” Clark said, drawing the word out as his eyes hit upon the stack of newspapers that Alfred hadn’t yet cleared from the coffee table, “I think I know just the one to start with.” He picked up the paper on top and gazed at the logo — a globe with a ring running around it declaring *The Daily Planet*. “Yeah,” he said with more conviction. It all made sense. He’d been reading the *Planet* for years, and had always admired their impeccable dedication to getting to the truth.

“*The Daily Planet*,” Bruce said with approval. “That’s about as good a paper as it gets.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “And I’m going to join its ranks, no matter what. Metropolis, here I come.”

THE END