

Free Falling

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Summary: When something causes the Kent family's superpowers to disappear, they suddenly find themselves in sticky situations. They will need to rely on their ingenuity, and have a little help from their friends, to get themselves home safe and get things back to normal. But will they be able to do that before the criminal element realizes what happened?

Story Size: 76,787 words (423Kb as text)

NOTE: This is another story in my Kent Family series. This one takes place about a year and a half after "[Relative History](#)." You don't have to have read any of the prior stories to understand this one, though it might make more sense if you do.

My son is a creative kid and for a long time was into writing stories. He's an old hand at watching Lois and Clark, and all the DC animated stuff. So when it came time for him to write his own superhero story, what character did he come up with? His name was SuperRobert and he came from Super Power Planet. He seemed suspiciously like Superman, but with my son's name used instead. Those cute little stories served as a bit of an inspiration for a couple lines of this one. So for that, I dedicate the story to my own SuperRobert.

Standard disclaimers apply.

Laura Kent-Owens settled into the rocking chair as the last words of a lullaby escaped her lips, watching anxiously to see if her daughter would stay still. Now just over one year old, Lilly Ann had taken her parents' life by storm, entering the world on a night filled with violent storms, almost as if the heavens knew the force of nature that had been unleashed that day. Everything she did, she did at her own pace and on her own schedule, regardless of what her parents wanted. It was something that could be aggravating on the best days, but at the same time, Laura felt an unmistakable pang of pride whenever her daughter asserted her independence. She was sure it would be less cute once the teenage years came around, but she would let that sort itself out when the time came. For now, it was enough to know that their tiny tornado could, in fact, be tamed at bedtime, given a big sippy cup of milk, a few stories, and a lullaby. Tonight it seemed that they had done the trick, and as the seconds ticked into minutes, it was apparent that the little one had drifted off to sleep. Satisfied, Laura floated out of the chair and made her way out of the room.

Her feet hit the ground once the door latched behind her. After one last, long glance toward her daughter, she made her way through the apartment and back into the living area, where Matt was typing furiously on a computer keyboard. Now that his first book had been released to modest sales and stellar reviews, his publisher was asking for more, and Matt was happy to oblige. She paused to watch him for a moment, his head bobbing to the beat of the music blasting through his headphones, and she didn't even need to activate her super hearing to be able to make it out. The light from the setting sun cast a bright pink light across the room and onto his back, turning his yellow shirt a loud orange, and his dusty blonde hair ginger. It was odd how colorful sunsets had been of late, to the point that it had caught the attention of the local news anchors. Often, forest fires in Canada would fuel such

phenomena, but those also tended to cause a steel gray sky even during the brightest days, but there were no fires up north, and no explanation given for what was causing it, though she had to admit that it made the world seem more colorful.

Matt seemed deeply engrossed in his writing, and she almost hated to interrupt him while the words were flowing so freely. But she had some things to do tonight, and she didn't want to leave without letting him know. Slowly, she approached him, marveling at how strong her feelings for him were, even while watching him do such a mundane thing. He was the father of their child, he was brilliant and creative, and incredibly supportive, especially considering how complex their lives had become in recent months. Her hand brushed on Matt's shoulder, stilling his fingers and diverting his attention from his work. He quickly knocked the headphones off his ears and looked up toward her with a smile.

"She's down," Laura said, then leaned in to kiss him.

"That was quick," he answered.

"Well, I think Mom and Dad wore her out today. I don't think I've ever heard her laugh so hard." Lois and Clark had come up for the day, showering their attention on Lilly, and mercifully giving Matt and Laura a little time to themselves. The baby had come only a couple months after they had been married, and their honeymoon period had been filled with lot of sleepless nights with the baby, press tours for Matt's new book, and the debut of Superwoman. Add to it that they still had to earn incomes, and sometimes it felt like they never saw each other anymore.

"You're probably right," he said with a nod. "It was nice of them to give us a little... alone time." He stood and wrapped an arm around her, leaning in for another kiss.

"Mmmm, yes," she answered, licking her lips, flashes of memories from that afternoon coming to mind.

"Speaking of alone... the baby is asleep..."

She leaned into him, her body begging her to give him just five minutes to continue what they started that afternoon. It was so very tempting, but... there were only so many hours in the day, and they had already spent too much time that day indulging in themselves, and there was so much more to be done. Sighing heavily, she pulled out of his embrace. "Unfortunately, all that... fun this afternoon means that I need to catch up on work on my project."

After taking a few months to be a stay-at-home mom when Lilly came along, Laura had returned to school with the start of the winter semester, this time in pursuit of her master's degree. Adding school to everything else in her life sometimes felt overwhelming. It took a truly superhuman effort to be able to do all that needed to be done around the house, study, work on her master's project, earn some money as a teacher's assistant, occasionally save the world, and give enough of her time to the important people in her life that they didn't feel neglected. She was aware that she wasn't the only mother in the world trying to balance college with real life, though nobody else had a second career as a superhero to consider.

"Need to go out for a while?" Matt asked, and she nodded.

"Shouldn't take too long. Then, after, if you're not too busy..." She ran a finger down his chest and shifted her weight to one leg.

He pulled his arms tighter around her. "Ooh, I will be counting the minutes." He planted a few kisses along her neck and jaw line, then let her go. She gave him her widest smile, then stepped away and became a blur, changing into her uniform. She no longer wore the almost black outfit that had followed her from Metropolis to Gotham. Once her other persona had gone public, she figured it was time to make the change to a brighter suit. This one still had plenty of black, but it also had some patterns in fuchsia, and a one foot wide silver S shield over her heart. Her hair still gathered over her head, though now she often braided it first. A black mask still covered her face, but she now wore short gloves with frills at the

wrist, and a silk flower in her hair. Tonight she also carried a backpack containing supplies and her phone. She paused just long enough to catch the appreciation in her husband's gaze, then made her way toward the patio door.

"Love you," she said, then took off.

"Love you, too," he answered as she flew away. She heard him sigh as she set her sights on the sky over the upper Midwest, and she promised herself that it wouldn't take the intervention of her parents to give them some private time in the future. With a shake of her head, she gained altitude, dodging flight paths before finally coming to a stop several miles above the great lakes. Without hesitation, she shrugged her backpack off and started rooting around, pulling out a large map, clip board, and pencil. The geology of the great lakes area was fascinating, and her master's project revolved around trying to figure out how they came to be, and cataloging the formations that controlled how they were today. X-ray vision came in very handy for this task, allowing her to see through the water to the lake floor, and below. So far she had cataloged Lake Superior and Lake Michigan, tracing rock formations on the maps, noting locations of ancient impact craters and faults, and even fossils that she saw. Someday she would procure equipment to make the discoveries official, but this investigation at least gave her an idea of where to start.

It was hard to tell how long she had her sights set on Lake Ontario before she became aware of the fact that she was cold. The sun, still very pink from her vantage point, now sat low on the western horizon, the stars shining brightly overhead. She knew academically that the atmosphere was very cold where she was, even in the depths of summer, and although she supposed that she had felt it before, it had never made her physically cold. Now, though, she flexed her fingers, aware that they were cool and stiff. A shiver passed through her body and she brought her arms in next to her to help warm her up somewhat, but spandex wasn't exactly well-insulated, and it only served to make her aware of how chilly she truly was. She didn't have the time to ponder it, though, as she felt herself start to lose altitude.

"What...?" she asked, momentarily losing a grip on her clipboard and pencil. With great effort, she forced herself to stop, though she found that she was shaking now — whether it was from cold or from the shock of the fall, she wasn't quite sure. Maybe it was time to call it a night, she decided, placing her supplies back in her bag. No sooner had she zipped it up than she found herself falling again, and this time, no amount of concentration seemed to be able to stop it. She looked down in terror, making note of all the towns and infrastructure that were her potential flight path. Quickly, she decided that if she couldn't stop her descent, she could at least try to alter her path so that she didn't do any damage when she inevitably crashed. Willing herself to the east, she found herself veering ever so slightly, taking her trajectory toward Ohio. In a perfect world, she supposed that her ideal landing spot would be close to Metropolis, but the ground was approaching more quickly every moment, and any changes that could be made at this point surely weren't enough to get her home, and probably wouldn't even get her out of the state. She was going to crash in Ohio, and from there... she would probably be stranded, or worse.

No, that wasn't exactly true, she reminded herself. Matt's parents lived in the state, and even though they had no idea she was a costumed crime fighter, they were still friendly, familiar faces. They lived on an acreage, far enough outside of town that they didn't have any immediate neighbors. She could crash on their property without raising too much of a fuss, she was sure. It took all of her concentration to alter her path, but as the ground grew frighteningly close, she could see their house, their land, and she knew she would be okay. Content that she was now in the right path, she rolled so that her back was facing the ground and curled into a fetal position, protecting her backpack and its

precious contents, the results of months of labor. Then, knowing that the collision was imminent, she closed her eyes and succumbed, relaxed, and waited.

Then the collision came, and everything went black.

Fire licked at Jon Kent's feet as he hovered in the air, observing the massive inferno that engulfed the buildings below him. The fire had started in a grain elevator in a small town about 20 miles northwest of San Antonio, quickly igniting the dust in the air and rapidly enveloping the neighboring co-op buildings. Local forces had been overwhelmed from the start, and the fire had spread first to one block, then another, until it threatened a nursing home. The fire had caught his attention when he was ferrying his mother-in-law between San Antonio and Metropolis for a girl's day with Diane. Although he was slated to look after the twins that evening, he decided to take care of the fire first, figuring that it shouldn't take too terribly long. The first order of business had been evacuating the nursing home, which had been slow going due to the fragile nature of the patients. Many were sustained by complex machinery that couldn't just be picked up and moved, and it took constant consultation with doctors to determine the best way to get some of the residents out. Judging by the relative darkness of the night sky above him, he assumed that an hour or two had passed since he had first arrived, his quick operation turning into a much more time-consuming job, but the evacuation was now complete. The fire, on the other hand, raged on.

He took a short break from action and looked around with an appraising eye. Fire fighters from several towns were attempting to tackle the fire, but so far, the best they had been able to do was to stop it from spreading further. A dozen tanker trucks lined the streets around the perimeter of the affected area, sending arcs of water into the flames. Despite the danger that the fire held, townfolks and media lined up as close as they could, crowding barricades, cheering the successes and gasping at the small explosions that came from time to time. His eyes scanned the crowd, looking for possible hazards — children just waiting to run toward the flames, casualties, or those who might cause trouble. He made a mental catalogue, vowing to follow up once the immediate danger had passed, and was about to turn his attention back toward the flames when a familiar face caught his attention. There, on the very outskirts of the crowd, leaning up next to a pickup truck and looking him right in the eye, was Diane's father. At Jon's recognition, he nodded and gave the barest smile. For a moment Jon was too surprised to move, but the moment quickly passed. Blinking, Jon nodded back, then decided to get to work on the fire.

His first point of attack was the grain elevator at the epicenter of the blaze, where everything had started. It was the hottest part of the fire, and had an almost endless supply of fuel thanks to the corn stored inside. If he cut that off and tackled the fire from the inside out, it should greatly help the cause. He floated gently toward the silo, and as he took in a deep breath, he became aware of a stream of moisture working its way down his forehead. The bead of sweat stung his eye as he exhaled a blast of cooling breath, and he found himself distracted enough that the air appeared to miss its target. He quickly took another breath, hoping to quickly correct his mistake, but this time the heat from the smoke and embers floating in the air caused a burning sensation in his chest, and he began to cough. What on earth...? He'd fought hundreds of fires over the years, often with smoke much thicker than was present here, and it had never bothered him before. There was no reason that it should be bothering him, now, either, but as the seconds ticked by and he continued to choke on the smoke, there was no denying that something was wrong.

Panic began to creep into his subconscious, displacing the confusion, but he didn't have time to dwell on it, not while the fire continued to rage around him. More sweat leaked into his eyes,

but he rubbed it away, determined. He started to take a breath again, but realized that he wasn't as high in the air as he had been. The flames that had licked his feet were now reaching toward his midsection, and his pants, close enough to his skin to slide under his aura during normal circumstances, were starting to smolder. Before he could even begin to ponder what exactly was happening, he found himself in free fall, and in the next moment he hit the ground in a spray of sparks, crashing next to the burned-out husk of an office building adjacent to the elevator. He let out a scream of surprise as he realized that it felt hot, painfully hot. Every breath he took now burned, and the portions of his body in contact with the ground were now numb.

This was some bad nightmare, it had to be. Everything around him was illuminated in shades of yellow and orange, creating dancing shadows that distorted shapes and made the whole landscape unrecognizable. The longer he stayed rooted to his spot, the more it felt as if his whole body was on fire. He was in real danger, he realized as his breathing became more pained. Crimson Superman, who had fought hurricanes, collapsed skyscrapers, and even visited the moon under his own power, a man who was supposed to be invulnerable, was going to die in the middle of a fire unless he could get himself out of there fast. But there were no firefighters around to help – none would dare venture this deep into the inferno. He had to get out of this himself, no matter how much it hurt, and that thought spurred him on. Scrambling to his feet, he stumbled forward toward a dark gap in the flames, then kept going. His eyes burned in the smoke, and eventually he had to drape his arm across them, going blindly, not daring to feel with his hand, which was already starting to blister after being in contact with the embers when he landed.

It felt like an eternity that he staggered forward, but eventually he felt the heat subside, and felt solid ground under his feet. Uncovering his eyes, he squinted against the light, and realized that he was now on a street about a block from where he had initially landed. He was still within the footprint of the fire, away from the rescue workers, but a path out was now available, the street was relatively clear, and if he followed it to the end... He straightened up as he realized that the end of the street led very near to where he had seen his father-in-law. With renewed purpose, Jon started to jog, ignoring the pain in his feet and legs. As he neared the outskirts of the fire, he noticed a few people gathered, and he veered toward the walls of the buildings, not wanting to be seen. He stopped to catch his breath, pondering how he could possibly get out of there without the world knowing that he was... he shook his head. Positive thoughts. He leaned his head back against the brick of the building and closed his eyes, thinking, but the thoughts were stopped as he heard someone say his name from very close.

"Jon?" said the loud whisper, and Jon immediately turned toward the source. A wave of relief washed over him as he saw Cruz Martinez standing there, a blanket in hand.

"Am I glad you're here," Jon said, pushing away from the building. The action caused him to cough a few times, bringing a look of concern from his father-in-law. The concern only grew as he got a better look at Jon's body.

"Yeah, son, me too," Cruz said. "Now come on, let's get you out of here." He wrapped the blanket around Jon, covering his uniform and obscuring his face, then wrapped an arm around his shoulders and guided Jon ever so slowly toward his truck. At first they walked in silence, then, as they approached some people, he started to speak again. "I don't know what you were doing, running into the fire like that. I don't care if you left your phone on your desk, it's not worth risking your life for."

"I know, I'm sorry," Jon said, recognizing the playacting for what it was. He let himself continue to be led, his eyes directed steadfastly toward the ground.

"Now let's get you home so your mother can take care of these

burns," Cruz continued, reaching for the door handle and pulling it open.

"Hey, man," one of the bystanders said. "Don't ya think maybe he should get to an ambulance?" Jon glanced up and saw the man pointing toward his legs. Jon let himself look, and was shocked at what he saw. The knees of his pants were burned away, and his skin was blistered beneath it. It was probably a minor blessing that he was still numb, because he was sure it would feel worse than it looked once the feeling came back.

"My wife's a nurse," Cruz lied, gesturing for Jon to get in to the truck, which he gladly did. As Cruz's arm fell away from Jon's shoulders, Jon moved to clutch the blanket and hold it closed with his right hand, but he quickly pulled it away with a curse. Turning the hand over, he realized that it, too, was blistered and raw. Cruz gave him a long, sad look, patted his arm gently, then closed the door, walking quickly over to the driver's side and getting in. Without hesitation, he started the truck and pulled away from the crowd. Only then did Jon let himself relax.

It was silent in the truck as Cruz guided it out of town, but once he hit the highway, he looked back over at Jon. "How... what happened?"

Jon looked at him, then turned his gaze out the window, back toward the fire that still raged on. His relationship with his father-in-law was hard to define. They had only met once Jon and Diane had been dating for quite some time, and by then he had built up an image of an angry, overbearing man who would hate him on sight and never deem him worthy of his daughter no matter what he did or said. But the truth did not match his expectations at all, and the man he found instead was somewhat quiet and tentative, and very accepting of Jon. Maybe it was due to the fact that he had lost contact with his daughter for so many years and didn't want to scare her away again once she had come back, he wasn't sure. For many years after he and Diane were married, Jon only ever saw his in-laws on holidays, and he was never alone with them for more than minute or two, which made it hard to get to know them very well. They probably felt like they didn't know him well, either, but they always treated him like a true member of the family. Then, once the twins came around, Jon and Diane revealed Jon's other identity to them. It had been a logical choice, made to draw the family closer together, and give them greater access to their grandchildren via Superman Express. But Jon had sensed a shift in how he was perceived by them, one that made him a little uncomfortable. He was still treated warmly, still greeted with a smile, but their gazes always seemed to linger on him a little too long. It was a look that he knew all too well, and had seen on the faces of countless people in the crowd every time he went out and performed super feats. He kept waiting for a moment when they would sit down as family and he would answer any questions they had, alleviate their fears or misconceptions and allow them to view him as just another person again, but they just didn't work that way. Diane had told him that her family didn't talk about things like that, that they didn't really address their feelings, and he hadn't believed her because it was anathema to how he was taught and how he thought all families should operate, but she had been absolutely right. Their relationship persisted on this strange level, friendly but not really loving per se, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. The idea of confiding in his father-in-law, of being stuck in a car alone with him, of being rescued by him, was so odd that it was hard to process. But here they were. Maybe this was the opportunity he had been waiting for; maybe confiding in him and talking things through with him would lead to a new understanding. It certainly couldn't hurt.

"I don't know," said Jon.

"Has it ever happened before?"

Jon shook his head. "No. Well, kinda. Have you heard of kryptonite?"

"Green rock, right?"

“It’s basically poison for us. The only other time anything remotely like this has happened before was when I was exposed to that. But believe me, when you get hit with kryptonite, you know it. It’s...” he exhaled and shook his head. He had enough problems without reliving that feeling.

“Bad?”

“I passed out the first time I was exposed to it. Diane thought it killed me.”

Cruz was silent for a moment. “She never told me about that.”

Jon gave a slight smile. “She probably wanted to forget.” The ride was quiet for a few minutes, then Cruz leaned over and turned on the radio. They were picking up a rock station from San Antonio, and the glow from the City could now be seen not too far off on the horizon. “So, I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but... why were you there tonight?”

Cruz sighed, though as Jon looked toward him, he could see the barest smile on his face. “I was just...curious, I guess.”

Jon smiled back. “I can understand that.”

“This isn’t Metropolis or Gotham. We don’t get to see you do your work, except on television. I just wanted to see.”

Jon nodded, letting the music on the radio play for a moment before responding. “When I first found out about my dad, I did the same thing. I’d go blend into the crowd and watch him do his thing, in awe the whole time. I always sort of figured that I was being inconspicuous, that he had no idea I was there, because he never said anything or even so much as looked my way. But I bet he knew....”

Cruz chuckled. “So you DO understand.”

Probably more than he realized, Jon thought. Watching Superman perform his super feats helped him to find his father behind the guy in the spandex. It was humbling to think that Cruz was going to the same effort to try and understand him. “Yeah,” he answered quietly.

“But you found me tonight in that crowd,” Cruz continued, and Jon bobbed his head. “What would you have done, if fate hadn’t stepped in? Would you have stopped by, said hi?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” Jon answered. They were passing a few scattered hotels and restaurants now, finally reaching the outskirts of town. “But...probably not, or at least not there. You understand, it’s about protecting you from scrutiny.”

“I get it,” Cruz said. Jon expected to hear hurt in his voice, but he seemed to genuinely understand. “You attract a lot of attention.”

“And we couldn’t really talk in public anyway. It’s an image thing more than anything. When you wear the S, you’re supposed to be...stoic, I guess. Commanding.”

Cruz gave him a sideways glance and a small smile. “You’re saying you’re not? When not wearing the S, I mean.”

Jon gave Cruz a long look, wondering if he’d been holding out on him. “I think your daughter would give an emphatic no.”

Jon felt his smile widen and Cruz laughed gently. “Our wives know us better than we know ourselves sometimes, huh?”

“Oh, I would agree with her on this one.” He let his grin linger as his mind turned toward his wife. She had probably expected him home hours ago, but she knew that the job sometimes entailed longer hours than expected, that things rarely went according to plan. She deserved to know what was going on, if only so that should could move on with whatever plans she had for the evening. “Speaking of our wives... I should call.”

“Oh, right. I should’ve thought of that,” Cruz said.

Jon usually kept his phone in his front right pants pocket, and as he absently went to reach for it, the movement caused the pain in his hand to come back, shooting up his forearm and causing him to wince. He gently turned the hand over to look at it, and was shocked to see that the giant blister that took up most of the palm of his hand was now weeping. He stared at it for a long moment, uncertain that this was his hand he was looking at, though the pain

made it clear. Losing his powers was one thing, but this...he flexed his fingers and quickly stopped, the action bringing more shooting pains. This was bad, and it happened so suddenly. How COULD his powers just go away, right in the middle of action, without any kind of warning? He would spare no effort in looking into it after they got to his father-in-law’s house, but first things first. Gently laying his wounded hand in his lap, he reached over with his left and awkwardly pulled the phone out of his pocket. The phone was a little worse for the wear, the heat from the fire causing the plastic to deform and the screen to discolor. It still worked, though, thankfully.

Diane seemed relieved to hear his voice, and she didn’t seem to begrudge him the extra time he had been away. Truth be told, the kids weren’t acting like themselves, so having her mother there to help comfort them had been a blessing. Jon filed that information in the back of his mind – his kids were generally healthy, almost super healthy, so the times when they weren’t were noteworthy. Jon related his story, what had happened and where he now found himself, and Diane’s first question had been the same as her father’s. The second question was how he was planning to get home.

“I can’t do anything tonight,” he told her. “It’s too late to catch a flight, and anyway I look like a guy who just fell into a fire. I’m not in any shape to go anywhere. Maybe some time in the sun tomorrow will help bring things back.”

“And if it doesn’t?” she asked, and he was silent for a moment. He preferred not to think about what would happen if the powers stayed away, but...if he didn’t know how they left, how would he know they would come back?

“I’ll worry about that tomorrow,” he answered quietly. There was silence on the other end, and his mind’s eye gave him a very clear indication of the expression on her face. He sighed. “If I can’t fly myself, then I’ll just go the conventional way.”

“Just...don’t be gone too long. And...you’ll be okay with my dad?” she asked. There was skepticism behind her words, and for good reason, given their history.

“We’ll be fine, don’t worry. He’s already saved my bacon once... we’re getting on like old pals.”

Jon looked toward Cruz, and saw his eyebrows raised. Jon and Diane exchanged a few more pleasantries, and then they ended the call. Jon shoved the phone back in his pocket and looked around, noting that they were getting close to his in-law’s house.

“You don’t mind me sticking around for a night?” he asked.

Cruz smiled, glancing toward Jon. “Well, as much as I was looking forward to having the house to myself for the weekend, I have to admit that it might be nice to have you around... to get to know you... maybe get to talk a little...”

“Yeah,” Jon answered. He had to admit that this was probably the opportunity that he had been looking for. “I’d like that.”

With that, they went silent again in the truck cab, but this time it wasn’t uncomfortable.

The musty darkness inside the warehouse was broken as a side door opened with a metallic screech, allowing the pink light of the fading day to filter in. Long shadows from a half dozen men marched inside, then the door screeched shut, but not before a switch was flipped and the whole floor was awash with light. From his spot in the rafters, CJ squinted slightly, his eyes quickly acclimating to the sudden brightness. It was easy enough to make out the faces of the men below him – the grandson of Carmine Falcone, quickly followed by his bodyguard, then another family member – some cousin who was new to the game and looking to make an impression – followed by two of the better known drug suppliers in town and one of their armed guards. The group wandered toward a stack of crates covered by a tarp, unaware of the visitor observing them from on high.

“I don’t know why we can’t just off him,” said the cousin,

reaching to pull up the tarp. “Bet they’d leave us alone after that.”

Falcone gave him a hard stare. “Or start a war,” he said after a moment. “The last thing we need right now is more heat on us. Anyway, didn’t I tell you to be patient? After tomorrow this won’t be a problem.” He made a gesture, and the bodyguard stuffed his gun in his waistband, then went over to one of the crates and started to pry it open. “The heat won’t be going after anybody, and the town will be ours.”

As the lid of the crate came off, a cache of weapons was revealed, weapons that had quite recently disappeared from the evidence lockup at the Gotham City Police Department. CJ knew, of course, what the origins of the weapons were well before the men had entered the warehouse, and he could very well have confiscated them earlier and started to dig more deeply into the police corruption at the center of their appearance here. But then he wouldn’t have had the fingerprints of some of the city’s most wanted criminals all over them. He couldn’t help but smile as each man reached into the box, pulling out a firearm and ammunition. He waited a few more moments, just to make sure there was enough hard evidence of their involvement to guarantee they’d all get locked up for a long time, then he pushed away from the ceiling truss and let gravity take effect.

He landed on the warehouse floor around 10 feet away from them, his cape billowing behind him making him appear larger and more menacing. Before anyone could react, he lunged toward Falcone, his fist connecting with the mobster’s jaw. Falcone staggered backward, though under normal circumstances that punch should’ve knocked him out. CJ felt a twinge of surprise, along with a dull pain in his knuckles, but the motion of the bodyguard drawing his gun forced him into action, and CJ’s foot flew up to knock the gun away. It felt like he was moving underwater, he thought, his attention turning to the other four men in the room, all of whom were now pointing their guns toward him. CJ directed two much stronger punches toward the bodyguard, one connecting with his midsection, while the second, to his head, caused him to fall to the ground. He moved to address the cousin when the first shot rang out. He reached up to catch the bullet as he had done a thousand times before, but as it met his hand, he felt pain shoot up his arm, and the bullet pushed his hand back, eventually ricocheting off and into the ground. Two more shots rang out, and those hit him in the shoulder and thigh. He growled in pain and shock as his skin exploded in agony with each impact. For a moment he was too stunned to move, but he quickly realized that standing still could be recipe for disaster.

As additional shots rang out, CJ moved to avoid the projectiles, fighting through the pain to strike out at the men, putting all his strength into each punch. In short order he had taken care of the remaining thugs, though he had to reach into his belt to grab a projectile to throw at Falcone, who had retreated into the shadows after the initial punch. He kept himself moving, lashing out, until all the men were down and subdued. Only then did he stop to try and assess his situation, and what he found scared him. A sticky wet spot was spreading out around a hole in his suit at his shoulder. On his thigh, the blood from the wound was making its way down his leg, a few drops splattering onto the warehouse floor as he stood there for a stunned second and gaped. Finally, he forced himself to move. The longer it took for him to get home, the more potential that he wouldn’t make it safely. Striding toward the door, he hit a button on his cowl, then commanded his electronic assistant to call the local police precinct. He managed to keep his growing panic out of his voice as he directed the police toward the men he had caught, then hung up.

Once he reached his car, he absently reached for the door handle, which brought pain from where the bullet had impacted his hand. Climbing in and closing the door behind him brought yet more pain, and he felt cold panic creep over him. He was hurt. . . the concept was mind blowing. He couldn’t get hurt, yet here he

was, sitting in his car, possibly bleeding to death while he contemplated the unreality of the situation. After a moment, he dialed his wife. She answered immediately.

“Hey, babe,” she said, her voice cheery. “What’s up?”

“Are the kids in bed?” CJ asked, aware of the worried tone in his voice.

He could almost hear her frown through the phone. “Yeah,” she said slowly. “Why?”

“I’m in trouble, here,” he said, looking down again at the hole in his leg. “I’ve been shot.”

“I thought you got shot at all the time,” she said.

The corner of his mouth twitched up. “I do, but tonight, for whatever reason. . .” Out of sheer curiosity, he reached down with his free hand to touch the wound on his thigh, but even the slightest brush against it caused a fiery sensation to pulse down his leg. He grunted in response. “I’m. . .bleeding. A lot.”

“Clark!” Jenny gasped. “Where are you? Does someone need to come get you? Should I call Laura?” Her words came quickly, and he could hear her moving around, probably headed toward the stairway down to the cave.

“I think I can get home okay, but I’m going to need some help when I get there. And gauze. A lot of gauze.” He blinked a few times, contemplating whether what he just said was funny, or if he was just starting to get lightheaded.

On the other end of the line, Jen stilled. “I’m getting Bruce.”

CJ was about to protest, but he figured that Bruce knew more about do-it-yourself wound care than any other living human being, having undoubtedly been in the same situation himself. “Thanks,” he said weakly.

“Don’t thank me yet. If we have to dig a few bullets out of you. . .”

He winced. “I know. Look, I shouldn’t be long, so please hurry.”

“I will,” she said softly. “Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“Please be careful. If you start blacking out, please don’t put yourself or anyone else in more danger and just pull over.”

“Will do, Mom,” he said, though he suspected his feeble attempt at teasing wouldn’t be appreciated. Her sigh told him he was right.

“Look, I’m going to stay on the line with you, okay?” she said, and he knew immediately what she was doing. If she could keep him talking, maybe she could keep him alert.

“Yeah. Actually, I’ll be glad to have some company,” he said, starting the car.

“So tell me what happened,” she said softly, and as he guided the car through the streets of Gotham, driving as fast as he dared, he related the tale to her. When he started to trail off, losing his train of thought, she would ask a question, forcing him to refocus. The further he went, the more often he found himself losing the narrative, and gradually he was overtaken with an almost overpowering desire to close his eyes. He resisted, trying to fidget himself to wakefulness, though that caused the pain from his bullet wounds to increase.

“Clark, sweetie, I need you to stay with me,” Jenny said. “You have to hang in there.”

“Hmm,” he answered, aware that he was starting to fade. It was all he could do to keep the car in its lane and stay aware of the other vehicles around him.

“Hey, do you remember that time I brought you lunch out there on the docks when you were working a case and couldn’t get away?”

He smiled. “I had to pull you up to the roof with the line,” he said. “That’s when we found out that you do have a fear of heights.”

“It’s not a fear of heights so much as a mistrust of your knot tying skills,” she answered with a laugh in her voice. It made him

feel warm, which wasn't helping at all.

"I ended up with mustard from the sandwiches on my uniform."

"Well, these things happen when you make out with someone eating a ham sandwich." Colorful spots began to dance in his vision, with darkness creeping in from the edges, as he piloted the car off the interstate and toward the hills.

"I'd been messing with the uniform, so the bad guys probably thought the mustard spot was some sort of new abstract bat symbol," he said, the last part almost a mumble. He had to keep it together for just another minute or two....

"But you kicked ass when the time came," she said, her voice filling with emotion. "You were strong. Hang on to that, just for a few more minutes."

"Strong," he repeated, pushing the button in the dash that opened the door to the cave. As he pulled in and came to a stop, Jenny and Bruce came running toward the car, Bruce pulling open the door and dragging him out while Jenny slid her arm around his waist, repeating his name, trying to keep him awake. He stumbled toward the large work table at the center of the cave, pulling his cowl and cape off as he did, dropping them haphazardly on the ground.

"Clark, honey, please stay awake," Jenny pleaded with him.

"I'm here," he said, his voice sounding far away.

"How were you shot?" Bruce asked. "Was it kryptonite?"

"Don't think so," CJ said, though it came out more like a mumble.

"You need to get up on the table," Jen said, her firm grip and Bruce's hands helping guide him up. He helped as much as he could, and as he collapsed on the table top, he found it impossible to keep his eyes open anymore. He was aware that his boots were being pulled off, followed by his gloves and pants. He reached out for Jenny, grasping her arm.

"I love you," he said softly and clearly, then he let the darkness envelop him.

The Australian Comic Book Convention was the largest fan event in the southern hemisphere, and on this day it sure looked the part, teeming with colorfully dressed fans of all ages. Taking place in the International Convention Centre Sydney, it was a destination for entertainment industry representatives, comic book authors and artists, collectible retailers, movie actors and producers, and those who just liked to people watch. This morning, it would play host to Superman, along with actor Spencer North, who played Superman in the movies, as part of a special paid panel to raise money for charity. Superman was always a sucker for a good cause, and he had to admit that he was looking forward to meeting his double for the first time. It was also fun to come to conventions like these, if only because they generally gave him the opportunity to hide in plain sight and mix and mingle with the crowd without them knowing that he was the genuine article. He'd done it before at other similar conventions, and was planning to do it again at this one once his official duties were concluded.

Clark hovered over the building for a few moments, observing the activity with a small smile, before making his way to the VIP entrance in the rear of the building. Immediately waved through the door by the awed security guard, he was greeted by his handler, who led Clark to a little dressing room. The dressing room was something that was provided to all special guests of the convention, though normally he would decline the offer, seeing as the average blind alley coupled with superspeed generally worked quite nicely to conceal him during wardrobe changes. But since he was on another continent and planning to enjoy all the convention had to offer in a more conventional sense later, he had come prepared, a little bag tucked up under the top of his cape carrying supplies. The room afforded him a nice place to stash everything,

and he had to admit that it was nice to have a private space away from the crowd to provide a few moments of quiet.

Clark didn't let himself settle in, though. As soon as his cargo was unloaded and he helped himself to a bottle of water, he stepped back into the hallway, his handler ushering him toward the meeting rooms. About halfway to the room, he approached his doppelganger, who thankfully was dressed in street clothes.

"Mr. North," Clark said, catching the actor's attention. Immediately his face lit up, and he halted his forward progress, turning instead to offer Clark his hand.

"Superman!" he replied as Clark shook the offered hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you!"

"Likewise," Clark replied. He gestured toward him once the handshake was done. "It's like looking in a mirror."

Spencer laughed once. "Oh, you're far too kind." The pair started walking again, this time more slowly. "Though, I think it will be interesting to see how confused some of the younger audience members will be, the ones that consume endless amounts of entertainment and are completely blind to the news. 'Hey, what's Superman doing up there in normal clothes, and who's the guy wearing an S?'"

Clark bobbed his head. "To each his own... Superman, I mean," he answered. He had noticed, in the last couple of years, that some people would look surprised when he rescued them, as if they were expecting someone else. It was amusing more than anything, and he didn't feel as if he was losing his identity to the guy on screen, if only because he was the one who actually had the superpowers. "So how's the second movie coming along?" Clark asked. He knew that part of the reason this appearance was set up was because the movie was filming in Australia.

"Oh, we have another week or so to go, then it's a wrap, at least until the studio gets a hold of it and decides to reshoot half the film." He made a face and shook his head. "Honestly, I'll be glad to be done with it for a while. I've practically lived in my costume for the last four months — it's comfortable and all... well, maybe except for the cape, but it drives you crazy after awhile. I'm actually deliriously happy to be back in real clothes for a couple of days. Do you ever get to the point that you just want to... wear something different? Maybe peel off the S-suit and burn it?"

You have no idea, Clark thought. There were times in his life when his Superman persona seemed determined to ruin his real life, and he would give anything to banish the suit and never see it again, but his conscience wouldn't allow him to do that. "I do have other suits," Clark stated, not mentioning that they were of the business variety. "And I don't sleep in it, if I can avoid it."

Spencer nodded. "Well I, for one, have a lot more appreciation for everything you do after having to walk a few miles in your footsteps. And that's with a stunt double taking care of the dangerous stuff."

"I appreciate that," Clark said sincerely. "And for what it's worth, I think you're doing a good job in the role."

Spencer beamed. "That means a lot," he answered. By that point, they had reached the room where the panel would take place. Clark x-rayed through the wall, noting that the room was really more of an auditorium, with about 1,500 seats, and it was already at capacity. Each audience member had contributed at least \$500 for the pleasure of seeing both the real and fictional Superman, the money going toward a charity that helped out families of children with serious medical problems. The front row of the auditorium was filled with children who would be helped by the contributions, who would be able to ask the first questions of the special guests and who would each get their pictures taken with them.

"It's a packed house," Clark said, turning toward Spencer. "Hope you don't mind performing to a crowd...."

"I'm game if you are," Spencer said, and at that moment one

of the handlers poked their head out into the hallway and gestured for the two to enter. With a sweeping wave of his arm, Spencer motioned for Superman to go ahead of him, and the two were announced to great fanfare and thunderous applause.

The panel was moderated by a local celebrity, who read from some prepared notes that had been put together based on comments Superman and Spencer North submitted prior to the event. The moderator asked each of them some softball questions, and they gave their answers, sometimes supplementing each other, sometimes giving vastly different perspectives. Once the questions started coming from the audience, things got a little more unpredictable. There were some of the same questions that Clark fielded at practically every celebrity appearance or entertainment interview, but others were entirely new.

“Superman, did you have any say in Spencer being cast to play you?” asked a somewhat shy teenage girl in a Superman t-shirt.

Clark glanced at his companion and then looked back toward the girl. “When the studio went to fill the part, my only stipulation was that whoever was hired be a virtuous person. No men who beat up on their girlfriends, nobody with substance abuse problems or a criminal past, et cetera. I’ve spent my career standing up for truth and justice, and it was important to me that my on-screen representative had the same moral compass. Whether in real life or on screen, Superman needs to be someone who people can look up to, who they can trust. All things considered, I think the studio chose very well.” He looked back toward Spencer North and saw him blushing slightly.

“Wow,” said Spencer, diverting his eyes downward. “I, uh... thanks.” He took a deep breath, then regarded the audience again. “I was the little kid running around with a red towel tied around my neck, trying to leap doghouses and lawn furniture in a single bound. When Superman was interviewed on television, I would hang on every word he said; when he gave words of wisdom, I always took them to heart. Kids would tell me that he was a boring hero, that I should follow someone more interesting and edgy, someone like Batman or Green Lantern, but as far as I was considered, Superman was the first and the best, the example that all the others tried to live up to, and that was that. For a long time, just the idea of meeting Superman sounded like the closest thing to heaven that I could imagine. But we didn’t live in Metropolis, so it had to stay a dream.

“After high school, I set my sights on acting, and headed west to pursue that dream. I had only been in Los Angeles for a few months, trying to get cast in anything I could, when my agent told me about the opportunity of a lifetime, the opportunity to BE Superman. We looked a little bit alike, and I kept in decent shape, and though I was still very new to the business I ended up getting the part. For days, maybe weeks, I was on cloud nine, a smile was constantly plastered on my face, and I told myself that I would do whatever I could to be the best Superman I could be. Throughout this whole process I’ve tried to live by the example he set, but it hasn’t been easy. People can be...awful toward public figures, but I’ve had a great support from friends and family, and I take the image of Superman seriously. When you think about the people Superman can help just by being an example to others, or being a moral compass, it makes the job so much easier.”

Clark couldn’t help but smile as Spencer spoke. He knew that there were plenty of actors out there who eschewed the standard Hollywood model, who were good, decent people and didn’t seek to be constantly in the spotlight, but the news made it seem like they were a rare breed. It was one thing that had truly worried him when they cast the part, that they would never find that magic combination of looks, talent, and ethics, that whoever they found would turn to the dark side once they found fame. But it had worked out better than he had imagined, at least so far. This discussion was making him anxious to get to know Spencer North

a little better, and maybe welcome him into the super family fold in a more official capacity.

Next, a middle aged woman approached the microphone and cleared her throat before speaking. “Uh, hi,” she said with a small wave. “I wanted to know about Ultra Woman. Was it love at first sight for the two of you, like the movie shows? And what’s your secret to keeping a marriage going for 30 years?”

Clark cringed inwardly. The personal questions were always the worst. He never wanted to lie, so he usually tried to give somewhat vague answers when questions like these popped up. The problem was that once he started talking about his family, he often found it hard to stop himself from saying more than he should. “I would say that it definitely was the proverbial love at first sight for me, but it took her a while to come around. We became friends very quickly, and we always shared the same values, but I don’t think she wanted to become attached to anyone when we first met. She was very independent, looking to take the world by storm and change it by sheer force of will. Ultimately she admitted that we could do so much more together than we could apart, and the rest is history....” He was focusing off in the distance, images from the past passing by in his vision, and suddenly he wished strongly she was there, even if only as a face in the crowd. The room had grown very quiet as he spoke, and he suddenly became aware of that fact. Mercifully, he was saved from awkward silence as Spencer chimed in.

“I actually wanted to say that the love story between Superman and Ultra Woman was one of my favorite parts of these movies. Going into it, we all knew the amazing things Superman could do, we knew that he has rescued the planet many times over, and saved more lives that anyone can count. I think most of us, especially those of us who grew up idolizing him, saw him as something like an unapproachable god – he came down from on high, helped us with our problems, then disappeared into the ether until he was needed again, never questioning, never complaining, always on guard. The fact that he has a wife, a family...it changes that perception completely. When he comes to help us, he’s leaving someone at home who loves him. He’s putting his life on hold, dropping whatever else he’s doing, and prioritizing our safety, our lives, over his own. That’s heavy. That blew me away.”

Spencer looked over toward Clark, who by this time had regained his focus. As he continued, he addressed Clark directly. “Have you ever had a date night with your wife interrupted by some emergency?”

“More times than I can count,” Clark answered, to some chuckles.

“Family time?”

Clark felt a twinge at that one. “Yes. Inevitably, there are hurt feelings with that one.”

“Have you ever been right in the middle of some project that had taken you all day to really get into, only to hear a call for help and have to leave it behind?”

“Well, being faster than a speeding bullet has some advantages,” Clark quipped, which was true enough. Many a home improvement project had been undertaken, only to be interrupted by something or another. The problem with completing projects at superspeed, though, was that the neighbors would tend to notice, and the last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself. So he usually just left things as they were.

“And what about the opposite – have you ever been in the middle of helping people, only to have your family need you?”

Flashes of Lois in dangerous situations played in his mind. For a long time after they first met, he had to constantly keep an ear open for her, and dropping everything to come to her aid was a way of life. But by the time Lois was actually family, those times were few and far between. For the most part, there wasn’t much that came up in his absence that Lois or the kids couldn’t handle, but it was hard to ignore their cries when they came, even if they

were for silly reasons. “A few times, but nothing too serious – when one of the kids had a bad dream, when my wife overcooked the dinner and set off the fire alarms in the kitchen...” That one was more common than he wanted to admit. The audience laughed, lightening the mood, which had threatened to grow heavy.

“I admit that it’s not easy being married to me, but my wife takes all the adversity and unplanned absences with grace and understanding...most of the time. We have unique challenges in our relationship, but the core of it, the thing that’s kept us going for so long, is no different than what it is for any normal couple. You have to have mutual respect, you have to check your ego at the door. Every decision that you make affects your partner, so you have to understand that it’s not about what you want, but what’s best for the family. And most of all, you have to love each other. It’s really that simple.”

The crowd clapped vigorously. More questions followed after the applause died down, many of the more usual variety. As the session continued, though, it occurred to Clark that it was becoming harder for him understand the speakers. The background noise seemed to drown out the sound system, and he found himself straining to hear what was being said, no matter how much he tried to apply his various mental filters. While Spencer gave an answer to a question, he tried an experiment and reached out with his hearing to tune into the rest of the city, maybe catch the chatter on the police band or tune into a local radio station. What he heard, though, was more of the same. His super hearing was gone. Straining to keep his face in a neutral expression, he tried x-raying through the back wall of the auditorium, again not having any luck. His mind started to churn and his heart beat a little heavier as the implications of the situation presented themselves, but the sound of the crowd clapping brought him back to interview. The crowd was here because of him, and it didn’t take superpowers to answer their questions. Pushing the problem to the back of his mind, he forced himself to relax and smile, and he finished the panel, enjoying the interaction with the attendees in spite of everything.

As most of the people filed out of the room, Clark and Spencer stayed behind to chat with the children and take pictures with them. Being able to provide a bit of happiness to sick kids always lifted his spirits, put his problems into perspective. Apparently his companion felt the same, and he was strangely silent as they wandered back to their dressing rooms afterwards. Reaching his room, Clark stopped and regarded him, then stuck out his hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you,” he said.

Spencer smiled and took the offered hand. “The pleasure was all mine, believe me.”

“If you ever want to talk shop sometime, get some pointers,” Clark started, then trailed off at Spencer’s laugh.

“Hey, I only play a superhero on film. I don’t think I would be able to hold up my end of the conversation. Now, if you wanted to give me a tour of the real Fortress of Solitude...”

Clark smiled knowingly and released his hand. “Don’t believe everything you see in the movies,” he said, bringing a puzzled expression to Spencer’s face. “Take care of yourself, Spencer North.” With a nod, he turned and entered the room, closing the door behind himself. Maybe some day he would stop by and visit Spencer under more normal circumstances, maybe on the set of the movie...it was strange, but after their panel today, the way they interacted, he felt close to him. He wanted to get to know him better, maybe have Spencer get to know him better, too. With a shake of his head, Clark moved toward the bag he had left in the room, then reached inside and pulled out his cell phone. Sighing, he dialed Lois, mentally calculating what his cell phone bill would be after this call. She picked up after only a couple rings.

“We have a problem,” he said, not bothering with pleasantries.

“What kind of problem?”

“At some point during the discussion today, my powers just... went away.”

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment. “So, someone showed up with kryptonite? And these people call themselves your fans...”

Clark shook his head, even though he knew she wouldn’t be able to see it. “No, I don’t think that’s it. There was no pain. It’s just...one second they were there, and the next they weren’t.”

“So if it wasn’t kryptonite, what else could it be?”

“Good question.” Clark started to pace. What else COULD take his powers away? He had learned enough about himself over the years, through the help of the scientists at STAR Labs, to know how his body worked, and where his powers came from. He was essentially a giant solar battery, and it didn’t really take much to charge up his reserves, which he had spent his entire life on Earth building up. He had never hidden away from the sun to try and test his limits, and he couldn’t recall any prolonged stints in darkened basements or caves that had caused him to feel drained. It wasn’t like he had spent much time recently out of the sun, either. But it was hard not to notice that the sun didn’t feel as invigorating recently as it had in the past. “Do you remember how the sky looked when I left tonight? How it’s looked every night for a week?” he asked, suddenly realizing what the potential key to everything could be.

“Uhh, yeah. It was that funny pink color.”

“Right. I was just thinking, Kryptonians only have powers on Earth because of its yellow sun. Under a red sun, like the one that Krypton had, we wouldn’t have any powers.”

Lois let out a long breath. “You know, it hasn’t just been the sunsets that have seemed too pink. Now that I think about it, everything’s kind of had a reddish hue. You think that’s what’s caused this?”

“What else could it be? In the absence of magic or curses or something equally far-fetched, that’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Agreed,” Lois said, and Clark could hear her rooting around, no doubt reaching for a notebook. “So the next question is, how does a yellow sun suddenly turn red?”

“I don’t know that the sun itself necessarily turned red – there are people who spend their entire careers studying the sun, and if something happened to it, you think that they would be shouting it from the rooftops. But a lot can happen in the atmosphere to make the sky appear pink – if a volcano puts enough particulates into the air, that can have that effect. Smoke from fires turns the sky pink all the time. If you wanted to make the Earth appear to be under a red sun, all you’d have to do it filter out the yellow spectrum and boost the red. I would wager that whatever is causing it is on a more planetary level.”

“Okay,” Lois said, and Clark could tell from her slightly detached tone that she was writing something down. “The next question is whether this is a natural or man-made occurrence.”

“You think someone wants me out of the way?”

“You or the kids,” Lois said in that same distracted tone, then stopped with a sharp intake of air. “The kids! God, Clark, this affects them, too.”

“Yeah...” It hadn’t occurred to him until that moment that whatever was happening to him might be happening to them, too. He closed his eyes and flinched as a stab of concern caused a momentary tightening in his chest. Getting to the root of the cause of his current situation suddenly became much more pressing if they were in harm’s way.

“You were on the ground when your powers left. What if they weren’t? What if one of them was in the middle of something? What if CJ was taking one of his flying leaps off a tall building or Laura was exploring the ocean floor, or...”

“Lois,” Clark said quietly, calmly. Her rant stopped abruptly, before she could get herself too worked up. In all honesty, the

same scenarios were flying through his mind, too, but dwelling on them at that moment wasn't helpful. "I'm worried about them, too. But first things first, all right? Red sun?"

She took a deep breath before responding. "Red sun. Right. I can check for potential natural causes, but again I think we would've heard about it if enough of the world was on fire to cause that kind of color in the sky. That leaves man-made causes. Cloud seeding?"

"The sky was pinkish down here, too. It has to be something more global."

"Some sort of laser, maybe? Something to do with satellites? You know a lot more about those things than I do."

"When you can go up there and check them out, sure. It's a little harder now." He sighed. "I do still have connections, though. I'd like to talk to them, to help you figure this out."

"You know, the other question is: assuming that someone purposely caused the situation, and assuming that you are the target, whoever is doing it has to know enough about you to know what a red sun will do to you. I don't think that particular bit of information is well known."

"For good reason," he answered, letting himself process that statement for a moment. "It's been a long time since anyone targeted me. Feels a little weird."

"Yeah. Well, I guess this is better than getting hit by kryptonite. I mean, you might be without powers, but you're in no danger of dying or anything." He could be wrong, but he sensed something in her voice, a little smugness maybe. "You just have to keep 2 feet on the ground now like the rest of us normal humans." Yes, that was definitely smugness he heard that time.

"There's nothing normal about you, honey," he said with a small smile. "As for the danger, I'm in imminent danger of mild embarrassment, if this gets out."

"Poor thing," Lois said.

"Seriously, though, this is a bit of a jam. I didn't even bring my wallet, just a couple of those prepaid credit cards. And as for clothing..." he reached into the bag he brought with him and pulled out one of CJ's Batman suits, which he had lent him for the express purpose of having some fun at the convention while he was there. Neither that nor his current outfit were exactly inconspicuous. "Let's just say that I didn't bring anything that I would wear in front of polite company. Or, really, anybody other than the Justice League... or random comic book geeks."

"So, stranded on the other side of the world with only gaudy spandex to wear, no identification, barely any money, and no alibi. I can work on finding you a flight back, I suppose, but there will be inevitable questions about why you were down there in the first place. I doubt I can find you anything before tomorrow, and even if I do they won't let you on the plane without a passport."

Why was conventional travel such a pain? "Okay, so I'll need a hotel room, and you'll need to put together a care package to overnight there."

He could hear her writing again. "Ah, contingency plan F. I was wondering if we were ever going to need to use that one," she said with a teasing tone in her voice. Shortly after they were first married they discussed contingency plans for when Superman got into various unpleasant situations – being trapped somewhere, being detained by authorities, falling victim to kryptonite, things like that – and what they would need to do to ensure he got home safely and with his identity intact. Thankfully, they had never needed to break out any of the plans, at least until today. "So, you'll need your laptop, wallet, press pass, a few outfits..."

"Story ideas. I'm going to need to file something while I'm down here or John's going to skin me alive. And he'll quite literally be able to do that now." John, their editor, gave him a lot of leeway on the stories he chose to write, but he suspected that a trip to Australia for a casual, low stakes story might strain that trust.

Lois laughed gently. "True. Well, I don't know if you'll be able to help much with this red sun problem from there, but... With primaries happening right now, maybe you could spotlight the Australian voting system. It's different enough from ours that it's fairly intriguing."

"Good idea," Clark answered. There was thoughtful silence for a moment, then he had another idea. "I know that entertainment news is not considered real news by a lot of people, but... they are filming the sequel to my fake life story down here, and I did meet the star today."

"I meant to ask, how did your thing with him go?"

"The panel? It was actually a lot more fun than I had thought it would be. Spencer North is more perceptive and thoughtful than people give him credit for."

"What kinds of questions did you get? Anything uncomfortable?"

"Ever since I started wearing the wedding ring I've gotten a lot of questions about you, and they asked again today."

"I imagine you told them about how wonderful I am," she teased, and he smiled.

"Of course," he said. "Though when I created Superman I never thought that he would become a marriage expert. Makes me yearn for the old questions about what it's like to fly or how much I can bench press."

"Well, they wouldn't ask if you weren't doing something right."

"It's not just me in the marriage, and you probably deserve way more credit for its longevity than I do. I even said as much, thought I don't think the fans believed me."

"Whether they did or not, it was still very sweet."

"I love you, you know that, right?" he said, wishing very strongly that she was there so he could sweep her up and kiss her thoroughly. It would just have to wait a couple of days, he supposed, but it would probably feel like an eternity.

"I know, flyboy. It's a darn good thing you do, too, since you're going to owe me for this little unplanned vacation."

"Anything you want," he said, then sighed. "I'd love to continue this, but my bill for this call is going to match the GDP of a third world country if I don't hang up soon. Text me the name of the hotel once you make the reservation?"

"Sure. Shouldn't take too long."

"And once you hear from the kids, can you let me know how they're doing?"

"I will. Hey, love you. Be safe."

"Talk to you later," he said, then hung up. He looked at the phone, chewing over the conversation for a moment, then shoved it back into the bag. His hands brushed against the spandex from CJ's outfit, and he pulled it out, regarding it quizzically. Before all this happened, he had planned to go out and mingle a bit. That was before he had other, pressing concerns pop up that probably needed his attention, but there was only so much he could do on his cell phone, especially when he was paying ridiculous roaming charges for any services he used. He was stuck here for a while... why not try and enjoy it? Besides, he'd need to go buy a t-shirt or something if he wanted to go anywhere else, and it was undoubtedly better for him to be out there as Batman, someone who was only human, after all.

With a shrug, he reached back and unzipped his suit.

Christy Owens tried to slow her rapidly beating heart as she rose from her recliner. The late local news had just begun when the sound of thunder rumbled across the sky. The day had been gorgeous and clear, the type of day that made her long to strap on her hiking boots and explore the great outdoors, although her hip precluded her from making those excursions these days. She had been about to get up and peek out the window when a violent crashing sound came from very close to the house. For a few long

minutes she had just sat there in shock, waiting for more to happen, but all she heard was the steady sound of voices from the television. After a moment, the door to the master bedroom opened, and her husband Tom shuffled out. He had been in bed for roughly an hour, but the crashing sound would've been loud enough to wake even the dead.

"What was that?" he asked, slipping his glasses onto his face. She looked at him with wide eyes.

"I have no idea," she said. "It came from outside."

He looked toward the door, then nodded and walked toward it, detouring to the spot next to the coat rack where they kept a baseball bat, just in case. Christy followed behind, content to let him take the lead. Opening the door, he poked his head out and looked around, his brow furrowing as he apparently saw something. Leaving the house, he angled toward the back corner of their yard, where the light from the nearly full moon illuminated what appeared to be an exploded mound of dirt. Christy leaned to look around him, curious. They were almost to the mound when she heard a moaning sound. Instantly, her husband tensed up, raising the baseball bat to strike if necessary. The moan came again, this time accompanied by movement from behind the dirt.

Her husband took a couple cautious sideways steps toward the mound, which she could now see was the raised edge of a crater, craning his neck to determine what was inside. After a moment he gasped and lowered the bat, letting it slip out of his hands as he quickly covered the remaining distance to the hole.

"What is it?" Christy asked, rushing to catch up.

Her husband gestured with an arm. "She's hurt," he said.

She? Christy turned toward the object in the center of the crater, and saw that it was a woman dressed mostly in black, curled in a fetal position. The pinkish accents around her uniform made it easy enough to identify her as Superwoman, the newest hero from Gotham. A moan came again as she moved her arm, causing what looked like a notebook and a phone to shift from its position on her stomach. Christy was at her side in an instant, stilling her moments. "What happened?" she asked, looking at the superhero with an appraising eye.

"Fell," Superwoman said weakly, clutching her side as soon as she spoke. Christy's gaze started at her feet, making its way up toward her stomach, arms, and shoulders. Finally, she turned toward her face, noticing that her mask was skewed across her face, not covering her eyes anymore, apparently jarred loose when she impacted the ground.

"How do you feel?" she asked. Her husband was picking the objects up off her torso, starting with a backpack, followed by what looked like a large map and a pencil. Finally came the notebook and phone. He placed them all gently inside the bag.

Superwoman shifted and attempted to straighten her legs. "About like I thought I would if I fell from 40,000 feet," she said, giving a weak chuckle that ended with a wince.

"Broken ribs, I'm guessing," Christy said, putting her hand on Superwoman's side. Applying slight pressure, she noticed that nothing seemed loose, so if they were broken, it was probably more of a hairline fracture. "What about your hands and feet? Can you feel everything okay?"

Superwoman moved her hands and feet in circles and nodded. She seemed to notice at that moment the position of her mask, then reached up and pulled it off, allowing them to take a good look at her unobscured face. Beside her, Tom gasped, and Christy could understand why. Without her mask, Superman looked an awful lot like her son Matthew's wife.

Superwoman looked at Tom and gave a small smile, then turned her gaze toward Christy. "Surprise!" she said softly, although both Christy and her husband were both too stunned at that moment to move. As they watched dumbly, she scooted herself around to get her hands and knees under her, then pushed

herself up. She then planted a foot on the ground, put a hand on her knee, and attempted to stand, though that caused her to momentarily lose balance. That seemed to spur Tom to action, and he stepped down into the crater and held out an arm, offering her support so that she could get to a standing position. Christy just watched as he guided her out of the hole and toward the house, grabbing her bag as he did.

Why did Superwoman look like her daughter-in-law? It didn't make any sense. And how was it that she fell from the sky and onto their yard? Her mind churned with a thousand questions as she followed her husband and Superwoman, absently picking up the bat as she went. Reality became an abstract concept as she gave herself over to her thoughts. It seemed like a simple conclusion to say that this superhero who created a crater in her yard was Matt's wife, but she couldn't see how that could be. Everyone knew that Superman was an alien, and although he did have children, it was only because his wife was alien, too. He didn't live anywhere in particular, because dozens of journalists over the years had attempted to find property deeds or rental contracts in his name, without any luck. Although he had his own charitable foundation which generated millions of dollars per year, he took no salary, and public records indicated no income from other sources, either. Superman was a benevolent ghost, real and unreal at the same time. Matt's wife, though, was a nice girl from Metropolis. She was beautiful, sure, but she seemed very normal, and so did her family. There was no way that Superwoman was her daughter-in-law. It was absolutely impossible.

Once inside the house, Tom guided Superwoman to a seat at the kitchen table, though she didn't seem to need his support anymore. As she sat, she reached up and pulled a couple pins from her hair, and a long braid uncurled from around her head, bobbing as it reached its full length. Her resemblance with Laura was even stronger now, and Tom had started talking to her in a familiar way, asking if she wanted any water, asking about the items in the bag, which led to a discussion on her master's thesis. Christy watched it all mutely, settling into a seat across the table from Superwoman, her eyes never diverting from their visitor. Her mind was now openly at war with itself, half of it declaring that Superwoman couldn't be Matt's wife, and the other asking how much more evidence she needed. It was enough to make her doubt her sanity, and as lull seemed to strike the conversation between Tom and the superhero, she finally blurted out the one question at the center of all the other ones.

"I'm sorry, but... who are you?" she asked, and both her husband and their guest looked at her, puzzled. Superwoman looked sideways, then furrowed her brow as she turned back toward Christy.

"What?" she asked.

"You're Superwoman," Christy said, pointing to the S shield on her outfit.

"Yeah," Laura said slowly, turning toward Tom, who just shrugged. "But I'm Laura. You know me," she said, turning back toward Christy.

"Do I?" Christy said, and Laura's expression softened somewhat. "I mean, you look like the person I know, but she's not... invulnerable."

"Well, at the moment, I don't think I am, either," Superwoman said, reaching for her side and wincing as she put pressure on it. "So maybe that will help you... put us together, I guess. Would it help if I changed clothes?"

"I... no," Christy said with a shake of her head. Tom sat down in the seat at the end of the table, crossing his arms across his chest. He apparently wanted to be an observer in this conversation, and that was fine with her. "But how can you be Superwoman? You're a college student. Your parents are journalists, not..."

"Superman and Ultra Woman?" Laura finished, and Christy nodded. "But they are."

Christy let out a frustrated grunt and looked away. That made even less sense, if possible. She had spent some time socializing with Lois and Clark Kent, first at the kids' wedding, then when the baby came along. It's not like they were particularly close to the couple, but she thought she had a good handle on who they were, what their personalities were. Superman and Ultra Woman were as far from Lois and Clark as she was from a heavy metal rock star. It was utterly inconceivable that they were the same people, but apparently they were.

"The novels, the comics, the movies, they're all just fiction," Laura said, her voice seeming far away as Christy struggled with her thoughts. "My Dad pointed the writers down a certain path to lead them away from the truth and keep us safe. The more outrageous the story, the happier he was. Because who could possibly believe the truth?"

"Does Matt know?" Tom asked, and Laura nodded, smiling.

"His reaction to finding out the big secret was part of what made me love him," she said, tenderness evident in her expression.

Superwoman loved her son. Superwoman, who possessed the powers of a goddess, who could obliterate mountains or walk into a nuclear blast if she wanted, loved a mere mortal who grew up in small town Ohio. Someone with her gifts, of her stature, had no business marrying into their family, which was filled with ordinariness. They were nothing special, they didn't deserve her attention, but here she was, sitting at their table, mother to their grandchild, wife to their son. Why? There had to be something she was missing.

"What do you want from him?" Christy asked, her voice shaky now.

Laura blinked and looked at her for a long moment. "Love?" she said, and Christy could see something burning in her expression, some of the fire that Matt always talked about. "What do you want from your husband? What makes our relationship any different?"

"You're...super. You're...important," Christy said.

"And Matt's important to me," Laura said, the tone of her voice leaving no room for debate. "He can see past the powers and see the real person inside. He knows I'm not perfect, not some superhuman deity, and he loves me anyway." She looked at Christy again with absolute conviction, then looked away as Tom put his hand on her arm. "Dad figured it out a long time ago, the ultimate secret, I guess," she continued, her voice softer. "Superman is nothing without love, without someone to come home to and share his life with. I'm kind of surprised nobody else has figured that out."

"But Matt did?" Tom said, and she nodded.

"He's pretty smart," she said with a wry grin. "Why do you think his book did so well? He has a perspective that very few people will ever get, and he understands so well what it means to be part of my family. He probably knows better than I do, believe it or not."

Tom smiled at that, and Christy found herself relaxing, though she knew she had a lot more truths to unwrap before she could think clearly. Laura and Tom talked some more, and she related a couple stories to them, little anecdotes that gave them just a small insight into the ordinary life of an extraordinary hero. The stories almost sounded like something made up for a movie, but she didn't doubt they were true. After a few minutes, Laura glanced up at the clock, then back toward her them. "I need to call home," she said, reaching for her phone. "Matt's probably wondering where I am." Before dialing, she rose from the table stiffly, her face showing that she was still in some pain. Slowly, she walked toward one of the guest bedrooms, closing the door behind her.

Christy and Tom looked at each other, neither quite knowing what to say. After a moment, Tom hit his knees with his hands and stood. "Well, this has been an interesting night. But I need to get back to bed. I still need to work in the morning."

"Don't you want to talk about this?" Christy asked, gesturing toward the bedroom that Laura had just entered.

The expression on his face told her very plainly that he did not. He was never one to delve into matters of emotional weight, and tonight was no different. Normally she didn't mind too much, since she could always talk things through with any of a number of her friends, but this... This wasn't exactly something that you shared. Tom might be all she had right now. "What's there to talk about?" he asked. "Our daughter-in-law has a night job? That's nothing unusual."

She tried to wordlessly convey what how dense she thought he was, but his yawn forced his eyes closed, and he turned to go back to the bedroom before they opened again. "You know there's more to it than that."

He stopped and glanced back at her. "What if there's not?" he said, then continued to the bedroom. He spoke with his back to her. "Our son is happily married to an upstanding young lady who...dropped in for a visit. That's it." Opening the bedroom door, he glanced back at her one last time. "Good night," he said, then closed the door, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

She closed her eyes and summoned all the images she could of the woman that had married their son. Memories of precious few special occasions with Matt and Laura burst forth, but now they were colored with the knowledge that there was more going on than she realized. Wisps of old conversations played behind the images, and she remembered that Laura had mentioned her family – she had two older brothers, Christy recalled, though one was in a plane crash and died. She recalled now that she had met one...no, she had probably met them both, she thought with a frown. There was no way her "dead" brother was actually dead if he was another super person, though she couldn't quite place who of the other guests at their wedding he could be. Each new thought brought more questions, and after a while she had to take a deep breath to keep from feeling completely overwhelmed. A moment later, she heard a door open, and she opened her eyes in time to see Superwoman...Laura emerge from the bedroom. Her expression clearly reflected that she was not entirely comfortable talking to her, which Christy supposed she could relate to.

"I need to get home as soon as I can," Laura said, standing at the periphery of the room.

"Can't you, uh...?" Christy said, holding out her hand and taking a deep breath. "Fly?"

Laura shook her head. "That's the problem, and that's why I'm here. I WAS flying, and then I wasn't. Everything was gone, poof, just like that. I had enough control to point me here but..." She shrugged. "Right now I'm as normal as everyone else."

"How can that stuff just go away?" Christy asked.

"That's the question, and that's part of why I need to get home. I need to help find out what happened, because whatever it is, I'm betting it didn't just happen to me."

Christy looked at the clock, noting that it was now well past 11 PM. "Maybe we can look for flights in the morning?"

Laura shook her head vehemently. "I was hoping I could convince you to drive with me back to Gotham. Tonight."

"Tonight?" Her eyes widened.

Laura gestured toward the kitchen. "I could fire up the coffee maker and get a couple thermoses out. We'll both need all the caffeine we can get."

"But..." Christy protested, a whole new set of thoughts entering her mind, not the least of which was a sense of panic at the thought of being stuck in a car for 10 hours with this stranger masquerading as her daughter-in-law. "Surely your investigation can wait until tomorrow. I don't think Matt would be happy with either of us if we got into an accident in our rush to get you home."

An unfamiliar expression flashed on Laura's face for just a moment, then she diverted her eyes downward. It took a moment

before she spoke again, and when she did, her voice seemed incredibly small. “I want to be there when Lilly wakes up... and I know that probably won’t happen, but I hate the thought of her being afraid because she thinks that something happened to me.” She took a shaky breath and looked back toward Christy, her eyes haunted. “I want to get back to my baby,” she said, and something inside Christy melted. For all the problems she had trying to figure out who this person was, at that moment it was crystal clear. She was a mother, not unlike herself. The idea of wanting to get home, of moving heaven and earth or at least suffering through a few awkward hours alone with her mother-in-law to return to her child, was something that Christy could absolutely relate to, and she found herself nodding even before she could say anything. Instantly, Laura’s face lit up.

“Put on the coffee,” Christy said. “I’ll let Tom know what we’re doing.”

The first order of business upon arriving at the Martinez house had been to tend to Jon’s wounds. His suit, a total loss, was carefully stripped off, exposing the burns on his feet, legs, hands, and forearms. Under normal circumstances, he supposed that he would probably have gone to an emergency room for treatment, or at least to his normal doctors at STAR labs, but he wasn’t about to make an appearance at a hospital, and STAR Labs were several thousand miles away. Fortunately, Cruz Martinez had a fairly well stocked medicine cabinet and plenty of gauze on hand. Jon admitted to feeling some embarrassment to his reaction as Cruz helped to clean and sanitize his wounds. The sensation of water caused him to wince, but the hydrogen peroxide made him squirm with discomfort, and he involuntarily pulled himself away from his father-in-law’s grip with a whimper.

“Not used to this, huh?” Cruz said, amused.

“It’s just...been a long time. And I definitely didn’t miss this part.”

That seemed to surprise Cruz. “You haven’t always been... super?”

Jon shook his head and avoided eye contact. “I didn’t get powers until high school. Before that I was just like anyone else, and I had my fair share of kid accidents.”

Cruz sat back, though the bottle of peroxide still hovered uncomfortably close to Jon’s burns, waiting for him to acquiesce and let him finish disinfecting them. “Let me guess – fell off your bike?”

“Once or twice. I actually broke my collar bone jumping off some playground equipment when I was four. Then there was the little league practice where I jumped to catch a fly ball and landed on a freshly trimmed tree branch.” Cruz winced, and Jon dared to look at his face again, some of the embarrassment passing.

“Makes the disguise that much better, I guess – nobody who saw me with my arm in a sling as a kid would ever believe I’m the same guy who can bounce bullets off his chest.”

“I suppose that’s right,” Cruz said, and Jon tentatively extended his arm out to continue the process.

“At this point I think I would prefer a broken bone,” Jon said through clenched teeth as the liquid flowed over the burn. Cruz again looked somewhat amused.

“Burns are a different animal than cuts or scrapes,” Cruz said, putting the bottle down and examining Jon’s hand and forearm. Apparently convinced that they were clean, he reached for a tube of antibiotic cream and squirted a glob on, before covering it with a couple of gauze squares and taping it in place. “But the fact that you can feel pain is a good sign. Third degree burns just make you numb.” He moved on to Jon’s legs, though those seemed to go much more easily.

Once they were done, Cruz went to his closet to find some clothing that Jon could wear. Jon wandered into the living room and gravitated toward the stereo, which had several components

that had to be as old as he was. During previous visits to the house, he had noticed a sizable record collection residing at the bottom of the stereo cabinet, though he had never had time to really examine it before. He took the opportunity now, squatting down and fingering through the LP’s with his good hand, noting the wide range of classic Jazz that was represented there. Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, John Coltrane, Miles Davis... there was also big band music from a variety of eras, and a fair amount of classic rock. Jon was so engrossed in the collection that he didn’t notice his father-in-law’s return until a t-shirt and shorts were thrust between his eyes and the records. It took a second for him to process what he was seeing, but once he did, he gave a shy grin and stood.

“You have an amazing music collection,” Jon said, gesturing to the records, then grabbing the offered clothing.

“You think?” Cruz said with a shrug.

Jon slid the pair of shorts on. “Of course. Mind if we put something on? I don’t care how bad I feel, the Duke always makes me feel a little better.” The shirt slipped over his head.

“Well, if it helps with the healing,” Cruz said, reaching down to retrieve the LP. “Sometimes I’ll get out my horn and play along, depending on the mood I’m in. My wife’s not a fan, but if she’s not around...” He slid the record out of the sleeve, then reached over to lift the lid of the record player, putting the record on and turning on the system. Dropping the needle on the vinyl brought a series of pops, before the music started to pour out.

“What do you play?” Jon asked. Cruz started toward the kitchen and Jon followed behind.

“Trumpet. I had a side gig with a local combo band before family life got too hectic,” Cruz said, angling toward the refrigerator. “Want something to drink?” he asked, opening the door and revealing a selection of sodas.

“Root beer please,” Jon said, settling into a chair at the table. “I thought I was the only one who played along with old records.”

“Well, I have my secrets, too,” Cruz said with a wink, grabbing the drinks and sitting next to Jon. They sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying their drinks and letting the music wash over them. When Cruz finally spoke again, he caught Jon off guard.

“You said in the truck that you used to go out and watch Superman when you were a kid,” he said, his voice almost small. “Didn’t you always know who he was?”

“No,” Jon said, taking a long drink. “Once I started seeing through walls it was pretty obvious, but...he never told me. As a father myself, I understand why. Giving a kid a big secret to try and keep puts a lot of weight on their shoulders. He didn’t tell us because he wanted us to have carefree childhoods, and I’m glad he did.”

“But it was a shock?”

“To put it mildly,” Jon said. “My Dad was a stranger for a few days. But I put it together pretty quickly.”

There was a silence for a moment. “When you found out, did it feel like your life was... predestined? That you had no choice in what you would do?”

“The knowledge of who my Dad was didn’t change how I viewed my future, and he always made it clear that what I did with my life was my choice. But the first time I was able to help someone because of what I could do... that’s when the idea that I could follow in his footsteps hit home. That’s when I realized the pure joy that came from making the world a better place. But knowing that I wanted to go out and help and actually doing that were two different things.”

“It all looks so easy,” Cruz said. “At least, for someone with superpowers.”

“That’s by design, I guess,” Jon said. “If you’re being rescued by someone, you want to feel confident that they know what they’re doing. But I sure as heck didn’t at first, and I know Dad

didn't figure it out for a long time. Even with him showing me what he learned over the years, it doesn't make it less...terrifying when you start out." Jon shook his head. "It would be one thing if all you had to do was go out and help. But then you have to deal with politicians and law enforcement and groupies and the press. I've lived around the press my whole life — my parents' coworkers are like members of the family — but suddenly, by virtue of the fact that I can fly to help people, they made themselves the bane of my existence." Jon felt frustration building up, but one look at Cruz's face and the shadow of pain that lingered there squelched it. He had forgotten that Diane's family knew all too well the power of an out-of-control media. "I'm sorry," he said, contrite. "I forget..."

"Don't be," Cruz said. "It's ancient history. And it's not your fault. One bad apple, and all that."

"Right," Jon said, and suddenly it was uncomfortable again. He took a long drink of his soda, then looked down into the can. "So, forgive me, but I have to ask," he said, twirling the can and watching the liquid inside swirl around. "I know finding out about me hasn't been easy for you, and I hope sharing this stuff has helped you get a clearer picture of who I am, so we can maybe get back to a more normal relationship. But if this all makes you uncomfortable..."

Cruz's hand reached out and made contact with Jon's arm, stopping what had started to turn into a babble and grabbing his full attention. "Before the twins were born, we thought we knew you reasonably well, at least as well as we know our daughter these days. You were something different to us — a cosmopolitan reporter from the big city marrying into a southern family that has had a historically bad relationship with reporters — but we accepted you, because you were the answer to a prayer," he said. "You brought my daughter back to me after I ran her off, and for that I will always be eternally grateful. Then you told us your secret, and suddenly you became...something else. The Other. And that bothered me, because you were still who you were, nothing had changed with you, all that changed was our awareness of you. I had to ask myself what made you different, and in doing so I found what we have in common. Your father is an immigrant; mine is, too, though I would admit that yours came from much further away. You have some special talents, but I do, too. Did you know I was a horseshoe throwing champion as a teenager?" He smiled proudly.

"I do now," Jon said.

Cruz released Jon's arm and leaned back. "Granted, your talents are a little more rare and useful, but they're still just things you do. Ultimately, a lot of the things that make you different are not things that you have any control over, and as much of a problem that I may or may not have with those differences, you've probably had a much harder time dealing with them than I can ever imagine. Hearing some of your stories tonight helps to bear that out. I decided that it's not my place to judge, but to accept and to love, and if my daughter accepts and loves you, than why can't I?"

Jon felt incredibly touched at that moment, and as the music played behind them, he just sat and stared, speechless, until he was finally able to muster some words. "Diane never saw the differences. She always knew who I was, no matter how I presented myself. That was one of the things that I've always loved about her — she could see past the S." He shook his head. "Actually, that's not entirely true. She did have a hard time looking past the whole reporter thing."

Cruz's smile faded somewhat. "That was my influence, I'm afraid. But it sounds like you worked through it."

"I think she figured out that if a reporter can also be a Superman, then maybe reporters aren't beyond redemption after all."

Cruz nodded. "Sounds about right. Anyway, what I struggle

with these days is the celebrity thing. Before I met you, I never knew anyone famous."

Jon gave a rueful smile. "I hate the fame. I guess I knew it came with the job, but if I had my choice..."

"It is what it is," Cruz said with a shrug. "But I bet Diane's not a fan."

"God, no," Jon said, and they both laughed. "Honestly, though, I don't think her problem is so much with the fact that I'm famous, but with the idea of fame as a concept. Lord knows she didn't care about my celebrity when we first met."

"She never was one to put much stock in what other people thought. Famous or not, if you weren't a decent person she wouldn't give you the time of day."

"Well, she's a good judge of character, I guess," Jon said.

From there, he and Cruz made small talk until they finished their drinks. By that time, the hour was starting to get late, and Cruz got up from the table to turn in for the night.

Jon stood with him, and looked anxiously toward the living room and the old-fashioned desktop computer that sat at a desk in the corner. "Do you mind if I use your computer?" he asked. In reality, his phone probably had a faster processor, but he hated working with such a small screen and had much better luck typing fast on a conventional keyboard...not that he could type any faster than a normal person at the moment.

"Feel free," Cruz said. "Just, you know...don't be downloading stuff you shouldn't," he said, pointing a finger toward Jon, which was met with a crooked grin.

"Yes, sir," he said, and with that, Cruz retreated to his bedroom. Jon turned down the stereo so that he could barely hear it, then telephoned his mother. Lois filled him on all the news from the family, including where everyone was currently stranded. The two of them tossed around ideas about what could've caused him to lose his powers, and he agreed with his dad that the pink sky must have something to do with it. Since he had a computer at his disposal and nothing else to command his attention at the moment, he volunteered to start looking into potential causes, starting with the projects that have been authorized by NASA. With that, he said goodbye and got to work.

It didn't take much time to find out what the space agency had been up to recently, and he quickly zeroed in on a potential culprit. A couple months earlier, a series of satellites had been launched, ostensibly to study the planetary climate and to perform experiments to try and reverse the effects of climate change. What those experiments might be was never mentioned, but a satellite with the ability to change the Earth's climate could certainly cause the type of global transformation that could result in his current problems. It was worth checking out further, and through a stroke of luck, the company that developed the satellite was based out of Houston. That was only a three hour drive from where he was, which made it very easy for him to conduct some interviews and do a little snooping tomorrow. Despite the hour, he called his mother and related his findings, and she agreed that he should pay the company a visit the next day.

After hanging up the phone, he found himself suddenly exhausted. Without bothering to change, he turned off the music, wandered into the guest bedroom, and immediately fell into a deep, restful sleep.

CJ's first thought as the darkness around him started to fade was that he was cold. And, he realized, he probably was not wearing much clothing, and whatever he was laying on was not exactly soft and warm. Without opening his eyes, he tried to summon the last thing he remembered, but all he got was a vague sense that something was wrong. The coldness, he realized...while it certainly was coming from the air and the hard surface beneath him, it was also coming from his arm, entering his body and following it upward toward his shoulder. Scrunching his eyebrows

together, he weakly flexed his warm arm, intending to reach over and feel for the source of the coldness, but he found that that hand was already occupied. His efforts were greeted with a gentle squeeze.

“There he is,” he heard Jen say from very close by, and that was enough to cause a smile to form on his face and his eyes to open. There, sitting next to him, was his lovely wife, her hair gently pulled back to show her full face, which looked relieved, and very tired. She looked like an angel, his very own angel, and the warmth radiating from his heart at that moment made all the coldness vanish instantly.

“Here I am,” he said, his voice raspy. “And you are so beautiful.” That caused a smile to spread across her face, which only enhanced the effect. He tore his eyes away from her face and looked around, noticing that he was in the cave, probably on the table at the center, by the computer. With that realization, the memories of what had happened before he arrived came. He’d been shot! He tried to sit up a little to get a look at his shoulder, but the simple act of tensing his abdominal muscles caused a surge of pain, and he flopped back on his back with a low growl.

“Well, you look like death warmed over,” Jen said, standing at his movement and putting her free hand on his chest, gently applying pressure to keep him lying down.

“Gee, thanks,” he said, his eyes finally finding the source of the coldness in his arm: an IV line, which was entering his body through a large needle stuck in the inside of his elbow. He raised his eyebrows. How was it even possible that he could have an IV? But then again, how was it possible that he could’ve gotten shot?

Jen followed his gaze. “You, ah, lost some blood. Bruce thought that giving you fluids would help things out. It’s not like we could give you a blood transfusion.” He nodded gently and their eyes met. With a sly little smile, she leaned down and kissed him briefly, straightening up far too quickly. “Of course, the plus side of you being vulnerable is that we can give you some drugs that might actually help with the pain.”

“Oh, so that’s why everything seems a little...fuzzy,” he said, and chuckled. “You know, I’ve never been drunk before.”

Her hip leaned against the table and she took her hand from his chest. “You’re not drunk, you’re medicated. Drunk is more fun.”

“Okay, I’ve never been medicated before,” he amended himself, bringing his hand up and running it through his hair, and action which brought an unexpected ache, which only really went away once he was no longer touching anything. He then brought his hand back in front of his face and stared at it for a moment, noticing the dark bruise which was forming beneath the palm. “I don’t think I like this feeling. It’s like the sensation is delayed as it goes to my brain.” He wiggled his fingers a few times, then turned toward her. “Pain’s no fun, don’t get me wrong, but this is its own problem.”

She smiled and squeezed his hand again. “Bad for your reputation to be a little slow on the uptake?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Worse for my reputation to not be bulletproof.” That caused him to frown. Whether from the influence of the drugs or the bloods loss, it seemed that thoughts kept hanging around the periphery of his brain waiting to be fully formed, thoughts that were probably profound — deep insights into how it was, exactly, that he found himself with two bullet holes in his body, or what it would mean to him if the situation with his powers became permanent — but try as he might, none of those thoughts seemed to want to develop. Feelings, however, seemed to be somewhat enhanced in his current state, and aside from the strong affection for his wife, he was beginning to feel a growing sense of guilt. It was nothing new, he supposed, though in the past the guilt came from time not spent with the ones he loved. Now, though, the feeling was much stronger, probably because the stakes were higher given his lack of powers. This time being

Batman didn’t just mean that he was out of the house instead of reading books to the kids, it meant that he could’ve died. Mortality, real mortality, not just the loss of identity, wasn’t exactly something that he’d ever had to contemplate, certainly not while playing around in spandex after hours. But tonight he had gotten hurt, badly, and Jen had been there for him. She helped to make sure he had made it safely home, had probably helped to play nurse while Bruce dug a bullet out of him, and had stayed by his side as he found his way back to consciousness.

He disengaged his hand from hers and brought it up toward her face, lovingly tracing her jawline, then up her cheek before brushing up against her hair and tucking a strand behind her ear. “I’m sorry,” he said, locking eyes with her.

“You don’t need to apologize for getting shot,” she said, putting her hand over his. “What in your history would indicate that could ever happen?”

“True. But when you contemplated life with me, I’m sure late night emergency surgery and the specter of losing me to, of all things, a third rate gangster fencing guns stolen from a police impound were the furthest thing from your mind.”

She shrugged. “I knew life would be interesting. I would say that I’m definitely getting my money’s worth in that respect.”

“I love you,” he said, and her smile returned.

“I know you do. And I know why you do what you do after hours, even if you don’t exactly know yourself.”

That thought amused him, although he wasn’t entirely sure what she was getting at. “I’m stopping bad guys...usually. Bringing the guilty to justice, providing closure for those who were wronged, all that stuff. I’m making the city a better place for everyone. It’s not that complicated.”

“You’re right, that part is very straightforward,” Jen said. “But that’s not WHY you do it.” He looked blankly at her, waiting for the punchline. His mind wasn’t exactly helping him out at the moment, and she seemed to sense that, giving him a crooked smile. “You live a charmed life,” she said, meeting his eyes with hers after a moment. “You were born with almost everything that a person could want — loving parents, family, a sharp intellect, a nice selection of superpowers, and devastating good looks.” She smiled suggestively. “We found each other and fell in love so easily. And even after your name was taken away, you still had everything you had before, and you were handed all this,” she said, gesturing to the cave around them.

“So, you’re saying I feel I have to atone for all the good things in my life?” he asked, connecting the dots to their only logical conclusion.

“No,” she said thoughtfully, shaking her head. “That makes it sound so negative. I think you feel grateful, and your way of showing gratitude is to give of yourself.” She ruffled his hair. “It’s a very Kent family thing to do, actually. You help out because you have so much love in your heart. And every time I see that, I love you even more.”

His heart swelled as the words sunk in, and he realized that it really was pretty obvious in retrospect. The awe he felt at her brilliance was making it hard for him to speak, and it took a moment before he was able to find his voice. “Well, you’re right that I would never have thought of it that way.”

“No, it’s not exactly macho, is it?” She made a face. He smirked back.

“How’d you get so smart?” he asked.

“What can I say? You rub off on a girl after a while.” They smiled at each other for a few long seconds, and he wondered again for the millionth time how it was that he had gotten so lucky in love. He managed to find someone who understood him fully and loved him despite his flaws and the difficulties that came with being his wife. She sighed, bringing him out of his introspection, and he realized that her teasing smile had faded, now replaced with a little frown. “We’re going to need all our combined

brainpower to figure out how all this could've happened," she said. He quirked at eyebrow, sensing that there was more information forthcoming. "Your mom called while you were out. Your dad lost his powers while at a comics convention in Australia."

CJ snorted. The medication probably made that situation seem funnier than it actually was.

"Your brother's in Texas. Guess he got burned pretty badly. And Laura... she lost her powers while flying and crashed to Earth. To top it off, there are reports of coordinated crime waves coming out of all the major cities...."

"Yeah, one of the goons at the warehouse mentioned that a criminal free-for-all was coming tomorrow," he said.

"Which is now today?"

"Someone has to be masterminding this. They somehow found a way to strip us all of our powers so they could take advantage of our absence." He shook his head with a frustrated growl. So many half-formed theories floated around in his head, and he just couldn't grasp any of them. "These drugs need to go away," he muttered, drawing a sympathetic look from her.

"It was a one-shot deal," she said, reaching across him to disconnect the IV. "I'm sure your brain will be back to its old self in no time. Until then, take it easy. The rest of us are on the case."

"Any way I could take it easy someplace a little more comfortable?"

"Only if you think you can handle 52 steps up to the mansion." She held out her hand to him, and he looked at it for a second before reaching up and taking it. She snaked her other arm behind him, supporting his back as he sat up, though it didn't help the pain. He grimaced as he finally reached a full sitting position, then pondered if this really was the best decision. As he was contemplating 52 long stair steps, Jenny sat down on the table next to him and pressed herself against his good side. Her lips were quickly on his, and all conscious thought ceased while they kissed hungrily. Despite the pain in his shoulder, he wrapped his arms around her and got lost in the sensation of their kiss. He badly wanted to take things further, but he was acutely aware of his current limitations, so he drew out the moment as long as he could. All too soon it was over, and she was pulling away, though her hand stayed in his. Newly revitalized, he forced himself off the table and to a standing position, then, slowly, he made his way across the cave and up the stairs.

Jenny was a model of patience during his walk. There were no teasing remarks, just gentle encouragement and small talk, and he found himself drawing strength from her. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, he made his way to his bedroom, and the soft, welcoming mattress waiting for him. Almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, he slipped into a deep sleep, and by the time he came back to consciousness, the bright morning sun was streaming through his window. Opening his eyes again, he noticed that his wife was in bed with him, her arm wrapped around his midsection. For a moment he was puzzled about what had woken him up, but then he noticed a little person crawling toward him from the foot of the bed.

"Hi, Daddy," Adam said, wedging himself between CJ and Jen. CJ winced with a twinge of pain at the contact, but Jen just rolled onto her side, giving Adam more room to wiggle into.

"Hey pal," CJ answered, attempting to awkwardly put an arm around him.

Adam wiggled closer to CJ, his head coming in contact with the bullet wound. CJ sucked in a sharp breath, causing Adam to look more closely at him. "You have an ouchie," he said, pointing to the large gauze square taped over CJ's bullet wound.

"Yeah, I do," CJ answered.

Adam's eyebrows scrunched together. "Did you get it from bad guys?"

CJ smiled and held off a chuckle. "What makes you think

that?"

"Because bad guys hurt people," he answered, very matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, sometimes they do, I guess," CJ answered, wondering how he could explain the situation. He didn't want his 5-year-old son scared of hypothetical bad guys coming to hurt his family, but he also didn't feel comfortable lying. As he was internally debating what to say, Adam spoke again.

"I see Grandpa on TV sometimes fighting bad guys," he said, and all of CJ's internal thoughts ceased, replaced with raw shock. Beside him, he saw his wife stir, her head turning so that she was looking at their son.

"What do you mean?" CJ asked slowly.

"On the news and stuff. Sometimes if a bad guy is hurting someone, Grandpa Clark will come in and save them. He's Superman."

Jenny rolled so that she was facing CJ, and the two of them just looked at each other for a few long moments before they both turned their eyes toward Adam. "What makes you say that?" CJ asked.

Oblivious to their shock, Adam laid down and snuggled into the space between Jen and CJ, hugging his blanket close to him. "I couldn't sleep one night and I was looking out my window when I saw Grandpa walk out of the house and into the yard. Then he became a blur and suddenly he was Superman. I yelled at him and he came into my room faster than I could blink, and he told me I was having a dream and should get back into bed, but I know it wasn't a dream."

CJ squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced, bringing a hand up and running it through his hair. "Ugh, Dad," he groaned.

"You know he's Superman, right?"

CJ opened his eyes again and glanced at his wife, before turning back toward Adam, mustering a smile. "Yes, I was aware of that."

"And he can fly! Can you fly?" he asked CJ, looking at him eagerly.

"No, I can't. But Uncle Jon and Aunt Laura can." Adam seemed momentarily surprised, then he smiled and nodded slowly. "I can do most of what he can do, just not the flying or the going fast thing," CJ continued.

"So you can shoot laser beams out of your eyes?" Adam said, sitting up, excited.

"Yeah," CJ answered with a nod.

"Can I see? Can you zap something on the ceiling? Maybe Mommy's smelly candle over there?" he said, pointing to her chest of drawers and the candle on top that they tended to only light up during special occasions. Not that the kids knew that.

"Well, see, something happened... I can't do any super stuff right now," CJ answered. Adam, looking disappointed and a little confused, laid back down.

"Is that why you're hurt?" Adam asked, and CJ nodded. "But Superman can't get hurt," he said in a small voice.

"Not most of the time," CJ said, trying to sound reassuring.

"Honey, you haven't told any of your friends about Grandpa, have you?" Jen asked, changing the subject to something a little less uncomfortable.

Adam shook his head vigorously. "Grandpa said it's our little secret. But I almost told Tommy one day when he said Batman was better than Superman."

CJ couldn't help but smile. He looked at Jen. "Should I tell him?" he asked her, and she quirked an eyebrow.

"I don't know why not at this point," she answered.

"Tell me what?" Adam asked.

"Who Batman is," CJ answered.

"It's you. Duh," Adam said, rolling his eyes. "But you don't fight bad guys on the news, and Grandpa does, so he's cooler. Plus he has a movie."

“That movie’s a bunch of made up stuff, none of which is true” CJ said, suddenly grumpy.

Jenny seemed to find humor in the situation. “Well, Grandpa’s right about it being our secret, okay? You can’t tell anyone about it, no matter what.”

“I know,” Adam said, wrapping his blanket around his arm, then unwrapping it, repeating the motion a few times out of nervous habit.

“It’s not just his secret or my secret, it’s our family’s secret. Maybe someday you will be a super secret hero, too, but you can’t do that if everyone knows who you are already,” CJ said, trying to cover a serious message with a little bit of humor.

Adam seemed thoughtful. “Can I be SuperAdam?” he asked after a moment, and CJ couldn’t stop a chuckle.

“I think that kinda defeats the purpose of a SECRET identity,” Jen said, giving Adam a little tickle, which caused him to squirm and laugh.

“Maybe I can have a comic book, too, like Grandpa.”

“Or pin-up posters in teenage pop magazines, like Uncle Jon,” CJ said.

Jenny laughed and smacked him on his shoulder. Even Adam managed a giggle, despite the fact that he probably had no idea what CJ was talking about. They had officially entered a strange new world, and all the planning and thinking and worrying he had done about his son and how he would react once the family secret was out was now officially moot. Maybe when the time came, he would bring Adam down to the cave, let him play with some of the bat toys, give him a ride in the batmobile. Maybe someday he could fill the role of Robin, assuming that he would also likely be bulletproof...and assuming that whatever was affecting him would correct itself eventually.

“Are you going to go back to sleep for a while?” Jen asked Adam, and he shrugged after thinking for a moment.

“Can I just stay here?” he asked.

“I think Daddy needs to sleep a little more so he can feel better,” Jen said, glancing at CJ. “Maybe you and I can go get some breakfast and leave him alone.” She leaned closer to Adam. “I can tell you about flying with Grandpa,” she whispered to him, and Adam’s eyes lit up.

The two of them got out of bed a moment later, but not before CJ reached over to hug them both tightly. “Love you, pal,” CJ said to Adam as he skipped out of the room.

“Love you, too, Daddy,” Adam said without turning around.

CJ looked toward Jen and thanked her, which caused her to give him one of the smiles he found so beautiful. As they had left the room, he heard Adam start asking more questions and Jenny giving answers that he couldn’t help but smile at.

“Mom, who would win in a race between Grandpa and the Flash?”

“They both move so fast, I bet nobody could tell.”

“What’s the heaviest thing that you’ve seen Daddy lift?”

“A skyscraper.”

“Where’s the fortress of Solitude?”

“Grandpa and Grandma’s house in Metropolis.”

“Do you think that Batman will ever have a movie?”

“If he does, I’m not going to let you see it until you’re a teenager.”

CJ found himself drifting back to sleep as the questioning faded down the hallway. This time he knew it would be accompanied by dreams of his son helping with the family business. The thought was scary and comforting at the same time, but, CJ decided as he finally succumbed to the darkness, there was a lot to be said for not keeping secrets from his son.

Spencer North walked into the hotel bar, his eyes adjusting to the relative darkness. Tables skirted the perimeter of the room, and a long bar ran the length of the back wall. Behind the bar, shelves

of liquor alternated with large-screen televisions. One television appeared to have a drama of some sort on it, the closed captioning relating the words being said, a small crowd gathered eagerly around, watching in rapt attention. The second television behind the bar had a soccer game on, drawing its own small crowd of somewhat rowdy onlookers. On the third television... Spencer almost did a double take. The third was showing an American baseball game, and one lone individual sat in front of it. Spencer couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen a baseball game – probably the year before – and right now it sounded positively relaxing.

Without another thought, he made his way over and sat next to the man watching the baseball game. He was unremarkable in almost every way, probably thirty-ish, wearing a polo shirt and jeans, his hair a dark black, and glasses on his face. In front of him was three quarters of a beer, though as Spencer watched, he took a hearty drink, lowering the level in the glass significantly. He then looked at Spencer and raised an eyebrow as recognition burned in his eyes. Spencer fought back a sigh. Now that he was a big shot movie star, it was almost impossible to go anywhere and not be recognized, even in Australia. Under normal circumstances he would probably hole up in his hotel room and not bother with confronting the crowds, but tonight he just had to get out.

“Spencer North,” the man said. Well, thought Spencer, at least he didn’t call him Superman.

“In the flesh,” he said. He started to turn away from the man, maybe try and deflect the inevitable small talk and try to enjoy the game and consume some adult beverages, but something about the man’s face caused him to do a double take. There was something...familiar about him that he just couldn’t place. “And you are?”

“Clark Kent,” the other man said. When he said his name, Spencer couldn’t help but think that he had been expecting him to say something else. The name was somewhat familiar, though.

Spencer nodded, still trying to place Clark Kent, to figure out when they’d met before. “So what brings you here tonight, Mr. Kent?”

“Oh, I’m stuck in town on an assignment and got a little lonely, I guess. Figured I’d see if they could tune in a game for me,” he said, sticking out his thumb toward the television. “Looks like I got lucky.”

“Who are you rooting for?” Spencer asked. The game was between two west coast teams – the Giants and the Padres.

Clark shrugged. “I have no rooting interest in this one. It’s just...I have so little time to sit down and watch a game anymore....”

“I know how that goes,” Spencer said. He had spent long enough in Australia, all things American were beginning to feel... exotic. “So who’s your team, then?” he asked, summoning the bartender. In short order he received his beer, then took a long sip from it and gave a contented smile. Beside him, Mr. Kent just look amused.

“I’m a Royals fan myself, though I hold out no hope of seeing one of their games down here. I can’t even get them in Metropolis.”

“The Royals? Really? If you’re from Metropolis, I would think you were a Metros fan.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’ll root for the Metros if they’re playing. But I’m from Kansas, and the first baseball game I ever went to with my dad was a Royals game, so they’ll always have a special place in my heart.

Spencer felt himself relax somewhat, let his guard down a little. “The Royals are my team, too. Grew up in the Kansas City area myself. Small world, huh?”

“You have no idea,” Mr. Kent said, something ironic in his expression.

They talked a little about memories of going to games at

Kauffman Stadium as kids, about where they were when the Royals won the World Series, and each managed to finish his beer and order another as their conversation progressed. And he figured out where he knew Mr. Kent from, too – he worked as a reporter for the Daily Planet, and had been featured in some of their advertising not too long ago. It had been a long time since Spencer had met someone who hadn't broached the topic of Superman within the first sentence or two of their conversation. Of course, Mr. Kent was from Metropolis, and had undoubtedly interviewed Superman more times than Spencer could count, so he was probably old hat to him, too. It felt good, really good, to be able to hold a real, normal conversation like this, drinking beers and watching baseball. Eventually the topic transitioned into family.

"My wife brought the kids down for a week. They just left last night," Spencer confided in his new friend. "When I'm out shooting a movie, that's all we ever seem to get – a week here or there where we can be a family. It's hard, but then, once it's over, I can give them my undivided attention for however long they want. They'll probably end up getting sick of me and begging me to do another one."

Clark laughed gently. "So how old are your kids?"

"Two and five. Not really old enough to appreciate a vacation in Australia, but we took them to see some kangaroos and koalas anyway."

Clark looked off in the distance for a long moment. "Enjoy them while you can. Kids grow up so fast. One day you're changing their diapers, and the next they're going off on their own."

"You have kids?"

"Three," Clark answered quickly. "And five grandkids, if you can believe it."

"I absolutely cannot," Spencer answered. "What, did you start when you were five?"

Clark gave a sly smile. "Thirty. Guess they just kept me young," he said.

Spencer shook his head and regarded Clark Kent more closely. There was no way he was as old as he was alluding to. There was no gray in his hair, no wrinkles around his eyes. He looked fit and healthy, and, Spencer realized, he looked more than a little like the famous hero that Spencer made his living portraying. It could be the alcohol talking, but it sure was a strong resemblance. He mentally shook himself, almost laughing at the absurdity of that notion. "I think I need photographic evidence," he said, trying to keep things light.

Clark looked like he was going to decline, but after a moment, he gave a small groan and pulled out his cell phone. "I don't usually keep photos on this phone," he said, turning it on. He pushed some buttons, brought up some programs, and after what felt like an eternity, he brought up a picture and turned the phone toward Spencer. "My granddaughter with my daughter on Memorial Day," he said. On the screen was a beautiful woman with dark hair gathered into a loose braid, holding the hands of a toddler, who looked to be walking unsteadily. The woman resembled Clark Kent – her coloring was the same, and there was a lot of similarity in their faces. The toddler had a fairer complexion, and her hair was almost blonde.

"Adorable," Spencer said, sincere.

Clark turned the phone back toward himself and swiped the screen a few times before pointing it toward Spencer again. "That's my oldest, Jon, his wife, and their twins." Jon looked like he could practically be Clark's double. He was pushing one twin in a swing, while his wife pushed the other, and everyone was smiling. It was the prototypical happily family, and Spencer felt a twinge of jealousy.

"You're a lucky guy," Spencer said, taking a sip of his drink.

"I try not to take it for granted," Clark said quietly. His expression flashed for a moment, and Spencer suspected that there

was an undercurrent of something else there, but it went away as quickly as it came. "So, come on, you have to show me your family photos," he said, his expression once again pleasant.

Spencer pulled out his phone, and his photos were only a touch away. He showed Clark pictures of the excursion to the zoo, of the kids on the movie set, his little boy dressed in a Superman t-shirt with Spencer in the full suit. In one of them, Spencer held up his son, making him "fly." That one caught the eye of his companion.

"What does he think about the fact that you're Superman?" Clark asked, using his fingers to form quotation marks around his character's name.

"He knows it's just pretend. He's seen me maim myself pretty good while trying to be handy around the house...that tends to disillusion a kid, even if all his friends keep telling him about all the cool things his dad can probably do." Clark laughed at that. "But I've seen him give me some funny looks when the news comes on about something the real Superman did. I don't think he grasps the fact that daddy's playing the fictional version of a real person. He actually asked me what Superwoman is like the other day." He cocked an eyebrow and looked at Clark. "I bet you've met her, being a reporter and all. What IS she like?"

Clark fingered his beer glass, looking like he was going to take another drink, but hesitating. "She's in Gotham, I'm in Metropolis, so I haven't really met her professionally."

"But Superman must've said something about her. I know you and your wife get your fair share of interviews with him."

"He's really proud of her," Clark said, his eyes far away, and a smile on his face. "I mean, he's proud of all his kids, but there's something about fathers and daughters, and she's his little girl..." He seemed like he was going to say something more, but he looked wide-eyed at his beer for a second, then sighed. "I really shouldn't have gotten a second drink," he said with a shake of the head. "I am feeling this way more than I'm used to."

Spencer sloshed his beer around a little. "I think it's a little more alcoholic than its American counterpart."

"No, I'm just a bit of a lightweight right now," Clark said, that ironic expression flashing on his face again as he stretched his left shoulder back and winced slightly. "And damned if I'm not starting to feel my age."

Spencer glanced over at him with a more critical eye, but nothing really seemed amiss. He didn't have a ton of experience on the bar scene, but he had been a bachelor once, and he knew what someone looked like when they were in the bag. "You seem okay to me."

"All the same," Clark said, pushing the bar stool away, "I should probably call it a night. It's been great speaking with you."

Disappointment knifed through Spencer. He was having a good time, really enjoying the conversation, and it was a shame that the evening was ending so early. "It was great talking to you, too, Mr. Kent. Hopefully we'll meet again sometime," he said, holding his hand out.

Clark shook it eagerly. "Likewise. Take care of yourself, Spencer North," he said, then stood up and turned to walk away.

His words shook something loose inside Spencer, and he flashed to the last thing Superman said to him earlier that day. It was the exact same phrase, said in the same way with the same inflection, and almost a twinge of fatherliness. He remembered that it had caused a feeling of warmth to wash over him when it was said earlier in the day, and that same feeling was asserting itself now. And his voice...it was the same voice. Abruptly he stood, making a mental note that Superman was the same height as Clark Kent, had the same hair color, the same general build. It had occurred to him earlier that Clark Kent looked a lot like Superman. What if it wasn't just a resemblance? The thought caused his heart to race. "Clark?" Spencer said, causing him to pause and turn, his eyebrows raised in question. "Are you...?" he

started, at first intending to ask if he was Superman, but he just couldn't do it. This wasn't the place, and anyway, he wasn't all that sure at that moment that he wanted that confirmation. "Are you sure you're feeling okay?" he asked instead. If Clark was Superman, and he was affected by the beer, feeling aches and pains, then he couldn't be okay, could he?

"I'm... fine," he said. "Feeling normal, I guess." His smile was kind, though Spencer could now see a bit of a gloss in his eyes.

"Even so, if you need anything, even someone to talk to, feel free to knock on my door." He reached for a cocktail napkin, wrote his name and room number on it, then handed it to him. Clark looked it over quickly, then folded it, put it into his pocket and nodded. With that, he walked out of the bar, an odd hitch in his step that hadn't been there earlier in the day.

Spencer sat and turned back to the baseball game, but he didn't really see it. His mind was reeling, going over their conversation, and he couldn't help but question himself. All of a sudden, it felt like up was down, black was white, right was wrong... Superman was a guy just as outwardly normal as any guy off the street. Clark Kent couldn't be Superman, could he? He talked about growing up in Kansas, he had a family, grandkids... he was a well-known reporter. He had an attachment to the Royals that just couldn't be faked; he told stories about bringing his kids to games, and later about his son playing collegiate football, following in Clark's footsteps. One the face of it, none of those things could ever remotely pertain to the Man of Steel. But... it was known that Superman was a father, and kids weren't generally raised in a vacuum, certainly not ones who were as sociable and well-spoken as Crimson Superman and Superwoman. And if Superman could have kids, then who's to say that his children couldn't, too? He could be a grandfather and nobody would know, at least not until one of the grandkids started flying around. Nobody had ever found anything resembling the Fortress of Solitude, and if it couldn't be found in an age where satellite mapping covered every square inch of the planet, then it probably didn't exist. It all begged the question: Why couldn't Superman just be some normal guy with powers, living a normal life in a normal city? Spencer knew how much of a burden being Superman was to him, how much getting out of that suit improved his mood... why couldn't the same be true for the real Superman?

Spencer had at least half a glass of beer left, and he downed it all in one long drink, then ordered another. He felt almost like crying, but the more he thought about it, really thought about it, the more resolute he became. Superman, the real one, was a real person. In many ways he was an actor just like Spencer was. And he was in trouble, he had to be, otherwise he wouldn't be in a hotel bar in Australia, just trying to watch a rebroadcast of a baseball game. Spencer wasn't sure if he looked forward to or dreaded the thought of Superman seeking him out, knocking on his door, but maybe, if he didn't... Maybe Spencer would find him in the morning, offer his help, one Superman to another.

Traffic was mercifully light as Laura guided her mother-in-law's car through the Gotham suburbs. Her apartment was now close enough that she could practically feel it, though she knew it was just her imagination. Ten hours in a car with Matt's mom had felt simultaneously shorter than she had feared and longer than she could bear. She managed to sleep during the first three or four hours as they barreled through Ohio and into Pennsylvania, but once they hit Pittsburgh it had been time to swap seats, and Christy had spent the next few hours sleeping. The quiet in the car had afforded Laura a good opportunity to think, and her mind had wandered. What were her brothers and her dad experiencing at that moment? What could cause their problems in the first place? Was Lilly sleeping well? Thinking about her daughter made her heart ache, and led her to push the accelerator down a little farther than she might otherwise.

She had glanced at her companion more than once, wondering what had been going on in her head. Matt seemed to keep his parents at arm's length, and although he loved them, she suspected that he didn't feel he had much in common with them anymore. He called them every couple weeks to catch up on news, but the phone calls never seemed to last very long and never seemed to range outside of a certain subset of superficial questions. How's the car? How's the job? How's the weather? He'd tell them about whatever new thing the baby was doing and they would tell him what his cousins were up to. Topics never ranged into deeper philosophical discussions of life or politics or what's going on in the world. It was almost rote, and Laura never cared enough to listen in, not that they ever asked to speak to her. Before last night, she had met them a handful of times and was friendly enough with them, but that was really it.

So what had been a distant relationship was now much more complicated, and the way that Christy had reacted to Laura's revelation had only made things more strained. It was almost as if Laura's Kryptonian heritage had stripped her of her humanity in Christy's eyes. Being a Superwoman meant that she wasn't capable of love, that she couldn't exist in a normal world. It was the exact opposite to Matt's reaction, which was incredibly strange. Being stuck together in a car for ten hours should've given them every opportunity to talk things through, but they had exchanged very few words between the shifts of sleeping. After the last driver change, near the New Jersey border, Laura had stayed awake, even though she supposed she could've dozed off and avoided a fair amount of awkwardness in the process. By that time, the sun was blazing in through the car windows, and she tried to soak it in, even though something about it felt wrong. For a hundred miles, she had leaned her forehead against the passenger window and stared up at the sky as music played softly on the radio. The clouds looked almost pink, the sky a very dark blue, to the point of almost being purple, and the sun... its rays didn't give her the invigorating feeling she was used to. Her side still hurt, her muscles ached, and the sun wasn't helping. That was the key to it, she was sure. Theories went through her mind as the countryside passed in silence, and she kept waiting for Christy to ask if she could have a penny for her thoughts, but no such inquiry came.

Finally, reaching the outskirts of Gotham, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed her husband. It was a weekend, so normally he would want to sleep in, not that Lilly would allow that, but it was possible he didn't sleep much at all, not with his mother aware of the family secret and racing toward their apartment. He didn't sound too tired or weary when he picked up, not that she could glean much from a two syllable word like, "hello."

"Hey," Laura said quietly. There was no way to have a private conversation in the car at that moment, but that didn't mean she was going to make it easy for her mother-in-law to listen in. "I'm just getting into town," she continued.

He sighed audibly. "I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that," he said.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to say it," she replied.

"I can guess," he said, a smile evident in his voice. "I would imagine that the, ah, mode of transportation is probably causing a few frustrations."

Not to mention the company, Laura thought, but she wasn't going to say it out loud. "All things considered, I think I prefer being able to shoot across the country in a few seconds flat."

"I think I have a little violin here," Matt said, and she could imagine his eyes twinkling in a completely adorable way. It didn't make her want to smack him any less.

"I'm glad you can get some amusement out of all this," she said, her voice taking on a pouty tone that was only half serious.

"I laugh to keep from crying," he said, also only half serious.

"So where are you right now?" she asked, noticing a fair amount of noise behind him that could possibly be the television,

although she doubted it.

“Oh, I brought Lilly over to the manor to play with her cousins and keep her from dwelling on the fact that you’re out of town. Then I got roped into the big investigation....”

Laura raised her eyebrows. “The one looking into what’s going on with our powers?”

“That’s the one, though there’s a lot more to it than that. The gang’s all here, the only one missing is you.”

Despite everything that had happened, the four hours of uneasy sleep she’d gotten in the car, the kink in her neck and the lingering aches from crashing to Earth, the thought of digging into a famous Kent family investigation made her feel invigorated, alive. She smiled. “I’ll be there soon enough. First though, I need to stop home and change. Maybe take a shower. Making an impact crater has led to dirt and sand getting into all sorts of places that they’ve never been before.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t need to know that.”

“So we’ll be there in an hour.”

“We?” he asked, and Laura glanced toward her companion, who looked for all the world as if she was ignoring their conversation.

“I didn’t think I could do 10 hours in a car alone after last night. Your mom came with.” There was a long moment of silence, and Laura felt like she had to keep talking to keep the awkwardness at bay. “I think Lilly will be glad to see her.”

“I guess it would be good to have someone here to watch the kids,” he said half-heartedly.

“We can talk more in person,” she said, knowing that a very long conversation would be forthcoming, at least as soon as they got some free time, probably once the investigation was over. He agreed, and with that, they signed off.

Laura smiled at her phone for a few moments before her thoughts were interrupted by her mother-in-law. “They’re not home?” she asked.

“No, they’re at my brother’s place.”

“In Metropolis?” she asked, and Laura balked for a moment. It had slipped her mind that there were more family secrets than just the knowledge of who Superman was. There was still the matter of Sam Wayne that needed to be discussed. No time like the present, she supposed.

“No, my other brother.”

“The one that died?” Laura looked at her and waited for her to make the connection. She didn’t have to wait very long. “Oh. Right. He’s a superman of some sort, too, then?”

“I guess you could say that,” Laura said. “It’s complicated. But he lives in Gotham, and he’s got a heck of a knack for solving tough cases. And he and Matt are practically attached at the hip these days.”

“Have I met him?” Christy asked. Throughout the conversation, her voice had been almost flat, as if she was making polite small talk, but the mention of Matt seemed to animate her.

“Sure. He was at our wedding. Actually, I think Matt went out of his way to introduce him to you. I think he wasn’t sure how you’d react to knowing he was friends with a big wig like Sam....” Introducing CJ to Matt’s parents and making it clear that they were good friends had been a test of sorts to see how they would handle celebrity...and secrets. Laura recalled Christy being rather flustered at the meeting, enough that they’d been reluctant to reveal any deeper secrets.

“Sam WAYNE?” Christy asked, turning to gape at Laura. In fact, she had taken her eyes off the road long enough that Laura was reaching toward the steering wheel by the time Christy finally regained her composure. “He...I was impressed by him, I guess. But I had no idea....”

“I mean, as far as celebrity goes, he’s small potatoes next to my dad and Jon. He’s not even a real Wayne.” Laura tried to smile, but she could see it was probably too much. She was used to

dealing with the heavy issues in her life with light humor and understanding. Matt had told her once that his family was much more serious, but she had just figured that they just hadn’t had the right influences – after all, he had a well-developed sense of humor and fun, and that couldn’t have developed in a vacuum. But, she admitted, it was possible that she was wrong. Defeated, she turned her attention back to the road, and gave directions through town to her apartment.

It was getting to be lunch time by the time Laura had finished showering and changing, so they indulged in some sandwiches while they were still at the apartment. Christy seemed reluctant to say anything more than absolutely necessary, and even small talk seemed to have flown out the window. Laura couldn’t recall ever feeling so uncomfortable in her own home, and she ate as quickly as she could, anxious to get to Wayne manor and pawn Christy off on someone else for a while, as awful as that sounded.

Laura drove to the manor, piloting the car to the garage, which was built into the side of the knob that the house sat upon. Their approach path probably meant a less spectacular view of the house for her guest, but at this point she was beyond niceties. She did offer a bit of commentary of where they were, and pointed out the various rooms and collectibles as they entered the manor and worked their way toward the living area. Finally, she could hear voices, and she practically ran toward them, rounding a corner to discover Lilly playing with her little cousin Kate, with Adam running in circles around them. So fixated was she on her daughter that she ignored the greetings from everyone else in the room. Lilly barely seemed to register her presence, though, until Laura was holding her, then she broke out into a grin, though it only lasted until she realized that her toy was now out of reach. Laura trailed some sloppy kisses across her face and down her neck, which brought some giggles, then took mercy on her and let her get back to playing.

The reunion now over, Laura looked up and finally took notice of the scene around her. The room she was in could be considered the family room, the most lived-in room in the house which also best reflected the personalities of its occupants. The kids were by a large toy box and kid-sized table and chairs, along with some other toy storage. On the far wall was a television, with a couple couches and a recliner set in a loose U-shape around it. A large grandfather clock ticked loudly against the wall opposite where the children played. On the recliner sat CJ, wearing a loose-fitting t-shirt and sweats. Although his face held its usual congenial half-smile, something about his complexion seemed off, as did his posture. He looked too gray, and she caught herself frowning as she regarded him.

“Are you okay?” she asked him, but before he could answer, she realized that it was entirely possible he was out and about at the same time she lost her powers the night before. She also noticed that he wasn’t rising to meet her, which only deepened her frown.

“I’m as okay as can be expected,” he said. “The sun is shining, I’m watching my kids have fun, and I’m finally able to think clearly again. All things considered, I’m just peachy.” He smiled toward Jen, who was standing next to him.

She walked closer to where he was seated. “So what happened? No offense, but you look terrible.”

“None taken – you should see how bad I look under the clothes. I, uh, stepped in front of a couple bullets before I was made aware of the fact that they don’t bounce off me anymore.” Laura felt a streak of cold run down her back at the thought of him getting shot. In his shoes, she would probably be glad just to be alive, too. “I heard about where you were when the power went out, so to speak,” he continued.

“About 40,000 feet over Indiana?” He gave a sympathetic look, and she raised her eyebrows. “Left a nice impact crater where I hit the ground.”

“So are you okay then?” he asked her, but then his eyes seemed to focus past her. “Hi, welcome. Please come in,” he said toward Christy, who was hovering out in the hallway, observing the interaction between them. He braced himself against the chair, preparing to rise and greet her, but he stopped when Jen put her hand on his shoulder and shook her head. Jen then rushed toward Christy, putting her hand out as she went.

“Hi, I’m Jen Wayne. You must be Matt’s mom? I think we met at Laura and Matt’s reception.” Christy shook her hand, and Jen guided her toward the children. “Lilly, look who’s here?” she said.

Laura took the opportunity to lean up against the arm of the couch next to where CJ was seated. “Matt told you?” she asked in a low voice.

“Whose yard you wound up in? Yeah.”

“I figured if I was going to pass out in someone’s lawn and possibly be unmasked, it would be best to have that lawn belong to family. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

CJ smirked. “Not going well?”

“I feel like an exhibit at a zoo,” Laura said, her voice now barely audible. She watched as Christy seemed to relax in the presence of the children, pulling up a kid-sized chair and settling in while Jen grabbed a few toys. “Not that you’d understand. You won the in-law lottery.”

Usually CJ came back with a quip or tried to lighten the mood in situations like this, but every now and then he surprised her. “I would imagine it’s a lot for her to take in. Give it time.” She stared at him hard, but he just smiled at her, then looked back toward the children. “Besides, you gave her a granddaughter. If that doesn’t humanize you, I don’t know what will.”

On the other side of the room, Jen leaned down and gave her daughter a kiss, then tousled Adam’s hair and stood, heading toward Laura and CJ. “How was the drive?” Jen asked, taking up her spot next to CJ.

“Long,” Laura said.

“This is my sympathetic face,” CJ said, pulling a face that was so ridiculous that Laura had to laugh, even though she would much rather punch him.

“Yes, I now have a new appreciation for your completely mundane life,” she said with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

“So, are you ready to get put to work?” Jen asked, and Laura nodded vigorously. “Okay, well, here’s what’s going on. Matt’s downstairs getting a laptop setup to bring to Clark, here.”

“I’m going to hack into a satellite,” CJ said, sounding a little like an overly excited kid. Laura supposed she would be excited if she could hack into a satellite, too.

Jen continued. “Jon and your Mom have been doing some digging, and they’re about 98% sure that the cause of your problems is a weather satellite that was launched a couple months ago and activated earlier this week. Jon is going to do some interviews with company brass, and while he’s there, he’ll be finding a way to get us access to their computer system.”

“Once we can find a way to get behind their firewall, it should be a cinch. I’m going to brick the thing and we can all get back to normal, the sooner the better. And maybe if you or Dad are Jon are feeling benevolent in the future you can retrieve the satellite for them so it’s not all for nothing,” CJ said.

“But that’s just the first part of what needs to be done,” Jen continued. “Why would someone program a weather satellite to create the right conditions to remove your powers? And who benefits from it?”

Laura nodded. “Just listening to news reports on the radio on the way in, it sounds like things are bad out there.”

“Right. So this is where it gets complicated. In Metropolis, Diane is making it her mission to interrogate the people they apprehend during this crime spree, to see what they know about how and why it started. I mean, the news hasn’t even noticed that you guys are absent from the skies, and why would they? It’s only

been, what, 12 hours? It’s not unusual for you guys to take breaks that are a lot longer than that. Yet it seemed like both Gotham and Metropolis both exploded with crime almost as soon as your powers left. That can’t be coincidence,” Jen said.

CJ nodded. “We have Dick shaking down thugs here in Gotham, too, so between the two of them we hope to get some good information. Meanwhile, Mom and Jen are doing a deep dive into the background of the company that launched the satellite – who makes the decisions there, how do they get their funding, stuff like that. Bruce and Matt are going after the government agency that issues permits for space launches to see what they knew and if there was someone pulling the strings on that project.”

“So...is this a Planet story or a criminal investigation? Is someone getting a visit from Batman when it’s all said and done?” Laura asked.

“Yes to all of the above?” CJ answered.

“This can’t just be some sort of innocent mistake. There has to be some sort of ulterior motive for why everything happened. Whoever orchestrated this is responsible for injuries to you, Clark, and Jon, and is responsible for whoever gets hurt in the current crime spree. They need to be brought to justice,” Jen said.

“I’m in,” Laura said. “But what do you need me to do?”

“Try to find a pattern to the crime waves gripping the major cities? Everything escalated dramatically around midnight last night...” Jen raised her eyebrows.

“Another angle is to find a connection between STAR Labs and the company that launched the satellite. If someone was able to make our powers disappear, they had to have some physical data that made them believe what they were attempting would work,” CJ said.

“Makes you wonder what else they might know,” Laura answered, and the three of them just looked quietly at each other for a moment.

The silence was broken as Matt entered the room, bringing squeals from Lilly. He was holding a laptop computer and some cords, but he detoured to give some attention to his daughter and greet his mother before continuing toward Laura, Jen and CJ. His eyes positively sparkled as he caught sight of his wife, and he unceremoniously dumped the equipment on a side table and approached her. They didn’t even greet each other before he pulled her toward him and captured her mouth with hers. Laura practically melted into him. Ever since waking up in that crater, through all the long hours on the road, this was the one thing she had truly been craving – the feeling of his lips on hers, his strong arms around her, the soft smell of his aftershave. His touch made her feel like everything was going to be fine, despite what her body aches were telling her, and made her forget about all the other problems she had been having.

The sound of CJ clearing his throat pulled them out of their kiss. “I waited 12 hours for this. I think we can get another minute,” Laura mumbled, then leaned into the kiss again.

CJ cleared his throat more insistently. At Laura’s annoyed look, he smirked. “Hey, the sooner I get to work on this, the sooner we can all get back to our normal lives,” he said.

Matt squeezed her hand and backed away. He then retrieved the computer and thrust it toward CJ. One end of a cord was plugged into it, catching CJ’s attention. “Bruce said no wifi,” Matt said, catching the cue. “You want to connect to the big computer, you have to do it through the LAN.” CJ sighed, a look of annoyance on his face. “Or, you know, go downstairs.”

“No, this is fine,” CJ said, flipping open the laptop while Matt went and connected the cord to a nearby ethernet port. “Feels very last millennium, though.” Jen went toward a table in another part of the room and grabbed a notebook and pencil, then brought it to the table next to CJ, along with a cell phone.

“All set?” she asked, and he nodded. “Well, I suppose we should get back to it.”

“Should we take the kids?” Laura asked him, and he shrugged. “As long as they aren’t bothering me, I’m fine,” he answered. The children appeared to be playing happily with Matt’s mom at the moment, but Laura knew from experience that things with kids could go south really fast, especially with strong-willed ones like theirs.

“And what are we going to do with your Mom?” Laura asked Matt in a softer voice.

“I’ll talk to her,” Matt said, though he sounded reluctant. “She seems to be having a good time with the kids, but I need to let her know what’s going on and what to expect out of us. If she wants to help, then I will welcome it. If she wants to observe, I’m not against that. Otherwise?” he shrugged. The implied conclusion was that she was free to leave, that nobody was going to insist that she stay, but it was up to her.

Laura watched Christy play with the kids for a moment, then nodded. Christy might not be the best travel companion, and she might not have her head right when it came to the family secret, but she had left her home behind to help Laura out, and she had been patient during the whole ordeal. Just by helping with the kids, she was doing them an enormous service, and if she got enjoyment out of it, even better. Laura wasn’t going to complain if she did decide to stay...it might even be nice. “Come on, let’s get to it,” she said to Matt, taking his hand.

As the sun streamed into the guest room window, Jon awoke from an uncharacteristically deep sleep and greeted the world with a purpose. Today, he was going to get to the bottom of what was going on with the weather satellites launched a few months earlier. If he was extremely lucky, he might be able to eliminate the problem, though that would require some help. Fortunately, he had a plan. First things first, though.

His first stop for the morning was the kitchen, where he put on a pot of coffee. It seemed he had awoken before Cruz, though the coffee aroma seemed to work its magic, and soon he joined Jon. They worked together to prepare a hearty breakfast, and while they ate it, Jon laid out what he had proposed for the day. As soon as they were done, Jon would be calling up Orbital Technologies, the company in Houston that developed the satellites, and scheduling an interview with the highest ranking executive that he could, though realistically it would probably end up being with their media relations person. Second, he would need to see about getting some work clothes. The borrowed outfit that he had worn to bed were the only clothes currently available to him, apart from his ruined super suit, and they were a far cry from professional. Cruz had a comprehensive wardrobe of plaid shirts with piping and mother-of-pearl inlaid buttons, but they would be small on Jon, and they weren’t exactly his style. So he would need to find a men’s shop that could set him up with a nice shirt and tie, along with some slacks and an all-important pair of glasses. And since he didn’t bring his wallet with him during hero work, it meant all his credit cards were in Metropolis, and he would need to bum some money in the meantime.

“I’ll pay you back, I swear,” Jon said, expecting some resistance from his father-in-law. It was hard not to be aware of the fact that Cruz and his wife lived in a working class neighborhood and had to keep to a budget, though that didn’t necessarily mean that they wanted for anything. It felt odd borrowing money from anyone, least of all his father-in-law, but Cruz was very gracious about it.

“I know you’re good for it,” he said, bringing a small smile to Jon’s face.

Jon paused and looked at his hands, working up the courage to ask the next question. Their discussions the night before had been eye-opening, to say the least. They had transformed Cruz from a virtual stranger to a confidant, and he hoped that meant that he had earned a new level of trust, since he was going to need to lean on

that trust if his plan for the day was going to succeed. “Would you be willing to go to Houston with me today? What I was hoping to accomplish there goes way beyond an interview.”

Cruz’s eyes went wide. “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think I would be any good at hero stuff....”

Jon smiled at him. “This isn’t hero stuff. It’s what my mom would call guerilla journalism.” At his confused expression, Jon continued. “The interview will be real enough, but it will mostly just be a pretense. It’s an excuse to get behind closed doors so we can figure out how to shut down their satellite.”

Wide-eyed again, Cruz didn’t speak for a moment. “So what would my role be in this?”

Jon explained his plan, at least the parts he had worked out, and gradually Cruz’s expression morphed from tentative to resolute. “If this works, it means everything can go back to how it was. I know I don’t necessarily need my powers to get back home or to heal, but... flying back in a plane won’t be the same as flying myself. I won’t be the same,” he finished quietly.

Cruz nodded slowly. “I think maybe you don’t give yourself enough credit,” he said. “You’re still you whether you can fly or not. And the you who doesn’t have powers can still do some incredible things, if your plan is any indication.”

“I know,” Jon said with a soft smile. Cruz definitely understood now. “But the me who can fly can do exponentially more. Besides, there’s just something about being able to go up and touch the clouds....” He sighed wistfully and turned to look out the window. Little, puffy clouds floated by in the violet sky, and for a moment he indulged memories of this neighborhood as seen from the sky. Silence seemed to stretch out for minutes, though in reality it was probably only a matter of moments, before Cruz finally spoke again.

“Yeah, I’ll help. Sounds like it could be fun.”

As soon as they were done and the dishes were picked up, they headed toward the bathroom to change the dressing on Jon’s burns. Cruz then left for the men’s store, armed with a sheet of paper stating Jon’s shirt and pants sizes as well as his preferred fit. Alone in the house, Jon took the opportunity to make several phone calls. The first was to set up his interview, which he scheduled for right after lunch. Next, he called his brother to set his plan in motion. Upon initially answering the phone, CJ seemed a little out-of-it, as if he had just awoken for the morning. As Jon started explaining the theory behind their power loss and how he proposed to remedy it, though, CJ perked up considerably.

“The company probably has all their satellite control systems hidden behind a very robust firewall,” CJ said, and Jon could tell that he was writing something down. “I’m not too concerned about it potentially not being connected to the internet, because everything is these days. But they won’t want foreign governments or terrorists hacking their systems, so it will be locked down tight.”

“So...I can call you once I’m inside with access to a computer and you can tell me what to do?” Jon said, uncertain. “I can type command prompts into the computer to help break down the firewall.”

“That would work, I suppose,” CJ’s voice was thoughtful. “But I think my preference would be to introduce a little trojan horse as a first step, just to soften things up. Do you have a USB drive?”

Jon looked around, opening a couple drawers to the computer desk. He actually found a couple of AOL discs in the drawers, but no USB drive. “I have my phone and a USB cord,” he said. Who needed USB drives anymore when phones could serve the same function?

“That’s no good,” CJ said. “The computer would need to install a driver to recognize the phone. Besides, your phone points right back to you, so it’s terrible for stealth operations.”

“We can pick one up, then,” Jon said.

“You have a little time. I still need to put together my little virus.”

“Well, don’t take too long. My in-laws don’t have a laptop, just an ancient desktop, and I need to leave for Houston in an hour.”

They agreed to get in touch again soon, then Jon hung up, immediately calling his father-in-law’s number and asking him to pick up a USB drive while he was out. Once that call was completed, Jon called his wife to check in on things. He supposed that he shouldn’t have been surprised to hear that she had volunteered to help with the investigation into what was going on, but that didn’t stop his eyebrows from rising when she told him what she was doing. “You can’t imagine the scope of it all,” Diane said. “Just the sheer amount of crime, and all at once. Normally safe parts of town have become dangerous, and normally dangerous parts of town are war zones. And no matter how many people we throw at the problem, they always have more.” She sighed. “I really wish you were here.”

“Me, too,” Jon answered softly. “But I’m doing what I can to get back into action.”

“I know you are,” she said. “And my dad?”

“He’s been very gracious,” Jon said. “And understanding. I think the last few years, he’s just been trying to feel us out, not willing to push too hard or ask too many questions that might lead to embarrassment. With me getting hurt, though... he rescued me, and at that point the confrontation that we’d been avoiding for so long became inevitable. And now... I think we understand each other.”

“That sounds... very mature,” Diane said, though her voice said she wasn’t convinced.

“He’s going to help me and CJ hack a satellite,” Jon continued, and was greeted with silence on the other end of the line. “And yes, I know I’m a bad influence.”

“I’m just... this is my dad we’re talking about, right?”

“It is. I’ll re-introduce you to him once this is all over with.”

He laughed gently, though Diane didn’t seem quite so amused. He decided that changing the subject was probably the best approach. “So, uh, have you found any pattern to the crime spree?”

“Not yet,” she answered quickly, her tone now businesslike. “The people we’ve snagged so far all seemed to be small potatoes. For some of these guys, once they see the chaos, they feel like they have to join in. The bigwigs, the people who are behind this, are laying low right now. But the message they’re sending – that they are in charge right now and not the cops – is loud and clear.”

Jon grunted, feeling frustrated. Under more normal circumstances he would be out there, helping. Maybe, if he was successful today, he would be able to join in the effort before anyone missed him. “And how’s your mom taking her forced exile?”

“She’s enjoying the kids too much to mind,” Diane said. “I’m actually grateful she’s around, given how badly they need me here at work. I don’t feel so much like I’m abandoning them right now.”

“We’ve been lucky,” Jon said, marveling at how everything had worked out for them. Burns aside, it had been a positive experience. “Imagine what could’ve happened if your dad wasn’t curious about my other job, or if this happened without an instant babysitter around.”

“True,” Diane said. “And all this is certainly giving me a new appreciation for my folks. But something tells me that we would’ve found a way. We always do.”

“In large part because of the people we have in our lives,” Jon answered. Diane liked to think of herself as being capable of taking on any challenges that came her way without help, and by and large that was true. But Jon knew that so much of the good in their lives came from the people they surrounded themselves with,

and the influence they had on their lives. They wouldn’t be together if not for CJ and Jen’s interference; Diane would not have kept her sanity in the early years of the twins’ lives if not for generous help from his parents. Every time Jon got in a scrape – from being lost in time to being stalked by crazy fans – he persevered with the help of friends and family. This was no different. He tried to help her see how blessed they were, how much fuller their lives were thanks to the others that they shared it with, and he was pretty sure that she understood. But that didn’t stop her independent streak.

“We have each other, and that’s most important,” she said softly, and he couldn’t disagree.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, his voice filled with intensity. As he was about to say more tender platitudes, he heard keys being inserted in the door lock, and he knew his time alone was done. “Hey, your dad’s back. I have to go. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” she said, and with that, she hung up.

Jon was just putting down the phone when Cruz entered the house, his hands loaded with bags. Jon stood up to help him, and together they took out the business attire – a nice shirt, a pair of khakis, a tie that was subtle but still had enough of a pattern to make it interesting, some socks, and a pair of shoes. Jon tried it all on before they took off the tags, and it all seemed to fit well enough. Putting on the glasses and running a comb through his hair, he finally felt like himself. Cruz nodded his head in appreciation of the transformation. “There’s the guy I know,” he said, bringing a smile to Jon’s face.

He held out his bandaged hand, the only outward sign of the problems he’d had the night before. “More or less,” Jon said.

“Ready to go?” Cruz asked. Jon nodded at first, then remembered something. Holding up a finger, he stopped himself, then reached for his cell phone, autodialing his brother. CJ confirmed that he had been able to come up with his computer virus, though just barely. There seemed to be a lot of noise behind him, and CJ confessed that he was working from the living room, where his kids were playing with Laura’s daughter, which made for a lot of noise. It also made concentration a little more difficult, although the lack of superpowers took the edge off some of the loudness. In any case, he put the file out on a file transfer site and emailed the link to Jon, who used Cruz’s computer to transfer the file to the USB drive that Cruz had purchased.

“Insert the USB drive into any computer in the building, and it will get to work.”

“Any computer? Does it need to be unlocked, or logged in or whatever?” Jon asked.

“It has to be on,” CJ said, deadpan. Jon was clueless enough about the advanced workings of computer viruses or programs that he had a hard time telling if he was being made fun of. At this point, he didn’t care.

“And then...?”

“Probably give me a call and let me know that you’ve put things on motion. Then I can see if I’m getting anything, and let you know if there’s anything else you need to do.”

“Okay. Appointment is after lunch here. I’ll call you then.”

Jon shoved the USB drive in his pocket, then hit the road with Cruz. Their time in his truck this time around was much less awkward. Cruz asked Jon about some of the higher profile stories that he’d worked on in the past, and Jon asked Cruz about his time as a teacher. The long drive seemed to pass in a matter of minutes, and as they entered Houston, they stopped for lunch. As they ate, Jon pulled out his phone and showed Cruz pictures of surveillance cameras, and talked about what to look for once he was in the office. He also gave tips on various ways of obscuring his actions from the cameras, tips learned from many hands-on experiences and advice from his mother. Finally, they pulled into the parking lot for Orbital Technologies. As Jon exited the truck, he ran his good hand through his hair, then grabbed a small notebook and

pen he had found at Cruz's house. Once his father-in-law had circled around the front of the truck to stand beside him, Jon handed him the USB drive. "You know what to do?"

"Distract the receptionist and shove this into his or her computer," Cruz answered confidently. Jon had worried that the operation might cause him to be shy or tentative, but to the contrary, Cruz seemed to be enthusiastic to take on his part in the operation.

"You know what the USB port looks like, right?" Jon asked after a moment. Cruz's enthusiasm waned momentarily, and Jon pulled out his phone, pulling up a picture of the port. "You may have to unplug something else first," he said. "A keyboard or mouse or printer or something. Not the worst thing in the world, just remember to plug it back in again."

Cruz nodded and smiled, then placed the drive into his pocket. "Sounds easy enough."

"Well, just remember to stay alert. And..." Jon handed his cell phone to Cruz. "Call my brother just as soon as you put the drive into the computer. He's in there under Sam Wayne...it should be the last number I called."

Cruz looked thoughtful for a moment, then reached into his pocket, pulling out his phone and handing it to Jon. "In case I need to get a hold of you," he said. You never know..."

"Good idea," Jon said, then pocketed the phone. He turned toward the building and absently pulled his glasses down his nose out of habit, before remembering that he was without powers. He sighed and pushed them back up again, wishing very strongly that he could muster even a little bit of x-ray vision. It would help to know the building's layout, the location of surveillance cameras, and the nature of the security measures, among other things. He felt like he was flying blind, but... he was no less disadvantaged than his mother was when she undertook missions like this one, and he liked to think he had all her smarts and at least some of her cunning.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" Cruz asked, and Jon gave him a knowing smile.

"Yeah. But frustration won't get me anywhere," he answered. "With a little determination, though, we can change the world." Cruz's smile was the widest that Jon had ever seen, and it filled him with confidence. They could do this, he was positive. "Come on," he said, and with that, they approached the building.

Once inside, they headed toward the reception desk, with Jon introducing himself, and describing Cruz as his Uber driver. "Seemed silly to send him away when I was just going to call again in a few minutes," Jon said, giving more information than would normally be necessary, in part to make the receptionist a little uncomfortable. It was all part of the plan, discussed during their drive, and Cruz was more than game to hold up his end of the charade.

"He's a good tipper," Cruz added, and the receptionist nodded, quickly dialing the lower level vice president that Jon would be interviewing.

"Well, you told those stories about your poor grandchildren. If I could help you help them..."

The receptionist smiled weakly as Jon and Cruz continued their conversation and delved into the finer points of Cruz's supposed personal misfortune, her eyes quickly giving away the fact that she wished she could be anywhere else. By the time Jon was summoned back for his interview, the receptionist was checking her watch or glancing at her phone every few seconds. Cruz just leaned on her counter, earnestly rambling on about increasingly private aspects of his life. Jon would do his best to draw out the interview, and he silently wished his father-in-law good luck in holding up his end of the operation. Before disappearing behind closed doors, Jon captured Cruz's eyes with his own, smiled, then glanced toward the security camera. Cruz kept talking even as he followed Jon's gaze, nodding almost

imperceptibly.

"You have to hear about this case of salmonella my wife had. You'll never want to eat potato salad again," Cruz said as he turned his attention back toward the receptionist, and Jon had to fight to hide a smile. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and took a deep breath, clearing his mind and refocusing his attention on the task at hand. Jon then turned his attention toward his job, and the very real interview that awaited him.

A new day had dawned in Australia, bringing sunshine and a fresh perspective. Today would be a day for chasing down leads, and hopefully bringing a big story back to Metropolis, one that would completely justify his unplanned trip down under. Lois had been onto something with the story about the voting system, though it really wasn't something that required a presence in the country to report. There had to be something bigger. Normally, he would check some of the social news feeds in the morning to get a handle on what the daily topics would be, but until his laptop arrived, he would just have to find his story the old fashioned way. With all the big name stars still in town from the Comic Convention, it might be worth tracking one of them down and discussing some hot topics in the entertainment world. A delegation from the U.S. government was in Canberra that day discussing trade agreements, and with the controversy swirling about that topic these days, that could also be a good lead. But Canberra was a couple hours' drive from Sydney, and without his license he wouldn't be able to rent a car. Turning on the morning news as he dressed, he made note of a story about violence erupting in cities throughout the world overnight. Without any super men or women, he supposed it was to be expected, though the scale was beyond anything he would've imagined. Even Sydney, normally a very safe city, wasn't spared. Maybe that was his story, he thought with a frown.

Whatever story he ended up pursuing would have to wait until after breakfast. Now that he was a mere mortal, he found that he was positively starving after a long night of sleep. Normally he didn't necessarily get hungry, but this morning his stomach rumbled rather loudly, and he decided that a trip down to the hotel restaurant would be his first order of the day. He whistled quietly as he made his way down the hall, into the elevator, and through the lobby, grabbing a local periodical before finding a table in a nice, quiet corner of the restaurant. He had ordered and was a couple of pages into the newspaper when he heard someone say his name. Lowering the paper, he saw Spencer North a couple tables over, getting up from his chair and making his way over.

Clark folded the newspaper as Spencer approached. "Care for some company?" Mr. North asked, and Clark gestured toward the empty seat across from him.

"Sleep well?" Clark asked, though a look at his companion's face told him all he needed to know.

"Not really, no," Spencer said. Catching Clark's critical glance, he ran his hand across his chin. "I always look worse in the morning than I feel, though. I never shave until after breakfast. Somehow I look less famous with a little stubble. Keeps the crazies away."

Clark nodded, brushing the back of his hand across his cheek. His normal way of shaving wasn't exactly available to him at the moment, and he still needed to pick up some shaving supplies. "I thought the rugged, day-old stubble look was in," Clark said with a smile.

"Not for Superman," Spencer answered, a twinkle in his eye. Clark opened his mouth to ask him a question, but the waiter picked that moment to show up. After Spencer gave his order and handed over his menu, he turned his attention back to Clark.

"So what's on tap for today?" Clark asked.

"Oh, back to the Comic Convention for me," he said in a low voice. "More autographs and photos, and today they're doing a

panel with a couple of my Superman movie costars and executives.”

“Sounds interesting,” Clark said, and Spencer just shrugged.

“I don’t mind interacting with the fans. There are one or two out there that make you want to crawl out of your skin, but most of them just want to tell you how much they like your work. Nothing wrong with that, I guess. It’s good for the ego, if nothing else.” Clark nodded, knowing full well what Spencer was talking about. He did enjoy meeting the public, and usually came out of those interactions with buoyed spirits. “How about you?” Spencer continued. “Anything exciting planned for today?”

“Oh, just chasing down a big story,” Clark said.

“Oooh,” Spencer said, leaning in closer toward the table.

“Anything you can tell me, or is it hush hush?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Clark said, then ducked his head.

“Actually, I have no idea yet what I’ll be writing about, but I’m sure inspiration will strike at some time. It always does.”

“Well, could you maybe talk to some of my costars? I can set something up for you, if you’re interested.”

Clark gave a friendly smile and shook his head. “I appreciate the offer but...entertainment news isn’t generally considered hard news. No offense.”

“None taken. I get it.”

“Unless you know if some intrigue or strange goings on with the movie production...” Clark made sure the tone of his voice implied that he was kidding. Then again, if there WERE problems with production, his alter ego would have a vested interest in getting things straightened out.

The smile from Spencer North told him that he understood. “We’re making a film about the most straight-laced guy on Earth. I feel confident that everything is on the level.”

“Well, strike that idea, then.”

“Sorry.”

Clark smiled. “I enjoy the thrill of the hunt. It’s part of the reason I got into the business,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

There was a long moment of silence, then Spencer sat up straighter and regarded Clark eagerly. There was something in his expression that seemed a little too wide eyed, to the point that it made him almost uncomfortable to be on the receiving end. It was the type of expression that was typically reserved for his alter ego. “Even if there’s no story there, have you thought about swinging through the convention?”

Clark hesitated a moment, wondering how much to stay, then he decided that there was no harm in admitting that a certain Dark Knight had already made an appearance. “Actually, I was there yesterday. In disguise, no less.”

Spencer blinked. “Yeah?” he said, scooting toward the edge of his seat.

“I have this great Batman costume....”

Spencer gave an odd laugh and shook his head. “Of course you do,” he said, causing Clark’s eyebrows to pinch together. What did that mean, exactly? Spencer made a visible effort to relax. “I, uh, would’ve thought a guy from Metropolis would be more of a Superman fan.”

“Well, sometimes it’s fun to mix it up.”

Spencer seemed thoughtful for a moment. “You know, I should try that....”

Clark nodded, though his mind gave a warning. Two Supermen in as many days trolling around the convention in Batman suits was just edgy enough that of course someone would catch on, then it would be one less fun thing he could do with the fans. He would never begrudge Spencer some fun over his silly worries, though. Besides, he had bigger things to worry about at the moment.

Anxious to change the topic away from secret identities, Clark asked Spencer about his favorite sports teams outside the Royals, which led to a rather enjoyable trip down memory lane discussing

high points in the Kansas City Chiefs and Kansas Jayhawks sports histories. All too soon their food came, and most of the conversation trailed off as they ate. Clark was feeling full and in good spirits as the meal wound down, and he and Spencer North parted company.

Exiting the restaurant, Clark stepped toward the front desk to check and see if his package had been delivered, tracking Spencer across the lobby toward the elevators as he did. As the clerk checked for Clark’s package, a waiter quickly exited the restaurant, looking frantically around the lobby. Recognition seemed to come as he found Clark and hurried over.

“Uh, sir, I believe you left your credit card at the table,” he said, handing over a credit card with a name on it that he didn’t recognize.

“I think you must be mistaken,” Clark said, studying the card for a moment before handing it back.

The waiter just stared at the card. “Denver omlette, right? Extra bacon on top?”

“Oh, that was what my companion ordered,” he said, then glanced toward where he last saw Spencer North. The elevator doors were in the process of closing, with no Spencer in sight. He must’ve returned to his room. Clark pulled the card away, looked at the name again, and stuffed it in his pocket. Leave it to a celebrity to use a card with a fake name on it. “You know what? I can return it to him when I’m done here,” Clark said, much to the relief of the waiter.

“I appreciate it,” he said. “Have a great day, sir.” With that, he turned and rushed back to the restaurant. A moment later, the clerk emerged from a room behind the front desk with a large box in his hands.

“You’re in luck,” he said, plunking it down on the counter. “This just showed up a few minutes ago.” Clark felt at that moment as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Then he saw the shipping price on the UPS label and cringed. “I’m just going to need for you to sign for this,” the clerk continued, pulling out a clipboard.

Clark signed his name, then picked up the box, which was heavier than it looked, and headed toward the elevators to drop it in his room. It would feel great to change out of the clothes that he had been wearing since the day before, and he was itching to pull out his laptop and get to work. After lugging the box through the hallways and to his room, he decided that the next order of business would be to return the credit card to Spencer before he left for the day. The piece of paper with his room number on it was on the nightstand, and Clark quickly moved to retrieve it, glancing at the room number before shoving it into his pocket next to the credit card and heading back toward the elevators. Spencer was staying in the swanky upper floors of the hotel, and even the hallways up there were nicer, Clark noted. The room was at the far end of a long, quiet hallway, and Clark started whistling again as he ambled along, finally reaching the door and knocking.

Even absent his superhearing, he could make out several hushed voices talking urgently from inside the room. It seemed to take forever before the talking ceased and the door cracked open, the chain still engaged. The opening was only an inch or so, but it was enough for him to see an odd expression on his friend’s face. “Ah, Clark! What are you doing here?” he asked, though he didn’t move to disengage the chain or open the door in a more welcoming manner.

Concerned, Clark craned his neck to try and look into the room. “You left your credit card at the restaurant,” he said, though he didn’t move to pull the card out of his pocket just yet. The situation seemed off somehow, and he wanted some more information before he left.

“Oh,” Spencer said. “That was careless of me.” He seemed to almost be speaking too loudly, which further strengthened the thought that there was something wrong.

“Lucky the waiter found me,” Clark continued, only half paying attention to the conversation now. His eyes were soaking in all the details that he could catch from beyond the door, not that there was much to see. All of a sudden there was a glint, almost like sunlight reflecting off metal. Or a gun? Clark’s eyes snapped to his friend again. Silently, he mouthed the words, “Are you okay?”

Spencer shook his head vigorously. “Yeah, that is really lucky,” he said.

Clark felt his jaw clench as he stood up straighter, cursing his lack of powers. If he could look into the room, he would know what he was dealing with. As it was, the best he could do was guess. He held up his hand and made a gesture indicating that Spencer step aside so he could look. Spencer nodded once and moved just enough that much more of the room was in view. The gun in the hands of another man was now fully visible, though it wasn’t pointing toward the door at the moment. His eyes must’ve gotten wide, because Spencer nodded again and gave a knowing expression. “Poor guy was pretty frantic,” Clark continued, his focus shifting to the hallway. Think, Clark, he coached himself, his eyes darting around. There had to be something there he could use as a weapon, or at least as a shield if worse came to worse. He wasn’t going to walk away without helping Spencer out, and he wasn’t going to let that door close without doing something.

Spencer gave a forced laugh. “I’ll bet,” he said. At that moment, Clark found what he was looking for. Across the hallway was a tray piled with empty dishes, the remnants of a room service breakfast, no doubt. At the top of the stack was a metal cover, used to keep the food warm when it was brought to the room. That would work well as a shield, he decided. There was also an assortment of silverware there, including, mercifully, an ugly looking steak knife. Clark smiled as he looked back toward Spencer, made eye contact, and held up one finger. At Spencer’s slight nod, he lunged for the items he located, quickly bringing them back in front of the hotel door. Clark then made a gesture that indicated that Spencer should keep talking. “Well, uh, you must be a busy guy with plenty of other things to do today. I’ll just undo the chain here and take that credit card off your hands...” he then inhaled sharply, the portion of face that Clark could see distorting into a grimace. Apparently his captor wasn’t fond of that idea. “I mean, uh, if you could just slide it into the gap, here...”

“Sure,” Clark said, pointing to Spencer’s left and raising his eyebrows. Spencer nodded almost imperceptibly. Clark pantomimed elbowing someone in the stomach and pointed at Spencer, indicating that’s what he wanted him to do. Another small nod. Poising himself in front of the door, shield in one hand, steak knife in the other, Clark mouthed a countdown. Three... two... one...

The blow from the other side was followed with a grunt and a thud. Clark waited until he could see that Spencer was no longer in front of the door before his foot came up and slammed into it, breaking the chain instantly. He might not be super at the moment, but apparently he still retained not-quite-super strength. He swiped at the door again with his foot, swinging it wide open. On the floor, Spencer was punching the man who had been standing to his side, though that man seemed to be in too much pain to put up a fight. Meanwhile, the man with the gun had caught notice of what was happening, and Clark found the weapon trained on him. Without another thought, he strode forward, holding the shield in front of his face as the gun fired. He cringed, waiting for the strike to the shield, but none came. Apparently the gunman was a bad shot. Clark gave a small smile and began to run, determined to barrel into the other man and take him down that way. A moment later their bodies met, and his football training instinctively kicked in. Applying a textbook tackle, Clark found himself on the ground on top of the now stunned man, while the gun flew across the room. He shoved his forearm across the other man’s chest, holding

him back, while his other arm cocked back into position, then landed a strong punch to his jaw. The first punch seemed to stun him, so Clark punched again, the second one knocking him out.

Still sitting on top of his subject, Clark felt himself relax with relief. Turning back to look toward Spencer, he found his friend in a similar position. “So, what was this all about?” Clark asked, giving a smile.

Spencer smiled back and shook his head, though he was too winded to talk at just that moment. Clark took advantage of the lull to push himself up into a standing position, and after a minute, Spencer did the same. “I have no idea,” he said. The two of them walked toward each other and stood side by side, surveying the other men. They needed to call security, Clark knew, and probably the police, but at the moment, inertia seemed to grip him, the effect of the initial burst of adrenaline wearing off. He’ll do it in a moment, he told himself, but something stopped him. He had never looked too closely at the faces of the men in the room in his haste to save Spencer North. Now that he got a chance to see them clearly, he realized that he recognized them. He must have gasped, because Spencer put a hand on his arm. “What is it?” Spencer asked.

“I know these men,” Clark said, and it only took a moment of sorting through his mental files to figure out who they were. Boy, that sure made everything a lot more interesting. Roaming charges be damned, this warranted a call to Metropolis and a conversation with his wife. Something told him that this could be an important key to her investigation in why his powers disappeared and who might be behind it. There was also a bigger story here: some men had just assaulted a major celebrity – maybe with the intent to kidnap him or do worse – something that was sure to attract the attention of people even outside the entertainment industry. Clark turned toward Spencer. “I guess I know what I’m going to write about today,” he said with a wry smile.

Spencer’s eyes went wide, then he sighed. “Yeah I suppose you do. But when you’re done with that... I don’t suppose you do bodyguard work on the side?”

Clark’s expression softened and he pointed at the goon by the door. “Looks to me like you don’t need any help.”

That seemed to calm Spencer slightly. “I never would’ve had the guts to do that without you for backup,” he said. “You’re fearless.”

“Well, you’re Superman,” he answered. “Never forget that.” Clark always believed that people were capable of whatever they believed they could do, good or bad. His words seemed to work, and he could see Spencer’s eyes go distant as he considered what Clark said, his posture improving with each passing moment. Soon enough, he was standing rod straight, his arms crossed across his chest, his expression commanding – a very Superman-like image.

“You’re right,” Spencer said with a smile. “But if that’s the case, then I say you might make a better Superman than me.” His eyes seemed to twinkle as he spoke, and Clark had the uncomfortable feeling that the words meant more than what they seemed. Before he could ponder that, though, Spencer reached for the phone, and called the authorities.

CJ drummed his fingers absently on his computer, looking past the screen and the text file containing the code for his computer virus that would break through the Orbital Technologies firewall. In the long minutes since he had sent the file to Jon, he had nervously gone through it multiple times, making sure the syntax was correct, confirming that it should work as expected. He had pulled up more files and tools on his end to use in hacking into the computer once the time came. The minutes seemed to tick by incredibly slowly, more so because of the anticipation of what exactly they could accomplish. He knew it would take a couple hours for Jon to make the drive to Houston, for him to eat lunch and get inside the building, but he was not an especially patient

person. At least under normal circumstances, he had a cave full of fun gadgets to fiddle with, or case files to look through to pass the time. He supposed he could give his attention to his wife and children, but his wife was helping with research, and the kids were happily playing with their cousin and Laura's mother-in-law. CJ was just another part of the scenery right now as far as they were concerned. It was probably just as well, he thought, considering how lousy he still felt. He began to contemplate the thought of taking a nap, but no sooner had he closed his eyes than he heard a small voice call out for him.

"Daddy!" Adam said, rushing over to him and launching himself into CJ's lap.

"Ooof," CJ said at the impact, his hands grasping for the computer, saving it from a date with the floor. "You gotta take it easy on me right now, buddy."

Adam abruptly stilled, then relaxed into his lap. "Sorry," he said, wrapping his arms around CJ's chest.

CJ moved the computer onto the side table and returned the light embrace. "It's okay," he said. "So what's up?"

Adam looked back toward the girls and Matt's mother, who was now watching him with interest. "Katie's stinky," he said, wrinkling up his nose.

CJ stared at Adam for a moment, then turned back toward Kate. Normally in these circumstances, he would pop up and whisk his little girl to the changing table. A diaper change was an opportunity for some one-on-one time, maybe with some snuggles afterwards. But right now the prospect of getting up from his chair was just painful, and bending down to pick up his daughter, who was a very solid child, was doubly so. But he wasn't about to let her marinate in her own juices. Besides, moving around was supposed to be good for him, or so he heard. Something about preventing blood clots, not that he knew much about that.

"I think Lilly's stinky, too," Adam whispered, and CJ raised his eyebrows, making eye contact with Christy Owens.

"I hear it's a little ripe over there," he called out to her, and she reached down to pull back Lilly's pants.

"You heard correctly," she said, releasing the pants and looking around, probably for a changing station.

"You can't hear smells, can you?" Adam said, confused, then leaned toward CJ. "Or is that a Superman power?" he whispered.

"Having a good sense of smell is a super power, yes, but ears can't smell things and noses can't hear things, silly boy," CJ answered in a quiet voice, giving Adam a light tickle and eliciting a laugh. "Anyway, Daddy's not super right now, so I have to rely on your nose, or Mrs. Owens' nose."

"Is there a place to change the girls here?" Christy asked, still looking around.

CJ patted Adam's legs and told him to hop up. "We usually change Katie in her bedroom. It's not too far away," he said to her, then braced himself against the chair, mentally preparing himself for the surge of pain that would come when he stood. Before he had a chance to rise, Christy was by his side.

"Should you be standing?" she asked, putting a hand on his arm. "I heard you have gunshot wounds?"

CJ relaxed for a moment. "My surgeon-slash-boss-slash-adoptive father told me that it was good for me," he replied. "And he should know. I think he took out more than one psycho while injured worse than I am now."

She raised an eyebrow. "You mean Bruce Wayne?" she asked, and he had to remind himself how new to the family secret she was.

"Also Batman," CJ said, and she blanched. "And yes, I'm surprised he's still alive, too."

Christy's eyes got a faraway look in them, but she didn't say anything. It was another in a long line of new revelations for her to absorb, though CJ figured if she was in Wayne manor under these circumstances, then she deserved to know. Still somewhat dazed,

she followed CJ over toward the girls, and scooped up Lilly as CJ picked up Kate. Together, they made their way out of the room.

Adam bounced along beside him as he walked stiffly down the hallway. As CJ and Christy made small talk, Adam looked back and forth between them, and after a while his expression seemed to settle into an impish grin. Once there was finally a lull in the conversation, he turned toward CJ and hopped a couple more times. "Is it okay to tell her my secret?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, it's okay. And thank you for asking first," CJ said, but the last part was lost as Adam immediately turned toward Christy. "My Grandpa is Superman," he blurted out.

"Is that so?" Christy asked. She seemed rather wide-eyed at the statement, though it was hard not to smile at Adam's enthusiasm.

"Yeah, it's cool! And he flies, I saw it! And he said I could go with him but it had to be our secret."

"That sounds like fun," Christy said.

"Is Daddy cool, too?" CJ asked, eliciting a snort from Adam.

"I guess. But, I mean, you don't fly...."

For the first time that CJ could remember, Christy laughed lightly.

"Hey bud, why don't you run on ahead? Maybe Grandpa Bruce needs some comic relief," CJ said, which seemed to be all the suggestion that Adam needed to go skipping down the corridor well ahead of them. CJ shifted Katie in his arms. "If this is how he keeps secrets, he's not getting the code to the garage until he's twenty."

"This is all so...new and strange to me," Christy said with a shake of her head. She turned toward him. "How did you handle it as his age? The big secret, I mean?"

"Oh, I had no idea until I was 14 or so."

Her pace faltered. "Really? Why would you keep secrets within your family? And weren't you always...super?"

"Super!" Kate yelled at that moment, wiggling a little in CJ's arms, causing him to smile.

"That's the thing – we were perfectly normal kids. We weren't bench pressing bulldozers or peeking at girls through the locker room walls. We played little league – in Jon's case, badly – or football or in the band. The simple fact is that there was no reason for us to know. It wasn't about trust, it was about the nature of kids. If I'd have known the big secret when I was five...." He grinned. "As far as I was concerned, Superman existed in the same category as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy – cool people who did awesome things and were kinda magic. I wouldn't have been able to resist telling most of Metropolis that I was related to an almost mythical being."

"I guess I never thought of that," Christy said, regaining her momentum.

"If I had my choice, Adam wouldn't know right now, either. He doesn't need the pressure of trying to keep that quiet. But what's done is done. Thanks, Dad." They walked in silence for a moment, CJ's mind chewing on where to take the conversation. "So I imagine it's been a bit overwhelming for you" has asked, glancing at her.

She shook her head and kept her eyes on the ground in front of her. "It's tough," she said. "I just have a hard time believing that Clark Kent is Superman, that you're Laura's brother, that my son married a girl who flies."

CJ cocked his head. "Why?" he asked, genuinely curious. When no answer was immediately forthcoming, they settled into an uncomfortable silence, though he was determined to not let it last. Something about getting shot, about surviving a near death experience, made him suddenly feel philosophical. He could have the same conversation with Christy that he'd had dozens of times with those new to the secret, about the value of family and blah blah blah, but he really didn't feel like doing that now. Any anyway, he felt like his companion might benefit more from a

different perspective, and that's what he intended to give her.

"When you're a kid, you start out looking at the world in superficial terms – you see what you're meant to see, at least until someone shows you what's under the surface. But you also haven't yet had a lifetime of people telling you how to interpret what you're seeing. There's a reason kids see dinosaurs and unicorns in the clouds – their imaginations haven't been beaten into submission yet. The world was fun and interesting when you were a kid because it was so full of mysteries. Then you solve all those mysteries, learn the truth behind them, and a little of the color seems to bleach out of everything. Santa Claus isn't some magic guy, he's just your parents giving you gifts they bought at the same store you shop in every week. You let yourself believe that if he isn't real, then neither are any of your other heroes, and usually find out pretty fast that you're right. Every time another sports star goes to jail for beating up his girlfriend or another politician is indicted for bribery or money laundering or just being a general slimeball, a little light disappears from the world.

"Superman's no different, but is completely different at the same time. He's real, you can see him on the news or flying in the sky above your town. Maybe if you're lucky, you'll see him up close, stopping a bullet that had your name on it. But at the same time he's not real – he's a comic book, a movie. His symbol graces your coffee mug or maybe your underwear. You can believe that he's a myth even though he's obviously not, just because nobody really knows him. Until you do. But do you want to know the secret? Even after the truth behind the fairy tale comes into focus, it's still magic, because it's all so incredible and completely unbelievable. Your eyes and the analytical part of your brain end up going to war with the part of you that's always seen Superman as magic, or a caricature, or a myth, because the truth makes everything you'd ever seen or heard or been told up to that point completely wrong. And if that's wrong, what other 'truths' are wrong?" At this point, they had reached Kate's bedroom, where the changing table was located. CJ gestured toward Christy and entered the room, turning on the light as he did.

"Case in point: when you heard that there was a second generation – when my brother showed up on the scene, before there was no movie around to tell you what to believe, what did you think?"

Christy shifted Lilly to her hip and looked at her thoughtfully as CJ got down to the business of changing his daughter. "It was shocking, I guess," she said. "I'm an adult, and I know perfectly well how children are made, at least in humans. But like you said, Superman isn't human, he's... Superman. So who's to say what the story was. Nobody knew where Superman came from, he was just there one day, out of the ether. Maybe Crimson Superman came from the same place."

"And when Superwoman came along?"

"Well, by then the movie was out and there was a plausible explanation."

"Asexual reproduction was off the table?"

"Magic, too. And I never said that's what it was," Christy said with a blush. "Reproduction with someone of his own species made a lot of sense."

"And it's a lot more fun," CJ said with a wink. "You point out that Superman's not human, but wouldn't the... process involved with reproduction maybe involve some human emotions, at least in your mind? Couldn't his relationship with Ultra Woman be based on love?" CJ made a face at his daughter, trying to get her to smile despite all the heavy talk from the grownups around her. He was rewarded with grin and a squeal.

"I saw it more as a duty, I suppose. You don't need love to... reproduce, but it's something that needs to be done by beings who are the last of their kind. It's only logical."

"In a robotic kind of way," CJ muttered, shaking his head.

"So, okay, Superman and Ultra Woman have a family, kids who

start as babies and go through childhood and adolescence hidden away somewhere. Did you wonder how it was that these children could have gotten their educations – both practical and otherwise – if they spent every moment of their lives until their first rescues cooped up in some arctic fortress?"

"Crystals?" she said with a shrug, and CJ chuckled again. This time she smiled with him, then turned away to get a better look at the room. It was painted a very light pink, with white furniture and colorful prints on the wall. It was a fairly normal room for a little girl, seemingly out of place in a big, opulent mansion like Wayne Manor. It was a dichotomy, but CJ's life seemed to be all about dichotomy. "I know it all sounds ridiculous, and I know I'm guilty of not looking beyond the rumors and conventional wisdom, but the same is true of almost everyone. Superman is better than the rest of us, an almost mythical being, as you said. Mythical beings are infallible, right? They don't fall victim to the emotions that hold the rest of us back. He has transcended the human experience, and that's how he has been able to help save the world." She looked frustrated, her gaze no longer directed toward him.

"I would argue that the human experience is exactly why he's done what he's done. Do you think that Superman, and by extension his family, are capable of empathy?" CJ asked, quietly.

She looked toward him with a rush of emotion. "Obviously. Superman is one of the most empathetic people I know."

"People," CJ said with a nod and a smile, recognizing that small admission for what it was. She seemed surprised as he repeated the word back to her, then a realization seemed to come. "To empathize with someone, you need to understand what they're feeling. Could you talk someone who is suicidal down from the ledge if you don't have at least a basic understanding of what it's like to feel hopeless? Would you put your life on the line for the sake of others if you didn't understand what your sacrifice would mean to those you save? And more importantly, would you keep going out despite homicidal billionaires, government agents, and crime kingpins if it didn't mean something deeper?"

Moisture gathered in the corners of her eyes, and she shook her head. Her expression spoke of a new understanding.

"And love? Is that possible from your heroes, do you think?" CJ asked, a twinkle in his eye.

She looked lovingly at her granddaughter, then back toward him. "It appears so."

"Nobody's infallible, not even a superman. I guess I never had to struggle with that realization because I lived under the same roof as him when I found out, and I knew darn well what his blind spots were." At this point, CJ was done changing his daughter, so he straightened up her clothes and placed her on the floor. He stepped aside and leaned against the wall as Christy started changing Lilly. "I could write a book about my brother's imperfections."

"What about the idea that you're also an alien? Was it tough to come to grips with that?" she asked.

"Well, my genes might be half Kryptonian, but I was born in Metropolis, which makes me 100 percent Earthling. And anyway, there are a lot worse things to be than alien. It's not like people can look at me and see my ancestry. There are plenty of people out there whose differences are on full display for the world to see, people with deformities or other physical differences, people from countries where they don't look like we do here. Someone would only know I'm different if I tell them, or show them, and even then most people see those differences as being positive. The things that make me and Dad and Laura and Jon different also make us able to help people. It really is pretty cool, if you think about it, and that's always been how I've viewed my alien half – as an opportunity to make a positive mark on the world."

She smiled and shook her head a couple times. "You make it sound so simple," she said, her eyes fixated on her granddaughter.

“Are you always this positive? Never any dark clouds on your horizon?”

“I mean, I was shot yesterday. There’s that,” he said, his voice taking on its usual joking quality now that they were past the emotional part of the conversation. She looked at him in mild annoyance. “Seriously, though, I have plenty of tragedy in my past. But I guess I figured out that brooding over the past doesn’t help the present. And the future. . . .” He gestured toward his daughter. “That’s the real adventure.”

“I just hope Lilly holds the same attitude,” she said, her expression tender. “I don’t want her to feel burdened by all this.”

“She’ll be fine, I’m sure,” CJ said, watching his own daughter toddle around the room and explore. “She has great parents who will point her down the right path. The teenage years may be interesting, but that’s probably true for any kid. Hers will just have more. . . setting things on fire with her vision. But Laura had to go through that, so she’ll know what to say to make it work out.”

Christy looked like she wanted to smile, but there was still some worry there, which CJ supposed was to be expected. Loving someone makes you want their happiness above anything else, and whatever her shortcomings, it was evident that Christy loved her granddaughter. Given everything that he’d already said so far during their conversation, CJ doubted there was anything else that he could say to assuage her fears, but he supposed that more exposure to his family could go a long way toward doing just that. In a matter of moments, Christy finished changing Lilly, then she picked her up and made her way back toward the hallway and the living area. CJ called for Kate, then grabbed her hand as she approached, and together they followed behind.

After standing still for a few minutes, the movement caused a new surge of pain, and he was aware that some unintended grunts managed to escape his mouth. “Still in pain?” Christy asked, looking back toward him over her shoulder. He nodded. “Are you taking anything for it?”

“They gave me some sort of voodoo juice when this happened, but I couldn’t think straight when it was in me, so I let it wear off. I can lose my strength and every other super power and not be any worse off, but without my mind. . . .”

“Ibuprofen won’t slow you down,” Christy said. “You have that around here, surely?”

“My wife probably does. I don’t know. That stuff hasn’t worked for me before. . . not that I’ve ever needed it.”

“Take a few of those and it’ll help. You’ll probably think more clearly if you don’t have to deal with the pain,” she said in a motherly way.

“What will help more is getting my powers back,” he answered, aware of how stubborn he sounded. Surely a little ibuprofen wouldn’t hurt anything, and would get pushed out of his system as soon as everything was back to normal. Maybe it was just pride talking, but he wanted to do this without the benefit of any chemical help. Besides, if it all went according to plan, he should be back to his old self in a matter of hours.

“But, how will you get them back? Laura said she didn’t know what happened to them.”

“We have a theory. . . really, the only theory that makes sense. So we’re going to follow it through and disable the technology that did this.”

“Without. . . flying or punching or cutting into it with heat vision?” Her voice sounded skeptical, but CJ smiled slyly.

“The mind is more powerful than any of those powers put together,” he said, pointing to his temple. “Just ask my mother. No matter what some theoretical bad guy does to us physically, as long as we have our minds, there’s always hope. Villains always seem to discount the fact that there’s intelligence behind the powers.”

Christy nodded appreciatively. “It IS hard to see past the more flashy stuff,” she said, and it was his turn to nod. There was a

reason that the Superman comics and books and movies and cartoons were so popular, and it wasn’t because of any hidden educational value. Superman was sometimes shown as being clever, but mostly it was all about using the powers, sometimes in creative ways. The comics especially were notorious for being big slug fests with equally powered aliens. CJ didn’t really understand the appeal, himself, but he had always been more cerebral.

“That’s not just true of superheroes. I played college football, I get it. Everyone always seemed surprised when athletes showed up in the honors classes.” He shrugged. “It is what it is. Anyway, we’re going to get out of this mess by being smarter than the baddies give us credit for.”

“I suppose that means you need me to watch the kids for a little longer?” she asked.

“If you would, thanks. Saving the world can get rather. . . intense.” He looked at his watch. “Fortunately, my brother should be setting our plan in motion in a few minutes. Hopefully we’ll have everything wrapped up by dinner.”

As they reached the living room, CJ kissed his daughter and left her with Lilly and Christy. Then he made his way back to his computer, opening it up and ensuring that all the programs he needed to hack the satellite were running and ready to go. He also used the land line to get in touch with Matt and Bruce, who were at various locations around the house, and let them know that it was about time to get started on the plan. While CJ hacked into the satellite, Matt and Bruce would utilize the computer in the Batcave and their newly established connection to Orbital Technologies to dig for incriminating files, design information, and correspondence housed on the company’s mainframe, for the aim of building a case against whoever orchestrated the scheme. The amount of time available to find the information would likely be short – if the company had an IT person worth their salt, they’d probably figure out they’re being hacked almost as soon as it happened – so they would have to move quickly and know what to look for. At least they took precautions to ensure that the company or other Federal authorities wouldn’t be able to trace the hack back to them.

About five minutes after Jon’s interview was scheduled to start, CJ began to see activity in his windows, and the pings that his programs were sending to the company mainframe began to yield responses. He sat bolt upright and began typing furiously, trying to determine the layout of the system and navigate his way to where he needed to be. A few moments later, his cell phone rang. The caller ID indicated that it was Jon.

“We’re in,” CJ said into the phone, even before giving a greeting. He uncomfortably wedged the phone between his good shoulder and his ear and continued typing.

“Oh. That didn’t take long, I guess,” the voice on the end said, but it wasn’t Jon.

CJ’s typing paused, and his eyebrows drew together. “Who-?”

“Oh, sorry, it’s Cruz. I’m doing the dirty work today, I guess.”

A grin crept across CJ’s face. This was an interesting development. Jon had dragged his father-in-law into the scheme, and left him to do the hard part. He didn’t think Jon had that in him, but. . . maybe desperation led people to do things they wouldn’t otherwise. “How’s that work?” CJ asked, then shifted his focus back to the computer.

“Well, one of us had to do it, and I’m lousy at interviewing people,” he answered, sounding self-deprecating and confident at the same time. CJ had met Cruz, of course, though not more than a couple times, and what he remembered was someone who preferred to fade into the background. He didn’t draw attention to himself, didn’t say much, but his eyes burned with intelligence, and the things he did say made it plain that he was more observant than others realized. Maybe he was the perfect person to help implement a scheme to break into a major company, CJ mused. It was likely that nobody would even remember him after the deed

was done. “So, do I need to do anything else here?” Cruz continued. “I don’t know how much longer the secretary will be gone. She just said she had to go to the bathroom....”

“You can remove the USB drive from the computer. It’s done its job,” CJ said, then repeated some promising file paths under his breath to remember where he had been. “I don’t suppose your secretary has some sort of manual lying around detailing how to access their satellite control systems?” he asked, intending the question to be rhetorical. Of course there would not be an obvious clue in plain sight, not in a sane and rational world.

“Hold on a sec,” Cruz said, and CJ could hear the shuffle of papers. “As a matter of fact....”

“Get out! Really?” CJ said, pausing his typing and grabbing for a pen and his notepad.

“I’m not kidding. It’s a draft or something that the secretary was helping to put together. ‘Guide for Major Satellite Operations.’ Boring title.”

“Awesome title, at least for us” CJ said.

The sound of pages turning came from the other end of the line. “The server is called Copernicus,” Cruz said, flipping more pages. “Runs all programs through a test machine before uploading...there’s a guy called Watson in charge of program development.”

“Watson, good stuff,” CJ said, then put down the pen and started looking for the server that Cruz mentioned. “Bingo,” he said, a treasure trove of information popping up on his screens. “Look, this has been a tremendous help. I can’t thank you enough. Don’t get yourself in trouble, okay? You can put everything back and play it cool now.”

“Cool. Right,” he heard Cruz say. “Good luck.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” CJ said with a smile, then ended the call. Everything was there, right in front of him, in folders that were clearly named. He could pull up the code for the program currently running on the satellites and see plainly what they were programmed to do. He saved the code to his computer, along with a few other related files, including the programs planned to run in the coming weeks. Then he wrote a program of his own in the same language used in the other programs, only this one would disable the satellites completely for no less than 100 years. Checking and rechecking the very simple program, he uploaded it to their directory, then compiled it and broadcast it to the satellites. Almost immediately, the background hue of the room changed, and a glance toward the window revealed a magnificent yellow glow behind the curtains.

“Yes,” he yelled, raising his arms over his head. Although the motion still caused him pain, he knew that it would only take a matter of minutes before his wounds would be a mere memory. He quickly moved his computer to the side table and pushed up out of his chair, taking a couple long steps to the window and throwing open the drapes. Glorious beams of pure, full-spectrum sunlight shone across him as he stood there, and he instantly felt invigorated, more energetic, and with that came a sort of euphoria. The sensation was like taking a warm shower on a cold day, only amplified many times. It felt better than the best massage he had ever received, recharged him more than the best meal he had ever eaten or the deepest sleep he had ever taken. Without hesitation, he pulled his shirt over his head and flung it to the ground, anxious to get more skin exposed to the light.

“I’m going outside,” he called over his shoulder, then practically sprinted toward the French doors that lead out to the patio, leaving a surprised looking Christy Owens behind.

Jon looked down toward the notebook in his lap and the list of questions written upon it, crossing off another line. The interview had been going pretty well so far, inasmuch as it had been relatively friendly and conflict-free, though it wasn’t turning out to be anything special. The vice president that he was speaking to

didn’t seem to be all that knowledgeable on the technical side of things, though he did hit all the company’s well-worn marketing points several times over. What kinds of experiments would the satellite program be carrying out? “Important missions to determine ways to combat global climate change and prevent cataclysmic damage due to the resulting change in weather patterns.” When pushed for more details, the VP only reiterated that the experiments were important and potentially groundbreaking, but would provide no further information. Who was the leadership behind the satellite program? “A dedicated team of knowledgeable personnel with years of experience on the cutting edge of science.” But no names. The whole interview had largely been slogans without much substance or heft.

Jon was about to ask another question, when the office door behind him cracked open. The VP looked up in mild annoyance at the interruption, but the visitor was not waiting for permission to enter. Pushing his way into the office, he muttered an “excuse me,” with a glance toward Jon before approaching the VP, getting almost inappropriately close, and whispering something into his ear, causing the VP to go pale. Jon’s lack of superhearing had long ago gotten old, and he hated not being able to listen in on all the office chatter or tips about potential problems. But he didn’t need superhearing to know what was being discussed here, and he felt a sudden jolt of adrenaline. If the VP was being summoned, that must mean that CJ managed to break into their system. It didn’t seem like enough time had passed for him to accomplish what he needed, but Jon hadn’t exactly been keeping a close eye on the clock.

The VP stood abruptly. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kent, but we’re going to need to cut this interview short,” he said.

Jon stood, too. “Is there a problem?” he asked innocently.

The smile on the VP’s face was completely phony. “No, no, the engineers just needed me to look at something before they finalize it. Nothing to worry about at all.” He gestured toward the door, and Jon exited the office. As he did, he noticed people scrambling around. He would gladly plant himself in that spot for a while and watch the chaos unfold, but the VP was ushering him back toward the lobby, and he ostensibly had no reason to believe that anything was going wrong.

As they reached the lobby, the VP shook his hand and wished him well, then practically sprinted back toward the chaos. At the receptionist’s desk, Cruz was still leaning lazily against the counter, rambling at the bored looking secretary about the finer points of the latest hit baking show. “Oh, mister Kent. Back so soon?” he asked, perfectly unfazed by the action around him.

Jon looked around, noticing that people were now crossing the lobby toward his location, panicky expressions on their faces. “Looks like I picked a heck of a time to show up. My host said that there was nothing going on, but you could sure fool me.”

Cruz pushed away from the counter. “Hey, you’re a reporter, right? Maybe you picked the perfect time to come here. I’d pay a quarter to know what the hubbub is.”

While Cruz spoke, the secretary’s phone rang. Her responses were nothing interesting – a few one-word answers and some grunts. But once she hung up the phone, she stood and motioned toward the door. “The boss says no visitors,” she said. “We’ve had a security breach and need to close up shop to deal with that.”

“Now THAT sounds interesting,” Cruz said with a smile.

Jon nodded and scribbled in his notebook. “Security breach, huh?” he said, causing the secretary’s eyes to widen. “He didn’t happen to give any additional information, did he?”

She stepped sideways around the counter and began to shoo them toward the exit. “No, he didn’t. Thanks for visiting,” she said, inching them closer to the door.

“Come on, Mr. Martinez,” Jon said. “Looks like it’s time to go.” With a shrug, Cruz turned toward the door and walked out with Jon close behind. As soon as the door closed, he heard Cruz

suppressing a laugh, which caused Jon to grin. Walking a few more steps and emerging from under the canopy, his grin widened, and he found himself stopping, his face turning skyward and his eyes closing as the sun washed over him.

“Jon?” he heard Cruz say from what sounded like far away, and the spell was broken. Reluctantly, Jon lowered his gaze and began moving toward Cruz’s truck again. “Is something wrong?”

“Can you feel it?” Jon asked, gesturing toward the sky. “Better yet, can you see it?”

“It does seem brighter,” Cruz said, shading his eyes and looking up.

“CJ did it,” Jon said quietly, feeling almost giddy. “The sun is yellow again.” As he reached the door to the truck, he pulled it open, then tossed his notebook into the back, followed by his suit jacket and tie. As quickly as he could with his bandaged hand, he unbuttoned the top couple buttons on his shirt and undid the buttons on his cuffs, rolling his sleeves up to the elbows. Cruz gave him an amused smile, then climbed into the driver’s seat. After a minute Jon, too, sat down, then started laughing, which also caused Cruz to laugh. Jon laughed until his sides hurt, then laughed some more, though he wasn’t entirely sure why. He just knew that he felt fantastic, and the laughter seemed to clear any lingering negative thoughts out of his mind. Finally, as things started to calm down, he extended his right hand toward Cruz. “I can’t thank you enough for your help with this.”

Cruz took the offered hand immediately, then pulled Jon toward him and wrapped his other arm around him in a one-armed hug. “It was my pleasure. This was a lot of fun. I never knew I had it in me to be an actor.”

Jon hugged him back. “You never know until you try, right?”

They pulled apart, and Cruz looked at him with respect and maybe a touch of awe. “You rub off on a person, you know?”

Jon blushed and looked away. “Not used to being the hero of the story?” he asked, and Cruz chuckled again, then started up the car.

“You’re the hero – this was all your plan. I haven’t been the hero of any story for a long time,” he said quietly, gripping the wheel and looking off into the distance. “I should be thanking you. I’ve felt more alive this weekend than I can ever remember.”

Jon shrugged. “All I did was take advantage of your hospitality, then drag you into one of our schemes. You did the hard stuff – you took the initiative to even see me in the first place, you gave me a place to stay and an ear to bend, then you carried out the hard part of the plot. Make no mistake, I was the sidekick this time around,” Jon said, and this time it was Cruz’s turn to blush.

It was quiet in the car for a few minutes as they pulled away from the office and back out onto the streets. “Well, I just wanted to thank you for being you,” Cruz said, then looked at him with a smile. “And for bringing a little excitement to my dull existence.”

“You’re welcome?” Jon said and they both grinned at each other.

“See, was that so hard?” Cruz asked.

“No, I suppose not.”

“So...going home how?” Cruz asked.

“No, it’ll take a while to charge up. But maybe shortly after we get back....”

Silence dragged on again for a few long minutes. “I don’t suppose I could persuade you to bring me with you when you go back to Metropolis?” Cruz asked.

Jon smiled. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said, and Cruz guided his truck onto the interstate and back toward Corpus Christi.

Laura Kent was aware of the change in the light coming in through the window the second the satellites were disabled. It was like someone turning on a light switch, or the world coming out

from under a thick, red tinted cloud. It had been hard to grasp all the ways the world had looked different prior to that, from the violet hue to the sky to the intense pink of the sunlight, the way that the shadows seemed darker and the world generally more gloomy. But having the sun shine with its full intensity instantly cheered her spirits, and she knew she wasn’t alone. Even the plants seemed perkier. The blinds in Jen’s office had already been wide open, but with the change in light quality, Laura found herself drawn to the window, staring up at the sky as all the other thoughts that had been swirling around in her mind just went away. The dull headache that had persisted the whole day, the stiffness in her body and the sometimes sharp pain in her back from her crash landing, almost immediately began to fade away.

“Go,” Jen said to her, breaking the spell. Laura looked toward her sister-in-law in confusion, and was greeted with a knowing smile. “Outside,” Jen continued. “You need all the sunlight you can get. And I think I can handle the research for a while.”

Laura nodded gratefully, fighting the urge to punch the window and leap outside from that very spot. “I’ll be back before too long,” she said, then turned to leave the room.

“Don’t hurry on my account,” Jen called behind her. “Take your time.”

“Okay,” Laura called out, then started almost jogging down the hallway toward the nearest door to the exterior, which led out from Bruce’s study. He was down in the cave, she knew, which meant there was little danger that she might run into him. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Bruce, per se, but he was an extremely difficult person for her to read. She could never quite tell what he was thinking, and when he gave her a hard stare, the chances were probably fifty-fifty that he would end up saying nothing to her, which was incredibly unnerving. Was he assessing something about her appearance? Her latest action on the hero scene? Did she say something to someone that he didn’t like? Did she just have something stuck in her teeth? He was so different from anyone else in her life, and the total opposite of her Dad in so many ways. Eventually, Laura came to the decision that she wasn’t going to let him bother her, that it didn’t matter what he thought of her, or if he disapproved of her in some way. Still, she did her best to avoid him whenever possible.

The study was very dark, which wasn’t unusual. A door off the back side of the room led to a balcony, which overlooked the back garden of the house, roughly 8 feet below. Normally such a drop wouldn’t bother her, but today her ankles fairly screamed out in warning as she reached the balcony railing. She looked up at the sun, now unobscured by glass, and let the rays wash over her and give her power. Without another thought, she jumped over the railing, landing on the grass below a second later, pain free. With a smile, she strode toward the garden, and the many varieties of carefully maintained flowers. The term “stopping to smell the roses” took special meaning to her in that moment, so she decided to do just that. She felt happy, amazing, really, and the fragrant smells of the flowers around her only seemed to reinforce that. Time lost all meaning as she wove between the plants, eventually wandering around to the other side of the mansion, where the patio that hosted most of the family gatherings was. There, in the one occupied patio chair, she saw her brother. Quickly, she made her way toward him, realizing as she went that he was shirtless, and fast asleep. Stopping next to him, she also noticed a smile on his face. At that moment it occurred to her that she was tired, too, and that a nap in the sun wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, especially if it meant feeling whatever it was that put a smile on CJ’s face. With a shrug, she plopped down in the chair next to him, laid out, and quickly fell asleep.

She awoke to the feeling of fingers brushing her bangs away from her forehead. She blinked a couple times against the bright sun in her eyes, and when her eyes adjusted, she saw Matt’s smiling face hovering above her. The pressure against her side

made it clear that he was perched next to her on the chair. “You don’t need to wake up,” he said softly. “I just saw you out here, so peaceful and beautiful, and I just had to touch you to make sure you’re real.”

She grinned seductively. “I’m pretty sure I’m real. But then again, maybe I’m dreaming. Maybe you’re just a figment of my imagination.”

He smiled and moved his face closer to hers. “Let’s find out,” he said, and she closed her eyes, waiting for a kiss that never came.

At that moment, a happy wail came from near the house, followed by the sound of Matt’s mother calling Lilly’s name. Laura turned toward her daughter and smiled, though Matt’s expression as he sat up next to her spoke of a moment interrupted. His disappointment only lasted for a second, then he was rising from the chair and jogging with open arms toward their daughter. Laura sat up slowly, watching the scene in front of her, cautiously feeling for aches and pains as she moved her muscles. There were none. Her smile widened as she finally stood, feeling like her old self. Just for effect, she willed herself up in the air, and beamed as her feet left the ground, suspending her inches above the patio. She landed again with a gentle touch, then walked toward her family. Behind Matt, Lilly, and Christy, Adam was now barreling out of the house, making a bee line toward CJ, who was just emerging from his nap. Taking pity on him, Laura took a step to the side and stuck out her arm, snagging her nephew in a fit of giggles.

“What are you doing there, champ?” she asked, holding his wiggling form in an embrace that felt more like a wrestling hold. “And why are you so mean to your poor daddy? Can’t you see he’s sleeping?”

“I’m awake,” CJ said from his chair, his voice still heavy with sleep.

“Because I feel like running and then running some more,” Adam said. “I want to jump and hide and play and Daddy always does those things with me.”

Laura felt her grip loosening, and she looked at him in surprise. “Did you get into a stash of cotton candy or something?” she asked, putting up no opposition as he wiggled free.

In the distance, Lilly squealed again, which elicited a similar response in Katie.

“He’s five,” CJ said and Adam barreled into him, though Laura had delayed him just enough that CJ had time to brace himself against the onslaught.

“I just feel happy!” Adam said, giving CJ a hug, then proceeding to run laps around the patio. Laura looked at him, then looked up at the sun.

“What if…” Laura said, turning her attention back toward CJ and pointing at the sky.

“He’s five,” CJ repeated, and Laura shrugged. She looked toward the girls and back toward CJ. He was now rising from the chair, flexing his muscles one by one as he did, a smile crossing his face as he found himself pain free, as well. He reached down and pulled the bandage covering his bullet wound off, revealing a perfectly normal, untouched area of skin.

Laura nodded toward him. “Looks like you’re feeling pretty good. I know I am. I realize the kids don’t have powers yet, but they share our genes, which means that they’re… little solar capacitors, too. Isn’t it possible that they are also feeling the effects of the sun going back to normal?”

He looked too happy to be contrary. “I suppose anything’s possible,” he said, putting his hands out and giving an agreeable smile. About that time, Adam did his third lap, and CJ turned his attention to his son. “Hey, bud,” he said, pointing toward the far end of the yard, where some shrubs and statuary stood. “Last one to the angel is a rotten egg.”

As the two shot off across the lawn, Laura turned to her

daughter, now held aloft by Matt. Laura jogged over and held out her arms, and soon Lilly was in them, giggling with delight as Laura planted raspberries on her cheeks. A sideways glance revealed a smile on Christy’s face at long last, and Laura knew that all was truly right with the world.

“Hey, boss man,” Matt said toward CJ, his voice quiet enough that a normal person shouldn’t have been able to hear it across the distance that currently separated them, and certainly not over a chattering five year old.

“What’s up?” CJ yelled back.

“What’s the plan for supper?” Matt asked, stepping behind Laura and making faces at his daughter.

There was a couple second delay as CJ crossed the green back toward them. He began talking once he was close enough for normal conversation. “I’m grilling out!” he said with a flourish, scooping up Adam as he attempted to run by. “Why waste a perfectly good day like this inside?”

“Amen to that,” Laura said.

“You, uh, want to go grab some esteemed guests?” CJ asked Laura with raised eyebrows.

“You should get my Dad. I mean, you can, right?” Matt asked.

Laura nodded. “Yeah, good idea. Maybe call first, though.”

“Grab Dick,” CJ said. “He’s been busting his butt out there today. He could use some family time.”

“Sometimes I think he would prefer hardened criminals to the circus here,” Matt said, and Katie screamed behind him, as if to prove the point.

“I haven’t forgotten about you, sweetheart,” CJ said to her, lumbering over and scooping her up with his free arm. He had one child in each arm now, but he looked almost unnaturally relaxed, as if it were no effort at all.

“I think the only way I get him here is if you promise to go take his place when we’re done eating,” Laura said.

CJ rolled his eyes. “Yeah, fine. I have a score to settle with the Falcone family, anyway.”

“What about Mom?” Laura asked.

“I’ll bet she’s too busy,” CJ answered. “She’s probably got the mastermind of all this nailed down and is scheduling an interview with them right now.”

“Credit where credit’s due,” Matt said. “We shared notes with her. So if she nailed down the mastermind, it really means that we did, too. So, you know, yay us.”

“We did?” CJ said, walking over toward the grill.

“While you were sleeping, some of us were working,” Matt said with a smirk.

“Hey, I disabled a satellite. I would say that made this a pretty productive day, all things considered.”

“You disabled a satellite?” Adam asked, his eyebrows drawn together. “You mean you… made it use crutches or something?”

“Or something,” CJ answered, making a face. Adam was starting to squirm now, so CJ bent over and placed him on the ground, and immediately he was on the move again. Katie, wanting to follow along, wiggled free and took off. “How about I call her?”

“That works,” Laura said.

“So, everything is okay, right?” Christy asked from behind Matt. She had been forgotten a bit during their conversation, and her face, while happy, revealed that she was a little lost.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. How have you been?” Matt asked, cupping his hand around his mom’s elbow and leading her back toward a private corner of the patio. As he did so, CJ pulled out a bag of charcoal and started arranging it inside the grill. When he was done, he squinted at the pile, grinning with satisfaction as it started glowing orange, the charcoal turning white as a small flame began licking at the outside.

“Still got it,” CJ muttered, then turned away and headed toward the house. Laura opened her mouth to say something,

realizing that she was now the only adult around to supervise the children, but her stomach picked that moment to let off a deep rumble, and she realized that her brother's time was best spent preparing their meal. If that meant she had to spend some quality time with her daughter, niece, and nephew, then she supposed that wasn't a bad trade off. She started to follow them across the yard, but she hesitated as her hearing picked up Matt's conversation with his mother.

"Lilly's been a joy," Christy said, not immediately answering Matt's question.

"I think that every day," Matt said with a half-smile. "But how are YOU?"

Laura found herself pausing and turning toward where Matt stood, just to watch the interplay. His relationship with his parents was always fascinating to her, just for how strained it always seemed, but now there was the added dimension of the family secret. Time seemed to stretch on into infinity as Christy looked at Matt, studied him, before the neutral, almost eager expression that had been on her face ever since entering the Wayne compound seemed to crumble away, replaced by sorrow. "Oh, Mattie," she answered in a raspy voice, looking away from him. "I don't know. I just don't know. I've always been the person who knew all there was to know about everyone. Turns out I don't know anything. I don't even know you anymore."

"That's not true," Matt answered, his expression now more annoyed than tender. "You were handed the world's largest secret — and a highly personal one, at that — on a silver platter. You should be overjoyed."

"I still don't know what to think about that," Christy said with a shake of her head. "But this isn't about that. This is about you. You've been, what, working for superheroes for the last few years?"

"I don't work for Sam," Matt said, his voice flat. "Or Clark or Laura or Jon. I wouldn't dream of taking money from any of them. We're family, we help each other out. We're also friends, and I enjoy spending time with them. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Were you ever going to tell me if necessity hadn't led to your wife crashing in my yard? Or is it the policy of their family to not let outsiders in on the secret?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Matt answered, his voice most definitely taking on a hard edge. He glanced toward Laura, locking eyes with her, knowing full well that she was listening in on the conversation. "Have they been anything less than hospitable and friendly to you? The Kents are the nicest and most honest people I've ever met."

"Well, the mob always seems wonderful as long as you stay on their good side. As soon as you cross them..." She put out her hands and shrugged, and Matt seemed horrified. There was a long silence as he was absolutely speechless, while Christy seemed almost smug. For a moment, Laura was sure that he was going to give her a piece of his mind, but then, inexplicably, he smiled. His posture relaxed and all tension seemed to drain out of him.

"I get it now. Even though you've spent the day getting to know Laura's family, seeing the real human beings behind the capes, you still don't understand them at all. And you fear what you don't know or don't understand. You are always so busy trying to look under the surface to find the angle, the dirt, that truly genuine people completely confound you."

Christy stepped forward and put her hand on Matt's arm, a look of concern on her face. "Honey, they can crush rocks with their bare hands. What if they have a bad day and you just so happen to be there? What if you have a fight? Make them mad?"

Matt laughed. Laura couldn't help but smile in response. In his place she'd probably blow up, tell her where she could stick her fake concern, but Matt was not like that, and he never had been. Patience has always been his defining trait, and she supposed with a mother like that, it was no wonder.

"It's okay, Mom. You're family now. Something tells me that they are going to make sure you get to know them whether you want to or not. Then you'll see that all your silly fears are just that — silly. You might also find some amazing people that have been hiding in plain sight, people that are made all the more incredible by the positive way in which they view the world in spite of all the terrible things they see. And, might I add, in spite of people like you, who seem to want to believe the worst about them despite all the evidence to the contrary."

Christy seemed frustrated at his words, and Laura thought it might be possible that they were reading her wrong. She had been guarded yet decently friendly throughout the day, and although her words seemed harsh, they were also couched in concern for Matt. "I don't believe the worst about them, I just want to be realistic."

"That's fine," Matt said, shoving his hands in his pocket. "But the first step in that is opening your eyes, and your heart." He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice. "I love my wife. I love her family. I'm happy, Mom. My life has purpose. I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not changing anything. So, I guess, you'd better get used to it." He turned his head to lock eyes with Laura again, and she felt goose bumps rise on her arms as she connected with him. He was always so damn handsome when he had that slightly mischievous twinkle in his eye, and she couldn't help but admire the way he dealt with people that anyone else would find absolutely aggravating, herself included. At that moment, she just wanted to kiss him, and he apparently knew it. "Would you like some company, darling?" he asked conversationally, even though she was halfway across the yard, and she nodded. Christy, confused, looked between them, catching the interplay. Matt smiled again, then gave her a sideways glance before ambling away.

"It's called superhearing, Mom. Laura's heard everything we've said. And, for the record, she wanted to tell you the big secret before we got married, and I was the one who said no. I had a pretty good idea of how you'd react... I'm not happy that I was right." He glanced at Christy again, then started jogging toward Laura. As soon as he was within arm's length, she reached for him and he reached for her, and they walked with hands intertwined toward the children.

"How did you get to be so...?" Laura asked.

"Awesome?"

She grinned. "I guess that's one way to put it."

He leaned in to kiss her. "Good influences?"

"Surely you're not talking about me? In your place I might've given her a little demonstration so she knew what real fear was like."

"Oh, no you wouldn't have," he said confidently, and she gave a little sideways nod, acknowledging that he was probably right. "And anyway, I was talking about your brother."

She made a face of mock surprise, but she was smiling enough that she knew she had given herself away. "It's a good thing I love you so much," she said, and he squeezed her hand. With that, they had arrived at the children, and they immediately engaged themselves in play, chasing them, playing hide and seek, pretending to be different animals. At one point, Laura hazarded a glance back toward her mother-in-law, who had now taken a seat at one of the deck chairs. She was watching them wistfully, a tear in the corner of her eye. Laura supposed she knew a little bit about what it was like to have her perspective on life changed... and maybe a little bit of her could feel some sympathy for Christy. But until Christy came to her, she doubted that she would offer any words of encouragement or wisdom. She had to figure it out herself. Until that time, all Laura could do was live her life, be happy, and not worry about what others thought.

After a few minutes, CJ came back out on the patio, carrying a large tray of food. He looked around the yard, noticing the same personnel as when he had left. "Hey Laura?" he asked. "Didn't

you have some errands to run?”

“Oh, right,” Laura said, looking toward Matt, who was pulling out his cell phone, and embarrassed expression on his face. “Guess I’ll get Dick first.” She pointed at Matt. “Keep me updated on your Dad?” He nodded, then made a gesture with his hand, indicating that she should be on her way. She leaned down and grabbed her daughter, giving her a quick hug and kiss, then then jogged off behind the shrubbery, within the private forest that surrounded the grounds, and shifted into Superspeed without any doubts.

Tom Owens stood anxiously on the front porch of his home, craning his neck to look up into the sky, seeing nothing but the usual sights – birds, insects, the occasional passing aircraft, clouds. It had been maybe five minutes since Matt had called, asking him if he wanted to have supper with them in Gotham City. He had said yes without a second thought, anxious to have to opportunity to see his granddaughter again. Then Matt had explained that they would be dining at Wayne manor, with the Waynes and their children, and it had caused him to pause, if only for a moment. Tom wasn’t someone who was overawed with celebrity, and unlike his wife, he couldn’t care less about their lives, preferences, or political affiliations. As far as he was concerned, people were just people, but it was easy enough to say that coming from a world where celebrities were very far away. Faced with the prospect of dining with one...it was a little heady. But then he remembered that he had already dined with a much bigger celebrity – Superman, of all people – and the headiness passed.

The fact that Superman was now a family member was taking a while to get used to. It was odd to think of him as just another man on the street, a man with a family, no less. But it made sense. What made absolutely no sense was the fact that Superwoman had chosen his son to start a family with. Tom had always found Laura Kent to be incredibly beautiful, much more beautiful than any hypothetical girl that he had ever dreamt would be interested in his son. But every time he saw them together, it was evident just in the way that they acted around each other, the way that they looked at each other, that they were deeply in love. He was proud to have her as his daughter-in-law, and that pride only grew once he found out who she really was. But the pride came with concern, and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t been worried about her over the last day or two, ever since she came crashing down on their lawn. Even now that she supposedly had her powers back, he found that the concern remained, and he supposed it probably always would. Knowing that she was out there doing outwardly dangerous things, putting her life at risk... It was probably twice as bad for Matt, he realized with a pang. It was his wife out there, doing those things. How he could stand watching her walking into fires or flying out into space Tom didn’t know.

Suddenly, a form appeared next to him, feminine, clad in black spandex with a metallic pink S shield on her chest. Tom startled, then placed a hand over his heart to calm himself, realizing it was Laura. “Sorry about that,” she said, putting her hands his shoulders to steady him. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

He took a couple deep breaths and calmed himself, shaking his head as he did. “No need to apologize. I guess I’m just not used to it.”

“I didn’t want the neighbors to see me coming here like this,” she muttered, and he smiled.

“It’s fine, really,” he said, and she removed her hands from him. “So, uh, how does this work?”

“Well, typically, I would put my arm around your waist,” she said, moving beside him and demonstrating. “And you can put your arm around my shoulder, or wherever you’re comfortable, I guess.”

He tentatively reached his arm up toward her shoulder, but

shied away before touching her. It just felt wrong touching his son’s wife like that, but before he could withdraw his hand, she was rising up into it, and suddenly they were both no longer on the ground. He was aware of letting out a yelp as they rose quickly, his hand now clutching at her shoulder with a death grip. She laughed lightly. “So, I see everything’s back to normal,” he said, the ground flashing by below his at an alarming rate, though he could barely feel any air hitting his face.

“As normal as it gets for me, I guess,” she answered with a wrinkle of her nose. Even behind the mask, he could see her, recognize her face clearly, and he wondered how it was that he had never seen it before. Perhaps he had never really looked.

“So what caused the problem?”

She gestured toward the sky with her free hand. “The sun. That’s what makes the powers work. Someone did something to block out some of the light frequencies, and prevented my powers from recharging. We fixed it.”

“Ah,” he said, not letting himself think too deeply about that. How the light frequencies from the sun could change, he wasn’t quite sure, but he was willing to take the statement at face value, knowing that there would probably be news stories in the coming days explaining it more deeply. After clearing the thoughts from his head, he took the opportunity to look around. The ground seemed so far away, more like an abstract canvas than anything real. People couldn’t be distinguished from the rest of the landscape, and the works of nature and man all seemed to blend together into something greater than they were when separate. It was beautiful. “Bet this is all old hat for you – the flying and all,” he said. “But do you ever just...stop and look around? Enjoy the perspective from up here?”

She gave him a knowing glance. “Quite often, actually,” she said. “It’s a great way to de-stress, and it’s so quiet. Sometimes, when the city seems too close or my problems seem like they’re too much, I’ll come up here and float...let my mind wander.”

“If I could do that, I think I wouldn’t need to worry about blood pressure anymore,” he said, and she smiled at him. It was a comfortable conversation that never pried too deep below the surface, and it continued along those lines for the rest of the relatively short flight to Gotham. Did she miss it when she couldn’t fly? Did she ever bring her husband up there? What’s her favorite thing about flying, aside from the convenience? Tom never considered himself much of a deep thinker, and he never cared much about the intimate details of the lives of others. The mundane things were interesting enough to him, and he was perfectly content with the answers. Laura, for her part, was gracious and straightforward, even though she had every reason to be shy in his presence. She was, after all, more of a stranger to him than he had ever realized. He hoped this conversation would go a long way toward changing that.

Upon arriving in Gotham, Laura flew straight to a large stone mansion situated on a rocky outcropping in the middle of the city, surrounded by trees. They swooped in so quickly that everything moved as a blur, and before Tom really knew what was happening, they had come to a stop on a patio next to a set of French doors. He was disoriented for a moment as the world seemed to catch up to them, then, after a gust of wind, he saw that Laura had changed into normal clothing and was reaching for the door handle. The door opened, and on the other side were a bunch of people, most of whom he recognized, though there were some he didn’t. Stumbling into the room on shaky legs, he spotted his wife. She didn’t notice his presence.

Thoughts of a reunion with Christy were put on hold as both his son and Sam Wayne quickly approached him, smiles on their faces. Matt had his daughter perched on his hip. “Hey, Dad,” Matt said. His expression seemed almost too eager. “You remember Sam?”

Tom nodded. Sam Wayne and his father had been at Matt’s

wedding, and Tom remembered being surprised and confused at the friendship between the two of them. It was interesting that Matt was now hanging out with the moneyed elite, but for the life of him, Tom couldn't fathom how they would have even met in the first place. "Sure. This is your place, huh?" Tom asked, though Sam only smiled, poking his thumb toward the crowd.

"Bruce was here first," Sam said. Tom was able to easily find Bruce Wayne in the crowd, though the billionaire, known to be private and distant, seemed to be happily giving his attention to Sam's youngest child.

"Dad, now that the Kents' secret is out, we wanted to put all the cards on the table," Matt said. Tom was aware that his eyebrows had pinched together, but as Laura walked toward Matt and picked up Lilly, he was able to see her next to Sam, and he sensed what was coming next before it was said. "Sam is Laura's bother. The one who was in a plane crash."

"I see," Tom said, and he did. It wasn't a strong resemblance, but it was enough. "That makes everything make more sense, I guess."

Matt and Sam nodded in unison. "He's not just some random rich guy I met and became friends with."

Sam arched an eyebrow and glanced sideways. "I was a random superhero you ran into instead."

"You weren't random. I knew who I'd find," Matt said, a teasing quality in his voice. The admission clarified everything, almost like putting in a missing puzzle piece, and it heartened Tom to see Matt interacting with someone who was obviously a true friend. He seemed so at ease here, so relaxed. The idea of Matt in a huge city like Gotham had always been strange to Tom, especially since all his happiest memories of him had been made in the woods or the country, in a tent or in front of a campfire. But here he was part of something. Here there were people that complimented him, that pulled him into their family, and now he looked as much at home in this large, Gothic mansion as he ever did back in Ohio.

At that moment, an unfamiliar woman came and grabbed Sam's arm. "I know it's fun to make mischief with Matt, honey, but the rest of us are hungry." She raised her eyebrows as she talked to Sam, who smiled back at her affectionately. She then turned toward Tom and raised her arm. "I'm Jen, by the way. I don't think we've met."

Tom bowed slightly. "Pleased to meet you."

"My lovely wife is correct," Sam said to him. "I have been neglecting my duties as chef. Please excuse me." He looked at the wall behind where Tom was standing and frowned, almost as if he could see something that nobody else could. Before he could make a move, though, Jen tugged at his arm, and he was smiling again. They gave each other a quick kiss, then went their separate ways, Sam out the door Tom had recently entered, and Jen back toward the rest of the assembled family.

Matt sighed and moved so that he was standing next to Tom, surveying the room. "Do you want me to introduce you around, or do you want to go see Mom?" he asked. Christy was sitting alone at the large table in the center of the room, obviously set apart from everyone else, an odd expression on her face – not sad but not happy, not contented but also not fearful. It looked as if you could say a word to her, and she would be just as likely to cry as to laugh. It was the expression of someone thoroughly overwhelmed.

"Looks like she needs me," Tom said in a low voice. "Besides, I think everyone else here was at your wedding?" The wedding was now over a year ago, and his memory wasn't what it had once been. The faces mostly looked familiar enough, though.

"Okay," Matt said, gesturing toward his mother. "Good luck," he added rather cryptically, and Tom raised an eyebrow. Before he could probe Matt on what the problem was, he had returned to Laura's side, placing an arm around her waist as he bent down to kiss her. The two began to walk away, giving their attention to

their daughter, and Tom found himself alone. He took a moment to survey the room, smiling a little at what he saw. A man with a familiar face was opposite him, with Adam Kent standing next to him, hands on his hips, looking at him through squinted eyes. The slightly familiar man was wearing dark colored tights and boots, and a black belt with a lot of pockets and compartments, pieces of unfamiliar hardware hanging from it. His chest was bare, and his eyes were uncovered, though there were smudges of black around them. His hair looked like he had been doing vigorous exercise recently.

"You're not Batman, because that's Daddy," Adam said, looking the stranger up and down slowly.

"Correct," the man answered, a little half grin on his face as he looked at his inquisitor. The lines on his face made him appear much older than Jen and Matt and Laura, too old to be wearing spandex, but his bare chest seemed to be that of a younger man. "But your Dad wasn't the first Batman, either."

Adam's eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed again. "But if you were Batman, then Daddy wouldn't need to be him," he answered.

The unfamiliar man seemed to appreciate the logic of the statement. "I can't argue with that," he said, then leaned down. "So who do you think was Batman before your Dad?"

Adam shook his head. "Not you," he said, eliciting a laugh from his companion. "But your eyes look like you wear a mask. Grandpa doesn't wear a mask."

"True," he answered. "So, I wear a mask, work in Gotham, and am not Batman. Who does that make me?"

"Robin?" Adam said slowly, unsurely.

"Maybe a long time ago," the man answered, a momentary flash of emotion on his face. "But not anymore."

The door behind Tom opened, and Sam breezed into the room, carrying a tray full of assorted grilled items. "Jeez, Dick, you seriously need a publicist," he said, making it clear that he had heard the entire exchange.

"I don't go out there for the publicity," the man, Dick, said as he put his hands on his hips.

"Well you don't appear to be getting credit, either," Sam said, quickly moving toward the table and putting the tray down. "I mean, every five year old in town should be playing with your action figure. Instead, they're playing with Batman figures, even though everyone knows he's...shall we say unfriendly?"

"Call it integrity," Dick said with a raise of the eyebrow.

"Are you saying Superman lacks integrity because he has a movie, books, and his symbol on about every product known to man? For shame, sir," Sam said in a joking tone, and even Tom smiled. Dick couldn't stop himself, either.

"Touche," he said, then turned back to Adam. "So, come on. What hero am I?" Adam, flummoxed, just shook his head. "I'm Nightwing."

"Nightwing?" Adam said, making a face. "What's a Nightwing? I've never heard of that."

Dick ruffled his hair and slowly began to make his way toward the table. "Ask your Grandpa. I got the name from a story he told me once."

Tom took that as his cue and began to move, too. "It wouldn't kill you to talk to a reporter once in a while," Sam said, causing Dick to roll his eyes. "I think I might be able to find one for you somewhere."

"When was the last time Batman talked to a reporter, smart guy?" Dick asked, pulling out a chair. "And don't say the last time your folks were here. I mean officially."

"Officially he doesn't have to," Sam said. Tom reached his wife, pulling out the chair next to her, though it hardly seemed to register with her. Now that he was closer, he could see that her eyes held an almost vacant, far away gaze, even though the conversation happening in front of her was fascinating, at least as

far as he was concerned. “Everyone knows who Batman is and what he does. All I have to do is occasionally flash a cape past a security camera or swoop past a public gathering and it gets everyone buzzing. I think Bruce and I, and now Adam, are the only ones in town who even know your name.”

“I knew it!” Jen and Laura said in unison, smiling at each other before Laura turned a challenging glance toward Sam.

“How about an interview with Gotham Magazine?” Jen asked Dick. “I think all the housewives in town want to know your brand of shampoo. And your workout routine.”

“I rest my case,” Dick said, sitting and reaching for the food. Everyone else in the room began to dig in, which calmed the discussion somewhat, though there was still amount of laughter and small talk. Christy sat unmoving, and it took Tom putting his hand on her arm to bring her out of her trance, and life seemed to come back into her eyes as she finally turned to see him. A small smile even seemed to form on her face, before quickly falling away again.

“Oh, hi Tom. When did you get here?”

“A few minutes ago.”

“Laura?”

“Yup. It was... quite an experience.”

“Hmm.” She looked away without emotion. “We’re going to have to drive home.”

“Maybe we can stay a while first,” Tom said, removing his hand from her arm. “Did you have a good day? Did you spend any time with Lilly?”

“Most of the afternoon,” Christy said, her features becoming more animated at the mention of her granddaughter. “I think I spent more time with her today than I have for her entire life up to this point.”

“Well, great,” Tom said with a smile.

“She’s a good kid,” Christy said, although the way she said it made Tom think that there was a “but” coming. Instead, there was nothing, and her eyes moved toward the children, her expression turning neutral again.

“Is something wrong? Haven’t enjoyed this trip?” Tom said after a moment.

“It’s not that,” she answered, turning toward him again. “I’m truly glad to be here. I wouldn’t trade any second with Lilly for anything.” Her voice sounded sincere, if still somewhat flat. She seemed like she wanted to say more, and rather than prod her, Tom decided to give the conversation some breathing room, and wait for her to decide when to finish her thought. His stomach got the better of him after a moment, and he started reaching for food items when she finally continued.

“He never told us, Tom. About any of this.”

“Should he have?” he asked, loading food onto his plate. His wife seemed annoyed at the question.

“Of course he should have!” she said. “We’re his parents!”

“He’s a grown man,” Tom said with a shrug. “More than capable of making his own decisions.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?” he asked, moving his hands away from the food and looking at her in frustration.

“He doesn’t trust us,” she said, and her frustration seemed to come out. She was now quite animated, enough that everyone else in the room could probably notice, though nobody seemed to want to look their way.

This was something that had crossed Tom’s mind more than once over the past day. Why hadn’t Matt and Laura told him? The idea that it was a trust issue was certainly one that had crossed his mind, but it seemed too simplistic. And anyway, he didn’t think that his son felt that way toward them. Yes, Christy had proven herself to be a bit of a gossip hound over the years, and Tom was aware that Matt had felt burned by that in the past. And certainly Matt had distanced himself from them after high school. But

looking around, seeing this family interact, remembering Laura’s family from their wedding and how pleasant and welcoming they were, he couldn’t imagine any type of ill intent coming from them. How would that change if the whole world knew what he now knew? He couldn’t imagine how that possibility hung over their heads, what kind of fear that must cause. “Did you ever consider that the reason he didn’t say anything had nothing to do with his feelings about us?” he asked calmly, putting a hand on hers in an effort to pacify her. “This,” he added, gesturing around the room with his other hand, “is so much bigger than you or me...or him. It’s crime and violence, life and death, even the fate of the world. But it’s also family. And one member of that family is from a place so far away that it’s hard to comprehend, a world that died before he even got a chance to know it. He’s alien...different, and so are his children. Never completely fitting in, never completely normal. Can you imagine what that’s like for them?”

“In the context of all that, of life and death and crime and violence, of deep space and world threatening problems, letting us in on this little secret should mean nothing to them,” she said stubbornly.

“Or maybe it means everything. Maybe this whole thing is held together because nobody knows, and as soon as the truth gets out to the wrong person it all falls apart. If the world sees the people underneath the spandex, then the illusion fades and their world shatters.”

“Or mine does,” Christy said softly, a tear working its way down her cheek, and all other words Tom had prepared to say evaporated. Instead, he reached over and gathered her in his arms, pulling her close.

“Nothing’s changed. You know that right?” he said.

“How can you say that when you flew here today?” she asked, her voice raw with emotion. “Before today would you have ever thought that such a thing was possible?”

“No,” he said simply, then smiled, understanding something himself at that moment. “But Laura is so much more than the flying. She still is what she was. When she crashed into the yard, she didn’t stop being a student or a wife or a mother. She became more, maybe, but the core didn’t change.” He suddenly realized that he respected her for that. She knew who she was, and there were so few people out there who could say that. Matt had been smart enough to understand, and confident enough in himself to let her go be the person she needed to be. Tom found himself immensely proud of his son for that, and he wondered again how the kid he had known, the slightly awkward and lonely boy, had grown into the man before him. Tom turned to look at Matt, who was tending to Lilly, and instead saw Laura looking at him, a knowing smile on her face. Tom winked at her, bringing a blush to her cheeks, then turned back toward his wife.

“This is special,” Tom said to her, letting himself relax for the first time in a long time. “Enjoy it. Don’t create conflict where there is none. This is a well-functioning family, and I, for one, and glad to be a part of it.” With that, he dug into his food, soaking in the atmosphere around him. It was hard to tell if his words had any effect on his wife, though she did appear to be more thoughtful from that point on.

They ate their meal in silence, then joined in the discussions around them once they finished, eventually being offered the VIP tour of Wayne Manor and its grounds. As Tom walked around, escorted by his son, his wife at his side, he gained a new understanding of Matt’s life in Gotham and the people he surrounded himself with. He also understood the difference that Matt was making here, and that understanding allowed him to let go of all the insecurities and hurt feelings that had come about when Matt had left Ohio for the city all those years ago. If this was the outcome, then he was glad. And he was proud.

“Clark, can I ask you something?” Spencer North asked. The

aftermath of the skirmish in his hotel room had been a blur of police officers and hotel personnel. A half dozen officers had questioned both of them at separate locations – city police, Federal agents, representatives from the American embassy. Clark, of course, was used to dealing with the authorities, and he had weathered the questioning without much worry. He got the impression that Spencer was not used to dealing with cops, evidenced by his wide-eyed reaction to each new official with a badge. He carried himself well, though, and at the end of it all he didn't seem too frazzled, even if he didn't exactly seem to be a model of confidence, either.

They currently found themselves in Clark's room as the hotel staff prepared a new one for Spencer. Clark was on his computer typing up his notes on the whole experience, intending to email a short story into the Planet for the interim. There was a lot left to learn before he would be able to publish anything more in-depth, and he found himself anxious to call Lois and get her take on everything, and to get caught up on the news from back home. What had happened to the kids? Were they doing anything to set things right, and did they need his help with the plan? Unfortunately, his cell phone had died sometime during the night, and his charger hadn't been unpacked from the care package that had arrived that morning until after he was released from the police. The phone was currently charging up, though he hadn't had time to turn it on yet.

Spencer occupied a spot at the foot of the bed, absently flipping through channels on the television. He was due to make another appearance at the comic convention in an hour or so, though he had insisted that Clark join him as a pseudo bodyguard. Clark was pretty sure that he would be acting as moral support more than anything else, but he didn't mind too much. The convention had been fun the day before, despite the disappearance of his powers, and he had to admit that he looked forward to meeting some of Spencer's coworkers. Spencer didn't seem particularly nervous about the prospect of getting out in public again, though the channel flipping indicated that his mind was occupied.

"Sure. What's up?" Clark said, stilling his fingers and giving Spencer his undivided attention.

"You said earlier that you recognized those guys who held me captive. I know you probably told the story a dozen times already, but I'm curious... who were they? And how do you know them?"

Clark leaned back in the chair. Because they had been questioned separately, Spencer never did hear what Clark told the police. "How much time do we have?" Clark asked with a half-smile, which Spencer returned.

"As much as you need."

Clark took a second to compose his thoughts. "My wife and I do a lot of work looking into the criminal underground in Metropolis. I could point you to dozens of articles on the Planet's website that we've written over the years detailing the activities of various organizations – Intergang back in the mid 90's, various foreign terrorist organizations in the early 2000's, and political extremists in the 2010's. In the last decade, we've seen the return of historic crime families, often in collusion with various elected officials and governmental representatives. We're about to break a story about the mob's influence in the last election, and the men who were here, the ones holding you hostage, play a role in that narrative.

"We first ran into them when we were tailing an associate of the Democratic mayoral candidate last fall. Shortly after that meeting, we saw them again, this time on one of those tabloid television shows, while in the company of a prominent local entertainer, who suddenly donated a lot of money to the candidate a day or two later. She then started throwing lavish fundraisers for him, and publicly endorsing him, but in the background at every party or interview were those two men, watching. We became

curious about them, and massaged some connections to get more information. Seems they're members of the Zarate crime family, specializing in dealing with dignitaries and celebrities. Today was their first public foray into kidnapping, at least as far as I'm aware, though something tells me they've given their previous victims certain incentives to keep their mouths shut. Nobody has ever been able to pin anything on them before today, though it's amazing how many people they visit end up doing things or saying things to benefit the Zarate's."

"I see," Spencer said, his eyes distant, as if mentally trying to connect the dots. "But what would they want with me?"

Clark looked at him thoughtfully. "I've been thinking about that. The Zarate family has had it out for Superman for a long time. You play Superman on the big screen...." Clark raised his eyebrow and held out his hand.

"But I'm NOT Superman. I couldn't do anything to them... I've never even heard of them until today."

"No, but I'm guessing they thought you could do something FOR them. You may not be the real Superman, but there's probably a decent number of people who believe you are anyway."

Spencer scoffed. "So I could, what, turn the public in their favor? Do PSA's for the mob while in costume? My agent might have a problem with that."

"A gun might speak a little louder than your agent."

"You've never met my agent," Spencer muttered, causing Clark to smile despite the seriousness of the conversation.

"Maybe they were in the audience of your panel with Superman yesterday. Maybe they figured from your rapport together that you were friends."

"And friends help friends, especially those that are in trouble," Spencer said quietly. His eyes met Clark's, and Clark felt the goosebumps rising on his arm as Spencer continued. "Makes me wonder what could've happened if Superman had showed up to help me instead of you," he said, his expression making it clear that it scared him to think of the possibilities. Clark had wondered the same thing himself, and had even gone to the trouble of asking the officer at the scene of the men had anything on them other than guns. Even without his powers, he was still vulnerable to kryptonite, and without his protective aura, he had to wonder how quickly he would succumb to it. It was better not to think about it, so he actively pushed the thought aside.

"They're obviously willing to do anything to get to Superman – you were just their latest target."

Spencer exhaled and ran his hand through his hair. "Thank goodness you were there," he said.

"Thank goodness you left your credit card at the restaurant," Clark said with a small grin, coaxing one in return.

"Finally, the fact that I'm not a morning person has reaped some benefits. If they had tried to kidnap me after I'd had some caffeine, they might have actually succeeded."

Clark raised his eyebrows and laughed gently. "I guess that's one way to look at it."

Spencer laughed with him for a moment, then looked at the clock. "Looks like I need to get going. You're still coming, right?"

"Of course," Clark said, saving the document he had been working on and flipping the top of his computer closed. Spencer rose to leave, then glanced toward the dresser, on which Clark's backpack was sitting. Clark followed his gaze, feeling a moment of panic as he noticed some fabric poking out of the backpack. That was the bag that he had flown in to the comic convention wearing the day before, and his suit was in there somewhere. He calmed himself, remembering the hidden compartment in the bag, and the fact that he had been especially careful to make sure the suit was well hidden once his powers went away. What he hadn't bothered to hide very well, he realized, was the costume he had put on immediately after taking off the suit.

Clark looked back toward Spencer, and noticed a crooked

smile on his face. “Didn’t you say that you went to the convention yesterday dressed as a certain caped crusader?” he asked, stepping forward and reaching for the fabric.

“I did say that,” Clark said. As Spencer gently pulled CJ’s old costume out of the bag, Clark shoved his hand in the larger compartment and pulled out the cowl.

Spencer’s smile grew. “I have a fantastic idea,” he said, then started to undress.

About fifteen minutes later, Clark Kent, dressed in a suit and tie, very much looking the part of the dapper reporter, approached the VIP entrance of the Convention Centre Sydney a step behind Gotham’s famous protector, Batman. While Spencer explained to the doorman who he was under the cape and cowl, Clark turned his face toward the sky, realizing with a start that the rays from the sun felt fantastic. It occurred to him that, up until their short walk to the Convention Centre, he hadn’t stepped out of the hotel at all that day. Any windows he had been near had been at least partially covered with drapes, keeping him from fully experiencing the sun’s rays. Now he felt invigorated, and he knew that whatever had happened to the sun to take his powers away had now been corrected. He wanted to pull out his now fully-charged phone and check the half dozen voice mail messages waiting for him; he wanted to call his wife and children and congratulate them for whatever they did to make the sun right again, but there was no time. The doorman waved them inside, and Spencer was looking at him patiently, curiously. As much as he wanted to stay out in the sun’s healing rays, he had other obligations, so he moved forward.

Immediately upon entering, Spencer headed down the same hallway that he and Clark had traversed the day before, the black cape billowing behind him. “Where did you say you got this suit?” Spencer asked, attempting to glance over his shoulder, though the movement was thwarted by the stiffness of the cowl. “I’ve never seen anything like it. The fabric...it’s not spandex or anything you would see in a conventional bodysuit. There’s something...heavy about it. Expensive.” His gloved hand plucked at the material, rubbing it back and forth a few times before letting it go.

The material was state of the art, an experimental polymer that nobody outside of Waynetech engineering had seen before. It was made specifically for breathability and ease of cleaning, and was tough enough that the seams wouldn’t tear out after a particularly vigorous night of crime fighting. Clark also found it incredibly comfortable to wear, and was ordering some fabric just like it in a bright blue for his own use. “I’m just borrowing it from my son,” Clark replied, which was very much the truth. “He’s...a huge follower of Batman.”

“Shouldn’t the outfit have a belt or something? The Batman we had on our set had this thing with pockets everywhere, supposedly hiding all sorts of gadgets.” Spencer looked down, running his hand over his hip.

Clark shook his head. “Batman hasn’t worn a belt for a few years. Look more closely at the photos coming out of Gotham these days.” Spencer looked at his questioning. “I, uh, cover Batman’s activities from time to time. Anyway, my son is enough of an enthusiast that he would be sure to have his suit match the real thing.”

Spencer stuck out his bottom lip and nodded slightly. They were now approaching a group of people gathered next to the door to the same room Clark and Spencer were in yesterday. The people, who had been chatting quite loudly, grew quieter as Clark and Spencer approached. Spencer made eye contact with Clark, molded his features into an appropriately solemn expression, and stalked toward them. He gave some greetings in a low, gravelly voice, drawing a fair number of raised eyebrows. Nobody said anything for a few moments as everyone seemed to become uncomfortable around the intimidating newcomer, then Spencer smiled and took on a more comfortable stance.

“Aw, come on guys, it’s just me,” he said in his normal voice,

and then everyone was laughing.

“That is brilliant,” Spencer’s co-star, the woman playing Ultra Woman, said as she pointed at him.

“I wish I could take credit for the idea,” Spencer said, then turned toward Clark. “Everyone, this is Clark Kent, a journalist with the Daily Planet in Metropolis. He’s also staying at the same hotel as me and he kind of saved my bacon this morning.”

Everyone looked at him questioningly, so he proceeded to tell them the story of his foiled kidnapping. All of a sudden, all eyes were on Clark, giving him the awed and thankful expressions generally reserved for his alter ego. As Spencer finished the story, he mentioned that Clark had been at the convention the day before in that very costume. “It’s seemed hilarious to me, the idea of Superman going as Batman, so here I am,” he said, sweeping his arms out with a flourish, which allowed the cape to fly out dramatically. It was a moment later that the convention official, a different handler than had been present the day before, came out to bring the cast and crew of the Superman movie into the room.

Clark was sure in retrospect that Spencer had asked him if he wanted to join them on stage, and he thought he remembered shaking his head and mumbling that he was fine staying offstage. He knew that Spencer’s costume stunt had brought a roar of laughter from the crowd that had gathered, and he might have smiled reflexively in response, but he wasn’t sure. All he was consciously aware of was the repeated words in his head. “...The idea of Superman going as Batman,” Spencer had said, juxtaposed with his reaction when told at breakfast that that was what Clark had done. There was recognition there. He knew Clark’s secret, he had to. Clark found himself stumbling toward the doorway to the room and leaning heavily against the frame. Was it necessarily a bad thing that he knew? Did he really know, or was Clark drawing too much inference from a silly stunt and a statement intended to be complimentary? It was entirely possible that he could’ve gotten the idea on his own, but there something about the way he said it...Clark was certain that he knew the truth.

In the large room beyond, Spencer and his costars, director, and producer took questions from the crowd and gave answers. For the most part, the things they said were fairly standard fan service and not what Clark would consider groundbreaking. Then a fan that Clark recognized from the day before approached the microphone and asked Spencer North if yesterday had really been the first time he met Superman. Spencer responded in the affirmative, then the fan asked Spencer what it was like to meet a real hero, someone who had done so much to help the world. “I mean, he’s Superman, he’s...stronger than a locomotive, able to change the course of mighty rivers,” the fan said, quoting from promotional material from the comics. “That must’ve been incredible.”

Clark found himself pushing away from the door jamb, standing straighter in anticipation of the answer. He wasn’t sure why it mattered so much to him – he tended not to dwell on what others thought of him – but Spencer wasn’t just some random stranger.

“It absolutely was,” Spencer responded quickly, then paused. “It was also completely different than what I had anticipated. He’s a guy who’s probably the biggest celebrity around, so big that he transcends even the idea of celebrity. But...it seems counterintuitive to say so, but Superman has no ego. None. It’s hard to give that man a compliment because he’ll reflect it right back at you. He’s the strongest man in the world, bar none, but he’s also the gentlest that I know, and so caring toward those of us lucky enough to know him. He’s the type of man that I wish I could be, that I strive to be. And I’m so thankful that he considers me a friend.” As he finished, Spencer looked sideways toward where Clark was standing, and his eyes told Clark everything he needed to know. The crowd in the room, the other celebrities and Hollywood bigwigs around him didn’t exist in that moment, it was

just the two of them. And the truth.

Applause greeted the comment, breaking the spell and causing Spencer to turn back toward the crowd. Clark took the opportunity to retreat away from the door to the room and further down the hallway, and a dark corner where he could be alone. At that moment, he decided he needed to hear familiar voices, so he picked up his phone and dialed into his voice mail. As the crowd heard all the juicy details about the new Superman movie and its cast and crew, Clark listened to messages from his wife and children, telling him all about satellites, rogue governmental contractors, gang wars and rampant crime. He heard tantalizing morsels about adventures that the kids had with their in-laws; he heard about the massive research undertaking happening in Gotham, and the interesting things that had been uncovered, and he found himself homesick for the first time in a very long time. Immediately after checking his messages, he dialed his wife. It was well past respectable socializing hours in Metropolis, but he knew she'd be awake.

"Hi," he said, and he could practically hear her smile over the phone.

"Ah, finally," she said, her tone teasing. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten about me."

"Perish the thought," Clark said, feeling instantly more relaxed at the sound of her voice. "My phone died. And then... well, it's been an interesting day. I'd say that you wouldn't believe what happened, but given our history..."

"I think I would be disappointed if you told me that you had a completely normal and uneventful trip."

"I'm more disappointed that you weren't here to share in the fun. My alter ego was nowhere to be seen during this one – my grounded adventures never quite seem as fun when you're not part of them." He leaned against the wall and sighed.

"I agree," she said wistfully, and his mind called up memories of the many escapades they'd shared together over the years. "It's been pretty eventful here, too. Maybe we can swap stories when you get home." There was a slight pause, and when she began speaking again, her voice took on a more teasing quality. "Speaking of coming home, you didn't happen to notice a slight difference in the color of the sky when you walked outside today, did you?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I've only spent a couple minutes outside so far today, but it was quite refreshing."

"Might you say it recharged you?"

"I might," he said slowly. "I think I will need to do a little sunbathing when I get back to the hotel, but then..."

"Then?"

"I hope to be there when you wake up in the morning."

"I'll look forward to it," she said. "I miss you, you know."

"Same here. Thank you, by the way."

"For what?"

"For the care package. For your patience. For being fantastic."

"What can I say? You're worth it." She answered. He smiled so wide it hurt, and he found himself fighting the urge to run outside and soak in the sun, just so he could get back to her sooner. "So, I have to ask – where are you now? What's so important that you have to stick around there for a while longer?"

"Would you believe that I have an interview set with Superman?"

"Really?" she laughed.

"Yup, and Batman, too." She gave no answer, and he could imagine her sitting at the other end of the line with her eyebrows raised, waiting for the punch line. "From the movie."

"And here I thought you might have the story of the century," she said, the laughter still in her voice.

"Well, who's to say I don't?" Clark answered. "Spencer North – the movie Superman – was kidnapped today, then subsequently rescued by a certain mild-mannered reporter who shall remain

nameless."

"You HAVE been busy down there," Lois answered.

"I told you it's been an interesting day."

"I believe you," Lois said.

"I haven't told you the most interesting part of the story yet," he said. "The kidnappers were a couple of Zarate goons."

"Really," Lois said, dragging out the word, thoughtful. "The plot thickens," she added under her breath, and Clark had to ask her to clarify. "Tell you what," she said. "I will tell you the whole story, but only when I can see you face to face. I want to be there to see your reaction to all the strange twists we've revealed."

"You weren't the only one to leave me voice mail, you know," he said. "I have a pretty good idea of what's going on over there."

"Ah, but I've saved the juiciest tidbit of information for when you come home."

"Gloating just isn't the same over the phone, is it?" he asked. Teasing her never got old.

"No, it absolutely is not," she answered, and he had to laugh lightly. "And anyway, let's call it incentive. If it gets you home sooner..."

"I don't need any incentive, believe me," he said, feeling a creeping ache from their separation. He knew she could feel it, too, and the ache only intensified as he briefly imagined what he would do to help soothe it away. He sighed again, knowing that he had to be patient for the time being. "It must be getting pretty late there."

"It was late a couple hours ago," Lois answered, then yawned. Clark smiled. "I should let you get to bed, then."

"Thanks. Well, I guess, have fun with your movie stars. Must be a thrill being around such huge celebrities. And Superman, no less," she said lightly, and he knew he would be hearing about this for a long time.

"My life is now complete," he replied. "Hey, love you."

"Love you, too. Hurry home."

"I will," he said, then ended the call. Almost immediately, applause erupted from the room where the Superman cast and crew were holding their panel. He turned to look, and the cast was standing, waving to the crowd, then filing out of the room and back into the hallway. Spencer North, who was now carrying the Batman cowl instead of wearing it, glanced around the hallway as soon as he was out of the room, locating Clark after a moment and raising a hand.

"They have a spread set up for us in one of those dressing rooms. I was hoping that maybe you'd like to come join us?" His expression was eager and earnest, and Clark couldn't say no. He followed the group back toward the entrance, then into a larger dressing room, which had some food waiting for them on a table across from the door. Clark tried to hang back and observe, but Spencer wasn't having any of that. As they gathered around the table with their food and drinks, Spencer initiated conversations between Clark and the various other castmates and crew present. It was here that he heard the stories not fit for print, and some more interesting ones that were. He couldn't help but ask the actors what drew them to their roles, and ask the producers how they viewed their subject. It was fascinating to him to hear what these people inferred from his story, what conclusions they drew about his thoughts and desires and motivations based on a completely fictional account of his life. The most fascinating part of it all was that they really weren't all that far off, at least not in his estimation. Superman lost some of his humanity through their portrayal, but Clark could live with that. He was also heartened to know that they all seemed like genuinely good people, honest people... the type of people he was glad to have attached to a project bearing his name. There was a lot of laughter, and nobody seemed threatened by the presence of a reporter among them. All too soon, however, the meal was done, and it was time to move along. Several of the celebrities had to meet fans and sign

autographs, and Spencer was still wearing a batsuit.

"I suppose I should go back to the hotel and change," he said, looking down toward his chest.

"Not feeling dark and gritty?" Clark asked.

Spencer made an attempt to scowl, but it wound up looking almost comically exaggerated. "I have a hard time getting in character when the guy I'm playing never smiles. It must be exhausting being so serious all the time."

Clark shrugged. "He prowls buildings at night. Maybe he smiles when nobody can see him," he said, fairly certain that what he was saying was not just speculation. The toughest part of CJ's transformation into the Bat was always the seriousness of the character. For CJ, the trick was not to be seen too often, because if people were able to see his face in full daylight, they might be able to see how much he actually enjoyed his work.

"Maybe," Spencer said with a thoughtful tip of his head, then he made for the door, and back toward the hotel. Clark followed, turning his face to the sun again once they got outside.

They walked in comfortable silence for a few moments before Clark spoke again. "I'm going back to Metropolis tonight," he said, and Spencer stopped. Clark, who had been looking skyward, almost ran into him.

"Tonight?" Spencer asked. Clark shifted his gaze toward Spencer's face, and saw confusion mixed with what he could only characterize as relief. Clark nodded. "I guess the fun had to end sometime."

"It always does," Clark answered, moving forward again. "But that doesn't mean we can't meet up again sometime. I'd love to meet your family."

"Likewise," Spencer said with a smile. It was telling that he didn't ask any questions of Clark about airlines or luggage or flight times. There was no need, though the reason why remained unsaid. Clark supposed that he preferred it that way. Spencer looked down at the cowl in his hand, then thrust it toward Clark. "I bet your family is filled with...interesting characters. I mean, anyone who could come up with this get-up..." He rubbed his hand over the black stitching near the heart on the bodysuit, the small Superman emblem that usually went unnoticed. But Spencer noticed, and Clark supposed that meant that he was also aware of the reason that the symbol was there.

Clark smiled and nodded. "I'm sure my son will find it hilarious that you wore this," he said, taking the cowl. The walk to the hotel was very short, and they were soon in the lobby, heading toward the elevator.

"He doesn't find it equally hilarious that you wore it, too?"

"I think with me the novelty wore off a while ago. I'm not shy about getting dressed up in ridiculous costumes if there's a little fun to be had. One Halloween I went out as the Flash..."

Spencer chuckled. "Well, please thank him for me when you see him next." He pressed the call button for the elevator, and the doors opened immediately. The ride up to Clark's floor was taken in comfortable silence, and soon they were at his room, and Spencer was changing back into his normal clothing.

They made small talk about the weather and their plans for the remainder of the day, then Spencer handed Clark the empty spandex and cape.

"I suppose I should get going," Spencer said, though he didn't make any move for the door.

"If I don't see you again before I go, it's been good getting to know you," Clark said, extending his hand toward Spencer. Spencer just stared at it for a moment, as if he didn't want the finality that came the offered handshake. After a moment he sighed and took this hand, forcing a smile onto his face.

"I should thank you for saving my life," Spencer said. "I'm not sure that I properly have yet."

"You don't need to thank me," Clark answered. "I keep telling you, you had as much to do with thwarting those guys as I did."

"The fact remains that I would've never had the courage to stand up to them if not for you. The example you set..."

Clark shook his head and held up his hand, recognizing that Spencer was dangerously close to speaking the unspoken, of acknowledging the truth. The subterfuge probably wasn't necessary anymore, but there was something about the status quo that seemed more comfortable. Facing the truth and having all the discussions that came with the revelation invariably brought awkwardness, and Clark refused to insert that into a friendship that was still very new and fresh. Maybe sometime in the future they would say the words, but not now. "I'm just a guy making his way in the world, same as you."

Emotions flashed across Spencer's face, and for a second, Clark was sure that he was going to launch into a long-winded speech about how wrong he was, but then he seemed to come to a realization and stopped, looking down at the floor for a minute before turning back toward Clark. "That's right. Clark Kent, from the heart of small town Kansas. Royals fan and family man," he said with a genuine smile. "And part-time Batman."

"You're a good kid, Spencer," Clark said. "And you're doing a great job. You've managed to do right by the characters you portray, by your family, your friends. You don't need my example — you're doing just fine on your own."

As Clark spoke, Spencer's expression morphed to one of gratitude. Almost as soon as Clark finished speaking, Spencer took a step forward and embraced him. Clark's arms automatically came up to return the gesture. They stood like that for a long minute, then Spencer stepped away, and all doubts and questions seemed gone from his face. "I know I don't need you, but that doesn't mean that I don't like having you around. You know, to talk to. To give me confidence. I feel more like myself when you're around. You're probably an incredible dad."

"And you do wonders for a guy's ego," Clark said, deflecting the compliments. "Tell you what, if you ever need anything — a pep talk, advice, or just a friendly ear to bend — feel free to call." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, flipping it open to dig around for a business card. Spencer watched with interest, one eyebrow quirked, then held out his hand to accept the card. The Daily Planet business cards were quite colorful, a gold embossed logo of the paper splashed across the back. "My cell number is on there, along with the office number."

Spencer looked at the card briefly, then pulled out his cell phone and entered the information into his contacts. "Here, I'll send you a text," he said, and a second later Clark's phone buzzed. Clark swapped his wallet for his cell phone, then saved the number.

"I have a genuine superhero on speed dial," he said, deadpan.

"Only one?" Spencer asked, and Clark just smiled and raised one eyebrow in return. "Well, I guess... until we meet again," he said, then gave a salute, turned, and left the room.

Clark stood rooted to his spot for a long time after Spencer left, basking in the aftermath of the moment. To say that this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship seemed awfully cliché, but it was the truth. He did feel almost fatherly toward Spencer, a feeling that was only strengthened by the fact that Spencer was in on the secret, not unlike his sons. With a shake of his head, Clark forced himself back into motion, unbuttoning his shirt and shrugging it off. A moment later his pants came off, and he went toward his box from home, digging around and eventually finding a pair of shorts. Wearing only the shorts and a pair of flip flops, he reached for his laptop, then made his way out of the room and toward the stairwell, bound for the roof. He still had a story about that morning's kidnapping to finish, and another one to start detailing his day with Hollywood's version of the world's finest heroes. That gave him plenty of time to absorb all the sunlight he could. Then, if all went according to plan, his reward would be the start of a new day beside his lovely wife.

The Falcone family home was a large, ostentatious mansion on the outskirts of Gotham. It was an old house, often spoken of in the same breath as Wayne Manor and the other old money homes in town, though its gothic façade and ornate landscaping often seemed to strike people as somewhat sinister. It was no wonder, CJ thought, eying the state-of-the-art security systems hidden around the grounds. Regular patrols of well-armed goons with dogs swept the grounds, making this possibly the most unwelcoming property on the east coast. Not that he needed a welcome, he thought, systematically shooting beams of heat at each of the security devices, creating a hole in the coverage that he would soon be exploiting. It felt good to be using his powers again, he thought as he leapt up over the security fence and landed in a long shadow on the lawn. He quickly moved from shadow to shadow as he made his way toward the house, tracking the patrols with his enhanced vision, choosing to avoid them rather than confront them and cause a disturbance. Soon enough he was under the window to the study, watching through the wall as the old man, Carmine Falcone, worked studiously at his desk. It would be easy enough to jump up and crash through the window, but that wasn't Batman's signature style. Instead, CJ eyed the private balcony a couple dozen feet or so away, leading to an unoccupied guest room. With a leap, he flew through the air, then summoned what meager flight abilities he possessed to land gently and without a sound. The balcony door was locked, but his heat vision made quick work of it. Slipping into the house, he snuck carefully thorough the corridor, finally reaching the study door. Before entering, he thoroughly x-rayed the room, noting the panic button mounted to the bottom of the desk. He followed the wires through the wall, surreptitiously zapping them at the point that they entered the hallway wall, also taking out the phone lines while he was at it. With a small smile, he opened the door and entered the room. Carmine Falcone glanced at him, outwardly uninterested, though his eyes burned with an inner fury.

"Batman," he said, his voice weaker than it had once been, betraying his advanced age. At one time he had been one of Batman's more formidable enemies, an underworld boss capable of mobilizing men and moving large quantities of drugs and materials. He had practically owned the town at one point, but that was a very long time ago, and things had changed.

"Surprised to see me?" CJ asked, keeping his voice low and gravelly.

"Cut the niceties. Why are you here?" Falcone asked, putting down his pen and placing both hands, palms down, on the desk.

"I had an encounter with your grandson the other day. He said something that intrigued me." CJ took a step forward and straightened up into his most menacing stance. Falcone didn't seem impressed, though he did cock and eyebrow at the statement.

"That kid has been called a lot of things, but intriguing was never one of them." His smile was sly.

"Yes, well, I'm sure that he's keeping the city jail staff quite amused with his wit right now," Batman said, though he didn't smile.

Falcone shifted his arms and relaxed in the chair. "Please, Batman, you don't honestly think that I'm going to let him rot in jail while I still own half the staff?" Falcone's laugh was mocking. "And weapons charges? That's the best you can do?"

"The best I can do is stringing him up and making him confess to the whole plot in a very public area," CJ replied. "But I have bigger fish to fry. So here I am."

The mocking smile remained. "You've gone soft. I remember a time when you would punch your way into a confession. You made men fear you, because they never knew what you would do next." He leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. "It's been how long since you strung someone up? Publicly humiliated them? Now you make empty threats and hope that people will

forget that you never follow through on your tough talk. You coast on reputation alone... HIS reputation. But you aren't him, are you? You put on his clothes and drive around in his car, probably with his blessing, but you aren't half the man that he was."

CJ smiled. "You think?" he asked, taking another step forward. "The way I see it, I don't need to beat your kind to a pulp to get results. I have my own form of intimidation," he said, letting his eyes glow red, noticing how Falcone's smile quickly faded. "I probably am half the man he is, but I'm also a lot more." He picked up a paper weight from Falcone's desk, one that was fashioned from solid marble, beautiful and extremely solid. With one movement, he crushed it to dust. He watched with satisfaction as Falcone's arms dropped and he leaned back, his eyes wide.

"I think we understand each other," CJ said with a smile, wiping his hands together to rid himself of the marble dust. "Now tell me – why would your grandson think that I would be out of commission last night?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Falcone scoffed, but CJ could see fear behind his defiant exterior.

"Really?" CJ asked, this time ambling toward the bookcase and grabbing the oldest book he could find. It was a first printing of a famous novel. "I was shot, Falcone," he said, thumbing through the book. "And your grandson knew exactly what would happen. He knew that I would be a little less...empowered by the time the day was up, which tells me that he knew about a certain project carried out by Orbital Technologies." He shot a small blast of heat at the corner of a page if the book, just enough to singe the paper and send out a whiff of smoke, but not enough to set it on fire. "I think it's pretty obvious that your plan failed, because I'm here, and good as new. And more than a little angry."

"And taking out your frustration on priceless pieces of literature?" Falcone said with annoyance.

"Just personalizing it for you," CJ answered, putting it back. "I'm thinking about personalizing your desk next." Being a Batman with ethics was hard, CJ thought with an inward sigh. Bruce really would probably drop the pleasantries and dangle him off a building or something. CJ had to admit that the possibility was mighty tempting, but he knew he couldn't do it. But modest displays of strength, with the threat that there was a whole lot more power at his disposal if he so chose, coupled with a little bit of anger, could provide quite the attitude adjustment. Sure, it involved a little bit of property destruction, but that was something he could live with. "Who were you working with Falcone?"

"What makes you think I'm working with anyone?"

CJ smiled again. "You may think you own this town, but I have yet to see you try to pull off anything on a more global scale in the time I've been around. Frankly, your men aren't that smart." On the side of the room mounted on the wall were a couple of antique pistols. He casually reached for one, turning it over in his hands, before he decided that it needed a little personalization. He went to work with a little heat vision and a fingernail as he spoke. "Let me lay out a scenario for you," he continued, focusing on his masterpiece. "Your partner in crime, whoever that may be, promises you a city without caped protection. Guarantees it, in fact, on a certain day. You see a major payday, a chance to be the big man in charge again. Who's going to stop you? Certainly not the Batman. Thing is, though, your caped protectors are a little more resourceful than you give them credit for, and the whole scheme crumbles in less than a day. Then here am I am, standing in your office." He finished his work, a nice little bat symbol etched into the barrel of the gun, then hung it back on the wall where he found it. He really was quite proud of the work. He then took a moment to look around, his smile widening as he did so. "You do keep meticulous records, don't you?" he said, zeroing in on a filing cabinet, then tuning back toward Falcone, who was now positively white. "Every business contact, every little scheme...could get a guy in trouble."

"It wasn't just me he talked to," Falcone rasped. "Guys in Metropolis, Chicago, Central City, Coast City...they were all in on it. He said he wanted chaos."

"Who?"

Falcone hesitated a moment, possibly weighing whether it was worse to have Batman mad at him, or his contact. He made is decision, then looked at Batman, all defiance gone. "Senator Robbins," he said, and a cold shiver worked its way down CJ's back, though he made an effort to not let it show outwardly.

"See, that wasn't so hard," he said, turning to leave.

"What are you going to do now, Batman?" Falcone asked. "You say you have names..."

CJ turned and looked over his shoulder, x-raying through the filing cabinet. "Jimmy Rizzito ring a bell?" he asked, then turned back toward the door.

"Maybe we locate some of Lex Luthor's rock. Maybe next time we take care of you for good. You better grow eyes in the back of your head."

"And maybe I pinch every one of your guys before you can say 'empty threat.' I can play this game, too," CJ answered, walking away.

"You'll regret it," Falcone growled, standing at his desk. "Carmine Falcone will not be pushed around!"

"You already have been," CJ said, reaching the door. He then stopped and looked over his shoulder. "And if you do something to me, well, perhaps my predecessor will come and dangle the lot of you off a building. I wouldn't want to see him mad, if I were you." With a nod, he left the room.

Any hopes of a quiet exit were quickly dashed. As soon as the door closed, after trying the phone and panic button and noticing they weren't working, Falcone threw open his window and started yelling to the guards. With stealth no longer an option, CJ walked boldly down the hall, down the grand staircase, and out the front door. The further along he went, the more goons he encountered, but none of them provided any resistance. All were dispatched without a second thought, and he couldn't hide a smile as he approached the gate and left the grounds. It felt wonderful to be back, he decided, relishing the feeling of raw power. He had taken so much for granted, and he intended to not do that again. As soon as he was away from the chaos, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed his mother. He pocketed the phone as the audio played through the earpiece in his cowl.

"Hey, Mom," he said, noticing when she answered that she didn't seem tired, even though it was quite late. "Say, I paid a friend of mine a visit tonight and got a name for you. I know we found circumstantial evidence that suggested that he was involved, but it seemed too outrageous to believe."

"Senator Robbins?" Lois asked.

"I have confirmation it was him," CJ answered. From behind him, one of the patrol dogs ran up and attempted to bite him in the leg. The dog had its jaws around CJ's calf before he was able to stop it, though it quickly let go with a yelp. No doubt it was akin to trying to take a bite out of a concrete block. CJ almost felt sorry for the dog, who was no longer following him.

"Good work, honey," Lois said. "You want me to give you credit when the story runs?"

"God, no," CJ said with a chuckle. He glanced over his shoulder and noticed that the other dogs had paused at the one that had tried to bite him. More goons were running up to them, yelling at the dogs to continue on, without success. CJ walked along, practically daring them to try and stop him, secretly hoping that he'd get a chance to pound a few more of them. The men ultimately decided that it wasn't prudent to continue the pursuit, and CJ soon found himself alone on empty street. "I work in the shadows, Mom. If you want to thank me, maybe mention who's doing such an awesome job cleaning up Gotham."

"You mean Dick? You're right, the poor guy probably does

need the press."

"I meant me," CJ said, feigning exasperation. He knew his mom was teasing, but he had fun playing along. "Dick really does need the press, though."

"How about we come up and thank you both personally... maybe next weekend."

"You might want to come up earlier. I have a couple houseguests that will probably want to talk with you guys. You know, to gain some perspective."

"Ah, got it. Well, it might be a couple days before this story clears. But we'll try and find some time."

"Okay."

"In the meantime...go clean up the chaos out there that was caused by this satellite stuff so I can write a nice puff piece about Batman."

"Yes, mother. Love you."

"Love you, too. And thanks for the tip," Lois said, and with that, the call ended. CJ continued to his car, his hearing clearly picking up the chaos in the city around him. It really was a mess out there – it was amazing what one bad night and word of mouth could do to set everything on edge. It was up to him to put a stop to it, and after a day filled with naps, he supposed he had the energy to go out all night if he had to. And now that his main task for the evening was taken care of, that was just what he intended to do.

Upon arriving in Metropolis, Jon deposited his father-in-law at his townhome. They landed about a block away, in a blind alley that more often than not served as Jon's private landing strip. Entering his house, the twins seemed excited to see them. Jon had only been gone for a day, but a day to kid might as well be an eternity, and they let him know how much he was missed. Also missing was Diane, who was still at work, and had been gone almost as long as Jon had. Under the circumstances, he felt awful leaving them again so soon, but he needed to find his wife, and from the sound of things, the city needed a little super help. The kids were in good hands with their grandparents, and Cruz had plenty of interesting stories to tell them now. Jon made sure to give hugs all around, then left mere minutes after he had arrived.

Upon leaving the townhouse, he took to the skies, scanning the city. The amount of criminal activity going on at that moment rivaled the worst days that he had seen so far as a superhero, both in numbers and in the sheer brutality of it. It seemed to be everywhere and all at once, and it took all of his patience to hover above it all and not act. But he needed to talk to Diane first, then make a plan of action. It was possible that taking out a few of the major players could cause a substantial amount of the activity to cease, but he wouldn't know who to target until he talked with someone who had a good handle on everything going on out there.

Hovering over the precinct, he saw her there, hustling between interview rooms, reading through files, lost in her own world.

Going down there in his civilian identity didn't seem like a good idea, especially since he could see another Planet employee hanging out at the front desk. Showing up out of the blue as Superman also didn't seem prudent, since it would be difficult to explain why, exactly, he needed to talk with one particular officer out of the dozens buzzing around the precinct. The best course of action, he decided, was to handle one of the crimes in the neighborhood and deliver the perpetrator to the station, taking the time to explain it to the one cop in the building who seemed to have her nose in every case.

His mind made up, it wasn't too hard to find a local crime to foil. A dozen blocks away, a car was in the process of being stolen. He landed on the street behind the perpetrator, apparently quietly enough that he didn't even notice. After a few seconds, Jon cleared his throat, catching the man's attention. For the barest second, he was sure that the man was going to run, though he seemed to realize pretty quickly that it wouldn't make any difference. With a

resigned sigh, he dropped his tools, and moments later they were at the police precinct. The sight of Crimson Superman instantly brought smiles and happy exclamations from the officers. Jon couldn't help but smile himself at the welcome.

"Uh, thanks," he said, tightening his grip on his prisoner. "Who wants this guy? Is officer Kent around?"

One of the officers behind the desk sprang to action, directing Jon through into the bowels of the station. As he dumped the man into a holding cell, the other officer ran off to fetch his wife, who arrived a moment later, appearing pleasantly surprised. "I caught him stealing a car a few blocks from here," Jon said, pointing his thumb toward where he caught the man.

Diane nodded, amused. "Really taking a bite out of crime, there," she said. Jon smiled teasingly.

"I can give you all the gory details, if you want to go somewhere a little more private to discuss it," he said.

She cocked an eyebrow. "The interrogation rooms are all full, but the Captain's office is free. We can step in there." He tried to hide his disappointment, knowing that the captain's office had one wall that was mostly glass, affording them almost no privacy. She gave a small shrug, indicating that she was feeling the same thing he was. But he knew better than to expect privacy in a police station. He held out his hand, indicating that she lead the way, and followed her away from the prisoner holding area to the office. They entered in silence, then both sighed once the door was closed. Behind them, through the large window, the police station buzzed with activity, but if they faced away from it, toward the back of the office, they could almost pretend that none of that was there. And they could speak freely without anyone reading their lips.

"Just make it back?" Diane asked. She made a show of grabbing a notebook, scribbling down some notes as they spoke. It also kept her hands occupied so that he couldn't absently reach out to hold one.

"I dropped your dad off at the house first. He wanted to come up and I couldn't say no. Also said hi to the kids. But with everything going on, I couldn't stay long."

"Well, I'm glad you're here. It's bad out there, and we need all the help we can get."

"Glad to be of assistance," he said with a smile. Not being able to touch her, even though she was right next to him, was almost painful. "Before I do anything, though, I wanted to check in and see where the hot spots are."

"Smart man," she said as she turned toward him, a little twinkle in her eye.

"I'm just well aware of where the action is," he replied, and she smiled in return. For a moment he had the strong urge to lean in and kiss her, but then her eyes shifted to the surroundings, and suddenly her expression was all business. The sudden change was like being doused with cold water, and he couldn't help but be a little disappointed. But she was right – he had gotten lost in those eyes and forgotten where he was. Clearing his throat, he forced his arms crossed over his chest and stood up straighter.

Diane, for her part, shuffled fractionally further away from him. "So, uh, it's been a hell of a night," she said, studying a photo on the wall and refusing to make eye contact with him. "The gangs have suddenly called a truce and turned their efforts to causing as much chaos as possible. There's no rhyme or reason to it, except that nothing is off limits. We've had our hands full picking up guys when we can, but for every one we take off the streets, another two pop up. No property is safe, no store front is safe. It's like a war zone."

"You think they're cooperating with each other? Why would they do that?"

"Yeah, I do. I've been trying to pry the information out of the perps we've picked up, but so many of them are far removed from anyone in power. Guys who heard from other guys that there

would be a free-for-all on that day, and nobody would be able to stop them."

"My brother said he heard someone say the same thing in Gotham, which makes me think that this is a lot bigger than it seems at first blush."

Diane nodded, hazarding a glance toward him. "I've been in contact with your mom. I think she's got a lead on something. She didn't say what, though."

Jon frowned. "Fat lot of good that does me right now," he said, making a mental note to visit his mother when he got a chance. "I was hoping I could go take down the kingpin and everything would clear up."

"Your optimism never ceases to amaze me," she said with a soft smile, before her eyes turned to his chest. "Honestly, I think just making your presence known will make a world of difference. I get the feeling that they anticipated you and your dad would be out of commission and that's why it's blown up the way it has. Speaking of your dad, when is he coming back?"

Jon shrugged. "Who knows. He got stuck in Australia. Their daylight hours don't exactly align with ours..." He uncrossed his arms and started pacing on the far side of the desk. Diane watched with curiosity, though he hardly noticed. His mind was formulating a plan, one that would give him as much visibility as possible. No doubt there was some press out there covering the action, so maybe the best place to start is the one that would get his face on the late news. Then he would probably need to make a show of being everywhere at once, which wasn't technically possible, though he could make a good show of making it appear that way. "I think I'm going to need you to make some calls," he said, drawing another eyebrow raise from her. She positioned her pencil over the notepad, waiting for him to continue. "I plan to hit this hard, which means getting to as many of these guys as I can tonight."

"Sounds exhausting," Diane said.

"I got some good sleep last night," he said with a wave of the hand. "Anyway, I don't want there to be any doubt that I'm back. I'm sure these guys won't be sitting at home watching the news – they'll need to see it with their own eyes. The plan is for me to catch them in the act and drop them at the nearest precinct, giving a statement to someone there and moving on as fast as I can."

"So you'll probably need someone at each location solely dedicated to processing these guys," Diane said, writing something on the notepad.

"That's what I was thinking. Some of the busier places, maybe two men. This is going to go as quickly as I can make it. I want these guys to think my vacation was spent making clones of myself."

"That would certainly solve the secret identity thing," Diane answered wryly, causing him to stop abruptly. He turned toward her, then burst out laughing at the statement. It was so out of place in the conversation they were having, but it made for a wonderful interlude, if only for a moment. He composed himself quickly, noting that she still looked completely unfazed.

"The faster I go, the sooner we can both go home," he said in a low voice, taking a step toward her. "Then maybe I can pay you back for that."

"You can do your best, flyboy," she answered, her voice barely above a whisper, her face very deliberately turned away from the window. His heart felt a burst of love, then he forced himself back into a neutral expression.

"Until then, be quick with the calls? I want to get this over with."

She nodded, taking a few steps toward the door and laying her hand on the handle. Once the door was cracked open, she started speaking again, her voice almost too loud. "I'll make sure we have all the personnel you need ready to assist you. Thanks for your help."

He bowed his head, then sped off, making it appear to those in the precinct that he had simply disappeared. The first thing he did was hover over the city, surveying the activity and forming a plan on how to approach the job. The television trucks were parked at different high visibility places around the city – one just outside Centennial Park, another near the swanky shops uptown, where the looting was merciless. He'd start there, he decided, noting the location of the camera rig and approaching the scene to get maximum screen time. He stopped next to some looters entering the broken front window of a high end handbag store, grabbing one with each fist and hoisting them out of the store, in full view of the camera. He made sure to pause and let the criminals squirm a bit, then said, "I'm back," with a little smile before taking off. After depositing the criminals at the nearest police station, he returned to the same location, repeating the performance a few times, though he varied what he said each time. "Surprised to see me?" "You know, it's a crime to take things that don't belong to you." "You're going to take a quick trip to meet some friends of mine."

Satisfied that he had bought some good press, he turned his attention to a few more matters that were a little more serious. In a neighborhood uncomfortably close to where he lived, some teens were taking pot shots with a pistol at various features, such as luminaires and traffic lights. He put a stop to that quickly. On the main freeway through town, gangs were putting up rolling roadblocks and terrorizing the traveling public. It was considerably harder to do when their cars were atop a local abandoned building. Gun crime was spread across the city – muggings, assaults, and worse – and he spent an hour or so cleaning that up. He spent another hour or so randomly finding and picking up mischief makers. In all, it was rather intense and exhausting, especially for someone who had only recently gotten his powers back, and as dusk approached, he decided that it was time to wrap things up for a while. He delivered his last catch to Diane's precinct, then found her again.

"You do work fast," she said to him, not bothering with finding a private place to hold their conversation. He was too tired for that anyway.

"Not all the time," he answered with a half-smile. "But tonight, I was aiming to impress...."

"I am definitely impressed. I didn't think it would be possible for one man to squelch that mob out there and get things back to normal, but damned if you haven't gotten awfully close."

"So the word is out, then?" he asked, looking toward a coworker of hers.

"It's all anyone can talk about," the coworker said. "Hell, my wife called just to ask if I'd seen you yet. I told her that I ain't never seen anything like what you're doing tonight. We couldn't even process one before you were bringing in another, and it was that way all over town," he said. "You must be exhausted."

"I'm... Superman," Jon said, causing the coworker to laugh.

"That you are," he said, reaching out to slap Jon's shoulder before turning and walking away.

"You know, the OTHER Superman," Diane added, a teasing twinkle in her eye.

"Ouch," Jon said, with a hand over his heart. "I think, with that, I will retire for the evening. You seem to have everything well under control here – maybe you should do the same."

She nodded. "Maybe I should," she said. "Good night." With that, she also turned and headed toward her desk. As he was getting ready to leave, his superhearing picked up something else, said at barely more than a whisper. "You better wait up for me. I want to welcome you home properly."

"Mmmm," he said, completely involuntarily, as an anticipatory shudder worked its way down his back, drawing one or two awkward glances from people near him, then he took off for home.

The eastern sky was just beginning to lighten with the first signs of morning when Clark finally made it back to Metropolis. Flying back from Australia had taken a little longer than anticipated thanks to the gigantic box now pushed up against his left hip. Get too bold and try to go multiple times the speed of sound and it was possible that the box would disintegrate, raining his personal possessions across the Pacific Ocean, or worse, across the western United States. Getting them back again wasn't a problem for someone with superspeed and x-ray vision, but it was a pain that he didn't particularly want to experience. The house was quiet and dark as he landed in the back yard and quickly made his way through the garage and toward the bedroom. Lois, he saw, was asleep in bed, though she was propped up against the headboard, papers and folders scattered around her and in her lap.

Carefully, Clark cleaned up the mess, stacking the papers neatly on her nightstand. Then he stripped off the suit and crawled into bed, kissing Lois on the forehead and gently wrapping his arms around her, pulling her onto his chest as he lay down. He told himself that it was to ensure that she didn't end up with any kinks in her neck, but he knew it was more than that. Even though he had spoken to her on the phone, hearing her voice was a weak substitute for actually being near her, for holding her. He missed her smell, the curves of her body against his, the little way that her breath caught in her throat when she slept. If it meant experiencing those things, even after a single night away, then he would gladly lay awake until the new day officially dawned and she awoke. Then hurricane Lois would hit full force, he was sure. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

Resting his cheek against her head, he gave a gentle sigh and closed his eyes. A moment later she stirred, her arms tightening around him. "Clark?" she mumbled, her head still resting on his chest.

"I told you I'd be here when you woke up," he said softly.

"Never doubted that," she said with a happy sigh.

"Go back to sleep. We still have a couple hours before we need to be up."

"Papers," she said, her eyes finally opening. She lifted her head to look around, but stilled at his touch.

"I stacked them on your table," he said, running his hand up and down her arm. She turned to look in his eyes, then nodded, laying her head back down on his chest.

"Read them," she said, closing her eyes again. "Call it homework." She gave a small smile, then relaxed and stilled.

He watched her sleep for a few long minutes, then reached over and picked up the first folder on the top of the stack, labeled "Orbital Technologies." Over the course of the next couple hours, he read the papers slowly, then reread them all just to make sure that he fully understood everything. By the time Lois's alarm went off, he was staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, processing what had to happen next, and what it meant.

Lois swiped blindly for the alarm to turn it off, finally sitting up and giving it a good smack. The physical act of sitting up usually meant that she was up for good, and today was no different. She sighed and ran her hand through her hair, noticing the expression on Clark's face once she finally looked back toward him. "You read it all, didn't you?" He nodded. "So...?"

"How could you go to sleep last night, knowing that?" he asked, gesturing toward the files now neatly back on her nightstand.

"Pure exhaustion?" she said with a small smile and raised eyebrows. He looked at her skeptically, which only broadened the smile. "Plus, I knew that I would need my beauty sleep to nail that bastard today." God, he loved that fearless confidence of hers that hadn't dulled over the years. Apparently, the look in his eyes gave him away, and she leaned down to engage him in the type of kiss that made him forget that anything else existed. It lasted only a

blissful minute, then she pulled away, patting him on the chest. “Let me take a shower, then we can talk it over.” With that, she hopped up out of bed and went directly into the bathroom.

He busied himself with the routine of getting ready for the day while waiting, although he didn’t plan to go into the office, since officially his plane was still in the air. That didn’t mean that he couldn’t still do some work from home. He had whipped up a light breakfast when she finally reappeared, dressed and refreshed. “So tell me all about your investigation,” he said, handing her a cup of coffee.

“This was a weird one,” Lois said, settling into a seat at the table, where a bowl of fruit and a plate with toast prepared just the way she liked it awaited her. “I was investigating a disaster that nobody knew about, and will never know about. Like with any disaster, there was a sense of urgency in trying to figure out the cause and how to make everything alright again, but because it was a very private disaster, there were no grandstanding politicians or cries for justice to propel the case. It felt more like one of our deep cover operations, where we try to ferret out the truth without anyone realizing that we’re even there. And let me tell you, it’s hard to be covert and fast at the same time.”

“Especially without superpowers to aid the cause.”

She pointed at him. “That’s for sure. Anyway, I really wanted to get everything resolved before anyone figured out that you and the kids were missing. You being out of the public eye for a day is nothing unusual...”

“I’ve taken vacations in the past for weeks at a time. A day isn’t even a blip on the radar,” Clark said.

“But much longer than that becomes a problem.” Lois nodded. “Complicating the investigation, though, was the fact that, at the same time, cities across the country just seemed to erupt, out of the blue. Nothing in particular seemed to have triggered it, and the violence didn’t appear to be targeted at anything specific. It was just chaos. Violence for the sake of violence. Nobody seemed to know what to do, everyone seemed scared, and the police were overwhelmed. It seemed like the type of thing crying out for a little super assistance, but none was forthcoming.

“So here you have two big events, seemingly unrelated at first blush, but it didn’t take much imagination to see how they could be part of something bigger. Because Jon had a vested interest in figuring out why your powers disappeared, and had a good lead on what was responsible, I let him take the lead on that facet of the case. Diane and Dick were out on the front lines fighting the chaos, and were in a position to try and get to whoever was behind it, through their own...unique interrogation methods. So they took the lead on the hands-on portion of the investigation. My job became trying to find the connective tissue between everything. It couldn’t be a coincidence that these cities were breaking out in violence at the same time that you guys are out of commission.”

It was interesting to get her side of the story and how the investigation developed, but Clark found himself impatient to get to the good part. “So the kids figured out Orbital Technologies was behind our powers disappearing, and took care of that problem. You researched the board, and some higher placed executives, and found a lot of the usual political meddling.”

“It’s like any of these agencies with big government contracts,” Lois said. “The politicians that fund them insist that they build in their districts, then they recruit their friends and family to work for them. Makes me sick.”

“And that’s where you first saw Senator Robbins’s name,” Clark said, drawing a nod from Lois.

“Texas senator with a ton of family in Houston. And his nephew just happens to be a whiz at computer programming, and, surprise surprise, the lead programmer at Orbital Technologies.”

Clark took a sip of coffee and looked at her thoughtfully. “Your research didn’t show any connection to the crime wave, though.”

“That was a tricky one,” Lois said. “But then two Zarate goons tried to kidnap Spencer North down under, and something clicked. I looked back at some of the surveillance we did on those guys, and one of their frequent targets was our good senator. They also paid a couple visits to the Falcone family in Gotham, who CJ said had advance knowledge of what was going to happen. That was the connection. That ties it all together. Then, late last night, CJ got a name from Falcone – Senator Robbins.”

The idea of higher placed government officials doing such a thing brought back old twinges of fears, old warnings from his father that g-men would take him away and lock him up if the world ever found out about him. He liked to think that the emergence of Superman and the welcoming embrace he had received from people the world over had put a lie to that, but every now and then something happened that proved the wisdom of his father’s words. It made his blood run cold, and anger welled up along with the fear.

“But why?” Clark asked. “Why would a United States senator want our family out of commission? Why would he start a wave of violence, assuming it’s true?”

“Ask yourself what his platform is. What’s his big issue?”

Clark had to think a moment about that. He generally didn’t pay much attention to the politics of senators from outside his state if they didn’t affect some prominent national issue. “I don’t know. Immigration?”

“Crime,” Lois said. “Specifically, support for the police and military. My theory is that he wanted to overwhelm the local cops to call for more Federal money to be funneled to them. Face it, Clark, there are people out there who think that Superman makes the local police complacent, and that’s bad for business when your signature issue is strong law enforcement.”

“Isn’t he up for reelection this year?” Clark asked, putting his food down as the bile rose in his throat. This man did something that affected his children – that could’ve killed them, in fact – and he did it as a cheap political stunt. Things like this eroded his faith in their national leaders, particularly those who talked big about law and order. Senator Robbins didn’t believe in law or order, despite what his political rhetoric said. He believed in power and control. To people like the Senator, Clark’s family was nothing more than a means to an end. It was no wonder Superman stayed as far from the political arena as he could.

Lois nodded, the disgust in her expression no doubt mirroring his own. She was evidently thinking the same thing he was. She sighed and looked away. “If you take away the confession, which would never be admissible, the case against the Senator is pretty flimsy, evidence-wise,” Lois said, and Clark couldn’t disagree. “And the reason why he would want to kidnap your Hollywood doppelganger still isn’t clear.”

“Propaganda,” Clark said quickly. It made sense, didn’t it? “If a strong, independent Superman is a problem, why not replace him with one that you can make your puppet? They could coerce him to make all those political endorsements that I’ve stayed far away from over the years. Make him spout off on how much he loves the local cops, how much he loves the senator. And what could I do about it? I’m out of the way.”

“But not anymore,” Lois said with a twitch of the lips.

“I’d love to take a quick flight down to Washington to let that guy know that his secret is out. And that I won’t stand for anyone targeting my family, I don’t care who they are.”

“But you won’t,” Lois said, laying a hand on his arm. “That’s not how Superman works.”

Clark signed. “I know,” he said quietly. “It’s just so frustrating. After all this, he’s going to end up as Mr. Clean, no whiff of scandal anywhere around him.”

Lois gave his arm a squeeze. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Clark quirked an eyebrow. “How?”

The smile she gave him in response was seductive, and he thought for the millionth time how lucky he was that she was on his side, because if she wasn't, he'd have been a goner a long time ago. "I still know guys who know guys," she said. "We also have a network of friends and family in the affected cities with an interest in getting to the bottom of things. Even if the evidence doesn't meet the standard to get him thrown in jail, I'm sure that there will be a few reporters and campaign operatives that would be very happy to let the public know what we find. Then, with any luck, he'll be an ex-senator." Her smile quickly faded, and her eyes burned with intensity as she spoke. When she turned toward him, he saw the type of raw determination that moved mountains. If Lois Lane said that this man was going down, then she would do everything in her power to make sure that's what happened. "He messed with my babies, Clark," she continued. "By the time I'm done with him, he'll wish you had gone down there and threatened to launch him into orbit, because that will feel like a vacation after what I have planned."

Clark wrapped an arm around her and drew her close. At first she sat rooted in her spot, defiance plain in her expression, but after a moment she seemed to give in and accept his embrace, and all at once the mask of the hardened reporter fell away. All the vulnerability and pain she had held in for the last couple days bubbled to the surface, and he held her in silence, letting her get it all out. Every now and then she gave a shuddering sob, and eventually her arms found their way around him, clinging to him as if she never wanted him to leave. After a few long minutes, the sobs died away, her arms loosened their grip on him, and she straightened up again. Her fingers absently ran their way through her hair, she dabbed her eyes against the back of her shirt sleeve, and it was as if that interlude never happened. He knew well enough to not probe more deeply into the subject at that moment. With the storm past and her emotions confronted, now was the time for action, and he intended to be there for it. "So what do you need me to do today?" he asked.

She smiled at him gratefully, knowingly. "Since you're not officially here, I guess you get research duty. Maybe call up Barry and Hal and see who was at the front of the crime waves in their towns. Get as much as you can to tie them to Robbins, or to Zarate's goons. I'll start with the interviews."

"I would also recommend you read the article I wrote up for the morning edition prior to leaving Australia," Clark said. "Did a little more of a deep dive into the men who tried to kidnap Spencer. Delved into some of their acquaintances and business associates, and touched on that surveillance work we did on them."

"Robbins has to be feeling the heat," Lois said. "Maybe he'll do us a favor and slip up. Say something he shouldn't."

"We can only hope," Clark said, reaching for his toast again. Lois, too, was now devouring her breakfast. She was done quickly enough that it almost seemed she had tapped into some super speed of her own. She looked at him and smiled again.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, then stood, taking her dishes with her. He stood and followed, wrapping his arms around her from behind and planting a kiss on the top of her head.

"The kids will be okay, you know. They're tough, and not just physically – you made sure of that. They could've spent the last day licking their wounds or feeling sorry for themselves, but instead they took action. Together, they solved the problem and made everything right again, and I am so incredibly proud of them for that. And I'm proud of you for giving them that tenacity."

"I'd say we both contributed to that," Lois said, turning in his arms. "You can't be a shrinking violet and Superman at the same time...."

"You remember what I was like when I first came to town, right?" Clark asked with a crooked smile.

"I mean, sure, you were green. But the blue spandex, mmm,"

she closed her eyes and tilted her head back at the memory, practically begging him to plant kisses on her neck. He gladly obliged, eliciting a giggle from her. "I would say that you were anything but shy."

"I think part of me just wanted to show off for you," he said between kisses. "My boldness back then was entirely because of your influence."

She arched her body into his. "Good to know," she said, finally capturing his lips with her own. The kissed hungrily for a few minutes, then he picked her up, deciding that it was time to thank her for her many contributions to his life, and to the world in general. "I have to get to work," she said weakly between kisses.

"I don't think anyone will mind if you're five minutes late," he said, taking a few strides toward the staircase.

She looked at him playfully. "I only get five minutes?"

He smiled at her. "I don't have anywhere to be today...."

Her finger traced a pattern on his shoulder, stoking the fire. "Just kiss me, flyboy." With that, he closed the distance to the bedroom, closing the door behind him out of habit. Though his life might have some bumps every now and then, it was most certainly good, and it would take a lot more than a rogue senator to change that.

The August sun beat down on the asphalt parking lots surrounding Kaufman Stadium, causing shimmering lines of heat to rise up off them, and making the already sweltering temperature feel even warmer than it was. Despite the heat, there were pockets of people tailgating all around, gathered under tents, drinking beverages to keep cool. It was within this sea of humanity and celebration that Spencer North and his family searched, his focus aimed at a specific corner of a specific lot, eventually finding what looked like a completely ordinary family gathering. Children ran around, pretending to play football, while others carried bean bags, dropping them everywhere except the boards where they were supposed to go. Four non-descript couples milled around under a series of tents, and a grill sat off to the side, smoke rising off it. Spencer had no sooner located his target when he saw Clark Kent turn toward him, raising a hand and smiling. They walked toward each other, and Spencer found his smile growing the closer they got. After a few moments they met, with Clark extending his hand and Spencer gladly taking it.

"Clark, good to see you," Spencer said.

"Glad you were able to make it," Clark replied. He turned his attention to Spencer's wife next. "Hi, I'm Clark Kent," he said, shaking her hand next. She had a basic understanding that Clark was someone that Spencer had met at his hotel in Australia during one strange weekend, and that Clark had saved his life. That was all that he'd told her, though, and officially any other truths between Spencer and Clark were left unsaid and unacknowledged. As far as she was concerned, this was a meeting between two families with mutual interests and no more. It meant a lot more to him than that, though, and he sensed she could see that, even if it was something that he couldn't put into words.

"Liz," she replied. Spencer had met her when he was in high school, a fellow Kansas City local who got to know him before he got starry-eyed dreams of Hollywood fame. He was continually grateful to have met her when he did, to have her by his side as he transformed from a nobody to a recognizable movie star. She kept him grounded, kept him from getting too big of a head, and kept him away from so much of the Hollywood noise – the drugs and parties and general phoniness – that tended to encompass other young stars. She took no nonsense from him, and certainly not from others, though that didn't make her anti-social, by any means. She was always game to meet his friends and co-workers, and she had been especially excited to find out that Clark Kent wanted to meet in Kansas City, for a Royals game. Her face was radiant, and she shook his hand enthusiastically.

Clark next turned to Spencer's two young children. He squatted down in front of them and met their eyes with his own. Spencer supposed that he shouldn't be surprised that Clark was good with kids – he had three of his own, after all – but it was still odd to him, knowing who he was in his other guise. He was the world's strongest man, he could turn the whole stadium to rubble if he so desired, yet he was so gentle with children. "Who do we have here?" Clark asked.

"Bradley and Eli," Liz answered, ruffling Bradley's hair.

"How old are you?" Clark asked the boys, and neither was shy as they gave their ages. "Well, tell you what, the kids over there are looking forward to playing with you. Adam, there, is 5, and the twins, Eddie and Ellie, are 3. You are the same ages! How cool is that?" Bradley and Eli nodded and smiled. "You want to go play?" Clark asked. At their enthusiastic nods, Liz shooed them off, and Clark's grandkids welcomed them without another thought. Clark stood and addressed Spencer and Liz again. "How about I introduce you around?"

They didn't have a chance to move before an attractive, older woman wrapped her hands around Clark's arm, drawing his attention. "Our guests finally arrived?" she asked, and he nodded. "Hi, I'm Lois," she said, extending her right hand.

"My wife," Clark clarified as both Spencer and Liz shook the hand in turn.

"Pleased to meet you," Spencer said, appraising the woman who was Superman's wife. She appeared to be around fifty, though when she smiled, she looked a decade younger. Something about her eyes, though, hinted at keen intelligence, and he felt certain that the moment she laid eyes on him she probably knew every last detail about him. This was a woman who lived her life ferreting out secrets, but lived with someone who held perhaps the biggest secret in the world. Spencer thought that they could probably hold a long, interesting conversation about how that dichotomy affected her, what that did to their lives, but officially he had no idea that it was even an issue. Officially he knew nothing, and he found himself itching to change that. Just being able to talk to someone would feel like heaven. But for now, this would have to do, he thought with a small sigh that didn't escape the notice of the tenacious reporter. She raised an eyebrow at his reaction, and he wondered again just what exactly she knew about him.

"Lois Lane, right? Of the Daily Planet?" Liz asked. She had been looking forward to this meeting, because she had long been a fan of Lois's work and her reputation as someone who didn't take any crap from anyone. Lois nodded. "Didn't you just write a story that took down a senator?"

Senator Robbins, from Texas, resigned just a couple days earlier after a conspiracy was unearthed by the Daily Planet to create a crime wave in cities throughout the country. There were also charges of meddling in various governmental agencies, and hints at a conspiracy to use the space program in a potential plot against Superman. The evidence was thorough and damning, and Lois Lane had been the primary author, though a large number of other reporters at the paper, including Clark Kent, also contributed.

Lois and Clark looked at each other, then turned back toward the North's. "All I did was search for the source of a crime wave, and went where the story took me. And I wasn't alone in that search."

"The story wouldn't have had nearly the same punch in anyone else's hands," Clark said to her with a smile.

"You wrote companion pieces that had plenty of heft of their own, dear," she replied, expertly reflecting the compliment back at him. She then turned back toward Liz and Spencer. "Anyway, I didn't take down a senator, as you said. He resigned because he was a scuzball and got caught."

Clark laughed lightly beside her, and Spencer couldn't help

but smile. "All the same, I feel like I should thank you for getting a guy like that away from the hallowed halls," Liz said, her expression clearly showing how much she admired the reporting duo.

"It was my pleasure, believe me," Lois said with a small nod. Letting go of her husband, she reached for Liz's hand. "Now, how about we get you something to drink?" Lois glanced back toward Clark, then guided Liz toward a couple coolers under the tent. If Spencer didn't know any better, he could swear that it was all a ploy to get Clark alone with him.

"Come on, I want to introduce you to the family," Clark said, gesturing for Spencer to follow him. The first small group they came upon was three men, all apparently in their twenties, one of whom seemed to be a carbon copy of Clark. Another was slightly taller and almost completely lacking the muscle mass of the other two. The third appeared familiar to Spencer in a way that he couldn't quite place. It was he who first noticed as Spencer and Clark approached, and his face broke into a smirk. "This is Sam," Clark said to Spencer.

"I wasn't aware that you were friends with any movie stars," Sam said to Clark, his voice light. "Very glad to meet you," Sam said to the Spencer.

The skinny one looked puzzled for a second, then recognition seemed to come, and he, too, smiled. "You play Superman in the movies, right?" he asked.

"This is Matt, my daughter's husband," Clark said.

Sam turned to Matt, his smirk still in place. "You might not recognize him because he's changed out of the spandex and put on a pair of sunglasses. How very interesting," Sam said.

It was true that the idea of hiding himself behind glasses while trying to be discreet in public didn't occur to him until after he met Clark, and he had started doing just that to great success in the ensuing month or so. He was about to reply, but the third one in the group spoke before he got a chance.

"Don't mind him," he said. "He has always thought of himself as a comedian. But comedy is very much in the eye of the beholder. I'm Jon," he said, extending a hand.

"I met Spencer in Australia when I spent a couple days down there last month," Clark explained, causing all three to collectively raise their eyebrows.

"Sounds like you had a nice vacation down there," Sam replied to Clark, a twinkle in his eye. Spencer was beginning to think that Sam wasn't so much a comedian as someone who delighted in the little absurdities of life, and he probably shared Lois's knack for sizing people up.

"Working. I was working," Clark said. "I filed a story from down there and few more about what I saw on the trip after I came back. Go ahead and check, it's all very above-board."

"Uh huh," Sam said.

"And he saved my life," Spencer said. The three of them looked at each other, then turned toward Clark, who just smiled and shrugged. "Saved me from some kidnapers," Spencer continued. "And we got to talking and figured out that we have a lot in common."

"Didn't I hear about you attending some comic convention down there dressed like Batman?" Matt asked. Jon hid a small smile as Sam quirked an eyebrow, apparently finding the question very amusing.

"That's right," Spencer answered slowly, looking more closely at the men in front of him, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Jon was obviously Crimson Superman, given his resemblance to his father, though he seemed very unassuming in civilian clothes. He was very well built, but the t-shirt he chose to wear fit loosely, downplaying the bulk underneath. Sam, though, had a tight shirt on, in addition to a ball cap that sat backwards on his head. That plus his general attitude made him seem almost like a college kid, though something behind his eyes seemed much

more calculating. The mention of Batman seemed to interest him greatly, which was intriguing.

“Moving on,” Clark said cheerily, ushering Spencer elsewhere before he was able to dwell too much on the situation. Next, he met Clark’s daughter Laura, a sweet girl whose beauty could put half the actresses in Hollywood to shame. Finally, he met Sam and Jon’s wives, who seemed very interested in him, but not necessarily as fans of his movies. They asked lots of questions that seemed somewhat absurd on their face – what was his favorite comic? When did he first hear about Superman? Which superhero did he most want to be like when he was kid? The questioning wasn’t uncomfortable and the women were perfectly personable, but something about the way they looked at him...he felt like he was being...interviewed, if that made any sense.

Clark stayed by his side for quite a while, a comforting shadow. After about a half hour, the food came out, and the whole family gathered in lawn chairs under the tents. Apparently they were quite used to tailgating, between Jon’s stint in a college marching band and Sam’s four years as a football player at Metropolis University. Spencer felt very welcome, like part of the family; he could tell his wife felt the same way. After dinner, Clark left him to his own devices, and he found himself bouncing between playing with the kids and talking with Lois Lane, who had quite a sense of humor and was much less intimidating than she seemed at first. As game time neared, the gear was put away, and the family started to gravitate toward the stadium. Spencer helped, and eventually found himself loading the last of the collapsible tents into a car next to Sam while the rest of the family started toward the stadium.

“So, Spencer, I have to ask,” Sam said once they were alone, lifting some heavy equipment into the car like it weighed nothing. “You and my dad, is there some sort of...understanding between you?”

“I guess I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Spencer said, though he was pretty sure that he did.

Sam stopped and looked at him, the mischievous expression he usually wore muted. “He never introduced me as his son, you realize that, right? Yet you assume that I am.”

“It’s hard not to see,” Spencer answered. “You look a lot more like your mom, but I can see his mannerisms in you.”

“I’m just saying that it’s noteworthy, because officially he hasn’t been my father for years. That’s because there’s a secret in our family...well, several, really, but one at the root of it all. He knows that, I know that. I suspect that you know that, too. Unofficially, I mean.”

Spencer nodded slowly. “So, officially, your father is...?”

“Bruce Wayne,” Sam said.

“THAT’s why you looked familiar,” Spencer said, wiping his hands against each other as he finished his job. Sam took the opportunity to sit on the bumper of the car, and Spencer followed suit. “You’re Sam Wayne. How did that happen? Why can’t you admit that you’re related to Clark...officially?”

A cloud seemed to pass over him, and all the joking and good spirits seemed very far away at that moment. “Because I just happened to be a passenger in an airplane that crashed. Nobody should’ve survived, but I’m still here.” A cold wave worked its way down Spencer’s back, and he had to suppress a shudder at the thought of what that must’ve been like. At that moment, though, a switch seemed to flip, and the easygoing Sam seemed to be back. “Ask yourself how that could be,” Sam said, and Spencer could only gape at him more a moment.

“Well, officially, I have no idea.”

“But unofficially?” Sam said, trying to lead him to acknowledge the truth. Spencer sighed.

“Clark’s not interested in discussing anything unofficially.”

“You’re here aren’t you?” Sam said. “Look, I’ve known him all my life. Once the truth is out there, he’s not shy about pulling

back the curtain and letting you in on all of it. That’s what this is, even if he’s not saying it. Which, might I add, is kinda weird.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m him, at least in the eyes of a lot of people. That has to be strange, facing down the fictional version of yourself, especially when our true selves have so much in common.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah I can see that.” He stood and gestured toward the stadium. “We should probably get going. The game should be starting any time.” He tilted his head, his eyes far away. “They’re just finishing the anthem.”

Spencer cringed and stood quickly, falling into step with Sam as he slowly made his way through the lots. They walked in silence for a minute before Sam spoke again. “I have to know, how exactly did you find out?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Spencer said. Ever since he had found out the big secret, he had wondered about how the people Superman loved were made aware of his other life. Did his kids grow up knowing the secret? Were they taken to some secret room when they hit a certain age and told? What about Lois? She had been a friend of Superman’s ever since he first showed up on the scene – surely she hadn’t been fooled by a bit of spandex or a pair of glasses.

“Rock paper scissors to see who goes first,” Sam said, causing Spencer to smirk.

“You guys aren’t telepathic, are you?”

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, I wish. Though, all things considered, being bulletproof comes in pretty handy, too. Come on,” he said, putting his hands out. Spencer followed suit, and won the matchup. When Sam insisted on best two of three, Spencer won the second round, too.

In hushed tones, so as not to be overheard by those around them, Sam related the tale of how he found out. Spencer was riveted, and wondered how he would have reacted in the same situation. Probably not by threatening to jump off a skyscraper, he thought with a chuckle, but it seemed very much in character with the type of man who could step into the persona of Sam Wayne.

“So you were fine with everything once you found out?” Spencer asked.

Sam bobbed his head. “It was an adventure,” he said, and Spencer supposed he could understand. “How boring could life be if you had stuff like heat vision and flying to look forward to?”

“I bet the first time you flew must’ve been something else,” Spencer said wistfully. Silence dragged on longer than he expected, and he looked back toward his companion, who seemed lost in thought.

“The first time I flew with my Dad was pretty incredible. Of course, I was twelve and had never even been in an airplane before, so I guess I was easy to impress. I kept waiting for the day to come when I could do it myself, but it never happened.” He shrugged.

“So you don’t...? You can’t...?” Spencer stammered, surprised. Sam just gave an amused smile.

“Can you?” he asked.

“Well, no,” Spencer answered.

“There you have it. I also can’t sing worth a damn, but you don’t see me grousing about that, either,” Sam said.

Spencer blinked. That was certainly a different perspective to have. “Guess that’s one thing I have on you,” he said after a second, and Sam smiled, wrapping his arm around Spencer’s shoulder.

“No offense, but I don’t think I’ll ask for a demonstration,” he said with a small laugh. “Okay, so while we’re on the topic of revelations, I have to tell you another story. If you think my story was interesting, you should hear how my brother found out. He was starting to come into his powers, though he didn’t have any idea that’s what was happening at the time. He certainly didn’t have any control, so during one of his...episodes, he managed to

look through the wall into my parents' bedroom while they were being intimate, and my dad was still in the suit."

"No way!"

"Hand to God," Sam said, holding up one hand and putting the other over his heart.

"That's... hilarious," Spencer said, laughing. "Seeing my folks like that would've caused me to curl into a fetal position and stay that way for a week, and that's without the whole Superhero thing on top of it."

"You have to know my parents – they have always been rather intimate anyway. If we went out to a restaurant or a movie or something, inevitably there would be heavy kissing at some point, so that part of the story was rather ho-hum. But, yeah, adding at all together... I'm surprised Jon turned out as normal as he did." Sam chuckled, and Spencer could tell that there was brotherly animosity there. "Okay, your turn. Spill it."

"It started with a panel at the Comic Convention in Sydney," Spencer said. "It was a good time, and the first time I ever met Superman. We had a nice discussion there, and before leaving he said something to me that stuck with me. Fast forward to that night in the hotel bar, where I met your dad, who was watching a baseball game. We struck up a conversation, and he got a little tipsy...."

"Whoa, hold on," Sam said. "Clark Kent got TIPSY? That's new."

Spencer raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Anyway, as he moved to leave, he said the exact same thing that Superman had, with the same inflection, in the same voice. It helped that there was a resemblance...."

"My dad, drunk... it's like seeing a unicorn in the wild," Sam said. "Or finding El Dorado or something."

At this point, they had reached the gates to the stadium. They both handed the usher their tickets, walked quickly through security, and began making their way up to their seats and their families. "I like to think I found something rarer than a unicorn," Spencer said. "I mean, I figured out the big secret. Unofficially."

"You saw my family, right? Those of us in the know aren't as rare as you think," Sam said, then appeared to be thoughtful. "To be fair, though, unicorns are imaginary creatures, and there are at least two real Supermen and a real Superwoman..." He looked at Spencer.

"Who, might I add, are also fictional characters," Spencer said. "I should know."

Sam pointed at him. "Very true. What's something else that is demonstrably real but everyone assumes to be fake?"

"An honest used car salesman?" Spencer said. They looked at each other for a second, then both started cracking up. They were still laughing when they located the family.

They separated and found their seats, starting the game with their families. As the innings wore on, though, there was a fair amount of seat shuffling. At one point the kids all gravitated toward each other, and Spencer found himself among them, keeping an eye on his two while getting to know Clark's grandchildren a little better. They all seemed like fairly ordinary kids, although Adam, the oldest, most definitely had the same appraising gaze that Lois and Sam had down pat.

Settling in next to him, Adam gave Spencer a long stare. It was disconcerting, and despite his best effort to ignore it, Spencer found himself shifting in his seat uncomfortably. He glanced toward Adam from time to time while trying to concentrate on the game, but it was hard to escape those eyes, which were both innocent and knowing at the same time. At last Adam spoke. "You're not Superman," he said.

"No, not really," Spencer answered. "I just play him in the movies."

"But you can't, like, fly or move super fast, right?"

"That's right," Spencer said. "I'm just a regular guy."

"So why would you pretend to be him?"

Spencer sat back, and wondered what exactly the kid knew about the nature of his family. "Well, I'm a fan," Spencer said. "And the movie studio wanted someone to pretend to be him, because he's far too important to have sitting around a studio for months on end filming a movie." That seemed to be the right thing to say, and Adam smiled a little. "I pretend to be other people for a living, and the movie studio thought I would make the best pretend Superman."

"Have you ever met him?" Adam asked with squinted eyes, and Spencer got the feeling that this was a loaded question.

"Sure," Spencer said, keeping his demeanor upbeat. "We spoke together at a comic book convention in Australia last month."

"That's the only time, huh?" Adam said.

"Yup. Say, did you see the movie I was in?" Spencer asked, trying to change the subject.

Adam made a face. "Yeah I've seen it a few times. Daddy always thinks it's super funny, but I don't know why." Spencer looked over his shoulder toward Sam, noticing immediately that he'd heard the comment. He looked acutely embarrassed, though Spencer thought he could understand the sentiment. The movie was obviously so far from the truth that it seemed almost silly by comparison. "Aunt Laura said you're the only reason why the movie is worth watching." Spencer's gaze shifted to Laura, who was trying very hard to look like she wasn't hearing the conversation, though the scarlet in her cheeks betrayed the fact that she was.

"So do YOU like Superman? The real one?" Spencer asked. Adam beamed.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Adam said, and Spencer scooted closer.

"Adam!" he heard Sam Wayne say. "What did we say about telling secrets to strangers?"

"But he's not a stranger! He plays Grandpa in the movies!" Almost immediately, his eyes went wide, and his hands flew up over his mouth. Sam didn't seem shocked or mad, instead seeming almost smug.

"Thanks again for telling him, Dad," he said, turning toward Clark, who just shrugged.

Spencer leaned in toward Adam. "It can be our secret, bud," he whispered, relaxing the boy, who responded with a nod.

Toward the middle innings of the ballgame, Spencer found himself in a group with the other men. Without the distraction of children, they were free to critically watch the game, and they started following every pitch.

"Curve," Sam would say, and Clark would shake his head.

"Slider," he'd reply. "That's what the guys in the broadcast booth said, and they should know."

At some point, a baseball was produced, and one of them would demonstrate the grip and the arm movement. This went on for an inning or two. Spencer played a little bit in high school, so he was able to contribute to the conversation and demonstrate the difference between a two-seam and a four-seam fastball. The conversation was generally congenial, though at some point it degraded into whether or not they could hit certain pitches, which Spencer had to admit that he found humorous.

"Want to play a pickup game after this one is over?" Sam asked, and although Clark looked interested, nobody else seemed all that excited.

"There's only so much baseball I can take in one day," Jon said, bringing an exaggerated gasp from Sam. "And as much fun as it would be to demonstrate what a REAL fastball looks like, with my luck I'd miss the strike zone completely and end up punching a baseball-shaped hole in a building several miles from where we're playing."

"Yeah," Sam answered slowly, thoughtfully, causing Spencer

to chuckle. The mental image of Supermen and women playing baseball with each other was rather humorous. The prospect of smoking fastballs that arrived at the plate almost before it was out of the pitcher's hand, of popups that reached the stratosphere and beyond... Maybe it had happened before and he had never known about it. He found himself getting lost in the thought of a superpowered football game, or basketball, or a tennis match, and he found himself itching to get ahold of some writers for a future Superman movie to see if he could put those ideas of screen.

Spencer spent the last couple innings with the women, who wanted to hear all the dirt on the projects he was working on. It was really the first opportunity he'd had to talk shop since he'd arrived, and he did so gladly. He took the opportunity to ask them about their jobs, too, and was amused to find out that Jon's wife was a police officer. When he asked if they met while she was working, she just bobbed her head, almost as if it was a silly question. Of course one of the Supermen would get married to an officer that he met on the job. It was left unsaid which outfit Jon had been wearing when they met, though he assumed that it wasn't his everyday street clothes.

The final inning arrived way too soon, and Spencer found himself dreading the last out. He was just beginning to feel like part of this incredible family, and he didn't want it to end. One by one, he thanked all the family members for a great day, then, once it was over, he followed them out of the stadium and said his goodbyes. The world seemed too quiet as he climbed into his car with his wife and children. In a few months, when the latest Superman movie debuted, he knew he would be meeting up with Clark again, and if he was lucky he would see the costumed versions of the other family members, too. But the heroes that kept the world safe, the larger-than-life figures that were the subject of comics and books and the movies that he acted in... he knew they weren't real. And as long as they were in public in their spandex-clad personas, they could never act real, either. Talking to Superman at the premier would be nothing like talking to him here today. Maybe they could meet again sometime in the real world, but this day felt like something that could never be repeated.

With a sigh, Spencer started his car and pulled away from the stadium, eventually entering the interstate and heading toward his parent's house where they were staying. It would take the better part of a half hour to get there, so he settled in and let his mind sift through everything he'd seen and heard that day. He knew he probably wasn't watching the road as closely as he should, but suddenly something caught his attention, and all the random thoughts evaporated, his eyes fully fixed on the road ahead. What he saw was a horror story unfolding almost in slow motion. A semi truck started sliding sideways uncontrollably several hundred feet ahead of him, taking out cars and other semis on the crowded highway and sending debris flying into the air. Brake lights lit up in front of him, and he found his hand flying out to brace his wife as he stomped hard on the brake pedal, saying a silent prayer that the person behind him was paying attention. His car stopped comfortably behind the car in front of him, but at that moment, a giant fireball erupted from somewhere further ahead.

He sat absolutely still for a moment, trying to process everything that was happening. The sound of screeching tires and screams filled the air, along with the horrible sound of vehicles hitting each other. The pocket of cars immediately around his were at a standstill, but nobody seemed to be in too much of a hurry to do anything. What could they do, anyway? To leave the car was a recipe for getting struck by some driver who was paying more attention to their phone than to the road. But he realized that he couldn't just sit there. Somewhere at the front of this knot of traffic were people who had possibly been injured, and the giant plume of smoke showed no signs of dying off. He was Superman... in a sense. Didn't he have a duty to help? What was stopping him?

Without another thought, he opened his door and jumped out of the car. "Wait here," he said over his shoulder to his family, then started running toward the accident scene. His hand reached for the phone in his pocket, with the intention of finding Clark's number and calling him. But it occurred to Spencer that Clark was already in town, and if he couldn't see the plume of smoke, he was probably more than able to hear a scream. "Help! We need help! I-435 south of the river!" he yelled as he ran, hoping it wouldn't be for nothing. After a few seconds, he reached the front of the tangle of cars, and stopped abruptly to observe the scene in front of him. Cars and trucks were mangled, and the fire was now burning two vehicles. He started forward again, heading toward the fire with the intent of rescuing people trapped inside if necessary. The heat stopped him before ever got there, though, and with a grunt of frustration he turned his attention toward the cars in the immediate path of the fire. The car he stopped next to had a family inside, but the accident seemed to have left them disoriented, and they didn't appear to recognize the danger coming their way.

"Hey!" he said, pounding on their windows. "You need to get out!" He tried the handle, but it was locked. He went to the next door and handle, then, finding it locked, as well, he started banging and yelling. The family seemed to stir, but they weren't moving quickly enough. Frustration welled up inside of him, and he started hitting the window with more solid parts of his body, to no avail. Then, suddenly, there was what felt like a gust of wind, and the first door was being torn off its hinges. Spencer turned to see what had happened, and found Superman standing there, in all his glory. All his frustration was instantly gone.

"Get them out of there," Superman said, then disappeared for a split second, rematerializing next to fire. With one deep breath, he blew the fire out, then started helping those who were injured. Spencer got down to business, helping the family out of the car, then helping anyone else he could find. Superman disappeared again, then showed up carrying an ambulance, which he deposited ahead of the accident scene. By that time, others had joined the effort, and ordinary people were helping each other. More paramedics and firemen quickly showed up to the scene, and Superman would stop by periodically to discuss things with them, pointing toward the long line of stranded motorists stuck behind the crash, then pointing to the vehicles on the road. A policeman arrived to take photos of the scene and make some measurements, then Superman cleared enough of the wreck away to allow vehicles to start clearing out.

Spencer kept helping for as long as he felt he was needed, but by the time the roadway opened up and engines behind him started up, he paused, taking the time to just stand there and watch. A sense of accomplishment washed over him as he realized that he had done something important. Because of him and other good Samaritans, nobody had been killed, and the injuries were fewer than they might have otherwise been. It was even possible his action had been the catalyst to spur others to help, to accomplish something that they weren't aware that they were capable of. All the notoriety and fame that he had achieved up to this point in his life had been because of the accomplishments of the man he portrayed; today he had finally lived up to that legacy. He smiled. Then he was aware of a presence beside him.

"You seem to have a nose for trouble," Superman said, causing Spencer's smile to widen.

"Only when you're around," Spencer answered, and it was Clark's turn to smile.

"You sound like my wife," he said. "So where's your vehicle? You need a lift anywhere?"

Spencer indicated that Superman follow him, and they walked toward his car. He was aware that people were gawking at them, though he was certain that it was the blue spandex and red cape that were attracting their attention. A glance at Superman showed that he was completely unfazed by the stares. It only took a

moment to get the car, and when they did, he found his family with their noses buried various electronic devices. “Look who I found,” Spencer said as he leaned into the open window.

His wife looked toward him, then her jaw dropped. “Superman!” she said, and immediately both children were also staring wide-eyed at their guest.

Superman nodded toward her. “Ma’am,” he said. “I was just thanking your husband for his help out there.” Spencer noticed a slight change in his voice, which had taken on a slightly different timbre from when he was wearing civilian clothes. It occurred to him that he hadn’t seen Clark in the suit since the first time they met, and even though he now knew the man under the cape, he couldn’t help but think how impressive he still appeared.

“The traffic should be clearing up soon, but Superman offered to give us a lift wherever we wanted to go...you know, as a favor from one Superman to another.”

Spencer and Superman looked at each other and smiled. “Well, I, uh, would be honored I guess,” Liz stammered. In the back seat, the kids started bouncing as best they could while still being strapped in their car seats.

“Superman, are you going to fly us?” one asked.

“Like, in the sky?” the other chimed in.

“That was the plan,” Superman said, and the kids cheered. He looked toward Spencer. “It looks like the family is on board. Where can I take you?” Spencer gave an address, mentioning a few landmarks near where they were going. Clark didn’t ask too many questions, but then, if he knew the area as well as Spencer suspected, he wouldn’t have to. After a moment, Spencer climbed into the car and fastened his seatbelt. “Ready?” Superman asked. Spencer could only nod.

With that, Superman bent down, and the next second the car jostled a bit before there was a disconcerting feeling of weightlessness. Outside the window, the ground seemed to disappear, and there was only blue sky and puffy clouds around them. Spencer craned his neck to see out the windows, and what he saw made him gasp. The ground was very far below, far enough that he couldn’t make out individual people. Scenery flashed by below at speeds faster than he could contemplate, though he couldn’t feel any g-forces acting on them, holding them in their seat. If he closed his eyes, it felt like they were sitting on a cloud of air. It was a peaceful feeling, made more so by the silence around him. His family had been shocked into quiet, and everyone seemed content to stare silently at the world below them. But all too soon he could feel them start to descend, then they were on the ground again, precisely where they needed to be, parked neatly against the curb. Superman was now standing next to the car, his hand on the window frame.

“So, what did you think?” he asked.

“I think that’s the only way to travel,” Spencer’s wife said, and he nodded in agreement.

“It was soooo cool!” Bradley said.

“I want to do it again!” Eli said.

Superman smiled at looked at them. “You boys are going to be good from here on out, right?” They both nodded vigorously.

“Because if you aren’t, I’m sure your dad will let me know about it.”

“We promise,” Bradley said.

“Good,” Superman said, then turned to address Liz. “I hope you don’t mind, but I need to borrow your husband for a few minutes.”

Liz looked at him with an expression that was hard to classify. She had never been all that impressed by the idea of celebrity, but it was hard not to be impressed by Superman, especially when he had just flown them across the Kansas City metro. Likewise, she had never considered Spencer to be anything other than the normal kid that she had met in high school, even after he became a household name, but now there seemed to be some new respect

there.

Spencer reached for the door handle and stepped out of the car. “We shouldn’t be too long. Just a little bit of business. Go on inside.”

Liz nodded, and with that, Spencer felt an arm around his waist, and he was airborne again. This time, without the car around him, the experience was absolutely incredible. The whole world seemed to spread out below them, and he found himself at a loss for words. The city transitioned to countryside and they flew over the hills of eastern Kansas, eventually angling toward a clearing at the top of a large rise, landing in a spot that had a view of the landscape for miles around. As soon as their feet hit the ground, Clark stepped away and dropped his arms. He turned and looked toward the southwest.

“The town I grew up in is about ten miles away...you can barely see the water tower from here.”

Spencer took a step so that he was at his side again, and saw the little town in the distance. It was no Metropolis, that’s for sure, and the idea of Superman coming from that place seemed outwardly absurd. Clark Kent, on the other hand, he could picture down there.

“Do you miss it?” Spencer asked.

“Sometimes,” he said. “It was an idyllic place to grow up. But it’s hard to hide in a small town, where everyone knows everyone else. There are no secrets in a place like that.”

“None?” Spencer asked.

Clark gave a half smile. “Well, maybe some. I like to think that nobody back home recognized me when I first put on this suit and walked onto the bridge of the Prometheus, though sometimes I wonder.” The spot they were standing in had tall grasses that waved gently in the breeze. Clark reached down and grabbed at the seeds atop a strand of grass, gently pulling them off and cupping them in his hand. As he spoke, he tossed them onto the ground one by one. “I spent a lot of time by myself, especially once my powers started to develop, but fortunately my parents had a couple hundred acres to explore and figure things out. The worst thing in the world is to be scared of yourself, or scared of what you might do to others. But in a place like that, with the wide open land for miles all around, you can let loose, and learn to be yourself without anyone the wiser.”

Spencer had never thought too much about the story behind the movies he acted in. Maybe he assumed that they were more or less true, maybe he didn’t care if they were completely made up. But now, more than ever, he could see the complete disconnect between those stories and the man they were ostensibly about. His character was an alien who had always had his powers, had always known who he was. He set himself above humanity as a symbol of what man could aspire to. Clark Kent didn’t come into this world knowing what he could do, he had to learn. He had to suffer through fear that Spencer could only imagine, had to isolate himself, but somehow managed to come through all that with a positive attitude even though he had every reason in the world not to. He wasn’t above humanity, he was in many ways the best of humanity.

“When did you come here? To Earth, I mean,” Spencer asked, trying to put the last pieces of the puzzle together, though he was fairly certain that he knew what the answer would be.

“When I was a baby,” Clark answered. “The story was that I was the child of some obscure relative, left to my folks because the pregnancy was not approved of by the family.” He shrugged. “I have no memory of anywhere but here. This is my home, and as far as I’m concerned, it always has been.”

“So the idea that you somehow came here as an adult...?”

He gave a smile that was charmingly contrite. “A little bit of fiction that I was more than happy to let people believe. The comic book writers have to put out new adventures every week, and since my early years are a blank canvas as far as the public is

concerned, they happily paint in whatever backstory or indulgence that they want. According to comics canon, I brought from Krypton a super dog, super cat, monkey, horse, and cousin, and I keep a miniature Kryptonian city in a bottle in my fortress, which is secured by a giant golden key. I would say that you can't make this stuff up, except obviously someone did. Like I told you once, you can't believe everything that you see in the movies."

"Are you upset that I know the truth?" Spencer asked after a moment.

"No," Clark answered quickly. "You're a good kid; I trust you. I apologize if it seemed like I was trying to keep you at arm's length – that wasn't my intention."

"Has anyone found out that you wish hadn't?"

Clark raised an eyebrow. "The name Lex Luthor ring a bell?"

"He knew?"

Clark nodded. "And he made sure to make my life hell because of it, even well after he died."

"Wow," Spencer said, running his hand through his hair.

"Lex hunted me for years before he found out, though. Lois and I worked together for two years before she figured it out. I'm still trying to figure out what led you to the truth." His expression showed good humor, and Spencer was grateful for that. Being questioned by Superman could make even the toughest guy squirm, especially when they were alone together, miles from civilization. Spencer pushed the thought away, reminding himself that Superman had been nothing but gracious toward him.

"Did you know you look like this reporter I know named Clark Kent?" Spencer said with a teasing smile, which was gladly returned.

"I might've heard that before."

"Well, you sound a lot like him, too. And, might I add, you also say some of the same things, especially with a couple of beers in you."

Clark groaned, putting his hand over his face. After a second, he balled his hand into a fist and looked shyly from behind it. "Would you believe I'd never been drunk before?" he said.

"Oh, absolutely," Spencer said with a laugh. "And if you ever do it again, might I recommend maybe not doing it in a hotel bar next to virtual stranger?"

"Yeah, noted," Clark said, also giving a small laugh. "Though, really, you're not a stranger. You're me."

"If I've figured out anything over the last month or so, it's that the character I play isn't you at all." The smile that Clark gave him told Spencer that he was absolutely correct, and he felt for a moment like a kid getting the ultimate look of approval his idol. He let himself bask in that feeling for a moment, then forced himself to ask the question that had been on his mind for the last month. "So, tell me, why exactly were you there, hanging out with me instead of flying home to spend time with your family?"

"Well, the short answer is Senator Robbins."

"What?!"

Clark started to pace, gathering his thoughts for a moment before speaking again. "We reported on his plan to cause chaos in cities throughout the country in order to get reelected on a law and order platform. What we left out was the fact that he succeeded, and that he was able to get me and the kids out of the way in the process."

"But...how? I thought that nothing can hurt you. Aren't you always...super?"

"Well, very little can hurt me. I still haven't figured out yet how he knew, but he found out how to take our powers away."

Spencer couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sure, he'd thought that something seemed off with Clark, but he had never imagined that anything could make Superman powerless. "So that whole time you were down there, you didn't...? You couldn't...?" Clark nodded. "Even when you saved me from those kidnappers?" Spencer asked in a harsh whisper.

"I was just as normal as you were," Clark said softly.

"But you could've been shot," Spencer said.

Clark nodded again, his eyes soft. "Yes, I could've, but I wasn't going to let those guys take you, not while I had the ability to stop them. Just because I didn't have superpowers at that moment didn't mean that I was powerless, and the same goes for you."

Spencer felt his legs getting weak, and he sunk down to a squat, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands on his forehead. It was one thing to face danger when you knew that nothing your opponent threw at you could physically harm you. It was something else entirely to put yourself in harm's way for the benefit of others. Spencer was aware that one of the criticisms of Superman was that it was very easy to do what he did when there were no potential consequences – no bullet could stop him, no fire could burn him. But the critics had no idea that Clark Kent would gladly put himself in harm's way to help a friend, like he had done for Spencer in Australia. They were also oblivious to the fact that every time he goes out in public in the spandex, he risks potential discovery of his identity, which in turn risks the well-being of everyone he loves. "I don't know what to say except thank you," Spencer said. "It doesn't seem like enough to say, considering you literally put your life on the line for me."

As he looked up toward Clark, he noticed an amused grin on his face. "You were just as much a part of that as I was," he said. "Anyway, it was nothing more than what firemen and police officers do on a daily basis."

Spencer felt himself relax in the face of Clark's steady influence and good humor. With the tension draining out of him, he rocked back and sat, his knees drawn up toward his chest. "You are lousy at taking compliments," he said with a smile.

Clark took a step toward him, swept his cape back, and plopped down on the grass next to him. "I've heard that before," he said, placing his hands on the grass behind him and turning his face toward the sun. "So I suppose you're disillusioned now." His expression was still almost playful, and Spencer couldn't help but give a small snort.

"Why, because you have exactly one fault?"

"Lois could give you another dozen or so, if you're interested."

"No, I'm good, thanks," Spencer said. They both sat smiling in companionable silence, watching the hawks ride the air currents above them. Spencer's mind replayed snippets from the time they spent together, both in Australia and earlier that day, building a complete picture of the man beside him. Something occurred to him after a moment, something that only really made sense now that he knew Clark's family a little. "That Batman suit I wore – that was the real thing, wasn't it?"

"Yup," Clark said.

"Who? Sam?" Spencer asked. Clark nodded. "That just seems...counterintuitive. He doesn't seem like the brooding type."

"He's not," Clark answered. "But he's also not the original Batman. He has a particular skill set, he's extremely intelligent, and his predecessor was getting too old to be playing superhero, so there you are."

Spencer snapped his fingers, putting the pieces together. "Bruce Wayne, right?"

Clark just bobbed his head. "I will neither confirm nor deny that." Spencer raised an eyebrow, but Clark didn't elaborate.

"So, how did you come into possession of the bat suit and cowl?"

"Sam likes to give me gag gifts," Clark said, and Spencer could only blink at the ridiculousness of the concept. "Superman t-shirts, Superman pajamas, hats, whatever the most outrageous product is out there with my S on it. I think he thought that I didn't appreciate them enough, so last birthday it was a retired Batsuit. That one has actually been fun to have around, as you know."

“Didn’t appreciate the gifts? What, you don’t walk around in public in a Superman t-shirt?”

Clark chuckled. “God, no. I get enough of the S when I’m out working...I think you know what that’s like,” he said with a knowing grin.

“Definitely,” Spencer said.

“So now I have a closet full of gag gifts collecting dust...”

“Seems like a shame,” Spencer said, then Clark seemed to think of something. He stood up abruptly.

“Excuse me for a second,” he said, then disappeared. Spencer was a little too stunned to try and process what just happened, but before his mind had a chance to kick back in, Clark had returned, a bag in hand. Spencer stood, curious. “I brought a gift for you,” Clark said, extending the bag toward Spencer.

He grabbed the bag and looked inside, finding a large collection of various Superman items. He couldn’t help but laugh. “Just what I always wanted,” he said.

“I figured you might be able to get better use of that stuff than I ever could.”

“My wife might have a little fun with this, I think,” Spencer said, his mind conjuring various Halloween costumes and party gags that they could pull off with his new possessions.

“Don’t say I never gave you anything,” Clark joked.

“Nobody will believe I got these from you, you know,” Spencer said, and Clark shrugged.

“Then it can be our secret pal gift.”

Spencer laughed again. He didn’t know the last time he had laughed as much as he had today. He took a few deep breaths and looked out over the countryside. “I told my wife we were coming out here to discuss business. Better do a little out of that so I don’t come back a liar.”

Clark crossed his arms across his chest, striking the classic Superman pose that Spencer had gone to great lengths to imitate. His cape billowed behind him with a gust of wind. He looked for all the world like Superman should look when discussing business. “We’re planning to do charity fundraiser premiers in cities across the country again. Maybe you could help me out and be the featured guest at a few of those.”

Spencer couldn’t stop an involuntary shudder. “Are those the ones where rich people can pony up to get an audience with you?”

“And free drinks. And, you know, watch a movie.” Clark’s mild joking was completely at odds with his appearance, and Spencer had to look away to keep himself focused.

“I hate those things,” Spencer said. “Normal fans are one thing – I love meeting them. But people with the kind of disposable income that would allow them to attend a fundraiser like that...”

“I know, believe me,” Clark answered. “I told Jon that he had to take a few this time around, since he’s technically in the movie. I’m still burned out from the last round.”

“Shouldn’t Batman be there, too?” Spencer asked. He looked toward Clark, whose expression told Spencer the answer to his question. The man behind the cowl was someone who wore a perpetually amused grin, and probably couldn’t be counted on to maintain a gritty, scowling exterior for however long those parties were. That was probably an awful suggestion. “Ultra Woman?” Spencer continued, but he quickly decided that was also a bad idea. He didn’t know Lois Lane all that well, but he knew enough of her reputation to be aware of the fact that she couldn’t necessarily be considered a people person. “What if I went to a couple with you, so you don’t have to endure the whole thing yourself? We could divide and conquer.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully. “I’d be open to that,” he answered. “Might even be fun.”

“It’s a date,” Spencer said with a smirk. The conversation shifted to other things, including the day’s baseball game. Clark proposed maybe doing a football game together in conjunction with one of the charitable parties. They discussed memories of

other games they’d been to, particularly in Kansas City, which transitioned to their favorite players and teams. By the time that conversation tapered off, Spencer became aware of the shift of the sun in the sky, and the fact that they had probably been out there a lot longer than he had realized. A glance at his watch confirmed that. Recognition seemed to dawn on Clark at the same time, and they approached each other again.

“We should probably head back,” Clark said. At Spencer’s nod, he wrapped an arm around Spencer’s waist, and once again they were airborne.

“Next time we get together, I definitely want to do this again,” Spencer said, gripping his bag tightly, acutely aware of how far away the ground was. “I do all my ‘flying’ in front of a green screen.”

“I just hope that next meeting won’t be at some crime scene or disaster area,” Clark said, a very Superman-like sternness in his voice.

“My agent will have something to say about it if I ever try anything like that again,” Spencer answered. “As it is, I’m surprised my phone hasn’t started ringing yet.”

There was a moment of silence before Clark answered. “It felt good to go out there and help, though, didn’t it?” Spencer looked over, and he was smiling.

“Yeah,” Spencer sighed, and he marveled at how well Clark could read him. “I think there was a part of me that felt I had to live up to your legacy.” Clark looked like he was going to say something, but Spencer quickly continued before he got the chance. “And it’s not that I’m trying to somehow find a way to make you proud or impress you. That’s not what our friendship is about. It’s more that...I put on the ‘S’, too, and after meeting you...I think helping out makes me feel like less of a phony.”

The ground continued to flash by beneath them, sprawling subdivisions and winding streets making the beginning of the Kansas City suburbs. For a long moment there was no sound but the gentle rush of air, and a look at Clark showed him lost in thought. “At the time each of my kids found out about who I am, what I can do, and by extension what they would be able to do, I would sit them down and tell them in no uncertain terms that their lives were theirs to live. I would love them regardless of whether they chose to put on the spandex or not, and I would only be disappointed if they didn’t believe in whatever it was they did end up doing. Do you believe in your work?”

“Of course I do,” Spencer answered quickly.

“Then you’re not a phony.”

“But I’m no Superman, either, even if that’s how I present myself on screen.”

“That’s true, but those movies are fiction, and you’re only human. As far as I’m concerned, the best way that you can honor my legacy, to live up to S you wear on your chest, is to keep being yourself. Keep being a good person, someone who values truth and family and works for what you believe in, and you will be fine. I meant everything I said in Australia. I know you don’t need me to be proud of you, but I already am.”

Spencer was speechless. He wanted to say so much, but all he could think of was how grateful he was to have Clark Kent as a friend. After a moment, he felt them begin to descend, and just like that, their time together was done. Their feet touched the ground, and Clark stepped away. Spencer wanted to hug him again, but he was aware that this time around they were in a public place, it felt like too personal a gesture to be seen by nosy neighbors. Instead, he just extended his hand. “Thank you,” he said, simply, and Clark just nodded. “I’ll see you around.”

“Count on it,” Clark said, then took off.

Spencer walked slowly back toward his parents’ house, lost in thought. By the time he had entered and greeted his family, he had come to a decision. He answered the questions from his kids and his wife about his encounter with Superman as best he could, but

once the excitement of his return died down and he was able to have some quiet time, he sat his wife down and took her hand.

"Today was a magical day," he said, causing her to nod emphatically. "It almost seems like here, back home in Kansas City, we're the best versions of ourselves."

"I've never cared for California or the people there. You know that," she said, and he agreed. She always seemed out of place among the phony perfection of Hollywood, and he had never felt comfortable there, either. They lived there because that's where the work was. But with the Superman movies, including the promise of more to come, he had enough money that he probably never had to want for anything again. That, juxtaposed with what Clark had said about the benefits of growing up in a small town, with miles of open space around, made the decision very easy.

"Let's move back here," he said, and her face lit up.

"Oh, Spence, do you mean that?"

"Absolutely," he said with a smile, and she launched herself at him, wrapping him in a tight embrace, then seeking out his mouth with hers. In the whirlwind that followed, they informed the kids and his parents of their decision, and everyone was excited. Maybe he would seek out properties in the small towns surrounding the Kansas City metro, maybe Smallville had some real estate available. Spencer thought of the days to come, of meetings with real estate agents and the gossip that would inevitably come out of it, but he found it hard to be anything but happy.

*** EPILOGUE ***

The Wayne Tower in Gotham was abuzz with activity, despite the late hour. This was the night of the new Superman movie premiere, with a charity meet and greet in the restaurant at the top of the tower. CJ felt an acute sense of déjà vu as he and his wife made their way to the lobby and the set of elevators that led to the party. It had been a few short years since they had attended a similar party in the same location, though this time both Superman and Spencer North were there as guests of honor, and CJ and Jenny had brought Adam with them.

Three elevators had direct service between the lobby and the restaurant at the top of the building, and as each set of doors opened, groups of people streamed out before others climbed on. They had to wait several minutes to make their trip to the top, due to the sheer number of people. CJ spent the time making jokes for the benefit of his son, who was still awed at the majesty of the lobby and the sheer bigness of the building. They had made a conscious effort to shelter Adam from the business portion of CJ's life, in part to shield him from any publicity and keep him as innocent as possible. If CJ has his way, Adam would've stayed home tonight, too, but he had begged and pleaded to see the movie, and Jenny didn't see the harm. The harm, as far as CJ was concerned, would come from saying something he shouldn't in front of a few hundred rich and powerful people. Clark tried to diffuse that by visiting him prior to the party, in costume no less, and giving Adam plenty of attention before having a talk with him about how important it was to not let anyone know Superman was his Grandpa.

The next elevator made its way to the lobby, and CJ, Jen, and Adam stood next to the doors, waiting for it to unload before getting on. CJ hadn't exactly been paying attention to the people around him to that point, but he found himself noticing the faces of those exiting the elevator in front of him. He frowned as he realized that he recognized a few of the people who passed by him, although those men didn't give him a second look. Recognizing people in the Wayne tower wasn't unusual — CJ was a Wayne Tech executive and he regularly worked with employees throughout the company. But these men weren't employees, and something about their faces gave him a bad feeling. After the doors closed and the elevator started to ascend, he tried to figure out where he had seen them before. About 30 floors up it hit him,

and he uttered a curse, causing his wife to look at him funny, not that he noticed. He activated his x-ray vision and looked back toward the lobby, trying to track the men, though it took most of the rest of the ride up to find them again. They were approaching a vehicle down in the parking garage, and would soon be out of the streets. Memorizing the license plate, he brought his attention back to the elevator, which had now completed its journey, ushering his perplexed family out and toward the party at the restaurant.

"You need to take care of something, don't you?" Jen asked, though she no doubt already knew the answer.

CJ silently apologized. "You two go on ahead. Hopefully this doesn't take too long." He kissed his wife, then made a bee line for the stairwell.

"Hey, Dad?" he asked, looking toward the party, seeing Superman and Spencer North in the far corner of the room, surrounded by a group of people. Clark met his eyes, a question in his expression. "I need your help with something."

Clark nodded almost imperceptibly, then excused himself, slowly making his way through the crowd and out the door. It was only a few steps between there and the stairwell, though he shifted into superspeed at that point, not wanting his destination to be noticed. CJ was still standing in place, not exactly sure whether to go up to the roof, or down to his office, when his father abruptly appeared next to him. CJ blinked once, then held up a hand in greeting.

"On our way up, I noticed a couple of Falcone's goons stepping out of the elevator. It was the express elevator between the restaurant and the lobby, so they must have been at the party... or maybe just around it, if you know what I'm saying."

"Falcone? The mob boss?"

"That's him. We kinda sorta made mutual threats toward each other right after that whole mess with our powers disappearing." That was now several months behind them, though the story was still fresh due to the trial of Senator Robbins, as well as the recent release of information to the press from an anonymous source that detailed a bunch of classified information that was found on computers belonging to Orbital Technologies executives. It also outlined correspondence hinting at a conspiracy to use the company to get Superman out of the way, although as far as the public knew, those plans never came to fruition. "It's also common knowledge now that you and I share genes." CJ pointed between them, and Clark nodded.

"So you think that they might do something to disrupt the party as a bit of payback?" Clark asked, and CJ raised his eyebrows. "Maybe a bomb?"

"That was my first thought," CJ said. He met his father's eyes, then turned his vision back out toward the streets below. "I've been tracking the goons," he said, pointing out toward the street. "White Chevy sedan, heading west on 30th Street." He recited the license plate, and Clark quickly found it, too. "I might need you to tail them while I find whatever surprise they left for us. Then probably reel them in."

Clark kept his eyes on the streets for a few moments, noting the car's route, then turned back to CJ. "I'll go keep an eye on them, see what they do. I don't want to leave Spencer alone, though, if there's some sort of threat to his safety."

"On it," said Jen's voice from the other room, and Clark abruptly looked toward her through the wall. She was looking right at him, her eyes twinkling.

"Jen? What...?" Clark asked, then recognition seemed to come. This wasn't the first time that she'd been able to see through walls, and most of the other times had coincided with a pregnancy. His surprise quickly turned to joy. "You guys have been holding out on me, haven't you?" She just smiled, and Clark turned toward CJ, who was blushing.

"We were going to tell you later tonight, though honestly I thought for sure you'd noticed this afternoon. I swear his heartbeat

sounds like thunder.”

“This is fantastic! Congratulations!” Clark said, patting CJ on the back. They allowed themselves a second to bask in the glow of the moment, but soon enough the reality of the situation came back, and they were back to business. “Let’s do this,” he said, and a moment later, he was gone out the roof access, taking to the skies above Gotham.

“Do you know where Falcone’s mansion is?” CJ asked, turning his attention back to the restaurant. Jen and Adam were approaching Spencer, keeping things low-key.

“I can’t say that I do,” Clark answered.

“It’s the other big mansion is town,” CJ asked. “Has armed thugs all around and a fence that makes San Quentin look welcoming. Might be worth checking that out, too, while you’re up there.” He started scanning the restaurant, looking into all the dark, shadowy corners and hidden spots. It didn’t take much to locate the explosive, hidden in an air vent not too far from the bar. “Well, crap. Found it.”

“Where?” came the voices of his dad and wife in unison.

“In the room, of course. And there’s absolutely no way to get to it without drawing a ton of attention to myself.” His mind raced as he glanced at the timing device. It wasn’t set to go off for probably an hour, so he didn’t exactly need to hurry. At the same time, though, he didn’t want to keep it around and risk it possibly detonating sooner than intended. He also needed to change if he wanted to do anything about the bomb, but if Batman showed up in that room, chances were that the assembled crowd would think that his presence was part of the act. He needed to get everyone out of there before doing anything. “You might want to tune out your hearing, this is going to get a little loud,” he said, then located the nearest fire alarm and gave it a good tug. Immediately, alarms began to sound, and he raced down the stairs before anyone else even got a chance to react. His office was only a couple floors down, and he kept a spare suit there in case of emergencies. Shrugging off his suit coat and undoing his tie, he moved as fast as he could, though he didn’t mind taking a little extra time, just to give the place a chance to fully empty out before he arrived. Once fully dressed, he was just approaching the stairwell, x-raying it to make sure the coast was clear, when he heard his dad begin to speak again.

“You wouldn’t believe what these guys are up to now,” he said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

The stairwell was empty, which is what CJ had been expecting. Ladies wearing four-inch heels and evening dresses probably were not thrilled with the prospect of 90-something flights of stairs, and would no doubt be waiting out the elevators for evacuation, especially since there really wasn’t an immediate emergency. “What?” CJ asked, pushing open the door and turning his sights up several floors to the party. A large number of people appeared to have left already, though he noticed that Jenny and Spencer seemed unconcerned as they waited behind the remaining crowd.

“These geniuses are trying the same thing at the theater where Spencer’s movie is being screened. Planting a bomb right behind the concession counter.”

“With you in town? Give them points for boldness, for whatever it’s worth, but they had to know that you’d notice. You feel like it’s a set-up, maybe?”

“Maybe they just thought I’d be preoccupied,” Clark said. “And under normal circumstances they wouldn’t be wrong. Okay, going in now.”

“Likewise,” CJ said, gritting his teeth before opening the door to the floor with the party. The people gathered in front of the elevator all seemed to notice him at the same time, and the active conversation that had filled the air quieted immediately. As he stalked toward the lounge, he could feel all eyes following him, and he heard someone whisper his name, which seemed to open

the floodgates. By the time he entered the room, people were shouting at him. Fortunately, the security guards didn’t allow them to follow him through the doors, and once they swung shut, the sound was shut out, too. In the room, he saw a few security personnel surrounding Spencer, Jenny, and Adam, who were the last party attendees still there. The guards appeared exasperated by Jen’s quiet assurances that the Wayne family and Superman were not going to let anything happen to their celebrity guest, while Spencer was completely relaxed, sipping on a drink and stating that he would leave once everyone else was evacuated. Batman’s arrival stopped their conversation, as well, and he had to suppress a grin as he met eyes with Spencer, who didn’t seem at all surprised or excited at his presence. With a mental nudge, CJ forced himself to get back to business and ignore the rest of the onlookers.

He quickly approached the vent and the bomb hidden behind it, then punched a hole in the wall and pulled the device out. It never ceased to amaze him how easy it was to slap some components together and make something that could kill or injure hundreds of people, he thought, looking at the crude mess of wire and explosives. After a quick analysis of the device, he located the triggering mechanism, detached it from the wires, then surrounded it with hands and waited for it to explode. The wait ended up being only a few seconds, and the explosion pushed on the palms of his hands, but otherwise caused no damage.

The security personnel were staring at him wide-eyed. “Go, help the others get out of here. I’ll secure the scene,” he told them in a gravelly voice, pointing toward the elevators with a hand that still had smoke rising from it. “I’ll take care of the stragglers, too,” he said, sticking out his thumb toward his family. The guards nodded mutely, then left. Once they were alone, Spencer approached him slowly, his eyes fixated on what was left of the explosive.

“Was that a... bomb?” he asked.

CJ waved his hand back and forth, still trying to disperse the smoke from the explosion. “Yup,” he answered. He looked toward Spencer, half smile on his face. “First bomb, huh?” Spencer just raised an eyebrow and made a face.

Adam practically sprinted to his side. “That was cool! It blew up while you held it!”

CJ held up his hand and wiggled his fingers for his son. “It tickled,” he said, causing Adam to giggle. “So tell me, was that cooler than what you’ve seen Grandpa do?”

Adam appeared skeptical. “It’s still not like flying.”

“Face it, you’re never going to win that one,” Jen said, putting a hand on CJ’s back.

“You know, you sure look like Batman, but I know he doesn’t really smile like that,” Spencer said to CJ, taking another sip of his drink.

The comment only caused CJ’s smile to widen. “Maybe he does and you just can’t see it,” he said, bringing an odd expression to Spencer’s face. At that moment, Clark showed up in the room.

“Perpetrators arrested,” he said, bringing an appreciative nod from CJ.

Adam ran over to Clark and hopped in front of him until Clark bent over and scooped him up. “It’s okay if I hug you right? Even when you’re being Superman?” Adam whispered, causing Clark to grin.

“I like hugs no matter what I’m wearing,” Clark whispered back, and Adam’s little arms flung around his neck.

“Why is that every time I come to one of your charity parties, something blows up,” CJ asked, bringing a snort from Jenny and an appreciative smile from Clark.

“Maybe it’s your explosive personality,” Clark answered, and Spencer groaned. “Certainly makes these parties a lot more interesting.”

“I have to say, this is more action than I expected tonight,”

Spencer said, then emptied his glass. He then noticed that the bar was unattended, which seemed to interest him greatly. “If all your charity parties are like this, I think I could go for a few more.”

“Feel free to join me on as many of these as you want, but Gotham is a whole crazy world unto itself,” Clark answered as Spencer ambled around behind the bar. “There’s always something interesting going on in this town. Actually...this whole thing tonight would make for a pretty interesting story.”

“Where’s a journalist when you really need one?” CJ said with a smirk, earning one in response from Clark.

Jen was thoughtful for a moment. “I’ve been selling a few pieces to the Gazette lately,” she said, looking toward Clark. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Be my guest,” he answered. “I think you’re...well situated to write the story.” Jen smiled appreciatively.

“Okay, okay, stop me if you’ve heard this one,” Spencer said, grabbing a clean glass from behind the bar and pouring himself some soda. “Two Supermen and a Batman walk into a bar...”

“I’ve heard that one,” Clark and CJ answered in unison. Adam giggled.

“I think you WROTE that joke,” Jen said to CJ, reaching up for a small kiss. The cowl made it somewhat difficult, but she was well practiced.

“I did. I also asked how many of us it took to screw in a lightbulb,” CJ answered. “It’s a lot funnier with Jon around,” he said to Spencer, who just raised his eyebrows in response.

“Grandpa, I want to fly with you,” Adam said eagerly, then yawned.

“Maybe he should fly home,” Jen said, walking over to him and cupping his cheek. Bruce was at the manor, watching over Cate until their return. CJ didn’t feel too bad about leaving Adam there with him too, especially if he was on his way to bed. “It’s getting awfully late and he has school in the morning.”

“Sounds like your Mom says it’s okay,” Clark said to Adam. He turned back to Jen. “I’ll tuck him in and be back. Since the party got cut short, you want to go somewhere for drinks?” He then looked toward CJ.

“There’s a place around the corner,” CJ said, bobbing his head in the general direction of the restaurant. “Rico’s. We’ll meet there in a little bit. I gotta take care of the cops first — they’re on the way up now.”

“We’ll get going then,” Clark said. Jen leaned in to give Adam a kiss, then touched Clark’s arm and stepped away. Clark cupped the back of Adam’s head and gently pushed it down so that Adam’s forehead was against his neck. “We’re going to be moving fast, okay? If you stay close, everything will be fine.” With that, he disappeared, and CJ found himself smiling toward the spot they had just occupied. He had initially been upset that Adam had unearthed the family secret at such a young age, and he worried about the burden that would put on him. That worry was still present, but it was balanced by the upside, which included tender little interludes like the one he just saw. At the same age, he probably would’ve been overjoyed at the prospect of a trip over the city in Superman’s arms. He was beginning to think that he missed out on something special by not being in on the secret at an age where everything was larger than life and magic was still real. A sigh escaped his lips, and an amused glance from his wife brought him back to the present, and the fact that the police were almost there.

“You should get going, too,” CJ said to Jen and Spencer.

Jen stuck out her arm. “Shall we, Mr. North?”

Spencer emerged from behind the bar and was at her side in a few long strides, taking her offered arm in an exaggeratedly gallant motion. “Charmed, Mrs. Wayne,” he answered.

“Watch it, North,” CJ said with mock seriousness, pointing at him. “Don’t get too forward with my wife, if you know what’s good for you.”

“I will be a perfect gentleman,” Spencer answered. Together the two of them walked toward the doors.

“Will you be long?” Jen asked over her shoulder as she laid her hand on the door handle.

“I don’t want to spend any more time around those cops than I have to,” CJ answered. “But...I was thinking that the partygoers got a bit shortchanged tonight. I might give them a little show when I leave.”

Spencer’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I’m not missing that.”

“Don’t give him any more reasons to show off,” Jen said with a wink, then the two exited, just as the police approached the door. They seemed somewhat surprised to see him at first, and more than a little awed at his presence, but he didn’t let that affect him. He quickly showed them what was left of the bomb and the fingerprints covering the surface, and mentioned that Superman had captured the prime suspects planting a bomb at the theater, and had dropped them off at the local station. He also instructed them to obtain surveillance video from the lobby showing the men entering and exiting the building. Once the facts were relayed to them, he couldn’t think of any need to stick around, so he quickly left the room and headed toward the stairwell. This time, instead of going down to his office, he went up toward the roof.

In the years since had created a sinkhole in the street below, he had been looking into technology that could be added to his cape to make it so that he could essentially glide off the building instead of free fall, and he had tested it out several times, to satisfactory results. Stepping up to the ledge, he looked down, noticing that many of the partygoers were gathered on the sidewalk outside the lobby, looking up, trying to spot their hero. CJ smiled, happy to give them a glimpse of an altogether different and unexpected hero. The wind buffeted his cape, trying its best to push him over the side, but he wasn’t budging until he saw Spencer and his wife down there. After a few long minutes he spotted them, and Jen immediately made a quip about flying superheroes, knowing full well that he was listening in. Without another moment of hesitation, he jumped away from the building, letting himself fall for several seconds before activating a switch which turned his cape into a sail, and caused him to glide over the street on the breeze. The crowd below ooh-ed and ah-ed, and he closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of flight at last.

He did a circuit of the building, then circled around the neighboring building, dropping about forty stories down in the process, before deciding that he’d had enough. Finding a clear spot in the roadway traffic, he deactivated the switch, letting his forward momentum carry as he dropped to the ground amid a flurry of camera flashes. A moment later, Superman dropped down from the sky next to him. They staged a handshake, the Clark grabbed him and whisked him into the underground bunker in the Wayne Tower parking garage that served as a secondary base of Batman’s operations.

“Now you’ve done it,” Clark said with a grin. “I think you’ll officially be trending by the time we get out of here. Hardly the best thing for a man of mystery and shadows.”

CJ removed the cowl and shrugged. “They paid big money to see a flying superhero — I figured I could give them their money’s worth.”

Clark cocked his head to the side. “Are you saying I shirked my duties for the evening?”

“Not at all.” CJ took off his gloves, then swirled his cape off his shoulders. The rest of his clothing could go on over the spandex, assuming he didn’t wear any light colored tops. After pulling on a button-up shirt, he clapped Clark on the shoulder. “All I’m saying is that you have plenty of help in that respect these days. You don’t always have to be the only one to fly over the city. In fact, I would say that you’ve earned some time off after all these years.”

The look that CJ received was filled with love and respect,

mixed with a bit of surprise. Superman would never go into retirement – he was too much a part of Clark Kent for that to ever happen. But between his kids, his friends, and all the other people he had inspired to action, there were more people out there ready to jump into action to make the world a better place. He hadn't been alone for a very long time, and now it was time for him to enjoy the world that he helped create. "Maybe I like that part of the job," Clark said.

"I know you do," CJ said softly, pulling on a pair of pants and completing his transformation. While he was putting on his shoes, he heard a whoosh of air, which indicated that Clark had also changed clothes. When CJ looked up, he saw his father dressed casually, a wistful expression on his face. He approached Clark and put his arm around his shoulder, guiding him toward the exit. "Come on. Let's go meet Spencer and Jen."

With that, they left, bound for more mundane adventures.

THE END