

# A Stolen Childhood (Kerth Challenge #7)

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Summary: No one ever sets out to be a thief.

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Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise.

Author's Note: This fic is in response to the prompt "The smell of roasting meat wafted out of the restaurant as he dug through the dumpster in the back," as given by DailyWritingPrompt on Twitter. I decided it made a perfect starting point for a backstory that we never got to see.

In a bit of perfect timing, this story also fit as a response to Kerth Challenge #7, which asked for a supporting character's backstory to be written.

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The smell of roasting meat wafted out of the restaurant as he dug through the dumpster in the back. It made his stomach rumble and ache. He wanted nothing more than to be able to sit down and enjoy a good meal. But he had all of eighty-four cents to his name. Not even enough to buy a buttered bagel at the deli across the street. And he didn't have just himself to look after either. His little brother was depending on him too.

Jack sighed and tried to put the image of a hearty steak dinner or rack of ribs dripping with barbeque sauce out of his head. He took a deep breath as he plunged his head back over the rim of the dumpster, trying not to gag on the stench of rotting meats and putrefying vegetables. He wasn't sure he believed in a god, but he sent up a silent prayer of thanks anyway, for the simple fact that the chill in the early fall air kept the rancorous odors slightly at bay. He couldn't imagine how impossible his task would have been in eighty- or ninety-degree weather, the sun beating down on the metal dumpster and turning it into a sidewalk oven of horrors.

"Come on, Jack, you can do this," he whispered to himself, trying to give himself a pep talk. "It's not *really* that bad. Could be worse, at any rate. All you have to do is find enough to get through the night."

How long would he believe that lie?, he wondered to himself as he dug through moldy cheese and shriveled, blackened lettuce.

He and Denny had been scrounging for themselves for a long time now. How long had it been? Jack tried to think but the buzzing of flies swarming around what may have been a pot roast at one point distracted him. Without warning, the precariously piled trash shifted, and the meat slid, releasing an odor of pure death. Jack pulled his head out of the dumpster and retched hard.

"This is a new low," he mumbled to himself in disgust, using the back of his hand to wipe the spittle from his lips. What he wouldn't have given for a bottle of water to rinse his mouth with.

As bad as things had gotten over the years, he'd *never* had to turn to dumpster diving in the hopes of securing a meal. But things in Metropolis had slowly been declining over the last couple of months. At first, he'd barely even noticed it. But now? With Intergang carving out toeholds in the area, things were degrading

at a faster rate. Not to mention the existing crime syndicate. Whoever lorded over the organized crime that was already established in the city seemed hellbent on securing his domain and forcing Intergang out.

Jack sighed, contemplating if it was worth trying the dumpster again. But before he could convince himself to give it another go, his stomach heaved violently and he nearly lost the battle to vomit again. He shook his head. It wasn't worth it. He could find a different place to secure something to eat. He wished he could turn to the soup kitchens, like he and Denny used to. But the soup kitchens weren't all that safe anymore, not with the two rival crime organizations and the increasing number of homeless people all trying to get at least one hot meal in per day. Jack knew he was tough, but some of those guys intimidated even him.

"Not worth it," he decided with the shake of his head, putting his back to the vile, hellish miasma rising from the dumpster.

Without even closing the lid, he sauntered off, wiping his palms off on his stained, ripped jeans. The bright, cheerful sun seemed to mock his grumbling, hungry stomach, and he scowled at the sidewalk as he walked. Bitterness welled up in his heart as he sauntered past the high-end restaurants that populated this portion of the city. Why couldn't he have had a normal childhood?

No, he had to have the father who'd walked out on the family when Jack had been four and Denny had been two. Jack snorted to himself in disgust. Denny had been the lucky one. He hadn't understood that Dad was never going to return. He didn't remember the man who'd barely been able to call himself their father. Denny didn't remember the police calling nine months later, informing their mother that her husband had been shot to death in a gambling-related incident in Vegas. As it was, Jack had only the fuzziest memory of it, but it was still there, lurking in his mind like the Grim Reaper. He hated the man for what he'd done to their family.

His death — and the end of any hope that he would ever return — had begun their mother's downward spiral. She'd started drinking to drown her pain. Often, she would pass out at night and Jack would have to put his younger brother to bed. Then his mother — a line worker at a paper goods factory — had injured her back. Money had been tight to begin with and had been even scarcer while she recovered, but by the time her doctor cleared her to return to work, she'd already become hooked on her prescription pain killers. She'd never gotten any better, and, in fact, had turned to illegal substances, chasing that same feeling the pain pills had given her.

That had become her main focus, her sons taking a back seat to getting stoned and/or plastered beyond measure. Jack had become his brother's sole caretaker by the time he turned eight, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, making sure they both got to school on time. He tried to make their mother get help for her addictions, but the alcohol and drugs had had too firm a grip on her. Instead of listening to their pleas, she would often turn violent, lashing out and anyone and anything that got in her way. And spare money had become as rare as a unicorn with the way their mother spent every available cent on her addictions.

Jack sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets. He and Denny would have been homeless or would have starved to death long ago if their neighbor, Mrs. Sanchez, hadn't been so caring. She'd always made sure to share whatever food she could with them and had donated plenty of clothing to them that her own, slightly older, sons had outgrown. But she'd always worked long hours at the hospital, and usually came home well after their mother was passed out in a stupor. She'd been blissfully unaware of the ticking time bomb that resided in Jack and Denny's apartment, and the boys had been too young and scared to tell her.

Everything had changed when Mrs. Jenkins moved in after Mrs. Sanchez and her family moved to Houston for a job opportunity. Mrs. Jenkins had been the stereotypical nosy

neighbor. She was unable to work due to an old injury that had left her left side paralyzed, so she was home all day long while her husband provided for them both. As a result, she came to find out *everything* that had been happening in the Miner's apartment. Unbeknownst to Jack and Denny, she'd placed call after call to Child Protective Services.

The social worker assigned to their case was the one who'd found Jack and Denny's mother on the floor that fateful March day. While the boys had been at school, their mother had accidentally overdosed. The social worker had found her on the floor, eyes wide open and unblinking, the needle in her hand and tourniquet still wrapped around her left arm. The EMTs declared her dead upon their arrival, guessing she'd been deceased for three or four hours by that point.

Jack and Denny had known, even back then, what this had meant. They were orphans, at the ages of fourteen and twelve, respectively. Foster care was in their future. Only, they hadn't wanted to be split up. So they'd run away, taken to the streets, dodged any and all attempts to find them. For two years, they'd been successful. Jack figured they were probably assumed to be lost causes and that chances were good their case had fallen through the cracks. But he wasn't willing to risk things, so he and Denny stayed under the radar as much as possible, hidden away in their tumbledown little shack.

At first, things had been rough, but bearable. While their addict mother hadn't left much money behind – in either her bank account or in cash at home – she'd left enough money in her bedside table for Jack and Denny to be able to afford to buy food like normal people. Jack assumed the cash had been there only in anticipation of meeting her dealer later in the afternoon on the day she'd died. He didn't care. It was money and it had let them survive for this long. But even with careful rationing, using the soup kitchens, and thrifty shopping, the money had run out.

Now Jack was reduced to dumpster diving for their next bite to eat.

It was beyond humiliating.

It was dehumanizing.

He sighed and hunched up his shoulders as he walked. Two blocks down was a bakery. He carefully checked the shop as he slowed his pace. There were no lights on from what he could see in the huge, clean glass windows out front. A metal grating had been pulled across the windows as well as the door, locked tight as a deterrent against would-be thieves. Jack sniffed the air as he slipped down the alleyway between the bakery and the bookstore next door. He couldn't detect even the slightest scent of fresh bread or hot cookies. It appeared no one was around, not even to make fresh products to sell the next day.

*Perfect!* he thought with a grin. *With any luck, the dumpster will have something edible in it.*

He set to work, dragging an old wooden crate over to the front of the massive metal dumpster. He climbed up on top of it and, with a grunt, shoved the lid open. Then he closed his eyes, said a silent prayer to the universe, and peered inside.

"Jackpot," he whispered with a tired grin.

Within the trash bin he found several loaves of Italian bread – well past the point of stale, but not yet moldy. He found a bag of almost fresh cookies that had, unfortunately for the bakery, come out too well done and hadn't been sellable. He took that as well. It wasn't healthy food and it wouldn't supply the nutrients he and Denny needed, but it would at least keep them going for a couple of days. It would take off the edge of their hunger and quell their growling, twisting, hurting stomachs long enough to allow them to sleep as well.

Nothing else seemed worth taking, so Jack closed the dumpster lid and put the crate back where he'd gotten it from. Not that anyone would care about some missing trash, but he didn't like to leave any trace he'd been forced to do something so

demeaning as combing through the garbage. He likened himself to a ninja that way. If no one knew he was around, no one would catch him and force him to be split up from his brother.

Denny.

He should get the food back to his brother. The poor kid hadn't eaten more than a few bites of scavenged food in a couple of days now.

Jack sighed and slumped his shoulders as he angled his path back to the rotting little building they were currently squatting in. At least this place was better than the last one, Jack mused. The roof had literally caved in one afternoon after a heavy summer storm had swept through. It had only been through sheer luck that neither of the boys had been "home" when it had happened, or they might have been crushed to death beneath the debris. Carefully and constantly checking to make sure he wasn't being followed, Jack slipped between the gap in the chain-link fence surrounding their modest little impoverished kingdom. Denny was sleeping when Jack let himself in through the door, so he woke his little brother up.

"Did you bring anything to eat?" the younger boy asked, rubbing the heel of his palms into his eyes. He yawned mightily.

"Yeah," Jack said with an impish grin. "It ain't exactly a five-star banquet, but it'll do for today. I'll go back out in a bit and see if I can scrounge up anything better for tomorrow, but for now, let's eat."

He affectionately tousled his brother's mop of unruly brown hair. But his heart hurt as he did it. How much longer could they keep going like this? Certainly not until they were both over the age of eighteen and considered legal adults that social services couldn't touch. He would have to do more, be better, find a way to make money on the down-low. But he knew most places in the city wouldn't hire a sixteen-year-old kid with no experience and no active education. And even if he *could* find someone willing to take a chance on him, most would either restrict his hours due to his age and need to fill out paperwork to pay him. He couldn't risk that. What information could he give them?

*Yes, my address is second rundown shack from the left, abandoned lot west, New Troy,* he thought with a concealed snort of derision.

No, a job wasn't in the cards for the time being.

But what then?

How could he make some money and make sure their basic needs were met?

*Something will come to me,* he thought with a heaviness in his heart.

*Yeah, sure it will. How long have you been trying to delude yourself that you'll come up with some brilliant idea?* his mind shot back angrily.

He shoved the voice aside and led Denny to the cookies and bread he'd found. He swept a hand out over the meal like he was presenting a bountiful feast.

"Behold! Dinner is served!" he intoned with a heavy dose of fake snobbery.

Denny laughed. "What? No caviar?" he joked.

Jack chuckled in response. "Sorry. Oversight on my part," he jested. "Next time," he added with a grin.

They ate in silence, then, when they'd had their fill and carefully packed the rest away so rats and roaches wouldn't be attracted to the leftovers, Jack brushed the crumbs from his shirt and jeans. Denny eyed him with a knowing looking.

"Where you going?" he asked.

Jack shrugged. "Not sure yet. I need some air and some space to think."

"About what?" Denny asked, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his skinny arms around them.

"Money," Jack replied, figuring it was best to be straight with Denny. "There's got to be a way I can make some money. We

can't keep dumpster-diving for our meals. And what if one of us gets hurt or sick? We can't even afford a box of bandaids right now."

Denny looked like he might say something, but then he shook his head. "You're right."

Jack nodded. "Don't wait up for me, okay? I'm not sure when I'll be back. I might hit up a few other likely places, see if I can't find something else for us to eat in the morning."

"Okay. Be careful, okay?"

Jack gave his brother a confident grin. "I always am."

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Jack sat on a rickety wooden bench down at the piers. It was a good twenty-minute walk from their current hideaway, but the walk had been pleasant and had helped to clear his mind a little. But only a little. He was still very, *very* worried. What would they do in the winter months, when bad weather could roll in at any moment and dump enough snow to keep them holed up for days inside of their tiny, ramshackle abode? What would they do when the temperatures began to plummet and it got too cold to wander around the streets looking for the next likely dumpster to raid?

Money.

That was the only answer.

They would need money to buy the essentials – bread, peanut butter, cereal; anything they could store easily and didn't need to refrigerate. Although, Jack supposed if and when the weather got cold enough, they could probably keep the occasional refrigerated items. But cooking them could be a problem. The gas had long since been cut off to their makeshift home. They couldn't easily cook a hamburger or heat up a can of soup, as much as they might want to, unless they were willing and able to create a fire out back in one of the old, already burnt and hole-filled metal garbage cans.

He shook his head. He would stick to non-perishables and ready-to-eat meals as much as they could, just the same as he did now.

But that was getting ahead of himself. First, he needed a plan to make money. He sighed and squinted up at the westering sun, soaking in the last half hour or so of golden rays of light before the sunset was complete. The pier was still fairly busy and Jack watched as couples meandered hand in hand, skateboarders weaved in and out of pathways of others, and families took strolls before or after having dinner at the waterfront restaurants.

Families.

Jack heaved a heavy sigh in his chest. He envied the kids that he saw. Some of them had a mother and father, some were only with their mother or their father, but they were still kids who could actually *be* kids and enjoy their childhood. Even the teens that sulked along behind, obviously embarrassed to be seen with their parents... Jack wished he could be them, even if just for a little while. They didn't know how good they had things – having living, breathing, caring parents. Of course, he had to acknowledge the fact that he couldn't *actually* judge how perfect or not their home lives were based simply on that fact that these kids had parents. But he still felt compelled to feel like they probably didn't have it too bad, whereas he and Denny had had their childhoods stolen out from under them by the circumstances their parents had forced them into.

He watched as a couple of teenagers, older than himself, stopped to take a series of pictures in increasingly more outlandish photos. He envied them too. He would do just about anything for a legitimate friend or two. The boy with the camera – maybe eighteen or nineteen years old, Jack estimated – then turned his attention to the brilliant orange and red sky over the water. The guy took another series of photos, then he and the others leaned against the wooden posts that stuck up above the safety railing on the dock. Jack could see a couple of the guys playfully shoving each other until they eventually knocked into the cameraman, sending him crashing into the expensive-looking camera he'd been

using. The camera tumbled off the post where the guy had set it down, over the edge of the dock to the harbor below. An actual fight ensued, and before long the cameraman stalked off on his own, his face red with anger. The rest of the teens slowly migrated in the opposite direction.

Jack stood up after the group dispersed and went to the spot where they'd been. He'd always enjoyed being down at the docks. Something about the tang of salt in the air from the harbor had always helped him to clear his mind or settle his mood. Now he just wanted a closer view of the water, to watch the gentle waves as they rolled in. He looked down as he got to the railing, judging the time to when the tide would be the highest. And then he spotted it – the camera.

*Looks really expensive*, he thought dismissively at first. Then, a new thought came to him. *I wonder if it still works. The water hasn't touched it yet. The lens might be cracked but that can probably be fixed. I wonder...*

Before he could even properly formulate a plan of action or a reason for doing what he was doing, he swiftly checked his surroundings, made sure no one was paying him any mind, then slipped through gaps of the railing and let himself down onto the rocky, thin shoreline. In seconds, he scooped up the camera, noting that, somehow, the device seemed to be in a scratched, but otherwise perfect, condition. The lens was still intact at any rate. Then he scrambled back up to the dock, with much more difficulty than he'd had getting down. But soon he was standing on the dock, the purloined camera in his hands.

*One-Eyed Pete*, his mind whispered to him.

He nodded slowly to himself even as he shuddered with a cold sense of dread. Pete was known throughout the city's underbelly as a man who could make stolen goods disappear.

*Stolen?*

Jack shook his head as the weight of the word slapped him in his face. Was the camera truly a stolen item if it had been abandoned by its former owner?

*Does it matter?*

He shook his head again. No. It didn't matter. What mattered was that Jack could probably score a few dollars for the camera. Pete was a notorious thief when it came to taking his percentage of a sale, but Jack could watch and learn from the career criminal, just in case some other abandoned, sellable items came across his path. In the meantime, even if he got fifty or a hundred bucks for the camera, he could afford some food.

Food.

His stomach twisted and let out a ferocious growl at the thought of food. He needed to concentrate on getting something more substantial in his and Denny's stomachs than cookies and nearly rock-hard old bread. He tucked the camera under his left arm and hurriedly left the docks behind, angling for the old subway station where One-Eyed Pete kept his "office." He didn't like the idea of seeing Pete – not since the last time, about nine or ten months ago, when Jack had visited him asking for a small loan to buy some antibiotics when Denny had gotten sick. Truth be told, the massive one-eyed man terrified Jack. But Pete was *the* best dealer of stolen goods in the city. Jack saw little choice in the matter if he wanted to get rid of the camera quickly.

With a resigned sigh, he hastened his step, wanting to get the matter over with. Luckily – or unluckily, depending on how Jack wanted to look at it – the subway station wasn't far and he was descending the steps to the underground within minutes. The guard on duty, Viper, was tall, lanky, and not much older than Jack, but rumor was, he'd killed more than one person for crossing One-Eyed Pete, so Jack kept his guard up and his usually sharp tongue and rough language as silky smooth and non-threatening as he could. Viper seemed to recognize him, and, after checking with Pete, led Jack down a short distance of tunnel to Pete's inner sanctum.

“Why, if it isn’t Jack,” Pete said neutrally, chewing on a wad of cheap tobacco. “You come to borrow more money? My rate is higher this time, since it took you so long to pay back the last loan I gave ya.” He spit a dark globule of spittle into a filthy paper cup.

“Not this time,” Jack said, trying hard not to smirk. “I brought you something instead.”

Pete’s eyes flicked over to him with interest. “Yeah?” he asked casually.

“What do you think you could sell this for?” Jack asked, holding the camera out before him as he took bold steps toward the man, forcing down the butterflies in his stomach.

Pete took the proffered camera and, for a long, silent, tense few minutes, he examined every angle of it, checking for obvious signs of damage and other identifying marks. At last, he set the camera down in the middle of the worn, scratched, chipped wooden desk before him. He steepled his fingers.

“Where’d ya get this?” he demanded without any hint of a threat.

“Some idiot dropped it over the side of the pier and I rescued it once he was gone,” Jack offered, knowing that Pete hated long-winded stories and preferred to cut straight to the chase. “I haven’t tested it out, but it looks like it should still work.”

Pete nodded absently. “This is a good camera. In high demand, if it works. I’ll give you fifty bucks for it.”

Jack gaped, despite his best effort not to show any emotion. Fifty bucks seemed like a rip off! Pete saw and narrowed his eyes in a dangerous way.

“You’re not...happy?” Pete dared him to answer.

“I just...thought it might be worth more,” Jack carefully replied. “Isn’t that thing worth like a grand or something?” he asked with a gesture toward the camera.

“New and from the store, yes. I’ll be able to sell a used, slightly banged up one for a couple hundred at best. Take the fifty and don’t waste my time.”

Jack gulped a little at the threat. Pete was said to have ordered his minions to beat up those who he felt had “wasted” his time before.

“Fifty’s better than nothing,” he forced himself to agree.

Pete nodded with a barely-there smile. “Smart choice. You got any other goods to unload?”

Jack shook his head. “Not today.”

Pete nodded almost absently and nodded toward the shadows behind Jack. A lanky black-haired young woman stepped forward, so silently it was as if she was a ghost. Jack hadn’t even seen her there and her sudden appearance unnerved him. Pete motioned.

“Pay him,” he ordered.

Without a word, the girl peeled five grimy ten-dollar bills from a roll of cash she withdrew from her front right pocket. She roughly pushed the bills in Jack’s direction. He took them gingerly. Though the girl was less than five years his senior, she looked like she could easily break him in half if he made a wrong move. As soon as the money was out of her hands, the girl melted back into the shadows as though she’d never even existed.

“Thank you,” Jack said, forcing humble politeness into his voice, and making the words generalized enough that they couldn’t be construed as being exclusively for Pete or the girl.

Pete nodded gruffly. “Keep bringing in stuff and I’ll have more for money for you. Maybe. Depends on what you bring me.”

“I...I’ll keep it in mind,” Jack said noncommittally. He bowed awkwardly, trying to concoct a way to excuse himself from One-Eyed Pete’s lair.

But before Jack could say anything, a heavy-set man, at least twice Jack’s age came rushing into the room. Pete immediately scowled.

“Boss!” the man wheezed out between heaving breaths.

“What?” Pete asked sourly.

“Slash and Hammer got picked up by the cops! They ain’t

gonna be able to do tonight’s job,” the man managed to get out as he struggled to suck in enough air to sate his lungs. He seemed to notice Jack only then. “I mean...uh...”

“Phantom, get this weasel out of my sight,” Pete growled and the girl from earlier reappeared to drag the man from the room by his greasy blonde ponytail. Pete sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he appeared to have an idea.

“Jack,” he nearly barked and Jack fought not to jump in his startlement. He spat out the wad of chewing tobacco into the cup.

“Yeah?” Jack asked warily.

“Congratulations. You just earned a raise. You’re going with my crew tonight. They’ll learn you the ropes.”

“Out?” Jack stammered uncomprehendingly.

“There’s a few jobs I need taken care of. You do what you’re told, I’ll give you three hundred bucks, no questions asked.”

Jack hesitated. “But I...”

Pete narrowed his eyes in a deadly way. “In case I didn’t make myself clear, this *isn’t* an option.”

Jack gulped hard, wondering what he’d just gotten himself roped into. “I...uh...” He paused, taking a moment to compose himself. “Fine. But on one condition.” He lifted one finger as though making a point or illustrating his single condition.

Pete snorted a laugh and lit up a cigarette. He blew a hefty plume of smoke in Jack’s direction. “You’ve got some stones on you,” the man growled between gritted teeth.

“It’s not much,” Jack rushed to assure him, perhaps a little too quickly. “I’ll do what you want, no questions asked. You pay me the three hundred. But I also want you to have your goons back off when my brother and I visit the soup kitchens. Yeah, okay, I owed you money. I paid it back. Now I’m doing a job for you – a *one-time deal*. Tell your guys to leave us alone from now on.”

Pete continued to glower for a long minute, during which, Jack mentally kicked himself for having dared to make the demand. But after what felt like a year, the crime lord nodded.

“Agreed. But if you cross me, the next thing the police will pick up in this city is your – and your brother’s – dead bodies. Got it?”

There was no mistaking how real a threat it was. Jack nodded. “Understood.”

Pete cracked a partial smile that was devoid of actual happiness. “Good. Now get out of my sight. Angel will take you under his wing for tonight.”

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Metropolis at night was never dark, Jack realized with a sigh as he tried his best to keep out of the pools of orangey illumination from the street lights. Still, a part of him was fascinated and drawn to what Angel was doing as he jimmied the locks on car after car, ransacking the glove compartments and other storage areas for items of value. Jack was in awe of how many people left valuables inside their vehicles – cash left over from drive-thru orders, laptops meant for their jobs, even a cell phone or two, forgotten for the night as people rushed home to be with their families. He also couldn’t help but to be a bit intrigued with how quickly Angel could complete each job. Just a few seconds to pop the lock. Another half a minute or so to scrounge around the interior. Another minute or less to open and investigate the trunk – and Jack was surprised that in five cars, people had left gifts or bags with newly purchased items in their trunks.

In two to three minutes, tops, Angel was finished with each car and moving on to the next target.

At the end of the block, Angel handed Jack the slender, flexible metal tool he’d been using to pry open the door locks. Then he shoved Jack toward a silver Buick, gesturing that it was his turn to take a stab at breaking and entering. Reluctantly and with shaking hands, Jack accepted the tool, his stomach churning. He didn’t really want to do this, but what choice did he have? The prison tattoos on Angel’s arms, legs, neck, and face didn’t exactly

give Jack a sense of comfort that the older man would just let him walk away from this. Besides, if Jack *didn't* do as he was told, there was no telling what kind of vengeance One-Eyed Pete would exact on him...or worse, on Denny.

So, with a gulp and a deep breath to steady himself, Jack tried to follow the same steps he'd seen Angel take twenty times already that night. But, try as he might, he couldn't seem to grasp the technique. The lock remained bolted tight no matter how gently or hard he tried to manipulate it open. After fifteen minutes on the first vehicle, Angel shoved Jack aside with a roll of his eyes.

"Useless," the man muttered under his breath in an annoyed tone.

"Sorry," Jack apologized in a thin whisper, looking furtively around, fearing that the police would find them at any minute.

Five seconds later, Angel got the lock open, then he shoved Jack forward again.

"Search," he gruffly commanded, and Jack nervously did as he was told.

He made his clumsy way around the interior of the Buick and eventually resurfaced with twelve dollars in cash, a fistful of coins from the dashboard compartment, a cell phone, and a set of expensive golf clubs from the back seat. He didn't feel like it was much, but Angel gave him a stiff nod of approval.

"Good."

Jack didn't feel so pleased about the result. He felt...dirty, stealing from these cars. He bit his tongue against the scathing retort that had formed there. He'd learned long ago that his mouth could get him into real trouble – more so than his attitude and fists ever had. If he hadn't made that one, final – albeit satisfying – crack about the safety officer at the homeless shelter, he and Denny might not have been thrown out to live in the moldering shack where they currently resided. Not that the shelter had been much safer, he reminded himself, but at least the roof hadn't leaked in the rain.

He didn't have much more success on the next car or the next or even the next. Down the block he went, trying – and failing – to break into each car he and Angel came across. By the end of the block, the big man was scowling and clearly at the end of his patience. Jack kept mostly quiet, fearing to set the man's anger off.

"You suck at this," Angel complained as they reached the corner. He didn't even bother handing his tools to Jack, and instead, popped the Blazer's lock himself.

"Sorry," Jack mumbled apologetically, shrugging his shoulders.

"It ain't even like it's difficult," Angel continued, but it was clear he was talking to himself, and not Jack. "Come on, this way."

Angel had ransacked the car so quickly that Jack had almost missed it as the man grabbed the laptop bag sitting on the front seat.

"We're done?" Jack asked in surprise.

Angel rolled his eyes. "Yeah, because a couple of computers, some cheap phones, and a handful of cash is really gonna be enough for Pete." Sarcasm dripped acidly from each word. "We're heading uptown a bit."

"Uptown?" Jack gulped. "Like to the rich neighborhoods?"

"Exactly."

"Do the hoity-toity people leave better stuff in their cars?"

Angel looked ready to slap Jack in the head. "We ain't hitting their cars. This was a warm up."

Jack could feel his face pale a bit at the implication. "Oh?" he managed to wheeze out without completely showing how nervous he was.

"We're hittin' up their houses," his companion confirmed.

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"Do it," Angel commanded in a hiss as he flattened himself

against the cool faux gray stone façade of the house, trying to blend into the shadows.

Jack looked at the door again, marveling briefly at the unblemished, fresh coat of white paint before him. He nodded, exuding more confidence this time than when he'd been tasked with breaking into the cars. This was something he had experience with. How many times had he picked the lock of his own home, after his mother had either drank or injected herself into a stupor? He could do this. It had been a while, but he knew it was a skill much like riding a bike – once you learned it, you never forgot it.

"I got this," he assured the other man. "No problem."

"Then hurry."

Jack rolled his eyes, thankful for the shadows which concealed the motion from Angel's watchful eyes. He took the lock picks with steady hands, inserted them into the lock, and with silent precision, worked them gently to release the lock.

"Boom," he announced, a flat declaration of his prowess.

"Not bad," Angel grudgingly praised him. "Now get inside, before some nosey neighbor sees us."

Jack did as he was told, opening the door just enough to slip inside the darkened home. Angel was forced to widen the gap to accommodate his larger frame, then he closed the door behind him, shielding them from prying eyes as they went about their unsavory business. Angel was very methodical. He guided Jack through the house, room by room, swiftly but thoroughly pinpointing objects they could easily take that would be worth money. Jack noted the way Angel disregarded anything that was personalized, citing the fact that it would be harder to resell things with people's names on them, even if they looked like they might be worth a few dollars.

"Easier to track down too," he gruffly informed Jack as they worked. "A police report gets filed about a personalized item and you wouldn't believe how antsy some of our dealers get. Besides, people like this ain't exactly lacking other, easier to move merchandise. Like this video camera here."

"This big clunky thing?" Jack asked, not bothering to hide his shock.

Angel shrugged. "We got the truck with us, it's not like we gotta lug it all over town on our shoulder."

Jack shrugged in turn. "If you say so." He paused, then spotted a discman, half hidden under a throw pillow on the couch. "What about this?" He held up his prize for inspection.

Angel considered it. "Ain't worth much, but yeah, decent find," he half-grunted.

For a solid ten minutes, the pair swept through the house like thieving ghosts, hardly speaking, communicating mostly by hand gestures and nods – or shakes – of their heads. Jack was constantly surprised by how much Angel selected to take with them. Of course, as it had been pointed out, they *did* have a vehicle waiting for them. Still, he'd assumed it would be more of a smash-and-grab kind of thing with them breaking in, grabbing whatever they could within seconds, and getting back out again. But Angel was working with his own kind of finesse. And Jack was captivated by it.

Soon, Angel jerked a thumb at the door. "Time to go," he said, startling Jack with the unexpected sound in the otherwise quiet and still house.

Jack nodded. "After you."

They wound their way back through the house and out the front door after checking to make sure the coast was clear. They dropped their purloined loot in the car, then moved on to the next target that Angel pointed out, where they repeated the process and Jack's "education" in what was worth stealing grew.

At the end of the night, when they returned to One-Eyed Pete, they'd acquired thousands of dollars' worth of ill-gotten merchandise. Pete was pleased with the haul, and declared Jack free to go about his business after paying him. For Jack, as soon as

he had the money in his hand, he stammered an excuse to get away.

Out on the nearly empty Metropolis streets, Jack finally breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad the night was over. He hadn't particularly enjoyed burglarizing people's homes and cars. He felt dirty, in an abstract way. And yet...he had to admit, the money in his pocket felt *good*. Tomorrow, he would waltz right into a supermarket and buy some food, and maybe even be able to buy Denny a pair of sneakers to replace the well-worn and too-small pair his brother was currently squeezing into. He wouldn't go to the local shoe stores, of course, but Jack knew from experience how good of a condition some of the items could be in thrift stores.

A police car drove slowly by him as he shuffled along, sending an automatic shiver down his spine. He instinctively lowered his head and studied the cracked sidewalk, feeling like if he looked up, the cop driving by would see the guilt in his eyes. And yet...he felt a certain elation too. He was bringing home money. He could provide for his brother, at least temporarily. He wasn't stupid. He knew the money would run out fairly quickly. But what if...?

"No," he whispered as the police car passed him by, the lights clicking on to illuminate the night, the siren blaring as the vehicle picked up speed, heading toward Hobbs Bay. Jack breathed a sigh of relief. "Opposite direction from the break-ins," he muttered under his breath.

A tiny smile crossed his lips for the first time all day.

"I got away with it."

It was an exhilarating thought. He'd been in what? A dozen homes? As many as twenty? He'd lost track as he and Angel had slipped from home to home. And no one appeared to be the wiser. At least, not yet. He'd gained a terrible new knowledge that night — things he'd never wanted to know. But could it be the answer to all his problems?

"No..." he repeated, but his faltering voice held no conviction. "I can't..."

*Yes, you can*, his voice hissed back seductively. *You can and you will.*

"It's not..." he weakly tried to convince himself.

*It'll keep money in your pocket. You won't even have to deal with Pete. You're a smart guy. You can cut out the middle man and find your own buyers for the things you'll...procure.*

His heart was racing now, his mind swirling.

"No," he said again in a flat, dead voice. "I was raised to know right from wrong."

*Right from wrong? By a deadbeat father and a drug addict mother who cared more for her fix than her sons' health and safety?*

"I have my morals," he grunted through gritted teeth, aware of the fact that, if anyone had been around to see him talking to himself, he'd look like a lunatic.

The voice in his mind laughed derisively. *Morals?* it sneered in disgust. *You can't afford morals! You're one infected cut away from the grave! You can't spare a quarter to buy a piece of bubblegum! Morals! Pah!* It spat at him.

Jack sighed noisily. The voice in the back of his mind was right. If he or Denny got sick, they couldn't afford to treat it. A simple cut could easily become infected or go septic, all because they couldn't afford to buy a box of bandaids and some antiseptic ointment. A cold could turn into pneumonia without proper care. Did he dare put his morals above his brother's safety?

*You need the money*, his mind pressed harder.

That was true. There was no denying it. But could Jack *really* turn to a life of petty crime to support himself and Denny?

*It won't be forever. Soon enough, you'll be of age when you can work*, his brain reasoned. *You can put thieving aside then, get a real apartment where you can keep Denny safe and sound. You'll have all the comforts — heat, electricity, running water, the*

*works. But you have to survive until then.*

"It won't be forever," he mumbled, his stance on the matter crumbling beneath him like a sandcastle in the encroaching tide. "Denny's life is the most important thing."

His mind made up, Jack hurried back to the moldering rathole he and his brother called home.

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Jack's fingers nimbly unlocked the door to the Clinton Street apartment. Though it was the middle of the afternoon, the sun bright and shining, he didn't fear getting caught. He was too well-versed in his craft and he'd been staking out his targets for the past week. The old Asian woman usually stayed home — he'd avoided her place entirely. The Hispanic couple appeared to hold typical 9-5 jobs. Jack could be reasonably sure they wouldn't be home, but he'd watched to ensure that both of them had vacated their home just to be certain. The Caucasian man who appeared to be the landlord typically conducted whatever business he had outside of his home in the early afternoon and didn't return until well after dinner time. Jack had hit his place first, but had found little to no items of value, other than a CD player, a VCR, and about a hundred dollars in cash, hidden away in his bedside table.

Now it was time to hit the other man's apartment. This one actually made him nervous. The tenant kept odd hours — sometimes leaving at the break of dawn, sometimes not returning until close to midnight, sometimes sneaking out without Jack even seeing him leave, only to reappear at random and entering through the front door, though Jack had meticulously checked and had found only one door into the apartment. As far as Jack could tell, there was no girlfriend to worry about either. Sure, he'd seen a fairly attractive woman accompany the man home once or twice, but she'd never stayed too long and certainly hadn't ever spent the night that he'd seen. No, she wasn't romantically involved with the apartment's owner. At best, she was a friend. Jack wouldn't have to worry about her randomly showing up while he worked.

Jack felt the lock release beneath his careful ministrations. With gloved hands, he turned the doorknob and slipped inside. For a moment, he stood still, just absorbing the overall feel of the place and taking stock of the items around him. Over the past few months, as he'd honed his skills, he'd come to feel like he could learn a lot about a person based on the contents of their homes. This man, whoever he was, appeared to be well traveled, if the random assortment of knickknacks on shelves and tables around the living room were all authentic. He was probably a pretty intelligent man too — just a glance at the titles of the books he saw gave testament to that.

"Probably all kinds of good stuff in here," Jack said to himself, deep in thought as to where to start first. "Some of this stuff looks expensive at least."

He started in the living room, ransacking the bookshelves first. He was the first to admit that he lacked Angel's finesse. The burly man had been surprisingly cautious about putting things back where they came from as he'd worked. "Makes it take longer before anyone notices anything's missing," he'd explained when Jack had complained about how long things were taking.

But Jack had never been the patient kind. His was a more "smash and grab" style, as he'd heard it referred to. He didn't care for the books that tumbled to the floor, the spines nearly groaning as they stretched in ways they'd never been meant to. He ignored the potted plants that toppled over and spilled soggy dirt onto formerly clean floors. He turned a blind eye to pillows and throw blankets that became scattered everywhere. He pretended that papers and pencils didn't fly off desks or tables to form an impromptu carpeting beneath their original homes.

Why should he care about the mess left behind? It wasn't his concern. It wasn't his home. He didn't have to clean up the destruction he'd wrought. And he didn't care how quickly or not missing items were noticed. He was a fast learner and he'd already

almost perfected the art of moving his stolen goods. He never had to wait more than a day, tops, before finding buyers for his merchandise. The police would never be able to connect him to the thefts. Not even Superman himself would be able to pin anything on him.

Jack grabbed a couple of plaques from the wall. He glanced at the name on engraved there. Clark Kent. He blinked, trying to figure out why that name sounded so familiar. Then he saw the paper laying on the coffee table, the front page boasting an article written by...

"Clark Kent," he whispered, running his gloved fingers over the newsprint. "No way. This belongs to that reporter I keep seeing those ads around town for. Lane and Kent, hottest team in town, if the slogan is true."

He normally would have put the plaques down right then and there. Taking personalized items was extremely dangerous. They could too easily be tracked to the original owner and then back to Jack. But the gold plating was worth something, even if not all that much, and Jack was still desperate for cash. If push came to shove, he could probably pop off the gold-plated pieces and ditch the rest in the local landfill, just to get it out of his hands. He shoved the items in his worn, nearly threadbare old blue backpack and went to check out the bedroom.

It, like the rest of the apartment, was impossibly neat, the bed perfectly made, not a single shirt or sock thrown haphazardly on the floor. Jack frowned. What kind of weirdo *was* this reporter anyway? Shrugging, he rummaged through the room, snagging a few items off the dresser and from the shelves. A little box caught his eye, reminding him of the small "treasure" box he'd had as a young child, where he'd put his most valued possessions. Granted, those possessions had been limited to cheap Matchbox cars and the occasional coins he found laying around on the street. Perhaps this reporter kept something valuable to himself in the box?

Jack flipped the lid open and was disappointed to find a small globe nestled within. He rolled his eyes and huffed in annoyance that it hadn't been something worth money. But then, as he was about to dismiss the object, he noticed that something was off about it. Plucking it from the box, he held the globe up and studied the map-face.

"What the hell?" he asked himself as he gazed at the alien-looking world represented by the unfamiliarly shaped blotches of red landmasses. Then, he smiled. "You're going to fetch me a pretty penny," he told the globe before slipping the smooth orb into his backpack.

The kitchen was next. Jack ignored the refrigerator but went straight for the cabinets, pulling out whatever non-perishables he could find. He found plenty of sugary cereal and candy bars, box upon box of pasta, tons of tea bags of all different flavors, three full boxes of hot chocolate mix, marshmallows, cookies, and the like. Jack shook his head, sizing up the stash, deciding on what he thought he and Denny could use the most.

"This guy eats worse than we do," he said to himself in wonder, thinking back to the photo ads he'd seen all over the city. The man in those ads had been slim, like someone who carefully considered each morsel of food that entered his mouth and who probably spent a fair amount of time at the gym. He had not appeared to be the kind of man who ate like a toddler. "At least we *try* to eat healthy, as much as we can anyway. This guy..." His voice trailed off as he shook his head again. "Must be nice, having the luxury of eating whatever you want. Of being *able* to spend that kind of money on stuff like this."

In the end, he couldn't resist the temptation to swipe some of the candy and cereal. Denny would be surprised, he knew. It wasn't often they found themselves in a position where they could indulge in simple pleasures like a Double Fudge Crunch Bar.

"Tonight, we feast," he muttered triumphantly, a smirk on his face as he stuffed the items into his backpack, careful not to crush

anything.

Ten minutes later, he was done tearing the apartment apart. His backpack was bulging from all the items in the various apartments he'd broken into – most of them before he'd even gotten to Clinton Street. He wished he could take more but had to resign himself to what he had. He considered taking the reporter's laptop, but upon closer inspection, the machine was several years old and barely worth the trouble of trying to sell it. Still, he was reluctant to leave it behind, and wondered if he should just tuck it under his arm. In the end, he decided to leave it. He had three other laptops that were worth two or three times the amount of the reporter's crummy little machine.

"So odd that a guy who needs a computer to do his work would have such a piece of garbage computer," he said to himself in disbelief. "But I guess maybe he does most of his writing at work."

He went to the stairs and paused at the door. Looking back over the place, he sighed a little. He'd taken a lot more from the reporter's place than he'd anticipated, and a small, distant part of him felt the tiniest bit guilty. But it was only a fleeting feeling and he hardened his heart to it almost as soon as it surged through his heart. He'd never asked for this life. He'd never *wanted* to be a thief. But a stolen childhood and an intense need to do whatever it took to survive had driven him to his illicit career choice. And no one – not even Superman himself – could ever change that.

THE END