

What Friends Do (Kerth Challenge #11)

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Summary: After bringing down Lex Luthor, Jack notices that something is wrong with Clark.

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Author's Note: This fic was inspired by L, who asked if there are stories where Jack, Jimmy, and/or Perry are worried about Clark when he goes missing just before Lois' wedding to Lex Luthor. I've always firmly believed that Jack figured out Clark's secret, and so my muse ran away with the idea. It also just so happened to coincide with Kerth Challenge #11, which asked that someone other than Lois or Jimmy discovers Clark's secret and what they do with that knowledge.

Special thanks to Feli for double checking my gorier descriptions. You rock, hun!

Missing.

Clark Kent was missing.

And what was worse was that neither Perry nor Jimmy seemed to have noticed.

Granted, they were each eyeball-deep in their own parts of the investigation they were running. Jack himself had barely had time to surface from his own contributions into sleuthing out who "The Boss" was and what connection he might have to Lex Luthor, if he wasn't Luthor himself. So perhaps the young photographer hadn't had time to stop and realize that Clark hadn't come back to his apartment yet. Jack supposed he couldn't be too disappointed with his friend for that. After all, not only were they working to prevent Lois from making the biggest mistake of her life, but they were also racing against the clock to clear Jack's good name. If they didn't, he was going to languish in a jail cell for a crime he'd never committed.

Perry was another story. Jack *was* disappointed – even angry – with the grizzled old editor. Lois and Clark were like Perry's own children. Jack knew the Chief loved his star reporters and was always watching out for them. But Perry hadn't noticed that Clark was missing. It baffled Jack as to how something like that could escape the Chief's notice. Or... had it? Could it be that Perry was just as scared as Jack was? Was Perry deliberately not bringing it up to spare the others from worrying?

Something was *wrong* though. Jack could feel icy tendrils of fear tightening around his heart. Clark had been gone for *way* too long now. He'd mentioned something about heading out to meet with someone, all very vaguely. Or had Jack just been too preoccupied to really listen? He wasn't sure now, and that made him even more uneasy. Either way, Clark had been gone for too long. It was already after two in the morning, and Clark had headed out... When had that been? After lunch?

Yeah, it was just after lunch, Jack thought to himself as his stomach roiled in unease. *He said he'd be back in time for dinner.*

Damn! Where is he?

Jack sighed and rifled a hand through his hair, a habit he'd unconsciously picked up by watching Clark for the last few months.

If anyone can handle things, it's Clark, he tried to reassure himself. *It's not like the guy's completely helpless. Maybe something else came up. He could just be busy and hasn't had a chance to call and check in.* Jack nodded to himself, trying to convince himself of this truth. *He'll be back in time to head to the church tomorrow. I'm sure of it.*

Despite his misgivings, Jack yawned. He stretched mightily, trying to wake himself up a bit. Perry started at the unexpected noise and looked up from the pile of research before him, his yellow highlighter posed above the stack of print outs, ready to pinpoint useful information.

"Jack? You okay, son?" he asked with concern.

"Yeah," Jack lied.

Perry looked at his watch, and his eyebrows shot up in alarm. "When in the name of the King did it get this late?" he mumbled. Then, louder, "Why don't we call it a night?"

"You serious, Chief?" Jimmy asked, pulled out of his own work. He blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the sudden change in distance.

"We're no good to the investigation if we're too tired to read," Perry countered. "Besides, we've covered a *lot* of ground today."

"We're *this* close to proving that Luthor's The Boss though," Jack protested, holding his fingers a hairsbreadth apart for emphasis.

"Too close to throw it all away in carelessness, simply because we're exhausted," Perry argued. "Look, the wedding's not until mid-afternoon tomorrow. We have enough time to rest for a couple of hours and then finish up our work." He rubbed his tired eyes for a few seconds. "Clark..." Perry stopped as he looked around. "Say... where *is* Clark?"

"He hasn't been back since he stepped out this afternoon," Jack replied, trying hard to keep his voice even. "I guess he got caught up with something."

Perry nodded thoughtfully. "You know Clark. He's more invested in this than any of us," he commented gently, his words loaded.

Jimmy nodded in turn. "Lois is probably the only person in Metropolis who doesn't realize how head over heels CK is for her." He grinned before yawning.

Jack chuckled. "Yeah," he agreed, but his heart wasn't in it.

"Don't worry, Jack. Clark'll be back soon, I'm sure of it," Perry said, as though reading Jack's thoughts. He jabbed his finger down on the tabletop. "There isn't a force on this Earth that'll keep that boy from bringing down Lex Luthor."

There was more Perry wasn't saying, Jack was sure of it. Jimmy appeared oblivious. But Jack had to wonder if Perry knew something he was unwilling to voice.

"Yeah, you're right," Jack agreed, more for the sake of dropping the conversation than because he believed Clark would be back before the morning. He couldn't explain it, but he just had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Let's try to get a little sleep."

The next morning dawned bright and warm. Small, puffy clouds drifted lazily through the clear blue sky. It was perfectly picturesque, Jack thought to himself as he sifted through the last bit of evidence that Perry, Jimmy, Clark, and he himself had compiled against Lex Luthor. It was clear now that Luthor actually *was* The Boss, responsible for most of the city's organized crime. Not only that, but there was also no mistaking the fact that Luthor had ordered the bomb strike on The Daily Planet, framing Jack for it probably because he was an easy target – a troubled young street kid that few people would go out of their way to believe or defend.

The three of them had spent the entire morning and all through lunch finalizing their case against the multi-billionaire, with Clark still nowhere to be found. Now they were at the police station, handing their hard-earned evidence over to Inspector Henderson. The policeman had often worked closely with Lois and Clark and had been more than willing to listen to their case. Thumbing through the physical evidence they'd brought with them, Inspector Henderson looked eager to make the arrest.

"Guys, the wedding's gonna start in like twenty minutes," Jack interrupted as he checked his watch. He jerked this thumb toward the door. "We should probably get there before the 'I dos,' don't you think?"

Perry nodded gruffly. "Right."

Jimmy took a step closer to the door. "I'll grab a cab."

Henderson shook his head. "I'm not really supposed to do this, but follow me. I'll give you a lift to Lex Tower in my cruiser. Time's of the essence after all."

Jack smirked. "Sure. Why not? It'll be fun to ride in a police car when I'm *not* in handcuffs," he said sardonically.

Perry chuckled and patted his shoulder. "Let's go nail Luthor to the wall."

Jack scanned the crowd that had spilled out of Lex Tower to congregate on the sidewalk. He was feeling pretty good about their timing. Lois hadn't yet said her vows when he and the others had burst through the massive double doors of the ceremony space. She had looked relieved to see them, even as her features fell in disappointment. Her eyes had darted about, searching for something. Jack had given the crowd a quick scan too, only to find a very prominent empty seat where Clark should have been sitting. He'd realized with a jolt that she was silently pleading for Clark to be with them.

But Clark was still missing.

Even now, after the evacuation of Lex Tower, Jack's eyes constantly roved, his mind begging God or the universe or the fates or whatever force might be out there that he would catch a glimpse of his friend.

But there was no sign of the man.

Jack's stomach roiled in dread.

More than twenty-four hours had passed since he'd last seen Clark. During that time, Clark hadn't even called to check in.

Something was *wrong*. Terribly, terribly *wrong*.

Inside the building, he knew the officers, led by Henderson, would be making the arrest. He could scarcely wait to see the multi-billionaire brought low – handcuffed, shamed, and disgraced as he was put into the back of Henderson's cruiser. But that sweet thought was tempered and soured by Clark's continued disappearance. Jack has been so *sure* he'd see Clark at the wedding, their paths finally converging as they exposed Luthor for the criminal he was.

"Where's Clark?" Lois asked, her voice cracking with a mix of humiliation and genuine need.

Tears had smeared the once-carefully applied makeup. Black rivulets ran down her cheeks, and her eyes were red, puffy, and ringed with smudged mascara and destroyed eyeliner.

Good question, Jack thought queasily.

He opened his mouth, wondering what on Earth he was going to say.

"Right here," came a raspy, ragged, exhausted, and reed-thin voice as a man stumbled forward, people parting for him as he advanced.

Clark!

Never before had Jack been so thrilled to see the reporter. He forced himself to hang back instead of rushing over to see if Clark was okay. Now wasn't the time. Now it was time for Lois to throw herself into Clark's arms, seeking the comfort and strength only her best friend could give her. She was still crying, and the way

she held onto Clark spoke of her heartbreak and gratefulness that he was there. And Clark... Jack saw the way Clark closed his eyes and sighed as Lois clung to him. The man looked close to collapsing in relief that Lois had been spared the horror of marrying a criminal.

But, as expected as Clark's reaction was to Lois flinging herself into his arms, something was wrong. Jack could see it, plain as day, and wondered if the others saw it too. He stepped back two paces to give Lois and Clark space, as well as to observe Clark better.

He looks like hell, Jack thought as his stomach lurched and a chill ran down his spine.

It was true. Clark looked deathly pale; the eternal, natural tan to his skin had gone ashen. His breathing was labored, and his movements were stiff, uncertain, and slow. His features were pinched tight, like he was sick or suffering from excruciating pain. His normally bright eyes were dull and barely focused. Jack could swear he'd seen a limp in Clark's stride too.

What had happened in the hours between when Clark had left his apartment and now?

Jack didn't know, but Clark's condition scared him.

A gasp rippled through the crowd as people pointed, drawing Jack's discerning gaze away from Clark and up to the penthouse of Lex Tower. There, teetering precariously on the edge of the balcony, was a man. Jack did a double take.

Luthor! he realized with a jolt and a fresh sense of foreboding.

Luthor was gesturing wildly, like a man possessed. Then, to everyone's horror, the billionaire was plummeting to the ground – a conscious decision, judging by the way it unfolded. Jack looked away in horror. Luthor might have been responsible for crimes too numerous and heinous to count, not to mention framing Jack for arson, but he had no desire to see the moment of impact. Instead, his eyes flicked over to Clark. He saw as Clark turned Lois away from the inevitable, letting her bury her face into his shoulder. But even as she burrowed into his embrace, Jack saw Clark strain forward, as though to get closer to where Luthor was gaining speed on his journey to the pavement.

"I can't."

Even amid the screams of the crowd, Jack heard the heavy regret in Clark's barely uttered words. He saw the torment in Clark's eyes as he came to terms with some inner pain.

There was no time to dwell on it. In the next heartbeat, there was a sickening thud as Lex Luthor, once a pillar of Metropolis' society, a man whom people admired and looked up to as a generous philanthropist, hit the ground with an unbelievable force. Jack was close enough to hear the snap and crunch as bones splintered, snapped, and exploded from the impact. There was a grotesque squelching sound as blood vessels were torn apart and poured their contents onto the sidewalk.

Jack fought the urge to vomit. He'd seen some terrifying and disgusting things during his time living on the streets, even the occasional drive-by shooting, but nothing like this. His stomach heaved and churned, and he put his back to the morbid scene. He forced his attention to remain on Clark, and his efforts were funneled into getting away from Lex Tower. They'd done their job in exposing Luthor for the criminal mastermind he'd been. There was no reason to linger. Lois didn't deserve that, and quite frankly, Jack was worried about Clark. The poor guy looked on the verge of collapsing from whatever ordeal he'd plainly gone through before arriving at Lex Tower. Was it Jack's imagination, or was Clark shaking ever so slightly? And were those burns on his hands?

"Come on, let's get out of here," Jack offered. "There's no reason to hang around."

Perry nodded gravely. "Jack's right. "No need to linger. What's done..." He glanced at Lois, his hard expression softening in concern. "Well, uh, there's no need to stay and watch the

aftermath.”

Clark nodded distractedly over Lois’ shoulder. She still hadn’t turned away from his chest. “Can one of you check with the police and make sure it’s okay for Lois to leave?”

“They’ll need a statement,” Lois realized, her voice muffled by Clark’s shirt. “I’ll stay.”

Clark looked down at her, giving the top of her head a tender smile. “It’s okay. I’ll be right here with you, no matter what.”

Lois’ only response was to visibly tighten her embrace.

“I’ll meet up with you later,” Clark informed the others.

“You want us to head to your place?” Jimmy asked.

Perry shook his head. “You know what, Jimmy? Let’s head back to my hotel for a bit and let Clark do what he needs to.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Clark said with a tired smile. “Truth be told, I’m not sure I’m up for company today. I’ll be in touch.”

Reluctantly, Jack followed in Jimmy’s wake as they turned and made their way through the dispersing crowd. He couldn’t shake his concern for Clark though. His friend was in bad shape; there was no way Jack felt comfortable leaving Clark alone in his apartment.

“Look, I didn’t sleep too great last night,” Jack said as Jimmy flagged down a cab. It wasn’t a lie; Jack had tossed and turned most of the night. If he’d slept a solid three hours, that was a lot. “I’ve been staying with Clark. I’m gonna head back to his place and crash for a while.”

“You sure?” Perry asked, looking Jack up and down like he was hiding something.

But Jack knew the dark circles under his eyes would convince his former boss. “Yeah. I’m beat.”

Slowly, Perry nodded in agreement. “Okay, but take care of yourself. Tell Clark to rest up. It looks like he pulled an all-nighter too.”

Jack grinned impishly. “No problem.”

The next thing Jack knew, the Chief ushered him into the waiting cab, gave the driver Clark’s address, and handed Jack a few bills to pay the fare. The driver sped off, leaving Jack in the back seat to wonder what kind of hell Clark had been through in the last day.

Jack stretched and yawned, feeling refreshed from his nap. He checked the clock. Had he only been asleep for just under three hours? It felt like a lot longer, though he considered closing his eyes for just a little longer. Ultimately, he decided against it. He’d probably wind up oversleeping, and he wanted to be awake when Clark got in. Or... had he come home yet?

Jack sat up on the couch and rubbed the last remnants of slumber from his eyes. Then he stood and made a quick check of the apartment. No Clark. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach, even though he’d seen with his own eyes that Clark was still in one piece just a few hours ago. He wondered if he should call Clark’s cell phone, but if Clark was with Lois, he didn’t want to interrupt that.

Biting his lip in indecision, Jack nearly jumped out of his skin as the apartment door opened. Clark stumbled in, his limp still present, but perhaps less pronounced now. His breathing looked a little easier too, but there were beads of sweat clustered on his brow, and he was still pale and sickly looking. Jack rushed over to let Clark lean on him as he helped his friend down the few steps from the landing down into the living room.

“Hey, I gotcha,” Jack said as he gently directed Clark to the couch.

“I’m okay,” Clark lied.

“No, you’re not,” Jack easily countered, helping Clark to sit down. “I’ve seen stabbing victims who looked healthier than you. What happened to you after you left yesterday?”

“Nothing.” Clark wouldn’t meet Jack’s eyes.

“Liar.”

“It doesn’t matter. We did what we had to do. We exposed Luthor,” Clark replied, settling back into the couch cushions with an audible grunt of pain. Jack heard a popping sound as Clark stretched his back a little.

He nodded. “Yeah, we did. Maybe a little *too* well,” he added, the image of Luthor flailing as he fell and the sound of the impact haunting his memories.

Clark shook his head softly. “Luthor made his choice. There’s nothing any of us could have done to stop it. Nor could we have predicted that he’d choose suicide over jail time.”

Regret infused Clark’s words, and Jack knew instantly that his friend didn’t believe a word of what he’d just said. Clark coughed slightly and groaned, his hand flying up to his chest to rub the center of it, as though it would soothe his aches and pains.

“Don’t make me ask again,” Jack said with mock-admonition.

“What happened to you?” Clark made a motion to protest, but Jack continued, cutting him off. “And don’t say nothing, or it doesn’t matter. *Nothing* doesn’t cause burns like these.”

He reached out and grabbed Clark’s wrist, firmly but gently forcing him to put his palms up. The burn marks Jack had thought he’d seen earlier were still there – faded but still visible to those looking for them.

“I got myself into a little scrape, nothing to worry about,” Clark answered, involuntarily flinching, pulling his hands away again, hiding the marks on his palms as though ashamed.

“Bull,” Jack challenged, feeling brave. “Superman doesn’t get into scrapes.”

What little remaining color had been in Clark’s face drained away as he fought to keep a neutral expression. For a split-second, Jack felt guilty that he’d phrased it that way. But he was worried sick about his friend, and he had no patience for dancing around and mincing words with a man who looked like death warmed over. If ever there has been a time to lay all his cards on the table, Jack figured it was now.

“Don’t bother denying it,” Jack continued, crossing his arms over his chest in defiance. “I figured it out a while back. I just never said anything because... well, there wasn’t any reason to.”

“Jack, I’m not...”

“I said not to lie to me!” Jack gently snapped. “Please. You’re one of the few people who’s ever been straight with me about pretty much everything. So, be straight with me now. Don’t pretend you don’t fly around in a pair of tights and a cape.”

“Jack,” Clark began, his eyes troubled.

Jack held his breath, waiting.

“It... isn’t tights,” Clark tiredly corrected him, a barely-there smile curving his lips upward.

Jack snorted with mock annoyance. “Sure looks like tights to me.”

Clark chuckled and groaned with the effort. “When?”

“When did I figure it out, you mean?” Jack questioned. He grinned. “I had my suspicions from the get-go. Why else would you have this globe-thing that showed a man wearing Superman’s S, for starters? You didn’t exactly strike me as the ‘crazed fan’ type.” He shrugged casually. “But I wasn’t completely convinced until a couple of months ago, when those mobsters held us hostage in the bullpen. I noticed things the others didn’t, and with the suspicions I already had... it just solidified my theory.”

“You never said...”

“I know,” Jack said gently, interrupting. “You were working so hard to keep it a secret that I kind of felt bad about figuring it out. And, besides, it didn’t really matter to me. You’re still Clark. Still the guy who should have pressed charges on me for breaking into your apartment and stealing your stuff. Still the guy who *didn’t* have me arrested. Still the guy who took a chance on me, got me a job, and befriended me. It really doesn’t matter to me what you do in your spare time.” He sat up a little straighter and hunched forward a bit to make his point.

“You mean that?” Clark asked quizzically, dumbfounding Jack.

“Uh... yeah. You actually did all that stuff, remember?” he lightly ribbed in his confusion.

Clark shook his head – just the barest minimum amount of movement. “I mean, the part where you said I’m still Clark. You don’t just... see the man in the cape?”

Jack was startled by the wonderment in the other man’s voice. “Absolutely. I get it. Superman’s all just an act.”

“You’d be one of the few to understand that,” Clark mused. “Most people, if they knew, would say ‘Superman is Clark,’ not the other way around. I’m not sure Clark would ever be real to them.”

“Of *course*, you’re real,” Jack snorted. “I’ve seen you do your taxes,” he joked with a dismissive wave, a wry grin lighting up his face.

Clark chuckled again. “I guess that’s true.”

“Anyway, does it matter? Clark is Superman, Superman is Clark. It’s all the same when you boil it right down,” Jack said after a moment, motioning up and down with his hands, as though they were a scale measuring the two sides.

“Yes,” was Clark’s immediate answer, some strength returning to his voice for that single word. “Superman isn’t who I am. Not really. He’s... the embodiment of my powers. Without Clark, he can’t exist. But Clark *can* exist without Superman. I did for my whole life until recently when I decided to give the whole alter ego thing a chance. I didn’t even have a name for him until Lois decided on Superman for me when she wrote that first article.”

“Lois doesn’t know, does she?” Jack asked as realization hit him. His felt his eyes widen in surprise.

“No.”

“Because she’s smitten with Superman.” It wasn’t a question.

Clark cautiously nodded. “In part, yeah.”

Jack snorted again, feeling proud of himself for seeing the bigger picture when so many others might not have. “A *large* part,” he clarified.

Clark sighed, the sound heavy with sadness and lingering hurt. “Guilty,” he admitted. “But it’s also a safety issue. Luthor targeted Superman. Imagine if the information that Clark and Superman are one and the same was out there. *Anyone* suspected of knowing his true identity would have been at risk. Not *just* from Luthor. His death doesn’t erase all the other criminals out there who would torture or kill anyone who might know where Superman hangs his cape at night.”

“Wait up a second. You said Luthor *targeted* you?” Jack asked, hands up in a ‘stop’ gesture. He raised his eyebrows. “*How?*” he probed.

Clark averted his eyes and threaded his fingers together as if praying. “There were certain... tests... Superman was put to after he first arrived in Metropolis, one of which was designed to obliterate him. And that’s just *one* example.”

“This targeting... it has something to do with why you look like you barely escaped death, doesn’t it?” Jack pushed, already knowing in his heart that he was right. “Doesn’t it?” he asked again, a little more forcefully after Clark failed to respond.

Clark sat forward in his seat and hung his head for a moment in thought. A look of indecision was on his face.

“You can trust me. If you don’t want it to leave this room, it won’t. Neither will your secret. I swear. Although,” he said, hesitation weighing his words down, “I can’t be sure of it, but I think Perry might suspect.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully as he unwound his fingers and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve wondered the same thing. And... I trust you. You’ve kept my secret so far. I have no doubt you’ll continue to protect it. It’s just...” He gestured vaguely, his movements slow and calculated, as if it hurt to do so much as move a finger. His statement was left to hang in the air,

unfinished.

“What did that creep *do* to you?” Jack nearly demanded, ice in his voice against the idea that anyone would hurt Clark. His anger seethed beneath the surface like a volcano about to erupt, though he had no one to target his wrath at. Luthor – what had remained of him to be scraped like chewing gum from the sidewalk – was probably already at the city morgue.

Clark’s eyes clouded over with memories, and he shut them for a moment as though powering through some phantom torture.

“He had a... cage,” the man finally got out in between shuddering breaths.

“A... cage?” Jack repeated. “A cage can’t hold Superman.”

“That’s what I thought... at first,” Clark sheepishly admitted. “Turns out Luthor was a step ahead of me. The cage bars...” A shiver ran through him.

“What about them?” Jack coaxed. “You can tell me.”

“Coated in Kryptonite,” Clark said simply, those three words explaining it all.

Jack blinked in surprise. “That stuff is *real*?”

“Unfortunately.” The word dropped like a stone from Clark’s tongue. “And it does all the things the rumors say it does.” He looked dispassionately at the marks on his hands. “It saps my powers. And, given enough exposure, it can kill me.”

“K... Kill?” Jack stammered. “You’re sure?”

Clark nodded gravely. “I... came close... to that reality today.” He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. “But... I didn’t. We exposed Luthor’s criminal misdeeds. And Lois is safe. That’s what matters. She’s safe, Jack.”

“Yeah, she is,” Jack agreed, nodding and folding his arms over his chest again, “but that shouldn’t have come at the cost of almost losing your life.”

“When he asked Superman to meet with him, I wasn’t sure what he wanted. I guess a part of me hoped he was looking out for Lois’ best interests. As much as I wanted to stop that wedding from taking place, I didn’t want to see Lois hurt.” He shook his head, perhaps embarrassed over how naïve he’d been. “And if they’d exchanged their vows, it would have been a little easier, maybe, if I’d known that he really cared about her. But all he wanted was to lure me in close enough to spring his trap.” He ran his hand through his hair, breathing hard, as though reliving the horror of Luthor’s cage. “Knowing that he *didn’t* have Lois’ best interests in mind hurt worse than knowing I was stupid enough to get myself killed.”

“Wait, back up a second,” Jack said, holding up his hand in a ‘stop’ gesture. “All this talk of almost dying... Are you gonna be okay?”

Clark gave him a half-smile. “Yeah. I’ll be fine, just as soon as I can rest and take in some sun. I got a little this afternoon with Lois, but it wasn’t really enough. I *do* feel a little bit better than when I first broke out of Lex Tower, but it might be a couple of days before I’m completely back to normal.” He waved his hand slightly, dismissing Jack’s concern. “Based on how long I was exposed to the Kryptonite, my guess is that the sickness I feel will wear off before my powers return. It took every last bit of my strength to get out of that cage today.”

“Geez,” Jack commented, awestruck at how casually Clark was discussing his near-death experience. He knew his concern was still showing on his face.

“It’s nothing, really. I’ve gone without my powers before, when I first discovered that there was a stone out there that could harm me. I’ll just need to be careful for a few days so that I don’t do something dumb like cut my face while shaving or go to pull something out of the oven without an oven mitt, that’s all. No big deal.”

“If you say so,” Jack said with a shake of his head. He fell silent a moment while he tried to figure out what to say next. Finally, he cleared his throat and asked, “What happened to the

cage?”

“Nothing... that I know of,” Clark hesitated. “Superman didn’t talk to the police, and Clark can’t know about the cage. Actually, until my powers come back, Superman doesn’t even currently *exist*. I don’t think the police found it yet. It sounded like they haven’t combed through the entire building when Lois and I finally left. They’ll be too preoccupied going through his office, personal living quarters, business dealings, computer records, and the like for the time being.”

“Where was the cage?” Grim determination settled in Jack’s heart.

“The wine cellar. Why?”

Jack ignored the question. “Is there anywhere safe that the Kryptonite can be taken to? Someplace where people like Luthor won’t be able to get their hands on it?”

“There’s a scientist at S.T.A.R. Labs that I’d trust to lock it away. Superman’s only dealt with him a couple of times, but he’s honest and trustworthy. But... again... why?” Clark cocked his head slightly, giving him a quizzical expression.

“What’s the guy’s name?”

“Jack? What are you thinking?” There was no accusation, only caution in Clark’s voice.

“I’m thinking that I’m a former thief who knows how to get into and out of places without getting caught.” Jack grinned mischievously. “And I’m thinking that you saved my life on more than one occasion. I owe you.”

Clark’s face fell, and he looked scared. “Jack, you *can’t* break into an active crime scene. We’ve only *just* cleared your name in the bombing case. And you don’t *owe* me anything.”

Jack leveled his gaze with Clark’s, and he cracked his knuckles as though it would help his case. “Actually, I do.” He ticked off his points on his fingers. “First, you took me off the streets. Two, you got me a legitimate, respectable job. Three, you didn’t press charges and get me shipped off to juvie. Four, you kept *all of us* alive the night the gangsters invaded the bullpen. Personally, I would have let Luthor die if I were you,” he added as an aside. “Five, you didn’t turn me in when I broke out of juvie from the frame job Luthor did. Six,” he said, moving on to his other hand, “you just cleared my name.”

He shook his head affectionately at Clark. “I owe you. Big time.”

“No, you *don’t*. I didn’t do the things I did because I wanted to... have favors owed to me. I did what I did because that’s just... who I am. I couldn’t look the other way and leave you to a life on the streets or in jail. You’re a good kid, Jack. And you’ve become a good friend. I don’t want you risking your neck for me. Please. Just forget about it. I don’t want you to put yourself – and your freedom – in danger.” His voice was practically begging Jack to change his mind.

Jack shrugged. “I know. But my mind’s made up. You can lecture me all you want, Clark, but the truth is, you don’t look strong enough to open a jar of pickles by yourself right now. You can’t stop me.”

Clark sighed in resignation. “That’s probably true. I just want you to stay safe, Jack. If you go through with this...” He shook his head.

“Look at who you’re talking to.” Jack smirked, puffing out his chest in confidence. “I stole from Superman himself,” he teased.

“And got caught,” Clark tossed back, joking back. He crossed his arms in amusement.

“Those weren’t fair odds,” Jack shot back with a grin. He bit back a laugh and shook an admonishing finger at Clark.

Clark chuckled gently, shaking his head at the same time.

“So, what’s the guy’s name at S.T.A.R. Labs?” Jack prompted.

“Dr. Klein,” Clark finally said, appearing to accept that nothing he could say to Jack would prevent the young man from following through on his plan. “Once my powers return, I’ll pay

him a visit and make sure the Kryptonite is properly locked away. I just wish I could give you a hand in moving it all.”

“Forget about it. It’s not a big deal. I know a couple of guys who can help. Very much the ‘ask no questions’ type. They owe me a couple of favors. And besides, you’d be fairly conspicuous wearing a hazmat suit to protect yourself against the Kryptonite.” Jack beamed with pride at having thought the whole operation through.

“Please... reconsider this,” Clark begged.

“Not a chance. It’s not everyday I get to do things for a friend. *Especially* one who’s changed my whole life and future,” Jack replied defiantly. “This is what friends do for each other. You taught me that when you decided to be my friend rather than the person who would have ruined my life.”

There was an exhausted sigh that turned into a muffled cough.

“You should get some rest,” Jack urged.

“I can’t. Not yet,” was the instant rebuttal. “I told Lois I’d let her know when I got home.” Clark took off his glasses, folded them, and put them on the coffee table. He rubbed his tired eyes, looking like he was barely staying awake.

A thought occurred to Jack. “Does Lois know?”

“Know?”

“Aw, come on, Clark. I thought we were getting somewhere here. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean,” Jack egged him on. “Does she know? About you. About the cage?”

“Oh. That,” was his flat response. “No. And she won’t. Not yet, anyway.”

Jack blinked in surprise. “Why not?”

Clark shifted in his seat, apparently to find a more comfortable position. “She’s been through a lot, Jack. An aborted wedding. Her fiancé,” he spat the word out like a curse, “exposed for the psychopath he was. Watching him commit suicide. She doesn’t need to know that the same man tried to kill the hero she so deeply idolizes.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Jack jabbed a finger in the air to make his point. “I just... I can’t believe she doesn’t know about you.”

“I don’t want her to know. Not yet,” Clark said in sudden alarm, as though fearing that Jack would run off to tell her. “In the future, yeah, I’ll probably need to come clean. Either we’ll... get too close, and I’ll have to let her know what she’s getting herself into, or she’ll start to figure it out on her own. She’s too smart not to stay blind to the fact that I’m Superman forever.”

“Damn straight,” Jack agreed. “Clark, listen. I know I’m not exactly the best person to offer you advice, but... tell her *before* she figures it out. For your own sake.”

Clark grinned. “Sound advice. My parents would probably agree with you if they heard you say it. And I’ll try to. I’m just not ready to put my identity out there. Not yet. There’s no coming back from that. And she’s dealt with too much lately as it is. Telling her now might... push her over the edge.”

“She cares about you, Clark,” Jack continued, standing up to move around. “She’ll keep the secret too.”

“I’m not worried about that. I trust her. Just like I trust you. But I need to know that she...” His voice trailed off futilely.

“You love her,” Jack brightly pointed out, trying to help. “So, what’s stopping you?”

There was a long, heavy pause before Clark responded, during which he looked as though the right words remained just out of his grasp.

“Loving her isn’t enough,” he finally said. “I need to know... if she ever chooses me... that she’s choosing *me*, not the character I’ve created.”

Jack couldn’t help the amused snort that bubbled up out of his throat. Clark gave him a puzzled look that asked, without words, what was so funny.

“Sorry,” Jack apologized, knowing his voice wasn’t very

contrite sounding. “It’s just funny to see Superman be so insecure.”

“I’m not insecure!” Clark said with a laugh, his voice sounding reedy and fragile.

Jack hooted another laugh. “Yes, you so totally are!”

Clark shook his head and rubbed his hands together as if to generate some warmth. “All I’ve ever wanted was to fit in as a normal person, to *not* be exceptional. But my powers... I need to use them to help. Otherwise, what good are they?” He shook his head a second time, and his eyes shifted to a faraway look. “You didn’t see Lois, back when I first started at the paper. Ogling over Superman while barely acknowledging Clark’s existence. It’s gotten better since then, but I don’t want her to choose me because I can make her Superman fantasy come true. I need her to love the ordinary man before I can muster up the courage to tell her about myself.”

Jack turned this over in his mind for a solid minute. “Yeah, I can understand that,” he finally conceded. “Just... once she *does* pick you... don’t make her wait.”

A wry smile lit up Clark’s still-too-pale face. “Promise.” He yawned. “Sorry,” he immediately apologized, rubbing his eyes.

“Don’t worry about it. Why don’t you get some rest? You look ready to keel over,” Jack suggested.

“You just want me to fall asleep so you can sneak off to Lex Tower,” Clark countered with a knowing gleam in his eyes.

“Nah, much too early for that,” Jack lied.

Clark went to protest but another, stronger yawn took him, leaving him powerless to speak until it passed. “Maybe a quick shower instead before I call Lois,” he decided. “Don’t. Leave,” he instructed, wagging his finger at Jack.

Jack made a shooing motion with his right hand. “Go on. Wash the stench of Luthor’s arrogance off you,” he teased.

Clark nodded and stood up with a groan. His hands immediately went to his lower back as he shuffled off to grab some clean clothing from his bedroom before limping down to the bathroom. As soon as Jack heard the water in the shower turn on, he slipped out of the apartment.

“Sorry, Clark,” he whispered as he sauntered down the street a minute later. “But I need to do this for you.”

It was almost dawn when Jack let himself back into Clark’s apartment. He found Clark sound asleep in a sitting position on the couch, his head thrown back, snoring lightly. Jack smiled to himself as he took stock of the living room. It appeared Clark had done his best to stay awake waiting for Jack’s return, if the now-cold, mostly full cup of coffee, half eaten slice of leftover pizza, and open, but dark, laptop screen were anything to judge things by. But the late hour and Clark’s unseen wounds had gotten the best of the man. Jack squinted and rubbed his tired eyes. Was it his imagination, or had some of Clark’s color returned? Even in slumber, the reporter looked stronger, healthier.

“Good,” Jack whispered to himself.

He regretted it a second later as Clark roused, his eyes fluttering open blearily.

“Jack?” he yawned, scrubbing at his eyes with his fists, pinching the bridge of his nose as if warding off a headache.

“Hey,” Jack replied, suddenly feeling guilty for having snuck out when he’d been told not to.

“You left.” It was merely a statement of fact. Not a hint of reproach was there.

“I had to,” Jack defended himself quietly, regardless of how calm Clark was. He sat down on the couch next to his friend. “And, before you ask, the job’s done. No one will ever know about the cage. And, I have to say, that thing was... pretty unsettling to see.”

“I wish you hadn’t gone,” Clark said. He reached out and patted Jack’s shoulder. “But I’m thankful for what you did. It’ll

prevent a lot of uncomfortable questions and speculation.” He looked thoughtful for a moment before asking, “How’d it go?”

“Smoothly,” Jack lied. Clark didn’t need to know about the two close calls he, Derek, Vinny, and Tony had had. “We were ghosts. No one saw us, no one heard us, and my friends don’t care about the details of the job.”

“You’re sure?” Clark asked cautiously.

Jack nodded confidently. “Positive. I know too much dirt on them. They know better than to breathe a word of what we were doing to anyone. Not that I would ever get them in trouble, but they don’t need to know that.” He winked conspiratorially.

A relieved sigh ushered out from between Clark’s lips. “Thank you, Jack. I think I owe *you* now,” he joked.

“Nah, this was a freebie,” Jack teased right back. “Besides, that was the easy part. The harder part will be to figure out what to do now. We did the best we could, and we totally nailed exposing Luthor, but the paper is still in shambles.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Clark said with barely-there optimism. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. I... haven’t exactly been completely honest with you, Jack. And I don’t mean about my ability to fly to China for take-out.” He flicked his eyes nervously away for a moment. Without his glasses on, Jack could see that Clark’s eyes looked a lot clearer and more focused than they had the night before. But they were troubled.

“Oh?” Jack ventured cautiously.

“I’ve been doing some digging. I figured you might want to get away from Metropolis after we’d cleared your name,” Clark said slowly, deliberately choosing each word. “People have this tendency to only see what they want to see. Hence, why the Superman costume has worked in preventing people from figuring out who he really is.” He gestured down at his body, as though he were wearing the suit. “Or... well... *most* people,” he amended with a grin, before becoming serious again. “Even once it gets out that you were framed, there are going to be those who aren’t going to believe it, Jack. It might be wise to... get away from the city for a while. Give people a chance to forget.”

Jack scrunched up his brow in confusion. “I don’t exactly have a choice. Where am I gonna go? And what about Denny?”

Clark put his hands up in a gesture of pacification. “I’m getting to it,” he promised. “I know Denny’s at the halfway house, same as you were before the arrest. And I know your parents are gone. But I found an aunt we can try to contact. From what I gather, she’s your dad’s sister-in-law. Her name is Marianne.”

Jack nodded slowly. “The name is vaguely familiar. I heard dad mention her once or twice when I was much younger. She and my dad didn’t exactly get along. And when his brother was killed on duty one night... he dropped all contact with her.”

“I think we should see if she’ll take you and your brother in for a while,” Clark said in a quiet tone. He sat forward, clasping his hands together.

“I don’t know...” Jack began uncertainly. “I’m not even sure I’ve ever met her.”

“Family is family, Jack. We’ve got nothing to lose in contacting her. Worst comes to worst, she declines and we have to figure something else out.”

Jack thought it over for a long moment, then he shrugged. “I guess. I mean, I can’t just stay here with you or Jimmy or anyone else. I don’t want to leave Metropolis, but... I’m not sure the halfway house would welcome back someone accused of a terrorist attack, even if he *was* framed. Okay, Clark. We’ll see if my aunt is willing to talk to us. But, uh, where *does* she live anyway?”

Clark’s hand flew up to rub at the back of his neck. Jack had seen him do it a thousand times before. His friend was nervous. “Montreal,” he finally admitted.

“Montre...aw, man,” Jack said in a daze.

“It won’t be forever,” Clark promised quickly. “Unless you

want it to be, of course. But, as much as I'll miss having you around, I think it's for the best. After all, the paper is gone, and we don't know if we'll ever find a way to resurrect it."

Jack nodded reluctantly. "Yeah..." His voice trailed off, his forced enthusiasm gone.

"Besides," Clark said with a wink, "now that you know who I am, I can come visit from time to time. It won't be so bad."

That brightened Jack's view on it. "Yeah, you're right. Okay, count me in. Thanks, Clark."

Clark shrugged casually and patted Jack's shoulder again. "Don't mention it. That's what friends do for each other."

THE END