

The Boy in Black

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Rated PG

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Summary: Clark starts doing "super-rescues" as a teenager. What does that mean for Lois and Clark?

Author's Note: This is the last of what I see as Triangle spin-offs. Similar to Breaking Up, this is not that similar to Triangle. Rather it takes some of the flashbacks from there and goes in a different direction, and is thus an alt-universe type story from a different universe than either of its predecessors. As such, it is a stand-alone story.

To start off, the idea for this story wasn't mine. Credit for that goes completely to Patrick who suggested a story where Clark's attempts to be Superboy were successful. Also, while I hadn't planned on it, I ended up using another of Patrick's ideas for this as well. Throughout Triangle, he kept saying he wanted that universe's Clark to take up as Superman, but with a completely different costume. The reason Patrick wanted that in Triangle doesn't exist here (there is no Superman in this story - from this universe or another), but you can probably guess from the title that Clark isn't exactly dressing as Superboy either. (At least my understanding of Superboy, which is pretty basic, is that he's Superman but younger and in the same costume. This Clark is using a completely different costume.)

Similar to Breaking Up, this story starts with some flashbacks that were liberally "borrowed" from Triangle (changed to first person, although in this case, first person Clark), but fewer of them come from there. There are three flashbacks here, and the third one only starts off the same but in the end is quite different than the original.

Just to let you know what I was thinking - throughout the early part of this story there are several references to Clark's need for sleep. I'm thinking both that a younger Clark may not be fully "developed" in his super-powers and thus may need more sleep than an adult Clark would, and I suspect that how much sleep you "need" is based partly on how much sleep you are used to. So, if Clark is used to getting close to eight hours of sleep a night, but is suddenly going out at night to help more, he's going to feel tired until he gets used to the new reduced sleep schedule.

Lastly, given Chad's importance to the last two stories, I felt it was important to mention him here, but don't expect him to play a major part. He does come up from time to time, but never in any detail. And if you haven't read the other stories and have no idea who Chad is, you probably won't even notice him here. All characters are the property of Warner Bros, December 3rd Productions, ABC, and anyone else who may have a legal claim on them. The story, however, is mine.

For ease of reading,

signals a lapse of time. ~~~~ signals a flashback.

A huge thanks to Carol for both her beta work and her detective work. There are a few things in here that we discussed ad nauseam - and really small things that you'd never even guess I'd bother to get stuck on, but Carol was incredibly patient with me while I got stuck in those places.

Thank you also to Jeanne Pare for GEing this for me.

PROLOGUE

I awoke with my heart pounding. The dream had been very vivid, or at least the end of the dream had been vivid. I

had been free falling. I had awoken before I hit the ground, but the feeling of falling was still with me. I controlled my breathing the way Coach had taught us at football practice the week I had been on the team, reminding myself that it was just a dream. After a few moments, the pounding in my heart slowed down, and I opened my eyes to see what time it was.

I glanced to the left where my clock was kept, but it wasn't there. Stranger still, what was in its place was the top of my chest of drawers. I shook my head, trying to wake myself up. Nothing happened.

Cautiously, certain that I was still asleep, I glanced down. Almost instantly, I fell to the ground with a thump. I sat up, looking around in astonishment. I had never had such a vivid dream before and was getting eager to wake up.

"Clark?" Mom came into the room, her voice full of concern. "Are you all right?"

I looked at her in confusion. "I'm fine, Mom. I'm just dreaming."

"What was that crashing noise?" she asked me.

"I fell. It didn't hurt. I just need to wake up. This is such a weird dream."

Mom came over to place a hand on my forehead. "Do you have a fever? What's wrong with you? That was no dream, honey; you fell out of bed. How ever did you get all the way over here, though?"

"I'm fine, Mom," I insisted and after a bit more fussing, she was finally convinced and went back to bed.

I sat on the floor for a few more minutes. When I continued to stay where I was and did not wake up, though, I grew confused. Was this real? Was I not dreaming? But clearly I was - I had been floating in mid-air earlier and had not woken up since then.

I closed my eyes and focused on feeling as weightless as possible. After a moment, I cautiously opened my eyes again. I was floating, nearly at the ceiling. I only stayed there for a moment, before falling towards the ground once more. But at the last minute, mindful of my parents sleeping in the next room, I shot up again, hovering near the ceiling.

The idea had come to me slowly. I had just mastered flying. After the night I had found myself floating in my sleep, I had worked on it off and on. It was the latest in a series of weird non-human powers to develop and I had found it scary at first. When I learned to use it, though, it was liberating. I had come to terms long ago with the fact that I was different, that I was not like my classmates. Learning to fly gave me the ability to get away from the pain of that, and to experience something wonderful.

My first long distance trip had been to the Great Wall. I had wanted to get as far away from my classmates as possible. It was weird, as I knew I was well liked, but I still felt an undercurrent of not belonging. Maybe it was all in my head, because I knew I was different even if they did not, but it did not matter.

Shortly after my trip to the Wall, though, an idea started to take root in my mind. I could do so much with all of the abilities I now had. I thought maybe I could use them, really use them, to help. I wasn't sure how, but I knew I wanted to do it in some way.

For a few weeks, I did nothing, but the idea began to fester in my mind. Then one night I heard the news report on television. There was an earthquake in eastern China,

but I waited until Mom and Dad were asleep before going. I wanted to try this, but I was not ready to discuss it yet. So, after they had gone to sleep, I flew over to China. I didn't bother with camouflage as who would know me in China?

It was exhilarating. It was amazing how much I could do. I had never tested my limits quite this way before. I helped several families get to safety and all had been incredibly grateful.

The experience was not without its drawbacks - while I typically needed less sleep than others, I felt tired the next morning from the combination of lack of sleep and physical exhaustion. Plus there were the families I did not save, the little boy who I had carried away and brought to his family, already dead.

Still, overall, the experience was more positive than negative and I felt pleased with the results.

"You need to be careful, Clark!" Dad was nearly shouting at me. "This behavior... it's admirable that you want to help, son, but you can't keep doing this."

"Dad, stop worrying," I said, my voice calm. I wasn't sure why Dad was so upset. Nothing bad had happened.

"I can't stop worrying. You're my son and I love you," Dad said, his voice gentler now.

"But nothing's going to happen," I insisted. "Mom, tell him."

Mom shook her head. "I'm sorry, Clark, but I agree with your father on this. We're not telling you to stop, just to be more cautious."

I sighed. I appreciated their concern, but what were they so worried about? "What do you think could happen?" I asked, only half embarrassed at the whine in my voice. "Nothing can hurt me."

Mom sat down and I realized this was going to be a long conversation. "That's not true, Clark, and if you'd stop and think about it, you'd realize that."

"What?" I asked, confused. I hadn't been hurt since I fell out of my tree house when I was nine - and even then I'd barely cut my arm.

"Do you remember how you felt when you ran into Lana kissing Eric after she failed to show up for your date?" Dad asked.

I turned to him, feeling vaguely annoyed. Why was he reminding me of that? "Yes," I said, "but what does that..."

"You can get hurt," Mom interrupted. "Maybe not physically - and we're not sure of that, but regardless, you can get hurt."

"So you're saying if I want to help, I can't date?" I asked, still not sure what the connection they were making was.

"No, we're saying you're being too literal when you say you can't get hurt," Mom said.

"What if someone recognized you?" Dad asked me.

"So what? What could they do about it?" I asked, feeling myself get annoyed again. Why were they being so obstinate?

"Don't you think they'd want to figure out what makes you different?" Mom asked.

"Maybe." I shrugged. "But they couldn't. What would they do?"

"Who knows?" Dad asked. "But what if in an attempt to get you to adhere to whatever tests they wanted to set they did something like kidnap your mother?"

"That's..." My voice trailed off as I processed Dad's words. Really processed them. I sat down at the table. "So

what should I do?" I asked. It was clear I would need to do something. I wanted to keep helping if I could, but they were right. I needed to be careful. If something happened to Mom or Dad... Well, that was just unacceptable. They had protected me since they had found me in Shuster's Field. The least I could do was not go off and do something stupid that put them in danger.

"What do you mean, 'What should you do?'?" Dad asked. "You need to stop."

"Jonathan," Mom said, her voice soft, but her tone chiding. "Let's not be rash."

"How am I being rash?" Dad asked.

"Clark wants to help, and maybe he's right." Mom defended me. "Maybe there is a reason he has these gifts."

"I won't allow my boy to be dragged into a lab and dissected like a frog!" Dad said, shouting again as he got up.

I watched him quietly, not sure what to do. I wanted to tell him that I loved him too, but this didn't feel like the time. Besides, Mom was much better at calming him down than I was.

Sure enough, she got up and walked over to him, wrapping her arms around him. "I don't want that either, and I'm sure Clark agrees. But Jonathan, Clark can't live his life in fear anymore than we can. If he wants to do this, we need to help him, not forbid him."

"I really want to keep helping people, Dad," I interjected quietly. "I think... I don't know, but it makes me feel good. Less like an outsider - like maybe these weird things are my way of contributing to make the world a better place."

Dad broke away from Mom to move over and put a hand on my shoulder. "You are a good boy, Clark Kent." Then he leaned down and hugged me. I got up so I could hug him better. At sixteen, I still hugged my mom, but it had been years since Dad and I had hugged like this.

"So what do we do?" Dad asked, breaking away, and I smiled. While it was still unclear what we were going to do, there was no question we'd figure it out. With Mom and Dad's help, I could do almost anything.

THE BOY IN BLACK

I looked out over the tables in front of me. It was like being in high school again. Well, maybe not. None of these tables would hold large groups of people, so it was a bit more welcoming. I didn't feel like I needed to pick which clique I was going to try to align myself with before I put my tray down. I did, however, wish I had tried to make plans with someone for lunch, because I felt sincerely intimidated here.

Plus, I must look like an idiot standing in one place with my tray in my hands as if I were afraid to take a seat. Maybe I should have gone to Midwest U after all. I think it would have felt a little more like home.

"Yo, Clark!" A voice surprised me as someone clapped me on the back.

I turned around in surprise. "Hi, Steve," I said, feeling relieved to see someone I knew.

"A bunch of us are eating outside. Want to join us?" he asked me.

"That sounds great," I said, making sure to temper my response. I didn't want to sound too relieved. No need for my roommate to think I was completely uncool. At least until he found me floating in my sleep. I shuddered a bit at that. I had considered asking for a single, but Mom and Dad

really couldn't afford that. I was sure if I concentrated on it, I would manage not to float in my sleep. Maybe.

I followed Steve outside to a small group of students sitting under a tree. They could have been posing for the Met U catalogue. "Hey guys," Steve said as we sat down. "This is my roommate, Clark." He introduced me all around and I promptly forgot everyone's names.

"We're all in the same freshman comp course," one of the other guys, who was wearing a baseball cap backwards, told me. "It just finished."

I nodded. "Mine is Tues/Thurs at eight."

"Man, you'd think they'd be kinder," Steve said. "English at eight in the morning! I think classes shouldn't start until ten."

"Or eleven," a red-haired girl added.

"That would be nice," Backwards Baseball Cap Guy said.

"So, where are you from?" the red-haired girl asked Steve.

"I'm from New York," Steve told her. "My dad wanted me to go to school there, but..."

"New York?" the brunette asked with a grimace. "When you can go to school in Metropolis?"

Steve laughed. "That's what I told him. Where are you from?" he asked her.

"Metropolis born and raised," she said proudly. "I can't imagine wanting to live anywhere else."

"Where are you from?" the red-haired girl asked me.

"Kansas," I said.

"Where in Kansas?" Baseball Cap asked. I had only been in Metropolis for a day and I had already learned that everyone asked this, but the only places they'd ever heard of in Kansas were Wichita and Topeka. Not that I would expect anyone to have heard of Smallville, but I wondered why they asked.

"It's a little town in the middle of nowhere. No one's ever heard of it," I told him.

"What's it called?" the brunette asked, and I perceived a challenge in her voice.

"Smallville."

The red-haired girl laughed. "Smallville? That's seriously the name of where you grew up?"

"Yes," I said, trying to keep my temper in check. I did understand why everyone thought it was so funny, but it still annoyed me. I felt like I was being labeled a hick without anyone bothering to get to know me.

"Do you know Chad Andrews?" the brunette asked me.

I was startled. "Yeah, of course," I said. "Smallville is pretty small and Chad and I were in the same grade. How do you know him?"

"His parents are from Metropolis," she said and when she said it I remembered him mentioning that. I'm not sure how I forgot. It had even come up when we were applying for college. Chad was sure he did not want to go to Met U and when we talked about it, he had smiled. "Why would I want to go back there?" he'd asked. "This is my home now."

"We went to junior high together," the brunette continued. She gave a slight blush that made me decide right then that I liked her. "Chad took me to our eighth grade prom."

"His parents moved from Metropolis to Smallville?" the redhead asked with disdain.

"No, his parents are still here as far as I know," the brunette said. "Chad spent the summer after eighth grade in Tennessee with some cousins and he loved it. He ended up

asking to stay for freshman year and then his cousins moved to Smallville and Chad moved with them. I guess he was just a small town boy at heart."

I smiled. "Yeah, Chad never seemed like too much of a city boy. He didn't even bother applying to any of the Ivy Leagues for college, as he didn't want to have to live in a city. And he could have gotten in easily."

"Where'd he go?" she asked me.

"Midwest U. It's also in a city, but it's a midwestern city so that was bearable. Besides, Chad wants to be a doctor so he couldn't go someplace too small or he would have a hard time getting into med school."

"So, did you ever visit Chad in Smallville, Lois?" the redhead asked with a sneer.

Lois shook her head. "Nah. I'm not all that interested in small towns. I don't blame you one bit for deciding to come here for college," she told me. For a second I was annoyed at the slight on Smallville, but then I decided to forgive her. There was something about the twinkle in her eye that made it hard to get too annoyed at her.

I stared at the blank piece of paper in front of me. I needed to write something. Anything at all would be okay. Ideally it would be something really interesting, something worthy of printing, but that wasn't mandatory. It would definitely help, though. My chances of being allowed to write for the Met Titan were much greater if my first piece was printable.

I knew my chances were slim - they had never allowed a freshman on the student paper before, but I had to try, right? The hard part was that I wasn't the only freshman trying. While most of the freshman I knew who wanted to join the paper had backed off when they heard their chances, Lois Lane had announced loudly that she was going to be the first freshman ever to be accepted.

I couldn't decide what to make of Lois. She was part brash and part sweet, part overly confident and part insecure, part brave beyond belief and part afraid of her own shadow. In short, she was a mixture of contradictions all wrapped up in one small, beautiful girl.

So, yeah, of course I was a little bit attracted to her. But then again, I wasn't the only one. Steve had told me that Josh had asked Lois out our first week here, but she had turned him down cold - said she wasn't interested in dating. Not that I wanted to date her. Despite my attraction to her, I also found her a little off-putting. Some days I felt like I could talk to her for hours, others I wanted to avoid her at all costs. So what did I care if she wasn't interested in dating?

What she was interested in, it was pretty clear, was getting on the school paper. And I would bet she had her eye on the summer internship at the Daily Planet, too. While I was sure there were other people applying for the one spot held for a freshman each year, I suspected that Lois would be my fiercest competition. I couldn't be sure - I hadn't even seen anything she had written yet, but I just didn't imagine she was that overly confident about her chances of getting on the school paper without some talent to back her up.

I was sort of looking forward to spending the summer on the farm, but I also wanted the internship so badly I could taste it. It was my key to staying in Metropolis as a journalist full-time after college. While I could do that without the internship, and Mom told me to stop worrying about it this early (I mean, I did need to finish college first,

and I'd barely started), this would make it all so easy. If the editor of the Planet liked what he saw when you were an intern, you were guaranteed another internship the following summer. Of those freshmen interns that made it through senior year with internships, nearly 75% got job offers at the Planet after school.

Only a couple of other kids got hired by the Planet right out of college every year, but those were for boring research jobs. If you interned there after freshman year, by the time you finished college, you'd get a staff job. A small one for sure, but a staff job at the Daily Planet right out of college was like writing your ticket to a successful journalism career.

No, there was no question that this internship would be worth spending my summer here. If I could get it.

I sighed. Applications for the internship didn't even open up until next semester, and I had promised myself I wouldn't decide what I wanted to do before then anyway. Maybe, like Chad, I'd hate living in the big city and wouldn't want to settle here or spend my summers here. For now I needed to focus on trying to get a spot on the school paper. If I could only think of something to write about.

I snuck back into the room quietly. Steve went to sleep late - much later than me, and I was staying up much later now that I didn't need to get up to do chores around the farm. Still, this was late even for him and I was pretty sure he would be asleep. Just to be safe, though, I had already spun back into my regular clothes.

The spinning thing was really useful, and I was glad I had figured it out. When Mom first suggested the costume for helping out, I hadn't been crazy about the idea. Dad hadn't either actually - he thought it would make people think I had something to hide. In the end, we had agreed on something simple - a black shirt, a t-shirt or a turtleneck depending on the weather, and black jeans. If I took off my glasses and moved the part in my hair to the other side, I looked different enough. And of course, I stayed as far away from helping out in Kansas as possible.

It had worked, and combined with my promise to keep my helping to simple things where I at least had the appearance of being normal, no one had really commented on me. I got mentioned in the papers sometimes, but they were in passing and always vague references like, "One of the biggest surprise helpers was a boy in black..." While Mom, Dad, and I jokingly referred to my efforts to help as my being the Boy in Black, in reality, no one had ever put the pieces together and realized that the same boy in black was helping out at emergencies around the world.

For the first few rescues, though, I had found having to change annoying. True, I could do it at super-speed, but as that was normal for me, it still seemed annoying. But one day I had tried the spinning thing and it had worked. It was really the same as changing at super-speed, but somehow by spinning around I was able to change even faster. Now I could move between outfits in less than five seconds and I had become a pro at hiding one set of clothes beneath the other.

How well these tricks would serve me now that I was living with Steve, I had no idea. But I was about to find out. I opened the door quietly and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Steve asleep in his bed. He may have wondered what I was doing out so late, but at least for now, he wouldn't notice anything weird about his roommate.

"Yo, Kent."

I stopped without turning around. Was I ready for this? So far, all of my conversations with Lois after the very first one had been vaguely antagonistic. I wasn't sure I was in the mood this morning. I'd been out doing the Boy in Black thing again last night and two nights in a row with too little sleep was starting to affect me.

With a sigh, I turned around. "Hi, Lois."

"I can't believe you," she said as she stopped in front of me, her hands on her hips.

"What?" I asked her. How had I annoyed her today? I had just gotten up twenty minutes ago.

"I thought all the freshmen dropped out of submitting pieces to the Met Titan," she said.

"You didn't," I pointed out.

"Well, besides me," she said exasperated, as if her exclusion was a given.

"And me, I guess," I replied, trying to match her arrogant tone.

"Why are you bothering?" she asked me. "You know they don't take freshmen."

I shrugged. "Why are you bothering?"

"I'm Lois Lane," she said. "I'm going to win the Pulitzer some day. My goal is to win it before I'm thirty. I'm not going to meet that goal without getting an early start."

I smiled; I couldn't help it. I'd only known Lois for two weeks and already I could tell she was unique. How many other college freshmen had decided they were going to win the Pulitzer Prize by the time they were thirty?

"Well, I hope you succeed," I told her with a smile before trying to turn back around. I wanted to get to the dining hall in time to grab some breakfast before my English comp class.

"Then stop trying to compete with me," Lois said behind me.

I turned around, stunned. "What?"

"Pull your piece out of the Met Titan tryout," she said.

I closed my eyes. This was the problem with Lois. One minute she was the most arrogant person you knew and the next she was a little girl afraid of failure. "How are you going to win the Pulitzer if you're afraid of competition?" I asked her.

"I'm *not* afraid of competition," she said, her eyes flashing. "And even if I was, it wouldn't be from you."

I fought to keep the grin off my face. She had to be kidding me. "Then why do you want me to pull my piece from the tryout?" I asked.

She closed her eyes in annoyance. Was I missing something? Was I being the confusing one?

"My chances of winning are much better if none of the other freshmen enter," she said when she opened her eyes.

"But if you're not afraid of competition, why do you care? And if I'm barely competition, why do you care if it's me?" I asked her.

"I don't care!" she replied, nearly shouting. "I don't care if anyone else tries out and I definitely don't care if it's you!"

"Well, then, I'm glad we got that settled," I said, still trying not to smile. "But I'm in a rush..."

"Clark!" Steve's voice cut me off.

"Hey, Steve," I said as he jogged to reach us.

"So," he said, eyeing Lois. "I thought you weren't interested in dating. At least that's what you told Josh."

"I'm not," Lois said, her eyes narrowing. "I'm here for one thing only - to get my degree in journalism and land a

spot at the Daily Planet." Yeah, just as I suspected. There was no way she wasn't trying out for the internship.

"So what are you doing with Clark here?" Steve grinned.

"What? If I'm not interested in dating, I can't talk to any guys?" Lois asked.

"It's not the talking I'm referring to," Steve said.

"Then what is it?" I asked Steve, starting to feel annoyed myself. I mean, I have to admit, it felt good to see someone else give Lois a hard time. Still, given that it clearly had something to do with me...

"You've been out the last two nights," Steve said with a grin.

"Well, he hasn't been with me!" Lois said, indignant.

I sighed. "I haven't been with anybody." I turned to Steve, "I've been out a little late, but I've been sleeping in our room."

Steve shrugged. "You seemed like the early to bed type to me. Thought it was from growing up on a farm. Before two nights ago, you always seemed to be in bed before midnight. The last two nights, your bed's been empty when I get to bed at two. So where have you been?"

"Just out," I mumbled. "Nothing all that exciting."

"Till after two?" Steve asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes," I said.

"What have you been doing?" Lois asked me.

"Nothing," I said, glancing at my watch. No time for breakfast now. "Look," I said to both of them. "I'm going to be late for my comp class. I've just been out late the last two nights. I'm not doing anything interesting. Just..." I floundered, trying to think of a boring excuse for being out late. "Just studying," I said, staring at the ground. I was a horrible liar, but hoped this was believable. "Nothing more interesting than that."

"And Lois, I'm not taking my story out of the tryouts. If you're going to win the Pulitzer before you're thirty, you better get used to some harsh competition." I spun on my heel and started to jog towards the Humanities building.

"I told you," I heard Lois call behind me. "You don't count as competition. Let alone harsh competition." I couldn't help but laugh at her words.

"Clark Kent?" came the voice on the answering machine. "This is Paul Bender from the Met Titan. Please give me a call back when you have a chance. The newsroom is at extension 4-5656."

I stared at the phone in shock. Paul Bender was the editor of the Titan. Had my piece earned me a spot on the staff? I had to admit to being a bit surprised. Despite my confidence when I talked to Lois, I didn't really think it was that good. I hadn't been able to think of anything interesting to write about. It wasn't like I had had a chance to do some good investigative reporting or something. So instead, I wrote an article on the orientation process. Not exactly front page stuff.

Still, maybe this was about the quality of the writing, not the topic. That is what they claimed anyway. It was just that they also claimed that no freshmen had ever been good enough to get on the staff. Was I that good? I liked to dream I would be one day, but I doubted I was yet.

I sighed. It must be nice to be Lois Lane. I'm sure she would be jumping up and down over a message like this. She'd call Paul back immediately, not stare at the phone and wonder if she was really good enough.

Well, maybe I needed to channel my inner Lois Lane.

Or something.

I picked up the phone and took a deep breath before I dialed the number for the Met Titan. "Met Titan," said the cheery voice on the other end of the phone.

"Hi. This is Clark Kent. Is Paul Bender there?" I asked. I could feel my heart pounding, but my voice was surprisingly calm.

"Yo, Paul." I heard the person who had answered call.

"A Clark something or other for you."

"Thanks," I heard Paul say as he got closer to the phone. "This is Paul," he said a minute later.

"Hi, Paul. This is Clark Kent. You left me a message earlier," I said, wiping my sweaty hand on my jeans.

"Right, Clark. You were one of the freshmen who submitted writing pieces," Paul said. "I read it. It was good. Really much better than we usually see from freshmen."

I wasn't sure what to say. Did this mean I had a spot on the staff? "Thank you," I managed to say quietly.

"Unfortunately, it's still not up to the caliber we expect for a staff reporter," Paul continued, and I felt my heart sink. "But I want to encourage you to keep trying. Maybe submit a piece again next year."

"Thanks, Paul," I said trying to hide my disappointment. It was silly. I had known my chances were slim. So why was I so disappointed?

"No problem, Clark. See you around," he said before he hung up the phone.

I placed the phone back down and then sat back on my bed. I didn't get it. I hadn't really expected to land a spot and still... I had sort of hoped. I wondered if Lois got a spot. Not that I wanted to know right now. I thought I might just be disappointed if I found out.

I looked around me one more time. I wasn't sure why, but I was much more nervous taking off from Met U than I'd ever been taking off before. I guess it was just different. At home I had acres of farm to hide in, and when I traveled for rescues, not only did I look for places where I would be alone, but I was amid a bunch of strangers that were likely to think they had imagined it if they saw a boy flying.

Here, though, I was starting to make friends. Not a lot yet, perhaps, but certainly people were getting to know me. Even if I blended in elsewhere, I didn't in my Journalism for Beginners class. I would have liked to have faded into the background there, just absorb what I could of Professor Matthews' knowledge. I mean journalism was about writing; it wasn't about being loud, was it?

Unless, of course, you were Lois Lane. How I managed to get into arguments with her in nearly every lecture, I have no idea. I didn't think I was that argumentative. But it always seemed that if I dared say anything, Lois felt the need to argue with it. To be fair, it wasn't just me. She argued with nearly everyone. It was just that I was the only one stupid enough to rise to her bait, and argue back.

Anyway, this meant there was no question that the other students in that class knew who I was. Even if they just thought of me as the idiot who argued with Lois, they still had a label for me. And if they happened to see that idiot flying over campus, they'd probably notice.

I took one more glance, but no one else was around. It wasn't that surprising. It hadn't taken me more than a week to discover that the math building was pretty quiet after about ten. I guess the math students were all snug in their beds that early? Or maybe they were secret party animals and all at one of the frat houses? I wasn't sure. But it was a

convenient fact to have learned so early.

Okay, one more glance. Really, no one was around, so I took off. Still, despite all that, I breathed a sigh of relief when no one shouted as I took to the sky. Maybe I needed to start going off campus to do this. There were probably lots of alleys in Metropolis, but to be honest, I hadn't yet explored the city on the ground so much. Just taken in what I could from the air.

With a sigh of relief, I turned so I was heading east. The report had been of a school shooting in Lyon. I guessed I could thank my roommate for this one. If he went to sleep at a reasonable time, I would have missed it. But he stayed up late, and for some reason tonight when he had come back into our room at two, he had turned the radio on. Like I was invisible or something. I liked Steve, but I wasn't sure he was the best roommate ever.

Anyway, I had only caught a snippet of the report before Steve changed the channel to a rock station, but I had used the radio as my cover for getting up and going to the bathroom. I didn't think I needed much more than that. Steve would be asleep by the time I would get back normally anyway.

To be honest, I wasn't 100% sure where Lyon was - someplace in France south of Paris, I thought. Maybe a bit west as well? Or was it east? This was definitely one of the things I wanted to get better at. My geography was much better now than it had been before I started doing the Boy in Black thing, but I still felt like I had a lot to learn. The only place I could get to in France easily was Paris, and it was like that in many countries - I knew where the major cities were, but not much else.

I didn't take me long to cross over the Atlantic - I always went faster in the dark. There was something eerie about crossing the ocean late at night - miles and miles of dark nothingness. During the day it was a much nicer journey. Sometimes, if I traveled north enough, I could see whales breaching or dolphins or porpoises playing.

For a moment, I had an image, a vivid image, of flying over the Atlantic to see one of these scenes with Lois in my arms. I bet she'd love it. Then I realized what I was doing. Was I crazy? Did I really think Lois Lane could stay still long enough to go for a flight over the Atlantic? Even with me, where the whole thing took less than a couple of minutes unless I hovered to watch something, I couldn't see her staying still that long.

As I got closer to France, I started listening. Usually this was how I found the places I needed to go. I had gotten good at tuning out the unimportant sounds and listening for what I wanted to hear. In this case, it was the sound of crying adults. Maybe some crying teenagers as well.

It only took me a moment to hear them and when I looked down, I could see the crowd gathered around the school. This had to be it. I looked closely and could see that no one was in the back of the building, so I landed there. Then I just stood there for a moment, listening to the talk on the other side. Had the shooter come out yet? Were there more students inside?

No, the shooter was still in there, and it sounded like he had a classroom of students and one teacher hostage. Without waiting to hear where he might be, I slipped inside the building. The fire alarms were all going off, making the inside loud. So much for using my special hearing.

Instead, I used the vision gizmo thing - I had never figured out what to call it, but it was sort of like x-ray vision. I found the shooter in a classroom on the third floor.

There were police and firemen all around the door. How was I going to get in?

Sometimes, and I hated this, the best thing for me to do was to do nothing. Just wait for the authorities to handle it and then help them get people out. This was starting to look like one of those times, unless I was ready to let the French know that there was a boy who was impervious to bullets around. At least, I thought I was. To be honest, no one had ever shot at me, so I wasn't sure. But since nothing else had been able to hurt me yet, I just assumed bullets wouldn't do the job either. Regardless, I wasn't ready to let people know what a freak I was yet.

I flew up the stairs so I wouldn't make any noise and stayed hidden in the stairwell. I tried to block out the sounds of the fire alarms so I could hear what was going on in the classroom, but it was no use. It was way too loud.

I have to admit, what happened next surprised even me. I had been watching the door to the classroom from the stairwell using my vision gizmo, when I saw one of the policemen ram it open. From the rescues I had seen before, this seemed like a bad idea to me, but I wasn't going to go out there and say anything. Who would listen to an eighteen year old boy anyway?

Unfortunately, I was right. The shooter turned towards the sound and without thought, fired off a shot. The students in the classroom were all huddled behind desks, some of the bigger students sheltering the girls. The policeman fell to the ground. A fast check with my vision showed him to be wearing a bulletproof vest, but at that close range, the shot would have still been plenty painful.

A series of shots were exchanged - I counted seven in total - before it was all over. I guess the good news was that only one of those shots hit a student. I snuck in after the police and tried to blend in with the other students, checking out the girl who had fallen.

Her blond hair fell over her eyes, and I pushed it aside gently as I listened for a heartbeat. It was faint, but there.

"Who are you?" a voice asked harshly in French.

I looked up, suddenly thankful for the Berlitz lessons my parents had suggested after I started doing this. Combined with a facility for languages, I was passable in most major languages, and close enough to fluent in French to pass when I was only having a short conversation.

"I was just..." I floundered, not sure what to say. I had been about to say I had been passing by, but that was insane. They had clearly evacuated the other students, so passing by from where? Then an idea came to me. "I didn't leave with the alarms. I was in the bathroom when they went off. I was waiting outside."

The girl nodded at me as she took me in. She stilled seemed a bit suspicious, but didn't press things further. "Is she going to be okay?" she asked me.

I shrugged. Without the benefit of my super-hearing, I had done nothing that would make it seem like I had any knowledge. "I don't know, but I feel a pulse," I said, lifting up the arm in my hand.

Tears filled the girl's eyes as she sat down. "She's my best friend. I bet her parents are outside."

"Yours probably are, too," the teacher said as she approached us. She was young, maybe in her late twenties and, despite her calm words, I could hear her heart beating wildly. I wondered how she did it, how she stayed so strong for her students.

I looked up and realized that most of the students had been evacuated now. Really, there was little I could do. I

didn't want to move the girl for fear of hurting her more.

This was the most frustrating thing about not using my powers. I could have prevented her from getting hurt. I could have burst in here and... I'm not sure what, but done something to the gun long before shots were fired.

With a sigh, I got up and followed the injured girl's friend outside.

"I'm not sure," I told my parents over a stack of pancakes and a glass of buttermilk.

"Going public with your abilities is a tricky thing," Dad pointed out. I wanted to smile at his choice of words. He had never been comfortable with the help I provided, always worried I would get caught. But the only thing he said anymore was that he was proud of me. This was the closest he would come to asking me to stop - to ask me to consider if I was really ready to go further.

"I know," I said. "And I'm not sure I'm ready."

"You're still so young," Mom said, a hand on mine.

"Maybe you should at least let yourself get settled at school before you add a whole new level to the Boy in Black."

I nodded. I agreed with what they were saying. They were right, I knew they were. I wasn't ready to go public with all I could do. Still... "That girl, though. And the man last week - his kids are orphans now and if I..."

"Clark," Mom cut in, "the world and all its problems do not rest on your shoulders. What you're doing now, it's enough. It's more than enough."

"Thanks," I said quietly as I finished my pancakes, although I wasn't sure I believed her.

"So," Dad said, eager to change the conversation, I'm sure, before I changed my mind. "What's the word on joining the paper?"

"Oh," I said as I sat my glass down. The phone call with Paul, which was just the night before, seemed like a lifetime ago. I had called the farm to let them know, but apparently one of the horses had gotten free, so they hadn't been home. "I didn't get it."

"You didn't?" I smiled at how surprised Mom was.

"I told you no freshman has ever made it before," I reminded her.

"Well, I know. But... well, you're good, Clark. I thought you might be the first."

"You should meet Lois," I told her with a chuckle.

"Who's Lois?" Dad asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Stop getting ideas, Dad. She's just a girl. But one who is probably the first freshman to get on the paper."

"Really?" Mom asked. "She's that good?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I've never seen anything she's written. But she certainly seems to think she is."

"So she thinks she is or she is?" Dad asked. "Did she get a spot?"

"I don't know," I told them. "I haven't asked her."

"Are you okay?" Mom asked me.

I nodded. "Disappointed, I guess. But I knew it was a long shot anyway. I just hoped that maybe... But anyway, yeah, I'm okay. The editor said my piece was good, and he encouraged me to submit again next year."

"That's great!" Dad said, smiling at me broadly.

"Maybe he says that to everyone," I said quietly.

"Maybe," Mom replied. "And maybe he only says it to the very best. Like you."

"You have too much confidence in me, Mom." I smiled. She was delusional about my abilities, but I had to admit that it felt nice to know that they thought I could do this.

"Well, I don't think so, but even if I do, it's my job as your mother." She glanced at the clock. "It's also my job to remind you that you're running late for your poli sci class."

I glanced at the clock, realizing she was right. "Sorry. Thanks, Mom," I said as I got up and washed the plates and glasses at super speed. I slowed down to give my parents each a fast hug before taking off back towards Metropolis.

"Lois?" I asked cautiously, not wanting to startle her.

She didn't answer for a second, and when she did, she looked annoyed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to pick up a copy of my submission," I told her. "Paul said he had provided some comments for me on how to improve."

"Did you get in?" she asked and her eyes were challenging behind her tears.

"No," I said as I took a seat on the ground beside her.

"I'm guessing you didn't either."

"How did you know?" she asked annoyed.

I reached out to brush a tear from her cheek. "Call it a lucky guess."

She sniffled and then giggled a little. "Yeah, I guess it's a little obvious, isn't it?"

"You knew the chances weren't great," I said gently. "It doesn't mean you're not a fantastic writer."

"Of course, it doesn't!" she said angrily, and I fought the urge to laugh. Maybe the arrogance-self-conscious thing wasn't as much of a contradiction as I thought. Maybe Lois wasn't arrogant at all, just really scared of failure. For a moment, I wondered why she would be that afraid of failing at something so trivial, but then pushed the thought aside. It wasn't important right now.

"Can I see your submission?" I asked her.

She thrust it at me, holding her hand out for mine, and after a brief hesitation, I gave it to her.

For a few moments, we sat next to each other in silence, each reading the other's work. Lois had written an article on inefficiency of the cafeteria's buffet line. I was impressed by her ingenuity. I was even more impressed by her writing. She was good. Good enough that I was more than a little surprised she hadn't gotten onto the paper. Reading her article, I couldn't help but think that I could kiss the Planet internship goodbye.

I finished reading and looked over at her. She was still reading my article, but had the strangest expression on her face. Her jaw was hanging slightly open like she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Was it really that bad? Paul had been so encouraging.

She looked up at me a moment later, but said nothing, although she did close her mouth. She handed my article back to me without a word, grabbed hers out of my hand, stuffed it into her backpack and left, all without a word.

My article was so bad that even Lois Lane couldn't bear to tell me how awful it was? Was that it? It didn't seem believable. I had the impression that Lois would have relished the idea of letting me know how sub-par my writing was. But what other explanation was there?

I guess it was possible that she actually thought it was good enough that she felt threatened. But that wasn't very realistic. I had read her article. I wasn't half the writer she was. And while I had to admit I didn't know Lois well, one thing I did know was that she was not self-conscious.

No, she thought it was awful and couldn't bear to tell me. I couldn't even comprehend how awful she must have

thought it was for that to be the case. With a sigh, I put my article in my backpack, Paul's encouraging words from earlier nothing but a faint memory now.

I got up off the floor wondering what this meant for me. Should I just give up now? I shook my head. My parents would hate me for thinking this way. 'When things are hard, Clark, that just makes them all the more worth trying for,' I could hear Mom's voice in my head, and picture Dad shaking his head in agreement behind her.

When ever I had felt like I was failing at something before, my parents had told me the story of how they had been trying for three years to get pregnant, how much they wanted a child. How they had flown all the way to Metropolis to see some fertility specialist and were told it just wasn't possible. And how on the night they came back, Dad suggested a drive to cheer Mom up, even though he wasn't feeling cheery himself. He was going to take her to dinner at Maisie's, thought seeing some friendly faces would be good for her. But they never made it, because passing Shuster's Field on that sad night, they saw something fall out of the sky and found me.

Sometimes, I wondered what the life lesson was there. I knew what my parents wanted me to see it as: 'Don't ever loose hope, anything's possible.' Yeah, yeah, yeah. But what if it was more like: 'Be careful what you wish for. You could desperately want a child and then instead of your dreams being answered, find yourself saddled with space trash.'

I knew my parents didn't see me that way, and they didn't feel that way, but sometimes they must have thought it, right? I mean, back on the flight to Metropolis, before the specialist told them they couldn't have kids, were they thinking, 'I hope we have a little boy who can fly and burn things with his eyes'? It seemed pretty unlikely to me.

So, what if I kept striving to be a good reporter, and what I got was a job working for the Smallville Press or something? Then what? I would be stuck having to pretend to be normal in Smallville. I guess that wasn't so bad. I could live with my parents, so I could still be the Boy in Black.

It was reasonable, right? I mean, admittedly, when I pictured my future, it was here in Metropolis where I felt like once I got more comfortable, I'd have a little more freedom to blend in than I did back home. And I had always imagined that I'd get married some day. Not that I knew how - I mean not too many women were falling all over themselves to marry a science experiment gone wrong.

I sighed. This is what happened. It was always what happened. I had a habit, a bad habit, I knew, of sinking into thinking about my origins whenever I was having a bad day. Not that I even knew what my origins were, but I could still link everything there. I mean, as I saw it, there were two options: I was an alien whose parents didn't want me, and felt so strongly about it that they sent me to another planet. In which case, I must have been one mutant of an alien. Or, I was a science experiment. Similarly, I wouldn't have been sent to the middle of nowhere Kansas if I were a science experiment they were really excited about. I must have been a failure.

Not very auspicious beginnings, either one. So, it was no wonder I was a failure now, right?

I shook my head, practically feeling my dad's hand on my arm telling me to buck up, that the world was not that bad. That I wasn't a discarded alien or a failed science experiment, but his boy, the son he never knew he wanted. I

could feel Mom's arms around me, telling me that my differences were gifts. That she didn't bemoan Gramp's old couch that I had burned down when I was still learning to control things, but was thankful for a son who could lift the couch so she could vacuum underneath it.

I smiled slightly, despite myself. My parents were good at always looking on the bright side. I wanted to be like that. I wasn't sure how, but I knew that was what I wanted. So, for now, maybe I'd fake it. I plastered a smile on my face as I opened the door to the dorm. Maybe if I pretended I felt better for a while, I'd start to actually feel better.

That lasted for all of about two hours. And it wasn't much of a two hours. I spent most of it in the library working on my homework. Then I packed up my things and went to the dining hall to get dinner.

Walking inside, the first thing I saw was the small group of people I knew. I wasn't ready to call any of them friends yet, but they were the people I had spent the most time with over the past few weeks. The problem was, I wasn't even sure if I liked them, or if they were just comfortable because I knew them better than I knew anyone else in Metropolis.

I missed high school. I hadn't been so popular as to be voted Prom King or something, but I'd had a large group of friends and had been well liked. I missed Pete and Chad now. They were good guys - both were always up for a game of basketball, but were also the kind of guys who were willing to have a conversation once in a while, if that made any sense.

The three of us got along well, and were all well liked. The only thing we disagreed on was Lana. Honestly, while I could nearly hear Pete and Chad groaning at me, I missed Lana, too. Lana Lang was my first date when I was fifteen years old. Some date - I was supposed to meet her at the Pizza Shack, but she wasn't there when I arrived. An hour later when I left, I found her in the back of the restaurant making out with Eric Williams.

To be honest, she did that sort of thing to me all the time. But I couldn't help asking her out over and over again. Because when she didn't do that, she was the best girlfriend ever. She thought I was great, and wasn't too shy to tell me so. And of course, she was beautiful.

Pete would say she was only beautiful on the outside, but I knew better. I knew that underneath the bubbly, superficial cheerleader, she was a sweet girl who really cared about other people. I didn't get to see that side to her often, but when I did, it made my night. My month, really, because it was so rare, and she let so few people see that side of her.

Still, the superficial side of Lana hadn't wanted a boyfriend who lived so far away when she was in college. Not that it would have mattered really. Given how readily Lana cheated on me in Smallville, I never would have believed she was staying faithful to me when we were living so far apart. Ideally, I would have convinced her to come to Metropolis, but being the bubbly cheerleader in high school hadn't really bolstered her grades any, so she was in community college. She wasn't willing to move to Metropolis to go to community college.

Or maybe she wasn't willing to move to Metropolis for me. I sighed. I didn't know, and while I missed Lana, even I had to admit I was probably better off forgetting about her and moving on.

I glanced back over at the group of people I had been

hanging out with. There were three girls in this group of us - Alicia, Lois, and Maddie. Alicia was the redhead who had been so condescending about Kansas when I met her. Despite the fact that it was Lois who tended to call me "Smallville" or "Farm Boy", something about Alicia's condescension bothered me more. Maybe it was that first conversation where Lois had spoken about Chad. She clearly had no interest in Kansas, and clearly saw me as a hack because I came from there, and yet, she didn't dismiss the entire state away as nothing useful.

I had the impression that while it would take more effort to impress Lois than if I had come from Metropolis, it was still possible. Not true with Alicia. Not that I cared. I wasn't that into red-heads.

Lois was... well, Lois. And I still didn't know what to make of her exactly, but I knew one thing. She wasn't a potential replacement for Lana. She would never be that kind of girl. Not that I wanted to date someone exactly like Lana, but maybe more like her than Lois? I wasn't sure, but at the very least, I wanted a girlfriend with a somewhat less abrasive personality than Lois.

Which left Maddie. Maddie was cute and friendly and didn't have the same anti-corn state mentality as Alicia and Lois. I sighed. I wasn't really all that attracted to her either. Was I just looking for a potential girlfriend so I'd feel like I fit in better? To get over the failure I felt like in writing?

It didn't matter what the reason was. I didn't really want to date someone just to compensate for weaknesses in other parts of my life. Besides, similar to going more public, maybe I needed to get more settled in, figure out where Clark Kent fit into Met U, and where the Boy in Black fit into Clark Kent's life, before adding another person to the mix.

"Yo, Clark," Josh called out, thinking, I'm sure, that I hadn't seen them. I gave him a small up-nod as a hello before getting in line to get my food.

I hesitated before I put my tray down. There were two seats available at the table - one between Josh and Alicia and the other next to Lois. The seat next to Lois was at the end, and therefore the most obvious one to take, but it was next to Lois. I should just suck it up and sit next to her anyway, though, right? Who cared if she hated my article?

I started in that direction, but at the last second changed course and went for the seat next to Josh instead. I'd be brave another day.

"Hey," I said to the group as I sat down.

"Hey," came back the unanimously unenthusiased reply.

"We heard both you and Lois got dinged for the paper thing," Steve said with the emotional sensitivity of a flea.

I nodded, not sure what to say.

"That's a bummer, man," Josh said, patting me on the arm. "Lois says your article was really good, too."

I looked up at him, surprised. Had I heard that right? Lois had said it was good? Lois? My head turned to her to see her staring at her tray, blushing furiously.

"Thanks, Lois," I said softly, still shocked. "Yours was excellent. Really much better than lots of things I've seen published in the Titan."

Lois looked up at me sharply. "You think so?" she asked.

I nodded, and she gave me a broad smile in return. For a moment, I forgot there was anyone else at the table with us. I forgot we were even in the dining hall. Her smile was so bright, I couldn't think of anything else.

"Well, then," Steve said, "why'd she get dinged?"

"Maybe just cause she's a freshman," Maddie said, throwing a dirty look at Steve. I had already gotten the sense that he was not her favorite person. "Maybe in an effort to point out how hard it is to get in, they won't let any freshman in on principle and both Lois and Clark were hurt by that."

"I bet that is it," Josh said. "That Paul guy was a bit pompous when announcing that no freshman had ever been allowed before."

"Or maybe it's just cause Lois isn't blonde," Alicia said.

"What?" Josh and I asked together. I turned to Alicia in confusion. "This is for the paper. What would it matter what she looks like?"

"Cause Paul likes blondes," Alicia retorted.

"So there are no brunettes on the paper staff?" Josh asked.

"Well, no, but my roommate got on, and she's a freshman," Alicia announced.

Lois head jerked up. "A freshman got on?"

Alicia nodded. "And I read Linda's article, and it wasn't very good. But she's blonde and has big boobs, so..."

"Well, that's fair," Maddie said with a sigh. "So Clark would have had a better chance if Paul was gay."

"And Clark was blonde," Josh added with a chuckle.

"And Lois should have dyed her hair," I added.

Lois gave a small laugh. "I did that once. I make a pretty ugly blonde, so it wouldn't have helped."

"And no offense, Lois, but your breasts aren't a double-D," Alicia said with a smile. "Plus, I'm guessing you weren't willing to sleep with Paul."

"She's sleeping with the editor?" Maddie asked, and Alicia nodded.

"Nice..." Steve said. I tried not to roll my eyes. It really wasn't any surprise that Maddie didn't like him.

"Well, if that's what it takes to join the Met Titan, I'm not so interested in joining," I announced.

"That's good," Lois added. "Cause I think your chances of growing double-D breasts in the next year are smaller than mine."

We all laughed as we got up to head to our next class.

"Hey, Lois. Wait up," I called as I exited the dining hall. Our next class was together, although we hadn't ever walked over together before. To be fair, that was mostly my doing. I had a habit of avoiding Lois if I could help it - made for fewer arguments that way.

I didn't feel that way today, though. I'm not sure if it was the compliment on my writing or the way she laughed the whole thing with Linda off, but I actually *wanted* to talk to her today.

Lois turned around and looked surprised when she saw me, but stopped walking. "We don't usually walk to class together," she said as I reached her.

"I know," I said, feeling myself blush. "It's just..."

"You find me hard to deal with?" Lois asked with raised eyebrows.

I didn't answer her, not sure what to say.

"Thought so," she said as she turned away.

I jogged to catch up with her. "I was surprised you were able to laugh at that whole thing with Alicia back there," I said to get off the topic of why I usually avoided her.

Lois looked at me. "Me, too. But I don't know. I stopped being surprised I didn't get on when I saw your story."

"You did?" I asked.

She nodded. "I figured if you didn't get on with that, I didn't stand a chance."

"But you were so upset," I said, not understanding.

"About not getting on the paper?" Lois asked. "I was surprised."

I smiled. "You were that sure you were going to get it?"

She blushed slightly. "I know it's silly, but my roommate was sure of it. Said she could picture me being at home in the newspaper office."

"You were sure you were going to get on because she could picture you in the office?" I asked.

Lois laughed. "I told you it was stupid. The thing is, Star thinks she's a psychic or something. I don't usually believe in that sort of thing, but, I don't know..."

"She predicted something you wanted to hear..." I suggested.

"Something like that," she said. "I guess."

"That wasn't what I meant anyway," I told her. "About you being upset. I meant you seemed so upset when you read my article."

Lois sighed. "I know. It's just... I wasn't even thinking about the Titan thing anymore. I care even less now that I know getting on has nothing to do with writing ability, but even then, I guess I was over it. It was just..." Her words trailed off as we reached the Humanities building.

"Just what?" I asked, keeping my voice quiet.

"I wasn't thinking about the Titan thing. I just... I really want the Planet internship. I'm sure you're planning to apply?" I nodded, started to understand where this was going. "I just realized I'm not going to get it," Lois said quietly before moving through the door of the building.

I placed a hand on her arm. "That's funny," I said when she turned to look at me. "Cause I thought the same thing when I read your article."

"No, you didn't," Lois said, dismissively.

"I did. Really," I told her. "Your article was so much better written than mine."

Lois laughed. "So neither of us is going to apply thinking the other is going to win?"

I shrugged. "The thought had occurred to me," I admitted. "But somehow I don't see you not applying."

Lois smiled. "Me, neither. Now I just know I need to step up my game." With another grin at me, she turned and entered the classroom.

"You know what," I screamed, "you were right. I do find you difficult to deal with!"

It was all of two hours after our perfectly pleasant walk across campus. How we had gone from the point where we could actually be nice to each other to this, I don't know. Only Lois Lane, though. That I knew. No one else had ever infuriated me like this before.

I knew what Steve would say. He'd say it was sexual tension. In fact, after witnessing one of our previous arguments, he had said just that. But Steve was always thinking about sex, so that wasn't a surprise at all. And I'm sorry, but this thing Lois and I had going where we screamed and yelled at each other was about as far away from sexual tension as you can get.

I remember the few times I let myself get a little carried away with Lana on a date, and it felt nothing like this. Oh sure, both had my adrenaline pumping, but that was in a good way. Not in a 'I want to tear your head off with my bare hands' kind of way.

"Well, *you* know what?" Lois screamed back. "I don't

care! You find me difficult to deal with as I'm not like the Daisys and Sally Maes back home on farm land. If you're going to make it in the big city, you better learn to deal with real women!"

With that, Lois spun on her heel. I absently wondered just how often I had watched her walk away from me after a fight. We had only known each other for a month and this was already the way I was most familiar with her.

With a sigh, I realized I didn't really care. If Lois could get this worked up over a comment on whether or not it was important for reporters to understand grammar rules or whether that was what editors were for, that was her problem. For reference, I thought it was important; Lois apparently thought she was meant for bigger things. I smiled a bit as I wondered what Perry White would think of that. Did he really want to spend all afternoon proofreading his reporters' copies? Maybe the Planet internship wasn't a lost cause after all.

I took care when opening the door to my room. Given my special whatever-I-wanted-to-call-them, I couldn't exactly slam the door the way everyone else did when they were angry. I had learned that the hard way after what felt like a particularly bad fight with Pete when we were eleven. The front door had swung open with a bang as I had intended, but then kept going, wiping out a plant, a shelf Mom kept in the entranceway, and a good deal of the banister on the staircase. I had been sure Mom and Dad were going to ground me and stop my allowance until I paid for all the damage - which at the time I assumed was at least \$15 - and had still been standing there in shock when my mother came in from the kitchen to see what all the noise was.

I still have no idea what she was thinking when she saw what I had done, but my punishment wasn't nearly as bad as I had expected. I was told I couldn't watch television for a week, but compared to what I expected, this seemed like a pretty paltry punishment and I didn't question it. Mom and Dad fixed up the entryway within a few weeks and it wasn't until a few years ago that I realized how much it must have actually cost to get all that work done.

Luckily, while I didn't understand why it had happened, it was enough of a lesson that I never slammed a door shut again, and a year or so later I learned a similar lesson with throwing my backpack on the floor when I was angry. All in all, by the time I was fifteen, I had realized it was not okay for me to use excessive force to blow off anger. Now what I did was take to the sky for a while. I'm not sure if it was nearly as satisfying, but it did have the desired effect. A few minutes of floating among the stars, and it was hard not to realize how inconsequential my problems were.

So, that was my plan now. I wasn't sure why this stupid fight with Lois was getting to me so much, but something about how quickly we went from getting along to screaming at each other bothered me.

"Hey," Steve said when I came in.

I glanced at him, not really interested in talking, but not wanting to be rude. "Hi," I said quietly as I dropped my book bag to the floor. "I'm headed out for a while," I added, in an effort to forestall other conversation.

"Cool." Steve nodded before looking back at the textbook open in front of him.

Just as I was about to leave though, he called out again, "Hey, Clark, a bunch of us are heading over to the Sig house tonight. They're having their first kegger of the year

that's open to non-pledges. You interested?"

"Sure," I said, not really thinking. I just wanted to get out of here.

"I think we're meeting everyone at nine to head over there. Josh insists that we shouldn't let the girls go alone to a frat house. Do-gooder," he said, but I noticed he said it with a smile, and I decided Steve wasn't really so bad.

I nodded. "Probably a good idea. I'll be back long before then."

I wondered where to go to take off as I left the dorm room. It was only three, which meant there wouldn't be too many quiet areas on campus now. I imagined even the math geeks were in the math building in the middle of the afternoon. In fact, maybe they were more likely to be there than other majors in their academic buildings.

Maybe now was the time to explore Metropolis itself? I wasn't sure. The truth was Met U wasn't in the best part of town, but we were pretty sheltered from that aspect of the city. Not that I was really worried, but all I really wanted was to take a short flight and cool down. I wasn't sure I was ready to give myself a lesson in city crime.

Looking around campus, though, I realized I didn't have much choice. It was only late September and the weather was still beautiful. As a result, there wasn't an area of campus visible that didn't have students nearby. With a sigh, I headed through the gates that would take me to the city beyond.

My first thought was that this was silly. Metropolis wasn't different than any other city I'd been in. But that wasn't really fair. I didn't really travel the world looking for ways to help. I went when I heard about something major going on. In reality, major catastrophes weren't common in any one place, including the seedier sections of main cities. So, while I had been to other large cities before, I hadn't really roamed the streets like this, looking for an alleyway from which to take off.

Still, to some degree, my initial assessment felt right. The area outside of campus didn't seem particularly unsafe. Maybe because of its proximity to the school, it was full of students talking, and aside from the cars, didn't seem much different than inside. There were stores on either side of the street, and it was a busy area, but it really just looked like a city to me, and nothing particularly unsavory about it struck me. With a sigh of relief, I started walking north a little to get out of the crowds of students hanging around the underground station.

Within a few blocks, I found what I was looking for - a small alley far enough away from the crowds for me to take off unnoticed if I went quickly. I checked it out carefully, but there didn't seem to be anyone hiding back there. I guess even the homeless people find someplace to be during the day.

With another glance around to make sure no one was watching me suspiciously, I darted inside and took off with a burst of speed that would make it hard to see me if you weren't looking.

The truth was that by the time I did this, I had cooled off from my argument with Lois. Still, flying was one of my favorite pastimes, the special skill or whatever that I enjoyed the most. So, I didn't see any reason to cut my flight short just because I was no longer fantasizing about slamming doors or ripping the heads off pretty brunettes.

So, I took a somewhat leisurely flight around the northeastern US and Canada. I turned off my super-hearing, as I didn't want to hear about any major disasters that might

require the Boy in Black. It was a trick that I had found incredibly useful since I got to school.

I had promised my parents that my Boy in Black thing wouldn't interrupt my studies, and that meant I wasn't to leave class to go anywhere, nor was I to travel if I had studying to do. Dad had been convinced that this was going to be harder for me than I thought - that there would be more background noise in the city than I was used to and more people calling for help from petty crime.

I had dismissed his fears when he made them, but promised I'd 'turn-off' my hearing anyway, a skill I had already mastered after the first time I nearly blew my ear drum when the bell rang back in high school. I was glad I had made that agreement now, as Dad was right. Things were different here. I think I only had vague notions of what city-life would be like before, and I imagined a busier Smallville. But Metropolis was more than that - it may as well have been a different planet than Smallville for all the similarities it had. Within the first day, when I hadn't turned the hearing thing off, I had realized how little I knew about large cities from my brief visits to them before.

I circled around Metropolis one more time before landing, taking in my new home. It was almost pretty from here - all the tall buildings and the people walking around. When I turned my hearing on, though, things were different. There were lots of people talking, of course, but the biggest thing was the car horns honking. No one ever felt the need to beep their horn in Smallville, but it seemed to be a regular part of driving in Metropolis, particularly for the taxi cab drivers.

I smiled a little at the thought of how busy everyone was here, how they couldn't wait another second to get wherever they were going, before looking for a good place to land near campus. It took me a minute to orient myself, and just before I had found a good location, I saw something that looked weird to me. Was that teenager holding a knife on that boy? He couldn't have been more than six or seven.

Without thought, I landed in the nearest alley, but it turned out to be empty anyway. I took off in the direction I thought the boys had been at a run - just slow enough to pass for human. I reached them in a matter of seconds and it was just as I had thought.

The teenager was at least sixteen or seventeen - not much younger than me - and he had a knife trained on a boy that was barely old enough to have finished kindergarten. "Hey," I called as I approached them, trying to pretend I hadn't noticed the knife.

"Go away, man. This is none of your business," the teenager said, turning to glare at me. I saw the boy's eyes flicker to the knife as it twitched closer to him with the teenager's movement.

"Maybe I can help," I said. I could hear my voice shaking slightly, but I hoped neither of them could. I had never done anything like this before. What would I do if the teenager tried to stab me?

I shook my head. I'd deal with that if it happened. Better me than the child.

"I said 'Go away!'" the teenager repeated, sounding angry now. The knife twitched again, and the little boy flinched. I closed my eyes to calm myself down and finally identified the acrid smell I had noticed since I approached them. It was urine. Of course, it was. The small boy had probably wet his pants long before I arrived. It's what I would have done if someone had a knife on me and I didn't

happen to be invulnerable.

"I just want to help," I said, keeping my voice soothing and holding my hands up to show I didn't have any weapons on me. "What is it you want from him?" I asked, pointing a thumb at the boy.

"Nothin'," the teenager said. "I don't want nothin' from him. I want you to go away."

I was within a step of them now, and I wondered what would happen if I reached out and grabbed the knife by the blade. My dad would kill me, though. That wasn't an option.

"I don't have it," the boy said suddenly, tears I hadn't noticed before clear on his cheeks.

"What don't you have?" I asked him.

"GO AWAY!" the teenager nearly roared at me.

"Maybe I can give you whatever he owes you," I said.

"Oh yeah?" the teenager asked. "You have two grand?"

I felt my eyes widen. Two grand? What could this six year old owe two thousand dollars for?

"I didn't think so," the teenager said with a smirk.

"He really owes you two grand?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"Yeah. That was prime stuff I gave him," the teenager responded, sounding almost pompous.

"What kind of stuff?" I asked, confused.

"It was just weed," the six year old whined. "And it wasn't that good."

Weed? As in marijuana? I could almost hear Lois laughing at my naivete, but I had never imagined... Really? At his age?

"You still owe me," the teenager said. "I told you that was the last time I was going to cover for you."

At that moment, we could all hear the whine of police sirens, and almost so fast I couldn't see it, the teenager had pocketed his knife. "Next time, you better be able to pay up," he hissed at the boy before he ran past me.

I wasn't sure what to do or what to say. Some sort of 'Just Say No' message? Ask how old he was? Where his parents were? It didn't matter, before I could decide what to say, the boy was walking past me. I placed a hand on his arm to stop him, but before I could speak, he did. "You don't know what it's like," he said to me, his voice steely and strong for someone who was still walking around with urine soaked pants. I opened my mouth to reply, although I still had no idea what to say, but he cut me off. "It's none of your business," he said, repeating the teen's words from earlier.

I was still lost in thought when I got back onto campus. Maybe that kid was older than six, but he couldn't have been old enough... I smiled slightly as I thought of the after school specials Rachel used to like to watch when we were in junior high. We used to hang out at her place, as it was one of the few places we were allowed to hang out without adult supervision. I think our parents thought that since her dad was the sheriff, we couldn't get into too much trouble over there. I'm not sure we would have anyway, but this meant we watched a lot of after school specials.

They had always seemed so unrealistic to me - kids our age doing drugs? Wasn't that something older kids did? Or seventh grade girls getting pressured into having sex? In Smallville, having kissed a girl was really pushing limits in seventh grade. But maybe this was just another way that Smallville and Metropolis were different?

I didn't know, but it was startling to me that someone so

young could already owe that much money for drugs.

"Yo, Clark. You ready?" I heard Josh's voice just before I opened the door to the dorm. I looked over and realized my friends were standing there all watching me.

"Yeah, you're late, man," Steve said. For a moment I had no idea what he was talking about, but then I noticed that Lois, Maddie, and Alicia were all wearing make-up, which was unusual for them. The frat party Steve had mentioned earlier. I had forgotten all about it.

It was really too bad. I would have liked to have gotten drunk tonight - block what had just happened with those boys out of my head, but I knew from a graduation party that alcohol didn't affect me at all.

With a sigh, I walked over to my friends. As I got closer, I realized there was a new girl there - a pretty, dark skinned girl with bright eyes was standing near Lois. Lois was clearly not over our argument from earlier as she barely glanced at me as she murmured, "This is my roommate, Star. Star, Clark."

I smiled at Star and shook her hand, deciding immediately that I liked her. She had an open, engaging smile.

I glanced quickly at Lois, noticing that she looked even prettier than normal in her burgundy blouse and jeans, but then looked away. I was over our argument from earlier, but wasn't ready for another yet.

As we walked over to the frat house, I found myself walking next to Maddie. Maddie, like Lois, was dressed somewhat casually in a dark blue blouse and a pair of khakis, but the blue really brought out her eyes, and with the addition of make-up and a barrette to hold back her somewhat frizzy brown hair, she, too, looked even prettier than normal.

"Are you looking forward to the party?" I asked her as we walked.

She shrugged. "I'm not sure frat parties are really my thing," she said. "But Steve really wanted to go, and then Lois and Alicia were really into it..."

I smiled. "I know what you mean. It doesn't sound like my idea of a good time either," I told her.

She smiled at me as we reached the frat house. The party was audible from a block away, even without super hearing, and as we got closer, we could see that the house was packed with people.

"Yeah, this looks like fun," Maddie said to me quietly, the sarcasm in her voice clear.

I laughed. "Well, if it's really bad, I promise to walk you home early," I told her before we got close enough to the party that it became difficult to talk.

She smiled at me in thanks and we pushed our way in.

We were only inside for about ten minutes before we managed to all split up, and it was only five minutes after that that I spotted Steve across the room making out with a girl I didn't recognize.

I'm not really sure how I lost Maddie, as she had been right in front of me when we got there, but in this mass of bodies, it was hard to stick close to anyone. I wondered if we should be keeping a better eye on the girls, but then realized that we weren't their dates. Just to make myself feel better, I listened for each of their heartbeats. With the exception of Star, I'd known them all long enough to pick their heartbeats out from a crowd.

I heard Alicia's right away - hers was the fastest of the three and it sounded even faster now. I used my vision

gizmo to find her and see why, but she was dancing, or gyrating really, with some guy on a makeshift dance floor and seemed okay. I heard Maddie's not long after that, and while she seemed cornered by a different guy, her heart rate sounded normal, so I assumed she, too, was okay.

I had a harder time picking out Lois' heartbeat which was a little weird as I had always heard it loud and clear before now - sometimes even when I wasn't trying. I was standing on the staircase still trying to pick it out when someone bumped into me from behind. "Oops," she said with a giggle, and with my special hearing turned on, she sounded exceptionally loud in my ear.

I turned to face her and saw Star, already looking a bit tipsy, but pretty much in control.

"Sorry," she said. "That guy was in a bit of a rush." She pointed past me and when I turned back around, I saw someone pushing other people out of his way.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Think I'm going to head home, though. It's too loud in here," she said.

"Do you know where Lois is?" I asked her.

She smiled at me without saying anything for a second before responding, "She likes you, too."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Lois. I mean, not that she knows it yet, but she's attracted to you."

I think I almost choked on my tongue. "Sorry," I said. "I think we must be thinking of different Loises. I meant your roommate."

Star laughed, "Yeah. She's a funny one, isn't she? Seems so hard and coarse. But she likes you. Good to hear it's reciprocated."

I fought the grimace from appearing on my face. "Sorry, but I'm not interested in Lois. And I don't think she's interested in me. I just wanted to make sure she was okay."

Star smiled at me knowingly, so I told her, "It wasn't just Lois. I wanted to check on Alicia and Maddie, too. But I was able to find both of them."

Star continued to nod her head as if I wasn't fooling her. "Right. Well, whatever. At least she's just as clueless as you are. I think she's outside." She pushed past me to move outside, but turned around a few steps later. "I'll see you around, Clark."

I nodded, not sure what to say, and she laughed. "And I mean a lot of you."

"What?" I asked again.

"I have this vision. Lois told you I'm psychic, right?"

I nodded my head, not wanting to let on that I wasn't a big believer in psychics.

"I'm sure you think it's all hogwash or whatever, but I'm right more than I am wrong," she told me.

"Like with Lois getting on the paper?" I asked her, not able to keep the slight challenge out of my voice.

Star shrugged. "Admittedly, I'm not that good. I told her that might not be this year. But I know she'll make it on. She was the one who thought that meant she'd be the first freshman to ever be accepted."

I nodded. I had to admit that did make sense. Not that it meant much about Star. If she had read Lois' article, she probably could have guessed that Lois would make it on the paper at some point. "So?" I asked her when I realized she wasn't going to continue.

"I have this image. Maybe it's also not this year, maybe Lois and I will continue to room together. But at some point, I'm going to walk in on you barely dressed with my

roommate," she said with a smile.

I could feel myself flush from the neck up, but tried to keep my voice calm. "Sorry to disappoint you, Star, but that seems pretty unlikely to me."

She laughed again. "Okay," she said, before she turned away.

I shook my head. Not only was the idea of me being undressed near Lois ridiculous, the truth was that I tried to keep pretty tight bounds on where I went physically with anyone. As my parents had reminded me, more than once, I knew very little about myself. I didn't want to take the chance of hurting someone. So the chances that Star would find me in a compromising situation with anyone was unlikely. With Lois, though, the chances were about as close to nil as you could get.

Once I started looking outside, it didn't take me long to find Lois. She was chatting with a girl from our math class and seemed to be perfectly fine. Feeling like I had done my duty and made sure all the girls were okay, I made my way back inside to look for a beer. I still felt the presence of those boys from earlier in my head, and while I knew it wouldn't really help, I was willing to try anything to move back to just being Clark Kent, college kid, and not have to worry about things like that.

"No, thanks." I heard Maddie's voice in my ear. When I turned around, she wasn't there. That was weird. "I said, 'No, thanks!'" She repeated herself more forcefully and I looked around for the source of her voice. She was standing not more than fifteen feet from me, although in this crowd it was surprising I could hear her from there without my hearing thing 'turned on'. The guy she had been talking to earlier had a hand on her shoulder. In addition to the tone to her voice, her body language was now off and tuning in to her heartbeat, I could hear that it had sped up. As opposed to when I had first spotted her there a few minutes ago, she didn't look comfortable anymore.

I walked over to her and the guy she was with. "Hi," I said as I approached. "I didn't realize I had lost you until I turned around and you weren't there."

"Oh, there you are," she said with a strange look in her eyes. "Matt, this is the guy I was telling you about. My boyfriend, Clark."

I tried to keep my face placid as she said this, trying not to seem surprised, as the guy was watching me closely. I could see him trying to size me up, and quite frankly, he was probably thinking that he could take me easily. He couldn't, of course, but I had no desire for him to know that. I could seem stronger than I looked within reason, but I really didn't want the first person outside of Mom and Dad to find out I was 'special' to be an overly affectionate frat guy.

"Hi," I said to him instead, pretending I was a somewhat stupid boyfriend who hadn't noticed that this guy still had a hand on his girlfriend's shoulder.

"Hi," he said, still watching me intently, a steely look in his eye.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I said to Maddie. "I looked, but I couldn't find the brand of beer you wanted."

"It's all right," she said to me with a look of appreciation.

"I thought you were making him up," the frat guy finally spoke up. "Trying to play hard to get."

"Sorry," Maddie said with a smile, and I could hear her heart rate start to slow down as he moved his hand off her

shoulder.

"Later," he said to us as he turned to find new prey, I guess.

"Thanks!" Maddie said. "I'm so sorry about that, Clark. I just... I had told him I had a boyfriend earlier and I knew he didn't believe me, and then when you showed up, it just seemed..."

"It's okay." I cut her off. "I understand. Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I don't know. Maybe I've seen too many after school specials about girls being date raped at frat parties or something. But when he started to get pushy, I panicked."

"I'm glad you did," I said. "I probably wouldn't have heard you over all this noise if you hadn't raised your voice."

She gave me a shallow smile. "I think I need to get out of here," she said. "Is that offer to take me home still open? I mean, I'd understand if you want to stay, but..."

"I'm ready to leave, too," I told her. I wasn't sure I'd be able to relax now. I'd feel this need to make sure Alicia and Lois were okay all night. In reality, I was fully aware that they were grown-ups, and I didn't feel guilty about leaving at all, but I knew if I stayed, I'd be thinking about them all night.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

I nodded. "Come on," I said, reaching for her hand. "Let's get out of here."

The walk back to Maddie's dorm was quiet. We talked a little about our math class - Maddie, Lois, and I were in the same one. Like myself, and Lois, I was guessing, it wasn't Maddie's favorite class.

"I'm just not a math person," she said to me as we reached her dorm.

"I don't think any of us are," I said with a smile.

"I know." Maddie sighed. "But that guy... what's his name? Brad or whatever?"

"The one who asks all the weird physics questions?" I asked.

"Yeah, him. He so gets it. But then I guess he must be into physics and math or something to ask those questions. Math isn't so easy when you're into art history," she said with a smile.

"Or journalism," I told her. "I would love to skip it, but we need one semester of math to graduate, so..."

"Exactly," Maddie said. "I guess I just need to focus on the fact that this is the last math class I'll ever have to take."

"That is nice," I said, not having made that connection myself.

"Do you want to keep talking?" Maddie asked, pointing to a bench outside the dorm. "Or do you need to get back?"

"Let's keep talking," I said, realizing that while I'd spent a fair amount of time with Maddie since I had gotten to Met U, this was the first real conversation I had had with her alone. It wasn't half bad. Actually, it was much better than not half bad. There was something about her that made me feel at ease.

Talking to Maddie was like the antithesis of talking with Lois. Or maybe arguing with Lois would be better worded. It was comfortable and amicable. She reminded me of Rachel a bit, although I thought she might be prettier than Rachel. Not that I'd ever tell Rachel that.

We sat next to each other on the bench. "So," I started as we turned to face each other. "Is Metropolis very different than San Diego?"

Maddie laughed. "Yeah. I mean, not to make San Diego seem small, but it's more suburban. You can probably walk around the outside of the downtown area in about a half hour to an hour. Nothing like here. Although," she blushed slightly, "I haven't really been out to explore Metropolis that much. I guess it's silly to come here for school and then feel intimidated, but I know this isn't the best area of town and..."

"I went outside the gates for the first time this afternoon," I admitted.

"What'dcha think?" she asked. "I thought it was less scary than I thought it would be."

"Me too," I said. "It just seemed... busy, I guess. But not unsafe."

"But I've been too nervous to go outside the block or so outside of campus," she said. "Maybe we should have Lois and Josh take us on a tour or something."

I grimaced. "I'm not sure I want to admit to Lois that I haven't already explored Metropolis."

Maddie laughed. "Yeah, she's a bit... energetic in her enthusiasm for all things Metropolis and Daily Planet, isn't she?" I nodded, and she added, "Although she seems less obnoxious city-girlish than Alicia."

"You don't like Alicia?" I asked, surprised. I thought it was just me.

"She's okay," Maddie said, "but she can be a bit harsh, can't she? I mean, Lois can be, too, but she seems a little more tolerant or something. Oh," she suddenly turned a bright crimson, "you won't tell them that I said that, will you?"

"No." I laughed, making the childish sign of a cross on my chest, "Cross my heart and hope to die. It's between us, I promise."

"So, what about your roommate?" she asked me.

"Steve?" I clarified as if there was another roommate she might have meant. "I don't know. Sometimes he seems like the biggest jerk, but other times he seems like maybe he's really nice on the inside or something."

"You're one of those people, aren't you?" Maddie asked with a smile.

"What people?" I asked her.

"The ones who always see the best in people," she smiled at me.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think people are generally good." I suddenly realized what I sounded like. "So, do I sound more like a hippie or a naive farm boy?"

Maddie laughed. "You sound... like Clark, I guess. That's what I expected of you."

"It's awful and naive, though, isn't it?"

"No," Maddie said, putting her hand on my arm. "It's sweet. Really."

I gave a small laugh. "So, in San Diego it's not the kiss of death for a guy to be sweet? Or you just don't care?"

"What?" Maddie asked, confused.

"It's just in Smallville..." I trailed off as I realized what I was about to say. Was I hitting on Maddie? Of course not. But she did look awfully cute sitting there. Maybe I was. And maybe that wasn't such a bad thing? "In Smallville," I started again, deciding not to care, "sweet guys are the ones who have lots of friends who are girls, but who no one wants to date."

Maddie's eyes widened slightly at this, but then she replied quietly. "That may be the case in San Diego, too. I don't know. But I like sweet guys. Generally, I like them a lot."

"And specifically?" I asked, surprised at my own boldness. What was I doing? Did I really even want to do this?

To be fair, I wasn't sure I knew. I just knew that I was enjoying talking to Maddie more than nearly anyone once else I had had a conversation of this length with since I got here. And with the stupid stand-off with those boys earlier, I was eager for something positive to happen today.

That was probably a bad reason for hitting on someone I was friends with and wasn't sure I was even attracted to, but I didn't care. Besides, I was no longer so sure that I wasn't attracted to her. She was pretty and smart. Maybe she was less bubbly and in-your-face beautiful than Lana, but that wasn't a bad thing, was it?

"Specifically?" Maddie asked, bringing me out of my internal dialogue. "I... um..." She blushed, dropping her head slightly.

To go with the theme of the conversation which seemed to be act/speak first-think later, I leaned forward and captured her lips with my own. Those boys completely left my head as I realized that Maddie was responding, and I moved closer to wrap my arms around her.

I had no idea what I was doing, and yet, it felt like the best decision I had made since I had gotten to Metropolis.

I walked back to my room whistling. It was weird. I really hadn't been all that attracted to Maddie before tonight. She had seemed sweet and nice, but nothing particularly noteworthy. After our talk, though, she had seemed... more real, I guess. And that kiss... Well, I had never actually kissed a girl besides Lana before, but it was nice. Very nice.

Still, it had been a weird night, for sure. Between my run-in with those kids from earlier and Maddie's issues with the guy at the party, the kiss had been a nice diversion, nothing more.

Just before I walked into the dorm, I wondered if I should do a quick check on Lois and Alicia. Deciding that given what had happened with Maddie, my mom would box my ears for not at least checking one more time, I headed the other way. Lois and Alicia lived in different dorms, but the same quad, so it shouldn't take too long. At least I thought they'd likely be back in their rooms by now.

I found Alicia quickly. Actually, I almost bumped into her. She was on the way back to her room with some guy. I hung back to make sure she knew what she was doing, but she firmly turned him away at the door to her dorm and he seemed to take it well. I turned slightly and lowered my glasses to see inside Lois' dorm. I had only been by her room once - we had all stopped there before lunch one day as she said we had to see what Star had done to the room - she had decorated her side all in pink with those glow in the dark stars on the ceiling. Only instead of the way people usually applied those with random patterns, Star had actually produced a good replication of the sky above us at Met U in the fall. Lois had even let her extend the stars across the room so they were above Lois' bed as well.

Based on this one visit, I wasn't one hundred percent sure which room was Lois', but I thought I'd find it quickly. Once I started looking, it only took me a second. Their room was the most discordant of the ones in there. Most people had only minor decorations, although there were a few rooms that went the other way and both occupants (usually girls) had really personalized their room. Lois and Star's room was all pink and girly on Star's side and neat

and orderly on Lois' side with no decorations. She didn't even have a picture of her parents in her room or her best friend from high school. Then again, Lois never really spoke about friends from high school.

I smiled at the thought. Maybe she hadn't had any - I could kind of see her spending so much of the time focusing on the school paper and making sure her grades were good enough to get into Met U that she would barely notice the lack of social life. I thought she had mentioned being the editor of her school paper, and I could imagine her striding around the paper's office, barking demands. The other writers on the paper may not have liked her, but they'd respect her.

I shook my head. Who knew if any of that was true or if I had just constructed a life for Lois in my head? Besides, the newspaper office I had pictured was the one at Smallville High where I had been editor, but then we only had three people on the entire staff.

Star was in bed, snoring softly. Her frilly pink nightgown was poking out of the top of the covers. I stifled a snort. She hadn't been wearing pink tonight - what was with the secret love affair with pink?

Lois was not in bed and I looked around some more, trying to avoid looking into the hallway bathrooms. I didn't see her and started to head back to the frat house when I heard her voice on the other side of the dorm. I looked through the building and there she was arguing with the girl she had been talking to earlier. The girl looked put out and ready to leave, but Lois was holding her hostage.

I smiled slightly, glad to be witnessing rather than in the middle of one of Lois' arguments, and turned and headed back to my dorm.

I was surprised when I got back to my room to find a sock on the doorknob. A sock? What the heck was that about? Apparently, someone had been having a wild party in our dorm as well.

Shaking my head, I slipped the sock off the doorknob and went to open the door. Luckily, just before I did, I realized what it was. Or at least, the loud groaning sounds coming from my room let me know what the sock was. I should have expected this, I guess. I mean, I hadn't been surprised at all to find Steve making out with a girl right after we arrived at the party, why would I be surprised to find that he had brought her back to our room?

Still, I felt a little annoyed. We had never discussed the rules for this. We never said a sock on the door meant you couldn't come in, and we never discussed how long that was appropriate for. We had classes tomorrow and it was now three in the morning. I wanted to get to bed.

With a sigh, I turned around. I guess this was one of those days I could be glad I had those strange abilities, as I was clearly going to be sleeping in Smallville tonight.

"Clark?" Mom shook me gently. "Clark, is everything all right?"

I blinked my eyes wishing she would stop shaking me. Even though I didn't need as much sleep as most people, I still liked to do so and it felt like I had just fallen asleep a few minutes ago.

"What time is it?" I asked her.

"Four," she said, and I groaned. Of course, she had just gotten up to make Dad breakfast, but I *had* just gotten to sleep.

"Everything's fine, Mom. I just needed someplace to

sleep tonight," I told her.

"What are we paying for a room at that fancy school of yours for?" Dad asked from the doorway, but I could see him grinning. He already knew why I would need a place to stay.

"There was a party last night. Steve met a girl there and brought her back to our room," I explained for Mom's benefit.

Mom and Dad both nodded, probably satisfied in the knowledge that their boy was the one who knew better than to bring a girl home right after he met her. For a moment, I wondered what would have happened if I had brought Maddie back to our room. We left the party before Steve, so that could have been us...

I felt myself blushing. What was I thinking?

"How was the party?" Mom asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Did you meet a girl there, too?" Dad asked, winking at me.

"It was okay," I told them. "I didn't stay long. One of my friends was having a problem with some guy, so we left a little early."

"Is she okay?" Mom asked.

"She's fine. He was just being a little pushy is all."

"You didn't do anything visible to save her, did you?" Dad asked.

"It wasn't like that, Dad. It never got that far. She told him she had a boyfriend, I heard them arguing and showed up, so she clarified that I was the boyfriend, and he backed away."

"You're the boyfriend?" Mom asked, with eyebrows raised.

"Well, no," I said, blushing, remembering the feel of Maddie's lips against mine. "She made it up so he'd leave her alone. When I showed up, it was just convenient."

"So, you walked her home?" Dad asked, still concerned, I could tell, that I had done something foolish to expose myself.

"Yeah. And that was it," I said to make him feel better.

"Really?" Mom asked. I hated how she could always see right through me like that.

"Well, we talked for a while afterwards," I hedged. "But the guy was long gone and we were back in the quad where her dorm was, where it was quiet. So basically, yes, that was it."

"Basically?" Mom asked, smiling. When I didn't answer at first, she added, "I'm just teasing, Clark. You don't need to tell us."

"There's nothing to tell," I said. "I mean, we kissed, but..."

"You kissed and there's nothing to tell?" Dad asked, clearly suppressing a laugh.

"It was just... it didn't mean anything," I explained. "We both had had bad days and..."

"What was wrong?" Mom asked.

"Well, it was just that guy for Maddie, I guess. And my run-in with the kids earlier."

"What kids?" Dad asked, his tone serious once again.

I sighed. Mom and Dad were so supportive of me, so I couldn't really complain. Still, sometimes Dad was so fast to worry about me. I knew it was only as he cared, but still...

"I went flying earlier. Not for a disaster or anything, I just felt the need to get away."

"It sounds like something was already wrong before that

then," Mom said.

I gave a small laugh. "No, not really. Just another argument with Lois."

"Lois? The journalism major?" Dad asked.

"Right. The same one I'm always arguing with."

"But she's not the girl you kissed tonight?" Mom asked, her eyes shining with laughter.

"No," I said as emphatically as I could. What was with everyone thinking there was something between me and Lois? "That was Maddie. Maddie I actually get along with."

"Right," Dad said, grinning. "So you went for a flight after an argument with Lois."

"Yes," I said, glad to be off the topic of Lois so quickly. "And on the way back, I saw this teenager holding a knife on a little boy."

Mom closed her eyes for a moment. She always knew immediately why I did the things I did. "Exactly," I said to her look. "So I thought I'd try to do something."

"What if he tried to stab you?" Dad asked. "Or did he?"

"He didn't," I said just as Mom said, "Better Clark than the little boy."

Dad nodded. I knew he didn't really agree, but he was trying to be supportive.

"Anyway, he didn't. Nothing happened really. I tried to talk to them, to get the teenager to drop it, but it turns out that he was holding the knife on the kid as he owed him money."

"The little boy owed the teenager money?" Dad clarified.

"Yeah. Two grand, I think they said. For marijuana."

"How old was the little boy?" Mom asked.

I shrugged. "About eight, I think."

Dad gave a hollow laugh. "See, Martha. I told you Smallville was a better place to raise Clark than Boston."

Mom rolled her eyes at him. Grandma and Grandpa Clark still lived in the house on the outskirts of Boston where Mom grew up, but I knew she had never really wanted to settle there. Similar to Chad, she had come here as a teenager and fallen in love with both Dad and small-town life.

"Anyway, it ended okay," I told them. "We heard sirens and both kids ran away. But I was feeling... I don't know. I couldn't believe that such a young kid could... I guess it just brought my mood down," I finally finished lamely.

"Oh, honey," Mom said, moving to give me a hug. "We're proud of you for trying to help."

"We sure are," Dad said from where he was still leaning against my dresser. I smiled at him. Despite all his worries and how much I wished he'd stop worrying so much, I knew he meant that. He didn't want to worry about me, but he was proud of me for trying to help.

"So," Dad asked with a laugh, "one kiss from... Maddie? Made it all better?"

I flushed. "I don't know. But maybe, yeah. I sort of stopped thinking about it."

"But that's all it was?" Mom asked. "Do you want it to be more?"

"Mom!"

She laughed. "I'm kidding, Clark. It's okay to kiss a girl just for fun."

"Thanks," I said as deadpan as I could manage on two hours of sleep.

"Well, after your busy night of rescuing children and maidens in distress only to find interesting ways to bring them out of distress later, we'll let you sleep a little longer,"

Mom laughed at me.

I decided not to respond, afraid it would just set them off on more teasing.

I placed my lunch tray down across from Josh. I was waiting for Steve to show up. The sock had still been on the door this morning when I came back from Smallville. A quick scan had shown that Steve and the girl were asleep. It was not the same girl as the one I'd seen him making out with earlier - that one was a brunette and poking out from Steve's covers had been a blond head. I had grabbed some clothes and left for my political science class, so I hadn't yet seen Steve to let him know what I thought of his locking me out all night.

"Did you have fun at the party?" Josh asked as I sat down.

"I guess," I said. "We left a little early."

"We?" Lois asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Maddie and I," I clarified, wondering if it sounded like we had hooked up last night.

"Clark was my knight in shining armor last night," Maddie added as she showed up right then, placing her tray next to mine. "He pretended to be my boyfriend when one of the frat guys wouldn't leave me alone and then walked me home after since I didn't really want to stay."

"Are you okay?" Lois asked.

"Yeah," Maddie said. "I'm fine. Clark showed up before it got too serious. If it even would have."

Steve and Alicia showed up together right then.

"You two both seemed to have a good time," Lois smiled at them. "I saw you both leaving while I was talking to Ellen."

Alicia blushed. "Yeah, I did."

"What's his name?" Maddie asked.

"Chris," Alicia said. "He's a biochem major and he was really sweet. He walked me home and..." she hesitated and I wondered. She must like this guy a lot as this was the most nervous I had ever seen her.

"And?" Josh prodded her on.

"We're going out tonight," Alicia said. "So, I won't be able to make the movie."

"And the girl you left with?" Maddie asked Steve. "Her name? When are you seeing her again?"

Steve shrugged. "Mandy, I think. And probably never."

"You don't know her name?" Maddie asked, clearly disgusted. I decided that maybe now was not the best time to bring up my gripe about his locking me out.

"It was something like that," Steve shrugged again. "It wasn't important."

Maddie shot me a look as if to say, "I told you your roommate was a bit of a jerk."

"Real nice, Steve," Josh said, but Steve just shrugged again.

"We need to get to class," Lois said to me as if we walked to class together everyday.

"I'll catch up with you," I told her wanting to talk to Steve now rather than wait for later tonight. She shot me a dirty look. Was this a form of apology from yesterday? I sighed, but said nothing. I wasn't in the mood to play games with Lois today.

"Yo, Steve," I called, realizing he had gotten up as well. He turned around and looked at me. "Have a minute?"

"Sure," he said, waiting where he was a few feet away from our table.

"I'll see you later," I said to Josh, Alicia, and Maddie.

For just a moment, I had the urge to lean down and kiss Maddie lightly. Nothing big, just the type of kisses guys often gave their girlfriends, but I shook it off and went to join Steve.

Once I reached him, though, I changed my mind. Or something. It wasn't really a conscious decision, but I asked him to give me another minute and walked back to the table. "Want to meet for dinner tonight?" I asked Maddie.

She nodded, smiling at me. "Give me a call when you're ready?" she asked.

"I will," I said, and I could feel that my step was a bit lighter as I joined Steve.

We put our dirty trays down on the conveyor belt and walked out together. "Listen, man, I'm really sorry about last night," Steve said before I had figured out how to start the conversation. "I meant to take the sock off before we fell asleep, but I just forgot."

"Thanks," I said softly, sort of at a loss for words now that he had addressed the problem himself. "Maybe we should have some ground rules for this kind of thing," I suggested.

"Sure," Steve said. "Like we can't lock each other out more than twice a week?"

"That works for me," I said, although I didn't really foresee myself locking him out of the room ever. "And maybe there's a time after which we're allowed in."

Steve nodded. "Say 3 on weeknights and 4 on weekends?"

I smiled - this was easier than I had thought. "Do Thursday nights count as weeknights or weekends?" I asked. Given that Thursdays were typical party nights on campus, like last night, I thought Steve might have considered it a weekend night. Then again, he didn't have classes until noon on Friday, whereas I had poli sci at nine-thirty.

Steve shrugged, but then turned to me. "Oh, wait. You have a class on Friday mornings, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Oh, man, I'm so sorry. Thursdays definitely count as weeknights from now on."

"Thanks," I said, smiling. I knew Maddie was right and Steve was not the nicest guy ever, and clearly he was not someone I'd want one of my female friends dating, but he really wasn't all bad.

Lois gave me a dirty look as I took my seat in journalism. I sighed. I might want to stay completely silent in class today as she was clearly ready for a fight. I didn't get it. We had never walked to class together before two days ago. How was I supposed to know that was something we did now? And even if it was, I couldn't have something else to do?

I sighed again. If we were walking to class together regularly, and I had something else to do, I would have told her what that thing was. With a third sigh as I could sense already that this was not going to go well, I got up and walked over to where she was sitting.

I was still several feet away, and hadn't even contemplated opening my mouth yet when Lois looked me straight in the eye and said, "So you're one of those guys, huh?"

"What guys?" I replied, knowing as I did that I was letting her draw me into an argument rather than explain why I couldn't walk with her to class.

"The ones who get into a relationship and blow off all

their friends," she said matter-of-factly.

"What?" I asked, confused. "I'm not in a relationship, Lois. Nor did I blow off my friends. I had lunch with everyone the same as I always do."

Lois gave me a knowing look. "But you were too busy chatting up your new girlfriend to leave for class in time."

"I don't have a new girlfriend," I replied, feeling frustrated. "And," I took a look around the room, "I seem to have still made it to class in time."

"Whatever," Lois said and it was clear she was dismissing me.

I started to turn around and leave, but then decided I wasn't going to let her dictate all of our conversations. "Look, I'm sorry I didn't walk with you to class. I didn't even realize that was something we were doing now. But it had nothing to do with Maddie - who I'm *not* dating."

"Oh, that's better," Lois said and for a moment I could see something besides anger flashing in her eyes. Was she... was she jealous? Could Star be right? But that wasn't quite it. No, she was hurt. Hurt because she thought I was dating someone else? I shook my head. Not only was that ridiculous, but she hadn't looked hurt at all until I said that Maddie wasn't the reason I couldn't walk with her to class.

She was hurt because... did she think I just meant I didn't want to walk with her to class?

I had to admit, all those jokes about men not understanding women really applied to my feelings towards Lois. I didn't understand her at all. She was barely cordial to me most of the time. We walked to class together once, couldn't even be cordial enough to leave the same class speaking to each other, and now she was potentially hurt as she thought I didn't want to walk with her today?

I sighed again. "Lois, I didn't walk with you to class as I needed to talk to Steve. The girl he met last night? He brought her back to our room and locked me out the whole night."

Lois looked at me cautiously. "The whole night?" she asked as if she was trying to decide if Steve's infringement really warranted my blowing her off.

"Yeah," I said. "I left and slept someplace else, but when I came back this morning before my poli sci class, the sock was still on the door."

Lois giggled. "A sock? You guys use a sock? How classy!"

I laughed as well. "Yeah, it wasn't my idea. We hadn't even discussed it before. Ask Steve."

"You didn't discuss it before? I thought that was first item on the agenda for guys when they had a new roommate."

I shrugged. "No idea. I've never had a roommate before."

"But didn't you wonder? I mean what to do if you wanted to bring a girl back to the room?" Lois asked.

"Did you and Star discuss it?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "No, but we're girls. It didn't occur to us."

"Well," I said, "it didn't occur to me either."

"Really?" I could see her looking me up and down carefully and felt myself start to flush. Why was she watching me so closely? "And you don't have a girlfriend?" A light came on in her eyes. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean... I mean, it's perfectly okay."

"What's perfectly okay?" I asked, realizing only now that we had the attention of about half a dozen students around us.

Lois shrugged as if she, too, had just realized this wasn't a private conversation and didn't want to say.

Just then someone cleared their throat loudly and I turned around to realize Professor Matthews had come in. Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I went to take my seat.

It wasn't until midway through class that I realized what Lois was saying. Just because I didn't have a girlfriend and hadn't considered what to do if I wanted to bring a girl home that meant I was gay? Really? I nearly laughed out loud. Lois Lane had one very screwed up view of guys.

"So," I asked, feeling a little nervous. "Did you want to go off campus?"

Maddie turned to look at me. "We're going to brave the real Metropolis?"

I laughed lightly. "Well, maybe only the pseudo Metropolis. There are lots of places right outside the gates."

"Oh, my roommate mentioned this place called Anjelina's. It's right across the street on Columbus. I can't recall what kind of food they have, though. Maybe Italian. She just mentioned she went there for lunch and they had the best brownies."

I laughed again, "You want a brownie for dinner?"

Maddie giggled. "No, but it sounded like her lunch wasn't bad either."

"And it is right outside the gates, so no scary Metropolis," I teased her.

"Well, even if it is a little scary, I have you to protect me, right?" Maddie asked. I looked at her in surprise. Was she flirting with me? Was this a date? I honestly had no idea. Even if I was the one to ask her for dinner on a Friday night and suggest we leave the comfort of the dining hall.

"Well, yeah," I smiled at her, hoping I managed to convey the same flirtatious tone she had. "That is what I'm here for." I slung my arms around her shoulders in a way that I hoped seemed casual and like I was trying to pretend to be a big, strong man protecting his little woman.

"Right," Maddie said as we stepped outside the gates. "But you know, the big, buffoon guy types are not usually allowed to talk."

"So I'm supposed to stay silent during dinner?" I asked her.

She looked up at me thoughtfully. "Yeah, I think so. If you're quiet enough, I might let you sit at the same table as me."

"Well," I said as we walked across the street, "that *is* generous of you."

"I'm just that kind of girl," Maddie said as she pointed to the restaurant. "Is this okay?" she asked me.

I glanced inside. It seemed perfect. Definitely classier than the dining hall, but not some fancy place that was full of couples. "Looks good," I said as I reached out to open the door for her.

There were only four or five tables inside, but apparently it wasn't a popular dinner option as we got seated pretty quickly. The busboy came over to fill our water glasses and I glanced at the menu. Clearly the clientele here was largely students as the prices were very reasonable for a restaurant in Metropolis, I thought. More than Maisie's, but then I expected that.

"Do you want to share some mozzarella sticks?" I asked Maddie. I wasn't sure if that was appropriate, but I wanted this to feel at least a little date like. Somehow, sharing something made it seem that way to me.

"That sounds great," she said as she continued to peruse the menu.

A few moments later we had ordered and we lapsed into an uneasy silence. Maybe this was a bad idea? I suddenly had no idea what to say to her. I felt like we had known each other too long almost - I couldn't really fall back into small talk with her. I knew what classes she was taking and all that sort of stuff.

"Have you talked to any of your high school friends?" Maddie interrupted my thoughts.

"A little," I said. "I talked to my closest friend, Pete. He's at UCLA."

"Does he like it?" she asked.

I laughed. "Yeah, I think Pete had visions of spending all his study time on the beach and it's not turning out like that, but I think he's enjoying it. How about you?"

Maddie nodded. "My closest friend, Nicole, is at Hamilton. It's a small liberal arts college and it's exactly what she thought it would be. But one of my other friends, Olivia, is at Northwestern and I think she was hoping for something a little more laid-back than it turned out to be."

"How about you?" I asked. "How has Met U compared to your expectations?"

Maddie shrugged. "I don't know. I guess pretty well, sort of. I mean, it feels bigger than I expected. I feel like it's so easy to walk around here and not bump into anyone you know. On the other hand, I sort of expected that. It's just more than I expected."

I nodded. "I guess it's different coming from Smallville. Smallville's so small, I knew to expect something like this. I have to say, I think the campus is nicer than I expected."

"Really?" Maddie asked, her nose scrunched up curiously. I hadn't noticed that she did that before, but it was cute.

I nodded. "I think I almost pictured this cold, city-like school. No flowers or trees or anything. I know, it was silly, but that was what I was thinking."

"And the students? Did you expect everyone to be like Alicia and Lois - all city people through and through?"

"Sort of," I admitted.

Maddie laughed. "Me, too. I was so glad to meet you that first day. I think I thought I was going to be the small town person. Not that San Diego is a small town, but compared to Metropolis..."

I laughed, "But then you met someone from Kansas..."

"From a town called Smallville, none the less," Maddie added. "Yup, I immediately knew I didn't need to worry about being the small town person anymore."

"Well, glad I could help you out," I said as the waiter cleared our mozzarella sticks away and placed our entrees in front of us.

"I guess you are good to have around for more than protection," Maddie smiled at me.

"And you've even let me talk during dinner. I must be really outdoing myself," I laughed at her.

"I don't know. I'm still deciding that," Maddie said.

We lapsed into silence again, but this time it didn't feel so awkward. "Where else did you apply?" I asked her.

Maddie shrugged. "No place else I really wanted to go," she said.

"Me, too," I said, "but I did apply to a few places closer to home."

"Not me," Maddie said. "I couldn't wait to get away."

"Do you not like San Diego?" I asked.

"No, I love San Diego. It's beautiful. But... I don't know.

I was eager to get away from home. My parents are great and all, but... I can't really explain it." I didn't say anything, sensing that she was building up to tell me something of some importance. "I have a twin sister. I love her to death - she's great. But... well, I guess I've always been the 'good kid' and my parents really spoil Grace rotten. It's like they think that if they give her everything she wants, she'll stop being a bit of a troublemaker.

"Anyway, I guess sometimes it would get to me - watching them give her all this stuff for ridiculous things. I felt like it wouldn't bother me so much if I wasn't there to see it."

"Like what?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Like Grace wanted a car when we turned sixteen. And my parents said they'd buy one for her if she didn't fail any of her classes. Then they bought her one anyway when she failed English because it was fewer failed classes than she normal failed."

"And you didn't get a car?" I guessed.

"No. You don't get cars for getting straight A's if you always get straight A's. I guess the car was for doing better than normal and since I didn't..." She gave a small laugh. "Anyway, given her grades, Grace was definitely going to community college, although actually she didn't manage to graduate high school yet, so she's still there. I just thought it was time to get away from that."

"Did it help?" I asked her, wondering what that would be like. I couldn't imagine Mom and Dad doing anything like that.

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "I like my parents better from here. I can't explain it. I mean, I still know they are doing the same type of things, but now my life is different or something." She picked at her chicken for a moment before asking, "What about your parents?"

I smiled, "Sorry to say, they are perfect. I mean, well, maybe not perfect, but you know... I have the best parents of anyone I know. They are really supportive of me."

"Like what?" Maddie asked.

I sighed. "I think Dad would have liked it if I wanted to be a farmer and I could take over the family farm. I'm an only child, so if I don't, this will be the first time the farm won't pass down in something like ten generations."

"No pressure there," Maddie smiled.

"That's just it, though. There isn't. I know he'd like that, but he's never pressured me. And he's the one who encouraged me to apply here, said I'd make better contacts for a career in journalism than if I stayed near home."

"Wow," Maddie said quietly. "He does sound perfect."

I laughed. "Although, you know, as a teenager, you really don't fit in if you can't complain about your parents."

Maddie nodded. "I see your point. I do feel bad for you." We both laughed.

"Do you want a brownie?" I asked her as the waiter took our plates away.

"Nah," Maddie said. "I'll probably get snacks at the movie."

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Didn't you have any of the popcorn last time? I highly suggest bringing something with you."

Maddie nodded. "I forgot. You're right. It was pretty stale."

I looked over at the bakery case, which was a few feet away. "Maybe we should get a couple of things?"

Maddie nodded. "A brownie and a lemon bar?"

I nodded. "Sounds good." I gave the waiter our order

when he came back and asked him to pack up the desserts to go.

"So, does your dad's support mean you always knew you wanted to be a journalist?" Maddie asked as we waited for our desserts and the check.

I shrugged. "Pretty much. Since I was in junior high anyway. What about you? Did you always know you... Actually what is it you want to do?"

Maddie laughed. "Yeah, that was pretty much my parents' reaction when I told them I wanted to be an art history major. I want to be a curator. That's why I wanted to go to school here. There are no good museums in San Diego."

"We should get going," I said after I paid the bill. "We're supposed to meet in front of the theater in ten minutes."

"Thanks for dinner, Clark," Maddie said as we walked across the street. "I had fun."

"Me, too," I said, realizing just how true that was. I was glad I had decided to ask her that morning.

"Do you think... do you think when we show up together everyone is going to think we're together?" Maddie asked me.

I wondered for a second - I had thought they might, but I no longer knew that I cared. I wasn't even sure that they'd be wrong. If it was going to bother Maddie, though, I guess they would be.

"We can just tell them we're not," I said. I glanced over at Maddie and something flickered across her face. "Or we can tell them that we are," I said, letting my voice trail off.

Maddie stopped walking and looked at me intently. "Are we?"

I felt myself flush, but it was dark enough out that I doubted she could tell. "Do you want to be?"

Maddie didn't say anything at first, then gave a small nod of her head as she said, "If you do."

I leaned down, kissing her lightly. "Well then, that takes care of that," I said. Maddie smiled widely at me as I pulled away.

"I guess so," she said.

I took her hand as we started walking again and we went to meet everyone else.

Lois had thrown me a dirty look when Maddie and I showed up at the theater holding hands. I'm sure she thought I had lied to her earlier. Not that I really cared what she thought. Besides, the feeling of Maddie's hand in mine was a much better place to focus.

I had walked her home after the movie, and then went back to my room after a gentle kiss and plans to meet up for breakfast the following morning. I was glad I had breakfast to look forward to as my night did not go well. I was fast asleep by the time Steve came in, but as opposed to his normal behavior - which ranged from some small attempt to be quiet so as not to wake me and no real attempt to be quiet as if he had forgotten he had a roommate, this time he came and shook me awake. I stared up at him blearily.

"Hey man, sorry to do this, but could you get out for a little while?" he asked me.

I didn't say anything for a moment, still trying to wake up, but I was thinking that if he really hated to do this, he wouldn't, and would let me sleep.

"It's early still," he said. "Way before the four o'clock curfew we put on locking each other out, and I have a girl out there."

I swung my legs out of bed, not saying anything. I was thinking, though, that when we set that curfew, I hadn't realized it included the right to throw each other out of bed. I threw him one more annoyed glance before leaving.

The girl waiting for him outside was not the one from last night, and I wondered for a moment - was Steve really that attractive? I was too tired to really care, though, and walked dejectedly to the math building so I could sleep in Smallville again. My dad really was going to kill me for making him spend so much money on room and board so I could spend all my time at home.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Maddie asked me for the third time while we studied.

"Yeah, just tired," I told her. I hadn't gotten very much sleep at all last night. On the way to Smallville, I had seen a car careening off a highway in Indiana and had stopped to help. While I'd been helping them, though, I had heard on their car radio that there were wildfires raging out of control in California. So, once they were settled, I had flown to southern California.

I had spent most of the middle of the night there, helping some of the families who hadn't yet evacuated to get some of the most important things out of their homes. I tried to tell myself that they appreciated the help, and I'm sure they did, but I did wonder a little - how much more would they have appreciated it if I had actually used my powers to help put out the fires so their homes would be saved?

Since I didn't actually do this, the relief efforts were still going on when the sun came up, and I realized that given the time difference I was going to be late for breakfast with Maddie if I stayed any longer. I started to head for home when I caught sight of the little girl in the house I was in trying to make a desperate reach for her teddy bear. I spent a little more time helping them pack their home and then flew out of the range of the fire to find a payphone.

"Morning," came a voice I didn't recognize with a yawn.

"Hi, this is Clark. Is Maddie there?" I asked her roommate. Or at least, I assumed that was her roommate.

"Mad, get up. Some guy on the phone for you," the roommate said.

There was silence on the line for a moment before Maddie answered. "Hello?"

"Hi," I said. "Do you mind if we change breakfast to lunch?"

"Not at all, I actually want to keep sleeping," she said, and I could hear her smiling into the phone. "Meet at noon?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll pick you up in front of your dorm."

"Sounds good," Maddie said, before yawning and hanging up.

I had flown back to the frontline of the fire, or the second-line I guess since the firemen were at the frontline, and gone back to helping people move things out of their homes, all the while trying to think of the different ways I could put the fire out if I were to openly use my powers.

"Okay," Maddie laughed at me now. "What's with you?"

"I'm just tired," I said.

"You said that. But this is ridiculous. Didn't you sleep until nearly noon?" she asked.

I didn't say anything at first and finally Maddie asked, "Weren't you in your room when you called me?"

I sighed. "No, Steve kicked me out last night," I finally

said. That was the truth, although when I got back to the dorm at eleven the sock was gone from the door, so I suspected I could have gotten back in at four had I wanted to. Or rather, if I had been around, as I definitely wanted to.

"What do you mean Steve kicked you out?" Maddie asked me, her eyes wide.

"It's not really his fault," I said, not wanting to fuel her annoyance at Steve. On the other hand, I was still thinking it was sort of his fault, given that I had already been asleep when he kicked me out this time.

"What does that mean?" Maddie asked. "Is that like 'He's a loud snorer' or 'He walks in his sleep and kept bumping into things' or 'He's my roommate and our friend, and I'm trying not to hate him for kicking me out of the room we share?'"

I laughed. "I guess mostly the last one."

"That's what I thought," Maddie said with a sigh. "Is this the first time?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe. The girl from the party? He brought her home, too."

"This was a different girl?" Maddie asked.

I flushed slightly. I had a feeling Maddie and Steve were never going to be friends. "Yeah," I admitted. "But anyway, we talked yesterday and laid out some ground rules so things should be better now," I told her.

"But he kicked you out again last night," Maddie pointed out.

I nodded. "We said that was okay until four on weekend nights. It was just... I don't know, I guess I was feeling annoyed at him still for kicking me out, and I didn't even bother going back to our room until eleven." I flinched just slightly. Both of those were mostly true - I was still annoyed at Steve and I hadn't gone back to our room until eleven. However, the implication that those things were at all related... well, that was not so true.

"Why did you agree to these rules if they were going to annoy you?" Maddie asked.

"I didn't realize they involved actually kicking me out of bed," I explained.

"Wait," Maddie said, putting her book down now. "He kicked you out of bed? As in, you were asleep when Steve came in and he still asked you to leave?" I didn't say anything, but I could see Maddie realizing that meant the answer was yes. "Who does that?" she demanded.

"Steve," I offered lamely.

"Ugh!" Maddie groaned.

"He's really not all bad, Maddie," I pointed out. "I mean he did agree to abide by ground rules when I brought it up yesterday. And he even apologized when he realized that I had a class yesterday morning."

"I can't believe you're sticking up for him," Maddie said.

I sighed. "I can't hate him. I mean, even if I could, that wouldn't be good, would it? I still need to live with him for the next eight months. But I just don't. I don't think he's all bad. He's probably not someone I would have been friends with in high school, but he's not mean spirited."

Maddie smiled, but didn't respond.

"What?" I asked, not able to read the look on her face, but suddenly happy to know that at some point I would.

Her smile widened before she leaned over to kiss me on the cheek. "I just love your Kansas sensibilities, that's all."

I laughed. "So, I sound naive?"

"A little," Maddie said.

"And that's a good thing?" I teased her.

She shrugged, "It makes it much easier to take advantage of you."

"Oh really?" I asked. "And just how do you plan to do that?" I was happy to find that I wasn't blushing this time just because I had said something vaguely suggestive.

Besides, she started it.

Maddie shrugged again. "I don't know. I'm sure I'll think of something."

"So," a voice said from behind me as I was rushing to class on Monday. I turned around and tried not to groan. It was Lois, and she did not look happy. "All that talk on Friday about how you and Maddie weren't together..." she started, her voice full of accusation.

While I knew I would be late for class, I stopped anyway. "Look, Lois. When you and I talked on Friday, I wasn't dating Maddie. But we had dinner together that night and now we are. End of story. Why do you care anyway?"

She flushed bright red, but I couldn't tell if it was anger or embarrassment that caused it. "I don't care," Lois said. "I'm just annoyed that you lied."

"I didn't lie," I reminded her. "When we spoke, Maddie and I weren't going out."

"You must have known it was an option, though, given that you were going out just a few hours later," Lois pointed out triumphantly.

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head, trying to understand the gall of this girl. "When did we become such good friends that I had to let you know I might be dating Maddie later even before I had discussed it with her? Am I supposed to alert you to any crushes I have from now on?"

Lois flushed again, slightly, but stood her ground. No surprise there. It seemed entirely possible that if a tornado dropped down on the Met U campus while Lois was in the middle of an argument, she would stand still, and the tornado would move out of *her* path. "Why?" she asked me, the challenge clear in her voice. "Do you have any other crushes? I mean, you just started dating Maddie."

I sighed audibly, not caring if my frustration was showing. "No, I don't. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you!"

"Clearly," Lois said with an eyebrow raised.

"I need to go. I'm going to be late for class," I told her, my voice still cold, but I still wasn't caring.

I spun around and was glad that for once, Lois let me have the last word.

As I made my way through the buffet line at lunch, I couldn't decide if I was happier to be seeing Maddie in a minute or more annoyed at having to see Lois again. When I made my way to the table and saw Maddie sitting there, though, I knew it was the former.

"Hi." She smiled up at me as she moved over to make room for me to sit next to her.

"Hi," I said.

"You two aren't the only ones here," Lois said loudly.

I rolled my eyes, and turned towards her, all saccharine sweet. "Hello, Lois."

To my surprise, Lois giggled. "Hello, Clark." Sometimes I didn't understand her at all. Okay, make that most of the time.

"Hi," Alicia said as she approached our table. The guy I had seen walk her home on Thursday night was right behind her. "This is Chris," she told us. "Chris, this is everyone."

We nodded as Chris took a seat next to her. I had to

admit, I thought I might like Alicia better when in a relationship. She seemed softer somehow.

We all introduced ourselves to Chris as Josh and Steve joined us. Maddie threw Steve a dirty look, but true to form, Steve didn't notice at all.

"So, how was the movie?" Alicia asked us. We hadn't seen her the rest of the weekend, but then often none of us saw that much of each other on weekends. During our first week, we had tried to meet up for brunch on Sundays, but then as everyone started sleeping in later and later, those fell by the wayside.

Josh shrugged. "It was okay. I guess better than it would have been if we had to pay full price for it."

"I liked it," Lois said and for a moment I thought she was just being contrary, but then I realized she was serious. Interesting. I wouldn't have put Lois down as the mushy romance type.

"Me, too," Maddie piped up, but then that didn't surprise me at all. Not only would I have guessed that Maddie was the mushy romance type, but she had told me she liked the movie on the way back to her dorm Friday night.

"Of course," Steve said, his mouth half full. "It was a chick-flick."

"Could you not do that?" Maddie asked him.

"What?" Steve asked.

"We don't really want to see your food in mid-chew, man," Josh said.

Steve rolled his eyes as if this tip on manners was petty. I almost laughed out loud, but managed to prevent myself from doing so. Maddie poked me in the side, so clearly she had caught on that I thought Steve's response was funny, but when I looked at her she was smiling, so at least she wasn't annoyed by it.

"What did you guys do this weekend?" Josh asked Alicia and Chris.

"I took him to see all the sights," Alicia said.

"You're not from Metropolis?" I asked, embarrassed as soon as I voiced the thought. I didn't mean to sound so surprised, but I couldn't believe Alicia would date someone who wasn't from Metropolis.

"No," Chris said. "I'm from New York."

"Where?" Steve asked. "I'm from there, too," he explained when Chris looked confused.

"Chelsea," Chris said. "You?"

"SoHo," Steve said. "My mom's an artist."

"What kind of art?" I asked. Steve had never really mentioned his parents before now.

"Impressionist painting," he shrugged. "She's pretty good, I guess, but I'm not into art."

"Wait," Maddie said, her eyes alight and I had a feeling she knew of Steve's mother. "Your mom is Yvonne Michaelson?"

"Yeah," Steve said, his mouth half full again. This time, though, Maddie didn't seem to care.

"I can't believe it," Maddie said. "She's brilliant."

Steve shrugged again. "I guess. Like I said, she does pretty well for an artist."

Maddie looked at him in surprise, but decided to drop it although I could tell she didn't really want to. Clearly, she was very impressed that the doofus she could barely stand was the son of her idol.

"Paul," Lois said as she took the seat next to mine.

"What?" I asked as I turned to face her.

"Paul," she repeated, and when I guess I looked as confused as I felt, she continued. "You were right. I was being unfair. So, the boy I have a crush on is named Paul." With that proclamation, she turned away, opened her notebook, and gave off very clear body language that the discussion was over.

"Lois?" I asked, cautiously, afraid to turn what had been a somewhat pleasant, if confusing and short conversation into another argument.

"Hmm?" she asked, looking at me as if we hadn't been speaking just a moment ago.

"Are we... are we friends now?"

Lois shrugged. "I guess so. Do you want to be friends?"

I didn't know the answer to that. The truth was that when she wasn't being infuriating, I kind of liked Lois. However, so much of the time she *was* being infuriating. I wasn't sure I could say that to her, though. So, instead, I nodded my head.

"Then I guess we are," Lois said, turning back to her notebook. Something about the square of her shoulders or the look on her face made me glad I had agreed. I had a feeling that Lois had trouble making friends, and this interchange had not been a normal one for her.

Then again, it wasn't all that normal for me either. I had always fallen into friendships before. I would meet someone, we'd get along, and before I knew it, we were friends. I bit back a laugh - that didn't sound very Lois like at all. Lois went after what she wanted and sort of ignored everything else. So, she wouldn't "fall into" friendships as nothing in her life was that unplanned.

It wasn't until after class had started that I came back to what she had said. Paul? The name of the guy she had a crush on was Paul? It wasn't Paul Bender, was it? The guy from the Met Titan? The one who didn't accept freshman onto the paper unless they were willing to sleep with him?

I shook my head. It couldn't be. Lois had way more sense than that.

Still, the thought bothered me all through class and a few minutes before class was over, I wrote, "Paul = Paul Bender?" on the corner of my notebook and slid it towards her.

She glanced at it briefly and her cheeks flamed up. She did mean that Paul? It didn't make any sense. She had been so dismissive that day when Alicia told us how her roommate got on the paper. I shook my head slightly to clear it and went back to listening to the lecture.

When it was over, though, I started talking before Lois could leave. "Why?" I asked her.

"Why what?" she asked, her cheeks flaming again as she shoved her books back into her backpack. So, clearly, she knew what.

"Why Paul? He sounds like a creep," I said, instantly regretting my words. This was not the way to make friends. It certainly was not the way to avoid an argument with Lois.

To my surprise, though, she didn't respond with the ire I expected. "I know," she said. "He isn't the most... upstanding guy, I guess," she said. "But he's cute and he's so smart. The paper is awesome and that's all Paul."

I nodded, but couldn't help adding, "Because as long as you're not a freshman, he'll allow you on even if you're not blonde and have big breasts."

"And are willing to sleep with him," Lois giggled slightly. Only this time... I'm not sure if she was less good at covering it up, or I just knew her better, but this time I got the impression that her laughing it off was not real. Lois

was joking, but she didn't mean it.

"Hey," I said, my hand on her arm as we left the building. "You don't need to sleep with anyone to get on the paper," I said. "You'll get on next year just because you deserve to. I mean, so Linda got on. I haven't seen her byline listed once."

Lois flushed. "I looked, too, but I saw it. She even had a front-page story. Something about the new student union."

I shook my head. "That's Linda Curman. She's a senior. Alicia's roommate's name is Linda King, and I haven't seen her name anywhere."

Lois looked at me with interest as we walked towards the dorms. "Really?"

"Really. Lois, you weren't upset about not getting on the paper, were you?" I asked.

"Why?" Lois asked me, only this time I could see tears in her eyes. "Because my article wasn't good enough or because I'm not even pretty enough for Paul to proposition?"

I looked at her in alarm. "What?" I asked, flabbergasted. I shook my head. This was not the first time I was reminded that Lois' show of self-confidence was just that - a show. "Lois, your article was excellent. And just because Paul didn't proposition you... I mean, really, Lois, the guy's a loser. And apparently blind as you are plenty pretty enough for some guy to proposition."

"Have you seen Linda?" Lois asked, making a self depreciating motion at her own chest.

"Yes," I said. "And only guys who measure 'pretty' by breast size would think Linda was prettier than you. I know we're all idiots, but most of us manage to look further than that to make that assessment," I said.

Lois gave a wan smile. "You're a good liar, Clark," she sniffled.

I put my hand on her arm. "No," I said, "I'm a terrible liar. But I'm not lying right now. Lois, you didn't get on the paper because Paul is an idiot. And maybe he didn't proposition you as he knew you'd be too smart to say yes. Or he's blind. Or he saw Linda first. There are loads of reasons. I assure you, though, that you not being pretty enough or talented enough is not even a possibility as one of them."

"You really think he's a loser?" Lois asked me, hiding her face slightly as she flushed.

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry. I know you think he's smart, but any guy who runs the school paper even partly on the looks and promiscuity of the female staff is just lucky to have a paper that good."

Lois giggled. "Maybe. He still seems pretty smart to me. Except for his lack of judgment on women."

"Would you really want to date someone who isn't a good judge of how to treat women?" I asked her.

She blushed. "Well, in the abstract, no. But..."

I chuckled lightly. "But for Paul you'll make an exception?"

Lois didn't answer, but her cheeks flared again.

I shook my head. "Okay," I said. "Whatever. Paul's a lucky guy. Too bad he isn't anywhere near good enough for you."

We had reached the break in the path where we would have to go our separate ways to go to our respective dorms. I started to say goodbye, when Lois stopped me.

"You won't tell anyone, right?" she asked.

"Tell anyone, what?"

"About Paul. They'll think I'm an idiot," Lois said.

I wanted to point out that I thought she was an idiot, but I didn't think that was the way to move forward in our friendship. "Of course not," I said, instead.

Lois started to turn away, but then turned back. "Clark, do you think I'm an idiot?"

I started to say yes, but then changed my mind. "I think you could do much better than Paul Bender," I said again.

Lois nodded. "Josh asked me out," she admitted. "I mean, it was ages ago, but..."

"But he'd ask again if he thought there was any chance you wouldn't shoot him down again," I told her.

"You think he's better than Paul, don't you?" she asked.

I nodded. "But I also don't think you should date Josh just 'cause he asked. If you really like Paul, you'd just be using anyone else, right?"

She nodded. "Thanks, Clark. Maddie's lucky to have you."

I smiled slightly brighter at the mention of my girlfriend. "Thanks, Lois."

With that, she turned away and headed to her dorm and I shook my head. Lois Lane had done it again - she had acted in a way that seemed completely out of character to me.

"Hey," Maddie said as she leaned over to bump my shoulder. "You're quiet tonight."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not really sure why."

"Is something going on with Lois?" she asked me. "She was avoiding us at dinner."

I smiled. "I don't know what's going on with Lois. She was civil to me today. For no good reason."

Maddie laughed. "And that's surprising?"

"Actually, yes," I said. "Not sure if you noticed, but we argue all the time."

Maddie smiled. "Of course I noticed. I'm not blind nor deaf, you know. But still, I assumed that was mixed in with some periods of getting along."

I laughed. "It is. Those periods last for about 5-10 minutes at a stretch and are usually immediately followed by some sort of argument, but this time we actually manage to part still talking to each other."

"Should we declare a national holiday?"

"Very funny," I said.

"So, why was she avoiding us if you were getting along?" Maddie asked.

I shrugged. "No idea. She did tell me... well, I'm not sure I can say. She told me about this guy she has a crush on. I'm not sure it's a secret or anything, but just in case... Anyway, maybe she was embarrassed now."

"I didn't realize you guys were that close," Maddie said, and I was surprised to note that she didn't seem in the least bit worried.

"We're not," I said. "It was just... Well, she got angry at me the other day for not walking with her to class. I needed to talk to Steve and I didn't even realize we were walking to class together now, but anyway, she thought I didn't come with her as I was busy talking to you."

"And that was a problem?" Maddie said, seeming more interested now.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Anyway, it was on Friday and so I had told her at the time that we weren't dating..."

"But then we showed up at the movie Friday night clearly together..." Maddie interrupted.

"Exactly. So, she got upset as I had lied to her. It exploded into a typical argument and I pointed out that I

didn't need to tell her about every girl I had a crush on and well, I guess this was her way of apologizing."

"Every girl you have a crush on, huh?" Maddie asked with a smile. "So, who's on that list?"

I chuckled. "Do I need to tell *you* about every girl I have a crush on?" She nodded seriously. "Well, there's the girl at the student union deli..." I said.

"The brunette?" Maddie asked. When I nodded, she laughed. "The one who tells everyone she meets about how she's saving her earnings for her sex change operation?"

"That's the one," I confirmed.

Maddie nodded. "I guess I can see that. She's sort of pretty, if you like the beefy, manly type." We both dissolved into laughter.

I leaned forward to kiss her lightly. "I'm pretty sure it's just you."

"Pretty sure?" she asked.

I shrugged. "You could help me be surer."

"You have a one-track mind," Maddie pointed out.

I shrugged again. "I'm an eighteen year old. What do you expect?"

"Just study, Kissy-Face," Maddie pointed to my book.

"Kissy-Face?" I asked her.

"Well, I could call you Smallville like Lois, if you prefer."

"I think I might," I said with a grimace.

Maddie laughed again as she leaned over to kiss me.

Steve shook my shoulder for the third time. I was trying to pretend he wasn't there, but he was just not taking no for an answer.

"You know when we set those ground rules, I didn't think they included it being okay to wake each other up," I said as I sat up. I should have confronted him about this the other night, but I hadn't.

"What?" Steve asked, clearly confused.

"I sort of assumed that if I was asleep, you wouldn't wake me up. Don't any of these girls have their own rooms?" I asked. I could hear that my annoyance was coming through, but I didn't care.

Steve shrugged, "I'd get out of bed if you ever brought Maddie back here."

"But I wouldn't ask you to," I pointed out.

"Okay," Steve said. "I guess I can see that. But since you're up now..."

I rolled my eyes at him, but got up. "This is the last time you'll get me out of bed?"

"Boy Scout's honor," Steve said.

I laughed as I grabbed some clothes. "I somehow doubt you were ever a Boy Scout."

"I was, too," Steve said. "At least until we had a camping weekend with the local Girl Scout troop and I got caught 'fraternizing' with one of them."

"How old were you?" I asked.

Steve shrugged. "Twelve, I think."

I was still laughing as I left the room. Steve was annoying, but he did provide good comic relief.

"Hey, I'm sorry again," Steve said the next afternoon while I tried not to fall asleep in my pizza.

"For what?" Maddie asked, her voice already showing her annoyance.

"I asked Clark to leave last night," Steve said. "I'd do the same for you if you ever wanted to use our room."

Maddie shook her head. "Why didn't you come over?"

she asked me.

"I didn't want to wake you," I told her. That was partly true, but in all honesty it wasn't Steve's kicking me out of bed that had me feeling so tired today. I had put in another performance of the Boy in Black last night and was feeling the effects today. I really needed to start limiting how often I went out or I'd effectively be breaking my promise to Mom and Dad about not letting this get in the way of my schoolwork.

"Where'd you sleep?" Maddie asked.

"I found some couch like things in the physics building," I told her.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Couches are places to nap, not sleep. Next time, come over and you can sleep on the floor."

"Just the floor?" Steve asked. "That isn't very charitable. You won't share your bed with your boyfriend?"

Maddie was positively glaring when she replied. "My love life is none of your business, Michaelson."

"Ooh, you must be angry if you're calling me Michaelson," Steve said and I realized for the first time that he liked goading her.

"Cut it out, Steve," I said.

"Nice defense of the little woman," Steve replied to me. Okay, so maybe it wasn't that he liked to goad Maddie. Maybe he was just in a bad mood.

"What happened, Steve? Did you have trouble satisfying the girl you kicked Clark out for?" Alicia asked.

Steve glared at her, too. "I never have that problem. I'm just tired."

"Well, maybe if you slept more and spent fewer nights kicking Clark out of bed, you wouldn't be so tired," Lois said.

Steve gave one last look around the table before getting up and grabbing his tray. I wanted to say I felt sorry for him, but I didn't really. He was being a bit of a jerk.

"You know, I did apologize," Steve said as soon as I came into the room.

"I know," I started to say, but Steve continued to talk right over me.

"You didn't need to get everyone on my case. Why'd you even tell them our business anyway?"

I sighed. I had never actually dealt with Steve when he was in this type of mood before. I wasn't one hundred percent sure what the best way to diffuse the situation was.

"I didn't actually," I pointed out.

"What you do you mean you didn't?" Steve said accusingly. "Then how'd they all know?"

"You told them!" I said, and I could hear the anger seeping into my voice. "Right after you apologized, you said, 'I asked Clark to leave last night' or something like that."

Steve sighed and sank back onto his bed shaking his head. Unsure what to say, I got my poli sci and math books out. I was supposed to be meeting Maddie to study after dinner. I caught sight of Steve's face as I was doing so, though, and stopped. "Are you okay?" I asked him.

He nodded, somewhat listlessly. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Steve," I said. "Really. What's going on?"

He sighed again. "It's nothing really. It's just... I flunked my first test and my dad is really on my case about it."

"How does your dad know?" I asked, surprised he would tell his father.

Steve sighed. "We're kind of tight, I guess. I didn't

really mean to tell him, but I did. And before my dad's been mostly cool about that sort of thing. I thought he'd be that way here, too, you know? Understand that the first semester can be a little rough or whatever? But he wasn't. Gave me this big lecture on how he and my mom aren't paying for me to sleep around and be a big screw-up and how I'd better shape up."

"I'm sorry," I said. I couldn't imagine Dad ever giving me a lecture like that. On the other hand, I also couldn't imagine spending so much of my time meeting girls that I didn't have time to study. I couldn't even imagine doing that with Maddie. While we had spent most of our time together recently, we spent a lot of it studying.

"Maybe you need to find a girl who takes her classes seriously," I suggested.

"What?" Steve looked at me like I had two heads.

I shrugged. "It's just... I guess I feel like I still spend lots of time with Maddie, but we often study so I don't think my grades are suffering because of it."

Steve chuckled, "Yeah, I can see that. But sorry, bro, Maddie is so not my type."

"Well, I didn't mean Maddie specifically," I said with a laugh.

Steve sighed. "Even girls like her. I like girls who are a little more... Well, don't take this the wrong way, but a little more fun."

I shrugged. "Too bad," I said, "my way keeps me out of trouble with my folks."

Steve chuckled again. "Do you ever get in trouble with them? I imagine you're the perfect son."

I shrugged again. "My parents are really pretty great, and they don't get upset that easily. But I still get in trouble with them occasionally."

"Like what?" Steve said, and I fell silent. The biggest argument we'd ever had was when they first found out about my Boy in Black activities. Of course, a lot of why they were upset then was because I wasn't the Boy in Black. I was going out wearing my normal clothes and not making the smallest effort to disguise myself should someone in Smallville look up and see me flying over town.

"They didn't like my girlfriend in high school," I finally said. It was sort of true. Dad had told me in no uncertain terms that he thought Lana wasn't good enough for me. Mom had been a bit kinder about it, but I knew she felt the same way. Still, it hadn't been much of an argument. They had told me it was my mistake to make and some day I'd realize I'd want more out of a girlfriend than someone who cheated on me all the time. So, as long as it didn't affect my schoolwork or cause me to develop an attitude with them or whatever, they were going to let me keep making this mistake.

I still didn't know if they were right. I mean, Maddie was exactly the kind of girl that they wanted me to be with, and I knew they'd like her. She was responsible and kind and I couldn't see her ever cheating on me.

Still, as much as I liked Maddie, I missed something that I'd felt with Lana. I wasn't sure what it was, but there was something about the relationship that was different.

Steve laughed. "What was wrong with her?"

I shrugged. "I guess they didn't like how she treated me," I said. "She cheated on me a lot."

Steve gave me a strange look. "Why'd you stay with her then?"

I shrugged. "I liked her. And when she wasn't cheating on me, she was a really great girlfriend." I paused and

thought over my words. "I know. It sounds ridiculous, but that is how I felt."

"Was she hot?" Steve asked with interest.

I chuckled. "She was the head cheerleader. Yeah, she was hot."

"Hotter than Maddie?" he asked.

I flushed. I hadn't ever really considered that before.

"Um... They're different," I finally said. "Lana was more in-your-face pretty than Maddie is."

Steve shrugged. "I guess you're right. Maddie is pretty hot in that understated way of hers."

I shook my head. I wasn't sure I wanted to have this discussion with Steve. "Well, I'm meeting her to study right now. Do you..." I hesitated. Maddie would kill me for this. "Do you want to come?"

Steve raised an eyebrow at me. "And watch you make out with your girlfriend? No thanks."

"We're studying, Steve," I pointed out. Although, if I were to be honest, it was more than likely that if Steve didn't come, we'd do a little more than study.

"Nah," Steve said. "But I think I'm going to stay in tonight and hit the books anyway. Make the old man happy."

"Okay," I said as I swung my backpack over my shoulder. "Have a good night."

"I'm sorry about earlier, man," Steve said as I opened the door. "Accusing you of getting everyone on my back."

I shrugged, "It sounds like you were having a bad day."

He nodded. "And I won't kick you out if you're asleep anymore."

I smiled at him. "Well, that, I really appreciate."

I lifted the car up just slightly. I had to make it look really hard. The father of the little girl dragged her out from underneath. I blocked out my hearing. I didn't want to hear the sound of her being dragged. If I could help out openly, that wouldn't need to happen. I could easily lift the car with one hand and lift her up with the other.

I sighed quietly, although everyone was watching the girl, not me. I knew what I was doing was already too much. While not impossible, it wasn't common for teenage boys to be able to lift up cars single handedly. I just hoped Mom and Dad wouldn't be too disappointed.

"You have two weeks," Professor Matthews said as he opened class a couple of weeks later. Lois turned to me with a smile. I had no idea what he was talking about, but clearly Lois did. Why did that not surprise me in the slightest?

"I don't care the topic - anything related to either the campus or Metropolis in general works for me. It can't be any further a-field than that, though. You need to be able to investigate it properly."

I perked up at the word "investigate", but nothing compared to Lois. I could almost feel her straighten up next to me.

"The article will count for forty-percent of your final grade. You will be graded eighty-percent on the quality of your writing and twenty-percent on the topic you choose.

"For those of you planning to apply for the Daily Planet internship this summer, Perry White, the editor of the Planet, feels that writing is a skill that can be learned - and that is our job here, whereas investigating and having a 'nose for news' is a trait that you are either born with or not. As a result, for the internship, he typically judges applicants

more on their ability to bring in a good story than to write it well. However, he does expect that by the time he is hiring for full-time positions at the end of your schooling, you will have both skills down pat.

"I don't argue with Perry White, so I base the grades more heavily on writing so as not to disadvantage those of you without a nose for news. But just beware that it is needed if you hope to succeed in the real world.

"For this assignment, I would like a two paragraph description of your topic by the end of next week. These should be two short, concise paragraphs. One of the most important skills you can have as a journalist is conveying information quickly, so throughout the assignment, I am expecting crisp writing. You are more likely to be penalized for length than getting extra credit for handing in a long article."

Professor Matthews looked around the room for questions, I guessed, before he continued. "Lastly, to make things interesting - anyone in this room is eligible to apply for the Planet internship, but only two students each year get recommendations from the journalism department. One will come from Professor Halkuff who will teach those of you who are still pursuing journalism next semester. The other will come from me and will be based on the grade for this assignment."

Lois' hand shot into the air and Professor Matthews nodded at her. "How does Professor Halkuff decide to give recommendations?" Lois asked.

"Through a similar assignment as this one that will be given early next semester."

"So, can the same student get recommended twice?" Lois asked. I bit back a laugh. Only Lois would think she had a chance at two recommendations.

Apparently, Professor Matthews agreed, as he gave a slight smile before answering her. "Occasionally, we do both recommend the same student, but typically only if one student really stands out. If there are two students that seem close, Professor Halkuff and I will each recommend one."

I was still recovering from trying not to laugh out loud at Lois' question when I realized I had a question of my own. "How often does a student who did not get a recommendation get the internship at the Planet?" I asked once Professor Matthews nodded at me.

"Not often," he said. "Occasionally, a student will decide to major in journalism late in the year and won't take these entry level courses freshman year, but will apply for the internship. It's rare that these students have the talent to win the internship, honestly, although they stand a good chance of a Planet offer after college. And, of course, occasionally a student will submit a really outstanding piece for the internship, but usually the best applicants are those we recommend and we offer the recommendation for a reason. Mr. White takes our recommendations seriously.

"When he is considering a student we haven't recommended, he always calls us to ask our opinion."

I nodded. So basically, this assignment was my way in. It sounded like only two students would even be seriously in contention for the internship. I sighed. It meant I had to write a strong article now - and not only for my grade in this class. I shot a look at Lois. I wondered what the chances were that I could do better on the assignment than Lois, but doubted that I really could. My only saving grace was that the grade now was based on writing rather than topic.

From talking to Lois and reading a few of her

assignments as well as the piece she had submitted to the Titan, I knew Lois' strength was her investigative skill, whereas I thought mine was more writing style. Of course, this also meant that I better be on the lookout for a really interesting topic for the Planet application, since that's where Mr. White looked first for making a decision.

I sighed. Given that, maybe I should just assume that Lois was going to get the internship. I shook my head slightly. I couldn't think that way. I had to at least try. Even if I didn't stand that much of a chance, I needed to try. This internship was a large part of why I had chosen Met U for school to begin with.

"So, what are you going to write about?" Lois asked me as we walked towards the dorms after class. We had taken to not only walking together to class after lunch, but also walking most of the way back together as well. Surprisingly, since the conversation about Paul, we had had very few arguments.

I shrugged. "No idea. You?"

Lois shrugged as well. "I don't know either. I think I want to do something from the city, though. I figure being from here, I have a better chance of uncovering something good than other students and so many others will be confined to campus."

I grimaced. She was right, and I was one of the latter students. Still, what was my choice? What was the chance that Lois would help me find a topic from greater Metropolis? Even if she did, she was clearly going to keep the best topic for herself.

"That makes sense," I said, but even to my own ears, I sounded disheartened.

Lois patted me on the arm. "Don't worry, Clark. I bet you have the best story of the out-of-towners."

I threw her a glance. She was on her high ego kick again, of course. "Right. Of the out-of-towners."

Lois laughed. "Hey, there are two recommendation slots. Maybe you'll win the one next semester."

Now I couldn't help it, and I laughed out loud. "So, you don't think I stand a chance for the one this semester?"

Lois shrugged. "Maybe," she said, but she sounded doubtful. "You are a good writer, Clark."

"Thanks," I said. "Not as good as you, though, right?"

Lois shrugged again. "Not everyone is born with the raw talent I was."

"Or the self-confidence," I threw back, but was immediately sorry that I had. Lois' earlier smile completely disappeared and even her shoulders seemed to slump.

"You think I'm overly confident. Don't you?" she asked.

I sighed. "No, not really. I think you are very confident, but I also think you're very talented."

There was a hardness to Lois' eyes I couldn't completely understand when she replied, "I need to have confidence in myself. No one else does." With that, she turned away and walked quickly towards her dorm.

"That's sad," Maddie said when I told her about my conversation with Lois. "I mean, my parents and I could get along better, but I know they believe in me."

"But it's Lois," I said. "She could just be being melodramatic."

Maddie nodded, "Maybe. At this point, though, you know her better than I do. Do you think that's what it is?"

I shook my head. "No. Something about the look in her eyes when she said it. She wasn't holding back a laugh

while she joked away her attitude or something. She looked... hard, I guess. Like my response was typical. Except I kept feeling like she thought my response was different than it was."

"What do you mean?" Maddie asked.

"Like... I don't know. I had been teasing her for being so confident, but I also told her I didn't really think she was being overly confident as she is actually that good. It was kind of like she didn't hear that part. She just thought I was telling her she wasn't good enough or something."

Maddie put a hand on my arm. "You worry too much, Clark. Keeping Lois' spirits up is not your job. And while it sounds like maybe she has issues, you didn't know that. She never speaks about her family. So how would you respond except to tease her about her attitude? Really, ease up on yourself."

"You sound just like my mother," I told her with a smile.

"Just what every girlfriend wants to hear," Maddie said, but she said it with a bright smile.

I leaned over to kiss her on the nose. "Ah, my mom's not so bad."

"Should I start telling you to clean your room?" Maddie asked me.

"She's not that bad, but I don't want to date her!" I told Maddie.

"Well, that is good to know or I'd think you had more issues with your parents than Lois does," Maddie said before she leaned over to kiss me and we stopped thinking about Lois for a while.

"So, what are you going to do?" Maddie asked me later.

"What about?" I asked her, having no idea what she was talking about. We were stretched out on my bed, wrapped in each other's arms. Pretty much anything aside from Maddie was far from my thoughts.

"About the article," she asked, as she adjusted so her head fit more snugly on my chest.

"I don't know," I told her. "I haven't even started to really think about it yet."

"Maybe Josh could help you find something from town?"

I shrugged. "Does that seem like cheating?" I asked her. "I mean a real reporter wouldn't need help to find the news."

"They wouldn't?" she leaned up to look at me. "Isn't that what sources do?"

I nodded. I hadn't considered that, but she was right. "Yeah, it can be," I said. "I think they also provide information if you have a lead on a story already. But you're right. Maybe I'll give Josh a call later."

We settled back into silence when the door opened. "Aw, man, Clark, that's what the sock is for!" Steve said as he walked in.

"It is?" Maddie asked without lifting her head off my chest. "We're just laying here, Steve. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"But still..." Steve said and shaking his head, he turned around and left.

Maddie and I both dissolved into laughter. "So, he can wake you up in the middle of the night to have sex with some random girl, but you can't lie here, fully clothed, in the middle of the day with your girlfriend without grossing him out?"

"Apparently so," I said. "Not a bad thing to know,

really."

"Why, Clark Kent!" Maddie said, lifting her head to look at me. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"What?" I asked, as innocently as possible.

"You just said something that could be construed as potentially negative. I thought you were the eternal optimist," she teased me.

"Just shut up and lie back down," I told her. "Your elbow is digging into my side this way."

"Sorry," Maddie said, sounding sincere as she got comfortable again. I leaned over slightly to kiss her on the top of her head, just in case she had thought my annoyance was real.

We lay there in silence a little bit more before I felt Maddie stiffen slightly inside my arms. "You okay?" I asked her.

She nodded before asking quietly. "What was Lana like?"

I shrugged, surprised by the question. Was that why she had stiffened? Was she jealous of Lana? She'd never shown that sort of jealousy or possessiveness before. "She was..." I floundered for words to describe Lana appropriately. "She was the head cheerleader," I finally settled on, and suddenly understood at least part of why my parents hadn't liked her. Those words really did describe her well, but... well, how sad was that? I couldn't imagine that my telling anyone that Maddie was an art history major would give them a full view of who she was. She was much more complex than that.

Maddie looked up at me with a smile, "You dated the head cheerleader in high school? And here I thought you were the shy, brooding type."

I laughed. "I was. I'm not sure if would be fair to say I dated Lana. I mean, I did. When she wasn't dating someone else."

Maddie frowned at me. "You never mentioned that before. I thought you guys were serious."

I shrugged again. "I was, I guess. I had liked Lana since we were in grade school. But she wasn't as serious as I was. We would go out for a week or so, and then she'd find someone else."

"And so she'd break up with you and you'd take her back?" Maddie asked.

I could feel myself flush and was thankful that it was getting dark outside, so maybe it wouldn't be so obvious to Maddie. "She didn't really break up with me. She just..."

Maddie shook her head, sitting up. "Clark! She cheated on you and you let her? This explains a lot about how you deal with Steve." She shook her head at me. "You know you're better than that, don't you?"

I didn't respond. I knew what I was supposed to say. Clearly, she expected me to tell her that I did know, and I probably should add in something about being lucky to have her now. But I couldn't. The truth was that I didn't really blame Lana for cheating on me. I mean, I wasn't the most fun guy in high school. She was always after me to try out for the football team, but I never agreed. After my brief stint freshman year, I was too worried about forgetting myself and hurting someone.

I mean, I could sort of see how on the surface Lana's behavior seemed bad. It's never nice to cheat on someone else. Still, though, how much could I expect from her? She was dating a freak. And even if she didn't know it per se, she must have sensed. There was always so much I wasn't telling her.

For a moment I wondered how long it would take before Maddie would realize that, too. She wasn't Lana. She wouldn't cheat on me. She'd just break up with me. "I love you," I told her. I wasn't sure if it was completely true - at least in the way that Mom and Dad meant it. Was it a forever kind of love? Maybe not. But then, I'd never have that. I couldn't be with someone forever without telling her about me and once I did that...

But I did love her. Even if I felt bad that she wasn't getting what she deserved - a guy who was exactly what she thought I was, a typical small town boy with nothing unusual about him at all.

Maddie smiled at me shyly. "Really?" she asked me and I nodded.

"I love you, too, Clark," she said biting her bottom lip and blushing. I leaned forward, kissing her bottom lip lightly until she released it from her teeth and I could kiss her more properly.

Half an hour later, no longer fully clothed, we pulled apart. I smiled at her slightly. In reality, our activities were still pretty harmless, particularly compared to my roommate. Despite that, I had never gone this far with a girl before. I had wanted to with Lana, sometimes, but it had never felt right. I was always second guessing myself with her: was I kissing her right, was my hand in the right place, all the logistics. I never felt that way with Maddie. When we kissed, I sort of forgot to think for a while.

Now that we weren't kissing, though, I was worried. Had we gone too far? Too fast? Too slow, maybe? Was Maddie disappointed?

"What are you thinking about?" Maddie whispered. It was weird - we were all alone, but her whispering felt right. Like talking at a normal volume would spoil the moment or something.

I flushed slightly, although it was now so dark there was no worry that she could see me. "I'm wondering how you are."

"Me?" Maddie asked.

"Yeah, I mean was that... okay?"

Maddie nodded. In the dark, I couldn't see her features clearly, but something about the way her hair swung back and forth made me feel like maybe she was embarrassed.

"I know this is kind of a prudish thing to say," she whispered, "but I've never really done anything like that before."

"Me neither," I whispered back.

She raised her eyes to look at me and I could see them glinting with laughter in the moonlight. "What? You and Ms. Head Cheerleader never..."

"No," I cut her off.

"Wow," Maddie giggled, "you *were* a boy scout in high school."

"What about you?" I asked her. "You never mention anyone from high school. But you must have dated."

"No," she said and her voice was just a little sharp. "I didn't really date in high school."

"Why not?" I asked, running a finger over her bare shoulder.

"I just... didn't," she stammered.

"Maddie, what's wrong?" I asked, seeing a sheen of tears in her eyes.

"Nothing, really," she said. "I had a boyfriend for a few weeks. His name was Michael. But we never really did anything and it ended pretty fast."

"Did he hurt you?" I asked her. I'm not sure what made

me ask her the question, but something in her actions made me wonder.

"No," she assured me. "Michael was great. He was a nice guy, really. It just didn't work out."

"Okay," I said. I believed her, but something still was bothering me. I felt like there was more to the story than she had let on.

I sat over my desk agonizing over what to write. I had found a topic for the journalism paper - I just wasn't happy with it. I had decided not to ask Josh for help. I had forgotten, but he was also taking Professor Matthews' class, just at a different time than Lois and I were. He was less sure than Lois and I were that he was interested in journalism, but that didn't change the fact that he needed to do the assignment as well. So, I felt badly asking for his help. He had to find his own topic; I couldn't ask him to find one for me as well.

Still, the topic I had settled on was bad. My only saving grace at all was that the topic only counted for twenty-percent of the grade. On the other hand, I didn't want to essentially fail that twenty-percent.

"Hey!" Steve said as he came in, dropping his bag on the bed. "You coming to lunch?"

I sighed. The topic paper wasn't due until the end of the week anyway. I had hoped to turn it in during today's class, but it could wait. "Yeah," I said as I got up and followed him out.

"Where've you been?" I asked Steve. I had talked to Mom and Dad and agreed to cut down my Boy in Black hours a little, so I'd been home at night more often. I still wasn't sure it was the right decision, but between schoolwork and Maddie, I didn't have a ton of free time. I had gone to Mom and Dad trying to find a way to spend less time with Maddie, but they were both insistent that it was the Boy in Black stuff that be cut down.

"Clark, you're only eighteen years old!" Dad had said. "You can't fill your time up with responsibilities like this."

"So you think I should hang out with my girlfriend instead?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes!" Mom responded. "You know, maybe it seems silly to you now, but developing relationships like this is a part of life. You can't opt out of life so you can help others. I thought you said you loved Maddie?"

"I do," I said, "but I also feel guilty choosing her over..."

Dad came over and put an arm around me. "I love you, son. But you need to stop acting like an adult. You need to enjoy being eighteen and in love while you can. It's different when you're older, and you won't get this time back."

"Besides," Mom said, "the trade-off isn't really fair. You see Maddie during the day mostly, right?" I nodded. "And you go out and do Boy in Black things at night."

"But if I saw less of Maddie, I could sleep during the day to make up for the time I'm away at night."

"Losing study time in the process," Dad pointed out.

"Unless you and Maddie aren't spending as much time studying as you say you are," Mom said, grinning at me.

"We're spending most of our time studying," I mumbled, looking at the ground. We *were* spending most of our time studying, and I was pretty sure I had been honest with my parents that 'most' of our time was not the same as 'all' of our time. So far, they hadn't asked what we were doing with the rest of our time, and I didn't really see them

asking that either.

Still, sometimes the way they teased me made me feel like they knew. While I didn't think we were really doing anything wrong or that even came close to going against the promise I made to my parents to be careful, I didn't really want to go into detail with them about it either.

"You're allowed to have fun in your life, Clark," Mom said, her voice serious now.

I shook my head, although I wasn't sure I believed her. Well, I sort of did - I believed I was *allowed* to have fun in my life. But being allowed and having time were different things.

"Promise us you won't stop seeing Maddie," Dad said. "Just cut the Boy in Black stuff down to twice a week. See if that works and you feel less tired."

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I had agreed, and so far it had worked, although I was still feeling a little guilty about the decision.

"I've been studying some," Steve said in response to my question. "The library stays open pretty late."

"Why haven't you been coming back to the room to study?" I asked.

Steve shrugged. "I didn't want to interrupt your 'study-time' with Maddie," he said.

"Mostly we are studying," I told him. "I put the sock on the door when we're not."

Steve shrugged. "Well, that's not the only place I've been."

"Where else have you been?" I asked, laughing as I sort of knew the answer.

"Different places. I told my old man that I'd study more, not that I was going to turn into a priest."

I laughed as we walked into the cafeteria. "Somehow, I can't picture you as a priest," I told Steve.

"Who knows?" he said. "Maybe one day." Then his eyes found a redheaded girl in a miniskirt over by the buffet line. "Not today, though," he said to me, motioning towards her. "I'll meet you at the table," he added before running over to try to make plans with the redhead. I shook my head. I wished I had the confidence he had with girls.

"Hey," a soft voice said beside me and I looked over at Maddie as she slipped her hand into mine. Although, I guessed I was doing pretty well for myself for now.

I smiled at her as we walked towards the pasta station and ordered our lunch.

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"So, what are you writing about?" Lois asked as we walked to class after lunch.

I shrugged. "Not sure yet."

"You're not?" Lois asked, shocked. "Clark, the topic paper is due in two days!"

"Doesn't that mean I have two days to decide on a topic?" I asked her.

"What, are you channeling your roommate now?" she asked me with a smile.

I laughed. "I have an idea, but I don't like it," I admitted. "So, I'm still hoping to come up with a good one."

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"What are you writing about?" I asked her.

"No fair. I asked first," she said.

I sighed. "Okay. Don't laugh. Remember, I told you I knew it was bad."

"Clark!" Lois said, hitting me on the arm. "Just tell me. I'm sure it's not that bad."

"They're building a new track on the west side of the

football field," I told her.

Lois looked at me with eyes raised. "Are they using some sort of sub-par blacktop?"

I grimaced. "I told you it was bad."

"Well," she said as we entered the humanities building, "at least you have two more days to come up with a topic."

I laughed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Lois!"

"Anytime," she flashed a smile at me as we took our seats.

"So, what about you?" I asked her.

"What about me?" she replied.

"What are you writing about?"

"I'm not going to tell you here," she said. "What if someone hears me?"

I rolled my eyes at her, although secretly, my heart was sinking. Was her idea that good? I bet it was. Lois was worried someone would steal her idea. Who would steal mine? I shook my head. I had to think of something else or I didn't stand a chance of getting that recommendation.

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"Want to come see it?" Lois asked me as we reached the turn off for her dorm after class.

"See what?" I asked her.

"My topic paper, silly!" she said. "I have it mostly written."

"You'll show it to me?" I asked.

"You're not going to steal it," Lois said, but then she looked at me carefully. "Are you?"

"Of course not," I said, although I wondered a little. I couldn't really see myself stealing Lois' idea. On the other hand, if it was good, given my current idea... I shook my head. It didn't matter. I wouldn't steal it - I knew I wouldn't.

I followed Lois into her room. Star's side was still a mass of pink fluffy things. "How do you live with that?" I asked her.

"The pink?" Lois asked, giggling. "I don't know. It's sort of grown on me. I mean, I would never decorate my room like that, but it's not so bad."

"I guess," I said, looking at Lois' side of the room which was completely plain. Glancing at the ceiling, I realized Star had rearranged the glow-in-the-dark sticky things on the ceiling. They now matched the Metropolis sky in early winter, rather than fall. "How often does she redo the star things?" I asked Lois, pointing at the ceiling.

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think they've been moved at all."

I shook my head. "No, they have. When you first showed us your room, they were showing the Metropolis sky in fall. Now they are showing early winter."

Lois squinted up at them. "You mean, she's emulating what's really outside?"

I shook my head. "See," I told her, pointing to a spot just above her head, "Orion's Belt is above your bed now. Earlier in the year, it was over Star's."

Lois smiled. "I didn't realize you knew anything about astronomy."

I shrugged. "I don't know all that much."

"More than me," Lois said and I had to stop myself from reacting in shock. Had Lois just admitted I might know something she didn't?

"So, where's your topic paper?" I asked.

She thrust it at me, and as she did something crossed her face. I wasn't sure what it was exactly, but I found myself really hoping I was impressed. I didn't want to have to lie to her about what I thought, but I also felt like maybe

it was important that I compliment her on what she was showing me.

I needn't have worried about lying. Her topic paper was so good I actually felt myself sink onto Star's bed as I read it. I didn't stand a chance for the recommendation - or the internship for that matter. This wasn't just a good topic, but it was well written. Lois has beaten me at both my strength and hers.

"So?" she asked me as I neared the end of the paper. I looked up to find her watching me nervously.

"I thought you were going to do something from the city?" I ended up saying.

Lois shrugged. "I was. But then I found out about John and..."

"How did you find out about him?" I asked.

"Don't laugh," she said.

"Okay," I told her, although I did not feel in the slightest danger of laughing.

"His little brother is in my sister's class in high school."

"He's going around announcing this?" I asked, gesturing to her paper. "Is he an idiot?"

Lois giggled. "Isn't the point that he's really smart?"

Lois asked. "Wasn't that what Paul's article was about last week?"

I nodded. The front page article of the Met Titan last week, penned by none other than Lois' idol, Paul Bender, was about the newly elected class president. Apparently, John Bridgeworth was the first Met U student body president in recorded history to have a GPA of over a three-point-five. I had found it sad that that was news - so it was important to be a poor student to be elected president? Not that anything under a three-point-five was bad, but apparently, the average GPA of previous presidents was a two-point-one.

"So, is he gaming the system?" I asked Lois.

She shrugged. "I don't know all the details yet, but I don't think so. I think his GPA is real. He's just sort of abusing his power."

"But how..." I shook my head, still shocked. "How can he still be eligible to be class president if he's withdrawn from school?"

"I know!" Lois said. "But according to his brother, Ben, he got into a fight with one of his teachers who wouldn't let him make up the midterm and rather than fail, he decided to withdraw."

"Why did he need to make it up?" I asked.

Lois smiled. "I looked it up. There is a rule on the books that professors are allowed to give students exemptions from exams on Election Day if they are running for office."

"They are allowed to?" I asked. "Or they have to?"

"They're allowed to," Lois said with a smile. "I guess John just assumed his professor would do that for him and was wrong."

"That's insane. And so he withdrew from the entire semester?"

"It's too late to withdraw from a class," Lois said. "I checked with admissions. The last date for that was weeks ago. So, his only choice was to fail the class or withdraw for the semester."

"That's insane," I said again.

Lois nodded. "I need to check it out, of course, but if it's true..."

"Wow, Lois," I said, trying to infuse as much happiness into my voice as I could, "this is really great."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something good, too,"

Lois assured me.

I gave a hollow laugh. "What? You don't think my story on the new track is on par with yours?"

Lois shrugged - apparently she could be generous when she knew she was winning. "The topic is only twenty percent of the grade anyway, Clark. And you're a good writer."

I sighed. Somehow I doubted that was going to help me. Particularly when I looked at the paper in my hands. Lois' writing wasn't exactly bad and with a topic like this...

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"I need a new topic," I told Maddie that night. "I don't stand a chance at the internship right now."

"It's a paper, Clark. Not the internship," Maddie told me.

"But they are related. The recommendation is nearly essential for the spot at the Planet."

Maddie nodded, "I understand that, and I get why you're so stressed, but maybe given the importance of the writing for this assignment, you should worry less about the topic and start working on the writing now."

"Or I can just assume Lois is going to get the internship and stop stressing all together," I said.

Maddie put a hand on my arm. "Come on. Lois is good, I'm sure, and yes her topic does sound more newsworthy than yours. But that doesn't mean she has the internship all sewn up."

I nodded my head. She was right, sort of. "Maybe. But her topic paper is really well written," I said.

"Didn't you tell me you felt this way when you read her submission to the Titan as well?" Maddie asked me.

"Yes. And I didn't get on the paper," I pointed out.

"Neither did Lois. Maybe you're not being completely objective here. I mean, I'm sure Lois' paper is good, but maybe you're downplaying yours."

"How can I downplay mine?" I asked. "I don't have anything written."

Maddie laughed at me, which did nothing to make me feel better. "Come on, Clark. Sit down. Jot down some ideas, start your paper, or move on to a different assignment completely. But stop pacing. This isn't getting you anywhere."

I sighed, sitting beside her on the bed. She was right. I knew she was right. Not that it helped at all.

"Hey," Steve said as he came into the room. He gave us a furtive glance as if afraid of what he might find, but then seemed to realize that not only were we completely clothed, but we were just sitting next to each other, and he relaxed. "Are you stressing about this journalism assignment, too?" he asked me.

"Yes," Maddie answered for me. "Who else is? You're not taking journalism, are you?"

"No," Steve said. "I just bumped into Josh. He's not even sure he wants to be a journalist, but he's acting like this assignment is going to decide his career."

"He's not the only one," Maddie said, nudging me.

I glared at her. "That's because it is. This assignment is key to getting a recommendation for the Planet internship."

"And if you don't get the internship your career as a journalist is over?" Maddie asked me pointedly. "Clark, I get that this is important. I really do. I'm just saying that I think you're letting yourself get too worked up about it."

I sighed. She wasn't wrong; I knew that. Even if I didn't get the internship, the Planet made other offers. Even other internships were available at the Planet after freshman year.

And of course, there were other papers. But I wanted to write for the Planet. "But I want to write for the Planet," I repeated my thought out loud, knowing that I sounded like a whiny child.

"I know, but this is not your only chance to do so. Plus, I'm not sure why you're so focused on counting yourself out on this chance. Lois hasn't written her article yet. Maybe the rest of it won't be that good."

"How can my article on the track compare to hers?" I asked Maddie.

"You're writing about the new track?" Steve asked. When I nodded, he added, "Josh is, too."

I lay down on the bed with my arm over my eyes. My life was over.

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"It's just not fair," I heard one of the girls behind me whine as I walked to class the next day. "I'm paying just as much for my education as any of those guys!"

"I know," her companion said. "But you must have known before you came here, right?"

"How was I supposed to know that?"

There was silence for a moment and I thought perhaps the girls had turned onto a different path before I heard the second one speak again. "Well, I mean, it's not published or anything, but I thought everyone knew. Met med school is a great place to get a degree from, but you come here for the name if you're a girl, not the education."

"You mean it's not going to get better?" the first girl asked.

"I doubt it. I've heard it just gets worse in the later classes. You think it's bad now just cause some of the profs won't call on you in class? Wait until we start doing rounds and they ask us to stand in the back."

I turned around. "I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't meaning to eavesdrop, but what did you mean you don't come to Met med school for an education as a girl?"

One of the girls shrugged. "It's just sort of a rumor, but a well substantiated one, that the doctors and professors here don't take female med students seriously."

"I wish I had known that before I applied," the other girl said. "I'm sick of listening to Bradley What's-His-Name bumble his way through answers I know perfectly well."

"And later on, the girls are asked to stand in the back?" I asked.

"During rounds, so the boys can see better," the girl who seemed to be in the know explained.

"That's completely unfair!" I said. "Do all the professors do this?"

The girl shrugged. "That's what I heard."

"Even the female ones?" the other girl asked her.

The first girl nodded. "I heard they have to. Apparently, there was a female instructor at Met General a few years ago who didn't do that. They fired her for being a bad teacher and used the student reviews to back it up. The male students had all complained about her."

"But surely the female students praised her," I said.

"We're only about 25% of the med school population," she said. "So even if they all did, it would still look like the majority of the students didn't like her."

I held my hand out. "I'm Clark. I'm a freshman here. Any possibility I could interview you for a paper I'm writing for a journalism class? I would keep your names out of it."

The girls looked at each other uneasily.

"It's just for a class assignment and I promise I won't

use your names or any identifying information," I said.

The second girl shrugged. "I guess so. Can we see what you wrote to make sure we're comfortable with it?"

I nodded, "Definitely."

"If it's good maybe they'll put it in the paper," the first girl said. "That would be awesome. I mean as long as you can't tell it was us. I'd love to be able to speak in class."

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Lois leaned over to sneak a look at the grade on my topic paper. It didn't mean anything - it was mainly a way to gauge how impressed Professor Matthews was with your topic and what you had written so far. Still, it was classic Lois to want to make sure her grade was better than mine.

"You got an A?" she asked me.

"Well, for this part of it anyway," I said. "Didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, but I mean..." Lois trailed off. I knew she was disappointed, but it showed a real improvement in our friendship that she wasn't angry at me for it.

"I didn't write about the track, Lois," I told her.

"You didn't?" she asked me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't think about it, I guess."

"So what's your topic?"

"Sexism at the med school," I told her.

"There's sexism at the med school?" she asked me, so I handed her my topic paper. She read it quickly, paling a bit as she did. I hoped that was because she was impressed, not because she was horrified that this piece of drivel had gotten the same grade as her paper. "This is really good, Clark," she said to me, her voice soft. "Really good."

"On par with yours?" I asked her, although I knew I was pushing her.

"Maybe better," she said quietly.

"Hey," I said, feeling badly now. "That's not true. You know it's not."

"It's really good," Lois said. "I mean, if you could substantiate that, I could see it being picked up by a paper outside of campus. Maybe not front page, but I could see it running in the Planet. But Perry White is not going to care that our student body president dropped out of school for the semester."

"You can always get the recommendation next semester," I echoed her words from last week, smiling at her.

"Very funny," she said, but she was smiling back at me, so I knew she wasn't upset.

"So you're not mad I changed my topic?" I asked her. I mean, not that I would have stuck with the new track even if she was.

"No," Lois said as she handed my paper back to me and we made our way to the dorms. "This just means I need to step up my game."

I smiled at her. Only Lois would be able to recover that quickly from thinking she wasn't good enough.

\*\*\*

It was unbelievable. I mean, I wrote it as a topic paper as it was a good story, but I hadn't realized it would be this blatant. I thought the girls were sort of whining, and maybe I would be able to spin what they were saying into a reasonable story, but that was before I decided to take the assignment seriously and really investigate.

I went to the head of the medical school and told him I was considering medicine as a career. A quick call to Chad gave me enough information to pass as a freshman who actually had that interest. I asked if I could sit in on a

couple of med school classes and maybe follow some of the older students around as they did their rounds. I wasn't sure it would actually work, but it did. So now I was sitting in a med school course - way too science-y for me to follow in reality - and watching the dynamic. There were about forty people in this class, and just as that girl had said, only about ten of them were female. So, I guess that could be part of the reason why they seemed so quiet. Still, the truth was that two of the girls raised their hands to answer nearly every question, but were never called on.

It took me close to half the class to realize this, though. At that point it was so obvious, it was almost laughable. The professor, a middle aged man wearing round glasses that gave him an owlish appearance, asked a question and one of the girls was the only one in the room to raise her hand. The professor looked around and finally cold called one of the male students. This really got my attention since he hadn't cold called anyone yet. When the boy didn't know, he cold called on a second boy. It was only after this boy also got it wrong that he decided to call on the girl.

I was still feeling amazed as I knocked on Maddie's door that evening.

"So?" she asked as I came inside.

"Promise me that if you make some sort of about-face and decide to go to med school, you won't go here," I said to her.

"That bad?"

I shrugged. "I haven't even done the rotation thing yet. But the class was just like that girl said. And I spent the morning in the admissions office looking up records on past instructors at the hospital. I found the professor she talked about who was let go."

"And?" she prodded me on.

"And the reviews ranged from ones that said things like 'Finally a class where female students are allowed to talk' to some that were harder to tell like 'Dr. Wilmont plays favorites'. The most damning, though were ones that said, 'Someone needs to tell Dr. Wilmont how things are played here.'"

"Someone actually said that?" Maddie asked me.

"More than one person," I said.

Maddie shook her head. "I guess I'm glad the undergrad courses aren't like that."

I laughed. "With students like Lois and Alicia around, it's hard to imagine that would last anyway."

"What are you saying?" Maddie asked me, her hands on her hips. "That I would just take it?"

I leaned over to kiss her on the nose. "Not really, but you are a little less of a vigilante than they are."

"I guess I can live with that," Maddie said as she snuggled up to my side.

\*\*\*

Lois put her tray down next to me before she sat down. "I did some digging, and it looks like it's true," she said.

"What's true?" I asked her.

"My story!" she said, sounding annoyed, as if I should have known what she was talking about.

"What are you writing about?" Josh asked as he sat down across from us.

Lois looked at him skeptically. She didn't really think Josh was going to steal her story, did she? I nudged her in an effort to remind her to speak.

"I'm writing about the new student president," she finally said.

"The smart guy?" Josh asked.

"That's the one," I answered when Lois didn't respond.

"You're allowed to write stories that are already written?" Josh asked.

"My story hasn't been written!" Lois said. Apparently Josh's words, which she seemed to take as an insult, made it easier for her to overcome her reticence to share her topic. "I'm not writing about his GPA. I'm writing about how he isn't even a student here this semester since he withdrew from all his classes."

"He did?" Josh asked, dropping his spoon. "Get out! And he's still eligible to be president?"

"Apparently so," Maddie said. "Makes you really proud of our student government, doesn't it?"

Josh laughed. "That's a great topic, Lois," he finally said. "Way better than mine. I'm just writing about the new track."

"Wasn't that your old topic?" Lois asked me.

"It was," I said.

"You found something better, too?" Josh asked.

Lois laughed. "Better than the track? Think better than mine."

"Your topic is better than Lois'?" Josh asked. "Not that I really thought I stood a chance at that recommendation anyway, but I guess it's good to know now. So, what are you writing about?"

"Sexism at the med school," I answered quietly.

"Have you found any proof yet?" Lois asked me and I was surprised. Her words were curious rather than combative. I had expected Lois to want me to fail, but she was being somewhat supportive.

I nodded. "I found some of the reviews of a teacher that was let go for not favoring the male students. And I spent yesterday attending two lectures at the med school. In both of them, the professors only let the female students answer questions if no one else had raised their hands - in one of them, even then he only let the girl who raised her hand answer after he had cold-called two of the guys and they got it wrong."

"Wow!" Josh said. "That's major, Clark."

Maddie put her arm around my waist to squeeze my side briefly. "Yup. He's done pretty well."

Lois made a quiet gagging sound next to me, but I wasn't sure I would have been able to hear it without my super-hearing. I gave her a small smile.

"You okay?" I asked her.

She flushed bright red. "I'm fine," she said, staring into her salad bowl. Nope, I definitely wasn't supposed to hear that.

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"Thanks, Lois," I said to her as we walked to class.

"For what?" she asked me.

I smiled. "I guess for this. I was..." I struggled with how to word what I wanted to say. "Um... remember the tryout for the Titan?" I asked her.

She flushed. "You mean where I yelled at you for applying?"

I nodded, afraid to say anything else.

"I'm trying to be better," Lois said. "I know that's not the way to make friends or keep them," she said. "I guess I haven't had many friends before."

"Well, you do now," I said softly. "And I don't just mean me. I know Maddie genuinely likes you and Josh does, too."

Lois smiled. "You know, I thought of living at home during college. It's not that far, and I'm pretty close to my



younger sister."

"Why didn't you?"

Lois flushed again. "The guidance counselor in high school said it would be good for me to live on campus. She suggested I had some immaturity when it came to people skills."

"Ouch," I said.

"Yeah, I didn't take it well," Lois laughed. "And I dismissed it at the time. But Dad didn't. He doesn't live with us, but he is paying for college and basically told me he wouldn't pay if I didn't agree to live on campus."

"Wow!" I said, surprised. "I can't imagine."

Lois laughed a little hollowly, "Well, Dad has some people skills problems, too, so I guess he saw this as a way to make sure I'd overcome them. Something he hasn't really done."

"So?" I asked her. "Are you glad you decided to live here?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I mean, not at first. But now... I do think I like it here. I mean, if I was living at home, I probably wouldn't know you as well and I'd probably still be thinking I stood a chance at that recommendation," she said with a smile.

I laughed. "The topic is only twenty-percent of the grade. And it's not exactly like you have a bad topic, Lois."

She shrugged, "It's okay. There's two recommendations. I'm playing nice now, but I wouldn't count on the same behavior next time. And when it comes time to apply for the internship, all bets are off," she smiled at me.

I laughed. "I can definitely agree with that. I like you, Lois, but not enough to give up the internship for."

"Aw, shucks," she said as we took our seats.

\*\*\*

I tried to control my gait as I jogged to Maddie's room. The afternoon spent at the hospital had been everything I could have hoped it would be. Not only were the girls all standing in the back, but the doctor suggested I move forward to see better, so even I was standing in front of the girls - even though they were the actual med students. It would be good to give Chad a call tonight to make sure that you'd normally rotate students or something to make sure all of them could see what was going on, but I just sensed that this wasn't normal behavior.

Those girls I'd overheard hadn't just been whining. Rather, one of the best med schools in the country, outside of the Ivy Leagues anyway, was focusing pretty much exclusively on turning out top notch *male* doctors.

I stopped at that thought. There were probably a couple of other things I could check - what were the placement rates for students in the med school, how did they differ by gender, and in particular how did the differences compare to national averages. Did Metropolis U have a reputation for training excellent male doctors and poor female students? What were the ratings like for these physicians after they left school? Even if perhaps it wasn't well known, were patients in danger because the female doctors didn't have the same type of hands-on experience the male doctors did?

Lastly, and perhaps most telling, would be to see what the placement rates were by gender for students applying to Met General. Even if the sexism here wasn't well known outside of the med school, the hospital certainly knew. It would be pretty good evidence that they knew they were short-changing the female students if they were less likely to accept them in the hospital where they were trained.

Feeling nearly high with all the research I still had ahead of me and my sense that I was the track of something big - I tried not to let myself get carried away with thinking Lois was right and this story could get picked up by the Daily Planet - I knocked on Maddie's door a little harder than I should have.

There was no answer, which was weird as we were supposed to meet here for dinner at six and it was ten after now. Given my harder than needed knock, it didn't seem possible that she hadn't heard me, but I knocked again anyway, but still was greeted with silence.

I started to turn away when my hearing picked up on a noise inside the room. "Maddie?" I called out. My mom would box my ears if she knew what I did next, but I couldn't help it. It was just plain weird that Maddie wasn't here, and given that I could hear noise in her room... I used my special vision to look through her door. What I saw made my heart break.

She was in there, curled up on her bed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I knocked again, gently this time, calling once again, "Maddie?" I tried to keep my voice as soft and disarming as possible. What would I do if she continued not to answer? I wouldn't break into her room, of course, but I couldn't leave her in there crying alone.

I sighed as another moment passed by in silence. "I know you're in there, Mads," I said as softly as I could and still be sure she could hear me through the closed door. "So, I'm just going to sit out here until you're ready to talk."

I took a seat on the floor across from her room, sitting there for a half hour or so. Every once in a while, I'd glance inside again. Each time, I'd see the same thing. She was awake and crying, looking more miserable than I'd ever seen her. What was wrong? Had I done something? It didn't seem possible - I hadn't been around since lunch, but then she knew what I was doing. On the other hand, I was not exactly the most experienced guy at being a boyfriend. Maybe I had done something.

Could I have missed some sort of anniversary? It seemed hard to believe - we'd been together over two months now, but Maddie had told me after the first month that she thought it was silly the way people celebrated monthly anniversaries. It wasn't her birthday, either, since that wasn't until next semester.

Finally the door opened, and Maddie appeared in the doorway looking both adorable and miserable in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms. "Sorry," she said nasally, as she swiped ineffectively at the light brown hair that was swinging into her face.

"Do you want company?" I asked quietly. She nodded, and stepped back to let me in.

I stood in the middle of her room feeling awkward, not knowing quite what to do. Maddie closed the door and moved back over to the bed, sitting awkwardly on the edge. I watched her for a moment, before deciding what to do. Finally, I took a seat next to her, moving my arms out to pick her up and place her in my lap.

I sighed slightly when she came willingly. At least whatever was wrong didn't have anything to do with me. I scooted back on her bed so my back could rest against the wall, taking her with me.

"Want to talk about it?" I asked her in a whisper.

She shook her head. "It was just a fight with my dad," she said quietly. "It was so typical, it's not even worth discussing."

"If it made you this upset, maybe it is," I suggested knowing those would be the words my mother would use.

Maddie sniffled before shaking her head again. "I don't really want to talk about it right now. It's not like anyone can do anything to help anyway."

I nodded, not sure I should push more. Mom was pushy, but she was often pushy by being quiet and waiting until I was ready to come to her.

So, instead, we stayed there in silence. I brushed her hair back from her forehead, feeling at least a little better since I knew I wasn't the cause of her crying.

A half hour later, while I still had no idea what was wrong, I realized Maddie had stopped sniffling. It was hard to see her in the dim light of the room, but using my enhanced abilities - both sight and sound to hear her heartbeat - I realized she had fallen asleep.

I decided not to move - I didn't want to wake her. So, I sat there, staring at her tear-stained cheeks and wondering what was wrong.

\*\*\*

I couldn't help wondering what was going on with Maddie while I did my research the next day. She hadn't told me anything more after she woke up, but then she'd barely done that. After an hour or so, she had woken up disoriented. Claiming her face was sticky with tears, she had left to go to the bathroom.

When she came back, she climbed back into bed. "Do you want me to go?" I had asked her.

She shook her head. "Will you stay here tonight?" she said instead, her voice soft and pleading.

"Of course," I said. I didn't want to push her, but the truth was her behavior was scaring me. So once I had stretched out beside her in bed and taken her into my arms, I'd asked her again if she wanted to talk.

"Not right now, Clark," she said, snuggling closer into my chest. "Is it okay if I just sleep some more? There's nothing you can do anyway."

I wanted to tell her that there was something I could do - I could listen to her. I wanted to tell her what Mom always told me - that things always feel better after you talk them out. But when she looked up at me with tears in her eyes, I couldn't do it. Instead, I nodded my head, pulled her even closer to me, and let her drift off to sleep.

It meant I missed my Boy in Black duties - I had started going out on Monday and Wednesday nights looking to help rather than going when I heard about things. I found it made it easier to control how often I went. Still, maybe that was where the Boy in Black was needed most that night. It wasn't so bad really, realizing that someone needed Clark Kent.

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"What's up with you?" Lois asked me after class.

"Huh?" I replied, somewhat distractedly. I knew I shouldn't be obsessive, but I couldn't stop wondering what was going on with Maddie. As a result, I hadn't been quite as attentive as I could have been in class.

"Shouldn't you be on top of the world right now?" Lois asked me.

"About what?" I asked her. The truth was, I felt anything but.

Lois stopped with her hands on her hips. "You are about to secure one of two recommendations for the dream summer internship. What is with you, Clark? You know, if you're not careful, someone else might take advantage of your sudden distraction and steal that recommendation from

you.

"And in case you're wondering who would do that, don't forget..."

"I'm looking at her," I cut in with a small smile.

"Damn straight," Lois said. "So, talk. What's going on? Did your research this morning not pan out?"

"No, it went really well," I told her honestly. "I talked to Chad this morning and confirmed that from what he knew of medical school, you wouldn't always shove some students to the back. He's not exactly the most credible source since he's not in med school yet, but it did make me feel better. And the desk research went well, too."

"Yeah," Lois said. "What'd you find?"

"It looks like female students from here get placed nearly as often as the male students, and I can't find any information on what the staff at the hospitals they go to think of them, but I did find that male students more often get their first choice than female students.

"It took some digging - getting placed out of school isn't quite like getting a normal job, and it involves something called a 'match', but I could find records of how often Met med school students get their first choice in the match. On a national level, it's pretty even for male and female students. From here, though, while it's not completely out of place, but there is a definite discrepancy."

"That's great, Clark!" Lois said. "I mean, you had to guess it wasn't all bad. Didn't that girl say female students come here for the name?"

"Yeah. And the best evidence of all was that in the last five years, Met General has been the first choice of twenty of the students here - fifteen male students and five female. It's not too surprising that fewer female students would pick it as first choice. Anyway, of those students, ten of the male students matched, and only one female student."

"So that means..." Lois trailed off while she tried to do the math in her head. "Two of every three male students who choose Met General as their first choice get in, but only one in five female students."

I nodded.

"How does that compare?" she asked me and I laughed.

"It took me a minute to figure it out as well," I said to her. "But then I figured out. Just assume three times as many female students chose it - then there would be 15 female students."

"Same as the male students," Lois said.

"Right. And if three times as many female students got in, that would be three."

"Compared to ten male students," Lois said. "I can't believe it. That's so unfair! Clark, you need to submit this story somewhere besides as a class project. I mean, this needs to be stopped."

"So now you hope it gets picked up by the Daily Planet?" I asked her.

"I was thinking more the Star," Lois grumbled and I laughed. "Really, Clark. This is more important than the recommendation. You're going to get that anyway, and whether or not it's in the Daily Planet, if Perry White sees this it's going to help your chances.

"But think of all the female students here who are being unfairly treated. Isn't that more important than the internship?"

I put a hand on her arm to stop her. "I'll be honest, Lois. You're a better person than I thought you were. And I didn't think you were all that bad," I said cheekily.

"Yeah, well, this is why I want to become a reporter.

Rid the world of evil and all of that," she said smiling, but her reddened cheeks gave her away. "Anyway," she continued, pulling her arm out of my grasp and continuing on our way to the dorms, "with a story like this, what has got you so distracted?"

"Maddie," I told her.

"Trouble in paradise?" she said, but her tone was curious rather than barbed.

"I don't think so," I said. "I mean, I don't think the trouble is between us. Maddie's just going through something right now."

"Is she okay?" Lois asked me.

I shrugged. "I don't really know. She's having some sort of fight with her dad, but she won't tell me what it's about. All I know is that it caused her to spend nearly all of last night in tears."

"Should I try talking to her?" Lois asked. "Maybe she just needs another girl to talk to."

"Would you?" I asked. I mean, Lois wasn't exactly the nurturing, motherly type, but maybe Maddie would still be willing to talk to her.

"Of course, Clark," Lois said. "Maddie's my friend, too."

\*\*\*

I spent the evening typing up my paper. Luckily, Steve was out visiting with one of his girlfriends as I wanted to finish this quickly, potentially look to see if anyone had a need for the Boy in Black, and then visit Maddie. Normally I would have spent the evening with Maddie - she could have come over here while I worked, but Lois had said she was going to stop by there tonight and I wanted to give them time to talk.

Besides, given all I wanted to get done tonight, having some time alone in my room seemed like a good idea. Times like this, I had to admit, while I was rarely sure what to make of them, it was useful to have these special powers. Well, sort of, anyway. As it turned out, less useful than I would have liked tonight. I had been thinking of using my speed thing to type the paper, but before I could get to that, I needed to know what to type. That required thought and while it would have been nice, I guess, I didn't think any faster than anyone else. Or at least I had no evidence that I did, anyway.

As a result, I was still sifting through my notes after I'd been in my room an hour - I'd been hoping to be out as the Boy in Black by then. With a sigh, I turned the radio on, hoping some fast paced music would help speed up my progress through these notes.

It didn't really help. The music was more distracting than anything else and I got up to turn it off just as they switched to the hourly news update. I was about to turn it off anyway when the newscaster said something that stopped me in mid-stride. "They are still recovering bodies from yesterday's derailed train just outside of Johannesburg. Authorities say that they are loosing hope of finding anyone alive at this point, but will continue to search. As the train to Cape Town is largely used by tourists, local authorities are still trying to partner with agencies that can help them send recovered bodies back to their families for proper burial. In more local news..." I turned it off.

'Losing hope... proper burial.' Apparently a train derailed in Africa yesterday and I had done nothing to help. Of course, I hadn't. Who even knew when it happened? I could have been in class, or investigating the story, or asleep. Or hanging out with my girlfriend.

She needed me last night. Even if that was what I was doing, it was okay. Wasn't it? I mean, she had needed me. On the other hand, how many people died in that train accident? Had she needed me that much? She hadn't even told me what was going on.

I sighed before doing what I knew I had to do. Spinning quickly into my black gear, I left the room. Typing the paper could wait. This evening I was needed in South Africa. Even if I had been no help yesterday, I could help them uncover the bodies tonight.

\*\*\*

I landed a couple of miles away from the train site. Around the corner there were people working, and it looked like I was near one of the medic areas, but the area was wooded and no one had seen me land. Still, I thought of what Dad would say. I should have been more careful. I just... I didn't want to waste time by landing far away. I had already shown up so much later than I should have.

I ran to the site - at human speed when I was still near the medical site, but then faster when I got out of sight. Once I arrived, I looked around for someone official so I could ask how to help.

A dark skinned man approached me and asked if I was okay. I guess my white skin made him decide I would probably speak English. That was useful. I hadn't considered it before, but I wasn't even sure what the language was here, let alone have any ability to speak it.

"I'm fine," I told him. "I just want to help. I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner."

The man gave me an inscrutable look before speaking again. "We appreciate the help, but I'm not sure what there is for you to do."

"I thought..." I faltered. I had never done this before, at least not in this way. I had shown up for things before, helped in whatever little way I could and then left. I had never shown up after the fact and offered help to the rescue workers. Maybe this was a bad idea?

I sighed. "I heard that you were still looking for bodies. I thought that perhaps I could help," I told the man, hating the pleading sound I could hear in my voice.

The man nodded. "This is grown up work, son," he said. "I'm not sure..."

"Please?" I asked again. I needed to do this. I couldn't just leave.

"Okay," the man said, although he did not sound completely happy with the decision. "But please let us know if you find this too difficult. At this point, the hope for finding people alive is very low. What you'll be finding are bodies and in some cases body parts. It isn't pretty, glamorous work."

I nodded, although I had felt the bile rising in the back of my throat as I realized what it was I was getting myself into.

I followed him over to the train site and followed his instructions. I waited until after he felt confident that I knew what I was doing to walk away a little and used my special vision to find people faster.

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"Clark?" Mom's voice came from the stairs, but I didn't answer her. She came fully into the kitchen and walked over to me. "Clark, what's wrong?" I still said nothing.

"Martha, I'm going to see if the wheat survived the storm last night," Dad said as he came down the stairs. "Why are you standing there in the dark?" he asked her, and I could hear the teasing laughter in his voice as the light

came on. "Clark?" he asked.

I still couldn't say anything. I had come here directly from South Africa, and had been sitting in the dark for the past hour. I had nothing to say anyway. Two thousand people had died on that train. Two thousand.

Of course, I hadn't found more than a couple dozens bodies or so before I had left. The man who had first approached me had come over after I'd been working for several hours to suggest I needed to rest. I wanted to tell him that I didn't, that I was fine, but it would have been a lie. I didn't feel fine at all.

Dad came over to stand next to Mom, placing a hand on my shoulder. "What is it, son?" he asked.

"The train in Africa," I finally said.

"Did you go?" Mom asked, and I nodded.

"You're just getting back?" Dad asked.

"I didn't go until last night," I said quietly. "I hadn't heard about it before."

"I thought you were listening for things on Monday nights?" Mom asked me.

"I didn't this time," I said. "I just... Maddie needed me."

"Clark, what's wrong?" Mom asked, sounding more urgent this time.

"With Maddie or the two thousand people that died because I was hanging out with my girlfriend?" I asked bitterly.

"It sounds like you were doing something aside from hanging out with your girlfriend," Dad said, taking a seat beside me. "You said she needed you, not that you were busy hanging out."

I sighed. He was right, but still... Did that make it all right?

"What was wrong with Maddie?" Mom asked, taking the seat on my other side.

I shrugged. "I don't really know," I said. "We were supposed to have dinner and when I showed up, she was all curled up in a ball on her bed crying. She never told me what was wrong except that she had had a fight with her dad. But she was so sad. She spent most of the night crying and when she asked me to stay with her..."

"Oh, Clark," Mom said, placing a hand on mine. "Of course you did. You care about her. How could you leave her when she was upset?"

"But those people..." I said.

"You didn't even know about them," Dad said.

"I should have," I replied.

"What would you have done?" Mom asked me. "You couldn't stop the train derailing."

"Maybe I could have," I pointed out.

"You don't know that, Clark," Dad said, his voice slightly hard as it often was when we had these conversations.

"I don't know that I couldn't," I countered back.

"You know that you couldn't without exposing yourself," Mom said softly.

"People died, Mom," I said, getting up to pace. "Two thousand mothers lost their children so that your son could get to keep his secret. Is that fair?" I felt badly the instant I said it. Mom's eyes filled with tears even as she got up to put her arms around me.

"No, Clark," she said, softly. "It's not fair at all. But this isn't an issue of you or them. Bad things happen all the time. You can't help them all."

"I could help more than I do," I said, but the fire was gone from my words.

"If what?" Dad asked from his place at the table. "If you dropped out of school and became the Boy in Black full time? If you broke up with Maddie so she wouldn't expect you to be there when she had a fight with her father? Is that the type of life you want to have, Clark?"

"I'm not normal, Dad," I said. "Maybe it's unfair of me to want a normal life."

"Clark Kent!" Mom said stepping back to look me in the eye - a task that wasn't as easy as it used to be given the fact that I was now seven inches taller than she was. "Stop that nonsense right now. Of course you're not normal. You are special. Do you know what makes you special?" she asked, but she kept speaking before I could reply. "You are a good, kind boy who feels the pain of others acutely. You are a talented writer. You are a good student. And you are a better son than your father or I could have ever hoped for."

"These... strange abilities of yours, Clark. They don't make you special. They are not at all a part of who Clark Kent is. They don't define you, and there's no reason to let them."

Dad came to stand beside me. "Clark, you have just as much right to a normal life as anyone else. If you want to use your special abilities to help, that's admirable, and your mother and I will support you, but you can't give up your life for that."

I nodded, but mainly as I was too tired to argue with them. I still wasn't sure they were right.

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I went straight to my English comp class from Smallville. I just sort of hoped that no one commented on my clothes - I had changed in Smallville, but the clothes I had chosen were from high school and didn't fit quite as well as I would have liked. I should have left more time to change, but given that I couldn't use super-speed to change in the dorm room, I decided to just wait and change after class.

It wasn't like my heart was in my schoolwork today anyway. I'm sure Mom and Dad would have liked it to be, but I couldn't really compartmentalize like that. I couldn't block out the images of what I had seen in Africa just because I was Clark Kent, college student, and not the Boy in Black right now. I didn't tell them that, though. I was afraid if I did, they'd suggest I put the Boy in Black on hold for a couple more years.

I understood their point that I should be able to have a life. I really did. More than that, I could see how a decision not to do that could hurt them. While they had found a baby in a spaceship, they had always raised me as if they had carried me home from a hospital, as if I were a perfectly normal human baby. Really, it was nice in a way. No matter what it turned out my origins were, I knew Mom and Dad accepted me for who I was. If they had the stray thought that their son was a freak, they tamped it down so tightly I wasn't sure they even realized they had it.

So, I could imagine that if I chose to forgo having a normal life and started helping out openly, using all my powers, it would hurt them. It wasn't the life they had imagined me having when they pulled me out of that ship. On the other hand, maybe it should have been. Not exactly, of course. They didn't know about my... well, whatever they were yet. But they had pulled me out of a spaceship. My parents were great, but they weren't idiots. They had to have realized that this meant I wasn't actually normal. None of their friends had babies from spaceships, did they?

When I was a kid, Dad used to talk a lot about my

taking over the farm. Especially when my powers first started coming in, he'd grin and tell me I was going to be the best farmer in Lowell County. I still remember how excited I was that Dad could see me as a farmer, as being even better than he was, when I was really little. And I could remember how uncomfortable I felt later when I realized that wasn't what I wanted.

I must have been about thirteen when I realized what I liked best was writing, and I certainly knew enough about farming by then to know that it didn't include a whole lot of writing. I didn't say anything, though. It was also around that time that Mom and Dad told me the truth - the whole truth - about how they had found me.

I felt like I needed to be a farmer if that was what would make Dad happy. He had given me a life here, had supported me for thirteen years and showed no signs of stopping. If all he wanted in return was for me to take over his farm, that wasn't really that much to ask, was it?

So, I said little during those conversations, but I'd nod and smile and try as hard as I could to make him think I still thought being a farmer was the best job in the world.

It took a year before the conversations stopped. At first, I didn't even really notice that Dad had stopped mentioning it. It was a hard year, though. The first really strange thing about me had developed - my hearing, and I think we were all trying to deal with what it meant. There had been other stuff before that - I hadn't been sick in my entire life. I was really fast and pretty strong for my age. But none of that stuff was in fully yet and even added together, I don't think we really realized what it meant.

But when I started being able to overhear conversations Mr. and Mrs. Irig were having over breakfast four miles away, it was hard to ignore that I wasn't your average American boy.

So, even when I did notice that Dad had stopped mentioning the farm, I thought it was because of how strange I was. I thought he didn't want some weirdo inheriting his farm. I didn't say anything, because how could I? He was still raising me as his son, wasn't he? How lucky was I?

It all came out one night when we were fighting. I hadn't learned to control my hearing well. Mom had been on me to work on it, had even given me tips on it, for months now. She had even told me that she and Dad would work on it with me. But I was fourteen and frightened. I didn't want their help. I wanted to be normal. So, I ignored it.

Until the night I heard Mom and Dad talking about the farm and what was going to happen to it after they could no longer run it.

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"You know we can't leave it to Clark," I heard Dad say. I was supposed to be doing my homework, but I'd been eavesdropping half the night. I hadn't meant to, and I knew Mom was right. I should work on controlling my hearing better. I hadn't done it yet, though.

"I know we can't expect him to run the farm, Jonathan, but..."

I was downstairs before she finished her sentence. "Why not?" I asked them. "Why can't I have the farm anymore?"

Mom and Dad looked at me in silence. It occurred to me that I should feel ashamed at having listened in to their conversation, but I was too angry to be ashamed.

"What do you mean, Clark?" Dad finally asked.

"Why can't I have the farm anymore? You said I was going to be the best farmer in Lowell County. Maybe even Kansas. Why can't I anymore?"

"But Clark..." Dad started, but I cut him off.

"It's because I'm weird, isn't it? You don't want me running the farm anymore because I'm not your son," I said. I felt the tears falling down my face, and was embarrassed by them - I was too old to cry - but I didn't care right then. I was so angry. How could he have pretended to accept me as his son when he really didn't feel that way? How could they have lied to me like that?

"Clark?" Dad replied, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Maybe I should move out," I said.

"Move out?" Mom asked, and she had the beginning of a smile on her face. "Where to, Clark? It's hard for a fourteen year old boy to live on his own."

I shrugged. "I'm pretty strong for my age. I bet I could get a job somewhere," I said defiantly.

Dad sighed. "Clark, what are you talking about? What's this nonsense about being weird and not being my son?"

"You wanted me to take over the farm. You told me so all the time. But now that this weird stuff started to happen, you never talk about it anymore." I was crying like a baby and my nose was even running, but I was so upset, I just didn't care. "And I just heard you tell Mom that I can't have the farm anymore." I stared at him, daring him to argue with me.

Wordlessly, Dad handed me a napkin. "I don't know where you get this nonsense from, but you are my son," he said in a tone he rarely used, but I knew meant not to argue. "Now, go wash your face and come back down here and we'll talk about this like adults."

Still feeling angry, but knowing better than to argue, I took the napkin and swiped at my face as I made my way upstairs to the bathroom.

When I came back to the kitchen, though, I made my displeasure known by sitting down sloppily in a chair. Mom hated when I did that, but right then I didn't care.

"Do you want the farm, Clark?" Mom asked me.

I looked at her for a moment. Was this some sort of trick question? "It's my home," I finally said.

She nodded, but it was Dad who spoke. "Running a farm, Clark, it's a lot of work. You would be good at it and you *would* be the best farmer in Kansas. I'm sure of it. But between planting and plowing and taking care of the hens... well, when would you get any writing done?"

"What?" I asked.

"If you want the farm, it's yours, Clark," Mom said.

"We'd like nothing better," Dad said, "than for our only son to carry on running the Kent farm. But this isn't about what we want. It's about what you want. Would you be happy running the farm? Wouldn't you prefer to be writing?"

I didn't say anything. How did he know? I'd never said anything. Did he mean it? Was this really completely unrelated to my weird... traits? "So, it's not because I'm weird?" I finally asked.

"You are not weird!" Mom said loudly. "You are a boy."

"You're *our* boy," Dad interjected.

"And you happen to be a boy who has some special talents," Mom said. "Like good hearing and being strong."

"And being the best writer in the freshman class at Smallville High," Dad added.

I looked at them in disbelief. "Really?" I asked. "I can

have the farm if I want it?"

"Of course, Clark," Mom said.

"But we don't want you to take it because you feel like you have to," Dad said.

"But if I wanted it?" I asked.

"That would make your mother and me very happy," Dad said. "The only thing that would make us happier would be if you had someone else run it for you so you could follow your dreams and not ours."

"So, it's really not because of the hearing thing?" I asked. I just needed to be sure.

"No," Dad said.

"Although, we are going to work on that," Mom said. "You had no business eavesdropping on our conversation, young man."

I nodded and could feel myself flush. "I'm sorry," I said softly.

"We know you are," Dad said softly. "You're a good kid, and we're proud that you're our son."

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Since that day, Dad had openly encouraged me to pursue writing as long as that made me happy.

How could I give that up - the whole dream of having a normal life - after everything they'd done for me?

I thought of the bodies in South Africa from yesterday. On the other hand, how could I not?

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I got back to my room to find it empty. That wasn't too surprising. I had a break after English comp, but Steve had a class at that time. There was a note on my bed which I ignored while I changed into some clothes that fit better. Then sitting on the bed, I opened the note.

"Clark -

Where the heck are you?

Talked to Maddie. She didn't tell me what was wrong either, but she still seemed upset. You should go and see her if you ever get back here.

- Lois"

I had to smile at the note - the tone was perfect Lois. Still, I had to admit to being worried about Maddie. I had really hoped she'd open up to Lois.

I sighed. I also wondered if Lois' tone meant something. "Where the heck are you?" made it sound like she had been waiting for me for a while. Had anyone noticed that I wasn't in my room last night? Steve might have, but that was unlikely. I'd only been away once for an entire night before, but he was a deep sleeper and didn't seem to notice when I came in other times. So, as long as I had an early class, it was unlikely he'd notice my not coming back.

Maddie had a class now, too, so there was no point in trying to see her, but maybe I could head over there in a little while and try to meet her before lunch. First though, I thought it might be a good time for a nap.

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"Hey," I said, as Maddie exited the psychology building.

She shot me a look as she fell into step beside me. "What happened to you last night?" she asked me.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I knew perfectly well what she meant - I was supposed to meet her after dinner and I had never shown, but I wasn't sure what to say.

"Where were you?" she said, looking at me as if I had two heads. "You were supposed to come over after you finished typing up your paper and you never showed."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't realize our plans were that

firm."

Maddie stopped walking to fix me with a hard look.

"What does that mean?"

I shrugged.

"You know, if I wanted to date a flake, I would have gone out with your roommate," she said, and if I had missed the clues before, it was pretty clear she was angry now.

"Steve doesn't do relationships," I said, even though I knew that wasn't the point, and it probably wasn't the right thing to say at all.

"Okay, what's wrong with you?" Maddie demanded.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I could almost feel her anger, but I was at a loss as to what to say.

"The Clark I was dating up until yesterday never would have made plans to come over and then not shown without calling first. He never would have then tried to act like it hadn't happened. And he never would have acted like an idiot when I confronted him about it.

"And, by the way, I'm not sure he would have told Lois about my fight with my dad either."

"Hey!" I said. "I only did that as I was worried about you. I thought maybe you'd talk to her since you wouldn't tell me what was wrong."

"You were so worried that you blew me off last night?" Maddie asked.

"I'm sorry," I said. "My article was harder to write than I expected. I guess I got caught up in that."

"You guess?" Maddie asked. "Besides, I called your room around eleven and Steve said you weren't there. So, where were you all wrapped up in how hard it was to write your article?"

"I went to the library," I told her, looking at the ground so she couldn't see the lie on my face. "I thought it would be easier to concentrate there. It wasn't, though. I never even finished it."

"Why would you go to the library?" Maddie asked.

"How were you planning to type your paper from the library when your word processor is in your room? I thought that was the whole reason you weren't coming to my place - you don't like my word processor."

"I never got that far," I said truthfully. "I was just trying to organize my notes."

"Half the night? And it never occurred to you to call me and let me know?"

I shrugged again, still not knowing what to say.

"You know what?" Maddie asked me. "I don't know what your deal is today, Clark, but you are not behaving anything like my boyfriend, and I'm not all that fond of this version of Clark Kent." With that she spun on her heel and stormed off.

I watched her walk away for a moment. What was the right thing to do? I couldn't tell her I had been in South Africa. I imagined how that conversation would go - she would think I was joking, and given her anger at me, this wasn't the time to joke.

I sighed. On the other hand, I didn't need to be so cavalier about not showing up for our plans. I did feel bad about that. It was just... I guess I got caught up in trying to cover up where I was so much that none of what I was really feeling came through.

I gave a sigh again before running to catch her. Mom and Dad would be so disappointed in me for my attitude already.

"Maddie!" I called. She stopped, but didn't turn around,

and I could tell by the set of her shoulders that she was still pretty upset. Not that I was surprised really. It hadn't even been a minute since she had walked off.

"I'm sorry," I said to her softly as I came to a stop in front of her. And instantly, any apology I had been planning to make didn't seem like enough. She didn't look at all angry now that there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

I pulled her towards me, afraid she would fight against me, but she didn't. She let me wrap her in my arms. "I'm so sorry," I whispered into her hair. "I don't know what came over me back there. I really didn't mean not to call, Mads. I just got wrapped up in what I was doing and..." My voice trailed off. So far, I had managed not to lie in this little speech. Did I want to ruin everything by continuing on?

So, instead, I stood here, just holding her, while she cried some more. Eventually, she backed away. "I'm sorry," she said with a sniffle. "I probably over reacted."

"No," I assured her. "You didn't. Really. Maddie, I'm so..."

"I know," she gave me a small smile. "I guess I'm just... You know it's fine that you're so busy right now with this article. I know how important it is to your future. And I have this stuff with my dad to deal with, so maybe we just take some time off..."

"Are you breaking up with me?" I cut her off to ask. That was what it sounded like. I know I'd been looking for ways to spend less time with her so I could be the Boy in Black more, but I didn't really want that. I didn't want to break up.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not. I'm just thinking that maybe we both need some more time to ourselves than we've been getting."

"Let me help you with the thing with your dad," I asked her.

She shook her head. "No, it's not something you can help with. It's not something *anyone* can help with, Clark. Honestly. I just... I need to deal with it. I will, I promise. I've dealt with it before."

Something about the look in her eyes scared me. I couldn't pinpoint what it was. She looked determined, but also... beaten down? I wasn't sure, but it made me uneasy. "Maybe we could just talk about it," I suggested softly.

"No," Maddie said again, shaking her head. "Really, Clark. I'll be okay. Let's go to lunch." She grabbed my hand and tugged slightly, so I followed her, but I still wasn't comfortable.

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Given that more free time to be the Boy in Black is what I said I wanted, I guess I should have spent more time as the Boy in Black that week. I still saw Maddie, but mainly during the day, and so I had plenty of time in theory. In reality, though, I was spending so much of my time working on my article, I often just didn't even hear announcements of things going wrong.

I probably should have started after I finally handed in the article on Monday, but then... I don't know. I just didn't. I felt worn out. Not physically, really, but emotionally. I had put aside the whole thing with Maddie while I worked on my article. It was easy to do when she looked fine when I saw her. But there was still something there, some haunted look in her eyes almost, that made me feel like maybe I should have pushed harder to help her.

I managed to forget it again on Thursday, though, when Professor Matthews handed back our articles at the end of class. I was waiting to see what he would say - would he

tell us who had gotten the recommendation?

He didn't. Nor did he hand back my article. Or Lois'. Instead, after he had handed back all the papers he had, which seemed to be everyone else's, he announced, "Lois Lane and Clark Kent, please come see me during office hours tomorrow."

I looked over at Lois. Was this a good thing? Was it a bad thing? Was he giving us recommendations? Both of us? Did he think our articles were awful? Or he was giving Lois a recommendation and thought mine was awful?

"What do you think this means?" Lois asked quietly as she put her books away.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Do you think we both got recommendations?"

Lois smiled slightly. "Maybe. I don't know. It can't be anything else, right? I mean, you're article was so good, Clark."

I suddenly had a thought. "But my article was about sexism at the medical school."

"Right?" Lois said, looking at me quizzically as we left the building.

"At the university where Professor Matthews works."

"You don't think..." Lois started.

I shrugged. "It sounds like the professors at the medical school all know. Maybe all the profs do. I mean, the school wouldn't want this getting out, right?"

Lois gasped. "Just like they may not want it getting out that they just allowed the student class president to withdraw from the university without giving up his office."

I sighed. She was right. While it seemed less awful an offense, Lois' article, too, could bring bad press to the university. Of course, we weren't doing anything with them aside from giving it to Professor Matthews, but maybe he felt like he had to tell us they were bad or he'd be required to take some sort of action.

"Well," Lois said, standing up straighter as she walked. "If that's the case, we just need to go further. We know our articles are based on fact, and we know that both things are injustices. So, if Professor Matthews isn't interested in them because they make the school he teaches at look bad, we just look further."

"What do you mean?" I asked her, a little in awe of her attitude.

Lois shrugged. "We may be too young for the editor of the Planet to take seriously, but there are other papers in this town. Maybe the Star would be interested in our stories."

"You're thinking we should shop our stories around to real papers?" I asked her.

"Why not?" Lois asked.

"Why not?" I parroted back. "Why not? Because we're freshmen, Lois. It's not just the Daily Planet that won't take us seriously. No one will."

Lois shrugged. "It's too bad. You have the better story. But it's what I'm doing if he shoots down my article."

I smiled. "You're insane, Lois."

She gave me a wide grin back. "I know. But how else am I going to get the Pulitzer before I'm thirty?"

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I brushed my sweaty palms on my jeans again. For the third time in about as many minutes. Lois and I had decided to walk over to Professor Matthews' office hours together, but when we got there, another student was already there, so we were waiting outside.

Lois, in a complete twist from her normal self, was the

picture of serenity. I was a mess, pacing back and forth and running my hand through my hair so often, I knew it was a mess.

Finally, the other student exited his office. "Ah, Miss Lane and Mr. Kent, come in," Professor Matthews said when he saw us.

We glanced at each other as I followed Lois into his office. As far as I could guess, there were two reasons he'd want to see us together - if he was recommending us both or if he was telling us both that our articles were awful. Maddie had pointed out last night at dinner that he had seen our topics beforehand, so he shouldn't be terribly against them. It was a reassuring thought, but somehow did not completely remove my fear that this was exactly what was going on.

He motioned to the two guest chairs in front of his desk and took a seat himself. I sat down, running my hands over my jeans yet again, and Lois sat down next to me. It was only in the brighter light of his office that I realized that despite her calm demeanor, Lois was white as ghost.

Professor Matthews picked up some papers from his desk and glanced at them before looking up at us. "Miss Lane," he said, turning to look at Lois. "I have to tell you how impressed I was with your article." I could almost feel Lois relax at his words. "When I read it, I couldn't stop thinking that it was the best piece of investigative reporting I had ever seen in my freshman journalism class."

Lois was positively beaming beside me, and I looked over to give her a smile.

"In fact, I was so impressed with your article that I sent a copy over to Paul Bender and he will be calling you shortly to give you a place on the Met Titan. Your article for my class will be on the front page of next week's edition."

I chuckled, and both Lois and Professor Matthews looked at me strangely. "Sorry," I said, feeling myself flush. "It's just that you were right, Lois. You *are* the first freshman to ever be given a place on the Titan."

"Except for Linda," Lois pointed out and I shook my head. She was right, but did Linda really count? Lois would be the first freshman published.

"Well, it is still quite an accomplishment, Lois," Professor Matthews said. "And very well earned."

"Thank you," Lois said, still looking as if the sun was shining directly on her.

"Then," Professor Matthews continued, "I read your article, Mr. Kent," he turned to me. "And I have to say I was equally impressed." I could feel my shoulders sag in relief. It was going to be okay. He didn't hate my article. "And I almost got on the phone and called Paul Bender again." Lois glanced at me before looking back at Professor Matthews, clearly as confused as I was.

"But then I kept reading," Professor Matthews said, "and realized that this is not a topic for the school paper. So instead, I called up Perry White." Lois gasped beside me. I grasped the sides of the chair I was in, afraid I might actually float off the chair. "I can't promise your article will be printed in the Daily Planet, but Mr. White would like to talk to you. He asked that you give him a call today."

"So, Clark got the recommendation," Lois said next to me, her voice surprisingly calm. I was glad she had asked the question as I wasn't sure I was able to speak.

Professor Matthews sighed. "I haven't decided. Honestly while Clark has the bigger story, the writing in these articles are both very strong. I'm waiting to see what comes out of the assignments for Professor Halkuff's class,

but frankly, right now I don't foresee anyone else but the two of you getting recommendations from us."

There was silence for a moment, before I finally found my voice and said a quiet thank you.

Professor Matthews handed us back our papers. "There are a few notes here on your articles, but overall, these are really excellent pieces of journalism."

"Thank you," I said again, and Lois thanked him as well as we took our papers and got up.

"Here's Mr. White's number, Clark," Professor Matthews said, handing me a small piece of paper. "Make sure to call him as soon as you can. Perry White does not like to be kept waiting."

We walked out together, not knowing what to say. I stole a glance at Lois. How was she doing? Was she still excited about her Titan job or was she upset about my meeting with Perry? I couldn't tell.

"I knew your article would get to Perry White," she finally said quietly.

"It sounds like we're both going to get recommendations," I said, not sure what else to say.

"But Perry White already knows who you are," Lois said. "That has to improve your chances at the internship."

I shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it means he'll be expecting even better things from me for the application, and if I don't deliver, he'll be disappointed."

"Maybe," Lois said, but she didn't sound convinced.

"Are you angry?" I asked cautiously.

Lois gave a short laugh. "No. But I am jealous. Still, it's okay. Now I know to start looking now for a great topic for the application. I'm going to have to blow you out of the water."

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"You're early," Maddie said when I showed up at her room that night. She had left a note with Steve asking me to stop by.

"I just got off the phone with Perry White," I said to her. When she looked at me quizzically, I added, "the editor of the Daily Planet."

"Clark, that's great!" she said. "Is he going to print your article?"

I nodded. "He wants to have one of his researchers double check my facts, but basically yes."

Maddie got up to give me a hug. "I'm so excited for you. Your first article in the Planet. And you're going to get the recommendation, too, I'm guessing."

I shrugged. "Professor Matthews hasn't decided yet. Lois' article is getting printed on the cover of the Titan and she's a member of the staff now. Professor Matthews wants to wait for next semester, but he says he expects us both to be recommended."

"That's great!" Maddie said, "But I would think you stand a better chance of getting the internship with an article already published in the Planet."

I shrugged again. "Mr. White said no. That this was impressive journalism, but he expected to see something better for the internship application. But I'm meeting with him tomorrow to go over my sources. Maybe he'll tell me something else."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I bet he's just trying to scare you."

"Maybe," I said, but I wasn't sure. He hadn't sounded like he was kidding. "So, are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "I actually wanted to see you as I have a favor to ask."



"What is it?" I asked her.

"My cousin is coming for a visit. He has some sort of conference in Metropolis to attend and he's arriving on Sunday. I'm supposed to go to dinner with him, and I was hoping you'd come with me."

"Sure," I said. "Is there anything I should know?"

"Not really," Maddie shrugged. "I just... I don't get along that well with him, so I prefer to have someone I like with me."

I smiled. "Well, I'm glad to be someone you like."

She swatted at my arm. "Now, go," she told me. "I'm sure you want to call your parents."

I leaned down to give her a quick kiss on the lips before following her advice... or sort of. I went to see them instead.

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I felt moderately uncomfortable as I stood in the elevator of the Daily Planet building. When I'd gone home last night, I'd picked up my one and only suit. It was at least a year old and didn't fit quite right, but there was no time to get another one. Mom had taken one good look at me and declared that we needed to go shopping before my formal interview for the application process and perhaps buy a couple of suits for the internship this summer.

It was nice that she was so sure I was going to get the internship. I had to admit, in the quiet moments just before I fell asleep, I felt that way, too. It couldn't be a bad thing to have something Mr. White was considering printing in the Planet before I even applied. Even most interns didn't get to write anything that would get them printed.

When I was awake, though, I was less sure. I worried that after this, it would be even harder for me to impress Perry White. Plus, Mom didn't know my competition like I did. Lois was almost certainly not joking when she said yesterday that she was going to start looking for a topic for the application process now.

Now that I thought of it, I guess that meant I should be, too.

The elevators arrived at the newsroom floor with a ding and I stepped out of the elevator. Luckily I knew enough to know that the weird feeling in my stomach wouldn't materialize into anything. I didn't completely understand it, but I felt nauseous when I was nervous, even though I hadn't actually thrown up since I was a kid. I had to admit, though, standing at the top of the ramp leading into the newsroom, I wondered if today would be the first time.

"What are you looking for, kid?" a man asked me as he passed.

"I... I have an appointment with Perry White," I finally managed to say despite my overly dry throat.

"He's in his office," the man said, pointing to an office on the side of the newsroom.

"Thank you," I said as I followed the direction he had pointed in.

I took a deep breath before I knocked, and tried hard to remember the advice Mom and Dad gave me the previous night. I imagine a lot of it was typical advice to give your child before a meeting like this: Remember to say thank you. Send a thank you letter afterwards. Be polite. Remember you are there because you deserve to be. That kind of thing.

But they also gave me other advice that was probably less normal: Remember when you knock on his door to watch your strength. You don't want to break it. Same thing when you shake his hand. If things go well, concentrate on

feeling heavy so you don't float. Try not to get too startled and let off a bit of heat vision. There's bound to be lots of paper around a newsroom and you don't want to start a fire.

To be fair, these were things that I had a tendency to forget when I was nervous. I had gotten a job working for the Smallville Press in high school, and I broke the editor's door on my way out. As for the fire thing, I wore glasses to prevent that, but occasionally my glasses slipped and... Well, when I got into Met U, I had found my parents in the barn and ended up lighting up a bale of hay. So, while I wished I didn't need those words of advice, the truth was that I did.

Particularly, as Dad pointed out, today. It would be a big thing to screw up and let out my secret. It would take that mistake to another level to do it in front of the editor of the world's greatest newspaper. I'd probably be on the front page before I even made it back to campus.

"Come in," came the gruff reply from the other side of the door.

I opened the door cautiously, already wishing I knew better what was going to happen. My conversation with Mr. White had been brief yesterday, and had not left me feeling prepared for meeting the man himself today.

"Mr. White?" I asked as I entered his office. "I'm Clark Kent."

He nodded at me. "Perfect, Clark. You're right on time," he said, smiling. While he was just over average height, he had a little bit of extra weight on his middle. He had the look of someone who was going prematurely bald, although he still had most of his brown hair. When I had first come in, something about the look on his face had made him seem very imposing despite his size, but when he smiled, he seemed different. Fatherly almost.

He extended his hand to me, and remembering Dad's words from the previous night, I took his hand firmly, but tried not to use too much strength. "Take a seat, son," he told me, and I followed his advice.

I wanted to glance around his office. There was paper everywhere, and it had the look of orderly mess. But I was afraid it would be rude to look around in awe.

"As I said on the phone, Clark, that was excellent writing," Mr. White said.

"Thank you, Mr. White," I said, afraid I wasn't going to be able to think of anything else to say for the entire meeting.

"And the investigative piece was quite impressive for a freshman in college," he said, but this time he fixed me with a stare that made me uncomfortable. Why was he looking at me like that?

"Thank you," I said again, and I could hear the slight tremor to my voice.

"Are you sure you did that investigation all on your own?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir," I told him, straining to keep my voice steady.

"Explain what you did, son," Mr. White said and now his voice was gentler. I wasn't sure if that meant he believed me or just wanted me to feel at ease, although given the question, I worried it was the latter.

"I told the head of the medical school that I was thinking of becoming premed and wanted to sit in on a couple of classes. He let me attend two lectures and spend a couple of hours following some of the older students around during rotations," I told him, still trying to keep my voice steady.

"I interviewed a few students - two girls that I had heard

talking on campus - they were the ones who alerted me to the story in the first place, and then another couple of students - two girls and one guy - afterwards.

"I also checked records for the doctor who the girls mentioned had been let go for not pushing the girls to the back during her rounds, and I checked placement statistics for Met U students compared to other schools and particularly for Met General where I thought they were more likely to know that the female students weren't as well prepared." I took a deep breath, not sure I had breathed at all during that speech.

"Oh," I added at the last minute, "and I called a friend of mine who is pre-med at Midwest University to make sure it wasn't normal to systematically favor some students over another. He's also a freshman, so he didn't know, but he'd been able to sit in some classes before and had friends who had done rounds."

Mr. White had nodded along with my monologue, and smiled at me when I finished. "Well, it sounds like a very thorough job, son. I'm very impressed. I'd like to see the statistics you collected. And I'm going to get some of my best reporters to work on getting some more data.

"Norcross and Judd have interviews scheduled for this afternoon with some of the professors and doctors who teach at the medical school as well as the dean himself. They'll be adding their findings to your article."

I felt my eyes get big. "So, you're really going to print it?" I asked.

Mr. White smiled again, "If everything checks out, son, this will be on page two or three of the paper. My expectation, depending on how much they need to rewrite, is that Norcross and Judd's names will appear before yours, but you will be on the byline."

I almost forgot Mom's advice and started to float, but at the last minute, I realized it and grabbed the chair to stay grounded.

"Thank you, Mr. White!" I said again, this time sounding more excited than I suspected I was supposed to.

"No need to thank me. This was excellent work. I'll introduce you to Norcross and Judd and we can go from there."

I nodded and followed him out to the newsroom.

"One more thing, son," Perry said as we exited his office. "While this is excellent work and it is highly unusual to have something published in the Planet at your age, I want to reiterate what I told you yesterday. This does not guarantee the internship spot. In fact, Professor Matthews shared with me another article by a classmate of yours, and that, too, was very strong work."

I smiled. "Lois'," I half mumbled to myself, but not quietly enough.

Mr. White smiled. "Yes, Lois Lane was her name. She's going to give you a run for your money, son."

I chuckled. "I don't doubt it," I said in reply and Mr. White laughed in response.

"Come on. I'll introduce you to Norcross and Judd."

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I could hear the sound of a girl's voice coming from my room even before I got to my floor. Did Steve have a girl in there? I could see that, but I certainly hoped not. I wasn't really in the mood to be kicked out tonight. I was still feeling a little overwhelmed from my visit to the Daily Planet. Plus, as ridiculous as it was, it was my first time taking the subway in Metropolis. If I hadn't been going to the Planet, that would have been an activity in itself.

As I got closer, I realized I could hear another girl in there as well. Did he have two girls in there? I prayed if he did they were just talking. So far, Steve had shown no proclivities towards that sort of behavior, but it wasn't exactly out of the realm of possibilities. He did seem like the sort of guy who would be open to that. I was tempted to use my vision thing to look and see, but was a little worried about what I might find if I did.

As I got closer, though, I could see there was no sock on the door. Thank goodness!

In fact, when I opened the door, I realized the girls I had heard were there for me. Maddie and Lois were sitting side by side on my bed.

"So?" Maddie asked me as I closed the door.

"How did it go?" Lois followed her when I didn't respond right away.

I smiled. I had to admit, I was continually amazed at how happy Lois seemed to be for me. None of the overt competitiveness that had been present when I first met her was displayed now. While I'm sure she was serious when she told me she was jealous, she also seemed sincerely happy for me.

"He mentioned you," I said to her now.

"He did?" she asked, and I could see her eyes light up.

I nodded. "Apparently, Professor Matthews showed him your article. He said he thought you were going to give me a run for my money."

"That's great, Lois," Maddie said.

Lois flushed and looked at the floor, but I could tell I had just made her day.

"So, are you going to tell us what it was like?" Maddie pressed.

"Weird," I said as I finally put my bag down and started untangling my tie. "He seemed... stern sometimes and fatherly the next."

"What did he say about your story?" Lois asked.

"He's assigned it to two reporters there. Norcross and Judd."

"Norcross and Judd?" Lois interrupted. "Clark, they are the Planet's star reporters. That's amazing."

I grinned, "I thought that might be the case, but I couldn't tell. Anyway, I left them the statistics I had found, and they have some interviews they are going to do, and then if it all pans out, they'll use my story as an outline but beef it up. Mr. White said their names will be before mine on the article, but he expects me to be on the byline."

"I can't believe you're going to have a byline in the Daily Planet," Lois said.

"I can't believe you're going to be the first freshman ever to be allowed on the Titan staff for legitimate ability and you're going to be on the front page," I countered.

"I'd trade you in an instant," Lois said.

"Really?" I asked, giving her a meaningful look. We hadn't talked about it, but I imagined Lois was pretty excited to be working with Paul.

She blushed. "Well, maybe not."

"That's what I thought," I said.

"Well, it sounds like you're both shoe-ins for the recommendations," Maddie said.

"I hope so," Lois said. "But we don't know about anyone else."

"Josh said he got an A- on the assignment," Maddie said. "So, he did pretty well, but Professor Matthews didn't say anything to him about the recommendation."

I shrugged. It wouldn't pay to get overly confident now.

We still had a long way to go.

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We walked across campus wordlessly. I wanted to say something, anything, to break the silence, but I wasn't sure what to say. What if I had imagined it all?

Dinner with Maddie's cousin wasn't what I expected at all. First off, I hadn't realized that he wasn't a first cousin. He was her dad's cousin, and so he was older than us. Maybe in his mid-thirties. Not that this was a big deal, I was just expecting someone our age. Although, given that he was in town for a conference, I guess I should have known better.

Also, there was something about him. I couldn't pinpoint what it was, but almost instantly, I knew I didn't like him. He seemed too... slick somehow. Again, I probably shouldn't have been surprised. Maddie had said they didn't get along. I just had thought it must be something minor. I mean, she was seeing him anyway.

The other thing that hit me almost immediately after meeting him was how much different Maddie was around him. She could have been a completely different person. She got quiet and shy and barely said two words during dinner. I'd seen her quiet before and sometimes it was just because she was stressed, but this was different. I could feel the uneasiness coming off of her in waves, and she was so tense, I could actually see that her shoulders were held higher than normal.

Despite all of this, I probably could have brushed it all off and at least not disliked Dave. I mean, he did take us to a pretty nice restaurant - although Maddie hadn't told him I was coming apparently, and he didn't seem at all pleased to be paying for a third person - not that he would let me pay for myself. Besides, later I wasn't sure it was the paying for my dinner that had bothered him.

I know it was very weird, but I actually felt like... well, like he wanted to be alone with Maddie and he felt like I was intruding.

I mean, I must have been imagining it, right?

Except that in the middle of dinner, Maddie had gone to the bathroom, and Dave even mentioned that Maddie was one of his favorite cousins, and wasn't it funny that given they weren't first cousins, they could marry if they wanted to? I personally didn't see the humor in it at all, and I doubted there was any "wanting to" from Maddie's side, but I didn't want to say so.

Still, maybe it would be a bit weird to be attracted to your cousin - your much younger cousin, but again, I probably could have brushed it off. Particularly since the comment was weird, but was hardly an admission of attraction.

What I could not brush off, though, was the way he watched Maddie. I felt like his eyes almost never left her. He watched her steadily through dinner, enough that conversation was stilted since Maddie wasn't talking and it was hard for me to talk to him when I couldn't drag his eyes away from her.

He even watched her when she got up to go to the bathroom until she was out of sight. And even then, his eyes seemed to scan the restaurant, almost waiting until she was in sight again.

And then there was the way he watched her. It was almost... I couldn't describe it really, except to say that when I looked at Dave watching Maddie, I felt like... almost like he owned her or something. Or at least thought he did.

I sighed again. I was still trying to tamp down the thought that had been playing around my head half the night. I had to be wrong. It couldn't be what I thought.

But what if it was? What if that was why Maddie had been so upset recently? Although she said that was a fight with her dad. Could this have been why they were fighting? Maybe her dad didn't know?

I wanted to ask her, make sure she was okay, but how did I do that? I mean, what if I was wrong? It would be embarrassing for both of us.

I chanced a slight glance at Maddie's face as we walked into her room, but she was just as closed off as before. Her shoulders were only slightly less tight now than when her cousin was around.

Watching her, my anxiety increased. More than that, my suspicions seemed somewhat less ludicrous.

"Mads," I said quietly.

She jumped at the sound of my voice and then gave a small laugh. "Sorry, I guess I'm on edge."

I nodded. "Yeah, I noticed. I wondered why."

"It's nothing, Clark. Don't worry about it," she said, avoiding my eyes.

"Your cousin, Dave. Why don't you get along?" I asked her as I sat on the edge of her bed.

She shrugged from her vantage point in front of her desk. It bothered me a little that she was keeping herself so closed off. Why was she standing over there rather than sitting next to me like normal? "Why? Did you like him?" she asked, the casual tone to her voice sounding forced.

"Not really," I said. She said nothing in response so I finally took a deep breath and added, "Mainly as I didn't like the way he looked at you. I felt like..." I stopped and sighed again as Maddie looked down at the floor in a way that would have caused a fire if I had done it. "Maddie, has he ever... I don't know how to ask this," I admitted. "But I felt like... Has Dave ever done something your cousin shouldn't do?" I finally asked in a rush.

Even with her head down, I could see the tear fall to the floor from her cheek. A beat passed before she nodded her head, just slightly, and quickly, before more tears fell. I immediately got up and wrapped her in my arms as tightly as I could without hurting her.

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"It wasn't that bad," Maddie said as we sat side by side on her bed in a little while later, holding hands.

I gave her a look, letting her know I didn't believe her.

"I just... I made sure I never was alone with him, so things couldn't get that far," she explained.

Now I was confused. "Couldn't get that far? How far is 'that far'? If you were never alone how did they get anywhere?"

Maddie gave a small hollow laugh. "My parents don't deal well with... conflict? Reality? I don't know what the word is."

"What do you mean?" I asked, still not understanding.

"I'd like to think that if Dave raped me in front of them they'd put a stop to it, but I have to be honest. I'm not sure they would." She gave another laugh. "Actually, they'd probably just tell me to stop fighting. Dave has had a hard life, and I should cut him some slack."

"That's not funny, Mads," I said softly.

"No," she said quietly. "I guess not. But... well, it's better than being bitter. And I'm not joking. I don't know what their limits are, but not as strict as I'd like."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just... it's not like they didn't know what was going on. I told them when it started. And they didn't say anything at all. And then Dave started visiting more and... it was like he knew they didn't care. He'd come over and touch me right in front of them and they wouldn't say a word."

I shook my head. I wanted to understand what she was saying. I really did, but I couldn't. I couldn't imagine Mom and Dad letting that happen to anyone in front of them, but if someone were doing that to their child? I shook my head. I knew I was lucky, but I couldn't imagine any of my friends' parents being okay with this either. Then again, maybe neither could Maddie's friends, I guessed. She clearly didn't go around announcing this to everyone she knew.

"Anyway, I don't know if he knew their limits better than I did, or if some things even embarrassed him to do with an audience, but nothing ever really progressed beyond... I don't know..." Maddie trailed off and I squeezed her hand tighter. "Beyond groping, I guess," she said. "But I don't... like I said, I never let myself be alone with him. I don't know if that's as far as he's willing to go or just as far as he's willing to go with an audience."

I nodded, still feeling at a loss of words. Suddenly, I realized - "Is this what you were fighting with your dad about?"

Maddie nodded. "I think my dad has always been somewhat protective of Dave. He's so much younger than my dad is. And you know, he did have a hard life. His little brother died when he was a kid - drowned in a pool right in front of him. Apparently, Dave's never been the same since."

"So, when he heard Dave was coming to Metropolis, he wanted to make sure he had someone he knew to talk to or something. I think..." Maddie gave another small laugh, but it was a little less bitter this time. "Dad hates to travel. He was probably thinking that Dave would be uncomfortable here and I could ease that."

"The truth is, though, that I don't think Dave has any problems traveling. He's been all over the world."

"Of course that doesn't mean he'd turn down a chance to see you," I said, remembering Dave's words at the restaurant about Maddie being one of his favorite cousins.

"No, Dave's view of our relationship is different than mine. I really do think he doesn't get it. He thinks we're... star crossed lovers or something. He keeps telling my parents that one day he's going to ask me to marry him."

I wanted to be surprised by this, but I really couldn't be. Compared to the other things she'd said, this just wasn't that surprising. Besides, given Dave's comment at dinner... No wonder he didn't want me there.

"Does he think... is he like waiting for you or something?" I asked.

Maddie shrugged. "I don't think so. He's had girlfriends before. And I don't know if he thinks I'm waiting for him. I mean, you are sort of my first long term boyfriend, but it's not like I never dated before."

"I still can't believe your dad would want you to see him alone," I said. I couldn't get over how... strange? twisted? that was.

Maddie shrugged. "It's not like that, Clark. I don't think my dad was thinking anything like that would happen. He just doesn't like to think about it. So, to him, all he was asking me to do was to see my cousin. What's wrong with that?"

"But when you argued..." I said.

Maddie nodded. "I know, but sometimes I feel like even

when I'm arguing with him about it, he's blocking out the words. It's just easier for him to deal with that way."

I sighed. I didn't want to argue with her about it, but I still didn't get it. Her father blocked out the words as it was too hard for *him* to deal with? What about Maddie? With another sigh, I pulled her closer to me.

"Thanks, Clark," she said quietly into my chest a few minutes later. "I haven't really... I don't know. I've never really told anyone before. Thanks for being there for me."

"I love you," I said quietly. "And whatever your parents seem to think, in my mind that means I want you to be happy and safe. I want you to be able to talk to me about things like this."

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It was a couple of hours later, after we'd fallen asleep wrapped in each other's arms, that I awoke and thought about my words. It was weird how calm I felt while I lay there holding Maddie. I finally realized what I had been missing from my relationship, if you could call it that, with Lana.

I think I always felt safe with Lana. I never had to tell her my secret because she wasn't very... nice to me? Those weren't the right words, but something like that. Maybe just because she obviously didn't care about me the way I wanted her to. The way I thought I cared about her.

That safety net... it felt gone with Maddie. And sometimes, like now, that felt good. No one had ever trusted me with their secrets like this before. It felt as good to hold Maddie tonight and know she felt safe after sharing the thing about Dave with me as it did when I was being the Boy in Black.

But was I ready to return the favor? Tell her about the Boy in Black? More than that - tell her about how I was the Boy in Black - about all my strange abilities?

Honestly, I didn't think so. Maybe I didn't want that kind of relationship as much as I thought I did. I wanted to feel this close to Maddie, but at the same time...

Well, not to minimize the thing she had told me, but she wasn't the only girl in the world to go through that type of thing. But I was, as far as I knew, the only person who could fly and freeze things with his breath.

Basically, Maddie's secret didn't change who she was. But mine... well, it made me a freak. As much as she had trusted me with her secret, I couldn't be sure she would really want to hear mine. How could she ever look at me the same way again?

She couldn't. Obviously. I couldn't be the same somewhat naive farm kid she thought she was dating. I was... an alien. Or a science experiment. Or whatever it turned out I really was. And I couldn't see how anyone could know that and still think of me as Clark Kent.

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I woke up to the feeling of Maddie stirring beside me, and snaked my arm out to pull her closer to me. Whatever weird feelings I had had last night were gone now. Or at least unimportant. All I wanted was to feel my girlfriend beside me and sleep some more.

"You have an early morning class," she said as she snuggled in closer to my side.

I groaned. "Maybe I'll just skip it," I said.

Maddie laughed. "Somehow I don't think that's a good idea. You may be the only college student in history who would feel bad about it later."

I groaned again as I sat up. "You know, you make fun of me, but it's no fun to be the only college student in history

who feels guilty for missing class."

Maddie giggled. "Get out of here."

I got out of bed and bent down to give her a kiss. Just as I was about to leave, though, I had a thought. "Mads, how long is Dave in town?"

"I think through next weekend. I'm not sure. I told my dad I would only see him once. Why?"

"Why don't you stay with me while he's here?"

"Could you talk about this later?" came the groggy voice of Stacy, Maddie's roommate, from somewhere under her covers.

I moved closer to Maddie's bed to whisper. "I don't know. I don't like the idea that he could stop by unannounced. If you're in my room, he won't be able to find you."

"You don't mind?" she asked me.

I smiled. "Why would I mind? It sounds great to me."

She giggled again. "You think Steve will mind?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. "You think I care? Steve has girls over all the time. And when he has guests, I can't sleep there. I'm not planning to kick him out or anything."

"Thanks, Clark," she whispered before leaning up on her elbow to kiss me again. "I'll see you at lunch?"

"Yeah, see you later," I said as I hoisted my book bag farther up on my shoulder and left.

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"Hey," I said to Steve when I saw him just before lunch. "Do you mind if Maddie stays here for a few nights? Just to sleep. You can be here, but I guess if you could not bring girls back, I'd appreciate it."

"What? You two decide it would be fun to play house?" Steve asked me.

I shrugged. "No. There's just some stuff going on. So, is it a problem?"

Steve laughed. "What do I care? You're the one stupid enough to settle down with one girl when there are all these options out there."

I rolled my eyes at him before we headed out to lunch together.

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"So, I'm guessing whatever was wrong with Maddie is better now?" Lois asked me as we walked to class.

"What?" I asked, trying to distract her.

Lois shrugged. "She just seems more relaxed now. And you two seem tighter than ever."

I nodded. "I think we're good," I said. "And yeah, Maddie's fine."

We walked in silence for a few moments before Lois burst out, "He really mentioned me?"

"Who?" I asked her, not at all sure what she was talking about.

"Perry White. You said he mentioned me when you met with him."

I laughed. "Yes, Lois. He really did. It sounds like he was pretty impressed with your article."

"Any news on yours?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, but maybe Norcross and Judd don't work on weekends? They were meeting with people here on Friday night, so maybe they just haven't had a chance to call back."

"I'm sure that's it," Lois said. "I mean, we know your article is real, so it's going to get published."

"Thanks, Lois," I said, smiling at her. "So, how's the Titan?"

Lois nearly lit up at that. "It's so much fun, Clark. I

mean, I'm sure it's nothing like the Planet, but the newsroom is crowded and ...." She trailed off.

"Have you had a chance to talk to Paul?" I asked her.

"A couple of times," she admitted blushing. "But he's really busy and he mostly talks to the upper classmen."

"Have you met Linda?" I asked her.

"Linda King?" she clarified and I nodded.

Lois nodded. "She's just as Alicia described her. Blonde, big boobs, no brains."

I laughed. "And yet still this doesn't change your opinion of Paul?"

Lois shrugged. "He's a guy, Clark."

"Hey!" I said. "So am I. And last I checked Maddie didn't have blonde hair and she had a brain."

"No comment on the boobs part, I noticed," Lois said with a grin.

"I'm not an idiot," I said. "I'm not going to say my girlfriend doesn't have big boobs. Then I'll just sound like I'm disappointed or something."

"Actually," Lois said, "you'll sound like you noticed."

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Noticed what? That Maddie's a girl? Yeah, I did. Is that a crime now?"

Lois giggled. "I guess not. I don't know. You're right, of course. But maybe Paul just hasn't met anyone who's the total package yet, so he's settling."

"He's met you," I said.

"What?" Lois asked. "What's that got to do with..."

"You said he hasn't met someone who's the total package. I presume by that you mean looks and intelligence. And for the case of Paul, let's even add in journalistic talent, although it doesn't sound like that's all that important to him given his interest in Linda."

Lois shrugged.

"Well, you have looks and intelligence. And journalistic talent coming out of your ears."

Lois giggled. "Well, maybe I'm just not his type. Yet."

"You mean because you can think for yourself? Or because you're not the kind of girl who would sleep with him to get a spot on the paper?"

"Or because I'm not blonde. Or..." she trailed off.

"And that's okay with you? You're still attracted to him even if his interest in Linda over you is based on hair color or bra size?"

"If you tell me you've noticed my bra size, I may have to smack you, Clark Kent," Lois said firmly.

I blushed. I wasn't going to go anywhere near there. I mean, what was I supposed to say? Surely, it wouldn't be believable for me to say I hadn't. Even if I had been a good liar. And since I wasn't... Nope, I wasn't going to say anything at all.

Lois giggled. "Well, I guess that answers that."

"I'm not blind," I said softly.

"I didn't think you were. But this was my point. All guys notice things like that."

"Not all guys make their dating decisions based on things like that," I said.

"I was unaware we were dating," Lois said with a sly smile.

"I was unaware that was even an option," I countered. "I seem to recall something about you only being here for your journalism degree."

Lois blushed. "I am, but if Paul were interested in me..."

I groaned. "You're hopeless," I told her.

She shrugged. "Whatever. Just wait, Clark. I'll be dating him before the end of the semester. I just need to figure out

how to impress him."

"Have you tried stuffing your bra?" I asked her.

She smacked me. "Careful, or I'm going to have to replay this conversation for Maddie."

"Hey, I haven't done anything wrong," I said.

"You will have when I retell it," Lois replied, an evil glint in her eye.

I laughed as I followed her into the classroom.

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I grimaced as I heard the sounds coming from my room. It sounded like Steve had taken my request that he not bring girls back to our room for a couple of weeks to mean that he shouldn't do it at night, but during the day was fine.

I guess it was, sort of. I just wished I had some warning. The books I needed for my math class were in there. When I got to the door of my room, though, there was no sock.

Thank goodness - it was some other poor sap whose roommate had turned their room into a brothel in the middle of the day. I grinned at the thought. It was a bit unfair. Given it wasn't Steve, it could actually be some guy with his girlfriend. While still unfair to the roommate, it probably meant the brothel comment was a bit out of line.

"Oh man!" I cried as I opened the door. It was only years of training on my parents' part that made those the words that came out of my mouth, since I was pretty sure most people would have used much stronger language. As it happened, I was the poor sap. Steve had forgotten the sock.

Worse yet, he had apparently also forgotten the way to his bed as he and the girl du jour were on *my* bed. While I glanced away as quickly as I could, I was pretty sure their activities meant I not only needed to change my sheets, but perhaps throw these away completely. And I should probably wander off campus with Maddie to a drug store or something to pick up a can of disinfectant after class.

"Hey, man. The sock!" Steve half yelled, half whined at me.

"What sock?" I said back, also speaking somewhat louder than necessary. On the other hand, I decided it was okay. This was not a time I felt it was particularly important to use my 'indoor voice'.

"The one on the door," Steve said, clearly agitated. I just wanted to get my textbook and leave, but I couldn't spot it. Of course, my unwillingness to look anywhere near my side of the room where the naked people lay was probably part of it.

"There was no sock on the door, Steve," I said, turning away from him so I could see my desk without seeing any random body parts. There it was. I grabbed it before heading for the door.

"By the way, maybe next time you could take some care not to get lost on the way to your bed?" I shot out as I closed the door.

"Oh, Clark," Steve called, suddenly sounding calm now that I was leaving.

"What?" I asked without opening the door farther. I really didn't need to see anymore.

"Some guy called for you. Bill something or other from the Daily Planet."

"Thanks," I mumbled back. Great message. Very helpful. Not like the message was at all important or anything.

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"Wow!" Maddie said as I sat next to her in class.

"What's gotten into you?"

"What?" I asked grumpily as I pulled my book out of

my backpack.

"That," she laughed lightly. "The grumpiness. What happened to Clark Kent?"

"Did you say Clark was grumpy?" Lois asked as she took the seat on my other side. "I didn't know Clark got grumpy."

"Very funny," I mumbled.

"So," Maddie prodded again. "What's the deal?"

"It's just Steve," I said, shaking my head in an effort to bring myself out of my foul mood.

"What did he do this time?" Lois asked. That nearly did it, and I fought a grin. What had Steve done to Lois? That should have been Maddie's line.

"Did he do something to you?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "No. Not really. But he's not exactly up for Outstanding Roommate of the Year, is he?"

Maddie gave a laugh on my other side. "Of course he is. As long as it's for the jerk category."

This time I did laugh. "Okay, enough," I said. "He's really not that bad."

Maddie raised her eyebrows at me and I laughed again. "He could be worse," I pointed out.

"Of course, he could," Lois said. "I mean rather than just bring girls back to your room all the time, he could do something really nasty like sleep with them in your bed."

I groaned.

"Don't want me to suggest that to him?" Lois asked with a laugh.

I didn't say anything for a moment, and Maddie caught on.

"What? He's done that?" she asked. "When? And please tell me you changed the sheets after that?"

"Just today as far as I know," I said. "And I'm burning the sheets. And thinking of buying a new mattress as well."

"He didn't really do that?" Lois asked. "Did he? I mean even Steve has his limits."

"I'm sure he does," I replied. "But apparently having sex on my bed is within them."

"You're really not kidding?" Maddie asked.

"Not at all. Want to take a walk after class? I need to go buy some disinfectant since I can't really afford a new mattress."

"Not to burst your bubble," Lois said, "but you don't really think Steve's the first person to do that on your mattress, do you?"

"Um, yes," I pointed out. Maybe I shouldn't have been so obvious that Maddie and I hadn't, but I was pretty surprised by her question.

"That mattress was here when you got here," Lois pointed out. "I mean, I assume they also disinfect it between semesters, but you don't really think they buy new ones every year, do you?"

"I hadn't considered it before now," I said, giving her a dirty look. I hadn't wanted to consider it either.

"Yeah, thanks, Lois," Maddie said, sounding as disturbed as I did at the thought.

"Sorry," she shrugged. "I thought you both would have realized."

"Hey," I said, mainly to get her off of this topic. "Do you know someone named Bill at the Planet that might be calling me?"

"Someone from the Planet called you?" Lois asked.

I shrugged. "That was the extent of the information I got from Mr. Outstanding Jerk of a Roommate. He's a great message taker."

"Bill?" Lois said. "No last name."

"Well, it's hard to concentrate on last names when you're conducting extra-curricular activities in your roommate's bed," Maddie pointed out.

Lois smiled before bursting out, "Billy Norcross! I'm pretty sure that's his first name. It must be him. They must have news on your story. You have to call him back now, Clark."

"I should have thought of that," I said, remembering that Lois was right. His name was Billy. "But we can't leave now, we have class," I pointed out, looking meaningfully at the people around us who were waiting for the professor to arrive.

"This is more important," Lois said.

I looked at the clock. "I can call after class," I said. "It will only be four thirty."

"Later than that before we get to a phone," Maddie said. "I think Lois is right. You need to call him back now. Come on, Clark. This is more important than one measly math lecture."

"I'm not sure," I said. "My parents are paying for me..."

"To get a job at the Daily Planet in four years," Lois cut me off. "And calling back one of their star reporters has to be a more direct route to getting there than sitting in this meaningless class." She reached out and grabbed my book. On my other side, Maddie took my backpack.

"We're leaving," Maddie said. "And since we have your stuff, you can't take notes anyway."

I laughed at the looks on their faces. "Fine," I said, rolling my eyes. "Then let's get out of here before Professor Backley gets here and sees us sneaking out."

"Let's go to my room," Lois said. "It's the closest."

"Except for mine," I pointed out.

"Yours is currently otherwise occupied," Maddie pointed out.

"Right," I said, suddenly wondering what Billy Norcross would think if I called him back with the sound of Steve and that girl in the background. It probably wouldn't project the most professional image.

When we got to Lois' room, I looked up at the ceiling. "Have they moved?" Lois asked me.

"Have what moved?" Maddie asked.

"Last time he was here, Clark noticed that Star moves the glow in the dark stars around to match the current Metropolis sky," Lois told her.

"Neat," Maddie said, looking up. "How'd you know that?"

"Some of the constellations moved around," I said. "It looks mostly the same now, but it doesn't look all that different outside either."

"You know the constellations?" Maddie asked.

"He's a farm boy," Lois said with a smile. "He can probably see them from his house."

"That's a bad thing?" I asked.

"No," Lois said.

"But it is weird," Maddie added with a smile.

"You can't see the stars in San Diego?" I asked her.

Maddie shrugged. "Better than here, I guess. But not well."

"Well, not to validate Lois' stereotypes or anything, but we can see the stars pretty well from the farm," I said.

Lois rolled her eyes at me. "Just call the Planet," she told me, pointing to the phone.

I picked up her phone, sorry now that I had agreed to this. I wasn't really sure I wanted an audience for this. What

if I sounded like an idiot? It was one thing to do so in front of Billy Norcross. While it might not bode well for my chances at the internship, I never had to see him again. On the other hand, sounding like an idiot in front of Lois and Maddie was not the same thing. To have them witness my sounding like an idiot for such an important phone call, too...

I sighed. Neither of them wanted me to fail. They were both completely supportive. Although, I doubt Lois would be too heart broken if I did something that ruined my chances at the internship.

"Do you need me to dial for you, honey?" Maddie asked, her voice saccharine sweet. I gave her a dirty look.

"Clark, Perry White thought your article was good. What could you possibly have to fear from Billy Norcross?" Lois asked.

I nodded my head before picking up the phone. I used one hand to dig through my backpack for the business card Mr. Norcross had given me when I was there. Pulling it out, I punched in the number on the card.

"May I please speak with Mr. Norcross?" I asked when the phone was answered.

"This is," came back the somewhat curt reply. I wondered if I had called at a bad time. Maybe I should just call back later?

"Hi, Mr. Norcross. This is Clark Kent. If this is a bad time, I can call back..."

"Clark? Thanks for calling back. This is a great time actually. And didn't I tell you to call me Billy?"

"Um, yeah," I mumbled back.

He chuckled. "Relax, Clark. Really. I promise not to go tell Perry White you're a screw-up."

"Thanks," I said, feeling myself start to relax.

"Besides, Serena and I were really impressed with all you managed to uncover. And the investigating we've done since then has only confirmed everything you found. We made a few changes to your story, but overall, it's remained intact."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. They hadn't completely changed what I wrote?

Mr. Norcross chuckled again. "Really. In fact, Serena fought with Perry. We really thought you deserved the main byline on the article. When we showed Perry how little we had to change, he agreed."

"I have the first byline?" I repeated, feeling completely stunned.

Lois tugged on my arm and I turned toward her.

"Really?" she mouthed to me.

"You did most of the work," Mr. Norcross said. "So, you deserve the first byline. Look for it in tomorrow's paper. Page 3."

I nodded my head at Lois and I could see Maddie's smile behind her.

"Thank you, Mr... Billy," I fumbled. "Really. Thank you so much."

"We didn't do you any favors, Clark. You did good work. Serena and I expect to see you here in a few years even if you don't get the internship this summer," he said.

"Thank you," I said again.

He gave another small chuckle. "Have a good evening, Clark."

"You, too. And thank Miss Judd for me, too," I finally remembered.

I hung up the phone and paused. I had a byline in the Daily Planet. An actual byline.

"They gave you the lead byline?" Lois asked again.

"Uh huh," I said, still too stunned to really speak.

"That's amazing, Clark," Maddie said.

The door opened before I could respond and Star walked in. "Hello," she said, looking stunned at the group of us hanging out in her room.

"Hey," I said.

"We're on our way out to celebrate," Lois announced.

"Want to join us?"

"What are you celebrating?" Star asked.

"Clark just got a byline in the Daily Planet," Lois said.

"And we never celebrated your being the first freshman to get on the Titan staff. Well, by honest means anyway," I pointed out.

"We should go to EOW," Star said.

"What's EOW?" Maddie asked.

"You've never taken her to EOW?" Lois asked me with a grin. "Bad boyfriend," she shook her head at me.

"I'm with Maddie. What's EOW?" I said in reply.

"It's the sit down restaurant on campus," Star said. "It's not exactly Metropolis' finest eatery, but..."

"It's the best you can do without leaving campus," Lois said.

"Sounds good," I said, closing up my book bag.

"So, where is it?" Maddie asked as we made our way out of the dorm.

"On the west edge of campus. Apparently, it's sort of a joke, but EOW stands for End of the World. Not a very funny joke," Lois said.

A few minutes later, the four of us settled into a booth. "You can get an appetizer, drink, and entree for one dining credit," Star announced as we looked over the menus.

"Or you can skip the appetizer and get dessert. They make the best chocolate torte here," Lois said.

I smiled. It only took a couple of weeks of being friends with Lois to know she was a huge chocolate fan.

"So," Star said as we placed our menus down. "How are things with your cousin?" she asked Maddie.

I choked on the water I had been about to swallow. I didn't know Maddie really knew Star, let alone that they were close enough for her to tell Star about her cousin.

"Um, what?" Maddie asked, and I realized she hadn't told Star anything.

"I um... I had a vision or whatever that you were having some issues with a cousin of yours," Star said.

I stared at her in shock. How had she known that?

"I... well, I was, but they're better now," Maddie finally said, clearly as flustered as I was.

That was just weird.

It was only as I was falling asleep that night, that I recalled the conversation I'd had with Star the night we met.

'But at some point, I'm going to walk in on you barely dressed with my roommate.' Was there any chance she was right?

I pulled Maddie closer to me. Of course there wasn't.

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I tried to block the sound out. It wasn't really a good time for this. Why couldn't I have a more considerate roommate? I didn't understand.

After our dinner at EOW, Maddie and I had gone off campus to find a place to buy some disinfectant and then come back to my room. Steve, of course, was long gone. We had changed the sheets (I had thrown the ones I had been using away and vowed to make Steve buy me a new set), and I had sprayed the mattress liberally with

disinfectant. Then, even though the November weather was more than a little chilly outside, I had opened the windows to help expedite the airing out of the bed and rid the room of the smell of the spray.

My feeling was that the cold wasn't going to bother me, Maddie had teasingly told me it wouldn't bother her as long as I held her close, and I didn't really care if it bothered Steve.

Then we left for one of the small lounges down the hall to study for the night. We had come back to the room two hours ago to head to sleep. Steve was still out, so closing the windows, we had quickly gotten into bed.

Maddie had fallen asleep before me. She had been sleeping well the two nights she'd been here. She admitted that she had been sort of tired. She had not been sleeping well since she realized she was not going to win the argument with her father about seeing Dave, but staying in my room, she felt safer and had been sleeping easily.

I had fallen asleep shortly after she had, the rhythmic sound of her heartbeat lulling me to sleep. Steve had come in about five minutes earlier, and as he often did, pretended we were not in the room, let alone asleep.

I could tell from her heartbeat that Maddie was awake, but like me was pretending to still be asleep. I just couldn't deal with Steve right now. It was not the time to talk about boundaries with him yet again - explaining that I considered my bed off limits for his extra curricular activities, and I didn't want to be disingenuous by having a polite conversation with him now only to lay this on him in the morning.

Maddie had burrowed her head under the covers and I could tell that she was trying to fall back to sleep. I had been about to when someone upstairs turned the radio on. I probably would have slept right through it if Steve hadn't woken me up, but now that I was awake, I could hear the radio upstairs loud and clear. Apparently, Hurricane Mitchell, which had been in the Atlantic Ocean for a few weeks and appeared to be dying down to a tropical storm, had picked up some speed and intensity and was expected to hit the Miami area in the next couple of hours. Evacuation efforts were under way.

If I went, this was the type of thing where I could really make a difference. I had done it before, like with the wildfire in California. By offering my help to families in the area, I could usually help them pack much faster. Just having the extra hands helped and in those cases where I was left alone, I would pack at something approaching super-speed.

How could I leave though? What would I say to Maddie? Could I use the bathroom excuse I usually used with Steve? Would she be asleep before I could get back from the bathroom?

I had decided to quit the Boy in Black duties for the week. Maddie needed me more. Still, that was a much easier decision in the abstract than it was now when I was actually faced with the decision. What if some family refused to leave without packing some item with sentimental value and died? Even if no one died, wasn't my time better spent helping them pack than here with Maddie? She would be asleep in a few minutes, I was sure. She wouldn't even really notice I was gone. Would she?

I sighed. I couldn't just stay here. I was just using Maddie as an excuse. I clearly had to go.

I moved to get out bed.

"Where are you going?" Maddie mumbled, clearly half



asleep.

"I just need to go to the bathroom," I said as I slipped out from under the covers.

"It's freezing in here, man," Steve said when he realized I was awake. I shook my head as I walked out the door. I wasn't in the mood to explain to him that the temperature was a direct result of his actions earlier today.

I decided to actually go to the bathroom first, both as that would mean I hadn't lied to Maddie, but also so I could listen afterwards. If her heartbeat indicated that she was asleep, I could leave without worrying about it. If she was awake... well, I wasn't sure what, but I'd deal with that then.

She was still awake when I was finished, but I floundered outside in the hallway for ten minutes or so deciding what to do before I realized she had fallen asleep. With a sigh of relief, I took off for Florida.

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I crept back into my room at eight the following morning. There was still more work to be done in Florida, and honestly, I thought I might go back later. But Maddie had a ten o'clock class today and I knew she would be getting up in the next half hour or so. So, I thought I might sneak back into bed and take a nap, and then head back to Florida after she left for class.

She and Steve were both fast asleep when I came in and using my floating thing, I was able to slip into bed beside her without too much disruption. She snuggled up against my side a moment later, but seemed to still be asleep, so I relaxed and fell asleep.

I awoke an hour later when I heard Maddie close the door on her way out. I considered going back to bed, but then thought again of the people in Florida and got up and headed back there.

I was only able to help for a little while this time as I had my own class right after lunch and I didn't want to miss lunch. This was one of the days the group of us always met up, and Maddie at least would be wondering where I was if I didn't show since I hadn't told her I was going anywhere.

I went back to my room to pick up my books for my journalism class beforehand and bumped into Steve. I sighed. I still didn't feel prepared to deal with him on this, but I knew I couldn't keep putting it off.

"Hey, man," Steve said as I stepped into the room. "What was the deal with it being so cold in here last night?"

I moved over to my desk to start getting my stuff ready as I said, "Mads and I wanted to air the room out after I disinfected my bed."

"Disinfected your bed?" Steve asked. "What'd you do that for?"

I knew it wasn't Steve's fault that I hadn't slept last night, and I knew that was making me somewhat ill tempered, but I also wasn't sure I cared. I put my books down and turned to face him.

"I could be wrong, but I thought you were having sex in my bed yesterday," I said to him.

He didn't say anything at first, but did look a little flushed. "Sorry, man," he finally said. "We just... weren't paying attention to where we were and..."

"Your bed is ten feet away from mine. How do you make that kind of mistake?" I asked him.

"Oh, come on. Don't make it seem like that big a deal. We didn't do anything..."

"I'm sorry," I said, knowing as I said it that I didn't sound or feel one bit apologetic, "but I disagree. I prefer that the only people whose naked bodies touch my sheets

are people I agree to first and as much as I like you, Steve, you're not one of them."

He sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realize it would be that big a deal. If I had known you were such a neat freak, I never would have done it."

I didn't want to point out that I wasn't really that much of a neat freak, and didn't think I was being that unreasonable. Instead, I decided to play along. "Well, I am. And honestly, I felt the need to throw out those sheets. I'm expecting you to buy me a replacement set."

"Are you serious?" Steve asked me, his eyes wide.

"Um... yeah," I said completely not getting it. How could he be so clueless? Really. If I hadn't talked to Lois and Maddie yesterday, I might have thought it was me, but they had seemed equally grossed out.

"Did you really need to throw the sheets out?" Steve asked me.

"Your naked butt was on them!" I nearly exploded. "Do you want my naked butt on your sheets?"

Steve grimaced. "I guess I can kind of see your point. Can the new sheets wait till the weekend?"

"Yes," I said, feeling myself start to relax. "That's fine. And can you not use my bed in the future?"

"I can probably do that," Steve said.

I didn't say anything, not sure of the appropriate response, but turned back to packing my bag.

We were halfway towards the cafeteria before Steve spoke again. "I am sorry, Clark. I know I'm just about the worst roommate ever, but I don't mean to be."

I nodded. I had been about to tell him it was okay, but decided not to. The truth was that it wasn't okay, but I did know he tried.

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The first weird thing I noticed when we got to the table at lunch was that Maddie was sitting between Lois and Josh. She almost always saved me a seat if she got there before me. I mean, it was really a formality since there was always room for us, but I presumed it was because she wanted to sit next to me. At least that's why I saved a seat for her if I got there first.

If that hadn't been enough, there was the fact that she kept giving me weird glances through lunch.

It was hard to determine what, if anything, was really wrong though, as most of our lunchtime conversation was about Alicia. She and Chris had had their first fight and she was a bit of a mess. I have to admit, I was surprised. I wouldn't have expected Alicia to fall apart like that over a guy.

"I'm sure it will blow over," Josh said just as I sat down.

"You don't understand," Alicia said. "He was so upset. I've never seen him like this before."

"But if you just explain," Maddie offered, throwing me a look I couldn't interpret.

Alicia nodded her head. "He won't even listen to me right now," she said. "I tried to explain, but..."

"What happened?" I cut in, trying to infuse as much sympathy into my words as possible.

Alicia moved her fork listlessly around her plate. "We went to this party last night. And on the way over, Chris mentioned that he hadn't seen the guys throwing the party in a while. Apparently, they're kind of a party crowd and Chris used to be really into that. He said he was a bit like Steve, actually."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Steve asked, sounding offended.

Alicia looked up, her eyes covered with tears, but her voice was firm. "I guess he used to date a lot. Or not date as the case may be."

"Hey!" Steve replied before understanding seemed to cross his face. "Oh," he amended his response.

"Anyway, I don't know. I guess I got a little jealous when I realized how many girls he'd been with before. He kept telling me that he was over that, but I don't know..."

"That's completely understandable," Lois said.

"And I'm sure once Chris calms down a little he'll realize that," Josh said.

Alicia shook her head. "No, 'cause it meant when I got to the party, I started flirting with this other guy."

"What'd you do that for?" Steve asked. I kicked him under the table, but that only made things worse as he added, "What? It sounds like a stupid move to me." I shook my head in amazement at his lack of understanding.

"It was," Alicia said, still moving her fork around.

"But it was also completely natural," I said quietly.

"And nothing happened anyway, right?" Maddie asked her.

"No!" Alicia replied, vehemently. "Nothing. I flirted with him and I danced with him for a few minutes before I realized how stupid I was being and went to find Chris. But by that time he was already so angry at me, it was too late."

"I'm sure it wasn't actually too late," Lois offered. "Like Josh said, you just need to give him time to calm down."

"And then just let him know how sorry you are,"

Maddie said, throwing another unreadable glance my way.

"Maybe," Alicia said, sniffing. "You think he'll really listen?"

"Definitely," Josh said. "He really cares about you, Leesha, so he's not going to want to let this blow up to be something bigger than it is."

"Thanks," Alicia said quietly. "Sorry for falling apart like this."

Maddie smiled. "It's allowed occasionally."

Steve made a sound of annoyance next to me and I kicked him again.

\*\*\*

"Is everything okay?" I asked Maddie after lunch.

"Everything's fine," she said, but something in her tone made me unsure she was being honest. "You're going to be late for class and Lois is waiting for you. We'll talk later." Yeah, she definitely wasn't being honest.

\*\*\*

"Do you know what's up with Maddie?" I asked Lois on the way to journalism class.

Lois gave a small laugh. "You're asking me what's wrong with your girlfriend? Shouldn't you know?"

I sighed. "Well, ideally, yes. But I don't, so I was hoping she might have said something to you."

Lois shook her head. "No, she didn't. Well, she started to, but then Alicia came by and..."

"So, there is something," I said, Lois' words confirming my thoughts from earlier.

Lois shrugged. "I don't really know. She never really said anything. It was more that she seemed about to."

I sighed, audibly.

"Don't you think you should be having this conversation with Maddie?" Lois asked me as I held the humanities door open for her.

"Yes, but she wouldn't talk to me about it now," I said. "I just... I'm not sure what the problem is."

"Well," Lois said as we got our books out, "I'm sure

she'll tell you. Just give her some time to do so."

I nodded, but I didn't want to wait. I had this feeling I couldn't explain. Maybe it was just paranoia, but it felt like whatever had Maddie upset was going to be pretty difficult to fix.

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"Hey," I said quietly, when I met Maddie in the library after class. We often met here and then went into the stacks to study. It was quiet there and since it was set up as a series of cubicles, it forced us to work alone. While not as fun as the studying we did together in the evenings, it was sometimes more productive.

"Hey," she said back, looking at me warily.

"Can we talk?" I asked her. "Or do you really need to study right now?"

"We can talk," Maddie said, and this time I perceived a slight challenge in her voice.

"Do you want to go back to my room to talk?" I asked.

She shrugged in response, and deciding that was as close to a yes as I was going to get, I led the way out.

The walk over to my dorm was quiet and tense. It felt different than normal, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something was really wrong. Something I wouldn't be able to fix.

I let Maddie precede me into my room, thankful that Steve was out.

"So..." I said uneasily once we had both taken our jackets off.

"Where'd you go last night?" Maddie asked me.

"What?"

"Last night. After Steve came in. You left," she said accusingly.

I could feel my heartbeat speed up and was thankful that Maddie didn't have my 'special abilities' or whatever. "I went to the bathroom," I said, feeling myself flush. I really was a horrible liar.

"For several hours?" Maddie challenged me. "I lay there waiting for you to come back and finally fell asleep. And then, when I woke up again a couple of hours later, you were still gone."

"I um..." I fumbled, unsure what to say. "I... are you sure it was a couple of hours later?" I finally deflected.

Maddie gave me a glare that made me wish I hadn't questioned her. "Why don't *you* tell *me*, Clark? What time did you get back? Could it have been a couple of hours later?"

"I couldn't sleep," I settled on, wishing I had thought of it earlier. It was even the truth, sort of.

"So where were you?" Maddie asked, her voice no less accusatory.

"I decided to go for a walk," I mumbled. Or a fly. Or something. The details weren't important, were they?

"Why didn't you just tell me?" she asked.

"I didn't want to wake you," I said, knowing as I said it that I couldn't have sounded more evasive if I tried.

Maddie shook her head. "You know, before you said that, that was exactly what I assumed happened. That or you decided to go study in the lounge or something. I really couldn't imagine it was anything else. But now..."

"Maddie, I'm sorry," I said.

She looked out my window. "I was mostly annoyed as I didn't want to be here alone with Steve," she said quietly. "But now I feel like you're lying to me." She turned to look at me. "What is it, Clark? What were you really doing?"

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. What would she say if I

answered, 'I went to Florida to help the hurricane victims?'

"I don't get it, Clark. Why are you keeping secrets from me?" she asked, and now I could see the beginning of tears in her eyes. "I thought... what could really be that bad?"

'I'm not at all who you think I am,' I thought. 'I'm an alien... at best. Or a science experiment. Or something far worse.'

"Clark?" she prodded.

I wanted to say something to her so badly. I could tell my silence was hurting her. But what could I say? Wasn't it better not to know than to find out in this case? Nothing she could be imagining could be as bad as the truth.

"Fine," she said. Her tone was typically Maddie. She wasn't yelling or screaming or anything like that. She was just terribly disappointed. It was almost harder to take. "I think I'm going to sleep in my own room tonight," she said softly.

"But Dave..." I said, not able to finish the words. I couldn't do that. I couldn't let her sleep there. What if he decided to come for a visit and... I knew it was unlikely, but the thought still haunted me.

"He's not going to come by and... I can't stay here like this," she said quietly, gathering the few things she'd left in my room.

She was at the door, her hand on the doorknob even before I finally decided to tell her a little of the truth. "My parents... they aren't my real parents," I blurted out.

Maddie turned to look at me in confusion. "You're adopted?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Something like that," I said. Then I sighed. "No, not really something like that. Nothing that neat and ordinary."

She was still standing by the door watching me warily.

"I was a foundling," I said. "My parents found me in a field."

Maddie shook her head. "Okay, not to be rude, but does this have anything to do with your being gone last night?"

I didn't know what to say. Of course it had everything to do with that. But I couldn't tell her the rest and even with what I told her, she wasn't going to jump to the truth. A foundling just made me an unwanted baby. But she was still imagining a normal, human baby, I was sure.

"Sort of," I finally said.

Maddie put her stuff down to sit beside me on the bed. "I don't get it," she said quietly.

"Me neither," I replied. It was the truth. I mean, I knew the link between being a foundling and not being with her the previous night, but there was so much I didn't understand.

Maddie put her hand in mine. "So, your parents found you in a field. And you never found out who... your birth parents are?"

I shook my head. "I've never really tried to find them," I said. That was the truth, but it would be hard to explain to Maddie that even though I was found in a field in a small town, all evidence pointed to the fact that my 'parents' if I had any, were no where near by.

"Why not?" she asked quietly.

I shrugged. "They left me in a field," I said quietly. "Clearly, they didn't want me."

"Oh, Clark," Maddie said, moving closer. "You don't know that. Maybe they did want you very much, but couldn't afford to take care of you or something."

"I was found in a *field*," I reminded her. "Not a doorstep or something. In the middle of the field. I could have been

out there for days before someone came across me. If they wanted to make sure I was all right, I was taken care of, they would have made sure to put me where I would be found."

I could go on like this all day. I had had this conversation with Mom and Dad a thousand times, and I had thought of all the arguments. No matter what anyone said, it was clear that my birth parents hadn't cared enough to make sure I was all right. You don't send your child hurtling through space and just assume he's going to be okay.

"But your parents..." Maddie said, clearly trying to say something soothing.

"Are great," I said. "My real parents anyway. Mom and Dad. But whoever came before them..."

"Who cares who came before them?" Maddie asked softly. "I mean... I don't really mean that in that I'm sure you do. But, Clark, they aren't important. Even if you're right, and I'm not sure you are... But even if you are, so some people were too stupid to realize what a great little baby boy they had, and were careless in leaving you somewhere where you might not get found. But then your parents *did* find you. And clearly they love you." She paused and grasped my hand tighter.

"I'm not trying to minimize this," she said softly, "but honestly, Clark. It could have been worse. You've had a good life so far."

I nodded. She was right. It wasn't that I didn't know she was right. Still... it was hard to forget that I came from parents... or maybe not even parents, but people, who didn't want me. Who rejected me for whatever reason.

Maddie rested her head on my shoulder. "I wish you'd talked to me last night rather than go walking on your own," she said softly. "I want... I want to be there for you the way you've been there for me," she said. "I want to help you."

"You have," I said just as quietly. It was true, too. To be fair, I had sort of deflected the argument, but the truth was talking to Maddie about this had made me feel better. It was almost as good as talking to Mom and Dad.

"Promise me that next time you'll come tell me that this is bothering you. Or something else is. Don't keep it from me," she whispered.

I nodded, but felt awful as I did. It was a lie and I knew it. At some point, something else like the hurricane would come up, and I'd leave her again. Maybe next time she wouldn't notice, but I just didn't see...

I loved Maddie, I really did. But there was no way I was willing to risk that by telling her the truth. She loved me now. I knew she did, I could nearly feel it. But she wouldn't feel that way if she knew...

No, clearly I was going to do this to her again. It was just a question of when.

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"Give me a call," came the voice on the machine. "I just want to check on everything," she said. "I... well, I saw Maddie later. I just want to make sure you guys are okay."

I smiled at the small black box. When had Lois gotten to be so... caring? Something like that. I never would have imagined. How was it that she just kept surprising me?

I picked up the phone and dialed, the smile still on my face.

"Clark?"

"Hi, Star," I said, laughing. Her comments on being somewhat psychic still struck me as pretty funny, but I had

to admit, she had a good track record.

"Lois will be right back," she said. "Oh, and I know you haven't even opened the course catalog yet, but you should really take that class."

"What?" I asked. While she had a good track record, sometimes talking to Star could be confusing.

"There's a class you're going to agonize over taking next semester. You should take it," she said.

"Any idea what it is?" I asked her.

There was silence for a moment. "Nope. Sorry."

"That's okay," I told her. "So how are you?"

"Good," she said. "Trying to study hard for my economics final. I feel like I know the material, but I keep seeing myself failing," she said.

"So why study?" I asked her, curious. If she felt like she could see the future and was sure she was going to fail anyway, why waste time on studying?

She sighed. "The future isn't fully decided, Clark. We have some say in how things will go. I just need to work hard enough to change the predetermined path."

I nodded impressed. I had to admit, I tended to think of Star as flaky, but she wasn't really. A bit odd perhaps, but then, no more so than me.

"Lois is here," she said.

"Thanks, Star. Good luck with econ."

"Hey," Lois said as she came on.

"Hi," I replied. "I got your message."

"Is everything okay?" she asked me. "Maddie seemed... quiet? I'm not sure."

"We're okay," I told her. "Thanks for asking. We just... well, it's nothing."

"Good," she said, although I had the impression she wasn't sure she believed me.

"So how are things with you?" I asked her.

"Good," she replied, and I could hear the smile in her voice. "I got my first assignment for the Titan."

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing big. Paul seems to be sticking to his freshman can't write thing despite my article. So, I'm just interviewing some guy who's starting up a recycling campaign. Still, it'll get printed."

"And you're okay with this. Paul, the guy you think is so brilliant, isn't letting you write any real stories even though you have the front page story in this week's paper and this doesn't change your opinion of him?"

Lois gave an audible sigh and I wished I hadn't said anything. She didn't really need me questioning her judgment on this. She was a smart girl. She'd see the error of her ways soon enough.

"No, it doesn't, Clark," she said, her annoyance coming through loud and clear. "His cautiousness is what makes him so brilliant. How does he know I'm not some one-trick pony?"

I laughed. "Has he met you?" I asked her. "Sorry, Lois, but you're not calm enough to resemble a pony in any sense - one trick or not."

"Very funny," she said, but I could tell her annoyance with me had lessened.

"Well, good luck with your article," I told her.

"Thanks. I'll see you later?"

"Yeah. I think we're all meeting for dinner tonight, right?" I asked her.

"I think so. So, I'll see you then," Lois said before hanging up.

I stared at the phone after I put it down. I really did not

understand her attraction to Paul. And she made so many excuses for him. I'd have to take a closer look at him next time I saw him. I hadn't realized he was really that cute, but then again, Steve made it clear it was attitude as much as looks that mattered.

Shaking my head I decided to take out the course catalog and try to find the class Star was sure I was going to agonize over.

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I knew it would be quiet when I opened the door, but I also knew my parents would never forgive me for not coming by today, and this was the only chance I was going to have.

"I thought that was you," Mom said as she came in the back door. "I saw you from the window of the barn."

"And decided it must be your son who was falling out of the sky?" I asked her with a raised brow.

She shook her head at me before continuing on as if I hadn't spoken. "Your father should be here in a few minutes. He was out in the fields, but hasn't been in for lunch yet, so his stomach will be guiding him here shortly."

Mom bustled about, pouring me some juice, coffee for herself, and making sure Dad's lunch was finished. "Do you want anything?" she asked me.

"No, I ate before..." I trailed off as I eyed the cookie jar. Now that I thought about it, it smelled like my favorite peanut butter cookies in here. "Although," I said, as I judiciously used my special vision gizmo to confirm that the jar was full.

"Not until after I see your byline," Mom said with a smile, shaking her head. "It is impossible to keep secrets from you. I made those cookies yesterday in the hopes you wouldn't be able to smell them today."

"I thought I saw you, Clark," Dad interrupted us.

"He sniffed out my secret," Mom told him and Dad laughed.

"Never try to keep secrets from our boy, Martha. His nose is too strong, his sight knows no bounds..."

"Okay, Dad," I cut him off smiling. My parents' ability to joke about my abilities was one of the things I loved best about them. While I had a tendency to see them as signs of why I didn't quite belong here, they just accepted them and teased me about them the way other parents might tease their kid about their cowlick.

"So, where's this paper," Dad said, sitting down and picking up half the sandwich Mom put in front of him.

I pulled the folded over copy of the Daily Planet out of my schoolbag.

Mom took it reverently, and then strangely, turned right to the right spot to see the article.

"Did I tell you it was on page three?" I asked her.

Mom blushed and shared a glance with Dad. "Well," she said, "it's not every day your son has his byline in the biggest paper in the world."

"And?" I asked, not understanding. Mom continued not to meet my eyes and Dad seemed inordinately interested in his lunch.

I decided Dad was the weaker link. It was hard to crack Mom, but Dad just required a little patience. "Dad?" I asked, watching him carefully.

We sat in silence for a moment, Mom looking at the table, Dad continuing his fascination with his sandwich, and me staring at Dad. Finally, Dad cracked. "They sell the Daily Planet in town you know," he mumbled.

"I thought you wanted me to bring you a copy," I said.

"We did!" Mom insisted. "We wanted a copy from Metropolis."

"Aren't they the same?" I asked.

"Maybe," Dad said. "But we knew we wanted more than one copy anyway."

"You know it looks the same in every copy," I said, although I was secretly pleased.

"We know that," Mom said, getting up to bring the cookie jar over. "But... it's your first byline outside of Smallville, Clark. And in such an important paper."

"We just couldn't help it," Dad said, not looking at all embarrassed. "We knew we asked you to bring us a copy, but yesterday it seemed like too long to have to wait for today to see it."

"Thanks," I said quietly.

Mom shook her head. "What are you thanking us for? Because we love you? Because we're proud of you? You don't need... No. You *shouldn't* thank us for that."

"Now, let's read that article. We promised ourselves we'd only look at the byline yesterday," Dad said, pulling the paper closer to him.

Mom moved to stand behind him and they read quietly for a few minutes.

"This is really good, Clark," she said as she finished.

"Well, you know Billy Norcross and Serena Judd are two of the Planet's best reporters. They did a lot to fix up my writing," I pointed out.

"Well, first off, the fact that this Mr. White put two of his best reporters on this shows what a great job you did. Not that it isn't clear. Bringing this to light could really impact a lot of people's lives, Clark. Not just the female students at Met U, but also their patients," Mom said.

"And didn't Billy Norcross tell you that the reason you got the lead byline was because they didn't do much to change your writing?" Dad asked.

I nodded.

Mom handed me a cookie. "I always envisioned sharing a drink with you to celebrate this type of success. I never dreamed it would happen so early."

"We could still share a drink," I said with a smile. "I mean, we know it doesn't affect me given what happened at Pete's graduation party."

"No way. I know alcohol doesn't affect you, but I'm not going to push underage drinking, young man," Mom said, but I could tell that she was mostly joking.

"So," Dad said as he got up and moved the copy of the paper to the counter. "You never had a chance to tell us - have you managed to talk to Maddie and find out what was wrong?"

I sighed. I hadn't remembered, but in all the focus on my article, I had never told my parents about dinner with Maddie and her cousin. "Yeah," I said. "It didn't have anything to do with me."

"Is she okay?" Mom asked.

I nodded. "She was fighting with her dad as he wanted her to have dinner with a cousin of his when he was in town."

Mom looked at me curiously.

"He's not exactly..." I paused while I thought of the words to say, "cousin-ly with her."

Dad gave me a strange look. "Did you meet him?"

I nodded. "Remember? Maddie asked me to come with her to dinner on Sunday."

"Right," Mom nodded. "What do you mean, he's not 'cousin-ly' with her?"

I gave another small sigh. "Dave thinks they are going to get married some day. And sort of behaves like a boyfriend. An ill-mannered boyfriend, I guess."

Mom shook her head. "You're not saying..."

I nodded. "Yeah. I mean, she says she's never been alone with him, but the things he does in public... Well, he didn't really do anything while I was there. Just looked at her funny. But funny enough that I guessed what was going on."

"You guessed from a look?" Dad asked.

"Remember what you told me? Back when I said I thought Lana had cheated on me with Bob? That sometimes you can tell - there's a way two people who are intimate look at each other?"

"Oh... Clark..." Mom said, looking anguished.

"Maddie says it never got that far. But he does sort of look at her like that."

"And I'm guessing Maddie's father doesn't know," Dad said, sounding stern.

I shook my head. "He does. That's what I meant about the things Dave is willing to do in public. He's done them in front of her father."

"And he asked her to see him anyway?" Dad asked starting to sound annoyed.

I nodded. "Maddie says he's in denial."

"That's quite something to be in denial about!" Dad said, and there was no pretense now. He was clearly annoyed.

"Is she..." Mom paused, still looking like she wanted to cry. "...safe, I guess? With him in town?"

"She's staying with me for the week," I said.

"Good," Mom said sounding relieved.

Dad just shook his head. "Some people..." he started but then caught himself and stopped.

"So, that's the other thing," I said.

"What other thing?" Mom asked.

"She's staying with me. So last night, when I went to help out in Florida..."

"You decided to show up as the Boy in Black when Maddie is staying in your room?" Dad asked, and now I was sorry he was annoyed at Maddie's dad. Or her cousin? Or both? Which ever, he was transferring it to me.

"It was the middle of the night. I figured she would be asleep," I said.

"But she wasn't?" Mom asked.

"No. I guess she fell asleep, but then woke up a couple of hours later."

"This is why you should be limiting the Boy in Black activities for now!" Dad said, and I could tell he was trying to control his anger.

"What should he have done, Jonathan?" Mom asked.

"He's doing that the best he can. Should he have let those people's homes get ruined, knowing he could help?"

"But Maddie could have figured it out," Dad said, although he already sounded slightly calmer.

"Did she?" Mom asked. "I mean, she wouldn't really assume you were in Florida."

"No, but she was upset with me for being evasive about where I was. I told her I'd gone for a walk."

"Did that help?" Dad asked.

I gave a somewhat hollow laugh. "Maybe it would have if I was a better liar. But no, it sounded like I was making it up."

"So what are you going to do?" Mom asked.

"I think it's fixed for now. Sort of," I told her. "I ended

up telling her about being a foundling and that seemed to give more credence to the story about taking a walk."

"Are you..." Mom trailed off as she looked at me closely. "Are you thinking of telling her the truth?"

"He can't!" Dad said, just as I said, "I can't!"

Mom shook her head. "Why can't you tell her the truth?" she asked me.

"This has to remain a secret, Martha!" Dad answered her.

Mom sighed. "I seem to recall that the reason Clark is such a bad liar is that we taught him not to lie."

"That was before we knew..." Dad started.

"Knew what?" Mom interrupted. "That it's not always a good idea to be one-hundred percent open with others? We already knew that. Clark has learned that, too. But he's an adult now, Jonathan, and it's time for us to trust him to decide when he needs to be open. I have to say, I'm not really comfortable with the idea of it being okay to lie."

Dad sighed and I had the impression that they had had this discussion before, and Dad had lost then, too.

"Mom, you can't really think it's a good idea for me to be honest with Maddie," I said.

"Why not?" she asked.

"You want me to tell her my secret?" I was thoroughly confused.

Mom sat down again, placing a hand on top of mine. "Do you love her?" she asked even though I had already told her that I did. I nodded. "Does she love you?" I nodded again.

"He can't know that!" Dad interjected.

Mom fixed him with a look. "Don't you know that I love you?" she asked.

"That's different. Clark is just a boy. He doesn't..."

"Jonathan," Mom cut him off. "Are you trying to tell me you didn't know I loved you when we were eighteen? You proposed to me that year."

Dad sighed. "We were..."

"What?" Mom asked gently. "Older than Clark? Clark, who has seen more tragedy than we have seen even now? Has seen it as he chooses to? Do you really think Clark is younger at eighteen than we were?"

Dad didn't answer at first, sighing. "It doesn't matter. Even if she does love you..."

"She does," I interrupted. "I don't want to tell her either, Dad, but I know she loves me."

Mom squeezed my hand gently. "Clark, you can't live your life in fear. Do you really think Maddie would expose you?"

"No," I said quickly. I couldn't really imagine her doing so. "But still... I can't believe you'd want me to..."

"I'd want to meet her first," Mom said. "Maybe she could come home with you for Thanksgiving. I mean we'd have to buy you a commercial ticket which might be a bit expensive at this late date, but we could. And then Dad and I could get to know her."

"And if we decide we don't trust her?" Dad asked.

"Then we could reassess," Mom said. "But do you really think that we wouldn't trust her given that Clark does?"

"No," Dad admitted. "But that doesn't mean..."

"It doesn't matter," I said quietly. "I'd love to bring her here. Have her meet you. But I'm not ready to tell her."

Mom nodded. "I understand that. But Clark... Think about this carefully. Maddie has shared something personal with you. She trusted you. What do you think is going to

happen when she realizes you aren't doing the same for her?"

"I'm going to lose her," I said quietly. It wasn't like I hadn't thought of it before.

"Are you okay with that?" Mom asked me, and I shook my head. I had thought of that, too.

"I don't want... I love her," I said.

Mom squeezed my hand again. "I'm not pressuring you, Clark. I'm just telling you to stop worrying about everyone not accepting you for who you are. If Maddie truly loves you, she will. And at some point, she's going to ask you to make a choice. You can either lose her or tell her."

"Or stop being the Boy in Black," Dad said.

"I can't do that either," I answered quickly.

"It doesn't really matter," Mom said. "That would only make it easier to keep your secret. At some point, she'll still figure out that you have one."

"I don't really like the idea of Clark telling anyone," Dad said quietly.

"So, what's he going to do, Jonathan? Get married without telling his wife? Wait until their children are teens and start flying around their house?"

We all laughed. "I'm not ready to propose to Maddie," I said.

Mom smiled. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. I'm just saying, you are going to have to tell someone someday. Maybe that's not Maddie, and that's fine. But if you continue to live in fear that no one will accept you for who you really are, you're going to end up alone."

She put her hand on my arm to soften the words, but I knew she was right. Not that that made me any more ready.

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"Hey, you okay?" Maddie asked as she slipped a hand into mine. The warmth of her smile made it clear than any lingering annoyance she had had with me was gone now.

"Yeah, I am," I smiled at her. "Thanks. It was helpful to talk this morning."

She removed her hand from mine to wrap an arm around my waist as we entered the dining hall. "No need to thank me. It's what I'm here for."

Mom's words from this afternoon rung in my ear. She was right. I was going to lose Maddie if I wasn't honest with her. And I didn't want that. I loved her. She was sweet and kind and she sincerely cared about me. I knew she wouldn't be the one to turn me over to whatever authorities Dad was always worried about. Still, the idea of telling her was inconceivable. She sincerely cared about me *now*. But now she thought I was a naive farm boy. Who knew what she'd think if she knew the truth?

I sighed. Maybe I should just deal with the fact that at some point Maddie was likely to break up with me for my secret and enjoy the time with her that I had rather than agonizing over when that was going to happen.

I leaned down to place a small kiss on the tip of her nose after we both paid for our meals. "Well, then," I said as we made our way over to our friends, "then thank you for being here."

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After dinner, Maddie and I cornered Lois. We had prearranged to meet Star after dinner as this week's edition of the Titan was supposed to be released tonight. While this wasn't exactly the Daily Planet and things sometimes went wrong with the release dates, I had to admit that one way Lois was right about Paul was that apparently distribution had improved since he took over. I had no idea who the

poor guy in charge of it was, and he got no credit, but Paul got credit for getting him to join the paper in the first place. I guess that was the benefit of being editor.

So, the plan was to head over to the student union and try to nab one of the first copies of the paper with Lois' story on the cover. Then the four of us were going to head to that little Italian restaurant, Anjelina's, where Maddie and I had had our first date. I had called ahead and determined that they carried vanilla ice cream and hot fudge sauce to put atop the chocolate brownies that Maddie still swore were the best she'd ever had. So, we were planning to order a giant brownie sundae for Lois to celebrate.

It wasn't quite the dinner we had had for my article, but this seemed much more Lois' style. Maddie had even had the idea of asking for a sidecar of hot fudge for Lois, so there was no danger of her not getting enough chocolate.

Alicia had bailed on dinner as she and Chris had apparently made up from their fight and were going out alone. I had invited Josh and Steve, but of course Steve had plans with a girl. He assured me that they were going back to her room, though, so there would be no unpleasant surprises for Maddie and me when we got back later. Josh had also had a date, but had brought some fancy brand of chocolate to dinner and given it to Lois in congratulations. Lois had told him not to be silly, it was just an article in the school paper, but it was clear she was pleased.

"I still have homework to do," Lois said when Maddie and I approached her. "I was just heading back to my room to do it."

I shook my head at her. "Right. You weren't planning to go try to get a copy of the Titan?"

"It's just an article, Clark. I mean, it's not like it was published in the Planet," Lois said dismissively. I wondered why she was doing this. I thought this semi-closed off Lois had disappeared. I didn't believe for an instant that she wasn't proud of her accomplishment.

"Come on, Lois," I said. "In some ways, this is a much bigger achievement than that. I mean, Perry White doesn't have a rule saying he won't publish anything by freshmen. Only the Titan does. And, you have the front page story. That's huge!"

A small smile escaped Lois' lips before she could help herself. "It's still just a..."

"Come on," Maddie said, laughing as she grabbed Lois' arm. "We're not asking. We are heading over to the union to get a copy of the paper and you are coming with us. We can all study together later."

"I guess I am with Clark," Lois said with a smile. "He would never condone me completely blowing off my homework."

I rolled my eyes at her. I wasn't sure when I had gotten the reputation for being the perfect student. The truth was that aside from Steve, no one in our little group routinely blew off classes or assignments. I wasn't sure that I was any more adamant about that than Maddie or Lois, but I guess I was more vocal about it and thus it was a common tease among them.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Lois called out as we approached the union and saw Star sitting out front.

"Waiting for you," Star said as she got up with a smile.

Lois turned to look at me. "Did you guys plan this?"

I shrugged, but smiled, giving myself away.

Lois shook her head. "It's just an article."

"On the front page!" Star said as she brandished a paper from beside her. "STUDENT PRESIDENT WITHDRAWS

FROM MET U" it proclaimed in large letters. Under that in smaller letters it said, "By Paul Bender with some contributions by Lois Lane".

I looked at Lois quizzically. "Did Paul rewrite your article?"

Lois shrugged, seeming to be as confused as I was. I took the paper from Star and read over it quickly. "This sounds just like the article you submitted to Professor Matthews," I said, handing it to Lois, who was standing there stunned.

She read it, albeit more slowly than I had, and then looked up at us. "I'm not sure, but I think it's exactly the same."

"What?" Maddie asked. "It can't be. Right? I mean, he wouldn't have taken the byline for himself if he hadn't made substantial changes."

Lois shook her head. "No, he wouldn't. Of course not."

We all stood there in silence for a moment before I said, "Let's go back to your room and check."

"No," Lois said. "Maddie's right. I'm sure I'm misremembering what I wrote." I was surprised to see that Lois' eyes were clear and her voice was calm. Either she was doing an incredible acting job or she really did believe that Paul hadn't effectively stolen her story. In my mind "some contributions by" should require so many rewrites from Lois' original story that both of us would have been sure the story was nothing like the one Lois had written. And even then, the byline was an insult. Lois did do all the legwork, after all.

Still, as much as I was upset for her, I didn't want to ruin Lois' evening. "Well, then, let's go," I said, trying to sound as upbeat as possible.

"Go where?" Lois asked.

"Have you ever been to Anjelina's?" Maddie asked her.

"The little restaurant across the street from campus on Columbus?" Lois asked. When Maddie nodded, Lois added, "No, I've seen it, but never gone inside. But we just had dinner."

"We're not going for dinner," Star said.

"Trust us on this, Lois," Maddie said as we started walking. "You're going to thank us for introducing you to this place."

By the time we were situated in a booth at Anjelina's, any small part of Lois that might have been disappointed in her byline seemed to have disappeared. "So what are we here for?" she asked right as the waitress approached our table.

"What can I get for you?" she asked us, looking mostly at Maddie.

"I called this morning to see if we could get a brownie sundae," I answered.

"We don't have that on the menu," the waitress answered.

"Right," Maddie cut in. "But you do have a large vanilla sundae with hot fudge and whipped cream."

"And you also have brownies," Star added, pointing to the ones in the case.

"Right," I said, seeing the confusion on the face of the waitress. "So, if you could take two brownies and put them on the bottom of a bowl and then put two vanilla sundaes on top, we'd appreciate it."

"Oh," she said, still seeming confused. "I need to check with my manager to make sure that's all right," she said.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. "Okay," I said before the waitress walked away.

Maddie shook her head and Star said, "Luckily, I'm pretty sure her manager is a bit less dim-witted than she is."  
 "What?" I asked. "Do you foresee us eating a brownie sundae in a few minutes?"

Star laughed. When exactly I had taken to teasing her about her psychic abilities, I wasn't sure. But I had to admit she took it well. She seemed to expect that everyone she met would be a skeptic and so it didn't bother her at all.  
 "Yes," she said. "Besides, her manager had to get to be manager somehow, right?"

"My manager said that's okay," the waitress said as she approached our table again.

Star smiled at me. "Told you so." The four of us laughed which seemed to annoy the waitress.

"Well, we'll have that," I said.

"With a small cup of extra hot fudge," Maddie added.

The waitress looked a little put out, but nodded after confirming that she was going to need to charge us extra for the extra hot fudge. "Anything else?" she asked.

"I'll have some tea," I said when no one else spoke up. Star and Maddie also ordered tea, while Lois ordered a hot chocolate.

"You can never have enough chocolate," she told us with a smile after the waitress had walked away.

We chatted for a few minutes before the waitress came back with a big bowl filled with ice cream. She handed Maddie the extra cup of hot fudge which she promptly handed to Lois. Lois laughed as she stuck her spoon inside the cup and had one spoonful of just the hot fudge before joining us in devouring the sundae.

\*\*\*

"Do you really think Paul stole Lois' story?" Maddie asked me several hours later. After dessert, we had come back to campus and the four of us had gathered in a lounge and studied. Of course, despite this, Maddie and I still got back to my room before Steve.

"I don't know," I said. "But I doubt he really made substantial changes or one of us would have noticed. Certainly nothing major enough to downgrade her to someone who made 'some contributions'."

"It was a bit weird that she wasn't more upset, don't you think?" Maddie asked.

I sighed. "It was more than a bit weird. The only reason I can think of is that she idolizes Paul. But I have to say, I don't get it. How much evidence does she need that this guy is a jerk to kill her feelings for him?"

Maddie shook her head as she slid into bed beside me. "I don't know. Maybe she knows something about him that we don't know?"

"Like he teaches blind kids how to read in his spare time?" I asked, trying to guess what she could possibly know that would outweigh what it was we knew she knew.

Maddie giggled. "Something like that."

We lapsed into silence and I could hear Maddie's breathing deepen. Just before I drifted off as well, though, I heard someone upstairs talking. "Did you hear about the volcano that just went off?" a male voice said.

I tuned out the rest of the conversation. I didn't want to know where the volcano was. I didn't want to know anything that might help me get there and help.

Not wanting to wake her, I tightened my hold on Maddie just slightly. I wasn't ready to lose her yet and if that meant I didn't slip out to be the Boy in Black tonight, than so be it.

\*\*\*

"I looked at my article," Lois said the following day as we walked to class. She had been quiet during lunch and I wondered if she was just thinking about it or if she had actually checked.

"And?" I asked her.

She pulled the paper out of her backpack and handed it to me, followed by the one marked up by Professor Matthews. I read them both quickly, although not so quickly to be noticeable.

"They're identical," I said shocked. Even though I was nearly certain that Paul had not made the types of massive changes to her article that he should have given the byline, I hadn't really thought he had used it word for word. I mean, he hadn't even made any of the changes Professor Matthews had suggested.

"I know," Lois said quietly.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "There's nothing I can do," she said, sounding beaten down.

I looked at her carefully as we walked. "What happened to Lois Lane?" I asked her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The girl I met a few months ago would bite my head off for things as silly as comma usage. And once as I recall for using a salad fork to eat my dinner," I smiled at her.

"Why are you not getting all riled up about this? Confronting Paul?"

Lois shrugged. "The girl you met didn't have any friends. I'm supposed to be reinventing myself into someone with better social skills."

I stopped walking, completely startled. "That's what this is? You're trying to be someone... Lois," I said, at a loss for words. I sighed. "First off, having strong social skills does not mean you need to let people walk all over you. So, if someone steals your article, which Paul has, you should do something about it. At least mention it to Professor Matthews so he knows not to submit more of your work to the Titan to be stolen."

"But more than that, you need to be yourself. Was the girl I met a bit abrasive? Yeah, she was a little. But there was nothing wrong with her. Besides I don't believe that this softer side of you is all an act. I think it's real, you're just not used to showing it."

"This is what happens when I do," she said glumly, pointing to the paper.

"Which means it's time to stop suppressing the side of you that fights for what she believes in. You need to allow yourself to be whoever you feel like at that moment. Which means sometimes you'll be a bit abrasive and sometimes you won't. Abrasive isn't always bad, you know."

"You haven't met Linda King," Lois said. "She's all sugar and spice and everything nice. Paul clearly doesn't go for abrasive."

I almost groaned in frustration. My guess was Paul didn't go for abrasive because abrasive and stupid didn't often come in the same package. "You still want to date him?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I don't know what I want. I can't turn my feelings off just like that."

"He stole your story, Lois!"

"He gave me a byline," she pointed out.

"As someone who made some contributions to his story. That's not really the same thing as 'Lois did all the legwork and investigating. She wrote every word. I contributed by handing it to the layout editor.'"



Lois giggled slightly. "I know, but..."

"If you don't say something now, he'll just keep stealing your work," I pointed out.

"But I'll be getting published," she said.

"You won't be able to submit those stories with your application to the Planet," I reminded her. "They'll all have Paul's name on them."

Lois sighed. "I know. I don't know what to do though."

"Would it be easier to talk to Professor Matthews?" I asked her.

"No!" she said immediately. "I need to figure this out on my own, Clark."

"Okay," I said. What I wanted was to go punch Paul in the face, but she was right. This was her problem, and I should let her deal with it. I just hoped she did.

\*\*\*

I mulled over my words to Lois as I lay in bed the next night. I had told her to be herself. Was Mom right and I should be following the same advice?

On the one hand, I had to admit my mom generally had pretty good advice. She had never steered me wrong before. On the other hand, even her advice was not to go around openly helping people and telling them who I was. She was just saying I should be more open to the idea that someone might accept me for all of who I was.

So, taking her advice and trying to mesh it with what I told Lois wasn't exactly the same as me being myself with Lois. It was more possibly being myself with Maddie. I tightened my grip on her just slightly, not wanting to wake her. The truth was that the thought filled me with dread. If it was really right, shouldn't it have made me feel good? The fact that I was too scared to even start to think about it was probably a sign that it was a bad idea, right?

I buried my head in Maddie's hair and inhaled the sweet smell of her shampoo - something fruity. I wished this was an easier decision. I didn't want to have to lie to her, I didn't want to lose her, but I also didn't want to have to tell her.

The truth was that as painful as the idea of losing her was, it was much easier to lose her because she realized I wasn't being as honest with her as she would like than because she realized I was a freak. No, it was definitely better not to tell her.

\*\*\*

The strangest coincidence happened the following day. Or maybe it wasn't really that strange. I saw Paul when I was coming out of the library. It probably wasn't that strange since it wasn't the first time, but it also wasn't like I saw him everyday.

I knew Lois told me to leave it alone and let her deal with this herself, but just seeing him made my anger boil again.

"Hey," I called out to him as I approached. As I walked over, I tried to convince myself to pretend I had been calling to someone behind him, let Lois deal with it on her own, but I just couldn't do it. He was sitting with a group of guys, looking all cocky and like he belonged on the cover of a course catalog or something. I just felt the need to wipe that look off his face.

"Hi, Clark," he said smiling, and for a moment I stopped. I hadn't expected him to remember my name. When we'd seen each other before, we'd just nodded at each other.

"Hi," I said as I approached, and was surprised to hear that I didn't sound as angry as I wanted to.

"How're you doing?" Paul asked, then turning to the

guys he was hanging out with, he added, "This is Clark's first semester here. He submitted a really strong article to the Titan and he'll almost certainly be joining our ranks next year."

"You're the one who got the article published in the Daily Planet?" one of the guys asked me.

I nodded, feeling pleased that they knew of me.

"That's so cool!" one of the other guys said. "Why doesn't he have a spot on the Titan now?" he asked Paul.

"You know our policy on freshmen," Paul said.

"What about Linda and Lois?" a third guy asked.

"They're hot!" one of them responded and the guys all laughed.

"Is that why they're on the paper?" I asked, suddenly remembering why I was there.

"Of course not," Paul said, flushing. "Linda had a really great entry and Professor Matthews showed me something Lois had started that was equally good."

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked Paul. The guy was good - I had to admit that. He was a charmer and even trying to, I couldn't seem to feel the same level of righteous indignation now as I had felt earlier.

"Sure," Paul said as he got up and we walked a little way from their group. "What's up?" he asked.

"It's about Lois' article," I said. "The one on the cover of this week's edition."

"What about it?" Paul asked, seeming to be sincerely confused.

"It has your name on the byline," I pointed out, feeling my anger coming back.

"Well, of course. Lois is just a freshman. She's a junior reporter. She knows the deal," Paul said.

"The deal is she does all the work, and you get all the credit?" I asked, appalled that he could be so flippant about this.

Paul chuckled. "Did Lois tell you that? Clearly she didn't do all the work..." he started, but I cut him off.

"I saw the paper she turned into Professor Matthews!" I said, trying to keep myself from shouting. "It was identical to what you printed. You didn't even make the changes he suggested."

Paul paled. "I think you must be mistaken, Clark," he said, his voice quiet, but gaining in strength. "I'm not sure what you saw, but I made significant changes to the copy Professor Matthews gave me of Lois'. It was very good work for a freshman which is why Lois got a spot on the paper, but it was clearly written by a beginner."

"And if you are still planning on applying for a spot next year, I suggest you study the differences so you can get an idea of what type of writing we really expect. Your entry this year was strong, but clearly wasn't strong enough for a spot. I would think you would want to focus on how to improve to get on next year, rather than misunderstanding what happened with an article of which you had no part."

I almost backed down. Almost. But then I remembered how wrong what he was saying was. "If this is how the Titan is run, Paul, I'm not interested in having a spot on the staff," I told him before spinning around and walking off.

\*\*\*

"One more night. Just one more night," I told myself while the sound of Steve's radio played in the background and Maddie snuggled closer to my side trying to block out the sound. Maddie wasn't completely sure when Dave was leaving town, but either last night or today. As a result, she was spending tonight in my room, but was happily going

back to her room tomorrow. She had been very clear that she could not stand another night of Steve's coming in and waking us up.

In fact, she had asked her roommate, Stacy, if we could stay in her room, but Stacy had continued to say no. She was a nice girl, but her parents were really strict and she thought they may actually pull her out of college if they found out she had a boy sleeping in her room. I guess I was lucky. While my parents made it clear they thought I should limit how close I got to anyone in that way, they also trusted me to make my own decisions. I had never worried about telling them Maddie was staying with me. They trusted me to make the right decision as to what sharing a bed meant.

Still, I could understand Stacy's reticence to do something that would upset her parents so much. She had let me spend the night a few times before, but those were not planned and she felt like that made a difference.

Of course I was going to miss having Maddie with me while I slept. Even in the small dorm bed, I liked having her there. I guess I didn't really know what it would be like to share a bigger bed with her anyway, but I found I liked having her next to me more than I missed the ability to stretch out a bit. There was something nice about falling asleep talking to her and waking up to find her hair spread out across my pillow.

Despite that, I was having more trouble putting the Boy in Black activities aside than I would have expected. I wasn't sure if it was an exceptionally busy week for natural disasters or if I was just extremely sensitive to them right now. Regardless, nearly every night something came up that made me feel the need to go out and help and not doing so was becoming harder and harder.

"Just one more night," I repeated again. It seemed worse than normal. It seemed like as soon as one person in the dorm changed the station off of the news, someone else would turn it on and I'd be faced with the news again. An oil tanker had spilled off the coast of Venezuela and apparently was not well contained. There was fear of the spill affecting the Caribbean Sea and endangering the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef. Honestly, I had never even heard of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef before, but the news report someone was listening to upstairs claimed it was the second largest barrier reef in the world. I was guessing the largest was that one in Australia?

In any case, I wasn't even sure what exactly this could mean except that I knew coral reefs were rife with life and perhaps this could cause some sort of species to make the endangered list? Was there anything I could do anyway? I mean, without using my special abilities? I really had no idea.

That should have made it much easier not to go, shouldn't it have? But it didn't. Instead I felt guilty as if once again I was blowing off a duty to be with my girlfriend. I knew it wasn't really like that - it wasn't like Maddie and I were having dinner or something. I was trying to sleep.

Still, I knew I would go if Maddie wasn't here. My main reason for not going was fear of upsetting her again. I couldn't even console myself with the thought that I was just being there for Maddie rather than the... sea horses or whatever it was that could use my help in Central America. The truth was that whether or not Maddie needed me, and I wasn't sure she did anymore than she needed my bed, it wasn't the reason I wasn't already flying south.

It was fear. Fear of angering her. Fear of getting into another argument where I couldn't defend my actions. Fear of her getting fed up with me. Fear of her making the argument Mom made - that she had opened up to me while I remained closed off. Fear of never holding her in my arms like this again.

Mom was right - I was living my life in fear. I wasn't sure what to do about it, though. Could I really come clean with Maddie? How could I?

"You know how you told me that secret about your cousin, well I have one, too. I'm sorry to say I wasn't born in Kansas. No, I know I told you I'm a foundling and thus I don't really know where I was born and that's still true, but I can be pretty sure it wasn't Kansas. I mean, I don't know anyone else from Kansas that can see through things, cool things off with their breath, or fly, do you?"

"Really? You do? You love me more knowing this? For real? That's great."

And of course, a complete fantasy. Truthfully, I couldn't really see Maddie running away screaming either. She just wasn't that kind of girl - both as she was almost always calm, but also as she wouldn't want to hurt my feelings. Still, she would see me differently.

What I foresaw were smaller changes. Things like flinching slightly when I went to hold her hand. Not pulling away as that might hurt my feelings, but having to force herself not to. Looking at me funny as she tried to figure out who I was. Although if she was actually able to figure that out, I'd probably appreciate it.

And I wouldn't be able to kiss her again. How could I? How could she possibly want my lips anywhere near her?

Then again, did that mean it was just as bad to keep it from her? Was I tricking her now into thinking I was some normal, small town boy rather than the offspring of little green men or something?

"Volunteers are needed on the coast of several Central American countries for clean up," the sound came from upstairs. "Expectations are that more than two dozen species of birds may be impacted by the oil, not to mention the wildlife in the water that is more difficult to clean."

I sighed. Steve had shut off the radio now and was snoring across the room. I could also hear Maddie's quiet, rhythmic breathing, indicating that she, too, was asleep. If I slipped out now, would she even notice? Generally she was a pretty sound sleeper and didn't seem to wake up. I suspected that the only reason she woke up the last time I left was because she wasn't sleeping well, knowing I was gone.

So maybe I could sneak out and help? Maybe?

I tested things by floating just a couple of inches over the bed. If Maddie woke up, I'd easily be able to fall back down before she noticed. I waited at least a minute, but she didn't move. I floated a little higher, holding the blankets so I could place them down myself. I threw a fast glance towards Steve, just to make sure he really was asleep. Dad was unlikely to see the irony of Steve catching me floating while I tried to slip out on Maddie.

Steve was still snoring away and Maddie snuggled a little farther under the blankets, but did not seem to waken.

I lowered myself to the floor, or almost. To make sure I was as quiet as possible, I stayed an inch or so above the ground. I glanced down at myself. The first few nights Maddie was here, I had slept in sweatpants and a t-shirt. I'm not sure why, but it felt weird not to sleep fully dressed with her. She had teased me about it a little, pointing out that she

had certainly seen me less than fully clothed, and eventually I realized she was right. What I had worn to bed tonight, a pair of sleep shorts without a shirt, was probably not appropriate for a trip to Central America.

Taking another glance around the room to make sure Maddie and Steve were asleep, I spun out of my shorts and into my standard Boy in Black outfit before slipping out the door. I waited there for a few moments, just listening, but Steve's snores and Maddie's breaths continued on uninterrupted. Once I was sure they were not about to wake up and notice my absence, I ran out of the dorm and headed towards the math building to take off for Venezuela.

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It was an exhilarating experience. I had never done anything like it before.

I showed up in Venezuela all ready to help, even though I had no idea what exactly I'd be doing. I was only there a few minutes before I was told that they had all the volunteers they needed. I was surprised by this, until I heard one of the volunteers comment on how sad it was that other shorelines weren't getting the same response. Apparently, like me, many people had heard about the spill off the coast of Venezuela so local people were coming out to help. In some of the countries north, though, birds were already showing up covered in oil, but the press wasn't talking about it yet and as a result, they were not getting the same response.

So, I went back up north, deciding to land in Costa Rica. To be honest, there was no reason to go there rather than anywhere else, but I remembered Mom saying something about wanting to go there someday, so when I realized I was right above it, I decided to land.

I got trained there on helping with the clean-up and spent a couple of hours with the other volunteers. It was hard work trying to help the birds, who did not necessarily want help. Still, it was the kind of thing I liked to do. It was small, and nothing special, but I felt like I was really making a difference. It was a way to use my special abilities to help without coming out and announcing that some sort of science fiction freak lived among us. No one ever questioned how this American boy got there so fast; they just assumed I was on vacation or on a student exchange program or something. I had gotten very good over the years at letting people tell me why they thought I was there and then nodding noncommittally. It had been a necessary skill early on when my knowledge of other languages had been poor, and I had found it worked well even after that.

My Spanish was actually starting to get quite good. Considering how much of the world spoke the language, I guess it wasn't surprising. Plus, I had a facility for languages and for the most part had progressed past the simple skills I had learned through the Berlitz classes Mom and Dad suggested. I had gone far past it in Spanish, though, and was finally at a point where I could hold a conversation. My speaking was still somewhat stilted, but at least I could understand the people around me quite well - something that was trickier when using other languages unless the speaker slowed their speech down for me.

So, after several hours of work, the supervisor suggested we take a break. We sat around a small area of the beach. Someone's wife had brought coffee and empanadas and we sat around and talked for a little while.

After about half an hour, the group of us had split up, with several volunteers going home, while others said they could stay all day. I stayed a little longer, mulling over

something one of the other volunteers had said: The birds were a bad sign and clearly needed our help, but the worst damage was really in the water. The real danger was what I had heard on the radio - of changing the ecosystem to the barrier reef. But it was difficult, if not impossible, to clean that area. Meanwhile, they were expecting thousands of fish to float to the surface, dead, in the next few weeks, and expected that there were many more things that would die that only the snorkelers and divers would see, like the plant life that lived in the reef.

It seemed like this was where the most help was needed, but it wasn't clear how I could contribute. I had tried to ask some of the other volunteers if someone who could hold their breath a long time would be able to do something special, but they had laughed at me, saying no one could hold their breath long enough to make a difference.

So, I went back to washing birds, still trying to find a way to help in the reef. There had to be something I could do. It took two more hours before I found out what it was.

Apparently, according to another volunteer, one of the ways they cleaned up oil from the water was with puffed cereal. They dumped a bunch on the surface of the water and it would absorb the oil that was there. For the most part, this worked well for the surface, but less well for areas deeper where it was hard to get the cereal before it was water-logged and too "full" to absorb more oil.

They had been doing some experiments with divers and water proof containers, though. They weren't going very deep, but so far it was working. The divers would bring the cereal ten to twenty feet down, release it from the container and at least in the hardest hit areas, it would absorb a fair amount of oil before getting water logged.

I stayed another hour before I decided it was time to leave. I was itching to go out there and try to help, thinking I could do a lot given that I'd probably be working alone enough to go faster than normal. I just needed a way to get a diving suit or no one would allow me to dive.

Finally I decided the direct approach made the most sense. I went and asked the man talking how someone could get involved in helping with that effort. He explained that there was a small boat taking volunteers back and forth to the reef a little north of here. A local dive shop had even supplied all the materials. You just needed to prove you were certified.

I thanked him, still thinking it over. It sounded easy enough. The only glitch was that I wasn't a certified diver and it was unlikely I could get certified quickly.

Then I came up with the idea. It wasn't really a brilliant idea by any means, but it did lead to my helping in a way I'd never been able to help before. With a smile, I made my way away from the beach before taking off and heading back to Metropolis.

The library on campus was just opening when I got there, and after a quick perusal of the card catalog I found two books on diving techniques. It was plenty private enough there at this time of day for me to find a corner where I wouldn't easily be seen and speed read through the books.

Then with a smile at the guard on my way out of the library, I made my way back to the math building and then back to Costa Rica.

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It was nearly evening before I got back to Metropolis. I had flown from Metropolis to a small island in the Caribbean that was mostly populated by cruise ship

passengers. They gave one day diving certifications and as expected were a bit lax. I used what I had read in the Met U library to prove I knew what I was doing, and they gave me a certification within the hour.

I went back to Costa Rica from there and caught the small boat out to the reef. I dived for hours, coming back to the surface for more cereal as quickly as I dared. As it was, the volunteers providing the cereal for the divers were impressed with how often they saw me.

I have to say though, that as soon as I landed in Metropolis, my exhilaration evaporated. How could I have completely forgotten about Maddie while I was helping? She was sure to be upset to find me gone when she woke up.

If I had gotten back earlier, I could have told her I had woken early and gone to the library to study or something, but as it was I had missed lunch and dinner as well. What could I possibly say to explain my absence?

With a heavy heart, I walked over to her dorm and knocked on her door. The look on her face when she saw me made my heart break. She didn't look upset or sad or angry. Just defeated.

"Where were you?" she asked me quietly.

"I'm sorry," I said in reply.

"Really?" she asked me. "It took you all day to come find me. Did you just decide you were sorry for sneaking out on me last night? Did we not just have this discussion a couple of days ago about how I don't particularly like being alone with Steve?"

"Steve would never..." I started.

"I know!" she cut me off and I could tell her anger was building now. "I didn't say that I felt unsafe. Just uncomfortable. Really, Clark, is it too much to ask that when you invite me to spend the night in your room you intend to be there, too?"

"No," I said quietly.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her voice slightly sarcastic. "Because it seems to be a problem for you. Do you sneak out regularly and I just don't know since we're not usually in the same bed? Where is it you go?"

I fumbled, trying to find something to say. Anything. But lying wasn't the answer - I was a terrible liar and she would see right through me. Telling her the truth was also not the answer, though. What would she say if I told her I was in Costa Rica? And how could I explain without telling her the truth?

She shook her head. "You know what, Clark? This isn't a good time. I'm tired. I woke up at four this morning to find you gone and couldn't fall back to sleep. I wanted to nap today to make up for it, but couldn't as I was too worried. And it turns out you were fine all along. I'm just not awake enough to have this conversation. I'm going to go to bed."

"Do you want to..."

"No!" she cut me off. "Dave is gone by now anyway. And even if he wasn't, why exactly would I spend another night in your room while you're who knows where?"

"I'm sorry," I said again.

She nodded her head. "Maybe you are. We can discuss it tomorrow after I've gotten some sleep."

"Can we have breakfast?" I asked her.

"You have an eight o'clock class," she reminded me.

"I'll see you at lunch tomorrow."

I nodded, fearing that I had ruined everything, before heading back to my room.

\*\*\*

I had been too embarrassed to tell Lois I had seen Paul after my run-in with him at the library. She had asked me to leave things alone and I had butted in anyway. I knew I shouldn't have, but someone had to let Paul know they were on to him and it was starting to seem like Lois was not willing to do it herself.

I didn't understand and I wanted to curse the person in high school that gave her father the feedback that she had poor social skills. This Lois lacked all the passion and fire that the girl I had met had had. And I bet she was already toned down from her true self by then.

As a result, we still hadn't talked about it any more when Professor Matthews asked to talk to Lois at the end of class on Monday.

"Should I wait for you?" I asked her.

She glanced at Professor Matthews before nodding yes. I put together my things and then went to the door waiting for her outside. I have to admit, I was tempted to eavesdrop on their conversation, but I pictured my mom shaking her head at me and refrained from doing so.

When Lois finally joined me, she looked upset, but didn't say anything, just started walking, so I followed.

"Everything okay?" I asked her.

She nodded, but still didn't say anything. "Lois?"

She stopped as we walked out of the building. "He noticed," she said quietly.

"What?" I asked.

"Professor Matthews. He noticed the article in the Titan. And the byline."

I nodded. "And?" I prodded when she didn't say anything else.

"And he wanted to turn Paul in. He could get fired from the paper," she said.

"Doesn't he deserve to be? He plagiarized."

"It wasn't really plagiarizing," Lois said. "And he'd probably be brought in front of the publications board, Clark. It's not just getting fired. It would be humiliating for him."

"It *was* really plagiarizing!" I insisted, "And he deserves to be humiliated. Does this mean you haven't said anything to him about it?"

Lois didn't say anything for a minute and finally I stopped walking and grabbed her arm. "Lois, you can't do this!" I insisted.

She sighed. "I haven't said anything to him and I don't intend to. And I asked Professor Matthews to not act on it either. I told him I'd deal with it."

"Since when is ignoring it the same thing as dealing with it?" I asked her.

"Drop it, Clark. It's just one article," Lois said and I could hear some of the annoyance in her voice. Why was she able to show her annoyance at me, but not at Paul?

I sighed. I clearly had my own relationship trouble to deal with given that Maddie had ignored me at lunch. I should really let Lois deal with this on her own.

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Only the fact that I was a coward kept me in my room that evening after dinner. I wanted to go find Maddie, but was afraid of what she'd say once I did. So, I was in my room when Lois came pounding on the door shortly after eight.

"I can't believe he did it!" she exploded as soon as I opened the door.

"Who did what?" I asked.

"Professor Matthews," she explained. "I mean, okay, he didn't bring it up to the publications board, but he did talk to Paul."

"What?" I asked, surprised. I would have thought Professor Matthews would tell her if he was planning to talk to Paul. "He did?"

"He must have. Paul was all weird during the staff meeting and then asked to talk to me afterward. Asked if I had a problem with his editorial skills. It was so embarrassing," Lois said, the fire gone from her words.

"What was embarrassing?" I asked, annoyed again at how she was letting this guy walk all over her. "That he gave you a chance to tell him off and you didn't take it?"

Lois glared at me. "Of course I didn't. Do you think Linda would tell him off for taking a bit too much credit for one of her articles?"

I sighed. "First off, I doubt Linda has ever written anything worth stealing. Second of all, Paul did more than take 'a bit too much credit' for one of your stories. And thirdly, when did you decide you wanted to become Linda King? So she's dating Paul? Do you really want to date Paul more than you want to win the Pulitzer before your thirty? Cause Linda King doesn't stand a chance of that."

"I can do both," Lois insisted.

"Not if you let other people keep taking credit for your writing," I shot back.

"It was a one time thing," Lois insisted.

I sighed. "So what did you say?" I asked her.

"What?"

"He asked if you had any problems with his editorial skills. What did you tell him?"

Lois flushed. "I told him no. He asked if I had complained to anyone about it and I said I hadn't, but it wasn't clear he believed me."

"I'm sorry," I said and I really was. It didn't help for Paul to think Lois was a tattletale. Although, maybe it did. Maybe he'd be less likely to steal her article next time if he realized others noticed.

"I just can't believe Professor Matthews would say something," Lois said, sitting on my bed dejectedly.

"Wait," I said, as I processed all she had said. "Did he say it was Professor Matthews?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't think so, but who else would say something?"

"Have you seen him since Thursday?" I asked her, the dread in my gut building.

"No," Lois said with another shrug. "Why?"

"I..." I fumbled, not sure what to say.

Understanding dawned on Lois' face. "Clark, have you seen Paul?" she asked, her voice hard.

"I may have run into him at the union," I said softly.

"Did you say anything to him?" she asked. I said nothing but could feel myself flush. "Didn't I ask you to leave it alone?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Lois," I said softly. "I just got so angry when I saw him. And I never said anything to him about you complaining."

"Well, thanks for being such a good friend!" Lois said, her tone leaving no doubt that my being a good friend was not exactly what she was thinking. "I really appreciate that I can count on you to let me handle things on my own."

"You're not handling it," I pointed out.

"I am, too!" Lois insisted, getting up. "Maybe not in the way you'd like, but..."

"Lois..."

"Don't!" she cut me off. "You're not my father or even my boyfriend. It really doesn't matter what you think. I asked you to stay out of it and you didn't. And you had no good reason for not doing so!" she said.

"I just..."

"Not right now!" she cut me off again. "I'm so angry at you, I can hardly think!" she said just before leaving my room, slamming my door after her.

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Okay, admittedly, this was getting to be ridiculous. I hadn't talked to Maddie in nearly a week now. I knew I should go see her, try to talk to her, but I was afraid to push her. How could I? I wasn't exactly willing to come clean with where I had been.

So, instead, I waited for her to come to me. It was a little frustrating. It was so unlike Maddie to ignore me this way. No one had said anything yet, but Josh kept giving us looks at lunch - it was hard to miss the fact that she was no longer leaving a seat for me at lunch, and when I left one for her, she ignored it.

Add to that the fact that Lois, too, was ignoring me, and it was becoming more and more painful to join my friends for lunch. The only redeeming thing in all of this was that Thanksgiving break started late that afternoon. Just a few weeks ago, I had had mixed feelings about the very long weekend. On the one hand, it would be relaxing to be back at the farm. On the other, spending five days apart from Maddie didn't sound like fun at all.

Now, I was only looking forward to it. While I still didn't want to spend five days away from Maddie, maybe five days without her anger and disappointment staring me in the face was not such a bad thing.

I sighed a bit as I recalled my conversation with Mom and Dad about the break - how Mom had suggested I invite Maddie to come spend the holiday with us. I had never asked, afraid of what it meant to get that close to someone else. I was used to being myself at the farm, and so while having Maddie there would be wonderful, it would also limit my ability to relax for a few days and just be Clark Kent, weirdness and all.

Now, of course, it didn't matter. There was no doubt she would say no even if it wouldn't be impossible to get tickets there at this late date.

I watched her as she walked across campus with her friend, Natalie. From this distance, she looked just like any other college girl, bundled up against the cold, smiling and laughing at something Natalie had said. If I used my special vision gizmo thingy, though, I could see her eyes and they weren't laughing. She wasn't forgetting about her annoyance at me, she just wasn't dealing with it at the moment.

I zoomed out - was that the right term? I always found referring to my special traits weird, even in my head. Anyway, I did something so I couldn't see her eyes from this distance anymore, feeling guilty for spying on her. The truth was, though, that I missed her. I knew I was being terribly unfair to want us to move past this when I had no intention of giving her an explanation, but the truth was that that was precisely what I wanted.

I sighed again before getting up to go to class. It was my last lecture of the day and after that, I was planning on packing my stuff up and finding a place to take off for the farm. No need to wait until this evening or tomorrow to go home for the holiday. While I knew it wasn't true - I had other friends - between Maddie and Lois, it felt like

everyone here would be happier with me gone.

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"Hey," she said softly as I came up to my door after class.

I gave her a small smile, forced I was sure. I hadn't been paying attention, and so hadn't seen her waiting for me. Still, I should have known she would be. It was so unlike Maddie to ignore me this long, it made sense that she'd be ready to move past it before we left for the break. Of course, the real question was how did she plan to move past it?

"When does your flight leave?" she asked as she got up from the floor outside my door.

"Tonight," I said, evasively. "Yours?"

"Not until tomorrow morning," she said. "But given the time difference, I'll get home early enough to help my mom start preparing."

I nodded. "How many people are coming to your folks?" I asked her, hating the small talk.

She shrugged as I dropped my book bag on the floor and she sat in my desk chair. My desk chair. I couldn't remember Maddie ever coming in and not sitting on my bed before now. But of course this time she didn't want me sitting next to her. "I'm not sure," she said. "Maybe a dozen or something. But everyone's local, so they won't be there until Thursday."

I nodded, not sure what to say. I was such a coward. Why was I making Maddie do all the work when I knew I was the one in the wrong?

"Maddie," I finally said, just to make myself say something. Anything at all would be an improvement. "I'm so sorry," I finally said. "I miss you."

She nodded her head. "I know," she replied softly. "I can see it all over your face. But... I'm not sure that's enough, Clark."

I looked at her, surprised. I'm not sure what I had expected. I guess, I had thought, as unreasonable as it was, that if I apologized sincerely - if I could just get her to see how sorry I was - she would be able to forgive me. She had to be.

"What can I do?" I asked her, moving to kneel in front of her so I could see her eyes better.

She shrugged, her gaze pinned to the floor. "I don't know," she finally said. "But being sorry isn't it. I know you're sorry. Or at least sort of sorry."

"What do you mean 'sort of sorry'?" I interrupted her. "I'm..."

"You're not really sorry, Clark," Maddie said, her voice stronger now, and the residual anger coming to the fore. "If you were really sorry, you would have come to me before now. You would have told me where you disappeared to, and you might have promised not to do it again depending on where it is that you're going. But you've done nothing, Clark. Nothing. Just looked at me sadly from across the lunch table, occasionally across the quad. Looking sad and being sorry isn't exactly the same thing."

I opened my mouth, but was unsure what to say. She had seen me watching her across the quad? That was surprising, although not really what rendered me speechless. She was right - I knew she was right. Still, I didn't know what to say about it. I still had no intention of telling her where I disappeared to or promising not to do it again. Did that really mean I wasn't sincerely sorry?

I didn't think so. I certainly felt sorry enough. Did sorry mean I had to trust her with my secret?

"I'm sorry," I said again, feeling the need to say something, even though I had no idea what.

She shook her head in annoyance. "I don't get it, Clark. Really, I don't. I want to understand, but you're not giving me anything to work with. I thought..." she paused and for the first time I saw the tears falling down her cheeks. "I thought I meant more to you than this."

"You do," I insisted, meaning it and yet realizing after I said it how ridiculous it was. I didn't really, did I? When I said it, what I meant was that she meant a lot to me and she did. But when Maddie said it, she meant that she thought she meant more to me than whatever secret I was keeping. And while I wanted to think she did, the truth was how could I ever prove that to her when I had no intention of telling her what that secret was?

Sure enough she looked up at me, her eyes clear behind her tears. "Do I?" she asked me. "Do I really? Because if I do, why haven't you come to talk to me in the past week? Why haven't you come, apologized, and told me where it is that you disappear off to?"

I said nothing, having no answer I was willing to share and feeling like the world's biggest heel. I was making Steve look compassionate and sensitive, I was sure.

"You know..." Maddie started, brushing impatiently at her tears, "I haven't told anyone else about Dave. Anyone. And I'm not saying that as in 'I told you my secret. Now you tell me yours.' I just mean that..." she paused, seeming to be at a loss of words, but I was afraid to interrupt. Or more honestly, I didn't have any words to interrupt with. "I love you, Clark. And for me, that means I want to share things with you - both good and bad. I don't want there to be secrets between us."

"I don't either," I said. It was the truth. I wanted to be completely honest with Maddie, and I had no doubt that I would be if my secret didn't happen to be so out there.

"Then tell me where you're going at night," she said, nearly pleading. "And tell me why you waited so long to tell me."

I sighed. What was I supposed to say to that?

"That's what I thought," Maddie said, her voice soft again. "I do love you, Clark, and I wish I didn't feel this way, but... I don't know. I trust you, sort of. I don't honestly think that you're slipping out at night to cheat on me or something."

"I'm not!" I insisted.

She kept talking over me, though. "But I don't know where you're going and I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't be hurt even if you promised that wasn't what you were doing. I can't help it. I'm sorry, but I can't... I can't do this. I can't be completely honest with you while you keep secrets from me. And I can't not be completely honest with you when I feel this way about you. It's not what I want. I want us to be completely honest with each other, and I don't think I can keep dating you without it. It just... it just hurts too much."

I watched her face, the tears falling down her cheeks, and tried to think of something to say. Anything. I had always known it would come to this. I knew that at some point, Maddie would suspect I was keeping a secret from her and she'd break up with me.

I had hoped it would take more time than this, but that didn't change the fact that I knew it was coming. And I had known, in a somewhat abstract sense, that it would hurt. But I had imagined it hurting like it hurt every time Lana had cheated on me.

As it turned out, it felt nothing like that. It felt one

hundred times more awful. This was completely my fault and completely within my power to correct. Worse off, I knew I was going to do nothing to correct it.

That hurt badly enough - I was completely sabotaging a relationship, maybe even a friendship, with someone I loved. More than that, though, much more than that, was seeing Maddie. She looked the way I felt every time Lana had cheated on me - hurt and beaten down. Like she was tempted to say it was all right, she didn't care, just so she didn't need to lose me. But unlike me, who had done that with Lana every time, Maddie wasn't going to do that. She was going to hold her ground so I couldn't keep hurting her.

When I continued to say nothing, she sighed, and finally got up. "Have a good Thanksgiving, Clark," she whispered.

"I do love you," I told her back as she reached my door.

She shook her head. "No. I don't think you do. I used to. I want to. But if you did, you'd just tell me what's going on and we'd move past it together. I'm sure of it - I just can't believe whatever it is, it's so bad it's something we can't move past. But not saying anything, Clark? Well, how can I believe you love me when you won't tell me something so stupid?"

When a beat passed without my giving an answer, she nodded her head and walked out the door.

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Dad watched me across the table warily. He was conflicted, it was clear. His first reaction was that I had done the right thing - I couldn't tell anyone my secret. But then he had seemed to change his mind, saying I couldn't let my secret isolate myself from my friends.

Mom's view was much clearer cut. She thought I was being foolish - that if I wanted to keep being the Boy in Black and I wanted to keep being with Maddie, I needed to tell Maddie about the Boy in Black. If I wouldn't then I needed to realize that Maddie wasn't that important to me.

Maybe she was right - maybe Maddie wasn't that important to me. But it didn't feel that way. It didn't feel that way at all. It felt like my heart was breaking into a thousand pieces. And because I couldn't get the image of her face out of my head, I knew Maddie's was as well. No question about it - I was the world's biggest cad.

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My Thanksgiving break was basically a wash. I was miserable the entire time, and by the end of the five days, even Dad was tired of me. I kept hearing Mom's voice in my head telling me that Maddie wasn't important to me, and wanting to scream at it. Mom hadn't actually said that - I could just tell she thought it. Or at least thought that Maddie wasn't as important as I claimed.

I don't think she got it, though. Neither did Dad. I know what she was thinking was that as much as I cared about Maddie, it wasn't like the kind of love they had for each other. That was true - I knew it was. On the other hand, though, it was the most I was ever going to get. I couldn't have anything like what they had. They had what Maddie wanted - a relationship with no secrets, complete openness. Not that I could see either Mom or Dad defining their relationship that way. In the same way Maddie had told me about Dave without stipulating that that was the type of relationship she wanted to have, Mom and Dad were just open with each other as they wanted to be. They didn't want to keep secrets from each other.

How could I ever have that though? I mean, Mom and Dad were great, but sometimes I felt like they missed the big picture. No matter how much I loved someone else, I

could never truly be myself with them, could never be completely honest. How could I do that and not scare them off? How could I do that and not risk my parents' safety?

The truth was that I couldn't. I could never give Maddie what she wanted. I could never care for someone in the way I know Mom had thought I cared about Maddie and now was convinced I didn't. I had cared for Maddie as much as I could. I had let her in as much as I could ever let anyone in.

I recognized that she not only wanted, but deserved, more than that, but that didn't change the truth. This was as good as it was going to get for me.

Maybe I was better off dating girls like Lana in the end.

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Lunch the day after the break was painful. I almost wished I hadn't gone. Lois seemed a bit softer towards me, but I barely noticed. It was hard to see past Maddie. Maddie, who looked like she hadn't slept since the last time I had seen her, who only looked up at me once the entire time we were at lunch and then with tears in her eyes.

I could tell that she was hoping something had changed over the break - that I was sorry and was going to come and apologize and make it all right. She expected that of me. The boy she thought she had been dating would have done that.

But I wasn't the boy she had thought she was dating. I wasn't even a boy really. I was... well, I still didn't know what I was. But I was something, something Maddie wouldn't want to know about. In the end, she'd be happier thinking I wasn't the boy she thought I was than finding out she had spent the better part of a semester dating an alien or a science experiment gone wrong. Wouldn't she? I mean, how embarrassing would it be to realize that your first love was space trash?

Clearly, I was being kinder to her this way.

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I was surprised when Lois stepped into place beside me after lunch. We hadn't walked to class together in the week before the break, and while I had thought she seemed friendlier during lunch, I hadn't really been paying close enough attention.

"So what's with you and Mrs. Kent?" she asked me as we walked towards the humanities building.

"What?" I asked, confused both about what she was doing beside me and what she was talking about.

"You and Maddie. You guys break up or something?" she asked.

I didn't answer her right away, trying to find the right words. "Yeah, I guess," I finally said. It bothered me that those were the right words, but it didn't change the fact that they were.

"What happened?" Lois asked, and now the teasing sound was gone from her voice. She sounded sincerely concerned.

I shook my head. "Things just... didn't work out," I said softly.

"I'm sorry, Clark," Lois said, her hand on my arm.

"You shouldn't be," I told her. "It was my fault."

"What did you do?" she asked, looking for all the world like she couldn't believe I was to blame for a second.

"Why? Did you think it was Maddie's fault?" I asked her.

She said nothing for a second before finally responding, "I guess I didn't see it being anyone's fault. I can't see either you or Maddie screwing up. I can see you moving apart or something, but not this fast."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you," I said, "but that's not what happened here. I screwed up, Maddie got upset, and now we're not together anymore," I said, feeling unreasonably annoyed at Lois.

"Well then," Lois said, her reasonable tone of voice firmly in place, "why not just apologize and move on?"

"When did you become Ann Landers?" I asked her. I knew I was being snippy with her, but I didn't care. "I thought you weren't even talking to me."

Lois looked slightly hurt, but stood her ground. "I wasn't. But I thought about it over the break and realized that you weren't trying to be mean. You were trying to help. So I decided to forgive you. Sorry to disappoint you, Clark," she said, sounding annoyed herself now. "I thought I was being a good friend. You looked like you were hurting and I was trying to help."

"Well don't!" I told her. "I don't need your help. How can you help anyway? Have you ever been in a real relationship? How would you have any idea how to fix this?" I was nearly shouting at her now. Some small part of me felt badly. This wasn't Lois' fault. I knew that. But I couldn't help it. Maybe being angry at her was easier than being angry at myself.

"I wouldn't," Lois said firmly, but there were tears swimming in her eyes. "Sorry. I thought I was being a friend, but clearly I still have a lot to learn about that." She turned to precede me into the classroom, but at the last minute I turned around and walked back out the door.

Even I, Clark Kent, the student who wouldn't skip classes for anything, couldn't deal with sitting in a classroom today.

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I took a fast flight around the world. Well, okay, I took several fast flights around the world. When I ran out of steam, I landed in the Arctic and sat on the cold ground. It was dark there now - being late enough in the year that it probably never got light. And it was cold. Far colder than a normal human could probably stand without adequate winter gear - which I most certainly did not have.

But that was fine. It was just another reminder of how far from normal I was. Of how I didn't deserve Maddie anyway. Or Lois for that matter. I shouldn't have screamed at her like that. It wasn't her fault I was in a bad mood, and she hadn't really been doing anything wrong. She *was* being a good friend - I was the idiot who was not.

I sighed. I was quickly becoming my least favorite person, which was not a fun place to be. I mean, I couldn't really limit my time with myself, could I? What could I do?

I looked around as if I thought I might see someone, but even the research outpost based a few miles away had seemed empty when I passed by. I was all alone out here. Maybe this was a better place to be than a crowded college campus. Maybe all this work at trying to pretend to be normal, to pretend to be an average college freshman, was stupid. Maybe I should have followed my instincts.

When I was about thirteen it started to become apparent that I wasn't ever going to be normal. More and more weird things were happening to me and it was starting to seem more like the reality than the exception that I was just not like my classmates. My first instinct had been to run away, to live my life alone. Why bother trying to fit in when I never could?

I was only thirteen, though, and hadn't handled it well. I packed a bag, but announced my plan to my parents before I did it. They had laughed at me. Not meanly, but

affectionately. Mom had said that every little boy feels like he doesn't fit in and if I didn't have these weird powers, I'd think I'd never fit in because my eyes were brown or something silly like that. I hadn't really believed her - I mean, who doesn't fit in because they have brown eyes? But I had still decided to stay home.

Maybe that first thought was correct. I mean, I'm sure Mom was right - everyone feels like they don't fit in sometimes. But no one had a reason as good as mine. Right? And maybe by trying to fit in, by trying to have a normal life, I was just hurting myself and others.

If I had just accepted I wasn't normal, I never would have bothered to make friends and then I'd never have dated Maddie, never have been friends with Lois. All three of us would be better off right now.

I'd be lonely, I supposed, but I wasn't sure that wasn't worse than this.

I sighed. What I would be doing for sure, though, was disappointing my parents. They wanted nothing more than a normal life for me. I owed them that. I owed them more than that. They had saved me from starving or whatever in Shuster's Field and supported me when it became clear that their son was anything but a normal boy. They had always taken my differences in stride.

While lots of things in my life seemed pretty awful right about then, the truth was that I never stopped being lucky. Martha and Jonathan Kent were amazing people, and I couldn't have hoped for someone better to find me. So I owed them the effort to try to have a normal life.

Maybe, though, a normal life with limits. Maybe friends were okay, but no romantic relationships. Those were just disasters waiting to happen. I never wanted to feel what I was feeling now again. And more than that, I never wanted to see someone else I cared about look the way Maddie did and know I was the cause.

Yes, definitely. Friendships were probably okay (although the one with Lois certainly needed work right now), but nothing more intimate than that.

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"Hey," Star smiled at me as she answered the door. "Lois is at the Titan staff meeting, but you can come in and wait for her."

"Thanks," I gave a small smile, following her in to the dorm room. "How are you?" I asked as I sat on Lois' bed.

Star shrugged. "Good. I aced my econ midterm."

"That's great!" I said, remembering how she had stressed about that.

"What about you? What did you decide about that course?" she asked me.

"What course?" I asked her.

"I told you - you were going to consider a course for next semester but not be sure if you should take it. What did you decide?"

I flushed. I hadn't decided on my courses for next semester yet. I had until the end of the week and with all the things going on right now, I hadn't even opened the course catalog since the day Star had last mentioned it to me. "I... um... haven't decided yet."

Star shook her head. "I thought that was the case, but thought I might be wrong. You don't seem like a procrastinator."

"I'm not usually," I said, "but things have been busy lately."

Star nodded her head. "When do you have to put your picks in by?"



I grimaced. "Can I guess that the fact that you don't know means that you've already done it?"

Star laughed. "Yes. Your chances of getting your first pick is better if you submit early."

"I know," I admitted, "but we have until the end of the week. I'm planning on making decisions tomorrow afternoon." That wasn't strictly true - I had had no plans at all before now, but now that Star had reminded me, I realized that it was something I really did need to do something about. Provided I wasn't still planning on dropping out of school and living on a glacier, anyway.

Lois walked in just then and seemed surprised to see me. The surprise just flickered across her face though and was gone almost before I could comprehend it.

"Hi," I said to her softly.

"Hi," she said and even if her face was unreadable, her tone was unmistakably guarded.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked her. "Can I treat you to a cup of coffee or something?"

"I'm not sure," she said.

"I'm really sorry," I interrupted her. "I was way out of line earlier."

She nodded. "I guess so."

"Thanks," I said as I got up. "See you later, Star."

"Later, Clark," Star said before burying her head in a book.

"I meant it," I told Lois as we left her dorm and walked towards the union. "I'm really sorry. I was in a bad mood and I shouldn't have taken it out on you. You were being a good friend - I wasn't."

Lois nodded. "I guess I can understand that. Are you feeling better now?"

I shrugged. "I guess. I mean, I'm still not okay about the whole breaking up with Maddie thing, but I'm not angry about it. I know it was my fault and I know there's nothing I can do to fix it. I just wish I hadn't hurt her."

"So what did you do?" Lois asked me gently.

I shrugged. "I don't really want to talk about it," I said. Lois could be like a dog with a bone. The last thing I wanted to do was tell her I had kept something from Maddie - she wouldn't rest until she knew what it was.

"Why don't you just apologize and work through it if you know it's your fault?" Lois asked in what had to be a superhuman effort not to push me to explain what I had done wrong.

"It's not that simple," I said quietly as I opened the door for the union.

"What isn't?" Lois asked, sincerely confused.

We paused as we came to the counter and Lois ordered a hot chocolate and I ordered a tea. We waited in silence a minute or so as the guy behind the counter made our drinks and I paid for them. We carried them out to the big area in the center of the union filled with couches.

"So?" Lois prodded as we sat next to each other.

"This isn't like that. I can't just apologize. I need to... I really don't want to talk about it," I said again as I realized I couldn't really explain without saying too much.

Lois looked at me quizzically for a moment before asking, "Do you still love her?"

I nodded although I knew what was coming.

"Well, then, why wouldn't you do anything you could to fix things?"

I smiled. "Really? That's advice from Lois Lane? I can't imagine you following that advice."

"You'd be surprised what I'd agree to if I were in love

with someone," she muttered so softly I wasn't sure I was supposed to hear her. Louder, she said, "Sometimes you need to make sacrifices."

"Are they always worth it?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "Don't ask me. I'm the one with no experience. Remember?"

I sighed. "It doesn't matter. Maybe my mom is right. Maybe I don't love her as much as I think I do. I just can't do what I need to do to make this right," I said, feeling frustrated.

"I don't get it," Lois said, but then rushed on. "You know if you told me what was wrong, maybe I could help."

"Maybe," I said, not that I had any intention of telling Lois what was going on. "I think it's just over, though, Lois. Maddie deserves better anyway."

Lois snorted. "Where is she going to find that?" she asked me.

"What?"

"Better than you," Lois replied deadpan. I gave her an incredulous look and she clarified, "You are always telling me that if Paul doesn't notice me, that's his fault. Well, the same is true here. Maddie isn't going to do better than you, Clark."

I gave her a shallow smile. "You'd be surprised how easy that would be," I told her knowing that any doofus on campus would be better than me. Well, maybe not any doofus, but most. I mean, how hard could it be to be better than the weirdo who could fly?

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I walked back to my room feeling at least a little bit better. Somehow it was a little easier to take the whole break up with Maddie when Lois wasn't also angry at me. Not that her anger at me earlier hadn't been justified.

Still, I had to admit that I was sort of looking forward to the semester ending in a couple of weeks. Things weren't the same now and even the journalism class, which was my favorite one this semester, had been sort of sleepy since the big assignment for midterms. Professor Matthews had told us that this would be the case - he tried to assign the biggest assignment early so we didn't have a big investigation to deal with while we were trying to study for finals. So, even when I asked Lois what I missed by skipping class that day before the break, she had shrugged, telling me I hadn't missed much.

I stopped when I realized where I was. My feet had taken me directly to Maddie's dorm. Somehow I doubted she'd be happy to see me this evening, so with a sigh, I did an about-face and went back towards my own. Maybe now would be a good time to take on more Boy in Black activities. I had nothing else to keep me occupied in the evenings.

When I got back to my room, however, I realized I had more schoolwork to do. Star was right. I couldn't keep putting off choosing my classes for next semester. So with no real interest, but a feeling of obligation, I pulled my course catalog towards me and started flipping through it.

There were a few classes I had to take - the next class for the journalism degree was specifically on investigative journalism. It wasn't mandatory you take it next semester, but it was a bad idea to wait if you were going to apply for a Planet internship since that was the class with the second recommendation. While I felt fairly confident that I'd get a recommendation (much more than that I'd get the internship), it seemed like a stupid idea to put that at risk by not taking the next class.

It was also recommended however, that you limit your journalism classes to just one, and heavy up on some of the other requirements for graduation. From talking to some upper classman, some of the more advanced journalism classes took a lot more of your time and left little free time to focus on areas where you may be weak, so it made sense to get other requirements out of the way now.

The remaining classes to take were somewhat open, though. Essentially, aside from needing one hundred and twenty credits to graduate, I needed to take a mix of classes from different disciplines. My poli sci course this semester had fulfilled the need for a class on government or economics and the math class for non-majors I was taking with Lois and Maddie fulfilled the math requirement.

I still had a science requirement I needed to fill as well as a literature one. I sighed. Actually, there were several other requirements - not that this was surprising given I had only finished my first semester. I really only needed to take two courses a semester towards these inter-disciplinary requirements in order to meet the goal. This left me a fair amount of time for both journalism classes - I'd likely take two a semester starting next year - and then at least one other class of my choosing.

Maybe literature would be a good class for next semester. I looked through the catalog, but there were a dizzying array of classes - early American literature, late American literature, early British literature, and late British literature. There was even a class on classic Greek literature taught in Greek. I wasn't sure I was fluent enough in any language to take a literature course in it, so I should probably stick with the American and British classes. Unfortunately, none of them seemed as interesting as I would have liked. I wasn't interested in a semester of Jane Austen, and while I loved the novels given as examples for the early American literature class, I had already read many of them. So maybe this was a class better left for later semesters given that it may not be that difficult for me.

I flipped to a new section, deciding to come back to literature later. So far, I had been flipping through the catalog for an hour and the only course I had decided on was the journalism class. Somehow, when Star told me I was going to have trouble deciding on a course, I had thought she meant one course, not all of them.

I went back to the front to look at the other inter-disciplinary requirements and pick one I thought I might want to fill next semester. Both social science and history seemed like good options for next semester, so I went to the social science section. Sociology did not interest me at all, so I flipped past all of those. Philosophy? Maybe. That didn't seem so bad. I marked that down on my notebook with the class times to come back to.

Okay, so two classes down. But to get to my one hundred and twenty credits, I needed to take fifteen a semester and so far, I was at six. This wasn't even enough to be a full time student. I sighed. My heart clearly wasn't in it tonight.

I tossed the catalog aside, but then quickly grabbed it back. It seemed unlikely I was going to get out of this funk I was in sometime soon and I really did need to decide on classes.

"Hey," Steve called, startling me as he opened the door.

"Hey," I replied listlessly.

"What are you up to?" he asked, pulling his shirt on over his head and reaching over to grab his deodorant. It was readily apparent what he was up to.

"Just picking out classes for next semester," I told him.

"Ah, man, our choices don't need to be in until Friday. Come out with me tonight," Steve said.

"What?" I asked, confused. I thought Steve and I had established pretty early on that we were very different people. Aside from lunch a few days a week, we weren't really friends and almost never saw each other outside of the dorm.

"You and Maddie are history, right?" he asked me. As always, he managed to convey just the right tone of nonchalance to make it seem like nothing in the world could possibly be painful - including the demise of a relationship with someone you were in love with.

"Yeah," I said warily. I wasn't sure what I was agreeing to.

"So, come out with me. The Sigma Phi House is having a party," Steve said.

I almost said no - I hadn't really had that much fun at the last frat party I had been to - well, except for talking with Maddie afterwards. Before I could, though, Steve added, "Josh is coming, too."

"He is?" I asked. Josh hadn't had any more fun at the last party than I had. Steve was really the only party guy in our group.

"Yeah, they have a killer game room," Steve explained.

I shrugged. Maybe it would be quieter in there than the rest of the party? If not, I could always bail anyway, I guessed. "Sure," I said, tossing my course catalog to the side.

Steve smiled at me as I grabbed my jacket. I just hoped this didn't make him think he was going to convert me to a party boy.

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"Hey," Josh said when I followed Steve's half-hearted advice on how to get to the game room. Without the help of my enhanced vision, I wouldn't have found it.

"Where is everyone?" I asked him, looking around.

He shrugged. "These rooms are always half empty during parties. It's the best part- you can't come in to use these without a friend in the frat normally, but only a few of the frat guys want to be in here when there are girls upstairs. I'm actually glad you're here. Otherwise I need to wait until later for one of them to come down here so I have someone to play with."

He motioned towards a bumper pool table. "Wanna play?"

I smiled. This was going to turn out to be my kind of party after all.

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I was tempted to pack using super-speed, but Steve was still around here somewhere and I wasn't really up for explaining to him how I managed to pack in less than a minute. Particularly as I had to admit, since Maddie had stopped dropping by, I had let my side of the room go to pot. Not that it mattered that much - Steve had never been much of a neat freak, so now our sides matched.

Still, it meant I had some cleaning to do. We didn't need to take everything home over the long break, but it made sense to clean the room before leaving for a month. Besides, there really was a fair amount of packing to be done. Given the limited space, most of us only brought enough clothes for the first semester. Some of my winter clothes could stay since I'd be back in February, but I needed to go through the "fall" clothes and decide which I was likely to use in the spring. I had to admit, I was glad I

was a guy. My guess was that this was a much harder task for girls.

The knock at the door startled me as we had had the door open all day. It was a bit party like here with the semester over and everyone packing. Lois, however, seemed oblivious to the chaos around her, though, when I saw her standing just outside my door.

"What's up?" I asked, raising my voice loudly to be heard over the din in the hallway.

"I just had the best day," she told me with a broad smile. I wasn't sure I had ever seen her looking so happy, and I realized with some surprise that I had also never seen her looking so beautiful. She was nearly glowing.

"Care to share?" I asked her.

She blushed a bit as if she wasn't sure she wanted to, but by now I knew Lois enough to know to just wait. She had knocked on my door - clearly she did want to share. She still, though, seemed to be trying to determine the best way to be friends.

Finally, she seemed to make up her mind and walked fully inside, closing the door behind her. "Do you mind?" she asked me, motioning to the closed door.

I shrugged. "I don't, but if you want privacy, this is not the best place to get it today. We could go out."

Lois' eyes lit up. "I could go for another brownie at Anjelina's before I head home."

I laughed at her. "Lois, you live in town. You can come by Anjelina's anytime."

She shook her head, "I know, but I'm never in this neighborhood."

"Well, then, Anjelina's it is," I said as I guided her out the door. "Some day you're going to have to take me to see your house so I have an idea of what other parts of Metropolis look like. And why getting on the subway to come here is such a big deal."

Lois scrunched up her nose. "There's nothing to see. My parents live in a boring building. It's nice, I guess. We have a doorman and stuff, but it's just city living. Like an apartment, only they own it. Nothing like living on a farm."

"What?" I asked, shocked. "Are you suggesting there are some benefits to Smallville over Metropolis?"

Lois laughed - actually her laugh was almost tinkle-like. I glanced at her again. Was she just really happy or was she high or something?

"Hardly," she said, making me feel a little better. "But you know, no one around here is going to have a pond on their property."

I opened the door for her as we reached Anjelina's. "Or a barn," I added.

"Not a benefit," Lois told me. "Barns smell."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "When was the last time you were in a barn to see if it smelled?"

"I've read books," Lois told me.

"Well, not on the Kent farm," I replied. "Our barn does not smell."

Lois smiled at me. "Okay. I'll have to trust you on that one."

A few minutes later we were seated with a brownie in front of each of us. "Okay," I said to her as I broke off a piece. "Spill. What's got you so happy?"

She leaned forward slightly and with a smile whispered, "I went out with Paul last night."

"You did?" I asked, rather loudly actually, as I was surprised.

"I told you I would," Lois said, leaning back and

looking smug.

"What'd you have to give him to do it?" I asked her.

"Another article?"

"That's not fair, Clark!" Lois said, looking sincerely hurt. "You don't think he'd go out with me otherwise?"

I sighed, knowing I had bungled things. "Honestly, no. But not because you're not pretty enough or smart enough or interesting enough or whatever else it is you're thinking. Just 'cause Paul's a jerk and I don't think he dates girls unless he gets something from them."

"What was he getting from Linda?" Lois asked me.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I have an idea, and I hope it's not what he got from you."

Lois blushed and I worried - she wouldn't really do that, would she? Not Lois. She had way too much self respect for that. Although... not where Paul was concerned. She had let him steal her story. Why not her... well I didn't really know if he could have "stolen" her virginity. Although that was the wrong word. Taken maybe? I just sort of assumed that given that Lois said she had trouble making friends in high school, she probably didn't date much either.

"Lois," I said softly. "Please tell me you didn't sleep with him just to get him to go out with you."

"What if I wanted to?" she asked me.

"Did you?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"You didn't..." I started, but she cut me off.

"What if I did?" she asked me, and her flashing eyes let me know I had gone too far. "Is that so bad? I really like him, Clark. Maybe even love him. You're not going to tell me that you and Maddie didn't... I hate the double standard that makes you a success for sleeping with Maddie and me loose for sleeping with Paul!"

I closed my eyes, knowing I had to tread carefully if I didn't want her to storm out. "I'm not applying a double standard," I told her. "You probably even remember that Maddie and I finished our first date by going to the movies with you. And even after that, we never..."

"You didn't?" Lois asked surprised.

"No," I told her. "Which doesn't mean I think you're... easy? I don't know... if you did with Paul. Just that I hope you didn't do so just so he'd go out with you. You should be with a guy who wants to be with you just to spend time with you. The rest of it is just... bonus or something."

Lois giggled. "Only the farm boy."

"Thanks," I said, rolling my eyes at her.

"So," she said, blushing again. "I did sort of tell him that I'd sleep with him before the date. But I meant it, Clark. It didn't really seem like I was giving in or anything."

"But?" I prodded her.

She smiled brightly at me. "I don't know," she said. "The date went really well. We went to EOW and talked. And then we took a walk around campus. But when we got back to his room, I sort of freaked out. I was sort of regretting telling him I'd... well, you know. So we started kissing and stuff and at first it was nice, but then I got just more and more preoccupied with what was coming and just couldn't... Well, anyway, I ended up asking him if he'd mind if we waited." She finally finished, taking a deep breath - perhaps the first since she'd started.

"And?" I asked her quietly, only hoping that her good mood meant he had responded well.

"And he was fine with it," she said, smiling brightly. "He said he never meant to push me and if I wasn't ready, then I wasn't."

"Really?" I asked, surprised, but somewhat impressed. Maybe Paul wasn't the jerk I thought he was.

"Really," Lois said as she popped the last piece of brownie into her mouth. "So, he must really like me, right?"

"Yeah," I smiled at her. "Not that that's surprising."

She glared at me, although her eyes were still shining.

"Okay," I admitted. "It's a little surprising. But only as I thought Paul was a jerk. Not because it's really surprising that he finds you attractive. So when are you seeing him again?"

"Not until next semester," Lois said. "He lives in Florida somewhere, and is going home over break. But we exchanged addresses and he said he'll write to me."

"That's great, Lois," I said. I meant it, too. Or sort of. I just couldn't help feeling that this was the first time I had heard anything about Paul that didn't make my skin crawl, and so it was hard to be sure he was really not a jerk after all.

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Coming back to school after winter break was very different than arriving in September had been. First off, the way I arrived was different. When I came in September, Mom and Dad had been pretty firm that they did not care that I could fly myself to Metropolis. It was their right as parents of a student starting college to drive me to school and help me get settled into my dorm room. Besides, my dad claimed that he wanted to see what all the fuss was about anyway - which was a lie, since he had been the one who urged me to come here in the first place.

So, we had piled Dad's pick-up high with my stuff, thrown a tarp over it in case of rain, and drove from Kansas to Metropolis. I have to admit, as much as I had complained about having to sit in the jump seat in the back of the cab when we could have taken Mom's car (although her little compact would not have fit my stuff), I was glad they had insisted on driving me. Coming here in September had been oddly frightening. At the time, Metropolis seemed like no more than a big city where I likely wouldn't belong and where I certainly didn't know anyone.

This time while it was actually a better time for Mom and Dad to take a long road trip as there was a lot less to do on the farm in February than in August, they were happy to let me fly back. More than that, though, it wasn't so scary coming back. As weird as it was, Metropolis, or at least the little corner of it populated by Metropolis University, was starting to feel like home.

The break had been great and I had enjoyed the time in Smallville, particularly at first when I was still feeling bummed about the break up with Maddie. Then after moaning about it to Chad and Pete for the umpteenth time, Pete had suggested I call her. Of course, I never really told them what went wrong which frustrated them, I'm sure, but I could tell they didn't really care. They just wanted me to get out of my slump.

So, I had called her on Christmas Eve. It was a weird conversation at first as after the usual pleasantries I hadn't known what to say. But I decided to be honest with her, at least up to a point. I told her I was sorry, that I knew she deserved better, but I also didn't think I could be the person she deserved. That didn't change the fact that I cared about her, though, and I missed her.

We ended the conversation well. Clearly, Maddie had gotten over some of her anger in the time since we had broken up, and while I think she was disappointed that I still wouldn't tell her whatever it was I was keeping from

her, it no longer hurt quite like it had. I wasn't delusional enough to think we'd ever be best friends, and I had to admit that made me a little sad, but I thought that it would be easier to continue to be friends with her when we got back than it had been. At least we wouldn't feel the need to avoid each other and lunch wouldn't be filled with these awkward silences whenever our eyes caught each other.

I had talked to Josh a few times over the break and Lois as well. Like me, Josh seemed to enjoy his time catching up with high school friends (and of course, the lack of school work for a month didn't hurt). Lois seemed like she was enjoying the break less, but then she had less high school friends to catch up with. She and Josh had gotten together for lunch once, though, and she'd even ended up on some sort of school trip with her sister to New York. She hadn't gone to see Steve while there, but apparently Alicia had been in town visiting Chris, so they had gotten together.

It really was starting to seem like our little group of friends was really that - rather than a rag-tag group of freshman that happened to meet up when they didn't know anyone else. I had my suspicions that Steve may not really be friends with the rest of us through college once he and I no longer lived together, but at least the rest of us had come to care for one another. Even Alicia and I were friendly now. Not close enough to talk during the break, but she had seemed so much softer since she started dating Chris and her anti-Kansas thing had worn off. It turned out that when she wasn't busy putting down Kansas, she was a pretty nice girl.

So, while I wasn't looking forward to going back to class, I was sort of looking forward to getting back to my friends. I had flown in a couple of days early so no one would notice the strange kid who seemed to come from out of nowhere with a suitcase, but after dropping it off in my room, I had gone back to Kansas until the break was over.

About the only stressful thing on my mind as I unpacked my bag was the paper for Professor Halkuff's class. I knew it was ridiculous - classes hadn't even started yet, but I knew Lois was already working on it. She was determined to make sure she didn't lose the leg up she already had on the second recommendation. Whereas I felt much more confident than she did in getting one of the two letters, I still felt like I needed to hand in something good or maybe they'd change their mind. Besides, just in case they handed our papers into Mr. White with our recommendations, I didn't want my second article to be a flop.

Add to that the fact that I knew it was only a month or so before we'd need to start working on our application for the internship itself, and I really needed two great story ideas. Right now, I had none, and I wasn't sure it was safe to assume another story like the med school one would land in my lap.

I had been mulling over the idea of more of a human interest piece for Professor Halkuff's class. I knew it would need to involve some investigating since her class was in investigative journalism, but I thought it might be good to balance out the articles Mr. White might see with something a little less hard hitting than my last article had been. I was fully aware that a softer piece for the actual application would not be at all acceptable.

During the break, I had talked to my parents a bit more about my experiences as the Boy in Black. Maybe it was the timing of it - since it happened the same night as my first kiss with Maddie and that night was one I replayed

often over break, but I kept coming back to that little kid who had been in so much debt for drug use. Mom had suggested that perhaps my paper could be an investigative piece on the presence of illicit drugs in elementary schools. It was certainly better than most of the ideas I had come up with myself.

Once I was happy that my room was mostly in order, I decided to go out and grab something to eat. Classes didn't start until the next day and so far there had been no sign of Steve. I'd called Josh, Lois, Maddie, and Alicia when I'd arrived to see if anyone wanted to get together for dinner, but hadn't heard back from any of them yet.

I wasn't gone long - I had decided to just go to the dining hall for lunch and have a sandwich, but when I came back, Lois was sitting in the hallway outside my door. "Steve still not back?" I asked her from down the hallway as I approached.

She didn't respond right away, so I waited until I got a little closer before speaking again. "Hey," I said as I got my key out. "I'm guessing Steve isn't here yet."

Lois was still staring at the ground, but shrugged. "No one answered when I knocked," she said.

"Do you have a cold?" I asked her. She had sounded nasally, and I was pleased to have noticed - glad that a month away, even with the occasional phone call, hadn't meant that I had forgotten what her voice sounded like.

"No," she said as she got to her feet to follow me inside, but when she passed me by, I realized why she had sounded nasally anyway.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, taking in her red nose. She didn't appear to be crying, but it was clear that she had been a few minutes ago.

She sniffled before taking a seat on my bed. "You were right," she said.

"About what?" I asked, completely confused.

"Paul," she told me, sounding miserable.

"What about Paul?" I asked, a sinking feeling in my stomach. On the one hand, Lois hadn't seen Paul over the break as he had been in Florida, so what could he have really done? On the other hand, I did think Paul had a gift for being a jerk, and Lois was crying... Like Dad said, 'If it looks like a duck, acts like a duck, and quacks like a duck - it's probably a duck.' All signs seemed to point to Paul being a duck. Well, not really a duck, but...

"I called him when I got here and we made plans to meet for lunch," she told me.

"Had you talked to him over the break?" I asked her, although I had asked her before and she had said no. Still, it had been a week or so since we had last talked.

"No," she said, sniffling again. "But I still didn't think it was a big deal. He was busy catching up with friends or whatever..." she said.

I wanted to point out that I had been busy catching up with friends and had still found the time to talk to her, and I wasn't even interested in her in that way, but I decided to stay quiet. That wasn't something she wanted to hear right now and I doubted it would be helpful.

"So, what happened?" I asked. "Did he show for lunch?"

She nodded. "And at first it was great. He told me he had missed me, and kissed me and it was... just nice."

She trailed off, so after a moment of silence I prodded her on. "But..."

She sniffled again, "Then he asked me if I had any ideas for a new story for the paper," she said. "I was surprised

since he doesn't usually take my ideas seriously, but then I thought maybe he had changed his mind."

"But he didn't," I guessed.

"No, he did," Lois said, sounding slightly bitter. "Or at least it sounds like he has. I didn't really have any ideas. I started to tell him about my idea for Professor Halkuff's article, but I decided not to at the last minute. I didn't want him to use it for the Titan before I have a chance to hand it in as an assignment."

"You have an idea for Professor Halkuff's paper already?" I asked.

She gave a small smile. "Yeah. As long as we're allowed to use things from around Metropolis again. Over the break, I heard some guys talking at a diner. They're building a new apartment complex in Suicide Slum, and it sounds like it's not up to code."

"Suicide Slum?" I asked. What sort of name was that?

"It's the... not so nice part of Metropolis," Lois said with a small smile.

"I thought this area was the not so nice part."

"Well, it is. If you're a middle-class yuppie. But Suicide Slum is really not nice."

I laughed at her smirk. "So, I'm guessing there isn't enough money for the apartment complex to be built up to code in that area."

Lois shrugged. "I'd have to find out if it's true or not, but I did check and there is a new apartment complex being built there for low income families."

"Well, I don't see that as Titan material anyway," I said.

"Exactly," Lois agreed. "I didn't see how it would help Paul anyway and even if it did, I thought I needed it for class more. So I told him I didn't have any ideas. And then things got... weird, I guess."

"Weird how?"

"Paul asked how I expected him to keep dating me if I wasn't giving him anything," Lois said, her cheeks flushing.

"Giving him anything?" I asked, simultaneously not surprised, but appalled at the gall of this guy.

"Yeah. I didn't understand what he meant at first, so I asked, and he said..." she trailed off, sniffling again. "He said that Michelle always provided him with good stories he could publish under his name."

"Wait," I said. "Who's Michelle?"

Lois shrugged. "She's a sophomore on the paper. I always thought she wasn't very good as she never seemed to get anything in the paper. But it turns out she has been, just under Paul's byline."

I closed my eyes so Lois couldn't see how I felt about this news. Not that I was sure what I felt. Revulsion, maybe? Disgust? I wasn't sure, but whatever it was, I thought it was probably better for Lois not to see it.

"Anyway, so I asked him what he was talking about - why Michelle would be letting him steal her articles and he said it wasn't stealing. That was the deal. He was dating her, and in return she provided him with articles."

"I'm sorry," I said, placing a hand on hers. "I didn't..."

She shook her head to cut me off. "So I asked if Linda was providing him articles, too. Told him I didn't even realize he was still dating Linda, let alone dating Michelle, but I now guessed he was, and he just shrugged and said she wasn't providing articles but was providing him other stuff, and since I wasn't willing to do that type of thing..."

"I hope you smacked him," I said without thinking about it.

Lois gave a small giggle. "I wish I had. I just sort of sat

there for a minute before saying that I wasn't planning to give him either and if that meant he didn't want to date me then he wasn't the person I thought he was."

"Good for you!" I said, happy that at last she had not just let Paul walk all over her.

"I guess," Lois said, shrugging again. "He called me a frigid cow and walked away."

"Do you care?" I asked her. "You meant it, didn't you? You don't want to date someone like that."

"I don't," Lois said, "but I can't just stop my feelings for him. I keep thinking he's... nicer than that or something. I know now he's not, but... I just wish..."

"That he was more like you thought he was?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said, leaning her head on my shoulder. "I was thinking more that I just wished he was more like you."

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"No, I have an art class at that time," Maddie said. We had so far discovered that the only days we all had lunch free at the same time was Mondays and Fridays, although everyone but Maddie and Steve were free on Wednesdays as well. Maddie had some sort of three-hour art seminar Wednesday afternoons and Steve had decided to join the intramural basketball team which had a game every Wednesday afternoon.

Today's lunch was filled with comparisons of class schedules. Alicia had hands-down the worst - she had classes starting at eight every day, and it was agreed that Lois and I had the best as both of us had somehow managed to secure Friday afternoons off.

Surprisingly, except for Lois and me both being in Professor Halkuff's class, none of us had any classes together.

"How come you're not in this Halkuff's class as well?" Steve asked Josh as he picked up his milk container and guzzled what was left.

"I decided to skip the journalism major," Josh told him. Both Lois and I had talked to Josh about it over the break. He seemed somewhat torn as he loved to write, but just wasn't sure journalism was for him. "That's what the short story workshop is about," he added. The English department here offered a few workshop style classes a semester and Josh had managed to get into one of them. It was quite an honor - apparently you needed to submit a portfolio of your writing to be considered, and then the professor chose eight students to attend the workshop. Josh was the only freshman to get in this year.

"It sounds like fun," Lois said. "I wish I had gotten in."

"You tried, too?" Alicia asked.

Lois shrugged. "Come on. Everyone who wants to be a writer of some sort dreams about writing the great American novel. I figured learning how to improve my short story writing would have helped with that."

"I can't believe you didn't get in," I said, still amazed at the transformation. Gone was the whimpering girl from yesterday. No one at the table but me had any idea what had happened with Paul.

Lois shrugged. "She said I was a strong writer, but lacked the creativity she was looking for for this. She urged me to try again and I probably will. There's a reason freshman usually don't get in."

"Well, that just makes it all the more impressive that you did, then," Maddie said to Josh and Lois nodded in agreement.

Now it was Josh's turn to shrug. "I don't know. Maybe I got lucky."

"Or maybe creative writing is your calling like journalism is mine," Lois said and I marveled at her again. This new Lois was really somewhat amazing. It was like she had spent time over break determining the fine line between being too hard and too soft or something. All the aspects of Lois that had made us friends were still there, but now she wasn't this beaten down little girl - she was stronger and more willing to be herself. I guess it was elements of the girl I had spent so much time fighting with earlier last semester. I couldn't help but find the result both amazing and, if I were to be honest, more than a little attractive.

"I hope so," Josh said. "My dad seems to think I should have picked out a major by now."

Alicia laughed. "Wow. Your dad doesn't know many college freshmen, does he?"

Josh smiled at her. "Just me."

"So, is this Professor Halkuff supposed to be hard?" Alicia asked us.

I looked at Lois, wondering if she had any knowledge of this that I didn't, but she shook her head. "No idea. Clark?"

"I haven't heard anything either," I told them.

"But this is the class the second recommendation comes from, right?" Maddie asked us.

"Yeah," I said, as I finished my sandwich.

"So, it can't be that easy," Alicia said.

Josh gave a snort. "Like Lois and Clark don't have the recommendations all sewn up already?"

"I don't think we do," Lois said. "I mean, I think Clark does and right now I'm in a good spot for the second one, but I don't think it's a sure bet."

"I'm sure it's not," I said. "My guess is if my article isn't good enough, Professor Halkuff could even convince Professor Matthews that I just got lucky and I wouldn't get a recommendation."

"Of course that doesn't change the fact that Perry White has seen your writing already," Lois pointed out.

"He's seen yours, too," I reminded her.

"All the more reason I need to show him I can do better," Lois said as we all got up.

"You're going to get it, Lois," I said as we moved towards the line to drop off our tray. "I'm sure of it."

Lois nodded. "I hope so. I just... well, I really hope so."

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"Welcome to Investigative Journalism," Professor Halkuff said from the front of the classroom. "For those of you who want to be an investigative journalist, this is where it all begins. And for those of you who want to work in any other area of journalism, you will find the skills you learn here are the ground work for almost anything else you do."

The girl sitting next to me, a tall skinny girl with auburn hair, snorted. "I doubt that," she said under her breath.

"You will need to investigate to write editorials or the gossip column, even the obituaries," Professor Halkuff said and I saw the girl next to me straighten up when she said 'gossip'. I smiled. She looked like a gossip columnist to me.

Obviously, Lois, who was on my other side agreed, as I saw her hide a smirk.

"Perhaps most motivating to many of you is that in this class you will write an article that, in combination with the article you wrote for Professor Matthews last semester, will determine the two students who will get recommendations for the Daily Planet internship. And since Perry White is mostly looking for a freshman with investigative skills, this

class will teach you the ground work you will need for the application process."

Someone in the first row raised their hand and Professor Halkuff nodded at him. "If we're learning the basics here, how will we apply it in the middle of the semester?"

"Has he never heard about natural ability?" Lois asked me in a whisper.

"Mr. White is looking for someone with a 'nose for news' as he likes to say," Professor Halkuff answered. "He believes he can determine the great writers early in your education and a full semester of investigative reporting isn't necessary."

"That's not fair," someone in the back said loudly.

"Maybe not," Professor Halkuff said, looking like she had this particular conversation a lot. "But as the editor of the greatest paper in the world, he gets to make that call. And I'll tell you, few students here who were awarded the freshman internship at the Planet haven't gone on to become the best in their field. So, I'd have to say, my experience has shown me that Mr. White knows what he's looking for."

I felt myself tense slightly and saw Lois do the same. He'd probably already sized us up. What had he thought? I wondered - was all his talk last semester about expecting something even better for my application so I didn't get lazy, or was he telling me that he already saw my weaknesses and wasn't sure I would be the best candidate for the internship?

"Because I'd like to enable those of you applying for the internship the opportunity to really focus on it, the article for this class will be due in three weeks. The rules are similar to what you did for Professor Matthews - a topic of interest to either the students of Met U or the population of Metropolis is acceptable. I will also accept topics of interest for other locales, but keep in mind that this is a class in investigative journalism. If there is no investigation involved, you will fail."

"When are the topic papers due?" Lois asked.

"There are none," Professor Halkuff told us. "You're on your own here. Submit the article when it's ready or by February 22nd at the latest. If the topic is not up to par, it will be reflected in your final grade."

"No pressure there," I whispered to Lois.

"So you won't tell us what you think beforehand?" someone asked.

"Is he deaf?" the girl next to me asked.

"This is the real world. You will not get feedback from Mr. White on your application to the Planet. Think of this as a practice run."

I sighed. I was worried that my idea wouldn't be investigative enough and could really use the judgment beforehand, but understood her point. I needed to learn to judge the worthiness of paper topics on my own.

"So what do we do in this class after this paper?" someone asked.

"I assure you, you will not be bored," Professor Halkuff said, sounding vaguely annoyed. "I will be using your Planet application article as an assignment for this class, so even those of you not planning to apply will have to write one more full article and you will conduct several smaller scale investigations throughout the semester."

Lois beamed at me. "This should be fun."

I rolled my eyes. Fun wasn't the word I was thinking of. Scary. Intimidating. Something more like that. I suspected, regardless of the internship outcome, that by the end of this semester, I'd have an idea of whether or not I was someone

who had a 'nose for news', and I had no idea what I would do if I didn't. I didn't have a back-up career. Unlike Lois and Josh, I wasn't really all that interested in writing the great American novel.

Of course, I could always become the Boy in Black full time. But that seemed like a cop-out and a decision I was hesitant to make while Mom and Dad were alive as it would hurt them so much.

I smiled. Or I could become the best farmer in all of Kansas.

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Josh and I had dinner that night at the student union, and I was coming back from there when I bumped into Lois. "Lois?" I asked her. She was virtually stomping across campus.

"What?" she snapped at me, but then looked immediately apologetic. "Sorry," she said. "I'm having a bad night."

"Something wrong with the investigation of the apartment complex?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No. I haven't even started on that yet."

"So, what's going on?"

"The first Titan staff meeting of the new semester," she said.

"I take it it didn't go well?" I asked her.

She rolled her eyes at me. "What was wrong with me?" she asked.

"What?"

"What was wrong with me? What did I find attractive about that snake?" she asked and I smiled.

"No idea," I told her, "but I'm glad you see the error of your ways now."

"He ignored me through most of the meeting," she told me, "and when he didn't, it was to make snide comments about me. Like I'm not worth his time! Who knows if the guy has any talent at all or if he's just good at getting girls to write things for him."

"Even if he does," I told her, "it's not nearly as much talent as you have in your pinky finger. If he had just a fraction of the talent you do, he wouldn't want to steal other people's stories."

Lois smiled. "Maybe he's just lazy."

"Maybe," I shrugged. "But if he's looking to get a job in journalism out of here, wouldn't he want a portfolio of his best writing? So if the best he can do is better than what he can steal, he'd want to have that written."

"Maybe he doesn't want to be held to too high a standard. That will just make it harder for him to find someone good enough to steal articles from in the real world," Lois said.

"Either way, you're way too good for him," I told her, smiling. I still couldn't get over this new Lois. The fire in her eyes when she was angry was transfixing.

"Let's bring him down," Lois said.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Let's bring him down. Let's get him off the Titan. Expose him for who he really is. Stop letting him get away with it," she said.

"What?" I said again, surprised. Isn't this precisely what she hadn't wanted to do last semester?

"It was your idea," Lois pointed out. "I was just too stupid to realize you were right. So help me do it now. Let's make sure he can't get a job out of here where he keeps skidding by, stealing articles, and making a successful

career out of it."

"At least until he loses his looks," I said to her with a smirk.

Lois' eyes lit up. "We could put a hit on him. Ask someone to mess him up so that happens now." We both laughed before Lois added, "Not really, but we can expose him for the fraud that he is."

"We could start by going back to Professor Matthews," I reminded her. "He'll back you up."

Lois flushed. "But I told him I would handle it. I don't really want to tell him what happened."

I shrugged. "Maybe you don't have to. Just tell him that you wanted to handle it by yourself, but the problem was bigger than you thought. Tell him Paul asked you to write more articles for him. And that he told you someone else on staff was doing that as well. Would she back you up?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "Maybe. She looked sorry for me at the meeting tonight. But if she's been letting Paul get away with it while he was also dating Linda..."

"You thought he had stopped dating Linda. Maybe Michelle did, too," I pointed out.

"Is this just stupid?" Lois asked me as she opened the door to her room. "Is it too late and I should just leave it alone?"

"No!" I said, possibly a little too emphatically as I sat on her bed. "This is important, Lois. You're right to want to stop it. Hey," I said as the thought occurred to me. "This could be your investigative piece for class."

Lois blushed. "I don't really want to write about myself. If you wanted to... well, actually, do you have another idea? 'Cause I'd prefer you didn't write it either."

I nodded, completely understanding. "I won't write it, but Lois, no one is going to think you're stupid."

"You did," she said quietly, staring at the small area of blanket between us. "When I first told you I was interested in Paul. You thought I was an idiot."

I smiled slightly. "I didn't mean it like that. I just thought... well, he was so clearly not good enough for you."

"But even later - you thought I was letting him walk all over me," she pointed out. I didn't say anything, because she was right. "Maybe I was," she added. "But I thought I should be making an effort to be softer."

"And now?" I asked quietly.

She shrugged. "You told me once that I could be both - not so argumentative and still not let people walk all over me. Did you mean that? I don't seem too... I don't know. Overbearing now?"

"Not at all," I told her, trying to let her see how much I liked the new version of Lois. "You seem... real now. Whole. And it's okay to get angry at people once in a while."

"I really don't seem... what was the word Mrs. Noris in high school used... confrontational? She said I was too confrontational and hard to be around."

I groaned. "Lois, the woman had a job as a high school guidance counselor. Didn't you guys make fun of her at your school? Besides, it's okay to confront people sometimes. And I don't find you at all hard to be around."

Lois smiled at me, her whole face lighting up. "Thanks, Clark," she whispered, just before she leaned over and kissed me.

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I was confused at first. Not confused enough to stop it or something, but confused. I wondered if Lois was thinking clearly or if this was just a reaction to Paul's

hurting her. Then I wondered how I felt about it. Was I really so over Maddie by now that I could kiss someone else? How long did it take to get over someone you loved?

I heard Steve's voice in my head asking me if I was a girl - what did it matter if I was over Maddie, Lois was hot. I almost laughed at that. I never called girls that - it seemed somewhat... demeaning or something, but in Steve's voice, it sounded right. And no matter whose voice it was, it was true. She was hot.

Lois mistook my slight gasp as I fought down the urge to laugh, and instead used it to deepen our kiss. And seconds after that, the voice in my head stopped.

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"You know if you'd just study once in a while, you wouldn't constantly need me to be telling you how you're going to do in your classes, as you'd know." Star's voice only vaguely filtered through my brain as the door to Lois' room opened.

"Hey, Lois... Clark?" Star's voice was clearer as Lois pulled away from me. For a moment, neither of us said anything, or even moved, really. Then, taking in the smirk and the knowing look Star shot my way, some semblance of higher brain function came back to me, and I grabbed Lois' blanket and threw it over us.

How had that happened? One minute we were kissing, and I wasn't even sure that was the best idea, and now we were lying in her bed... well, not nearly naked, but still... mostly down to our underwear.

"I guess I'll come back later," Star said, clearly trying not to giggle.

"No!" Lois and I both said emphatically. I guess like me, Lois was hoping that if she stayed we'd continue to act sane.

"I... I was actually just going," I stammered.

"Really?" Star asked, eyeing my pants, which were currently falling off the edge of Lois' bed.

"Yes," I said, keeping my voice as composed as possible considering my heart was beating a mile a minute and a thousand thoughts were running through my head. Lifting the blanket so that Lois was still covered, I got up. I was a little self conscious standing in my underwear in front of Star... Well, actually, I was a little self conscious standing in my underwear in front of Lois, too. Regardless, I knew I needed to leave before we did anything far stupider than what we had almost just done. Considering how far we had gotten without my even thinking about it, I did *not* want to spend too much time wondering where things would have stopped if Star had returned to their room just a little later.

I pulled my pants on hurriedly and grabbed my shirt from the floor as I walked to the door. "I'll call you later?" I asked Lois, feeling my face flush. In reality, I wasn't sure I wanted to call her later, but somehow I had the sense that it was the right thing to do.

She nodded silently as I turned around.

"See you later, Clark," Star called cheerily as I opened the door.

"Yeah, um, see you later," I replied, not bothering to turn back around.

I started back to my room, but then changed my mind. I felt the need to sort out what had just happened, and my roommate was not the person to do that with. My first two choices on campus were clearly also out. Lois would have been the obvious choice, but given that she was involved, this particular problem didn't seem like the best one to go to her with.



And Maddie... well, it wasn't clear I could really talk to Maddie about much of anything personal anymore, but this? I think it was safe to assume this was completely out of the question.

I considered talking to Josh, but somehow didn't feel right about that, either. I knew from our talks over break that he was over Lois now, but I also knew he had had quite a crush on her last semester.

This left me with the person I had always been most likely to go to with any sort of question. Maybe I was a Mama's Boy or something, but the truth was, no one could listen better than my mother.

So, I headed over to the math building and then back to Kansas.

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"Clark?" Mom called from the living room as I opened the door into the kitchen.

"Yeah, it's me," I called back thinking I went home too often if my parents still thought I was their most likely visitor when I lived half a continent away.

"What's the matter, son?" Dad asked as I came into the entranceway.

I started to ask how he knew something was wrong, but reconsidered. My parents knew me well. Just my being here likely meant I had some good news to share or I needed help, and the tone of my reply to my mother probably helped eliminate the former option.

"I kissed Lois tonight," I said, sitting down heavily on the couch.

"You what?" Dad asked, surprised, but Mom just smirked.

"I kissed Lois. Or...well, she kissed me, but I didn't stop her. And in fact, I don't know... things got out of hand," I finally said.

The smirk was gone from Mom's face. "How out of hand?"

"Not that out of hand!" I rushed to reassure her. "But bad enough."

"Bad enough for what?" Dad asked, and now he seemed to be on the verge of laughter.

"There was... clothing removed," I mumbled.

"And?" Mom prodded me on.

"That's it. But I mean... how could I have let that happen? I wasn't intending to...and she was all worked up about Paul and I'm not sure I'm over Maddie and..."

"Take a deep breath," Dad instructed me.

I followed his advice although I resented the chuckle I could hear in his voice.

"So you kissed a girl," Mom said. "You're eighteen. That's really okay."

"But..." I started, although I wasn't sure what to say. How could I explain what I wanted - how I was always so careful to be in control, and then somehow lost that tonight. How could that happen? How could I just completely stop thinking? I *never* did that. Mom and Dad had ingrained it in me that I couldn't do that.

"It's okay, Clark," Mom repeated more firmly. "I mean, I would suggest you spend some effort trying to keep a little more in control of your hormones so you don't get carried away, but overall it's okay to kiss someone."

"But how could I not even realize how far we'd gotten?" I asked her. How could she not understand how serious this was?

"Did you really not realize it?" Dad asked, "Or was it more that you didn't care?"

I stopped to consider the question, but I already knew the answer. It wasn't like I blacked out or something. I had been fully aware of Lois' fingers on my chest as she removed my shirt. And I had been more than fully aware of the feel of her skin under my fingers as I removed hers. "I guess that I didn't care. But it wasn't really like that. It was more like I just wasn't thinking at all."

Mom laughed.

"This is funny?" I asked her.

"A little. Yes," she said between giggles. "You're an eighteen year old, Clark. All you did was act like it. It's really okay not to act like a forty year old all of the time. Particularly considering you are no where near forty."

"I don't act like I'm forty," I mumbled.

"Really?" Dad asked. "How many of your friends do you think call home to tell their parents that they feel guilty for not helping other people more?"

"That's not fair," I said. "They can't help out the way I can."

"Still," Mom said, "the point still holds. So," she said, standing up and sitting back down with her leg underneath her. I took in her posture with trepidation. She sat like that when she thought our discussion would be more like juicy gossip than her providing real advice. I never enjoyed those talks as she always seemed on the verge of laughter throughout them. "Tell us what happened."

"I told you what happened," I said.

"Well, in that you kissed Lois," Mom said, "but I thought Lois had a crush on that guy from the paper you didn't like. And I thought you didn't know you were interested in her."

"She did have a crush on Paul," I said, amazed she could keep all these details straight. "But he was a jerk to her when we got back, and she seems sort of over it now. And...wait a second. What do you mean I didn't *know* I was interested in her?"

Now it was Dad's turn to laugh. "I think your mother means that you've been interested in Lois for a while. We were just waiting for you to realize it."

"No, I wasn't," I said. "I'm in love... or was in love with Maddie."

"That doesn't mean you can't find anyone else attractive," Mom pointed out.

"Maybe," I said, mainly to placate her. "But doesn't it mean I can't... I don't know. But... I don't know how to say what I want," I finally mumbled. As I suspected, this conversation was not going the way I wanted.

"I think it makes it hard for you - and by you, I mean specifically *you*, to act on your interest in someone else," Dad said. "You feel too guilty. But given that you and Maddie have been broken up for two months, maybe you're over that."

"Especially enough to not stop Lois when she kisses you, even if you wouldn't kiss her," Mom added.

"You're not being helpful," I told her.

Mom laughed again, and Dad smirked. Typical.

I sighed. "I'm looking for some advice here," I told them. "What do I do now?"

"Have you tried talking to Lois?" Dad asked.

"About what? You think I should ask her why she kissed me? I can't do that."

"Why not?" Mom asked.

"It would be too embarrassing," I explained.

"You kissed Lois today, and it sounds like some pretty heavy duty kissing, but you're too embarrassed to ask her

why she kissed you?" Mom asked, her eyebrows raised.

I understood her point, but it didn't change the facts. I got up. "I think I'm going back to campus," I told them.

This time Dad laughed, too. "Good luck with Lois, son," I said.

"Gee, thanks," I said, making no effort to hide my sarcasm. Not that it mattered - I could hear them still laughing as I closed the door behind me.

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I considered going back to Lois' room when I got back to campus, but while I knew my parents were right and I should talk to her - if for no other reason than that she would know I wasn't ignoring her - I decided to go to my room instead. I just didn't feel up to talking to Lois. Not at least without some more guidance on how I felt about our kiss. I just couldn't break apart the mix of emotions - the... guilt? Maybe, Dad was right and I did feel guilty for kissing Lois when I wasn't sure I was over Maddie. But it was more than that. There was also the confusion since Lois had been interested in Paul up until yesterday.

Plus, she was Lois. She was my friend - perhaps even my best friend on campus. I didn't think it was such a good idea to kiss your friends. Not that I had had enough experience doing that to be sure. The only real female friend I had had in high school was Rachel. Rachel was nice and she was pretty enough, but at the time, noticing Rachel as a girl would have required my looking past Lana Lang, and I wasn't really capable of that.

Lastly, and most annoying to me, was how far we had gotten. I might have been able to brush off my kissing Lois as a one time slip up, but I always tried to be much more in control of my actions than I had been with Lois tonight. Even with Maddie, where things had felt easier than they ever had with Lana, it was more that I wasn't over thinking things. I still felt in control of what I was doing. Losing control could cause a problem. Who knew what I could do when I did, and what the potential consequences would be for the person I was with?

I thought once more of the conversation in Smallville. Why did my parents insist on considering this a normal eighteen year old thing? I wasn't a normal eighteen year old. How much in denial could they be? I sighed. I knew they knew that, and I knew that they thought I exaggerated my differences in my head as much as I thought they minimized them. This was basically not a new issue, but it was still one I found frustrating. I wasn't normal and thus I couldn't act normal. I needed to be more careful than that.

With a sigh, I headed back out. It might be a good night for a flight around the world.

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After a fitful night's sleep, I headed over to Lois'. Thanks to our conversation the first day of the semester, I knew her first class today was at noon. I was also pretty sure I was remembering correctly that while Lois was an early riser, she also liked to kind of lounge around in the mornings. At least twice during the break, I'd called her in the afternoon and she had mentioned she was still in her pajamas. So, I figured it was a safe bet that on days she didn't have class until noon, she would still be in her room at ten.

I knocked, feeling terribly insecure. It wasn't like I had come to any further understanding of how I felt or how Lois felt or whatever. I just knew I couldn't put off talking to her any longer.

"Hi, Clark," Star said as she opened the door.

Something about the tone of her voice bothered me. She sounded a bit like the cat that ate the canary.

"Hi, Star," I said cautiously.

"So," she said, looking at me appraisingly as she leaned against the doorframe. "Aren't you going to apologize?"

"Apologize?" What was she talking about?

"For doubting me and my psychic abilities," she clarified.

I tried not to roll my eyes. Of course I doubted her psychic abilities. I mean, they were... just weird. Who could do that? And what proof could she give that she really had them?

Although, to be fair, she was right more often than I would expect. And while I wanted to brush them away as not real as they were improbable... well, how many people would say that to me if I told them I could fly?

Still, what would make me change my mind now? "I'm sure you think you have psychic abilities," I said to Star. "But that doesn't mean you do."

"So you don't believe me even when I make predictions you think are wholly unbelievable and they turn out to be true?" she asked.

"Like what?"

She smiled again. "Don't you remember the frat party last semester?" she asked.

"Of course I do," I told her, remembering again how that was the night Maddie and I had first kissed.

"But you don't remember our conversation?" Star prompted me.

I did vaguely remember bumping into Star on the stairs. I had been... looking for Lois at the time, I thought. But what had we talked about?

I could feel myself flush as I suddenly remembered.

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"I have this image. Maybe it's also not this year, maybe Lois and I will continue to room together. But at some point, I'm going to walk in on you barely dressed with my roommate," she said with a smile.

I could feel myself flush from the neck up, but tried to keep my voice calm. "Sorry to disappoint you, Star, but that seems pretty unlikely to me."

She laughed again. "Okay," she said, before she turned away.

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"You were right," I said softly.

"I know I was," Star said with a smile.

I couldn't help myself. Despite the knots in my stomach over my impending talk with Lois, I laughed. "So... you were right. Maybe you are a little psychic."

"A little?" Star asked, but I could hear the teasing glint in her voice.

"Well, it'll take more than once to convince me," I told her. The truth was that my teasing her about this was part of our relationship. It just didn't feel right to completely give in.

"I'm sure it will," Star said, smiling at me broadly. "Anyway, my roommate is out."

"She is?" I said, somewhat disappointed. I had worked up the nerve to talk to Lois this morning. I didn't want to have to do it again.

Star nodded. "Yeah, she said something about having to work on her paper for journalism."

I groaned. I needed to do that, too. Not that I felt at all up to it this morning.

"Want to go to breakfast?" I asked Star.

"Sure," Star said, leaning behind her to grab her jacket. "Just don't think this means you can shove your tongue down my throat. Save that for my roommate."

I stared at her in horror for a moment before she burst out laughing, and despite myself, I smiled.

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"Star said you stopped by," Lois half-asked, half-mumbled from the doorway.

"Yeah," I said, recognizing that I didn't sound any better than she did. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I don't know," Lois said, her voice still soft. "I wasn't thinking or something," she continued before I had a chance to ask what she meant. "I didn't mean to kiss you." I nodded, although I knew she couldn't really see me with her head down. "We're still... friends, right?" she asked.

"Of course, we are," I said quickly. "Why wouldn't we be?"

Lois finally seemed to relax slightly, and moved into the room and nearly sank onto my bed. I stayed by the door, still feeling sort of out of place. "I don't know," she said softly. "I just thought... I don't know what I thought. It's just... I didn't date much in high school. But it always seemed like when girls in class hooked up with friends of theirs, the friendships would end."

I nodded. "I knew some people like that in high school, too. Couples who never seemed like they had really been friends. So once they hooked up, there was no reason to keep up the charade."

Lois nodded emphatically. "Exactly."

"But we *are* really friends. Aren't we?" I asked her, suddenly feeling unsure myself.

Lois nodded again. "If I didn't screw it up."

"You didn't," I told her, finally feeling on firm enough ground to sit next to her on the bed, although just to be sure, I kept my distance. "Besides it wasn't just you. I hardly put a stop to what we were doing either."

"Can I ask you something?" she asked me, looking up. The look in her eyes worried me slightly. She looked scared. What if I said yes and then I gave her the wrong answer? But what if I said no? Finally, deciding either way was a risk, I nodded. "Were you thinking about Maddie?" she asked quietly.

I paused before I answered her. Had I been? Maybe at first when I was confused, but later? Definitely not later. "A little bit," I said quietly. "Just at first. But then I sort of stopped and... most of the time, no," I finally said, hoping that honest was the best way to go here. Lois didn't respond, so after a few minutes I asked her, "What about you? Were you thinking about Paul?"

She didn't say anything at first, but then nodded slightly. "Sort of. At first, like you said. But then I just forgot about him. That's weird, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. I don't really have that much experience kissing girls," I admitted.

Lois leaned back on her elbows, but continued to stare ahead of her. "Do you still miss her?" she asked quietly.

"Maddie?" I asked, and she nodded. "Sort of," I admitted. "I miss... being friends with her, I guess. I mean, really friends. You know?" I asked. "I'm glad that things are better between us, but I miss really talking to her. I'm not sure how much I miss... the other stuff."

Lois nodded. "You know, you never told me what really happened with you guys," she said.

I nodded, not sure what to say.

"Maddie..." Lois trailed off. "Well, she didn't say much

since she knows we're friends, but it sounded like she felt like you were keeping secrets from her."

I smiled slightly. Trust Lois to pick up on that. If it had been anyone else, I would have been annoyed at Maddie for talking, but I was sure she had said virtually nothing. Lois was just that intuitive.

"I was," I said without thinking.

"You were?" Lois asked surprised.

Darn! What was it about Lois that I forgot all of my controls when we were together? I sighed. "It wasn't important," I finally said.

"It wasn't? Then why not just tell Maddie what ever it was and make her happy?"

I shrugged, not knowing what to say, but knowing it was too late to stay silent. "I didn't mean to hurt her, but there were just things I couldn't tell her. They didn't have anything to do with her."

"I thought... I guess I thought when you loved someone, you wanted to be honest with them," Lois said. There was no judgment in her voice - she clearly was just telling me what she thought, not what she knew.

I hung my head slightly. "I don't know. Maybe. But it wasn't like that. It wasn't that I didn't want to tell her. I did. I just... couldn't."

"Is there something wrong, Clark?" Lois asked, sounding concerned.

"Not really," I said, then realized how that sounded and amended it. "Nothing's wrong. It's just sort of a family secret."

"Well," Lois said, sitting up and smiling. "It's good we're not dating then. 'Cause I'd definitely want to know all your dirty little secrets."

I leaned over and bumped her with my shoulder. "You don't already?"

"Want to know?" Lois asked, and I nodded. "Of course I do."

I laughed. "I'm really sorry about yesterday, Lois. I'm glad we're still friends."

Lois flushed slightly. "Me, too."

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"Look, I don't care what you've seen on some after school special, young man, but there is no drug use at this school!" the middle aged man in front of me said, stopping just short of shouting.

I clearly had not handled this correctly. I wasn't sure the right way to go about it. I had thought about waiting outside an elementary school yard and seeing if I might see something suspicious, but then I realized that my hanging around would be suspicious on its own.

I thought the best thing to do then was to interview the school officials to see what they were doing about the problem. I had done some looking and finally decided on the elementary school closest to where I had seen those boys. It seemed as good a place to start as any.

The secretary had been perfectly pleasant when I called. I had explained I was doing an assignment for a class on illicit drug use at local elementary schools and she had happily scheduled an appointment for me to talk with the vice principal of the school.

Everything went downhill from there, though. Mr. Dwight had seemed like a nice enough guy when I showed up - he was short and stout and reminded me a little of Santa Claus. He had smiled openly and welcomed me into his office. He had even remained smiling while I explained again what I was doing there.

But then I had asked how wide spread the problem was at his school and what they were doing to curb the problem, and his manner had completely changed. He had let me know in no uncertain terms that there was no drug problem at his school - "This is an elementary school, for crying out loud!"

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, wondering how to go on from there, but he just kept on speaking.

"Typical of you college kids. Think you know everything. Well, let me tell you something, kid. This may not be the same as the school you went to in the sticks back in Iowa, but this isn't the inner city. The kids here are white, they come from middle class families. There is no reason why any of them would want to do drugs."

I bit back my natural response and decided not to correct his use of Iowa. I have to admit, though, I was tempted to say, 'Typical of you city folks. Think you know everything. Well, let me tell you something. Not every Midwestern state is the same. Kansas and Iowa don't even share a border, which I would think as an elementary school vice principal you would know.' Instead, I closed my eyes to control my temper.

"Well, I'm sorry for wasting your time, Mr. Dwight," I said as I stood up. I held my hand out to him, but he just looked at it disgustedly. Maybe it was childish pride, but his whole attitude made me feel even more committed to finding out if there was a drug problem at his school and uncovering it.

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"No, it's just a little intimidating," Josh told us at lunch the next day. Alicia, Lois, Josh, and I had decided to meet for lunch even though Maddie and Steve were both busy. Josh had had his first session of the short story seminar the previous day, and Lois was insanely curious about it.

"What's intimidating about it?" Lois asked. Josh laughed at her which did a good job of hiding my chuckle. "What?" Lois asked.

"Are you ever intimidated by anything?" Josh asked her. Lois flushed slightly, but didn't answer.

"There's all these seniors in there and one or two juniors and me. We went around the room to read one piece from the portfolio we had submitted. Do you know how good they all were?" Josh asked.

"No better than you or you wouldn't be there," Alicia pointed out.

Josh shook his head. "These guys all know they want to be writers and they've spent the last couple of years taking classes that help hone those skills..."

"Still, Alicia's right," Lois interrupted. "You got in because you showed the same potential they did. That just means that if you end up deciding you want to be a writer, when you're a junior or a senior you'll be even better."

I smiled at Josh, "Will you still be friends with us when your newest book is number one on the Daily Planet's Best Seller List?"

Josh threw his napkin at me. "Fine. If none of you want to hear about the class, why'd you ask?"

"We do want to hear about the class," Alicia said.

"We just think you're letting yourself feel inferior to the other students when all data suggests you're not," I pointed out.

"You should see these guys, though," Josh said. "They all look so... old."

"They're only a couple years older than we are," Lois pointed out.

"I know," Josh said. "But they look like... well, they look like adults."

"That is going to be us in a couple of years," Alicia pointed out, but her voice was a bit wistful as she said it.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Josh asked.

"I'm not ready," Lois said.

"Well, you don't have to be," Alicia said, but I got the sense she was talking to herself as much as Lois.

I said nothing, thinking about what they were saying. Who would I be in a couple of years? What would happen to Clark Kent? Would I still live in Metropolis after college? Would I have a job at the Daily Planet? Would I even want to?

Or would I have given that up, despite my parent's wishes, and be living alone somewhere, helping out when I could? Where would I live in that scenario? For some reason, I kept imagining a cave in the Arctic. It seemed kind of cold and lonely.

"Clark?" Josh's voice pierced my thoughts.

"Sorry," I said shaking my head. "Just thinking about what my life would be like after we're finished here."

"Picturing yourself as the next Billy Norcross?" Lois asked.

I smiled slightly. "More wondering what I'll do if that isn't a possibility."

"Nonsense," Alicia said. "It's clearly a possibility."

I smiled. "Thanks. I'm not so sure, but I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"I thought guys were supposed to have more self confidence than this," Lois said to Alicia.

"Me too. I guess it's just our luck that we became friends with these wusses," Alicia said with a smile.

"Hey!" Josh and I said in unison, but Lois and Alicia just laughed at us as we got up to head to out.

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"So, have you started on your article yet?" I asked Lois as we walked toward the dining hall after journalism class. We had already established a pattern of having lunch and dinner together on Mondays and Wednesdays. We had lunch with everyone else, often split up afterwards, but would meet up in class and then have dinner afterwards. Josh had an evening class on these nights and Alicia had dinner with Chris alone, but sometimes Steve or Maddie would join us. We had invited Alicia and Chris, too, and maybe they would join us at some point, but right now they seemed like they wanted to spend as much time alone as possible to make up for the break.

"A little," Lois said. "I did some more digging around on the building codes and what they would need to be and how someone could get around them."

"And?" I prodded her on.

"And it still looks possible, but no real data yet. What about you? Did you pick a topic?"

I nodded. "I think I'm going to write about illicit drug use in Metropolis' elementary schools."

Lois stopped in her tracks. "What? You're kidding. That's way more newsworthy than my article."

"It is?" I asked. "Public funding being used to build shoddy housing for the poor? I would think that was pretty newsworthy. Besides, at least you have some data to back up your story. So far, I have nothing."

"Have you started?" she asked me, still looking skeptical.

"I met with a vice principal of an elementary school in town. But he wasn't very helpful. He insisted there was no

problem at his school."

"You think he was right or just in denial?" Lois asked.

I smiled. "I don't know. I guess I think if he was right, it was more luck than anything else. He was so insistent it was clear he had never thought of it before. His argument was mostly that the students were middle-class white kids. Apparently, middle-class white kids don't do drugs."

"Do middle-class black kids?" Lois asked. "Or lower-class white kids?"

I chuckled. "My guess is both, but no group is as bad as lower-class black kids."

Lois laughed. "I didn't realize middle-class white kids came from perfect homes."

"Well, they do," I said, suddenly flashing to Maddie. She was white and her family was definitely middle-class. Probably even upper middle-class. But that didn't change the fact that... well, the thing with her cousin. That could drive a kid to do drugs, couldn't it? Even if it hadn't done that to Maddie, it could do that to someone easily.

Not that I hadn't known that Mr. Dwight was being a bit racist and classist, but the thought hadn't been quite so well-formed before. I knew a white, middle-class person whose home life had not been as idyllic as he wanted to believe.

"You did, didn't you?" Lois asked softly as we sat down at a table in the dining hall with our dinners.

I looked at her quizzically. "I did what?"

"You come from a perfect home," Lois said simply.

"Yeah, I sort of did," I told her. Well, if you ignored the alien/science experiment for a son anyway. "What about you? I don't know much about your childhood except that you have a younger sister and your parents are divorced."

Lois shrugged. "There's not much else to tell. But it's not perfect."

"You said your dad has some social problems?" I remembered.

"You could say that. My dad is a doctor, but he does more research than real practicing. And he's like the stereotypical scientist - reclusive and more comfortable in his lab than with people."

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

Lois shrugged again. "Lucy and I are used to it. And to be fair, in the last year or so he's made efforts to be around more."

"How about your mom?" I asked her.

She didn't answer at first, just stirred her soup. "She's not reclusive," Lois finally said quietly.

I reached over to place a hand on top of hers. "You don't need to tell me if you don't want to."

Lois looked up. "She's an alcoholic. Recovering, I guess, but she relapses frequently."

I tightened my grip on her hand. "I'm sorry," I whispered, although I wasn't sure if she could hear me in the noisy dining hall.

She nodded her head, smiling slightly. "Thanks."

And then, it was like my head left the rest of my body again. I leaned over the table and our food to press a soft kiss to her lips.

Moments later, the sound of a catcall accompanied my backing away. I looked to the right and saw a group of guys I didn't know looking our way, giving me a thumbs up. I could feel myself flush, and sat back down, only glancing at Lois once I was firmly in my seat again.

"Do you know those guys?" she asked me, sounding completely calm.

"No. You?" I asked, ashamed to realize that unlike Lois,

I sounded as nervous as I felt.

"No," she answered.

"So... um... I'm sorry?" I finally said after a moment of silence.

Lois said nothing for an instant and then giggled.

"What?" I asked her.

"Are you? It sounded like a question," she pointed out.

I felt myself flush again. "I... I don't know," I finally said honestly. "I mean, I didn't mean to kiss you. But I don't really feel sorry," I admitted.

Lois glanced down at the table top for a second before saying softly, "Me neither."

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to respond to that or not. It wasn't even clear that I would have been able to hear that without my special hearing. She looked up at me a second later though, red, tell-tale circles on her cheeks and it was clear I was supposed to have heard her. "So, what does that mean?" I asked quietly.

Lois shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you want to... date or something?" I asked her, then mentally kicked myself in the back of the head. I'm sure I could have made that sound less appealing. If I was a monkey. "Sorry," I said. "That didn't come out right at all."

Lois laughed. "No, it didn't."

"I'm sorry. I'm nervous," I told her and then inwardly cringed again. I was pretty sure you weren't supposed to say that to a girl.

"Let's get out of here," Lois said, motioning with her head to the group of guys who were still watching us closely. "I feel like they're waiting for the instant replay."

I chuckled when we got up, and they all groaned. "I guess you were right," I said.

We walked outside in silence, and I noticed that we stood farther apart than normal. I looked up as we stepped outside. "It's snowing," I said quietly.

Lois laughed. "Doesn't it snow in Kansas?" she asked me.

I nodded. "But it looks different," I said. "The little white lights on the trees make it seem... different," I finished lamely. The trees on campus all had little white Christmas lights up, and it did give the campus a festive feel. While I guess it was unusual, it hadn't snowed at all in December, so this was the first time I had seen snow in Metropolis.

"It is pretty," Lois said quietly as we continued to walk.

I looked over towards her to ask where she wanted to go to talk, and noticed the snowflakes falling on her. Similar to the lights on the trees, the white snow on her dark hair made a pretty picture. Without thought, I reached out to run my fingers through it. The motion startled Lois, and she stopped walking. "Clark?" she asked quietly.

I stepped toward her and lowered my head. I waited just a second to make sure she wasn't going to push me away before I leaned forward and kissed her again.

A moment later, we both backed away and giggled a little. "So, um..." Lois looked at me with a slight smile. "Are we dating now?"

"If you want," I said softly and then realizing that I still wasn't really saying the right thing, I added, "I'd like to."

Lois nodded, "Me, too." Then shivering a little, she leaned down to take my hand in hers. "Let's go inside. It's cold out here."

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In the end, it took all of five minutes of detective work to discover whether or not there was actually a drug

problem at Westside Elementary School, the school where Mr. Dwight worked. I floated above the cloud line above the school and used my vision gizmo. The image of that little boy from the day of the frat party last semester was burned in my memory. It took just a few minutes to find him amid the hundreds of students in Westside.

I guess it was possible that he was the only child in the school doing drugs, but it seemed pretty unlikely to me. So, I floated above the school during the middle of the day on Friday after my classes were over and waited for him to come out. He was with a couple of boys his age. I had determined when I found him that he was a bit older than I had guessed - he was in the third grade, which I thought meant he was about eight or nine.

I followed the boys to a park nearby where they stood around talking. One of them had a basketball, and they took turns shooting it, but it wasn't much of a game. This wasn't that surprising though as they were a bit young to be playing with a normal height hoop, so it was rare that one of them got the ball in.

I was amazed watching them. When I was in elementary school, I went home directly after school unless I had plans with a friend - and then I went directly to their home. The kids in town went home by bus, those of us farther out were picked up by our moms. Regardless, no one left Smallville Elementary without an adult of some kind. These kids just left school and wandered around Metropolis much the way we walked around Smallville during my senior year of high school. I had to remember to ask Lois if this was what she did after elementary school as well.

I must have watched them for about half an hour before I started thinking of heading back to campus. It didn't look like anything was about to happen. Just before I headed out, though, some older kids showed up and approached the young boys. The new kids were still young, but looked like they could be in high school. Using my special hearing, I listened in on the exchange and heard the older kids teasing the younger ones.

The teasing was a bit crueler in nature than I would have expected, but nothing newsworthy in and of itself. After a few more minutes of listening to them speak, I realized this wasn't what I was waiting for and went back to campus.

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"Hi," I said softly, still feeling shy around Lois in this new role.

"Hi," she smiled at me. I got the impression my nervousness amused her. At the very least, she didn't seem nearly as nervous as I did.

"You still want to go study somewhere?" I asked her, and she nodded. It felt weird to develop some of the same habits with her that I had had with Maddie, but on the other hand, they made sense. We were students - why wouldn't we study together?

"Sure," Lois grabbed a couple of books. "Do you mind if we go down the hall? Star usually studies in our room with some friends on Tuesdays."

I shrugged and followed her down the hallway.

"So," I asked as we sat down. "How's the investigation going?"

Lois' eyes lit up. "Really well. I went down there today and tried talking to some of the workmen. The foremen ran me off before I completely finished, but I got some good information first. It took him awhile to realize why I was

there."

I laughed. "I'm sure it did. A pretty college girl hanging around a construction site probably doesn't conjure up thoughts of reporters."

Lois blushed. "Well, whatever," she said.

"Whatever what?" I asked, confused.

She blushed even further. "Whether or not he thought I was pretty," she clarified.

I shook my head. "Was he blind?" I asked, and almost laughed out loud at how red she got.

"He was a foreman," Lois pointed out. "Seems like he probably had reasonably good eye sight."

"Did he look really, really old?" I asked with a smile.

"Really old?"

"Like he was from ancient Russia or wherever it was that being heavy was related to attractiveness," I said.

"What?" Lois asked, looking confused.

"Somewhere," I said, trying to recall where it was, "the more excess fat you had, the more attractive you were considered. I think it had something to do with wealth. The affluent people had more to eat, so they weighed more. As a result, that was considered attractive."

"As opposed to now, when everyone can afford food, but wealthy people can afford cooks for low-fat food that tastes good," Lois said with a smile.

"And personal trainers and gym memberships," I added.

Lois giggled. "No, he didn't seem that old."

"Then he thought you were pretty," I said.

Lois giggled again. "You don't know what he thought, Clark."

I shook my head. "I can almost guarantee it," I told her. "Unless he has some really strong aversion to brunettes or something."

"You're weird," Lois smiled at me.

"I'm weird?" I asked, not understanding.

"You're so... I don't know," she said. "You like... you say some of the same things Steve does, but you sound... I guess less like you're trying to get me into bed or something."

"Steve hit on you?"

"Don't act so surprised," Lois said. "I have breasts and I'm breathing, right?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I guess I just thought he had decided you guys were off limits."

Lois laughed. "No, I think we decided we were off limits."

I shrugged. I had had no idea Steve had hit on the girls. I wondered briefly if he had ever hit on Maddie - if he did, was it while we were dating? Honestly, I wasn't sure I would put it past him. In some ways, Steve was a nice guy, but when it came to girls, all bets were off.

I shook my head. Whether or not he hit on Maddie while we were dating just wasn't that important. Maddie wouldn't have said yes and even if she had, at this point it would be mostly my pride that was hurt. I still cared about Maddie, honestly I was still attracted to Maddie, but when I was with Lois... I guess I just didn't think about it much. Besides, Maddie and I were friends now. Just friends. And I was actually okay with that. More than okay - I was happy about it. It was more than I deserved after the way I had treated her, and I was very aware of that.

"So," I asked her, "what's your next step?"

"What?" Lois asked, looking confused.

"Your next step. On the investigation?" I clarified.

Lois shrugged. "I'm not sure. The information I got

wouldn't be enough to be defensible - mainly, it was just a conversation I overheard between two of the workmen. They were saying that they had been given orders to work as fast as possible, the quality of their work wasn't as important as the look of quality. Basically, it sounds like they were told to make it look like they did a good job, but not necessarily to spend the time to do so."

"Yeah, that's good," I agreed. "But like you said, it's not exactly admissible in court."

"But I'm not sure where I would go to get information that was," Lois said. "Any ideas?"

I started to say no, but then had an idea. "Maybe. Could you try to get hired as an office manager for the foreman or something? Then you could look through the paperwork in his office and see if you could find invoices for the materials. If the invoices are detailed enough you might be able to show that they didn't buy enough material for what they are building."

"That's a great idea, Clark!" Lois said, smiling at me. "Although, how could I prove that there wasn't more materials purchased that were reflected on another invoice?"

I thought in silence for a few minutes before finally admitting that I wasn't sure.

"Still," Lois said, "trying to get a part time job working for him is a good idea. Thanks for the help, Clark."

"No problem," I smiled at her. "I guess we make a pretty good team."

Lois leaned over and bumped me with her shoulder. "Don't be getting any ideas. Partnership is not an option right now."

"What?" I asked. "You're saying you don't want to work on the Planet application story together?"

"And ruin both our chances of getting the internship when Mr. White says he can't tell which one of us is stronger. No, thank you," Lois said good-naturedly.

"Maybe some day," I said with a smile.

"For a project later on this semester?" Lois suggested.

"If Professor Halkuff is okay with it, you're on," I told her.

"So, how about you?" Lois asked me. "Any new info on the elementary school? Or are the students as lily white as the vice principal claimed?"

I started to tell her that I was sure there were students there doing drugs, but then I remembered - Clark Kent had had no previous dealings with that boy. Only the Boy in Black did. I sighed. Did I want to start off this relationship with a secret already? Lois was even less likely to be forgiving about that than Maddie was. Sure, she had let Paul walk all over her, but I presumed she was over that now. I even sort of hoped so. As much as it would be convenient if she was as meek with me, the truth was I wasn't nearly as attracted to that girl.

But what was the other option? I could tell her a version of the truth - I had been out in Metropolis and run into the boys. No need to tell her I was coming back from a flight after one of our fights when I found him. What was my reason for getting involved though? And why hadn't I told her about it before - like when I first mentioned the topic of my article?

Maybe she wouldn't ask those questions? Who was I kidding? This was Lois Lane. Unless she was in her meek, walk-all-over-me mood, which she did not appear to be, she was going to ask those questions.

"Clark?" she prodded me. Oops, time to make a

decision.

"Um, no," I finally said, deciding that I should at least be as honest with her as I could be. Minimizing my lies seemed like a good idea right now. "I haven't gotten any information yet, but I did see a boy there I knew and I know he's done drugs."

"You know an elementary school kid in Metropolis?" Lois asked, looking like she wasn't sure she believed me.

I shrugged. "Only sort of. I met him on a walk I took around town last semester."

"And he told you he did drugs?" Lois asked, still sounding suspicious, but less so now.

"Not really. I... he was being bullied by a teenager and I tried to help. It turns out he owed the older kid money for drugs. A lot of money."

"How old is he?" Lois asked, sounding worried about him.

"About eight or nine, I think," I told her. "He's in the third grade."

Lois shook her head. "Were you able to help?"

I shrugged. "Not really. I wasn't about to pay off his debt for him even if I had had that kind of money. But I managed to distract the teenager until we heard sirens near by and he ran away. On the other hand, it's probably foolish of me to think he didn't find the boy again later."

"How much money did he owe?"

"I don't remember," I said. "A couple thousand dollars, though. It was a lot."

Lois shook her head. "It was nice of you to try to help him."

"He's a kid, Lois. Of course, I would try to help him."

Lois smiled as she leaned over to place a light kiss on my lips. It was only as she backed away that realization seemed to dawn. "So," she asked, having no idea how much her question was getting my pulse to race, "how come you hadn't mentioned this earlier? Isn't this what made you consider this story to begin with?"

I took a deep breath as a way to stall. "Yeah," I admitted.

"So, why the big secret?" Lois asked and I said nothing. This relationship wasn't even going to last a day, was it?

"I... I'm not sure," I finally settled on, which was at least partly the truth. I mean, I sort of knew why, but on the other hand, it might have occurred to me before now that this might come up again. I wasn't sure why I hadn't considered it before. Although, it was sort of stretching it to say that meant I wasn't sure why I hadn't mentioned it, wasn't it? "We weren't really friends yet when I bumped into him," I added. "And then... well, I don't know. I guess it just never occurred to me to mention it since then."

Lois looked at me suspiciously for a minute, and I could feel myself start to flush, but then she seemed to decide to accept my sorry monologue of an excuse.

"So, are you going to interview him for the article?" she asked instead.

I shook my head. "I hadn't really considered it, but I doubt he'd agree if I asked, so probably not. I may make reference to him, but not by name. But the incident where we met would probably make a good lead-in to the article."

Lois grimaced. "I should be thinking about that, too. Having a great lead-in is not my strength."

"Well," I smiled at her, feeling more relaxed now that we were on more Clark Kent ground than Boy in Black, "you don't need a great lead-in if you can bring in a story with a great headline."

"True," Lois smiled at me. "That is definitely my plan. Always bring in front page stories."

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I watched the interchange below me with fascination, excitement, and some nausea. It was what I needed, and taking the camera out of my backpack, I snapped a couple of photos as evidence. I was going to crack this story wide open. Clearly that was important to my chances for the internship. Still, some part of me had hoped I wouldn't be able to do it - that I had misremembered or something and these kids weren't really doing drugs. While part of me wanted to show Mr. Dwight that he was wrong, and a little bit racist, part of me had hoped that he was right.

I sighed. Since I was correct, I now needed to decide what to do. I could sit back and assume I had a good chance of getting the recommendation as long as my article this time around was passable, or I could try to really impress Professor Halkuff - and maybe save the lives of some children in the process.

I flew off to a camera store near campus and ordered prints of the pictures I had taken. Tomorrow morning, I would take these to the police.

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"Hey," she said when I answered the phone. I could hear giggling in the background. Was she having a party? That seemed so unlike her.

"Hi," I replied, wondering if she could even hear me over the noise in her room.

"How was your afternoon off?" she asked, and I could hear the teasing in her voice.

"Useful," I told her. "I was working on the article for the journalism class that decides the second recommendation. How were your classes?"

"Friday afternoon classes," she replied. "Boring. As usual. So, what is your article about?"

I gave a small sigh. I had never told her either, but since I told Lois, I might as well tell Maddie. It wasn't a secret anymore. "You remember the night of the frat party last semester? The night we... uh..." I stammered, suddenly not sure how to say it.

"Yeah," she said softly, but with the noise in the background I couldn't hear her clearly. Was she amused at my discomfort or did she feel the same way?

"Anyway, with so much going on that night, I never mentioned it, but that afternoon I took a walk around the area outside of campus and ran into a kid, maybe eight or nine, who was already in debt for marijuana. So, I'm writing about drug use in elementary schools."

There was a pause before Maddie replied, "You're going to be famous one day, aren't you?"

"Come on, already," came the voice in the background, and I realized that the giggling that I had heard was Alicia.

"Sorry," Maddie said to her and I could clearly hear the amusement in her voice now. "Alicia and Chris are over here and we were thinking that we should all branch out a little more. So, we talked about going off campus for dinner tonight and then maybe to a movie as well. Interested?"

"Sure," I said. It sounded like fun.

"I'll give Lois a call. Do you want to call Josh?" Maddie asked before I could respond. I had been about to volunteer calling Lois. Then I realized the potential for awkwardness I had caused.

"Um... actually, I should call Lois. But maybe we shouldn't come," I said.

"We? who?" Maddie asked. "You and Lois or you and

Josh?"

"Me and Lois," I replied, feeling my heartbeat quicken. "Um... Mads..."

"Clark?" Maddie asked when I trailed off, sounding concerned. She had no idea. I hoped this wasn't going to destroy everything between us. Or things between her and Lois.

"Lois and I are dating," I said so quickly the words all ran together.

"What? Clark, I couldn't understand you," Maddie said, laughing.

"Lois and I are dating." I said the words more slowly now. "I'm sorry, Mads. I know this could be awkward, so Lois and I..."

"No, it's fine," Maddie said over me. "It's fine with me. Really. It's been ages since you and me... Well, anyway. So, I guess you should call Lois and I'll call Josh." Her words were casual, but I could hear the hitch in her voice. I had hurt her again. I sighed. I bet Maddie wondered if I had ever really liked her, but I had. Really.

"Maddie," I started, although short of apologizing I wasn't sure what to say.

"Want to meet at the gates on 98th Street?" Maddie cut me off.

I nodded before realizing she couldn't see me, and so quietly told her I'd see her there in fifteen minutes.

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Lois gave me a smile as I met her outside her dorm. We had decided to go together to meet everyone. It was going to be awkward enough to see Maddie, having Lois with me would make it easier. Of course, I realized I was being somewhat unfair. This was going to be far easier for me than for Maddie.

I hoped Josh was able to make it. Steve was nowhere to be found, so if not, it would be Alicia and Chris, Lois and myself, and Maddie. It would be hard enough for Maddie to have to be out with Lois and me. No need for it to be even worse by her feeling like the fifth wheel.

"Maddie's a big girl," Lois said to me, giving my hand a squeeze. "It's going to be okay."

"I know," I told her. "It's just... I know it's my fault we're not together anymore. I'd hate to make her feel like I never really cared about her at all."

"Do you still care about her?" Lois asked, and I could hear the worry in her voice.

"No," I rushed to reassure her. "Well, I mean, yes. Not that way anymore. But she's my friend, and I don't want to hurt her."

Lois nodded. "I feel the same way. But I'm sure Maddie will be fine. It's not like we got together the instant you guys broke up or anything."

As we approached the group by the gates, I tightened my hold on Lois' hand, whether for fortitude or to make sure I didn't drop it in deference to Maddie, I wasn't sure.

"Great. We're all here," Maddie said brightly as we reached everyone else. She was smiling, but a quick look at her eyes showed that she was feeling uncomfortable. Alicia glanced at the place where Lois and I had linked our hands, but looked away quickly. I wondered how she felt about this - was she happy for us, or angry for Maddie's sake? Josh and Chris just looked uncomfortable.

"So," Alicia said. "Here we all thought it was Steve that was the dog in our group. But I guess it was you after all, right, Clark?" Okay, so her position on this was pretty clear.

"Hey," both Lois and Maddie said at the same time.



"That's not fair, Leesh," Maddie said quietly. "It's been months since Clark and I..." she trailed off.

"Maybe Clark and I should just go," Lois offered.

"No," Maddie said. "I'm fine. Really. And if I'm fine, no one else should have a problem with this either." She gave Alicia a firm look. Alicia didn't reply, but shot me a look I couldn't read.

"We thought we'd go to Hunan Palace," Josh tried to change the subject. "Figured it would be a bit cheaper to eat family style."

"Sounds good," I said, trying to sound a lot more comfortable than I was feeling.

I gave Lois' hand a squeeze and glanced at Maddie as we approached the restaurant. Lois nodded to show she understood, and I let go of her hand to walk a little ahead.

"Hi," I said softly to Maddie as I walked alongside her. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure," she said, still trying to sound more comfortable than I knew she felt. We stepped to the side as Lois and Josh made their way inside to see if there was a table available now. Alicia and Chris stayed outside, Alicia still giving me dirty looks.

"I just..." I wished I knew what to say, but while I didn't, I knew I wanted to say something. I had to let Maddie know that this thing with Lois didn't mean that I had never cared about her. I sighed. "I just don't want you to think... I really did love you, Maddie. And I really do care about you. Still. I just..."

Maddie smiled at me, and I could see the sheen of tears in her eyes. "I know, Clark. Really. I'm not angry. Disappointed maybe, but not angry. I guess... For a while I had hoped you'd tell me whatever the big secret was and we could work past that, but I don't feel that way anymore. I... I still care about you, too, Clark. But I'm not interested in getting back together anymore."

I smiled at her, glad to hear that she was over us, too. I moved forward to give her a hug and she came willingly into my arms.

"Hey," she said into my ear, although not softly. "Isn't that guy Paul?"

I released her and turned to see where she was looking. "Yes. And... I don't know who that girl is."

Maddie laughed softly. "I can't believe Alicia called *you* a dog."

"Compared to Paul, I'm virtually a saint," I said, still looking across the street.

"You are a really great guy, Clark," Maddie said.

I smiled at her. "Not great enough to deserve you," I told her honestly.

"Will you be honest enough with Lois to deserve her?" Maddie asked me, her tone cautious.

I sighed, not knowing the answer. Maddie's implication was correct - I wouldn't deserve Lois anymore than Maddie if I didn't tell her about the Boy in Black. That didn't mean I was about to offer up all my weirdness for her inspection either, though.

"I hope you do," Maddie said softly. "I hope you stop running from whatever it is."

"They're ready for us," Lois said as she and Josh came outside, and I was glad for the interruption.

Then Lois glanced across the street and her skin got slightly pale.

"What's wrong?" Alicia said as she walked closer to us.

"Paul," Lois said. "With Grace. Clark... I need to do something. Grace is nice and she's new on staff. She doesn't

know Paul."

I nodded. "What do you want to do?"

"I should have talked to Professor Matthews already. I was just so embarrassed."

"For now, maybe we should go confront Paul? Give Grace a chance to leave?" Maddie suggested.

"We?" Lois asked.

"Of course," Josh answered. "We'll all go. We're not going to make you go alone."

Lois nodded, and started across the street. I smiled. I could hear her heart racing inside her chest, but she wasn't going to let that stop her from doing the right thing.

"Hi, Lois," Grace smiled at her as we approached.

"Hi," Lois said quietly.

"I'm Lois' friend, Maddie," Maddie offered her hand to Grace. "This is Josh, Alicia, and Chris. And this is Lois' *boyfriend*, Clark," Maddie said throwing a look at Paul that was clearly meant to make sure he understood. Lois had moved on; he hadn't crushed her. I had to smile at Maddie's ability to do that even though it must have been difficult to refer to me that way. She really was something special.

"Nice to meet you all," Grace said.

"We came to talk to you about Paul," Lois said, her voice soft, but gathering strength.

"What about me?" Paul asked, his voice hard.

"Don't worry, Paul," Josh offered when Lois didn't reply immediately. "We aren't going to tell Grace anything that isn't true."

Grace was looking confused now, and then Lois spoke up. "Look, maybe Paul really likes you, Grace," Lois offered. "But I just wanted you to know that as best I can tell, Paul doesn't date girls he can't get things from. Usually articles or sex."

"Geez, Lois," Paul said, sounding amused. "Grace might think you're serious."

"I am serious," Lois said. She turned back to Grace.

"Paul's also dating Linda."

"You told me that was over," Grace said turning to Paul.

"It is," he said, his gaze on Lois again. "Lois doesn't know what she's talking about."

"Maybe it is over," Lois said. "But he only dated her because she was sleeping with him. And he only dated Michelle because she let him steal her stories. He stole one of mine, too. Only he hadn't asked permission for that one. And then we went out once because I told him I'd sleep with him. When I changed my mind, though, he said I'd need to start giving him more stories to use with his byline. Otherwise what was the point?"

"Lois," Paul said, the warning clear in his voice.

"No," Lois said, and she was trembling, but her voice was strong. I was feeling so proud of her. "I'm going to talk to Professor Matthews tomorrow. He knows you stole my story. And I don't want you getting away with doing it anymore."

"You told me you just needed one story," Grace said, turning to Paul. "That it was a one time thing that you needed for your quota as editor."

Paul shook his head. "Lois is just bitter, Grace. I broke up with her a few weeks ago."

"Why would she be bitter? She already has a new boyfriend," Alicia pointed out. "And," she gave me a glance, but this one was less cold than before, "Clark is a lot hotter than you are. It seems to me that she traded up." I saw Chris hide a smirk, and I bit my lip. This side of Alicia, sort of crude and cold, which had been so prevalent when

we first met, had faded the longer she dated Chris, but somehow it wasn't surprising to see it come out in spades when it came to protecting one of her friends.

"And why would she claim that she and Michelle both gave you stories to use with your byline? She didn't even know you had asked Grace to do that as well," I added.

Grace got up, looking at Paul with disgust. "I can't believe I ever fell for your line," she said. "Sorry I won't be able to join you for dinner after all."

"You can come with us," Lois offered, smiling. "We were just about to eat at Hunan Palace."

"Thanks," Grace got up and joined us as we all crossed the street. I turned back once to look at Paul. He was still sitting where we had left him, his mouth hanging open in shock. He looked so surprised at being caught, I couldn't help but laugh.

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The ringing phone woke me up, but Steve had just come in from a night at a frat house and picked it up before I finished rolling over. "It's for you," he said as he passed, leaving the phone on its place on the floor. I groaned. Would it have been so hard for him to pass it to me?

Getting out of bed, I glanced at the clock. I needed to get up in a few minutes anyway if I wanted to get breakfast before the dining hall closed.

"Hello?" I asked into the receiver, trying to stifle a yawn.

"Hi," Lois answered, sounding sleepy herself. "What are you doing this afternoon?"

"When?" I asked. "I'm planning on going over to the police station after breakfast. I'm not sure how long that should take, but I doubt it will be all afternoon."

"Do you want to meet for lunch?" Lois asked.

"Of course," I told her. "Should I come by after I get back from the police station?"

"Yeah," she said, sounding a bit dispirited.

"Is everything okay, Lois?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she replied. "It's just... Well, I was going to try to speak to Professor Matthews this afternoon. You remember he mentioned that he sometimes comes in on weekends to grade papers? Well, I heard that the first assignment for Intro to Journalism was due earlier this week, so I thought he might be there."

"Do you want me to come with you?" I asked.

"Would you?" Lois replied, sounding relieved.

"Of course," I told her. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"Good luck with the police," she replied before we hung up the phone.

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"So, what can I do for you, Mr. Kent?" the police officer asked me. He looked young - just a few years older than me, with light brown hair and blue eyes. For a moment, I wondered what his life was like. Did he have a family that would miss him if something happened to him on the job? Being an officer was a lot like my Boy in Black thing except that I presumed Officer Billings was not invulnerable. Well, that and the fact that being an officer was not a cause for secrecy - it was no more unique than being a reporter.

Maybe I should follow Josh's lead and instead of being a reporter, try to write a novel. It didn't interest me, but that would allow me to live the life of a recluse and then I wouldn't need to worry about my strange abilities. I could continue being the Boy in Black - maybe even really use my abilities as I would have no connections to someone

else who could be hurt.

"Mr. Kent?" Officer Billings brought me back from my wandering thoughts.

"Sorry," I told him, shaking my head to clear it. "I... um... I'm a student at Met U. I'm studying to be a journalist and for a class I've been investigating the use of illicit drugs at Westside Elementary." Officer Billings' eyebrows rose slightly, but he didn't say anything. "I took these pictures yesterday."

I pulled the pictures out of my jacket pocket and handed them to Officer Billings. He flipped through them quickly, shaking his head, finally heaving a sigh. "I have a son the age of these boys," he said as he straightened the stack of pictures. I guess he was older than I had thought.

"I'm sorry," I said, confused. What was the right response? It wasn't like his son was one of those boys. At least I hoped not.

"Thank you, Clark," he said. "There isn't much we can do with this. With just photos it's hard to prove much..."

"But, you can see the marijuana..."

"We can't prove it's marijuana from the picture," Officer Billings pointed out gently. "But I do appreciate this, and it's not a lost cause. I'll mention this to my boss. We'll start patrolling the area more heavily and may be able to put a stop to this. Well, sort of. At least the sale of drugs so close to the school."

"Can you tell me when these pictures were taken?" he asked.

"I took them yesterday afternoon. It was about three o'clock," I told him.

"Shortly after school let out," he said. "Makes sense. Thanks again, Clark," he said, holding his hand out towards me.

I smiled as I shook his hand, but I was a bit disappointed that so little could be done.

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"What has you smiling so brightly?" I asked Lois as I put my tray down across from her.

"I took your advice and went down to the construction site this morning. You are now looking at the new secretary for the foreman. It's perfect - he doesn't need much help. He said five to ten hours a week would be best, and he's okay with my doing those on weekends. This means I'll be down there alone most of the time so I can look through the paperwork all I want."

I grimaced. The idea of Lois being down in Suicide Slum all by herself if the area was as bad as she had said made me nervous. "You'll be alone?" I asked.

She nodded, looking pleased with herself. "Not all the time. I'll work Friday afternoons after class for three hours, and that's when Eric and I will discuss what else he needs me to do. Then I can finish up on Saturdays."

"Maybe I could go with you on Saturdays?" I asked.

Lois looked at me quizzically. "What for?"

"Didn't you say this was a bad area of town?" I asked her.

Lois laughed. "I should have guessed you'd be the over protective type. I'll be fine, Clark."

"I know," I was quick to reassure her. "Still, maybe I could come with you. Make sure you're okay? I could even help you look through the paperwork," I offered.

Lois laughed. "Okay. We can talk about it next weekend."

I nodded, not sure if she was being sincere or if she was just putting off telling me that she didn't want me with her -

that she could take care of herself. "So," I said, to change the subject, "what do you plan to tell Professor Matthews?"

Lois sighed and the laughter seemed to go right out of her. She stirred her mashed potatoes listlessly for a moment before looking up. "The truth," she said quietly. "Or at least sort of. I may not include the part where I offered to sleep with Paul."

I reached over to take her hand. "Lois, you don't need to be embarrassed about that. I mean, you don't need to mention it to Professor Matthews either, but when you made the offer you thought it was something you wanted."

"Yeah, 'cause I didn't listen to you about the sort of person Paul is," Lois replied, self depreciatingly.

"As you know, Paul is good at covering that up. You are hardly the only person fooled by his charm," I pointed out.

"I guess," Lois said with a grimace. "Ready to go?"

I nodded and picked up my tray. Once we walked outside, I took her hand, squeezing it slightly in the hopes of making her feel less nervous.

The journalism building was quiet and our footsteps echoed in the hallways. Still, Lois' thought had been correct - I could see the glow of a lamp coming from Professor Matthew's door before we reached it. I gave Lois' hand one more squeeze for support before letting go.

Lois knocked on the office door, and Professor Matthews looked up. For a moment, his face was blank, but then he seemed to recognize us and smiled. "Mr. Kent, Miss Lane. Come in," he said, gesturing to the two chairs in front of his desk. "How are you? How is the assignment for Professor Halkuff coming along?"

Lois smiled slightly, "Very well, I think. Clark's, too."

"What are you writing about?" he asked Lois, looking sincerely interested.

"The new low-cost housing development being built in Suicide Slum," Lois said. Professor Matthews nodded. "I heard a tip that in order to keep building costs low, the structures will not be built according to code."

Prof. Matthews' eyes widened. "If you can prove that, Lois, it will be major news!"

"Good enough to send to the Daily Planet?" Lois asked, cheekily.

"Well, that would be Professor Halkuff's call. Honestly, we don't usually do that sort of thing. But yes, given the topic, I would think the thought would at least cross Theresa's mind."

Lois beamed. "Well, I've made good headway. I have a job working for the foreman starting next week, so I'll have access to the paperwork involved."

"That's great!" Professor Matthews said, clearly impressed. "And you, Clark? What are you writing about?"

"Drug use in Metropolis' elementary schools. Although I'm focusing my investigation on Westside Elementary."

Professor Matthews shook his head. "You two are the most ambitious and talented freshmen I've ever had in my class. I don't envy Perry White having to choose just one of you for the internship."

Lois and I glanced at each other with matching smiles on our faces.

"So, what can I help you with?" he asked us, and once again, I felt Lois' good mood deflate.

"It's about Paul Bender," Lois said, and I could hear the hitch in her voice.

Professor Matthews nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Last semester I told you I would deal with his stealing my article," Lois said quietly. "I didn't really, though, and

now... well, I wanted to know if you could help me do something about it. It turns out Paul routinely does this." I could hear Lois take a deep breath to compensate for the fact that she hadn't breathed at all during her short speech.

"Routinely steals articles, you mean?" Prof. Matthews asked, looking concerned. When Lois nodded, he added, "How routinely?"

"I'm not sure if he writes *any* of his own articles," Lois told him. "He hasn't assigned me anything aside from fillers since I joined, so he hasn't stolen anything else of mine, but he asked me to write something else that he could steal at the beginning of the semester. I refused, so now I don't get any assignments at all. I know he steals articles from at least one other staff member, but I'm not sure if she'd be willing to come forward with that. And Clark and I saw him with a new member of the staff last night and he had asked her to write an article for his use as well. Grace said she'd be happy to back me up by reporting her own discussion with Paul."

Professor Matthews shook his head. "This is a serious offense," he said softly, shaking his head.

"You do believe me, don't you?" Lois asked, her voice shaking.

"Of course," Professor Matthews said, looking up sharply. "I saw the article I sent him of yours and how it was printed under his byline. I was appalled then. I just hadn't realized it wasn't a one-time thing. It sounds like Paul is abusing his position as editor."

"Um..." Lois looked supremely uncomfortable. "Well, that and the fact that..." she trailed off, blushing deeply.

"I think what Lois is trying to say," I cut in when it was clear Lois was not going to finish her thought, "is that between his position and the fact that Paul is fairly attractive and charming, several of the female staff members are interested in dating Paul. He uses this as a bartering tool of sorts."

"What?" Professor Matthews looked at me confused.

"As in he'll date the young women on staff in exchange for articles?"

Lois nodded.

Professor Matthews looked at the ceiling, one of his hands balling into a fist. "Lois," he finally said, his voice calm. "Are you sure you want to do something about this now? I think you should, but I do want to warn you that it will probably involve a disciplinary hearing in front of the school ethics board."

Lois paled slightly, but I reached out and took her hand and she turned to smile at me, although the smile was wan. "Yeah, I still want to," she said.

"Great," Professor Matthews smiled at her. "I'll start the process on Monday and give you a call once I have some news. In the meantime, if you could let me know Grace's last name and make sure she's really okay with this, that would be helpful. You may also want to talk to the other girl involved and see if she is willing to participate in this as well."

"I will. Thanks, Professor Matthews," Lois said, sounding more confident now.

I got up and gave Lois' hand a gentle tug so she would follow me to the door. "Have a good weekend," Professor Matthews called to us.

"Thanks," I said and Lois nodded before we were back in the dark hallway again. We walked for a few moments in silence, but once we were outside, I pulled her to me. "Are you okay?" I asked her.

She nodded against my chest and mumbled, "Thanks, Clark," before pulling away and taking my hand again to walk back across campus.

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I glanced at my watch before landing. It was 3:30, so the math building was out. I had never checked to see if there were generally students there on weekend afternoons. I decided to land outside the gates instead.

I wondered what the chances were that no one had noticed my absence. All of us, including Steve, were supposed to meet up for lunch today. We had agreed to get together for lunch and then spend the afternoon studying together - Maddie needed to work on a drawing for one of her classes and was planning on drawing Lois, and Josh needed to write something for his seminar and wanted Lois and me to review it for him. Then we were supposed to go to dinner together.

That had been the plan, anyway. Still, that was a poor excuse for ignoring the need for help. I had spent the morning at the playground watching the boys from yesterday and gotten some more evidence - I now had pictures of them rolling and smoking the joints they made from the marijuana they had bought on Friday. They were listening to the radio while they smoked and while it was a rock station, the news had come during a news bulletin. They were measuring the strongest earthquake to hit the center of Los Angeles in years.

Helping had taken longer than I expected. For one thing, I had a hard time finding the "center" of Los Angeles. I had never been there before and hadn't realized that it was more of a sprawling suburb than a city. Still, I had eventually given up and just started helping out in the areas that were clearly being hit. I had mostly done my usual job of helping to evacuate people from their homes, but once that was done, I had stuck around and tried to help a little with recovery efforts. Most of that work was being done by emergency professionals, but there was some volunteer work that I was able to do as well. Nothing that even compared to what I would be able to do if I acted "special", but I was still able to help.

Still, while it made me feel better, as always, to do something productive with my gifts/curses, it had meant I had missed lunch with my friends. I wondered if I should try to find them and join them in studying or just skip it and show up for dinner.

I went back to the dorm - regardless of which I did, I, too, needed to spend the afternoon studying. I grabbed my books and went to the study lounge down the hall - I'd catch my friends later. Perhaps by dinnertime I would have thought of a good cover story.

"Clark? Where were you?" Lois asked nearly the instant I opened the door. I stopped and stared in silence. I guess I'd need that cover story sooner than I expected.

After a moment's pause, I mumbled, "Um... I didn't realize you guys would be here." Well, that was honest, but stupid. Now it sounded like I was trying to avoid them.

"Were you trying to avoid us?" Lois asked. Typical that she would cut right to the chase. At least she didn't sound annoyed as much as curious.

"No," I said, and I could feel myself sweating. I have to say, it always annoyed me that with all my special abilities, I still reacted like a normal human to embarrassing situations. If I had to be cursed with being a freak, couldn't I have the added benefit of not blushing or sweating when nervous or embarrassed? "Of course not," I added, not sure

I sounded at all honest. "I just wasn't sure where you'd be studying."

"Where were you?" Josh asked me, but he, too, didn't sound suspicious. In fact, no one seemed to be at all upset that I had blown them off for lunch except for Maddie. And she didn't seem so much upset as... well, I wasn't sure what, but I thought I saw disappointment in her eyes.

"I spent the morning doing more surveillance for my article and kind of got caught up in what I was doing," I said, happy to think of something to say that was very nearly the truth.

"Did you get anything good?" Lois asked me.

I nodded. "I have pictures now of them rolling and smoking joints. I think with this evidence I could probably write the article. But I thought I'd try to show the pictures to Mr. Dwight first - that vice principal guy I met with before. See if he changes his tune."

"Trying to go for a happy ending?" Alicia asked me. Her annoyance at me for dating Lois had seemed to have vanished sometime while we had dinner on Friday night.

I shrugged. "I guess. Although I wasn't so much thinking of the story as that maybe I could convince him to do something in school to correct the problem. It's just that if I'm going to do that, I thought I'd incorporate it into the article as well."

"Farmboys," Alicia said with a smile. "You think you can orchestrate happy endings. It's admirable, Clark, and sweet, but a little naive."

"Probably," I admitted, "but I should try, right?"

Alicia nodded, smiling. "Yeah. I imagine one day that will make you a good reporter."

"And it may even get you to win you an internship now," Lois said, her voice a mixture of admiration and jealousy.

"Well, maybe it would if I didn't need to compete with you for it," I said, partly to make her feel better, but partly as it was true.

For her part, Lois just shrugged. "I guess we'll see how well my article turns out. I don't think I'll get much of anything else done on it until I start work next weekend."

"Yeah, but once you have access to the files, your article should be all but written, right?" Josh asked.

"I hope so," Lois said.

Eager to change the subject far off our articles and thus where I'd been all afternoon, I looked over Maddie's shoulder. "That looks awesome," I told her. The picture was an incredible likeness of Lois and captured not just the obvious features of her dark hair and eyes, but also somehow managed to convey something of Lois' personality as well. The eyes and mannerism of the person in Maddie's picture showed a young woman who was both overly confident and a bit scared of her own shadow - much the same way Lois' eyes did.

Maddie flushed. "Thanks. It's not done yet, but I'm close," she said.

"I thought you said your talent was more for noticing details in other's pictures than in your ability to draw?" Chris asked her from his place beside Alicia, after looking to see the picture of Lois himself.

"It is," Maddie replied.

"That's hard to believe," Steve said. "My mom would kill to be able to do portraits that good. She sticks to abstract art as she says she can never capture the essence of a person when she draws them."

Maddie blushed, and I took the opportunity of everyone

being distracted to get my books out and make myself comfortable.

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"Hey, Clark," I heard Maddie's voice from behind me as I made my way across campus.

"Hey," I replied turning around.

She fell into step beside me a minute later. "Where you headed?" she asked me.

"To philosophy," I told her. "You?"

"Comparative religion," she replied.

We lapsed into silence for another minute before we reached the social science building where both our classes were held. I opened the door and let her walk in before me, and she turned around once she'd walked through.

"Clark?" she said, her voice a question.

"Yeah?"

"Um... don't take this the wrong way," she said, her heart hammering away inside her chest, "...it's just... well, maybe you were working on your article and that's why you didn't meet up with us for lunch as planned this weekend. But... well... it's just that..." She fumbled with her words and I could feel myself flush as I realized where she was going with this. "It just felt familiar, that's all," she finally said. "Just don't make the same mistake with Lois that you made with me, okay?"

I nodded, at a loss for words, as I watched her walk into her classroom.

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I could hear the radio playing somewhere on the floor above me and hoped that there would be no natural disasters tonight. I could use a night off. Maybe more than one. I kept thinking of Maddie's words. I had tried to cut down on my Boy in Black duties when we were dating, and I think I had been somewhat successful, but not enough. Was it worth trying again or was I fooling myself to think I could do it?

I wanted to. Not just for Lois, but for me. I wanted to be able to have a normal relationship, and I couldn't if I kept ruining them by running off to help other people. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing out loud - Steve had stayed in tonight and was asleep. What would Lois think if she could hear my thoughts? I kind of thought that she'd be ashamed of me for not helping if I could. Still, that was only if she knew, and there was no chance of that. No way was I stupid enough to tell her - I certainly didn't want the Boy in Black to end up as Lois' article for the Planet internship, and while I thought Lois cared about me, I wasn't sure she cared about me enough to pass up an opportunity like that.

The question still remained, though - could I ease up on my Boy in Black duties for the sake of my relationship with Lois? And just how much did I need to ease up on them? If I had to give them up completely, could I? It seemed like if I could, I should just give up and propose to Lois now. I bit my lip again as I imagined the incredulous look on Lois' face if I did.

Okay, definitely not ready to propose. And also probably not ready to give up being the Boy in Black full time. Did I really need to? Probably not. As long as I kept better track of time when I was helping out so I didn't run off with unexplained absences all the time. At least this weekend, Lois had bought my excuse that I was working on my article, and I could use those type of excuses for a little while. I'd need to start working on the Planet application soon, and there were bound to be other assignments for Halkuff's class after that.

So, perhaps if I could just limit the time I spent on helping somewhat, and become a better liar, I could make this relationship with Lois work without cutting out my extracurricular activities completely.

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"Guess what?" Lois asked, her voice downright bubbly over the phone.

"What?" I asked, trying not to laugh at how gleeful she sounded.

"Michelle and Grace both agreed to testify in front of the ethics committee if there has to be a hearing," she said.

"That's great!" I told her. "Paul doesn't stand a chance then."

"Yeah," Lois said, and I could hear the grin on her face. "He was a bit subdued in the meeting today."

"Well, you did warn him," I reminded her.

"I know. And I thought he'd be antagonistic today, but he pretty much ignored me and Grace and then Michelle, too, when he realized she was sitting next to us for a reason."

"I'd love to see Paul's face when he gets an invitation to the disciplinary hearing," I said, trying to imagine the look on his face.

"Yeah, too bad we couldn't manage to be there," Lois said.

"Well, I need to get going. I have another appointment with Mr. Dwight," I told her. "I'll see you at dinner?"

"Yeah," Lois replied. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I chuckled. "I think I'm going to need it."

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"So, what can I do for you, Mr. Kent?" Mr. Dwight asked. This time there was no pretense of being friendly.

"Thank you for meeting with me again, Mr. Dwight," I said, offering him my hand. He took it, but there was no warmth in the gesture, and I had the feeling he was barely tolerating this meeting. "I did some more investigating of the drug problem here at Westside."

Mr. Dwight rolled his eyes. "I believe last time we spoke I told you that there was no drug problem."

"I know," I said, trying to keep my voice even. He was getting upset, but I didn't want him throwing me out of his office before I showed him the pictures. "But I wanted to be sure. I saw some of your students purchasing marijuana last week..."

"You must be mistaken," he cut me off to say.

I pulled the pictures out of my pocket. "I took these pictures..." I said, offering him the pictures I had taken last week. "I know it isn't one hundred percent clear what they are purchasing, but then I took these pictures just a couple of days ago. I think we can agree that there isn't much of anything else that they could be rolling into cigarettes and then smoking."

For a moment, Mr. Dwight looked at the pictures in stunned silence, his face getting redder and redder. Then taking a deep breath, he began to speak in controlled tones, although I could hear his heart beating away in his chest. "I don't know what you are trying to pull here, Mr. Kent, but there is no drug problem here at Westside. These pictures weren't even taken on school grounds."

"But the students are Westside students," I pointed out.

"We are not responsible for them once they step off the grounds," he replied.

I wanted to point out that they didn't stop being white kids from middle class families when they left here, but decided to hold in the temptation to be a smart-aleck. "I'm

not suggesting that you are," I said instead. "My question remains what sort of programs do you have in place to teach these kids about the dangers of drug use?"

Mr. Dwight took another deep breath. "And as I told you last time we spoke, we don't have any programs as we don't have a problem."

"But these students..." I started pointing to the pictures.

"I'm a very busy man, Mr. Kent. You have now taken up my time on two separate occasions for a silly class assignment. I'll thank you not to do it again," he said, standing up to signify the end of the conversation.

"Thank you for your time," I mumbled as I left. Once outside, I shook my head. I wondered in how many other ways Westside Elementary was failing its students.

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"You're being a bit idealistic, Clark," Mom said to me over the phone.

"To expect the school to do some education on drug use?" I asked.

"Well, not just that, son," Dad added. "But it's asking a lot of this vice principal to admit that there's a problem."

"And he's not wrong to say he isn't responsible for the students after hours," Mom pointed out.

"No, but they could..."

"Really, it's the parents that are to blame here," Dad said. "They should be teaching their kids, and should not allow them to roam unchecked in the city after school."

"Well, Jonathan, that's a bit harsh, too. I bet some of these parents have jobs that they need, so they have limited control over where their children go after school," Mom said.

"So, what?" I asked them. "These kids are just lost causes because their parents don't dictate where they go after school for what ever reason and the school doesn't see fit to educate them on the dangers of drug use?"

"I know it's hard, Clark, but you can't expect this type of problem to get fixed just because you took some pictures. Mr. Dwight was turning a blind eye to it before; your pictures aren't going to change that," Mom said.

"I guess," I said, disgruntled. "I just feel like the system is failing them, and I wish I could do something."

"The world and all its troubles are not your problem, Clark," Dad pointed out, not for the first time.

"I know," I told him. "That doesn't mean I can't try to find a way to do something."

"Like what?" Mom asked.

"I don't know yet," I said. "But I'd like to find something. I'd hate to trash Westside in my article. If I could find a way to get Mr. Dwight to understand, to do something..."

"It doesn't sound like that's going to happen," Mom pointed out.

"I know," I said, half lost in thought. "What if I could set something up?" I said.

"Like what?" Dad asked.

"I don't know. But what if I offered to help them organize some sort of workshop?"

"I don't know if he'd agree, Clark," Mom said, "and even if he did, Clark, you need to realize that one workshop isn't likely to change the behavior of these kids."

"I know," I repeated, feeling discouraged.

"Maybe your article will change things," Mom suggested.

"How?" I asked. "It's just a school assignment."

"Like the med school one," Dad pointed out.

I chuckled. "Dad, you can't seriously expect this one to end up in the Planet, too."

"Why not?" Dad asked. "It's just as good a topic."

"Dad!"

"I'm just saying, Clark, you shouldn't discount the possibility."

"Okay," I said, just to humor him. Just then, Lois knocked on my door. "I have to go," I told my parents.

"Okay. Tell us what happens," Dad said.

"I will," I told him as I opened the door. "Talk to you later."

"Hey," Lois smiled.

"Hey," I smiled back. We stood there for a moment, smiling goofily at each other. "So, dinner?"

"Sure," Lois smiled at me. I leaned down and kissed her before we headed out to the cafeteria.

\*\*\*

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Kent." Officer Billings smiled at me. My meetings with him on this topic were so different than my meetings with Mr. Dwight, it was almost comical.

"Thanks," I said, taking a seat in front of his desk.

"So, what can I do for you?" he asked me.

"I went back to the playground a couple of days ago as I needed more evidence for my story," I explained.

Officer Billings smiled again. "That's good practice for a reporter. And working with the police is also a good idea. What did you find?"

I pulled the pictures out of my pocket, and handed them to him. "I showed these to the vice principal of Westside, but he wasn't interested."

"What did you expect him to do?" he asked, but his tone was curious, not incredulous the way I had feared it might be.

I shrugged. "I don't know exactly. I just feel like maybe these kids need some education. Maybe if they knew..."

"A class isn't going to change deep-seated behaviors," Officer Billings said quietly.

"So, you think these kids are lost causes?"

"No," he said.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Well, we've already started patrolling that area more heavily based on your earlier pictures. I'll also keep an eye out for these guys in general. If I can keep these pictures, I'd appreciate it," Officer Billings said.

"Sure. I made copies for you," I told him.

"But that's not enough for you?" Officer Billings asked me.

"I'd just like..." I trailed off, not sure what to say.

"You're a good kid, Clark," Officer Billings said. "I have an idea. We can't force the school to start educating the students on the evils of doing drugs, but there are programs that go in and do a one-day seminar. I can give you a list of the ones that have some contact with the police station. If you find one that will be willing to do it at Westside, I can help you talk to the superintendent of Metropolis School District 469."

"You would?" I asked, surprised he was willing to get that involved.

"It's hardly a bad cause," he smiled at me.

\*\*\*

"How's it going?" Lois asked as I put my tray down next to hers at dinner.

"Good," I told her. "I have most of my article written. I met with the officer I had met with last week again, and he's

going to help me get a seminar or something started there. If I can get that going before the article is due, that would be a great way to end. I still need to call and set that up, though."

Lois grumbled good-naturedly. "Okay, so you've pretty much not only finished the article, but made the world a better place."

"Sorry." I shrugged. "You will, too, once you find the evidence you need this weekend."

"Well, that might get me a recommendation-winning story, but it won't make the world a better place," Lois said.

"That's not true," I pointed out. "If you can get the news out, maybe the buildings will be built to code."

"Umm... how is a paper turned into Professor Halkuff going to do that?" Lois asked me.

"The same way my paper turned into Professor Matthews has already gotten some changes made at the med school," I replied.

"Only because your paper ended up in the Planet."

"And who's to say yours won't?" I challenged her.

"That's never happened before," Lois said, her hands on her hips as she got into the fight. Sometimes, I thought Lois liked to argue for sport.

"And you don't think it will ever happen again?" While generally, I didn't like to argue much, with Lois it was kind of fun.

"It's not likely to."

"You never know until you try," I told her. "You don't think I'm a better writer than you are, do you?" I asked with a grin.

"Of course not," Lois replied, fire in her eyes. "But that doesn't mean..."

"I'm not," I said softly, knowing that deep down she did fear that I was. "You're a much better writer than I am. I just got lucky."

"That's not true, Clark. You're really good, and..."

"Maybe we're both really good," I said, not wanting to argue about this for real.

"Maybe," Lois said. "I guess we'll find out by who gets the internship."

"That will only prove who has the better application."

"Let's make a deal," Lois said, her voice soft. "I know you're thinking that this recommendation is mine as you got the last one, but..."

"I didn't get the last one," I reminded her. "Professor Matthews said he and Professor Halkuff decide together with the results of this assignment."

"Yeah, but come on, Clark, you are a shoo-in right now."

I nodded. She was right. While I thought I had the possibility of screwing it all up, I had to admit I wasn't stupid enough not to realize that I was in a pretty sweet spot at the moment.

"Okay, let's say I do. What's the deal?"

"For the application... Just don't go easy on me just 'cause we're dating," she replied, her voice earnest.

I had to fight the urge to laugh. "You didn't seriously think I would, did you? I don't imagine you have any intention of doing that for me."

"No," Lois said, "but I don't want to have to feel bad about that. I want our friendship or dating relationship or whatever to be completely separate."

"Agreed," I said. Then added, "But does this mean we agree not to let the competition effect our relationship? So, if I won, which I doubt I will, but if I do, you won't be so

upset we have to break up?"

Lois smiled. "You think we'll still be dating when the results come back?"

"You clearly think we'll still be dating when the process starts," I shot back.

"The process starts?" Lois asked me. "You haven't started yet?"

"You have?" I asked, surprised and a bit alarmed. "You haven't even finished the paper for Halkuff's class yet."

"I know, but I can't do much on that until Friday. I've been looking for topics for the Planet internship application for weeks. You need to have a good topic, Clark," Lois said, her tone bordering on lecturing.

"I know," I said, hearing a slight whine to my voice.

"But I have such trouble with that."

"That's why you need to start early," Lois pointed out.

"So, you have a topic picked out?" I asked her.

"No, but I have some ideas."

"Like what?" I asked. "Or are they a secret?" Lois paused, clearly trying to decide whether or not she could tell me. "I won't steal any of them," I told her, then wondered if I wanted to hear them. If she had several and I promised not to steal them, that was several ideas I was eliminating. What if I found one of them on my own later? If I didn't know that Lois was considering it, it would still be fair game. Not that it was likely that we'd think of the same thing, but maybe...

"Okay," she agreed, somewhat reluctantly. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes," I said. Perhaps it was a stupid move, but I was really curious.

"Well, I have two ideas right now," she admitted, "but I'm leaning more heavily toward one."

"What are they?" I prodded her.

"Well, I could write about the Paul thing," she started.

"So, I'm guessing you're leaning toward the other?" I asked with a laugh.

"Yeah. I also... well, Chris mentioned it to me actually..." she hedged away from mentioning the other idea for some reason.

"Chris, as in Alicia's Chris?" I asked her.

"Yeah," Lois said. "I had lunch with them last week and Chris mentioned that some of the members of his frat are here on football scholarships..."

"And?" I asked. That wasn't much of a story.

"And they are getting help on tests to keep their grades up," Lois said.

"What sort of help?" I asked, starting to understand where this was going.

"Like the professors giving them the answers ahead of time."

"But that's crazy! Not only could the students be expelled, but the teachers could be fired," I said.

"I know," Lois said. "With the medical school stuff you uncovered last semester, it's starting to seem like Met U isn't such a great place after all."

"Great. That's what we want to uncover. Make our college diplomas useless," I said, and then realized how that sounded. "Not that you shouldn't use that for your application," I hastened to add. "Just that I'm disappointed at all the corruption around here."

"Well, if we start now, maybe it will be all be cleared up by the time we graduate," Lois smiled at me.

"It's a great topic, Lois. I can't believe you're even still looking."

"Well, who knows what else will come up?" she said. "Like you said, I haven't finished the paper for class yet. I figured until I start investigating, there's no reason to be wed to a topic."

"I guess," I said, feeling a bit downcast. I couldn't believe she had such great ideas while I had no ideas at all.

"So, I take this to mean you haven't started work on the application," Lois asked me.

"No," I replied. "I did spend some time thinking of a topic back at the beginning of the semester, but I couldn't think of anything then, so haven't spent anytime since then."

"Don't worry, Clark. I'm sure you'll come up with something," Lois tried to be reassuring.

\*\*\*

"Okay," Lois announced when she called Friday afternoon. "Are you free to come with me tomorrow?"

"Huh?" I asked, somewhat distracted. I had spent the afternoon calling the places Officer Billings gave me, and one of them had agreed to come speak at Westside if we could set it up. I was busy transcribing the information from our phone call so I would have all my notes organized when I called Officer Billings.

"Tomorrow?" Lois repeated. "My job at Suicide Slum?"

"Oh, right," I said, remembering now. "Yeah. I can come. What time?"

"Nine?" Lois asked.

"Sounds good. I was planning to stop by the police department tomorrow. Do you want to come after you're finished?" I asked her.

"Sure," Lois replied. "What for?"

"I found someone to give a talk at Westside."

"That's awesome!" Lois replied, sounding truly happy for me.

"Yeah. I just hope Officer Billings can get Mr. Dwight to agree," I said.

"Clark, you're a great guy, but I'm guessing a police officer may be more convincing than a college freshman," Lois pointed out.

I chuckled, "Okay, good point. So, do you want to meet for dinner?"

"Yes," she said. "An hour?"

"Sounds good. Do you need to work afterwards or do you want to go out?"

"Out?" Lois asked, a teasing note to her voice. "Like on a real date?"

"Something like that," I smiled at her voice. "I thought maybe we could go off campus for dinner. A guy in my art history class mentioned an Indian place nearby and said there's a really nice coffee house next door that has live music on Fridays and Saturdays."

"Sounds nice," Lois said. "I can procrastinate working a little bit."

"Great. See you in an hour," I said before hanging up the phone.

\*\*\*

"Hurricane Edward is making its way towards Florida. The affluent neighborhood of South Beach is being evacuated, many residents in danger of losing their homes." The radio being played in the stockroom of the coffee house was loud in my head. It was nearly drowning out the guitarist playing out here.

I glanced at Lois. Not hearing the radio, she was enjoying the musician. She seemed more relaxed than I'd ever seen her. Could I leave to help the people in Florida?

Clearly not without Lois noticing. I guess this was my chance to prove I could do it - I could cut down on my Boy in Black activities in order to make my relationship with Lois work. I took a deep breath and blocked out the sound of the radio.

"Having fun?" I asked Lois.

"I am. She's good," she said, gesturing at the singer on stage.

"Yeah, she is. Ever wish you could play a musical instrument?" I asked, trying to remain focused on the here and now with Lois rather than the guilty feeling in the pit of my stomach as I pictured the people in Florida hurriedly packing up as many of their belongings as they could.

"I can," Lois replied.

"You can?"

"What? You think you know everything about me?" Lois asked, a glint in her eye.

"I guess not," I chuckled. "It just surprised me. So what do you play?"

"Piano."

"Are you any good?" I asked.

"Of course," Lois replied, looking vaguely offended, but her eyes gave her away. She wasn't really upset.

"Can I hear you?"

"How? Maybe you haven't noticed that Star and I don't have a piano in our dorm room," Lois pointed out.

"We can reserve a room in the music building one day."

"And I can give you a private performance?" Lois asked, eyebrows raised.

"That's what I'm hoping for," I told her, winking. She leaned over and slapped me lightly on the arm. "Seriously though, will you?"

"I guess," she said, looking a little uncomfortable.

"You don't need to," I told her.

"I know. Maybe. I guess, let me finish this article first."

"It's a deal."

\*\*\*

"This is great!" Lois exclaimed as she pulled another piece of paper out of the file cabinet.

"It's all coming together," I smiled at her in encouragement.

"Yes. I think by the time we leave here today, I'll have enough to write my article."

"And maybe finish the work you were hired for?" I suggested softly.

"Yeah, that too," Lois grinned at me.

"Help!" A voice called from somewhere outside. I glanced at Lois, but she hadn't heard it. I guessed it was coming from farther away than I had thought. I tried to shut off my super hearing and focus on Lois. "Help!" the voice called again.

I closed my eyes. I could do this. I had managed to not go to Florida last night; I could not help the person this morning, too.

"Someone please help," the person was now pleading.

I glanced at Lois. She was immersed in the paperwork she was looking through.

"I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back," I told her.

"Mmmm hmmm..." she replied, caught up in what she was doing. Now if only she could stay caught up as long as I was gone.

\*\*\*

"Where have you been?" Lois asked me as I came back into the office. "I've been ready to leave for an hour, but



couldn't find you. I thought you just went to the bathroom."

If the tirade of words coming out of her mouth wasn't an indication, her stance made it pretty clear that Lois was more than a little annoyed at me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You were busy, so I thought I'd step outside for air." In reality, I had been out the whole time. Lois wasn't kidding about this not being a great area of town. Once I found the person who had been calling, I had heard another and then another. I had helped out six people in total this morning, although two of them together. To be honest, I wasn't careful about not using my powers in public for all of those rescues, but I made sure only the victims could see me. I hoped that they'd be too traumatized to really be aware of what I had done.

I had stopped by several times to make sure Lois was okay, but only peeked in the window briefly each time. She had seemed okay and engrossed in paperwork last time I had checked, and so I had felt safe staying out. I kept an ear trained on Lois in case she called out, but I wasn't listening closely enough to realize she had finished.

"Why didn't you say something?" Lois asked me, and I could tell that she wasn't sure whether or not she completely believed me.

"I didn't realize I'd be outside that long. I figured I'd hear you if you called for me, but I guess I had zoned out more than I thought."

"But you weren't right outside," Lois said. "I looked for you."

"I just went for a walk around the block," I said, feeling awful about lying, but I couldn't tell her the truth. How would she respond to knowing that I had gone out and helped others? How would I explain my ability to do so?

"Okay. Well, I'm ready to go," Lois said, still sounding wary of me.

"Great. Let's head to the police station," I said, hoping that I could distract her.

She nodded and I knew I'd been given a reprieve, but I'd need to be careful. Lois was not going to put up with much.

\*\*\*

"Did you hear about this?" Chris asked as he flipped through the paper. He was taking some class this semester that required him to read the paper at least once a week. I'm not sure why he chose Sunday given it was the largest paper, but he had brought this week's copy of the Metropolis Star with him to dinner.

Alicia had warned him that Lois and I would lynch him for reading the Star over the Planet, but he quickly pointed out that as an inferior paper, the Star was shorter and used simpler language, making it a faster read.

"About what?" Josh asked, as he scooped out the remains of his taco with his fork.

"Several crimes were thwarted in Suicide Slum yesterday morning. Each of the victims claim an angel showed up to help them," Chris said.

I could feel myself pale and hoped no one was paying attention.

"An angel?" Lois laughed. "This is what happens when you read the Star rather than the Planet."

"The Star isn't a tabloid, Lois," Steve pointed out.

"I didn't think so," Lois said, "but an angel? Do you really believe that?"

"No," Alicia said. "Clearly they were all too busy with their emotions from the attacks to realize what had really happened."

"But then why doesn't that happen all the time?" Chris

challenged her. I felt like I was going to pass out, but luckily all eyes were on Chris and Alicia right now, so no one was paying attention to me.

"No idea," Alicia shrugged. "But you don't really believe these people were helped by an angel, do you?"

Chris shrugged.

"Speaking about angels," Lois interrupted, "we have our own right here. Clark got an officer to agree to convince someone at Westside to give a seminar on the evils of drug use."

"That's great, Clark!" Josh said.

"You managed to create your happy ending," Maddie said, smiling at me.

"Who knew? Farm boys aren't just idealistic. They get things done." Alicia said, but her smile let me know she was teasing me.

"Well, it wasn't hard," I said. Lois raised her eyebrows at me. "It wasn't," I insisted.

"It was still more than you needed to do," Lois pointed out.

"What about you?" Josh asked. "Did you get the evidence you needed for your article?"

"I did," Lois said. "And I called Eric today, and told him that I realized I really couldn't handle the work with my studies so I've now quit my job and don't need to go down there again."

"So, you are both on track for finishing your papers this week?" Alicia asked us.

I nodded. "They're due next week anyway, and we both want to get started on the Planet application."

"I have other news, too," Lois announced.

"You do?" I asked her. She hadn't mentioned anything to me before now.

"I got a call from Professor Matthews this morning," she told us. "Paul's disciplinary hearing is set for this Friday."

"That's great!" I told her. "Are you ready?"

"No," she admitted. "But I don't think I'll ever be. I'll just be glad when it's all over."

"At least you won't be alone," Josh pointed out. "I'm sure it will be less scary to have Michelle and Grace with you."

"Definitely," Lois admitted. "Plus, it makes me feel less stupid."

"You weren't stupid," Alicia said.

Steve snorted. "What?" he asked when Maddie, Josh, and I all turned to give him dirty looks. "The rest of us all saw what a snake he was."

"The *rest* of us didn't interact with him at all," I pointed out. "The one time I did, I was charmed, too."

Steve shrugged, and I fought the urge to hit him.

"Thanks, Clark," Lois said quietly.

I reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. "I mean it, Lois. I'm not just saying that to be nice."

She nodded, but I could see the tears in her eyes.

\*\*\*

"What the heck is wrong with you?" I demanded the instant Steve came in the door that evening.

"What are you talking about?" he asked as he dropped his jacket on the floor.

"Earlier," I replied, "at dinner. Telling Lois that she was stupid."

"Oh, come on, Clark. We all know she was behaving like a groupie or something," he said, dismissive of his actions.

"I don't know that," I told him. "And even if I did, that wouldn't be the point. The point is Lois' feelings. Are you even capable of thinking about how anyone else feels?" I asked him.

"Of course I am," he replied, his voice soft. "I just... I guess I wasn't thinking."

"That's the problem, Steve. You're never thinking."

"Okay, okay, I get the point," he said, and I could hear the sincere remorse in his voice, as well as some annoyance, probably directed at me. "I'll call your girlfriend and apologize."

"Thank you," I replied. "And I thought Lois was not just my girlfriend, but your friend as well."

"Yeah, we're bosom buddies," Steve said, his tone almost over the top sarcastic.

"I..." I trailed off, not sure what to say.

"Oh, come on, Clark. Don't pretend you don't know that the only reason I'm still invited to hang out with all of you is because I'm your roommate. You guys can't stand me."

It was true, sort of. Not the part about not being able to stand him, but the fact that he was only invited to hang out with us as we were roommates. "That's not completely true," I pointed out. "No one else's roommate hangs out with us."

"But I was the only one to hang out with you guys from the beginning," Steve said. "That's the only reason I still do. The rest of you are actually friends, but not with me."

"We want to be," I said, not sure it was entirely true, but I knew it was at least sort of true for me. I'd love to actually get along with my roommate better than Steve and I currently did. "But we just have so little in common," I told him. "You're so busy with your dates and..."

Steve sighed. "I know I'm not like the rest of you. I don't study that much and I date a lot more, but... that doesn't mean I don't have anything in common with you."

"I know," I admitted. "It's just that... Well, in addition to not having much in common, you make comments like the one you did today and..."

"It doesn't endear me to the rest of you," Steve said with a grin.

"Sort of."

He picked up the phone. "What's her number?" he asked me.

\*\*\*

"So, are you one of the girls in the hearing on Friday?" The auburn haired girl who had sat next to me on the first day of class approached us as Lois and I entered Investigative Journalism.

"I'm sorry?" Lois replied, confused.

"I heard a rumor that there's an ethics hearing this Friday for the editor of the Titan. That he was taking advantage of the female staff members. That same rumor has you as the person who reported it," the girl said.

Lois didn't say anything, but the blood rushing from her cheeks gave her away.

"Look, I'm not just gossiping," the redhead said.

"You're not?" I challenged her.

"No. I... I know I don't stand a chance. Another rumor says you guys have the recommendations all sewn up, but I'm applying for the Planet internship anyway," she said.

"What does that have to do with the disciplinary hearing?" Lois asked.

"It's my topic - about the fall of the Titan's editor," she said. "Look, I think it's great that someone was willing to stand up to him. The information I've uncovered so far says

he's been doing this since he was a freshman. You don't need to worry about me making you look bad if that's the problem," she said.

Lois gave a wan smile. "So you want to ask me about it?"

"If you're willing to talk," the girl said, holding out her hand. "I'm Catherine, although people around here have taken to calling me Cat."

"I was considering using it as my own topic," Lois admitted.

Cat looked confused. "I thought you were supposed to stay away from topics you were too close to?"

"You are," Lois admitted. "But it's a good topic."

"I think so, too," Cat giggled.

"I have another idea," Lois admitted. "I'd be happy to talk to you as long as you promise to make me look good."

"Not a problem," Cat said. "I'll be honest. I sort of thought you were a bit of a dork at first, but the more I've heard about you, the less I think that."

Lois gave a smile. "I am a bit of a dork," she admitted as we took our seats.

\*\*\*

"You want to get together tonight to finish up our articles?" Lois asked me after class.

"I'll edit yours, you edit mine?" I asked her.

"Something like that," she smiled at me. "You game?"

"Sounds good," I told her.

"I'm free whenever," Lois said.

"I have a night class tonight," I reminded her. "I'll call you once I've had a chance to grab dinner after."

"Sounds good." She leaned over to give me a kiss before taking off for her next class.

\*\*\*

"Did you finish?" I asked her as I joined her in her room.

"Not yet," she smiled at me. "But I wasn't as far along as you were. I'm getting there, though. How was class?"

"Okay," I said, finding the look in her eyes captivating. The light was catching them just right, making them sparkle. I leaned over and kissed her again, just a gentle kiss hello. A moment later, though, I had leaned over again, kissing her one more time. This was also just a gentle kiss, but this one lasted longer.

A moment later, Lois had spun around in her chair, I was hunched over, our kiss growing in intensity. For a moment, I thought of Star and the whole finding us half naked thing. I wondered if last time was really the vision she had seen, or if she was going to come in and find us even less clothed at some point. As Lois stood up to be more on my level, I realized that I half expected that to be the case.

Then Lois and I were tumbling onto her bed and I forgot about Star and her prediction.

\*\*\*

"Good morning," Lois whispered in my ear.

"Hey," I said, opening my eyes and feeling a bit confused. I looked around. I hadn't intended to spend the night. "I'm sorry," I said. "I had really meant to go back to my room."

"I know," Lois smiled at me. "It's okay. I like waking up to find you in my bed."

I smirked at her, I couldn't help it. "Really?"

"Oh, wipe that smirk off your face. Yes, really. But I'm also perfectly happy with our activities before we fell asleep last night."

"Meaning?" I asked her.

"Meaning that when I say I like having you in my bed, I mean it literally, not figuratively."

I nodded, not sure what to say. If I admitted that I felt the same way, I feared she would think I wasn't attracted enough to her to want to have sex. If I told her I did, though, I'd have to explain that I was sort of saving myself. And without explaining the inherent risks involved in sleeping with me, I would just come across sounding like a girl.

"You have a class," she reminded me, looking at the clock.

"Oh shoot. In like ten minutes," I realized when my eyes followed hers.

"I'll see you later?" Lois asked me as I raced around her room picking up my clothes.

"Definitely," I smiled at her. "We still have to finish our articles, don't we?"

"And that's why I'll see you later?" Lois asked me, but the smile in her eyes let me know that the question came from teasing Lois, not insecure Lois. I felt myself smile in return, glad that she felt confident enough in me, in us, to know that I wouldn't disappear after last night.

"Of course," I told her. "I mean, if you weren't helping me write my paper, what other use would I have for you?" I teased her.

She glared at me as she tossed her pillow my way.

"I'll call you later," I said, my voice softer, more tender this time. I leaned down to give her a brief goodbye kiss, then leaned down again for another kiss - less tender and less brief.

I moved away after that. "I really have to go," I told her. "I know. I'll see you later."

For a moment, as I made my way out of her dorm, I worried again about my reaction to her - how little I seemed in control of my physical response to her. Then I remembered Mom's words about just being a teenager and I decided not to worry about it. Lois was my girlfriend and as long as we were both okay with our physical relationship, I shouldn't worry about it so much.

\*\*\*

"You're going to be great," I told her, holding her hand tightly.

"Maybe," Lois replied, sounding very unsure of herself.

"You are," I assured her.

"What if I get up there and turn into a bumbling fool?" Lois asked.

"Not possible," I told her. "I've never seen you turn into a bumbling fool before."

"When was the last time you accompanied me to a disciplinary hearing?" she challenged me.

"Never, but still..."

"Still nothing," Lois said, her voice firm, and I knew I was at least distracting her from her thoughts about the hearing.

"You know the trick, right?" I asked. "You just picture everyone in their underwear."

"That would make Paul happy," Lois giggled.

"Oh, and Paul... I bet he wears red silk undies," I said, smiling.

"How did you know?" she replied so deadpan that for a minute I thought she was serious.

"Very funny."

"Thanks, Clark. This helped," she said as I opened the door to the administration building. The hearing was on the

third floor. I wasn't allowed in, but I was planning on waiting for Lois in the hallway.

I gave her a tight hug outside the door. "I'll be waiting right here for you," I whispered into her hair.

"Thank you," she said, leaning back to look me in the eyes. "I mean it. I'm so glad you're here with me."

"No problem," I smiled at her. "There's no place else I'd rather be."

She leaned over to give me a kiss before leaving me alone in the hallway.

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"It's been sixteen hours since little Melissa Patterson fell down the well, and still emergency workers have not been able to get to her. After an all night attempt to find a way to save the little girl without a risk of the old well collapsing around her, new strategies are needed. While food and water have been lowered down into the well to keep her strength up, the five-year-old must be terrified." Thankfully, whoever had been playing the radio I was hearing turned it off.

I had been tempted to go help the little girl. Not that I knew what I would do to help. Besides, I needed to stay here for Lois. I just needed to forget about the child, however scared and lonely she must be. No! I really did need to stay here.

I tuned in to the conversation in the other room.

"No," I heard Grace say. "I never wrote an article at all."

"So, Mr. Bender did not steal any of your work?" someone asked her.

"Well... no," Grace admitted, sounding unsure of herself. "But he asked me to."

"Or that was what you understood even though it never happened," one of the professors corrected her.

I used my special vision to look inside, but aside from Lois, Grace, and Professor Matthews, I didn't recognize anyone in there. I could determine that the girl with the long hair and cocoa colored skin was Michelle, but only as she was the only other student in the room besides Paul.

"But it only didn't happen because Lois warned me about it first," Grace said, her voice plaintive.

"How did Ms. Lane warn you?" another of the professors asked.

"I was out on the date with Paul - the one he agreed to after I agreed to write an article for him - and we bumped into Lois there. She came and told me that Paul had a habit of dating women who wrote articles he could use his byline on. So, I left Paul, had dinner with Lois and her friends, and never gave Paul anything."

I wasn't one hundred percent sure, but I thought I could probably burrow beneath the ground and save the little girl from below, but I didn't want to leave. Not now when Lois needed me. Besides, I had no idea how I could pull off the rescue without giving myself away.

"And how many articles did you write?"

"I'm not sure," Michelle said, her voice unsteady.

"Maybe a dozen or so." I hadn't realized how distracted I'd been. I'd missed the rest of Grace's testimony. Was that what it was called? This wasn't an actual trial. Well, whatever it was.

"Why did you let him use your articles with his name?" one of the professors asked Michelle.

"I... I know it's stupid, but it's like Grace said. I thought he was cute," Michelle answered, her cheeks flaming up.

I could go and borrow the tunnel starting pretty far away, then show up at the place where all the emergency

workers were and suggest the tunnel idea. They would start it closer in, but quickly hit the tunnel I had built. This way I wouldn't have done anything, but I would still speed up the rescue.

No. Lois needed me. This was not the time to go off and perform a rescue.

But that little girl had been trapped in the well overnight already. She must be so scared.

Gritting my teeth, trying to block out thoughts of the little girl, I turned my hearing into the proceedings next door again.

"Yes, that is true," Paul said, the picture of innocence. "Professor Matthews submitted that article to me. I thought it was excellent, which is why I offered Lois the position on the paper. I sent the article to the copy editor, but somehow when the paper was being checked over before publication, the byline was changed to my name. It was just a typo. I explained the mistake to Lois and up until a week or so ago, she had told me she understood.

"But that's the only article where that happened, and as it was an honest mistake..."

"There was a typo that had your name on the byline with Ms. Lane's as a contributor?" one of the professors asked, looking like he wasn't buying Paul's story.

"Well, yes," Paul said, stumbling a bit over his words, realizing how feeble that sounded, I'm sure.

"And these other young ladies, in addition to Ms. Lane, are all mistaken. They did not write the articles they claim they did?" one of the other professors asked.

"Yes," Paul said again, but his voice was weak, and he blushed.

Maybe I could fly to Wilmont to rescue the little girl and be back before the hearing got out? It's not like Lois would know the difference. She didn't know I could hear what was going on anyway.

"Thank you for your time," one of the professors said, cutting into my thoughts. "We will need a chance to talk this over, but will get back to each of you within the week."

Okay, so no trip to Wilmont.

Less than five minutes later, Lois, Grace, Michelle, and Professor Matthews were exiting together. Paul had walked out a few moments before. He had glanced at me, before looking away, pretending he hadn't seen me, and nearly running down the hallway.

"Clark," Professor Matthews said with a smile. "It's good to see you."

"It went great," Lois told me. "At least I think it did."

"It did," Professor Matthews assured her. "You ladies were excellent - all of you were composed and well spoken."

"Thank you," Grace replied, blushing.

"Thank you for supporting us," Lois added.

"Yes," Michelle added. "I felt a lot better knowing you already believed us."

"Well, in a few days, I'm sure you are going to hear that everyone in that room believed you, too. I hope you all have a great weekend," he replied.

"You, too," I said as he walked away.

"Shall we go someplace and celebrate?" I asked the girls.

"Please," Michelle said. "I could use some chocolate."

"Yes, let's pig out," Grace smiled.

"I'm Clark," I said, holding my hand out to Michelle. "I don't think we've met before."

"Sorry," Lois said, seeming to come out of the trance

she was in. "This is Michelle. Michelle, my boyfriend, Clark."

I smiled at her. Something about hearing her call me her boyfriend made me feel better about the decision not to head off to Wilmont.

"Lois! Clark!" someone called as we exited the administration building.

"Josh?" Lois asked. Sure enough, there was Josh, Alicia, Maddie, Star, and Steve a few feet away.

"We came to see how things went," Star explained as they approached us.

"It was great," Lois smiled. "Professor Matthews is sure they believed us." She introduced everyone else to Michelle and the whole group of us headed to the student union for ice cream.

\*\*\*

I couldn't sleep. I had been lying in bed for two hours now, but could not stop the thoughts in my head. I hadn't been able to get away from everyone soon enough. Melissa Patterson had been in the well for nearly twenty-four hours by the time we finished having our ice cream and Lois, Michelle, and Grace had given their accounts of the hearing. I wanted to fly off to Wilmont, but felt like I was probably expected to spend the rest of the evening with Lois.

It didn't matter. Lois, Star, and I headed back to their room and I suggested we turn on the radio. They announced just a few minutes in that the child had been saved. Even with the food and water they had been able to get to her, she was dehydrated and was spending the night in the hospital. She was in poor shape, although a full recovery was expected.

That was good news, I guess. Still, I couldn't stop wondering - if I had left when I first heard about it, if I had saved her hours ago, would she still be dehydrated? Would she still be in the hospital?

I had no way of knowing, of course, but I couldn't help but think that the answer to both questions was no.

I sighed again. There was nothing I could do at this point. I knew that. I understood that. And yet still I couldn't sleep. I wondered what she looked like. Did she have blonde hair? Brown? What color were her eyes? I had this image in my head of a green-eyed girl with blond ringlets. Not quite Cindy Brady type curls, but close. And she looked sad and bruised.

Shaking my head, I swung my legs out of bed. It was nearly four in the morning now, which made it three in Smallville. If I left now, Mom and Dad would still be asleep when I got there, but it wouldn't be too long before they were awake.

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"Clark?" Mom called from the doorway.

"Hi," I said quietly, lifting the remote control to turn off the infomercial I'd been watching until they woke up.

"What are you doing here?" she asked me.

"I needed to talk," I told her.

"Well come on into the kitchen. We can talk while I make breakfast," she told me as she moved towards the base of the stairs. "Jonathan?" she called upstairs. "Clark's here."

Mom placed a glass of buttermilk on the table, and then started to take out the skillet and food for breakfast.

"What's going on, son?" Dad asked me as he came down the stairs.

"Did you guys hear about Melissa Patterson?" I asked

them.

"Who?" Dad asked.

"That poor little girl," Mom said. "You remember, Jonathan. They talked about her on the news last night - trapped in a well for almost twenty-four hours. Clark, were you there?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I should have been. I heard about it hours before she was rescued. Who knows how much better she'd be if I'd gone when I first heard about her?"

"Clark, we've talked about this," Mom started.

"I know," I cut her off. "The world and all its problems are not mine. But, Mom, she's five-years-old!"

"So, why didn't you go?" Dad asked.

"When I heard about it I was waiting for Lois to get out of the disciplinary hearing," I explained.

"Well, then you couldn't go," Mom pointed out.

"I know!" I nearly yelled, but then blushed. "Sorry."

"Clark, we talked about this before. When you were dating Maddie. It's okay to put your girlfriend above the Boy in Black. There were already lots of emergency workers on the scene with that little girl. What could you have done anyway?" Mom asked me.

"I thought I could dig a tunnel to get to her from below. Then show up at the scene and find a way to suggest the idea to the rescue workers. They could dig their own hole, but then find mine fairly quickly."

Dad smiled. "Impressive," he admitted. "You do seem to have a knack for this sort of thing."

"And yet, I'm ignoring it," I pointed out.

"Lois needed you today," Mom pointed out.

"But she was in the hearing. If I had gone right when heard about it, I probably could have been back before she was out."

"But you wanted to make sure you were there when she got out," Mom asked, although it came out as more of a question.

"I guess," I said. "I wanted to make sure she was okay."

Dad grinned at me. "So, things with Lois are pretty serious then."

"What?" I asked. "No, it's just that..."

"You had a much harder time giving up the Boy in Black for Maddie than you seem to be for Lois," Dad pointed out.

"Are you listening to me?" I asked, only slightly ashamed of the tone I was using with Dad.

"Yes," Mom said, her voice an exaggerated version of calm that I'm sure she was hoping would transfer to me. "You feel guilty for not saving little Melissa. But you still did feel compelled to stay - a decision you could not seem to make for Maddie."

I started to argue, but then realized they were right. Despite constantly saying I wouldn't, the best I had done when with Maddie was not listening to hear about places where I could help. I had always gone if I heard about something.

"So, what do you think it means?" I asked instead, hating the defeated sound I heard to my voice.

"I think it means Lois is very important to you," Mom said when Dad motioned to her to answer.

"Well she is," I replied. "I like her a lot."

"You thought you were in love with Maddie," Dad said.

"I was in love with Maddie," I replied, not liking the implication he was making. "Lois is really important to me, but it doesn't change how I felt about Maddie."

"No one was saying that it did, son," Dad replied. "I'm just pointing out that you said you *like* Lois a lot, and yet you aren't willing to leave her to be the Boy in Black, and yet you were willing to do so for Maddie whom you loved."

"I'm not in love with Lois!" I insisted. I'm not sure why the idea of it bothered me so much, but it did. It felt like it was too soon to fall in love, and given how little control I had over my hormones when with Lois, did I have to have no control over my emotions as well?

"Regardless of your feelings for Lois or Maddie, helping Melissa Patterson would have been nice, but wasn't necessary. And last I heard, they expected her to make a full recovery," Mom said, still using her exaggerated calm voice.

"But I could have helped!" I pointed out again.

"Yes, but you didn't need to and you were busy with something else," Mom replied. "You can't be everywhere at once, Clark. Even if you decided to stop living a normal life and help out all the time, you won't be able to help everyone who needs it."

"But..."

"So you're going to have to learn to live with not helping everyone who needs help," Mom continued.

"I guess," I conceded. "But if I'd been helping someone else..."

"You were," Dad cut in. "You were helping Lois. And I'm sure she was glad you were there."

"She was," I admitted.

"And things went well for her?" Mom asked.

"Yeah, Professor Matthews doesn't think there's much chance that Paul will get off. I sort of listened in, and Paul sounded like an idiot, honestly."

Mom laughed. "Good to hear that justice will be served."

"I need to get out to the fields," Dad said, looking at the clock.

"I should get back to Metropolis," I replied.

"Clark..." Mom started, and I could hear the gentle lecturing tone to her voice already.

"I know. I can't be everywhere at once. It's not all my responsibility. It's okay to be a normal teenager," I recited.

"Well, it's good that you hear us even if you're not really listening," Mom said with a smile. I wanted to be insulted, but I knew it was true. I believed them and yet... well, I didn't really.

Not having an appropriate response, I gave Mom a kiss on the cheek and without a word headed back to campus.

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"I'm meeting with that girl, Cat, tomorrow morning to discuss the disciplinary hearing," Lois told me after class. We had finished our articles over the weekend, and just handed them in. Now that they were essentially in the past, we were obsessed with working on the Planet internship application. Since Cat was working on the Paul story, Lois was committed to writing about the football team getting test answers ahead of time.

I was still at a loss. I had no idea what to write about. For now I was focusing on the boring paperwork part of the application, and sort of hoping that an article topic would land in my lap.

Aside from the fact that it would mean I wouldn't have had a chance at a recommendation, I sort of wished I had used my lame track re-pavement idea for the article in Professor Matthews' class and saved the med school paper for the application. That was certainly up to the internship

application type standards.

Now not only did I not have any idea of a topic that would be at least acceptable for the application, but since Mr. White had seen that article, I felt like I had just set a benchmark for myself, and my application article had to be better than the med school article.

"Are you nervous?" I asked Lois about her interview with Cat.

"Not really," she admitted. "I talked to her a little bit over the phone, and I believe her that she isn't trying to make me look bad. I just sort of hope that we get the decision before then. I know it won't really matter when I'm talking to her, but I'll feel better - like it's my way of putting the whole thing behind me."

"Are you nervous about the outcome?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "Sort of. I know that things look good, but I just keep thinking that if the decision was that obvious, they would have gotten back to us by now. The fact that they still need time to decide doesn't bode well for justice being served."

"Good to hear that you have such confidence in the system," I said, nudging her with my shoulder.

Lois gave a small laugh. "I do. Sort of. But I just can't help but worry..."

"Don't," I told her. "Trust Professor Matthews' feeling about this."

"As if it were that easy." She smiled at me.

"So," I asked her, "what's your starting point for the football team article?"

Lois shrugged. "I think I'm going to start by talking to Chris. I mean, I promised I'd keep his name out of it - his frat brothers would kill him if they found out he was my source, but at least I'll have a better idea of where to go once I know more about who is involved and stuff."

"Makes sense," I told her. "Do you think you'll interview any of the students or teachers?" I asked her.

"I'd like to, but I'm not sure how I'll manage it yet," Lois admitted. "I have to admit, part of talking to Chris is procrastinating."

I smiled at her.

"So, what about you? Any topic ideas yet?" she asked.

"Not even a bad one," I admitted. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed that I just stumble across something."

"Well, if I hear about anything, I'll share it with you," Lois offered.

"As long as it's no better than the football team cheating, and getting help from their professors, right?" I asked her with a grin.

"Doesn't that go without saying?" she asked me.

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I spent part of the next day looking into how to reserve the music practice rooms. I wasn't sure if she had meant it or not, but Lois had said she'd play the piano for me after our articles were finished. While clearly my time would be better spent looking for a topic for the internship application, this was much more fun.

I wasn't one hundred percent sure that Lois would play for me, but it wasn't like we'd get in trouble for not using the room, and I really did want to hear her. I had trouble picturing Lois playing the piano, and I felt like perhaps seeing her play would allow me to learn more about her.

It wasn't that easy to reserve a room. The thought seemed to be that it was mainly music majors and minors that would want them, so only people in the music department knew how. It took awhile before I found

someone who could help me, although once I did, the process was pretty easy. It was mainly a first-come-first-serve thing, so I signed up for the first free time that I thought would work for both of us, and had the rest of the afternoon free.

I spent the free time working on homework assignments, catching up on everything due that week. Now I had the rest of the week free to panic about the Planet internship. The recommendation would do me no good if I didn't hand in an article with my application.

"Hey," Lois said as she came up behind me as I was walking towards the cafeteria, "I was hoping to bump into you. Do you want to have dinner?"

"Yeah," I said, glad to see her. I was trying hard to put my conversation with my parents about Lois out of my mind, and so far was successful. Still, while I was shying away from labeling my feelings for Lois, I couldn't deny that just seeing her made me happy.

"What's your secret?" Lois asked as we sat down.

"What?" I asked her.

"Your diet. I've been eating with you several times a week for the past six months, and you have the most atrocious diet," she said pointing to my tray. I looked down to take in my dinner for tonight - fried chicken with French fries and a rather large slice of carrot cake. "How do you eat like that and look the way you do?" she asked me.

"Hey, it's not so bad. For instance, I chose carrot cake for dessert..."

"One of the most fattening cake choices," Lois interrupted. "With the cream cheese frosting on that, it's worse than the chocolate cake they have."

"Really?" I asked. While I knew a lot of random trivia as I had a pretty good memory, I never paid much attention to nutrition information. Given that I never gained weight, and I didn't think it was likely that I'd need to worry about human ailments like high cholesterol, I didn't bother to pay much attention to what was healthy and what wasn't. I knew the basics - fruit and vegetables good, fried and highly processed food bad. Anything beyond that, though, seemed like useless information.

"Yes, really," Lois said, shaking her head at me.

"What?" I asked her.

"You're such a guy in some ways," she told me.

"I'm sorry?" I said, although it came out as a question. What was wrong with being a guy?

She laughed. "It's okay. No need to apologize. But you still haven't answered my question. What's your secret? How do you eat like that and maintain your weight?"

I started to tell her I worked out regularly, but that wasn't true, and Lois probably knew enough about my schedule to know that. So what could I tell her? After a silence that lasted just a second or two too long, I realized the truth would be okay here. "I'm just lucky, I guess," I told her. "I've never seemed to have to worry much about my weight."

"Lucky you," Lois smiled at me.

"Do you?" I asked her, surprised.

Lois shrugged. "Well, not super carefully, but yeah, I do think about what I eat. If I don't, I eat too much chocolate and that definitely impacts my weight."

"Well, you look great right now," I told her with a smile.

"Thanks," she replied, blushing.

This was the part of our relationship that was the strangest. We kept letting our hormones get the best of us, and yet, we were still so nervous around each other that

Lois blushed when I said she looked good. And the thought of giving her a more detailed compliment than that made me blush.

I was pretty sure that despite telling me it was okay to act like a teenager, Mom and Dad wouldn't approve of this. They had always been clear that they thought physical intimacy should go hand in hand with emotional intimacy. If I didn't feel comfortable talking about doing something with someone, then I shouldn't do it.

"Lois?" I asked without thought. "Do you think there's something wrong with our relationship?" Did I really just ask that?

"What?" Lois asked, looking as stunned as I would have expected if I had bothered to think before I spoke. Of course, in this case had I done that, I never would have spoken at all.

I took a deep breath. The best way out of this was probably honesty. Anything else was likely to sound like I wasn't really interested in her.

"It's just... well, I feel like we're still sort of unsure around each other," I started.

"Well yeah, but our relationship just started," Lois pointed out.

"And yet... sometimes when we're together it's like we... well, we act like a much more serious couple than people who blush around each other so much."

Just saying those words made me blush, and when I looked up, I could see that Lois was blushing, too.

"I guess," she mumbled.

"It's like we're almost more serious subconsciously than we are consciously," I said.

"Yeah," Lois said, looking at her watch. "I have to go," she said. "I have an evening class."

I glanced at my watch. I was sure she was being honest, but I thought she still had another half hour before it started. Had I just really screwed things up?

"Okay," I said. "By the way, I reserved a practice room with a piano in it for tomorrow afternoon. Are you still willing to play for me?" I hoped that changing the subject would be a good thing, but Lois still looked pale and eager to get away.

"Yeah, that's fine," she said. "What time?"

"Two o'clock," I told her. "Should I meet you at your dorm?"

"Sounds good. I really have to go, Clark," she said, gathering her stuff.

"Okay. See you tomorrow," I said as she got up and nearly ran out of the cafeteria. Yup, I had totally screwed things up.

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I took a seat outside of Lois' room at a quarter to two. Lois was nowhere to be found, and while I could hear Star down the hall, I didn't feel like bothering her. I could just as easily wait for Lois in the hallway anyway.

At ten after two, I started to wonder if Lois was going to stand me up. I hadn't expected that of her. Even though I definitely got the impression I had made a mistake yesterday, and maybe even destroyed the easy camaraderie that enabled us to have a relationship, I hadn't considered the idea that she would just not show up. Just how long was I willing to hang around here waiting for her anyway? I wasn't sure.

Finally at a quarter after two, I heard Lois' heartbeat near the front door of her dorm. There didn't seem to be any reason to wait for her near her room, so I got up to meet

her.

"Hi," I called when I could see her down the hall. I decided it was only fair to let her know she was about to bump into me since I knew she was coming.

"Hi," she replied so softly I wouldn't have been able to hear her without my hearing. So, I decided to wait to reply.

"Did I screw things up yesterday?" I asked her when she got closer to me. I couldn't believe I had the nerve to ask the question. What was wrong with me?

Lois flushed and stared resolutely at the floor. "No," she said. "You didn't say anything I hadn't already thought. It was just... I guess I hadn't expected you to say anything about it."

I looked around, taking in the students milling around the hallway and decided that maybe the dorm hallway was not the right place for this conversation. "Can we go someplace and talk?" I asked her.

Lois nodded. "Is the recital room still available?" she asked.

"Yeah. I got it for an hour," I told her.

We walked towards the music building in silence, and I could feel the unease between us. I never should have said anything. We found the room that was assigned to us relatively easily, and Lois took a seat on the piano bench. I sat on the one other chair in the room, a somewhat cushy guest type chair.

Neither of us said anything for a minute or two, and then Lois turned around and started playing scales on the piano. She played for a couple of minutes before stopping, taking a deep breath, and beginning to play for real. It only took a few moments before I recognized the song she was playing as Tchaikovsky's The Sleeping Beauty Waltz, and I sat back to enjoy the music.

In some ways, if I had been able to imagine Lois as a piano player, I would have done so correctly. Not one to do anything half way, I would have imagined her being very skilled, and she was. Still, I don't think I would have given her enough credit. Maybe it was just as it was so counter to my image of her, but I would have imagined her as skilled but somewhat cold.

She was anything but. Lois seemed lost in the music. She was quiet, contemplative, and passionate as she played. She was nearly as fascinating to watch as to listen to, and I found my eyes glued to her throughout the nearly five minutes of the song.

"Wow!" I said softly when she finished. "You were amazing."

"Thanks," she nearly whispered, her fingers still hovering over the keys, the last notes of the song still lingering in the air.

We settled into silence once again. I wasn't even sure - did I want to continue our conversation and clear the air or hear her play some more?

"I'm sorry I freaked out yesterday," she said softly, her fingers starting to play again, but softly this time, and a tune I didn't recognize. "You didn't say anything I hadn't thought before, but... I guess I wasn't ready to think about it."

"Me, too," I admitted. "I'm not sure what made me say anything. I hadn't intended to."

Lois didn't reply, but the forlorn sound of the piece she was playing filled the room. "I... I've never felt this way about someone," she finally whispered, barely audible over the music.

"Me neither," I replied. It was true. I didn't think I was in love with her, and yet if I was honest with myself, my

feelings for her were so different from what I had felt for Maddie that it was weird to compare in that way. "When we're together, I don't think at all," I said. "I've never done that before."

"It scares me a little," Lois admitted. "I'm afraid I'm going to get hurt. I don't deal well with secrets, Clark," she said, looking up at me. "Whatever came between you and Maddie... I worry it will come between us too if you don't trust me with it."

"I'd never knowingly hurt you," I said. It was a half hearted reply, I knew. But I couldn't promise not to keep it from her. I knew I would. Still, some part of me wondered - could I tell her the truth? I almost wanted to. I had the feeling that if anyone could accept me as I was, it was Lois.

I wasn't ready yet, though.

"I know," she whispered. "But that doesn't mean you won't."

I didn't reply and we let the sound of the music fill the room once more.

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I could feel the heat on my skin as I rose up once again. I knew what I was doing was risky, but for some reason it didn't feel that way. It felt right. Like I was doing what I was meant to be doing.

"Thank you," the woman said as I sat her on the ground.

"You're welcome," I said. My voice was different than normal - stronger, less unsure. More formal, too.

I felt myself give the woman a smile before I rose up into the air again. That, too, felt different. I felt more graceful than normal. The way I felt when I flew over the cornfields back home. Nothing like the stilted jerky movements I made over Metropolis, always looking down, making sure no one was watching, I moved as if it didn't matter that this woman was in plain sight.

I saw the lava rushing down the street. I could hear the sounds of the volcano going off although it was miles away, and over that the sounds of the heartbeats, racing, as people moved frantically, trying to outrun the molten earth coming towards them.

"Over here. Please help!" a young man cried, looking right up at me.

I swooped down and picked him up in one arm, his neighbor in the other, bringing them both to rest beside the woman I had saved moments before.

"Thank you," they said. I smiled at them both before flying back to where the people were still in danger.

I sat up straight in bed, looking around me in surprise. I could hear Steve snoring a few feet away. That dream had felt so real. I looked at my clothes closely in the darkness. I hadn't just been at the scene of an erupting volcano, had I?

I hadn't. I breathed a sigh of relief. Dad would have killed me if I had been using my abilities out in the open like that.

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I woke up hours later feeling disoriented. How long had I been asleep since I came back from the volcano? What was it that woke me anyway?

The shrill ringing of the phone cut into my thoughts, and I realized that was what had woken me up. As I leaned over to grab it I realized Steve was already gone for the day. I guess I had slept in a bit after the rescue last night. It was only just before I brought the phone up to my mouth that I remembered that the volcano rescue had been a dream.

"Hi," I said quietly, still feeling a bit discombobulated.

"Hi," Lois' voice came over the line. "Are you free for lunch?"

"I think so, why?" I answered while trying to remember what day it was. Why did I feel so confused? I shook my head. It was just that dream. It had felt so real, even now, hours later.

"I got a call from Professor Matthews. We're supposed to meet today at noon to get the results of the hearing. Can we get together after that?"

"Sure," I said. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No," Lois said. "You have class. I'll see you afterwards."

"Okay," I told her. "I'm sure the news is good," I reassured her.

"I'm not even sure what good is," she confided. "I want them to believe us, but I'm not sure I want this to destroy Paul's life."

"It won't," I assured her. "I'm guessing they'll throw him off the paper, but he can probably still put his work as editor on a resume. Who's going to check to see why he stopped? He can just say he was too busy to finish off his senior year."

"Yeah," Lois replied, not sounding completely convinced. "I'll see you later?"

"Good luck," I told her as I hung up. Glancing at the clock, I realized it was only nine o'clock. I still had an hour and a half left before my class started. I swung my legs out of bed, deciding that a shower was in order.

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I wasn't sure where the news came from - I normally turned off my hearing thing when I was in class, but this one seemed to pass right through the "off switch". Maybe it was because I was distracted with thoughts of the disciplinary hearing. Maybe it was because it was a volcanic eruption like my dream, but something made me hear it.

The eruption was in Japan and near a town called Shari. I'd never heard of Shari before, but clearly the fact that the volcano was near a town meant there were people in danger.

I considered ignoring it - I was supposed to meet Lois in two hours, and I'd need to run out of class. I remembered my promise to my parents that I wouldn't let the Boy in Black stuff distract me from class. Still, there had to be a reason this natural disaster made it past my normal filter.

Hoping Mom and Dad would forgive me, and Lois, too, if I didn't get back before I was supposed to meet her for lunch, I packed up my bag and slipped out the back of the lecture hall. Running at a speed that was just slow enough not to attract attention, I went back to my room to drop off my stuff and spin into my black clothes.

I was off of campus and in the sky above Metropolis inside of ten minutes. It took me another ten minutes to locate Shari. I really needed to improve my geography skills. I had flown straight to Tokyo thinking I'd see the smoke from the volcano and that would guide me, but as I got closer and closer to Tokyo, I started to panic. I didn't see smoke anywhere. I rose up higher over Japan and finally spotted it. It turns out Shari is not even on the same island as Tokyo and is thus quite a bit north. I hadn't even realized that Japan was made up of more than one island.

I promised myself I would buy an atlas and study it in the next week as I swooped down. People were panicking. I had heard earlier that Mount Io hadn't erupted since 1936. It



wasn't clear whether it was now thought to be dormant or if people had just started to feel safe due to the many years without activity. Not that I'd have any way of finding out. Japanese was not among the languages I had grasped to any real degree. I could say thank you and goodbye, but that was about it.

Swooping down, I landed a few miles away from the people. What was it I was going to do? I think I had come here with images from my dream in my head, but clearly that wasn't what I was planning on. Was it? No! I wasn't going to let everyone know there was a person out there who could fly.

So what was I going to do? These people weren't going to be packing up their things. They didn't have time for that. So what could I do? Nothing. I was completely useless. I should just go back home. Only I couldn't. I needed to do something.

With a sigh, I ran into town and followed one of the emergency vehicles. I'd go to wherever they were taking the residents, and see what I could do. Could I do anything without knowing Japanese? This whole trip may have been a colossal waste of time.

I arrived at the tent where they were dropping people off and went inside. "Excuse me," I said to the first person I saw.

"Nihongo o hanashimasu ka?" the person said, or asked. I wasn't sure which.

"Um... Do you speak English?" I asked her.

"Aiko-san Eigo hanashimasu," the woman said, pointing at another woman a few feet away.

Not having any idea what she said, I went over to the woman. "Excuse me," I said again.

"Hello," the woman replied.

"Do you speak English?" I asked her.

"Yes. Can I help you?" she asked.

"I was actually hoping I could help you," I told her.

"My name is Clark. I heard about the volcano, and hoped I could do something to help."

"Hello," she smiled at me. "My name is Minako Aiko. Give me a second and I'm sure we can find something for you to do."

I smiled at her. "Thank you, Minako." I caught sight of a man a few feet away giving me a dirty look. "Did I do something wrong?" I asked Minako.

She smiled at me warmly. "No," she said, glancing at the man I had seen. "It's just... well, in Japanese culture we don't use our given names often. Most people call me Aiko-san."

I nodded. "I'm sorry, Aiko-san."

"You didn't know," she smiled at me. "When did you arrive in Japan?"

"Today," I told her, trying to find a way to end the conversation quickly. I wanted to avoid lying if at all possible. "Well, I'll go stand over there, out of your way. Just let me know what I can do."

"Just give me a minute," she told me.

I wondered if I could get a book on different cultural norms to study as well as an atlas. I should probably know things like the fact that the Japanese don't use first names. And the "san" thing. Was it always added to the end of their last names? Was it just for women? I had no idea.

A moment later, Aiko-san motioned to me.

I walked over to her. "We need help handing out food. That won't require you to know any Japanese. I'm pairing you with Yakasu-san. He knows a little English, so should

be able to help you."

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It was eight o'clock by the time I got back onto campus. I wasn't sure how I felt. I wished I had done more - there were nearly one hundred deaths due to people who hadn't managed to get out of their homes in time. I could have saved those people if I had been willing to use my abilities openly. As it was, I was glad I had stayed, but still felt like my help had been paltry compared to what I could have done.

Then, of course, there was Lois. I had stood her up for lunch. Not only was this right after she found out about the disciplinary hearing, but we had just had that discussion two days ago about my keeping secrets from her.

I sighed. I should probably just resign myself to the fact that my relationship with Lois was over. There was no way she had forgotten that we were supposed to meet for lunch. And there was also no way she wasn't going to ask where I had been.

I headed over to Lois' dorm room with a heavy heart. I felt like I should prepare for this conversation, but I couldn't even begin to imagine what she would say. I was too consumed with how badly this had all gone.

I wondered - had it been worth it? Given how little help I had provided in the end, had it been worth the end of my relationship with Lois? I wasn't sure.

"Don't you watch where you're..." I bumped into someone, and she started yelling at me. Her yelling came to an abrupt halt however, when she looked up and took in my face. "Well, there you are."

"Hi," I said shyly not sure what to say.

"So," Lois glanced at her watch. "You're only seven hours late."

"I'm sorry," I said meekly.

"Care to tell me where you were?" Lois asked, and there was no mistaking the challenge in her voice.

"I... um...", I couldn't think of any sort of answer. A complete lie, a half truth, anything would work right now, but I was coming up completely dry.

"I had dinner with Maddie," Lois said, avoiding my eyes. "It took some prying, but she told me what the problem you guys had was specifically. And I won't put up with it, Clark. I don't know why you wouldn't tell Madde, but you need to tell me now where you were, and why you thought it was more important to be there than at lunch with me." By the time she had finished, she had stopped avoiding my eyes and had her hands firmly on her hips.

"I... I can't," I mumbled.

"You can't?" Lois challenged. "What? Do you not know the words to explain it? You're a journalist, Clark. You plan to make your livelihood with words. Use them now!" It was a command more than a statement.

"I told you awhile back that the thing I wouldn't tell Maddie was a family secret," I started.

"I don't care," Lois cut me off. "I don't care if it's a secret you're keeping for President Reagan. It made you miss lunch with me. And not just lunch, Clark. Lunch right after I found out about the disciplinary hearing. I deserve to know what was so important that you felt it was appropriate to blow me off, and not even call to tell me you wouldn't be there."

"How did the meeting with Professor Matthews go?" I asked, hoping it was good news and that would distract her.

"Great. Paul was kicked off the paper, and he was told he could mention his time on the paper as experience in job

interviews, but not his time as editor. And not to list anyone at the university as a reference or they would tell anyone who called about his behavior.

"But I don't care about that right now. What I care about is where you were. We just talked about how scared I was that you were going to hurt me with your secret. Did that mean nothing to you?"

"No!" I insisted. "It was... You are very important to me."

"Not as important as whatever it was you were doing all afternoon," Lois pointed out.

"If I could explain it to you, you'd understand," I said, knowing it was true, but that it was completely the wrong thing to say.

"Well, explain it to me then," she said.

"I can't," I told her, hating the look in her eyes. They were flashing with anger, but I could see the hurt behind that; could see the tears shimmering on the surface.

"Well then... I can't do this," Lois said quietly. "I can't date you anymore."

"Please, Lois," I said. "Please..."

"Please what?" she asked. "Give you another chance to disappear and blow me off? Give you another chance to break my heart?"

"I..." I trailed off, having no idea of what to say.

"That's what I thought," Lois said. "Well, the answer is no. I'm not putting up with this. If you want to tell me where you were, please do so now. Otherwise, I have no interest in talking to you about it anymore."

"I can't," I said again.

Lois nodded her head at me, ducking it as a tear fell down her cheek. "Okay, then. Good to know. Goodbye, Clark."

"No," I said, not sure what I was trying to say. I didn't want her to write me off like this.

"Are you going to tell me where you were?" Lois asked.

"I told you..."

"You can't," she interrupted me. "I get it. And I told you that means I can't keep dating you." She looked up at me, her eyes still flashing as tears fell down her cheeks. When I didn't say anything, she spun around and walked away.

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"I'm sure you can all guess why Professor Matthews is here," Professor Halkuff said at the start of class the following week. "And for those of you who haven't met him, this is Mr. White, the editor of the Daily Planet, and the man who will ultimately decide which of you gets the Daily Planet internship."

The room got almost eerily silent. Professor Halkuff always seemed to command respect, and yet I was pretty sure the room had never been this silent before.

"Now, before we announce the two students who will get recommendations this year, we have a couple of things to discuss," Professor Halkuff said. "Getting one of these recommendations means we see strong talent in your writing. So, if you were not planning to apply for the internship, but are given a recommendation, we urge you to reconsider applying."

"But if you still decide not to apply," Professor Matthews cut in, "please let us know. We have chosen the two students who we feel show the most potential right now, but there are several strong writers in this class and more than two of you would do well at the Daily Planet this summer, so we would like to give other strong students the right to a recommendation."

I looked over at Lois, but she was firmly ignoring me.

"And I urge you to apply even if you don't get a recommendation," Mr. White said. "While I value the opinions of Professor Matthews and Professor Halkuff, occasionally I receive an application that is superior to one of the two students who were given a recommendation."

"Additionally, this is just your freshman year. I expect many of you will apply for internships next year as well, and I tend to remember the strong applicants from this year."

"That said," Professor Halkuff announced, "the students who will be receiving recommendations this year are Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

"Congratulations, Lois and Clark," Professor Matthews said looking in our general direction.

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I was surprised by how supportive our classmates were. Many of them came over to congratulate us right after class.

"I knew you two would be the ones to get it," Cat said to me with a smile. "But I figure I'm going to apply next year, too, so I might as well get some exposure with Mr. White now."

"Who knows?" I told her. "Maybe you'll get it this year."

Cat laughed. "I'm pretty sure you and Lois have it all sewn up. I saw your article in the Planet and Lois' in the Titan. I'm pretty good at writing up gossip, but I'm not really an investigative journalist, and you can tell when you compare my writing to yours. But next year there are other internships available."

"Well, you never know, Cat," Lois said as she passed by. "You'll probably beat out Clark. He doesn't even have an idea for his article yet." She shot me a dirty look as she walked out of the room.

"So, I'm guessing the budding romance has died?" Cat smiled at me.

I was still looking after Lois, but shrugged. "I don't imagine it's much of a secret, is it?"

"When she looks at you like that?" Cat asked. "No. I'd say you guys would be more subtle if you took out an ad in the Planet. Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I guess. It wasn't a complete surprise."

"Well then," Cat took a step closer to me. "Do you want to go to dinner?"

I had still been looking towards the door Lois had just exited, but my head spun around at that. "Um... dinner?"

"Yeah," Cat smiled. "You know. The meal between lunch and breakfast. I mean if you and Lois are over..."

"We are," I said quietly, thinking. Cat was right, there was no reason I couldn't go out with her. But I wasn't ready yet. "I don't think..."

"It's okay," Cat smiled at me, placing a warm hand on my arm. "I get it. It's too soon. Let me know when it's not."

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Clearly what I should have been doing was trying to think about my topic for the Planet application. I wasn't, however. Instead, I was thinking about Cat. Or more accurately, my reaction to Cat's offer.

It was too soon. And that was fine. I mean, Lois and I had just broken up a week ago. But what if it never felt like it wasn't too soon? I know I felt like that after I broke up with Maddie, too, but it was different this time. It felt different.

I wasn't sure exactly how it felt different, just that it did. It felt like... Like maybe Lois was the person I was meant to

be with.

That was ridiculous, though, right? I mean, who meets the person they are supposed to be with when they're eighteen years old. And as much as I loved Maddie, I never really thought she was "the one". So how could Lois be when I had never been in love with her?

Only... well, Mom and Dad had met when *they* were eighteen. But Lois and I hadn't even dated very long. Even if for no other reason, I hadn't had time to fall in love with her. Right?

Right?

Right. I was not in love with Lois.

Was I?

No. Clearly not.

But what if I was?

I shook my head. It didn't matter if I was or not. I still wasn't planning to tell her that I had been in Japan, and if I wasn't going to tell her where I had been, she wanted no part of me. Not that I could blame her.

So, clearly I hadn't been in love with her. If she was in love with me, she would be willing to give me another chance, right? And I wasn't willing to be in love with her if she wasn't in love with me. It could work that way, couldn't it?

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I had been avoiding my friends for the past week. I thought it would just be too awkward. Plus, I could hear the barbs now from Alicia about how she knew I was trying to make the rounds, but she was already taken. But I needed to move on. Lois' looks at me during class made it clear she was still more than a little annoyed at me, but I was hoping she could be civil enough for me to join them all for dinner again.

Luckily, when I arrived, only Josh and Steve were there.

"Hey man, how come you didn't mention you and Lois were splitsville?" Steve asked me.

I rolled my eyes, and saw Josh stifle a laugh. "You have all the emotion of a postage stamp," he said to Steve.

"What? They broke up. Who cares?" Steve asked, looking confused.

"Maybe Clark," Josh reminded him.

"You don't, though, do you?" Steve asked.

I put my tray down across from Steve, not sure what to say. I *did* care, although I suspected if I said I did and Lois heard me, she'd point out that it would be easy enough for me to fix things. Besides, it wasn't cool to care, right?

"Aw man," Steve said, clearly deciding my long silence meant I was upset, "she's just a girl. I can set you up with another one any time you want."

Even in my depressed state, I laughed at that. "You realize girls aren't like pens, right? You don't get a new one when one runs out. They aren't interchangeable like that."

Steve shrugged. "They can be if you let them."

I laughed again. "Thanks for the offer, Steve, but I'm not ready to meet someone else yet."

"Your loss," he shrugged.

Alicia and Chris sat down right as Steve said this.

"Whose loss for what?" Alicia asked.

Josh grinned at her. "Clark said he didn't want Steve to set him up with someone else. He doesn't think Lois can be replaced with any random girl."

Alicia burst out laughing. "Steve, you crack me up."

Steve just gave her a look. I'm sure he was half-confused by her reaction.

"What happened with you and Lois anyway?" she asked

me. I was in shock. Both as she didn't know - Lois struck me as the kind of girl who would let everyone know how mean you'd been to her when she was angry - and she was clearly still angry. Also, though, as I just assumed Alicia would take Lois' side even if she didn't know what had happened.

Of course, this left me with another problem - how to explain the issue to everyone else at the table. "I sort of screwed up. I missed lunch with her after she heard the results of the disciplinary hearing."

"That's it?" Alicia asked. "Didn't you apologize?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but it was a big deal, and I didn't have a good excuse. I was just caught up in doing other things," I said, feeling myself flush as I lied. "It was a big deal for Lois. I knew that, but I just forgot."

Alicia nodded. "I see that. I guess I just wouldn't realize it was worth breaking up over. I thought you and Lois would go the distance."

I did a double take. She thought we would...? But she had been so upset when she learned we were dating. Why would she...? "I don't get it," I finally said. "I thought you were angry with me for dating Lois after breaking up with Maddie."

"I was," she said. "But honestly not because I thought you and Maddie were going to get married some day or anything. Mostly just 'cause... well, it seemed like maybe you got over Maddie sort of quickly, and she's a really great girl even if she isn't your soul mate. I thought you cared about her more than that."

"I did," I insisted. "I was in love with her. But sometimes..."

"Love isn't enough," Josh interjected. "Like with Lois?"

"Surely you weren't in love with Lois," Steve said. "I mean, come on. You don't fall in love with every girl you date, right? Please tell me you're not a girl."

"Hey!" Alicia said. "What's wrong with only dating people that you are compatible with? I think both Maddie and Lois fit well with Clark, and so there's no reason he couldn't fall in love with both of them."

"It's just... so lame," Steve said, his voice whiny.

"What's lame?" Maddie asked as she joined us.

"To fall in love with everyone you date," Josh said. "Or at least Steve says so."

"I think it would be lame for Steve to fall in love with everyone he dates," Maddie said. "You can't fall in love in the course of one night."

We all laughed as Lois approached the table. She stopped for a second when she saw me, but then raised her chin and, resolutely ignoring me, took a seat at the other end of the table.

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"Do you have a minute?" Maddie asked from the doorway.

"Sure," I said, motioning to my bed from my place at my desk.

She looked around uneasily for a second before asking, "What are you working on?"

"Setting up a talk on drug use at Westside Elementary."

"You got that set up?" she smiled at me.

"Sort of. Officer Williams, the guy I had spoken to, called the vice principal there. Mr. Dwight wouldn't talk to him either, so he called the superintendent. He thought it was a great idea and asked if we could set something up for the other schools in District 469. We agreed to start with Westside, and if things go well, roll it out to the other

schools," I told her.

"That's great, Clark!"

"Thanks," I said. "But Westside is a problem. Mr. Dwight can't just ignore Mr. Standers, the superintendent, but instead is just claiming that every day I propose won't work for some reason or other."

"What's his problem?" Maddie asked. "Why would he care if you're doing all the work?"

"Cause then he has to admit there's a drug problem at his school?" I suggested. "I don't know. But I'm not worried. Eventually, I'll feel it's all right to contact Mr. Standers again. I don't want to go over Mr. Dwight's head, but I will if I have to."

Maddie smiled at me admiringly. "That's so... you," she finally settled on.

"What?" I asked, not having any idea what she meant.

"You're so... noble, I guess," she said. "Always trying to do the right thing."

"Thanks," I said softly, not sure what to say.

"Except," Maddie cut in, "when it comes to relationships." She paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. "I really don't want to get into all this with you again, Clark, but I care about you. I get the impression your relationship with Lois ended for much the same reason ours did."

I didn't say anything, just blushed. What was there to say?

"I just want... I guess I want you to be happy, and I feel like that's never going to happen if you don't stop making the same mistakes over and over again. I get that you didn't care enough about me to tell me whatever your big secret is. And I'll even believe that you didn't care enough about Lois either. But at some point, Clark, you're going to need to decide to come clean with someone."

"Just promise me that you will," she said quietly.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

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"I think I'm going to call Dan tomorrow to see about helping out at the Post this summer," I told Mom and Dad as I listlessly moved a slice of Lowell County's best peach pie around my plate.

"Clark, you can't count yourself out of the Planet internship yet," Dad said. "Who knows what might happen?"

I gave him an incredulous look. "Lois is writing an article on the football players cheating. You know what my article is about?"

"You never mentioned," Mom pointed out.

"That's 'cause I don't have one," I told her.

"What do you mean?" Dad asked.

"I mean the application is three days away, and I have yet to think of any topic worth writing about. Or even not worth writing about for that matter."

"Maybe something will come to you before then," Dad, ever the optimist, said.

"It's an investigative journalism internship, Dad. I don't just need a topic. I need a topic that warrants an investigation, and I need to conduct that investigation. How am I going to come up with a topic, investigate it, and write it up all in three days? Or two and a half now. And even if I did somehow manage to do that, what are the chances it would even compare to Lois' article, which she's been working on for a month and a half?" I asked.

Finally seeing the gravity of the situation, Mom and Dad didn't reply. Then after a long moment of silence, Dad

said, "You got that recommendation for a reason, son. You deserve this. Don't give up yet."

"When can I give up?" I asked him. "On the day the application is due when I send it in without a story? Or the day after? Or do I need to wait until Perry White announces that Lois Lane is this year's freshman intern?"

"You'll have a story before the application is due," Mom insisted. "We're sure you'll think of something."

I started to protest when suddenly I did have an idea.

"Maybe I do have a story idea," I said slowly as I ran it through my mind. Did I have enough information now to call it investigative journalism? I thought I might. "It just might work," I said, still considering. In many ways it was a bad idea. I knew it was a bad idea, and I knew Mom and Dad would never go for it.

But what was my other option? I didn't have any idea what to write about. I knew of no scandals on campus, in Metropolis, or anywhere else for that matter that were worth investigating. This, though, I knew about. I knew a lot about it. Enough that very little actual investigating would need to be done. And what was needed, I could do easily with the help of my ability to self-propel myself in air.

"What is it?" Dad asked with a smile on his face. He was proud of me for thinking of a story idea - that was clear. He'd be prouder of me still if it worked and I got the internship. Still, despite that, he'd be horrified if he knew what the story idea I was considering was. I had no intention of telling them though. I'd write it up and submit it and then tell them.

And then maybe they could help me figure out how to move forward after I'd not only out-ed myself, but done so to the editor-in-chief of the most influential paper in the world.

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I locked myself in my dorm room when I got back to campus. Against my better judgment, I skipped classes for the next two days, too. I needed to find a way to make up the time I had missed in not only crafting a story, but honing it until it shined. I was sure Lois had finished investigating her story weeks ago, and had probably finished the rough draft last week if not the week before. Since then, she'd just been editing, and editing, and editing some more. I had a lot of time to recoup.

It just made sense, though. If I was going to risk everything for this story by writing about the Boy in Black, why wouldn't I risk lowering my grades slightly in a few classes to make sure I at least got the internship? I was sure Mom and Dad would agree. Well, after they finished tearing me limb from limb for doing this.

Finally, no more than two hours before the five o'clock deadline for the application, I had an article that I was proud of. I had prowled through the microfiche section of the library looking for every mention of me I could find. To be fair, this was made much easier by the fact that I knew what rescues I'd appeared at and even where I had done something noteworthy - be it something that was just out of the range of normal human behavior or, more often, by being the only American volunteer aside from the Red Cross. Then I had visited some of the people I had helped who wouldn't know me.

I had started with my first rescue after I started at Met U - the French teenage girl. She had never seen me - her friends and teachers had, but she had been unconscious the entire time. I visited her, telling her I was a student writing

a story on gunshot victims and asked what she recalled of the day she was shot. Eventually, she came to tell me about the boy her friend mentioned - the strange American who had watched over her until emergency services arrived. She remembered almost nothing her friend had said except that he was dressed all in black.

I talked to all the people in Metropolis who thought they were helped by an angel that day I had been in Suicide Slum with Lois. And then used the reports from all these people and to suggest there was a link. I didn't go so far as to say I thought the boy in black had supernatural abilities. I just said he had been to all of these places. I couldn't recall what she said the official name for it was, but my article was what Professor Halkuff called a leader piece. If this was a real Planet article, this would just be the first article, but it would stir up interest and other articles would follow.

Professor Halkuff said that was how real investigative journalism worked. If they only wrote up finished investigations, they wouldn't have enough to print. This way major investigations had several articles. I was guessing that if anyone ever did write about me, I'd be big enough news to warrant multiple articles.

I wasn't sure how Mr. White would feel about a leader article for the application, but was hoping that his claim that he was looking for someone with a nose for news was honest. If it was, I thought I actually stood a good chance of getting the internship.

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There were two weeks after the deadline before the winner was announced. I spent almost the entirety of that time feeling nauseous. Would I get it? What would happen if I did? How would Lois feel? Did I care?

Well, yes, I did care. Not that her reaction was hard to predict. She'd be hurt - she was probably the only other person at Met U that wanted that internship as badly as I did. She'd probably be surprised as well - last time we talked I didn't even have a topic. While I'm sure she suspected I had found one before the deadline, she had to have assumed it wouldn't be as well written as hers as I wouldn't have had time to investigate it properly. Or if I did, it would have to be a lame topic that required little investigation.

Yeah, it was nearly a sure bet that Lois secretly thought she had this internship in the bag. Even given my stronger performance last semester, her application by all rights should be so much better that given its importance, I wouldn't stand a chance.

Without cheating anyway.

Had I? Maybe. Was it cheating to write about myself? I wasn't sure. I mean, I guess it sort of was, but maybe not. No one ever said that Peter Parker was cheating when he took pictures of himself as Spiderman. He was just hiding his secret identity.

For a moment, my mind wandered as I thought about my life if I could be like Peter Parker. Shy, mild-mannered student by day, superhero by night. He had it all. Well sort of. I couldn't remember if he actually had Mary Jane Watson. I wasn't really a Spiderman fan. If he did, though, did that mean I could have Lois Lane?

\*Lois Lane? That's who I saw as my Mary Jane? Really? I mean, I cared for Lois a lot, but Mary Jane? She was supposed to be the love of Peter Parker's life. Lois was not the love of mine. If she was, I would have told her the truth.

Although... Peter Parker never told Mary Jane about

Spiderman. At least, I didn't think he had.

I laughed. I needed to stop thinking like that. Spiderman was a comic book. My life was real. Besides, even if he had told Mary Jane, he had a scientific explanation of why he was what he was. Plus he knew he was human. That had to go a long way towards acceptance. It was a lot easier to love a human who had been bitten by a spider than someone who had probably never been human at all - whether that person was scientifically engineered to be different and so was sort of like an advanced robot or was the discarded child of aliens.

Right - my situation was nothing like Peter Parker's. Even aside from the fact that it wasn't fiction.

I got up to get my books. I'd been lackluster about classes since I had handed in my Planet application, but I did try to go. My parents were paying for me to be here after all.

I was nearly at the room for my investigative journalism class before I remembered about Lois - how I had considered Lois the love of my life, even though it was just for a moment. It was just a slip, though, right? Just as she was my most recent girlfriend.

I caught her eye as I sat down before she looked away, pretending she hadn't seen me. Right, that was all it was.

Well, that and the fact that I was in love with her.

I was in love with Lois Lane. In a way I never had been in love before. Seeing Lois was like the rush I used to feel when I saw Lana, and the comfort I felt when I saw Maddie. She was perfect for me.

And I had let her slip away by not telling her the truth.

And if I had done what I set out to do, I had also taken her dream internship away from her.

I should fix things if I really felt that way. But for what purpose? It wasn't like she would ever want me.

I was nearly out of my chair, ready to go talk to her. Not that I had any idea what to say. But before I could, Professor Halkuff came into the room. And she wasn't alone. Perry White was with her. This was it. We were going to find out who got the internship now.

I took a seat. It was okay. I'd talk to Lois after class. It would be easier, even. I could congratulate her on getting the internship - I mean, I thought I had done an admirable job given how late I had been in getting an idea, but I didn't really think I stood that much of a chance. I mean really, what was the chance that Mr. White wouldn't think my article was just stupid? So, I'd congratulate her and apologize for my bad behavior. She'd react coldly, letting me know she was still angry, but I'd persist, follow her out of the room and invite her out for a brownie at Anjelina's. She'd start to say no, but then reconsider - it was a brownie from Anjelina's. She'd give in, letting me know if it was only for the brownie. And then...

Well, and then, somehow in Anjelina's I would tell her a little bit about myself. Not a lot, especially in some place so public, but enough that maybe I'd know how she felt. If she was completely repulsed by me or not. And if not... who knew? Maybe I'd tell her the rest tonight even.

I couldn't believe I was even thinking about this - telling Lois my secret that is. And more than that, that I thought there was any chance she could accept me once she knew.

Wow, my mind really was in fiction-land today, between dreaming of being a superhero with a secret identity like Spiderman, and now thinking that Lois would love me even if she knew what a freak I was.

I shook my head. Professor Halkuff had been speaking,

and I hadn't been listening.

"So with that, I'm going to hand it over to Mr. White," she said. The class gave a smattering of polite applause for Perry White, but it was clear everyone was too nervous to be excited about his being in our classroom.

"Other papers, particularly important papers like the New York Times and Washington Post, don't give internships to college freshman," Mr. White opened with. "They don't feel that seventeen and eighteen year olds with only a year of training behind them have what it takes to even start contributing to a newsroom in any real way.

"Every year at this time, I'm amazed by how wrong they are. Maybe I'm just lucky to be the editor of a paper so close to Metropolis University, but I always get more than one submission from someone who shows true talent, and I just know will be a great contributor to a major newspaper one day.

"This year was no exception, and although the freshman internship can only go to one student, I urge all of you to apply for internships next year. I expect to see more than one of you in my newsroom next summer.

"Thomas Owens?" he asked, and a tall dark-skinned boy stood up in the back of the class, looking startled.

"The internship didn't go to Lois or Clark?" someone called out.

Mr. White didn't reply. "Mr. Owens, your article on the recent rise of pickpockets on the subway was well researched and well written. Your observations were right on. I passed your article on to a friend at the Metropolis Police Department as I thought you might have pointed out some things that will be useful in catching the perpetrators.

"Catherine Grant?" he asked and Cat, who had arrived late and snuck into the seat next to me, stiffened. I nudged her with my arm. "Get up." I reminded her. "This is a good thing." Cat blushed, which was surprising to me, but she rose. "Your article on the antics and eventual dismissal of the Titan's editor was riveting. It was an entertaining read, in addition to being informative and newsworthy."

Cat thanked him so quietly I'm sure Mr. White didn't hear her before she sat down.

"Lastly, Lois Lane," he said, and I glanced at Lois to see her pale. I felt a bit pale as well. "Lastly, Lois Lane," he had said. So, Lois had gotten the internship. I wasn't surprised at that, but I hadn't even warranted a mention? I had thought I had pulled through in the end and written a decent article. Forget the nausea I'd been feeling for the past two weeks, I really thought I might throw up now. This was it. It was over. I hadn't gotten the internship, or even a mention. Despite my recommendation, and the article I had in the Planet last semester, Mr. White was so under-impressed with my showing for the application he hadn't even mentioned my name.

I should just give up now. That glacier living idea was getting more appealing by the second.

"Miss Lane," Mr. White cut into my thoughts, "you obviously came highly recommended. And I saw the articles you had written for Professor Matthews' and Professor Halkuff's classes, so I knew how well deserved that recommendation was. Still, despite this, I was very surprised by the raw talent shown in your submission.

"Your article on professor assisted cheating for the football players here at Metropolis University showcased crisp, entertaining writing, and the effort you went through to investigate the matter thoroughly was clear. It was a well researched story and one of the best submission articles I've

ever received."

"Thank you," Lois said quietly, blushing furiously.

"So what happened to Kent's article?" Alan Mandell asked. It was a bit surprising to me how many people knew me. I had spoken to Alan once the whole year. Without my extra powered memory, I don't think there was any chance I'd remember his name.

"I was getting to that," Mr. White said kindly, but something in his tone made it clear he did not like being interrupted. "Miss Lane's article was one of the best submission articles I've ever seen, but it was not the best.

"I'm sure Professor Halkuff mentioned to you that what I'm looking for mostly in these submissions is a nose for news. All of the articles I just mentioned reported on noteworthy stories. And there were several other submissions that also fit that criterion.

"But Mr. Kent's story stood out as one that was not an obvious news story. He saw what must have seemed to most people to be random human interest stories in other papers, and found a common link that suggested there was more to it than that. He then did extensive research with eye witnesses around the world to gather more evidence that the link existed."

"What was it? Was it real?" Lois asked, and now she sounded nauseous. Personally, I felt numb.

"I'm not sure it's real," Mr. White said. "Frankly, I doubt it. Mr. Kent's article was on an American boy who dresses in black and volunteers at natural disasters around the world. I'm not really sure there is any rational explanation for how he would travel from place to place like that unless he was causing the disasters. So my guess is that it is just a coincidence, at best an organized attempt to help by several American boys, most likely a coincidence.

"But the article was impressive despite this. As I read it, I found myself considering that maybe it *was* real. Mr. Kent's article was well written enough to be nearly credible even to me - and I'm a hard sell. And more importantly, he showed a talent for looking beyond the obvious for story ideas, for finding common links that the average reporter doesn't see."

"So, Clark has the internship," Lois said, looking like she couldn't decide if she wanted to cry, throw up, or pass out.

"Yes," Mr. White said simply. "Congratulations, Mr. Kent. I told you in the fall that you would need to show something more than you showed in the medical school article to get a spot on the paper this summer, and you rose to the challenge. I am proud to include you as part of the Planet team this summer."

"Thank you, sir," I said, my throat dry.

"Congratulations, Clark," Professor Halkuff said, as Mr. White walked out the door, and she made a somewhat half hearted attempt to finish out the hour with the typical classroom discussion. Everyone was too busy talking about the internship, though, and she gave up after a few minutes.

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"Way to go, Clark," Alan said as he passed me on his way out.

I nodded, still feeling a bit shell shocked.

"You did it," Cat smiled at me. "I'm proud of you."

"Hey." I reminded her, "Mr. White was impressed by you, too."

"Yeah, that was better than I expected. I didn't expect to even compare to you or Lois."

"The angels!" Lois exploded behind us, and we turned

around. "The ones Chris read about in the Star. You basically ripped off a Star article," she said, her eyes flashing at me.

"That's not fair," I said. I could feel myself working up to argue with her. Why was I doing that? I should be diffusing the argument so I could talk to her. Tell her the truth like I had planned before Mr. White walked in. Somehow, though, seeing her like this was making me want to argue with her, not explain myself to her.

"It's not?" She challenged me.

"No. The Star article just mentioned that a bunch of people thought they were helped by an angel one night. I connected it to the other sightings and suggested it was all one boy. I used the Star article as well as several others, but the link I wrote about didn't exist anywhere else."

Lois' narrowed her eyes at me. "I know you, Clark Kent. I'm not sure how, but I get the feeling you cheated on this. How did you interview all those people around the world anyway?"

"I called them," I said simply.

"What? There's a phone book for people who think they've been saved by an angel?" she asked, her tone more biting than it ever had been back when we first met.

"It's called investigating, Lois," Cat cut in. "I didn't realize you'd be this petty. Clark won the internship fair and square."

Lois gave her a look that made it clear she did not appreciate Cat's butting in to our argument, but then turned to me without a word to Cat. "This isn't over, Clark. I wanted that internship more than anything. I *would* happily step aside if I thought you won it fair and square, but I don't. I'm going to figure out how you did this, and expose you for the cheater that you are."

Just when I thought the nausea had subsided...

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I put off flying home to tell Mom and Dad the news as long as possible. I had managed to get out of telling them the topic of my article when I thought of it by claiming, honestly, that I desperately needed to get cracking on it and fly off to Metropolis.

Since then, I had kept conversations with them brief, and steered them as far away as possible from the Planet internship. I knew I'd need to come clean eventually, but I thought when I lost the internship anyway, maybe they'd feel too badly for me to ream me out appropriately. Or when I won, they'd be too happy to remember to be angry.

Fat chance. My parents were supportive, but they were still parents.

I landed in the cornfields with a copy of the article in hand. I thought it might help diffuse things slightly if they could see what I wrote, rather than guessing and assuming the worst. Still procrastinating, I took a jog through the fields. They were sparse this time of year, although Dad had seeded a few weeks ago now.

Finally, knowing I couldn't put it off forever, I made my way to the farmhouse. I could only hope they were only angry, and not disappointed in me. Not that I wouldn't deserve it if they were, but disappointment was so much harder to take.

"Clark!" Mom said warmly when I let myself in. It was just past dinner, and she was at the sink washing dishes. "We didn't expect you. To be honest, your dad and I thought you might be avoiding us recently."

I looked at the ground, ashamed of myself. "I was, sort of," I mumbled.

Mom shut off the water. "What?" she asked, giving me her full attention. "I couldn't hear you over the water."

"I said, 'I was', I told her.

"Clark Jerome Kent! What are you up to? You only mumble when you've done something wrong!" Her tone was sharp and very mom-ish.

"Clark, you're here," Dad said as he came in from the living room. "Your mother and I thought you were avoiding us."

"He was," Mom told him. "Or at least, I think that's what he said. It was hard to tell, though, as he was mumbling."

Okay, Mom was already pretty upset, and I hadn't even told them what I'd done yet.

"Mumbling, huh?" Dad said with a smile. It nearly broke my heart how my dad was under the impression I could do no wrong. I knew I was about to break that illusion into a thousand miniscule pieces in a few minutes. "What'd you do?"

"I got the internship at the Planet," I said, trying, unsuccessfully, not to mumble. Mom was right - I did mumble when I felt guilty about doing something wrong, and it seemed unconscious at times. I didn't want to mumble, but it was so hard to speak out and say what I was thinking when I knew I had screwed up so badly.

"That's wonderful, Clark," Dad said, coming over and giving me a hug. I noticed Mom held back. No surprise there. "I knew you'd think of something and pull through in the end. This is great news!"

Mom looked at me suspiciously for a moment, but then smiled. "It is good news, Clark. I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"So what's going on?" Mom asked. "What's wrong?"

"I thought I should maybe..." I paused while I tried to think of the right words to say. Maybe I should have practiced this little speech before I came out here. "I wanted..." I paused again, taking a deep breath before blurting out, "I needed to tell you what my article was about 'cause I wrote about the Boy in Black."

Neither of them said anything for a moment before Dad, looking at me quizzically, asked, "Did you say something about the Boy in Black?"

I nodded. "That was what..." I couldn't do it again. It was too hard to say the first time.

"That was what your article was about?" Mom asked. She sounded calm, but I could see the redness in her cheeks growing - a tell tale sign that she was not happy.

I nodded, thrusting the article forward until Dad took it. Mom moved to stand behind him and read over his shoulder. After a few moments of silence, the sponge she had still been holding from doing the dishes fell out of her hand and landed on Dad's foot. Neither of them seemed to notice.

When Mom finished the article, she looked up at me, her eyes covered with tears. Uh huh. Disappointment in its purest form.

"Why?" she asked me, and Dad who finished reading just seconds after Mom did, looked up at me confused.

"I just..." I floundered. I didn't really have a good excuse, did I? I had known that this was a bad idea - I had known when I first thought of it. Still, though, I had thought we'd find a way out of it. Looking at their faces now, though, I realized how much bigger this mistake was than I had originally been thinking. I wasn't sure I had ever screwed up this badly before.

"I just wanted the internship so much, and I didn't have a topic..." I started. Mom's eyes got wide, and I realized I was rambling. I wasn't a rambler generally, but I could have beaten Lois in a rambling contest with the speed of those words.

"I needed a topic idea," I finally finished lamely.

"But this one?" Mom asked. "This nearly exposes you, Clark. No normal human could be at all of these disasters, and yet you suggest it's one person. What explanation would there be aside from a boy who can fly?"

"Maybe no one will think of it," I suggested.

"Oh honey," Mom said, sitting down on a kitchen chair. Dad still hadn't said a word and was staring at Mom, clearly hoping she would be able to carry this conversation.

"Clark," she said, sighing, and holding her hand out to me. I took it, and sat beside her. Wordlessly, Dad took the seat on her other side. "No one will think of it, Clark," Mom said. "Who would consider that the boy you describe here could fly?"

"Up until writing this article, you've always been so good at hiding yourself. You've done nothing on any of these rescues that speak to who you really are. And if you've done nothing else that's 'super', or whatever you're calling it these days, no one is going to assume you can fly.

"And still, writing this article was a foolish thing to do. Because there is either no story here, or at least not a big one. I can't believe you got the internship based on this article unless Perry White does think the Boy in Black can fly."

"He doesn't," I rushed to reassure her. "He just... he said he was impressed with my ability to see a story in seemingly random, non-important articles. It showed I have a nose for news."

Mom gave me a look that let me know she wasn't happy with that. "So you beat out other people because Mr. White thinks you have a knack for seeing things that others can't? Isn't that a little unfair?"

"No," I started to say, but Mom gave me a stern look. "Well, maybe..."

"Maybe?" Dad finally spoke up. "Maybe the fact that you saw something other people didn't *wasn't* because those articles were about you?" he asked.

"Well, no," I admitted.

"Then you didn't win the internship fairly, Clark," Mom said. Her tone was compassionate, and yet I could still sense the disappointment in her eyes. "Other people, like Lois, for example, also wanted this internship badly. The only reason Lois lost was because she didn't cheat. She could have written an article that seemed better researched if she'd written about Paul, couldn't she have?"

I flushed as I realized how right she was. "So, I should tell Mr. White that I don't want the internship after all," I mumbled. Only this time my mumbling was as I was disappointed. I didn't want to give up the internship.

"No!" Dad said sharply. "I mean, by all rights, yes, that is precisely what you should do. What you deserve. But you can't."

"I can't?"

"No," Mom said. "Because if you do, you risk making Mr. White suspicious about why you would do that. And I don't think it's the best idea to have the most prominent man in print journalism having any suspicions about you at all. Especially when you handed him evidence to get him started on an investigation if he wanted to." Mom pointed at my article still sitting on the table.

"I don't think Mr. White would investigate me," I said. I just couldn't imagine that my turning down the internship would kick off a full scale investigation.

"Probably not," Dad said, "but is that a chance you're willing to take? Do you realize what would happen if he did and found out the truth?"

"I'd be dissected like a frog," I said. It was what Dad had been saying for years now.

"And your mother and I would never have any kind of normal life again," Dad pointed out. I flushed even deeper. I hadn't seriously considered that. It wasn't that I didn't know that this secret affected Mom and Dad as much as me, but when I made the decision to write the internship article on it, I just... I guess I just didn't think at all. I was completely selfish - I saw it as a way to win what I wanted without thinking at all about the consequences - about the fact that if it worked, I would have won unfairly, about the impact it could have on Mom and Dad. I had thought of no one but myself.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. "I know I've never screwed up this badly before."

"No, you haven't," Dad agreed. "Thank goodness."

"So, what do I do?" I asked them.

"Nothing," Mom said. "Sometimes you need to live with the consequences of your actions. In this case, the consequences are that you're made a mess you can't fix. You are going to have to live with the fact that you potentially, probably, stole the internship from Lois, because the consequences of fixing that are too great."

"But that could impact her entire life," I pointed out.

"You should have thought of that before you did this," Dad said. "Maybe what you should be doing now is thinking of a way to make it up to her."

"And before you think of it - giving her the full, unedited story of the Boy in Black to submit to Mr. White is not it!" Mom said.

I wanted to tell her that I knew that - I knew I couldn't write any more articles about myself. I had to admit though, I knew I deserved that. I'm sure up until a few minutes ago, my parents thought I knew enough not to write about myself at all.

"So, what do I do?" I asked. "How do I make it up to her?"

"I don't think that's a question that can be easily answered," Mom said. "It's going to take some thought. A lot of thought."

I nodded my head. I had potentially ruined Lois' life as I was selfish. How could I ever make that up to her?

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I flew back to campus slowly. I had known that was going to be a hard conversation to have, but I hadn't expected it to be... I don't know. I guess I still hadn't been thinking about anyone but myself. I had expected my parents to be disappointed in me, but I had thought I'd be able to blow it off. They didn't know how important this internship was to me.

That wasn't how it had turned out at all. It was like when I had that little daydream, I had forgotten who my parents were. Of course they knew how important the internship was to me. But they also expected more of me than what I'd been showing recently. And as much as I wanted to pretend this was a case of my parents not understanding, I had to admit, it wasn't. They expected more of me because I had recently been acting like an idiot - and a selfish idiot at that.



I hated the idea that they were right, though - that there wasn't anything I could do to make it better.

I suddenly flashed to a memory of Rachel's living room couch. It was last spring, during one of the many times Lana was off dating someone else. I had gone to Rachel's after school like always, but this time, only Chad and I were there. I can't recall where everyone else was, but I remember being relieved as there were no after school specials on that day. With just Chad and me, we wouldn't have stood a chance.

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"What do you want to watch?" Rachel asked as she turned the TV on.

"What? There's no deep and meaningful show on about some boy hanging out with the wrong kids at school and..." Chad started, smiling at me, before Rachel cut him off.

"No, but there's a Facts of Life marathon on!" Rachel said excitedly.

"Really? No after school special?" I asked. I would take an after school special over a sitcom about four teenage girls living at boarding school any day.

"No, but this is better," Rachel said, turning the television to the appropriate channel and sitting down on the couch between Chad and me.

I threw Chad a drowning man look and he grinned before Rachel caught us. "Oh stop it, you guys. It's not that bad!"

Chad rolled his eyes at me, but Rachel threw us each disgusted glares and we stopped.

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It had been a fairly decent show. To be fair, my interest was probably piqued slightly since the main storyline was about one of the characters taking a journalism class. Maybe Chad didn't like it quite as much.

She felt like the teacher was being unfair to her, and then she got a tip that he was at a party where there was drugs. Something like that anyway. Angry at him for always being hard on her, she wrote the story up for the school paper. The editor was one of her friends, so she had no trouble getting it into the school paper.

The teacher was fired because of it, even after everyone found out it was a mistake of some kind. She felt awful, and went to talk to him, offered to fight for him to get his job back. She was certain that once the school board found out it was a mistake, everything could go back to normal. Only it turned out the school board already knew, they just couldn't deal with the publicity of having a teacher potentially involved in drugs at their high class boarding school.

He gave her the same advice my parents gave me - she had made a mistake that was going to have a huge impact on his life, like mine potentially had on Lois' life, but there was nothing that could be done. Sometimes you couldn't fix your mistakes.

She had felt awful. But then, it was a sitcom. A few minutes later the episode was over and when the next one started, she was happy again and it was like the previous episode never happened.

No such luck for me. I didn't get a reset button on my life. I had screwed up, likely with no way to make things better, and I couldn't just pretend it had never happened. I gave a wan smile - even if I could, Lois would never let me.

I landed behind the math building without a sound, and made my way back towards my room. I had no idea how I was going to move on from here, but I had to find a way. I

didn't want this to be the defining moment of my life.

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I almost didn't go to lunch with my friends the next day, but then I decided that was a bit cowardly. So I went, and regretted going the entire time.

"Oh, look who's here," Lois said as I approached. The venom in her voice was like nothing I'd ever heard from her before. It made the girl I first met back in September seem like a cuddly teddy bear. "Metropolis' own..." she floundered, trying to think up a good nickname for me, I'm sure. "Whatever," she mumbled. "You know what you are!"

"What's going on?" Alicia asked as she took a seat next to Chris.

"Clark won the Daily Planet internship," Josh informed her.

"And Lois is taking it very gracefully," Chris added in an undertone.

"That's great, Clark!" Alicia said. "Not a big surprise that one of you would get it, but still impressive."

"Impressive?" Lois asked. "No. Impressive would be spending weeks looking for the perfect article. Impressive would be spending even more weeks writing the first draft and then rewriting it. And rewriting it. And rewriting it again."

"Impressive is not essentially repackaging an article from the Star - one he didn't even find himself, but Chris read to us," Lois told the group.

"Lois," Alicia said, her voice soft. "I'm sure you're disappointed, but you're making it seem like Clark cheated."

"He did!" she insisted.

"Wouldn't Mr. White recognize it if Clark had stolen an article from the Star?" Maddie asked.

Lois didn't reply, but her eyes were flashing. I didn't know what to do. All of our friends thought Lois was being petty when in reality she was right. I had cheated. But I could hardly announce that to everyone, could I?

"I'm sure Perry White has better things to do with his time than read second-rate newspapers," Lois finally said.

"That's not fair," I finally added to the discussion. Although, I felt like a heel in doing so as I knew I was only going to make things worse. "I never tried to pretend that I had found those people on my own. I made it clear that I was tying several articles from newspapers around the world together."

"And how did you know to do so?" Lois asked me. I felt the tension at the table increase. I could almost feel Alicia's desire to yell at Lois in my defense. But Chris had a hand on her arm that I'm sure was meant to remind her to stay out of this. Everyone else at the table seemed to have the same good sense, but there was no question that everyone was watching us closely.

Worse yet, Lois' voice had started to carry. So, it wasn't only our friends who were watching us now, but several people at the tables around us were watching, too.

"I don't know," I finally said. "It wasn't like I'd been playing with the idea for a long time or something." I decided to be at least partly honest about this although I was fully aware that the rest of what I planned to say was completely fabricated. "I was just talking to my parents about how I didn't have a topic when I remembered the article Chris mentioned. And I remembered Alicia's asking why that doesn't happen all the time. I wondered if maybe it does, so I did some research and found some other instances of something similar and... well, after that it made

sense to make the link."

"Well, it sounds like really great investigating, Clark," Maddie said smiling at me.

"Yeah, man. You really pulled through in the end," Josh added. "Lois, we're all really sorry you didn't win, but you had to know this was an option. You and Clark couldn't both win the internship."

Lois glared at Josh. "I did know that. And last semester I was even fine with it. Clark deserved it based on his med school article. But this... this isn't the same thing. I knew when he still didn't have a topic a week before the application was due that I had the internship in the bag."

"And now you're upset because it turns out you didn't," Chris supplied. "That really is too bad, Lois."

"But it's not Clark's fault," Maddie said, placing a hand on Lois' arm to soften her words.

"It wouldn't be if he hadn't cheated," Lois insisted.

"How did he cheat?" Alicia asked.

"I don't know. But I know he did," Lois said, looking at me. "I know you, Clark Kent," she repeated her words from the classroom again. "And I can tell that you feel guilty about this. I can tell that you did something underhanded. I don't know what it is now, but I'll find out."

No one at the table said anything, and after a few moments, Lois got up and left the cafeteria. I quickly followed before our friends told me how badly they felt about Lois' behavior and I felt like even more of a slimeball than I really was.

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I tossed and turned all night, trying to think of some way, any way, to make this up to Lois. There had to be something I could do. Not that I had any brilliant ideas yet.

I skipped breakfast the next morning, not sure I'd be able to hold it down. When I finally got hungry around noon, I decided to try one of the other cafeterias on campus. Lois and I used to eat lunch together every chance we got so I knew she generally stuck to the cafeteria near our dorms, and I didn't want to risk bumping into her right now.

I ate quickly, barely tasting my food. I had to find a way to make things better. I just wasn't sure what that was.

I spent two days ignoring my friends in an effort to avoid Lois, and I felt nauseous the entire time. This was worse than when I was waiting to hear the outcome of the application because there was no set end date. When would I come to terms with the fact that I had screwed up? What if I never did?

Finally I had an idea. I wasn't sure my parents would approve of it since it involved lying, but it felt like at least it was fair, even if it was dishonest.

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"Mr. White?" I asked, hovering in the doorway.

"Clark," he smiled at me. "It's great to see you, son. Are you here to get started on all the paperwork? You'll need to go see John in human resources. I'll introduce you."

"No," I said, still feeling sick to my stomach. "I came as I wanted to talk to you."

"Is everything all right?" he asked, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk.

"Sort of," I said, finding myself at a loss for words. How to say this without arousing any suspicion? "Mr. White, I'm really grateful to you for giving me this opportunity," I started. "But I don't think I can take it."

His eyes got wide, and when he spoke again, his southern drawl seemed a bit stronger than before. "You can't take it?"

"I really want to," I assured him, "but there's been a small emergency back home, and I think I'm going to have to spend the summer there."

"What sort of emergency would have you turning down the chance of a lifetime?" he asked, his eyes slightly narrowed. The look almost made me back out. I'd just take the internship and deal with the guilt later. Then I realized - it was too late. No matter what I did now, I had lowered my standing in Perry White's eyes.

"I just... I really do need to go home, sir," I said.

Mr. White shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, son, but I spend a lot of time reading those applications. And particularly for the freshman internship, I only accept people with a real passion for what they are doing. It was clear to me when I read your article, all three of your articles, that you have a passion for journalism. You have a desire to make things right in the world, and have chosen a pen as your tool to do so.

"Look, Clark, I'm not in the habit of trying to get people to take this position, but this year I had two remarkable applicants cross my desk and it was difficult to make a choice. You and Lois Lane have more talent now than half my newsroom has with all their education. Whatever has you running scared, you need to ignore it. Or fight it. Whatever you need to do. I expect to see you bright and early on June 1st."

"But, Mr. White," I said, feeling like if I didn't get out of here and to a bathroom soon, I might just start retching in his office, "if that's the case, why not just take Lois?"

Mr. White looked at me for a moment with clear, wide eyes that made it clear to me why he had been such a great reporter in his day. That look made me want to tell him all my secrets. "I won't say I didn't think of it. I considered breaking tradition and offering two internships this year. But I changed my mind. The freshman internship has only been for one student for longer than I've been editor. Lois, I'm sure, will apply again next year, and I'll be happy to have her as a sophomore intern."

"But you could take her instead of me this year," I pointed out, although I was starting to fear that I was going too far.

"I could," Mr. White said, with a tone that made it clear he was starting to wonder why he hadn't done that to begin with. "But you had the stronger application. So, I chose you. Now, git. I don't have time for this. This is the real world, son, not college. I expect to see you here on June 1st. If I don't, don't bother applying to the Daily Planet again."

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I really couldn't fix things. Well, I guess I could, but only by destroying my life. Was that a price I was willing to pay? And would it even work? Would Mr. White see me again, or just ignore me, and if I didn't show up, no one would get the internship.

Besides, maybe turning down the internship was only continuing to be selfish. Mom and Dad had given up so much for me. It wasn't easy harboring a... science experiment/castaway alien/mutant/whatever I was. But they had done so. More than that, they had raised me as their own, and did everything they could so I could live a normal life. How would they respond to my giving up my one chance to get the job of my dreams?

I couldn't sleep. I was too upset, too wound up. Pulling on my black outfit, I crept out of the dorm. Even campus was quiet at four in the morning, though, so I had no

trouble getting down to the math building without anyone seeing me.

I floated among the clouds for a while, but even that didn't provide the peace it normally did. This was the defining moment of my life, I knew. How I handled this situation was going to change my life forever. But I had no idea what the right answer was.

I was trying harder than I'd ever tried anything before to figure it out, though. Even harder than I'd tried for the Planet internship. Or at least that's what I told myself. It's the only way I could forgive myself for what happened next. For the voice that rang out when I gave up my quest for inner peace and landed.

"So that's how you knew to tie those stories together!" she said, her voice a mixture of anger and wonder. "I *knew* you cheated!"

I was stock still for a moment. Then taking a deep breath, I stammered, "L... Lois?" How much had she seen? Had she seen me flying? Stupid question. What else could her words mean?

"How did you do that?" she asked, the anger gone from her voice now. Well, probably only temporarily, knowing Lois.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Don't play dumb, Clark," she said, "I saw you. I saw you up in the sky. Defying gravity. How. Did. You. Do it."

"I... um... I don't know what you're talking about," I said, although even someone who didn't know me would be able to hear the lie in my voice, so there was no question Lois could.

Lois shook her head. "So, it was you, right?" she asked, and now her voice had transitioned totally to wonder and curiosity.

"What?" I asked, aware of the fact that I sounded like I had only a cursory grasp on the English language.

"The boy... the one in your article."

"My article?"

"The one you submitted to Mr. White. For the internship," she said, and now her tone was completely confusing. She actually sounded friendly. "I got a copy of it, and read it."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I asked Mr. White for it. I said I wanted to learn how I could improve."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"Really" I said that, or 'really' I meant it?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"Both, I guess."

"I did say it, but I didn't mean it," she said with nary a sign of anger, remorse, or pretty much any emotion at all.

"So then why did you want a copy?"

Lois looked at me incredulously. "Um... it's called investigating, Clark."

"You were investigating me?"

Lois shook her head at me in wonder. "Don't you listen? I told you I was going to figure out how you cheated."

"Yeah," I admitted. I hadn't missed her saying that. Either time. "But I hadn't realized that meant you were going to investigate me."

"No," she said, contemplative now. "I suppose if you had, you would have been more careful about making sure I wasn't around before you landed."

I didn't reply to that since it was so clear she was right - my landing when she was nearby was careless.

"Anyway," she said, still sounding like we were having

a discussion. Well, I guess we were, but like it was happening a few weeks ago when we were still dating and friends. Not now when I was persona non grata in Lois Lane's life. Or at least I had thought I was. "I read your article. About the boy. The one who did all those things. Always an American boy in black clothes." She eyed me now in a way that made it clear she had not failed to notice my all black get up. "So it was you, right? And you got to all those places because somehow, and you'll have to tell me how, you've learned how to fly."

I nodded. It seemed pointless to argue.

"So, I was right," Lois said. "You cheated." Strangely, she continued not to sound angry.

"Yeah, I did," I admitted. "Not that I intended to."

"Of course you didn't," Lois said as if it were obvious. "That's not who you are. Besides, you wouldn't have been so panicky if you had had the idea of cheating all along. But you didn't and the deadline drew closer, and you panicked, and so did something stupid. I mean really, Clark. What if Perry White had believed you? What if it was Perry White who had decided to investigate you and not me? You'd never have a moment's peace. And I have to assume you don't want the world to know you can fly. According to your article you started this a couple of years ago, and yet you haven't gone public yet. I assume that's the reason."

This whole conversation was surreal. Lois was acting so calm. So... well... *not* angry. And, therefore, not Lois. "So, you're not mad?" I asked her. I heard my mom's voice in my head telling me that 'dog's get mad, people get angry', but ignored it.

Lois laughed. "Of course, I'm angry, Clark," she said, still sounding eerily calm. "I'm furious. But I also understand. I mean, if I had something like this I could write about myself, I would have done it in an instant if I didn't have a better idea."

"So, you're angry, but you understand?" I clarified. She nodded. "And so you've decided to forgive me?" I asked. That didn't seem right, but she was being so friendly. I wasn't sure what else to think.

"Oh, no. At least not without an explanation. And maybe a lesson or two."

"A lesson or two?" I asked.

Lois looked at me incredulously again. "Of course. Come on, Clark. You didn't think I'd let you keep this to yourself, did you? I want to know how you do it. I want to learn how to fly, too."

"Oh," I said, feeling myself sink to the ground. I could feel the ground beneath my pants, already wet with the morning dew, but sat there anyway. So my pants would get wet. Who cared? I had thought, just for a moment, that Lois' knowing my secret was a wonderful thing. She didn't seem repulsed or disgusted at all. I had somehow missed the fact that Lois did not actually know my secret yet. As far as Lois was concerned, I was still in Spiderman territory - a human being with a special gift. I had yet to explain to Lois how it is I could fly. How I probably wasn't human at all.

"Is that not okay?" Lois asked, and now her voice was hardened slightly.

"It would be, if I could teach you," I said weakly. "But I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" she asked, her voice still hard.

"I can't. I can take you with me, but I can't teach you how. It's not something I know how to do. It's just

something I do, if you get the difference."

"So, what?" she asked, sitting on the ground across from me. "You just realized one day that you were flying?"

"Something like that," I admitted. "I woke up one day hovering over my bed." I couldn't do this. I couldn't come clean with Lois. I mean I wanted to, I had even planned to earlier, but I just wasn't ready yet. And not here. Not where so many people could hear us. Well, I guess that was a stretch. Not too many people were up and running around the math building at four in the morning.

But Lois had shown up unexpectedly. Someone else could do so, too. This was hardly a secure location.

"Could we do this tomorrow?" I asked her. "Maybe I could take you flying. Take you to Smallville where we could discuss this without lots of other people around."

Lois looked at me suspiciously. "You're not trying to get out of talking, are you?"

"No!" I insisted. "I just... I'm just not ready for this," I said in a whisper. "I'm just..." and then to my horror, I felt my eyes well up with tears. What the heck was I crying for?

"Clark?" Lois asked, sounding concerned now. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "It's just... I think I liked it better when you were angry at me."

"Than now?" she asked. "Clark. I meant it. I understand. I mean, I'm not sure I completely forgive you yet, but I do understand. Really. I would have done the same thing."

"Not now. I liked it better than I will tomorrow. After I tell you."

Her eyes narrowed again. "Why? What did you do? Why would I get angry at you again?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure you will. In fact, I can't see a reason you will. But you may hate me."

"Why?" she asked, still suspicious.

"I'm not... Lois, I don't think I can tell you."

She looked caught between concern for me and annoyance. "What do you mean?"

"Can't we do this tomorrow?" I begged her, the tears audible in my voice. "Please?"

She nodded, looking a bit concerned. "I think you're over tired or something, Clark. You're acting delirious."

"I'm not delirious," I told her. "Just..." I had started to say tired, but that wasn't it, really. It was more scared.

Lois nodded as if she understood. "Okay, let's head back to the dorms. You'll tell me tomorrow." She took my arm, and I had the feeling that she still thought I was delirious, but I didn't have the energy to try to correct her.

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"Hi," I said quietly. I had considered not showing up. But I couldn't run away forever. At some point I was going to need to face Lois. And I had thought about telling her my secret anyway, so what was the big deal?

I knew, though. I knew that while I had considered it - had even gotten out of my chair in class that day, I never would have done it. I couldn't bear the thought of her being disgusted or afraid of me. So, I probably never would have told her. Not that it mattered now. Now she knew. Well, she knew part of it. She knew I could fly. That wasn't the worst part, of course, but there was no way to explain it without explaining what I was. Or what I might be, I guess, since I didn't know what I was.

Which was worse, I wondered, the possibilities for what I might be, or the fact that I wasn't sure which of the possibilities described me?

"Hey," Lois said, looking friendly and downright

cheerful. Had she forgotten how last night went? She wasn't still thinking I was going to give her flying lessons, was she? "Ready?" she asked, linking an arm through mine.

I didn't say anything, but followed her lead and walked outside.

"So, is the math building your spot all the time or only in the middle of the night?" she asked as we went outside.

"Just the middle of the night. There are sometimes people there during the day," I told her, surprised by how calm my voice was.

"So where do you go during the day?" she asked.

"Um... I don't usually go anywhere, but if I need to, I look for an abandoned alley off campus."

"Well, let's go then."

We were exiting the gates before I had the thought. "Is this okay with you?" I asked her.

"What?"

"Going to Smallville? I mean, it means you'll need me to get you back, and..."

"And what, Clark?" she asked, looking sincerely confused.

"What if you don't want to fly with me? After I tell you?" I asked, afraid she wouldn't be able to hear me as I was speaking so quietly. I was finding it hard to speak up, though. I wanted to crawl into a hole in the ground.

"Why wouldn't I want to go with you?" she asked.

"You're going to take me flying. It's going to be amazing! And maybe once we talk a little, you'll realize you can show me how to fly, and then I can fly home myself."

I sighed.

"I'm not counting on it," she said although I felt certain she was lying. "Just saying it's possible."

"Neither of my parents can fly, and I've been doing it since I was sixteen," I told her.

"You've been flying since you were sixteen?" Lois asked, sounding excited. I flushed, looking around to see if anyone had heard her. "Sorry," she whispered. "I forgot. I'll stop asking questions until we get to Smallville."

"Thanks," I said, looking to my left. The alley was empty, so I motioned to it. Lois followed my lead.

"So, how do we do this?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "I haven't carried that many people." I told her. "I've carried my mom a few times. I always carried her sort of like a baby."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"One arm under her knees and the other around the back," I explained, but when Lois continued to look confused, I added, "Let me just show you." I took her into my arms. "Is this okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "Okay, Flyboy. Destination Smallville it is."

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"It's amazing," she said, her voice full of awe. "This is... how do you not spend all your time up here?"

I smiled. "It's hard sometimes."

"Do you come up here sometimes just to relax?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "I used to. But less often now. I'm not sure why."

"Were you coming back from a rescue last night?" Lois asked.

"Um... well, no. I guess I was trying to relax. Something like that anyway."

"What was it?"

I sighed. "I went to talk to Mr. White yesterday. I tried

to quit the internship."

"You what?!"

"I... you were right. I cheated. And I felt badly about it. I feel like this could have a huge impact on your life. Although, maybe not. Mr. White knows how great you are. He told me he considered giving both of us an internship, but didn't want to break with tradition."

"He said that?"

I nodded. "He said you, well we, have more talent than half the newsroom."

"He said *that*?"

I nodded again. "He did. Anyway, I tried to quit, and convince him to give you the spot, but he said no."

"Well, it's not like you told him you cheated. You didn't, did you?"

"I can't. I mean, it's not just my secret."

"It's your family's secret," Lois said, sounding like she had found a puzzle piece she'd been looking for for a long time. "This is the family secret you said broke up you and Maddie. You were running off to be the boy in those articles?"

"Like that day in Suicide Slum! You were off saving people."

I nodded again.

"So you came up here last night as you were trying to escape your guilt."

"Yeah. Not that it worked. But I was looking for... I guess the peace of being up here."

"Do you ever fly off somewhere to visit?" Lois asked as I started to descend. "You know, spend an afternoon as a tourist in China or something?"

"Not really," I said. "I'm not sure why. I've really only used my flying to get places for two things - for being the Boy in Black and for coming home to see Mom and Dad. I come home a lot."

"I didn't realize you were a Mama's boy," Lois said with a grin.

I shrugged. "I don't know that I am. Although I don't know that I'm not. My parents are... well, you just need to meet them."

"Aren't I about to?" Lois asked as she looked around the cornfield.

"Yeah, I guess you are."

"Clark?" Mom called from the porch. "Is that..." Mom's voice trailed off as Lois caught up to me and Mom could see that I hadn't come alone.

"Clark?" Mom repeated, this time as a question.

"Mom, this is Lois Lane. Lois, this is my mom, Martha Kent," I introduced them. I tried to keep my voice even and calm, but both Mom and Lois gave me a look that made it clear my nervousness was coming through loud and clear.

"Nice to meet you, Lois," Mom said, always gracious, even when I could tell that she was trying to decide if it would be appropriate to rip me to shreds right in front of Lois. Of course, I was guessing that she presumed I had told Lois - that this was my way of making amends for cheating. Not that Lois had caught me.

Although, now that I thought about it, that probably wouldn't change her desire to rip me limb from limb, since Lois wouldn't have caught me if I hadn't been careless.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Kent," Lois said. I suddenly remembered what Lois had said about her parents, and suspected that unlike other kids, Lois didn't immediately respect adults just because they were adults. Still, she hadn't sounded rude to Mom, just... wary? No, that wasn't it. I

guess just like she was waiting to pass judgment. Which she probably was.

Mom led us into the kitchen. "Jonathan," Mom called up the stairs, a strangled quality to her voice. "Clark is here.... And he brought along a friend."

Dad's response came almost immediately. "Very funny, Martha. Clark couldn't bring a friend home without telling them..." His words stopped as he reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Lois standing there.

"Hi, Mr. Kent. I'm Lois Lane. And Clark hasn't told me anything yet."

"How... how did you get here?" Dad asked, downright confused by Lois' statement.

"We flew," I confirmed.

"Flew?" Mom asked, trying to determine how we got here. I think she was starting to think that flying commercially was an option based on Lois' words, but was trying to determine the logistics of the last minute tickets, our getting to the cornfield, and all that.

"Well, really Clark flew," Lois clarified. "I was just a passenger on the Clark Kent Express."

"You flew," Mom said, sitting down at the table as she realized that her first assumption was right. No commercial flights involved.

"But... I thought... You said he hadn't told you..." Dad nearly sputtered in confusion.

"He didn't," Lois said, still sounding so calm I almost wanted to smack her to wake up the real Lois. "I saw him flying last night. I demanded some answers, and he said he'd give them to me. Here. So, here we are."

"You saw him flying?" Dad asked, and now his eyes were on me. He didn't sound angry. Not yet. That wasn't Dad's way. He waited first to make sure he hadn't made a mistake. Then he let you know how angry he was.

Mom, though. Well, when Mom was angry she was more of a 'take casualties, ask questions later' kind of person. So, while Dad tried to determine exactly what happened, Mom decided Lois' presence did not mean she couldn't take me down.

"Lois saw you flying, Clark?" she asked, only it was no longer a real question. "Don't take this the wrong way, dear," she said to Lois. "It's just that Clark knows how important it is to be careful that no one sees him using any of his gifts. Or at least I thought he did."

"\*Any of his gifts?" Lois repeated. "You can do other things besides fly?" she asked me.

Mom's cheeks got red as she realized her mistake, but Lois' comment didn't really redirect her anger. "Clark Jerome Kent, you better explain yourself right now!"

"Jerome," Lois snickered under her breath. No one but me could have heard her.

"It was Mom's grandfather's name," I said to her. Right now Lois was easier to deal with than my mother. I couldn't believe such a thing was possible, but it was.

"I didn't... I didn't mean to," I finally said to Mom.

"Well *clearly*," Mom replied, not looking like she forgave me one iota. "I presume you got careless, Clark, not that you completely took leave of your senses!"

"It wasn't really Clark's fault," Lois cut in, and all of our heads swung in her direction. What did she mean it wasn't my fault? "I was investigating Clark. I had followed him to the math building, and although I hadn't been able to figure out where he went, I waited for him. I'm sure he thought no one would be there when he landed given it was four in the morning."

"Thinking there was no one there is not the same thing as *knowing* there was no one there." Now that he had the facts, Dad weighed in.

"What were you thinking?" Mom asked.

"He wasn't, clearly," Dad answered for me.

"I would have found out at some point," Lois said.

"Even if not last night. I was following him everywhere."

I saw Mom crack a faint smile, but she still looked furious. "Even so, I would have thought Clark might have considered that."

"Considered what?" I asked, although I knew in general it was best not to speak during these discussions.

"That Lois might be investigating you," Mom said, and when she looked at me, there was no amusement in her eyes.

"I had," I admitted, "but I was distracted and..."

"Distraction is not an excuse, Clark!" Dad exclaimed, and there was no mistaking the anger in his voice now.

"We've talked about this. If someone were to see you, who knows what they would do? They'd want to see what makes you you. You could end up in a laboratory somewhere..."

"Being dissected like a frog. I know," I took over Dad's age old warning. "How are they going to do that, Dad? I'm impervious to knives."

"You are?" Lois asked in amazement, but everyone ignored her.

"We talked about this before," Mom said, her voice quiet. "When you first started the Boy in Black thing. Even if you can't be hurt physically, that doesn't mean you can't be hurt."

I nodded. She was right. We had discussed that. And every time I reminded myself of that, every time I pictured what someone who wanted to test me badly enough to blackmail me could do to Mom and Dad, I got a knot in my stomach.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "You're right. Being distracted isn't an excuse. I should..."

"Be constantly vigilant," Lois supplied with a smile. "Like those aliens."

"Aliens?" Mom asked. "You know aliens?"

Lois laughed. "Of course not. I don't even believe in aliens. I meant like the ones on Star Trek. The Borg, maybe? I can't recall. One of them is always saying they need to be constantly vigilant."

"You don't believe in aliens?" I asked her. "Why not?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. Little green men with antennae? The whole concept is just so weird."

"But not all aliens are Martians," Dad pointed out.

"Do you really think we're the only planet with intelligent life?" I asked her.

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. I just think it's silly."

"What if they looked human?" I asked quietly.

"How likely is *that*?"

"Not very," I admitted. It was a thought I had had many times. Somehow, I preferred the alien idea. Because maybe then I wasn't unwanted. Okay, probably I was - probably I was an illegitimate child or a mutant or something. But maybe I wasn't. Maybe I was a child of noble blood sent away because my parents feared for my safety. Like if there was a coup planned or something. Or a genocide. I knew it wasn't likely, but at least it was possible.

On the other hand, if I wasn't an alien, if I was some sort of science experiment, then I had never been wanted as anyone's child. Worse yet, I wouldn't just be a science experiment, but a failed experiment, since presumably if I

had been a success they wouldn't have dumped me in an uninhabited field in Kansas. And since it was unlikely that there were not only aliens, but that they happened to look human, the failed science experiment was the most likely option.

"Cheer up, Clark," Lois laughed. "Were you hoping to meet intelligent life from other planets or something?"

"I was hoping to *be* intelligent life from another planet," I said quietly.

There was silence in the room for a moment. My parents, I'm sure, were all ready to pitch in with their usual response to this. How I *was* wanted - I was wanted by them. How lucky they felt to have found me. Yada yada yada. None of it mattered. I knew they wanted me, but I still wanted to be wanted by someone else. Whoever was responsible for my existence.

Although given the magnitude of my screw up, maybe my parents weren't feeling like they wanted me that much either tonight.

"What do you mean?" Lois asked, taking a seat at the table.

I shrugged, leaning against the doorframe. "The flying. The being unable to be harmed by pretty much anything I've been able to try. The ability to see through things. The speed that makes me faster than a Concorde Jet. The... I don't even know what else. It all makes it pretty clear that I'm not your everyday, run-of-the mill human."

"You can really do all those things?" Lois asked, amazed.

I nodded my head, despondent.

"That's amazing, Clark!" she said. "Really, truly awesome."

I didn't respond. I didn't know what to say. It didn't feel awesome.

"Don't you think?" she prodded.

I shrugged.

"Clark?" she asked, her voice compassionate now.

"Don't you think it's awesome?"

I shrugged again.

Mom moved over to put an arm around me. "It's been hard on Clark. Not knowing why he can do those things. Not knowing where he comes from. And not being able to be himself, to always have to hide all the things he can do."

"Not to mention the things you've already noticed - his desire to use his gifts to help others, even when doing so puts other areas of his life, like romantic relationships, at risk," Dad added. It was clear that Mom and Dad believed my apology, and I was now forgiven.

"Like say, missing an important lunch with your girlfriend," Lois said slowly. When I nodded, she asked, "So where were you really?"

"In Japan. Helping out at a town that was near a volcano that had just exploded," I told her quietly.

"And with Maddie?" she asked.

"Which time?" I asked back. "I ran out on her a lot. The last time, though, the one that broke us up, I was in Costa Rica helping clean up an oil spill."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" she asked. "I would have understood."

"You would have?" I challenged her. "If I had told you that I had been in Japan, you would have been okay with that?"

"Well, you would have had to tell me about the flying thing, too," she admitted. "But I guess... what? Didn't you ever plan to tell anybody?"

I shrugged.

"When you met the right person maybe?" she asked.

"Who's the right person?" I asked her. "Someone who seems really wonderful but then has to deal with the fact that her boyfriend is... whatever it is I am. Space trash? Rejected alien? Failed science experiment?"

"Our son!" Mom said with a look that said she was disappointed in me for still feeling this way.

"My boy!" Dad said at the same time.

There was silence for a moment after their outburst before Lois quietly said, "My friend."

"Where you came from doesn't change who are, Clark," she continued when no one else spoke. "I don't care if you're a failed science experiment or a Cyborg, you're still the guy who held my hand as we walked to the disciplinary hearing, the only one I felt would be understanding enough for me to tell about my crush on Paul."

"It really doesn't change anything?" I challenged her. I had noticed that she hadn't said anything about being the first guy she kissed or something like that. She didn't want to remember that. Who would want to remember that? She was probably wondering if I had a mass of wires in my chest or green scaly skin under the more human looking stuff.

"No," she said. Mom and Dad remained quiet, probably hoping Lois could get through to me when they couldn't. "Well, okay, it does."

"I thought so," I said, looking somewhere over her head. If I tilted my head up just right, maybe the tears wouldn't actually leak out of my eyes. I had hoped that maybe... But it was silly. Lois was great, but she wasn't completely insane.

"It means now I know where you go when you run off. Now you can tell me. So now I'll understand. It means that now I know something about you, something incredibly personal. Something I can't tell anyone else about. It's like... You ever hear old people talk about their 'list'?"

I shook my head. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"It's like the list of everyone they ever had sex with or something. Well, you have a different kind of list, Clark - of the people who know your secret. And I'm on it. And just like with the regular kind of list, once someone is on it, they can never not be on it. So we're tied together. Forever."

I nodded, not wanting to talk for fear that the tears would be audible in my voice.

"Don't you get it, Clark?" she asked. "If I understand, I won't get angry. It means you can run off on me all you want, well, to save the world or whatever. And it won't mean that we need to break up." Lois flushed as she finished talking. "I mean, if you still wanted to date, I guess."

"You still want to date *me*?" I asked. "Even though..."

"Even though what?" Lois cut me off. "Even though you're still the same boy I thought you were? Better even since it never occurred to me that you were off trying to save the world? Why wouldn't I want to date you?"

"Cause I'm..."

"I *told* you," she said, sounding a bit annoyed now. "Where you came from isn't important to me."

"Really?" I asked. I knew she sounded annoyed, but I had to be sure. I mean, it didn't really seem possible.

"Really," Lois giggled. "If you are an alien, I'd like to meet some others from your planet. Determine if you're all lunkheads or that's just you."

Mom and Dad laughed at that while I flushed.

"I... um..." I stumbled over my words. I hadn't imagined I'd ever have the opportunity to say them, and even when I fantasized that I did, Mom and Dad certainly weren't in the room. Still, this was the right time. "I love you," I whispered. "I wanted to tell you all this before, but..."

"But you were worried what I would think," Lois cut me off. "I think I can sort of understand that. But it doesn't matter to me, Clark. 'Cause I love you, too." Lois looked around the room, "Did we just say 'I love you' for the first time in front of your parents?"

Dad laughed, "It's a little unconventional, but then if you're going to date Clark, you have to get used to being a little unconventional."

Lois nodded.

"Maybe, though, we could all get to know each other a little bit better," Mom suggested, and I could see Lois relax. "After Jonathan and I give you a moment alone." She gave a meaningful look at Dad, and they went into the living room.

"I think this is the place where we kiss," Lois said. "Or at least I assume that's why they left?"

"I think so, too," I chuckled, feeling a strange mixture of amusement, relief, and exhilaration.

"Your parents are so weird," Lois said quietly as we moved closer together.

"Well, they did raise me," I pointed out.

"Good point," she whispered, although I could tell from the look in her eyes she wasn't thinking so much about my parents anymore.

"I love you," I said again, quietly this time.

Lois smiled. "You know, despite all the stuff we've been through recently, I believe you. Maybe because I love you, too."

And then, like every time I kissed Lois, the sounds of the house around us disappeared, and all I could hear was her heartbeat in my ears.

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It was about five minutes before Mom and Dad came back into the kitchen. Or five years. I wasn't completely sure. But I felt like a completely different guy. I had a girlfriend - a really amazing one. She was way prettier than Lana, and yet she didn't break up with me, constantly thinking she could do better.

More importantly, she knew the truth about me. The whole truth. And she said she didn't care. Stranger yet, I really believed her. She seemed so sincere. Plus, I felt like I was pretty much getting to be an expert on Lois Lane. I was pretty sure I'd be able to tell if she was lying.

I hadn't ever really imagined... Well, that wasn't quite true. I had fantasized about this. In the same way little girls daydream about their Prince Charming, when I was a teenager and realized how different I was, I had dreamed about finding a girl, pretty of course, who would be okay with it all. Who wouldn't be grossed or weirded out by how strange I was.

Still, I had thought that's all they ever would be - fantasies. I didn't think I'd ever really find someone who could do that. And I never imagined there was any possibility that that someone would be someone I loved so much, and not just because she accepted me for who I was, but because I just honestly loved her. I just hadn't expected that at all.

It was all a little hard to take in really. So when Mom and Dad came back in, I took the opportunity to sit down.

"So where are you from?" Mom asked Lois as we all took seats around the table. "I think Clark said you were from Metropolis?"

Lois nodded, "A different area of the city than where the university is, though. A bit more suburban. Have you ever been to the east coast aside from dropping Clark off. Wait? Did you drop him off?" She looked at me. "Did you fly yourself to college?"

Mom laughed. "He wanted to."

"We took care of that quickly enough," Dad added.

"Just 'cause Clark may be a different species doesn't mean his childhood has been that different. We weren't letting him go off to college without having us help him move his stuff," Mom said.

"When did your childhood start?" Lois asked me. "I mean here."

"Here?" I asked, confused.

"Here," Lois clarified. "As in Earth or Kansas. Here."

I shrugged. "Before I remember," I told her.

"When we found Clark, he was about six months old," Mom told her. "At least that's what we estimated."

"But you must have thought he was... well..." Lois blushed as she mumbled, "normal, back then."

Mom nodded. "Well, we weren't really sure. We did find him in a spaceship." Lois' eyes bugged out at this knowledge, but Mom continued before Lois could ask more questions. "And he was normal. Mostly. Up until he was a teenager. He didn't ever get sick, but we didn't really notice that much. And he got hurt less than other children, but he did get hurt."

"My invulnerability didn't kick in until later," I told her.

"So you're invulnerable, huh?" Lois asked.

I shrugged. "I guess. I don't know for sure, but I haven't been hurt by much of anything since I was about twelve. And by the time I was sixteen, I was trying. Looking for things that could hurt me."

"So if I were to punch you right now, it wouldn't hurt?" she asked me with a glint in her eye.

"It might hurt you," I told her with a smile.

Lois didn't reply, just looked me up and down. Recognizing where this was going, I stood. "Okay," I told her. "Take a shot." I relaxed my muscles so she wouldn't get hurt and waited for it.

Lois looked at me skeptically for a moment, then reached out and punched me. She didn't punch very hard, and I had the feeling Lois was holding back. She wasn't completely sure she believed the invulnerability thing or something, I guess. But when I didn't react at all, she punched me again, harder this time.

"You didn't even flinch," she said awed. "I knocked some guy out last year using that move."

"You knocked a guy out?" I asked. I didn't really see Lois ever resorting to violence.

"He was picking on my little sister and wouldn't stop," Lois shrugged.

We sat down, Lois looking at me more closely. "So," she asked slowly, "when you said you tried, what do you mean? What sorts of things did you try?"

Mom shuddered - she was remembering some of them, I'm sure. She had not been happy with my decision to try to define my limits, although she had understood my motivation.

"I started with small things," I told her. "I tried cutting myself with a knife. I mean, part of what had tipped me off was that I had never cut myself, even when it seemed like I

should, but I started by making sure I wasn't missing something. But then I moved onto bigger things."

"Like?" Lois prodded me.

Mom wouldn't even look at me, and Dad looked at some point over my head when he said, "One day, Martha and I came back from shopping to find Clark running in front of the tractor - while it was moving."

"Are you insane?" Lois shrieked at me. "What if you were wrong? You could have killed yourself."

I shrugged, "Maybe. I guess. But I really wanted to know. How else would I be able to define my limits?"

"And you weren't wrong?" Lois confirmed.

"It rolled right over him," Mom said. "I've never been so scared in my life. I don't think I believed he really was impervious to any thing before that. I was sure that despite the fact that he had fallen from the hayloft without getting hurt, the tractor was just too much. Or the hayloft was just a fluke or something."

Dad nodded. "I actually closed my eyes while I yelled at him. I was sure I was yelling at a flattened Clark."

"Flattened?" Lois said with a smile. "Like a Clark pancake."

Dad nodded, still not smiling. "Just like that. And not breathing."

"But I was fine," I added in, trying to get my parents off of this morbid tone. "It was like I hadn't been hit at all."

"Really?" Lois asked. "Just like not being hit?"

"Well, no, in that I remembered being hit. It was more like... like I had been run over by a matchbox car. Or a Styrofoam version of the tractor I guess, 'cause it was still full sized."

"Wow!" Lois said, smiling again. "So, what about the other stuff? What else can you do? How'd you find out about them?"

"Most of them just happened," I told her. "I can hear really far away. I guess I started noticing it in school - sometimes my mind would wander and I'd hear what was going on in other classrooms."

"But we tested it here on the farm," Mom said.

"Jonathan walked farther and farther away until Clark couldn't hear him. We used walkie talkies so Jonathan would know when to come back."

"Well, actually, I started driving at some point. When I got to the end of the farm and Clark could still hear me, I came back and got the car. I was nearly in town before he started having trouble."

"I don't hear as well in Metropolis, though," I added. "I guess it's all the ambient noise or whatever, but I can't hear more than a few blocks away normally."

"Oh," Lois said, sarcastically, "just a couple of blocks away. Pitiful really."

We all laughed before I moved on. "I can see pretty far, too, but it's pretty clear how I figured that out. And I can see through things. That one was weird - when it first came in, I couldn't control it at all and it sort of came in and out. I'd be looking at something and then suddenly I'd be looking through it. For a long time, if I was looking through something, I couldn't *not* look through it."

"And the flying?" Lois asked.

I shrugged. "Didn't I mention this before? I just started hovering one day in my sleep."

Mom laughed. "I guess he fell when he started to wake up and the noise woke me. I came in and found him in the middle of his floor. He was so confused! He kept trying to tell me he was dreaming and I kept telling him he was



awake. It wasn't until the morning that I even knew why he kept saying he wasn't awake yet."

"After Mom left and I realized I was actually awake, I spent all night trying to control the hovering. It was the last thing to come in, so I had gotten pretty good at controlling things by then."

"You mean like you do with seeing through things?" Lois confirmed.

I nodded. "I do it with everything really. I can see clear to the Irig's farm out the window, but I'm not looking out of the kitchen." I gave an example. "Or I can hear things nearly in town, but I'm not listening to anything outside this room."

"Is that how you keep from running off all the time?" Lois asked.

I nodded. "I promised Mom and Dad that I wouldn't do the Boy in Black thing during class. That's not what I'm in college for."

"The Boy in Black?" Lois asked. "Is that what you refer to your rescues as?"

Mom got up and pulled out the book where she kept articles where I was mentioned out of the kitchen drawer. "You can look through these. He's always referred to as the boy in black, so we started calling it that."

Lois flipped through, looking up at me after seeing the first two or three. "You've been doing this for years!"

I nodded. "Pretty much since I realized I could fly."

"You just decided..."

"At first, I just used the flying to get away. It felt so freeing to be up in the sky where no one else was. A way to escape the pressure. Typical teenage pressure, I guess," I admitted.

"Made more intense by knowing you were different," Lois nearly whispered.

I shrugged. "Yeah. I guess. Anyway, at some point, I ended up flying clear to China, and after that I realized what I could do if I was willing to use my powers."

Lois nodded, looking through the clippings. "Use your powers?" she finally asked. "Do you use them for anything besides getting places?"

I flushed, but Dad took over anyway. "Not often. He can't," he gave me a pointed look while he said it. "Clark knows that it's important that he act as normal as possible in front of other people."

"So he doesn't get caught," Lois said.

"Right," Mom said. "Not that he's always good at it," she joined the pointed look Dad had given me.

"Sometimes," I told Lois, "I stretch things a little. It's just... there's so much more I could do if I could help out in the open."

"It must be hard to hold yourself back," she said, placing a hand on my arm.

Mom sighed. "I had a thought about that."

"About what?" I asked her.

"I've been thinking since you told us about writing that article for Mr. White," Mom said. "What could we do as damage control if he were to decide to investigate? I know he's not likely to," she cut off my objection, "but if he were."

"And?" Dad prodded her on.

"What if Clark came out, so to speak?" Mom asked.

"Came out?" I asked, but I noticed Lois nodding.

"Just admit that you have all these gifts," she said, looking at Mom to confirm that they were both thinking the same thing.

"He can't do that!" Dad nearly exploded.

"Well," Mom said, "I wasn't thinking it would so much be Clark doing it."

"It would be like Spiderman," Lois added.

I gave her a look. Was it weird that I had been wondering if I could live a life like Spiderman recently, and now she was drawing the same correlation? That was what Mom and Lois were talking about, wasn't it?

"Spiderman is a fictional character," I pointed out softly. I wanted them to knock my objections down. If I could make this work...

"Who cares?" Lois said. "That's not the point."

"No," Mom said, picking up speed now that she saw someone else was buying her idea. "The point is about having a secret identity. Someone else who would be the Boy in Black."

"But what if someone made the connection?" Dad asked.

"Who would?" Lois asked. "Who would expect that this man with special abilities, this... super man, so to speak, was actually just your average college kid?"

"Particularly Clark," Mom said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but Clark, you are always so unsure of yourself. You..."

"Don't look super?" I asked with a smile.

"Exactly."

"That could be your new name," Lois grinned at me.

"What?"

"Superman," she told me. I rolled my eyes at her. I was *not* going to use a name that sounded so...arrogant, I guess.

"Do you think we could make this work?" I asked Mom and Lois, ignoring Lois' silly suggestion. "Cause if we did, I could really use my abilities."

"No!" Dad said. "It's too dangerous."

"I actually think it's less dangerous than what he's doing now, Jonathan," Mom said.

Lois nodded her head. "There'd be a lot of press about it for a while, but then people would stop asking. They wouldn't necessarily be looking for a secret identity."

"You could write it up!" I said, maybe a tad too loudly.

"What?" Lois asked.

"If we do this, you could write my 'coming out' story. You could even say you found this man after following the story I wrote. But if you wrote this story, Perry would almost have to give you the internship."

"And he's not likely to take the spot away from you," Lois nodded. "That could work. But first we need to work on you. It's more important that we find a way to do this that doesn't put you in any danger."

Mom nodded. I could see Dad was still uncomfortable, but I ignored that for now. Once he saw it working, he would be on-board. I hoped.

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"I like her," Mom said several hours later.

"Thanks," I said, not sure what the appropriate response was. After a long evening of talking, Lois had given a yawn and we had decided to spend the night. She was up in my room getting ready for bed. I was sleeping on the couch.

"She's..." Dad said, looking for words. "Perfect, I guess. I can't imagine anyone else finding out about you and putting your safety before their best interests."

"Yes," Mom replied. "Lois seems to realize that keeping your secret is more important than her getting the Planet internship. Even if that's not the same choice you made," she said with a wink. The wink was made to soften the

blow, I'm sure, but she got her point across, and I felt myself flush.

"Plus, she's pretty," Dad said with a smile.

"And really smart," I said, picking up steam now. "And, she's really kind. It's hard to tell right away, but Lois really wants to make the world a better place."

"It's not hard to tell at all," Mom said softly. "Lois is something special. I can see why you love her."

I flushed again, although I wasn't sure why.

"Well," Dad said, looking at the clock. "Lois is not the only one who's tired. I need to be up in four hours, so I think it's time to head to bed. I don't suppose you'll be awake before I head out to the fields tomorrow?" he asked me.

I looked at the clock, although I knew the answer already. "Probably not."

"Good night, Clark," Mom said, giving me a kiss on the cheek. "We'll see you and Lois on Saturday."

I nodded. We had agreed that Lois and I would spend Saturday here working on this idea Mom had of my creating an alter ego.

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I was lying on the couch, unable to sleep, when I heard Lois' heartbeat on the stairs. I sat up and waited for her to join me.

"Hi," I said quietly as she sat down. By the moonlight streaming in the window, I could see she had chosen to wear the Smallville High t-shirt I had left out for her. It was ridiculously large on her, coming down to her knees, but it had never looked that good on me.

"Hi," she said, tucking a leg under her as she sat next to me. "So, tell me," she said.

"Tell you what?" I asked her.

"Everything," she whispered. "About the spaceship you were found in. How they found you. About what it felt like growing up. About how you felt the first time you did the Boy in Black thing. About how scared you are now that someone outside your parents knows your secret. Everything."

I smiled. It was so Lois to want to know all the details.

I took a deep breath. "The spaceship - I don't know much about it. Mom and Dad don't talk about it much. I know how they found me, though. Mom and Dad wanted a kid, but they couldn't get pregnant. Apparently, Mom has some sort of condition so she stopped being able to get pregnant as a teenager, but she didn't know it. Anyway, it took them a long time to find that out.

"Finally, they went to see some sort of specialist in Metropolis..."

"So, they'd been to Metropolis before you started college?" Lois interrupted.

I nodded. "Mom grew up in Boston, so she'd been there lots of times growing up. I think my dad has only been there that once aside from taking me to school. Anyway, it was the specialist who diagnosed Mom with her condition - let them know that they could keep trying, but their chances of conceiving were only slightly higher than zero. Dad was trying to cheer Mom up the night after they came back, so they went to dinner in town at Maisie's.

"On the way back, Mom saw a shooting star. At first she made a wish on it - wished that they'd somehow get pregnant anyway, but then she realized it was a really bright star and she thought it had actually landed, so she decided to investigate.

"I had landed in Shuster's Field, which is pretty much

unowned property since Tom Shuster died thirty years ago or something. Mom and Dad walked around until they found my spaceship.

"And Mom decided to keep me. She and Dad raced home and got some materials to transfer the ship to the farm. Mom said she held me in her arms the whole time, and I just fit there."

Lois smiled. "It was fate that they found you."

I nodded. "I like to think my birth parents planned it that way. I know it's not true. I know in reality, most likely I don't even have birth parents, I was created in a lab or something, but I still like to think that Mom and Dad were chosen. I guess even if they weren't, no one could have chosen better parents for me."

"You are lucky," Lois agreed. "Even if you don't know your origins. You could have worse parents."

I nodded, realizing that I was lucky. Compared to Lois or Maddie, I was, even if I was space trash.

"So what else?" Lois asked.

"About being found?" I asked. She shrugged to show that she didn't care what it was, as long as I kept telling her things. "They were worried that some government types would be looking for me - either American or Russian depending on where I was created. So, they got rid of the spaceship. I don't really know how," I told her, anticipating her question. "It's never come up before. And they told everyone in town that I was the son of a cousin of Mom's.

"You know how small towns are - they always think people living in the big city are devoid of morals, so it was easy to get them to believe that a cousin of Mom's from Boston had gotten pregnant out of wedlock and couldn't take care of the baby. Over time, I guess, people just started to accept that I was Mom and Dad's. No one's ever asked me why Mom's cousin never visits to see me."

"I can't believe they did all that," Lois said awed. "Do you think... I mean, if you had had a normal childhood, that is, do you think if you had found a baby in a spaceship that you'd go through all that trouble for it?"

I shrugged. "I like to think I would. But maybe not. And who knows? Maybe Mom and Dad wouldn't if they hadn't wanted kids. Or they had some of their own. It was a lot of hassle."

Lois nodded, but then I corrected myself. "Actually, I think they would have done it anyway. That's just the sort of people they are."

Lois nodded. "Yeah, I guess I can see that."

"I was a terror when I got older. When I first discovered all the things I could do. I was scared of them, and scared of feeling different. Mom and Dad could have bailed on me so many times. It couldn't have been easy on them. But they never did. No matter what happened, no matter what new, weird thing we discovered about me, or how awful I was, they always let me know how much they loved me. How much they wanted me." My words were soft and I could feel the tears in my eyes, but ignored them. I was so lucky. I got that. I always had, really, and still I had spent a lot of this year not appreciating all my parents did for me. Worse yet, my little stunt with the article could have put them in a lot of danger. I was an ingrate.

"Did you feel unwanted as a child?" Lois asked quietly, her hand on mine.

I shrugged. "Not as a child," I told her. "More... later, I guess. When I started to realize I wasn't normal. I remember one time... I was about fourteen. I heard Mom and Dad talking... Well, really I was eavesdropping. I had

just recently discovered the hearing thing, but hadn't worked to control it yet.

"Anyway, I heard Mom and Dad saying I couldn't have the farm. I threw a temper tantrum. Dad had always said he was leaving the farm for me to run, and I was so upset that he had changed his mind."

"You thought it was because you're... different?" Lois asked.

I nodded. "Pretty much. I remember accusing Dad of not wanting some weirdo running his farm."

Lois moved closer to me. "You're not a weirdo," she said softly.

"That's what Dad said," I told her.

"Why couldn't you have the farm anymore?"

I chuckled softly. "I could. They just thought I wouldn't want it. That I'd rather be a writer than a farmer."

Lois laughed. "You didn't realize that?" she asked me, her laughter still warm in my ear.

"I did. I guess I didn't realize that they did. And I was so ready... for something... for some sign that they didn't want me anymore, I guess."

"It must have been so hard for you," Lois said, moving away to look up at me. "I mean, it was so different than for me. My parents aren't like yours. They seem to barely remember that they had kids. I'm really not sure if they love Lucy and me. But... I don't know. I guess I always pictured that you had this idyllic life here in the country with parents that love you, you know? But it wasn't like that, was it?"

"I guess it could have been," I said. "I think it was when I was little. Before I realized I was different."

Lois wrapped her arms around me even more tightly than before. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked her, nearly whispering in her hair.

"For how hard it must have been. Learning all that about yourself. Feeling like you didn't belong. I'm just... sorry."

I started to tell her that it could have been worse, that it wasn't so bad, but I stopped. It was nice that she understood. And while it could have been worse, there were certainly times when it hadn't felt like it could. It was nice that Lois got that. So, instead, I tightened my hold on her and whispered, "Thanks."

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When I awoke later, it was to find both Lois and myself sprawled on the couch. Lois didn't look at all comfortable. We had fallen asleep sitting next to each other, holding each other, and apparently when we fell asleep had just sort of tipped over from that position.

A fast glance with my special eyesight confirmed that Mom and Dad were up. They were both in the barn. It looked like Dad was having some trouble with the tractor, so I gently extricated myself from the mess of arms and legs Lois and I made on the couch. After I gently repositioned Lois into what looked like a more comfortable position, I tucked the blanket I'd been using over her.

I ran upstairs and threw on an old pair of cutoffs and a t-shirt, giving my teeth a fast brushing, before heading outside.

"Mornin'," Dad said when he saw me. "Care to give me a hand?"

"That's what I'm here for," I told him. "I saw you from the living room."

"You and Lois looked awfully cozy on the couch," Mom said pointedly.

I grimaced. I had hoped they hadn't noticed that. "It was

a mistake," I told her. "Lois came down as she couldn't sleep. We were talking and just..."

Dad's guffaw interrupted my flow of words. "It's all right, son. Your Mom was just teasing. Neither of us thought you purposely fell asleep like that. It didn't look at all comfortable."

I threw Mom a look to let her know I didn't appreciate her teasing, but ended up smiling at the grin on her face. My conversation with Lois last night came back to me, and as I went to reach for some of Dad's tools, I said, "You know, I'm not sure I've ever thanked you."

"Thanked whom?" Mom asked.

"Both of you," I said while using my special vision thing to look amid the mass of wires in the tractor engine. It turns out one of them was just loose, so I set about prying off the cover and trying to get to it without disturbing the others.

"For what?" Dad asked.

"For everything," I told them as I located the wire. "For taking me in when you knew you were potentially putting yourself at risk. For raising me, even when I was being really difficult. For... keeping me, I guess. Even though I turned out to be... not normal."

"Oh, Clark," Mom said, moving over to me. "You don't need to thank us for that. We did it because we love you."

I nodded, "Yeah, and thank you for that, too. It couldn't have been easy."

"Now see here," Dad said, his voice firm. "Stop talking like you were some sort of burden or an ugly, evil mutant that no one could love or something. You're a boy, a wonderful boy. We are lucky to have you as a son. I'm tired of this, Clark. Of your not feeling worthy enough or whatever it is you feel."

"Your mother and I didn't do you any favors. Well, except for having to put up with hearing you talk like this. You're my son and I won't have anyone, even you, bad-mouthing my son. Not unless he's saying something true."

I nodded, not sure what to say, but feeling chastised just the same. I guess I could see his point. I was a bit of a broken record this year. Even more than normal. But really, I'd just been trying to thank them.

Mom gave me a tight hug. "We love you, Clark. And not because we feel like we have to 'cause we took you in nineteen years ago. But because you're a wonderful person. We knew when we took you out of that spaceship that we were in for some troublesome times. And we worried about what you may be like - would you be a baby forever? If not, would you turn out to be some sort of bred assassin or something?"

"We were prepared for having to deal with all sorts of things, but most of them were unjustified fears. In all the ways that are important, you are just a boy. And if we had been able to go to a store and pick you out, we couldn't have done better."

I sniffled, willing the tears to go away, as I gave her a tight hug.

"I told Lois last night that I like to think... well, I know I probably don't have birth parents. But I like to think that if I do, they chose you. It wasn't some random coincidence that landed me here. Because I know if I do have parents, and they were able to choose, they couldn't have found anyone better."

Mom smiled, brushing my hair off my forehead. "I don't know about that, but I'm sure they couldn't have found anyone that would love you as much as we do."

She gave me another hug and Dad came over and joined us.

"So," he said a second later, "is my tractor ready yet?"

We laughed lightly. "Just a second, Dad," I told him as I reattached the cover.

Dad leaned over and turned it on, smiling when the engine started up. "Yeah," he said, ruffling my hair, "I guess we'll keep you."

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I could hear Lois' heartbeat going a mile a minute as we walked into the cafeteria. "What's up?" I leaned down to ask her. "We're just having dinner with our friends, right?"

Lois nodded. "It's just that... well, they all think I'm a little crazy or something. That I was unfair to you. What are they going to think about the fact that you've forgiven me?"

I laughed. "Why are you worried about that? You should feel vindicated. You told them that I cheated and I did."

"Except that I can't tell them that," Lois pointed out. "So now they are going to think I made it up and you were benevolent enough to forgive me. You come out looking even better than ever and I'm the lucky crazy girl."

I stopped when I could hear how serious she was in her voice. "Lois, stop," I told her. "First off, these are our friends. Not my friends, but our friends. They don't think you're crazy." She cocked an eyebrow at me. "Well, okay, a little unreasonable at times, but not crazy. Second of all, it doesn't matter what they think, we know that you were right, and I'm lucky that you forgave me, not the other way around."

"Got that right," Lois muttered, but she smiled, knowing now that I could hear such things.

"And lastly, if it makes you feel any better, Steve isn't going to wonder."

"He isn't?" she asked me, surprised.

"No. Have you looked in the mirror lately?" I asked her. "You are far more attractive than me. Steve thinks I'm an idiot for not groveling to get you back before now."

Lois chuckled. "I'm not sure in what world I'm the more attractive one, but whatever."

I could hear that her heartbeat was back to normal, and grabbed her hand to get into the cafeteria before she remembered she was nervous.

Alicia's eyes just about bugged out of her head as we approached hand-in-hand. I shouldn't have been surprised that she was the first to notice. Although it wasn't her reaction I was nervous about. I didn't mention it to Lois, but I was worried about Maddie.

I wasn't sure, but I had gotten the impression before now that Maddie didn't share everyone else's viewpoint that Lois was being unreasonable. I think Maddie guessed, correctly, that my missing that lunch was not a one time thing and Lois broke up with me for much the same reason she did. What would she think when she saw us back together? Would she think Lois decided she didn't care? Or would she realize Lois knew the secret?

I know Maddie said she wanted me to tell someone, but I wasn't sure she wanted to be around to see it. That couldn't be fun for her. She probably meant in a "someday" sort of way, and thought that day would be long in the future. If she knew Lois knew now, would that make it seem like I had never cared for her at all? The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Maddie more than I already had, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. I wasn't going to tell her my secret just because Lois knew it.

Without a word, Lois and I put our stuff down at the table, and went up to the line to pick up our food. I could tell that Lois was taking her time picking things out to avoid having to sit down. I leaned over and grabbed the last piece of chocolate cake, placing it on her tray. "For fortitude," I whispered and she gave me a weak smile.

"So, you guys are back together?" Alicia asked as soon as we sat down.

"Alicia," Chris warned her. "This is their decision."

"I'm just curious," she told him.

"Yes, we are," I said.

"So, you forgave him for missing lunch?" Alicia asked. Lois nodded.

"And you forgave her for getting upset about something so..." She trailed off as Chris put a hand on her shoulder.

"There was nothing to forgive," I told her honestly.

"Cool," Josh said, and Steve nodded in agreement.

Everyone got quiet for a moment, and I looked at Maddie. She smiled at me encouragingly. I wasn't completely sure what she was thinking, but I did get the sense that she was happy for me.

"So," Chris said, looking at Josh, "what are your plans for the summer?"

Alicia grumbled a bit, clearly she wanted to pry more, but after a moment, Josh replied and the topic was dropped.

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"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked Lois as we walked off campus in search of a deserted alley.

She laughed lightly. "It's too late, Clark. Don't you get that? I know your secret, and unless one of your extra features is the ability to erase someone's memory, you can't change that."

"I know that," I told her. "And, no, I can't erase anyone's memory. Or at least I don't think I can. But what I meant was you. Regardless of my choices, or lack thereof, you have a choice. You don't need to get any more involved in this than you already are. You don't need to get any more involved with me."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Lois said, grinning up at me. "We're just getting to the good stuff. And I get the feeling your mom and I are on the same page. By the time we're done with you, you are going to make Spiderman look like... well, a comic book character, I guess."

I chuckled. "I'm not sure if I should be happy about that or not. You're not going to want to dress me up in spandex or something are you?"

Lois backed up from me a step as we entered the first suitable alley we passed. "Hmmm... not a bad idea, Kent. Not a bad idea. You'd look pretty good in spandex."

"So would you," I said, my voice a bit husky as I pulled her closer to me. We shared a kiss - potentially more heated than was appropriate for out in public, but then again, this was only sort of in public.

"Okay, let's go, fly-boy," she commanded me softly as we pulled apart.

"At your command," I told her as I scooped her up in my arms.

The last few days had been... I wasn't sure. Surreal, I guess. It was so weird to be back together with Lois - wonderfully weird, but weird none-the-less. It was even stranger that she knew my secret. It made my relationship with her completely different than any one else I'd ever known. Before Lois, no one besides my parents knew about me. I sometimes thought Grandma Clark might have suspected something, she was Mom's mom after all, but no

one else. Besides, Grandma Clark never mentioned anything, and we had still never talked about it when she died my junior year of high school.

Even if she had known though, Lois was the first person outside of my family, the first person my age, the first peer, I guess, who knew. It was frightening and wonderful all at the same time to have someone know - to have *Lois* know.

"It's so beautiful up here," Lois sighed, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I nodded, although with her eyes focused on the city lights below us, she couldn't see me. "I've always loved this," I told her. "The rest of the things were scary, but flying never was. Well, at least after the first time. But it was the last of my powers or whatever to come in, so it was somehow less scary."

"How come?" she asked me, taking her eyes off the earth below us for a second.

"I guess," I tried to put my thoughts into words. "by the time I woke up that morning floating, we already knew so many other things, I had lost hope of being normal. I guess maybe I'd seem a little less weird if I didn't fly, but really, how much? I already felt alienated from my classmates a little by the other things, and I already had all these secrets. So flying didn't change anything. Just gave me a way to get away from it all."

"So I took to it somewhat quickly. I was also pretty good at learning to control these things quickly by that time. And once I realized how peaceful it was up here, how quiet... I guess I ended up feeling grateful. Flying feels like the one great thing about being weird."

"Still does. Without flying, I couldn't really be the Boy in Black. It would look weird for me to be helping out all the time in Metropolis - people would probably start to realize I was doing things, even if only occasionally, that no one else could do."

"Well, they'll be doing that soon enough anyway," Lois smiled at me.

"Are you sure?" I asked her, still feeling a bit uneasy about this idea she and my mom had. "Going public seems so... dangerous."

"And freeing," Lois said. "Think about how much better it will be to be the Boy in Black when you can help using all of the things you can do."

I nodded as I landed in the cornfield. "That will be nice. As long as it doesn't put my mom and dad in danger. Or you."

"It won't," Lois said, as I set her on her feet. "I'm pretty sure we'll figure it out."

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"Okay," Mom said, a myriad of fabric samples on the table in front of her. "My first thought is that you need a costume."

Lois picked up a bright red piece and grinned at me. "Spandex."

I glanced at Mom.

"Spandex is practical," she told me. When I gave her a disbelieving look, she continued, "The goal of the costume is to keep your identity hidden. Thanks to your... well, whatever it is, you stay looking lean and fit. Spandex will keep eyes on your body rather than your face," Mom said.

"Hey, wait a minute," Lois said. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea."

I laughed. "Really?"

"I don't want lots of women ogling you," she said, but I could tell from the look on her face that she was kidding.

"They can ogle all they want," I told her, "but only you can touch."

"Um, Clark," Dad said, reminding me that Lois and I weren't alone.

"PG type touching," I mumbled as I felt my face get hot.

"We'll be okay with PG-13," Mom said with a smirk. I had to admit to feeling a little bit of satisfaction when Lois blushed, too.

"Right," Dad agreed, picking up a piece of plaid fabric. "Really, Martha?" he asked.

"Oh, that one's for you," Mom said. "I thought it would make a nice kilt."

"You wear kilts?" Lois asked Dad disbelievingly.

Dad chuckled. "Not routinely. Just for Halloween. I lost a bet back when I was in high school. Now I need to dress like a Scotsman every year, including a kilt."

Lois laughed, while Mom and I, who knew the story, smiled.

"Sure makes me wish ole Bill Malloy would move out of town," Dad admitted.

"It's his own fault," Mom told Lois. "He bet Bill he could get me to go to the homecoming dance with him."

"I thought you were from Boston?" Lois said.

"I was. I spent my freshman year of high school here, though. My grandfather's dream was to own a farm, so when they retired, they moved here. One year my mom got sick and my parents decided I should live with my grandparents for a while."

"She was quite popular," Dad told us. "Far prettier than any of the local girls."

"Don't let him fool you," Mom told them. "Things don't change. I was only popular 'cause the boys all thought a city girl would be... willing to go further with them than the local girls."

"Hey, I never..." Dad started.

"I didn't say you did," Mom smiled at him. "I went out with you only because I knew you weren't like that."

"But not to the homecoming dance?" Lois asked.

"I didn't know him yet," Mom said. "So I thought he was just like all the other boys."

"I was," Dad mock whispered to us as he grabbed Mom around the waist. Mom smiled and turned to give him a kiss before breaking away.

"So, I got a few other fabric types, but I really think spandex is the best option," Mom said, coming back to the topic at hand.

"Clearly," I said, looking through the pieces on the table. She had bought spandex in several colors.

"I like the red the best," Lois declared. "It really stands out."

"I like the blue," I offered, thinking maybe I'd blend in with the sky a bit, although it was a pretty bright blue.

"Don't look at me," Dad said. "I'm still not sure about this idea at all."

"Well, I tried something in green already," Mom told us, going into the closet and pulling something out. It was a costume made of a forest green spandex. It was all green, but it had... not briefs, but something like them, and on the outside no less. They were the same green, but with stripes.

"I'm not wearing my underwear on the outside," I told her.

"They aren't underwear," Mom said.

"You wear boxers..." Lois said, trailing off when she realized she'd admitted to knowing what kind of underwear

I wore in front of my parents.

Mom laughed and Dad chuckled, so I decided to ignore it.

"No one else knows that," I said.

"Maddie doesn't?" she asked me. I felt the flush creep up my neck all the way to the top of my hairline. Did she really want to have this conversation in front of my parents? "Right. Not the point," she mumbled.

"Just try it on," Mom said.

I took it from her, already hating it, but carried it up to my bedroom. It was really hard to get on. It took quite a bit of pulling, and then once it was on, it was quite tight. It definitely would require some getting used to, and I was already in favor of a different material. Plus, it looked ridiculous.

Both Mom and Lois wolf whistled when I came downstairs, and I glared to let them know I didn't appreciate it. "It looks stupid," I told them.

Mom nodded. "Yeah, the stripes definitely aren't right."

"But the idea is good," Lois said. "I like the briefs over the rest of it, breaks it up a bit. Makes it seem less like a cat suit or something."

"The spandex isn't that comfortable," I told them.

"You'll get used to that," Lois told me.

"And it really does make sense," Mom said.

"I know. Eyes off my face," I repeated her words from earlier.

"Plus it's thin, so you can wear it under things. That will be useful when you're not in class - you won't need to go back to your room to change if you want to go somewhere," Lois added.

"And it will bring down your wind resistance when you fly," Mom pointed out.

"Mom, I fly now in normal clothes," I reminded her.

"And think how much faster you'll be in spandex," she replied with a smirk. We both knew it was unlikely I'd get much faster.

I turned towards Dad for his opinion. He shrugged. "I have to agree with your mother on this. I think if you wear spandex no one will look at your face."

I blushed and avoided eye contact with Lois. Sometimes my parents were a little too supportive.

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Several hours later, a mess of different spandex pieces around us, we had made a decision. I wasn't completely happy with it - it was still spandex and thus still tight, plus it still had the underwear on the outside, but I had to admit it looked better than the others. It was blue with red underwear and a yellow belt.

"Just wear it for a little while," Lois said. "See if you get used to the feel."

I shrugged. It was hard to imagine I would, but then all I had done for the last several hours was pull the stuff off and on. Maybe leaving it in one place for a little while was a good idea.

Mom was still looking at me critically. "It's missing something," she announced.

"What?" I asked.

Mom shrugged. "I'm not sure. Just something to break up the blue on your chest."

"Like a crest or something," Lois suggested.

"Exactly," Mom agreed. The two of them stood looking me over like a piece of meat. I felt distinctly uncomfortable.

"Whatever it is, it should have the red and yellow in it," Lois said.

"That's it!" Mom exclaimed and ran up the stairs.

We all turned around to watch her, and then gave each other looks to confirm that no one knew what she was talking about when she disappeared from view. She came downstairs a few moments later with a piece of blue flannel.

"This was covering you in your ship," she announced, holding it out to me.

"It was?" I asked, opening it slowly. It was a blue baby blanket. It was wrapped around some sort of crest - just like Lois had suggested. The crest was even made out of red and yellow.

"I must have subconsciously been thinking about this when I chose these colors," Mom said.

I didn't say anything, just stared down at the blanket. "What do you think it means?" I asked Mom, Dad, and Lois. "I mean the crest? Do you think it's a family crest? And the blanket... I mean... if I was really just a science experiment, no one would have bothered to put a blanket on top of me, would they?"

No one said anything for a moment, and then Lois stepped over to me. "I don't know what it is, Clark, but it means that even if you are a science experiment, someone who knew you before your parents, even if it was just one of the scientists, cared about you."

I nodded my head in agreement. Someone had covered me with a blanket. Like Lois had said, someone who had known me before my parents had cared about me - had wanted me to be warm while I was in the ship. Even if I was science experiment, I hadn't been completely unwanted. Well, okay, maybe I was, but I wasn't completely unloved.

Mom reached over to grab my hand and Dad moved over to put his arm around me and Mom. Lois grabbed my other hand as I stared down at the blanket. It was silly really how much this stupid piece of flannel meant to me, but it did mean a lot.

Lois reached out to caress the crest still sitting on top of it. "It's perfect," she whispered. "Look," she smiled up at me. "It's even an S. It's perfect for Superman."

"I told you, I'm not using that name," I said, looking up to see Lois grinning at me. "I'm not," I insisted.

"Well, whatever," Lois said, dismissing my comment. "I'm sure whoever put the crest in your ship would be happy to have it on this suit," Lois said.

Mom nodded. "I'm sure they'd be very proud of the choice you're making," her voice cracked slightly. "I know your Dad and I are."

Dad didn't say anything, but his arm tightened slightly around me.

"So this is it then?" I asked, gesturing to the crest.

"Well, maybe we should wait to put it on until you're sure you want to wear this suit," Mom said. "I don't want to ruin the crest by sewing it on. You may want it some day."

"I'm sure now," I told her. Now that I saw the blanket, saw how well the crest matched the suit Mom had created, I knew I wouldn't want to change to anything else. This was it. My costume would be the one my mother created decorated with the emblem or crest or whatever that someone before Mom and Dad had laid over me.

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I put off making my debut for nearly a month. There were several reasons for it really. There was still a lot I needed to learn. Lois, Mom, Dad, and I had put together a list the weekend Mom created the suit; the most daunting of

which was local laws around the world. I probably didn't need to know the minutiae of every law, but a general sense of big ones made sense. I still needed to work on my geography skills and my language skills. Dad suggested I have some training on dealing with crime victims and Lois suggested learning how to work with criminals would be useful, too.

All in all, there was a lot to do before I could pass myself off as a full fledged superhero. Luckily with my eidetic memory, much of it could be learned quickly and without the need for classes, but it was still a lot.

The main thing slowing me down, though, was the fear of it all. The responsibility of being a superhero. Superheroes were the things of comic books and television shows. They didn't exist in real life. Was I ready to be the first? Could I live up to everyone's expectations considering that those were built on dreams rather than reality?

I wanted to, but it was a daunting task. The Boy in Black had been easy compared to this. At first Lois didn't understand, she saw the Boy in Black as an undercover superhero of sorts - a bit of a Batman-like character. But eventually she started to appreciate my concerns. The Boy in Black went under the radar screen - no one had made the link between all my appearances. And as Mr. White proved, even a newshound wouldn't think much of it even if he saw the link made. More importantly, most of the time, the Boy in Black was only notable for his being American. Even that was only slightly noteworthy much of the time.

This new Boy in Black, or Boy in Blue? I still needed to decide on a name. Anyway, this new character would use all of my strength, all of my special skills. There would be no more hiding who I was. And once I was out there, there was no going back. I mean, I guess if I really hated it, I could say I was an alien and needed to go back to my home planet, but that would just cause all sorts of questions I wasn't prepared to answer. So I needed to be sure. Once I was out there, that was it.

Still, there was one argument for not putting it off too long. Lois' internship opportunity hinged on my coming out. Without it, things stayed as they were, and I alone had the internship. As Lois started to understand my fears, she told me not to consider this - that the Boy in Black was bigger than an internship, particularly since we were both pretty sure she'd land an internship sophomore year easily.

Still it seemed unfair. It certainly felt like if I was going to do this sometime, I should do it now so Lois could write it up.

We had even started working on her article - both discussing what we would say and what not, but also working on the writing. Lois had a reasonable rough draft written, minus whatever the event was that would be my formal "coming out", and we had spent almost whatever time we weren't talking about the actual coming out honing the words. I say almost because we did sometimes divert activities from all the Boy in Black stuff. Sometimes we acted... well, Mom said we acted like typical college students in love. I guess that was accurate. Still, I would have been happier to have all the superhero and internship stuff over with so we could really concentrate on the "typical college student" activities. As much as I loved writing, making out with Lois was a lot more fun.

Given all the conversations we had about the Boy in Black coming out, and the even greater amount of time I spent thinking about it, it was surprising how it all happened. I had turned off my hearing thing after that

weekend. I didn't want to make a rash decision, and I doubted I'd be okay going out as the Boy in Black when I knew I had a costume all ready to go out and could really help without anyone knowing it was Clark Kent doing the helping.

So, I hadn't been on a rescue in weeks, hadn't used any super powers in that time at all. Well, okay, I did fly. Lois and I flew a lot. To Smallville to see my folks pretty regularly, but also all over the world, just because we could. I had never done that before, but Lois saw no reason not to. So on Friday afternoons, while the rest of our friends had class, we used the free Friday afternoons we'd arranged and traveled.

Aside from that though, I hadn't used any super powers. That should have kept the issue of helping from coming up at all, but it didn't.

My "coming out," so to speak, hinged on something so small, so trivial, no one would have believed it if it actually were part of the newspaper article Lois wrote. It was a Wednesday morning, and Lois and I had gotten together for a late breakfast and were making our way towards the academic buildings for our first classes of the day - Nineteenth Century British Lit for Lois and Economics for me.

"Come on, Clark," she teased me as we walked. "Name them all."

"Sleepy," I started and Lois nodded. "Dopey," I added another. "This is silly. I know I know all seven dwarfs."

"Good," Lois said. "So list them."

"I will," I told her, already regretting the bet I had made. It wasn't a big deal, I only owed her a brownie if I lost, but still. It was a matter of pride. "Sleepy," I started again. "Dopey. Doc. Happy." I smiled as I realized it was coming back to me. "Smiley?" I asked, realizing I'd lost it.

"Nope," Lois smiled at me. She looked like she was tasting her success already.

"Ugh! I know them all!" I insisted.

Lois nodded knowingly.

"Fine. Tonight," I told her.

"Tonight what?" she asked confused.

"Tonight I'll take you to Anjelina's for your brownie."

Lois smiled as she linked her arm with mine and we walked to class. When we reached the English building she leaned up to give me a kiss. "I have a late class tonight, so maybe I'll meet you at Anjelina's?"

I nodded. "Okay. Seven?"

"Sounds good," she said as I leaned down and gave her another kiss.

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We were eating our brownies and chatting. For once we were talking about classes and not the Boy in Black. I was completely relaxed, I could tell Lois was, too, and it felt like the best day of the year.

And then it all changed. There was a yell from the back. Everyone in the restaurant turned to see what had caused the commotion, but no further information came. Out of habit, I turned my hearing back on. I could hear a roar, but it wasn't a sound I really recognized. I could see Lois looking to me to provide additional information, and I shook my head to let her know I had no idea what was going on.

Still, I could hear the panic of the people in the kitchen and so I turned my sight on. It was clear the instant I did.

"There's a fire," I said to Lois. "A big one."

"How big?" she whispered back.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure, but the campus buildings around here have already been hit. It's headed this way."

"As in we're about to be burned alive?" she asked.

"Let's go," I told her.

"What do you mean?" she asked, indignant.

"This is it. My debut. But you need to get out of here before it hits."

"I will not!"

I groaned. I should have known she'd say that. "Lois, I don't have time to argue with you."

"Then don't," she cut me off. "Go get the suit and do your thing before Anjelina's is hit."

I started to argue, but then realized she was right. I was never going to convince her to go home, and I didn't have the time to lose. I sighed, but gave her a kiss anyway, as I ran out the door. The instant I was outside, I ducked down an alley and took to the sky, landing on the roof of my dorm. In an instant, I had the outfit Mom had made on and was flying out the window at the end of the hall. I could only hope no one had seen me.

"Good luck, Clark," I heard Lois' whisper as I landed in the back of Anjelina's. "I love you."

I nodded in reply, although I knew she couldn't see me. And then I panicked. I realized I had no idea what to do. And it was too late to turn around and go back. People were pointing and staring. I could hear them whispering about my costume, about how they had seen me flying. It was all over. This was my debut as a superhero - complete with tights and cape, but I was no help whatsoever.

For a moment, though, the panic cleared and I saw the fire trucks nearby. I ran over, feeling stupid in my get up now, but went over to one of the firemen. "I'd like to help," I offered, knowing I sounded like the teenager I still was, rather than the superhero I was pretending to be. "What can I do?"

The firemen shrugged his shoulders. "Beats me," he said.

"We can't get the hoses to reach up there," one of the guys yelled back to him.

"Excuse me, kid," the man said, clearly trying not to laugh.

"I can do that," I said, making my voice firmer now, trying to sound older. I grabbed the hose.

"Hey!" he said. "You can't..." but his admonition fell from his lips as I flew straight up, taking the hose with me, aiming the water directly at the fire. Within moments, I had mostly squelched the fire on this side.

"Wow!" I heard some of the other firemen saying, although the one I first approached was still staring at me in shock.

"There are people trapped in the building over there," one of the people said as I landed.

I took off in the direction he had pointed. People rescuing I could do. And maybe, just maybe, I could do the rest of it, too, with a little practice.

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"You were amazing," Lois said when I saw her later. She had been among the onlookers when the fire was out, but I hadn't been able to go over to her; didn't want to single her out in the suit. So instead, I had taken a flight around the world, making sure it wasn't clear that I had flown from campus.

I had spun back into my regular clothes - I had spent some time in the intervening weeks learning how to adapt

my old trick for the Boy in Black outfit to the new one, and had to admit it was a more comfortable way of putting on and taking off the spandex.

When I got back to campus, it was over an hour later - long enough that no one, even if they had seen past the different hairstyle I had always worn as the Boy in Black or taking my glasses off as I had also done, would have really thought it could have been me.

I went directly to Lois' dorm to find her waiting for me. "Thank you," I told her. "It felt... well, amazing, once I got over being scared."

"I know. I could see your face. You looked so happy," she told me.

"Let's go," I urged her. "We need to finish your article. We need to get it to Mr. White before anyone else submits one."

"It's done," she told me. "I just came back from submitting it."

"What do you mean you already submitted it?" I asked her.

"I couldn't wait," she told me, grinning widely. "I was too excited."

"But... you didn't want me to see it?" I asked, slightly hurt.

"Well..." Lois hesitated. "Here," she said thrusting the article at me.

I looked at it quickly and immediately saw why she didn't want me to see it. "You shared the byline?"

She nodded. "You did so much of the work with me. It was only fair."

"But what if Mr. White..."

"I know," she cut me off. "He could have decided not to give me the internship since I said we worked on this together, but I decided I was okay with that. It was fair that you get the byline. If that meant I didn't get the internship, then that was what was fair."

"Except that I cheated to get the spot to begin with," I reminded her.

"Well, whatever," she brushed that off. "It doesn't really matter, Clark. I talked to him already. And he didn't give me the internship and he took yours away."

"What?" I asked, completely confused.

"He gave the internship to Cat. Said he didn't really see her as an investigative journalist long term, but he did see her in the newsroom, so thought the training would be good for her, and she had done a 'bang up job' on the application."

"He took my internship away?" I asked, still confused. I knew it was petty - I still had cheated, but I couldn't believe he had taken it away. And why? What had Lois' article done? And maybe even a bigger question - why did Lois seem happy about it?

"Yup," she said. "He said he couldn't in good conscious give either of us internships. The internships are for doing grunt work, learning to understand the skills that make a great reporter. He didn't see how he could claim we needed that when we had an article on the front page of the Planet before we even started. So, he's giving us staff positions instead. Just for the summer, and we'll be working with Norcross and Judd as sort of trainees, but it's a real job."

"The article is on the cover of the paper?" I asked, stuck on that fact. I mean, it made sense given the topic, but still...

Lois nodded with her smile wide. "And the staff job pays better than the internship in addition to giving us a



chance to write."

"That's amazing," I smiled at her, starting to grasp all that had happened.

"I know," she continued to look like it was Christmas and her birthday all rolled up into one.

"Wait." I suddenly realized. "Why couldn't you show me your article before submitting it? I didn't need to see the byline."

"I know," Lois said, looking confused. "That's not why I didn't show it to you."

I took another look at the article, reading through the parts that had been done before, reading the new parts she had written more carefully. Still, I had nearly finished the article before I caught it. It was clear - this was the real reason she hadn't shown me the article. "Lois," I said. "I told you. I didn't want to..."

"I know," she cut me off. "But you were never going to decide on a name of your own. This one works."

"But Superman?" I asked, still not sure I could handle the name.

"Yes. And you better get used to it, because with this on the cover of the Daily Planet, it's only a matter of hours before it catches on."

I shook my head at her. I shouldn't have been surprised really. It was just like Lois to do what she wanted, what she knew was right. I chuckled. "I love you," I told her.

"I know," she grinned at me. "I love you, too."

I glanced at her article - our article - again. The Boy in Black was dead. Or maybe he was just all grown up. Regardless of which it was, my new suit wasn't black, and with Lois by my side, I didn't feel so lost and like a little boy. I glanced at the article and then at Lois' smile. Superman was born.

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#### EPILOGUE

"She looks beautiful," Lois said as I spun her around, looking over my head.

I nodded without taking my eyes off of Lois. "She doesn't even compare to you," I told her.

Lois scoffed. "I seem to recall that you found Maddie attractive once upon a time," she reminded me.

"I did. That doesn't mean I don't think you are far prettier."

"Come on, Clark," Lois said, and although she continued to keep one hand in mine and the other on my waist so as not to interrupt our dance, it was clear she wasn't going to let me get away with this. Not that I really expected her to. After nearly five years together, I knew Lois as well as I knew myself.

I spun us around so I could see Maddie and answer honestly. "She does have a glow tonight. This may be the best she's ever looked," I admitted. "Maybe tonight she could actually hold a candle to you. But she still isn't quite as pretty," I told her honestly.

"It's her wedding!" Lois insisted.

"And I said she looked more attractive than I've ever seen her before," I pointed out.

Lois shook her head at me. "You're incredibly pig headed. You just have to get the prettiest girl, is that it?"

I shrugged. "I don't have to. I just did. Lucky me."

Lois laughed as she leaned in to kiss me. As she pulled away the song ended, and we made our way back to our table.

"What were the two of you fighting about out there?" Alicia asked as we took our seats. She was smiling, though.

She loved to tease us about the fact that we fought more than anyone else she knew.

"We weren't arguing," I told her. "We were discussing how pretty Maddie looks."

Chris nodded from his place beside Alicia. "She is glowing," he said.

"\*She's glowing?" Lois asked. "That's nothing compared to your wife."

"This isn't glowing," Alicia said. "This is sweat. And the faint bluish tint of nausea."

"Well the tint of nausea is very becoming on you," I told her.

Alicia rolled her eyes. "Give it up, Clark. I'm pretty well taken."

I chuckled. "So am I," I raised my hand - the one that had Lois' left hand in it, displaying her engagement ring.

Just then the DJ announced the cake cutting ceremony, and we got up to get a better view. Maddie smiled up at Josh sweetly as she smeared cake all over his face, and the group of us laughed. Josh turned to give us a mock glare, but a second later, he leaned over to kiss Maddie, rubbing his cheek against hers to pass some of the frosting off onto her.

"They are so cute together," Sarah said.

"Who would have guessed?" Alicia asked. "I mean, now that I see them together, they make so much sense, but I never really thought of them together when we were in school."

"Me neither," Lois admitted. "But when you think about it, they were both going after such creative jobs, it's not like they had nothing in common."

"But isn't that what kept them apart your last year of college?" Sarah asked. "Didn't Josh have concerns?"

I nodded. "They were silly, though. He was worried about how they would survive financially since neither of them are in lucrative careers. But given how much they loved each other already at that point..."

"Well, they don't need to worry about that now," Lois said. "With Josh's first book getting published and Maddie's job at the museum, I think they're set."

Steve laughed. "Set may be stretching it. I don't think Josh is expecting his first book to make the best seller's list or anything."

"It will make more than a yearly salary at the Planet," I pointed out. "No publisher would take it if that wasn't the case."

"I can't believe he has a book published already," Lois said, sounding slightly jealous. "Or nearly."

"What?" Alicia asked her. "Being part of the 'Hottest Team in Town' isn't enough for you?"

Lois shrugged. "No. It's really not."

We all laughed as Maddie and Josh came over. "How much of a mess am I?" Maddie asked as she approached.

"You look beautiful," Steve told her.

Lois leaned over and wiped the remaining dot of whipped cream off her cheek. "You really do."

"We're so glad you all could come," Josh said as Chris stood and offered Josh his seat. Josh sat down gratefully, Maddie sitting on his lap.

"Did you really think any of us would miss this?" Alicia asked.

Maddie gave a pointed look at the bump that was not-so-hidden under Alicia's dress.

"Oh come on," Alicia said. "You asked me first. I told you I thought I'd be fine. I'm only six months pregnant."

"But you didn't know you'd still be suffering from morning sickness," Josh pointed out.

"Well, if it was anyone but the two of you, I wouldn't have done it," Alicia admitted.

"The food smells are still bothering you?" Lois asked.

Alicia nodded. "Don't worry," she told us. "I'm sure in a month I'll be better."

"And we'll be back from Thailand," Josh said to Lois, "and all ready to celebrate your wedding."

"You better be," Lois mock challenged him.

"And what about you two?" Maddie asked Sarah and Steve.

Sarah coughed. "You're kidding, right? We aren't anywhere near ready yet."

"I still can't believe we've managed to stay together for more than a year," Steve admitted. Like him, Sarah had dated a fair amount in college. They had met on a business trip a year after graduation. Neither of them had really changed their behavior from college yet, and at first their relationship wasn't supposed to be anything more than a one night stand. To our surprise though, Steve came back from his trip half in love with Sarah.

He flew out to Indiana a week later, pleaded with Sarah to give him a chance, and they had been together ever since.

"We're still getting used to living in the same state," Sarah told Maddie. "We should do that before we move on to talk of marriage."

"Oh, I completely forgot," Chris announced. "You won't believe what I heard last week." No one said anything for a moment. "It's about Paul," Chris continued.

"Paul Bender?" Lois asked.

"That's the one," Chris told her.

"Did he finally get fired from the Star?" Steve asked. "Or... he was already fired, right?"

Lois nodded. "He was fired from the Star before we finished college. Apparently he was caught stealing someone else's article."

Chris nodded. "Well, word has it he's been fired from the Dirt Digger now."

"Also for stealing articles?" Josh asked.

Chris shook his head. "Worse. Apparently, he didn't live up to the high and mighty standards the Dirt Digger has for source verification."

"The Dirt Digger has standards for that?" I asked.

Chris chuckled. "According to Gordy, Paul was on thin ice for low production. He was trying to steal stories there, too, but, you know, he's not so young and charming anymore. So he decided to completely fabricate a story. The Dirt Digger's standards are low, but they do require at least one source, even if it's not that credible."

"I wonder what he'll do now," Lois said.

"Do you care?" I asked her, surprised.

"Sort of."

"Lois, he never grew up," Alicia pointed out. "He was still trying to do what he had done to you back in college. It's been five years. Don't think he deserved it?"

Lois nodded. "Still, I'd hate for him to starve."

"He's not going to starve," I told her, squeezing her hand. I loved that despite her intense need for truth and justice she didn't want Paul to be too downtrodden. "Paul's the consummate schmoozer. He'll find something to do."

Lois nodded her agreement.

"If we can get the bride and groom out on the floor," the DJ called.

Maddie groaned. "Don't we get a break? It's our

wedding."

"And that means everyone wants to see you," Josh pointed out.

"Us," Maddie corrected.

"No one wants to see the groom," he told her. "It's the bride they want to see. And no wonder, you look more beautiful than I've ever seen you."

Maddie reached up to caress his cheek. "I love you," she said tenderly, blushing when she realized we were still watching them.

"It's your wedding," Lois told her. "You're allowed."

"It's time for the throwing of the bouquet and the garter," the DJ clarified his call for Maddie and Josh.

Maddie looked at Lois. "I expect to see you front and center," she declared as she and Josh made their way back to the dance floor.

I kissed Lois on the nose. "I hate catching," she said.

"Doesn't matter if you do or don't. I'm going to marry you in four weeks whether or not you catch the bouquet," I told her.

"You better," she kissed me lightly before joining Sarah on the dance floor with the other single women.

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"Can you help me?" Maddie asked me a little later. I had just come out of the bathroom and Maddie looked like she was making her way out of the ladies' room.

"Sure," I said. "What do you need?"

"The train," Maddie said, pointing to it. "My sister hustled it for me, but some of the buttons seem to be coming undone." She turned around and I could see where some of the train was falling. I knelt next to her and moved to button the few places where the train loops had fallen off.

"You look beautiful," I told her while I worked.

"Thanks," she said, turning to smile at me.

"All done," I told her, getting up. "Can I escort you back to the room?" I asked, offering her my elbow.

She took it and we walked in silence for two beats before I said, "You know, I want to thank you."

"For what?" Maddie asked, stopping to look at me.

"For still being my friend. I know I wasn't the best boyfriend all those years ago, and I don't blame you for breaking up with me. I'm not sure I even deserved your friendship after that."

"I knew that you were going through something," Maddie told me. "I knew I wasn't seeing the real you. You were so uncomfortable keeping secrets. Although, I guess you've gotten better at that."

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

Maddie didn't say anything at first, then when I continued to wait for her to explain, she asked, "Is it tiring having two jobs or do you need less sleep than the rest of us?"

I started to ask what she was talking about, but looking into her eyes I realized there was no point. She knew.

"I don't need as much sleep as humans," I told her.

"So you are an alien?" she asked me quietly. "That isn't something Lois made up when you invented your history?"

I shrugged. "No. We made it up. I don't know what I am, but I'm pretty sure I'm not human. Too many things for it all to be random mutations." I looked at her for a second, feeling somewhat ashamed. She was so calm, so matter-of-fact. Like Lois, my mental images of her repulsion were far from reality. "How long have you known?" I asked her.

Maddie shrugged. "I don't even know anymore. Not long after the article where you came out. It just all fit."

"Does Josh know?" I asked her.

Maddie shook her head. "At least, I don't think he does. I haven't asked. I wouldn't be able to lie to him if he asked me, so I just haven't brought it up. And in case you're wondering, I'd gladly lie to anyone else who asked. Just not Josh."

"Thank you," I told her softly. "That's more than I deserve from you."

"I'm glad you were able to confide in someone," she said to me, waving off my comment. "And I'm not upset that it wasn't me. I cared about you a lot. Still do, but you know what I mean. But it was never the same between us as it is with Josh. Like it is with you and Lois. I've never been upset you didn't tell me."

"Still, I wanted you to know that I know. I guess... since I figured it out, I always thought that perhaps you didn't tell me less because you can't have everyone know than because you were scared of how I'd react. I wanted you to know that I wouldn't have cared. I would have been surprised, but it doesn't change who you are. You're still one of the best guys I know."

"You are the best woman I know. Well, aside from Lois," I told her, feeling slightly overwhelmed. I hadn't expected any of this.

"I'm glad I didn't give up on you so much that we couldn't be friends afterwards," Maddie told me. "I'm really glad you're still in my life."

I gave her a tight hug. "Me, too, Mads."

"Hey, as I recall, you had your chance," Josh said in my ear, smiling at me good-naturedly.

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"Maddie knows," I told Lois as I drove to Star's apartment after the wedding. Lois had moved out of her own place a week ago when the lease expired. I had moved into our new place when my lease expired, but Lois hadn't wanted to move in with me before the wedding. Not that she had anything against living together, but she felt like it would be too much temptation. We had promised ourselves we'd wait until our wedding night, and while in the previous years Lois had been less committed to that goal than I was, now that we were in the home stretch, she was holding firm.

"I know," she said. "She told me, too."

"She did?" I asked.

Lois nodded and I could see her smiling at me out of the corner of my eye. "She told me how glad she was that you and she had never made things work. How much she had been in love with you and still loved you, but how her old feelings for you didn't even compare with how she felt about Josh."

I smiled at hearing that. "The same is true for me," I told Lois.

"What?"

"I was in love with Maddie," I told her. I don't know that the issue of love had ever come up, and certainly when we were first dating I hadn't wanted to say anything as sure as I had been that I wasn't in love with Lois. "Or at least I definitely thought I was. Sometimes I wondered if being in love with her meant I would have told her. But whether it did or not, my feelings for Maddie never compared to what I felt for you then, let alone what I feel for you now."

Lois reached over to place a hand in mine. "I don't think the fact that you wouldn't tell Maddie your secret means you weren't in love with her," she said softly. "You were so unsure of yourself back then."

"Does it bother you?" I asked her.

"What?" she looked at me confused.

"I don't know. Any of it. That I was in love with someone else besides you. That Maddie knows about me?"

Lois shook her head. "No. It actually makes me feel good that you were in love with her. It's like you really know what else is out there and you still chose me, if that makes any sense. It makes me feel lucky to be with you."

I raised our joined hands to my lips. "Don't be silly. It's me who is lucky."

Lois squeezed my hand tighter as she said, "And I'm not upset she knows. It's not surprising really given your relationship. Maddie's not stupid. But I also think she's completely trustworthy."

"She was sincere," Lois told me. "She wanted me to know that she was happy that you had confided in me. That she was glad you ended up with someone who pushed you to go public. She wasn't sure if she would have even considered that, but she said she knew it made you happy."

"To be public?" I asked. How did Maddie know that?

Lois nodded. "She said that's how she knew really. She wasn't sure when it was that she started to suspect, but she thought something sort of clicked when you talked about your internship application. But she knew for sure when Superman appeared. You looked happier, and that sort of clinched it for her."

I pulled up in front of Star's, and ran around the car to get Lois' door. It was mostly open before I got there, of course, but she smiled gratefully at me anyway.

Star had bought a large apartment as she used part of it as an office. Her day job was working as a paralegal for one of the more ethical law offices in town. In fact, her boss had represented Superman once when he had needed a lawyer. But as a side hobby, Star offered fortune telling. She did it for free as she claimed that she didn't feel right charging for her gift, but wanted a relaxed place to do it in - she claimed it made her predictions more accurate. While I teased her about this assertion all the time, I had come around. Star either really did have a gift or was just really lucky - she had continued to forecast more true things about me and Lois than even she knew.

"Can I ask you a question?" Lois asked as we walked up the walkway.

"Sure."

"If Maddie had somehow found out back then, would you guys have stayed together? Do you think you'd be married now?" she asked me.

I looked over at her. Was she a little jealous after all? I couldn't tell from the look on her face.

"I don't think so," I told her. "I don't know for sure, of course. I do think we would have stayed together longer. But it's not like we only met you and Josh because we were broken up. It seems to me that one of us would have realized we had stronger feelings for someone else at some point."

"It may have been a messy break-up, but I think it still would have happened," I told her.

"Well, I'm glad that didn't happen," Lois said, resting her head on my arm as we stood in Star's doorway. "I'm glad we're all still friends."

"Me, too," I told her. "Good night, Lois," I whispered.

She smiled up at me. "I love you, too," she grinned.

I leaned over to place a soft kiss on her lips. "I'll be by in the morning?" I asked.

"Just be careful with my car," Lois said. I had been

using her car since she had moved in with Star as there was no place to park it here. I didn't have a car anyway.

"Hey! That car is going to be mine too in a few weeks," I reminded her.

"And I'll want you to be careful with it then, too," she grinned at me.

I gave her another kiss as I laughed. "Fair enough," I told her. "I'll be perfectly careful while I drive it. I just hope I don't accidentally key it on my way to the door."

"Don't you dare!" Lois mock glared at me.

"You're too easy," I told her.

She shook her head at me before she turned around to open the door and disappeared from sight.

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"How was the wedding?" Cat asked the following morning while we made our way downstairs. The three of us had joined the Planet as permanent staff shortly after college, and had quickly developed a habit of going downstairs everyday we were all there to get coffee. There was coffee in the newsroom, of course, but it was atrocious.

"It was beautiful," Lois said. "Maddie and Josh looked so happy."

"And Steve?" Cat asked.

Lois and I shared a look. Steve and I had continued to share a room throughout college - he really had become a much better roommate by the time we finished our freshman year. At some point, he and Cat had had a brief fling. At the time it seemed to make sense - neither of them wanted more.

But then somehow this had developed into a pattern - every few months or so, the two of them would get together for a night or two. It was never anything serious so much as repeated. By our senior year, though, it was clear that Cat felt something for Steve. I'm not sure she would have called it love or even a crush, so much as she didn't like it when she was up for getting together and he blew her off.

Steve had never really developed any stronger feelings for Cat, though, and then after college they'd only gotten together once before he met Sarah.

"He seemed pretty happy with Sarah," Lois said gently, placing a hand on Cat's arm.

"That's great!" Cat said with false cheer.

"Cat," I said.

"Don't," she warned me. "It's not a big deal. It's not like Steve's the first guy who hasn't felt the same way about me as I felt about him."

"I know," I told her, "but..."

"You may recall I asked you out once upon a time," she said, smiling at me, even though I could still see the hurt in her eyes.

"You did?" Lois asked.

Cat laughed. "Yeah, not that it meant anything. It was freshman year when you guys had broken up."

"You had a crush on Clark?" Lois asked, surprised.

"No," Cat said clearly. "I just thought he was hot. I hate to tell you, Lois, but half of the freshman class thought your boyfriend was hot. And the other half just hadn't met him yet."

Lois grinned. "That I did know," she said as she smiled at me.

"So," Cat said, choosing her words carefully. "You really think Steve and Sarah are happy?"

Lois nodded.

Cat nodded back. "Matt from the sports desk asked me out last week. I said no, but I do kind of like him. Maybe I

should reconsider."

"Matt Baines?" I asked her. She nodded.

"Why would you even want Steve when you can have Matt Baines?" Lois asked. It was commonly agreed upon that Matt was the most eligible of the bachelors at the Planet.

Cat shrugged. "It's just... I guess I feel like I've been waiting for Steve for so long."

"That's all the more reason to stop," I told her.

Cat nodded and gave a small giggle. "I guess it would be good to get this one area of my life in order."

"Cause the rest of your life is such a mess?" Lois asked her. "I would think you'd be pretty well set. Isn't being the lead gossip columnist for the Planet your dream job?"

"Yes," Cat conceded. "It's not work that's a mess. It's just with looking for a new place, it feels like everything else is. But you're right. It really is just finding a condo to buy. Buying my first place feels overwhelming, but the process of finding something and getting the paperwork done will only last so long."

We nodded in agreement. We had been trying to provide some help to Cat, having just been through the process ourselves, but there was only so much you could do to make buying a new home easier.

"So, how are wedding plans coming along?" she asked us as we re-entered the Daily Planet building.

"Good," Lois told her. "I think we have nearly everything set. You're free Wednesday night for the dress fitting, right?" Cat nodded. "Great. It really will be so much easier I think to have us all go in at once."

"You know the dress fitting for your bridesmaids is unimportant, right?" Cat asked her. "We can all look stupid in ill-fitting dresses. That will just work better to make sure you shine."

"Lois doesn't need any help with that," I piped up.

Lois rolled her eyes at me. "You can stop sucking up, Clark. You've got me already."

The three of us laughed as Perry's voice rang out through the newsroom. "Kent and Kent - in my office now!"

"Coming, Chief," I called back as we bid goodbye to Cat.

Lois had changed her name to Kent right after college. We knew it was only a matter of time before we got married, and she didn't want to establish herself as Lois Lane and then have to change it. We had talked about her using Lois Lane-Kent after we got married, but then decided that was too long a byline, particularly given that she'd often be sharing a byline with me. So since her name at the Planet needed to match her legal name, she had just gone ahead and changed it ahead of time.

"Hi, Perry," Lois said as we walked in and took seats in front of his desk.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"I want a status update on the Berlinger investigation," he opened with.

"We have an interview with a source this morning," Lois told him.

"And we have the first article - on the election fraud in the primaries - almost all written. We want to wait to have a little more evidence to tie it to the general election before finalizing it," I told him.

"Great," Perry smiled. "I also have a favor to ask you."

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"I have a young kid coming in today. He's a freshman at

Met U. Just got his article for the freshman internship and it looks really promising. It's not exactly about sexism at the medical school or the appearance of aliens," he said smiling at us, "so I'm not planning to print it, but with what I saw of the stuff he wrote for classes, I've decided to give him the internship. Would you be willing to talk to him? Maybe give him some pointers? Obviously, he'll be coming in more like a standard intern than either of you did, but Professor Matthews said he's still really nervous. It would be great for him to get some pointers from you on ways to improve, but also to talk to him about how you became staffers."

"Sure, we'd love to help," I told Perry.

"Great," Perry replied. "He's coming by around three. I'll have him ask for you. His name is Jimmy Olsen."

"I bet he looks like a kid," Lois said to me as we got up.

"You both still look like kids to me," Perry smiled from his desk.

"Hey!" Lois said. "We're two time Kerth winners!"

Perry nodded his head. "Yes, but you got a head start. I've never had freshmen who published anything in the paper before, let alone won a Kerth before they'd finished their sophomore year of college."

Lois shrugged. "That is why you hired us."

"Yes," Perry agreed. "And I'm hoping to get another Kerth winning story out of you before your wedding, so git."

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I sat with a blank piece of paper in front of me and a pen in my hand. It had been my idea that we write our own vows, and it still felt like the right thing to do. Still, it was harder than I thought to sum up our experiences over all of these years into a short concise speech that communicated the depth of my feelings for Lois. We had been through so much together...

"I can't believe you," she said as she stopped in front of me, her hands on her hips.

"What?" I asked her. How had I annoyed her today? I had just gotten up twenty minutes ago.

"I thought all the freshmen dropped out of submitting pieces to the Met Titan," she said.

"You didn't," I pointed out.

"Well, besides me," she said exasperated, as if her exclusion was a given.

"And me, I guess," I replied, trying to match her arrogant tone.

"Why are you bothering?" she asked me. "You know they don't take freshmen."

I shrugged. "Why are you bothering?"

"I'm Lois Lane," she said. "I'm going to win the Pulitzer some day. My goal is to win it before I'm thirty. I'm not going to meet that goal without getting an early start."

"You know what," I screamed, "you were right. I do find you difficult to deal with!"

It was all of two hours after our perfectly pleasant walk across campus. How we had gone from the point where we could actually be nice to each other to this, I didn't know. Only Lois Lane, though. That I knew. No one else had ever infuriated me like this before.

"Well, you know what?" Lois screamed back. "I don't care! You find me difficult to deal with as I'm not like the Daisys and Sally Maes back home on farm land. If you're

going to make it in the big city, you better learn to deal with real women!"

"Paul," Lois said as she took the seat next to mine.

"What?" I asked as I turned to face her.

"Paul," she repeated, and when I guess I looked as confused as I felt, she continued. "You were right. I was being unfair. So, the boy I have a crush on is named Paul." With that proclamation, she turned away, opened her notebook, and gave off very clear body language that the discussion was over.

"Lois?" I asked, cautiously, afraid to turn what had been a somewhat pleasant, if confusing and short conversation into another argument.

"Hmm?" she asked, looking at me as if we hadn't been speaking just a moment ago.

"Are we... are we friends now?"

She shrugged. "You told me once that I could be both - not so argumentative and still not let people walk all over me. Did you mean that? I don't seem too... I don't know. Overbearing now?"

"Not at all," I told her, trying to let her see how much I liked the new version of Lois. "You seem... real now. Whole. And it's okay to get angry at people once in a while."

Lois smiled at me, her whole face lighting up. "Thanks, Clark," she whispered, just before she leaned over and kissed me.

"Well, there you are."

"Hi," I said shyly, not sure what to say.

"So," Lois glanced at her watch. "You're only seven hours late."

"I'm sorry," I said meekly.

"Care to tell me where you were?" Lois asked, and there was no mistaking the challenge in her voice.

"I... um...", I couldn't think of any sort of answer. A complete lie, a half truth, anything would work right now, but I was coming up completely dry.

"Well, explain it to me then," she said.

"I can't," I told her, hating the look in her eyes. They were flashing with anger, but I could see the hurt behind that; could see the tears shimmering on the surface.

"Well then... I can't do this," Lois said quietly. "I can't date you anymore."

"Please, Lois," I said. "Please..."

"Please what?" she asked. "Give you another chance to disappear and blow me off? Give you another chance to break my heart?"

"I..." I trailed off, having no idea of what to say.

"That's what I thought," Lois said. "Well, the answer is no. I'm not putting up with this. If you want to tell me where you were, please do so now. Otherwise, I have no interest in talking to you about it anymore."

"I can't," I said again.

Lois nodded her head at me, ducking it as a tear fell down her cheek. "Okay, then. Good to know. Goodbye, Clark."

"So that's how you knew to tie those stories together!" she said, her voice a mixture of anger and wonder. "I knew

you cheated!"

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"Who's the right person?" I asked her. "Someone who seems really wonderful but then has to deal with the fact that her boyfriend is... whatever it is I am. Space trash? Rejected alien? Failed science experiment?"

There was silence for a moment before Lois quietly said, "My friend."

"Where you came from doesn't change who are, Clark," she continued when no one else spoke. "I don't care if you're a failed science experiment or a Cyborg. You're still the guy who held my hand as we walked to the disciplinary hearing, the only one I felt would be understanding enough for me to tell about my crush on Paul."

"I... um..." I stumbled over my words. I hadn't imagined I'd ever have the opportunity to say them, and even when I fantasized that I did, Mom and Dad certainly weren't in the room. Still, this was the right time. "I love you," I whispered. "I wanted to tell you all this before, but..."

"But you were worried what I would think," Lois cut me off. "I think I can sort of understand that. But it doesn't matter to me, Clark. 'Cause I love you, too."

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"Let's go," she said, leaning on my door jam.

"Where?" I asked, still sort of lost in the discussion we had had in my last class. It was only noon - I had just finished my last class of the week, and I wasn't sure I was up for another discussion about the evolution of the Boy in Black.

"The Eiffel Tower. The Great Wall of China. The pyramids. The North Pole. The Empire State Building. I don't care where, just somewhere."

"Okay," I said slowly, trying to determine what was going on. "Why?"

"Why?" she asked me, incredulously. "Why not? Because we can. Haven't you ever flown before? Gone somewhere just because?"

"Well, no," I admitted. "I mean, yes. I have flown of course. But not gone somewhere without a reason."

"Well, you owe me," she smiled. "I decided not to hurt you for cheating. It turns out you couldn't repay me with flying lessons, I can accept that. But then I expect something else. A free pass to the seven wonders of the world, or sever other locations of my choice. Or a fantastic date making use of your ability to take me anywhere in the world. Something."

I smiled at her as I started to understand her thinking. "That seems only fair," I told her.

"Good. So let's go."

I chuckled. "Let's go back to your dorm and get your coat."

"Why?" she asked me.

"Because best I can remember it's the middle of the night in Beijing right now. It might be chilly for your private tour of the Great Wall."

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I had meant to fly to Kansas, but barely registered that I hadn't when I saw Lois stand up. "Come on," she whispered. "I packed a bag for you and told Steve and Star it was an anniversary. Star is staying with a friend for the night."

I nodded, although I didn't really hear her. But when she

reached a hand out to me, I grasped it tightly and let her lead me away.

She led me back to her dorm and then into the girl's bathroom where she locked the door. "This isn't going to make me any new friends," I heard her mumble, but didn't bother to ask her why she was locking everyone out. She came over to me and untucked my shirt. I started to bat her hands away - I wasn't interested in that sort of thing right now - but I didn't have the energy. But Lois finished undressing me in silence without ever turning towards more amorous activities. I guess the fact that she stayed dressed should have been a clue, but I only realized it later.

She fiddled with the knobs in the shower and once she was satisfied, moved me under the water. The shower was nearly silent, with me just standing there, until Lois put a dollop of shampoo in her hands and asked me to lift her up. I picked her up by her waist mutely, and she shampooed my hair. I let her down when she was done, doing everything on auto-pilot, while Lois wrapped me in a towel.

Finished with her ministrations, she handed me a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, and once I was dressed, she moved me back to her room and pushed me towards her bed.

"Tell me about it," she said quietly, taking a seat next to me.

"I can't," I told her, the words sounding strangled and torn from my throat.

"Yes, you can," she insisted.

"I can't," I repeated. "It was awful. I didn't get there in time and everyone died. I can't... I can't do this anymore."

"Yes, you can," she reassured me, stroking my back lightly. "You can and you will. You won't always be successful, but you'll do what you can. Whatever you can do is enough, Clark. More than enough. You need to believe that."

I wasn't sure if I did or not, but it felt good to hear, so I nodded my head.

She kept stroking my back until my tears dried up and I drifted off to sleep.

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My heart was thudding in my ears. Only Lois. It was a stupid classroom assignment. Only Lois would turn it into a full scale investigation. Only Lois would put her life in danger for the chance to get an A on an assignment.

'Call to me,' I thought silently, willing Lois to think of it. I was getting used to it now, the calls for Superman. I had regular hours, if you could call them that. I didn't do rescues during school hours and Lois had put that in one of the articles we had cowritten during the summer. We had explained it as my helping out in other locations, and then I had spent some time on our days off doing daytime rescues in Europe and South America during the summer to prove it. We banked on the idea that after a few examples had been reported, no one would check that it was true - since I wasn't really off doing small rescues during those hours once school started.

So far, it had worked. I did get the occasional call, but it was only for real emergencies. And I had gotten good at balancing Superman duties with classes. My grades had suffered a bit, but not noticeably so, and with our success this summer at the Planet, my job prospects were already quite good for after graduation anyway.

During my non-class hours, though, I got lots of calls. I ignored some as I needed to get homework done and my

parents and Lois urged me to try to balance having a life with school and Superman, but I tried to respond to most of them. So I had gotten used to hearing calls for help nearly all the time when I had my hearing turned on. Still, I thought I'd be able to pick out Lois' voice among the others if she would just call to me. 'Call to me,' I thought again.

I flew in concentric circles over Metropolis, hoping to see her even if I couldn't hear her when finally the call came through, faint but definitely Lois. "Help, Superman." I flew straight to where she was, locked in a barrel, quickly making its way over the pier. As it hit the water, I heard her words clearly. "I love you, Clark. If you don't get to me in time, please know that it's not your fault. It's mine. And I'm so sorry. I love you so much."

I pulled the barrel out of the water before the level reached her mouth. "I can't believe you," I started shouting before I even opened it up, knowing full well she could hear me. Knowing that anyone else in the vicinity could hear me and not caring what it meant - what it would mean if someone caught Superman yelling at Lois Lane. "How could you be so stupid? What if I hadn't heard you?" I was pulling her out of the barrel now. "What if I had lost you?" The tears were falling down my cheeks now and I pulled her to me as she pulled me to her. I could feel the matching tears on her cheeks as she stroked my hair.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into my hair. "I'm so sorry."

"I can't," I choked out. "I know I need to get better at this, that you're going to keep taking chances, but Lois, I can't. You can't do this to me."

"I'm sorry," she whispered again. "I'm so sorry, Clark."

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"It's beautiful," she whispered, shivering even in her winter jacket as she looked up at the Northern Lights.

"Not even half as beautiful as you," I told her softly.

Lois giggled. "Are you channeling Nora Roberts again?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "You know that there is no one in my life as important to me as you are." It was a question and a statement all at once, and she nodded her head in reply. "I can't imagine the past four years without you. I wouldn't even be me without you. And I certainly wouldn't be Superman."

"You would, too," she interrupted me, but I continued as if she hadn't spoken.

"I don't want to imagine what my future would be like without you by my side," I told her.

"You don't need to," she reassured me.

"Promise me," I asked her.

"I do," she replied.

"No," I corrected her, placing one knee on the ice of the glacier below us. "For real. Please, Lois, promise me in front of our family and friends. Be my wife."

Lois looked at me, tears in her eyes. "Of course," she whispered.

"Lois," I said, trying to remember to keep my voice up so everyone in the church could hear me. "I stand before you a different person than the one you met - a better person. And that is because of you. You push me to be the best me I can be, and you make me want to meet that goal. You make me want to deserve you."

"I don't. I know that. I know how lucky I am to have you."

"I have never known someone more accepting, more generous, more spirited, or more idealistic than you. I love

each of those parts of you. Some annoy me and some delight me, and all make spending my days with you a joy and a constant surprise."

"This day has been a long time in coming, but not because I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you, didn't always know that was my most urgent desire. Only because I wanted to make sure that when I promised you my life, it was the life you deserved."

Lois smiled at me, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"Lois?" Perry quietly prodded her. Strangely enough, Perry was an ordained minister and had asked to marry us. We couldn't think of a better person, so had immediately said yes.

"Clark," Lois said, the tears audible in her voice. "When I met you on the lawn of Met U all those years ago, I dismissed you as a hick. I mean, you came from a town called Smallville. As far as I was concerned, the only redeeming quality was that my eighth-grade prom date now lived there, and I had dismissed him as not worth my time when he moved." Lois shot a brief grin at Chad, who stood behind me with Pete, Josh, Steve, and Chris.

"But what did I know back then of Smallville? Almost nothing, it turned out. Because as much as I looked on the small town with disdain, out of it came the best man I've ever met."

"You are the prince I didn't know to dream of when I was a little girl, and the superhero I dream of now." She gave an impish smile at her way of working the reference in, and I chuckled softly.

"I can't wait to spend the rest of my days with you," she told me, her eyes sparkling. "I know that like the days we've already been together, they will be fun and filled with adventure, challenging me to be a better sport than I naturally am. But then you challenge me in many ways - to be a better reporter, a better partner both in work and in life, and a better woman."

"I hope to spend the rest of my days trying to meet your expectations in all of those."

I leaned down, but at that last minute remembered and turned towards Perry. He was already chuckling at me when he said, "It's okay, Clark. You can kiss the bride."

"I love you," I whispered before I kissed her.

We broke apart a few moments later to applause. I could see my mother with tears falling down her cheeks, and my dad, his cheeks red at his pleasure. Lois' parents were on the other side, smiling at us in a way I know Lois didn't often get to see. Lucy, Star, Alicia, Maddie, and Cat were to Lois' side as her bridesmaids, but I could see their enthusiastic applause, and the similar response from the guys on my side.

"For the first time," Perry said when the church quieted, "I present to you Clark and Lois Kent."

I knew what we were supposed to do at that moment was to walk down the aisle, but that didn't feel right to me. So instead, I turned toward her and gave her another kiss. "Wrong direction, Flyby," she whispered as we broke apart.

I shook my head. Leaning my head towards hers, I whispered, "Towards you is always the right way to go."

THE END