

the
BIG GIRLS'
BOOK
of

Smallville
BIG BOYS

the
BIG GIRLS'
BOOK
of

Smallville
BIG BOYS

a clark/lex slash zine
edited by
caroline k. carbis & tallis

the
BIG GIRLS'
BOOK
of

Smallville
BIG BOYS

a Clark/Lex Smallville slash zine
110,000 words
editing by Caroline K. Carbis and Tallis
design by Caroline K. Carbis
published by
Oblique Publications
PO Box 43784
Tucson, AZ
USA 85733-3784

Oblique Publications' catalogue of zines
is available for free download in PDF format
from its website:
www.oblique-publications.net
oblique@oblique-publications.net

WARNING

This anthology contains same-sex adult-oriented material (slash). It is intended for readers of legal age who understand the nature of the contents and wish to read them.

THE BIG GIRLS' BOOK OF SMALLVILLE BIG BOYS is an amateur publication, copyright © February 2003 by Oblique Publications. All rights reserved. This copyright is not intended to infringe upon or conflict with other holders of copyrights. PDF files of Smallville Big Boys (at www.oblique-publications.net) may be freely downloaded and printed when they become available. No archiving or posting at other websites is permitted without the express permission of the publisher.

Smallville

CONTENTS

- 7** **SHERRY AND OAK**
M. Fae Glasgow
The best vintages, like the best people, shouldn't be hurried. Post Redux.
- 9** **VICTORIOUS**
Fajrdrako
Men were so easy to manipulate—or at least Lex had been before.
- 16** **CARS**
M. Fae Glasgow
Everyone thinks they know why Lex loves fast cars, but Lex knows better. First season.
- 19** **COCHINEAL**
M. Fae Glasgow
How Lex Luthor gave birth to Superman. Post Red.
- 43** **HIS MASTER'S VOICE**
M. Fae Glasgow
Lex knows exactly what his father would want him to do. First season.
- 46** **FIREFLIES AND BUTTERFLIES**
M. Fae Glasgow
Sometimes, 'yes' is the last thing Lex needs to hear Clark say. First season.
- 54** **A TANGLED WEB**
M. Fae Glasgow
Why would Lex need Helen to break down the walls around his heart when Clark has already reduced those walls to a pile of pretty pebbles? Post Visage.
- 61** **THE PRINCE LEX**
Jane Mailander
Smallville recast in the classic film The Princess Bride. First season. Humor.
- 80** **LIGHTNING CRASH**
M. Fae Glasgow
Bringing light to the dark places with the touch of his hand on his own rain-slicked skin. First season.
- 83** **DRESSAGE**
M. Fae Glasgow
Damnit, why did sex objects have to insist on being real people? First season.
- 88** **EXEUNT**
M. Fae Glasgow
Even when it's the stuff of legends, will love always be enough? Future, not comic canon.
- 90** **THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD**
M. Fae Glasgow
Ray's used to Fraser risking his life in wildly bizarre ways, but this is the first time it's led to anywhere quite as bizarre as Smallville. Second season Smallville/pseudo-Call of the Wild Due South.

Sherry & Oak

M. FAE GLASGOW

*H*e'd been a boy the last time he'd done this. Of course, he'd considered himself every inch a man at the time, and had measured himself to prove it. Pointing out to his dad that he'd outdone his father at the ripe old age of only 14 (and with the glorious potential for further growth still glowing rosily in his future) had been the highlight of his life at that point—much better, even, than losing his virginity. Well. If he were to count losing his virginity the way the world did. Which he wouldn't, because he'd be damned if he was going to count the times he'd been used. He was still being used, but at least now it was with his active cooperation: he was using his partners just as much as they were using him, and that made the transactions really quite pleasurable and oddly honest.

He rolled his fountain pen between his fingers, the square-cut amethyst on the cap catching briefly against his thumb. The last time he'd done this, he'd used a ballpoint—he grinned, suddenly, remembering a detail long misplaced: purple ink. He'd driven his teachers mad because he'd used nothing but purple pens. And that had been the least of his sins. God, he'd started out a brat and ended up a real hellion. He could still remember one of his minor but wonderfully effective transgressions: standing up in English class, one hand in the pocket of his grey uniform trousers, his navy blazer pushed aside à la James Bond, while he declaimed that if Mr. Dowling wanted him to endure reading purple prose, then Mr. Dowling could just damned well endure reading purple essays.

He'd skipped out then, and headed downtown, where he'd met some...

interesting people with even more interesting pharmaceuticals. He'd also met Phelan for the first, and nowhere the last, time. Barely a month before he'd met Phelan again, being dragged back to school with a bellyful of pretty colored pills mere hours after he'd earned a standing ovation at Excelsior's Concert Night, only to have his dad dismiss it all because Chopin was too 'sentimental.' And now his dad was—no. This wasn't about his dad, and anyway, if his dad thought pretending to a romantic side would win over Martha Kent, well, he was going to thoroughly enjoy watching Mrs. Kent cutting his dad off at the knees. Or cutting something else off a little higher up.

He tapped the still-capped pen on the naked page, looking down at all that blankness. It was, naturally, good quality paper, proper writing paper, a far cry from the college-lined paper he'd used last time, when he had been the one instructed by Principal Reynolds to write the infamous 'where I want to be in five years' essay. What had he written back then? An ugly combination of sentiment and arrogance, if he remembered correctly, with a hefty dose of bilious hate. Well, his mother was still dead and his father was still alive, so he still hadn't succeeded in that part of his Five Year Plan.

Although now he knew he loved his father as much as he hated him: progress, of a sort. His old psychiatrists would be so proud of him. A major breakthrough in self-understanding and personal growth, and all it had taken was nearly letting his father die, causing his blindness, and then killing a man, just to save someone else's father.

His small smile mocked himself. 'Someone else.' What a delightfully bland and impersonal euphemism. Someone else. It sounded so wonderfully unimportant, someone too insignificant to bother remembering their name.

He must remember that—use it often enough, and it might put his father off Clark's trail.

Clark. The reason for doing this again after so many years.

Clark had come here to type the illegibly scrawled essay up on Lex's G4, then printed it out on Lex's laser printer. Lex had wondered why Clark hadn't done it at home or in the *Torch* office, till Clark had shyly offered it to him "for proof reading," but it had been touchingly obvious that Clark had wanted him to see it.

Clark's vision of his life in five years, where he'd be, what he'd be doing. Who he'd be. 'Where' was pretty much anywhere not on the farm or in the meteor capital of the world, and 'what' was anything but farming, which explained why he hadn't wanted to type it up and print it out in the family home office, which was, bizarrely enough, a corner of the family kitchen, where one or both parents could usually be found.

The second paragraph narrowed things down a little. Five years from now: journalism. Being a reporter. Being what Clark called a 'reporter advocate,' someone who not only reported on crimes and misdemeanors and

political shenanigans, but someone who ferreted out sinners. Not people who danced on the Sabbath, but people Clark called 'sinners against society': slum lords, tobacco execs deliberately targeting kids, politicians who authorized budget cuts that left child social services underfunded and understaffed while the politician still had an expense account fit for an oil sheik. Clark didn't want to merely report or dig up dirt: he wanted to be someone who would use his position to get things changed. Lex certainly understood why Clark hadn't wanted to print it out at the *Torch*: journalism was Chloe's lifeblood, but Clark was aiming several orbits higher than her, and with so much altruism, Chloe would feel shamed, no matter how well Clark intended it.

The third paragraph showed that even though Clark didn't want to be a farmer, he had been brought up with a farmer's pragmatism and understanding that to get things done, you had to take care of the details and sow seeds months before harvest and breed cows years before you would need the income from them. There were details of classes and courses, of scholarships and ways to get relevant work experience without having to do internships that didn't pay or wouldn't pay enough for someone making his own way through college. Well, at least that was something Lex could handle easily enough.

The fourth paragraph, though. The fourth paragraph had made Lex fight the urge to collapse into his chair, but had still hit him hard enough that he'd clenched his fist in his pocket and gone from standing there, casually reading Clark's proffered paper, to pacing his office like the condemned.

The fourth paragraph was the longest of all, and it was all about who Clark wanted to be.

It was an almost painfully honest and intimate insight, and afterwards, Lex had worried that Clark would reveal that much of himself to a world-class grudge-bearer like Reynolds.

Who Clark wanted to be. All Clark wanted to be was a good and decent man. No problem there. But then there was the talk about love, and friendship, and how the best life-long match Clark had ever seen was his parents,' who had become best friends as well as people in love. And then more and more about how Clark thought love and romance built on a solid foundation of friendship was the best way to begin a life-long relationship, because the friendship would be there even when passion waned, or when passionate emotions caused people to fight and flare at each other. Word upon word, about love and friendship and commitment, and how that was what Clark wanted five years from now, and fifty years from now.

And not a gender specific pronoun in sight.

He'd actually resorted to pretending his cell phone had gone off—"no, you wouldn't hear it, Clark, I set it to 'silent' during my last meeting,"—to get out of giving Clark his reaction. He'd even managed to keep his back to Clark while Clark had picked his essay up off the desk and left. Slowly. Watchfully.

While Lex had chattered into a dead phone about business matters that he'd taken care of a week ago.

He hadn't seen Clark since.

The shocking thing had been just how much time and effort it took to manage that—he'd been...unnerved...to realize just how much he had to rearrange his schedule so that he wouldn't see Clark. So that he wouldn't be here when Clark stopped by with deliveries or after school or for what Lex now realized were their regular movie-watching nights and afternoon games of pool. So that his office and work routines didn't fall into the pattern that had him at the Talon right when school let out and Clark wandered over for a caffeine fix and to talk. So that he didn't go out for a drive and end up heading down the dusty track to the Kents' farm before he realized where habit had literally driven him. So he didn't find himself picking up the phone at odd times to tell Clark something that would make Clark laugh and take the sting out of the event for himself.

It had been...almost frightening. It was the most solid foundation of friendship he'd ever seen outside of literature and Greek history. And he knew perfectly well what went on between the closest friends in Greek history and legend, thank you very much. He just hadn't realized that the pride he'd taken in flirting right up to the edge had been so...misplaced.

But now he knew he'd gone over the edge at some point, crossed that invisible line so that Clark felt confident enough to show him this essay. So now he knew exactly where Clark wanted to be in five years. The question was, where did Lex Luthor want to be? And with whom?

He pulled the thick creamy paper towards him, uncapped his custom designed pen with its left-handed fine italic nib, and watched as deep black ink flowed sharply pointed letters across the paper as he began finally putting into words hopes and dreams he hadn't thought to articulate until now.

An hour, a plate of cappellini d'angelo d'oro and one snifter of post-prandial armagnac later, he knew exactly where he didn't want to be in five years, what he didn't want to be and clearest of all, *who* he didn't want to be. Wonderful, that his future could be reduced to a series of negatives, like a recalcitrant two-year-old who's just learned the magic word 'no.' So he could define himself as well as a toddler. Now that was something he could really brag about at the next LuthorCorp schmoozefest and holiday party.

But where did he want to be? Who did he want to be?

He wanted to rule the world, although he said it in such a way that most people thought he was being wry and droll. But he not only wanted to rule the world, he *would* rule the world—but what exactly did that mean? He'd said it, believed it, had plans and stratagems he'd thought were so sure and certain, but now, stopping to look at them, thinking about them in terms of a farmer planning a harvest or a businessman planning a new venture, were they truly to rule the world? In

Alexander's day, what it meant to rule the world was a clear-cut goal with a clear-cut answer. Now, though? Rule the world like Saddam Hussein on steroids, or rule the world like Teddy Roosevelt, walking softly and carrying a big stick? Or rule the world the way the Rockefellers and Carnegies and Hearsts had ruled theirs? The way his father fooled himself into believing he did?

Or did what he really wanted to do amount to nothing more than ruling his own life, his own small orbit, his own small world? Was that what he wanted under all this talk and ambition?

And wouldn't his old psychiatrists be even more pleased with him now.

Alexander the Great, known for ruling the world, outdoing his father, being the best of several generations. And known for the love he shared with Hephæstion.

Dear God, it was actually funny—he didn't want to rule the world, he just wanted...

Well. He wanted what he wasn't quite willing to commit to paper yet, and it wasn't as if he needed to see it actually written down: the shock slithering through him wasn't something he was ever going to forget. He was neither stupid nor dead from the neck down: he'd known from the start that he wanted to fuck Clark. He just hadn't realized his subconscious was envisioning a future where he and Clark...

So.

He knew where he wanted to be in five years. He knew where Clark wanted to be in five years. The difference was that he'd already been Clark's age, he'd already lived through and experienced a life far beyond Clark's 'five years from now.' He sat there in an office he'd never envisioned himself in, staring at that page of smooth, handmade paper, looking at the empty space left near the bottom for the...dreams he didn't quite dare put in words. He and Clark both wanted the same thing: the difference was that unlike Clark, he was only too familiar with the gulf between plans and reality, and the pitfalls of human nature.

For starters, for all Clark had a farmer's pragmatism, that last, painfully personal paragraph was all smoke and mirrors, will-o'-the-wisps, dustings of dreams to go with the stars in his eyes. A couple of months ago, and it had been Lana Clark wanted: Lana, who was the ticket to normalcy in a small town. The cheerleader, the pretty girl who needed someone to take care of her without taking advantage of her, a good girl—literally the girl next door. A few weeks after that, it had been Chloe, and the Spring Formal, a different form of conformity, a different path, but another one that led straight to fitting in. Then there had been the Native American girl, and Jessie, whom Clark had taken to that bar and to whom Lex suspected Clark had lost his virginity. And then straight from the reality of sex—or at least the promise of sex—with willing

Smallville
BIG BOYS

girls back to the safe fantasy of the untouchable Ms. Lang. Clark, bouncing from one to the other, unwilling or unable to choose, constantly seeking a wellspring of normalcy. Not something Lex could exactly provide.

Maybe it was Clark's secrets that drove him so, but Clark was a master at passing for something he wasn't, for fitting in where he didn't really belong—and for sticking out like a sore thumb where he *did* belong. There was no way in hell Clark could ever even catch a glimpse of normalcy if he was with Lex: there were too many things in the way, the paparazzi and Lex himself to name but two. Then there were names they'd be called—faggot was probably still as much a favorite in high school as it'd been when Lex attended—and the looks they'd get. Even if the Kents or his own mortified father didn't find some excuse to jail him and ground Clark till his thirtieth birthday, they'd be shunned and ostracized, and worse than that, they'd each have to deal with being the cause of the other one being cast out and suffering.

Lex had seen just how well Clark dealt with guilt. And whether Clark was willing to admit it or not, Lex Luthor wasn't the only one who was a powder keg of anger, resentment, and rage just waiting to explode.

But he shouldn't be so pathetically defeatist. Clark could be bouncing from girl to girl so he didn't have to fulfill their expectations or hurt them by promising a relationship he couldn't deliver. Perhaps he and Clark could overcome that, or bypass the perils of being found out. Clark was used to keeping secrets and pretending to be someone he wasn't, even from his friends, so being in the closet in the traditional sense wouldn't necessarily be all that difficult for Clark. And Lex was very well accustomed to hiding his feelings, and his relationships, and his weaknesses—and Clark was undoubtedly his greatest weakness.

Friends and strangers and the good townspeople of Smallville...Clark could cope with those if they were able to keep their relationship secret. And if not, there was always Metropolis—or Gotham, or Edge City, or anywhere in the world.

Of course, that would depend on Clark's parents giving permission, or Clark being willing to have himself declared an emancipated minor.

And he really, really, really didn't want to think about that little detail. Clark was over the age of consent, but he wasn't old enough to vote or sign certain contracts or buy alcohol legally. It didn't matter that Clark looked old enough to run for office. And as hard to remember though it sometimes was, especially when Lex was thinking about getting what he wanted, the truth was Clark was still young. Very young. It wasn't as if Lex was some old fuddy-duddy: he remembered

being that age with a visceral clarity that scalded. He remembered the desperate intensity of emotions, the

way the world would surely end if things went this way, or that way, or any way but the way he fervently needed. Life simply wasn't worth living if the object of his affections didn't return them, or if they couldn't be together.

At least Clark didn't seem prone to such drama queen behavior. Of course, the same couldn't be said of Clark's father, who could give Lear and Falstaff and Shylock a run for their money, going above and beyond the call of paternal duty to make it clear just how much he didn't approve of Lex's friendship with Clark. Not that it wouldn't get even worse once Lex started doing what Jonathan Kent no doubt suspected he was either already doing or in the process of seducing Clark into doing, and then it would be 'choose your weapons, gentlemen,' with Lex having a rusty old butter knife courtesy of Martha Kent's protectiveness of her son, and Jonathan having his rifle. Or a tank.

A tank was probably more likely, just to make sure the message came through loud and clear.

The irony was that his own father was even more disapproving of his friendship with Clark—precisely because it was, still, purely a friendship. 'Fucking the boy,' as his dad had so delicately phrased it, was perfectly understandable. But this friendship nonsense had to stop forthwith.

Somehow, though, he doubted 'my dad told me to and I'm trying to follow Clark's example and be a good and obedient son' would curry much favor with the Kents if they found out he was...involved with their son. Brutally honest with himself as he was with no one else, he wondered if, for that matter, he could curry any favor at all with Clark, once Clark's parents made their disapproval clear. It was easy to understand, although it would be considerably harder to forgive: even with his queasy blend of love and hate for his own father, he was still making the occasional attempt to win his father's approval, and Clark was far closer to both his parents and needed them in a way that was a mystery to Lex.

No mystery over one thing: even if Clark still wasn't sure which of the girls in his life he wanted to be with from one week to the next, Lex could seduce him because Clark might want both or neither or one of the girls depending on his mood and hormones and which had smiled at him most recently, but Clark always wanted Lex, day in, day out, week in, week out. It had begun innocently enough with the saving of a life, but it hadn't taken long before Lex had noticed Clark sliding into long looks and hands that were shoved into jeans' pockets to...ease the fit.

The only real news in that damned essay had been just how much more than sex Clark wanted. Or thought he wanted—or, Lex thought, grimacing, it was what Clark would want, at least until one of the girls offered him the public stamp of normalcy by being his 'steady.'

He was sure now that could have Clark as his lover, but what he needed was Clark as his steadfast friend—and his



conscience. He wanted Clark to be his home, his haven, his anchor, something to make him feel less adrift. But—but was he more or less likely to have that if they were lovers? No matter whether they were lovers or friends, he could still have Clark as his conscience and touchstone. He just needed to make sure he didn't completely screw this all up by taking too much too soon—and with Clark still shilly-shallying over which girl to dally with, right now was obviously still too soon. Far too soon, for Lex, if not for Clark.

Clark could tease himself with tantalizing glimpses of the girlish path to normalcy while teasing Lex with what Clark thought he wanted his life to be five years from now, and Clark, so young, so unfinished, not yet fully molded into the man he would be one day, that Clark would emerge largely unscathed. As long as the Luthor in Lex, and the Luthor around Lex, didn't ruin Clark, or leave scars that would tug and pull and warp forever.

He should leave Clark to find his own path. Should stand at his shoulder, fix Clark's ties before proms, offer manly advice as Clark tested the water of sex and sexuality.

And if he were a saint, he could do precisely that. But God help him, he felt like he'd been in the wilderness for more than forty days and was being offered more than all the kingdoms of the earth.

He needed to find a distraction before his emotions ruled him yet again.

Just because he hadn't been able as yet to find anyone in Metropolis willing to bury themselves alive in Smallville didn't mean he couldn't find someone to distract him while Clark finished growing up. Or maybe it was time he started looking a little closer to home: Smallville wasn't exactly a one horse town any more, there had to be *someone* in the surrounding area who could keep him occupied till Clark finished growing up.

Because that really was the problem.

That was at least half of why he'd been trying to keep this as just a friendship from the start—why he'd even resorted to claiming Clark was the little brother he'd never really had, in the hope the nearly sacred memory of Julian would help him keep his lust tamped down and his friendship intact.

If he let this go beyond friendship, now... If he let Clark have what Clark wanted so deeply, so sweetly...

Where would Lex himself end up in five years?

He'd been through the years Clark was about to face. He *remembered* the years Clark was about to face, and if he became not just Clark's first lover, but Clark's first male lover—or the reason for Clark becoming a pariah in his own home town and shaming his father...

Even under the best of circumstances, if they were indeed able to keep it secret and there was no parental or peer disapproval, even if Clark didn't succumb to the charms of Normalville via dating girls and dumping the secret boyfriend, Lex, remembering himself and his friends, would give it till...

maybe the end of Clark's first semester at college. Everyone, even spoiled rich kids, knew what regular guys did when they flew the coop and came to roost in the sudden, heady freedom of college. If he were *really* lucky, he might even get to endure the dreadful winter vacation, when a tongue-tied, awkward Clark had dutiful sex with him, smiled over gifts and gave him pained smiles as he tried not to break up with him over the holidays. But as soon as the holidays were over...

If it even lasted that long.

When he had been 14, he'd fancied himself so deeply in love, he'd nearly been expelled from Excelsior, which would've squashed his chances of going on to any of the European schools deemed suitable for the Luthor scion. But threats of expulsion and disinheritance hadn't even made him blink because he'd been in love. And now? He could remember her name, and the scare when they'd thought she might be pregnant, and he remembered snatches of conversation and odd details, but—would he recognize her immediately?

He honestly didn't think so. He wasn't even sure he could immediately pick her out of one of the school photographs, not without stopping to look carefully.

When he'd been 16, he'd taken to reading Sylvia Plath and wearing all black, half convinced he was going to commit suicide *any day now* because the boy he was in love with didn't love him back. He'd known for an absolute fact that he'd just die if he couldn't be with Blair forever. And he'd nearly exploded with joy, with unguarded bliss when his affections had been returned, only to find that passion and what he'd thought was love burned out quick as a candle. By the end of term, he'd been counting the days until he could get out of there and not have to go through the mortification of trying to avoid his former love in the hallways and classrooms and pretending that all the jokes and catcalls from his acquaintances and enemies were just so much dirt beneath his feet.

If he let this...possibility...between him and Clark progress to where Clark wanted it to go, then it would be wonderful. It would be fireworks and shooting stars, laughter and love, a perfection of passion. And after that?

When passion had burned itself out, and all that was left was this solid foundation of friendship Clark set so much stock by, would it be even worse than if they'd never had a friendship at all? Because the fire between them would sputter and die, but Lex... he himself would still have the same passion for Clark, because that—well, that wasn't going anywhere any time soon. He wasn't that much older than Clark, but even so, he was far from the callow youth he'd been, and this... this was mountainously different from anything he'd ever experienced before. So he would still be in the same old boat, but Clark—so young, so quick, driven by the inescapable force of nature that was youth and growth and the transition from self-proclaimed manhood into true adulthood—Clark

Smallville
BIG BOYS

would still be bursting with all the surges and drives and newness of discovery; Clark would still be a shooting star, something to wish on, but beyond reach, burning his way through the sky.

And Clark didn't know it yet, but when a friendship was put through the crucible of romance and passion and fervent declarations of love, it came out tarnished. The glister was always gone, the metal brittle, too easily broken. So Lex would be left with an ex-lover (of which he already had more than enough) and a fractured friendship. They might be able to paper over the worst of the cracks, but it would never be as strong, never as steadfast as before.

And despite all the noble good intentions of romantic youth, when Clark had burned his way through first love, Lex would be the guy Clark wouldn't know what to say to when they'd bump into each other. Lex would be the reason Clark would tell Pete and Chloe and Lana that he'd become bored with the Talon and couldn't they go somewhere else. Lex would be the person Clark tried to cross the street to avoid being seen or worse, having to say hello to. Lex's name would be the one that would make Clark groan in embarrassment at how young and stupid he'd once been. Lex would be the first love Clark's friends would tease him about years from now.

Lex would become Clark's youthful indiscretion. Clark's first failed romance. Clark's first romantic regret. He might even become Clark's first 'what the hell was I thinking?'

Lex knew this: Lex had lived this, had seen other people live this.

Still, he was tempted. Oh, how he was tempted. It would be so wonderful to look through Clark's eyes, to see the future with such a brightly-polished sheen.

But that was the difference between wishes and reality.

Clark had this Technicolor, Disneyesque dream where they lived happily ever after, where love was a Beatles song, all you need is love, and once you fell in love, you stayed that way. But Lex had survived more than music and movie scripts: he'd been there, done that, and had the 20/20 hindsight to prove it. Not that Clark would believe that. He could hear Clark's voice delivering such sincere protestations, declarations of how it was different with Clark, how Clark wasn't like other people.

Well, true: Clark really wasn't like other people (outside of Smallville anyway), in ways that made Lex's curiosity twitch and itch abominably. But when it came to this, when it came to dreams of forever and ever, till death us do part... Clark was still nothing more than an idealistic kid.

Maybe until the end of Clark's first semester in college, if he were lucky. That was what he'd have to look forward to. That was the *most* he'd have to look forward to. And yes, for whatever time he would have with Clark, he'd willingly pay the price. They'd burn so brightly—but they'd crash so hard, and Lex wasn't sure just how well he'd deal with losing

another person he loved. He'd survived losing his mother and Pamela, Julian and what little trace of loving father had ever existed in his dad. He'd survived losing first, second, third loves. But who would he be if he lost this love, this final love?

He remembered more than being Clark's age. He remembered seeing Clark for the first time, heading towards Clark on that bridge, seeing Clark staring back at him as he slammed his brakes on and knew that he would never stop in time. He'd had the same feeling then that he had now as his feet had tried to press the brake pedal through the floor: this was his last chance to stop, this was his last chance to meet a human being's eyes with honest regret and apology. This was his last chance to redeem himself, even if only a little.

Clark had proved him wrong, had given him back life, and given him back his chances. But how many times could a man be reborn before he ran out of chances?

Clark... Everything in his life now grew from the single thread of those moments with Clark: the willingness to give his life for others came from the moment when he would've gladly died if only he didn't have to take someone else with him; the willingness to do what was right, not what was fun or expedient, came from the moment he'd steered into the guard rail in an attempt to avoid Clark; the willingness to be honest, to connect, to *feel*...all of it, linked directly to the moments when he'd stared at Clark as he'd hurtled ever closer.

He'd been well on the way to hell in his own luxury, custom-crafted handbasket until Clark had stopped him. Who the hell would he end up being if he lost Clark, if he lost the one signpost to the walled-off goodness he had within him?

He was deathly afraid he'd end up being someone his father would be immensely proud of.

But if Lex could resist Clark, if Lex could stay just Clark's friend, if he could, just this once, postpone his pleasure—they'd be friends forever. Clark would be best man at Lex's wedding, Lex would be godfather—well, rich uncle—to Clark's kids. And Clark would stop Lex from repeating his dad's thankfully unique parenting style on his own kids. He and Clark would talk every week, email every day, get the kids together for birthdays and Christmas and summer vacations. Their kids would be best friends too, and rich Uncle Lex would put all the kids through college...

And he was accusing Clark of having foolishly unrealistic dreams.

Just friends or not, he wouldn't be able to stand and watch as Clark fell in love and settled down, and thanks to the meteors, there wasn't much chance Lex would be producing any heirs any time soon. He'd had a hard enough time watching Clark moon over Lana and Chloe, and he knew those for the transient teenaged crushes they were: how the hell would he stay within the polite bounds of friendship if he had to watch Clark actually fall in love with some genuinely nice, decent woman who'd actually be good for Clark?

Christ. How the hell would he keep his more Luthorian traits in check if Clark fell for some nice, decent man who'd actually be good for Clark? If Clark got his white picket fence and could be normal, then Lex could just about convince himself to stand supportively at Clark's shoulder and smile approvingly, no matter what he might be thinking inside. But if he gave Clark up for Clark's own damned good, then Clark had the unmitigated gall to fall for a man...

Very carefully, Lex unclenched his fists and put his pen down. Well. That didn't exactly augur well.

And that lack of control, already, before he'd so much as kissed Clark or seen Clark kiss someone else—that was a hell of a lot more unnerving than realizing he wanted Clark's Disneyfied future.

He rose from behind the desk and poured himself a couple of fingers of scotch. Hesitated, then added another couple of fingers' worth. It was a bit early in the day to be drinking, and he was drinking for all the wrong reasons, but there were extenuating circumstances, in his never humble opinion. And thanks to the meteors, it wasn't as if he ever got truly drunk, and he'd never had a hangover in his life. So he could drink with impunity.

Besides, he needed a drink, because if he'd had this much, he wouldn't drive. Wouldn't get in his car with the intent of running away to Metropolis, only to find his car parked and himself running up the stairs to Clark's barn hideaway.

He sipped his scotch, and it was his scotch, not the peatier, smokier malt his father preferred. Lex could taste the slight sweetness in the aftertaste, an echo of the sherry casks this particular scotch was aged in. He'd seen them, three years ago, on a private tour of the distillery. Rows and racks of the huge barrels, the smell both utterly familiar from the finished product, and utterly different, too. Raw whisky went in and this—he hefted the cut crystal glass so that the rich amber within was lit by the bright afternoon sunlight cascading through red glass—this came out the other end. Maturation. A natural process, completely unavoidable, but what a difference the cask made. Other whiskies were aged in prosaic, strong oak, but this was the only one aged exclusively in sherry barrels. It would still be a fine whisky if it had spent fifteen, twenty years in oak, but it would taste completely differently.

Who would Clark be if he spent the next five years maturing not in the clasp of the Kents and his Smallville friends, but in the grasp of Luthors and Metropolis?

Would Clark even be recognizable as Clark, or would he come out the other end all smoky and with the sharp tones of oak, instead of the rich, mellow sweetness of the sherry barrel?

And would Lex still want that new Clark?

He seated himself in his favorite chair, the one in front of the fireplace, propping his feet up on the ottoman, his left hand balancing his glass on his stomach.

He had killed a man.

For the best, most noble of reasons, but it didn't alter the ugly truth: he'd killed a man.

And just thinking about Clark falling in love with a man had unleashed an even uglier spike of violent anger within him.

Once you'd killed someone, was it easier the next time? Once that ultimate taboo had been sundered, was it easier to choose that solution next time around?

He was terrified he'd find out. One day. Sooner, or later. But one day. It loomed over him like those damned Kansas storm clouds he'd seen his entire life, monstrous clouds that stacked up like skyscrapers in the sky, a reminder of just how small and powerless even a Luthor truly was. A precursor to the sky turning that indescribable, unforgettable shade of sickening green—reminiscent of the glow from Lana's damned necklace around Clark's throat one dark night in a cornfield—right before tornadoes hit. He'd been nearly killed by one tornado recently, had nearly let his father die under that green sky. Had killed a man, under the clear blue open expanse of the aftermath.

Did he dare let Clark spend the next five years so closely entwined with someone who could kill? With regrets, with gut-churning aftermath, but without hesitation, without doubt, without any attempt to injure rather than kill?

He'd done the right thing, he knew that. Under those conditions, shooting to stop but not kill could have left Nixon in a position to kill Clark's father. But it had been instinct controlling him at that moment.

Instinct.

His instinct had been to kill.

And instinct had him wanting to beat up some non-existent guy because Clark might choose this figment of his imagination over Lex. In the future. Maybe.

Never mind who Clark would be after five years exposure to that: who the hell would *he* be after five years of feeling like that? Five years of having his deepest, most vulnerable needs fulfilled, and every single day spent waiting for Clark to move on, to fall out of love with him, to realize it was just another crush, just another stage, the first true love, the love that so rarely lasted because people changed.

He'd changed so much. Not as much as he'd changed from being dead and brought back to life, but close. Sure, some things never changed, but of all the people he knew, how many were still with their first love?

Not even Jonathan and Martha Kent. Certainly not his own father, who'd sworn eternal love and devotion to each of his four wives, but only Lex's own mother had lasted more than two years—and even then, his dad's fidelity had lasted even more briefly than that.

He could have Clark, right now. He could pick up his phone, hit speed dial, and Clark would be here in... It



took nearly ten minutes for Lex to cover the distance in his Lamborghini, but he'd known Clark to take less than two minutes to get here. So allowing for the speed they never discussed or mentioned, allowing time to confess he'd been thinking about Clark's essay, allowing time for blushes and first kisses and the initial tender fumbblings... He could have Clark in his bed and be fucking him half an hour from now. Tops. After all, he'd been Clark's age not too long ago, he knew just how quickly Clark would respond.

Half an hour.

That's all it would take. Half an hour. And he could have five years—

No. Less. Five years was Clark's plan, Clark's dream, but the reality...should be counted in months. Which would at least limit the damage the Luthor world could inflict on Clark's sherry sweetness. But the very uniqueness that drew him to Clark would be tarnished.

And what would it do to Clark if Lex were the one to walk away? If Lex were the one to fall out of love, or to decide this wasn't what he wanted any more? That Clark wasn't who he wanted.

He took another contemplative sip of his scotch, then another, sitting there as the afternoon wore itself away to nothing, and he finished the glass in his hand, savoring the faint aftertaste of sweetness. such an ironic counterpoint to the bitter recognition that he needed Clark, but the Clark he needed wouldn't be here for another few years. Recognition that Clark needed him, but not right now.

Clark had written down where he wanted to be in five years. Not where he wanted to be right now, today, this afternoon, this evening, this night. Five years from now.

Clark wanted him. Five years from now. Clark wanted to settle down forever. Five years from now.

They both wanted each other, right now. Half an hour, that's all it would take, and they both wanted that.

But that was uncharted territory, the place the old cartographers would write 'Here be monsters.' Serpents, of the Edenic type, and like Clark, bearing apples.

Even as Clark declared himself in that essay, even as Clark tempted him almost beyond redemption, Clark had been asking him to wait.

Sunset was setting fire to the tall windows and spilling across the floor when he finally roused himself. He picked up the decanter, took it with him to the small bathroom he'd had tucked discreetly in with the renovations after the tornado. He

could almost hear the purists and the popularists all screaming as he took the stopper out of the narrow neck, then tipped the decanter, letting the liquid gold pour so slowly into the sink it didn't even splash as it trickled down onto the molded glass basin.

But it wasn't a sinful, wicked waste. It was a libation to propitiate the gods, a sacrifice on the altar of good faith.

He would wait. He would be Clark's friend, Clark's dearest, closest friend. He would let this love that simmered between them keep right on simmering. They could flirt, could dance around each other, could talk and play pool and be there while the other went through whatever romances or liaisons the near future would bring.

He would wait till after the winter break of Clark's first year at college; he would wait till after Clark's first taste of Spring Break, which took on mythical proportions even here in Kansas. He would wait till Clark had lived a little more, knew himself a little better. Until Clark knew *him* a little better, even the things Clark preferred to just sweep under the rug right now.

The decanter was empty, but the heady scent of the Macallan was nearly as intoxicating as the drink itself. So many complex elements to that bouquet, such a unique nose to it, instantly recognizable because of the sherry tint, as sweet as a rose in a peat bog. He wasn't blind to the parallel of Clark in a crap factory.

He went back into his office, placing the empty decanter beside what would be his drinks of choice now: armagnac, if he wanted sweetness, or the oaky peatiness of the scotch his father preferred. Both would serve as reminders of his roots, of who he was trying not to be, of why he was waiting. He didn't need essays assigned by principals who still hated him after so many years; he just needed the rich, rolling warmth of good scotch to remind him.

He would wait. He would find a way to wait.

Clark had Lana and Chloe; there had to be someone in this town who didn't hate Luthors but was old enough to date. He'd find her, his own distraction, his own escape while Clark swithered between Lana and Chloe and went through the endless shifts of growing up. In the meantime, he would have oak and peat, and entertaining affairs with pleasant women, and the only true friendship he'd ever known.

And in five years, if Clark was still Clark and if Clark still loved him, then Lex would buy a new bottle of the Macallan, open it with Clark, share it with Clark, and finally, finally, fully taste that sherry sweetness at last.

Victorious

FAJRDRAKO

Men are easy to manipulate. Lex Luthor might have thought he was Machiavelli reborn in the business world, but he could be led by his cock just like anyone else.

It was not entirely by accident that I ran into him in Metropolis at a special showing at the Museum. When I noticed the newspaper announcement of the opening of the Alexander Breastplate Exhibit, I showed it to Daddy.

“So?” he said. Sometimes he is slow.

“Lex Luthor will be there,” I explained. “Don’t you think it’s time for me to run into him again?”

There was a pause while we both thought about our plans for Lex Luthor and his father’s LuthorCorp. “He’s been living in Kansas,” said Daddy. “He’ll be bored.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “It’s time to give him some excitement.”

Museums are even more boring than Kansas, but they serve their purpose. Lex was there, and he looked well: no circles under those beautiful eyes, no visible needle-tracks. No scars, either, as I discovered when I ran my fingers playfully along his arm, where the skin was as soft as ever. A hairless man. They breed dogs like that.

I’d heard rumors. There were always rumors about Lex Luthor. He lived in a cloud of gossip, just because he was who he was—because he fostered it. The new rumors were different. In the past we’d all heard about the drugs, the alcohol abuse, the bisexuality, the rows with his father, the clubs, the affair with

the movie star, the overspending in Hong Kong. Old stories, all of them, and now Lex Luthor was shocking the world by turning respectable. The *Financial Times* had called him 'a man to watch out for.'

I had spent years watching Lex Luthor. He was a hobby of mine. We'd known each other in school, and then ran into each other sometimes at various dance clubs and parties. We moved in the same circles. We'd been close, from time to time, but he wasn't a man for long-term relationships. Since he'd gone, well, straight, the next move was mine.

I made the move with fingers on smooth skin, under the silk shirt. Lips on a sensitive neck, making a trail in designer lipstick. I might not be a movie star, but I have my talents, and I knew what Lex liked. Respectable? Oh, no. He might put on a good show for the paparazzi but I could taste arousal on his skin, hear the change in his breathing, feel the response of his cock. Lex Luthor might play the virtue game but his body had its own ideas. His daddy had a reputation for quality fucking, and Lex inherited the gene.

His style had changed. He'd put on a good suit—the kind you'd wear to a board meeting, not a dance club—and calm manners. Underneath he was the sensualist he'd always been, exiled to a hick town to manage, in his phrase, a crap factory, sent by the only man who had ever been able to make him obey anything, Lionel Luthor of LuthorCorp, because (bottom line) it was Lionel who held the purse-strings. Policy. Lex had learned about policy. He had more faces than I had clothes, another skill learned from Luthor père.

So there I was, at this museum that was duller than Kansas, pretending to admire a ghastly torso of old rhinestones and bad paint. Lex was practically drooling over the thing while pretending to be cool about it because people were watching—it belonged to Alexander the Great. Lex adored Alexander of Macedonia because he was beautiful, queer, and earned the admiration of the world when he'd killed enough people. This said something about Lex's ambitions but not much about his fashion sense. I happened to know that all his clothes were chosen by his valet.

For some awful reason Lex had brought a gaggle of kids from the corn farms to Metropolis. He didn't bother to introduce them to me, thank God. What would I have found to say to them? "Hi, how are the cows?" They were pretty and earnest and awestricken, quite out of their element here. Lex was advising them about some bucolic heartbreak that was going on, a triangle involving a tall boy who looked like Li'l Abner, a blond quarterback, and a Barbie doll princess. I had to look twice at Li'l Abner, who was all sad eyes and dark, mopy hair. It was easy to guess that under the bad clothes he had a body like one of Lex's Greek gods. Quite toothsome, really.

From the tone of voice Lex used when he mentioned the Quarterback, I inferred that he had offended Lex

somehow. Perhaps Lex had made a pass and the Quarterback had turned him down. Was the boy a fool? He must have known about Lex's money. Lex's odd hairless body might not be attractive to him, and the jock wouldn't have the brains to appreciate Lex's clever bitchiness, but all the same: money is money. Anyone can act smitten and spread their legs for money like that. It isn't even mercenary, it's just realistic. Wealth is seductive, whoever you are.

After watching the Quarterback for about three seconds, I realized that Lex could never be so desperate as to make a move there, not even in Smallville, Kansas. The Princess was even less his style, radiating anxiety and self-consciousness like a bad soap-opera heroine.

Reassured that I had no competition from the farmlands, I concentrated on Lex. If the children of the corn brought some amusement to Lex's days in the middle of nowhere, that was well and good, but if he was bored enough for them, he was ready for headier games.

Games I could play with him.

Li'l Abner hardly glanced at me, but he wasn't my target. I elbowed him away from Lex with no trouble. Lex and I had done a thing or two together in the past, after a rocky start. We went through rebellious phases at the same time, but I got along just fine with Daddy these days and wondered how Lex was feeling about Lionel. Not so good, I'd guess. For one thing, it was Lionel who'd sent him to the crap factory, and I could only guess how Lex would resent that. No love lost there, I was sure. That made him a prime target for a bit of filial betrayal. Lionel Luthor had few weaknesses, but his son was one of them.

Lex and I had some good shared memories. As I flirted with him I wondered if he, too, was remembering that time on the roof of his first Porsche. It's a memory I'll never forget, and not just because I tore my Versace gown. Lex in bed (or out of it) was velvet over fire. I couldn't see his calm restraint in public without remembering the explosiveness that lies underneath. I like a man like that.

I could use a man like that.

So I touched the skin on the back of his hand and smiled, and he touched my hand and smiled back, and I knew I had him. It was absurdly easy to get myself invited to that faux-Scottish folly in Kansas once I got my tongue in his ear and my leg around his waist, in the corner behind the statue of naked wrestlers. Li'l Abner followed Lex around the corner like some sort of lapdog and saw us. He had the sense not to interrupt. He just stopped, stared, turned around and walked away, looking hurt. I wondered why. Envy, perhaps, because the Smallville Princess didn't treat him the way I treated Lex.

"Bitch," whispered Lex into my ear, which was his sort of love-talk. I knew then that he planned to take me home, where I could see how much he'd really changed.

Soon after that, there was an accident with a bus on the street



nearby, and everyone rushed outside. I stuck to Lex closely all evening; then afterwards, all night. After the accident, things started to wind down at the Museum. Lex waved the high school kids off to their bus and whisked me into his limousine. He had my panties off before we turned the corner. His skin was still magnificent, and he'd lost none of his expertise while living among the cornfields.

When I got to Luthor Manor, I almost regretted the whole business. There was only a skeleton staff because Lex liked to do everything himself. He expected servants to be invisible. There were huge empty wings, with furniture either made for Dracula or covered with cloths because, as Lex said carelessly, "I don't need all those rooms when it's just me here." Minimal television. He didn't even have a satellite dish because he had no time to watch. There was a DVD player, but hardly anything to play on it. He'd left most of his DVD and video collections in Metropolis, including the good porn. He claimed to have burned those tapes. I pouted.

"I don't know what your problem is," he teased. "There's plenty to read."

"Yes," I snapped, "most of it in Ancient Greek."

There were no stores worth visiting in Smallville, Kansas. No clubs. Even if there had been anyone worth talking to, anyone associated with the Luthors was a pariah in that town. They blamed the Luthor family for health problems and their own lack of business acumen in selling land; they probably blamed the Luthor family for the Garden of Eden and the bombing of Dresden—assuming they had heard of the bombing of Dresden, which I doubted.

Lex didn't mind the isolation. He said he had friends in Smallville, which made no sense, unless he meant Gabe Sullivan, the plant manager. Old Gabe was cute in his way, but Lex hardly saw him except at work—of which he did a tedious amount. Lex also claimed he was sleeping alone there till I came along. At first I thought he was simply lying. When I realized he was telling the plain truth, I knew there was more to Smallville than met the eye.

Something had made my party boy go sober, and I needed to know what. Not Lionel's orders, that was certain. I tried to make Lex talk about the town, though he had little to say. For some reason he'd started going to a coffee shop with vinyl booths called The Beanery. These people had no shame. I was too embarrassed to go inside, and Lex laughed at me. "It's just a place," he said. "The coffee's not bad."

Compared to what?

The next evening, I found him talking on the phone. It wasn't a business call. He was discussing a philosophical problem. As I stroked his thigh, I realized it had something to do with an essay on existentialism. Something about grades, the Philosophy Club, and a demanding teacher. This was high school homework. I leaned in to nuzzle his crotch, and he stopped me, a hand in my hair. I glared at him and went to

play at the pool table, giving him the best view of my arse. It wasn't as if the phone call was important, anyway, and what did existentialism have to do with anything here? I don't think Lex even looked at me.

As he hung up, he said, "Bye, Clark," and there was something in the line of his mouth that should have warned me. I couldn't place it—lust? Some secret pleasure? Then he turned his attention to me and I forgot about it.

The next day I put two and two together when Li'l Abner strolled into the room as if he lived there. "Morning, Clark," Lex said, casually enough, but I remembered the phone call and the guarded expression in his eyes and the way he'd pushed me away from his cock. The boy had come by to deliver fresh food from his parents' farm, and what a wholesome farm it turned out to be—organic produce only, including milk and eggs. God, they eat that crap at the fitness club. I draw the line.

Li'l Abner, whose name was Clark Kent, made no move to rush back to the pigs and Lex didn't dismiss him. I could hardly believe my eyes. Lex, who preferred his servants in other rooms, who never encouraged familiarity, who never so much as flirted with an underling in the whole of his life, was talking to Clark Kent as if he were his best friend, and Clark was talking back with no deference at all. Just friendly, open regard. It was clear he was pleased to see Lex. It was clear...

My God. Too many things were clear. This was what was keeping Lex in Smallville. This, a teen-age delivery boy with a body like one of those Greek wrestlers, and eyes that were larger than life when he looked at Lex. He had the kind of infectious smile that tempted a person to lick it off his face. He had the kind of physique that brought to mind words like 'strapping' and 'healthy' and 'hunk.' Of course there was nothing in that to make Lex look the other way, but I'd never known him to go for the rustic type in plaid flannel. Yes, plaid.

I hardly heard the rest of their talk, my mind in a blur of implications. Clark was in no hurry to leave, Lex in no hurry to let him leave.

I'd always been curious about Lex's sex life, the part that wasn't with me. He'd generally been absurdly tight-lipped about it, given that it was a regular topic in the *Inquisitor*. There'd been a rumor at school that he'd made it with Bruce Wayne, the richest and best looking boy in our school—and also the most frigid. All Lex said to me (damn him!) when I asked was, "So Bruce is immune to your charms?"

Whether Lex succeeded in getting Bruce Wayne or not, I don't know. I do know that by the time Lex was Clark's age, fifteen, he had long since lost his virginity. As I had. And as, I would wager a good guess, Clark hadn't. Fifteen years old and gorgeous: that's rural Kansas for you. It made me wonder how deep Clark's interest in the Barbie doll Princess really was.

They didn't require me to join in their conversation, which was just as well. When Clark the Magnificent

Smallville
BIG BOYS

finally left, I sat in Lex's lap and murmured, "Tell me about your hottie?"

"My what?"

"Clark Kent."

"It was an explosive meeting. I drove off a bridge into a river. He pulled me out, saved my life."

That must be the story for public consumption. I tried to picture it: the beautiful boy diving into the water, carrying Lex out in his arms. Small-town hero. In my imagination, it was like the cover of a romance novel, except that rescued damsels are seldom bald.

"And then?" I prompted.

"The encounter changed my life." He chewed his lip a little, thinking. "I knew I could trust Clark in a way I'd never trusted anyone. He became...the brother, the companion, the friend I never had."

As I recalled, Lex had many enemies and many lovers, but I couldn't think of anyone I would have called a friend.

I tried fishing. "He's what, fifteen? So you finally found a Julian substitute?"

"Julian?" Lex never talked about Julian. I only knew about him because Daddy had known the family forever and we were at the little baby's funeral. "Hardly. He'd only be ten or eleven. Clark is mature for his age."

I nibbled Lex's ear. "So you have a new taste for organic chicken?"

He did not tense up, so I had no warning. He caressed my wrist so gently that I thought it was foreplay until I realized that the pressure was hinting at pain. Luthor anger was like that. You didn't even notice they were angry, but you found yourself hurting. My heartbeat quickened. Lex said softly, "Clark Kent is my friend. He saved my life. If you insult him, or his family, or his friends, in any way whatsoever, I will see that your pretty ass is on the next bus to nowhere and my doors will never open to you again."

Well, well, well. Lex had it bad. I wasn't sure he even knew it, or whether he knew what his eyes revealed when he looked at Clark, and what his voice revealed when he said Clark's name.

In bed that night I said, "Pretend I'm Clark."

"What for?" he said, momentarily distracted, but I felt his cock react inside me. Oh, yes, whether he admitted it or not, he liked that idea. He liked it very much indeed. He looked down into my eyes without expression, but he listened. His body, on top of mine, listened as I started to talk to him.

"Pretend you're inside him, Lex. Pretend it isn't me. Pretend he lets you fuck him. Pretend he wants it. He's so eager he can't keep his hands off you. He's begging, Lex. His eyes are wide and they shine with need. So you're deep in his hot young arse and he's moaning underneath you. He can't even say your

name he's so far gone. There's sweat in his hair. His eyes are unfocused. They devour you. His hands are large and

strong. Can you feel them on your body? Can you feel him in spasms around your cock, groaning as he comes? His mouth is open, soft and wet from kissing. Can you hear him say your name?" I deepened my voice. "Lex, Lex.... He wants you so much he can't bear it." I bent my head closer to his ear. "Come for him, lover. Come for Clark."

He did, then, his body shuddering and shaking. His breathing had gone from soft to irregular to uncontrolled. It was Lex the primal beast, like that night on the Porsche. I lay in his arms and soothed his head with my fingers and mouthed his earlobe as he came down from climax. Oh, Lex might deny what he wanted from here to eternity, but his body betrayed him utterly. He wanted Clark. Now he knew I knew it.

He kissed my face and neck and breasts. He moved his lips to my ear and nipped. "Victoria," he whispered, "you really are a bitch."

It was his kind of love-talk, and an admission of my victory. I'd sussed him. I'd figured him out. I laughed in triumph. Oh, yes, he was mine now. Not that I was sure what to do with my knowledge. He was mad over Clark Kent, but hadn't touched him yet. I was sure the boy would be easy to seduce, for all the usual reasons. I wondered what qualm prevented Lex from taking him. Whatever it was, it gave me an advantage. I knew something he didn't want anyone to know. Because of it, I could give him something no one else could.

As I said: men are easy to manipulate. You just have to know how.

Clark Kent didn't like me. He was coolly polite, as a well-brought up boy would be, but something in his eyes had categorized me and rejected me. Jealousy, because I was the one in Lex's bed? Righteous indignation, because I was interested in LuthorCorp business? Puritan distaste for my sophistication?

And what on earth was the attraction of Clark for Lex? He was pretty, I'd grant that any day, but as green as they come and utterly guileless. A gawky kid whose life was cows and homework and the coffee shop. Too large for his age, boyishly clumsy. I mentioned this to Lex—it wasn't insulting, it was simply the truth—and Lex shook his head, amused.

"He's all right," he said. "Clumsy? Only when you intimidate him."

I liked the idea that one could intimidate Clark. The next time Clark was hanging about Lex's office trying to find some excuse to linger, I managed to brush against him. He backed off, blushing furiously, but I felt those remarkable muscles. Under loose flannel plaid and basic T-shirt he had a body of steel. I'd have given a lot to see him naked. I could work out ten hours a day on my trim-gym and never get that kind of body-sculpting. Did it come of being born on a farm, or was it a genetic accident? Whatever it was, it was a turn-on.

I let him go, that time. I was still assessing my strategy with him. I wondered if he knew how Lex felt about him and

concluded that he was young enough and innocent enough to be totally oblivious. He probably thought 'gay' meant 'happy' and that boys didn't do other boys. I wondered if his dislike of me masked desire—or was he still pining over the Princess? Should I put it to the test?

Clark-talk in bed turned Lex on every time, night after night. He started to anticipate my fantasies about Clark, as I spun them in the dark. In bed, he refused to say Clark's name, but I could do that for him, to bring him to new heights of arousal. I was the one who reaped the benefit, here. I thought I'd done—or imagined—every trick there was that two bodies could do together, but Lex showed me an act or two not in the *Kama Sutra*. Farm boy, eat your heart out. Perhaps the experience addled my head because one night afterwards I said aloud, "You should marry me."

"Oh?" He sounded like a man ready to humor any insanity. He'd climaxed hard and was feeling mellow. "Why?"

"Because we're good together. Because I'd let you play with anyone you wanted." I didn't mention Clark's name. This was not disparaging.

He just laughed. "I'm not the marrying kind," he said. They all say that. He fell asleep and I felt stupid, which I never do. Of course anyone who married Lex would have to let him play with whoever he wanted, what other choice would there be? A Luthor is a Luthor. I had no illusions of undying fidelity. Marriage to him would be exciting, and not just in bed.

Another movement in the game occurred when Clark Kent walked into Lex's office and found me alone there, reading Lex's computer-screen on his private laptop. I didn't have any passwords that mattered, but the Kent boy didn't know that. He frowned.

I said, "How goes the battle?"

"Which one?"

"I thought you were fighting the Quarterback for the Princess."

"Who? Oh, Lana." It seemed he had forgotten the Princess. As far as I could tell, he'd never put up much of a fight for her, not while he was spending most of his spare time at Luthor Manor. I got up from the desk and moved close to him. He did not run screaming. "I suppose the Quarterback won."

I ran my hand down his chest. What a body. What a body! I could feel his warmth through the red T-shirt and sense the steady beat of his heart. "A good looking young man like you doesn't need to be a virgin if he doesn't want to be."

He took a step backwards. "No!" Flat refusal. To my disappointment, he did not blush or scowl this time, but something flickered in those expressive eyes. Was he being true to the Barbie doll Princess, or to the millionaire? Whatever direction his interest lay, I was no part of it.

"You don't like me," I said flatly. "Or is it that you're just into guys?"

The possibility didn't seem to alarm him, but he wasn't ready

to admit anything. "It doesn't matter. I won't let you use me to hurt Lex. I won't let you hurt Lex at all."

So young, so earnest.

"You don't know him very well, then," I said. "If you did, you'd know Lex Luthor is invulnerable."

"Do you love him, or just his money?" He didn't drop his eyes as I gave him my measured stare.

"I love what he does in bed," I said, hoping to get a reaction. Even a blush would be good, but Clark Kent was made of sterner stuff than that. He learned fast, and he saved lives as a hobby. I smiled at him. "Do you think he loves me?"

"He probably loves what you do in bed," said Clark Kent, with a tone that I could only describe as insulting. "He says he doesn't love you."

Was that supposed to be a heavy blow? He was so inexperienced, so simple, he had no idea of the psychological games being played around him. It was interesting to know that he and Lex had discussed me. I was flattered. Had Lex unburdened his heart to this schoolboy? It was not beyond the realm of possibility. Lex was so entranced he might have said anything. So what had he confessed? If not love, then desire? Had he said anything about our little plot to oust power from Lionel Luthor?

"He thinks it's a kind of game," added Clark. I wondered if he was challenging me.

"So it is. We'll see who wins." You or me, farm boy, and the prize is a Luthor. Solid gold, and built to last.

I didn't tell Lex about that conversation. Neither did Clark, which disappointed me. I'd love to have heard Lex's reaction.

A few days later I walked into Lex's office intent on some early afternoon seduction, but it wasn't Lex who sat at the desk contemplating the ikebana. It was his father, LuthorCorp personified.

Lionel Luthor always scared me in a way that felt good and made my fingertips tingle. In our last encounter I'd been the catalyst (I hope) to a father-son clash of wills. I'd listened outside the door, heard Lionel say, "It's always business where the Hardwicks are concerned." He thought I was sent to distract Lex. Well, he'd learn otherwise.

He had made it clear that he didn't like my association with his son. I suspect he had some sense of what I was up to with Daddy and the takeover bid, though he couldn't know about Cadmus or that Lex was double-crossing him, and he wouldn't care that Lex and I were having sex. Daddy once told me Lionel Luthor didn't care who fucked whom because he was always busy screwing everyone. As far as I could tell, he was a man of stone. Terrifically sexy, all the same. You could see where Lex got it from.

I might have been wrong about the stone part. He stood and smiled and there was warmth in his tone when he said, "Victoria! Still here, I see. Where's Lex?"

“Not here,” I said. It was self-evident, but I really had no idea. At the plant? At the Beanery? Behind the barn with Clark?

Lionel Luthor came around the desk and touched my cheek. Lex hated it when Lionel touched him and made a point of never touching anyone without good reason. Lionel, in contrast, liked to fondle things. His fingers slipped from my cheek to my breast.

Lex walked in at that moment, pushing the doors open with both hands as if aping his powerful father. “Dad! What brings you here today?”

Lionel moved past me, his fingers lingering for a moment as he went. No, not a stone. I shivered.

Being with Lionel and Lex together in the same room was like witnessing Ragnarok without the sound effects. I don’t like blood baths till they are over. I slipped away and, lost in their battle, I’m sure they never noticed.

Bloodbaths. Baths. Someone tried to kill me in Lex’s bathtub. Clark Kent saved me—I never thought I’d be grateful for the way he wandered around the mansion as if he lived there. I couldn’t see my attacker. Later I only remembered the fear and the suffocation—death by strangulation and drowning, how tacky—and then the warm, strong arms wrapping me up and carrying me, taking me away from darkness and danger.

Clark Kent, everyone’s savior. He had saved Lex’s life. That I could bear. Now he had saved mine.

Well, I didn’t react by falling in love with him, however pretty his eyes were. We didn’t really speak. My throat ached. I said, as best I could, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. He’d been brought up with good manners, despite the lack of elegance. His eyes held nothing but concern for my welfare.

“You don’t even like me,” I said.

“You don’t deserve to die,” he answered. His smile was, maybe, just a little apologetic, but it was noticeable that he didn’t deny disliking me. He was no liar, this boy. Utterly frank. Totally out of place with the scheming Luthors.

I cried that night, when I was alone, but I had my brave face on again by the time Lex came to my bed. I remembered that once, years ago, he had been impotent and had cried in my arms. I never knew what that was about. I didn’t want to show that sort of weakness.

I wondered what the score was between us, and what, if anything, I owed him. The mansion frightened me, now. It was full of ghosts and mysteries. Lionel frightened me. Lex did too, a little. He seemed a part of Smallville now. I wanted to be back in Metropolis, surrounded by city lights and noises, knowing the police force could protect me.

I didn’t have the heart to spin Lex a fantasy of Clark that night. He was doing pretty well anyway, and while we were making love he whispered, “It’s all right. It’s

all right, Vic. Clark saved you.” I didn’t know why he said that until I realized that I was crying again.

Damn.

The next day, Clark was back in that vague wandering way he had, after school. No produce, no real excuse for being here except that he called himself Lex’s friend. Lex wasn’t in the room, but Clark didn’t back off as he might have earlier. Instead he said, “Are you all right, now?”

“I’m not all right.” I smiled my cat smile. “I’m amazing.” He almost smiled back, and staring at his farm-boy face, I suddenly realized what Lex saw in him—besides beauty and physical power.

It was the fact that Clark Kent was the real thing. Unlike everyone else we knew, full of pretension and ambition, he was exactly what he appeared to be. An overgrown teenage Kansas boy with no worries except for school and girlfriends, no plots, no secrets, nothing complicated about him. He was simple and honest and that was appealing because there’d been nothing simple or honest in my life or Lex’s since the day we were born, and there never would be. It wasn’t possible in our world. But out here in Smallville, Kansas, Lex had found a whiff of something pure, something genuine, and he was drawn to it.

It was then that I realized I’d lost the game. It was time for me to leave Smallville, so I did.

I didn’t miss it. It was great to be back in a world of designer clothes and flaming hairdressers and women to talk to. Lex came to see me, before the end, but it was over between us before he even dropped the punch line: he’d sold us out to his father. It seemed that blood was thicker than fertilizer. Together they outmaneuvered us and won. Lex as good as called me a whore—well, we were playing the same game, weren’t we? So which of us was the whore?

Daddy was furious. He’d lost his chance to get LuthorCorp, he lost Cadmus, and he lost his hope of becoming Lex Luthor’s father-in-law. He told me to get a real job and fired me from the one I had—well, his company was a crumbling house of cards now, anyway. It was time to cut my losses there.

There is always another plan, another victory. There is never only one way to win. You just change the game. When Lionel Luthor telephoned me to offer condolences on the loss of my position in Daddy’s company and to hint at the possibility of an opening for me in LuthorCorp, I remembered the touch of his hand on my breast in Lex’s office. I remembered the kind of man Lionel Luthor was—wealthier, more powerful, more shrewd than his son, and not infatuated with a country schoolboy.

I saw Clark Kent, too, before I left Smallville for the last time. I was driving away in my own Maserati and I took a detour over to the Kent farm. It looked the way anyone would predict: yellow and wholesome, with sunflowers at the fence. Utterly middle America, just the kind of place that fresh-faced young

man would come from. He paused in his work on the fence beside the road and watched me drive up, holding the hammer still at his side. He was all tight T-shirt and masculine sweat and hard muscles. Lex knew how to find them. I stopped the convertible as close to the fence as I could.

"I came to say good-bye," I said. "I didn't lose the game. I'm winning. Next time you see me, I just might be Mrs. Luthor."

He raised an expressive and skeptical eyebrow.

"Mrs. Lionel Luthor," I expanded. Why not say it? He'd never tell anyone about this conversation.

He grinned. I'd never seen him smile quite like that: all dimples and teeth. I wondered how often Lex saw that look. I wondered how often he'd see it in future.

"I hope it works out for you," he said graciously. I suppose he was glad to see me gone, leaving the field open for him and Lex. No wonder he was smiling. "Good-bye, Victoria."

I left the dust of the Kents' road behind me, and I never looked back. Clark Kent could have Lex Luthor if he wanted him. I had other fish to fry.

Men are easily manipulated.





Everyone knows Lex loves his cars. All that power. All that sex appeal. All that promise.

Oh yeah.

Lex knows all about it, better than anyone else. The way his cock always perks up as the low throaty vibration of power shimmers through the leather seat right up into him. The way the gear stick fits into his palm like the head of his cock—or someone else's. The way the power rushes through him like orgasm, the way the speed intoxicates him, thrills him, makes his blood pound.

He's always at least a little hard when he drives. Usually a lot hard. Sometimes hard enough that he'll undo his pants and while he leaves the throttle wide open and drives at least twice the speed limit, he'll stroke himself—one of the unexpected advantages of being left-handed. Leather glove on bare skin, skin on skin, thick and thin, tanned hide against the moonlight paleness of his own.

He loves it.

And of course, everyone knows that, or suspects it.

But what he most loves about his cars is what he's never told anyone, what no one suspects. He loves his cars because no one can just walk in on him. His father can't show up, can't speak to him, can't look at him, can't frown at him, can't stand in front of him like a warped mirror, Dorian Gray meet your doom.

If he switches off his cell phone, no one can talk to him, or reach him. No one even really knows where he is.

It's just him.

Alone, but not lonely. Solitude that's welcome, a balm, a cure, a haven, not rejection, nor failure, nor loss.

He feels safest when everyone else thinks he's risking his life.

Father and Metropolis finally far enough and long enough behind him, he grinned, staring fiercely at the road, foot pressing down a little harder on the accelerator. And even though his was the only car on the road, he shouldn't, not this close to Smallville, but that was just another added frisson: so he did it this time, of course, unzipping his pants, no underwear, rarely any underwear—and wouldn't Smallville society be just ever more appalled by that every time they discussed it?—and he was open, exposed, his cock milky pale against the near black of his charcoal wool trousers. He pulled off his sunglasses, wanting to see himself more clearly: yeah, that was perfect. Black leather driving gloves, pale patches of his hand revealed matching the cover/reveal of his gloved fist sliding up and down his cock. Not as pale now, flushed pink, the only blush he ever allowed himself, blood rising, cock rising too, hard and thick and as potent as his car. He shifted smoothly, both feet perfectly balanced on the pedals, and the blasphemous thought crossed his mind that if he drove an automatic, he could spread his legs, let the deliciously heated weight of his balls slide between his thighs. But he pushed such heathenry from his mind and instead, he cupped his balls through his trousers, adjusting them till they were cradled nice and tight by his pants, and then—he couldn't leave his cock alone for another second, gripping it tightly, feral smile as the very tip of him touched the steering wheel.

Oh this was good. This was better than good: this was great, and this was pure gold, and this was reward and recompense and redress for having to spend time with his father. He shifted in his seat, easing his discomfort, and he shouldn't think about that, not if he wanted to stay hard, and free, and alone. He tightened his grip on his cock, but his smile had retreated, flagging like his erection. This was stupid. He'd convinced his dad that the crap factory finally showing black wasn't a fluke. He'd bought the plant and himself time. He'd *won*. Victory, at any cost, was just as sweet.

And his dad was miles away. Hours away. Out of sight, out of mind. Out of reach, out of touch.

It was just him. Alone in his locked car, the sun bright and clear the way it never was in Metropolis. The road stretched out in front of him, long and empty and taking him far, far away, endless possibility written in asphalt. He stroked himself again, base to crown, until he was fully hard again, thumb sliding over the tip, the tip sliding along the underside of his steering wheel, perfect height, perfect angle for this. There was a reason he was particularly fond of Porsches.

There was a truck ahead, one of the big lumbering abattoir trucks, empty thank God, save for the bored driver. He pulled around it, peeled away so fast there was no way the driver could have seen him, although the risk, oh the risk was good for another shiver, and another pulse of pre-come. Then he was well clear of the truck, back in his own lane, relatively straight road ahead, so his left hand was free again, peeling back his foreskin—and thank you, Dad, for this one piece of Luthor arrogance—his cock too hard now to let the skin slide all the way back up.

He was dripping, leaving glistening marks on his dark pants, on his leather glove, catching the sunlight streaming through the windscreen. He shifted gear, the clutch smooth as water over stone, and the movement of his legs pressed the tight muscles of his thighs perfectly against his balls, and the turn of the steering wheel rubbed the head of his cock.

Oh, it didn't get much better than this: middle of the day, empty road, an obscene amount of horsepower under him, in his control, and his cock out, hard, demanding, promising, and so far beyond his father's grasp. He stroked himself again, leather against skin, and he was slicking himself with pre-come, the slide as sweet as a willing mouth right down the length of him. He shifted gear, let go of his cock long enough to click the remote, the castle gates slowly parting before him, Red Sea to grey Porsche, and he nearly held his breath, making it through the still-widening gap with barely an inch to spare beyond his wing mirrors.

Damn, but he was *good*. Better at this than his father with his Bentleys and Mercedes and Rolls. The ostentatiously long driveway stretched straight and clear in front of him, but he shifted gear and pulled the wheel, heading off down the narrow access road that circumnavigated the entire estate through deserted grounds that were dappled with shade and drenched in solitude.

He shifted gear again, listening to the engine, feeling the clutch, feeling the power—loving the solitude, and the control.

His dad couldn't touch him here. Couldn't say a word, couldn't so much as give him one of those *looks*. Couldn't defeat him in this; couldn't even begin to match him in this raw potency. Yeah, Dad could fuck Victoria and outmaneuver him behind his back, run rings around him when it came to business chicanery, but this?

But this was *his*, and his alone. This was about what he wanted, and how he wanted it, and with whom he wanted it. This was about him, nothing and no one else.

Cock hard in the sunlight, bare skin against wool and leather, steering wheel caressing the head, power under his thighs and between his thighs, and he was less than half his dad's age, decades from needing Viagra, unlike—

No. Not there. He was not going there.



He was alone. This was his time, and his place, and his cock in his hand in his car.

His dad couldn't match him in this, couldn't touch him here, gloved palm sliding up and down his cock, black leather made slick by his own pre-come, shift of his muscles as he changed gear, barely slowing for a tree-banded corner, shifting up again, more power, more speed—more friction, more torque, twisting his fingers just so, oh, and that felt good, so fucking good—

He was close to coming, too close, back off, slow down, downshift, ease up, give himself a bit more time, didn't want to come right now.

Give himself time to put his father from his mind first.

He was alone, but not lonely. He didn't need his father—there was more to life than family, or the family business. He didn't want his father—there were other places and other ways he could get affection and approval.

And there it was. His secret. The secret he allowed himself here, and only here, where no one could hear him if a word or a name should slip past his lips. Here, where it was him, and him alone, nothing but him, and his cock, and his desires, and the inside of his own head.

The one thing that could wash the muck and mire from his head, and leave him feeling as light and clean and open as a spring rain.

Clark.

God. Clark.

The one man who was more than a match for a Porsche.

Clark. All open smiles and closed secrets, dark hair and bright eyes, oh, the way Clark looked at him...

He shuddered then, his shirt rubbing against his nipples, his glove rubbing against his cock, and that was just about perfect. All alone, but not lonely: he could see Clark in the passenger seat, barely having to move to reach him: Clark so deliciously tall and broad. Long arms, big hands, touching him, smiling at him, driving hell for leather in the sunlight, Clark's hand on him, Clark's smile on him, Clark's eyes so warm with all the affection and approval Lex had ever earned decently.

Clark—

He fishtailed the car to a perfect halt, power barely leashed, the low rumbling idle of the engine vibrating through him, both hands on his cock now, stroking, rubbing, sliding the head back and forth on the underside of the steering wheel, too hard, too harsh, Clark's hands softer, warmer, his teeth catching on the leather as he pulled his glove off his left hand, yeah, warm like that, the fine caress of skin on skin, Clark smiling at him, touching him, wanting him, loving him—

He came, arching up in his seat, feet pressing down, stalling the engine, his come splashing steering wheel and windscreen and shirt, and then—silence in the aftermath, nothing but the incongruity of birds singing, his own harsh panting breaths and the slow tick of the stalled engine cooling down.

He lay back in his seat, pants spread open, cock delicate and tender under his tracing fingertips, pleasure slowly receding along with the illusion of love that didn't have a soiled price tag attached.

Oh yeah, he loved his cars.

Because this was the one place his father couldn't touch him.



Cochineal

M. FAE GLASGOW

He'd taken flowers to Lana (and what a model of success *that* had been), had done chores for his mom and dad as well as returning all the stuff he'd bought. Jessie was gone, and he wasn't sure what he could've done to apologize to her anyway. Which left Lex, who was richer than Croesus and had formal gardens—including flower beds—bigger than some local farms and more than enough staff to do every chore imaginable, which kind of put paid to Clark's stock of ways to apologize. Which left returning the Ferrari, which was...well, something Clark wasn't exactly looking forward to doing, and not just because it meant giving up the hottest car he'd ever driven and going back to using the school bus or his own two feet. But while he couldn't imagine there being a good time to return the Ferrari and face Lex, this was probably the least worst time: he'd seen the LuthorCorp helicopter head for Metropolis and his mom had said the emergency meetings would run real late and not to wait on dinner for her or worry if she had to stay at the Luthor Towers overnight, so at least he wouldn't run into Lex's dad.

And with any luck at all, Lex's now blind dad wouldn't know about the bullets Clark had shot into his own palm—jeez, what the hell had he been thinking and what kind of sleazeball was glad a man was blind? But if Lionel Luthor did know about the bullets, Clark could hope that at least Mr. Luthor wouldn't have mentioned them to Lex. Or would think they'd hit the federal agent's Kevlar vest or something.

Explaining the whole running away to the Metropolis penthouse and liking the sound of their names linked together was going to be hard enough: Clark really didn't think he was up to explaining the whole bouncing bullets thing as well.

Lex was, of course, in his office. Not behind the expanse of glass desk though; this late in the afternoon, he was half-sprawled in one of the eternally rearranged pieces of furniture with his G4 open on his lap. The brown leather couch was one Clark had last seen in the pseudo-den in the south wing; it was the one he had sat on a million times while he and Lex had played shoot-'em-up video games. Or just sat side by side while Lex talked and he listened, or while he worked on essays or research while Lex went through reports and emails. It conjured up the familiar, the routine—the dependable, reassuring Clark Kent everyone thought they knew.

It made his skin crawl, his face an ill-fitting sheath covering his skull, the outside so very different from who he was. So he plastered a smile on like a mask and hoped he still looked like the person he'd been before that damned ring with its red meteor rock.

"I thought you'd put your office back the old way," Clark said, bright and breezy, making Lex look up at him.

"I had, but it seems the games room was being painted and all the furniture had been moved out, so..."

"It's a good fit, matches the woodwork—" Clark said, stopping himself before he got into the surrealism of discussing interior design with Lex Luthor, tempting though it was to let Lex's easy demeanor smooth them past Tuesday. And Wednesday, and a little bit of today. Just because he wanted to pretend the entire thing hadn't happened didn't mean he didn't need to apologize to Lex. "I...uhm...I just stopped by to return the Ferrari."

One eyebrow raised at him. "In one piece?"

He nodded, letting his gaze drift away from Lex's sharply perceptive eyes down to the velvety curve of cheek then jaw. As smooth as Lana's or Jessie's—

He wasn't going to think about that now. He wasn't going to allow himself to think about that right now: Lex wasn't Lana, Lex wasn't someone Clark could safely allow himself to want. "All in one piece. You know me, Mr. Reliable. I didn't drive it off any bridges," he said, aiming for jaunty, suspecting that he'd only managed embarrassed at the reminder of the shameful way he'd manipulated Lex to get the Ferrari in the first place. "I washed it, too."

And it was kind of Lex not to point out that the man to whom Clark had given both Ferrari and keys was Lex's full time mechanic, an unnervingly intense middle-aged man who doted on his cars and who would no doubt, at this very second,

be checking over the Ferrari with fervid dedication and who would then wash it, probably far more thoroughly

and definitely far more lovingly than Clark ever would. It was kinder still of Lex not to make some joke about cleaning up after 'rocking her world.'

"Thank you," was all Lex said.

Lex really was willing to let it go. Willing to let it go completely. Not just the car and Jessie and the backbone that came with the two-thousand-dollar coat, but the whys and the wherefores and the what-the-hell-happeneds.

And that, perversely enough, was the goad that pushed Clark: Lex was smoother than silk and a hundred times as urbane, but even Lex should have a few questions in his eyes when his fancy red Ferrari was returned by the former No-More-Mr.-Nice-Guy now once more safely wrapped in flannel and much-washed denim. He was keeping secrets from Lex—Lex should at least be interested. "I should be thanking you for letting me borrow it." And he should be thanking Lex for talking to Big Eddie's and several clothing stores in Metropolis about the wisdom of providing good customer service to a personal friend of Lex Luthor even when the items had been opened and/or used.

His dad was god-almighty pissed about that, and even more pissed that they'd had to accept that favor or be stuck with another mountain of debt they couldn't afford. But what pissed his dad off most of all was owing Lex, of having to be grateful to Lex.

There was just enough of the red meteor in Clark to make him like that. A lot. And that scared him enough to not let it go, even though Lex would let him because this was the stuff he couldn't talk to his parents about, or to Pete or anyone else, and it was writhing around inside him like a snake eating its own tail—and if he didn't talk about it, this whole thing would end up devouring him, too. "Thanks for talking to the stores, too."

Lex dismissed that with a small wave, his attention ostentatiously focused back on his laptop. Clark very nearly said it aloud—you're good at that—but caught himself in time. If Lex wanted to create the appearance of sanguine disinterest, it didn't do to force the issue. Not when you still wanted to ask him a favor or two, or a question or three.

Not even when you couldn't forget that it was Lex who'd suggested the penthouse. The two of them, together, in the penthouse. It had probably just been a stalling tactic, but—but that still meant Lex had realized what Clark wanted.

Maybe. If Lex did know what Clark wanted though, Clark wished to hell Lex would tell *him*.

Clark moved around to the front of the sofa, and Lex absently shifted so there was just enough room. It was exquisitely casual and utterly convincing, if a person hadn't spent months using their handy-dandy X-ray vision to watch Lex when Lex didn't know he was being watched. Lex was never that cozily absentminded with anyone, ever. Not even during Lex's carefully mellow displays with Victoria or the

woman Lex had brought to Clark's one and only party, or any of the other girlfriends who came and went like so many ships in the night. So, just as casually, just as absently, with just as much forethought and awareness, Clark settled himself on the couch, close enough that this time his side and thigh were against Lex.

Who did look up at him then, giving Clark his full attention, like a double-bore shotgun.

"What is it?"

Everything and nothing. He had a list as long as his arm and as short as a breath, and all of it things he didn't know how to encompass in mere words now that Lex was waiting. "I'm just sitting here, Lex."

"Clark, you're hovering—"

"No I'm not!" he said, panic sharpening his voice, till he realized Lex hadn't meant it literally.

Lex just looked at him for a moment, amusement laced with an indulgent kindness Clark was willing to bet no one else got from Lionel Luthor's son. Then Lex went back to his laptop, where he went through a familiar routine: checking email, then the news, then the status of the books he'd ordered—incredibly normal things, mundane things, the same everyday things that everyone seemed to do on the net, and about a million miles from how most people would assume a billionaire's heir would spend his time.

But it was something Clark was used to seeing and it was a side of himself Lex was used to showing Clark. This wasn't the studied casualness that was a surreptitious invitation; this moment was simple friendship, with that endless promise of *more* just around the corner. The easy intimacy of Lex's daily routine made Clark stretch his legs out a little, push the glass and steel coffee table farther away—realizing just a fraction too late that the coffee table was too heavy to be moved so casually. Glanced, almost fearfully, at Lex, who looked at the coffee table, then at Clark and then, without saying a word, back at his laptop's screen.

Willing to let that go, too. At least for now. The sheer magnitude of that much trust—from Lex, who was king of dysfunctional families and had hard-earned trust issues roughly the size of the western hemisphere—lodged in Clark's throat, choking him.

"Lex..."

Flicker of a glance at him, then back to where the list of hottest dj mixes was pouring into one window while Lex's browser checked his bookmarks for updated sites, and the main window waited for Lex to choose which "room" of the antiquarian booksellers returning user lxthr wanted to browse.

Clark had questions and he had issues, and he still didn't have succinct or elegant words for any of it. No classical allusions, no literary references—hell, he didn't even have basic words for some of the stuff he needed to talk about.

And Lex didn't push him, which was when Clark finally admitted that it was more than wanting Lex to be interested in him, more than wanting Lex to push him: he'd been depending on Lex's questions, Lex's curiosity, Lex's willingness to breach the unbreachable. He shifted, looked at Lex, looked over at the window. Fiddled with his fingertips, considered biting his nails. Looked at Lex again.

The body beside his tensed a little, energy coiling, but the face remained calm, relaxed, averted. Giving him time, and space.

Which was pretty much the last thing he needed. Then, just as Clark was about to admit defeat and leave, Lex gave him the tiniest of pushes: "Is it Lana?"

Yes. And no. And maybe.

Lex was looking at him again, measuring him or figuring him out, and Clark was more tongue-tied than ever. At least with the red meteor ring he had never run out of things to say. Most of them had been the wrong things, but at least the words had been right there, glib and fast and easy. Kind of like him, when he'd been wearing that ring. And that had probably been the highlight of his little transformation: himself, so glib and fast and easy, repercussions something that happened to the boring old Clark Kent. But his dad had destroyed the ring, and Clark still wasn't any too sure just how much of all of that had been the ring, and how much of it had always been inside him, just waiting for the ring to let it all out.

The ring had overflowed his mouth with slick words, but here and now he was tongue-tied and tied in knots. He could feel the warmth of Lex's concern on his skin, and knew that Lex was looking at him. He could even feel it the moment when Lex went back to his laptop. He'd thought that Lex looked at him differently after his shenanigans with the meteor ring, and this proved it. Sitting right beside him, Lex did something Clark had never seen Lex do before, something that millions of people did every single day on the net, though precious few of them did it in front of their best friends and even fewer did it as a tacit reminder that any subject could be broached: Lex surfed over to a porn site, muttering under his breath when he saw who was about to appear in the live sex show.

"You don't like her?" Clark asked, surprising himself that he could even comment on what Lex was looking at, let alone that he could do it so easily, without the influence—or the excuse—of the ring. Although some of it was probably because she was still pretty much fully dressed. Pretty much. With a couple of notable exceptions. "She's— She's..."

Open amusement now, Lex's eyes twinkling and mouth shivering with leashed laughter. "She is, to a...large degree."

And maybe he didn't need the red meteor rock to let this side of himself out: maybe he could just stop pretending, could just stop hiding behind the image everyone had of him. "But *silicone*, Lex," he said, pointing at the man-made globes,

the nipples oddly flat and completely disinterested. “That’s just—ewww.”

“Ewww?” Lex repeated, the way he had a couple of days ago with Clark’s ‘rock her world.’

“You prefer ‘ick’? Gross? Or how about—zaftig?”

That surprised a tiny hitch of outright laughter, infectious, warming. Welcoming.

“I’d prefer natural,” Lex said, as if the two of them sitting discussing a woman’s breasts was the most natural, boring, everyday routine in the world. “But it’s not them per se. It’s the faces she makes.”

“Apart from the overgrown grapefruits, she looks fine—”

“That’s because she’s hasn’t even started yet, Clark. But when she’s building up to coming... she twists her face up and opens her mouth, then she looks right at the camera—”

Clark leaned over to where the woman had turned her back to the camera and was wriggling out of her skirt to reveal her black thong underwear: it was a very nice view, made all the better by Lex’s liquid chocolate voice talking about breasts and sex and coming.

“So you hate the way she...”

“Comes? Well—” Lex shrugged, closing the dj window and enlarging the sex show window to full screen, angling the laptop more towards Clark. “Technically, I suppose I hate the way she fakes orgasm. And this guy? Her partner? Ugliest cock I’ve ever seen.”

Lex talking about seeing cocks jolted right down Clark’s spine, images and imaginations helter-skeltering through him too fast to stop them. Lex, looking at cocks. Lex looking at cocks and judging their attractiveness. There was no way Clark was touching that, metaphorically or literally, because they’d never taken their flirting this far ever before, and it really was a resolutely heterosexual website—bookmarked—that Lex had gone to, so this probably wasn’t a come-on. Lex could well just be letting Clark know that no subject was out of bounds, no matter how taboo Clark might think it was. Or it could be Lex going with the flow, going off on a minor rant the way he did once in a rare while, a spate of words about the right-wing reactionism of the so-called liberal media or the deconstructionism of history or the right way to wear a tie or people who wore flashy watches with tuxedos. Nothing significant at all.

But most likely it was just Lex reminding Clark that Lex had seen everything at least twice and done all of it at least once. No matter what, it was a tacit welcome to say whatever was on his mind, a tacit reassurance that Lex wouldn’t freak and however esoteric Clark might think the problem was, Lex would take it in stride. Clark took a deep breath and tried not to think about Lex looking at naked women and talking about cocks, but even so, all he managed was a strangled: “Lex?”

It was so quick, Clark wasn’t a hundred percent sure Lex really had looked at him.

“Hmmm?” Lex said, closing the window just as the woman started pulling off her thong, then clicking on another bookmark. He wasn’t looking at Clark now, which made the whole confession/question thing a hell of a lot easier.

“What do you do when you find out you like hurting people?”

Well, that obviously wasn’t what Lex had been expecting: he stopped even pretending to pay attention to what was on the screen, his gaze—piercing and all-seeing—lasering in on Clark. Lex paused for just a few seconds then said, carefully, “You find people who like to be hurt and you respect their limits—”

“God, no, not like that! At least—I don’t think so. I—I don’t know. It was...”

Shackled by his need to keep secrets, Clark stumbled over wanting talk to someone—wanting to talk to Lex, who had depths and darknesses enough to understand and the courage to admit he had them.

“Tell you what, Clark,” Lex said, tone flip, mouth amused, eyes dark with understanding and other things Clark couldn’t quite name. “I’ll make you a deal.”

That brought Clark’s head up, and he was sure the whites of his eyes were showing: this was Lex, yeah, and so that meant he was pretty much safe, but a Luthor offering a deal? Even his own Luthor? Anyone with any sense would head for the hills, then stop to make sure they hadn’t lost a pound of flesh or a few internal organs.

Lex was looking at him, steady, placid as a lake under midnight skies, and just as deep and unknowable.

Lex seemed to be waiting for something, so Clark said, “What kind of deal?”

“If you don’t lie to me, I won’t ask any questions.”

That was—that was the biggest gift anyone had ever given him. That was as big as the X-ray vision and the space ship in the storm cellar.

And that was a pretty huge damned hint that Lex knew *something*, or at least had some good strong suspicions. Which meant that even the offer of no questions was perilously close to his secrets, too close to the thing he wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, the thing that had changed Pete and him, altered the friendship, made it closer on the surface, but where it really counted... Not closeness, but distance. Still small, for now, but every day, every week, it widened by a breath or a look, as Clark was that little bit different, or Pete took that little bit more risk than he ought because Clark could save him or Clark could find out their grades or Clark could just fix everything. Clark could draw a map of the future, his friendship with Pete like a parched field in a drought, all their potential sundered by cracks and fissures and divides—and his friendship with Pete had been a hell of a lot more uncomplicated than his friendship with Lex could ever hope to be. So what the hell could happen if Lex ever found out?

Or what was happening now, right now, if Lex already knew?

He swallowed, and Lex watched that, then Lex's eyes were meeting his again, and Lex was waiting. Waiting.

Waiting as Lex had waited from the very start. But the risks—

No questions, no lies. It was an offer his own dad would declare suspect and Lex's dad would stomp on. But it was lying there between them, waiting for him to pick it up or reject it.

It was up to him: Lex wasn't pushing him, Lex wasn't coercing him, Lex was giving him a choice, the ball was in his court and... He just had to make the decision. Right here, right now, without a crisis or the threat of discovery or anything else. Just Lex, waiting for him, unnervingly patient. But damnit, he wanted Lex to push. Just give him that one last, little push so he could take that leap into the unknown, so he could have an excuse if it all went wrong. Lex made me do it, he could tell himself, later, if a secret-knowing Lex pulled away, or if Lex couldn't resist the temptations of having his own pet alien. The amount of money Lex could make from having an alien—the money brought in by exclusive picture deals alone would be in the millions: it would finance LexCorp, would free Lex from his father.

How could he expect Lex to resist that sort of temptation?

Lex's smile was diamond bright and twice as cutting, only it wasn't Clark who was bleeding. And then Lex was turning away, going back to his laptop, all small, perfectly controlled motions and white-knuckled smiles, his face nearly bovine in its bizarre placidness.

No questions. No lies.

Maybe no secrets told either.

Because the danger here wasn't that Lex was asking for his secrets: the danger was that after the red meteor rock, he couldn't pretend he didn't want to tell Lex every last secret he had. In detail. More than once.

That was something else he and Lex both understood: the influence of a father, and of a mother, and of what you'd been brought up all your life to be.

Don't tell anyone.

Don't get too close to anyone.

Be careful.

Don't let anyone ever see you.

The knowledge soured his stomach and tasted bitter in his mouth: it was dressed up differently, but he'd been brought up with the same core lesson Lionel Luthor had drummed into Lex day after day after day.

You can't trust anyone, son.

And he could hear that as clearly in his own dad's voice as in Lionel Luthor's.

Lex was a study in elegant relaxation, like something out of a glossy magazine and just as real: there was a tiny twitch at the corner of Lex's left eye, and those knuckles were still white.

Half an age ago, before he'd retreated into awkward silence, Lex had asked him the safest non-question question of all: was it about Lana.

"I took Lana to this bar—" And it did something to him, deep down in his guts, where lust dwelt, that Lex turned to him so quickly, like a feral cat offered a trough of chicken and cream.

"Where you were seen leaving in my father's latest attempt at a birthday present after having quite an altercation."

"Uhm—yeah. Sorry about that, too."

Flicker of a genuine smile, melting Clark's bones. "Believe me, I've done worse. But—Lana? In a bar that has sawdust on the floor and cowboys dancing to Billboard alt-crap?"

"Hey, we can't all listen to thrash trance or whatever you're into this week. We're a long way from Metropolis. MTV's about as cool as we get around here."

Lex didn't need to actually say anything to express his opinion on *that*.

But Lex was still not pushing, still sitting there, still waiting, albeit with the beginnings of tics and tensions, one finger and thumb rubbing at his right eyebrow, lips pressed tightly together, and it was enough to know that Lex *wanted* to push. That Lex needed to know even more than Clark needed to tell. "I took Lana there, but when she didn't let me...when she said...when she wouldn't..."

"Let you rock her world," Lex said, all warm butterscotch over smooth vanilla ice cream.

"That was when Jessie showed up."

"Your original plan. And she, I take it, was willing to let you rock her world?"

And there it was, just sitting there, looking at him. He fixed his gaze on the way his fingers were twisting and turning, making pretzel shapes. "Lex, can it still be rape even if the person doesn't say no?"

The silence was very, very, very still, all watchful waiting and unspoken thoughts.

Eventually, Clark looked up.

"What happened?" Lex asked him, neutral, nothing at all in that voice.

"She—"

He closed his eyes, and replayed it all against the backdrop of his eyelids. "She wanted me, she did," he said, and it wasn't until he heard himself say it he realized how hard he was trying to convince himself that it was the truth. "She never said no, she didn't even try to push me away or anything, not seriously. But..."

"But what?"

But with his strength, could he tell the difference between her playing rough and her genuinely trying to stop him? He thought he could, he desperately hoped he could. He needed to believe he could and more importantly, that



even under the influence of the red meteor, he would obey the difference.

"It seems kind of clear cut, Clark," Lex said, but there was still that cautious, waiting neutrality, until Clark felt like a mouse in a hole with a cat outside. "She didn't say no, she didn't try to stop you—"

"But did she really want it?"

There was another pause, and the words spilled out of him like his come had that night, filling the emptiness. "You didn't see how she was dressed, Lex. She was—she was just about wearing a sign with Teenage Rebellion printed on it. And it wasn't *me* she wanted, it was—you know how some good girls are attracted to the bad guys? And when girls are trying to be all mean and tough and prove to themselves they're strong enough to take whatever the world throws at them so they want the even badder boys? It was that, but—but she was scared, too, The fight in the bar—after it, I saw the way she was looking at me, but I grabbed her anyway. Lex. I—"

The question stuck in his craw and he had to swallow twice before he could actually speak. "I don't know if she said yes because being kinda scared turned her on or if she didn't say no because she was scared what I'd do if she tried to stop me."

"Oh shit," Lex said, and maybe it was a new "gift" rearing its ugly head, but Clark heard the nearly subvocal murmur loud and clear.

"Yeah," he said. "That's pretty much how I feel."

His dad had a saying for this, just like his dad had a saying for everything: better hung for a sheep than a lamb. "And the other thing, Lex?"

A wordless, encouraging little noise.

"I'm not sure if I really wanted it. I mean—I wanted it, of course I did, I'm not a freak."

He made the mistake of glancing at Lex at that moment, and the rich affection in Lex's eyes almost—almost—made up for the disbelief on his face.

"Okay, so yeah, I'm a freak," he confessed, his reward being Lex's hell-bent smile, and Lex's right hand stroking over the smooth baldness of his skull, freakishness Lex's own particular badge of pride—and courage. "But I wanted sex, and she was—I think she was willing. Maybe. And I did it and it was good, but..."

"But the first time is never as good as our fantasies, Clark," said with such mature, gentle understanding that it would be galling coming from anyone but Lex. "It can't be. How many times did you imagine your first time? And how many times was it perfect, when it was all in your head and you didn't have to deal with another person and your own haste? No fumbles, no missing the target, no awkwardness—"

"But it was perfect," Clark nearly whispered, looking down again, his fingernails making a play of picking at the seam of his jeans, a nervous habit without the destruction

of his strength up against mere cotton threads. "It really was. It was as if I'd done a it million times, and I think maybe she had, and it was just—perfect."

"And the problem with that is...?"

"One of the things I kind of bought was a motorcycle," Clark said, peripheral vision telling him this sideline had thrown Lex another minor loop. "I picked Jessie up on the way to school, drove us right through all the kids and everyone was looking at us—looking at *me*. I had this hot bike between my thighs—" Beside him, Lex shifted suddenly, nearly upsetting the laptop. "And this even hotter girl at my back, wrapped all around me. I could feel her inner thighs around my legs and it should've—"

With just the thinnest sliver of a smile: "Rocked your world?"

"Yeah. Instead it was... kinda..." He shrugged, giving up on describing everything it hadn't been. "So then I saw Lana standing there staring at me, and I thought, that's it, there's nothing wrong with me, it just wasn't hot because it wasn't Lana. I've wanted Lana since—God, I've wanted Lana since before I could...well, since before I could, you know, really do anything about it. And that's why it wasn't hot with Jessie wrapped around me on the bike."

He took a breath, giving himself a second to gather himself, darting another quick look at Lex. "Then I took Lana to that bar, but the second she made it clear she wasn't going to do anything, it didn't matter, *she* didn't matter any more. I walked away, Lex," he said, looking right at Lex, not sure what it was he was looking for in Lex's eyes. "I had Jessie, who was willing, so I dumped Lana who wasn't. " He flushed with shame, ears and cheeks and the back of his neck painfully, pricklingly hot. "It was just sex, it was just about—"

"Fucking," Lex said for him.

"Yeah," he said quietly.

"Forgive me if I fail to see the problem, Clark. You're not exactly Methuselah—why shouldn't you be out to get laid just like every other guy under 50?"

"Because it was Lana," he whispered. "And I thought I loved her." He couldn't bring himself to look at Lex, but he heard the sharp intake of breath. "I thought I worshipped her. Pete says—" Lex was waiting again. "Pete says I'm married to Lana in my imagination."

"So you found out you're a real boy after all," Lex said, and Clark had a sudden vision of something other than Pinocchio's nose growing long and hard and sprouting.

"Why shouldn't you be like other guys—" Lex raised a hand, forestalling Clark's reaction. "Sorry. No questions, no lies. Look, Clark, she didn't say no, you didn't force her—"

And Clark knew he should be panicking about Lex knowing not to ask why Clark wasn't like everyone else, but damnit, the alien crap could take a back seat for just five minutes. "But she was doing it for all the wrong reasons. So was I."

"I don't know what you want me to say here, Clark, but if you're looking for blame or someone to make you feel guilty, you've come to the wrong place."

It hadn't even occurred to him that he might want that—that he might need that. An excuse to feel badly about what he'd done, so that he could push it aside like an inverse image of the usual "it's not your fault" that he pushed aside every week.

"You slept with Jessie because she wanted what you were that night, and you wanted what she was offering. I slept with Victoria, to name but one, and my motives were even less pure than just wanting to fuck a willing body for the first time."

And Clark had no clue how to answer that without royally pissing Lex off and/or mortally insulting him.

Lex was still looking at him with even more understanding. "But you wanted it to be more than just fucking, didn't you?"

Clark knew his smile was lopsided, but he figured he should at least get points for trying. "I'm a closet romantic, I guess."

He might as well admit to that since he was a closet everything else.

"Clark..."

"I know, I know, not every relationship is about love."

"And that isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"As long as she doesn't say no."

"As long as neither of you say no."

And they hadn't, either one of them. But they hadn't been able to look each other in the eye afterwards.

"Did you, Clark?"

"Did I what?" he asked, stalling for time, fully aware that Lex would know he was doing exactly that.

Very gently, as soft as a summer zephyr: "Did you say no? Even if only to yourself?"

"I think..."

Lex waited, all coiled listening and concern, the tacit push Clark needed.

"I think maybe I wish I had."

Beside him, Lex shifted again, not as precipitously this time, just a restless surge and a tense resettling. "You know you don't have to answer anything you don't want to, don't you, Clark?"

Clark resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I'm a big boy, I can get out of answering questions. I'm not going to lie to you," he said. Then he surprised the hell out of himself by adding: "Not about this."

"Sounds like a deal," Lex replied, mildly enough for Clark to look at him sharply. "And it sounds to me like you're having a typical morning after the night before, but without the hangover."

"Yeah, I know, people do stupid things all the time, usually when they get drunk or high and yeah, I know, you've done it all and I bet you have a million things worse than this," and that was unfair, and he knew it as soon as the words left his mouth because he'd been depending on Lex's debauched past and blasé present, but this whole thing *mattered* to him, "so this is nothing much to you, but for me—"

Lex's gaze was fixed on his laptop, where the woman who irritated him had been banished in favor of a webcam that showed nothing but an endless vista of snow and ice and solitude, and Lex's voice was almost dreamy when he spoke. "But the first one changes your life. It changes who you think you are."

And oh, that was the voice of experience talking, that was the voice Clark needed to hear—and oh, but that was the voice of pain, too, and he hadn't wanted that, hadn't wanted to stir up old miseries. Hadn't stopped to think that his weren't the only secrets risking exposure around here. "Lex?"

Lex still wasn't looking at him, was still staring at the expanse of white, and now Clark could see that it wasn't a featureless abstraction, but shades of white on white, with minimal hints of palest blue, even an icy trace of green. It looked like death, if death decided to dress up in its Christmas best, finally fit for a Luthor.

Clark moved slightly, not daring to put his arm around Lex or offer obvious comfort, but pressing his warmth a little bit more closely, leaning in just a touch more when Lex didn't pull away.

"You find out things about yourself," Lex said, nearly dismissively, not that Clark was fooled—not that Lex thought Clark was fooled for a moment.. "Usually things you didn't want to know."

"That's some of the stuff in your past you're not too proud of, right?"

"Some of it."

This time, Clark was the one who waited, and it was Lex who finally yielded.

"Most of my sordid past can't be blamed on anything or anyone but me. But there are quite a few mornings-after on my slate, so I can imagine how you're feeling."

"Yeah?" And then Lex was looking at him, really looking at him—and more, Lex was letting him see Lex. "You think you know how I'm feeling?"

"Yeah," Lex said, soft and sad. "Soiled. Used. Guilty. And a little bit smug, a little bit proud because you *dared*, because you did what nobody else had the balls to do. You did what nobody expected you to do—what *you* didn't think you'd ever do."

Which was one of the things that scared him. Other people could afford to slip like that, and enjoy it, but him?

His secrets pressed against his lips, clamoring to be set free, like all the denizens of Pandora's Box in full cry. He couldn't let them loose, but instead, he could sacrifice another truth alongside Lex's on the altar of friendship. "I feel like I have two identities and I don't know which one is the real me."

Which made Lex grin, then out and out laugh, if such a constrained, polite little sound could be called laughter. "Like the cartoons, the Devil on one shoulder, the angel on the other."

"No," Clark said, offering the truth,



the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him, God, if there was a God and if He covered aliens. "As if the angel and the devil are both me, right here, inside my head, and—I knew I wasn't a saint, but—"

Lex's eyes were as hard as his lips were soft. "It's hard to see the other side, to find out just what we're capable of."

Clark swallowed and held Lex's steady gaze with his own fear filled one. "I hurt people, Lex."

"So have I."

"I liked it."

The tiniest of twisted little smiles, the first time Clark had seen anything truly ugly about Lex. "So did I."

He was being met, point for point, accepted, matched. And it felt like absolution. And perdition.

Another thing he'd said to someone else, an elliptical question he couldn't quite bring himself to ask and for which he was still desperately seeking the answer. "I kind of got lost along the way."

"But you had people to drag you back."

The fear he'd been skirting was sitting there now, black and ugly and grinning up at him with feral teeth. "What if they're not there the next time?" And he asked the questions he could only ask of Lex, no one else, because who else had the morality to recognize this in himself and the courage to admit it? "How do I stop myself from getting lost again? That wasn't someone else doing those things, Lex, that was *me*. How do I not be that part of me ever again?"

And his breath caught, and his heart stuttered, because Lex touched him then. Lex reached out, just his fingertips, and touched his face, tender as a mother to an infant, or a lover to a new love, before pulling back into himself.

"You do what I did. You get a hero, Clark," Lex said, staring at him, eyes painfully sincere even as the slight smile slid into self-deprecation. "You find yourself a hero and you try to live up to his standards." And now the smile was all-out self mockery and the eyes were simply pained, "You try to be someone you're not."

"You can't do that, Lex," and knew a moment of fear that his eyes would burn the way his voice did, and maybe Lex saw something in him, maybe Lex had a taste of Clark's fear, because Lex was starting to pull away, and Clark grabbed him by the wrist, stopping him. "You can't be someone you're not—"

"Don't you—I can *try*, Clark."

"No, you can't," he said, not letting go, gut instinct telling him that if he let Lex go now, he might never be able to catch him again. And maybe this was the moment when they finally stopped skirting the issue, stopped dancing a do-si-do up to their desire then away again. "You can't be someone you're

not, which means that the man you are *here*, in Smallville, with *me*, is who you really are, just as much as the messed

up kid you were when you were in Metropolis was who you used to be."

"You seem very sure of that," Lex said, and amidst all the intense looks and spiraling tension and the heat that was crawling up his spine, Clark still noticed that Lex was very carefully not struggling, wasn't trying to pull his wrist free—wasn't doing anything that might raise awkward questions about just how strong Clark really was.

"I am very sure about that."

"Based on what? This? What you've seen while I've been here? In Metropolis, I had a wild crowd I ran with—no, I didn't run with them, I led them. Every week, there were clubs and raves sending me special invites and offering me sex and drugs if I'd just show up. I had drugs being handed to me when I walked through the door of those clubs—or into my favorite restaurants sometimes. I had people walking up to me in the *street*, Clark, complete strangers, offering to blow me right then and there, if I wanted them, just to get a taste of my money or my name or hoping that maybe a little bit of the Luthor nightlife glamour would rub off on them."

Clark could see it—could feel it, in his mouth, in his cock, so much lust and hunger and need pulsing through Lex's voice.

"What temptations are there here in Smallville? Why are you so convinced this change in me is permanent?"

"I'm not," he said, and saw that shock shiver through Lex's eyes. "But whatever you are here and now is really you, even if the rest of it's really you, too."

"I am legion—"

"No you're not. Maybe your dad is, but you're no demon, Lex."

"That's not what everyone else says. It's not what your dad says."

"Yeah, well, my dad also says Creedence Clearwater Revival is the best band ever, so he's wrong sometimes. And he's wrong about you."

And what else was his dad wrong about?

Don't tell anyone.

But lift the truck to save a trip into the barn to get a jack.

Don't tell anyone ever.

But once he'd told Pete, it had been a smile and a hug for Pete and a welcome to the family.

"Your own dad's wrong about you too, Lex. And maybe he knows that, maybe that's why he's so desperate to get you back to Metropolis and if he can't get you back there, maybe that's why he's come here."

"He knows he's losing his hold over me. that's all. My father doesn't like to lose what he owns."

"He only owns you if you let him."

"You think I don't know that?" By now, anyone else would've degenerated into foul language and yelling, but Lex's voice was barely raised, for all it sounded like shouting. "But that's me too, Clark. The me who won't walk away from all this money and power because I *like* it. I want it."



"I only told you a bit about that night—I'm not perfect either, Lex."

His hand was no longer clenched around Lex's wrist: it had slid downwards to hold Lex's hand, without his intent, moving purely on the instinct he tried so hard to curb; they were palm to palm now, his fingers wrapped around the strong, callused heat that was holding onto him as tightly as on a well-remembered day on Level Three.

"Even in Smallville, I'm not a saint," Lex told him, low and private, like a confessional box. Or a bedroom.

"You think I don't know that, Lex? I remember—I know about you hesitating over your father, I know about Roger Nixon—"

God, he had no idea Lex was still so torn up over that, and this was why he'd always tried to rein things in around Lex, stop it going to the next level. If he didn't keep Lex at a safe distance, then he had no defenses against Lex's suffering, especially when Lex was putting such a brave, impassive face on it.

But if there was one thing Clark Kent knew way too much about, it was the wearing of masks.

"Lex," he said, knowing he was letting too much show, knowing his father would never approve of him trusting Lex this much, that his mother would have a fit over what was probably going to happen to her little boy before he left here tonight. "I meant I knew about you hiring Nixon. That was...shady. But what you did to save my dad's life—"

"Yours."

He looked at Lex, holding on tight, not letting Lex go.

"I did it to save your life."

Although it had been his dad lying there helpless on the ground: he'd been told, in hushed tones, one very late night, of how his dad had lain on the ground with a steel bar aimed right between his eyes, how it had felt to feel another man's blood on him, to feel the hot splash of blood before he realized he'd heard a gunshot, to feel the weight of a dead body pressing down on his own still-breathing chest, to look into the eyes of a man who'd been killed to save you...

"But then I realized what I'd done," Lex wasn't whispering, was nearly snarling, lips pulled back from his teeth, and Clark understood that he wasn't the only one who was being devoured by secrets and lies and fears. "I had killed a human being. There was someone lying there dead because of me."

"Not because of you. Because of what he was going to do." What Nixon had been taunting his father with, standing there with rusty metal poised to kill. How much do you know, how much did you hear?, he wanted to ask Lex, but the words were strangling him, secrets bottled up for years and years, stoppered by fear and he wasn't sure if he wanted to let them out or if he needed to keep them in...

"You didn't have any choice, Lex. If you'd shot to wound him, he could still've got my dad, or he could've turned on

you. You had a choice about your dad, but Roger Nixon was the one who chose that someone had to die out there in the woods."

"But I chose who died."

"You expect me to fault you for that? You think I'd prefer it if you'd let Nixon live? Lex—"

He tugged Lex closer, then let go, just long enough for both of them to scabble together to catch the laptop before it crashed to the floor—and he saw Lex start to move again, saw another one of those moments when it would be so easy for Lex to withdraw back into the safety of his old protective shell. He barely had to move, and then his hand was on Lex's back, smooth, densely woven cotton warmed by Lex's body.

He could feel Lex's shoulder blade move and his muscles shift as Lex leaned forward, elbows on knees, both hands smoothing over his skull, a silent scream.

"My dad and I were fighting. Yelling at each other. Just before the tornado blew out the windows," Lex said, and then stopped, leaving too much time for Clark to think, to envision what it'd been like in the castle. "My father," Lex said, "threatened to bury me and anyone in Smallville who took my side."

"But you still saved him," Clark said, sliding forward, hand curling around the curve of Lex's shoulder, his side pressed against Lex's, offering warmth and comfort and anything else Lex might want to take... "I didn't save him. You did."

"Don't try to make me into a hero, Clark."

Clark could feel the deep breath Lex took, Lex's ribs expanding against Clark's side for a moment.

Then smoothly, hiding every scrap of emotion behind polished perfection, Lex looked at him and said: "You'll only be disappointed, sooner or later."

"You think I'll never disappoint you? C'mon, Lex, you trying to tell me you weren't disappointed when I doubted why you were helping Ryan?"

Chips and cracks appearing in the polished surface. "I don't need you to be perfect."

"That's a relief." He answered the question in Lex's quick glance at him: "I'm Clark Kent, goody two shoes. I'm that nice boy of Martha and Jonathan's, I'm the guy who didn't take advantage of Lana when she was all half-naked in her red lace underwear—" That got a raised eyebrow. "The flower, remember? I'm—you know how you hate the way people put you in a box because of who they think you are? I'm the same, only I'm expected to be this— this—"

"Guardian angel, rushing to the rescue, then stepping to the back so nobody notices you."

"Yeah, exactly. Everyone else expects me to be perfect."

"Clark—"

"What?"

"So how come you're so...sanguine about Nixon and all the rest now?"

He edged closer, till there was no way



he could pretend he was doing anything other than hugging Lex, wrapping himself around Lex as much as he could. He still hadn't gone too far: he could still pull back, play the best friend card the way he had with Chloe and Lana, but...but he'd been doing that for so long, hiding his secrets, hiding behind his secrets, and maybe he didn't have to any more. After all, it didn't look like he was going to have to hide one of his closets much longer.

"It's easy to get mad at people when you think you'd never do anything like that," Clark said, and no, he wasn't going to draw attention to the fact that Lex was allowing him to rub soothing circles in the middle of Lex's back, nor to the fact that he wanted to do that against bare skin... With his nails. "I was so busy throwing stones, I never stopped to look at myself. You don't know half of what I did when—I was going to say when I wasn't myself, but I was more myself than maybe I'd ever been before. I didn't even try to control myself, Lex. I just took what I wanted and you know, I kind of fell off the pedestal me and my parents built for me. And—"

"Yeah?"

"I learned friends can do stuff they're not proud of to their friends," he could almost hear himself speaking in the voice of the red meteor, using the day he'd first saved Lex's life, using that and using Lex for money and status and cars, "and it doesn't mean those friends are any less...close."

There was a sparkle of a smile, a tiny twitch in Lex's profile, and Clark touched the corner of that smile with his fingertip. A tiny breath inwards, then Lex turned towards him, and his finger slid along Lex's parted lips, feeling just the faintest hint of even, wet teeth.

Desire hitched his breath, and pulsed through his cock, and this time he didn't pull away. Nor did Lex. "I would've gone with you to the penthouse, just the two of us," Clark whispered. "Why did you go to my dad instead of taking me to Metropolis?"

"Look around you, Clark," Lex said, throwing a quick look around the opulence and understated extravagance of this room, of a pseudo-castle dropped in the middle of Kansas farm country. "I'm an expert on the difference between getting what I want instead of having what I need."

And that warmed Clark in a way nothing ever had: when was the last time he'd felt protected, instead of being the protector? When was the last time he hadn't been at least half pretending when he'd accepted someone's help? Lex had refused him what he wanted to give him what he needed, and that meant Lex had refused himself what Lex wanted too.

He wasn't a complete fool: he'd known from the start that Lex wanted him. But now he knew why Lex, dissolute, experienced, jaded Lex Luthor, hadn't taken what Clark could so easily

have been seduced into giving: an unexpectedly straightforward refusal of what was wanted in favor of what was

needed. Now it was his turn: Lex wanted to trust, but needed the truth, or that trust would corrupt and decay like a body abandoned in a ditch. Lex needed the truth, or this would end as badly as Lex's relationship with his father...

Clark could hear his own pulse pounding, could feel the triphammer beat of Lex's heart. Could see the wariness in Lex's eyes, could see how far Lex was from hope.

It wasn't just physically that he had to hold onto Lex and there were worse ways to lose someone than not having them as a...well, whatever they would end up being if they took the next step. If it was what they both needed, more than just wanted, and perhaps it was an echo of the red meteor influencing him, but he wasn't going to hide from what they both needed, not any more.

Lex needed the truth or trust would turn to something maggot-ridden and rotten. And frighteningly, Clark needed to tell Lex the truth. He'd wanted to when he'd been wearing that ring, wanted to tell everyone he knew, but this...this was his ticket, his quid pro quo for Lex's friendship and beyond. More. He needed more, and so did Lex. And Clark was finally ready to give it to them both. "You remember that paperweight?"

He heard Lex swallow, felt the tension knot Lex's shoulders, felt the movement of muscles as Lex nodded yes.

Deep breath, just say it. "It's mine."

"Yours."

Not a question, but there were so many questions crowding Lex's eyes, so much need leashed and held at bay.

"For my—" God, he couldn't say it. He couldn't just put it into the harsh glare of words. "Nixon was onto something. He really was."

Lex said nothing, just sat there, tense and taut under Clark's arm.

"About me. He—I'm..."

One heartbeat. Two. Three. And Lex saying nothing.

Not pushing.

Not pushing at all.

This was his decision to make, his and his alone. There'd be no blaming someone else, no excuses. Nothing he could take to his parents, or use to console himself if it all went wrong.

Because he wasn't afraid Lex would betray him—God, one of the first things he'd learned was the frightening extremes Lex would go to to protect his friends, and who else fit that label better than Clark Kent? But he'd forgotten that, misplaced it under the constant barrage of his father's hate and suspicion, and under the onslaught of his own fear of exposure.

No, betrayal wasn't what he was afraid of. He was afraid Lex wouldn't see him the same way any more. He was afraid Lex would be repulsed by his lack of humanity, his alienness, his...his lying.

His feet were turning into blocks of ice because he was afraid that finally telling Lex the truth would mean Lex would never trust him again.

But—

He only wanted to keep his secret. Lex needed the truth. They both needed the truth.

“What do you think I am, Lex?”

A long measuring stare that made him squirm, made him uncomfortable with being so close to Lex, being so closely under a metaphorical microscope.

“I used to think you were another meteor mutant,” Lex said, the old urbanity back in full force again, hiding things Clark wished he could hear. “I used to think you were like me.”

“Is that why you started investigating the meteor rocks?”

And just like that, the urbanity was gone again, shredded like tissue, telling Clark just how close to the edge Lex was. “Every other week, someone who’d been exposed to the meteor shower twelve years ago goes nuts or turns into some kind of murderous monster. I was...”

Clark stroked his hand across Lex’s shoulder when Lex looked away, and rubbed his thumb over the back of Lex’s neck when Lex lowered his head.

“I was afraid, Clark.”

And safe in his little alien cocoon, that hadn’t even crossed his mind. “It doesn’t affect everyone the same way, Lex.”

“But how could I be sure it wouldn’t do that to me? That I wouldn’t end up out of control, running through Smallville—”

“I’d stop you.”

He felt Lex take another deep breath, felt the fierceness of Lex’s protection burning in Lex’s eyes with the weight of that stare on his skin. “I wasn’t going to make you do that.”

Protecting him. Again. “Lex—”

He stopped because Lex had twisted around till he was sitting sideways, one foot braced on the floor, the other tucked under him. Clark didn’t let go; he let Lex slide deeper into his embrace, let his arms encircle Lex from this new angle, let Lex come close enough to share breath, a gentle, nearly fuzzy embrace, which blunted the honed edges of the conversation and eased the discomfort of so much honesty between two people brought up on lies.

“The piece of metal, the alloy that’s like nothing else on Earth. That’s...yours.”

So much for that little detail just sliding in under the radar to cozy acceptance. So much for Lex not pushing. So much for thinking telling Lex was such a great idea. “Yeah.”

“Which means you’re...”

Looked like Lex couldn’t bring himself to say it either. “Yeah. I’m...I’m...that. One of those.”

And Lex just stared at him. Then stared at him some more.

Then Lex was on his feet and across the room almost as fast as Clark could manage.

“That’s—that’s...”

Lex Luthor, flabbergasted. Speechless, wordless, standing there with his eyes kind of wide and his mouth hanging open. It was almost reassuring that even Lex could look like a

complete dork of a loser once in a while. Maybe Clark wasn’t entirely out of his league after all. And at least Lex hadn’t run screaming from the room. Thank God for comic books and closeted geeks.

“You...it’s...”

“Yep. Kind of how I reacted when I found out.”

“When you found out?” Lex demanded, turning incredulity into an art form. “What the hell d’you mean, when you found out?”

“I didn’t know. Don’t look at me like that, I really didn’t! I don’t remember anything until after the meteor shower. My first real memory is running through our house with my mom chasing me.”

“So you don’t remember where you came from?”

“Nothing.” And he realized he could talk to Lex about this, really talk to him: Lex wasn’t Pete, Lex wasn’t going to feel threatened or inadequate if Clark could outrun him and outshoot him at backyard basketball, because Lex had a lifetime of privilege and status bolstering him. Lex was also used to being a freak, immediately and visibly different from everyone else. An outcast, right here in Smallville. The words started like pebbles rolling down a hill, picking up size and speed, going faster and faster and faster, relief tumbling in their wake. “I don’t even know where I came from. I don’t even know my own name! There’s no handy star map with an X marks the spot telling me where I came from. Hell, I don’t even know if I’m from this *galaxy*. What happened to my folks? Why am I the only one, why did they send a little kid out on his own? And how old am I? I arrived with the meteors, so I couldn’t’ve been traveling faster than the speed of light, so how long did it take me to get here, and was I in stasis or a traveling incubator, or is it normal for whatever the fuck I am to look five years old after however long it took me to get here? I could be from anywhere. I could be anything, anyone, there’s nothing, just—”

Very quietly, with a trace of unsteadiness, and Lex was handling this pretty damned well, considering. “That piece of metal and whatever it fits into.”

“Yeah. There’s...I guess it’s a pod. It’s not big enough to be a regular space ship.”

“Oh, and we all have space ships lying around to know what the average size is.”

“Lex—”

“Sorry, but—God, Clark, this is something out of my comic books or Arthur C. Clarke. This isn’t supposed to be real life.”

“Yeah. Exactly,” Clark said, and he knew he was hunching his shoulders, but it made him feel better. Smaller. Less noticeable.

Less like an outsider.

Less like he could break something, or someone, by accident or sheer overgrown alien clumsiness.



"Are you—" Lex paused, which was kind of unnerving: Clark wasn't sure he wanted to know what made Lex Luthor look nearly embarrassed. Oh. That. Reasonable question, considering where they'd been heading till he'd come out as an alien.

"I know it doesn't make any sense, but I seem to be like humans pretty much all the way."

"Apart from the effect the meteors have on you, the indestructibility, the strength and the speed, right?"

"How did you—"

And Lex was meeting his gaze with the perfect honesty that always said that Lex was lying.

"Don't," Clark said. "I'm not lying to you, don't you dare—"

Lex looked out the window, at the formal gardens Clark always thought looked painfully out of place amongst the Kansas fields.

"Nixon's personal effects were signed over to me—"

He could feel the sweat beading his palms. This meant—he wasn't going to freak. He wasn't. "I am *so* not going to ask how you arranged that."

"And he had photographs, audiotapes and videotapes."

Of the truck exploding, and God alone knew what else, but the truck was the big thing and if Lex had seen evidence of that—

"A farming accident," Lex said dryly. "I believe that's what you said happened to the truck."

"It was an accident and it was on the farm," he said, because being caught in a lie came with its very own reflexes.

"It was deliberate sabotage—and you came through unscathed."

Like the time Lex had hit him with a Porsche, not that either of them needed to actually say that out loud: it hung between them now, as it had from the instant it had happened and he'd first lied about it.

"I think—"

"Ergo sum," Lex said, and Clark supposed he should let Lex in on the other little secret, that he wasn't quite as dumb as he played. But he could tell from the way Lex was looking at him that nothing he did or had done was going to be taken at face value for a while. For a hell of a long time, if he knew his Lex.

And he did know Lex. Who wasn't the most moral person on the planet, unless you measured him by Lex's own peculiar and strict code. Or unless you compared Lex to his father, at which point Lex suddenly became a saint. "I don't know why I'm here," he said, and that brought another slew of relief that flooding through him. It was a delight, the first bright sunny day after winter, to finally be able to talk about his doubts and fears to someone who wouldn't feel guilt or worry about whether or not they'd brought him up right or made the best

decisions for him. "I thought it was all an accident, you know, just pure chance that I ended up here, but—"

"The cave," Lex said, and Clark recognized that combination of wonder and speculation. "The relief in the wall for the metal octagon—"

"And the illustrations."

Sharp, penetrating look, digging into him even from across the room. "You believe everything in the cave?"

"I want to."

"And what do you think the cave art means? Two beings joined together, or one being split in two?"

Decision time. Or—really, the decision had been made a long time ago, almost at the very start. Maybe even while they were both still dripping river water. So this wasn't decision time, this was simply *time*. The right time, the time when he was ready, the time when it was finally right.

"Two beings joined together," he said, his smile turning into an outright grin when Lex gave him a small smile in return. He got up from the couch, took a couple of steps towards Lex. "Two beings with a shared destiny, two beings sharing the same root..."

And yes, that was one of those smirks he liked so much. "I told you our friendship would be legendary."

"Yeah?" he asked, still grinning, probably looking like a dork, but Lex didn't seem to think that was a turn-off. "So which one are you?"

"The purple one, of course."

"The purple—"

But Lex broke in with: "Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"You really are an..."

He knew how this felt: just when you thought you had your brain wrapped around it, it would suddenly hit you again: alien. Space ship. Science fiction for real. Shock that made you want to hide for a year or laugh hysterically. "Yep. Should probably get a green card."

Lex walked towards him, grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him over to the couch, where Lex just...deflated, and flopped down onto the leather cushions like a spent balloon.

Clark stood there, and waited, while Lex stared his fill. He didn't even wince when Lex finally whispered the word. "Alien?"

"Yes."

"Not a meteor mutant."

"No."

Stronger this time, with more certainty, and a hint of a smile in Lex's eyes. "Alien."

And this time, he could admit it. Could even smile as he admitted it to this Warrior Angel fan. "Alien."

"That's—that's more than I expected. Damn, I was so *sure*—"

And that was—that was just Lex, to the max. "I don't believe this! I thought this—" Lex's perfectly natural shock, his reactions, all of it, "was all about the whole alien thing, it's

because you were *wrong!*” But at least Lex wasn’t edging away from him or looking at him warily, although it was more than a little unnerving to see the knowledge begin to settle through Lex, to see the wheels start really turning in that analytical brain. “So, uh, you’re fine with the alien thing, it’s the being wrong that’s freaking you out?”

“Not exactly,” Lex said, and Clark was willing to accept that: it was a hell of a lot better than it could be, and anyway, the whole alien from outer space was a bit much to handle in a single sitting.

He’d stuck his arm into the wood chipper more than once.

After that had lost its charm, he’d lost count of how many hours he’d spent studying anatomy books, trying to X-ray himself, staring at himself in the mirror, trying to see, looking for the things that made him not-human, that made him other. That made him alien.

And in Smallville, a place with fat-sucking teenagers and a father who brought his son up to be the second coming of the conqueror of the known world, well, he was beginning to wonder if maybe he wasn’t particularly alien at all.

Just not from around here.

Slowly, not wanting to startle Lex, he sat down on the couch, beside his...not just friend, not quite more than friend. The perfect match for an alien who thought himself human, and a human who’d found out he was alien. After a few moments, he reached over and was allowed to take Lex’s hand. “Lex?”

“Hmmm?” Lex was still looking over at the shelves with the antique objets d’art and the state-of-the-art executive stereo system.

“Kind of thinking deep thoughts, there,” Clark said, following Lex’s gaze and realizing Lex was looking at the ranks of leather- and calfskin-bound first editions.

“Biographies.”

“Yeah...” Clark said warily, knowing this wasn’t about the books on the shelves, that this was going somewhere.

“Every year, since I was about fourteen, LuthorCorp’s press office has updated my biography. They’ve been very...selective about what they include.”

Even more warily: “And?”

“I want to be president.”

To rule the world, although the law would stop him from doing it as young as his namesake.

Lex wanted to be president.

They’d come so close to being more than friends. But Lex wanted to be president.

Clark let go of Lex’s hand, and wrapped his arms around himself.

He should leave. Get back to the farm. With mom out late, his dad was out with a couple of the guys from the local farmers’ group, but there were always chores to be done on an active farm. He could maybe build that new chicken coop his mom wanted. She’d like that; it’d even get the shirts taken

off his guilt slate. Funny how she hadn’t batted an eyelash over the motorcycle and the Ski-Doo, but the fact that he’d bought dry-clean only silk clothes had really gotten to her.

He should leave. And he would. He’d get up in just a minute.

Lex wanted to be president.

He’d forgotten that, or maybe he’d just hidden it away from himself so he wouldn’t have to think about that, wouldn’t have to face what that meant.

No room in a presidential campaign for a gay lover.

And God knew what Lex’s opponents would do with his unconventional immigration and adoption.

Although he was pretty sure it would still be the whole gay issue that would be the big thing.

He really should leave.

To think he’d been so sure the whole alien-with-lies would be the big problem.

Well, Lex had handled that okay, so maybe there’d be a way around the presidential prospects thing too.

“I’m just wondering,” Lex said, making Clark look up too suddenly, “how selective presidential biographers would be.”

Clark was willing to bet Bill Clinton would say it wasn’t the biographers who mattered, but the press and political enemies. And a gay alien lover trumped a cigar and a dress any day of the week.

“But there’s a hell of a lot to be swept under the carpet. My juvenile records are supposed to be sealed, but that won’t stop my opponents from having them leaked.”

Clark waited, impatient, but letting Lex talk this out.

“There’s the whole Club Zero incident,” Lex said musingly. “That won’t look good when they add Nixon on.”

Clark went still, almost afraid to breathe because he might not have to leave after all.

“The press will love my past. But I could argue youthful indiscretions, say that I learned from my misspent youth.”

“But you’d have to be a saint from now until you get elected,” Clark said, feeling his way, tiptoeing around what he thought Lex might be trying to say.

“I want to be president,” Lex said again.

The emphasis was so slight, Lex probably didn’t even realize he was doing it—or Lex was being subtle enough to let Clark feel damned clever for figuring it out. But whatever it was, there was no doubt now: Clark understood what Lex was really saying—what Lex was probably asking for. He tried to stifle his smile, but could hear the warmth of it in his voice. “But what do you *need* to be?”

Lex didn’t say anything, and Clark knew exactly how that felt: looked like he wasn’t the only person in this room needing the other guy to breach the unbreachable.

“Lex,” he said, and turned, and touched him. Touch as light as a whisper, but still, Lex went where he

wanted Lex to go, lying down on the couch, Clark leaning over him, moving over him, putting his own alien invulnerability between Lex and the rest of the world. “So the way I see it, you’ve got two choices. There’s the presidency, and with that, you get the socially perfect wife. That relationship won’t be about love either, and you’ll have to live your entire life playing by other people’s rules—”

Lex made a sound like the start of a protest.

“It only looks like ruling the world, Lex, but it’s not like Alexander. You have to fit into their rules, you have to do nothing your opponents could use against you. From now till after you leave office, you’d have to be a little goody two shoes.” He grinned, flicked the tip of Lex’s nose with his finger. “You’d have to be me, Lex, and flannel just isn’t your color,” he dropped his voice and dropped his head lower, till he was within kissing distance; he couldn’t resist and allowed himself one quick taste, one quick lick of Lex’s skin before pulling back just out of temptation’s reach, “Or the other choice is complete uncertainty, no maps, no routes planned out, nobody making the rules but you—and me. Because everything kind of changes when you add the whole alien thing to the mix. So which one, Lex? What you want, or what you need?”

Lex stared up at him, giving nothing, revealing nothing, and that told Clark just how afraid Lex was. Because this relationship wasn’t about love either: it was about love and trust and forever. And who they were going to be.

“Destiny and heritage, Lex,” he said, and leaned down, brushing his lips over Lex’s in the briefest, chastest touch. “Ask yourself this: what would your father choose?”

And there was a moment, a long moment, while Clark watched and waited and Lex thought and weighed and decided. Then under him, Lex moved, Prometheus unchaining himself from the rock, bringing Clark the fire of his kiss, his touch, his need.

It was—it was a promise, it was a beginning, it had the subtle underflavor of what he’d been looking for and hadn’t found with Jessie—or Lana, or Chloe. And it was hotter than it had ever been, and he couldn’t wait to get naked and hard and get his hands on Lex’s nakedness and hardness. He was no innocent: he’d grown up on a farm where bulls serviced heifers, billy goats bred with nanny goats, and one farm over, there was a stallion with several mares. He knew all about the birds and the bees, and he knew what a man and a woman did, what two women did, what two guys did, and a lot of variations in between. What he didn’t know was how it felt to do those things, and this felt...beyond words, beyond description. It was more than just physical, and maybe this was where his true alienness showed, because he preferred this, this touching and kissing, fully clothed, to being naked and inside Jessie.

Okay, so only because he knew he was going to get naked and inside Lex—or vice versa—pretty damned

soon, but oh, this was more than want, this was more than need: this was what he’d craved, this was who he was.

This was—

Lex stopping him.

Not part of the plan.

He let Lex push him up a little, and couldn’t quite get his brain to put together what they had been doing and how good it felt, the way Lex looked (kissed, kissable, *his*) with what Lex was trying to do right now.

“Stop?” Clark said, and maybe in a couple of hours or years he’d be embarrassed by the way his voice just squeaked that word out. “You want us to *stop*?”

At least it took Lex a couple of deep breaths and a hard swallow before Lex had the wherewithal to speak. “I have staff, my dad has staff. We can’t fuck on the couch in my office.”

Oh. Yeah. “Discretion’s the better part of valor.”

“I hate that quotation.”

“So. Not here.”

Lex didn’t seem to have any more functioning brain cells than Clark did right now, or maybe the delay was because Clark had pressed down with hips and cock and tongue and had just kissed Lex into the couch.

He was definitely developing another gift: he could hear footsteps somewhere, but all he could tell about location was that they were too far away for regular hearing. Not on the couch. No fucking on the couch. Which meant fucking was okay elsewhere. “Bedroom?” Clark said.

“Fuck, yeah. But discreetly—”

He grinned slowly, and if he’d had a mirror handy, he would’ve recognized the smile that had gone with the red meteor ring. “Want a taste of the whole alien thing?”

Lex cupped Clark’s cock through his jeans and licked his lips.

“Fuck, yeah,” Lex said again, even more fervently.

Still grinning, Clark helped Lex up off the couch, stood beside him for a moment, kissing him, just because he could—just because he had to, the need sneaking around behind him, ambushing him.

And then, between one heavy-lidded blink and another, Clark whisked them up to Lex’s bedroom, and had them both stripped naked.

Lex lay on the bed, spread-eagled and—

Superspeeding him up here was supposed to have been sexy, but maybe rubbing Lex’s face in the whole alien thing hadn’t been such a good idea after all. Clark looked down at Lex’s... total lack of interest.

“What the fuck was *that*?” Lex demanded, and Clark wasn’t going to comment on the wobbly squeakiness of Lex’s voice.

“Uhm...would you believe...cool?”

“You were trying to impress me?”

“You’ve got all this stuff—” a quick gesture, rounding up the castle and the clothes and the cars and the sheer *class* that

Lex exuded the way other people exuded sweat, “and I don’t. I thought maybe...”

Lex closed his eyes and lay there for a moment.

“I’ve met prime ministers and sheiks,” Lex told him. “I’ve shaken hands with men who could buy and sell this entire country—Clark, my *father* could buy and sell this country. I have Alan Greenspan’s home phone number. I went to school with several dukes, earls, and one prince, two places from an honest to God throne you’d know about. I’ve fucked a princess and several countesses, and I’ve played polo with crowned heads of Europe, tennis with Wimbledon winners and chess with world masters. I’ve had dinner with Shaq and Kobe, Elton and Britney—hell, I’ve had birthday parties where Foo Fighters and ’NSync played.”

Lex opened one eye and peered up at him. “’NSync was my dad’s idea.”

Clark stood there, naked and vulnerable, feeling his erection deflate as Lex went through this laundry list of impressiveness.

“I’m too much of a gentlemen,” and only Lex could look that charming with such a wicked grin on his face, “to name the actresses and singers and models I’ve fucked.”

So he should be grateful for small mercies?

“But want to know the only thing that’s ever really impressed me for more than five minutes? The one thing that hasn’t been replaced by the next big star, the next big event?”

Oh. “Me,” Clark said, grinning. “Not me exactly, but—but I like your money, but that’s not why I like you. I don’t like you because of or in spite of you being a Luthor. I like you because you’re Lex.”

“You don’t need to impress me,” Lex said softly, eyes still closed, long pale arm reaching blindly for Clark.

Clark went, more than willing, his cock rising rapidly to the occasion, eager for the touch of bare skin against bare skin.

“And you do NOT need,” Lex said, hand sliding up Clark’s arm, all that naked skin only inches away now, “to take me on a gut-churning amusement park ride right after I’ve eaten and before I’ve taken my Dramamine.”

So much for sexy—he collapsed into a fit of laughter, giggles, if he was honest, because that explained the closed eyes and just lying there and...he wasn’t laughing as much now, because he’d collapsed half onto Lex, who was naked and smooth as...as...as those shirts Lex sometimes wore, the ones that were so expensive that even Lex kept them for special occasions. It was so strange to touch skin like this, because even when girls waxed or whatever they did, and his hand had brushed against their legs, there were still pores, follicles, but Lex...totally hairless, totally smooth, only a few sprinkles of freckles breaking up the expanse of naked skin. It was actually kind of creepy, but he wasn’t going to tell Lex that. He’d get used to it, he’d adapt—hell, he’d adapted to being an alien, he could adapt to this too-smooth skin.

And there was other skin that he had expected to be that smooth, so he moved his gaze upwards, following the path of his eyes with his mouth, to the curve of Lex’s skull. Such incredibly tight skin, smooth as glass, oh, so nice under his tongue—“God, Lex, you’re gorgeous. So *hot*, so smooth.” He was babbling and loving it because there were so many things he wanted to say, things he’d barely dared think, things he’d wanted to tell Lex for months, and he finally could: his secrets laid to rest, rest in peace, life goes on—“You can trust me, I don’t want you for your money or your name—”

And why the hell was Lex pulling away from him?

In the middle of *sex*? He’d known Lex was messed up, but this was—it was just as well he’d been Lex’s friend first: at least he was used to Lex’s knife-edged mood changes.

He let Lex roll him over, lay there on his back with Lex astride him, over him, didn’t use the strength that even normal farm-bred muscles would have, just let Lex move him, and touch him. Here they were, naked together, and Lex had all but admitted this was forever, and now Lex’s eyes had gone guarded, distant, wary.

There were times Clark could cheerfully line Lionel, Victoria and Desiree up against a wall, douse them in hickory sauce and barbecue them to a crisp with his heat vision. He could understand why Lex needed to be this way, after Victoria, after Desiree, but no way was Clark going to have those women in his bed, not when Lex was dragging them around like Marley’s ghost, jangling chains and cackling voices and all. Lex needed to get rid of them, let go of them and all the baggage that came with them—but Lex was lousy at letting go of any bit of his past, good or bad.

So Clark would just have to do it for him.

He lay passive and compliant under Lex’s weight, which was heavy for a human but negligible as thistledown to him, feeling Lex’s desire hard against his thigh, seeing Lex’s fear hard in Lex’s eyes. “You married Desiree because she said she could save you,” Clark said, and grabbed on, stopping Lex’s recoil. Meeting Lex’s eyes steadily, he asked quietly, “What have I been doing since you got to Smallville, Lex?”

Another knife-edge, a bright, serrated moment that could cut off the lingering demons or cut Clark out of Lex’s life.

And then Lex smiled at him, small, tender, honest, and more naked than his body. “I remember flying,” Lex whispered against Clark’s lips. “I remember knowing I could start again.”

Clark simply wrapped his arms and legs around Lex, and opened his mouth to Lex’s kiss. He groaned as Lex started moving against him, long, slow, easy thrusts, sliding the damp head of Lex’s cock along the shaft of his own, such an unexpected, unknown pleasure, so completely different from the touch of a hand, or being inside Jessie. He shivered when Lex shifted just a little and slid lower, between his legs, cockhead kissing against his ass, and he knew Lex would

push into him, would thrust and push inside him, just exactly the way Clark had Jessie.

Then there was an awful, dreadful stillness that made his body scream with the need to touch and move and join. Lex was leaning over him, muscles bunched with the effort of staying still, of stopping this, and Lex was looking at him, really looking at him. Clark could feel the surgical precision of Lex turning the tables, of Lex letting Clark's demons go: "Do you want to say no, Clark?"

Even if he'd wanted to say no, he didn't, wouldn't, because what he needed was to say yes.

He breathed a kiss across Lex's mouth, then kissed Lex hard, devouring him, enslaving both of them to this passion that burned between them, and if Lex needed to call love, and love-at-first-sight, 'destiny,' then Clark could let him, because it was certainly the stuff of legends.

His answer was obvious, as blatant as his hard cock stroking against Lex's taut abdomen, but he wanted to hear himself actually say it, to hear the moment when he both yielded and laid claim. "Yes," he said, into Lex's mouth. "Yes," into Lex's ear. "Yes," his lips around Lex's nipple. "Yes," finally, as he took Lex's cock into his mouth, hard need sheathed in soft want, such soft, satiny skin sliding over such hot, rigid heat, the taste and the hardness filling his mouth, the scent and the sight and all that skin filling his senses until there was no world, no universe, no alien. There was only Lex and sensation and himself, and with every thrust of Lex into his mouth, that was narrowing down into sensation and a mindless, feral *us*.

Lex's cock in his mouth wasn't enough. He needed—

He needed, beyond words, beyond logic or reason or explaining. He'd expected to be blown away by the intensity of finally having sex with someone and he had, with Jessie; he'd hoped that the emotional intensity would shatter him, but it hadn't. But—this was more, this was Lex. This was different, this was other, this was alien.

Alien.

Long before he knew what sex was, he'd been fascinated by swans and wolves and penguins and gibbons, even weird little antelopes whose name had made him blush when he was a little older, when he'd tried to explain to his mom why he was fascinated by the dik diks. He didn't know what sex was, but he understood 'mated for life' before he could define the words. The concept...it spoke to him, an atavistic rightness, an ache that went all the way down to his individual cells. He'd wondered if it had been behind his ongoing obsession with Lana, but with Lex's taste in his mouth and Lex's skin against his, he could see his obsessive loyalty to Lana was his variation on a crush.

This—he didn't simply want to have sex with Lex, or fuck him, or marry him or be his significant other or whatever it was called in Metropolis. He wanted to *mate*. Not

to reproduce, but— He barely stopped himself from growling the word aloud, from rolling Lex over and just fucking him hard.

But he shouldn't do that, not without at least warning Lex that maybe Clark wasn't exactly Earth-normal over sex. But he couldn't stop now, couldn't find words, couldn't do or think or feel anything beyond this desperate drive to *mate*, to be joined, to be in Lex or have Lex in him. He could feel the fear clamor at the back of his mind because he hadn't expected this, he didn't understand this, he was afraid he would do something too weird for Lex. But he couldn't stop. This was worse than it had been with Jessie, he could not stop, wanted more, and more and more, needed Lex so much—

"Look at me," Lex said, rough as need and soft as love. "Look at me, Clark."

He couldn't stop himself, but Lex could. He obeyed, obeyed with a desperate gratitude and a shudder of relief that made Lex hold him harder and stare at him even more intensely. He could stop. He could. The mindlessness receded, and the feeling of connection was back, satisfying the drive to mate, to blend, and that's what he needed, this balance between sex and instinct, pleasure and purpose. Lex was here, with him, the two of them, together, and he could stop when he had to, he wasn't prey to this—and he wouldn't prey on Lex either. He wasn't a monster from outer space. This was just another difference, another new gift and all he had to do was hold onto the now-familiar routine of control, control, control. He gulped in huge lungfuls of breath, and stared up at Lex.

Lex's eyes were mirrors to him, showing an army of hungers and longings and unspoken needs. Not exactly the same as Clark's, but close, close enough. So this need to be joined, to be more than just his single, solitary self, to be more than merely one half of a couple, to know that this was it, there was no going back, no changing his mind, nothing but this *mating* with this one particular person...it didn't only mark him as alien: it made him human. Perhaps more human than most people on this planet.

"Do you want to say no?" Lex asked again, fierce and sure and needy, and it wasn't a question, it was an assertion of what was between them.

He didn't actually say yes this time: his body did that for him, and he was kissing Lex again, and rubbing up against Lex's erection. He was being rough, but Lex didn't seem to mind—Lex was grabbing at him just as desperately, with the same raw lust and need and want. He felt Lex's teeth on him, knew he should probably warn Lex to be careful, because cracking a tooth would put a damper even on the two of them, but god, it felt good, and he felt as much as heard Lex's animal grunt of pleasure—and that was as deep a thrill as Lex marking him because he was the one who'd made Lex lose his facade like this, him, just him and Lex's feelings for him, the power of that knifing through him. Clark tilted his head back and stretched

his throat, knowing exactly how Lex would read that and yes, Lex's teeth were on his bared throat, biting him hard enough that he could actually feel it, hard enough to feel so damned fucking good—

He struggled for a moment when Lex pulled away a little, but settled again when he realized that Lex wasn't letting go, Lex was just getting lube and condom, because right, Lex was no virgin; Lex had come of sexual age in a world with HIV and AIDS, promiscuity and wild parties: no matter how squeaky clean Lex was, it probably wouldn't even occur to him to have sex without a condom. At least, not when he was sober.

He watched as Lex fumbled with packaging and cellophane and a small bottle of lubricant—and he was the reason Lex was so turned on he was fumbling like the nervous near virgin Clark was supposed to be. Clark moved until he was right under Lex again, cocks stroking gently against each other, a nice, slow simmer while he waited for Lex to get his act together. “Thought you couldn't get sick.”

“You're not the one doing the fucking this time.”

He hummed happily at the implications of ‘this time,’ and surged up again, holding Lex in place with one hand on a deliciously rounded ass that fit his palm to perfection. “Alien,” he murmured, the word blurred by his mouth against Lex's shoulder.

“Who eats the same food as everyone else, even though you take the consumption of caffeine and pizza to new heights. So until we know for sure, we're going to do this right, start you off with good habits—”

And it was...well, adorable that Lex, made of fragile, breakable, tearable mortal skin and bones and muscle, would protect him like that, and he'd never really noticed how often Lex protected him, but Lex had been doing it from the start. Lex had claimed him long ago, and just thinking that brought the atavistic urge back, but he recognized it now. Before the panic could set in and before he could get lost in the need to mate, he treated it like just another ‘gift,’ something else to be controlled and gotten used to—or enjoyed, in this case. “Now,” he said, canting his hips, so that Lex's careful, gently-circling finger pushed right into him in one single surge.

“Oh yeah,” Clark said, and maybe everybody else needed the preparations he'd read about and Lex was obviously planning, but he didn't want or need any slow buildup: he was made for this, could feel the ease of his body with this as if he was just a regular guy in a regular guy-type relationship who'd done this a hundred times before. This didn't feel at all new, not even vaguely virginal: this felt fundamentally familiar, but momentarily forgotten. “Now,” he said again, and when Lex didn't comply fast enough, he made a sound he'd never heard himself make before, and he pulled Lex forward—

And Lex looked at him for barely a breath, then Lex was grinning at him, and pushing forward even as Lex said, “I'll take that as a—”

“Yes!”

And Lex was in him, Lex was *home*, and he was complete, better than when he ran, better than when he—

Oh shit, he was floating, and he couldn't concentrate enough to stop and—

“That's high enough,” Lex said, still grinning at him, wild and fierce and free, and it felt good to see Lex's hedonist joy in Clark's own alienness—in Lex not being the freak when he stripped down naked and exposed himself. It felt even better to have Lex's considerable strength pressing down on him, keeping him from floating too high, anchoring him through touch and presence.

Lex was pushing into him, withdrawing slowly, pushing back in. Clark was already sounding breathless as he said: “Yeah, just there, that's—oh, God, that's perfect.”

Lex's hands were locked onto the top of the headboard, and Lex was kneeling between his thighs, thrusting into him a hell of a lot harder than he'd dared thrust into Jessie. This was why Jessie hadn't been enough: no fault of hers, it had been him, he was the one who'd been lacking. He had craved this without words, without recognition; had tried to bury it. Even when the red meteor ring had let it loose, he'd refused to face it full on and had tried to bury it in Jessie's wetness. He'd held back with her—could feel that now, with Lex pounding into him, with himself shoving back against Lex—but he could take everything Lex could give, could handle this side of Lex, could see how much Lex loved being able to really let rip.

“Some delicate little virgin, huh?” Clark said, using his legs to pull Lex into him even harder, and it was beyond cool that he could make Lex laugh, even now, like this; to know that even in the middle of actually fucking, they were still friends, they were still themselves.

They were more, too. He could see that in Lex's eyes, could feel it within himself, more than just the physical sensations. The sense of *mate* was back, and he hoped to he wasn't going to develop some weird telepathic shit because no way could Lex cope with having some kind of bond with someone, and no way did he *ever* want to be in the scary place that was the inside of Lex's head. He'd stick to being here, like this, with Lex inside his body, and the promise that he'd be inside Lex's, that they could mate and fuck and share and play and—

Oh, now that felt good.

“There?” Lex asked, sounding surprised, but repeating the movement.

“Oh god yeah, right—”

“There,” Lex said with confidence this time, and moved at that precise angle again.

So maybe there really were differences between him and the locals after all, but from what he'd read, that was his prostate Lex was rubbing his hard cock against, even if it wasn't exactly where the anatomy books said it should be.

"Yes," he said, when Lex pushed into him just right, just hard enough, and poor Lex was going to have bruises on those sharp hipbones of his, but it was worth it, it was so worth it—

And this was better than it'd ever been, because Lex was inside, and he wasn't alone, and best of all, Lex was hitting the spot again and again and again. This was a million miles from just his own hand, and a hundred miles from using Jessie, and oh, right there, just right there, like that, yes, and any second now—

"Let me see you come," Lex said, nearly grunting the words out.

Even with the pleasure gyroscoping through him, he nearly laughed because it was just so like Lex to make that sound like a command instead of what it was: Lex was tiring and Lex was on the verge of coming himself. He could feel it in the sweat dripping down Lex's back under his hands, in the quiver in Lex's arms stretched out over him, hanging onto the headboard. Could see it in the flutter and quiver of Lex's abdominals, perfect six pack, adding more power to thrust into him and—

He hadn't even touched himself.

His cock was drooling, as hard as he'd ever been, and he was this close, *this* close, better than it had ever been, but he hadn't even touched himself. Hadn't even thought about touching himself. He looked up at Lex in astonishment, saw the expression in Lex's eyes—

And dissolved, just exploded and dissolved and felt something inside him quiver as Lex's hard cock stroked over it and he was just—pleasure, profound, complete, whole, pure light and sound and sensation, enfolded and unfolded by the sweet, sweet surge inside him. Dimly, he heard the noise Lex made, and knew Lex was coming too, and wished he could see Lex's face, but he could hear Lex and feel him, and that was enough.

Thankfully, they were in Lex's nice soft bed, because as soon as orgasm let go of him, he thumped back down onto the mattress, Lex landing even more heavily on top of him. Just as well Lex had slipped out of him, otherwise—well, if he'd thought explaining bouncing bullets would've been hard, just try explaining to the emergency room physician how you'd broken Lex Luthor's penis. Try explaining to *Lex* how you'd broken his penis.

Lex tossed the used condom into the wastebasket then turned and thumped him, hard, demanding—testily at that: "What's so funny?"

"You," he said without thinking, grabbing Lex before Lex could actually leave, rolling over to pin Lex as Lex started to squirm away, all that lovely slick skin under him, just begging him to rub against it.

"Not my performance," Lex said balefully, the effect totally ruined by his huge yawn and the tenderness lurking in his

eyes.

"Just thinking what would've happened if you hadn't pulled out."

Lex winced, left hand instinctively going down to cup his genitals. And that drew Clark's attention, along with a frisson of something that was close to desire, his body sated and content, his mind already edging towards an amorphous wish for 'more.'

Clark slid down the bed, nuzzling up against Lex, smelling him, then licking him, tasting a bitter echo of latex, but under that was Lex, pure, distilled, tasting exactly the way Lex smelled—

"Not alien," Lex said, pulling away, cock twitching unhappily and yeah, that was one of those things Clark had read about, being too sensitive right after coming, but given his own body's reactions, he'd pretty much thought it was a myth till now. "Give me fifteen minutes," Lex said.

"Just want to taste," Clark said, wriggling forward, and really, he just wanted one little taste. Okay, so the *mate* feeling was coming back just a little, so it was more a case of needing to get his mouth on Lex again, to taste and smell his mate. One good thing about condoms: they left all that come in the tip so the taste was strongest there, where Lex's foreskin had closed protectively over the damp head. Lex must've been clumsy taking the condom off too—hands still shaking, muscles quivering, his memory supplying images he'd been too far gone to register at the time—because the entire length Lex's tender, soft cock was still glistening, from Lex's come and Clark's brief taste of him. He needed more, already, his mouth opening to suck in the head of Lex's cock—

Lex thwacked him on the top of his head—even harder than the first thump—then grabbed his hair and pulled him back, Lex's inner caveman obviously liberated by the exigencies of having a real-life super-strong, invulnerable alien in his bed. Lex pulled him up the bed, letting him stay close enough to Lex's body to lick the sweat-slicked skin, but then Lex was letting him linger when he discovered his own semen mixed with Lex's sweat, the two tastes commingling, something deeply satisfying about that, and his mind darted off on other ways he could get them to mix, to blend, together—

"Having fun?"

He heard the amusement from somewhere above him: somewhere along the line, the hand grabbing his hair had shifted into fingers stroking through it.

"Uhm—" He focused his eyes on the wet, reddened skin of Lex's stomach: it looked like he'd been giving Lex a monster hickey, but— "Did I do that *licking* you?"

"Alien," Lex said, like it was the sweetest endearment known to man. "Yeah, licking. Next time, we're planning this better—" Lex's neatly trimmed fingernails scratched through the shadow of stubble along Clark's jaw line. "I'm setting a time limit on the licking—and you're shaving first."

Next time, his skin sang the words, immediately wanting that next time to be right now. Clark stretched out even more, covering as much of Lex's deliciously bare naked skin

as he could, rubbing gently, with more affection than he'd thought Lex would allow. "Your dad has a beard, you don't have hair—you gonna force one of the servants to loan me his razor?"

"I wouldn't do that to the staff. We have everything a guest could possibly need."

Not just what a guest wanted, but what they needed. Clark had come here with no more intention than to apologize and to squirm out of anything to do with bullets, meteors and just exactly what he'd meant when he'd suggested running away together, and look at where he was right now. So going with the flow was obviously working for him today, but even so, his heart was beating too fast as he said, with a studied casualness he'd stolen from Lex: "What if the...guest...wants to stay a long time?"

Lex shrugged, leaned back against the pillows and tugged Clark up, the move the sort of casual perfection Clark was still trying to copy. It was the same sort of absent 'oh, are you beside me?' Lex had pulled earlier on the couch, and this time Clark found himself neatly tucked against Lex, unable to see Lex's face—but able to feel the too-quick beat of Lex's heart.

"If someone wanted to stay for a long time, the response would depend on the circumstances."

"Such as?"

He slid his arms around Lex as Lex shifted uncomfortably.

"I was kind of wondering about a frequent visitor," Clark said, because Lex had coped with the whole alien thing, and the whole sex thing, and even the whole goodbye-to-the-presidency thing, so maybe now was the time to propose this whole forever thing right out in the open. "Someone who stops by all the time, maybe spends the night when there's a trip to Metropolis or a late night movie. Maybe someone who needs to save some money when he goes to college so he'd take advantage of his best friend and stay with his best friend..."

"Assuming said best friend had moved to Metropolis."

There was a question in Lex's voice, a deceptively idle musing, and Clark knew better than to ignore it. "Said best friend is being a big fish in a small pond, but pretty soon, he'll have to move to a bigger pond."

"Said friend," and there was a softness to Lex's voice that told Clark this was a gift, "should already be at the bottom of the local equivalent of a pond and is quite happy to stay on dry land. And doesn't much care where that dry land is or how big it is."

He stretched up then and kissed Lex because the sex had been great, the sex had been shockingly good, but there hadn't been enough kissing, because he could pour his heart into kissing the way he couldn't pour anything into words. Clark was beginning to think there could never be enough kissing, not when Lex tasted like this, and slid his tongue into Clark's mouth like that, or let Clark suck on and nibble that lovely lower lip—

"I've been thinking," Lex said, against Clark's neck, making him shiver.

"I haven't," Clark told him, rubbing his erection against Lex's thigh.

"I'm tired of staying at the penthouse—it's Dad's anyway, and I think it's about time I left home."

This was—this was the *more* he'd needed, this was the more he'd hungered for even as his body lay sated and filled. "Yeah? Maybe get a place your dad doesn't have a key to?"

"With truly exceptional security so nobody's dad can come after me with his rifle."

And he'd love to laugh and tell Lex not to be ridiculous, but his dad had already come after Lex with his rifle once—well, once that Clark knew about—and when his dad found out what had happened today...

Oh, God. The whole alien, great big secret, don't tell anyone, never trust a Luthor thing.

Maybe political opponents and the media weren't the only ones who could be distracted by a good 'my gay lover' scandal.

Only not right now. Right now, if he tried covering up exposing his secret to Lex by telling his folks he and Lex were now...lovers? boyfriends? mated?—well, whatever the hell they were, when his dad found out he might stroke out, but his mom... Clark knew all about his mother's reaction to Desiree just coming onto him. If she found out Lex had fucked him, it wouldn't be a rifle his mom came after Lex with. There was an antique gelding garrote hanging in the barn with Lex's name on it.

"Uh, Lex? About the whole alien thing and the whole sex thing?"

"Ixnay on the telling arentspay?"

"Hell yes."

"I didn't think we'd be taking out an announcement in the *Torch*."

And was that regret Clark had heard in Lex's voice? It was definitely regret he could hear in his own: "We probably need to keep it secret from everyone."

"Particularly my dad. If you think your dad—and your mom—would go ballistic over this, you have *no* idea what my dad would do."

"Because it's me or—"

"Heirs," Lex said succinctly. "I'm expected to produce an heir and a spare by no later than my 30th birthday. So unless you have any more anatomical secrets you'd care to share..."

"Pretty sure that's not one of them. But Lex..."

"Hmmm?"

"I uh...I'm not sure I've finished..." He was *not* going to call it puberty, because he'd gone through puberty years ago and no one should have to suffer that twice. "Whatever it is I've been going through." Lex was staring at him again,

questions crowding Lex's eyes. "It kind of started the day you hit me, and it's been going since then. First the invulnerability, then I got even faster and stronger than I'd ever been, then the X-ray vision...And I think maybe the heat vision was connected to—"

Yeah, well, maybe he could explain this without actually telling Lex about the whole 'mate' thing.

Lex pinched him, just enough to get his full attention. "Connected to what?"

"Uhm..."

"Clark, were you behind all those fires?"

"Not the car," he said, because she'd lied about that as well as everything else and he wasn't taking the blame for any of her crap. "But the rest—yeah. Before I could get it under control."

And right at that moment, Clark wished Desiree was right in front of him and he could forget his control for a moment, that maybe right after sex—God, he'd had sex, with Lex, his whole world had changed—his heat vision spiked or something. Because the whole urge to barbecue certain people was gaining appeal by the second. He'd like to immolate her like the Spanish Inquisition, just fry her to a crisp because she was the reason Lex had that look on his face.

"I still—" Lex swallowed and Clark watched as Lex's expression turned into something smooth and sophisticated, Lex's voice as bland as tapioca pudding. "So one sight of Desiree in the classroom and—"

"She smelled of you." And damn, but that was another thing he hadn't meant to say, but—but it was impossible to regret it when Lex's eyes lit with warmth and relief.

"She *smelled* of me?"

"Yeah," he said, squirming a little because he hadn't realized his sense of smell had decided to join his vision. God, what was next? Hearing? Touch? Maybe he be able to tell people's genetic structure by tasting their skin.

Which was uncomfortably close to what he'd just been doing to Lex with the whole licking thing, so going back to the now passé heat vision thing was easier. "Not like too much perfume, but— I didn't know what it was, I couldn't figure out why she'd got me so hot—"

"No pun intended."

This time, Clark was the one doing the thumping, albeit gently. "I like girls, and she was pretty sexy, but I'd never reacted like that."

There was a careful, thought-filled pause, then Lex said, "Never gotten hard that fast, never gotten so hard?"

Okay, so Lex had coped with the alien thing, the sex thing, the 'gifts' thing, the floating—oh God! "I floated!"

Lex eyed him curiously. "Yeah."

"In front of you!"

"More like under me."

"And you didn't freak."

"Clark, you'd already told me you

were an alien, I kind of expected one or two differences. It's not like you told me you were secretly Canadian."

"Cos of course, secretly Canadian, that would freak you out."

"All that *niceness*?" Lex said, shuddering delicately, laughter shimmering in his voice. "Total freakout city."

When Lex's hand tugged on the back of his neck, pulling him back down into Lex's embrace, he went willingly, eagerly.

"Lex?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

"Oh, it was my pleasure."

"Mine too," Clark said, shifting till he could lean up and look at Lex. He was grinning too much and he knew it, but Lex didn't seem to mind. "I was so scared you'd freak."

Lex's fingertips were very gentle as they stroked down his nose, down to bisect his lips, down over his chin, the bump of his Adam's apple, all the way down to where his heart beat strong and fast. "That's not the only thing you must've been afraid of."

"No—"

"Don't," Lex said, the harsh coldness of his voice worse than a bucket of cold water. "Do not lie to me, not now. Don't answer if you don't want to, but do not fucking lie to me."

Wow. "Uhm—okay. No lies."

"I'm a Luthor, Clark. You'd be an idiot not to worry what I'd do when I found out."

Only... "I'm not worried." And it was true: he was completely unworried, absolutely sure of his safety with Lex, although he wasn't sure quite why, considering Lex's own warnings. Lex's warnings, his dad's warnings, Phelan's warnings...everybody warned him about Lex, but—but maybe they were wrong. Maybe they were so busy looking for flaws, they found them in the smallest sign of simple human frailty. Maybe it took an alien to see beyond human nature to the man and his intentions. "You've protected me from the very start," Clark said, watching his words drip onto Lex like morning dew. "You saw the difference when Lana's necklace fell off me. You put Lana's necklace in a lead box, you investigated the meteors, you only asked me once how I got into the mansion..."

"Clark—"

"You tried to save the farm and my dad's pride, you called off Nixon and the investigation into the car and the field where you found the ship's key. You—"

"Clark, you still need to be careful around me—"

"Because of your father."

"Not just what he'd do, Clark, but what he's taught *me* to do."

"Destiny trumps heritage," Clark said, kissing Lex again, soft and slow and sweet. "And Lex? Everyone else gets to make mistakes, so how come you don't?"

There was a very delicate pause, then Lex said: "Because I'm special?"

Clark would love to claim he'd chortled or some other sophisticated thing, but the truth was, he snorted with laughter, and buried his face against Lex. "Oh, special, precious little Lexie. Destined to be perfect."

"Better than your destiny, pod person."

He was willing to be magnanimous and let that go—if only because he was too distracted by the small, firm pressure of Lex's nipple pressing against his chest, and once he started paying attention to that, the rest of Lex's body was attracting his interest too. "My destiny looks pretty good from here," Clark said, looking down the length of Lex's body, stroking his hand from chest to belly to groin, cupping his own big hand around Lex's cock and balls, loving the fragility of that all too mortal flesh, so soft and tender in his hand, so rapidly shifting towards heat and hardness.

"Your destiny is more than sharing my bed."

"My destiny—I thought you said my destiny was to be your friend?"

"Something like that. But more, Clark. You and me together—"

"I still like the sound of that," Clark murmured against Lex's neck, kissing him.

"So do I. But there has to be more for you. You have these powers, Clark. What d'you want to do with them?"

And that was something he hadn't really thought about. "I don't know—I've been so busy trying to control them, and keep everything secret—"

"You've had no energy left for anything else. But c'mon, Clark, look at what you can do. You can't waste that hiding away."

Clark fingered Lex's nipple, pinching and twisting it, testing to see just how Lex reacted to gentle touches and roughness and everything in between. Very softly, because this wasn't giving a vague answer to a new principal, but an admission of the truth, of a possibility beyond most people's dreams. "I want to help people."

"You mean rescuing people the way you do now, only more so?"

"Yeah. And other stuff—I was watching a documentary about a dam that was failing and they couldn't evacuate everyone fast enough. I could've fixed that."

"How?"

"What? Lex, I can *do* stuff—"

"I'm not arguing. I'm asking *how*. You run up to this dam, it's breaking, so how do you fix it?"

"I...I uh...I shove a giant rock in the hole?"

"But the rock won't fit perfectly. What'll happen with the water that's forcing its way around the edges?"

He'd built a sandcastle on the beach, and he'd seen concrete walls ruined by slow leaks behind sinks. "It might hold long enough to get everyone out."

"True, but—"

"But," Clark said, just to shut Lex up, taking a moment then to bite and lick at the same nipple he'd been playing with. "But that's where you come in."

"Me?"

"You. I provide the brawn, you provide the brain."

Clark could hear Lex's laughter rumbling through his chest. "So a post-modernist me Tarzan, you Jane?"

"Only if I get to choose your dress."

"I am not wearing a dress, Clark. Not for you."

"How about a skirt?"

"No chance." Pause. Gasp, when Clark sucked on Lex's nipple, then Lex continuing, voice husky and shaky: "But maybe a kilt."

"Easy access," Clark said, and slid lower, over the curves and dips of Lex's abdomen to the tumescent cock, half-risen. "I like that."

"So do I, so keep on doing it. But come up here—"

Clark kept his hand on Lex, slid back up him, sank gratefully into the welcoming kiss that soothed him again, easing the urge to *mate* before it had a chance to start spiraling. He licked and kissed his way along Lex's jaw, to his ear, such a delicate whorl on such a strong man. He could feel Lex's every shiver as he darted his tongue inside, another part of Lex that he'd entered, claimed—

Lex was talking?

Sex with Lex wasn't anything like he'd expected, and if this was how chatty Lex was the first time, ten years from now, and Lex would be delivering lectures on the political situation—

Oh. Wait. He already was.

"Lex?"

"Global economy," Lex said, and at least he was breathless and arching up into Clark's touch.

"Lex—"

"I can have it all, Clark. Global economy, that's how I can rule the world, better than a pathetic little presidency—"

And Lex was still talking, but now Lex was thrusting upwards, a sinuous undulation that brought every inch of him against Clark in an oceanic rhythm.

"And you—you could be a real hero. You could be a real Warrior Angel."

He was trying to have sex here and Lex was— "Like a *comic book*? Are you *nuts*?"

My dad would think so," Lex said with the biggest shit-eating grin Clark had ever seen. "But think about it. I could finance you, get the vicarious thrill of being ruler of the world, but without the risk of turning into my father."

Which made an unnerving amount of sense. "But—"

"Ryan asked me why Devilicus turned evil, and I told him I didn't really know."

He wasn't stroking or kissing or licking anything now, lying there beside Lex, staring at him in rapt bemusement. "But Lex, that's just a comic book—"

"Which is all about fantasy, but it's also a simplified distillation of human nature, Clark. I told Ryan that it wasn't like flicking a switch, it was a process."

"Lex—"

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," Lex said.

Clark was definitely going to invest in a barrel of barbecue sauce, line up everyone from Lex's past and fry 'em. Starting with dear old daddy. "Lex, you won't turn into your father—"

"You said it yourself, Clark. If I decide I still want to be president as a stepping stone, I can change the rules—to a degree. But I'll still have people watching me. If I build the biggest business empire in the world, I'll have a board of directors, employees, governments—you."

Lex was looking at him so strangely.

"Clark, I'm not talking about me."

"Not you," Clark said, and this was something else he hadn't really thought about, not beyond his parents' admonitions to not misuse his powers, or his own fears over what he might have done under the red meteor's influence.

Lex just kept on looking at him steadily, giving him time to accept it, to tie it into how he'd been with the red meteor ring. To marry it to *who* he'd been when he'd worn that ring.

This was Lex doing exactly what he'd depended on Lex to do: breaching the unbreachable. Lex making him consider the considered. He'd nearly killed Phelan. He routinely threw people across rooms, or hit them with things, or hell, how many times had he knocked someone out—not all of Lex's concussions belonged on Chloe's Wall of Weird.

How many people had he already seen die, and how many of them had died needlessly because he didn't have the skill or experience to prevent it, or because he...needed to keep his secret?

He'd gained so much strength and speed since the maniac in the Porsche had hit him; he'd gained new gifts—not gifts. Call them for what they were.

Powers.

He'd gained power, and he'd gained powers, and he was pretty sure his body wasn't finished with him yet.

Where the hell would he end up?

Who had *his* father been? Someone scarier than Lionel Luthor? Was that his heritage?

"Absolute power—"

"No, it won't. Not you," Lex said, hands tightening on Clark for a moment. "I'll make sure of that."

"Yeah? You think you could you save me from myself?" grinning hard because that was better than the alternatives, clinging hard to Lex, grasping at the hope Lex offered him.

"Yes," Lex said, simple, sure, certain, serious enough to give Clark pause.

Echoes within echoes, and he repeated Lex's own words back at him: "But how could I be sure it wouldn't do that to me? That I wouldn't end up out of control?"

And facing these truths was worth it for the smile Lex gave him, open and brave, and brimming with confidence and faith. "I'll stop you."

"I don't want to make you do that."

"Then don't just go blithely into this whole—alien superpowers rescuing hero scenario. Stop and *think*. Don't blunder along—"

"The way I've been doing?"

"Exactly. You're more than brawn—"

"Use my brain. Because if I don't..."

"I'm an expert on slippery slopes," Lex said, the touch of his fingers in Clark's hair soothing them both. "Stopping once you're halfway down isn't easy. It took dying to stop my last slide, Clark. I don't want the same thing happening to you."

"Protecting me again?"

"Someone has to."

And that sounded good, and felt even better. Someone looking out for him, someone protecting him, someone at his back, watching out for him—and watching him. Not with parental blinkers, but with a hard-eyed stare, trained by a lifetime in Lionel Luthor's shadow. If anyone could truly see him, if anyone could truly stop him if he needed to be stopped, it would be...

"Lex," he said, and it sounded like love.

Long stroke of fingers up his arm, to his throat, to his lips, slipping inside his mouth, and he sucked on them helplessly, because here, with Lex, he didn't have to be strong or brave or a good son. He could be himself, alien and human and a combination of both. Super strong, and vulnerable as a baby to his own blindness, and to his own strength. He'd nearly lost himself in the red meteor ring, and Lex had reeled him in so his dad could save him; he'd nearly lost himself in the drive to mate, and Lex had stopped him; he didn't have to fear what his alienness threw at him next because Lex was right there to stop him, and there was nothing he couldn't bring to Lex, couldn't tell Lex, couldn't confess to Lex. Lex already knew: Lex had lived everything that could be lived, had done everything that could be done.

Lex even knew what it was like to kill, and there would be a day when Clark had to come to him with that, too.

"You'll stop me," he said.

"And you'll stop me."

"Should I tell you I won't let you rule the world or wait till we've had sex again?"

"Oh, I'd wait," Lex said. "Because once you stop me ruling the world, you'll be sleeping on the couch, superman."

With a last hard suck, Clark released Lex's slicked fingers. "Yeah? Even if I do this?" And brought those wetted fingers down, twisting Lex's supple body until Lex's fingers were touching himself, there, where Clark was going to fuck him soon. "Still think I'll be sleeping on the couch?"

Clark watched as Lex's eyes became unfocused, almost

glassy, Lex's fingers circling and pressing, and yeah, it looked like most people really did need that kind of preparation.

"Yes—no—"

"Maybe?" Clark supplied, grinning, snatching a kiss then slithering down Lex's body, feasting on anything that caught his attention, from a cluster of freckles to a nipple to the small indent of Lex's belly button, to the sharp jut of a hip and the soft crimple of thin skin cradling Lex's balls. Then lower, not far, follow that smooth little ridge to where Lex's fingers were, lick those fingers, then lick where they were going, his own limber tongue against and inside Lex, getting Lex ready, getting Lex to where he was begging for it.

Reciprocation, balance, completion, the circle coming full and round and ripe. He would be inside Lex, as Lex had been part of him, and that felt right, necessary, this once. He needed this, instinct rising once again, the urge and need to mate nibbling its way up his spine and into his brain. But he wasn't afraid this time because Lex was looking at him, and Lex was right here in front of him, and Lex would always stop him. But not now. Right now, Lex was encouraging him, not stopping him; opening up to him, handing him lubricant, and yeah, condom, because the whole alien thing still harbored a few unknowns. Lex's hands were on him because Lex had put on who knew how many condoms, and Clark had struggled his way through this just once before, ruining several thin sheaths with fingers that were too big and strength that was too great to control. But Lex's was gentling him, guiding his hands, guiding his body.

Lex was staring at him, meeting his eyes, waiting for him. And when he was staring at Lex with Lex's own need reflected in his eyes, Lex said, clear and strong, "Yes."

Yes. No doubts, no shades of grey, not here, in bed. Here it was pure: Lex opening up for him, Lex letting him slide in, smooth and steady and easy. Here, it was Lex groaning and grabbing him, arms hugging him so hard, so tightly, Lex's teeth fastening on his neck, biting him, marking him, if only for a moment.

Right here, it was fast and hard and frantic, full of unspoken needs and hopes, driven by promises of tomorrow and the harsher realities of today.

They'd have to keep this secret, and not only in case Lex decided to rewrite the rule book so he could become president. But they didn't have to keep any secrets from each other: Lex could attack pleasure with the violence kept so tightly chained all the rest of the time, and Clark could not only take it, Clark could feel it as pleasure. Clark could take the passion, and the fire, and the demanding, devouring hunger that would consume anyone else.

Lex was his.

Raw, vulnerable, utterly naked, writhing under him, biting and clawing and grabbing, and punctuating it all with breathless moans or a kiss that slid unexpectedly into tenderness.

Lex was his.

All of Lex, good and bad, regardless. It was Lex, and so it was his.

His.

He could feel it within himself, deep, as if Lex was inside him again. He could feel it with every hard thrust of his body, with every time Lex growled at him to do it harder and faster. He could feel it every time his tongue tasted Lex's sweat, or his fingers touched Lex's skin.

Lex belonged to him, and he to Lex.

And they could and would stop each other, where no one else would dare. Where no one else would have that kind of power.

The truth had set them free and left them chained each to the other, a balance of power unlike anything the world had ever seen.

Contained here, and now, with his body sliding into Lex's, and Lex's fingers sliding into his mouth, cycle and circle of pleasure, completion, desire escalating, a widening gyre leading upwards, upwards, upwards.

He was staring into Lex's eyes, and Lex was staring back, unafraid, yielding nothing, but seeing him. Truly seeing him.

No secrets.

And with that, no shame.

He thrust into Lex, following the cues of Lex's body and Lex's half-gasped words. He could feel orgasm dogging his heels, but he wanted to see Lex first, wanted to see Lex lose all control. Wanted to be the one to hold Lex, to protect Lex.

Wanted to see—yes. That. The moment when Lex went rigid, whiteness splashing between them, pale as snow against the spring blush of Lex's skin. And that was what he'd needed: seeing that, hearing his name garbled by the rush of orgasm pillaging through Lex, and it was enough. He plunged inside Lex one last time, feeling the pleasure seize control of him, knowing that Lex would stop him, and he could let himself go. Just let himself go, surrender control, just...

He curled himself up smaller so that Lex could curl more tightly around him. Perverse creature: full of talk during and between sex, but now, when their bodies would need a lot more than fifteen minutes to be ready again, when sleep was just around the corner, Lex had fallen silent, letting the stroke of his hands and the affection of his kisses speak for him.

This wasn't what he'd expected earlier when he'd been hoping to get away with avoiding Lionel Luthor and the issue of running away to the penthouse. Now...well, now he'd committed himself to forever, and maybe even being a guy from a comic book. It was...weird, which pretty much suited Smallville, and him, and Lex.

"So you're really okay with the whole alien thing?"

A nip to the back of his neck, and a soothing swipe of tongue after.

"Is that a yes?"



"Yes, Clark. I'm fine with all of this."

He turned his face into the pillow to hide his grin—another one of Lex's secrets revealed: the man got grumpy, downright petulant, when he was on the verge of sleep and someone kept talking to him. "You're totally sure?"

"If you want, I'll schedule a total freakout next week. I don't have much on Wednesday, so how does that sound?"

"Market, so Wednesday's no good for me."

"Then you can just pretend. Now shut up and let me sleep—just for an hour, then I'll be ready for more."

Clark felt Lex's weight settle more heavily against him; he doubted Lex was going to wake after just an hour, but that was all right. He wasn't in the least bit tired, so he could lie here and think about all of it.

Himself, being a real hero.

He'd really be able to help people that way. And Lex was right, blundering in wasn't enough, he could do more harm than good. He'd need to start studying natural disasters and fires and train wrecks and tornadoes and all of those things, learn what could be done to avert disaster and what most needed to be done when disaster hit.

Learn what not to do.

He could help people, really help people, and not just one or two folks here in Smallville. There were so many people in the world who needed help, and with his gifts—

Powers.

He needed to call them for what they were.

With these *powers*, he save so many lives.

And he could save Lex, who would save him, if he needed it.

"Hey, Lex," he said quietly, in case Lex was asleep.

"Huh?"

"If you try to rule the world, will I have to call you Alexander?"

"Just stick to 'great' and I won't have to kill you."

He was still giggling when he felt Lex go completely limp against him, breath soughing along his nape, Lex asleep, trusting him with this vulnerability. Trusting him to not tell that Lex Luthor drooled a little in his sleep, or that Lex Luthor wanted to save people as much as he wanted to be saved himself.

Secrets. New secrets, good secrets, like planting a new crop on ground that had been nearly all grown out from the last crop. New secrets, and he liked these; liked that he'd be giving Lex some new secrets to hold in trust. Loved that he was here, and that he was surely an alien, and that it mattered. Loved that he wouldn't need red meteor rings to be himself, that he didn't have to be a good son all of the time, that he didn't have to be perfect. Loved that there was someone who would simply stop him for things he'd never be able to tell his parents.

Loved that he could lie here, in the gathering night, and not fear the dark at all.

His Master's Voice

M. FAE GLASGOW

It went against everything his father had ever taught him. He could list the lessons this ignored; could list every single one of his father's commandments, far harsher than a paltry ten absolutes written in mere stone.

He knew exactly what his father would advise, what Dad would expect of him, what would be required of the only surviving Luthor heir.

Well.

Mother had done exactly what was expected and required by Dad, had rejected the advice of the doctors and gone ahead with a second pregnancy. And it had killed her. Not immediately, but her health had never fully recovered from the actual pregnancy, a weakness lingering in heart and lungs after the toxemia and the pregnancy-induced diabetes, until the loss of his baby brother had been the proverbial last straw.

Proverbs. Now there was something his father didn't often quote. How sharper than a serpent's tooth, and other such things.

And a new one, for Lex, first heard years ago with the meteors when he'd been too young to truly understand, only finally making sense when he'd met the man who'd pulled him from a very expensive German-engineered coffin in a river: yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.

Although Lex very much doubted that the pastor at his boarding school had had quite the same interpretation in mind for 'thy rod and staff me comfort still.'

There were times when he could barely take his eyes off Clark's rod for thinking about the particular comfort that could be had there.

Another thing that would give his father apoplexy. The Greek ideal was alive and well in his father: a beardless youth could indulge in men, but once he became a man, he was to put aside such youthful pleasures. A real man, as his father had pointed out so many times, was always the pitcher, never the catcher. A real man was not to get on his knees like a beardless boy.

Which was usually when Lex would smile, and stroke his own meteor-smooth chin, and simply raise an eyebrow, murmuring, "Beardless, Dad?"

That was invariably followed by lectures on keeping the line going, providing heirs, continuing the family name, the family dynasty, the family business. And there would be an endless string of 'suitable' women paraded in front of him, their pedigrees all but hung around their pretty, enticingly bowed necks.

And as predictable as night following day, Lex would look at them, wine and dine them, fuck the most predatory ones then kick them out, while he headed off for the latest of the late-night clubs, dangerous places with dangerous men, rough sex in back rooms, and on dance floors and in toilets and hallways and alleyways and cars. As many men as he could get his hands on.

It was a miracle—or another item for Chloe's Wall of Weird—that he'd never caught so much as crabs let alone HIV. His miraculous, re-invented, reborn constitution had turned him from a frail asthmatic who could barely climb a flight of stairs without wheezing, to a boy who could run.

And run, and run.

He'd spent twelve years running, until someone had finally caught him, fish on a line, pulled from the river, lying there, landed and gutted and gasping, stunned by this new world around him.

And by this strange creature gazing down at him.

It wasn't just Clark's looks that had got him, although they didn't exactly hurt. He'd fallen in lust before, would've dismissed it as just another case of beauty from on high sinking right down low into his cock, but it had been the look on Clark's face, the haunted bleakness in his eyes when he had whispered that he'd be dead if Lex had hit him.

Lying there, awash in this sudden surge of life and living and rebirth, he couldn't even begin to comprehend why someone should look so...conflicted about not being dead. As if, oddly enough, not being dead was a death sentence.

He loved a good mystery.

And maybe, just maybe, he loved a good man.

He knew what his father would say. He could hear his father's voice echoing and reverberating through his mind, through this room, through this 'ancestral' castle, through Smallville. He could hear his father's words, the endless

repetition, the incessant insistence, the absolute conviction that brooked no possible dissent.

But still, and not just to spite his father, he might be in love with a good man. Lex Luthor, Alexander Joseph Luthor, he, himself, him, he just might be in love. With a good man.

Which just might be enough to finally make his father disown him.

While nighttime drifted past outside the stained glass window that his father had had replaced to 'improve' upon the 'boring' clear leaded windows of the original, Lex sat and thought, about his father, about being disowned, about what it would be like to walk into banks and businesses and hotels and airports and everywhere else and *not* be Lionel Luthor's heir. Thought about what it would be like to be branded, finally and publicly, as a complete failure, for that's what the world would see. That's what his father would see. Too incompetent, too weak, too flawed to do what he'd literally been born to. "All you have to do is survive," his father had said, once, when Lex had asked him what was the minimum his father required from him. Survive. Just keep on breathing, which was a hell of a lot easier since the meteors had taken care of his little problem.

If his father disowned him...

As the sun started coming through the clear glass panes and bleeding through the dark red squares of the stained glass, Lex Luthor thought about the legalities of the stocks his mother had left him, and his inheritance from his grandmother. Thought about living expenses, and capital, and start-up, and investments. Thought about cars, and farms, and mansions and penthouses in Metropolis.

Thought about secrets, and lies, and what his father had always told him about trust. What he had learned about trusting people who lied to him. People who kept secrets from him.

Lessons his father had taught him.

Lessons he'd learned from the life his father had mapped out for him. From the life he'd chosen for himself in rebellion against his father.

He could, without trying, hear his father's voice repeating the lessons again, and again, and again.

Could hear that voice telling him precisely what his father thought of this latest insane rebellion. Could hear the confidence in his father's voice declaring that it wouldn't be long before Lex realized that Clark was nothing, a dalliance, a convenient hole, that it was Lionel whom Lex needed. Could hear the disgust in his father's voice, reminding him once again that real men, that bearded men, could dip their wicks into hairless boys, but no real man—no bearded man—would ever take it lying down.

Could almost hear his own voice, insolent, indolent, sexual drawl, saying, "I wasn't lying down, Dad. I was on my knees for him."

Could almost feel what it would be like to get on his hands and knees, for Clark.

To allow Clark that.

To give Clark that.

To give himself that.

He watched dawn brighten into day and thought how much he wanted to feel Clark inside him. How much he wanted to...

To...

Not be alone.

Joined, to another person.

One he knew lied to him. Often.

And yet...

He could guess what those lies were about: after all, he had only told Clark half of his own meteor secret; there was still the half that no one else knew about, not even dear old dad. Not officially, anyway. Not in a way that could be proven, or documented, or measured.

He could still, sometimes, hear people.

Not their voices.

In the corn field that day.

In the corn field twelve years later.

Talking scarecrows, Jesus-figures whispering in supplication to him.

Not the only voices he heard from too far away.

His father's voice, sometimes, even now, although that was probably simply familiarity breeding contempt. But he could still hear, sometimes, even when he should be long out of earshot. Not so different, perhaps, from Clark's secrets. Close enough, certainly, that he could understand why Clark's secrets were protected with such fierce desperation and fear.

A few miles away, far closer than his father's presence in Metropolis, the Kent farm would be already astir, cows no doubt being milked and animals being fed. Clark would be up doing his chores, contributing more than his share to the family workload, doing things that the Kents so fondly believed were 'secret.'

As if Lex Luthor was blind, deaf, and stupid.

So he knew that Clark was lying to him, but he also knew what some of those lies were—and why Clark was lying.

He could still hear his father's voice ringing in his ears, raging and pounding against him.

Sounding like a bad X-Files: Trust No One.

On the other side of doors and walls, he could hear his

staff starting the daily routine; there were phones ringing, voice mail being transcribed, schedules being checked and rechecked, ready to be brought before him. Music, and the occasional flurry of laughter.

Not the way his father ran his houses, or his office.

Not the way his father ran his own life.

Not the way his father wanted to run Lex's life.

The late winter daylight had reached the lake, glinting brightly, sunlight dancing.

His father would never take the time to notice such a thing.

His father would never even contemplate what Lex was considering: it was appallingly poor business, a fiscal nightmare, a recipe for disaster.

He could hear his father's voice giving him a complete business run-down on the losses that would be incurred if he went ahead with this foolishness.

"You're absolutely right, Dad," Lex said aloud, meaning it. No two ways about it: this was going to cost him a fortune, remove most of his power base, put his plans back by years. He could also kiss the presidency goodbye—hell, he could kiss being elected to Smallville's town council goodbye: his political aspirations might survive him being a Luthor, but they'd never survive him being a Luthor *and* having a male lover.

He ran the whole thing through his mind like another business report, profits and losses, expenditures and incomes, write-offs and investments. Balancing books that couldn't possibly be balanced because the price was so damned high. And not for a sure thing, but for a chance. A second chance.

It was a choice his father wouldn't comprehend; it was a choice his father couldn't possibly make.

And that, perhaps, was the best argument in its favor.

The wind carried the sound of Smallville's mutant year-round sunflowers waking to the morning, and a tractor starting up. Lex Luthor smiled, and picked up his phone, making the choice his father couldn't possibly make.

"Good morning, Mrs. Kent," he said, still smiling, gazing out at sunlight glittering on a lake, acutely aware that he'd just taken the road map of his life and created a brand new fork in the road. "I need to talk to Clark, please," and then he sat there, in the cool brightness of winter sun warmed by red glass, and waited till Clark came to the phone and it was time to take the first step.

Fireflies and Butterflies

M. FAE GLASGOW

There was no one around to hear him, so let himself make little noises of discomfort as he closed and locked the door behind him, the discreet little security tell-tale blinking reassuringly. With the rest of the world kept at bay, he dismantled another layer of his public face, allowing himself more little noises, of comfort, of relief, of freedom, as he dropped his heavy wool coat on the Castilian buffet in the hall, hung his new cashmere jacket on the old oak newel, kicked one shoe off as he walked past the Norman tapestry and the other at the Scottish oil painting, and he was relaxed enough to let himself damn near grunt as he finally pulled his damned tie off and dropped the noose over the doorknob. He unbuttoned the top button—damnit, who was there to see? The day was over, the damned party was over, he could relax, he could go back to being himself, so he wrenched the top three buttons undone, pulled his cufflinks out, cupped them smoothly in one hand while he rolled his sleeves up in a way that had always had his father (and be honest, he reminded himself, Mother, too) commenting about day laborers and Luthors and how the two simply didn't mix. He finally reached the bar and dumped the new cufflinks ("Made from Alexandrian gold. Appropriate, don't you think, son?") onto the silver platter, metal clanking on metal and ringing against crystal.

And causing a sudden startlement of noise from behind him.

He whirled around, his body assuming danger even as his brain realized who it had to be. Yeah, his mind soothed his body: no imminent death or destruction, just relax.

Yeah, right, his body mocked his mind, responding with alacrity to the sight of a very ruffled, very sleepy Clark Kent bolting up from the couch, hair awry, eyelids heavy, chin and cheeks dark with stubble, T-shirt rucked up under flannel shirt, a narrow patch of belly showing, dark line of hair—

“Lex!”

He dragged his eyes back up to look at those heavy, sleepy eyes: he was willing to bet Clark was hell to get up in the morning. And that took his mind—“Who the hell else were you expecting?” he snapped.

Clark stared at him for a few seconds, slightly wide-eyed, mouth thinned a little. “Sorry,” Clark said, shoving his hands into his jeans’ pockets, the twin fronts of his flannel shirt bunched forward to completely cover his crotch, gaze dropping guiltily away from Lex. “I must’ve fallen asleep.”

And the evening he’d just been through was no excuse to behave like his father and his own errant desires were no excuse to treat Clark like another Victoria. “I told you to come over and watch the satellite or any of the DVDs, Clark, it’s not a problem.”

“It’s rude to overstay a welcome.”

Was there...yes, there was a tiny flicker of amusement, of knowledge in the glance Clark slanted at him: a very mild, very tacit demand to be treated like a friend, not...

Well, not as whatever Lionel Luthor usually treated Clark as and not the way Lex had last behaved towards Victoria.

“Ceud mille failte,” Lex said, Clark giving him the expected, damn near trademarked look of innocent incomprehension. “Gaelic,” Lex said, pouring himself a glass of whisky, taking a sip, sweeping the nearly full glass around to encompass the castle. “Goes with the territory. Ceud mille failte, usquebaugh—”

“Which means...”

“Usquebaugh,” Lex said, raising his glass of the Macallan, “aka the water of life, and the other one is—” he spread his arms wide, his posture wobbling just enough for him to realize just how drunk he was, “a hundred thousand welcomes. Should take you a while to wear out all of them, Clark.”

He was gifted with another smile for that; took it as an invitation and crossed the room to the leather couch, pulling Clark down beside him, abruptly distracted by how big Clark’s hands were, how dark and tan—like any farmer’s—yet smoother than Lex’s own. He fitted his hand against Clark’s, unused to having other people’s hands be bigger than his own. Big hands, big feet, big—

Oh he was hellaciously drunk. Very, very carefully, he put Clark’s hand down onto Clark’s beddenimed thigh, patted it like a good dog who’d done what he’d told it to. Made himself stop before he started actually stroking that big warm hand or that big warm—“I suppose you need to get home before your parents start to worry.”

“Not really,” Clark said, and it was the tone of voice that

made Lex look at Clark’s face, a very odd expression sitting there.

He remembered that he was supposed to be having a conversation, not staring. “Why not? Told them you were at Pete’s?”

“Nope. Told them I’d be here.”

Well. That wasn’t what he expected.

“And your dad gave you permission to spend the night?”

Clark actually fidgeted. As soon as Lex had wrested Clark’s secrets from him, he was going to teach Clark the fine art of lying.

“Why’s it so surprising he’d let me sleep over?”

“Because he doesn’t like my *friendship* with you,” Lex said dryly, looking down at the swirl of his whisky in the crystal glass. And it was only because he hadn’t actually intended to face Clark that his sudden look at Clark caught both of them by surprise—and he caught the lie on Clark’s face. Perhaps not over what Jonathan Kent had really said, but that Clark was nervous. Clark...wasn’t. But a scant heartbeat later, and the ‘aw shucks’ blushing farmboy mask was firmly back in place.

Okay, so maybe he should be *taking* lessons in lying from Clark.

Tomorrow, as soon as he was sober, he was going to think about this, figure out just which innocent comment or blatantly nervous lie over the past months had really meant something else entirely.

Tomorrow. As soon as he was sober. As soon as he could look at Clark without thinking about burying his cock up Clark’s ass.

Oh man, he was drunk. He was dangerously drunk. The reward for staying stone cold sober all the way through tonight’s little torture chamber of a birthday party obviously shouldn’t have been getting plastered during the drive back to Smallville. He shouldn’t have come back at all, not tonight, should’ve stayed in Metropolis, where he could’ve gone out and picked someone up—let himself be picked up, gone into a backroom or up to the balcony at Metro...

Only he wasn’t sure if Metro was even still open, clubs came and went, a lifespan of months for true coolness, maybe a couple of years of actual profit brought by lingering reputation. But it’d been—God, where the hell had the time gone and why hadn’t he noticed?—nearly a year now since his last trip to a club. If he didn’t count being hung by his heels by a maniac and no way in hell was he even going to think about Club Zero and Amanda and severed hands and—

The crystal ice bucket flickered into existence in front of him.

“You looked like you were going to hurl.”

“Luthors don’t hurl,” he said, thinking about drunkenness, slowed reaction/comprehension times, and sheer, unnatural, meteor-mutated speed.



"C'mon, Lex, everybody—"

"Not since I was 9," he said quietly, and yeah, there it was, his right hand going up to touch his head. He was going to have to break himself of that habit completely, one of these days. Something else for his To Do list for tomorrow, when he was sober.

Beside him, Clark was very quiet, holding still in a way that made Lex's teeth itch, in a way that made him feel he should have a foil in his hand, poised in that endless second before a match started.

"Not even a cold?" Clark asked him, very softly.

"Even cleared up my asthma, my allergies—hell, Clark, it cleared up my fears too."

He turned then, to look at Clark's face to see what the knowledge of mutation would do.

Hadn't expected that.

Had so not expected Clark to look personally responsible and pleased as punch about it: Clark's expression was all but shouting, 'I did that!' Lex added that to Clark's usual guilt-ridden 'I did that' whenever the meteors caused something bad. So. Clark's secret definitely wasn't just the standard, everyday, Smallville meteor mutation. Which led Lex to...

He wasn't anywhere nearly drunk enough to cope with this, not on top of today, of being paraded round his father's associates and sycophants and the social register as if he was a prize heifer— Oh God fucking help him: he was thinking in farming metaphors.

The whisky was smoky and peaty and ripe on his tongue, in his throat, in his stomach, the carved crystal warmed by his hands, the whisky breathing, soft scent rising...and the entire thing nearly kissing the floor, because even drunk as he was, he recognized a touch when he felt one.

"How did things go in Metropolis?" Clark was asking him, voice softer than skin.

"How do you think it went?"

"That bad?"

He actually snorted, something he'd pretty much broken himself of doing—years ago, when he'd rarely been sober. "Take as bad as that, multiply it to the nth degree, throw in a little gratuitous humiliation, and you're getting close."

The touch on his arm slid up, and across, until there was a heavy arm across his shoulders and that was—that was...that was too close to what he wanted, what he needed, what he couldn't have. He shrugged, not sure if he'd managed to make it look natural or if he'd hurt Clark's feelings by too-blatantly shrugging him off.

Not that it apparently mattered: Clark just put his arm back around him and—God, hugged him close.

He was not—absolutely not—going to melt into Clark.

Wasn't going to let himself slide down and rest his head in Clark's lap.

Wasn't.

Also wasn't going to drink anything else until Clark was safely out of reach. "There should be snacks in the bar fridge," he said to himself, gauging just how much this latest glass of whisky would've impaired the remains of his balance.

Of course, as always, when a Luthor mentions such things, someone takes care of it.

"You're not a fucking retriever," he snarled, and Clark, the bastard, frowned at him uncomprehendingly—real, or faked?

"No, I'm your friend," Clark snarled right back, for once letting a little of that temper show. "And friends don't let friends drive drunk—"

"Limo," he said, even though Luthors didn't answer to anyone but another Luthor.

"—and friends don't let friends go get snacks when they can't even see straight. Here—"

A plate was shoved into his hands, big hands—bigger than his, so strange in someone he was trying to remember was caught in the summer between high school freshman and high school sophomore—ripping Saran wrap off the finger sandwiches his cook had left for him.

He wasn't hungry; wasn't in the least bit keen on actually putting food in his mouth, masticating it to a pulp, swallowing the gelatinous—

The ice bucket was right in front of him again.

"Have to eat," he said.

"Then don't think about it, just—"

And yes, today's humiliation was complete: he was sitting here drunk as a skunk in his father's pathetic approximation of an ancestral castle being fed like a child...by someone not quite a child, but nowhere near adult. He took the food—and he did not snatch it from Clark's hand, he took it, calmly, politely—and shot a glare up at Clark's completely unrepentant face. Not thinking about it at all, he chewed the food just enough to swallow it, too dry, too large—and took the bottle of water that appeared in front of his face.

"Had a lot of practice at this?"

"Nope," Clark said, sounding cheerful enough to make Lex's stomach roil. "But it's obvious what you need and—"

He twisted round a little, leaned back, so he was sprawled with carefully negligent ease in the corner of the couch. Clark was standing less than two feet away, and he simply stared up at him, waiting—pressing—for the rest of it.

Clark didn't blush, didn't fidget, just stood there very still, looking down at the floor. Then he slowly raised his eyes, and Lex could see—more than he ought.

"You don't let people give things to you. You don't let me— us—just do stuff for you, you always have to give us something to 'repay' me—us— or whatever and I want—"

Lex blinked, hoping his face was safely blank.

"I want to be able to do something for you that's a bit smaller than saving your life." Sudden smile, another glint of humor in the eyes. "It's okay, I'll still save you, so you don't have to give

up your cars. But...but you know, just sometimes...I want to do stuff for you. Not so you'll give me something, but—because you'll let me. Because it's not all business."

It was that simple? That's where he'd been going wrong with the people in this damned town?

That's where he'd been going wrong with *Clark*?

He swallowed, and looked away. "Thanks," he said, feeling peculiar. "For the sandwiches."

And yes, that light blinding him was Clark's smile. Jeez. And to think he'd wasted money on a truck.

Then, for his sins—and they were legion, even if he'd never known most of their names—Clark sat down beside him. And picked his feet up. And took his socks off. And put his bare feet on Clark's laps, inches—millimeters—away from Clark's crotch and then—oh, how he'd sinned!—Clark started rubbing his feet.

He just lay there and watched. Those were his feet, in Clark's hands. Pale, narrow, pedicured feet, in Clark's big, tanned, manly hands.

He had to clear his throat twice before he trusted his voice to sound like it belonged in the living room and not the bedroom. "Had a lot of practice at this?"

"My mom," Clark said, shrugging.

So there was a God. Mom, Clark's mom, and that just blew, so to speak, any sexual connotation right out the window.

Until Clark slanted a glance up at him that Mata Hari would've been proud of. "Though I don't enjoy it this much."

He should take his feet back. He knew he should. But his feet had never been an erogenous zone. He hastily swallowed another finger sandwich as he remembered the time some woman had pulled his motorcycle boots off and started sucking his toes on the floor of the filthiest bar he'd ever—

"Lex?"

He swallowed, waved away any hint of the ice bucket.

"Yeah, that's right, Luthors don't hurl," Clark said, with the most delicious edge of sarcasm.

Feet. Concentrate on feet, which were not, never had been and never would be erogenous zones.

Thank God Clark hadn't decided to give him a neck rub.

Or a scalp massage.

And he hoped to hell Clark would think that groan was just relief from having the, ah, kinks rubbed out of his feet.

"Lots of standing?"

"All night. It's easier to mingle without a sit-down dinner."

"And you mingled a lot?"

Oh, how he'd mingled. He'd managed to finish the sandwiches and the water, so he lay back, and contemplated the ceiling which, thankfully, bore no resemblance whatsoever to Clark, and didn't even remind him of Clark. Nice, safe, non-erotic view. He liked this ceiling—

"Lex?"

"Three debs," he said, since he was, after all, drunk and

therefore couldn't be held responsible for anything he said. "Three debs, all hand picked by my father—" and wasn't that an image he didn't need in his head?—"all paraded before me like Miss America."

"In bathing suits?"

Lovely Clark. Wonderful, lovely, delightful Clark, to inject just the right tone of levity and facetious shock into the conversation. "Evening gown competition. My designer's better than your designer. Miles and miles of this season's de rigueur fabric and style and color—puce," he said, raising up a little and giving Clark a sharp look, just to make sure Clark realized how horrifying miles of puce could be, "and miles and miles and miles of Dad smiling encouragingly at me, making—"

Clark, bless him, didn't say anything.

But he answered the question anyway. "There's something deeply disturbing about talking to an 18-year-old, convent-educated girl while your dad stands behind her and—"

He repeated his dad's masturbatory hand gesture.

"But if you picked the girl, you wouldn't have to do that, right?"

That surprised him. Clark usually blushed and ran a mile when the talk turned sexual.

"Unless," Clark was grinning at him, eyes amused, the 'aw shucks' farmboy not quite in place, "she was a very unusual girl."

Laughter gurgled from him, and yes, it was pathetic that him laughing out loud had Clark looking at him in surprise. Christ, what a pair they made.

"Oh, I could tell you about some of the unusual girls I've known, Clark."

Very quietly, voice deep, and strong, and certain. Inviting, too.

"Then why don't you, Lex?"

"Because I'm pretty sure that would count as corrupting a minor in this fine state."

"You're planning on racing off to tell Sheriff Ethan that you just told me all about the unusual...women...in your past?"

Good point. If he didn't tell anyone, and Clark didn't tell anyone...

What was that they said about the slippery slope?

He shouldn't say a word, but...

But Clark wasn't hiding behind his innocence tonight. Clark wasn't pretending ignorance—not that he'd ever believed Clark's innocence and ignorance, not when Clark had such easy access to the internet.

He should keep his mouth shut.

Instead, he curled his spine a little, shimmied up a little until he was partly propped up against the arm of the couch. And Clark moved, too, so that his feet were still in Clark's lap, and Clark's hands had stopped massaging, were simply

rubbing now, fingers sliding up his ankles, under the hems of his trousers, stroking skin, running along tendon, circling rounded bones...

Okay, so that was sexy.

That was...

As sexy as the way Clark was looking at him, mouth slightly open, eyes focusing on him so intently, and—

Clark moved his feet, and he could feel the press of Clark's groin along the side of his foot.

Groin? he mocked himself. When had he turned into a walking Health Education class?

Cock.

His foot was held snug and warm and tight against Clark's cock.

Which wasn't soft.

Not soft at all.

Okay, so maybe feet *were* an erogenous zone—not for him, but maybe Clark...

Those fingers were stroking him again, tracing bones and very nearly tickling, but feeling almost obscenely good instead.

"Everyone knows about drag queens," he said, and Clark nodded, encouraging him. "But there's more than one type," he said, remembering, wondering how Clark would react. "Some don't try to look like men in drag, some try to pass as women—"

"Thought most of them were straight?"

"Most. And then there are the trannies."

"Chicks with dicks," Clark said quickly—and this blush was genuine, he'd bet money on it. "Internet," Clark told him, shrugging, blush fading—fingers stroking, and pressing his foot that bit tighter against a cock that was that bit harder.

"Exactly," he replied, and rubbed his foot against Clark's cock.

Got the hottest gasp for that, Clark's eyes closing and mouth opening in a beautifully unsophisticated, unjaded response.

"First time I met one, I had no clue," he said, rubbing his foot back and forth, back and forth. "I thought I was king of the debauched, but when 'she' took off her dress and I saw this huge, hard cock through her panties—"

He'd nearly panicked, because he'd been younger than he'd pretended to be, younger than he'd thought himself to be, and while he'd already done *some* things with guys his own age—

Fuck. What the fuck was he doing? Clark was—internet be damned, five o'clock shadow be double damned, Clark was *young*. And Clark probably thought he was ready for this, even though Clark wasn't even ready enough to ask Lana for a date.

He pulled his feet away, sat up properly, naked feet planted firmly on the ground.

He was not going to seduce Clark—and he wasn't going to let Clark seduce

him. Goddamnit, there were laws in this fucking state, and if they'd put him in jail for laying a finger on his former housekeeper's daughter, they'd crucify him for fucking an underage boy.

Even one who thought he was ready and more than capable of giving informed consent.

And when they'd finished crucifying the local Luthor, they'd turn their attentions on Clark: Lex had lived in a small town long enough now to know that there were worse punishments than jail.

"Lex—"

"No, Clark," he said, and tucked his hands under his own thighs, trapping them between fine wool and smooth leather, nice, safe things for him to touch.

"Why not?"

Somehow, he didn't think a parental-sounding 'because I said so' would be the wisest answer right now.

He got to his feet, started for the bar and headed for the fire instead. With the food and the water in him, he was realizing that it had been as much low blood sugar as liquor: it wasn't that he'd been nervous or dreading today, just... Hell, he'd kept so busy he hadn't had time to think about it until he was getting dressed and then walking into that roomful of people standing measuring him, Dad leading him around like...

Proof of the old man's virility. Proof that the company was utterly stable, even if some upstart bolt of lightning should dare to strike Lionel Luthor the next day. Proof that Lex was a loyal little Luthor, doing Daddy's will, being a good little boy.

His dad had hugged him, patted him on the back. Stroked the backs of long, bony fingers down his cheek.

The sandwiches threatened to reappear.

He closed his eyes, braced his hands on the mantle, and stood there for a moment, dimly grateful that Clark wasn't saying anything, that Clark wasn't asking questions that were impossible to answer—

That Clark had come up behind him, and wrapped himself around him.

It wasn't often Lex got to feel small. It wasn't often that he got to feel...protected. Wasn't often that he got to feel cherished.

Oh God, how he wished he was drunk. Rotten, stinking, falling down, drunk.

So that tomorrow when he was sober, he wouldn't remember any of this. Wouldn't remember the hands stroking him, or the cock pressing against his ass, or the strong arms wrapped around him, or the mouth gentle against the back of his head.

Wouldn't remember how hungry he was for this.

"Shh," Clark was telling him. "It's all right."

Another lie, because they both knew it wasn't anywhere near all right: the only difference was that Lex knew exactly why it wasn't all right. Never would be.

His skin was tissue paper, his bones pillars of salt, and one wrong move would dissolve him.

And how the hell could Clark—so young, so fucking *young*—not make a wrong move?

There was still the reason Clark was here tonight in the first place: Whitney coming home for weekend leave after boot camp, and Lana's house the eternal focal point of Clark's telescope. There was still Lana, for all Clark was here right now. There was still the whole figuring things out, for all Clark was here right now. There was still being willing to deal with the shit of people's reactions, if Clark stayed—compared to the open-armed welcome and approval of that nice boy having such an enduring, loyal crush on sweet little Lana.

No two ways about it: his timing absolutely fucking sucked. If only he'd been exiled here a few years down the line—

But then Clark kissed him—surer than he expected, no fumbling virginal uncertainty—right behind his ear, just where the tendons to his neck began. Kissed him, and mouthed him, tip of tongue tracing down, down, to his neck, to nip and bite and suck, then move up, open mouth on him, and he heard himself groan, felt it in his chest, felt himself shiver as Clark's mouth hit him right *there*. Almost—not quite, but almost—as good as a mouth on his cock, sometimes.

He was going to pay for this: he was going to have his skin rip open and his bones spill out, because this was going to backfire on him and burn him badly.

But it would be worth it, for this moment, this comfort and this passion and this...

He didn't want to give name to the feelings within himself, fear curling low in his belly, adrenalin rush adding to his arousal. Knew only too well what name went with Clark's slow, intense caresses and firm hands stroking over his chest and belly, not quite daring low enough to touch his cock yet.

Wondered briefly, bitterly, if Lana had ever let Clark get this far. Wondered just exactly what had happened while Lana had been under the influence of the Nicodemus flower.

"Shh," Clark said again, mouth biting and licking the muscles at the base of his neck, devouring the tension in them, loosening him up.

With Clark's mouth on him, he'd loosen up in two seconds flat: he could have that cock in him instead of just against him. He could have Clark be part of him, for however long this crush lasted, for however long this experimentation endured. His own experimentation had settled into a fairly even mix of male and female, but he could barely remember the name of the boy he'd been so desperately in love with when he'd been Clark's age. Remembered his surprise at how full his mouth felt as he'd sucked that first cock. Remembered how much he'd hated that first cock shoving its way up his ass, in those far off days before he'd learned to separate sex from love.

Looked like he'd have to relearn that lesson all over again.

But for now—

He had Clark wrapped around him, arms and heat and voice, and Clark on him, mouth and tongue and cock. Naked fingers

sliding inside his open shirt to squeeze his nipples, twisting a little when he gasped and arched into the touch.

It was going to hurt like hell when Clark wanted to go back to being just friends, but it wasn't as if his expectations would be shattered, would it? *Carpe diem*, and all the other platitudes Clark probably learned at Jonathan Kent's knee.

Fathers, good or bad, weren't exactly conducive to enjoying what was going on here. He was going to savor this, wallow in it, milk it for everything he could get for the brief time it would exist: fireflies and butterflies, brief flare of light and beauty, then gone.

Worth it. So fucking worth it, to hear Clark's voice repeating his name over and over and over in that hoarse little murmur, breath against his ear, tongue against his skin, cock against his ass, fingers against his chest, the other hand reaching up, and he opened his mouth to suck the fingers in—but Clark didn't see, and Clark...

Stroked his face. The backs of Clark's long fingers ghosting down his cheek.

Oh God. That was an echo he just didn't need.

There wasn't enough booze in the world for this.

He closed his eyes, and leaned back against the pillar of strength holding him up, and felt the weakness of his bones, the fragile friability of his skin.

He could still feel his father's fingers on his face, and still hear his father's low-voiced whisper: I hear Victoria's had a little medical procedure of late, Lex. Wonder which one of us she has to thank for that.

He and Clark could keep this secret from the Kents, and the town and the law, but his father... fuck, his dad had probably known before he did.

There was very little that happened in this house without Lex Luthor knowing about it: there was absolutely nothing that happened in it without Lionel Luthor knowing about it.

And Clark was sucking on the back of his head with such a sweet intensity, such a sweet attempt to convey acceptance of what set him apart from everyone else.

Yes, the 'aw shucks' mask had slipped more often tonight than usual, but what it had revealed was hardly up to taking down Lionel Luthor.

For Clark's sake, he had to stop this. Right now, before they burned their bridges, before he knew exactly what he'd be missing, because if he knew, he'd never be able to deny himself from knowing it again and again and again.

For Clark's sake. If this was more than just sex (and God help him, it was, on his side at least), if this was more for him than just fucking another pretty young—very young, too young, what the fuck was he thinking, even *contemplating* having sex with Clark?—then Lex had to be the adult here, had to be the one with the sense and the comprehension and the power to stop it right now.

But Clark—Clark was touching him, mouth and hands, lips and tongue, and he could feel Clark's erection (bigger than his own, and wasn't a man measured by the size of his cock; how could Clark be just a boy if his cock was bigger than most of the men Lex had fucked?), heat and hardness, promise and threat, pressed up against him. Pressing against him, like the sea, pushing against him, retreating from him, waves of pleasure against him. Clark wanted this, Clark obviously had some idea what to do and how to do it, Clark was ready for this, mature enough for this, even if Clark's dubious adoption papers said he wasn't old enough to do this with a jaded, debauched man.

"Yes," Lex said, even though he knew he shouldn't. He wanted this, Clark wanted this, Clark knew what he wanted—

Oh fuck. Clark wanted *this*, but this wasn't all of it. His father would know. And his father wouldn't want his only legal heir settling down with someone who couldn't give birth to lots of little Luthors.

It hit him like a blow, weakening his knees, scrunching his eyes closed, collapsing him against Clark's solid strength.

He wanted this. More than he'd wanted anything since he'd begged his mother not to die. And he could have this, if he would only just throw Clark to the jackals. But Clark was big, and strong, and tougher than even the meteor mutants—and Clark was holding him, one hand rubbing circles on his belly, under his shirt, fingertips sliding under the waistband of his pants, pinkie finger sliding down, stroking over bare naked skin, shivering pleasure through Lex. Clark wasn't some delicate little flower needing his protection, Clark would cope. What harm would it do to have Clark, at least for a little while?

His nails bent as his fingers dug into Clark's wrists; anyone else, and there would've been half-moon indentations seeping blood. But this was Clark, Clark with his secrets and lies, Clark with things that couldn't be trusted to a Luthor, not even one so un-Luthorian as Lex. And if he had Clark, even for a little while, his father would have every last one of Clark's secrets on his desk by morning, even if it meant destroying the Kents to get them.

"Clark," he said, and was appalled at the naked vulnerability in his own voice, at the pathetic echo of need. He put some steel into his backbone, and forced himself to stand up, to stop leaning on Clark. He should turn, face Clark, stare him down as he said this, but—

He couldn't. A lifetime's lying wasn't enough training enough to deceive Clark. Or himself.

"Clark," he began again, warm and yielding as twice-forged steel, although he couldn't quite manage the practiced, cutting smile that was supposed to go with it, "I'm drunk, and right now, a knothole in a fence—"

"I'm not stupid, Lex. You haven't been drunk or high since you moved to Smallville—"

Now that was perfect: the truth as damnation. "Yes, I have."

He still wasn't looking at Clark, but he could feel the bristle of disbelief behind him. "I had staff bring my things down from Metropolis. But I brought my own...supplies in my own car."

And he'd used those supplies—of course, that had been during the thirty-seven and a half hours he'd been in Smallville before he'd driven off a bridge and been brought back to life by Clark's kiss. Damn shame he was no Sleeping Beauty to have a happily ever after.

"Fine, so you got high or drunk or *whatever*, and if you need to pretend you're drunk right now, fine, great, go right ahead, this is me not stopping you. You're drunk, Lex," Clark said, and his voice was startlingly close. "Drunk as a skunk, three sheets to the wind, pickled like pie and I've got a dozen other things my dad says to tell you that you, Lex Luthor, are drunk."

Which blended perfectly with Lex's plan to claim that his response had only been the booze talking, so why the hell did he have the sure and certain knowledge that somehow, somewhere, Clark had snatched control of this conversation?

"Okay, so you're drunk, and that's why you got hard when we were making out—"

The phrase dropped onto Lex's shoulders with the weight of decades, until he felt as old as his father; obscene thought, his father licking his lips and staring at Clark, his father taking Clark the way his father had claimed Victoria and everyone else even half-important to Lex.

"So stay drunk, Lex, stay drunk and let this happen—"

"You have no idea," he snarled, white-knuckled, anger knotting his hands into fists. "You think you know me, you think you're ready for this—for *me*. Are you, Clark?" Fast and dangerous as a summer twister, he turned on Clark, anger his best defense and Clark's only protection. "I date my men as openly as I date my women. I won't hide, I won't run, and I won't be ashamed or discreet or anything else. Are you ready for that, Clark?"

Clark's mouth was set in a line as stubborn as anything Lex had ever managed, and wouldn't his father just love trying to break Clark the way he'd tried to break Lex? "Are you ready for what people will think and say behind your back? What they'll say to your face? What your *dad* will think and say?" he snapped, although he flinched as much as Clark. "You think you're all grown up," he sneered, at Clark, at himself, spreading the pain evenly because that was the price he had to pay for Clark. "So are you ready to walk into school on Monday and face the jocks and Pete and Chloe and Lana when they know you're a fag? When they know you're Lex Luthor's fag, my toy, my fucking pet?"

And yes, there it was, at last: Clark blanching, lips whitening in anger and eyes widening in fear and hurt and dismay. "Nothing's free, Clark, every single fucking thing in the entire fucking world has a price, and that's what fucking me will



cost you. Can you afford that, Clark? Are you ready to pay the piper?"

And then Lex stood there, waiting, feeling the booze sour his stomach and recede from his head, misery the best detox he'd ever had the misfortune to find. He waited through the thundering beat of his heart, through the short, sharp breaths Clark was taking. Stood there, and waited for the answer. A part of himself, the weak, feeble part that needed and hungered and craved and curled up at night when the dark stretched too wide and too lonely, was hoping Clark would say yes, yes, damn the price, damn the piper. But the parts of him that were untouched by his father, the part of him that had awakened to decency and potential and promise when he'd died and Clark had brought him back...oh, that part, that aching, hollowed, gauntness in him was praying that Clark would say no, that Clark would—yet again—save him, from himself this time.

What his father had done to Victoria would be nothing compared to what daddy dearest would do to someone Lex actually loved.

And Clark still stood there, staring at him, eyes stormy, entire body nearly shimmering with the finest tremble running through it. Lex hoped it was fear or anger. Regretted that it might be pain or loss. Didn't want to think that it might be power and the sort of strength that could lift two grown men one-handed back up onto a collapsing walkway.

Say no, he pleaded, inside his own head, where no one but him could hear the broken edge of lost hope. And Clark stood there, one more second, two more seconds, and Lex could see him thinking. Wondered if Clark, as quick to lie about his intelligence as his strength, had seen through what Lex had said: had seen through the surface truths to the fearful truth beneath. Clark, after all, had found the photographs of his dad and Victoria, and he'd told Clark about Pamela himself.

That's why he had—eventually—been able to forgive Pamela: he knew his father and so did she. Running far, far away was the only viable option for someone who didn't want to end up dead or wishing they were dead by the time his father finished with them. And their family.

He watched Clark, watched the thoughts chasing themselves in circles behind those eyes that covered lies so well.

He wanted Clark to say yes. He quite desperately needed Clark to say no.

Because he couldn't.

God help him, he couldn't.

And finally, finally...

Clark touched his mouth, just a fingertip, touching the scar

that was the other main leftover from the meteor shower, and for a long, painful moment, Lex was wracked between wanting it to be the start or the end.

Then Clark smiled at him, not a familiar Clark smile, but one of Lex's own, and for a moment, he wondered if he himself looked so melancholic, so...lonely, when he smiled like that.

The answer, then.

Clark Kent to the rescue, once again. This would be the end. Friendship would continue, blunted though, weighted by the knowledge of what they'd chosen not to do tonight.

Lex turned sharply on his heel, downed the last of his whisky, headed briskly over to the decanter, his hand barely trembling as he poured another drink. He was perfectly poised. No one would ever know.

He didn't want to know either.

Did not want to know how much it hurt that Clark had said no.

Did not want to know how much of a relief it was that Clark had said no.

He was safe—Clark was safe. He should be grateful, and he was. But he was human enough, still, under the Luthor mantle, to wish for a different world, a world where...

There was no point in dreaming. None at all. None.

Glass in one hand, decanter in the other, Lex breezed past Clark, waved the decanter in a dismissive gesture. "Feel free to use one of the guest bedrooms," he said, inordinately pleased with just how casual he sounded. "Or to lock up behind yourself when you leave."

"Lex—"

Habit and need stopped him, and he turned around, took a deep breath and looked up. Saw Clark's face. Read Clark's eyes.

Want. Need. Hunger. But not enough to face the slings and arrows of his hometown, not enough to deal with his father finding out. Not enough to risk either of them to the dangers of Lionel Luthor. Or perhaps just unwilling to be tarnished in Lana's eyes.

Too young. Clark was still just too damned young.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Lex said into Clark's tongue-tied hurt and regret, gentler than he'd meant to. Clark was, after all, very, very young. And for all his strength, terribly, terrifyingly, vulnerable. Even now, he could see Clark having second thoughts, could see Clark swayed by the burn of want and lust. With one last look at what he couldn't have, Lex took his decanter of very fine, very strong whisky and headed upstairs, alone, knowing that he'd done the right thing.

And finding it very cold comfort indeed.



a Tangled Web

M. FAE GLASGOW

The photographs just sat there on his desk, mocking him.

He had no one but himself to blame. Desiree, apparently, hadn't been warning enough for him. No, he'd rebounded from her like a rubber ball and then just had to go running around looking for someone else to love, someone else he might woo, someone else who might give him some crumbs of affection and acceptance. At this rate, store mannequins wouldn't be safe from him plighting his troth to them.

He was so pathetic.

He should've learned by now that running hell-bent and determined towards something was just another way of running away from something. His own need. His own weakness. His own feelings. Loneliness. A turret of solitude surrounded by lies, the one person he really wanted a proven liar, proven to be someone he couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't trust.

And now he was lying to himself. Great. This was just... great.

So busy running from one set of lies, he'd run headlong and heartfirst into the charmingly deceptive embrace of even more.

In his defense, she'd been utterly convincing on those five dates—from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, and she'd ripped him a new one, and held him at arm's length. Played hard to get, the oldest trick in the book, and he'd fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker. Landed like a gaping, gasping fish, just waiting for her to gut him.

Which she'd done. And damn well at that.

Even when he'd shown her the photographs, she'd sounded so believable, been so—wasn't that how the truly innocent reacted? At least here in Smallville?

He'd been wrong about her, he must have been wrong about her—not from the beginning, maybe not on those five dates, but about lying over the photographs, and his dad. Accusing her of being in bed with his father—because that was what he'd been doing, even if Helen hadn't realized he was having flashbacks to Victoria, hadn't he driven her to that reaction? Maybe she'd been right to storm out of here. Surely she'd been right to be appalled, absolutely right. And surely this was one of his worst indulgences in wishful thinking ever. His fingers lingered on the photographs, fanning through the glossy sheaf so he could see her in all of them. Maybe. Or maybe she—

"Put them away, Lex," Clark said, gentle and kind and absolutely refusing to brook the least little argument. Lex dropped the photos to the desk. "Staring at them's not going to help."

"I know, but..."

"But," Clark said, tossing a pool cue at Lex, nearly hitting him with it, startling Lex out of his reverie and out of his seat, "you don't know what to do, so you're sitting here broodier than a hen who hasn't laid in a week, and that's not helping." Clark looked at him sharply, the pool balls clacking as he racked them and Lex left his desk and the photos behind. "Is it, Lex?"

"No. It's not. In fact," Lex chalked the tip of his cue, set up his shot to break the rack, "it's making it worse. But what the hell else am I supposed to do, Clark?"

"Talk to her."

Lana, Chloe, Victoria, Desiree, Helen: it didn't seem to matter which female they were talking about, they always seemed to end up being a sounding board for each other, working through things in ways Lex still found novel and more than a little strange. "And say what? I'm sorry, I'm a slimy sleaze ball of a Luthor who doesn't know how to treat someone properly?"

Clark caught the cue ball as it hit off the corner and bounced over the edge of the table. "You treat me just fine," Clark said mildly enough, but there was the usual warning behind the calm voice, refusing to let Lex tar himself with his father's brush. "You tell her why you reacted the way you did, and ask her to explain things to you."

Lex watched Clark take his shot, two balls dropping neatly into two separate pockets. At this rate, he wouldn't have to worry about how he was going to surreptitiously pay Clark's way through college. Clark could finance himself as a pool shark.

"Already tried that," he said, missing another shot, Clark shooting him a concerned glance. "She nailed my balls to the wall for checking her bank account—"

"Lex!

He leaned on his pool cue and met Clark's gaze head on. "There were a hundred thousand of my father's dollars in that account."

Clark blinked at him, opened his mouth to say something then shut it again. Then, finally: "I'm sure there's an explanation. Maybe your dad put it there without her permission?"

"Then why didn't she just tell me that? It's not as if I'm going to call her a liar or throw her out if she tells me something terrible about my dad. Hell, I'll probably embellish on it until it really sounds like something he'd do."

Clark was looking at Lex out of the corner of his eyes, and there was tension beginning to knot his shoulders. "You think she lied to you?"

"I know she did. She said she'd never met my dad, but I have photographs from two separate occasions. Feeding pigeons in the park," he added scornfully, insulted at being betrayed using such a trite cliché. "And when I confronted her—Clark, I even told her it was because I'd been burned and the whole disaster with my honeymooning bride trying to kill me wasn't exactly kept quiet."

Clark looked at him with what just might be pity, and Lex winced because the memory of the racks and racks of magazine covers, tabloid headlines, and entertainment news on what felt like every television station in the country still stung. There was no way Helen could've missed the overkill coverage, especially not here in Smallville where the news had been bandied around with such glee.

"Clark, I told her I found out not because I suspected her, but because I was having my dad followed."

"Why are you having your dad followed, Lex?"

Lex took two shots, pocketing one ball, nearly digging into the felt with the second. "He told me he'd bury me. And all my friends."

There wasn't a lot anyone could say to that—particularly not when they knew Lionel Luthor well enough to know that it probably wasn't just venting spleen in the heat of the moment.

"Have you found anything?"

"Apart from his tête-à-tête with Helen? Not a thing. Which just makes me even more nervous."

"I can't imagine—"

"What it's like to have a father willing to kill you?" Lex said when Clark broke off.

Clark looked up at Lex, missed his shot, and didn't even notice. "I couldn't believe it when he sealed the plant or wouldn't even talk to Mrs. Dunleavy."

"Yeah, well, those weren't the first times, so I'm kind of used to it."

And Lex didn't just miss his shot, he missed the table. Clark had blindsided



him, had come up beside him out of nowhere and just grabbed him. His ribs were creaking from the tightness of the hug. But it beat being dangled off a steel catwalk or left to die at the hands of one of your dad's former mistresses. Those things hurt, but this... It had been a long time, but not so long that he didn't still recognize comfort when it was offered. When it was wrapped around him like a boa constrictor, refusing to let him go.

When it came in the form of lips pressed to his temple, and a voice cracking over, "I'm so sorry."

Then he was left to stand on his own two feet, dizzy, befuddled, while Clark went back to playing pool as if he'd never hugged Lex, let alone kissed him.

"Clark, did you just—?"

"Your shot," Clark said.

Lex got the message: pretend I didn't do that. Pretend I didn't take us to the next level like life is a giant video game. Pretend I wasn't tacky enough to kiss my best friend for the first time when he was talking about being dumped by his girlfriend. Okay. Lex could do that. He was good at pretending, and what was one more lie between friends? Somehow, he'd held onto his cue for the duration of that hug and hadn't dropped it in shock when Clark had, yes, kissed him. Not a huge passionate tonsil-tickling sexfest of a kiss. But a kiss. A definite more than just-good-friends kiss.

Lex muffed that shot too.

He wasn't even sure it was the cue ball he'd hit.

Clark had kissed him.

Clark, meantime, was bent over the pool table, his face flushing a color unpleasantly close to the exact shade of the baize. "What else did she tell you?"

"Apart from the fact that I was pathetic and paranoid and even more arrogant than everyone said I was? Well, that my dad had offered her the money to dump me."

Clark looked up at him, then went back to the table.

"The thing is, about the money for dumping me?" Lex said slowly, talking to the back of Clark's head, wondering what expression Clark was trying to hide and whether or not this hug and kiss behavior was a singularity or going to ambush him in the future like the local meteor mutants. And whether or not he wanted to be ambushed. Regularly. "I'm pretty sure she was lying to me about that too."

Then Clark stood up and looked at Lex across the pool table where they'd played countless games, not all of them pool. "Maybe she had a good reason for lying, Lex."

"A good reason for lying, Clark?" Lex asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral, allowing neither hope nor accusation to color it.

Clark shifted uncomfortably, a penitent at the confessional. "To protect you, maybe."

"From something worse than my dad trying to wreck the first serious relationship in my life?"

"Five dates is a serious relationship?"

"For me, yeah," Lex said, swallowing hard before continuing. "Told you, I'd never even contemplated more than two months with a woman before. With anyone before. But it's what I want."

Clark hesitated for a long moment, standing there, fingers sliding restlessly up and down the cue stick in a way any guy would immediately recognize. "So you're considering more than two months with...Helen, then your surveillance of your dad—and Lex, I know you say it's business, but you do know spying on your dad is seriously weird, don't you?—shows her meeting him twice even though she said she'd never met him, and then she tells you it's because your dad wants her to dump you?"

"I can't decide if that's more depressing or accurate," Lex said, taking a shot out of turn because who was he to turn down the rare opportunity to cheat on Clark at pool. "But you've nailed it, Clark. That's essentially the whole pathetic situation."

"So you need to figure out why she did what she did. Because—" Clark stopped, waiting till Lex looked up at him, continuing with a surfeit of honest sincerity, "because maybe she had some really good reasons for not telling you everything. And it wasn't just her. She did stuff she shouldn't, but you did stuff you shouldn't and you *both* said stuff you *really* shouldn't."

"But why lie to me in the first place? She comes from the same circle I do, she must know about my dad and me, the way we are with each other. And to be blunt, Clark, when you get into our income bracket, a background check is considered perfectly routine. So why lie? Why not come to me and tell me what he did?"

"Maybe," Clark said softly as Lex set up his next shot, "she didn't want to hurt you."

"And postponing—" Lex stopped, rose to his full height. Stood at the opposite side of the pool table, took one step towards the window, while Clark took one step towards the door, so that they fetched up directly opposite each other, red baize scattered with a few brightly-hued balls lying between them. "Maybe she wanted to tell me," Lex said carefully, watching Clark's reaction, "but was embarrassed."

"Maybe she wanted to tell you, but didn't know how to tell you right when it happened. Then the longer she didn't tell you," Clark shrugged, ventured an apologetic, shy half-smile at Lex, "the worse the delay made her not telling you look. So then she couldn't tell you, and then that delay just made it worse..."

"Maybe she had the best intentions, but things went awry because of events outside her control, and to confess would make her look worse than she was." Lex knew he wasn't actually smiling, but suspected he was looking at Clark with an expression bordering on softness.

Apart from the low murmur of their voices, there wasn't a

single other sound in the room as Clark looked right at Lex and said, "Maybe she felt she couldn't tell you because she wasn't the only person involved, so it wasn't only her secret."

Lex laid his pool cue down on the baize. "Maybe she was going to try to fix it, but I found out before she could."

Clark picked up Lex's cue, held it alongside his own, both of them together in one large hand. "Maybe she was afraid that if she told you, you'd look at her differently."

"That maybe it would tarnish her."

"Make you think less of m—her. Maybe she was afraid you'd never see her the same way again."

Lex walked slowly around the pool table, stopped right in front of Clark. Took both pool cues, laid them across the pool table. "Maybe she was afraid that the ugliness of past truths would ruin things between...us."

Clark picked up the pool cues, slotted them into the wall rack as he spoke. "Maybe she was worried that once she told you, you wouldn't be able to let it go." He smiled suddenly, his entire face lighting up, Lex's eyes brightening to match. "You're kind of obsessive, Lex."

A gracious, amused nod of agreement, and an affectionate warmth in Lex's eyes. "Maybe she was afraid that if she didn't handle it herself, I'd think she was incompetent, or weak."

"Yeah, like that's going to happen," Clark said, nudging Lex almost playfully. "Maybe," and Clark was still smiling, not his usual grin, something softer, chenille instead of everyday cotton, "maybe she was afraid that if you knew and your dad found out because your dad's even more obsessive and weird than you are, it would be used as a weapon against you."

For a moment, Lex frowned over that, then nodded, not in total comprehension or acceptance, but as if he were tucking it away for later consideration. "Maybe she hadn't ever encountered anything like this since being a kid, and maybe she didn't have the slightest clue how the hell to handle any of this."

"Maybe," Clark said, stepping closer, very close to Lex now, "she only found out about...stuff...kind of recently, and it was taking a while to get her head around it, and by then she'd already told her first lie and didn't know how to go back and undo it."

"Exactly," Lex said, breathing the word out. "Maybe it's been years since she had anyone she could even imagine trusting, and she just doesn't know how. Yet."

"Maybe she's only trusted two people her whole entire life, then," Clark ducked his head, looked away like a liar then met Lex's eyes again, honesty like a beacon. "Maybe she had to trust someone else, and they could be trusted, but...they kind of weirded out on her for a while and it scared the living daylights out of her."

"Maybe she's scared shitless that when...people...learn the truth about her, she won't see them for dust because they'll leave her so fast."

"Maybe she shouldn't be afraid of any of that stuff," Clark said, a breath away from Lex.

Lex leaned forward, less than a breath away, breaths mingling as words passed from one of them into the other. "Maybe she should learn that you don't have to lie to keep secrets. Silence works even better."

"Lex," Clark said, and ran the tips of his fingers along the sleek column of Lex's neck, where the top buttons of the amethyst shirt were undone to reveal freckle-dappled skin, "are you going to keep digging?"

"There are some things I need to know, Clark," Lex said, pointedly running his right hand across his scalp. "Anything that turns up alongside that is...irrelevant. Something to be ignored."

"Like finding out about Helen and your dad?"

"Some lies are told out of friendship—"

"And necessity."

"And fear, or habit, or—"

"To protect people."

"She lied to me, Clark, but I'm becoming a real connoisseur of lying. She wasn't lying out of friendship or self-preservation or anything else justifiable. She was lying for her own sake, and it didn't matter that it betrayed me."

"You don't know that."

"I didn't expect you to defend a liar, Clark."

"Sometimes lying's the last resort. Sometimes it's the only decent thing left."

"Compared to what?"

"Compared to putting an unbearable burden of secrecy on someone," Clark said, his hand sliding down Lex's chest to his waist, then across, fingers brushing against Lex's palm. "Compared to putting more temptation in front of them than they could resist."

Lex was very still under Clark's touch, under Clark's words. "Compared to revealing things that hurt too much to relive?"

"Yes," Clark said, closing his hand gently around Lex's.

Lex stared at him, barely blinking, trying to read the tiniest nuance. "Compared to being judged badly for something they didn't intend?"

"Definitely," Clark said, rubbing his thumb across Lex's palm.

And this was the crux. "Compared to doing something they know most people would think is wrong, but it's the only way to survive?"

Clark took a deep breath. "It's easy to pass judgment when you don't have to walk in another man's shoes. But when you've walked in his shoes..."

"You won't pass judgment?"

"I'll..." Clark looked down, hiding himself from Lex's view for a moment. "I won't say I won't yell about it."

Familiar ground, but traversed by



a totally unfamiliar path. "And I won't yell...about other things."

"Just—be careful."

"She won't—"

"I'm not worried about what she'll do."

For a moment, the fire flared, the legendary temper that went with the hair Lex had lost so many years ago. And then it was gone, even more suddenly than it had flared, doused when Clark slid his arm around Lex's waist, a warm, reassuringly loose embrace, freedom no more than a motion away, should he want it. "All right, Clark. I won't go too far."

"Even though you think she's another Victoria?"

"Well, she hasn't slept with my dad yet, and she hates her dad more than I hate mine, so she's not working for her father. But—yeah. Maybe."

Harking back to an old discussion, an old dispute, an old disagreement. "Not all relationships are about love?"

Lex raised their linked hands. "Friendships are."

"I have to tell you something, Lex. I don't know how things are done in Metropolis," Clark whispered, leaning forward till his lips were almost brushing Lex's ear, "but in Smallville, buddies don't go around holding other buddies' hands."

Lex said nothing, just smiled a little, and turned his head so that his forehead rested against Clark's, just for a few seconds before he pulled slowly away. "I still have to..."

"Find out, yeah, I get that. Okay, so I don't, but I know it's...it's just you." A bright, insightful gaze pinned Lex, giving him another glimpse of who Clark really was under his mild-mannered exterior. "But Lex?"

"Hmmm?"

"After you find out?"

"Mmm?"

"Maybe we can try figuring out if *some* relationships are about love."

With a gesture borrowed from a gracious Venetian count he had once admired, a gesture so wonderfully out of place and absurdly romantic that it invited a little bit of laughter, Lex took their joined hands and kissed the back of Clark's hand. "I look forward to it," he said, very nearly shocked by how true that was.

"Then as soon as you know what's going on, we'll try figuring it out. Unless—" Clark stopped, obviously confused. "What if you find out she wasn't lying, it was more... she just wasn't telling the truth? Will you still be looking for more than two months, Lex?"

Lex stared down at their linked hands, pressed his lips to Clark's skin again, darting his tongue out to taste, then lingered, paying attention. Chalk, and soap and skin. And promise.

Lex straightened up, met Clark's gaze steadily, with a degree of honesty and openness that would horrify his father

and might well terrify Lex tomorrow. "Not with her," he said.

"Good," Clark said.

Then they stood there, holding hands, staring at each other because neither of them had ever done anything like this before. Neither, Lex thought, had the slightest clue how to continue or end a moment like this.

Until Clark blushed, and laughed, and Lex grinned, and tugged his hand free, and Clark started crowing about he'd just thrashed Lex in pool *again*, and Lex got them both water.

Very normal, very routine, apart from the half-shy little smiles they shared between them like secrets.

Clark took all the sunlight with him when he left a little later. Took all the light, period, a familiar, deep gloom settling over Lex as soon as he was alone again. He couldn't quite decide if it was disturbing or exhilarating that he and Clark were more honest to each other with their lies than most people were with their truths.

Secrets and lies, truth or dare, and didn't that just sum up Helen's reaction. He'd raised the truth to her and she'd been outraged, daring him to continue being so unfair.

The problem was, he was used to telling lies, and he was used to being lied to. There were corporate lies and business lies, lies to seal deals and get better deals, lies to lure employees from another company, lies to get rid of employees who'd become liabilities. Lies to cover his ass, lies to lay blame where it belonged even if there was no evidence, lies to protect the truth. There were the lies that had driven him half-insane trying to figure out the truth behind them, since the truth in Smallville could make science fiction look unimaginative. There were the lies he told like reflexes, the lies he needed to tell himself, the lies he wanted to hear because they were better than the truth. Or not knowing. There were the lies he welcomed, because he'd suspected—and now knew—that in an odd way, the lies were for his sake, not his betrayal.

How many lies had he told Clark, and vice versa, in the time they'd known each other? And how many truths, truths that neither of them told anyone else?

Compare those to Helen's lie.

Outright lie, immediate attack, a thrust-and-parry Lex had used his whole life, and had had used on him.

Not the same sort of lie Clark told him, or that he told Clark.

She said he'd given her no chance to explain, but he had. He'd even rolled over and showed her his belly, made himself vulnerable to her by telling her *why* this bothered him, why he needed to know.

And she'd attacked.

And attacked again, in the so-aptly named Talon.

This was something he was used to, and it had thrown him only because Smallville had gotten him out of practice. But those were familiar tactics and familiar lies, just like the ones



with which he was most familiar: I only hurt you, son, because I love you. It only hurts, son, because you're fighting me so. It only hurts, son, because you let your emotions rule you.

He'd very nearly let his emotions rule him on this, too. Which was, perhaps, exactly what his dad had been counting on him to do.

So push emotion aside—no. Hold onto the emotion he had with Clark, the lying truth and the truthful lies they shared, hold on tightly to that, put his emotions there, where it was if not safe, then at least a hell of a lot less dangerous. Emotions aside. Use his mind. No feelings. Logic.

She'd already met his father twice before she told him she'd never met Lionel Luthor with a flawless innocence and honesty he'd believed completely.

She'd looked at those photographs, and despite what she'd said later she, like Clark, hadn't even tried to explain. She, unlike Clark, had immediately attacked him.

And she had twisted the knife in the wound. Belittled him. Hit him on the very places made most vulnerable by his own father. Coincidence? Lucky shots? Insider knowledge?

A hundred thousand dollars would go a long way in Rwanda. He'd looked into what she was doing there, the international aid organizations and volunteer groups she was working with. A hundred thousand dollars would build the hospital they were trying to raise funds for, and the three orphanages they were trying to build and the four they were trying to supply with food. A hundred thousand dollars would even stretch, in Rwanda, to a few schoolrooms with slates and chalk and volunteer teachers. Especially if a hundred thousand of his father's dollars were only the down payment, the balance due on completion of her...job.

Dumping the spoiled, shallow heir to billions of dollars might seem like cosmic justice, or like the ends justifying the means, a very reasonable trade for a hospital and orphanages and schools—if dumping him was what his father had actually paid her to do. He could see where his father wouldn't want him getting too close to someone who had so thoroughly broken free from her own father, and for reasons so close to Lex's attempts. But still, considering some of the people he'd been involved with, considering what he'd done and with whom he'd done it, his father had never done anything so crass, so *déclassé* as to simply, straightforwardly *pay* someone to dump him. Cover up for him, sure. Make evidence and arrests disappear, you bet. Because all of that saved the family name too. But just having someone dump him? For a straight quid pro quo involving *cash*?

When you were a multi-billionaire who already knew everyone had a price, where was the sport in that? Where was the fun, where was the challenge?

His father was up to something, whether Helen knew it or not. Most likely not, judging by the fact that it had taken so little effort to find what she'd done with the hundred thousand

dollars that she'd taken from her bank account—although she'd been careful not to mention the money beyond telling him what his father said it was in payment for. She obviously hadn't expected him to have his people check architects to find out if anyone was drawing up plans for a hospital in Rwanda. From what he'd seen—and he'd seen the copies with Helen's handwritten notes and instructions for changes—Bryce Hospital was going to be an excellent facility, no money wasted on ostentation and plenty of attention given to the specific needs of the region. The special family accommodation rooms were a particularly nice touch, he thought. Good to know that hating your own family didn't necessarily make you forget that some people actually loved theirs. And were loved by them in return.

She had such good motives. Such good intentions. And such blindness to let his father use her so consummately.

At least she wasn't having sex with his dad. That was an improvement. But she was definitely being used, and being paid off to dump him... No. No matter how hard he tried to believe that, that was just too simplistic for his dad. Maybe it was supposed to humiliate him enough or sour him so completely on Smallville that he would return to Metropolis. But with LexCorp growing by leaps and bounds, his father was now actively trying to prevent him from getting anywhere near LuthorCorp. After all, information is power, and he already knew far too much about LuthorCorp for his father's peace of mind.

So why had dad told her he wanted her to dump him? Even if she were lying about that too, it still left his dad up to something, and him in the dark.

And he'd never, ever liked being left alone in the dark.

A hundred thousand dollars. Considering his dad had been willing to let him die rather than spend five minutes talking to someone, that was a hell of a lot of money. And for what? To accomplish what leaving his juvenile record for her to read would do for absolutely free. She'd nearly been put off just by him puking semi-digested alcohol all over her when he'd been in college: there were a dozen things in his juvie jacket that would have her slapping his face and stalking off in righteous contempt. And maybe talking to the district attorney.

But dad had chosen to spend a lot of money, to get her to dump him. Dad had a plan, and dad had been depending on Lex's predictable over-emotionalism. And dad had formulated this plan without knowing that Clark would step up to the plate and...change things. Offer Lex what Lex had been looking for in and from Helen.

That gave him hope for the future and it had to give him a major advantage over his dad.

Rubbing one finger across his lower lip, he sat deep in thought for a few minutes before deciding on a course of action. There were certain...occasional employees



he needed to re-activate, and he started contacting them, beginning the first stage in the shadier side of his campaign to find out what the hell his dad was up to. And for the first time, he felt there was someone peering over his shoulder, not to spy, but to keep him in check, so that the yelling could be kept to a minimum. To keep the lies as few as possible.

There were some lies he could and would tolerate, some lies he could understand, some lies he could even applaud. But woe betide those who lied to him to betray him, to hurt

him, to profit his father. Those people...well, those people were just fish on a line waiting for him to reel them in. Even if they didn't realize it and thought that it was they who had him hooked. Even if they couldn't realize just how wrong they were, just how dangerous it was to fish for sharks, until he gutted them.

He picked up the phone and dialed Helen's cell number, his voice perfect, a flawless combination of restrained hurt and pride-choked need. All the better to reel her in.

P the Princess Lex

JANE MAILANDER

(Being a Bastardization of The Princess Bride by S. Morgenstern, the 'Good Parts' Version edited by William Goldman, adapted by Jane Mailander)

Warning: If you haven't seen the film "The Princess Bride," you won't get most of the jokes in this story. By the way, Princess Buttercup didn't get half the stomping that wimpy bitch deserved.

"Emily honey, Grandma's here to see you!"

"Mom, she's gonna pinch my cheek again."

"Oh, she won't do that!"

"Mom, Grandma *always* pinches my cheek."

"Well, hey! I heard someone had a cold!"

"We're in here, Mom!"

"And how's my favorite granddaughter today? Ooh, chubby cheeks!"

"Mpph!"

"Right, I'll just leave you two alone, I have to get to work. Thanks a million, Mom, you're a lifesaver."

"Quite all right, Cath, we'll have a fine time. Goodbye! ... Well, now, let's see. Ah, reading comic books. Smart girl! Best way to spend the day in bed sick. What are you reading?"

"STRANGERS IN PARADISE."

"Good choice. Two girls who love each other, their friends, their adventures.

I got your mother started on those when she was a girl, too. Now, Emily, have you ever read SUPERMAN?"

"No way, Grandma. Superman's boring. Boys like that stuff—a dumb jock in tights flying around punching planets."

"Well, certainly the way some of those comics are written, they are dull. And Lois Lane's a real ninny in some of those. But there's more to Superman than the tights and the cape, or throwing cars around. Now I have here a Superman story I think you'll like very much. I thought I'd read you some of this, and then you can decide for yourself. Deal?"

"...Deal."

"Very well. Now this version is called 'The Prince Lex.'"

"Does it have friendships and adventures?"

"Does it! Star-crossed love. Beautiful young men. Inseparable friends. Bad guys. Good guys. Bad girls. Good girls. Wicked fathers. Wise mothers. You'll love it, I just know. So let me begin.

"Ahem. Once upon a time..."

Once upon a time, in a small farm town in a faraway land, there lived a young prince whose name was Lex. Now, princes as a rule don't live in small farm towns; they live in cities. But this prince had been sent by his father, the King, to govern this small outpost in his kingdom as a test of the young man's ruling abilities. Or so the King said. Lex privately suspected that he was a thorn in his father's side and that he had been sent away so as not to embarrass the King.

Small farm towns are nice, quiet places to live for the people who are born and raised there—but for a young man used to the noise and activity and dangers of a great city like Metropolis, this town was a dull, terrible, wall-less prison, a place of exile far from the wild parties and boisterous companions to which he had been accustomed. In addition, his governing duties were dull and repetitive and most of the farmers were foul-smelling, which put the prince in an even fouler mood.

The only two pleasures Lex took in his new life were in driving his expensive cars very fast on the roads of the small town, and in tormenting the young man who brought him fresh produce every day from his family's farm. So proud and haughty was Lex that he would not even use the lad's name, but ordered him around thus:

"Farmboy! Fetch me that basket of apples!"

To which the young man would say, as he brought the bushel of fruit to the prince, "As you wish."

Or, on another occasion, Lex would drive up to his home where the young farmer stood with his basket of produce, leap from the vehicle and imperiously order, "Farmboy! Wash and wax my Porsche!"

Again, the lad's reply was the same, as soft and even-voiced as ever, even as he stripped off his flannel shirt and stood

naked to the waist beside the sleek, beautiful automobile, with a hose in one hand and a soapy sponge in the other.

"As you wish."

On still another occasion, while Lex was at fencing practice, he threw a foil in anger and it fell near the lad's feet. Furious at losing a match to his trainer, Lex snapped, "Farmboy, bring that back to me!"

The lad picked up the sword in one hand, walked over to the prince, took his hand with his free hand, and pressed the pommel of the foil into Lex's palm, curling the hand round the hilt with both of his big hands. He smelled of apples, and his eyes were the color of the sky.

"As you wish," he said quietly, and reached a hand up to gently close Lex's mouth before turning and walking out the door of the game room.

No matter what order Lex gave to "Farmboy," or how proudly or coldly he snapped his demands, the young man's reply never varied, never showed anger or resentment. Always, his answer was a quiet, gentle "As you wish."

That steady reply worked on Lex the way sunshine works on a clump of spring snow. And it wasn't long before Lex began to realize that every time this young man said "As you wish," he was really saying "I love you."

And Lex looked at this young man he had treated like a servant for so long out of cruelty and loneliness. He saw how beautiful the lad was, how strong and well-built, how splendid he had looked washing the car, and how blue his eyes had been looking down into his own in the game-room. A great longing built in the prince for the wild games he had played with his cronies in the city. The farmboy loved him. It would be easy.

So the next time the lad came to the prince's estate with his bushel of fresh apples, Lex smiled at him. "Farmboy," he said softly. "Lie with me."

The lad set the apples down and went to Lex. "As you wish," he whispered.

They kissed.

"Eww!"

"What is it?"

"They're kissing!"

"So?"

"Grandma, I hate kissing! They always have kissing scenes in movies!"

"You know, in a few years you might not hate kissing in books and movies so much."

"Gross!"

"Still want me to skip them?"

"Yes!"

"Fine. Let's see, where were we? Kissing, skip that. We don't need this part either. Here we go..."

The next day Lex awaited the farm lad with great eagerness.



He had not slept much that night, thinking of the handsome young man and the joy he had found in those strong arms. The pleasure had been so intense that at one moment Lex had felt as if he were flying. This dull little town now had one thing he thoroughly enjoyed.

But that day another boy came to Lex's estate with the basket of fruits and vegetables from the farm. He also brought a note from the lad, which Lex opened with haste.

My beloved Prince, [the note read] I am off to the city to make my fortune and prove myself your equal. When I have risen to an estate in which you can look into my eyes and see who I truly am—when you can love me as I love you—I will return and become your inseparable companion.

P.S. My name is Clark.

Lex was enraged, but it was too late. The lad was gone to the city, and he himself must stay to work at his father the King's business in this dull little town. There was nothing he could do but stay, so he stayed.

One month later word came from the city that the young man had been crossing a city bridge on foot when he was struck by an automobile which hurled him into the water far below. His body was never recovered.

Lex laughed bitterly when he heard the news. Those days with the farm boy—with Clark—had been the sweetest he had ever known in his dissolute life. A tenderness had stirred within him that he had thought dead and buried with his beloved mother.

The prince knew, then, that the pain he had felt in missing the lad had not been yearning for his sweet body. It had been love. True love. And now it was gone.

Lex hoisted a bottle of expensive imported water and silently toasted the dead boy and his wasted chance. "I," he said, and drained the bottle, "shall never love again." He flung the bottle into the fireplace. Then he called his father and agreed to the marriage the King had arranged with a neighboring King's daughter.

Not long afterwards the prince stood with his lovely betrothed upon the balcony of his estate, flanked by their grimly smiling regal fathers, and addressed the townspeople. "Citizens of Smallville," he proclaimed, "I present to you your future queen, the Princess Victoria!"

"Ayuh," the farmers responded, and wandered away to finish shoveling cow manure and chugging through the spring mud in their filthy tractors. Lex envied them.

Preparations for a grand royal wedding began at once, and took up great amounts of time, money, and icing. Princess Victoria brought in her wedding planner, Nell, who soon filled the best rooms in the palace with yards of fabric, forests of flowers and her own obnoxious, imperious personality. It seemed that if the slightest detail of this wedding were to be left to chance, both kingdoms would collapse.

With only a few days remaining before the nuptials, Lex was

more unhappy than he had ever been in his life. He spent his time avoiding Nell, Victoria, and the palace, driving out and far from that small town, as if trying to drive back the clock or to escape the invisible fences that held him there.

One day he had gone very far and was deep in a clump of woods when his Porsche got a flat tire. Cursing, Lex climbed out to fix it himself. As he was taking the spare out of the trunk, he heard a voice say, "My lord?"

Lex looked and saw three people facing him—a pop-eyed man dressed like a guardsman, a mouse-haired white teenage girl in a pink sweater, and a muscular black teenage boy wearing football shoulder pads and a helmet.

"Forgive us, my lord," the guardsman said politely. "I was driving my kids to their first day at their new school and my car got a flat. I'm walking them to school the rest of the way because it's dangerous here deep in the forest. Can you tell us if we are getting close to Smallville High and the Fighting Crows?"

"Go Crows," the two teens chanted.

"Your sense of direction is badly damaged," Lex said shortly; he was in no temper to be polite, or even cautious. "We are miles from Smallville High—and Smallville itself."

"In that case," the guardsman said, smiling, "no one will hear you call for help."

Lex was hit from behind with a big stick to the back of his bald head. He had never seen anyone sneak up on him. When he found himself wrestling with an armful of air, he realized that he was dealing with a fourth assailant—and this one was invisible.

He'd thrown his invisible attacker right into the pop-eyed man and had kicked the jock in the crotch when the pink-sweatered girl picked him up with one hand and threw him against a tree. The impact stunned him long enough for their leader, the guardsman, to bind him.

When the brown-skinned boy stopped rolling around on the ground and moaning, he changed the Porsche's tire and pinned a note to the passenger seat. The car then appeared to start by itself, turn in the direction of Smallville, and drive away, back to the Prince's stately home—clearly the invisible attacker was at the wheel.

"Girl!" the man barked.

The mousy girl simply picked up Lex and threw him over her pink-sweatered shoulder. The three trudged through the woods down to a small boat anchored at the shore of the lake.

They had rowed a good way out across the lake—or, rather, the football jock and the strong girl had rowed a good way out—when Lex said sharply, "What do you hope to gain? My father the King will refuse any ransom you demand! If you kill me, he'll thank you for removing an embarrassing heir, and then he'll have you executed as a warning to others! If it's money you want, you should have simply robbed



me—it's the same risk of the gallows without putting yourself to the trouble of kidnapping me."

"I don't want money, Your Highness," the pop-eyed man said cheerily. "I'm just acting on my employer's orders. When your father reads the note in your car, it will implicate conspirators from Smallville in your disappearance. This will be all the excuse needed for Metropolis to annex Smallville, if it doesn't cause a war between the two."

War meant profits to so many on so many levels that Lex was kept busy and silent, trying to figure out who would stand to profit most from this scheme. He did not leave out his own father the King as a suspect, nor his less-than-beloved fiancée Princess Victoria from Central City.

"Uh, Phelan," the jock said uneasily. "There's a guy following our boat."

Phelan snorted. "Inconceivable! I made sure we were well out of earshot and away from anyone who could see us."

"But there's the other guy's boat, Phelan," the sweated girl said.

Lex looked, as well as Phelan. There was a small boat following theirs, and gaining.

Only one person in that boat. If Lex overcame that one, the boat was his—

He jumped overboard, bound arms and all, and began to kick his way toward the small boat.

Seconds later he realized his mistake when a shark fin broke the water and headed toward him. Several others followed. The sharks came at Lex, their mouths open—

"Okay, no way, Grandma!"

"What?"

"Sharks? In a lake?"

"Oh. I forgot to mention about the sharks. There's a long passage here in the book, very dull, about the shark eggs that were flushed out of the Metropolis Aquarium by mistake years ago, and got washed into the river and downstream to the lake miles away."

"Metropolis sharks?"

"Very rare. Very nasty. Big sharp teeth. Green eyes that glow in the dark."

"Sharks. Right."

"Anyway, Lex is in the water, the sharks come at him, mouths open, and—"

And Lex was seized by the collar of his purple shirt and yanked back into Phelan's boat by the very strong girl. The sharks' teeth snapped on air and water.

"Idiot prince!" Phelan snapped. To his hench-teens he shouted, "Row faster! There's only one man in that boat! He'll get tired before we do!"

"We?" the boy-jock and the strong girl muttered.

"How many times do I have to tell you little thugs that I am the *brains* of this gang?" Phelan sneered. To the jock he said, "Do you really want to stuff envelopes for the Democrat party for the rest of your life, pretending you were once a great athlete? And you!" This, to the sweated girl. "May I remind you that you're wanted by the law for stalking the homecoming queen and burying her alive? You're lucky you're not in jail! You two are here to do the things you're good at—hitting and fighting and rowing."

They rowed all night across the lake. Rather, the two teens rowed. Phelan skulked. Lex glowered, which was all he could do tied to the anchor.

"Hey, Tina," the boy muttered. "Phelan says we can just fight in the dark."

The girl paused. "He's lucky...we don't toss him to a shark."

The boy grinned, and pulled his oar. "He thinks he's so great, he thinks he's so smart."

The girl smiled and rowed with her own oar. "Phelan the guard is just an old...fart."

Phelan glared at them. "Girl, do you have to rhyme?"

"No, no, just some of the time." Row. Row.

"Stop that rhyming, girl!"

"Look down there! Is that a pearl?"

Phelan squawked. Lex watched with amusement.

By dawn the opposite shore was in sight. And the stranger's boat was still in sight behind them.

"Inconceivable!" spluttered Phelan. "He's keeping up with us!"

"We're almost at the Cliffs of Improbability," the jock said. "He won't be able to follow us up that way."

And indeed there they were, ringing the opposite shore of that lake, looming over everything for nearly 300 feet—the Cliffs of Improbability.

"Isn't Smallville in Kansas?"

"Yes."

"There's no cliffs in—"

"Shh."

The strong girl in the pink sweater carried Lex out of the boat, anchor and all, once the boy had leaped out and pulled the craft into the shallows. A thick rope dangled from the very top of the cliff. With the aid of a specially-made harness, the pink-sweater girl was soon climbing hand over hand up the rope; this would have been a marvelous testimony to her great strength all by itself, and was even more amazing considering that she also carried Phelan, the boy-jock, and the bound Lex (sans anchor) via the harness.

The boy looked down. "Phelan, there he is."

Phelan looked down too. There was the man who'd followed them, and the morning light revealed him as wearing an outfit of vivid blue and red. He had just started climbing up the rope as well.



"Inconceivable!" spluttered Phelan. "Climb faster, girl!"

"I can't climb any faster," said the girl. "And I'm carrying three others as well as myself."

"I asked for faster climbing, not excuses! Do you want me to hire another super-strong teenager in your place? Do you?"

"Dick," the girl muttered, but climbed faster.

At the top of the cliff, Phelan lost no time in cutting the rope and watching it whip out of sight. "That'll stop him!"

Both teens looked down the cliff. "Nope, he's still there," said the lad.

Phelan stared over the edge. There was the man in blue and red, clinging to the rocks, and slowly climbing up by his fingertips. "Inconceivable!" he spluttered.

"You keep using that word," the jock said. "I don't think it means what you think it means."

"Enough!" Phelan turned to the girl. "Pick up the Prince and we'll keep going. You." This, to the jock. "Wait till he comes up here, and kill him."

"Okay." The jock shrugged. "I'll wrestle him, and when I've pinned him, I'll push him off the cliff."

"You don't need to do that!" Phelan blustered. "Just push him off the cliff when he's made his way up here!"

"Okay," said the jock.

Phelan and the girl took off with Prince Lex.

Once they were out of sight, the teen boy looked back down the cliff at the advancing young man in blue and red, who was already nearly at the top. "Hey, man, he says I'm supposed to push you off the cliff."

"I heard," the stranger responded, still making his way up by finger holds. He was a very good, swift climber.

"You know, it's not really fair of me to do that. I'd rather wait till you're up here, and beat you in a fair fight before I kill you. I swear."

"You are the enemy," the stranger said dryly. "You'll forgive me if I'm a little skeptical."

"What if I gave my word as a football player?"

"I've known too many football players."

"Then I swear by the career of my father, William Ross, that I will treat you honorably and kill you only after I've beaten you in a fair fight."

The strange young man looked up the cliff. "What is your name?"

"Pete. Pete Ross."

"Pete. I believe you." With that, the stranger in blue and red finished climbing, and hopped over the edge to stand before the jock.

Pete held up his hand. "Catch your breath first, man."

"Thanks."

They sat amid the rocks overlooking the cliff and eyed each other.

"Catchy outfit," Pete said, indicating the stranger's blue-and-red form-fitting suit and cowed mask. "Looks like a pro-wrestler's costume."

"Thanks."

"I don't suppose you have shoulder-length hair," the jock said.

"Do you start most conversations that way?"

"Sorry, man. But I'm looking to put the hurt on this long-haired guy. Wanted to know if you were him."

The young stranger lifted the cowl to the side, just enough to show his short black hair, and returned it.

"Thanks. See, this long-haired dude evicted my dad from his creamed-corn business years ago. The poor guy was devastated—he had to become a lawyer just to feed our family. I swore I'd avenge the insult to our family, and to my dad's trust in this guy who'd ruined him."

"Your dad went from canning creamed corn to being a lawyer?" the stranger asked. "Wouldn't most people see that as a step up?"

"Not in Smallville, man—Creamed-Corn Capital of the World. That's where people go to make their fortunes in the creamed-corn business—all the other professions are adjuncts to creamed corn. My father was a broken man when the Long-Haired man finished with him. So I've started studying law too, and practicing every legal trick I could learn, so that when I finally find this man, I can look him in the eye and say: Hello. My name is Peter Ross. You ruined my father. Prepare to be sued."

The stranger shuddered involuntarily.

"Right, let's get to it shall we?" Pete said, standing up. "Standard rules, best two falls out of three. You lose, I throw you over the cliff. I lose, it's up to you."

"Fair enough," said the stranger, also rising. "But I should warn you, I'm stronger than I look. Think locomotives."

"Yeah, right," Pete replied, and rushed at the stranger.

The young man in blue and red tapped Pete on the forehead with two fingers. Pete blinked. "Super, man," he muttered. Then he fell, out cold.

The stranger stared over the land and picked up the trail of the kidnappers. "Like I said," he called over his shoulder to the unconscious jock as he began to run, "I'm stronger than I look."

Amid the steep rocks of a hill a mile away, Phelan saw a blur of blue and red on the horizon. "Inconceivable!" he shrieked. "It's up to you, girl. Stay here, and stop him."

The girl set Lex down with a thump. "Should I tie him up and bring him along?"

"No, you idiot! Just kill him! Throw a boulder at him! Throw him at a boulder! Whatever!" Taking hold of Lex's bound arm, Phelan hurried away toward distant Metropolis, leaving the girl there.

"Dick," she muttered, and looked for a good-sized stone.

When the cowed stranger appeared, she threw it at his head as hard as she could. But the stone shattered against



the boulder behind the stranger—he'd stepped aside so quickly it was as if he'd teleported.

"Stop!" she shouted, though she was afraid at what his survival meant about his strength. He'd gotten past Pete. She stood away from the rocks and faced the stranger, hefting another very large stone. "I'm stronger than you think!"

"I'm sure you are, but I'm faster than you think," the stranger called. Next moment he was off like a shot, gone in a blur of blue and red before she could throw the stone.

The girl stood, mouth open and stone still in her hand, watching the blur tear like a speeding bullet after Phelan. "Nice cape," she mused. Then she took off into the wild; Phelan clearly wasn't going to survive long enough to pay her.

When the stranger caught up to Phelan, the guardsman had stopped running and shouting "Inconceivable!" He was seated amid the jutting boulders at the edge of a long sloping hill that plunged into a dark forest at the bottom. The bound and blindfolded Lex sat beside Phelan, and the guardsman held a long wickedly-sharp dagger at the prince's throat. "By all means, come closer," Phelan said politely, and dug the dagger tip in; a tiny trickle of blood oozed down Lex's neck. "You'll only wind up killing the Prince that much faster."

The stranger stood still. His hands moved rapidly.

Phelan laughed. "A mute, are you? I'd be a poor watchman if I couldn't read silent hand signs. 'What do you want,' you say? What I want, blue boy, is for you to stand off and let me go to Metropolis unimpeded with my cargo."

More hand signs.

Phelan threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You're going to take him away from me? You may have out-wrestled my moronically honorable jock, or overcome my super-strong girl, but I have the advantage right now. Come a step closer and I slit his throat."

Sign sign sign. The stranger folded his arms.

"Then kill him now."

For the first time since his captivity, Prince Lex smiled a very little bit. He knew that the stranger had called Phelan's bluff.

Phelan snorted. "True. We're needed in Metropolis, and it'll be harder going if I carry a dead bloody man on my shoulders. But I can certainly wound him. Suppose I cut off one of his ears, or put out his eyes?" The knife hovered beneath an earlobe.

More signing.

"Money?" Phelan snorted in contempt.

"Forget it," Lex said bitterly. "I already tried buying him off, and I'm richer than you'll ever be."

"Shut up," Phelan snapped to his captive.

More signing by the blue-and-red stranger.

Phelan likewise rejected the stranger's suggestions of a poison-drinking contest, a quick round of Yahtzee or Rock-Paper-Scissors.

"Sorry, hero. Looks like you've been out-thought," Phelan said cheerily. "I hold all the cards. You forgot the most basic premises of warfare. The first is never to get into a land-war in Asia, and the other is to hold the high ground. I hold the high ground and you don't. As long as I don't care what state my captive is in when I get him to Metropolis, I win."

In rage and frustration, the stranger punched the rock wall beside him and stalked away, back the way he'd come.

Phelan smiled at the retreating back. Without a sound, still holding Lex by one bound arm, he hefted the knife in his hand and drew it back to skewer the stranger between his shoulder blades.

That was when the rock wall cracked and split at the site where the stranger had struck it. A boulder-sized slab toppled and fell. Lex was completely untouched save for the wind of the stone's descent, but all that remained of Phelan was a red smear seeping beneath the rock.

The stranger turned and walked back without a word, even as Lex ripped the blindfold off his eyes. Bending down to retrieve the dagger from the limp hand protruding from the boulder, the Prince glared at the cowed blue-and-red man as he cut his own wrist bonds. "Before I thank you for rescuing me, I'd prefer to know your own ulterior motives, or your part in this scheme."

"Only to return you to your beloved betrothed, Your Highness," the stranger said in a cold, sharp voice, and started back toward the cliffs.

Lex quickly caught up with the striding young man in blue and red. "The Princess Victoria is hardly beloved to me. This will be a convenient and appropriate political marriage, nothing more. Who paid you to save me? Was it Victoria? My father? It seems unlikely."

"I came on my own, Your Highness, as a loyal subject of Smallville doing my duty to my Prince. Nothing more, as you say." The young man's voice was still hard and cold. "The sooner the joyful day of your loveless wedding approaches, the better for our kingdoms."

Lex wouldn't stand for that, not after the pain he'd felt for months. "Listen, *boy*," he sneered. "I have known love that made my heart soar. That love is dead and gone now, and so is my heart."

"Such pretty, poetic words. How long did you wait to pledge the Princess' troth, Highness?" The angry young cowed figure strode along the hill's steep edge, red cape fluttering behind him. "Was it the very hour you lost that love, or did you wait a whole week out of respect for the dead?"

Lex's temper snapped, and with that he shoved his insolent rescuer hard, down the hill. "Go to hell!" he shouted.

Down tumbled the blue and red figure, down the steep hill to the dark forest below. A voice wafted up—soft and gentle, not hard and cold. Familiar.

"Aaaass...youuuu...wiiiiishhh..."

That voice, that familiar voice! The farm boy—Clark—
“Clark!” Lex shouted, in a very different tone.

Only one thing to do, insane and drastic as it was. The Prince flung himself down the hill, after the tumbling figure.

The rocks weren’t confined to the hilltops, unfortunately. Lex was more bruised and bloodied by the time he reached the bottom of the hill than he’d been by the entire kidnapping ordeal. His physical pain was the last thing on his mind.

When he opened his eyes Clark was gazing down at him. He’d pushed the cowl off his head, and his sky-blue eyes and ruddy cheeks were the same ones Lex had dreamed of with grief these past empty months. His breath still smelled of apples. He smiled.

“Clark,” Lex whispered, one hand going up to stroke a beautiful cheek. “They said you were dead. You’d been hit by a car and you went into the river. They never found your body. I was in despair. I let my father arrange the marriage to Victoria. My true love was dead.”

Clark smiled. “I’m stronger than I look,” he said softly. “But true love is stronger than I am.”

They kissed.

“Eew!”

“Oh right, right, you don’t want the kissing parts. Let’s see, ah—”

“How did you survive the crash?” Lex asked, sitting up to brush bits of weed and stone chips out of his clothes and torn skin.

Clark was already on his feet; he didn’t seem to have taken much damage from the fall. “I was crossing the bridge over the Metropolis River when some maniac in a Porsche swerved right at me. He had a cellphone in his hand—I noticed that. He hit me and knocked me right into the water, along with his car. But I’m stronger than I look. I survived the encounter. So did the man in the Porsche.” Clark reached a hand and all but lifted Lex to his feet. “I dragged him out of the car and to the shore, where he coughed up a good portion of the river, three Xanax, and the cell phone. He moaned and tossed his head and muttered, ‘Kill the farm boy.’”

“Did he have long hair?” Lex asked. He wasn’t really surprised, only full of cold anger.

“Shoulder-length. And a beard.”

“And did you see the royal coat of arms on the Porsche door?”

“Now that you mention it...”

The Xanax only confirmed the Prince’s suspicions. “It was the King. My father.”

“Yes.”

Who’d wanted this embarrassingly emotional obstacle to an expedient political marriage stricken from the picture in a way that would not cause his son to object. “So you disappeared before he regained consciousness, and you hid your identity.”

“Exactly.” Clark smiled his beautiful smile again. The bold blue and red colors of his suit looked good on him.

Lex smiled—truly smiled, for the first time since he’d received Clark’s note. “My father can go hang, Clark. If you can defeat a very strong girl, an honorable wrestler and a corrupt guardsman, I think you can face the King unmasked while I let him know that I have made my choice. He will have to settle for negotiation if he wants Central City under his thumb as well as Metropolis. I will not marry Victoria.”

Clark smiled again, and left his cowl down. “In the meantime...” He looked away from the hills, to the dark and threatening woods. “We’d best go back to Smallville by an alternate route. Through the Woods of Weird.”

Lex stared apprehensively into the forbidding forest. “We’ll die if we go home that way. No one survives the Woods of Weird.”

“Oh, pooh! You’re only saying that because no one ever has. I think we should start a trend, don’t you?”

Lex shrugged. They ran into the unwelcoming canopies of tree limbs.

It was dark within the forest, save for occasional flashes of unnatural orange light; the stillness was punctuated by an odd “foom-foom” sound followed by the screams of small rodents.

“This could be a valuable foray,” Clark said. “If we learn exactly what are the perils of the Woods of Weird, we’ll be able to find a way around them and warn others.”

“Legend says there are three perils,” Lex replied. “Each one is deadly.”

Foom! Foom-foom!

“That sound...” Clark mused.

And then the trees before them burst into flames, with a man in their midst dressed in a Smallville High sweatshirt, a baseball cap and wearing a whistle around his neck. “How dare you destroy my *legacy!*” the Fire-Coach roared, his eyes blazing. Flames leaped out at them from the trees.

Lex yanked Clark back from the flames and helped him stomp out the blaze that had caught on his red cape. Taking up a handful of sand from the ground, Lex threw it in the Fire-Coach’s eyes. “Go snuff yourself, coach!” he shouted.

Howling in rage, the Fire-Coach covered his eyes with his forearms and fell back amid the trees. They were in darkness again, with only a few smoldering branches here and there to light their way.

“Right,” Clark said. “Well, that’s one. That strange noise is the sound just before he blazes up. So we’ll be warned next time. That was quick thinking, Your Highness.”

“Well, everyone knows that sand will put out a fire...” Lex paused and looked down.

So did Clark.

“Sand?” they both said, just as they plunged out of sight into the sand-pit they’d been standing on.



The forest was quiet again, save for the crackling of fires and the nearby ominous rumblings of yet another peril. A smoldering tree fell over, one branch poking deep into the sand-pit.

A hand seized the branch and pulled hard, let go and grabbed for a higher hold. Slowly, Clark pulled himself out of the deadly sucking sand-pit, one arm wrapped tight around Lex. They clung to the charred log, coughing out sand and gasping for breath.

"A featureless, expressionless pit that sucks the life out of everything that crosses it," Lex gasped when he could speak once more.

"Reminds me of a girl in my class," Clark said, standing on the log and offering Lex a hand out. "I think I'll call this thing Lana Lang, too."

Together they walked on the log out of the Lanalang Sand and back onto the solid, non-sandy ground of the sullen forest.

Clark was decidedly cheerier as they traversed the gloomy woods. "Well, we're nearly to safety, Lex! We've discovered how to look for the Fire-Coach, and that tree was kind enough to save both of us from the Lanalang Sand."

"What about the T.F.S.C.s?" Lex said.

"The Terrible Fat-Sucking Chicks?" Clark replied. "I don't believe in—"

Just then a Terrible Fat-Sucking Chick pounced on Clark, face contorting like a SCREAM mask. Lex leaped forward to help and was flung aside once again. He was having no impact at all with women of any age.

Frantically Lex rifled his pockets and found some sandy M&Ms, which he threw into the gaping maw even as Clark wrestled with the savage creature. It was no good. Lean and wiry as a giant blonde rat, as cruel and voracious as Melissa Rivers at the Oscars, the fat-vampire tore and worried at Clark's flesh. It was clear that the lipophage was starving, living this close to Smallville and its lean and photogenic young people.

Lex looked around for a stake (or a steak) and heard "Foom. Foom-foom." Instantly he jumped up and waved his arms.

The Fire-Coach blazed into view.

"Look!" Lex shouted, and pointed at the T.F.S.C. "Over there, Coach! It's trying to overthrow your legacy!"

FOOM! The liposuctioning creature went up in flames with a squall.

Lex pulled Clark away and helped put him out once again. Their noses wrinkled at the smell of charbroiled, very lean veal that came from the dead T.F.S.C.

"Well," Clark said, "at least she's now the Size 2 she always wanted to be. Well done, Lex."

"Afraid so," Lex said, eyeing the charred remains with disgust. "I don't think I'll ever eat meat again." He

touched Clark's shoulder with one hand, wincing in disgust at the slobber. "Did she hurt you badly?"

"Not even close. I'm stronger than I look, Lex. More to the point, we're almost out of the forest, and once you're back in the castle we can—"

"We can see you pay for your crimes, kidnapper," a cold voice said from before them.

Clark and Lex looked at the group that had just appeared ahead of them. A pretty, haughty woman sat in the driver's seat of a Ferrari, and Lex's father the King was in the Porsche that had been driven off by the invisible boy. Many other men and women surrounded them, heavily armed.

"This man saved me from the kidnappers," Lex called out at once. "He has been injured saving my life in the Woods of Weird."

The King clapped, slowly, three times. "You have our gratitude, peasant. Your duty is discharged. Lex, return with me to Metropolis."

"Yes, Lex, come back to the castle," Princess Victoria said. "You must be overcome by your terrible ordeal. And our wedding is only a few days away."

"I think not, Your Highness," Lex said. "I have found my true love again, and it is he that I will wed."

"Don't talk nonsense, Lex," said the King. "You will wed the Princess Victoria, and that's that. Don't let some fling with a farm boy cloud your judgment."

"That's quite all right, Your Majesty," said Clark cheerily. "Lex and I have decided that we can stay in the Woods of Weird until this can be resolved."

In the next moment every rifle and gun muzzle was pointed at Clark.

"Or we can resolve this right now, farmboy," the King said, just as cheerily.

"If you promise not to hurt him, Your Majesty, I will go with you," Lex said at once.

"Lex, I'm stronger than I look," Clark muttered. "I don't know if I'm bulletproof or not, but what better way to find out?"

"I won't lose you again, I couldn't bear it," Lex muttered back.

"Hurt him?" The King smiled. "Why, Lex, I only want to question him on his remarkable ability to survive the Woods of Weird. His insight may finally make this corner of my kingdom safe for other people." All the guns and rifles went back to the guardsmen's shoulders as two of the men took hold of Clark.

"Now come with me, Lex darling," Princess Victoria said. "You've had a terrible time of it. I'll run us a hot bath."

The only thing Lex wanted less than a hot bath with Victoria was to be parted from Clark now. But his father held all the cards, once again. Never breaking his gaze with Clark, Lex let himself be herded into the passenger seat of the Ferrari. The



betrothed royal couple drove away, in the direction of the great city Metropolis.

"You lied," Clark said flatly.

"Of course," the King said airily. "Royals do not make promises to peasants."

"One royal has made a promise to one peasant," Clark said. He smiled. "I see you have shoulder-length hair. I know someone who wants to meet you." He yanked his arms free of the guards that held him, ready to dash back into the woods.

Still smiling, the King held up his hand. Emblazoned on one ring was a shiny green stone.

Clark collapsed, sick and weak and frightened. He had never felt this ill before.

"Know thy enemy, goes the saying." The King waved his glowing green-stone ring before the crouching farmboy. "I have studied you well, farmboy. I have learned the one thing that cripples you. Take him along."

Clark lost consciousness as the guards seized him again.

"**G**ramma, how'd the King know about kryptonite?"

"Spies. Informants. Tattletales. Intrigues. Sources. Snitches. Listening devices. Hidden cameras. Turncoats. Hearsay—"

"Okay, okay, *okay* I get it!"

"And I'm just listing the top ten methods used by powerful and ruthless people."

"Eew."

When Clark came to, he was lying on a metal table. He seemed to be alone in what looked like a laboratory of sorts. He was fettered and manacled to the table, and from his sick feeling he knew that the strange power the King held over him in the ring was in this room too. Indeed, there seemed to be a faint green glow from a small open box just over his head and fastened to a support pillar that made him too weak to snap his bonds. The T.F.S.C. hadn't done much damage to him, but she had hurt him, and the immediate presence of that sickly green ring on the King's hand hadn't helped.

Clark heard a thumping sound from behind—the sound of someone descending a flight of stairs. A man approached him. From the man's white lab coat and untidy mop of hair, it was clear that he was a scientist of some kind. "How is my patient today?" the man said, beaming at Clark.

"I've been better," Clark said airily. "I don't know why I'm a patient—I'm not really sick. So if you don't mind I'd like to go now."

"I'm sure you would," the man said. "But the King is very interested in you. I have to make sure you're well before he starts questioning you."

Clark took a deep breath, which hurt under that green light. "And by 'questioning' you mean 'torturing,' don't you?"

"Torturing is for barbarians," the labcoated man snapped, examining Clark's shoulder where the T.F.S.C. had attacked

him. "Our discoveries will benefit the entire kingdom. My special job is to discover everything there is to know about these special green rocks. They may make a very useful weapon if hostiles ever show up here." The man glowered at Clark. "Hostiles, such as a treacherous young man who has seduced a prince away from doing his duty to the kingdom."

"If there was any seducing," Clark said sharply, "we seduced each other. Tell the King that."

"You may tell the King yourself when he appears tonight," the scientist said. "Be honored that His Majesty will grant his presence at such an important time. He is in excellent spirits, by the way." The man gathered up his instruments. "His son will wed the Princess Victoria in two days. The entire kingdom is preparing for a celebration."

Clark closed his eyes as the scientist left him alone once again.

Three days later Prince Lex sat upon his dais and contemplated the dead body laid out before him. This time it was no rumor or hearsay. The proof of Clark's death lay before his eyes. His father and his father's agents, of course. Not that he could ever prove such a thing, or be allowed to spend so much time worrying over a dead troublemaking peasant.

He leaned over Clark's corpse to lay one last kiss on the dead lips, but a hand on his arm stayed him. It was his bride-to-be. "Lex, we'll be late for our wedding if we stay here," Victoria said, not looking at the corpse at her feet.

Lex looked at her, and the last wisp of love he'd ever felt for another human being shriveled and was gone like a single hair in a fire. Yes. It was time for him to do his duty by his kingdom. Wed this cold-hearted schemer and acquire her lands, spend his married life avoiding her poisoners and assassins, and see which of them would survive to ascend the high throne once his father had finally been claimed by the Devil.

Lex looked at Victoria and said,

"**W**ait a minute, Grandma."

"Yes, honey?"

"Um...that isn't right. That isn't in the story."

"It's right there. See?"

"But...but he's not dead. Clark can't die like that. He and Lex should be together, not Lex and that rotten Victoria!"

"Honey, this is what the story says—"

"But these guys don't die! They're comic book guys, they don't die! Clark's having a bad dream! Or, or that creepy scientist gave him a drug to make him think this is happening! Or Lex took the drug!"

"No. None of that happened."

"But Superman doesn't die! Not even when he died in that Doomsday thing!"

"Honey, I know most comic books don't let people stay dead forever. But stories get changed. People tell their



own stories. Even superheroes have died, really died, forever, in official comic books—'Crisis on Alternate Earths,' 'Death in the Family.'"

"I don't care! The story can't end this way! Doesn't Lex even kill the King for doing this? How can he just roll over and do what his father says after this? Why did you even start this story!"

"Sweetheart, I think you're taking this too personally. Maybe I should leave this and read you something else—"

"No, Grandma, keep reading, please!"

"But I'm upsetting you, and you don't like the way this is going—"

"I just wanna hear how it works out. Please, Grandma. I'm calm. Really, I'm okay. I'm okay now. Really."

"Well...all right. If you say so. Let's see. So Lex says to Victoria..."

"Then let us go to the altar, Your Highness."

So they were wed. And as the newlywed royal couple stood at the door of the royal chapel, the citizens of Metropolis, Smallville and Central City cheered, and then bowed to their future monarchs.

But then Lex heard a loud "Boo! Boo!" from the crowd. Startled, he looked over the bowed heads, and saw the one unbowed head—a young blonde woman with a PRESS card around her neck from the Daily Planet.

"Prince Lex Spurns True Love to Wed For True Greed!" the young woman shouted, scribbling away in her notepad. "Bearing of a Prince, Heart of a Snake!"

"Why are you saying this?" Lex asked, angry and bewildered.

"Your Obedient Highness would rather roll over like a lapdog for your father's wishes than follow the path of true love!" the woman called back angrily. "What is the hallmark of true royalty, Your Highness? Is it purple clothing, or a gold headband, or the right to have a troublesome subject put to death? No—the true mark of a royal heart is courage. Courage! Courage to do what is right!" To the people around her she said, "Look at him! Look at her! Such a beautiful-looking couple they make, the Prince and the Princess! And it's as real as the sugar-candy bride and groom atop a wedding cake! He whines and fawns at his father's feet, and kills his heart to gain a kingdom! Boo! Boo!"

The other people straightened up and glared at the shocked Prince. "Boo!" they roared. "Boo! Boooo!"

Lex leaped up with a cry of fear, and found himself sitting up in bed. The wedding was still two days off. It had only been a horrible dream.



"See! I was right, it was a bad dream! I told you so!"

"Do you want me to go home right

now and take the book with me?"

"...no. Go on, Grandma."

Lex was not one to take warning signs lightly. He rose from his bed that very moment and flung on his robes, and marched into the King's chamber.

The King sat up in his bed. So did the Princess Victoria.

Sadly, Lex was not really surprised, and he didn't let the revelation slow him down. "Your Majesty, I will not wed the Princess," he said sharply. "Your Highness, it is Clark I want, and not you. It is Clark I will have as my true love."

"Really, Lex," Victoria snapped, looking indignant (not a bad trick to pull off when one was caught naked in bed with one's fiancé's father by said fiancé). "Listen to reason and logic. We are to be wed."

"Don't be ridiculous, Lex," the King said irritably. "You know this wedding will be an advantageous match."

"Advantageous for you, Your Majesty," Lex said. "All of Central City will be yours, as well as Metropolis and Smallville. I have not been blind to the messages you and the Princess have exchanged. I will no longer pretend that I see nothing."

"But the decorations have been hung, the cake baked, the linens monogrammed," Victoria pouted. "Nell will be furious."

"What—Your Highness is now afraid to inconvenience a few servants? What a change of heart, especially when everyone in Central City knows you don't flinch at beating your dressmaker or your cook!" Lex snapped. "Father, call Clark back from his farm and bring him here. It is he I will wed, and you and Victoria may be hanged together."

The King smiled. "Clark is not on a farm, Lex. After talking to me, he has gone his own way, into the wilderness. He said he didn't want to ruin your special day by showing up and embarrassing you."

Lex smiled also. "More likely Clark has gone to muster an army and bring them back to my side to oppose you. Clark is no ordinary farm boy."

The King lost his smile. "Yes. I know that very well."

Lex felt calm, as if he'd just battled his fencing instructor to victory. "Let the wedding go on as you see fit, Your Majesty. My Clark will return for me. And then, Your Highness, we will see who is embarrassed." He left the chambers.

The King stared after his son. "I always knew that boy would be nothing but trouble," he muttered.

"Lex? Or that dung-shoveling farmer's brat?" Victoria sneered.

"Does it matter?" The King rang a bell.

A tall blond thug appeared and bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty?" A good lackey, the thug saw nothing out of the ordinary in his master's bedchamber.

"Whitney, I've heard rumors that a mercenary army is mustering to attack my son on his wedding day," the King said

to the Captain of the Guard. "No doubt they'll recruit in the Thieves' Forest."

"No one's in there but a few mangy bandits and the hermit Kyle," Whitney said. "Trash, but hardly fighting stock."

"It is a believable source. Draft a brute squad and clear out the forest for a day's journey in every direction from the castle." The King rose from his bed. "I myself will be occupied for a time at my laboratory. Report back to me in 24 hours with an empty forest to show for your work, or it's your jockstrap."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the thug said, and bowed deeply before leaving the chambers.

"I'd best go back to planning my wedding, Your Majesty," Victoria said demurely, also rising from the bed.

"Yes." The King smiled at his paramour and future daughter-in-law. "After all, we want this event to be a fairy tale made real. The peasants will love it. Those commemorative tea-towels and plates were a brilliant idea of yours."

"We're levying a special tax on those items," Victoria said. "Those unwashed idiots will buy anything."

The King stared at the young woman. "If you weren't betrothed to my son," he said, "I'd marry you myself."

Victoria left the room. The King headed out to his laboratory, which looked like an old barn rotting at the edge of the Thieves' Forest.

His lab-man met him there and bowed. "Your Majesty, I have the subject prepared for you. Say the word and we may begin the experimentation."

"Very good, Dr. Hamilton," said the King, and the two descended the storm cellar into the room where Clark lay bound and helpless beneath the cruel green light glowing over his naked body.

"So this is the threat to my son's marriage," the King said amusedly, as Clark's eyes opened, bleary with pain, to stare at the two men. "This brazen kidnapper who can dance through the Woods of Weird but faints at a little, little rock from the sky."

"Your son danced through those woods with me," Clark whispered. "We conquered the unconquerable, together."

"I think we need to learn more about what these rocks do to this saboteur, Dr. Hamilton," the King said, and took up another, larger glowing rock from a box nearby. He smiled at the big-eyed young man on the table. "Does it hurt when I do this?" He touched Clark's forehead with the stone.

Clark screamed and his back arched. His body shook violently under his restraints. Tears flew from his eyes and frothy saliva dribbled from his howling mouth. Blood started at the places where Clark yanked at the iron bands on his wrists and ankles. His heels drummed hard on the metal table.

The King took away the stone and Clark collapsed, sobbing for breath.

"I'd say that's a yes," Dr. Hamilton said, and made some notes on his clipboard. "What do you think, Your Majesty?"

"I don't know, Dr. Hamilton," the King mused, eyeing the shivering, sobbing boy before him. "The hallmark of the true scientific method is repeatability. In other words, will we get the same results every time?"

Dr. Hamilton and the King smiled. "Only one way to find out, Your Majesty," said the scientist.

The King nodded. "At least one more time. Five or ten would get us more scientific results." He turned back to the shaking Clark, and lowered the stone again.

Meanwhile, Whitney and his brute squad were kept busy clearing out the thieves and brigands from the surrounding forest, driving them away or hauling them off to the dungeons for the duration of the royal wedding. But one thief would not leave.

"He's holed up in the hut, Captain," a guardsman said. "Every time someone gets close to him, he throws a pack of legal papers at them. Those things hurt." He rubbed his head.

Whitney curtly signaled his best brute and marched on the hut himself.

In the hut was Pete Ross, furious and ready, throwing legal briefs at all comers. "Habeas Corpus!" he shouted, clocking another goon. "Anti-trust! Restraint of trade! Emotional distress! Come on, Long-Haired Man, I'm ready for you! Bring it on!"

Whitney signaled his thug. "All right, you little punk, you're sleeping in the dungeon ton—"

Whitney was picked up and thrown hard against a rock. He was out like a light.

Pete blinked in the dim light of the hut at the thug who'd just turned on her boss. He gaped. "Tina? That you?"

The strong girl in the pink sweater smiled. "Pete. How d'you do?"

The girl brought Pete up to speed on all that had happened at the castle—including the fact that Lex was to be wed the next day, the castle was surrounded by guards, and that the King was a long-haired man.

"Man, we need that guy—the one in blue and red who iced Phelan and put the smackdown on both of us," Pete said. "If anyone can get through that many guards and help me get my revenge, he can."

"We don't know where we can find the man," Tina said.

"Don't bother me with trivia!" Pete snapped. "I'm within suing distance of the man who canned my dad's factory!"

At the castle, Victoria found Lex in the game room, playing pool. "My husband-to-be," she said with a smile.

"My princess bride," Lex said, with the same smile, and struck a blue ball into a pocket.

"Your farmboy will not return, you know," Victoria said. "He is a kidnapper and a dangerous threat who faces death if he returns anywhere near the castle."

Lex smiled at the red ball, and sent it after the blue ball. "He's stronger than



he looks. And he loves me, as I love him—as I do not love you, nor you love me. My Clark will return to join me.”

Victoria’s smile wavered. “I wouldn’t say such things if I were you, Lex,” she hissed. “We will be wed tomorrow.”

“No such wedding will occur,” Lex said. “Your commemorative royal wedding tea-towels and plates will become valuable collector’s items because they will have commemorated a non-event. Take the money and be happy with it, and with the King’s sexual attentions. I don’t beg for my father’s table scraps any more.”

Victoria turned gray; her pinched lips turned white. She left the room and the double doors banged shut hard behind her.

Lex set down the pool cue and headed to his office. His spies hadn’t located Clark yet, but worry would be pointless now. He unlocked his laptop and sent a few coded messages.

In the laboratory, Dr. Hamilton and the King looked up in surprise as Victoria strode into the room, radiating fury. “What are you doing here, girl!” the King snapped.

Ignoring both men, Victoria bent over the shaking, gasping captive. Clark blinked open eyes running with pain-tears to see her.

“You two, together, would have been happier on your worst day than he and I will ever be on our best day,” Victoria hissed in the boy’s face. “So I think no one will suffer as much as you will!” She snatched up a chunk of the green rock and shoved it into Clark’s gasping mouth.

“No!” Dr. Hamilton and the King shouted together before clapping hands to their ears and staggering back from the table at the scream that radiated from the captive.

Victoria also staggered back, clutching her ears and shaking her head.

Beakers shattered from the sound, spewing green and yellow and red smoke. Engines trembled from the sonic vibrations. Kettles screamed—unheard in the shriek coming from the captive. The walls of the barn shook and bowed, creaking, from the pressure of that noise.

All three fled the barn in different directions, through swaying trees and along with terrified animals dashing away for their lives from the horrifying noise.

The sound roared through the forest. People huddled in their huts, shaking. Guards at the castle gate gripped their weapons anxiously. In the Thieves’ Forest, lowlifes fled the sound, along with members of the brute squad.

Pete and Tina did not. “That’s the guy!” Pete said. “That’s the guy who beat us both! Only he could have a yell of pain strong enough to clear out a forest!”

So Pete and Tina were the only ones to run in the sound of ultimate suffering.

They ran into Dr. Hamilton running the other way. Tina caught the struggling, yelling man. “This is the King’s torturer,” she said. “This must be the one who caused the pain we’re hearing.”

“Lemme go! Lemme go!” Dr

Hamilton screamed, kicking and fighting the strong girl. “Dammit, lemme go!”

“Where is he? Where is the man you’re torturing on the King’s orders?” Pete snarled at Dr. Hamilton.

“Torturing is for barbari—”

Tina shook the man the way a terrier shakes a rat; when she stopped, the man dangled limp from her hand. “We said ‘where is he?’” she growled in his face.

“Clark! Clark! Barn! Barn! Lemme go!” Dr. Hamilton shrieked, hysterical.

Tina shrugged and set Dr. Hamilton down, and the man tore away from them, running fast to get away. (Dr. Hamilton was never seen again. They say he didn’t stop running until he wound up in Champion City, where he met his end at the tines of the Blue Rajah’s fork.)

The shriek stopped just then; the silence was deadly. “Clark,” Pete said. “His name is Clark!”

Pete and Tina followed the trail of flattened grass from panicked animals, back toward the bent trees, and then the broken and fallen trees, until the still-trembling wooden barn came before them. They entered the decrepit structure.

The place was a mess of shattered glass and disrupted machinery, oozing liquids and noxious odors. And in the midst of the carnage, a metal table, and a body lying still upon it, despite the snapped bands that had once held him.

It was Clark. And he was dead.

“He’s dead,” said Tina.

“You’re not kidding,” Pete added, staring sadly at the contorted corpse.

“Well?”

“Well what, Grandma?”

“Aren’t you going to get mad at me for reading you this story, if it’s just going to be about Clark dying like that?”

“It’s not over yet.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. If Lex isn’t gonna give up, I’m not either.”

“Smart kid.”

“He’s dead,” said Tina.

“You’re not kidding,” Pete added, staring sadly at the contorted corpse. “We’d need a miracle to save him now.”

“What about Miracle Maxim?”

Pete winced. “Didn’t the brute squad run him off?”

“We cleared the whole Thieves’ Forest, except for three. There was you. The hermit Kyle kept shaking our hands and telling us he didn’t need to be chased out, and for some reason we believed him and left him alone. And Maxim came out of his house and started talking to us, and most of the brute squad ran away.”

Pete winced again. “I don’t blame you guys. Oh man, do we have to? Miracle Maxim?”

"If anyone can help us, his wife can," Tina replied stoutly. "And to get her help, we have to go to him."

Pete glared at Clark's body as Tina lifted it in her arms. "Clark man, you owe us big time for this."

So off they went, the three of them, to a little farm located between the forest and Smallville. Over the kitchen doorway was the motto: LIVE SIMPLY THAT OTHERS MAY SIMPLY LIVE.

"Oh God, this is gonna hurt," Pete whimpered. But he knocked at the door.

"Abandon hope all ye who enter here!" a voice boomed from inside.

"Miracle Maxim?" Tina called. "Aren't you the farmer who's been enemies of the King since he took over Smallville?"

"To remind someone of past injuries is to re-open the wound!" the man shouted angrily. "Guests are best viewed as they leave! Suffer not the King! Heavy lies the head that wears the crown!"

"I'm outta here," Pete whispered.

Tina collared him as he tried to flee. "Miracle Maxim," she called again, "We have an innocent here who needs a miracle from you and your wife! He is a victim of the King's mischief!"

"Fool me once, shame on you! Fool me twice, shame on me!" Maxim bellowed from within.

"This isn't a trick!" Tina called. "This man can't even hurt you, he's dead!"

The door opened a crack, and a farmer in his late forties peered at Clark's body. "Dead men tell no tales," he observed. "There's always someone worse off than you."

Pete pinched his lips and whimpered. But he managed to whimper out, "This guy...this guy got the King mad. The King did this to him. If you could help us out here..."

Miracle Maxim's eyebrows rose as Pete mentioned the King. "To have the ear of a King is to be a King," he said suspiciously.

"Oh for God's sake, let them in, you big hick!" a woman's voice snapped from behind Maxim.

Maxim winced and turned to face his wife as she came to the door. He was momentarily silenced by her, and Pete liked the woman already.

The Witch was a pretty woman, also in her mid-forties, and she pursed her lips as she appraised the visitors. "You say the King killed this poor young man?"

"We need a miracle desperately," Pete said to her. "I know he's dead, but—"

"I've seen worse, bring him in," the Witch said.

Maxim stared uncomprehending at his wife.

The Witch said, slowly and clearly as if to an imbecile, "Mi casa es su casa."

Maxim nodded, still frowning a little. But he let Pete and Tina in with their burden.

"Just plop him on the kitchen table, I'll be right back," said the Witch, and disappeared.

Maxim glared at Clark's body. "Trust requires a lifetime to gain and needs but a moment to be lost," he muttered.

"Look, man," Pete said to Maxim. "This guy—his name's Clark—Clark really needs a miracle. He *deserves* a miracle. He's—he's a good guy, loves widows and orphans, saves nuns and cute fuzzy animals from danger..."

"The more you shovel it, the higher it piles," Maxim retorted, glaring at Pete.

"Dude, I need this miracle!" Pete snapped, losing his temper. "If Clark stays dead, we can't storm the castle tonight, we can't call off the royal wedding, the King gets control of Central City—"

Maxim stared at Pete. "Get me to the church on time?" he asked, pointing to Clark.

"We ruin the wedding," Pete prompted, seeing what he had to say. "The King loses his grip on his son. The King loses Princess Victoria's lands. Humiliations galore."

The change in the farmer was astounding. Maxim beamed from ear to ear. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend!" he boomed, giving Pete a hard whack on the back.

The Witch came back, her arms piled high with different colors and types of cloth. "Right, let's get to business."

"Your sorceress' robes for your magic?" Pete asked.

"Of course not," the Witch snapped, shaking out her armload—a red flannel shirt, patched blue jeans, socks, underwear, some worn boots. "The poor boy shouldn't wake up naked. He's about your size, dear."

Maxim smiled. "Clothes make the man," he said predictably.

Rolling his eyes, Pete helped the Witch dress Clark's body. Even in flannel and denim, red and blue looked good on him.

Only when the body was dressed did the Witch pull out what looked like a spotty, small apple. "Make him take a bite of this," the Witch said to Pete. "It's organic."

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away," Miracle Maxim said inevitably. Pete bit his lip.

The Witch held the apple, and Pete worked Clark's jaw to make the dead man take a bite. There was something...reversed...about a witch using a special apple to bring a hero back to life.

Crunch.

Clark's eyes blinked open. He turned green. Then he turned his head and vomited on the table. Out came the chunk of apple—and the poison-green rock. "Gugggh," Clark said, coughing hard.

The Witch smiled. "All our produce has that effect on people," she said proudly. "It's so bad, even the dead throw up when they eat it."

"Great," Pete said weakly, his own stomach a bit queasy.

Clark lay back down, still coughing



weakly. He blinked and stared up at the people looking down on him. "Bluh," he said.

"It's always darkest before the dawn," Miracle Maxim said.

Clark blinked and stared at Maxim.

"If you've got your health, you've got everything." Miracle Maxim beamed and thumped Clark's shoulder.

"Uh...Darmok and Gilard at Tenagra?" Clark ventured.

"Close enough," Pete said. Tina pulled Clark off the table.

"Thanks for the help, sorry about the table, we got a royal wedding to stop and a King to destroy."

"At least stay for dinner, we're making apple pies," the Witch said.

Seconds later there was only a dust cloud to show where the visitors had been, and the kitchen door swung lazily on the one unbroken hinge.

"Bye, you three," the Witch called after them cheerily. "Wear a sweater, the castle's cold."

"Luck is when preparation meets opportunity!" boomed Miracle Maxim.

"Do you think they can do it?" the Witch muttered to her husband.

"Close only counts in horseshoes," Miracle Maxim replied *sotto voce* before getting out his toolkit to fix the door.

Lex stared at Victoria. For one of the few times in his life, he was poleaxed.

"Tonight?"

"Midnight," the Princess said. "It will be the next day, technically, and there will be less chance of interference from the King's enemies."

"It's for the best, Lex," the King said.

"Shouldn't you investigate whatever made that horrible screech in the Thieves' Forest an hour ago?" Lex added, trying to sound casual.

"It is investigated, Lex," the King said, and smiled. "It seems your farm boy found out about your wedding. The grief was too much for his heart to take. His cry of pain as his heart broke flattened everything within a mile. I must say, he was an extraordinary lad—I'm only sorry I couldn't learn more from him before he died."

Lex stared at both the King and Victoria. "You're lying," he said. "You wouldn't move the date of the wedding up if you thought he was no threat to the proceedings."

"Oh, he's not a threat any more, Lex," Victoria said calmly. "And when we're wed, you won't be a threat either. Not even you would be stupid and ambitious enough to destabilize our kingdoms at such a crucial moment."

"You don't want your future subjects to think that you'd turn on your own beloved bride out of rage at the death of your—paramour,"

the King added, smiling. "They'd question your ability to rule them without letting your heart interfere with your duty."

No. No. This was his father talking, and his faithless fiancée. His ruthless father, who had had Clark surrounded the last time he'd seen him in the Woods of Weird. That cry in the woods had mirrored the sound in his heart when he'd thought Clark dead once before. He would tolerate much from these two, but the one thing he would not tolerate was the death of hope. Clark would come for him, just as he'd climbed the Cliffs of Improbability, defeated powerful henchmen and outwitted the vile Phelan, and walked safely through the Woods of Weird with the Prince. Clark was stronger than he looked.

Be strong, and wait for the opportunity.

Lex sagged, a little bit. "Midnight."

"You've little time to prepare, love," Victoria said. "I'll run us a hot bath."

"And I have to see that all preparations around the castle are finalized," the King added, and left the betrothed pair.

Once outside, he called to Whitney. "Double the guard around the castle."

"Your Majesty, we already have fifty men stationed around the perimeter," the henchman replied.

"Then make it a hundred, dolt! I will have nothing interfere with this wedding!" thundered the King, cuffing Whitney for his insolence. "The forest is clear?"

Whitney remembered confronting the last holdout in the Thieves' Forest, a harmless lunatic with a briefcase full of papers, and nothing after that. "It is clear, Your Majesty."

In the meantime the last holdout from the Thieves' Forest, the last member of the brute squad, and the last person the King wanted to think about were heading toward the castle at a fast clip—or as fast as two people could head somewhere while carrying a limp torture victim. Clark was back from the dead, but he'd felt better. Tina had no problem carrying Clark, but threatened to kill him again if he asked "Are we there yet?" one more time.

Just outside the castle wall, they hid behind a turret. It was nearly midnight. Torches and heavily armed guardsmen filled the courtyard.

Pete stared over the wall at the opposition, his arms full of his weapons. "There's at least thirty guys on that door. Should we pick another way to get in?"

Clark stared all around the castle. "The other doors and windows are heavily guarded, too. This is the best entry, and the closest to the chapel." He froze. "I can hear the ceremony starting! We have no more time to lose!"

"I can take on fifteen of the guards by myself," Tina said. "Can you get the other fifteen?"

"I could take on one of them. Maybe," Pete said sourly. "Clark?"

"I could take them all on—in the morning. But I need sunlight to regain my strength. We don't have that time." Clark stared at the guards grimly. "We need a distraction of some kind. Something terrifying, like a horrible thing from the Woods of Weird, or a big fire, or—"

Foom. Foom-foom.

"Or both of them at once. Hey!" Clark shouted, exultant at his amazingly good luck. "Hey, Coach!"

The Fire-Coach, who'd stumbled out of the Woods of Weird to finish off the interlopers who'd escaped his wrath and had ended up at the castle gate just at that very moment, turned to glare at Clark.

"Those guys! All those guys!" Clark waved at the startled armed guards who'd heard his voice and were looking around, drawing their weapons. "They're trying to destroy your legacy!"

The Fire-Coach glared at Clark. "Do you think I'll fall for that stupid trick AGAIN!!" he roared, and flames shot up all around him, melting down the iron gates, cracking the nearby stone walls, and terrifying the guards into fleeing right and left.

"My mistake. Thanks!" Clark called as the three invaders leaped the wall and headed for the doors.

Only one guard stood between the three of them and the door. Whitney glared at the invaders. "You won't stop this wedding! Not if I have to die for it!"

"We're not here to stop the wedding," Pete said. "We've brought a wedding gift for the royal couple from some grateful Smallville farmers. Here, have one." He pulled an apple out of his backpack and held it out.

"Oh, thank you!" Whitney gratefully took the fruit and took a big bite. He turned green, then white, then tore away from the door in the direction of the outhouses.

Pete grinned. "The Witch let me take some apples with me. I figured they'd come in handy."

"You bastard," Tina said admiringly, and kicked the doors in.

Meanwhile in the royal chapel, everyone could hear, if muffled, the screams of the guards, the roar of fire, and the deep BOOM of the main doors opening wide. The few royal guests able to appear on short notice for the hasty wedding looked around and muttered nervously. Victoria, completely oblivious to the showing she made in her original-design wedding gown, kept looking behind her at the chapel doors in the direction of the noise. The King and Victoria's father didn't look behind them, but their knuckles whitened as they gripped the pew fronts.

Lex alone seemed to listen intently as the bishop, flanked by a squad of altar boys, droned the wedding homily with all the enthusiasm of a high school principal announcing the cafeteria menu over the intercom. "Clark is coming, Your Highness," he muttered to the agitated Victoria. "Your plans, and the King's plans, are ashes."

"You're lying!" Victoria snapped. The Bishop stopped and glared at both of them, as if he wanted to issue detention to both. "Clark is dead and gone!"

"Why is my father upset, then?" Lex murmured. "He only

gets this furious when one of his schemes is about to be destroyed."

More screams from outside. Pounding feet, heading toward the chapel door.

The King stood up. "Bishop, pronounce them married, now!" he shouted. "Now, or it's your head!"

"I hereby pronounce you man and wife, the mass is ended go in peace, let's get the hell outta here!" The Bishop took off for the apse of the chapel, followed by the squad of shrieking altar boys.

Victoria stood up, beaming from ear to ear. "I am Princess of Central City, Smallville and Metropolis!" she announced to the stunned congregation and the grinning King. To the four guards at the back door she commanded, "Go in my name and kill the invaders!"

"Your Highness!" they chorused, and left through the door in the back.

To the four guards flanking the wedding party the King commanded, "Take the royal couple to safety at once!"

"Your Majesty!" they chorused, and hustled the newlyweds out through a side door in the chapel and down a little-used corridor.

He didn't come Lex thought, stunned at the speed of change.

The King headed out the chapel doors after the four guards—and all five came face to face with the assailants.

Pete stared, in the forefront, ahead of Tina carrying Clark. His briefcase was out, and seconds later all four guards were struck down by the unerring flight of four perfectly served subpoenas.

Pete now faced the King alone. "Hello," he said softly to the petrified monarch. "My name is Peter Ross. You ruined my father. Prepare to be sued."

The King stared at Pete for a long moment. Then he turned and fled down a corridor.

"No!" Pete shouted, and tore after the king.

"Pete!" Clark called after the obsessed legal eagle, and shook his head in despair.

"He came here for revenge, not for true love," Tina said, stepping over the subpoenaed guards. "You came here to stop a royal wedding from subverting the course of true love."

Clark nodded from Tina's arms, and focused his eyes on the walls of the castle, looking for the silhouette he knew above all others. "There! I see them! That way!"

Tina took off down that corridor.

The King dashed into the main banquet hall, and his eyes fell on the covered dishes laid out for the wedding guests. He opened one silver tureen and smiled.

So that when Pete Ross charged into the room after him, the King flung a ladleful of creamed corn that hit Pete in the face.

With a cry of pain, Pete dropped his briefcase and slumped against the wall, gasping for air and clawing at the



yellow mess on his face. His legal papers scattered everywhere, useless.

"Oh, I get it! it's like yellow kryptonite!"

"Exactly, hon. Just as Clark's old home planet is now fatal to him, creamed corn is Pete Ross' one great vulnerability."

...**E**verywhere, useless.

"So!" the King gloated as his adversary sank to the ground, trying to wipe the creamed corn from his face. "You were that little brat who threw cow pies at me while I made your father sign the papers to give me his farm! Do you mean to say that you spent all this time studying law in order to wreak your revenge—only to be stopped by a handful of mashed vegetables? I don't think I've ever seen anything so sad in my life." The King advanced on the whimpering Pete, one hand reaching to his side. "There's only one thing I can do in a case like this." Up came the King's hand, holding a cell phone bearing the royal seal. "And that's to acquire your law firm and have you disbarred."

Pete gasped for breath, blinking the creamed corn out of his eyes to see the King approaching him. The King who had stolen so much from so many and was so high above the law that he considered himself to be the law. Feebly he groped around him on the floor. His fingers found a paper, then two, then three.

And as the King bent down to watch Pete succumb, Pete threw the papers at the King. The King yelped and staggered back, clutching at the massive paper cut across his face.

That cry, and that wound, gave Pete strength. He had touched the untouchable! He hoisted himself upright, and groped for another paper. It was a lunch menu for a Chinese restaurant near his father's law office, made of cheap paper with very sharp edges. He flung it at the retreating King, and it cut across the back of the monarch's hand. The royal cell phone dropped to the ground.

"Hello, my name is Peter Ross, you ruined my father, prepare to be sued!" Pete called, and stood upright, scorning the creamed corn dripping down his Armani.

The King backed away, clutching his paper wounds.

So this was how you battled a paper tiger! Pete advanced, growing stronger and angrier as he grabbed more papers. The King ducked behind the banquet table to re-arm himself, but Pete kicked over the tureen of creamed corn. The besieged King was reduced to flinging nut cups and individual tomato aspics at his pursuer, while documents rained down hard and fast in a blitzkrieg of legalese.

"Hello my name is Peter Ross you ruined my father prepare to be sued!" Pete roared triumphantly and frisbee'd a writ of habeas corpus that gashed the King's cheek.

"Stop saying that!" the King roared back, finally backed up against the wall.

Pete was a hideous sight—plastered in dripping red and yellow blotches and peppered with fancy salted almonds. But his briefcase was shining leather, untouched by the King's attack, and papers still boiled out of it.

Scornfully, Pete flicked one hand at the King, and a ghastly combination of creamed corn and tomato aspic gel spattered his custom-made morning coat. "Say you'll settle out of court, Your Majesty," he retorted. "Promise me you'll agree to a reasonable recompense for the loss of my family business!"

"Yes, I promise. Yes, anything!" the King babbled.

"Ask me for my terms! Promise me whatever I ask for recompense!" Pete shouted, and flung another handful of aspic-corn goo at the King's suit. "Any reasonable repayment!"

"Anything! I will give you whatever you wish!" bleated the King.

A second later the King shrieked with pain as the full weight of the lawsuit struck him in the chest. The folder was as thick as two cinder blocks and weighed about the same. He collapsed to the floor.

"I want my family farm restored, you son of a bitch," Pete said quietly. "So do every one of these other twenty people who are suing you simultaneously." And staggered, finally feeling the full effect of the creamed corn. He sank to his knees, opposite the gasping monarch.

"You're hurt too, ambulance chaser," snarled the King, glaring with hatred at the weary attorney. "Don't you know I'll destroy you?"

Pete laughed painfully. "Do your worst, Your Majesty. Call in a phalanx of your best attorneys. Ruin me financially for generations to come. Buy us all off, if you can. Have me arrested for Driving While Black.

"It doesn't matter, because the publicity from this trial will make your stock drop like a paralyzed falcon, and your name will be a joke on the lips of every investor for months—long enough for your securities to bottom out. Once the money starts drying up, your employees will leave for greener pastures if you don't let them go first. You might want to start learning a marketable skill, like selling apples."

"My allies will—" The King froze. He went stone-faced, but not before a look of horror had appeared in a flash.

Pete laughed hard, through his tears of triumph. "Your Majesty—*what* allies? Who will stay at your side when your money is gone? You'll be very, very lucky if your own *son* merely disavows and exiles you before assuming the throne."

Just then the door burst open and in came a troop of soldiers bristling with armor, their swords out and flashing. "Your Majesty!" the troop-leader called. "I serve the King!"

"It's about time you showed up, you fools! I order you to kill him!" the King roared, pointing a finger at Pete.

Pete held up his legal briefs. "He's poor now," he said to the guards, pointing to the King.

"Sorry, wrong room," the troop-leader said, and the guards left. "Where's the bald one?" The door clanged shut.

Pete grinned at the stunned monarch. "The King is dead," he whispered, and sank to the floor toward a well-deserved faint. "Long live the King."

Father, you may conduct law in peace from now on. You are avenged.

The guards hustled the royal couple down the corridor to the deepest, best-guarded, most impregnable portion of the castle.

Lex's mind worked fast. He could go along with this sham marriage as long as was needed, until he could summon his resources and go find Clark. He would endure anything thrown at him by his father and his...his wife until the moment he could join his true love and become undefeatable. His people would flock to his side and join him against Victoria when the time was right. Even now he could see Clark standing at his side, eyes shining, saying "You are married, Lex. It wouldn't be right."

Lex froze, and stumbled a little.

"Careful, Your Highness," a guard said beside Lex, and offered a hand.

Lex shook his head and took back his stride. But the blow to his own heart had finally cleaved what hope remained in his breast.

Clark would be as bitterly heartbroken as Lex—but he would not approach the Prince and Princess now that they were wed. His duty was to the now-conjoined empire of Central City and Metropolis, just as Lex's was. Any course of action he took from here—an affair, a cunningly-executed spousal murder, one-sided annulment, combat—could cause a war between Metropolis and Smallville. And Clark would despise Lex for it.

It was over.

"Here, Your Highnesses," the guard said.

The labyrinth of tunnels had ended at this small iron door and the small room within. Windowless, boasting only the one door, deep below the ground and inaccessible save through a labyrinth of tunnels, it was surely the safest, most impregnable, most inescapable prison in the kingdom.

"We're safe now, Lex," Victoria said sweetly, and took his hand. "Why, you're steady as a rock and cool as a cucumber."

Cold as a corpse, Lex mentally corrected his wife. Duty and Intrigue were locked hard around his wrists and ankles, and the chain pulled at his very heart.

The guards, after inspecting the room, ushered in the heirs. The room, constructed of massive stone and mortar and wired with spotty fluorescent light, was as cheerless as Lex himself felt inside. It was a war room, clearly; a big oval table stood at the center, surrounded by chairs and microphones. A red telephone stood by the chair embossed with the Royal Seal;

a small lead box rested on the table before the head chair as well. Dark screens formed a perfect circle around the room, meant no doubt to display updates on battles or disasters. A few cots lined the far wall between a small kitchenette and a small bathroom.

Victoria pouted. "This is a terrible honeymoon suite," she whined.

Lex looked around at the trappings of raw, cold, loveless power. This was a perfect room to symbolize this wedding.

"I'll stay here on guard with Their Highnesses," the head guard said, and shook hands with the other three guards. "Stay outside and set up the checkpoints." The other three agreed and filed out of the room.

"I'll run us a hot bath, Lex," Victoria said, and entered the bathroom. Seconds later she flounced back out, fuming. "Bloody hell, it's only a shower stall!" she snapped.

Lex smiled for the first time in days. "You may have the first shower, my bride." The smile left his face the instant she was back in the bathroom.

"Would you like me to fix you and the Princess something to eat, Your Highness?" the guard asked. "It's a poor substitute for a wedding feast, but I can make soup or sandwiches."

"Not unless there's a strong poison you can add to my soup," Lex said stonily. "It seems to be the only way out of my prison now."

"Why would you say such a thing, Your Highness?" asked the guard. "You are safe, not in a prison."

Lex laughed. "I am at the center of a labyrinth, guarded at four junctures, and impregnable by all but those who can pass through and open the one door. And I am wed to Princess Victoria."

The guard scratched his chin. "Your Highness, I helped stand guard at the back of the chapel during the ceremony. His Majesty the King ordered the bishop to pronounce you wed, which he did without obtaining consent of both parties."

Lex stared at the guardsman. "He did!"

"In that case, Your Highness, you are not truly wed yet. Marriage still requires the consent of both parties before it is considered legal and binding, whether one follows the laws of God or of man." The guard shrugged elaborately. "You and the Princess are not married."

Lex was so stunned with relief that the sound of the wall being smashed open did not register at first. The dust and noise filled the room and quickly caught the Prince's attention, as well as that of the instantly alert guard and the shrieking Victoria.

The wall had been broken open from the outside, near the negotiation table. A figure emerged from the smoking hole. It was Clark. He smiled at Lex from the breach. "Your Highness," he said softly.

It was like having all his blood returned to his heart all at once. Lex



couldn't take the grin off his face now if his father were in the room. "Hold," he called as the guard ran forward, sword drawn, "this is a friend." He himself stepped forward, beaming. "Clark."

But Clark looked behind Lex. "Princess!"

It was Victoria, out of the shower, naked and furious, her face contorted with rage. She stood by the royal chair at the table, the lead box in her hands. "Farmboy!" she shouted. "How many times do I have to kill you!" She flung open the box and dashed the contents at Clark—a large glowing green rock, bigger than all the other stones put together.

Lex stared in horror at the sickly green stone, only able to watch as it sped toward his true love.

Clark caught the rock with one hand and grinned.

Victoria stared at Clark, her eyes white-ringed with rage. "That rock should kill you, you bastard!" she screamed. "Do I have to cram it down your throat again?" She lunged forward, her hands out and shaped like claws.

Clark pitched the rock right at Victoria, beaming her in the forehead. Down she went, out cold.

"Hold!" Lex shouted, physically stopping the guard from going after Clark.

"Your Highness, please put that stone back in the box," Clark said. "It's very poisonous to Clark." And with that, Clark wavered and melted and changed shape to appear as...the strong teen girl who'd helped kidnap him.

Lex blinked. It seemed she was a shape shifter as well as being very strong.

"Clark is here behind me," the teen girl said. "We both thought Her Highness might try this kind of attack if she saw him coming." She bent down to pick up someone lying behind her.

Lex nodded, dazed. He fumbled the stone back into the lead box and handed it to his guard. "If the Princess tries to get that box from you," he said, "you have my permission to kill her." Then he stepped toward the breach in the wall, where a weary, pained Clark smiled at him from the girl's arms. "These corridors are tangled like a knot," he said softly. "How did you get through them?"

"The same way Alexander the Great solved the Gordian Knot," Clark said. "Did you think that a few corridors would stop me when both of us have walked through the Woods of Weird and lived to tell the tale?"

And then he and the Prince Lex were in each other's arms.

Both the guard and the girl looked away for a long time and pretended not to hear anything for the same amount of time.

"I'm not married," Lex whispered, his forehead pressed to Clark's. "I can be with you, with the only one I truly love."

"If the Princess contests the legality of the marriage," Clark

replied, "I know a good lawyer who'd be happy to assist you. Even now he is subpoena-ing your father."

"Bastards!"

Everyone looked over at the enraged Victoria, once again conscious, upright, and enraged. In a flash she darted forward, and snatched out the sword Lex had worn as part of his wedding outfit. Now she was looking at Lex, face contorted with hatred, the blade pointed straight at his heart.

"If I can't kill your *whore*, dear husband," she spat, "I'll kill you! I will rule with or without you! My word will be law! Your father the King will see to that!"

Tina strode between Lex and Victoria, Clark glaring at her from the teen's arms. He was far from the sun, far from the strength that would have kept him safe from the blade that was now as fatal to him as to any other man. But he could die to save his love's life.

They were not alone. The guard stood between Victoria and her targets as well, and his sword was out. But it was not pointed at the Princess. It was held to her, hilt-first. The guard knelt. "Your Highness, accept my sword in your defense," he said, "and take me as your vassal from this day forward, to defend you against all your enemies." He bowed his head and extended his right hand to her. "Or should I say—Your Majesty."

Betrayed, Lex thought numbly, remembering the small kindnesses of the guard. Proved false. No doubt the man thought he'd be under better protection or be better rewarded as one of Victoria's minions than as a royal guard.

Victoria beamed. "Two swords against none. Guardsman, you will be richly rewarded for your loyalty to me when I am Queen." She reached a hand down to his, to accept his quick oath of fealty.

The guard took her hand in his, looked up and smiled. "Princess, you and Lex are not truly married," he said. "Lex is the true ruler of his kingdom."

"Lex and I are not truly married," she said sweetly, eyes slightly unfocused. "Lex is the true ruler of his kingdom."

"The King is your true love, and the source of all your power," the guard said. "Go to the King and join him. Your fates belong together, the King and you."

"I will join the King," Victoria agreed happily, eyes vacant. "The source of all my power. Our fates belong together."

"Take the other three guards with you. The crisis is past," said the guard. He let go of the Princess' hand.

Victoria walked past everyone in the small room, still smiling vacantly. "The crisis is past. I must join my true love and the source of all my power," she said prettily, and walked out of the door. "I will call off the guards."

The guard stood, and with the stupefied Lex, Clark, and Tina, watched the Princess walk down the labyrinthine corridor to the first stunned guard on watch. "I should have told her to put some clothes on first," the guard said ruefully.

"What is this?" Lex demanded, flabbergasted rather than angry.

"Forgive me for the ruse, Your Highness," the guard said. "But it seemed the only way to get the Princess to touch my hand. I am Kyle, better known as the hermit Kyle of the Thieves Forest. I have a—gift."

Tina nodded, shifted to look like Clark, and shifted back. "So do I."

Lex looked at his allies, looked back down the corridor. "She and the King will team up once again."

"When Pete is done, the King won't have two pennies to rub together," said Clark. "No money and soon no power. How long will Victoria stay with him then?"

Lex smiled and found he couldn't stop smiling. "Once I have ordered my father exiled, she can join him if she likes. She won't try to make war on me as long as I have enough proof of her treachery with the King to turn Central City against her." He took Clark from Tina's arms. "Then you are quite right, Clark. The crisis is past. I am unmarried, the kingdom is mine, my enemies are deposed, and I am free to be with my true love." He laughed, and his voice had a catch to it. "And not an hour ago, I was sure that I would die of grief."

"Nonsense, Your Highness," Clark said, eyes shining. "You're stronger than you look."

The four proceeded down the deserted corridors and back to the main part of the castle. Outside the doorway of the banquet hall they found a weary, blotched Pete still trying to clean up the creamed corn spilled on him. "Super, man," he said when he saw Clark and Lex together. "Your Highness, your father just threw some silverware into a bag, shredded some documents, hotwired a royal Porsche, and took off for parts unknown. I think I'm safe in saying—Your Majesty."

Lex smiled, and it wasn't a nice smile. "He won't get far. I was able at least to contact some of my own operatives. He'll be stopped at whatever border he uses and detained as a conspirator and a threat to the throne." He looked at the lawyer and at Tina. "For the service you have done me today, you both have a royal pardon for your parts in my kidnapping. Take a commission in the guards, girl, and teach my men a few things about combat."

"Great!" Pete said. But a frown crossed his face. "I've spent so

much time building my case against the King. Now he's out the door, I have no idea what I'll do."

"I do. The Royal Steward of Agriculture," the Prince said. "A man well-versed in both creamed corn and law is just the one to fairly arbitrate land disputes and to mete land out to wronged farmers."

Pete beamed.

Rumors spread faster than light. By the time Lex and Clark reached the royal chambers, every member of the kingdom present for the wedding knew what had happened, and the roars of "Long Live the King! Long live the King!" preceded them as Lex stepped out onto the balcony to greet his subjects, still holding Clark in his arms.

The rising sun touched Clark's face, and he stood, strong and beautiful and alive once again.

"My people!" King Alexander called, and they fell silent. "I choose my royal consort from among your own humble ranks, to be one of you in my royal presence! I present to you—the Prince Clark!"

The roars doubled in volume. "Long live the King! Long live the Prince!"

Lex beamed up at the tall, beautiful young man at his side. "Farmboy," he said softly. "My love. My true love. Kiss me."

Clark smiled like the rising sun himself. "As you wish," he said, just as softly.

"The End."

"Oh, Grandma."

"Well, what do you think of Superman now?"

"It's...it's great. Thank you."

"My pleasure, honey. And now, it looks as though your mom will be back from work any minute, so I'd best get home and feed the cats. You know how Flash and Adam get when their food's late."

"Yeah, really. ...Um, Grandma?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Could you...could you come back next Tuesday night and read me the story again?"

Grandma smiled at Emily. "As you wish," she said, and closed the bedroom door.

Lightning Crash

M. FAE GLASGOW

The rain slicked his skin like kisses, wet and warm, sliding over him, running down the back of his neck like a lover's finger, while the threat of the looming thunderstorm crackled through him, making him even harder.

He could feel his pulse, in his wrists, in his throat, in his cock, the heady excitement of life driving through him. Ironic, that he'd driven through Clark and that's what had brought him life. Rebirth. Born Again. Far from Christian, but born again, and just as unsteady on this narrow path as any newborn would be.

Which was why he was standing in the middle of the Kansas night, with rain pouring down him and lightning thrusting over the horizon. He hauled his jacket off, tugged the soft pima knit of his shirt off over his head, threw his arms out and his head back, and just stood there, letting the rain pelt him, shower-warm, summer-warm, smelling of ozone and farms and birth. The breeze, kicked up by the encroaching storm, blew across his chest, dancing heavy raindrops against his nipples, souging linen slacks against his cock.

He loved being hard. Loved the power of it, loved the pleasure of it, loved the fecund solitude of standing here, hard and male—just *being*. Alive. So very alive.

He brought his hand forward, undoing the waistband button, a little clumsy because his left hand was pinching his nipples and he couldn't spare it just to undo his trousers. But then the button was open, the zipper down, and his left

hand darted into the gap, his cock filling his hand, the pulse, pulse, pulse so hot, so perfect, the heartbeat of life.

Glorious. This was—

He threw his head back, raising his face to the night sky, the warm rain, the distant storm, and laughed, this moment sheer exhilaration, his first taste of joy in too many years.

He was alive.

For whatever reason, or simply because there was neither reason nor plan, only random chaos, he was alive.

Thanks to Clark.

Who was...

His hand tightened on his cock, stroking himself lovingly.

Clark was inspirational.

Clark was life, and life was sex and this moment—

He was on the grounds of his father's damned megalomaniacal castle, behind walls ridiculously high and a security system that made state-of-the-art look obsolete. No staff, by happenstance and overdue vacation time, till 7 AM. No one for acre upon acre. Just himself, his hand and his cock and his skin, licked by wet rain, slicked by warm moisture, while he thought about Clark, and sex, and life.

He kicked off his loafers, bare toes curling into the grass, then peeled off the clinging trousers. It was almost as electrifying as the storm on the horizon, to stand here naked, in the dark wildness of a summer's night, rain sheeting down, wind gathering strength, lightning illuminating him like the best strobes at the most underground of clubs. He stood, legs spread, balls pulling up in tight anticipation against his body, right hand stroking them, left hand—stronger hand, powerful hand, the hand the ancient Greeks believed led straight to the heart—stroking and squeezing his cock.

The next gust of wind was briefly colder and he shivered, his back rippling, muscles bunching and relaxing, then moving smoothly as he moved his arms. This was—

He laughed at himself, at his own pedestrian, predictable need for this primal display, this atavistic connection between himself and the elements, sex and life and thunder and rain.

Life and sex and Clark, inextricably intertwined, vine on a tree, but not choking, no, simply coiling all around until the tree couldn't stand without the vine to hold its weight and the vine couldn't survive without the tree to climb.

Oh, their friendship was going to be the stuff of legends. He'd always been Alexander, and finally—about fucking time—he'd found his Hephaestion.

Both hands on his cock now, slick with rain and pre-come, and he held his fists in a tight tunnel, holding them steady, the muscles in his arms quivering with the tightness of the grip and the fight to stay still, to hold still, to give himself something tight and hard and hot and wet to fuck. Like Clark's mouth. Clark's ass. Clark on his knees, facing him, mouth proffered in tribute, or kneeling away from him, ass offered in supplication. But either, both, meant Clark wanted him, was

ready for him, was his shield and his sword and the protector of his back, safe haven and warm hearth, savior and saved.

And then he stopped, shocked, while the storm raged and the rain poured down.

This...

This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Yes, Clark at his side, Clark there to urge him on, to help him do great things, to protect him. But to feel this...

This...

He threw his head back again, eyes screwed shut, mouth fallen open, as if a scream or a shout or a raging protest wanted to burst from him.

This was...

Tenderness.

Love.

The desire to be Hephaestion to Clark's Alexander.

That was...

That was...

He could hear his father tell him what that was.

But—

But his father would never stand here, like this, naked to the elements, one with the night and the rain and the storm, bare feet getting muddy on the rain-soaked grass.

His father... Lionel Luthor would stifle this, would destroy Clark as a weakness.

Unlike Alexander. Unlike Alexander the Great, or the not-great-yet.

Lex opened his eyes to the night sky where the clouds covered the stars and the moon, but a little moonlight filtered through, a gentle glow overhead, trailing against the violent, spectacular flash and burn of the storm spreading nearer. The rain made him blink, and tasted even better than his Ty Nant, softer and warmer and with just a hint of the life it would bring to the land.

Rebirth. He had been reborn, begun again.

Lionel would destroy Clark.

Lex...Lex would *create* Clark.

Give Clark everything Clark didn't even know he needed to grow and expand and be greater than anyone else could even imagine. Convince and cajole Clark into being the great man he could be, with Lex at his side. All that power, unleashed; all that goodness, brought to bear. It was...a new beginning. A dream worth having, a plan worth fulfilling.

Together, side by side, the two of them.

Lex stroked his cock again, bringing himself back fully erect, and thought about Clark, doing this. Thought about kissing Clark, and about saying certain words out loud.

Thought about secrets, and trust, and what he already knew—far more than Clark suspected, far more than Jonathan Clark wanted him to ever know, far less than Lex wanted to know, but enough.

For now.

Thought about his own secrets, the ones that brought shame and regret, and the ones he never looked at because they'd always made him feel too much of a freak and those latter secrets...who else but Clark could he ever confess such things to? Those particular secrets...those wouldn't bother Clark at all. His own little stash of relatively shame-free, secrets that were lesser than Clark's secrets, secrets that wouldn't—just this once—make him the only freak.

Shield mate and sword bearer, savior and saved: they could be both to each other.

And wouldn't that just take the world by a storm?

A far bigger storm than this one crashing around him tonight.

He stroked his cock lovingly, the rain as soft as Clark's tongue would be, his wet fists as hot and tight as Clark's mouth would be, and oh, to be inside Clark, to thrust—

Shield mate and sword bearer, together. A new life, a new beginning.

With Clark, secrets and all.

Lex braced his legs more firmly, leaned back, let the rain fall on his face and into his mouth like kisses while he stroked his cock with liquid warmth and strength, his pulse thundering, the storm approaching.

All that power, around him, within him, waiting for him in Clark.

Clark's hands, Clark's mouth, Clark's ass, on him, around him—in him, Clark—

He came, whiteness mingling with the rain, his semen poured on the ground like an offering, a potent ritual even older than his namesake. Trembling from the breeze blowing a steady chill across his naked skin, and from the aftershocks of pleasure still rippling through him, Lex stood for a moment, watching the life-giving rain water where he'd spilled his seed. And he smiled.

He knew which path he was going to take; knew who would walk beside him. Had time and inclination and enough power to plan where that path would lead them—and the world. His own lust for power, his own ruthless streak, ameliorated by Clark's corn-fed decency: it was the best possible revenge upon his father. Become what his father had demanded, but not become *who* his father had wanted him to be.

Leaving his sodden clothes sprawled on the grass, Lex turned towards his castle where he had left lights burning like beacons, and planned exactly what he was going to say when he called Clark.

Behind him, lightning crashed, and the parched earth drank in the rain and the seed he had sowed on the ground, and life began again.



Dressage

M. FAE GLASGOW

Little rills of laughter still ran under his skin, making his mouth twitch in barely suppressed smiles. The horse and rider were both fine, so the initial fear and panic had evaporated; the horse had been checked, unsaddled, rubbed down, pampered, and otherwise safely settled in the lush green paddock round the back of the barn to rest, while the rider...

The rider was alternating between giving Clark "I'll kill you later" looks and the other looks, familiar and fun and indecently incandescent, hot little looks that lingered like caresses, part of their game. A dangerous game, perhaps, if played by other people, but this was them, and this was theirs, angles and planes rounded into something oddly comfortable, reassuring. This was what they did, this minuet of flirtation and fire, banked embers stoked into occasional flare-ups designed to warn, not burn.

There were days when Clark wondered if he was the only person left unburned by Lex's fire. If he was the only person left untouched when Lex Luthor wanted, when Lex Luthor desired.

But untouched he was, because this was what they did: they played with fire, and Lex allowed Clark to warm himself on Lex's passion, and Clark allowed Lex to hope. So Clark led Lex from the paddock, into the barn, where there was a primitive sink tucked into the far corner, a place where Lex could wash up a little after the...mishap.

Still smiling, Clark turned around and nearly laughed outright again at Lex

standing there besmeared with mud and grass. And then Lex wiped the smirk from Clark's face simply by looking at him. That look. The one that always made Clark feel naked and displayed and splayed, open and ready for Lex.

Until his body reacted to the heat of Lex's stare, and he blushed, as he always did, and Lex smirked, as he always did, and backed off, leaving Clark both aroused and protected, tempted but safe. This time, though...still blushing, he gave Lex back look for look, playing their eternal game, but upping the ante with a look and a smile and the tip of his tongue wetting his own lips.

Oh yeah, he won *that* round! Lex was standing there, mouth half-open, whatever Lex had planned on saying lying temporarily forgotten on the tip of his tongue.

Feeling really quite smug—Lex usually rang rings around him in their little game—Clark dug around until he found the hand soap and the towel. And then he stood still and turned around, very slowly, as he heard Lex's voice, plum velvet and raw silk, the supple shock of it nearly winning Lex the entire game.

"Undress me," Lex said. "I dare you."

Clark hoped he was wearing his most innocent expression because right now, that was about the only innocence he had available. "Sure, Lex," he said, and yep, he'd done it—he sounded as perky as Chloe and as clueless as Lana! Not bad, for a guy who'd spent four hours on the internet last night—with his bedroom door closed, and locked, and his parents at the town hall meeting. "Don't see why you can't do it yourself," he went on, crossing the barn in three easy strides. "I mean," he risked a look at Lex's face, figured he could get away with it and got down on his knees, turning his face up towards Lex, making sure his eyes were wide and guileless, scoring points right left and center, "it's not as if you'd get your riding pants dirty."

Which gave him the perfect—the absolutely *perfect*—excuse to look innocently at the mud splattered from the top of Lex's head to the toes of Lex's once-polished boots. And hell, Lex was so muddy, he could even get away with having a good look at Lex's crotch—which was a real pleasure, considering Lex was wearing white polo pants that were now brown with mud. Wet mud. Clinging mud. And Clark didn't even have to use his x-ray vision to know that Lex was circumcised.

Down boy, he told himself, lowering his head, hiding his face, cursing himself for being too obvious. Lex's hand flickered into view for a second, but nope, he'd gotten away with it: Lex was stepping back, turning slightly aside, subtly trying to cover up the fact that his dick was at least half-hard, a real chubby pushing against the wet polo pants.

And the innocent farmboy wins again! Clark thought, hiding his smile behind his blushes.

"Hey, Lex, I can't get all this off you if you keep moving away," he said,

staying down on his knees, looking up at Lex—and sure, it was purest, purest, *purest* coincidence that this left his eyes at Lex's crotch level. "C'mere, let me—"

He'd made the mistake of raising his eyes above crotch level. Lex looked... well, he looked...

Flick of a switch and it was the same old urbane Lex, a cool smile, cooler eyes, totally bored sophisticate stuck in a hick barn. Only Lex's left hand came up and smoothed across his scalp, and the tendons in Lex's neck were tight.

And yeah, before the mask had fallen in place, Lex had looked...miserable.

Which made no sense at all. "Lex?" he asked, not sure what the question needed to be to get any sort of answer from Lex.

"I'm a mess," Lex said, with the weirdest twist to his smile, as if Lex had just been talking to that old bastard, Lionel. "And I don't have a change of clothes here, so I'll just head back to the mansion and get changed there."

Then all he could see was the gorgeous flex and rise of Lex's ass in those white polo pants, polo pants that were still fairly clean because Lex had landed face first in the newly ploughed field. Then—oh, there was a God! Lex wiped his hands on the back of his pants, muddy, damp streaks molding the pants to those tight muscles, and the movement of those long-fingered hands pulled the pants really, really, really tight and man oh man, there were no underwear lines marring the smooth, expensive polo pants, so it hadn't been his imagination that he'd been able to see—

Yeah, he'd seen Lex half-hard, but he'd also seen—

Damnit, why did sex objects have to insist on being real people? "Lex," he called, getting to his feet, hurrying—within normal human limits—towards the man who was his friend as well as the object of his desires.

"Clark."

He couldn't quite bring himself to take hold of Lex's arm: there was a distance, suddenly, an invisible bubble of Do Not Touch around Lex. Shit. His fault, too. Lex had been fine, a bit pissed, a lot amused, when Clark had nearly killed himself apologizing for startling Lex's horse into throwing him. But this...this wasn't teasing, this wasn't playing the innocent, this wasn't fun at all.

This was scary, because this took their usual flirting and eye-fucks and teasing and made it something...real.

Once more, with feeling.

Shit.

How the hell was he supposed to deal with a Luthor with feelings? Lex was the sophisticated one, Lex was the one who'd started the whole prick-teasing routine, Lex was the one who could go out and get laid any day of the week, Lex was— Lex, Clark realized to his shame, was supposed to stay in his nice little shiny box until Clark wanted to take him out and play with him like a toy.

Lex was the one who kept it a nice, safe game, a place Clark

could thrust and parry without ever having to follow through or...or...

Lex had stopped waiting for him to speak, and had started walking again. One hand—still mud streaked—raised in a typical gesture, a casual farewell, Lex's voice the usual dryly amused grown-up tone Clark mostly only heard when Lex was talking to him about his crush on Lana. Back to normal: Lex was putting this back to the way it had always been, action replay, total rewind, aim the magic remote control and undo a bit of real life like a TV show, and just...go back to the way it was.

Only—

Clark was used to making Lex react. This wasn't even close to the first time he'd seen Lex get half-hard around him. It was part of the game, part of the tease, part of the flirtation. But Lex hadn't been kidding when he'd said, "undress me, I dare you." That had been...

That had been an invitation. That had been *real*.

That had been Lex, putting it all on the line and he'd— He'd pulled the innocent farmboy routine, which would look like—which would feel like—

Clark swallowed hard. He'd been so scared—terrified—of Lex rejecting him—No. That wasn't true, or at least, not all of the truth. He'd been afraid of that, yeah, who wasn't, but... but he'd been scared pissless that he wouldn't measure up for Lex. Lex had had innumerable lovers, sophisticated, experienced; every last one of them would have known everything in the Kama Sutra and Joy of Sex combined or they'd have trained courtesans or be just plain fantastic and skilled in bed. But what Lex had done in before he'd turned to walk away... He'd never been able to start even thinking that this playing might be a rehearsal for the real thing.

And he didn't have half the ego Lex did—nor half the abandonment and acceptance issues that Lex did.

Lex had run his hand over his scalp, and turned, and walked away. Lex, who never left a battlefield without saving face, was just...walking away, without even looking at Clark. No smirk, no condescendingly raised eyebrow, no witty little dig, nothing. Just—walking away.

In riding boots, over rough terrain, with a good three miles to the mansion. Had Lex even realized he didn't have a cell phone on him? That he'd have to walk home, in *public*, where anyone might see him?

Because Lex wasn't heading for the paddock where they'd put Bucephalus to rest rather than ride him too soon. Because Lex wasn't heading to the house, where there was a phone he could borrow. Lex, Alexander Joseph Luthor, was heading out across muddy fields and open land, on foot, his face and clothes covered in mud. And he didn't seem to give a damn.

Oh shit.

Yeah, Lex had given him the familiar dismissive wave and farewell, but—

Weirdly honest as only Lex was: I'm a mess, Lex had said, and if he paid attention, Clark could see that. After all this time of playing around, Lex had taken the chance and he...well, he'd flat-out rejected Lex—God, it was worse than that. Clark knew just how good he was at playing the total innocent: not only could he easily convince his parents, but far more impressively, he could even fool Chloe and Pete. He hadn't just rejected Lex, he'd convinced Lex that the offer had sailed right over his head—which it had, but it wasn't Lex's fault it sometimes took Clark a second to shift gear—and he'd convinced Lex that Lex was wrong about the game, that Lex was wrong about Clark flirting and teasing back. He'd convinced Lex that Lex was a fool, and that, *that* was something from which there was no coming back.

Well, not if he didn't try to persuade Lex.

He knew exactly how to persuade Lex. Even though finally doing it, finally being that naked, that exposed, brought a lump of fear to his throat—and a surge of excitement down his spine and into his cock.

He didn't need to use all that much of his speed to catch up, but he was faster than he should've been, and when he took Lex's arm to stop him, he used more strength than he ought, Lex scything a sharp look over his shoulder at him. The show of strength wasn't much, really, just a little gift, a sort-of apology, and a little bit more of his strength was enough to turn a stubborn Lex towards him. Lex's eyes widened, then narrowed, and Clark smiled as he saw comprehension dawning, as Lex realized just exactly what Clark was giving here, just exactly what Clark was revealing about himself. And just exactly what that revealed about Lex's place in Clark's personal pantheon. Not that anything about Lex was ever that simple. Lex was still looking at him, thinking way too hard to be persuaded yet.

"C'mon, Lex," Clark said, heading Lex back to the house. "Even my dad wouldn't let you walk home like that, not after being thrown."

"I'm fine—"

"Anyway, what about Bucephalus?"

"I'll send the horsebox for him—I'll pay for his stay in your paddock and any feed he goes through, of course—"

Oh, that was just—that was just so *Lex*. Try to do something for the guy and he throws money in your face. "Lex, can it. You're not your dad, people *will* do things just for you, not your money—if you'll let them."

"And what am I letting you do now, Clark?"

He probably deserved that hard stare, and the suspicion in the tight set of Lex's mouth. "You're letting me—" Jeez, how the hell was he supposed to say this? "You're letting me have a redo. I messed up in the barn—"

So that's what Lex Luthor looked like when he was genuinely shocked.

"—and now you're letting me fix that. So—"



“Clark—”

The front door banged shut behind them, and Lex’s riding boots were loud on the wooden stairs, and Lex was getting a bit breathless from all that trying to pull his arm free of Clark’s grip.

And maybe Clark hurried a bit more than he meant to because they were standing in the middle of the upstairs bathroom, Lex looking around in a combination of horror, fear and total incomprehension—of course, that could just be in reaction to the cow-themed decor.

“So say it again.”

Lex stopped looking around, and looked at Clark instead.

“We’re doing this over,” Clark said. “So say it again.”

“It would help if you told me—”

“Don’t,” Clark said, taking the single step needed to cross the bathroom. “I’m sorry I messed up, but I thought we were still playing.” He touched Lex’s hand, fingertips to fingertips, then more, holding Lex’s hand tightly, probably too tightly, but it had just hit him that this was it, they were going to—he was going to—

Lex swallowed audibly. “Clark, your parents—”

“It’s the first Sunday of the month, Lex.”

Lex looked at him.

“The monthly farmer’s meeting and potluck. They won’t be back for hours. If Mr. Short heard from the finance guys and the insurance people, they won’t be back till tonight.”

Lex just kept right on looking at him.

“Please,” Clark said, and he’d never expected to hear his own voice as soft and breathy as a Hollywood romance movie and if he weren’t so damned nervous, he’d be embarrassed as hell. “I didn’t get it when you said it, but I figured it out. Say it again, Lex.”

And for a very long moment, Lex simply stared at him, cool and calm and distant, deeply thoughtful, until Clark thought that maybe he’d really missed his chance, maybe he’d really, really, really messed this up, maybe Lex wouldn’t...

“You’re pretty strong,” Lex said.

Clark’s heart thumped too hard, fear kicking him. He’d let Lex see—feel—a bit of his strength, but this was so close to telling, to spilling the secret, saying it out loud to the person who mattered most. This was—

Trust.

He couldn’t hint about meteors and mutations and Chloe’s Wall of Weird. If he lied to Lex now, even by omission...

Oh shit.

If Lex was going to trust him with...with whatever those feelings he was hiding were, then Lex was going to demand an equal and reciprocal trust. A deal. A balance. Quid pro quo. An exchange of goods for services.

It was so fucking Luthor, it was sick.
But it was also Lex.
Who was putting that bubble of

distance around him again, who was looking like he was a nanosecond from just walking away.

“Yes,” Clark said, a harsh croak of a word, and then he stood there, waiting, because ‘pretty strong’ didn’t even begin to cover it, and Lex was Lex, Lex would press the advantage, Lex would get more than ‘pretty strong’ out of him, but it was only fair: how many truths did he owe Lex for all the lies? More than the truths Lex owed him for the lies Lex had told.

And instead, Lex smiled at him, so bright and open, but sharp too, sharp enough to draw blood from anyone foolish enough to try to betray the trust in that smile. Lex touched the fingertips of his left hand to Clark’s mouth and said, “I know.”

“You know? You know! Then why—”

“Shh,” Lex said, and Clark’s heart nearly leapt from his chest when Lex stroked his thumb across Clark’s lower lip. “I like trying to ferret out your secrets, Clark—makes a change from the crap factory. I just don’t like being lied to like a fool.”

Which made sense in a Lexian sort of way. “So it’s okay if I lie to you like you’re a genius?”

And that surprised a little laugh out of Lex, a nearly breathless sound, one little tiny hitch of laughter on an indrawn breath, and a sudden flight of amused affection in the quick way Lex looked at him.

Then that thumb stroked along Clark’s upper lip and he’d been brought up on a farm, he didn’t mind a bit of honest dirt, right? He opened his mouth and—

“Undress me,” Lex said, low and sexy and raw. “I dare you.”

And this time when Clark went to his knees, he wasn’t pretending innocence. His hands trembled, but only a little, and when Lex saw it, he stroked his fingers across Clark’s hair, soothing and promising all at once, steadying Clark. He could do this. Lex wouldn’t laugh at him for not knowing what to do, for being inexperienced. Well, not much, and it wouldn’t be cruel—and if it was laced with as much affection as the way Lex was looking at him right now, even being laughed at might not be too bad.

After all, it wasn’t going to last long. Clark didn’t think anyone who had sex with Lex Luthor stayed inexperienced, ignorant, or innocent for very long.

“Clark, while I really appreciate having you on your knees,” and Lex did, he really did—Clark could see firm proof of that in Lex’s polo pants, “we’re getting nowhere. Let me take my boots off—”

“Jeez, Lex,” Clark said, stung by the egregiously gentle patient *understanding* tone in Lex’s voice, “what d’you think I am, a scared kid?” And he could see the answer to that on Lex’s face, so he simply picked Lex up—and how many people got to hear Lex Luthor squeak in utter surprise like that?—and sat him on the bathroom counter. Got back down on his knees while Lex was still gaping like a landed fish, and pulled the long riding boots off with a lack of effort that wasn’t exactly helping Lex regain his usual insouciance.

“Clark—”

“Told you I’m pretty strong.”

And Lex matched his grin and leaned forward, fisting his hands in Clark’s hair. “And I don’t injure easily,” Lex whispered into Clark’s ear, tongue tip dancing, teasing, making Clark shiver. “And I heal *really* fast.”

A secret, given like a gift: something Clark had noticed, but something never ever mentioned. Like his own strength and habit of rescuing people. Of rescuing Lex, which is what Clark figured he was doing again. Hard to be the Luthor of Lionel’s dreams when you have someone you can trust with your secrets.

Lex was still blinking in confusion three seconds later when Clark deposited him in the shower. Naked.

Oh.

He’d been moving so fast he hadn’t had time to pay attention—

Oh.

Oh my.

Lex was naked, in the shower, water pouring over him, washing away the mud in rivulets, leaving acres and acres and acres of bare naked skin behind.

Bare.

Naked.

Between one blink and the next, Clark was just as bare and naked and squeezed in beside Lex with the same water—too cold, should’ve taken the time to check—pouring over him, and his hands were on those acres and acres and acres of bare, naked skin and—

Lex was pushing at him, which was just *so* not part of the plan. “Lex, I thought we were going to—”

“And we are, and I don’t damage easily, but slower, Clark, slower, I’m not going anywhere—”

Oh. He hadn’t realized he’d been moving *that* fast. Okay, slower, he could do slower, although this was starving-virgin’s-first-time slow, which really wasn’t slow at all, but Lex didn’t seem to mind. In fact—

Lex was doing that laugh thing again, but it wasn’t cruel, it was delight, Lex was delighted, and smiling at him, and Lex was laughing, not because Clark was an idiot but because...

Lex was happy.

Clark actually stopped for a moment, just to look. Lex looked... there were probably words for this, but Clark couldn’t think of anything more sophisticated than that Lex was happy. And that Clark was the reason for it. And that Clark was pretty damned happy too, his hand on Lex’s cock, and Lex’s hands on his and—

“Sorry,” he mumbled against the side of Lex’s face, pushing back when he realized that little squeak was because he was smooching Lex into the wall of the shower. “I didn’t mean to—”

“To what, flatter me?” Lex said, and Clark had honestly

never heard anything sexier in his life than Lex’s voice at that moment. Had never seen anything sexier either, Lex’s pupils wildly dilated, Lex’s cock long and hard and up against his belly, Lex’s lips parted, Lex’s face and chest covered with a blush of arousal and a dusting of freckles.

“You’ll be ready again in two seconds anyway,” Lex breathed into his ear. “I was, my first time. Believe me, the only thing that saved me with her was that fast as I came, I was ready again even faster.” A swift kiss, little more than a promise, and another breath of laughter. “At least I made it all the way inside her the second time!”

And that was another gift, another of Lex’s little secrets, or maybe a big one, given how Lex felt about being incompetent. There was nothing he could give Lex, no secret that wouldn’t involve talking and explaining, when all he wanted to do was—

Stand here, and watch as Lex, oh God, yes, Lex was going down on his knees, and opening his mouth, and that was his cock, his own cock, the one he jerked off at least twice a day, sinking into Lex’s mouth. And that was Lex, looking up at him, eyes so bright, mouth so tight and wet and warm around his cock, and shit, Lex was still taking him, swallowing him, more of him, all of him, and Lex’s throat was so tight around him—

And he was *this* close to coming again, *this* close to losing it, in Lex’s mouth, staring into Lex’s eyes, and it was enough for him, but what about—

“Lex, let me—”

Lex just swallowed, his left hand disappearing out of Clark’s view, the muscles in his shoulder and upper arm flexing and relaxing in a rhythm Clark knew like his own heartbeat. And then Lex’s right hand moved, up between Clark’s legs, to his ass, to—yeah, there, and next time, oh next time he was going to have Lex’s tongue and Lex’s cock there, but right now, right now that finger was enough, that finger and that mouth, and Lex’s eyes and it was Lex, he was with Lex, who knew, who knew about him and *still* wanted him, and who was nearly as much a freak as Clark was, and Lex was like him, Lex liked him, and he was in Lex’s mouth and Lex’s finger was in him and—

“Next time,” Clark mumbled around a faceful of shower water and a lapful of Lex, “you’re going to fuck me.”

That got him a sharp bite to his collarbone, and a very wet Lex slithering around in his lap until Clark could feel Lex’s still-soft cock pressed against him. “Five minutes,” Lex mumbled against Clark’s shoulder. “Just give me five minutes, and I’ll be ready.”

It actually took Lex closer to fifteen minutes, but they managed to find one or two things to occupy themselves with in the meantime, none of which involved talking, although Lex managed to explore one or two of Clark’s secrets. And shortly after that, Clark showed Lex just how fast a learner he was.

Exeunt

M. FAE GLASGOW

It was over. They both knew it, had known it for a long time, not that either of them had said a word about it. Or taken the final step.

But it was over.

No discussion, no fights, no scenes. Just a careful, non-accusatory mention that LexCorp needed to expand into Europe, responded to with an equally unblaming reference to finishing a college degree here in Metropolis.

It was over.

The truth was in every kiss, in every touch. It was in the way they were so careful to always kiss goodbye, and hello, and to call each other during the day or if they were going to be late for dinner. It was in the way Clark never mentioned the skylight that was no longer part of the security grid, and in the way Lex always pretended to be asleep when Clark came home, and in the way Clark always pretended to be fooled, but nothing was ever said, no truths spoken, by either side, the lies as sticky as a spider web, trapping them.

It was in the way Clark was so careful not to ask if Lex had slept well, but always kissed Lex's closed eyes, the eyelids trembling delicately beneath his lips, eyelashes brushing against the faint purple shadows of sleeplessness.

It was in the way Superman was never mentioned in their home, and in the way Lex simply rose and left the room when Superman was shown on the news, and Clark never followed to ask what was wrong.

It was in the way Clark no longer asked how Lionel was, and the way Lex no

longer asked Clark to say hello to Martha or Jonathan for him. It was in the way Clark had dinner with his parents, or Pete, or Chloe, or Lana, and Lex didn't. It was in the way Lex had dinner with his father, or a CEO, or a useful contact, and Clark didn't. It was in the way that slowly, over time, dinner was just the two of them, or separately, with the unsharable part of their lives.

It was over.

No fights. No scenes. No discussion.

Just—kisses, like this, stolen in the darkness, cherished while the loved one slept. Just—the delicate touch of a fingertip to an upper lip, or the furtive touch against soft, dark hair. Just—lying together on a Sunday morning, the sky lightening in the east, the two of them facing the huge window, watching the light creep towards them, heralding the moment when they would have to let go of each other, and get up, get dressed, face the world. Just—smiles that quivered around the edges, eyes that swam in sadness, voices that broke with tenderness.

It was over.

It was in the way papers and finals were worked on in study groups at the library instead of at home. It was in the way business trips were no longer avoided like the plague and cut unwisely short. It was in the way they clung to each other as they whispered words of love in the darkness of night, but no longer talked about friendship, or trust, or truth in the brightness of day. It was in the way they were so very careful not to ask certain questions, or offer explanations. It was in the way a movie about lies or deceit was quietly turned off and a comedy chosen instead, and the way they held each other a little more tightly as they laughed too loudly. It was in the way Hollywood's sudden obsession with comic books and superheroes never found its way into their penthouse.

It was in the way Lex's collection of Warrior Angel quietly disappeared. It was in the way Lex never questioned Clark suddenly wearing glasses. It was in the way Lex never explained or excused anything LexCorp did or was rumored to have done, and it was in the way Clark never asked him for the truth and it was in the way Lex never offered him any.

It was in the way they started referring to 'the penthouse' instead of 'home.'

It was over.

It was in the way they looked at each other, every morning, every night, as if this might be the last time they would see each other. It was in the way they made love with desperation or heartbreak or fierce, clinging hunger, as if it would be the last time they would ever touch.

It was in the way they didn't talk about it. It was in the way they couldn't talk about it, the pain of loss too great a hurdle for both of them to cross.

It was over.

It was in the way Lex stayed in their bedroom for a long, long time, fingers running over old flannel shirts and newer white button-downs; it was in the way Lex's fingers lingered over sweaters, and jeans and the silk pajamas that were never worn for actual sleeping; it was in the way Lex stood there, for the longest time, looking out of their bedroom window at the vast expanse of empty, silent sky.

It was in the way the penthouse echoed with silence when Clark came back that night. It was in the way the bed was empty and cold when he slipped into it. It was in the way he cried for all the lost hope and lost dreams, and for the bitter knowledge that sometimes love just wasn't enough.

It was over.



the Yellow Brick Road

M. FAE GLASGOW

Author's note: I took the liberty of simply moving Due South forward a few years, setting the Due South elements immediately prior to Call of the Wild, lifting dialogue, ideas and elements wholesale from those two hours. Smallville is set an unspecified time after Rush, but written before any other episodes aired—so whatever happened next doesn't exist for this story.

I don't think we're in Kansas any more," Ray said, bracelet glinting in the sun as he pushed himself to his feet. He was grateful that at least Fraser's own Toto was still safely back in Chicago: the wolf, proving he was smarter than the average bear, Chicago flatfoot and Mountie all combined, had refused to sneak onto the bad guys' plane, no matter how many times Fraser had mentioned Duty, Honor and The Canadian Way. Ray scrubbed one hand through the short spikiness of his hair and sighed. "Nope, we sure as hell aren't in Kansas any more."

"Actually, Ray, allowing for the direction and duration of the flight, we *should* be in Kansas. The northeastern quadrant, in fact," Fraser said, the impromptu parachutes neatly folded at his feet, and who would've thought that thermal blankets and knitting yarn could serve so effectively? Ray certainly hadn't, which is why Fraser had resorted to underhanded subterfuge to get Ray to jump from the plane. Fraser dusted himself off and planted his Stetson firmly back on his head, turned slowly in a half circle and surveyed the landscape stretched before them. "And you have to admit, it's windy enough and flat as..."

It actually wasn't particularly flat, which shut Fraser up, but the wind was behaving like a proper Kansas wind, threatening to work itself up into a Wizard of Oz frenzy and making Ray's normally experimental hair even more experimental.

"Fraser, we are not in Kansas, this place is as flat as Dolly Parton," Ray said, squinting through the blowing dust and chaff. "And this damned wind is blowing dirt into my eyes."

The giant haystack had broken their fall exactly as Fraser had promised, although the rush of air had whipped half of Fraser's reassurances away as the plane receded to a black dot in the sky and the ground rushed upwards in a green and straw-yellow blur. "And I'm standing," Ray did a slow 360 degree turn, "on a model of something out of Star Trek. C'mon, start walking before aliens show up cos we messed up their haystack. And do not say another word," Ray said, Fraser's mouth shutting with a snap. "Turtles. Not 'here's my plan, Ray' or 'what do you think of this plan, Ray.' No, it was 'Look, Ray, turtles' then he pushes me into the wide blue yonder," Ray muttered, scrambling down the curved slope of the haystack.

Fraser slid down neatly beside Ray, opening his mouth to speak, shutting it when Ray glared at him. "When I get to a phone," Ray said, "those bastards are gonna have every cop in every state from here to Canada after them."

Fraser forbore to comment on either the legality or the practicality of having every cop in every state going after the malfeasants, especially since he had taken the liberty of interfering with the small plane's navigation system so the malfeasants only thought they were heading due north to Canada. Still, it would be prudent to warn the necessary authorities between here and the gulf that they were likely to have a moderately sized plane bearing empty fuel tanks and very confused criminals coming down in their midst. To do that, they would indeed need a phone and Fraser also forbore to even mention the hasty, if dramatic, destruction of Ray's cell phone. Instead, he lifted his head and sniffed the air, turning to each cardinal point in turn. "That way," he said, pointing diagonally opposite from Ray's chosen path.

"You can smell a town?"

"Not exactly, no," Fraser said, striding easily off down the tractor-rutted track, his voice whipped over his shoulder by the wind.

"A house?"

"Not as such."

"A farm?"

Ah. Just as he'd expected: there was a somewhat battered single-lane blacktop road up ahead. "Not specifically, although that seems likely."

Ray recognized that mutantly cheerful tone of voice: no way was he going to like this. "So what *specifically* can you smell?"

"Manure."

"Oh crap," Ray said, and followed Fraser anyway.

There was a hill in their way. A hill, with trees. A hill with so many trees, a man might be forgiven for calling it a forest.

"It's not a copse or a corpse or anything else a Chicago cop should be anywhere near without his gun. It's a forest, Fraser. I told you, we're not in Kansas any more."

"But Ray—"

"Fraser, you were beaten, unconscious—"

"Only briefly, Ray," Fraser said defensively.

"—for eleven minutes and thirty seconds, which I know because a) they took my phone and my gun, not my watch and 2) unlike you, I didn't get kicked in the head and knocked out. And on top of that, the whole time you *were* awake and not beaten unconscious, that whole entire time, you had bad guys yakking at you in French or Quebeckian or whatever the hell it was. So how the hell can you think you have *any* idea where the hell we are?"

Fraser just looked at him, then pointed to the sign nearly obscured by the lush, untouched vegetation.

Coming Soon! The 43rd LuthorMart in Kansas

And under it, in fancy pseudo-copperplate script:

Future home of Luthorville, Kansas, A New Model Community

Ray stared at it. Looked around, taking in the complete lack of housing, the single-lane blacktop that came from nowhere and led nowhere, the rising stand of trees, and it was a forest, never mind what Fraser said, the absolute, unnerving silence that told him there wasn't another human being within a mile radius at least, probably more. And there was going to be some kind of store here. Before the model community. But after the giant science fiction haystack.

If this place got any more nuts, never mind aliens, he'd start expecting Munchkins to come dancing down the street.

"Okay, so we're in Kansas," Ray said, with the calm acceptance of the totally bizarre that came from being Fraser's partner for more than a week. "We still need to find a phone. You still smelling that manure?"

Fraser looked somewhat shamefaced. "Yes, well..."

"You can track musk ox across the Atlantic ocean, how can you lose manure?"

"It...well, it *changed*, Ray."

"Changed," Ray said flatly, looking at Fraser, wondering just how many concussions and/or blows to the head it took to turn someone completely freakazoid nutso and trying to figure out just how long ago Fraser passed that number.

"Changed," Fraser confirmed, obviously relieved that Ray understood. "It was raw manure, with a little diesel exhaust and then..."

"Roses and lavender? Peaches? Gardenia blossom?"

"Nitrogen. Then the wind shifted direction—"

"And since we'd already found the road," Ray said, letting his anger put his feet in motion before it put his



fists into action, “you decided, without telling me, without asking me, you just decided *for* me,” and at that, he glared over his shoulder, Fraser walking quickly behind him, not quite catching up, “doin’ my thinking for me again like you always do, like you already did when you shoved me off a plane, which I have not forgotten and you can call it strategy or subterfuge or anything else you can find in your pocket dictionary but you and me both know you *pushed* me, you just decided since we’d found a road, we’d just keep on the road cos it has to lead to something somewhere sometime, and never mind telling Ray that we weren’t heading for the manure farm—”

He rounded the bend in the road and stopped dead in his tracks.

“That’s not a farm,” he said, quietly.

“No,” Fraser agreed, standing at the foot of a forested hill in what was, apparently, Kansas, and looking down at the gently rolling, sometimes hilly countryside, which was, apparently, also in Kansas, despite everything Fraser knew about Kansas, and staring down at the building nestled between folds of hills, a lake and several stands of trees. Lots of trees. Conifers, in fact. Of the sort Fraser associated with his one and only, thankfully brief, visit to suburban Vancouver.

“A castle?” Ray said, staring at it just as hard.

“Mansion,” Fraser corrected absently. “A Victorian mansion, apparently of Scottish extraction but with Jacobean and—great Scot, yes that’s Jacobean and Norman pretension. Together.”

“In Kansas.”

“Apparently.”

They exchanged looks that encompassed multi-lingual lip-reading deaf wolves, vodoun spells and, in Fraser’s case, entire log cabins built in his closet by his dead father.

Then they both just shrugged and headed towards the Scottish Victorian mansion in the middle of the rolling wooded hills of Kansas, while Ray whistled “We’re off to see the wizard” and Fraser brushed the dirt and hayseeds off his full dress red uniform.

Fraser was trying, for the fourth time, to persuade the guard at the gate to at least allow them to borrow the use of a telephone if they couldn’t be allowed to approach the premises proper, while Ray was trying to resist the urge, for the fifth time, to ram his fist and his spare gun down the guy’s throat and just use the damn phone, when the gate started to open automatically.

“Ah, you’ve changed your mind,” Fraser said ever so politely, and even added a “Thank you kindly” as he darted through the opening gate before the guard could stop him.

“Ray—”

“Ray.”

“Ray!”

It wasn’t until the sleek grey car fishtailed to a sudden stop that Ray shut his mouth and focused enough to

notice that Fraser was—like the car—through the gate and he hurried to follow.

“May I help you?” The voice was urbane, smooth, the question perfectly polite and just as clearly a demand to know what the hell they were doing and why they were doing it here.

“I hope so. I’m Constable Benton Fraser—”

“RCMP,” the driver said, walking towards them, black three quarter length coat snapping in the wind, one leather-gloved hand waving the blustering “but I tied to stop them” guard back to the guardhouse. “You’re a long way from home, Constable.”

“Well, not quite as far as you might think. I’m based here in the United States. I first came to Chicago on the trail of the killers of my—”

“Lamborghini,” Ray said.

Fraser looked at him with some hint of concern. “No, Ray. On the trail of the killers of my father—”

“Now that’s something I could get behind,” the bald man, who was surprisingly young on closer inspection, said as he stopped in front of Fraser. “Your father’s killers?”

“Yes. And for reasons that don’t need exploring at this juncture, I have remained, as liaison—”

“Well, everyone in America knows about Les Liaisons Dangereuse. But are you dangereux or amoureux?”

Fraser blushed, shifted his feet and looked down at his boots, which made the young man’s smile kick up another notch.

“You wouldn’t happen to be related to Clark Kent, now would you?”

“Not that I’m aware of, although there was my great-great-great Aunt Matilda, who was a Kent from Kent, but after the unfortunate incident on the farm—”

“Lamborghini,” Ray said again, this time running his hand a hairsbreadth above the car’s polished sleekness, following the voluptuous curves.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” the young bald man said, half-turning so he could talk to Ray, but not so far that he left his undefended back to Fraser. Or the now-retreated guard.

Fraser took a good, long, albeit surreptitious, look around to see if there was anything (other than forests and hills and Scottish mansions in what was, apparently, Kansas) to warrant such...caution.

Ray had been gazing at the silver car while Fraser had been looking around. In fact, Ray had been entranced by the silver car since it had slewed across the driveway in a perfectly controlled fishtail that just happened to block the entire narrow roadway.

“You’re a connoisseur of cars?” the bald man asked, swiftly circling around till he was on the other side of Ray, with Fraser and the guard in full view. “Mister...?”

“Ray,” Ray said, barely glancing from car to man. “Ray Ko—Ray Ve—” He broke off there, and whirled, facing Fraser.



"Uh. Fraser, who am I?"

For a long moment, Fraser just stood and looked at him, and the young bald man looked back and forth between them.

"You're my friend, Ray," Fraser said, and made it sound like that was all the answer needed.

"I was hoping for a last name more than his social status," the bald guy said, eyes narrowing for a moment before he finished his assessment and stuck his hand out. "I'm Lex Luthor."

"A pleasure to meet you. Do you happen to have a phone we could borrow?"

Lex Luthor paused for a moment, as if he'd expected a very different reaction. "Sure," he said, fishing a tiny folded phone out of his pocket and flipping it open, the small color screen brightening immediately. "Knock yourself out."

"Don't say things like that around him," Ray said.

Before Lex Luthor could comment, Fraser leaned over and said, conspiratorially, "It's a bit of a sore point at the moment." Then, into the phone: "Ah, yes, I do believe you could help me. I need to speak to Lieutenant Welsh."

As the strains of very bad muzak dripped out of the phone, Ray turned back to the silver car and said, once again, voice reverent, "Lamborghini."

Fraser thought that just this once he could be excused for punching his partner. If Ray said one more thing about that silly car, and it had been downright embarrassing to have to pull his partner from the car, especially when Ray had resisted so...energetically. Why Ray had wanted to ride in the car for such a short distance down the drive to the front door... Americans. Wouldn't know a good walk if it jumped up and bit them. Three days across the tundra in a blizzard, now *that* was a real walk.

And heaven help him, he was starting to sound like his father.

Ray, meantime, was now fully engaged in conversation with a very nice gentleman called Hans, who seemed to share Ray's nearly blasphemous worship of the totally impractical vehicle.

"Constable?" the young bald man was saying.

"Ray—"

"Can keep Hans company for a while," Lex said, opening the front door and gesturing Fraser inside. "I think he might punch you if you tried to drag him away again."

Bootheels ringing against the floor, Fraser followed Lex Luthor into a singularly schizophrenic room, high tech equipment and desk cohabiting with equally anachronistic 17th, 18th and 19th Century books and furnishings in a room, despite its clever recreations, that had been built no farther back than the early 20th Century. First editions stood cheek by jowl with comic books, and the serious work ethic of the desk and multiple computers was nearly shouted down by the decadent red baize pool table. Fraser blinked. Twice. "It

certainly seems as if Ray and Hans are bonding over your car, Mr. Luthor.

"Please. Call me Lex."

"Lex," Fraser said, matching Lex's smile with one of his own.

"You started to introduce yourself outside, Benton—may I call you Benton?"

"Ah...yes, sure, that would be...actually, that would be very nice."

Lex, who had once upon a time been called Alexander and understood the power of names all too well, looked at Fraser with bright eyes and quick understanding. "Been a long time?"

Fraser rubbed an eyebrow, and accepted the blue bottle of water offered him. Welsh water, in a Scottish mansion. In Kansas. "Except for my father on occasion, and I'm not sure he can legitimately be counted, so, yes, it's been a long time. Down here—well, you really don't need to hear about that right now."

"What do I need to hear about right now?"

"I'm really not—"

"How about why a Mountie and what I presume is a Chicago cop, if his accent and attitude are anything to judge by, ended up on my driveway after appearing out of nowhere in the middle of nowhere?"

"Ah," Fraser said, and stopped.

"Okay, so you don't think I need to hear about that. Then maybe—why the Chicago cop didn't know his own name?"

"Would you believe head injury?"

"Are you telling me that's what it is?"

"Yes," Fraser said, shuffling from foot to foot. "Really, yes, it's head injuries, dozens of them, some of them quite serious," he said, nodding in emphasis. "In fact," he assayed a laugh, "good grief, the decapitation alone—"

"Decapitation?" Lex asked, and not with anything approaching the level of disbelief anyone had a right to expect when they'd just claimed their very much alive partner had been decapitated.

"Yes, yes, absolutely. Well. No, not really."

Lex looked at him with a strange mixture of disbelief and relief.

"In fact, not at all. Not even close," Fraser finished, dropping his head briefly in shame.

All in all, it was the most fascinating spectacle of lying gone awry that Lex Luthor had seen since his own childhood practice sessions in front of the mirror. It even beat Clark's usual run of laughably feeble excuses hands down. "So...no head injuries."

"Not to Ray. I'm the one who suffered the most recent head injury." Fraser paused, then added, painfully honest, "And the last several, too."

"That would go a long way to explaining it."

"To explaining what?" Fraser asked, the perfect picture of slightly wide-eyed innocence.

"Are you *sure* you aren't related to Clark Kent, Benton?"

"Benton?" Ray said as he came through the double door. "You're letting him call you Benton? Just don't tell him to call me Stanley."

"I thought your name was Ray?" Lex said very softly, eyes narrowing.

"It is, but my dad had a thing about Marlon Brando, so he called me Stanley, only soon as I was old enough to figure out why grown-ups laughed when they heard my name, I switched to my middle name. Which is Ray, and which suits me better," Ray said, flinging himself down on the couch, all bad-guy attitude and bristle, "cos I'm more a Steve McQueen kind of guy."

Who still hadn't given Lex his last name. "In my considerable experience with law enforcement," Lex walked gracefully around to stand in front of Ray, "one of the first things a real cop does is tell you his name. Unless he's too busy shooting at you."

"My badge—"

"Wouldn't be any more convincing than several I've seen sold on street corners for cash. So are you a cop, Stanley Ray? Because really, it's not a problem if you're not. I've harbored felons here before, usually because Clark asked me to, but under the right circumstances," Lex's glance flickered towards Benton Fraser, "I'm willing to make exceptions."

"I can assure you Ray isn't a felon—" Fraser said just as Ray burst out with, "You harbor felons? Drugs? Murder, burglary, stolen goods—what's this...Clark...into?"

"Flannel," Lex said, as Clark walked in, heavy work boots making nearly as much noise as Fraser's regulation boots had.

"Hey, Lex. Uh...sorry, I didn't realize you had company..."

"It's all right, Clark, this isn't business. Let me—"

"Clark?" Ray said, getting to his feet in one smooth movement, covering the distance to Clark with the quick grace of a dancer, getting right in Clark's face. "The guy who asks the rich guy to harbor felons. You wanna—Fraser?"

Ray stopped talking. Lex shut his mouth hard enough that his teeth clicked audibly. Clark just stared.

Fraser was sniffing the air.

"Fraser," Ray said, looking at him warningly.

Fraser ignored him, just kept right on sniffing, walking closer and closer to Clark, sniffing harder the nearer he got, till he was just about running his nose over Clark like an over-friendly dog.

"Stanley Ray, what the hell is he doing?"

Ray shrugged, and looked unnervingly as though this was a perfectly normal thing for Fraser to do.

"Sniffing your felon-harboring friend," he said, crossing his arms, getting

comfortable while Fraser sniffed and looked and sniffed and, yes, finally licked, his way around Clark.

"You..." Fraser's eyes went from glazed distraction to sharp focus, pinning Clark. "I've never smelled anyone quite like you."

"Uh—it's probably just the farm," Clark replied, smiling winningly, even though the metaphoric whites of his eyes were showing.

"No," Fraser said thoughtfully, taking another sniff along Clark's jaw line. "The farm's there, and you need to adjust the potassium levels in your goat feed, but that's not it. It's...it's... I can't place it."

"Fraser, Fraser, Fraser," Ray said, shaking his head. "I can't take you anywhere. Oh, wait," Ray's voice sharpened, his fingers jabbing forward to punctuate his words, "I didn't take you, you dragged me. Pushed me. Both."

"I did not drag you—"

"Not physically but metaphysically! What else'm I supposed to do?"

"Volunteer," Fraser said as if it were a perfectly reasonable suggestion.

"Volunteer? Even Dief wouldn't volunteer, not even when you offered him raw liver!"

"And it's not my fault I pushed you—"

"You pointing out turtles to get me to the door—"

Lex exchanged a questioning look with Clark, who shrugged in total bemusement, then both stood back and just watched the show.

"—your hands, my back, how is that not your fault?"

"If you'd jumped when I asked—"

"Fraser, nobody in their right mind jumps outta an airplane!"

"I jumped—"

"Exactly! Thank you for making my point for me! Did I not just say nobody in their right mind—"

"What was I supposed to do, let them shoot us? You were—"

"In control of the situation."

"You were hogtied!"

"Only until you cut me loose, which you were about to do any second. I was in complete control—"

"They had your gun—"

"But I had my back-up—"

"Which was in your boot, and since you were hogtied—"

"My hand was nearer than if I'd been just standing there! Or unconscious, Mr. Let's-Just-Jump. They were going to shoot us—"

"You," Fraser said suddenly, his voice, his demeanor, his expression all changing, still as a pebble dropped in a pond, the effects rippling outwards. "They were planning on keeping me alive and using me as a hostage when they reached Canada, but they were going to kill you."

"Me?"

"You."

"So they were planning keeping you hostage for God knows how long, but did you get my gun out and stop them?" Ray was all but shouting, flustered and flushed and nearly vibrating with tension. "No, you you pushed me out of the plane—"

"I untied you first!"

"Instead of taking my gun and shooting them!"

"I have no jurisdiction in the United States nor do I have a gun permit—"

"Which you have never explained to me, Mr. Sharpshooter Marksman."

"Even if I had a permit to use a weapon, we were on a plane—"

"Which you pushed me from!"

"—and leaving aside laws regarding weapons on planes—"

"Which are to stop bad guys, not the good guys!"

"—I could hardly risk damaging the skin of the plane by discharging a weapon."

"So you discharged me instead, right out of the plane—"

"You had a parachute!"

"A thermal blanket and knitting yarn don't count as a parachute!"

"It worked, didn't it?"

And just like that: "Yeah, it did," Ray said, the anger dissipating faster than smoke. "So. We're here—this really is Kansas?"

"Uh...yeah," Clark replied. "Smallville."

Lex's smile was as slow and lazy as a basking shark. "Smallville, Kansas, meteor capital of the world."

"Really? That's fascinating," Fraser said. "I hadn't heard of Smallville, or the meteors—"

"Because they're really not that interesting," Clark butted in, sounding nervous even to his own ears and downright suspicious to other people's ears. "We used to be the creamed corn capital of the world, but that doesn't bring in many tourists, so..."

Lex was looking at him, and Clark was most definitely not looking back.

"And interesting though this is," Lex said, "it still doesn't answer my question. Who are you?"

"Constable Benton Fraser, Royal Canadian Mounted Police," Fraser said, leaning forward with the most charming smile, a small dimple forming in his left cheek. He reached out, shaking first Lex's hand then Clark's. "I first came to Chicago on the trail of the killers of my father, and for reasons that don't need exploring at this juncture, I have remained, attached as liaison officer with the Canadian Consulate."

"In Chicago," Lex said. "But this is Smallville. Kansas."

"Which I'd really like to ask you about," Fraser said. "The hills and conifers, and I believe I saw a large river dam in a deep gorge from the plane—"

"Before you threw me out or on the way down?"

"—which I confess, confuses me. My understanding of Kansas—"

"Won't get you very far in Smallville, Benton," Lex said, casting one more look at Clark. "So what brings you gentlemen to Smallville?"

"Jumping from a plane," Fraser said pleasantly. Distractingly.

"For you, Fraser. Me, I was thrown from a plane."

"Ray—"

"Do not start with the Ray, Ray, Ray, Ray thing, Fraser. No more crossing my Ts and dotting my Is, no more making my decisions for me—"

And they were off again, leaving Clark and Lex to stand shoulder to shoulder, discussing them. "Do you think they're always like this?" Clark asked.

"Looks like they've had plenty of practice."

"Yeah, they sound a lot like my mom and dad about tractors and combines." Clark hesitated for just a moment, casting a shyly challenging glance at Lex. "Think they're a couple?"

"Could be," Lex said slowly, turning slightly until his attention was focused completely on Clark. He swallowed, once, staring unblinkingly at Clark. "Could well be. Or perhaps they're not, it's only what they want to be."

"Uhm," Clark said, nearly blushing, looking away suddenly, just as quickly stuffing his hands in his pocket, his flannel over shirt bunching over his jeans, "you have guests, I have that hole in the barn floor to fix, I guess I'd better..."

"Run?" Lex asked, a millimeter away from smiling.

"Uhm...yeah. Run. Home. To my chores."

Lex took a long, deep sucking drink from his bottled water then said, lips still glistening, "Say hi to your mom for me."

And it was just as well Lex didn't know Clark's looks could kill, because if he had, he might not have smirked quite so openly as Clark hunched forward to hide his crotch even more as he bolted from the room.

Meanwhile, the two visitors were winding down, an endless cycle of comments circling the conversational drain.

They finally paused, looking at each other speakingly before looking, in tandem, at Lex. "Lex, may we borrow your phone once more?"

"Be my guest, Benton," Lex said, waving towards the small cordless on his desk.

Then he stood there in bemusement as Benton and Stanley Ray discussed calling...the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain?

After hushing Ray regarding Margaret Thatcher, Fraser turned towards Lex. "It's long distance."

"He can afford it, Fraser."

"That's not the point, Ray."

"I know that because I was there when you phoned Welsh. The rich



guy offered. Now pick up the damn phone and call her." Ray stepped forward, pugnacious and echoing the good old days of punk, or at least New Wave. "Or I will."

And interestingly, Fraser actually blanched. "That won't be necessary, Ray. I'll just..."

"Call her," Ray said.

"Absolutely. I'll just call her. Right now."

Not that Fraser made a move toward the phone, eying the small piece of plastic with a wariness usually reserved for small children confronting very large baths.

"Okay, that does it. I'll phone her."

Then Fraser just stood there, until Ray picked up the phone, and Fraser snatched it from him, finally dialing.

"Ah, yes, Turnbull," Fraser said, sounding like Lex years ago when he'd just been told exactly what was in prairie oysters, "There are two things— Yes, I'm aware there are more than two things in the— No, I'm not calling about either of those two— Yes, he's with me and that would make two— Turnbull— Turnbull— Can you continue to take care of Diefenbaker for me?"

Lex listened as brazenly as Stanley Ray as Fraser talked about a former Canadian Prime Minister, long dead. Who needed to be taken care of. This, Lex thought, was getting more interesting by the minute.

"Well, no, it's not pleasant, but if you would refuse when he begs for pizza with anchovies— Garlic? Oh good God, Turnbull! Are you insane—no, don't answer that. Restrict him to scrambled eggs and rice. Yes, brown eggs are fine— However many you think best— No, two dozen would be too many."

Lex leaned against his desk, openly amused by what had to be the most bizarre half of a conversation he'd ever heard, which was quite something, considering he'd been in Smallville as long as he had.

And just to make sure things were really entertaining, Stanley Ray was just about jumping out of his skin trying to catch Fraser's attention.

He finally succeeded, Fraser murmuring, "Yes, Turnbull, I'd like to hear about that," then holding the phone out to the side, hand covering the mouthpiece. "What?"

"Cooked rice," Ray said, sounding desperate. "Cooked plain white rice."

Fraser stared at him.

"The last three times Turnbull's made rice, Fraser. Szechwan. Curried. Gumbo."

Fraser closed his eyes in horror. "Turnbull? Yes, that was really...I'm sure you did find the whole thing stimulating. About the rice for Dief? Uh...I'm sure it's a splendidly authentic recipe, but no, paella wouldn't be a good idea, remember what that much garlic does to his digestive system.

Yes, I do remember, only too well, which is why I— Yes, plain white rice, steamed— Then tell him he can

do without— If he won't listen to you, tell him Ray won't let you and Dief stay in his apartment while he's here with me. Yes— No— He's deaf, Turnbull, I don't think that would help since he couldn't lip-read what— And to you. Yes, I would like to speak to Inspector Thatcher."

Inspector? Well, that scuppered the most interesting connection, Lex thought, revising his opinion when he saw Fraser's spine-straightening reaction to this particular Margaret Thatcher.

"Yes, sir," Fraser was saying. "No, sir, I— Yes, sir. I would— Absolutely, sir, I do— Understood. No, sir, I really do— " while Ray was making faces and using his hand to make 'yak, yak, yak' motions.

Watching these two was far more entertaining than anything on television these days, especially when Ray made appalled, 'who, me?' gestures and pretended to cut his throat even as Fraser handed him the phone.

"Hi, Maggie."

Fraser was shaking his head frantically.

"Nope, I haven't been consuming any interesting weeds," Ray said, winking at Fraser. "Why, d'you have some you want to share?"

Lex got himself another water, and seated himself in his comfortable desk chair, all the better to watch the show.

His two impromptu guests were in full flight, a high energy combination of silent movies and stand up comedians, gestures and comments and theatrically speaking facial expression being thrown around with, yes, he was going to call a spade a spade, gay abandon.

They were fascinating to watch. The communication between them, the warmth that fueled the bickering, the sheer intimacy...

It was enough to make a lonely man jealous.

Especially when said lonely man was bisexual, the two guests were both extremely attractive in very different ways, and the lonely bisexual hadn't had anything other than his own left hand to keep him company for quite some time. And was pretty sure he didn't want to have any other serious or long-term company, given the disastrous nature of his most recent romantic outings and the inherent dangers of a vengeful Jonathan Kent with a rifle.

Lex sipped his water, and watched the floor show, but no matter how he tried to be impartial and pay full attention to both his guests, his eyes were drawn inexorably back to Benton.

Tall, dark, handsome, almost comic book handsome. Clear eyes, shading from blue to green to grey and back again. Dark, dark, thick, shiny hair, with a hint of ruthlessly suppressed curl. Broad shoulders. So much power, so much strength...

And those were only the surface resemblances to Clark.

Oh shit, Lex thought, just as Stanley Ray hung up the phone and the two men turned towards him expectantly, Benton



looking at him with Clark's honest openness, *I am in such deep shit.*

"Did you hear that?" Ray said to Fraser.

"When you were telling her off about Canadian stupidity in American airspace?"

"No, when she was telling me off for American stupidity about Canadian labor regulations. You, Fraser, are on vacation."

"I'm on..." Fraser gaped, till Ray kindly reached over and tapped his mouth shut.

"Let me translate that into Canadian. You're on holiday, Fraser, and you are not to come back until the whole situation is cleared up."

"But that could be—"

"Hours, days or weeks," Ray broke in. "Which means, since I am officially liaised to the Canadian Consulate for the duration as your official bodyguard and American lesion," and a sharp look at Fraser nipped any nit-picking in the bud, "I am on vacation too."

Lex sat back and watched them tell each other the truth by using some very good lies.

"Vacation," Fraser said. "Right. Yes. Vacation it is then. Ray, there is one slight problem..."

"Yeah?"

"On the plane."

"And don't think I've forgotten you threw me off said plane."

"They took your main gun."

"Yeah. And?"

"And your badge."

"So?" Then Ray looked at Fraser, and Lex looked at both of them.

"Oh shit, it was in my wallet," Ray said, digging frantically through his pockets and, much to Lex's fascination, taking out a wallet. "The bastards stole my money!"

"Well, they are criminals, Ray."

Ray shoved his emptied wallet back into his pocket. "I got nothing. How much cash do you have, Fraser?"

Interestingly enough, Fraser picked his hat up and looked inside the crown. "About a hundred."

"That..." Ray broke off. "Canadian or American?"

"Canadian."

"Oh man, we're going to starve. Where can we find a room for that? Or a bank in Smallville, Kansas open on a Saturday that can transfer a measly hundred bucks Canadian into real money?"

"Nowhere," Lex said, getting to his feet. "However, I have some cash on hand, and you will, of course, stay here in the mansion. There's plenty of room, and the price is right for people with a whole hundred dollars Canadian."

Ray's "Great!" was drowned out by Fraser's: "We couldn't possibly impose—"

"Oh, it's no imposition," Lex said smoothly, just about managing not to stare at Benton and to keep his eyes mainly north of Fraser's belt. "In fact, I'd appreciate the company." Not to mention the eye candy and the entertainment value.

"In that case—"

"We accept. And uh...any chance we could borrow a car?" Ray added. "And if we can't borrow the Lamborghini, are you using your Ferrari?"

Fraser followed Lex and Ray through the study's double doors with a truly outraged "Ray!"

Ray was just about tiptoeing, peering into drawers and closets and under beds. He swung the armoire doors wide, and then stood there, agape, Paul on the road to Damascus, Abraham at the burning bush, Noah looking at the sun breaking through the clouds. "Holy shit," Ray said reverently.

Fraser, still in his boots, the public luxury of the Canadian Consulate obviously desensitized a man to the decadence of a billionaire's mansion, came up to see what Ray was gazing at with such rapt adulation.

"It's just a television, Ray."

"No, it's not. It's the Holy Grail of televisions, Fraser. It's a wide-screen HDTV plasma screen with remote, DVD player, satellite—"

Fraser snorted. "And I thought you watched too much television in Chicago. We'll never see you outside this room."

"Yeah, you will."

Fraser gave one last look at the television screen, then sat on one of the plump leather armchairs and started removing his boots. "You'll never leave this room. DVD, satellite, plasma—"

"Ferrari," Ray said. "Aston Martin. Lamborghini."

"Our host does have a lot of cars..."

"Those aren't cars, Fraser, those are works of art. Art on wheels, the pinnacle of automotive styling. Sure, they're foreign cars, but they're the Rolls Royces of foreign cars."

Fraser, knowing the better part of valor, didn't even try to deal with Ferraris being the Rolls Royces of foreign cars: one did not mess with Ray and his cars. "He has a Rolls Royce, too?"

"Maybe," Ray said, shrugging. "I was too busy looking at the really fast ones to pay any attention."

"Did you have a chance to speak privately with Lieutenant Welsh?" Fraser asked, crouching down to admire the fine dovetailing on the chest of drawers.

"Yeah, while you had your nose buried in one of those old books—"

"First editions, Ray," Fraser said with all the reverence Ray had used for cars and television combined. "Signed!"

"—he called on that phone your friend gave me. Seems our bad guys ditched the plane early."

Fraser straightened up. "Where?"

"Some small town nobody's heard of. And nobody's seen 'em since."



"How far away?"

"Not far enough. Which is and isn't a problem, because at least they're down here chasing us and not in Chicago meeting Armando Lingoustini. Because the thing is, the problem is, you know the guy who broke out yesterday?"

"Not beyond recognising—oh, you were being rhetorical. The guy who broke out yesterday—you mean, the one you arrested less than twenty-four hours prior to his escape?"

"The one I arrested when I was being Ray Vecchio's cover. You were right, his name shows up in Vecchio's jacket, way back when he was a rookie, but he wasn't the arresting officer which is why the guy's name wasn't red flagged."

"But since such information would bring a hefty reward, that would explain why our arrestee went to such lengths to break out because he remembered the real Ray Vecchio."

Ray's face tightened, almost imperceptibly. "And maybe he remembered where he'd last seen Vecchio, which wasn't as Vecchio, or maybe he still hasn't seen Vecchio as a mob guy. So we want that bad guy down here, keeping busy looking for us so he doesn't see Vecchio who's currently Armando Linguini—"

"Armundo Linguistini," Fraser corrected automatically.

"—but we don't want 'em finding us," Ray continued, blithely ignoring him, "because not only do we want him busy, but we don't want 'em catching us and killing us, because we're the only ones who can identify them as the kidnapers of two law enforcement officials—"

"—and can give just-cause verification of the phone calls they made to their contacts, which is needed to get the search warrants—"

"—which will lead to the documents—"

"—which will lead to incontrovertible evidence—"

"—which will lead to bringing down the biggest drug suppliers to the crime families in Chicago—"

"—not to mention the biggest drug operation in Canada—"

"—so we're to lay low, because nobody knows we're here."

"And anonymity is our best protection—"

"—considering they've got my gun, my badge and a whole new load of grudges against both of us and if the guys who think I'm Vecchio connect up with the guys who think Vecchio is Linguini..."

Disaster. And almost certain death.

"So we can't return to Chicago?"

"Where half the city has Family connections? Not till these guys get caught, and we can't risk being the ones out there catching us, cos as my lieutenant so kindly pointed out, *they* already caught *us* once, so we are not to show our faces outside of Smallville, Kansas till these guys are caught. Then we go back and give our statements, get the evidence, slam these guys in jail and throw away the key."

"Ray, the trial..."

"With our evidence, it's a foregone

conclusion," Ray said, forgetting for a moment that he wasn't supposed to use such sophisticated words. "In the meantime, we pretend we're on vacation."

"That makes no sense..."

"You want to tell a bunch of people we don't know in Hicksville, Kansas, that a Chicago mob family's got a million dollar open hit out on us and the Canadian drug cartel is offering a million Canadian for each of us?"

"We've already told them we're police officers."

"Not that your buddy Lex believes I am and you're a Mountie so it only half counts. But that's okay, we can work with telling them we're cops. If they ask, we tell 'em we messed up, big case, we're on forced vacation till our bosses forgive us enough to let us back in Chicago without kicking our butts."

"And in the meantime, the FBI, et al, have a chance to find the criminals before they find us, and before they blow Ray's cover—"

"You talking about the FBI blowing his cover or the bad guys? And how the hell do we tell 'em apart? But yeah, we stay low, give the FBI and Welsh and your guys time to get the bad guys before they blow our heads off with very big guns. Fraser?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"One more thing. Your boss was kinda...concerned. She said...uhm, lotsa stuff, but it boils down to, you're in protective custody."

"She thinks I'm in so much danger—"

Ray gave him a flash of a grin. "Nope. She said something about pontoons and punts and bills from last time you were let loose in the back of beyond."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Protective custody?"

"Like that time in the Consulate where you arrested me," Ray said, his voice a million times warmer than his words would suggest. "I'm just returning the favor."

"Buddies," Fraser said, his smile broad and almost innocent in its open delight.

"Buddies," Ray said.

And they stood there for a long moment, just looking at each other, the delight deepening into something far more grown up.

"So," Ray said, throwing himself backwards onto the bed, "what are we going to do with all this time off?"

"I assume you'll spend most of your time drooling on cars and televisions."

"Is there anything else to do round here?"

"With a hundred dollars Canadian? Well, we could..." Ray looked at him pointedly, and Fraser hastily reconsidered. "Considering your preferred entertainments, such as dinner, dancing, drinks with friends? Probably not."

Ray ran his hands over the raw silk comforter, his fingertips remembering the feel of a fabric his ex-wife had worn so often,



a fabric so different from the wool and cotton that Fraser habitually wore. "I'll call Welsh, he'll wire some money."

"That would be excellent. Only...Ray, the only ID you have with you is Ray's."

"Which I can't use in case the bad guys have contacts and find out Ray Vecchio is suddenly using the ATM in Smallville, Kansas. Shit."

"Perhaps Inspector Thatcher would consent to wire me some money."

Ray nodded, but didn't answer, more interested, it seemed, in looking around the room than looking at Fraser.

"Ray... is there... you seem..."

Ray stared down at the comforter, at the way the silk was shot through with rougher, coarser strands, at the way some of them looked knotted, his gun calluses catching on them. "This is a pretty big castle, Fraser."

"Mansion," Fraser corrected instinctively, his wince fading when he realized Ray's smile was wistful, perhaps even affectionate. "Yes, Ray, it's pretty big."

"So how come we got put in one room? With only one bed?"

"It's... It's also a very big bed," Fraser said.

"But it's only one bed," Ray said, still looking at the fabric and not at Fraser. "And there's two of us, which means they think..."

Neither of them said anything for a moment, Fraser standing there staring at Ray who was steadfastly not looking at him.

After a few moments, Fraser rubbed his thumb over his eyebrow, and said, "I'll go and talk to Simons."

And it wasn't till he left that Ray rolled over onto his back, breath puffing out of him in what could've been a sigh of relief, or a sound of regret.

A hundred dollars Canadian didn't convert to much, unless a person was given the special Bank of Lex Luthor exchange rate. Ray leaned over and looked at the wad of cash in Fraser's hand for a third time and said, again, "You're giving us how much?"

"Far too much," Fraser said before Lex could answer. "We can't accept this..."

"You *are* related to Clark Kent," Lex said. "No, take it, please, Benton. You'll need clothing and I'm really sorry I don't have anything for you to wear, although we have plenty of toiletries and sundries here at the mansion, just pick up any phone and dial 0 to get a member of staff to help you. In the meantime, I'm heading into Smallville, if you'd like a ride to Fordman's?"

"Lex, I truly understand the onus of hospitality, but you're already giving us a place to stay and you can't fault yourself for not having spare clothing for us. We really can't accept—"

"Yes we can, Fraser," Ray interrupted, snatching the money from Fraser's large hand. "Because it's not a gift, it's a loan, so you can keep track like a good amateur accountant, then when I get money from Welsh or my...other check book or new ATM card arrive or Thatcher trusts you with something other than Monopoly money, we pay Lex back. Okay?"

"Are you—"

"Fraser, just say thank you to the nice man, and let's go buy some clothes. I swear I've half that damned haystack up my—" Ray paused at Fraser's throat clearing. "My...my shirt," Ray finished, rolling his eyes at Fraser.

But all the way down to the garage, it was Lex who kept his eyes on Fraser.

And it was a toss up whether Ray or Fraser noticed it most.

With three grown men, none of Lex's favorites would suffice.

"I'm sorry, it'll have to be one of the Mercedes," he said, and Fraser didn't even pretend to understand why that elicited a groan of disappointment from Ray.

"I thought Mercedes Benz automobiles were reputed to be fine vehicles?"

"Oh, they are," Lex said easily, stopping in front of the key display for a moment, obviously checking to see which cars were in the garage. "Good, my dad took the sedan and left us..."

"Okay, so it's no Ferrari," Ray said, stalking closer to the sleek grey convertible, "but it's no Pinto either."

Then despite Ray's earlier rush to shop for new clothing, everything stopped for another few minutes while Ray and Lex discussed horsepower and steering and suspension and all sorts of arcane minutiae that left Fraser glazed over and the other two...animated.

And bonding.

"I thought we were leaving," Fraser said, far too sharply, judging by the way Lex and Ray turned to look at him. "I uhm..." He tugged the collar of his dress uniform a little looser. "In my experience, small town stores keep shorter hours than those in a metropolis."

"True," Lex said, sliding in behind the steering wheel. "Fordman's doesn't stay open as late as Beckham's in Metropolis. We should get going."

"Metropolis?" Ray asked, sharing a look with Fraser.

"Yeah," Lex said, glancing at them as he floored the accelerator and the Mercedes screamed out of the garage. "It's about three hours from here, so it's kind of far to go tonight, but if you want to head there tomorrow, you can borrow a car or I'll have the limo take you."

"Metropolis," Fraser said carefully.

"Place with houses and stores and museums," Lex said, looking at him oddly, as if he'd been expecting a different reaction to Metropolis as he had to the first mention of his own name. "Not to mention a sports stadium, opera house and several very tall phallic structures designed to comfort my father in his drooping old age. That Metropolis."

"Oh, *that* Metropolis," Ray said, frantic glance semaphoring questions at an equally semaphoring Fraser. "We've been there, I was confusing it with the one in—"



"California," Lex said, taking his eyes off the road long enough to give them both a very puzzled look. "Or Texas."

"California," Ray said, as Fraser said, "Texas."

They both paused, then Ray added, oh so casually. "We've done a lot of traveling. Places kind of blur after a while."

"Been on the...road...a lot?" Lex asked.

"Yes," Fraser said, as Ray said just as confidently, "No."

"I've done more traveling than Ray," Fraser said, honestly enough, leaning forward and smiling at Lex via the rear view mirror. "Although where I'm from, traveling even a short distance can be a great adventure."

The tiny little smile on Lex's face made it clear he wasn't fooled for a second, but was allowing the subject to be changed anyway. "Where would that be, Benton?"

The conversation about the Northwest Territories quickly morphed into one about the best kind of cars for those conditions, which led Ray right back to Lex's Lamborghinis, which kept Ray and Lex happy, and gave Fraser time to lean back and stare at the rolling, conifer-clad hills of Kansas as they headed into town.

What is it?" Ray demanded sotto voce as he leaned over to "help" Fraser get out of the car.

"This place, it looks like a relatively small town, yet the sign on the outskirts listed the population as—"

"Forty-five thousand and one," Lex said. "I've always wondered if that lone one is the same now as twelve years ago, when the population was 25,001. That," Lex continued as he came round the front of the car, "was before my dad built the crap factory here."

"The what?"

"Fertilizer plant," Lex clarified.

"That explains it!" Fraser said, continuing in answer to Lex's questioning look, "I was tracking the scent of manure, but it was mixed with diesel exhaust then disappeared."

Lex stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, Ray nearly walking into him.

"You were tracking manure?"

"Don't complain," Ray said, stepping around Lex and heading for the store's front door. "That's better than when he licks it."

"You lick—"

"Spoor," Fraser supplied helpfully. "Ordure."

"Shit," Ray said.

"Well, yes, Ray, but I prefer—"

"No, I meant shit shit. The store's closed. That kind of shit."

"But it's only 6:50 and the store hours are listed as closing at seven p.m. today."

"Which would confuse me too, Fraser, but I'm a detective and see, I notice things like that."

The poster was a hideous riot of primary colors and a looming



rendition of what appeared to be the star of Hitchcock's famous film, *The Birds*.

It wasn't exactly the most reassuring of images to entice people to support their local high school football fundraiser.

"Clark didn't mention anything about this," Lex said, rattling the door just to make sure it wouldn't open even for a Luthor.

"Why would Clark tell you about a high school football game?"

"Because he's big on supporting his school's team. Why he does I don't know, but—"

Ray was shaking his head. "Man, now I *know* I'm too old to jump outta planes."

Lex looked at him.

Fraser looked at him.

Ray looked back as if they were both morons. "You know you're too old when cops and doctors and teachers start looking too young."

"Clark's not—"

Whatever Clark wasn't, he was definitely, and unexpectedly, right there. "Lex! I didn't expect to see you downtown."

"Benton and Stanley Ray—"

"He doesn't care what you call him cos he's a freak," Ray said, squaring his shoulders, "but you call me Stanley again and I'll kick you in the—"

Broad shoulders, their flannel covering stretched taut, quivered with barely repressed strength and violence as Ray was picked up off the ground and held against the door.

"Head," Ray finished, just as Lex said, "Clark!"

"He threatened you," Clark said to Lex, keeping his stare leveled dangerously at Ray. "I don't like people who threaten you."

"And I appreciate that, especially considering the kind of...people who show up in Smallville. But Clark, this isn't like you. You have to let him go." Hands made strong and steady by years of fencing flexed on Clark's forearm, until Clark released Ray's shirt and let him drop back to the ground.

"Thanks for helping me there, buddy," Ray said.

"Lex seemed to have the matter well in hand," Fraser told him.

"No, Clark had *me* in hand," Ray said, not moving, standing very still while Lex eased Clark away from him.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Lex said, still not letting Clark go.

Ray and Fraser exchanged looks, then openly watched the low-voiced conversation.

"He threatened you."

"That wasn't a serious threat."

Clark's head lifted, all belligerence and defensiveness wrapped up in an embarrassed blush. "He was going to kick you—"

"In the *head*? Even so, why did you—"

"He's dangerous."

"Yes, he is," Lex said, voice smooth as satin, revealing nothing, simply soothing, but his hand was still on Clark's forearm, fingertips barely moving, a surreptitious stroking.

Or a subconscious one.

Fraser watched the compulsive motion of those fingertips, and remembered other fingers, on raw silk, moving in endless, enticing little circles.

"Hey," Ray said quietly, drawing Fraser's attention. "You think they're a couple?"

"Could be," Fraser said, then turned and caught a flicker of something on Ray's face. "Could well be. Or perhaps they just want to be."

And he didn't let Ray go, just kept looking at him, till Ray looked away, and cleared his throat, and closed in on Lex and Clark.

"So where else can we buy clothes?"

"That's it," Clark said, making a painfully obvious effort to be civil.

"In a town with 45,000 people? What, you got one grocery store too?"

"And one bank, but two coffee shops and a sunglasses store," Lex said.

"C'mon, Lex, Fordman's is *not* the only place to get clothes. If you can wait until Monday, when the Friendly Exchange opens."

Lex actually winced.

"The Friendly Exchange?"

"Strangers.' Used. Clothes." Lex's mouth tightened as the words left his lips.

Clark and Fraser both rolled their eyes, while Ray and Lex stared at each other in restrained horror.

"I'll drive you into Metropolis tonight," Lex said, much to Ray's evident relief.

"The department stores there will be shut, Lex. Even with the way you drive, you won't get them there before the malls close."

"There are stores—"

"Lex, you think Fraser's going to find anything in the kind of store that stays open all night, the kind of all night store that *you* know? I've got stuff at home, Fraser can borrow some of that."

Lex ran a look up and down Clark, making Fraser and Ray look at each other speakingly. "Yes, you could."

"So Fraser, you wear flannel, right?"

"He's married to it. Me, I'll—"

"You could borrow some of Lex's. You're pretty much the same."

This time it was Lex and Ray who shared the speaking look, and it was hard to tell which of them was more appalled at being compared to someone else.

"I suppose they are," Fraser said, looking from one to the other. "Apart from the face, the accent, the body language, the hair—what?"

"Most people try to pretend my baldness is a big secret, Benton. No one ever mentions it to me, as if they're afraid I'll suddenly realize I'm bald and blame them."

"But—"

"Like a cue ball, yeah, I know," Lex said easily.

"I never pretended," Clark said sharply.

"No, you didn't," Lex said with perhaps more lazy, easy warmth than he realized. "Which is one of the reasons you're my friend, Clark."

And if Ray didn't know better, he'd swear Clark came *this* close to sticking his tongue out at Fraser and saying 'neener, neener, neener.'

"So shall we swing by the farm to pick up some clothes for Benton?" said Lex, who still hadn't taken his eyes off Clark. "Or are you heading to the big football game?"

"Like I want to get too close to the football team," Clark said, which made no sense to Ray or Fraser, but Lex obviously understood on more than one level.

"The farm it is," Lex said. "Then dinner. You want to join us, Clark?"

Clark looked at Ray.

Who raised his hands in mock surrender and stepped behind Fraser.

"Sure," Clark said, and this time, the civility was less forced and the smile more genuine. "Hey—what car did you bring?"

"Nothing you want to drive," Lex told him, pointing at the very boring Mercedes.

"I told him he could bring his Ferrari and I'd drive the Lamborghini—"

"—but he looked like you'd told him you were going to eat chili cheeseburgers in it," Clark said, all hostility forgotten under the charms of Lex's cars, or perhaps he was simply warmed from basking in Lex's attention. "You saw the Lamborghini, Ray?"

"I touched it," Ray said, back to being reverent.

This time, Fraser was the only one who rolled his eyes, while the other three waxed lyrical over a mere mechanical device.

Only the outdoor lights were on at the farm, Lex didn't ask where the elder Kents were, Clark didn't volunteer, and neither Ray nor Fraser had any reason to think the emptiness of the farm was unusual, and it took Clark a remarkably short time to run into the house and come back with an armful of clothes. With the way Lex drove, it didn't take much longer before they made it back to the mansion.

Dinner was "something quick and simple" thrown together by the cook, at least that's how Lex described it, although the other three men were more inclined to use words like 'best thing I ever ate.'

After some slight confusion over whether or not staff should clear up after dinner or guests should, Fraser consented to join the others in the...well.

It was certainly a room.

Lex paid no attention to the lethal weapons adorning the walls nor the just as lethal weapons clutched by several suits of armor; he crossed the room quickly, flinging open what had looked like just another stretch of wall paneling. "You said you were a Steve McQueen kind of guy, Stanley Ray?"

Fraser was shamelessly taking advantage of Clark's fascination with Ray and Lex's verbal fencing to sneak up behind him to take another few sniffs. No. Still no closer to placing that completely unique scent.

"Drop the Stanley, it's just Ray."

"Just Ray?"

And at least now Ray knew which Ray he was being, because he couldn't risk being Ray Vecchio in case walls, or household staff, had ears. "Kowalski."

Lex stopped half way through picking up the remote and looked at Ray over his shoulder. "And your dad called you Stanley?"

"Then he married Stella," Fraser supplied helpfully.

There was no other word for it: Lex smirked. Annoyingly. "I can see why you switched to your middle name, Ray."

Clark just looked at them both blankly.

Which just made Lex smirk even more. "I think I know just the post-dinner movie to watch."

"Yeah," Ray's hand snaked past Lex's shoulder, long fingers snagging something from the top shelf. "Bullitt."

"Is that the one with the car chase?" Clark asked. "I love that one."

"Best car ever made—"

Fraser, for whom motorized vehicles were an unreliable substitute for a dog sled in winter, and Lex, who hadn't been in a domestic vehicle other than a limousine since his last club-inspired ambulance ride, sat there in bemused silence while Clark listened, rapt, as Ray described his own beloved car, languishing alone in Chicago.

"Lex, if you don't mind, you do have extensive grounds..."

"Make yourself at home. I'll call security to let them know you'll be outside."

"Thank you."

Then, on the threshold, Fraser paused for a moment, turned and took in the sight of Ray staring at the television and still talking about cars and speed and Steve McQueen, with Clark staring at Ray with all the intensity Ray was reserving for the movie unfolding on the screen. "Lex," he said, "would you like to join me?"

Lex looked at Clark, who didn't even notice. "Sure," Lex said, and nothing about him betrayed the slightest hint of how he was feeling. "Sounds like a good idea, Benton."

several minutes at their unhurried pace for Lex to lead them away from the formal front lawns, and as soon as they rounded one last twist in the path, the gardens became tree-dotted and segmented by tall hedges and plant-covered fences, this older section designed as a series of rooms, each with its own theme, color scheme, scent. In the dark, small lights glowed here and there, just enough to prevent stumbles, just enough to illuminate a particularly nice tree or pretty plant.

"This is my favorite," Lex said, stopping under a weathered wicker bower so Fraser could see the entire area, greenery bordered by high hedges like walls, a tiny little handkerchief of a garden, spread out in a neat square, clutches of plants gathered like embroidery.

"It's very..."

Lex waited, his face and scalp highlighted by the dapple of moonlight coming through the trees.

"It's very comforting," Fraser finally said. "Soothing, and calming."

"I used to come here to hide, when the mansion was being rebuilt."

"Imported?"

"Stone by stone. My family heritage."

"But the mansion looks Scottish."

"My mother's side of the family, far more respectable than anything several generations of Luthors could muster."

"Ah. We have an uncle like that."

"Respectable?"

"Horse thief. Well, more of a moose thief, really."

"Isn't it unwise to capture a moose?"

"Especially in mating season," Fraser said, completely deadpan. "Especially if you have a bull moose and your aftershave is musk-based."

"Ouch."

There was a distinct twinkle in the eyes turned in Lex's direction. "I believe so."

"There's a bench, over there, behind the roses," Lex said, crossing the small bit of ground, the smell of basil, mint and thyme rising with every step he took.

"Wonderful," Fraser said, breathing deeply. "And do I smell, yes, lavender."

"I was just a kid when the gardeners were planting all of this. The hedges came from another estate, so they were already pretty high. My mother let me choose whatever I wanted for this one little garden, but I was furious when the gardeners told me it was impossible to have plants that bloomed year round in Kansas."

"So you chose scent."

"My mother knew the lore behind all the herbs, and I knew rosemary was for remembrance." Lex shrugged, sat down on the bench and looked at his childhood garden. "So I picked everything green I recognized in the brochure, and ended up with essentially an herb garden... Benton?"

The grounds were wonderful, expansive, with paths wide enough for two men to walk shoulder to shoulder, in a silence that was unexpectedly comfortable. It took



"What? Oh, I'm fine. It's just...it must be the rosemary," he joked, not that Lex smiled any more than Fraser did. "This reminds me of a childhood memory I'd forgotten. Where we lived, outdoor gardens weren't an option for much of the year, but my mother never stopped trying to grow things indoors. She'd plant herbs, and the only thing that ever did well turned out to be an illegal substance. Considering my father was a Mountie, that was the end of her one and only successful plant. I think she would've liked this garden."

"Would have?"

"Yes," Fraser said, hesitating for a moment.

"How old were you?" Lex asked, voice as soft as the sage glimmering palely in the moonlight.

"Six," Fraser said, and perhaps his voice was a little less steady than he had schooled it to be.

"Nearly fourteen," Lex replied quietly.

They looked at each other then, understanding and comfort in the brief smiles they gave each other.

"Do you ever stop missing her?"

"No," Fraser told him bluntly, answering the unspoken 'will I ever stop missing my own mother?' as much as the spoken question. "People tend to think I should, but..."

"But she was your mother."

Fraser nodded, because that said it all, whether other people understood or not. Lex, though, obviously understood, and so they sat together, side by side on an old bench deliberately built low enough to make a boy feel big and tall, while the freshening breeze carried the scent of mint and thyme and rosemary to them.

"I suppose we should go back in, Benton," Lex said when the moonlight was slanting lower and the breeze turned chill. "Clark and Ray will be wondering where we are."

Fraser gave him a look that clearly said he thought Lex was out of his cotton-pickin' mind.

"The movie's over," Lex said. "No more cars, and Clark'll be hungry."

"And it's been a long day."

"Benton, did you *really* jump out of a plane?"

Fraser got to his feet and followed Lex out of the small garden, back along the winding path. "It was that or let them kill Ray."

"You saved him. In a wildly bizarre way," Lex said, shaking his head. "You're definitely related to Clark."

The suite they'd been moved to was even plusher than the large bedroom they'd first been put in. It was quiet as they padded around, discovering that brand new toiletries awaited them in the shared bathroom, Ray making happy noises over the small scattering of clothing that had been put into the walk-in closet for him, including a couple of unopened packets of boxer briefs.

"There is a god," Ray said fervently.

"Well, of course there is. There could hardly be an afterlife without God and my father couldn't very well still..." The heavy weight of Ray's look turned Fraser around. "I uhm..."

"Am I asking?" Ray asked. "You see this? This is me not asking," Ray said, heading into the bathroom, the small click of the lock sounding unexpectedly loud.

It wasn't all that long before Ray emerged, damp hair nearly flat against his skull, cheeks glowing from the multi-massage-setting heat of the three head shower. "I'm going to marry that shower and bring it home with me," Ray announced.

"Ray, you can't marry a shower..."

"I'm divorced, I can marry whatever I like."

"Legally speaking...oh dear."

"Legally what?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, not legally. Just 'oh dear.'"

With the fine Egyptian cotton of his borrowed pajamas still clinging damply here and there as if someone had touched him and left their handprints all over him, Ray came into Fraser's bedroom, right up behind him.

"Oh dear what?"

Fraser was staring at the now-empty bag on his bed. "It seems Lex's friend doesn't wear nightclothes."

"I don't usually wear anything, you want these," Ray tugged at the pale lavender shirt, "if they fit you?"

"Oh, no, no, they wouldn't fit, I'll be fine, I'll just..." Fraser said rapidly, not once actually looking to see if what Ray was wearing stood any chance of fitting him. His face was reddening slowly, hectic spots of color rouging his cheeks, his ears turning even redder.

Ray was looking over Fraser's shoulder, the edge of his towel flicking against Fraser's neck as Ray raised both arms and towel-dried his hair vigorously. "You'll just what, Fraser?"

"Be fine, Ray, I'll just...be fine. So..." He was being far too bright and far too hearty in his camaraderie, but that didn't stop him: before he could control it, he had pivoted on his heel, one long -sleeved flannel shirt clutched defensively in front of him in one hand, the other hand raised in a jaunty wave. "Good night, Ray. I'll see you in the morning."

As a hint, it was about as subtle as a root canal without novocaine and Ray left, the door closing softly behind him.

And if Fraser noticed, in the middle of the night, that his bedroom door opened quietly, and Ray stood in the doorway for a long time just watching him, well, Fraser had the common sense not to mention it.

The morning dawned bright and clear, the sun streaming in through leaded windows, already warm, caressing Fraser's skin like summer.

Which just confused him even more, because this was Kansas, and this was the first week of March, and it shouldn't be this warm.

But then again, there shouldn't



have been corn in the fields, sunflowers growing outside a farmhouse, nor hills, copses of conifers and the occasional dam, so who was Fraser to complain about a bit of welcome sunshine? He'd spent too many years above the Arctic Circle to ever complain about waking to an extra bit of sun and daylight instead of lengthening darkness and increasing cold.

The shower was everything Ray had implied the night before, and while it was a quick shower by anyone else's standards, Fraser lingered, enjoying the play of hot water over his skin. In fact, if it hadn't been for the fact that he was a guest in someone else's home and he hadn't locked the door that led directly to Ray's bedroom, Fraser would have been sorely tempted to meet his body's more carnal needs.

There were nights, still, when he thought of LadyShoes' hands on his back and her tongue in his mouth. Until he remembered how she had used him, and he had used her.

Memories of Victoria were never far behind.

And all desire fled.

He was bland and calm as oatmeal cooked in milk by the time he was dressed in borrowed jeans and flannel and heading downstairs, Ray's door still firmly shut, Ray presumably asleep, because Fraser hadn't peeked in.

He hadn't even been tempted.

Much.

He followed his nose, much as he had the day before, only this time, the aroma was oranges and coffee.

"Good morning, sir. Breakfast is in the small dining room," he was told before he'd even opened the kitchen door all the way.

"Ah. Thank you. I'll just..."

He let the door swing shut, and started following his nose again.

The small dining room was larger than his office-cum-bedroom in Chicago. Several times larger.

"Benton! You keep early hours," Lex said, closing the folder he'd been reading, adding it to the other one beside his plate.

"The sun woke me," he said, returning Lex's smile, accepting the invitation to sit beside his host. He was plied with juice, eggs, toast, fruit and when he expressed a disinclination for coffee, tea was ordered from the kitchen.

"Won't Clark be joining us?" Fraser asked with what he hoped was discretion, subtlety and sophistication.

"Clark? I have no idea. He comes and goes," Lex said, spreading some soft camembert on his toast points. "It's Sunday, so he could end up here all day or not show up at all."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"I'm sorry, he was still here when Ray and I retired, so I had assumed..."

Lex sat back, letting his body language shout his disapproval and his denial.

Fraser, it seemed, was listening very well indeed. "Excellent eggs," Fraser said heartily. "Are they from a local farm or do you keep hens?"

"Organic," Lex said, easing some of the threat from his posture. "From the Kent farm."

"Ah," Fraser said, then circled neatly around the minefield that was named Clark Kent. "My grandparents kept hens. In fact, my grandfather bred several varieties, with varying degrees of success. These eggs..." He looked down at the fluffy mounds on his plate, not at all like the scrambled eggs to which he'd become accustomed in America: homesickness ploughed through him again. He could almost hear his grandmother's voice again, sharp commands spiked with unstinting, unforgiving love, and his grandfather, deep and mellow as a bassoon, speaking rarely, but always meaningfully. "When I was a boy," Fraser said, still looking down at his plate, "I thought scrambled eggs looked like a plate full of sunshine. In December, before the daylight returned..."

There was a tiny touch of a hand against his, making him blink. He looked up, the room blurred and fuzzy for a few moments, till he wrestled the memories back into their cages.

"Benton?"

"After my mother's death, I went to live with my grandparents." He laughed, sounding hollow and ringing false. "These eggs brought that back to me."

Beside him, there was a long silence, then quietly, softly, as if afraid of malicious eavesdroppers, "For me, it's lemon verbena. My mother loved that in her bath, and it's as if...if I just turn around quickly enough, she'll still be here."

"Sometimes," Fraser said, not quite able to meet Lex's eyes, "it feels as if my mum's close. Very close."

The room was fuzzing around the edges, his eyes burning, but that was only because he wasn't blinking, was staring hard at the sunshine on his plate.

"Especially in dreams."

"Yes," Fraser said, the fist around his heart unclenching a little with that one word, with that one admission.

They sat together, in a silence far from the comfort of the night before's walk through the gardens, until a member of staff brought in a tray with teapot and cup, and an excuse to change the subject and pretend that the entire conversation had never happened.

Lex had his feet up on his desk when Clark breezed into his office after lunch. His dad would disapprove of the way he let himself smile at Clark, and the haste with which his laptop was closed and put away before Clark had even unracked the pool cues.

"So, are they?" Clark asked when they were half-way through their first game of pool.

"Are who what?"

"A couple."

"Benton and Ray?"

"No, Eminem and Elton John. Jeez, Lex."

Lex took the time to sink his next two shots before he spoke, his body still bent over, cue and arms and gaze angled over the table, Clark's crotch framed by the corner of the table. "I thought you weren't interested in that sort of thing, Clark."

Clark fidgeted, and while he'd never admit it under oath, Lex could swear he saw the pool cue bend a little in Clark's white-knuckled grip.

"I never said that, Lex."

Lex straightened, looked Clark straight in the eye for all of half a second before Clark looked away. "You never said you were either."

And he knew he had Clark by the short and curlies there: because Clark couldn't hit back with "you never asked."

Because Lex had.

Just remembering it still made him want the ground to open up and swallow him, Persephone reborn, because that was better than his other impulses, all of which his new-found conscience told him were wrong. "Your shot," Lex said in lieu of giving into temptation, and then he stepped back from the table.

Clark's shot, in more ways than one.

And yes, surprise surprise, Lex could feel his smile twist with a bitter dripping sarcasm, Clark's shoulders were pushing back, muscles gone tight, eyes gone wary, and there were excuses being made about chores and right on cue, homework.

Because Clark was just an innocent boy.

Lex barely contained the biting bark of laughter, turning it into clearing his throat, although even that made Clark look at him.

An innocent boy.

Who was playing a Luthor like a master. Who flared with jealousy every time Benton or Ray or anyone so much as looked at Lex. Who caught every innuendo instantly. Who could no doubt lie about virginal inexperience as readily he could lie about strength and speed and rescuing a man from a Porsche sunk in a river.

But Clark was just an innocent boy and that's why Lex shouldn't push him, should let this stay at flirting and playing and making eyes at each other.

Clark who was, right at this very second, making eyes at Lex. Looking at Lex like he didn't know if he wanted to run home to mommy or fuck Lex over the table.

Everyone in Smallville knew Clark was such an innocent boy.

Until the next time something mysterious happened around here and Clark turned into a sex-driven predator who wanted to run away to Metropolis with Lex. That Clark...perhaps it was the double-edged honesty that cut both ways when Clark had brought up saving Lex's life to get the use of the Ferrari. Maybe it was the raw honesty of the way Clark had stalked

these rooms, so tall and proud and potent. Maybe it was the way Clark had faced down Lex's own father. But whatever it was, that Clark had struck Lex as closer to the real Clark than the bumbling blushing reluctant bride who was standing there staring at Lex, muttering about helping his mom make deliveries.

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on Lex's part. A balm to this fledgling conscience of his, born on a riverbank. Maybe judging Clark by his aberrant behavior was nothing more than an excuse to debauch or to simply take what Lex wanted.

Lex bent over the pool table again, body vividly remembering other times he'd been bent over, sex and experience caressing his skin the way the hunger in Clark's eyes so often caressed him.

Or maybe Clark was both the bumbling bride and the stalking predator; maybe Clark was as caught between two sides of himself as Lex was.

And to think Lex's philosophy professor had claimed yin and yang represented balance. The bland little bastard had obviously never been torn between the two.

Clark said something else, although Lex was barely listening to him, something about chores and Lex being busy with guests—and then the words trickled away, and Clark was gone.

Running home to mommy.

Again.

Running away from Lex.

Again.

Rejecting all this fomenting possibility between them.

Again.

A loud crack echoed through the room as Lex banked the last ball into the far corner pocket. With only the briefest of glances at the doors that still quivered from Clark's departure, Lex straightened up and headed back to his work. And his endless battle between what conventional business wisdom said he had to do, and what Clark would say he had to do. What this new life, this new self, should try to do, instead of what he'd been trained to do, instead of what everyone he knew did. Instead of what he actually wanted to do.

Yin and yang was a bitch.

And not for the faint-hearted.

Especially not when the person you wanted most in the world was as scared of himself as he was of you.

Fraser was cleaning his boots in the somewhat palatial bathroom when Ray returned.

"Fraser!"

"In here, Ray."

"Uh, I don't want to..."

Fraser sighed and looked at the closed bathroom door. "I'm cleaning



my boots," he said. He did not, despite his rather ignoble impulse, tell Ray that he was fully clothed and therefore as decent as he could get and since Ray had just about draped himself all over Fraser last night, it was really a bit late to back up this far.

Ray flung the door open so fast, it just hung there, quivering, like a well-used virgin. Fraser, staring up at Ray, sympathized entirely.

Ray was... Ray, yet not Ray.

Ray was dressed in Lex Luthor's clothes; the fit wasn't quite right, but oh, what the clean, elegant lines and sophisticated dark palette of colors did for Ray...

It took Fraser a moment to realize Ray was repeating his name in ever-increasing irritation and decibel levels.

"Yes, Ray?" he asked, mildly, going back to polishing his boots as if they were the most fascinating artifacts in the world and as if he were completely unaffected by Ray's extraordinarily flattering new look.

"Okay, so I took forty bucks from our cash stash, and stopped off at this coffee shop."

"So I see," Fraser said, looking at Ray's hair that was bristling with as much energy as Ray was.

"Weird place, I mean, who calls a coffee shop The Talon? Yeah, that sounds like somewhere I want to go, kick back, have a latte—but that's not important right now, what's important is who I met there. That guy Clark our host is so keen on? He was there first with his buddy Pete, then the Clark guy leaves and this chick Chloe shows up and if you think my hair's experimental, hers is an entire science lab. So she's there, and the waitress turns out to be the owner who turns out to be buddies with Clark and Pete and Chloe—"

"Ray, have you ever considered decaf?"

Ray actually paused. "Decaf? Fraser, decaf is the spawn of Satan, an abomination, evil personified, do not even mention that word to me again. In fact, wash your mouth out with soap. When I'm finished, cos first, you gotta hear this. So these people?"

"Clark, Chloe, Pete and the waitress/cafe owner."

"Lana, right, her, so here, the Chloe chick is really into this digital camera stuff and she was showing off her new portable printer, so I got these pictures. Right, so I got these from her. Lookit these for a second, I need to write some stuff down..."

Fraser skimmed the photographs, lingering over the one of Clark: there was something familiar about Clark, but he couldn't get beyond the unique smell, he'd been trying, but he couldn't place it at all. It had nothing to do with either city or farm. The closest he could place it was the sweat-scent difference caused by some medications. But still...

"...with a pink tutu under your pea coat."

He raised his head sharply. "I'm sorry?"

"Earth to Fraser. What's got you so hooked on Clark anyway?"

"He... The truth is, Ray, I've never smelled anyone quite like him before."

"Smell," Ray said, then shook his head. "I am not going there, Fraser. Okay, so you and me, we're trained observers, right? So my trained observation looks at them and does the whole gender, age, height, weight, coloring, all the usuals."

Fraser nodded, unease creeping through him: he wondered if he'd ever stop looking at *people* and start seeing only descriptions for reports, wondered if that had already begun, because he wasn't looking at Clark as a person, but as an uncatalogued scent.

"...this one is?"

"Hmmm," he said, stalling for time, hoping that Ray's caffeine high would spit the question out again impatiently.

"Him, how old do you think he is?"

Fraser looked at the young African American man: Pete. "Eighteen to 20."

Ray snatched a photo from the pile and slapped it on top of Pete's: flipped blonde hair and a silly grin, obviously playing up for the camera.

"Chloe," Ray told him.

"20, 21."

Another photo slapped on top. "This must be Lana. Same chronological age as Chloe, although her make-up and pose would suggest she's emotionally younger."

"And our felon-harboring friend's friend?"

"Clark's mid-twenties—25, 26."

"And our friend of felons' friend?"

"Lex? Around 30. 29-31. Ray, is there a point to this? They can't all be harboring felons and even if they were, we don't know that they'd have any inclination to harbor the felons after us. And we have no jurisdiction—"

"Justice is above the boundaries man places upon the law, Fraser," Ray said, grinning when he saw Fraser's surprise that he even knew such a quote. "But that's not it. Here, look at this..."

Ray's familiar scrawl, made worse by being written on paper braced against Ray's thigh rather than a desk. Fraser deciphered the names and the ages written beside them. "So you estimated their ages the same as I did."

"The *exact* same, Fraser, *exact* same, no differences, no variances, the kinda certainty that even defense lawyers can't break."

"Yes, but—"

"Sixteen," Ray said.

Fraser looked down at the printed images in his hand: two of Chloe, three of Lana, two of Pete, one of Clark. "No, Ray. Eight."

"Not the pictures, not the pictures. The ages. These three, and our felonious friend Clark, are sixteen."



"But—"

"I'm serious! We thought Clark was a teacher at the high school? Student, Fraser. Student. Sophomore. And Lex? I called Jenny, you know, the gorgeous blonde in Records, the one with the great—"

"—computer skills," Fraser said pointedly.

Ray muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'prissy' and 'prude,' but Fraser let that go, if only on the grounds that Ray had been known to use stronger terms.

"So, Frannie has the day off, so I talk to Jenny, with the great, gorgeous, wonderful rack of computer skills. Jenny checks on things for me. All these kids? Full drivers' licenses, this one, some kind of field agent thing organizing stuff for the Red Cross. And this one has an internship with a newspaper set up, all stuff 16-year-old kids do not get to do, Fraser."

"I'm sure there's a reason."

"Yeah, me too, and guess what, buddy: I figured out what we can do for fun around here on a hundred bucks Canadian."

"And forty dollars American."

"Like I said, a hundred bucks Canadian."

"Ray?" Fraser said, following his hyper friend into the shared sitting room of their suite. "Did you spend *all* of that money on coffee?"

"Yeah, but I didn't drink all of it myself," Ray said, pacing faster. Fraser begged to differ, but he kept his mouth shut, too distracted by how attractive Ray was, striding around in his sleek new clothes with their intriguing textures.

"Now, Frase, this is what we need to do, because there's something hinky going on in this town and we have bad guys running around looking for us, and the combination is making me twitch."

"Actually, Ray, I think that's the caffeine—"

"I know a caffeine high when I get one, Fraser. This is my cop instinct itching, this is my hunch gland working overtime, this is a hinky town that harbors felons."

And it was, not coincidentally, an excuse for them to focus on everything but the fact that they were stuck in a small town, sharing a suite, with absolutely nothing to do but spend time with each other.

Considering that Fraser knew exactly what he wanted them to do with each other and considering Ray was still stuck on the teeter-totter of 'do I, don't I?', investigating 'hinkiness' was probably the wise thing to do.

Especially with Ray dressed in clothes that hugged and skimmed his body like that.

Well, that's weird," Ray said as he jogged down the steps of the sheriff's station.

"It certainly is," Fraser said, looking up and down Main Street, with its mix of small stores and utilities such as the bank and post office, a mix that was familiar to anyone who knew very small towns.

Only Smallville had a population of 45,001, which was, by Kansas standards...huge.

"I know what my weird is, so what's your weird?"

"Look around you, Ray."

Ray did, shrugging when he looked back at Fraser. "So it looks like Hollywood's idea of small town America."

"Not just that. You pointed it out this morning, Ray. Ages."

Ray looked again. "No kids," he said, looking up the street.

"No toy store."

"Book store with no kids books in the window."

"Department store with no toys on display."

They looked at each other, and without saying a word, took a comforting step closer to each other.

"And your weird, Ray?"

"Wanna know what the sheriff's called?"

"Of course, Ray."

"Ethan."

Fraser waited patiently for the punch line.

"That's it, Frase. Ethan. That's what his deputies call him, that's what the plaque on his desk says, that's what the duty roster on the wall lists him as."

"While Ethan is an unusual surname, it's hardly—"

"It's his only name. That's all there is, just Ethan. Like the artist formerly known as Prince before he was Formerly Known As, like Sade, like Moby, like Liberace—Fraser, why are you looking at me like that?"

"I just hadn't realized how eclectic your taste in music was."

"I'm still not going with you to the Tibetan throat singing concert, so you can just cut out the puppy dog eyes or I'll tell Dief. Anyway, Sheriff Ethan is at the diner, but Deputy Dan told me it's okay to go over there to talk to him."

"Do you have directions?" Fraser asked, buckling himself into the seatbelt of their borrowed vehicle, glaring at Ray, in an impersonation of his grandmother, not that he'd admit that to Ray, just in case his dad was hanging around, until Ray buckled himself in safely too. "Ray..."

Ray flashed a grin at him, and put his foot down harder, the truck leaping forward, nearly bucking as the powerful engine roared.

And Fraser had to look away, look away right now, this instant, Benton Fraser, from Ray with his arm slung over the steering wheel, Ray, with that unexpectedly flattering shade of shirt nestling up against his neck; Ray, with that flash of wildness in his eyes that spoke to Fraser of home.

"Got directions, got a name. The Dish And The Spoon. And if the cows around here go weird enough to jump over the moon, I'm leaving, Fraser."

There weren't any cows near the diner, just a couple of auto repair places and a realtor's office. Which appeared to be selling town homes for a quarter of a million



dollars. In rural Kansas. Within smelling distance of a “crap factory,” if Fraser’s memorized map of Smallville and its environs was serving him well.

He couldn’t decide what unnerved him the most: whether it was simply the egregious price of the houses or the fact that in such a rural area with so much empty land, people would choose to pay that much money to live in such cramped quarters.

Well. He was sure they had their reasons, and really, it was none of his business how they chose to spend their money. Plus, for all he knew, these people might consider that a reasonable exchange for...for...well, something.

“A quarter million, for a townhouse, so you can have the commute from hell to get to this Metropolis place? Are these people *nuts*?”

“Apparently,” Fraser said.

Ray just shook his head—again—and headed through the gleaming glass door of the diner, pausing long enough to draw Fraser’s attention to another murderous crow poster.

“There goes my appetite,” Ray muttered.

“I think it’s supposed to be an appealing image, Ray.”

“These people never heard of Hitchcock?”

Eying the baleful eye, massive beak and hooked claws of the poster crow, Fraser said: “I think we can safely say they haven’t.”

“Hey, you see anyone who looks like a sheriff in here, Fraser?”

Fraser cast a careful, assessing gaze around the small diner, taking in everything from the juxtaposition of old-fashioned (or so out of date they were now what Ray called ‘retro’) stylings made of modern new colors, of ultra-modern hairstyles and clothes on the girls with boys in timeless, or dated, jeans and sweats and flannel, of a high-tech television cheek-by-jowl with an almost practiced air of small-town America.

Some perfectly normal people, by the looks of them, but there was...yes, there was a hint of a very peculiar smell from one or two, a scent Fraser couldn’t quite place. Normal people, weird smell, but no sheriff.

From behind the counter and a very crisp, very white apron, a waitress said: “If you’re looking for the sheriff, you just missed him by five minutes. Got a call from some meteo—”

There was an uncomfortable shifting from just about everyone in the diner, customers either staring at the waitress or suddenly fascinated with the tables in front of them, and the unease in the room made every cop instinct Fraser and Ray had just perk right up and take lots of notice.

But all the waitress said was, “Kids, you know. In the high school, so he went to go take a look.”

“Wouldn’t he expect there to be...kids...in the high school?” Fraser asked her, Ray standing almost behind

him, discreetly enough that Ray would be able to notice details out of Fraser’s line of sight.

“Sunday,” the waitress told him.

“Ah. So no after-school groups, football practice, band practice, no extra-curricular activities at all?”

“Oh, plenty of extra-curricular activities,” a burly caricature of a farmer said from his table by the window, voice sour as milk. “Only the kids keep *those* for their beer keggers out at the lake.”

“So we’ll find the sheriff at the high school. Thank you kindly,” Fraser said, sharing a glance with Ray, heading towards the door in tandem, neither of them lingering under the weird looks they were getting.

Shaking off the nearly hostile weirdness beside the even weirder patch of late winter/early spring sunflowers, Ray said, “I’m beginning to see why the crow doesn’t bother ’em.”

“Hmmm,” Fraser said, staring at the soil under the sunflowers.

“Hitchcock wouldn’t—Fraser, what are you doing?”

“The soil...it has...it’s the most peculiar *aroma*, Ray. Not metallic, not quite rock, but—”

“Fraser, get up off the ground.”

“Just a moment—”

“Now, Fraser, get up off the ground *now*. Fraser, do not lick— Oh, yuck. That is so disgusting. Do you have any idea what they use for fertilizer round farmland?”

“You’d expect them to use manure, of which dairy farms have a plentiful supply, but due to concerns over cross-pollination, the propagation of bacteria and other disease-causing parasites, not to mention the introduction of— Ah!”

“Ah what? Ah, I just realized licking cow shit don’t taste good? Ah, I just realized I am embarrassing my partner by lying on a sidewalk with my head stuck through a fence into someone’s yard so I can lick their dirt?”

“Ah,” Fraser said, jumping easily to his feet, his perfectly clean hand opening to show Ray an egg-sized lump of dirt-encrusted rock with veins of an interesting green quartz running through it.

“So you found a rock.”

“Not just a rock, not just *any* rock, but a marvelous rock. This, Ray, is a meteor fragment. Look at it.”

Fraser shoved it right up under Ray’s nose.

“And smell it! That’s the smell I detected in the diner—”

“You detected a smell in the diner? The only thing I could smell was onions, fries and burgers.”

“Not the food, Ray, but the people. This—this is what some of them smelled of.”

“Like Clark.”

Fraser shut up then, flexed his fingers around the rock, looked at it, smelled it again, licked it again. “No,” he said thoughtfully. “Not quite. Clark...” He shook his head, shrugged very slightly as Ray patted his arm in condolence.



"It's okay, Fraser, you'll figure it out eventually. Of course, I'm gonna laugh when you find out it's his home-made soap or because it's Lex's aftershave smelling different cos it's on Clark or—"

"—his mom beats his clothes clean on the riverbank so he smells like river," Ray was saying as they pulled into the high school parking lot, although Fraser had stopped listening to Ray's list of smells a good three minutes ago.

He started listening again when Ray nearly vaulted from their vehicle and ran after a blonde woman, shouting a greeting at her.

No—not woman. Fraser recognized the flipped blonde hair: this was one of the sixteen year olds. There was nothing weird about it: it was probably just a trick of the photograph that had added several years to the teenagers' faces, that was all.

Then she turned around, and he saw the way the skin around her eyes crinkled when she smiled, and the difference in her general skin tone, and realized: regardless of what her birth certificate said, this young woman wasn't as young as she thought she was.

Or perhaps she didn't think she was that young either, judging by the poise with which she was dealing with Ray. And the heat of the stare she was sending at Fraser himself.

"Hi," she said, smiling in a way that was entirely too... practiced for someone who'd only been around for sixteen years. "I'm sorry for staring, but, that looks like a Clark Kent shirt."

"It is," he said, smiling too widely to be polite, but just too relieved to mind: it wasn't him she'd been ogling, it was the shirt. "My own clothes are..."

He looked at Ray for help: they hadn't exactly discussed this part of their undercover story.

"Red," Ray said, "way too red. Fire engines stare in envy when they see all that red. Our luggage got lost somewhere, so until the stores around here open again, we're borrowing things."

The young woman, Chloe, took a good, long, lingering look at Ray. "Lex Luthor loaned you clothes?"

"More kinda gave," Ray said, smiling the charming smile that was reserved for pretty women, particularly pretty women as blonde as Stella, and which always made Fraser turn away and find something really interesting to look at. "I think he was looking for an excuse to buy some more clothes."

"I think Lex has an entire department store up at the castle—"

"Mansion," Fraser said without thinking.

"That's Constable Benton Fraser," Ray said, waving a hand in Fraser's direction. "He dots I's and crosses T's."

"I thought he was a Mountie," Chloe said, making Fraser swallow and take a hasty step back: he recognized that predatory purr only too well.

"Ray?"

"To the rescue," Ray muttered. "He first came to Chicago for

reasons that don't matter, and he's stuck here ever since, like a lesion."

"Ray!"

"You want to handle the woman?" Ray whispered fiercely, his entire body a bundle of coiled tension shot through with red swaths of anger. "No? Didn't think so. Okay, so I'll handle the women, you," his fingers stabbed Fraser's chest, "do not get to complain or look at me like that when I do."

"Look at you like what?"

"Big green monster—"

"I thought it was little green men," the blonde woman butted in.

"Speaking of green," Fraser said hurriedly, "I found this—"

"Oh yeah," she said dismissively, very nearly sneering. "We have tons of meteor rock around town. It used to be all over the place, but it's finally being cleared up."

"So meteor fragments are routine here?"

"Ten a penny," she said, taking it from him and turning it in her hand. "Or about ten bucks for one this size."

"So people buy and sell them?" Fraser asked, keeping Ray firmly between himself and Chloe's inviting smile and tightly-clad bosom.

"That's not all they do with them," she said, smiling up at him, stepping around Ray, getting entirely too close, and the combination of what she'd said with the way she'd said it, well, Fraser really didn't want to think how uncomfortable it would be to use the meteor fragments the way she seemed to be suggesting.

"So they do a bunch of things with the rocks? Such as?" Ray said, moving forward gracefully at the precise moment Fraser stepped back.

For one ignoble second, Fraser wondered if Ray and his ex-wife had moved that well together anywhere other than on the dance floor. Which immediately conjured up images of Ray moving with Stella, fitting together perfectly, images that made Fraser blush with shame for allowing his imagination to stomp all over Ray's privacy like that.

Stella was, Fraser knew only too well, nearly sacred in Ray's mind. Or at least she had been. Now... Fraser watched Ray talking to this slightly odd, very bright young woman, half listening to Ray and Chloe talking about interior decorating.

If he were to tell the truth, Fraser would have to admit he had absolutely no clue what Ray thought of Stella any more.

Because he'd stopped asking, months ago, when the answer had remained, time after time, "I'll always love her."

There was some pain Fraser saw no need to endure, and that, surely, was one burden he could be forgiven for refusing.

And Ray, bless him or curse him for his perceptiveness, was looking at him with such tender concern, it hurt all the more. So close to what Fraser wanted from Ray. So very close. But as Ray would say: close, but no cigar. Particularly not in a Freudian sense. And woolgathering would get them

nowhere, so he brought his attention back to what Chloe was saying, and followed on where she led them.

"So this," Chloe said, switching on the light as she stepped through the doorway, "is what else people do with the meteor rocks. Or what the meteor rocks do to them."

Ah. Not interior decorating: it wasn't wallpaper or art she was hanging on her wall, but newspaper clippings. Dozens of them. And all of them were...

"Weird," Ray said, hooked by a picture of what appeared to be an exsanguinated deer.

"That's why it's called the Wall of Weird," Chloe said, fingers tapping lightly across the various images. "And this is only the stuff we have pictures for. The rest of it..."

And Fraser let her tales wash over him and through him, as he stared dutifully at the photographs, and tried very hard not to stare at Ray instead.

Who seemed, at least since they'd arrived in Smallville, a little less hooked on Stella and a little more interested in Fraser.

When Clark walked in as if he owned the place, Lex wasn't in his office, for once: he'd known Clark was coming, and the thought of watching Clark bend and stretch across the pool table while fondling long, hard, phallic symbols and playing with his balls was more than Lex could manage today. So while the uneven roar and cough of the Kents' old truck was still dying away, Lex fled to the gym, where he could run forever on the treadmill without getting anywhere—which was a very depressing metaphor for his life right now.

At least running endlessly on the treadmill was a very good disguise, too: if he should flush, or sweat, or pant or do anything other than remain cool, calm and collected, he could blame it on the exertion.

What a damned pity he hadn't stopped congratulating himself on his cleverness long enough to think about the drawbacks and pitfalls of grabbing the first things in the gym's changing room, which just happened to leave him wearing worn-thin sweatpants.

In front of Clark, who was letting his eyes wander over Lex with far less subtlety than usual.

Well, well, well, Clark really was interested after all, at least until the next time Clark ran away from Lex and left him feeling like a soiled pervert.

"Hey, Lex," the inspiration for most of his masturbatory sessions and several of his most recent sexual encounters said, "do you know where your guests are?"

"I'm their host, not their keeper, Clark."

"They might need one. They're talking to Chloe. About the Wall of Weird."

Lex didn't say anything, he just kept running nowhere.

"And they were asking around town where they could find Sheriff Ethan."

"Harboring felons. I should never—"

"But I'm glad you did. Kyle needed a place, so did Ryan."

"I'm not sorry I did it. I meant I should never have told Benton and Ray," Lex said, pressing a button on the treadmill, increasing the elevation, because the more exertion he could claim, the better his excuse for being out of breath around Clark.

Who was wearing relatively tight black jeans and whose shirt was rucked up because one hand was stuffed into a pocket, pulling the front of the jeans...

Being caught scoping his best friend's crotch wasn't a particularly smart idea, not this soon after he'd sent Clark running for home.

But looking up at Clark's face wasn't much better: Clark was looking at him as if he were good enough to eat.

Which wasn't exactly surprising, given the push and pull of whatever the hell was going on between them, but the timing sucked. And that look wasn't exactly PG-rated, especially considering Lex was wearing thin sweat pants. That rubbed. Nicely. Really nicely. Not as nicely as a hand, but beggars shouldn't be choosers.

Not when Clark was back to devouring him with his eyes. It wouldn't last long, and he was a fool to think it would ever lead to anything other than hot looks, but it would certainly be replayed for many a long, hot shower. Unless Clark fled the scene of his repressed sexuality again. That had a tendency to...deflate...the masturbatory value of these moments.

At least Clark was just looking away now, not running away. And at least Lex was wearing boxer briefs under his sweats, so maybe Clark could pretend that any visible interest on Lex's part (or parts) was just a fold or bunching of the fabric.

Riiiiiiight. And meteor fragments were just harmless, inert rocks that didn't do anything to anyone.

"So my guests are making nuisances of themselves?" Lex said when Clark's silence had stretched into uncomfortable fidgeting. "I have to say, Clark, that seems like standard operating procedure to me. Every cop I've ever known was a pain in the ass."

And wasn't it interesting the way Clark's stare had flown to Lex's face then straight down to his groin?

And wasn't it even more interesting that Clark had flushed and turned away?

God save him from repressed virgins who couldn't handle their nascent bisexuality. And if he couldn't be saved, was it too much to ask for a helping hand? Preferably a nice big broad male hand that wasn't his own for once?

Clark braced himself, and turned back around, innocent farm-boy mask firmly in place, or perhaps that's who Clark really believed himself to be. "But they're looking at the Wall of Weird, Lex."

He yanked the safety lock out of the treadmill, hopped lightly to solid ground before the tread could stall and trip him. "And as long as Chloe's had enough sense to keep my picture off that wall, I don't see what this has to do with me, Clark."



"They're cops," Clark said, as if that explained everything.

Which it did, for Lex, but it shouldn't, for Clark. "I thought the Kents believed in the goodness of Sheriff Ethan and all his colleagues?"

"Apart from the deputy who kidnapped Lana and buried Chloe alive, yeah, we immediately trust every cop in the country! Plus, they're outsiders, Lex. They're not used to...to *stuff*. Not the stuff that happens in Smallville."

"And that bothers you?" Lex picked up a small hand towel, used it to wipe the sweat from his head and neck, kept it in his hand so it could hang, casually of course, in front of his groin. This close to Clark, so soon after Clark had looked at him with lust, he needed all the camouflage he could get. Which was pathetic and ridiculous, but being in Smallville didn't just mean an ungodly number of concussions, it meant an unholy lack of conjugal relations because even marriage turned out to be subject to meteor mutant murderousness. "Or is it that the truth scares you, Clark?"

"Why would the truth scare me?" Clark asked, his usual stalling tactic for not answering questions. "I'm just a regular person, I live on a farm with my parents like half the people around here. What do I have to be scared of?"

"You tell me, Clark," Lex said, taking one dangerous step forward, one step into Clark's personal space, into Clark's presence, one step closer to the taboo of actually touching. He knew he shouldn't, but damnit, Clark was *looking* at him, and Clark was keeping the truth from him again, when a complete stranger was willing to tell him about mothers, and memories, and pain. "What does a Kent have to be scared of?"

"Foreclosure," Clark said immediately, the truth a perfect means of lying.

And even that soupcon was enough truth to soothe Lex's irritation. "I could help with that."

"Not with my dad around you can't. He's too stubborn and proud to accept a handout."

"It wasn't a handout. It was a legitimate business deal..." And the words just drifted to a stop, because Lex's breath had been stolen by the indulgent affection in Clark's eyes.

"No way you'd ever make an offer like that if it hadn't been for me. And my dad knows that. You dressed it up and made it look good, but it's lousy business to invest the way you were offering," Clark said, voice as warm as a hug. "But if I wouldn't keep the truck..."

"Are you implying I run my business based on *sentiment*?" He could feel the smile pushing at his lips even as he said it, responding to the way Clark was looking at him.

"It's one way of making your dad mad."

The smile escaped, and it took real effort to rein it in, took even more effort not to lean forward and kiss the fond smile on Clark's face, but even Lex Luthor wouldn't push that far. Not yet, maybe not ever. "A new way of making my dad mad. I'll keep that in mind."

"Think about it. Overblown sentimentality that costs money," Clark was grinning at him now. "It's a heck of a way to break free of your heritage."

He could actually feel a bubble of singularly undignified laughter tickling inside his chest. "Look, Pa, I'm a walking Hallmark card."

"Something like that. Although, Lex," Clark leaned in close enough that body heat was shared, mingled, and hearts beat a little faster, "I don't think you'd look too good in pink hearts."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, 'what do you think I would look good in?' but Clark was pulling back, the smile growing awkward, the tall, strong body going clumsy.

One more breath, and he'd scare Clark off again: he'd pushed enough for one day, and if he had any chance of getting what he wanted from Clark without feeling like a monster, then he had to be as unlike his father as possible. He couldn't be greedy, couldn't allow himself that particular weakness his father insisted was strength.

Maybe Clark's running away wasn't all repressed sexuality and internalized homophobia: maybe some of it was the predatory gleam Lex had seen so often in his father's eyes when gloating over a new acquisition. Maybe it was the glint Lex had seen in his own eyes, standing before the mirror, imagining himself in front of LuthorCorp's Board of Directors after a hostile takeover, or in the Oval Office, the whole country—the whole world—at his feet.

"You know I'm your friend, right?" Lex said before he could censor himself.

"There aren't too many things I'm sure of right now, Lex, but *that* I know."

"Good," he said, off-balance with all this bluntness and honesty and up-front emotionalism. "Because I am."

"Yeah, I know."

And damnit, but Clark was grinning at him again, amused and affectionate and entirely too sexy for Lex's self-control, and Lex's self-control was something they were both depending on.

Which was, in a really warped way considering Lex's infamous past, downright hilarious. Lex Luthor, bastion of self-denial and sexual continence.

The end of the world, obviously, was nigh. There was no other possible explanation for this. One minute Lex was thinking of ways to fuck Clark over the pool table or even better, his desk, and the next, he was thinking of ways to keep them both at a purely platonic level because that's what Clark needed right now even if it wasn't what Clark wanted all the time.

They were both so schizophrenic, Lex wouldn't be surprised if there were four people in this room, not just two, although this being Smallville under the influence of the meteors...

Life was so much simpler when it



was all about hate, rebellion, sex and drugs and rock and roll. This love business...

"Lex? Are you okay?"

Okay? Was Lex okay? Lex was pole axed, blindsided, run over by a steamroller and feeling incredibly, unbelievably stupid because he hadn't noticed he was in love with Clark, but apart from that?

"I'm just—hunky-dory," Lex said, mockery blatant, a warning to let it go just as clear. "What?"

Clark watched him for a moment, before saying, almost carefully: "You know I'm your friend too, right?"

Lex heard his own breath hitch, knew Clark had heard it too by the way Clark looked at him.

"I guess I haven't said that to you too much," Clark said, more than a little shamefaced. "I—"

"It's okay," Lex broke in, the word 'love' ricocheting through his brain like a bullet. "I understand, it's okay, I know—"

"Lex, you're babbling."

"And Luthors don't babble? Christ, Clark, Luthors do everything everyone else does, and more, only bigger."

"I know that, and you're not *just* a Luthor—"

"No? Tell that to your dad."

"I have," Clark said, hard as a punch. "And I'll keep on telling him. But Lex, are you really okay, you look..."

Like what? Like a man who's suddenly realized he's in love and doesn't want to be? Like a man who has vivid memories of what it's like to love a Luthor, his own mother, awash in a sea of white linen and pillows, trapped in a bed, dying, while her husband went on far-flung business trips and world-wide affairs, all dutifully reported in the press?

Lips barely parted, Lex took a deep, deep breath, through his nose, out through his mouth, the way he'd been taught was supposed to release stress, but which he'd always found simply reestablished control.

"I appreciate your friendship, Clark," he said, perfectly calmly. "And I really would like to hang with you this afternoon, but I have work I need to do."

"But Lex—"

"Oh, yes, my guests and the Wall of Weird," Lex said, sidetracking the conversation neatly. "You already said there was nothing for you to worry about, and if there is, you should be talking to Chloe, not me."

Clark was staring at him as if he'd suddenly morphed into this week's meteor mutant, which was laughable, really, because Lex had been a mutant for years, and a freak for even longer.

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Why should anything be wrong? My guests are being entertained with Chloe's Wall of Weird, you and I have reaffirmed our friendship. Really, Clark, if this were any more

Rockwellian, we'd be sitting at a diner sipping milk shakes. Say hi to your mom for me."

And this time, it was Lex doing the running away. Not to mommy, or home, but to the fine woolen armor of perfectly tailored suits and the powerful isolation of a very, very, very fast car.

Sheriff Ethan wasn't exactly hard to find: he was in the diner's largest table, in full uniform, finishing up both a meal and a conversation with one of the local farmers. Now this was something Fraser could understand even in this town: any law enforcement in a small community (of forty-five thousand, his mind supplied helpfully, making him boggle just slightly) knew that the best way to police the community was to fix things before they broke. And the best way to do that was interaction with the locals, being available for people to just happen by and sit down just to say hello, and then unburden themselves. Sit in the office, and people wouldn't say a word about anything. But sit in

the local diner, or coffee shop, or hunting supply store, and people would stop by to vent, or mention something not quite right, or talk in low, uneasy tones, about how they didn't like the way their neighbor was handling his kids, or his wife.

As Fraser and Ray approached, the locals melted away, until there were only a couple of people well out of earshot of the Sheriff's booth.

"Sheriff?" Fraser said, quite unable to be so rudely familiar as to use the Sheriff's first name.

"Well, who do we have here?" the Sheriff said, getting to feet, what had no doubt once been an impressive footballer's physique now allowed to go to pot.

With something very much like shock, Fraser realized the sheriff was only a handful of years older than himself. "But for the grace of God," he murmured, only Ray close enough to hear him.

"Sheriff," Ray said, nodding a greeting, then accepting the outstretched hand.

Fraser was very careful not to smile as the handshake lingered, both men's knuckles going white with their surreptitious mano-a-mano battle. When it was his turn, he reached out first, automatically reciting, "Constable Benton Fraser, Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I first came to Chicago..."

And he made a point of not gripping the sheriff's hand hard, of not displaying strength or aggression or any other testosterone inspired gestures. Which flummoxed the sheriff very nicely indeed.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ray hiding a very wicked little smile.

"...Canadian Consulate. You have a marvelously unique town here, Sheriff."

"We sure do," Sheriff Ethan said, reclaiming his hand as if he didn't know quite whether to wipe it off or not. "And I already know all about you—Detective Kowalski here too. Got a call from Chicago telling us to offer you any help you need."

"Oh. Well. We certainly won't hesitate to call on you if we need any help. Of any kind."

"You do that. I hear you've been at the high school."

"Yes, with a charming young—" a sharp glance at Ray shut his partner up before Ray could snigger, snicker or provide any other commentary, "—reporter, Chloe Sullivan."

"Yeah, I heard. You know, son," and Fraser hoped his double-take at that didn't show, although he caught a glimpse of Ray's reaction, "you can't believe everything Chloe tells you. In fact, she's a sweet kid," another reaction from Ray, "but you can't believe *anything* she tells you. You know how kids are, heads full of the crap television stuffs in them, seeing conspiracies—"

"And meteors?" Fraser asked, plucking the meteor rock from his borrowed jeans' pocket.

"Those are harmless. The government's done studies."

"But the articles on Chloe's wall—"

"Are weird, I'll give her that, but they all started when the fertilizer plant opened, and before Lex Luthor took over from his dad, that place had safety violations up the ying-yang, and that was even with the money Lionel Luthor was shelling out to keep the inspectors happy. So round here, we figure if he was getting cited for all those violations even when he had the inspectors in his pocket, there must have been some serious infractions out there."

"The thing is, sheriff," Ray said, swinging his leg over the back of the chair and just sliding into the seat, like a serpent or a stripper, "it takes a while for chemical mutations to show up. You remember Three Mile Island? Love Canal? Took years for those kids to get cancer. And that's what puts the weird in Chloe's wall o' weird. Those kids all got cancer and illnesses—they got asthma, birth defects, skin problems, mental development problems, but none of them turned into fat-sucking prom queens, or mom-eating bugboys."

"She wasn't a prom queen," Sheriff Ethan said as if that was the only thing that could possibly need clarification amongst fat-suckers and mom-eating bugboys. "And there was no evidence..."

"I'm sure there wasn't. Sheriff," Fraser paused, licked his lips, glanced at Ray, then continued, "I grew up in very small communities and I've policed largely unpopulated regions dotted with communities sometimes numbering no more than two dozen souls. I know how...odd some places, and people are. I know that there are many things that can't be explained and certainly can't be included in reports."

For a long moment, Sheriff Ethan looked at him, then cocked his head in Ray's direction, the question obvious.

Ray simply launched into a description of a case involving voodoo spells, segued into lip-reading deaf wolves with a penchant for doughnuts, and ended with the single strongest reassurance he could muster that would prove he was used to weird. "Canadian," he said, pointing at Fraser. "Lotsa Canadians."

"Good point," Ethan replied, relaxing back against the deep red leatherette of the booth. "This place...they're good people, you gotta understand that."

"Once," Fraser said in the voice Ray knew meant a story was cued up and ready to go, "I came across a small hamlet, really just a handful of houses, very isolated. They were on a small hummock of land in the middle of what was a lake in summer and sucking bog under a treacherously thin layer of ice in winter. They'd become so isolated, they spoke an incomprehensible version of English and their marriage practices were..." Fraser tugged at the collar of his borrowed shirt and examined the array of condiments on the white Formica table top, "...enough to make even tabloid newspapers blush. As far as I know, those people are still there, still speaking their own language, only now they also speak English and use satellite phones and the internet to get what they want from the outside world."

"You didn't enforce the law?"

"Of course I did, Sheriff. I was simply...thoughtful...about which laws applied and how justice could best be served."

"It all began around here in October, 1989," Sheriff Ethan said, elbows on the table, voice low and quiet. "I was pretty much a rookie back then, but I was on duty when the meteor shower hit, so I saw most of it and helped clean up the worst of it..."

Fraser and Ray both listened, Fraser leaning forward in rapt attention, Ray leaning back in very cool near boredom, as the sheriff related tales of flaming meteors and death, dismemberment and disorientation, of a town burning and afraid and inured to anything odd that might happen after a day like that.

"Wasn't just the deaths and injuries. Hell, this is tornado country, we haven't had too many direct hits, but we get 'em, and we cope. But...we grow up with the tornadoes, we know the way the sky looks before they hit, we have Doppler radar warnings and the like now. But back then—the sky fell. On a clear blue day, outta nowhere, the sky fell on us. There was no warning, no time to run, nowhere to run to, because those damned meteors, they covered the town and half the farms around here. I don't believe any of Chloe's crap about the meteors changing people, you can't convince me it's anything but the chemicals from the plant, but folks around here haven't been the same since the meteor strikes."

"Because the sky fell."

"Came crashing down on us. People like old Widow Carver. Swore up and down a meteor had landed right outside her house and it was the flash that burned her retina. Only the truth was her daughter was driving up to the house when she was hit by a meteor, killed instantly, judging by the accident site. But Cassandra...right after the accident, she said she didn't want to see or know a world that didn't have her daughter in it, and two days later, she was blind. Seemed

perfectly normal, but she didn't remember her own daughter and claimed she could see the future."

"Could she?" Fraser asked in all seriousness.

"She thought she could. But round here, we don't ask too many questions about people. Too many of 'em ended up kinda fragile or just kinda *different* after the meteors hit. So we never notice anything and we never ask questions."

"Even if they're bugboys?" Ray demanded.

"Even if there are some unusual circumstances connected with certain events," Sheriff Ethan said levelly. "So round here, we don't look too closely at things, because sure, if someone becomes some kind of miraculous football player, what they've always dreamed of being, you can talk about that."

"But?" Fraser prompted.

"But sometimes, it's more like they've cracked a little, or like instead of making their dreams come true, they've made their worst nightmares come true."

"Like the young man with the fascination with insects."

"I didn't know he'd had sex with his mom." Ray interrupted.

"Chloe didn't say anything about that."

"Insects, Ray," Fraser repeated, enunciating very, very clearly.

"As in bugs."

"Not incest—okay, right, gotcha. Uh, sorry, Sheriff, I kinda..."

"We're a small town, Ray, but we're not Mayberry. We have all the big city problems you big city cops are used to, only not as often."

"Sheriff," Fraser interrupted before Ray and the sheriff could get into a metaphoric chest-beating competition, "given the nature of certain spider practices, what exactly did you do with the mother's body?"

"Yeah, the vet talked to us about spider eggs sacs and...other things. So we cremated her," Ethan said. "It's one of the things nobody in Smallville talks about, but it's nothing for you big city cops to investigate either. We bury regular deaths, but since about '89...well, there are folks we cremate, and nobody questions it, nobody says a word about it, we just do it. Kind of an insurance policy after old Mr. Crane."

Ray shuddered. "Spiders are bad enough, don't tell us about Mr. Crane."

"But Ray—"

"We don't need to know. We're not investigating here, Fraser. We're just being nosy, because it's obvious this doesn't have anything to do with the other stuff we need to be aware of."

The harboring of felons, seven of which were currently on the loose somewhere nearby or in a neighboring state, looking for one cop and one Canadian Mountie to kill.

"In that case, thank you kindly for your time and information, Sheriff."

"No problem..."

"Constable." Fraser supplied, flawlessly polite.

And Ray didn't show by so much as a flicker of an eyelash that he noticed the distance and formality Fraser had just imposed on the sheriff. So pointedly different from what Fraser was allowing Lex.

"Constable," Sheriff Ethan continued, "you need to remember there's nothing weird going on in Smallville that can't be explained by chemical pollution and the fears and insecurities caused by the meteor shower."

"I'll be sure to remember your excellent advice, Sheriff."

And with a last 'thank you kindly,' they were out the door and out at the truck, Fraser looking at Ray like his grandmother would have, Ray grinning as he waited till the last possible second to buckle his seatbelt.

"So. Not the fertilizer plant. Meteors," Ray said.

"Absolutely," Fraser replied.

"Think you should carry a piece around since it turns people into freaks?"

"Oh well, since you already think I'm a freak, I thought there'd be no harm in hanging onto it."

Ray's grin warmed, turned wicked and amused. "That why you have it in your pants pocket, Frase? Hoping for some mutation down below?"

And knowing Ray expected him to be flustered and fumble, Fraser leaned back in his seat instead, spread his jean-clad legs and said as urbanely as he'd ever heard Ray speak, "Oh, I think I'm already satisfactory in that department, Ray."

Delighted at having turned the tables for once, he looked at Ray and realized the tables hadn't been turned, they'd been upended. Because Ray was looking at him.

Looking at his crotch.

Looking at his crotch where his body was behaving in a way that was entirely unsatisfactory around one's friends.

In a way that utterly betrayed just how much he still wanted Ray and just how willing he'd be to act on it.

Fraser sat up quickly, used transferring the meteor rock from his borrowed jeans to the glove box as his excuse to turn slightly sideways, concealing his turgid penis, which was softening with torturous slowness.

He wasn't the least bit surprised when Ray's jaw clenched, nor when the truck sped forward, a jerky flick of Ray's wrist turning the radio on too loud to music neither one of them liked.

But the noise filled the truck cab, was a nearly physical presence, an audio chaperone, and a perfect excuse for them to sit in total non-speaking silence all the way back to the mansion.

And it gave Fraser time to ponder whether the cusp Ray was obviously reaching would lead to more, or less, than they had now.

If Lex had arrived one minute later, it would've been his guests going through the gates first, and he would've turned



around and gone...somewhere else. Metropolis. Grandville. Edge City. Gotham. Somewhere, anywhere, as long as it didn't involve interacting with human beings for reasons other than sex and/or drugs.

But he'd been driving fast enough that he had pulled through the gate just before his guests, and by then it was too late to do anything other than drive up to the portico and wait for them.

He was a Luthor: he'd been raised on good manners and politeness that would make even the Kents pale in comparison. By the time his guests had pulled up behind him, he had his anger stifled back where it belonged. He was still metaphorically kicking himself for being so blind, so stupid, so delusional that he hadn't admitted to his own feelings for Clark. The anger was neatly boxed up and put away, the love... well, that was threatening to turn into a cozy comforter or the security blankets he'd seen other kids clutching, something that wrapped him up and made him feel...safe.

The feeling was so bizarre, he wasn't entirely sure whether he liked it or not, but it fit him like a glove or a shroud, and there was no point wasting energy trying to figure it out right now. He'd deal with it, quietly, and certainly not in front of his guests. He left the keys in the car and turned to his guests, noticing with something like amusement that Benton had no need to physically haul Ray from the truck the way he had with the Lamborghini. By the time his guests had finished their endless banter and were looking at him, Lex had his features perfectly schooled into interested politeness and a not-quite-distant welcome—which faltered between a genuine warm welcome and a fairly intense fight-or-flight response as Benton walked towards him wearing Clark's shirt.

"Lex, do you always drive that fast?"

"You're definitely Clark Kent's older brother," Lex said, sidestepping both the question and the sudden impediment of Ray standing between him and Benton. "It's usually pretty quiet around here on Sundays, did you find anything interesting to do?"

"We certainly did. We met the Sheriff, and a charming young reporter named—"

"Chloe. She's my plant manager's daughter—did she tell you her theories on meteors, mutants and Smallville?"

"You believe her?" Ray said, sounding surly, sidestepping every time Lex made a move towards Fraser.

"Considering the other local theory is that it's my plant doing this, I prefer her theory to the popular one."

"Yeah?"

Fraser had the oddest notion that Ray was just looking for an excuse to punch Lex, the same intense but irrational response Ray had had to Councilman Orsini all that time ago. Which made no sense at all: even if he and Ray were involved—which they most definitely weren't—Lex had done nothing. Lex hadn't dated him or—

Oh.

Lex had been smiling at him, and he'd smiled back. To Ray, that would've looked like flirting...

Lex was looking at him, amused and slightly mocking, over Ray's shoulder.

If it walks like a duck, if it quacks like a duck... Lex had been flirting with him: trust Ray to notice it before Fraser himself had.

"Ray, shouldn't we go and call your...ah, Ray's sister?"

Ray pulled the phone out of his pocket, and backed down, away from Lex, albeit with one last teeth-baring sneer.

Fraser decided he'd better get Ray away from Lex before the first punch was thrown. And before Lex could provoke Ray farther by doing more than just smile at him.

Although it was a lovely smile, full of promise and a playful sensuality that was so different from anything Fraser had ever seen turned his way, whether from woman or man. It was a smile that could convince him that being seduced by Lex would be fun, no strings attached, just good, not-so-clean fun.

Of course, Victoria's smile had convinced him she truly loved him, and look how true that had turned out to be.

"Benton?"

"I'm fine," he replied automatically, even though nothing had been asked: in his experience, any name said in that tone of voice signaled concern. And he was fine, or at least better than he had been when he'd nearly sold his soul to be with her.

Ray and Lex were both looking at him with a complete lack of conviction, but it was Ray who came closer to him, Ray who looked right into his eyes, Ray who pronounced him: "Not fine, but memories can't kill you. So yeah, you're fine."

Although that last assertion had a strong undercurrent "and when we're in private, you're going to spill your guts or I'll kick you in the head." Which was, frankly, another reason to be glad he wouldn't be sharing a room or a bed with Ray tonight.

But if he wanted to...

Lex was still looking at him, but the smoldering, flirtatious seduction had given way to a concern that was almost... friendly. Then Lex caught him looking, and the concern slid back towards flirtation, blended with the friendship, as if a person didn't have to give up friendship to have physical affection too.

"Want me to kiss it better?" Lex said, the self-deprecating smirk making the line funny rather than just appallingly cheesy.

"Want me to kick you in the head?"

"Is that your only threat, Ray? You need to diversify. You won't get anywhere with just one act of violence in your portfolio."

"Yeah? Well you won't get far with..."



Lex just stood there while Ray did a visual inventory of mansion, car that cost more than a several homes, even Lex's quietly expensive clothes.

"Damn," Ray said. "You even pull off the bald look. You should grow it back, give the rest of us a chance."

It wasn't often that Lex Luthor was surprised enough to show it. "I can't. This," he ran his hand over his smooth scalp, "is from the meteors."

Which meant—

Ray kicked Fraser in the shin, unobtrusively.

Fraser shut his mouth, trapping the question before it could escape.

But Ray's reaction confirmed it: they both thought Lex was like one of the people on Chloe's Wall. Fraser was almost tempted to ask what Lex did—shimmer through walls, channel electricity, suck the youth from people...

Which would at least explain all these 20-something "teenagers."

And the complete lack of middle and grade school children.

Or maybe Smallville's citizens were intensely Victorian and had a strictly enforced by-law that said children should be neither seen nor heard before their fifteenth birthday. Or maybe there had been no viable births for years after the meteor shower.

Lex, completely at ease while his guests fumbled for the right thing to say, smirked slightly and walked past them up the stairs, pausing at the door. "Are you coming in, gentlemen, or are you going to stay outside for a while kicking yourselves?"

"I'm sorry," Fraser said, mere steps behind Lex, his boots echoing even more annoyingly today as he hurried to catch up to Lex, stopping him with a hand on Lex's forearm. "We're simply..."

"Curious? Intrigued? Fascinated?"

"Sidetracked," Ray said, sending Fraser a dirty look for reasons beyond Fraser's comprehension. "This Wall crap—yeah, you got mutants, but I'm from Chicago, we got weirder than you and we didn't even need any meteor rocks."

"Oh dear," Fraser said, not looking at Ray, giving Lex an ingratiating smile instead. "He seems to have quite a bee in his proverbial bonnet about..."

Lex waited, but there was nothing Fraser could say without digging himself into a very deep hole with Ray or Lex or both. "Speaking of bonnets, I couldn't help but notice you have a very fine collection of Scottish armor."

"Not me, my dad," Lex said, permitting the change of topic, letting both of them off the hook and turning Ray's temper aside. "Apart from books, my tastes run closer to this century."

"And a little farther from your father's apparent fascination with war?"

"As far from that as I can get."

"Ah," Fraser said, following Lex into the office area. "The desk, the chairs, the rug..."

"The Le Corbusier chaise longue, the electronics, all of that. You should see my bedroom—" which came out innuendo-free, till Lex realized what he'd said and unleashed another one of those inviting smiles on Fraser.

"I bet he will. Some of us aren't sidetracked," Ray said pointedly, his glare quite out proportion if all that was bothering him was Fraser being sidetracked.

Ray ran a hand over his hair, the familiar gesture such a close match to Lex's that it made Fraser blink.

Then Ray was talking to him without looking at him. "Look, okay, so right, you're on vacation and you're a grown man so I gotta... Frannie has a shift today, so I'll call her, check out what's going on. You can..." Ray stared at Fraser for a moment, then ducked his head, shoulders hunched as he walked away. "I'll see you later."

And it bothered Fraser that Ray hadn't sounded sure of that at all.

The doors closed behind his partner, and Fraser turned back to his host, to find himself under the closest scrutiny, from eyes that were the exact shade of the Northern sky in the short, thin days before night set in and after summer had burned.

For just a moment, Lex looked like...home.

"I thought you and Ray weren't involved?"

"We're not," Fraser said, then threw caution to the wind and added, "but not for lack of inclination on my side."

"Ah," Lex said, and Fraser understood exactly why he himself drove Ray nuts when he said that.

"Ah?"

"Let's just say I'm not unfamiliar with that situation myself."

"Ah," Fraser said, getting a small smile out of Lex, lightening the mood before they both ended up wallowing in self-pity when anyone could just walk in and catch them.

Lex was following Fraser's gaze around the room, noticing everything that Fraser was noticing.

"Do you fence?" Lex asked when Fraser went over to examine the collection of foils and epees thrust into an umbrella stand in a casual, careless display of wealth.

"Not as such," Fraser said, pulling out a very nice blade, flexing it experimentally. "I'm quite competent with whittling and I've read several books on the subject of sword fighting. It seems simple enough, if one applies principles of balance, control, Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Newton's Third Law of Motion. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction..."

With a flourish worthy of Zorro, Lex pulled a blade out and tapped the tip against Fraser's chest. "Care for a match? Book learning against years of experience. Thrust and parry."

"Equal and opposite reactions."

Not that either of them was talking entirely about fencing, of course. Not that either of them was putting on protection either, but both were taking up the position.



"En garde," Fraser said, raising his blade to Lex.

Who acknowledged him, and then—

Movement, light and strong as the wind over unbroken miles of tundra, and Fraser knew how to move into and away from that. He planted himself, strength and bulk his only defense against all that spry, airy motion.

And Lex had strength too. A wind could break an oak, but not a reed that knows how to bend.

Somewhere in there was a lesson.

Slowly, very slowly, although their bodies were moving fast, quick glittering movements touched by the bright glamour of sunlight through colored glass, they shifted, balance edging first one way, then the other, wind and air learning something from the rock and oak, stolidity taking cautious flight, tasting what it is to be free from the surly bonds of earth.

So wrapped up were they in each other, in this lesson each was giving and each receiving, that neither noticed when Clark took root on the threshold between open doors, nor when Ray breezed in through the narrow gap left between Clark and the doorframe. Nor did they notice when Clark and Ray looked at each other, and both walked heavily away.

Regardless of who had given birth to him, he was Martha Kent's son, so he made the offer with good grace and even some hint of willingness. "Since they're...busy, is there anywhere you'd like to go? I could show you around."

Ray looked out over the sweep of sandstone steps leading down to the driveway, then beyond, to the endless flow of lawn, to an even more endless sea of farmland (and hills, and forests, but for the sake of everything that was supposed to make sense, he was ignoring those). "I'm allergic to the great outdoors," he said.

"Then how about the movies? Or the local museum. It's closed today but I can..."

"You think I'm going to arrest you if you pick a lock?"

That wasn't exactly quite what Clark had had in mind, but it was close enough for a stranger. "Isn't that what cops do?"

"Not me," Ray said, as if his voice were a stranger to him too. "Not me."

"Then what do you do?" Clark asked, heading towards the side of the building, Ray accompanying him pretty much automatically.

"Me? I pretend to be someone I'm not," Ray muttered, echoing something Fraser had told him a long time ago about the original Ray Vecchio. "What do you do?"

"Nothing much. I go to school," he didn't miss Ray's double-take, but in Smallville, a person learned to pretty much ignore those, and in self-defense, Clark had turned it into a fine art, "I work on the farm. That's about it."

He watched out of the corner of his eye to gauge Ray's reaction; realized that cop instincts weren't just the stuff of legends.

"I can go along with that."

Not believe it, just go along with it. "So you think I'm lying?"

"I know you're lying," Ray said, shrugging, apparently too busy looking at the mansion's crenellations and ostentations to pay much attention to Clark, but missing absolutely nothing. "But the truth's overrated anyway."

"How can you say that?"

And boom, the buried anger was right there, erupting up through the layers of repression and control. "Because the truth ruins everything! Me and Stella were fine, till we started trying to make it perfect and started telling each other the truth, and me and Fraser were fine till he told me..."

Clark opened a small side door, leading them into what had been the Great Room and was now Lex's gym. "What did he tell you?"

"Anyone ever tell you you're nosy?" Ray asked, going around Clark to the boxing ring that dominated the entire room. "Wow," he said, stroking his hands along the coarse canvas and smooth ropes, turning around to look at all of the framed posters of boxing greats, their names dropping from his lips like a prayer.

"Look at this! This is just..."

Clark shrugged, keeping over beside the door, well away from all these things that invited men to unleash their strength and aggression. "It's one of Lex's favorites. If you go through that door," he nodded at the door in the opposite corner, "it leads to the main entertainment room where we were last night."

"I can watch movies any time," Ray said, crouching down to take off his boots, leaping up to climb into the ring, dancing on his toes, throwing a few punches. "Hey, c'mon, get some gloves, we can spar—"

And Clark visibly recoiled.

"Uh, no, thanks. I don't box—"

"So I'll teach you. I used to coach boxers, I'm good at it, let me teach you."

"No, I'm fine, I don't want to—"

"I'll be gentle with you," Ray said, smile all challenge and mockery.

Clark was moving forward, pulling off his jacket before his brain got in gear, then he pulled himself up short, nearly stumbling. "No, I can't."

"C'mon, don't be a coward, it's an art—"

"No," Clark said, trying to keep the anger and resentment and everything else out of his voice, "I said I can't."

Not don't want to. But can't. Ray stopped, came over to the ropes and looked down at Clark's open face, recognized the miasma of emotions he saw there from all the other faces he'd seen it on: young men brought up on a steady diet of violence and brittle pride, young men for whom violence was something they'd endured all their lives, young men



who had committed violence on others and feared that within themselves. Feared that next time, they would do worse. Feared that next time, they wouldn't stop.

And that's what boxing was all about.

"Come up here," Ray said, gentle command and unyielding reassurance. "Boxing's not about violence, it's about control. It's about knowing your own strength, it's about learning to let off just enough steam so you won't explode and do something you'll regret. Come on. We'll put on helmets and gloves, you can't hurt me."

"Yes I can," Clark whispered, and for this man, this stranger who knew violence, this cop who struggled with temper and control, he could let it show. Could let his own fear show, to meet and match this man's, who would be gone in just a few days.

"The meteors?"

Close enough. He didn't confirm it, but he didn't deny it. Lying by omission, which was a sin in some quarters, but which Clark considered getting off easy, compared to some of the lies he'd had to tell friends.

"Okay, so no sparring. We'll start you with the punching bag, move up to people after. Go get some gloves, and I'll teach you the delicate art of the speed bag."

He'd barely made the bag move at all, and he glanced at Ray, expecting Ray to be looking at him like he was a total wuss. But Ray was looking at him with sympathy and understanding, as if he'd seen other guys do this a hundred times.

"Good, that shows you know how to pull your strength all the way back," Ray said. "Now try letting it out, a drop at a time, like this—" tiny light taps to the hanging ball, barely disturbing it, but setting it swinging, each arc a fraction higher. "Easy, easy, easy. And don't worry about it—you can't hurt a speed bag. You can bust it, but you can't hurt it."

Because it wasn't a person, and it wasn't a wooden upright in his family's kitchen, and there was no glory, no temptation to show off for cheerleaders or his dad or—or himself.

No repercussions, just controlling himself the way he'd learned to control his strength. He could do this, he could let out some of this...boiling mass inside him. Drop, by drop, by drop.

Easy, easy, easy.

But it was hard, hard, hard. He could feel his shoulders knotting with the conflict of wanting to slam his fist into that ball, let the anger out, and the need to control the anger rising up to counteract that. He'd been taught that all his life: suppress the anger, never lose your temper, never let it loose...

"Drop, by drop, by drop," Ray said at his side. "Easy. Just take it easy, can't do it all at once, learn how it feels, you're the one in control, not the anger. C'mon, let it go, easy, easy, easy..."

And it wasn't, but he could feel where there could be balance. Something to do other than just *running* when he felt he was

going to jump out of his skin or punch rock into dust.

Or hit a human.

He hadn't forgotten Phelan, and what he'd wanted to do to that slime bucket. Hadn't forgotten Nixon, and what he'd been prepared to do to save his father. Or to prevent his father from killing to keep his secret safe.

He hadn't forgotten what Lex had done, to save either Kent from being killers. And he'd thrown that in Lex's face—

"Whoa, easy, easy, easy!"

Clark was pretty sure that even speed bags weren't supposed to move that fast. Or bounce that hard against the plate.

"Uh...I guess the swivel must be defective."

Ray looked at the bag, still swinging too fast for the eye to see, then he looked back at Clark. "Sure," he said easily.

"Sounds good enough to me."

And why the hell couldn't Lex be like that? Why the hell couldn't Lex be this...this...*easy* about his lies?

Because Lex wasn't a stranger just passing through the way Ray was. Because Lex still believed that the truth mattered. That it was needed for trust.

"Did the truth really wreck your marriage?"

Ray watched the speed bag like a hypnotist's latest client, finally shaking himself, and looking at Clark, the bleakness in his eyes painful to behold. "It didn't help. We were already in trouble, I was just lying to myself about it. Then we started telling the truth, and all the little things you let slide in a marriage, all the little things about the other person that bug you or you don't like, but don't matter cos you love them? They became these big things, because now I knew she hated it when I watched Bullitt twice in a row, and she knew I hated it when she used her favorite perfume and I never liked her favorite suit, and she never liked my favorite restaurant, not really. All these things we started feeling guilty about, cos now we knew each other didn't like 'em. We knew all the big things to avoid—my dad, her mother—but then we started on the little things, and that soured everything, so we started on the big things."

"So lying is good?"

"As long as you trust each other, yeah."

Which was a concept enough to give a Kent-raised son a severe case of mental whiplash.

Ray took pity on him, and nodded at him to start back on the speed bag, easy, easy, easy, while Ray's voice was wistful as a summer's breeze. "You trust each other, because you know the lies aren't bad lies. They're little white lies, or big white lies—you know, yeah, I love your mother's cooking, no, you earning more'n me doesn't bother me. But you know they're not bad lies, you know they're to protect you, make both of you feel better. So lies are what glue a relationship together."

"That's..."

Mind-boggling.

But the possibilities...

He had to talk to Lex about this. Maybe not directly, definitely not directly, but somehow...



Maybe they could stop the truth from tearing them apart if only they could find a way to make lies glue them together.

Dinner was excellent, if you looked only at the food. If you looked at the conversation, at the people, then dinner had been...interesting, or excruciating. Or both.

They were all four of them outside now, Fraser's suggestion of a post-prandial walk shot down by Ray's protestations of allergies, which were shot down by Lex's offer of antihistamine for Ray and company for Fraser, which was circumvented by Ray's stepping outdoors and Clark quietly hemming Lex in.

The walk had been remarkably brief: only as far as the French doors and the large patio beyond, where a table and four chairs had been set out beside a small portable bar.

"Fraser!" Ray hissed, grabbing Fraser's arm, pulling him back a bit, Lex stopping until Clark urged him on towards the far end of the grand veranda.

"You spoke to Frannie?"

"Yeah. Word is this whole gig is gonna be over soon, maybe even tonight or tomorrow—your old friend is raking in the info, the whole shebang is good to go and our felons are still on the loose, but the Feds claim they're narrowing in on them."

"In other words, we should continue to use maximum caution—"

"—and expect the bad guys to show up before the Feds. Not that I'm saying the Feds couldn't find their asses in a snowstorm, but we've worked with these particular guys before."

They certainly had, which put paid to any hope Fraser might have entertained that the FBI would be of some assistance. In fact, they'd be lucky if those particular FBI agents didn't lead the felons right to their doorstep. Speaking of which... "Any information on our host and his friend?"

"Mucho," Ray said, he and Fraser heading towards the other side of the patio, as far away from Lex and Clark as they could get—well out of earshot: not even Fraser would be able to hear someone so far away.

And under the moonlight that covered Smallville and all its strangenesses, Ray looked at his partner and friend, a man who could see farther, hear better and taste chemical compounds. A man who had been known to leap from tall buildings, or onto cars or trains or planes. A man who could use chewing gum and wire to hear and decode radio messages, and Ray still wasn't sure how Fraser had tinkered with the plane's in-flight guidance. For a brief moment he was tempted to ask where Fraser had been in October '89, but Fraser was Fraser: he didn't need any meteors to make him a freak. And freak or not, he was Fraser, his friend, before he was anyone else's freak.

"So there's a raftload of information about our host, but none of it connected with felons in the past year and a half," Ray said, pretending he hadn't noticed Fraser noticing his protracted silence. "So whatever he and Clark were talking

about, they didn't get caught or their felons weren't real felons. According to Frannie, Lex was Mr. Wild Child till he came here. Since then, far as the law's concerned, he's been Mr. Clean. But Frannie says it's weird—"

"Which I would venture is par for the course around here."

"Which I would agree with. She says all the records she could find on our bald meteor friend are from Kansas City, Chicago, New York and L.A. No Metropolis."

Losing an entire city was...disturbing. Fraser could understand losing a settlement of fifty or so, he'd done that himself, due to the shift of coastline after the ice broke away, but an entire city? It had to be around here *somewhere*. But then, this part of Kansas also boasted a dam and a gorge and meteor mutants that no one outside of Smallville seemed to notice, so why fret over an invisible city?

"He's also richer than just this mansion and a dozen hot cars rich. So rich, we shoulda heard of him. And his dad, who is so sleazy the FBI are trying to pin a RICO on him. And the meteor mutant with hair?"

Fraser's eyes widened briefly at that piece of news. "Your boxing session with him?"

"Told you you could learn everything you needed to know from the sweet art. Anyway, our friend Clark has the funkier adoption you ever saw. Paper trails that dead-end where they shouldn't, no birth certificate, an *estimated* age, medical examinations and vaccinations done by a clinic that doesn't exist and certified by a doctor whose license was revoked for extreme drug abuse and malpractice two years later, a fly by night adoption agency that did his one adoption then folded, and all of it traced right back to our bald mutant's dad."

"Which is..."

"Which is stinking of illegitimate son."

"Which means we should tell them."

"Maybe that's why they haven't done anything."

"You're sure of that?"

"Clark didn't say nothing—but he hinted, and I'm not stupid. It all points right at illegitimate kid, but I don't know. The only birth certificates Frannie could find with Lionel Luthor listed as father were Lex's, his infant brother—SIDS..."

Fraser winced, looked ahead at where Lex and Clark were standing side by side leaning against the low parapet that separated the large porch from the grounds.

"And two other kids, both of which would be twelve or under. Nowhere near Clark's age, official or what's right in front of us."

"So perhaps they're not brothers after all. There's no family resemblance."

"It's crazy, Fraser. I know there's something hinky about Clark and his adoption, there's something hinky about his parents and how he was found and where he comes from, and illegitimate is the best candidate to explain all



the hinkiness, but—I got a hunch. It stinks one way, but I'm jumping the other way."

"More Smallville strangeness?"

"Yeah. Frannie checked—none of the missing kids right before he showed up adopted match him. None of the folks killed around here had any kids unaccounted for. He came from somewhere, but I don't know where."

"Maybe this legendary Metropolis."

"No weirder than anything else in this burg. He's fast, Fraser. I've never seen anyone hit a speed bag the way he did. And he's scared."

"Of Lex?"

"Himself. I seen it before, in the gangbangers I coached. But he's more scared of himself than any of 'em ever were."

"The mutations."

"That's some of it." Ray gave him a lingering sidelong look. "But it's really the anger. Hate. Resentment, self-doubt, self-loathing...that kid's super-sized his side orders of guilt and self-hate." Then, after a beat, with Fraser's unspoken question hanging between them: "Takes one to know one."

And that came under the category of interesting, and excruciating, that his friend should feel that way.

Not that any of those feelings were complete strangers to Fraser. They weren't exactly intimate friends either, but there had been times in his past of which he was less than proud.

Beside him, Ray had gone uncommonly still. "You like him, don't you?"

"Like who, Ray?"

Ray nodded in the direction Fraser had been looking. "The guy you were rubbing your blade against this afternoon."

He listened to the beating of his heart and the sounds of night birds, the answer to Ray's question more complex than his friend knew, the memory of Ray's clenched jaw and turning away still fresh and bitter in his mind.

"Socrates said that when we appreciate beauty here on earth, it's because we're remembering a glimpse of heaven and the essence of Beauty that lives there. I think love's like that, Ray."

"That better not be a crack about how I'm missing out on heaven cos I won't do the Greek thing with you."

A kaleidoscope of Greek pottery cascaded through Fraser's mind, clear-cut images of joyful men taking pleasure in each other, his desire for Ray so ragged and misshapen in comparison. "Of course not, Ray."

"So you mean...if you can't have the real thing, the essence, you take what you can get?"

"Something like that."

"What do you want from me, Fraser?"

"Whatever you can give me."

And knew it was, somehow, the wrong thing, too needy, too vague, too something, because beside him, Ray drifted away like smoke, or a dream undreamt.

Or maybe it had simply been too possible, something hard to deny, and Ray was afraid of what it would mean to stop saying no.

"You like him, don't you?"

"Who, Benton? I'm surprised you don't."

Clark shoved his hands into his pockets in a gesture Lex recognized only too well. "Why should I like him?"

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"He doesn't look anything like me!"

"But in ten, fifteen years, you'll look a lot like him."

"No, I won't."

Clark turned around, parked his rear end on the parapet, and watched Fraser, who was watching Lex.

"You'll be exactly like him in ten years," Lex said softly.

"You don't just mean on the outside."

"You're already very like him."

"Probably why I hate his guts."

Lex raised his head sharply, the moonlight showing the whites of his eyes. "Do you?"

But Clark had already hunched himself smaller, let his head hang lower. "More like envy him. Because he's got it so together."

"That's just age, Clark," Lex said, nudging him gently with one shoulder. "As you get older, you get better at faking it."

He was rewarded with a shy glint of smile, then a nudge of a shoulder against his.

"Ray's talking about driving him and Benton up to Metropolis tomorrow—you want them to wait till after school, then you could go with them?"

"Why would I want to spend that much time with them?"

"Because it's a trip to Metropolis and if it was after school, you'd have to stay out late, and because..." Lex dug into his pocket and brought out the truck's key chain Benton had returned to him after their fencing game, "...you can see what you've been missing."

Every last atom of playfulness simply fled. "You gave them my truck?"

"Your truck?" Lex asked. Oh, now that rankled. On top of everything else these past weeks, that really rankled. "If I remember correctly, your dad told you you couldn't keep it, and you went right along with him and gave it back to me."

"But you said it was *my* truck!"

"I thought you didn't want it, Clark. It's been sitting in my garage for over a year and you haven't laid a finger on it other than to reject it. So why shouldn't I lend it to someone who *does* want it?"

"But you gave it to me."

"And you gave it back!" Like so many other things Lex had offered. Like the one thing Lex had most wanted Clark to accept. "You can't have it both ways, Clark," Lex said, keeping his voice quiet enough that his guests couldn't hear. "You want



this chaste, virginal friendship, fine. I can give you that. I'd sooner give you a truck or the Ferrari and have a chance that you'll come to my bed one day. But you come to me and ask for my Ferrari, I give it to you," and Lex's protection from Lex's own baser instincts. How he'd wanted to take what Clark—that version of Clark—was offering. But he'd denied himself, for Clark's sake. And for what?

"You come to me and say all you want is friendship, Clark, then that's what I'll give you, and I'll be grateful for the friendship you give me." He stepped closer, nearly whispering now to contain the urge to shout and scream and yell, and it was painfully clear why Lex ended up in anger management classes and wrecked his office on a fairly regular basis. "But this isn't about me loaning my guests the truck, is it, Clark? What am I supposed to do? Put my libido on hold because you don't want me, but you don't want me to fuck anyone else? Because you want me to pretend I'm some kind of after school special high school kid like you?"

"But that's what I am, Lex, even though you keep pushing me not to be. I'm just a normal high school kid—

And that was the sort of lie he just couldn't live with. "Oh please, you're talking to someone who got kicked out of seven different high schools and you know something, Clark? I never got kicked out for something I did alone," Lex snarled, and now he was standing right in front of Clark, between Clark's spread legs, inches away from him, anger and arousal battling for supremacy. "Normal high school kid? Have you looked around you? What do you think goes on at those keggers? That kid, the one who froze my pond—you think he was just holding hands or looking through his telescope at his girlfriends? You think Lana's still a virgin? Because she's not, Clark. Quarterbacks don't date cheerleaders who don't put out. Maybe he never fucked her, but believe me, she's done more than hold hands."

Which was about as low a blow as you could get, and Lex wasn't surprised when Clark shoved him aside, leaving him to stumble and nearly fall.

And too soon, far too soon, a concerned voice at his back: "Are you all right, Lex?"

Hell, no. "I'm fine, Benton. I just..."

"You and Clark had words."

"Too many of them."

"I know the feeling," Fraser said, sitting bow-backed on the parapet beside Lex. "I know only too well."

"I shouldn't have said what I did."

"Speak in haste, repent at leisure."

Lex shuddered at that. "The last thing I need right now is you sounding like Clark's father."

"I thought that perhaps the last thing you needed was to let what you said to Clark fester."

"Go after him, you mean."

"If you think that's the right choice."

Lex looked askance at him in the moonlight, at the face and clothes that made him feel as if he were looking at the future. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a very annoying man, Benton?"

"Frequently," he replied far more cheerfully than he felt. But what was a social lie amongst friends—or acquaintances?

And when Lex walked away to look for Clark, he couldn't regret not taking what Lex would willingly give him; he didn't regret sending Lex after what Lex really wanted and needed. He was only here for a blink of time, hours or days, a week at most, until he returned to Chicago. To become intimate with Lex would no doubt be as much fun as Lex's easy acceptance of sex and sexuality implied, but it wouldn't solve anything.

And could well simply complicate matters even more.

With something very close to a sigh, Fraser set off to find Ray, and spackle over another couple of cracks in the cement of their friendship.

Fraser eventually found Lex sitting on the same bench from the night before.

"No Ray?"

"He's gone inside, to use the facilities."

Lex obviously didn't believe that any more than Fraser did.

"And Clark?" Fraser asked.

"Skipping stones over the lake with all the fury of a teenager lost in deep, meaningful thought."

"Lex, about Clark's age..."

"Don't ask, Benton. In Smallville, you never ask the cause of death, you never ask why and you never ask someone's age."

"Because..."

"Because all you get are lies."

Caught between the expensive indoors and the expansive outdoors, Ray hesitated. Maybe it was just a trick of the Kansas weather, of the clouds playing peek-a-boo with the full moon, but change was pressing in on him, demanding, nagging, gnawing. He could feel it. He could taste it in the air.

And he was poised, caught on the tip of a sword blade, hemmed in by change, cut off from the status quo, torn between staying or going.

Some people plucked the petals off daisies and repeated 'he loves me, he loves me not.' But that was one answer Clark already had, although Lex had been so weird with him today and tonight, he figured Lex had only just found that out himself. Clark stood at the very edge of the lake, the toes of his work boots stained dark with water, and skipped stones across the glassy surface. Under his breath, he whispered, "Tell him, tell him not, tell him, tell him not, tell him not."

But the rocks always sank before he had his answer.

The silence wasn't exactly comfortable, but at least it was peaceable, the scents



of this tiny herb garden dancing around them like night-time butterflies, borne by the freshening wind. The garden lights hadn't been turned on, and the darkness and the hedges cocooned them in a dream world, so far removed from the reality and its constant press of fresh woes.

Lex's voice was an unexpected melody in the darkness.

"I still feel guilty."

"About your mother?"

The pale head nodded, once.

"In my experience, there's always something, some sense that the child should have done more or done differently," Fraser said, not looking at Lex, both of them wrapped in little bubbles of privacy that overlapped with fragile delicacy. "How somehow we feel it's our fault, even when my head knows it wasn't."

Lex didn't comment on the sliding shift of pronouns, because he knew that slippery slope himself. Start with polite, intellectual distance, end up caught between the man he was now and the boy he'd been then. "I wasn't there when she passed," he offered quietly. "I was trying to track down one more answer, one more miracle cure. I wasn't even with her."

And as he'd expected, no judgment, no pity, just the blessed gift of understanding.

"I don't remember," Fraser whispered to the dark.

There was a startlement beside him, a quick flash of a gaze turned upon him, a feeling of almost guilt emanating from the man at his side.

"I remember sitting at the kitchen table, doing my schoolwork and speaking to my teacher over the radio. I remember gathering the tack for the sled, because Mum was going to clean and repair it, and I was going to help her. And I remember using the radio to send out the mayday the way I'd been taught, but..."

"But that's all you remember?" Lex asked, as if he had more answers than questions.

"I don't even know how she died. I don't remember her being ill, but we were living in a remote area, there were risks all around. It could have been anything."

"Benton, I...would you want to..."

"Yes?"

But Lex said nothing more and neither of them mentioned the two files full of faxed and downloaded pages that Lex had been reading at breakfast that morning.

And that, apparently, was answer enough for Lex.

For then, softly, Lex's hand was warm over his and it surprised Fraser, because it wasn't a prelude to seduction. They could've had sex, but they had this, instead, and it was closer to what they both needed, to what they each feared they'd never get from the one person they still loved with the purity and honesty buried so long ago in two very different places.

"The guilt will always be there," Lex said into the cool, still night.

"Always."

"Is that why you became a Mountie?"

"It probably had something to do with it. But the truth is, with my father, my paternal grandfather and my great-grandfather all being Mounties, it was my heritage," Fraser said. "And my destiny."

Lex's hand moved away, leaving Fraser feeling cold.

"How the hell do you fight that?"

He had never even thought of taking any other path." I never wanted to."

Lex was staring now, intent, cheetah ready to pounce, eyes narrowed to see in the faintest sheen of starlight and remnants of moonlight. "But if you had?"

"I would've chosen a career as far from law enforcement as I could get—a florist, dentist, banker, librarian. Anything that couldn't possibly lead to my father's footsteps."

Lex traced a spray of white jasmine blossoms, the scent rising sweet and pure in the night air. "What if you've already started down that path?"

"You step off it," Fraser said, sure and steady as a rock. "That's all you have to do. If you can see your father's footsteps, all you have to do is walk away in the opposite direction."

The willow bent in the night breeze. "Instead of running his crap factory, and playing him at his own corporate games."

"I'd think so."

"But..."

"But what?"

"Look at this. Look at all of this," Lex said, grand gesture taking in the gardens, the mansion, all of Kansas, all of it stretching endlessly, hidden by the darkness. "I've always been rich, my name's always been the key to almost everything I've ever wanted to unlock. Look at what I'd have to give up."

Fraser broke off a piece of rosemary, the blue flowers nearly invisible in the pallor of moonlight, but the scent was strong, unforgettable, rosemary for remembrance. He handed it to Lex, their fingers bruising the stubby blades of rosemary, making the scent even stronger. "But look at what you'd gain."

Fraser was almost at the patio when he saw Ray, leaning against the bole of a tree, looking like he needed a cigarette to complete the pose.

"Ray."

"Fraser. Or you want me to call you Benton?"

"It really doesn't matter," Fraser said, trying to tell if Ray were angry or unhappy or both.

"Doesn't it? You call me Ray because that's what I want to be."

"Ray, I'm sorry..."

"For what? You haven't done anything."

"But I know my attraction for you...well, it's not...you don't...I'm not..."

"I'm a big boy, Fraser, it won't kill me that you like me that way."

That was the precise moment the cloud thinned in front of the moon, and a wash of pearlescent grey drifted over Ray's face. No, it wouldn't kill Ray, but right now, it was torturing his friend. "But you'd prefer it if I didn't, and I try not to shove it in your face, but of late, I've been..."

"Human."

"Selfish."

"That's what I said."

"No, Ray, you said—Oh. Yes. Well."

They just stood there together, nothing more either had the courage to say, unable to part. Then, when the moon came out and bathed Fraser in pale white light, Ray spoke, voice like mist over water. "Fraser?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"Fraser do you ever get the feeling that you're you know, lost?"

"No, a quick look to the stars or the sun, you can always find your location."

Ray shifted uncomfortably, the movement of his long legs in those fine woolen trousers ensnaring Fraser's gaze.

"No I don't mean where you are, I mean who you are."

"Oh." That. Existential angst coupled with a hefty dose of sexual identity crisis because your best friend wants you and because maybe you want him back, maybe you want him enough to be jealous over a casual stranger. Maybe you want him enough to change your whole life. "When I first came to Chicago I felt as though I was from another planet."

Ray's smile was unexpected, and almost painfully, sweetly, affectionate. "Which you are."

"Which I have come to accept. Everything was unknown and at times frightening," although first one Ray and then the other had eased that fear, until desire had once more returned, and flayed him with fear and trepidation. "And I felt as though I was an explorer, an urban explorer."

"I get that," Ray said softly. "I know where I've been, Fraser. I don't know where I'm going."

"None of us do, Ray. We tell ourselves that we do, but the best laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft agley."

"What the hell was that?"

"Ah. It's from a poem—basically, no matter who we are or how much we plan, we can't control the future."

"So you go from being up north, to picking up dry cleaning in Chicago."

"Or from being with the same woman your entire life to..."

"A friend."

Stella going from wife to friend, or Ray moving on, leaving behind wife for friend? Fraser didn't know, but he knew one thing: "I'll always be your friend, Ray."

"But what about when that's not enough? Or when the other Ray comes back?"

"I'll still be your friend."

"How can you know that?" Whispered, broken, fragments of a heart spilling into words.

"Because I'm still friends with Innusiq, and June. I'm Godfather to Eric's firstborn. I spent my entire life moving from one place to another, Ray, I didn't even keep the same family unit. I learned how to hold onto my friends, so I would never lose them, even if I saw them once a year, or never saw them again. They're still my friends."

And then, as a cloud covered the moon and they were wrapped in the soft anonymity of darkness, Fraser felt hands upon him, and lips against his own. The tip of a tongue, the wetness of a mouth, the hardness of a body, heat and suppleness and pliability melting into him, melting him. It was more than he'd ever expected and so much less than he wanted, and he took what was given, every last scrap of it, squirreling it away to sustain him through the long cold winter that was bound to come.

And come it did, sooner than even he had feared.

Ray had his back to him, his shoulders heaving as if Ray was panting for breath after a long run, moonlight spilling over him, covering him with the lifeless white of ice. Winter. And winters lasted so much longer than summers.

The words ripped free from him, spilling onto the ground between them, raw and bleeding. "What do you want from me, Ray?"

Quiet as death, the answer came back: "I want you to be Stella."

And then Ray was walking away from him, having asked Fraser for the one thing Fraser could never, ever give him.

Who is it?"

Lex didn't sound scared exactly, just...cautious. As cautious as he'd been on the driveway the very first time Ray and Fraser had seen him.

"It's me, Ray. Where are you?"

"Over here."

"I feel like I should start shouting 'Marco,'" Ray said, words light, voice heavy, hands outstretched in the near pitch-dark of a country night.

"Polo," Lex said dryly, as Ray's hands latched onto not a polo shirt, but what had to be the finest cashmere ever.

"Now I know why you weren't worried about giving me a few shirts."

It could've been the wind soughing through the leaves, but Ray was pretty sure that's what passed for laughter for Lex. Which was pretty damned sad.

"Are you lost?"

"Hell yeah," Ray said. "Uh..."

"You don't just mean here in the parkland, do you?"

"Lex?" Ray said, and it was easier, in the dark, when Lex was nothing more than a faint gleam in the night, walking beside him. "You ever feel like you don't know who you are? Like if you weren't around somebody, or that someone

wasn't around you, then you wouldn't be you, or at least not the you that you think. You ever think like that?"

The moon came out, and now Ray could see Lex, standing alone, a few steps ahead, staring off at something Ray couldn't see, and didn't ever want to see.

"I'm a Luthor," Lex said, as if that were a curse. "I've never had the luxury of questioning who the hell I am."

And then the clouds moved in front of the moon and the darkness swallowed Lex up.

Ray scrambled around a tree, and nearly landed on his ass.

"Hey, careful!" Clark said, catching him with a phenomenal ease that was apparently perfectly natural in Smallville.

"I didn't see you."

"You didn't see me? But—"

"Night time. Clouds. No moon."

"Uh, right. Sorry."

Of course, that was when the moon came out from behind a bank of clouds, basking in the lake, white light glimmering on far too much nature for Ray's peace of mind.

Without a word, Ray and Clark fell into step together, Ray not knowing where they were going, Clark not saying, Ray looking around to see if Lex had reappeared or if the night had eaten him alive.

After some of the things he'd found out about Smallville, he wasn't too sure that it couldn't have.

"Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"You ever wonder who you really are?"

"Every day, Ray," Clark said, sounding older than he looked, older than the world maybe. "I'm adopted and I don't even know where my parents are from, what they were called, what language they spoke..."

Cop instincts, even when shaken by men being swallowed whole by the night, never truly shut down. "How did your parents—your adoptive parents—find you?"

"An agency, I guess," Clark said, shoulders lifting in a shrug, lips lifting in a smile that wouldn't fool anyone.

"Aren't you curious?"

"Yeah. No—both," Clark said, and this time the smile was genuine, and as charming as hell.

Ray didn't know whether he should be scared or relieved that he liked that smile because it reminded him of Fraser. Benton. Friend. Boyfriend, if he wanted that.

"Both?" Ray asked, because figuring Clark out was a hell of a lot easier than figuring himself out.

"If I don't know who I am, then I can be anyone I want to be."

Ray stopped.

Stopped in the middle of the path, and stared at Clark's back, until Clark realized Ray wasn't following and

turned back towards him, and then Ray stared at Clark's front, at a big, broad body wearing clothes so much like the ones Fraser always wore, at a flop of dark hair that had the same recalcitrant bits of curl and waviness, at eyes that went the same unpinnable color in the night.

"I could be anyone I want to be," Ray said.

"Maybe not Madonna or Britney Spears, though."

"Still leaves plenty to choose from."

"Yeah, it does," Clark said quietly, looking as thoughtful as Ray. "It sure does."

They hadn't mentioned what had been said earlier: they never did. Just like Lex never asked how Clark had got to, or into, the mansion, and he never asked how Clark was getting home. It was just another of those questions it was best not to ask, another of those subjects it was best to avoid.

With the guests tucked away upstairs, Lex and Clark had abandoned the verandah, and retreated to Lex's office, whence Clark could leave without raising a single awkward question or requiring a single clumsy lie.

And without so much as a hint of the ugliness of their earlier conversation. Because they didn't talk about these things, ever, the truth buried between them like landmines.

"What do you think happened?" Clark asked while Lex poured himself a Scotch and fetched Clark a Pepsi from the small fridge.

"Between Benton and Ray?"

"Yeah. I mean—I've never seen two people try so hard to avoid each other."

"That's right, you weren't at the theater fund raiser last month."

Clark gulped down half his can of Pepsi, waiting for Lex to expand.

"After the disaster with Desiree."

Which Lex didn't need to wince over, because Clark did that for him.

"Victoria was there."

That was beyond even wincing. "You didn't tell me."

"There didn't seem to be much point. What could you say, Clark? It was done, I just wanted it to be over."

It wasn't often that Lex lowered his mask, let the tiredness and the vulnerability show through. He dropped heavily onto the couch, shoulders slumping, eyes heavy.

It looked frighteningly close to a hint, a signpost for what the future held for the two of them. Wanting it to be over, going out of their way to avoid each other.

Nothing but regrets between them.

Neither of them knowing how to fix it.

Neither of them wanting it to be like this, broken and fractured.

They sat there, on the couch, while the fire burned low and the clock ticked the hours away.



"I should be getting home."

Lex never asked, and Clark never told.

But the visitors had brought the outside world into Smallville, and things were changing.

Clark was almost at the door before Lex rose from the couch and stood there, all lean loneliness, hands hanging limply at his sides. "Just tell me."

"Tell you what?" he said, even though he knew the pretence had worn away to transparency months ago.

"You don't have to tell me your secrets, you don't even have to stop lying," and that last was said with an odd inflection, an emphasis that wasn't accidental. "Just tell me you're a mutant, Clark."

Clark opened his mouth, the word "no" bursting out reflexively, but then he fell silent. That one word spread between them, while Clark looked at Lex.

It was an offer. An acceptable middle ground between what Lex desperately wanted to know and what Clark desperately needed to keep secret. A meeting ground, a compromise, an acceptable half-truth or harmless lie.

But still a lie, and one Clark would be claiming as the truth. And that was worse than simply lying. That...that smacked of betrayal, to Clark, standing there, shivering under the raw need in Lex's eyes.

"I can't tell you that," Clark said, staring at Lex as if sheer intent could give him telepathic powers. "How can I tell you that?"

"You just say it, Clark," Lex said impatiently, arms spreading wide. "Then I tell you I believe you. And we go on from there."

"Until you just can't resist finding out."

"I'm not my father." And then the second low-blow tonight, payback a bitch as always. "But I'm beginning to wonder about you."

There was so many words writhing on the tip of Clark's tongue, poisonous snakes just waiting to strike. And Lex deserved it, after what he'd said earlier.

But...Clark wasn't exactly blame free either, some of the things he'd said in the last few weeks had been... no better than what Lex had said tonight. Worse, maybe. Clark's fists clenched, and his voice scratched his throat with the pointed, cutting words that wanted to get out.

Easy, easy, easy, Ray had said.

Drop, by drop, by drop.

"What if all I ever wanted was to be normal?"

Lex closed his eyes, and swallowed. His hand came up and pinched the bridge of his nose, touched the scar on his lip and finally, as Clark had known it would, stroked over the bald head.

"Then I'd have to say," and it hurt, both of them, how it hurt them to say and hear this, Lex's voice breaking along with Clark's heart, "that I'm not the person you should come to."

It was the truth. It was nothing more than the truth, and it made them both crave the comfort of lies.

"Lex..."

"Go home," Lex said, turning back to the fading embers of the fire. "Just go home. Come back tomorrow, and we'll pretend none of this ever happened, the way we always do."

"I'm already so different, Lex," sacrificial lamb on the altar of friendship, "I don't know how I could be—"

"With a Luthor? Or is it me?"

"I don't know how I could be gay or bi, or whatever I am. My dad, Pete—God, even my mom..."

There was a curious expression in Lex's eyes, and it was a moment before Clark recognized it as wonder.

"I hadn't thought of that," Lex said, coming slowly towards him. "You have people who matter to you, people it would hurt you if they turned away from you."

Lex's fingers were dry, and callused when they touched Clark's cheek.

"Go home, Clark," Lex said, and brushed his lips across Clark's cheek, just for an instant. "Go home," he repeated, and this time, it was a benediction.

Clark left, confusion coiling low in his belly, struggling with the desire that lived there, and all the way home, he remembered not the chasteness of the kiss, nor the tenderness in Lex's eyes, but the fact that Lex Luthor hadn't remembered what it was to have a home.

Upstairs, while the fire downstairs still burned brightly, before it had collapsed into embers and ashes, the two guests stood stiffly in the shared living room of their suite, comparing notes, exchanging information, paying lip-service to the good cops they actually were, until they actually got to what they both wanted to talk about.

"Fraser, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

"About what Frannie found in Lex's juvenile docket?"

"No, okay, maybe a little. But I uh...I really meant about... about when I said I wanted you to be Stella."

"Already forgotten, Ray," Fraser said, dismissing it, dismissing the whole night.

"I uh...I didn't know I was going to say that," Ray said as he followed Fraser into Fraser's temporary bedroom.

"No, really, completely forgotten. Consider it never said."

"I didn't know that's what I was thinking."

"I am aware of that," and this time there was steel showing through the usual velvet of Fraser's voice. "I said, consider it forgotten."

"Fraser—"

"You kissed me! After all this time, after... You kissed me. Then you walked away and..." Fraser stomped over to the bathroom door, wrenching it open and stepping inside. "Ray, please, just..."

Ray pounded on the closed door,



barely avoiding punching Fraser in the face when the door was hauled unceremoniously open.

"I'm sorry for kissing you."

"Well I'm not, Ray. There, you made me say it. Now will you let it drop?"

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of water splashing and a toilet flushing on one side of a locked door, and a man breathing on the other.

Fraser, in boxers and t-shirt, nearly fell over Ray when he barreled out of the bathroom.

"You got a right not to be sorry I kissed you. And I'm sorry I walked away from you like that. Only..."

Fraser sat down on the edge of the absurdly luxurious bed, his neatly folded clothes held discreetly in his lap. "Is this why you asked me if I ever felt lost?"

"Yeah," Ray said, sitting down beside Fraser, not too close, but within arm's length. "Your Ray's coming back any day now, and I have to go back to being me. Only I've been someone else for so long, and I don't have Stella to go back to and..."

Fraser held his breath while Ray took a deep, gusting one, breathing deeply enough for both of them. Buddy breathing on dry land.

"I think I got feelings for you, Fraser. And that's not buddies. I know how to be married to Stella, and I know how to be buddies. But I don't know how to be..."

"I think you do, Ray. Yes, it might be different, but it could be the same as it was before," Fraser said gently. "It could be buddies, with benefits. Or it could be better than buddies."

Ray said nothing, just sat there, fingers plucking at the warp and weft of his borrowed, expensive trousers.

"Ray, how old were you when you fell in love with Stella? How old was she? Life changes, Ray—we change," Fraser said, placing his hand over Ray's as Lex had done with him. Comfort. More than sex. "And even if I could be Stella for you, from the very start, every time you looked at me, all you'd see would be the end."

Ray had gone very still, listening. Listening with a fierce concentration that very nearly scared Fraser.

"All you'd see would be the end, when Stella didn't love you that way any more, the end when you and Stella didn't fit together any more. I can't be Stella for you, Ray. I don't want to be another Stella in your life. And you don't want me to be."

Now that had Ray looking at him. Really looking at him.

"Who do you want me to be, Fraser? Victoria? Your bounty hunter lady? LadyShoes?"

"No one. There's no one in my sorry excuse for romantic experience I want you to be, Ray. I want...you. No more, no less."

Ray had gone back to picking at the threads of his pants, brow furrowed in concentration.

Fraser was just about to admit defeat and plead exhaustion, when Ray said, "Just me?"

"Just you."

"Can I sleep on it?"

"Of course you can, Ray, I'll see you in the morning—"

"No. I meant..." another of those deep gusting breaths, and Fraser held his, waiting to hear what Ray was going to say.

"I meant here, Fraser. Benton. With you."

It was so silent they could both hear the faint hum from the clock.

"We're buddies, Ray, we'll always be buddies," Fraser said, lying back on the bed, leaving himself wide open and vulnerable, waiting for whatever Ray wanted, or didn't want, to do. "No strings, no expectations. Just buddies."

"With benefits?"

"As many as you want, as long as you want them."

Ray's fingers were on Fraser's thigh, skin that was nearly hairless and terribly sensitive. "And if I never want strings, Fraser?"

"I'll settle for buddies, Ray."

"But you want strings."

Fraser swallowed, knowing that even now, the truth could be too much. "Yes."

After a moment, Ray got to his feet, and with the candor of a man married for most of his life, began to strip, and then eased himself on top of his best friend, and took the first steps on a brand new path.

Very early next morning, while even Fraser was still asleep, or at least, upstairs behind closed doors, Clark stood outside Lex's office doors, nearly succumbing to last minute jitters.

He'd been awake most of the night, had consumed enough coffee to make even his dad raise his eyebrows, had been unable to get last night out of his mind.

All he had to do was not mention anything that had happened, and things would go back to normal. All he had to do was walk through that door and Lex would accept his non-truths and non-comments, and Lex would even let him go back to flirting, and pulling away when Lex got too close or Clark got too scared of how much he needed Lex.

Normal. All perfectly normal.

Which was all he'd ever wanted to be.

Only at some point during the night, Clark had realized why he wanted to be normal: because normal meant familiar. Safe. Accepted. Wanted.

Normal meant belonging.

Only there wasn't just one normal: there was normal for them, and there was normal for Smallville, and there was normal for Clark, and there was normal for a meteor-mutated heir to billions.

Then there was the normal of home and family, the normal of having a family who didn't throw you to the wolves or sleep



The digital clock beside the bed shifted silently, displaying numbers, one after the other.

with your girlfriends, the normal that Clark already had. And there was the normal of wanting a home and family of his own making, and maybe that would be normal for him, making a home where someone like Lex could belong.

Clark wasn't afraid of not being normal: he was afraid that he would never find a place where he fit, a someone who would look at him and not see alien or freak or unknown quantity, but simply Clark.

He was beginning to realize all that 'normal' might have been right under his nose for over a year.

Lex was frowning at his laptop when Clark walked into the mansion's office, perfectly normal, as normal as the frown shifting to a smile when Lex realized who had come to see him.

Normal. This—them—was normal.

And maybe it was as close to normal—regular, everybody-else, not just Smallville normal—as Clark would ever get. Maybe it was the only normal he would ever want.

"Not that I'm complaining, but shouldn't you be in school?" Lex asked, closing down his laptop and getting up to meet Clark by the pool table.

Just like always. As if yesterday and last week and last month and last year hadn't happened. Just like normal.

"Farm kid," Clark shrugged his jacket off, accepted the cue Lex handed him. "We get special dispensation to miss class if an emergency comes up on the farm."

"If there's an emergency on your farm..."

Lex was watching Clark's hands tighten on the pool cue.

"There *was*. The tractor slid on a patch of mud, hit the main gate to the pastures, took out a chunk of fence too. The herd could've just wandered right out onto the road."

"That..." Lex looked at him consideringly, "...sounds like at least an all-day job."

Clark took the deepest breath he could, his whole body feeling shaky, almost shocky, nerves coursing through him. Not telling the truth, but not lying either. Just...normal. For him. "It is. But I helped my dad, so it's finished."

Lex looked at the clock, still ticking away.

Not even eleven a.m.

Not normal for anyone but Clark.

Maybe too not normal for Lex.

Clark stood there and waited, and waited, and waited, while Lex looked at him.

And then broke into the biggest grin when Lex smiled at him and simply said, "In that case, rack 'em. I'll play you for the truck."

Normal. They were completely back to normal, Lex flashing that sweet little smile at him, Lex dropping everything in his life because Clark showed up, returning the truck, a peace offering and affirmation of friendship all rolled into one giant red package. "The truck? That's supposed to make me want to win?"

"No, if you lose, you get the truck—and you have to explain it to your dad. But if you win..."

"I get the truck and *you* get to explain it to my dad. Prepare to lose, Lex, because I want to see my dad's face when you explain to him how you involved me in gambling when I was supposed to be researching my AP History essay."

"Clark—"

"Too late, you made your bet."

"Your dad—"

"Of course," Clark said, chalking his cue, brow furrowed in almost comical, comic-book concentration, "we could change the bet."

"Yeah?"

"Hmm, yeah. I'm sure you have something I want," Clark bent down to take his shot, outright ogling Lex's crotch where it was underlined by the lip of the pool table, and this was so much easier now that he knew t his was normal. Perfect and normal and perfectly normal. "Something that my dad wouldn't see or find or know about."

Lex relaxed then, sliding easily back into their old flirtation, enjoying it while it lasted, back to the yin and the yang, the push and the pull, but at least it was better than the alternative. "I have an apartment in Paris, your dad would never see that."

"But neither would I."

"Oh, so you want something your dad wouldn't see, but you want something tangible, something real? A watch—no, your dad doesn't react well to watches, and there's no way you could hide it." Then, slyly, as if this wasn't something he'd been thinking about for months and as if he weren't fully aware that Clark had circled round behind him and was watching him bend over the table, "How about a scholarship?"

"He'd see that, Lex."

"But he wouldn't know what he was seeing. He wouldn't know the scholarship was one I'd set up for farm families, he'd never know it was tailored for you..."

Then Clark did something that was entirely not normal for them, coming up close, right behind Lex, voice low and deep and outrageously sultry. "Not a scholarship, Lex. I know the perfect thing."

Lex straightened, Clark crowding him so much he was barely able to turn around. "And what would that be?"

"This," Clark said, and took Lex's cue from him, and took Lex's face between his hands, and took Lex's lower lip between his own, and took Lex's mouth in a kiss.

And took Lex's breath quite away.

"Wait..."

Clark waited, energy thrumming, his fingers restlessly stroking all the smooth bits of skin he could reach. He'd known Lex didn't shave, but now that he'd finally had the courage to take, to touch, the skin of Lex's jaw begged for his fingers, his lips, his tongue...

Breathless, voice catching every time Clark's tongue tasted him: "I thought you wanted to be normal."

"I have a home and parents who love me. I don't eat people's fat, I don't steal people's youth or their body heat. I don't transform into Whitney then go around killing people." He kissed Lex again, a small part of him wondering if Lex was just too shocked to take over, or if Lex were deliberately letting Clark set the pace. "So I think that qualifies me for pretty normal. In Smallville."

"And when you go to college in Metropolis?"

Asking about the future, wanting so much more than just a few months here in Smallville.

Maybe even wanting forever.

"I don't live in a castle or a penthouse, I don't have more cars than most people have shoes, I have a full head of hair..."

"Pretty damned normal. For Metropolis."

"Normal enough for both of us," Clark said, a pretty lie for both of them: Clark who wasn't normal anywhere but Smallville, and Lex who never wanted to be merely normal, average. It was a lie, yes, but it was a lie that told the truth, that their differences were what made them fit together, yin and yang, the push and the pull that made even a friendship between a billionaire's heir and a farmer's son possible.

"Okay," Lex said, far too breezily as if this was all just good clean meaningless making out. He eased back a little, his hips canted slightly to the side. "So exactly how many kisses are we playing for?"

So it was Lex letting Clark set the pace. Clark could go along with that, but only since it meant he could up the ante as high as he wanted, do it now while it still felt normal and before doubts and second guessing and fear could set in. He grabbed Lex's ass, and lifted him, set him on the edge of the pool table and pressed up—hard—between Lex's spread legs. "Who said it was just kisses we were playing for?"

In the end, it was Lex who set the pace, and Lex who led, and they decided that nothing this good could ever qualify as a loss for either of them. And so they declared a draw, and immediately started the first of uncounted rematches.

And that, too, was perfectly normal. For them.

But before the rematches...

"Whoa," Ray said, swinging the door shut, pivoting on his heel and propelling Fraser down the corridor. "Lex is kinda occupied right now, now is not the time to ask about borrowing the truck or where the hell Metropolis is, so why don't you and me...go take a walk."

"Outside? On purpose?"

"Sure. Since I don't seem so allergic now. I'm thinking it was maybe psychosomatic. I get nervous, I just—I get nervous."

Which Fraser knew, and remembering Ray's utterly delightful nervousness last night simply made him smile.

"Aw, jeez."

"Ray? What's wrong?"

They were on the main drive, and since there was a gardener directly ahead and someone removing dry cleaning from a white van into the side door on the right, they turned left.

"It's just—you look happy."

"Well, that's because I am," Fraser said, perhaps a little too heartily. "Ray...I'm making hay while the sun shines. You can't let my responses color your decision."

"After last night, you'd still let me back out?"

"I told you I would."

"Even though I fucked you?"

"Ray..."

Fraser had come to a halt, had turned away.

"Bothers you when I call it that, doesn't it? Because it's cold and it's about sex and not love."

"It's crude, that's all. I...don't regret you penetrating me, Ray. I don't regret having sex with you. And if that's all you want..." the glance Fraser slanted at Ray was too quick to be read, "then we pretend it never happened, go back to normal. Because that's buddies."

"It's never that easy, Fraser. We opened Pandora's Box, and you got Hope written all over you."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. Don't ever be sorry for wanting me."

Fraser's smile was a fairy tale castle of love and hope and happiness. "I'm never sorry for that. But I apologize for being so..."

"Hopeful?"

"I don't mean to pressure you, Ray. Last night...I know you enjoyed it, but..."

"Nothing's ever easy."

"No, I'm afraid it's not."

Ray kicked a loose bit of brick edging the path, nudged it into the grass. "Even if we you know, tried this...thing, this whatever we got going here, it can't work. Vecchio's nearly finished his gig, he'll be coming back, and I have to leave. You'll stay for a while, but Fraser, it's killing you, staying in Chicago. Even without my glasses, I can see that. So you'll leave."

Fraser braced himself, stood up straight, and did something his grandmother had always warned him against: he put all his eggs in one basket. "You could come with me."

"To the great outdoors where your balls freeze off in ten seconds flat—do not correct me, Fraser, I was being, what's-it, hyperbolic. I know that's where you belong, but me..." Ray looked at him then, and Fraser wasn't the only one looking the future dead in the eye. "I can't live in a cabin with no toilet or electricity. I can't, I get nuts if I don't see people for more'n a day and the one time I tried to do without my CD player and television, I ended up walking around in circles talking to myself."

Pandora still had her hope, but Fraser's was dimming. "I could stay."



"You'd be being Stella if you did that. She tried staying, Fraser, and it just poisoned it more," Ray scuffed the toe of his boot over the brick edging, coming closer to Fraser, reality breathing down his neck, but his buddy, his more than buddy, was breathing and warm and right beside him. "You'll have to leave. I don't want you to, but staying here'll kill you." A sudden flash of Ray's usual bright, knife-edged humor. "And don't think I've forgotten you still don't have a gun permit, Mr.-I'll-just-take-on-seven-armed-felons-by-myself."

"Even if I have to leave Chicago," and Ray was right, it *would* kill him to stay, his spirit died a little every day, until the wall between himself and the dead was stretched as thin as gossamer and twice as friable. "We could compromise."

"Somewhere up north but not Emptyville?"

"There are plenty of places..."

Ray was standing straighter now, looking out towards the horizon, where an inexplicably tall hill met the Kansas sky. "I know how many towns are up there. I kinda...when you were sleeping last night, I uh...kinda borrowed one of Lex's computers. I've been looking, on the internet. Maybe...Yellowknife?"

Fraser, who'd been willing to compromise even to the depths of moving to Toronto, nodded vigorously. "Yellowknife—Yellowknife absolutely, wonderful, yes, Yellowknife would be splendid."

And Ray, who knew Benton Fraser better than anyone else, just grinned at him, and let him have Yellowknife. "But could I work up there?"

"Eventually, and it certainly wouldn't be a problem. We'd have to go through the proper procedures and forms to change your status to landed—"

"Fraser, you start listing the form names and numbers and I'm walking."

"In that case, I'll just put them together for you later. Ray? Are we all right?" Fraser reached his hand out and asked, "Are we okay?"

"We're good, Fraser," Ray said, and right there, out in the open, he took Fraser's hand, the reaching out one. "We're good."

Then they smiled at each other, and grinned, and fell into step side by side, walking slowly around the mansion's perimeter.

"Okay, so we sorted out country, territory and city-cum-back-of-beyond," Ray said. "Now we got one more problem of locale."

"Yes?"

"We don't know where this Metropolis is, we can't ask to borrow a car cos Lex is kinda...occupied."

"Right."

"So we're kinda stuck in our present location."

"Agreed," Fraser said, cautiously, because Ray was up to something, which would probably prove to be wonderful, but still, when Ray got that glint in his eye...

"So. We got two beds up there waiting for us. Which one we gonna use?"

Fraser was grinning again, smile bright in the sunshine, arm brushing Ray's as they headed rapidly for the front door. "Well, we could always toss a coin for it, Ray."

"Thought you didn't gamble, Fraser."

"Only if there's money involved, Ray. Or we could always do rock, papers, scissors."

"Or we could always just use your bed," Ray said, taking the stairs two at a time behind Fraser. "That worked out pretty good last night."

And they found out it worked out pretty good that morning too.

A few hours later, Fraser and Ray, Ray's hair even more experimental than usual, emerged from Fraser's bedroom to be greeted by a butler bearing a message: the felons had been caught—by the FBI, much to Ray's loud surprise; Ray Vecchio had turned in enough evidence to bring down the entire Iguana family, and Ray—Kowalski—and Fraser were to head home. As soon as possible, no reason given, but Ray wasn't shy about pointing out just how often these particular Feds had lost people in their custody.

So home, fast, where they'd be safe, no matter how much the Feds screwed up. And where Fraser could be trotted out in full dress reds to make sure the RCMP got their share of the publicity pie.

Not even that prospect could dim Fraser's smile.

They had to get moving, and fast. Which would require transportation. Arrangements had to be made, funds and clothing returned, thanks offered, but fortunately, Lex was no longer...occupied.

Less than an hour after receiving their orders, heads still spinning, they were ready to get on the road. Fraser had had one last surreptitious sniff of Clark, the smell of the meteor there, but different, and not like the other people in Smallville.

Fraser hadn't forgotten Ian MacDonald, he of tall tales and surprising truths. The meteor fragment stayed quietly hidden in the glove box, and the secret Fraser suspected stayed quietly hidden in his mind.

So with a borrowed phone, a smaller amount of borrowed cash and a fragment of mystery tucked away, they were ready to hit the road.

In a red pick up truck, Clark's cheerfulness making Lex look at him funny.

"I was under the impression this was the truck Lex gave you, Clark?" Fraser said, resisting Ray's fairly insistent tugging to get him off the front stairs and into the truck.

"It was. But my dad won't let me keep it." Clark grinned and rather surprisingly, Lex...blushed?



"But I don't mind you guys taking it, because now Lex's given me something I can keep."

Fraser opened his mouth to ask what, and Ray clamped his hand over it to stop him.

"That's great, Clark," Ray said, then winked outrageously. "Don't forget, easy, easy, easy."

This time Clark clamped his hand over Lex's mouth. "He's talking about boxing. I'll show you, later."

"And first motel we see," Ray said, whispering right into Fraser's ear, "I'll show you exactly what Lex gave Clark."

This time, Ray had absolutely no trouble getting Fraser into the red pick-up truck, his thank you kindlies wafting behind them like pennants as they rode off, literally into the sunset.

"That is so cheesy," Lex said, before grabbing Clark and heading off to something a hell of a lot more satisfying than a sunset.

And something that lasted a lot longer, too.

