Visiting Hours

by rageprufrock

Summary

In which Metropolis stays weird.
Chapter 1

I.

Someone in Metropolis had decided that copyright infringement of hippies in Texas was justifiable and now every other person wandering around the city was wearing a "Keep Metropolis Weird" shirt.

It was a pointless rabble-rousing because Metropolis had never been normal a day in its existence and Lex Luthor thoroughly disapproved of the entire campaign. He'd gone so far as to smilingly make it a point to say that due to tax benefits provided to all small business owners in Metropolis, made possible by generosity and good budgeting, there were few conglomerates to speak of, and that the city was eclectic and alive and diverse. Mostly, he just hated the obnoxious font that spelled out the message.

However, the shirts did come in a very fetching shade of fatigue green, which was why Conner was shelling out eight dollars to buy one off of a street corner near city hall. He'd take crap for it later that night, because his father would know he'd purchased it--of course Lex would know that Conner had purchased it--but it would be worth the minor victory of seeing his father roll his eyes every time Conner wore it thereafter. Having shared living space with one of the ten most powerful men in the world for fifteen years and counting, Conner had learned the fine art of being content with small successes.

"I just need four minutes!"

Conner glanced up, folding his two dollars and shoving them into his pocket as he scanned the steps of the Howard J. Aycock building. There was the usual smattering of battered-looking metro reporters from the local papers, and one nervous-looking kid who looked like he'd just fallen out of a two o'clock class at MetU, clutching a reporter's notebook and looking vaguely ill.

"How about three? I talk very fast, Mr. Luthor."

And, there: Lois Lane.

She was wearing low, black leather heels with points that could gut a man and a pantsuit Conner had seen in the display window of one of the row stores on Harden Avenue. Her hair was curlier than Conner had last seen it and she looked flushed, excited, too-thrilled to be covering a council-meeting, and too happy to be badgering Conner's dad.

The thought made Conner break out into a huge grin, turning away from the vendor and tugging the Keep Metropolis Weird tee over his gray, long-sleeved, *St. Ann's Academy* shirt with the fraying cuffs. He shrugged on his messenger bag and tugged at his beltloops for a second, straightening his clothes out in a way that Geoffrey said was slightly gay. (Conner generally disregarded any derisive comments Geoffrey made about Conner's vaguely homosexual tendencies, writing them off on either his upbringing or the fact that Geoffrey inhaled a lot of paint fumes.) His dad said the outfit made him look like a work-study hipster, which always made Clark say that Conner's dad was an asshole.

Conner jogged up the street a little and stood on the sidewalk in front of the building, smirking as Lois walked down the steps backward, trying to shove a voice recorder in Lex's face, achieving only marginal success in either. That was Conner's favorite thing about Lois: she was reckless. Plus, she'd been his first girlfriend.
"I'm sorry to say I only have two and a half--and I think following me down the steps just concluded our time together for the afternoon, Ms. Lane," Conner's dad said, politely and totally infuriatingly, the same way he dismissed Conner's spirited appeal to be allowed to go to public high school.

Lois Lane scowled. "Lex, come on. You know this'll take you three seconds." She rested her manicured hands on Conner's dad's chest and smiled sweetly. "I'll make it worth your while."

Lex raised one dark auburn brow at her and said, "Lois? Off the record?"

Her breath hitched, torn between juicy details and a byline. "Yes?"

"I have enough Daily Planet t-shirts, mugs, travel mugs, mousepads, pens, and post-it pads to last me several lifetimes," Lex said wryly. "In fact, I'd give serious consideration to having Clark brought up on official misconduct for blatantly looting Metropolis Communications' office supply coffers."

Lois started to glare and stopped three steps from the bottom of the enormous, granite stairway that led up to the Greek revival building, which Conner's dad always claimed had been designed during a particularly bad acid trip.

"Why, if I was his employer," Lex went on cheerfully, "I'd have him in stocks in the public square."

"You were always a little medieval," Lois muttered.

"Ah, your bias is showing, Ms. Lane," Conner's dad laughed, side-stepped her easily, and said over his shoulder, "I look forward to our next meeting."

Conner leaned against a brass elephant set out on the street as part of Metropolis' latest community revival project and smirked. His mom always said that the expression creeped him out, reminding Clark entirely too much of Lex, but then Conner really couldn't do much to tone it down, as he had both nature and nurture working against any and all placid facial expressions: the combination of Lex's expressiveness and Clark's total inability to lie or fake it was really working against Conner's dream of being a hustler for a living.

His dad hit the sidewalk and acknowledged Conner with a tilt of his head.

"I think the kitschy hipster look went out of style a few months ago, Conner," he said.

Conner scowled. "Dad, you've got to start being less cool. It's beginning to embarrass me."

Lex laughed, and Conner swore he saw one of the reporters--one of the newer ones--raise his eyebrows in disbelief, like they'd never heard Lex Luthor laugh before, and it made Conner feel suddenly, unexpectedly proud to have caused it.

"Come on, I'll give you a ride home," Conner's dad said, and cocking his brow, added, "Nice shirt."

Conner had no great inclination to drive, a truth that alternately comforted and perplexed his father, and one which the Luthor household simply accepted. Being a city-boy at heart--despite his grandfather's valiant efforts to indoctrinate him in the ways of pick-up trucks and "feeling the dirt under his nails"--Conner saw no reason to waste the effort involved in learning to drive when he'd been free and mobile since he was nine and figured out the Metropolis bus system.
So Lex always drove and Conner sat in the side seat, elbow hanging out of the window with the glass rolled down, letting the snapping, blue oxygen of fall pour into the windows and ruffle his hair.

"How was the meeting?" Conner asked over the roar of the city.

His dad, smirking behind his thousand-dollar sunglasses, said, "Predictably pointless. If you ever aspire to political office, Conner, decide to start larger than city council. It's mind numbing."

"It's important stuff," Conner argued.

Clark had spent a great deal of time explaining to Conner the import of local politics, while his father had spent a great deal of time explaining the import of manipulating local politics. Years of warping left Conner civic-minded with a distinct streak of self-interest; he'd looked up the agenda for that week and the Kansas state senate was voting on the public works budget soon, which was not as boring as his father characterized it.

"It was a committee meeting," his father replied, laughing. "Nothing gets decided in committee. Things only toddle off to die in committee."

"Dad, did you just say 'toddle'?" Conner asked seriously.

They turned the corner, and the brick, eclectic charm of the city fell away to sheer walls of expensive buildings, multi-billion dollar investments, and the streets and sky seemed to turn gunmetal, as if they understood the wealth and power concentrated here.

"I'm not the one who calls Clark 'mom,'" his father shot back.

"I only did it once!" Conner argued, flushing and hoping desperately that his father didn't realize that Conner had pretty much resigned himself to thinking of Clark as his mom years ago and saw no hope of ever changing his pronouns around in order not to emasculate his mother. And, when the thought passed through his mind, he despaired, observing that he'd just done it again.

His father appeared sympathetic. "I understand. Clark is very feminine."

The car whispered into an underground parking lot, and Conner glared as the engine purred to a stop, his father stroking the steering wheel like an attentive lover.

"How long are you going to hold that over my head?" Conner snapped.

Content that the car was placated, his father took off his driving gloves and folded them into the glove compartment, slipped out of the car like water, and locked it, making all the lights flicker and security systems beep before beaming over the low, sporty roof to say, "I'm sure your mother is flattered that you recognize what a woman she is."

Conner narrowed his eyes, stalking off to the elevator, saying over his shoulder, "Yeah? Well, Your car looks like a ho. And? Its hood is flat."

As the elevator doors closed behind him, he heard a gasp of horror from his father.

Triumph, Conner thought. Sometimes, it was just so easy.

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His mom, who had really bizarre hours, was in the penthouse when Conner got there.
Conner had now had a mother for four years, though they were fairly rocky ones.

The first one was spent watching his mom and dad have epic battles the likes of which only children of very messy divorces knew. The second one his dad kept having some sort of allergic reaction to there being another person in the house, somebody else Conner spoke to about his problems, the natural result of which led to more chaos and instability in the universe. (The downside, Conner reflected glumly sometimes, when your mother was Superman and your father owned a fairly significant percentage of the world, was that when they fought, the entire galaxy felt it--literally.)

The third year, they'd started sneaking around behind Conner's back.

It'd been the subject of much speculation for both Conner and Geoffrey, and not until they'd conspired to set up a security camera did they realize that there were some things more horrifying than watching a sixty year old nun teach them the breaststroke--and that was watching Conner's parents making out.

So far, he hadn't found the appropriate time to say, "Hey, Dad, Clark, I know that you're doing it. You don't have to pretend anymore." Some deeply selfish part of himself felt that he
should never say it, and then they'd never, ever have to talk about sex, why Conner knew about sex, what his dad and his mom were doing when they were having sex, or when they did--which Conner hoped sincerely was "when we are far away."

The point was despite the fact that Conner threatened to stab himself in the face a lot, he had no real desire to do it, but if he had to sit down and talk to his parents about their illicit sex life, he'd really have to die.

At the moment, his mom was sitting in the living room, eating potato chips and watching *Pride and Prejudice* on the projection screen television. Mr. Darcy was huge. Clark didn't seem to mind.

Conner dropped on the couch next to his mom, and sticking his hand in the bag of chips, he said, "Don't you work today?"

Clark shrugged, and distracted, leaned over to drop a kiss to Conner's perpetually ruffled hair. Conner had stopped accepting expressions of physical affection two years ago, so the fact that his dad still hugged him and kissed his temple and Clark still kissed the top of his head meant that he just didn't have the resources to enforce the law. It was frustrating, but at least it was private.

"That's the good thing about news--sometimes, it just doesn't happen," Clark murmured, and pointed at the television. "Why didn't anybody tell me that Jane Austen movies were this cool?"

"No clue," Conner replied. He heard the elevator doors open to the apartment and craned his neck to say, "Hey, Dad. Took you long enough."

"I had to comfort the car," his father said sarcastically, dropping his keys on the counter and walking over to the couch, contributing to Conner's unfortunate hair situation by ruffling it. Conner saw out of the corner of his eye that his father's hand deftly swept the hair at Clark's temples, and that Clark closed his eyes at that. It was only a second, but it felt very kind, and Conner was grateful for that.

Somewhere, in between Conner groaning and putting a pillow over his head to deafen the sounds of the yelling and the sullen silences that reigned the next day, Conner hadn't really noticed but Clark had effectively started living there. He went home in the evenings but dropped by in the
afternoons, and occasionally, Clark would pick him up from school or take him out for the weekend. Slowly, so slowly Conner had stopped being surprised at Clark's being there, his mom had somehow started occupying space Conner had shared so long with just his father, and it was nice, it was comforting, it was as if it wasn't so lonely, anymore.

"She felt she wasn't good enough for me anymore. I had to disabuse her of the idea," his father added, disappearing down the hallway toward his wing while pulling off his jacket. And when he returned, Elizabeth was telling Mr. Darcy how she'd never marry him, and Clark was enraptured.

Lex scowled. "I never should have bought that," he muttered.

Conner's dad said that about every movie Clark liked watching, but it never stopped him from obsessively ordering things from Amazon.com--two days ago, his dad had purchased the box-set of the Kill Bill movies, even though he had them individually. Conner thought maybe it was a nervous tick, something to do with having a traumatic childhood or whatever.

"It's educational," Conner quipped, grinning at Clark's heartbroken face as Mr. Darcy left.

"It's rot," Lex said, but affectionately, and asked, "Half day?"

Conner sometimes suspected that it said a lot about him that his parents never thought that he was skipping class, only that school was let out early or that it was a vacation. Sure, Conner enjoyed school to a fairly unnatural degree, but he liked to say that it was only because he liked how the nuns were so endearingly well-intentioned, and not because he was a nerd. Plus, the fact that his best friend was there helped.

"The sprinklers went haywire. They had the church van drop a bunch of us off downtown and the rest of the kids had to wait for their parents," Conner explained, stuffing some chips into his mouth.

His father, though completely anal retentive about everything else had never seen it fit to be too concerned about Conner's eating habits, choosing instead to mutter about how if everything else bizarre about his son was genetic, then he probably got the metabolism, too. That translated to Conner eating as much food as he wanted whenever he wanted and still having visible ribs, which distressed his grandmother and led to widespread guilt on the parts of his mom and dad, which was always fun.

"That school is seriously falling apart," his dad murmured thoughtfully.

"It's fine," Conner answered. He narrowed his eyes. "Stop giving the school money."

"I just figure maybe you'll spend less time in Saturday detention," his father shot back sarcastically.

"I," Conner said dramatically, "will never spend less time in Saturday detention. And the nuns already think you're trying to bribe them."

"I am trying to bribe them," his dad said easily. Clark started to say something that sounded vaguely like a reprimand but was too involved with the television to give it much attention.

"Stop being so obvious about it!" Conner whined. "You're getting me into trouble."

The episode on the television ended with a crescendo, and Clark sighed, relaxing back into the couch like he was finally satisfied--seeing Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy at an impossible standstill, with Jane in London and Charlotte cheerfully and badly married. Sometimes, it was really horrifying the amount of plot you could pick up from watching A&E specials with Clark.
"How's Dr. Liebhart?" Clark asked, turning around on the couch and grinning at Lex.

"Jewish," Lex deadpanned. He looked at Conner and asked, "Are you heading out or is Geoffrey coming over today?"

Conner pushed off of the couch and started toward the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, "He's coming over."

"How're the party plans going?" his mom asked.

"Probably great," Conner admitted. The problem wasn't going to be with the party itself, it was going to be with the fact that Geoffrey hated surprise parties. "But I kind of get the feeling he's going to be wicked pissed with me when he finds out that I helped everybody plan this."

"He'll be so busy having a great time he won't even notice he's getting older," Clark assured him.

"That's what you think," Conner muttered, rifling around in the refrigerator until he found an orange. "Geoffrey's deranged."

Geoffrey was the only person Conner knew who had started to agonize about his birthdays the day he turned eleven. Nobody else spent their twelfth birthday party drinking punch like it was whiskey and moaning about how so much of his life had already passed--like fog or mist or other intangible, ephemeral things. And since Conner was Geoffrey's best friend, he was honor-bound to humor Geoffrey the entire week before and the entire week after Geoffrey's birthday; the former of which left Geoffrey annoyed and irritable, the latter of which made him melancholy and fingerpainting vast canvases in black.

"I could spike the punch," Lex offered, wandering into the kitchen to grab one of his bottles of clear dirt water.

From the living room, Clark yelled, "I heard that!"

Lex rolled his eyes and Conner just sighed, continuing to peel the orange.

"He's probably a depressive drunk, too," Conner muttered. "Maybe I can just give him a head injury."

"Happy birthday, here, have a concussion," Lex said, grinning.

Conner laughed and handed his father a quarter of the orange. "You're joking but I'm not."

Conner loved oranges. The year his father had gotten it into his mind that perhaps it would be a good, parental thing to take Conner to Disneyworld ("Disneyland is a cheap, Pacific coast backwater--we're going to Florida or bust."), Conner had gotten lost in an orange grove and spent half the day with migrant workers, speaking what little Spanish he knew and eating orange-red slices of fruit until he was sweet with it and sticky all over. By the time Superman found him, Conner had picked up a far more elastic Spanish vocabulary which alternately scandalized and amused his father and a serious bias when it came to fruit.

"What are you getting him?" Lex asked, popping an orange slice into his mouth.

Conner shrugged. "He has everything he wants," he said. "And Mister Archer's buying him a new computer that's all tricked out with some serious graphic arts stuff, so that's off the list."

Lex looked thoughtful.
Conner grinned. "Maybe I should buy him a hooker."

"I heard that!"

"You better not be doing anything for my birthday," Geoffrey warned. He waved a knife for emphasis.

Conner rolled his eyes and continued to chop tomatoes. "Everybody knows you hate your birthday. Guam knows you hate your birthday. Why would we celebrate something you loathe with the fiery passion of a thousand furious suns?"

Tenth grade at St. Ann's Academy for Children came with a host of indignities, not the least of which was home economics. The school was exclusive enough so that children entered the school and continued on through their twelve years of primary education with the same fifteen to twenty-five odd children they'd met in kindergarten. By the ninth grade, everybody already knew everybody else enough to know that nobody in their classes could cook; Conner had once tried to make instant macaroni and cheese on his own, but been thoroughly chastised by Mrs. Banner when she'd seen him lurking around the microwave. He couldn't really blame her, considering during his younger, more irresponsible years, he'd been known to explode kitchen appliances for the hell of it.

That day, class A was tackling spaghetti and meatballs from scratch. Conner had taken one look at the recipe and delegated meatballs to Geoffrey while he took to mangling tomatoes, which would all get cooked down anyway, so appearance was hardly paramount. It wouldn't do, however, for their final meal to turn out as spaghetti and meatblobs, which if Conner was left to shape them was depressingly likely.

"I just don't like to be reminded that I'm inching ever closer to middle-age," Geoffrey muttered. He poured some canola oil into a saucepan and set it on the range, turning the heat to high before he glanced at Conner, saying, "Sixteen is almost twenty."

Conner used every ounce of strength he had in his soul not to stab himself in the eye. Instead, he cupped his hands around the last few stray cubes of tomato and dropped them into the already-bubbling pot. It smelled good, like the bay leaf he'd dropped in there a few minutes ago, oregano, salt, and faintly of black pepper. If he could ever convince Mrs. Banner to let him use the kitchen at home, he felt he might have a good thing going.

"And twenty is almost post-mortem," Conner deadpanned.

"So you see where I'm going with this," Geoffrey explained, and used a spoon to set the meatballs into the sizzling oil, the golden-brown smell filling their workstation.

"You're deranged," Conner said bitterly, glaring and stirring the sauce.

They were knocking elbows in front of the stovetop, but they were already used to doing that from ninth grade Biology, so it mostly only bothered Julie, who pointed out three times that if Geoffrey just angled his body or Conner moved a little they could avoid all that unnecessary bumping together.

"Next, they'll tell me I have prostate cancer," Geoffrey reported sadly.

"Okay," Conner said seriously, "I am very close to killing you with this spoon."

At the end of the period, Conner and Geoffrey found that theirs was one of the only meals that was edible, and so spent their lunch hour defending it from hungry bystanders, who wanted to know
It was Thursday, which meant Geoffrey and Eve went off to one of the local after-school centers to provide hours of entertainment for bored children who were not artistically talented, despite Geoffrey's very best efforts to will them so. Conner once offered to try and make them do it, but Geoffrey had given him a withering look and said, "You can't just control everybody with your mind, Conner. I know that sounds retarded but with you--it's a distinct possibility."

Conner frowned at the memory. So Geoffrey was right, it didn't mean he had to be such a jackass about it; Conner was only offering to help.

And anyway, it wasn't even guaranteed to work.

Ever since that day at the Metropolis Museum of Art when he'd discovered Kryptonite, Geoffrey's heartbeat, and his mom's night-job, he'd spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to harness his telekinesis. Ordinary fifteen-year-olds worried about getting a blowjob before their other friends and whether or not their clothes looked cool; Conner worried about keeping his temper in check so he wouldn't accidentally fling a car through the side of a building. It hadn't happened yet, but that time he'd heard somebody from the *Inquisitor* calling his dad a filthy faggot had led to some pretty terrifying levitation, and only Clark's iron grip on his shoulder had brought him back to the moment soon enough that the armored truck had simply crashed the three feet back to asphalt.

The point was, it was Thursday evening, and his father had a determined expression on his face. His mom was out stalking the governor and Mrs. Banner had gone home for the night; there was no forthcoming rescue and Conner felt more than a little trapped.

"Dad, shouldn't I, you know, study for my SATs or something?" Conner asked, desperate. Even the hideous Princeton Review crapfest that was *Ten Real SATs* seemed a better alternative than dealing with his father in full experimental glee.

"Conner, you're fifteen, more than old enough to learn to control your powers--"

"*Power*," Conner insisted. "In the singular."

"--considering that it's volatile and is reactive to your moods I'd think you'd *want* to--"

"It doesn't even work all the time," Conner muttered sullenly.

"--be able to avoid hurting people with it," his father plowed on reasonably.

Conner rolled his eyes. His dad had the best intentions, but Conner had more than a passing suspicion that Lex's investment in understanding Conner's powers were more than just for Conner's benefit. He wasn't, despite Julie's not-so-affectionate nickname for him, a total moron, and he'd seen his father around experiments and test tubes enough to know that his dad looked at the whole thing like the best Christmas present ever. Conner used to try to deflect his dad's attention to his mom's powers, which had led to a lot of uncomfortable snickering on his mom's part and his dad saying, "Conner, please don't be slow," which Conner figured meant "been there, done that" in Lex-ese.

"Come on, is this really necessary?" Conner asked. He said the last word in his best bargaining voice, but his dad shot it down with his best *You're Clearly Out Of Your Mind* face, which trumped Conner's whining any day.

They were in Lex's office. His father was still in his five thousand dollar suit but his one thousand
dollar tie was loose around his neck, and he was talking with his hands, which was something Lex had picked up when Conner was in the sixth grade, and Lex's frustration had exceeded his considerable vocabulary. Conner was wearing the detritus of his school uniform, and was rumpled, untucked, wrinkled, and poorly-kempt all around.

"Clark told me about the armored car," his dad said evenly.

"Uh, that totally never happened," Conner said quickly, promising hideous fates for his mother in return his evil, narcing ways. "Mom hallucinated it. He was on the crack, Dad."

Lex cocked an eyebrow. "One, you've really got to stop calling him that," he said gently, "and two, you're a terrible liar and prone to levitating things with your mind when you're angry. I have a responsibility to society not to let this go unchecked."

"You just want me to do stupid human tricks," Conner muttered.

"That, too," Lex said smoothly, and stood up. "Come on, I've got a machine that detects wavelengths somewhere around here."

"I hate you," Conner moaned, letting his face fall into his hands. "I hate the whole world."

"That's very sad for you," his dad said, distracted and searching around his office.

Conner's power (singular) seemed to be the only thing left over that made him different. All of the strength and speed that he had when he was younger had sputtered out of him, disappeared--by his fourteenth birthday, in the early stages of puberty, the last whispers of his mother's alien traits had disappeared. What remained was an equally intriguing, much more difficult to master telekinesis, which had, in the early days, been cool, then terrifying, and now merely a chore.

For the next hour, Lex told Conner to focus on one of the Daily Planet mugs that they had laying around the house, telling him to try and move it one way or another. From a ten foot distance, cardinal directions were easy for Conner, just a nudge one or two inches back and forth, left or right. He had to be at least four feet closer before up and down came easily, and even then there was a little wobble, close calls, and the mug had fallen down and thudded on the lush carpet more than once.

"I suck at this," Conner moaned.

"It's not always going to be this hard," his dad reassured him, putting away his machinery and filing away the lab notebook where he kept all documentation of his and Conner's experiments.

"And if it is, I'm sure you'll just fix it for me," Conner said tartly, grinning.

There was a long pause before Conner caught his dad's expression, which was strangely detached. Conner could read his father like a book, all the tiny ticks of punctuation, dashes and broader words and things jotted in the margins. For so long the only person he really had to look at all the time was his father, and Conner had never really minded, because his father had a handsome face and bright, smart eyes, and a kind smile--at least for Conner.

He felt something in his chest contract, but before he could ask what was wrong, Lex said:

"That's a terrible philosophy," in a harsher tone than Conner had heard in years.

Conner gaped for a second, but stammered, "I was just--"
"It's is not a joke, Conner," Lex snapped. "I can't clean up your messes for the rest of your life."

His father looked seriously pissed, eyes grayer than blue and it made Conner feel small.

"Sorry," Conner said lamely. "I didn't mean it that way."

Lex rubbed his face, and said after a moment, "I know." He glanced over at Conner with a wane smile. "I've had a long day. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Hey, that's what I'm here for," Conner said encouragingly. "I can also provide a legitimate reason for you to be really angry with me, if you feel the urge one day. I could burn down the library."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Lex said.

"I could hit on a nun."

"Go to bed," Lex instructed, but he was grinning.

"Maybe I could streak during mass."

"Leave now." Lex pointed at the door.

Conner smirked.

At half past two in the morning, Conner's cell phone started shrieking a slow version of REWRITE, which he'd thought was cool the last time he'd rewatched Full Metal Alchemist but was now reconsidering because it was deafening him.

"Oh my God, what now?" he moaned, flipping open the phone and pressing it to his ear.

"Conner, I've been thinking," Geoffrey said solemnly.

Conner flopped on his stomach in the tangled mess of his covers and planned Geoffrey's slow, agonizing death. He kept his eyes closed and thought Vulcan Death Grip as hard as possible.

"I mean--I'm turning sixteen this year. A lot of people die with they're sixteen," Geoffrey said.

"Yeah, especially when they call people at two thirty in the morning to moan about it," Conner supplied hoarsely. "Seriously, Geoffrey, what have I ever done do you? Did I pillage your village? Did I rape your family's prized goat? Why me?"

"I just wanted you to know that if anything happens to me, I want you to take care of my dad."

Conner opened his eyes to glare at the side of his nightstand, hair falling into his eyes.

"And if you have time, check in on Eve. She might be a little upset," Geoffrey went on philosophically. "She's a really good girl, Conner. You should give her a chance."

"Geoffrey."

1. After."

"Geoffrey," Conner said desperately, on the edge of hysterical laughter now.
"Also," Geoffrey said, ignoring Conner's tone, "I know that first time we cracked into my dad's liquor cabinet we made that stupid promise about our gay virginity, but in case I don't live long enough to pop your ass cherry--"

"Geoffrey Chaucer Archer," Conner said, enunciating every single syllable, "I swear to God, when I learn to kill people with my mind you are the very first one on the list."

"You really don't have to bother," Geoffrey said sadly. "I'll probably be dead by then."

"I'm hanging up on you," Conner promised fiercely, completely awake, "right now."

There was a long pause. "Hey, so I'll be at your place in forty minutes alright?"

"You better bring kugel," Conner ordered, and hung up.

Geoffrey was under the impression that his two-month-old relationship with Eve Anthony was a secret. The only real secret was that everybody was taking pity on Geoffrey's naturally reticent personality and allowing him to keep up the act. The day Geoffrey had first kissed her, Eve had all but posted fliers in every girl's bathroom declaring that Geoffrey was taken and everybody else had better step off or she'd strangle them with her school tie.

Conner tried not to take it personally that for the first since they'd met one another, Geoffrey was choosing somebody over Conner. Intellectually, he understood it; in passing, in the hallway, when he saw Geoffrey leaning against Eve's locker and grinning at her, he still wanted to throw one of his gym shoes at her stupid, curly, shiny hair.

It didn't seem fair that of all the boys at St. Ann's, Eve would hijack Conner's best friend, but he was a mature, supportive friend, and he would not use his powers for evil. Or something.

So as much as he wanted to beat Geoffrey with a tire iron for this entire past week, Conner had to admit he was a little bit gratified that it was nearly three in the morning, and Geoffrey was bearing kugel and headed toward Conner's house--not Eve's. They were still best friends, Conner figured, just different now that Geoffrey had a girlfriend.

He yawned hugely and scrambled at his hair--it really was getting long, but damned if he was going to admit his dad was right and get it cut--padding out into the hallway and toward the kitchen. The third time he knocked into a wall, he just muttered under his breath, tugged the rainbow wristband off of his wrist, and tied what hair he could back in a high ponytail. He looked like a total retard but it was his house and his best friend and--

There was light, diffuse and soft, smoothing along the lines of the wall, spilling out of the kitchen. Conner frowned.

--and apparently his father, sitting at the kitchen counter, staring at a cabinet.

Conner paused, a hand on the wall, frowning at his dad's profile. Lex looked pale, washed-out and more tired than usual. The deep lavender circles under his eyes made him look old in the overhead light of the kitchen, and in Lex's long fingers, he loosely held a mug of what looked to be cold coffee. Lex had neither his cell phone, his Palm Pilot, or his pager on the counter next to his still hands.

"Dad?" Conner asked quietly.

It seemed to break the moment, enough so that Conner saw his dad blink in surprise a second,
before he turned to Conner.

"Conner," Lex said dumbly, and blinking, said, "Hey. What's up?"

Conner's brow furrowed, and he opened his mouth to ask, "What the hell is going on with you?" but ended up saying, "Geoffrey's just having his annual freak-out."

It made his father laugh, and that seemed to lighten the atmosphere, and when Conner blinked and looked at Lex again, he was blue-eyed and smooth again, pale and well-composed, the guy who owned LexCorp and made Conner feel wanted and had the highest score on LexCorp's personal Counterstrike server.

"It's so out of character for him," Lex mused. "He's usually so mellow."

"Well," Conner grumbled, stepping onto the freezing tile floor of the kitchen and wincing, "I think he gets all his freak yahoos out once a year, and I'm lucky bachelorette number one."

His father chuckled, and tightened his hand around the coffee cup, shoulders relaxing a little, eyes tracking Conner as he moved around the kitchen, first to the cabinets to pull out two dishes, and then the silver drawer to find some forks.

"So I see he's bringing kugel again," Lex said, amused.

"I'm no cheap date," Conner muttered darkly, and when his dad laughed, Conner added, "One day, I will cure him. I swear to God. If I have to lobotomize him, I don't care. I would rather swab his freaking drool than listen to him tell me to take care of his girlfriend for him after he dies in some fiery accident."

"At least he's planning ahead," Lex said diplomatically, voice softer. "Not a terrible thing."

Conner stared at his dad in horror, fingers frozen around the handle of the refrigerator door.

"You're condoning this behavior?" Conner asked.

"Well, if it gets me kugel from that place on Yeomen street," Lex said.

"Traitor," Conner hissed, and rooted around the refrigerator for Sunkist. "I'll carry this wrong against me to my grave."

"Hm," his father said philosophically, and slid out off of the kitchen stool, saying distantly, "Save some for me and Clark for breakfast, okay?"

"Got it," Conner said, watching his father head back to his bedroom, not a little bit surprised.

It wasn't like the idea of Clark spending the night was such a foreign one. The walls of the penthouse were very well soundproofed--thank God, Conner frequently reflected--but Clark wasn't exactly inconspicuous, and the "Oh, Clark dropped by for breakfast" excuse was probably the worst one in the history of time. All in all, Conner was glad that his parents were getting along, or getting together, or getting laid, whatever they did when they weren't having huge arguments or sniping at one another over dinner.

But the fact of the matter was that Conner still had no idea when his dad and mom had started spending the night together again, and it was in no small part due to his dad's furious belief in discretion. The fact that his dad had just said, "for me and Clark" was nearly a blatant admission that Clark was there, and that he would be there.
It gave Conner a weird pause, and he collated the information for the day and tried to make some sort of logical conclusion out of it, only to hear Geoffrey letting himself into the penthouse, saying, "So I saw Judy the she-male hooker again. She says that the discount she offered you still stands," and his dad's weird behavior was the last of Conner's list of woes.

On Clark's thirty-fifth birthday, Lex had gotten him a waffle iron.

"What the hell is this?" Clark had asked.

"Happy birthday, honey," Lex had said indulgently, smirking.

"Awesome, waffles!" Conner had yelled, and rushed to the kitchen to plug it in while his parents scowled at one another. A few minutes later, there'd been a small electrical fire, so Lex had ordered a new waffle iron for Clark and given Conner an hour lecture about his problems with arson. However, once the new waffle iron arrived, Clark just brought it over to the penthouse and left it--in retrospect, Conner should have noted that as the first big clue that his parents were together, but at the time, he'd been suffering the not-insignificant self-involved angst of all eleven-year-olds and incapable of bothering.

It had turned out for the best after all, because even though Conner was no longer allowed to touch the waffle iron, Geoffrey was--and Geoffrey was very good at making Conner waffles.

"I'm surprised you didn't go to Eve's," Conner said, a little bit meaner than he'd intended to sound, but when he caught Geoffrey's mostly-amused expression, he figured that it was all right.

Geoffrey just poured milk and eggs and things into a bowl and stirred it with a big fork, saying mildly, "Weirdly, I don't think Mr. Martinez would appreciate it much if his daughter's boyfriend--who she isn't supposed to have--showed up at their doorstep--at an address I'm probably not supposed to know."

"You're way too zen about this," Conner complained. "If my girlfriend denied my existence, I'd be pissed. I mean, what's she got to be ashamed about? You're not deformed or anything."

"Thanks," Geoffrey said dryly.

"I stand by my point," Conner insisted.

"And you're looking at this all wrong," Geoffrey said, grinning, pointing the batter-covered fork at Conner. "Her family's Catholic. Not Catholic like most Catholic people are--really Catholic. She likes me enough to go behind her dad's back, right? I think that's kind of nice."

"Kind of hot, actually, if you think about it, naughty little Catholic school--"

"Do not," Conner warned, flushing, "finish that line of thought."

"You're such a prude, Conner," Geoffrey chided, but gently.

"Which is something that you claim, I dispute, and we have decided not to argue over anymore because neither of us can throw a punch to save our lives," Conner finished, looking out the kitchen window and seeing night still cloaking the city in deep, midnight blues.

Conner had his own--what he felt were very good--reasons not to want to broach the subject of Eve and Geoffrey and what exactly constituted a hot girl, but mostly they revolved around the fact that
he was starting to get the impression he'd never been and never would be interested in girls, period. Also, the fact that he ended up surfing more gay than straight porn tipped the scales a little bit. It was not, he thought strangely, too weird a concept; if sexuality were genetic, he was kind of a sure thing already.

It was something to be discussed at length—with somebody else, Conner decided, because if he could tell Geoffrey most everything, Conner figured that liking boys was a fair caveat.

"Also, I figured it's kind of tradition at this point," Geoffrey said brightly. "I am realistic about my imminent mortality, and you tell me what a moron I am. I bring pastries to placate your dad and we eat waffles."

"You're such a goddamn drama queen," Conner muttered into his forearm, watching Geoffrey putter around the kitchen through half-lidded eyes. "Nobody else does this."

"You're really the last person on the earth who can call anybody a drama queen, Conner," Geoffrey shot back, stirring a bowlful of waffle batter.

"Full of shit," Conner murmured darkly. "Full of vile and unending shit."

"Says you," Geoffrey snapped back. He cast Conner a speculative expression. "What would you do if I died?"

Conner lifted his head, giving Geoffrey his most poisonous expression.

"I'm serious," Geoffrey said darkly. He set down the batter and looked at Conner with solemn eyes; it made Conner sit up straight in the kitchen stool.

"You're not going to die," Conner insisted.

There was no way of predicting it, but occasionally, Geoffrey went into a quiet, thoughtful mood, and the way he looked at Conner made Conner's stomach go into knots, made him feel flushed, made him wonder if maybe there wasn't something Geoffrey was keeping from him--a lot of somethings. Mostly, it just made Conner nervous.

"That wasn't the question, though," Geoffrey replied, and Conner silently cursed Geoffrey's three week tenure in Lincoln-Douglas debate for turning him into an insurmountable verbal enemy.

Conner rolled his eyes and propped his head up on his palms, elbows on the countertop, watching Geoffrey spooning out batter onto a sizzling waffle iron, watching him not setting anything on fire, watching him be Geoffrey. The same Geoffrey that Conner had known what felt like every day of his life, or most of what he remembered, at least; the Geoffrey Conner seemed to be able to get along with whether or not he was in a good mood, seemed to be able to fight with and be all right with and be upset with. What would Conner do if Geoffrey died, Geoffrey asked, Conner thought hatefully.

"I'd laugh and dance on your grave," Conner finally snapped, scowling, "now make our freaking waffles and stop being such a jackass."

Geoffrey grinned, and the seriousness of the moment evaporated.

"That's what I figured," he said demurely, and made his freaking waffles.
At some point, they relocated to Conner's bedroom, where Conner laid on his bed and pretended to listen to Geoffrey talk about how many diseases to which he could fall victim now that he was sixteen, how teenaged death rates were skyrocketing due to cars, and how there were always freak accidents, too. Then, Geoffrey started in on how much of his meager existence he'd already wasted and what would he do when he looked up one day and he was suddenly forty-five and had never made anything of himself.

Conner for the most part ate his waffle, and then drifted in and out of consciousness until he heard the shuffling sounds of human activity outside of his closed bedroom door. He blinked three times, saw that sun was streaming in through his window, and that it was half past ten in the morning. Also, Geoffrey was asleep, drooling on the foot of Conner's bed, body twisted into a weird L-shape to accommodate where Conner had passed out face-down in his pillows. At some point, somebody had come in a thrown a blanket over them both.

It'd be kind of sweet--if they didn't end up doing this every year the night before Geoffrey's birthday.

Conner picked his way around Geoffrey and out of bed, spent a good five minutes digging a piece of ground-in waffle out of his rug, and went to the bathroom. When he stepped out, Geoffrey was sitting up in bed, cracking his neck, and grumbling, "We really have to stop doing that. I'm going to end up crippled."

"'S your fault," Conner said hoarsely.

Geoffrey made an indistinct noise and rolled off of the bed, yawning hugely and trudging into Conner's bathroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

"At least you did it on a Friday this time," Conner muttered, and stumbled out into the hallway and toward the kitchen, where if he got there at just the right time, there would be coffee and no disapproving glances from the adults in the household.

The coffee argument was old. Conner said that if he wanted to drink it, he didn't see any problems with drinking it; Lex said that the same argument could be made about alcohol or acid or blood, which was about the point where Conner and Clark both rolled their eyes and then it became a whole different argument altogether. The first time Conner had tried to convince his father that drinking coffee was perfectly normal and fine for a then-twelve year old kid, he'd said, "But Lois does it!" which was the worst argument ever. At least he hadn't followed it up with, "But Lois always lets me drink it when we hang out together!" which would have gotten him locked up in a high tower in a Scottish castle waiting for his prince(ss) charming.

But it was a Saturday morning, which in recent years meant his father slept in, his mother had slept over, and that Conner had the kitchen to himself, since Mrs. Banner had smirked and said that she felt the Luthor household could function just fine over the weekend without her German efficiency.

Aside from some hums and creaks of the penthouse, it seemed all quiet.

Conner grinned, reached around the organic, fairly-traded, shade-grown by small cooperative farmers Breakfast Blend coffee, grabbed the grey Tupperware container behind it, and tipped out some of the French roasted beans his dad had flown in once a week into the coffee grinder. Conner figured that if his dad hid the stuff, then it was practically an engraved invitation for Conner to find it and pillage ruthlessly. Whenever he said stuff like that out loud, his mom always muttered about how it wasn't his genes or anything.

A few minutes later, the smell of fresh coffee was filling the penthouse, and it seemed to lure
Geoffrey out of the bathroom. He flopped down tousle-haired in yesterday's clothes and muttered something about orange juice into the kitchen counter.

"People on the edge of death don't need food," Conner said, mostly to be mean.

"I'll kill you," Geoffrey managed, but fell mostly-silent, making sad, desperate sounds.

Conner enjoyed nothing more than the rub Geoffrey's face in the fact that prior to noon, he was incapable of avoiding a parked bus. A snotty voice in his head pointed out that it was also really cool that Eve definitely didn't know that about her little boyfriend. The thought was a little jarring, so Conner shook his head and made up a bowl of Cheerios, stuck a spoon in it, and put it within easy reach of where Geoffrey had collapsed on the counter.

Conner then made himself some toast, poured a mug of coffee, stirred in some creamer, and had finished half of it before he narrowed his eyes at where Geoffrey seemed to have fallen asleep on the counter again.

"Geoffrey," he said, and when that garnered no response, Conner sighed and punched Geoffrey hard in the shoulder, which made his head shoot up, his eyes dart about wildly until they landed on the Cheerios, at which point Geoffrey fell upon the bowl like the ravenous teenaged boy he was and seemed to be at least somewhat awake.

There was a short silence before Conner said, "So I'm kind of worried about my dad."

Geoffrey swallowed and said, "Yeah?"

"A little, yeah," Conner mused. "He's been looking really tired recently."

"Maybe that just means your mom and dad have been getting along real well," Geoffrey leered.

Conner threatened Geoffrey with his mug. "I will seriously kill you with this."

Geoffrey cocked his eyebrow. "Your dad's a CEO, Conner. He's not going to be fresh as a daisy all the time, you know. Have you been checking out the business section lately?"

"'Fresh as a daisy'?" Conner asked, a little bit horrified.

"I repeat: have you been checking out the business section lately?"

The guilty thought that flashed through Conner's mind must have flashed across his face at the same time, because Geoffrey said, "See, you don't even know what's really going on, and you're all paranoid already." He smiled broadly. "Go read the paper, call up the Wicked Witch of the West-"

"Lois is not the Wicked Witch of the West," Conner interrupted, frowning.

"--and bring me more Cheerios," Geoffrey finished.

"You know," Conner said, annoyed, "I'm thinking of rescinding the offer of my ass cherry."

"I'm heartbroken," Geoffrey deadpanned, holding out his cereal bowl expectantly.

"I don't think I want to know."

Conner whipped around to see Clark watching them from kitchen doorway, eyebrows nearly touching his hairline. Conner felt all the blood in his body rush to his face immediately, and he
had just enough time to scowl at Geoffrey, who looked nearly as red as Conner felt, before Clark said, "I'm going to pretend that I primped in the dining room mirror, and that I totally just missed that last part of the conversation, all right?"

Conner nodded furiously, trying to simultaneously will time to reverse as well as to banish the image of Clark primping. "Yes, all right. This is a fantastic plan."

"I am one hundred percent behind that, Mr. Kent," Geoffrey agreed.

Clark smirked, and clearing his throat, he said, "Good morning, Conner. I see you're eating a wholesome, complete breakfast and--" Clark laughed "--stealing Lex's coffee again."

"I just wanted it more," Conner said, feeling the last, jittering remnants of embarrassment knock around his chest--not in the least alleviated by the speculative glance that his mom gave him, one that was lingering and thoughtful and not a little bit nervous. Inside Conner's head, a voice that sounded a lot like his own shouted, "Shit!"

"Good morning, Geoffrey," Clark said, stepping into the kitchen and heading straight for the coffee. Conner figured that the caffeine addiction was genetic, too.

"Morning, Mr. Kent," Geoffrey said.

"Excited about your birthday?" Clark asked innocently. Conner nearly choked on his toast, and covered his laugh by coughing very loudly while Geoffrey scowled.

"Nearly peeing my pants," Geoffrey muttered darkly, and studying the expressions on Conner and Clark's faces, his frown deepened, and he said, "I don't see how everybody can be so happy about the yearly marker of your ever-burgeoning--"

"And I see Geoffrey's awake and aware of his age," Lex said, weary but amused, striding into the kitchen. Conner was forced to cover his mouth this time around he was laughing so hard, and Geoffrey mouthed something that looked distinctly like, "I hate you" in Conner's general direction.

"Morning, Mr. Luthor," Geoffrey said resentfully at his still-empty cereal bowl.

"I see we're as upbeat as usual about our slow shuffle off this mortal coil," Lex said pleasantly.

Conner narrowed his eyes at his parents for a moment before he realized what seemed so very off about the picture. It was a Saturday morning, his mom and dad were both in their pajamas, lounging around the kitchen picking on Geoffrey--clearly unconcerned with what their impressionable, teenaged son thought of their already-questionable relationship. Conner barely kept the triumphant smile from curling across his mouth.

"Oh yeah," Geoffrey muttered, "Hamlet has nothing on me."

"Good morning, Geoffrey," Lex said tolerantly, and smiled at Conner. "Morning."

"Good morning," Conner chirped, and because he had a truly negligible amount of self-control, a wide, horrible smile spread across his face. "So, I guess Clark got here extra early, huh?" he asked, wide-eyed and bland.

Clark and Lex both went blank for a second and Geoffrey respectfully became fascinated by a fern that was sitting next to the French doors in the breakfast area, basking in the morning sunshine on the balcony. Conner, because he was their spawn, felt no such compunction, and continued to stare at his parents, both of whom were dressed in t-shirts and pajama pants and looked married, which
would be a nice change of pace from their normal duck-and-cover sexual antics. Conner was as open-minded as any test-tube baby made from the DNA of a man and a male alien could be, but everybody had their limits, and he could only handle his dad and mom having sex if they were going to be committed about it.

"Yeah, super early--" Clark started desperately.

"Clark stayed in the guest room last night, Conner," Lex interrupted gently, cocking his brow. But even as he said it, Lex's hand was on Clark's elbow, and his fingers looked white and smooth against Clark's golden-brown skin. Conner was fascinated by that contact: out in the open, nobody's big secret, more real--right in the middle of another lie. "You can knock that idea right out of your wicked little mind."

Clark's face closed over, and Conner's grin fell.

Conner had harbored suspicions about his parents since before he'd met his mother face to face for the first time. When he'd been nine, and started his noble quest to root out his genetic origins, he'd entertained--very briefly--the idea of his dad and mom getting married after Conner sorted everything out and they shook hands and agreed to play nice. In retrospect, Conner admitted that it had been childish and the result of having watched the Lindsey Lohan version of *The Parent Trap* a truly obscene number of times.

But since Clark had become such a huge part of his life, Conner couldn't help but note how the circles under his father's eyes had lightened, that Lex tore himself away from work on Saturday mornings more and more frequently. And, Conner noted most happily, how when his dad laughed, the ghosts that had been in his eyes seemed to have disappeared, fading into the black corona around his father's blue, blue irises.

Conner didn't kid himself that it was because his father's nearly-weekly trips to parent/teacher conferences had ended along with Conner's stupidly-adventurous streak.

Clark was funny and surprising; he knew everything there was to know about Metropolis local politics and business, and nothing about ancient Etruscans. Clark laughed at Lex's nerd-jokes and knew to buy Conner's dad Warrior Angel memorabilia in mint condition so that it could be locked away in a glass case and stared at in admiration. Clark knew Lex took two sugars and no cream in his strong, black coffee, and let himself get hustled at pool every time, even though Conner figured by now Clark probably knew better. Clark worried that Conner didn't get to spend enough time with family and worried about the untoward influences of being around nuns all day, but he still came to Conner's school activities with a shy, hopeful grin on his face. Clark took Conner to lame movies Lex wouldn't be caught dead watching, and when Conner wandered into the *Daily Planet* newsroom, Clark taught Conner the keystroke shortcuts in QuarkXPress and what a graf was, and they made up stupid headlines for important stories.

It was, Conner admitted, a little hurtful, in a distant, detached way to think that after all of these years, it'd taken somebody other than himself to make his father better, to put things right. But in a very selectively Machiavellian way, Conner could focus on the larger issues at hand, because it was difficult to feel sullen and unimportant when your father smiled more, seemed to sleep better, looked at you with the sort of comfortable fondness that made Conner long for home whenever things weren't going his way.

Things had been better since Conner found Clark.

"It'd--I mean, it'd be okay. If you guys were going out, I mean," Conner said, half out of mostly-fruitless hope.
Lex looked placid. "I understand what you're trying to do, Conner, but--"

"We're not," Clark interrupted softly, and smiled apologetically at Conner, lying through his big, white teeth. He reached out a hand and dropped it onto Conner's mop of hair. "We don't have to be together to be your mom and dad, you know."

Conner stared at them for a second, and tried not to seethe. When that failed, he cleared his mind, and forced himself to say, "Yeah. Hey, sorry. I was just curious."

For a second, Conner thought his mom looked apologetic.

"Anyway," Lex said, "I called a board meeting--"

"On a Saturday?" Clark asked, narrow-eyed.

"--and it wouldn't do to be late for my own party," Lex finished, ignoring Conner's mom. He smiled wanly at Conner and nodded at Geoffrey before he disappeared toward his bedroom again.

A few awkward seconds later, Clark smiled and said, "I'm going to head out, too."

Two changes of clothes, some shuffling, and a pair of strangely distant goodbyes later, Conner was left alone with Geoffrey in the kitchen, trying to blow the window out of its frame because he had to direct his rage somewhere, and there wasn't really a profitable outlet anywhere near him.

His hands were tight around his coffee cup, and it seemed like a long time passed before he felt Geoffrey's hand on his wrist, fingers gentle. It broke his concentration just enough so that he caught Geoffrey's eyes as they flickered down at the mug, and when Conner looked down, he noted that the coffee had boiled down to nothing, just a brown rim at the bottom of the cup--that was when he noticed the ceramic was hot.

Then, Conner dropped the mug to stare at his bright red palms, pain starting to register.

"Holy shit!" Geoffrey yelled, scrambled down from the kitchen stool, nearly leaped over the counter, grabbed Conner's hands by the wrists, and shoved him toward the sink, where Geoffrey made Conner hold his hands under a stream of cold water.

"Ow," Conner finally said, staring at his hands, which were starting to blister. "Oh," he said again, eyes widening. "Oh, ow! Shit! Ow!"

Geoffrey looked at him reproachfully, smoothing his thumb carefully over the curve of flesh where Conner's thumb met his palm in a way that technically should have been painful--considering the third-degree burns Conner had just managed to inflict on himself--but was actually kind of nice, in a thoroughly distressing way.

"You're such a moron," Geoffrey muttered under his breath, squinting at Conner's hands.

Conner just didn't have the strength of mind not to perve on his best friend and take his hand away like a good boy, so he sulked and watched the water roll off his palms, which were now mottled red and white and hideous.

"I can't believe they just lied to my face like that," Conner muttered, staring at the stainless steel of the sink and ignoring his hands. "God, that really hurts." Unsuccessfully.

Geoffrey's mask of irritation was starting to slip. "Maybe we should go to the hospital."
"Hey, Doctor," Conner said, mock-happy, "my parents are lying to me about fucking--"

"Conner," Geoffrey said warningly, the same way he did every time he sensed that Conner was just working himself up for the sake of working himself up. It was, aside from practical and well-intentioned, totally annoying.

Conner's shoulders slumped accordingly and he said, barely intelligible, "I'm just annoyed."

"I got that," Geoffrey said gently, and let go of Conner's hands, which led to Conner viciously quashing the tiny note of regret that resonated in his head. "I'll clean up the broken pieces--you stay here and don't destroy anything with your mind," Geoffrey instructed, grinning.

Conner watched the water running over his hands and did the exact opposite.

Since the tides of Geoffrey's temporary emotional breakdown over his birthday were well-documented, Conner, Mr. Archer, and Eve had had planned around them. It was pretty easy to keep Geoffrey distracted, considering the week leading up to his birthday he spent most of the time moping and surfing the web, looking up freak diseases that afflicted sixteen year olds and sighing at the accomplishments of other, younger people.

So while Eve and Mr. Archer were decorating the third floor of the warm, narrow-roomed brownstone on Alston Avenue, Conner and Geoffrey were ten blocks and four cross-streets away at Metropolis General.

"This is so humiliating," Conner muttered. "I had plans, too."

"I think this is pretty fitting, all things considered," Geoffrey said philosophically, leaning back against the medicine-green walls of the emergency room.

Across the room, there was a mom scowling at her son, who had three fingers jammed into the mouth of a handheld vacuum, some people with profusely bleeding gashes, and one person who was squirming uncomfortably in his seat, but who aside from his nearly tomato-red face, seemed totally well. Conner figured it was better not to know.

"It's your birthday, I was going to do best friend stuff," Conner argued.

"Conner," Geoffrey said reasonably, "on the day everybody I know officially marks my inching ever closer to death--" he made a broad hand motion "--is there really a better place to showcase what birthdays really are than a hospital?"

"I would hit you," Conner promised, "but it would actually hurt me more than you."

Geoffrey smirked, which was disturbingly cute, so Conner looked away and stared at the squirming, blushing guy, who seemed to be eyeing Geoffrey with abnormal interest. Narrowing his eyes, Conner leaned to his left, until his and Geoffrey's arms were pressed together in what he hoped was a clear signal that people blushing and squirming in the ER weren't going to have anything to do with Conner's best friend. The man gave Conner a once-over, rolled his eyes, and resumed fidgeting in his seat.

Torn between feeling insulted and disgusted on Geoffrey's behalf, Conner said, "So you know all the doctor's going to do is clean this in the most painful way possible, right?"

"And possibly some other things that they learned in school," Geoffrey said glancing at his watch.
Conner looked, too, eyes widening as he realized that it was nearly two, which was when Eve had made a date to meet Geoffrey at a bookstore to keep him distracted while Conner went to pick up Geoffrey's birthday present.

"You don't have to wait around," Conner said earnestly. "Seriously--they're going to call me in any minute. They'll ask me how I'm such a moron. I'll say something about trying to make breakfast. Go--you have a date with Eve, right?"

Geoffrey gave him a strange look. "How do you know that?"

"She told me when I was curling her hair," Conner said sarcastically.

He was doing a quick mental calculation: Geoffrey would be about ten, fifteen minutes late, but would arrive grinning and blushing and explaining how he'd had to schlep Conner to the ER. Eve would smirk, and distract Geoffrey with the architecture section in CitiBooks until five. (There'd probably be some inappropriate giggling and touching in there somewhere, but Conner found it was better for his blood pressure if he didn't think about it.) At some point, Conner would do that thing where he bought a present. He was starting to debate the relative merits of writing "IOU YOU ANNOYING BASTARD" on a piece of cardboard and gift-wrapping it.

"Go on. You've been looking at your watch." Conner grinned, self-deprecating. "You know she'll have your balls for breakfast if you don't show up."

Geoffrey made a face, but got up anyway. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Geoffrey asked uncertainly. "Because I could just run outside and call her."

"And get me lynched Monday? No thanks," Conner laughed. He waved Geoffrey off with one sore hand. "Go on, get out of here."

It took another five minutes of placating and bargaining and promises he'd get his hands looked at before Geoffrey finally managed to leave, and five more before Conner got called. Predictably, a doctor who didn't look much older than Conner asked questions about how Conner had managed to burn himself so badly and proceeded to clean out the wound in as painful a way as possible. Then, there was some goo and bandages.

While Conner did not, actually, have third-degree burns, just a few really uncomfortable spots which required lancing, everybody was making a big deal out of it.

"I should call your parents," Dr. Dougie said with all the uncertainty of a third year med student. Conner made a sincere face. "I don't think that's a very good idea."

The doctor frowned. "You're underage, Mr. Luthor."

"My dad's in a board meeting," Conner said, and figured there was about a fifty-fifty chance he was actually telling the truth. "Nothing annoys LexCorp shareholders more than having their annual report held up because of something totally inane, you know."

"LexCorp?" the doctor squeaked, and looked at Conner's chart again.

By the time Conner was pounding the pavement, feet tapping the rusted stairs down into the nearest subway station, he had only an hour and a half left before Eve ushered Geoffrey back home and their entire class popped out from behind the furniture.

It took him thirty minutes and four close calls to reach the build site. There, he thanked Jesus
It was four fifty-three when he finally hit the back steps of Geoffrey's brownstone, and by the time he got into the living room after depositing Geoffrey's gift on the kitchen table, Conner flopped down onto the ground, heaving for breath like a dying fish as all the lights in the room went out and Mr. Archer hushed everyone.

Garrison, who seemed more lucid than usual, was sprawled out next to Conner on the carpet, whispered, "Hey, what happened to your hands?" just as Conner heard the high, lilting curl of Eve's laughter at the front door as it opened with a creak.

The party was, predictably, a disastrously good time. Geoffrey spent the whole time mortified and trying to get five minutes alone with his father so he could strangle the man; everybody else had fun. Class A was in full representation, which meant that Julie was directing, Garrison was making everybody in the room laugh, Randall was inspecting all of the food for whether or not it had any hydrogenated anything, and Conner was playing Metal Gear Solid with Mr. Archer.

Normally, Conner would have one arm around Geoffrey's shoulders and be harassing him about how he always had such a dire outlook about everything, but today, Geoffrey had both arms around Eve, and Conner was beating the shit out of Major Raikov, despite potential later consequences. As soon as Raikov was appropriately stuffed into a locker, Conner passed the controller back to Mr. Archer, who regarded him with a raised eyebrow, but didn't ask.

"Anger management," Conner explained.

Which made Mr. Archer grin, because Conner had said the same thing when he'd been convincing Mr. Archer to buy Geoffrey Grand Theft Auto 6. "You're in a snit."

Mr. Archer was the only person in the world who still talked like that, which also explained why Geoffrey said things like 'fresh as a daisy,' But Conner was determinedly not thinking about Geoffrey at the moment.

"Yeah, well," Conner said evasively.

"Sharing your best friend is a pretty rough deal," Mr. Archer said earnestly, which made Conner cast a sharp him a sharp expression. "The first girlfriend is always hard, Conner."

"It is totally freaky," Conner said hotly, "how you do that."

"So how long have they been dating?" Mr. Archer asked casually, leaning back to peer through the doorway of the media room.

Conner gave him a Look. The thing about Mr. Archer was that he a Kansas Supreme Court Justice, and none of his questions ever really came out sounding casual. On the one hand, it made otherwise potentially lame field trips to the courthouse seem cool--on the other, it made other, potentially cool fieldtrips to places that shouldn't have been politicized lame. And then on the third, invisible hand, it made Mr. Archer really bad at faking subtlety.

"About two months now," Conner said finally, taking pity.

Mr. Archer glanced through the doorway into the family room again, where Geoffrey was letting
Eve play with his fingers while everybody was gathered around the big screen TV that was showing *Old School*. Conner tried not to think about how Eve was probably practically in Geoffrey's lap at this point, which may have been the whole idea behind the movie, anyway. When Geoffrey had proposed which movie to watch, Conner had rolled his eyes and volunteered to distract Mr. Archer, which was why he was here, watching Snake sneak around a Russian military base and--

"Is--is that man grabbing me in the crotch?" Mr. Archer asked, horrified, hands frozen on the PS3 controller.

Conner winced. He'd forgotten about this part. "Um. Maybe he missed your hand?" he tried.

Mr. Archer cocked an eyebrow. "Right," he deadpanned.

"Or maybe," Conner said, knowing that there was a reason Geoffrey couldn't lie worth shit, "that big, electric Russian guy is Major Raikov's boyfriend. And maybe he's angry about us stealing Raikov's uniform and wearing his face and jamming his nude body into a locker."

"I'd say that was warranted," Mr. Archer said philosophically.

"Yeah, we're total jerks, really," Conner agreed.

They watched The Boss come in and beat the living crap out of Snake on the screen, and after a few seconds of that, Mr. Archer said, flat out, "So how bad is this movie--if you volunteered to distract me this time?"

Conner winced again.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again, Conner," Mr. Archer said, grinning, "they didn't let me become a judge because I was the dullest crayon in the box."

"I'm starting to get that," Conner admitted, and added, "It's not that bad. Just a lot of really misogynist humor and this hazing thing that goes really horribly wrong. It involves penises and a rope and some rocks, so, yeah."

This time, Mr. Archer winced. "Glad I'm not there to see it."

Conner thought about Geoffrey curling, blond hair, and Eve's white fingers, stroking through it.

"Me, too," Conner muttered.

The party started to wrap itself up toward eleven, which was six more hours than Julie and Garrison had been in a room together of their own volition for years. (Privately, Geoffrey and Conner had a running bet that those two were going to end up married.) Their classmates all said their goodbyes and disappeared into the sleepy, October-blue night, and Conner, about to begin the traditional post-party clean-up and presentation of his gift, realized that Geoffrey was talking to his dad about taking Eve to a movie at the all-night theater.

"Did you even get Geoff a gift?" Eve asked in what was probably a normal voice. Conner thought it sounded like the agonized shrieking of a thousand wailing souls in hell--just how many sacrifices was he going to have to make so Geoffrey and Eve could slobber all over one another in private?

"Please," Conner begged, "never call him that again--ever."
Eve rolled her huge, deep-green eyes at Conner, which reminded him yet again how undeniably pretty she was, which only seemed to make him even more irritable. "Honestly, Conner, Geoff doesn't mind it--why should you?"

"Because it's hideous," Conner retorted, feeling a flush in his cheeks. They were standing on the sidewalk outside of the brownstone; Conner was--in theory--about to head home, and Eve was waiting for her date. "Because it's hideous and unacceptable and wrong. That's why."

Eve arched one dark eyebrow. "You're such a moron, Conner."

"So you've told me," Conner said darkly, "many, many times in the past, Evelyn Agatha."

One thing that Conner tended to forget about Eve was that even though she looked soft all over--and she did, which was one of the things that Geoffrey raved about--she was scary as shit and could totally kill Conner with her bare hands.

Not that Conner was going to let on that he was afraid of her or anything, so when she got right in his face, eyes narrowed so that in the twilight all Conner could really see was a dark fringe of thick lashes, he put his pride to the sticking place and glared right back.

"You know, Conner, I promised Geoffrey I'd try to get along with you--"

"You're doing an awesome job," Conner ridiculed. "I'm feeling all close to you, really."

Technically, it was true--there couldn't have been more than two inches between their faces.

"--But I think considering your truly awe-inspiring depths of stupidity--"

"Don't be a bitch, Agatha," Conner snapped, "I'm still making the toast at your wedding as soon as you trick him into marrying you."

"--I'd be more than forgiven for kicking you as hard as possible between the--"

"Hey, are we all friends here?"

Conner felt a tiny flicker of triumph when Eve jumped a foot in the air, eyes growing round in surprise, whipping around to see Geoffrey on the steps of the brownstone. Conner waited half a beat before he leaned back, looking innocently at Geoffrey, who was frowning at him, one hand on Eve's wrist.

"We're fine," Conner said, just as Eve yelled, "Conner's being a moron!"

Geoffrey opened his mouth for a second, but shut it, and flashed Conner a pleading expression, which made Conner see red. He took three deep breaths, and pasted the worst, most artificial smile he could dig up onto his face and said, "I'll just get out of here."

"I'll talk to you on Monday," Geoffrey said, and it meant, "I'm really sorry."

He gave Geoffrey a bland, blank look, and added, "If you want your gift, your dad can give it to you later."

The expression of guilt that stole across Geoffrey's face at the mention of a gift felt really, really good, especially when Conner realized that Geoffrey had let go of Eve's wrist, but Conner just smiled, waved, and headed down the street before Geoffrey could say anything.

It was not, Conner reflected later, his finest moment.
Nor, Conner thought darkly, was it his parents'.

He'd gotten three steps out of the elevator and into the penthouse when he heard them, angry, tight voices drifting from the kitchen, where a shaft of orange light spilled through a doorway into the dining room. From the foyer, Conner could only see the occasional flicker of a shadow when his mother or father moved across the kitchen floor, burnt sienna shapes, fuzzy on the walls and the floor.

"I thought we were going to tell him." Clark sounded hurt.

Conner's eyebrows shot up to his hairline, and he tiptoed forward, around the ultramodern table and chairs, flattening himself against the wall shared by the kitchen and dining room, and peered around the corner just enough to see his mom and dad facing off in front of the sink.

"Something came up," Conner's dad said tersely, loosening his tie and looking paler and thinner than Conner had seen him in a long time.

Clark was still wearing his sneakers, which meant that either they'd just gotten in, or Clark was about to leave. Conner was hoping perversely for the first one; even if it'd been ages since their last knock-down, drag-out fight, and even if Conner had been grateful for every single day that had passed without one, fighting was better than suffocating tension that fell over everything.

"Thanks for discussing it with me before you changed your plans," Clark said sarcastically.

"Let me remind you that you were starting to deny it, too--granted, poorly--when I came in."

"I was making a joke," Clark contended.

"I'm really not in the mood for this, Clark," Lex muttered.

Clark scowled, and Conner winced. This was not a good sign. Mom was about to go whiny and self-righteous and Dad was about to hit full-scale bitter, which were not their best sides.

"Sorry," Clark said tersely, "I was under the impression we were in a relationship--"

Holy shit, was all Conner could think. Holy crap. It was like he could feel the nuclear fallout.

"-but I see I've been presumptuous. I guess just because--"

"Don't, Clark," Lex warned.

"--we fuck it's too much to hope that--"

"I'm not the one who left!" Lex exploded, eyes blazing.

It made Conner jump, but all things considered, nobody heard.

All the blood drained out of Clark's face.

"I'm not the one who leaves, Clark!" Lex yelled.

Lex was red-faced and shaking, and Conner saw his mom taking two steps back.

"I'm not the one who told lies and I'm not the one who put every single goddamn fucking thing ahead of making it work out the first time we tried to do this, okay, Clark?"
Conner's eyes bulged. The words 'last time we tried to do this' knocked around in his head and he slumped against the wall, turning to stare out across the room, feeling like somebody had just kicked him in the gut.

"And it's gotten six hundred times more complicated," Lex went on, "and the very last thing I need to be doing is dragging Conner into something that I'm not sure about."

"You're not 'sure' about?" Clark bellowed. "What the hell are you saying?"

Conner shoved away from the wall and bolted toward the door; as the elevator doors were closing, the last words he heard were his parents, desperate and angry and accusatory, saying was that this time around, it wasn't like it was all those years ago.

Normally, Conner would be halfway to Geoffrey's house already. Normally, he'd already be there, because normally on Geoffrey's birthday Conner spent the night and they played video games until they were groggy enough to be philosophical.

Today, he was standing in the West Gate-Tallaway subway station, staring at the map of the Metropolis subway system like he was new or something.

What was more depressing was that he couldn't think of anywhere to go. All of the coffee shops and bookstores he liked would either already be closed, or well on their way; going home was the last thing he wanted to do, so blowing off steam at CitiBooks until one in the morning would only do so much good when Jerryna the transsexual clerk kicked him out.

His dad wouldn't be expecting him back until Sunday, so he had a free pass for one night out in Metropolis—and what was he doing? Standing in the subway station feeling like a loser.

Conner scowled at the subway map, with all its numbered lines, 1 going from Garden Row into Millionaire Mile, 4 from Halloway Mill into Paddington, edging around West Eden into--Advent Circle. Where Lois lived.

Conner hadn't, he realized with a sudden shock of guilt, talked to Lois in weeks. Since school had started and Geoffrey found the allure of females stronger than his natural lameness, Conner felt like he'd been spending all of his free time either helping Geoffrey plan how to ask Eve out--or now, in retrospect, figure out how to convince his mom to run really fast around the Earth and turn back time so he could undo it and be spared the indignity of it all.

Then again, Conner wasn't exactly enchanted with either of his parents at the moment, and he doubted negotiations would go well if he attempted it. He'd learned over the years that trying to talk to his mom and dad while he was infuriated with them--which had, so far, only happened twice--was the most foolish and totally pointless experience ever. His mother got standoffish and self-righteous, and was likely to turn on his Superman voice and lecture; his dad just cocked his eyebrow and had security escort him out of the room until Conner managed to keep a civil tongue in his head. Neither of which were conducive to Conner getting his way.

And upon further consideration, Conner should have been talking to Lois all these weeks, since she was his best and most reliable source of accurate information and provided the very best commentary on all of Conner's problems. Ever since he'd turned twelve and she'd explained how though she loved him and would forever, it was probably best if they saw other people, she'd been his second best friend. Had she been aware of the entire fiasco-in-progress that was Geoffrey and Eve's relationship, she would have had a few wise words and suggestions, Conner was nearly sure. Hopefully, they wouldn't be her traditional, "Get him drunk and never tell your dad what happens
afterwards,” because all that had come of that was a wicked hangover and that thing about the ass cherry.

The lady working night-shift at the information booth was giving him a look that bordered too close on “interest” for Conner's comfort, so he swiped his farecard and stepped through the turnstile just as a 4 train roared by. Conner thanked God under his breath and scrambled on, throwing one worried look over his shoulder to find the lady in the booth looking disappointed as the train was pulling out of the station.

Conner shuddered, and settled against the cold, molded plastic seats in the mostly-deserted compartment, grateful for the distance.

Recently, more and more girls were looking at him funny. The same way they'd been looking at Geoffrey funny since the second grade, when he used to smile and duck his head, blushing and running his hand through his golden curls. Conner used to call him Goldilocks--but then Geoffrey had glued Conner's hands to his face, so the nickname had been retired, not that it wasn't still appropriate. Now more than ever, Conner thought in annoyance.

The point was, people were starting to look for looking's sake. Then, there'd been that guy at the bagel shop who'd asked him if he wanted to take a walk through the park and thought he'd actually say 'yes,'--as if Conner hadn't gone to Catholic school his whole life and learned to fend off child molesters in the second grade.

Conner sighed, and let his eyes slide shut, letting his head loll back so he felt the cold plexiglass of the window on his scalp. Dark beneath his eyelids, he could still see the irritating, fluorescent glare of the overhead lighting, the occasional flashes of burnt orange, the passages of darkness, where something blinked. And in his head, it was quiet and still the way it never was when he paid attention--the way it never was when he let himself notice things and react.

He wasn't dumb enough to believe that everything had ever really been simple, but they'd been simpler before. Before the telekinesis had started to manifest, before he'd realized that he probably liked guys more than girls, before he was smart enough to figure out that Clark wasn't just "really fond of Mrs. Banner's poached eggs."

And now, even though he still held his head above water pretty well on a normal basis, when he really thought about it, Conner always felt a crushing weight on his shoulders, a sort of exhaustion he didn't know what to do with.

Conner opened his eyes slowly, hearing the recorded announcer's voice say, "Next stop, Advent Circle, with transfers to lines 2, 7, and 13."

He shouldered his messenger bag and pulled his coat tighter around him, one hand catching onto a metal railing just as the train slowed to a stop.

Lois had a brick-faced walk-up with a wrought-iron fence that blocked off about two square feet of bright green weeds on either side of the steps. She also had a flowerbox which always seemed to be blooming with violets, but was barren in one circular area on the left where Lois liked to smoke, leaning out of her window and snubbing cigarettes out into the potting soil.

Conner had only ever seen it from the outside when he and Lois had gone out on dates--which Lex had never known about because of Conner's careful negotiations with Hope, who seemed far more supportive of Conner's romantic quests than Mercy ever was--and she'd let him walk her home. When he'd gotten tall enough, she'd let him loop his arm with hers, and she'd kiss him on the cheek
before she stepped inside and waved goodbye as the door swung shut.

Lois, Conner thought with a wild grin, was perfect. She was beautiful and funny and whip-smart, mean to just about everybody, plus she was smooth and well-moisturized. She listened to Conner and perved out on Stone Phillips, who Conner had to agree was kind of smoking, despite contending that broadcast news was a cancer upon the world.

The steps leading out the Advent Circle station were crappy, and more than one person had stubbed a toe on the bolts which stuck out and tripped others when they were clattering down in the mornings, rushing for their train. Conner had taken them up and down enough that he knew them mostly from sense memory, even if he still ended up banging the head of his sneakers into the uneven edge of the topmost step.

Emerging out of the subway and into Advent Circle was like stepping out into a different world--the whole thing was lit up like Las Vegas, bright with wine bars and nice restaurants, art galleries and all-night cafes. And in between all of these were small apartment buildings, walk-ups like Lois’ or tiny, ten unit places, where people still sat on their fire escapes and talked while smoking clove cigarettes. There were jazz clubs and book stores and an organic food cooperative that Grandpa Jon drove crates of produce to, twice a week.

Then there was that bead store next to GayMart USA.

He was standing at her house--number 436, in faded, brass numbers on the door--when he realized it was pushing one in the morning and he had no idea if she was at home, whether she was still awake, or if there was company.

Conner scowled at the idea of 'company,' since Lois had a penchant for dating total morons. She said they were interesting, Conner said they were genetic throwbacks; it was a difference of opinion they couldn't seem to settle, and usually they resorted to making popcorn and watching Master and Commander again. Lois had a crush on Stephen; Conner just liked the boat.

He waffled a bit, standing on her front stoop, until he nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Lois stick her dark head out of her front window and say, "Conner, what the hell are you doing out there?"

Her hair was up and she was wearing a black tank-top and Conner could see down the front of it since she was leaning over. Lois was impressively endowed, but she had told him that she also had nice breasts, which was as important as size. If nothing else, Conner had an aesthetic appreciation of the view.

"Um," he said, eyes huge with surprise. "I was--I didn't know if you were up. Hi."

Lois laughed, and glanced up and down the block, which was on one of the quieter cross streets.

"You're lucky David's not here this weekend, Conner," she laughed, turning back to him.

Conner scowled. "You told him I was fifteen, right? Like, last time?"

Lois leaned back, face darkening into the shadows of her house, and she waved one arm, saying, "As if that would stop him--come on, let me unlock that door for you."

When he stepped in, the apartment was mostly dark, and smelled like clovers and honey, which Conner knew was because Lois spent an obscene amount of money on air fresheners, given that she never really knew when her father might drop by for one of his surprise visits.
"I've been trying to quit," she used to say.

"You've been trying to quite since you were sixteen," Conner had argued, and flushed her cigarettes down the toilet.

When Conner peeled off his coat and dropped it on a peg near the door, he looked up to see Lois grinning at him, wide and brassy and trademark Lane. Closer up, Conner could see that she was wearing gray sweatpants, that her hair was a wreck, how she was barefoot and seemed to only have three of her ten toes painted-in—and she still looked gorgeous. He sighed a little at her.

"Hey stranger," Lois said, looking him up and down. "You still look like you robbed a YMCA."

"Beat up a homeless guy and everything," Conner said earnestly.

"You're incorrigible," Lois said, pleased. "What happened to your hands?"

Conner glanced down at his bandaged palms. "Burned 'em being a moron."

"Classic," Lois commended, and asked, "What brings you to Casa de Lane?"

Conner scowled. "Geoffrey's a bitch," he muttered, and after a pause added, "also, there's some stuff about my dad which I probably shouldn't tell you about."

"That just means it's juicy and I want to know," Lois retorted. She cocked her head. "Kind of late, though--do you need to hit home anytime soon?"

Conner shook his head, pulling his messenger back over his shoulder and dropping it on the floor under his coat, stretching his arms over his head, he said, "Dad thinks I'm crashing at Geoffrey's." At Lois' raised eyebrow, Conner put on his sweetest smile and asked, "I was kind of hoping you'd do me the honor of allowing me a night in your presence."

Lois narrowed her eyes and pointed at him. "It's creepy when you do that," she reported. "It's creepy because that's your dad's personality on E."

"What's E?" Conner asked.

"Nothing," Lois said quickly, ruffled. "Come on--bedroom it is, then."

It was a nice apartment, all pink and tan and pale green, with a large, sleigh bed where Lois smoothed out a quilt she said her grandmother had made for her when she was going to college. Conner kicked off his shoes, and when he climbed onto the bed, he nearly groaned, sinking into the pillowtop mattress with an exhalation, feeling all the tension that had knotted up in his shoulders. He blinked his eyes open sleepily when he felt the mattress depress next to him, and saw Lois' thigh next to his face.

"You have a nice bed," he mumbled.

"You sound beat, sweetheart," Lois said, more nicely than most people in the world had ever heard her speak, Conner bet. That was one of the many things he liked about her.

Conner rolled over until he was on his stomach, and turned his face so he was looking at Lois, where she was lounged out beside him, propped up on her right side, hand cupping her face.

He reached over and tugged until his face was pillowed on her arm, turning to nose into her shoulder. Lois was soft, and she smelled like expensive perfume, the kind Conner got a whiff of
occasionally when he was walking through his dad's office, soft and subtle and classic.

"Hey," Lois asked gently, smoothing a hand over his hair. "Are you all right?"

"I think I had a fight with Geoffrey," Conner murmured.

"Goldilocks is a bitch," Lois said instantly, which made Conner start to laugh helplessly, and he eventually pulled away enough to see Lois smiling down at him, hand still smoothing the hopeless curls on the back of his head. "What did you guys fight about?"

Conner sighed and leaned against Lois' shoulder.

"So about two months ago, Geoffrey asked Eve out officially," Conner started.

"Took him long enough," Lois muttered, and rearranged her legs on the bed so that they were both staring at her ceiling fan, which was spinning, hypnotically slow on the lowest setting. Lois liked moving air in her rooms, she kept her windows open a crack even in the dead of winter, her ceiling fans going year-round. "I still say you should charge him for all the whining you had to listen to while he was getting up the balls to do that."

"He really wasn't that bad," Conner said diplomatically.

"You don't have to defend your little boyfriend, Conner--I like you way better," Lois said soothingly, petting him gently. "Go on, sweetie."

Conner rolled his eyes dramatically. "So ever since, it's been Eve, Eve, Eve, all the time, twenty-four hours a day. Which--" Conner paused "--I mean, I get, because she's his girlfriend, right? But then, tonight, his birthday, we're supposed to spend the night, he gets his present, and that's our thing, right? It's tradition."

"Tradition is important," Lois agreed pleasantly.

"Right," Conner said, waving his hands, "and what does he do? He ditched me, without any forward notice, to take Eve to the movies. I mean, he doesn't even tell me first. I have to overhear him telling his dad he'll be out late--what the hell is that?"

Lois laughed, and Conner twisted around to watch her eyes shining as she said, "Conner, I'm going to break some really sad news to you, okay?"

Conner narrowed his eyes, nothing good could possibly come of this.

"Despite Geoffrey being very, very, very pretty," Lois said slowly, "he is actually a boy. And as I have told you many, many times in the past--all men are bastards." Conner opened his mouth to protest when Lois cut him off, saying, "Except for you, because I've raised you well."

Conner turned to scowl at the ceiling fan again, feeling a little bit doomed and militant feminist.

"I get that he likes her, you know?" he said after a beat.

"You're a smart kid," Lois said approvingly. "You get stuff like that."

Conner let himself sulk a few more minutes before muttering, "Whatever. All men are bastards."

"I knew you'd see it my way," Lois crowed, delighted. "Now," she said, leaning over him and pinning him with her gaze, "what's this about your dad?"
Conner blinked his eyes hugely. "I'm an orphan," he said seriously.


"My parents died in a freak weed-whacking accident when I was seven," he went on sorrowfully. "I don't like to talk about it--every time I see crabgrass, I cry."

Lois smothered him with a pillow, which meant Conner was forced to retaliate by tugging at the elastic of her sweatpants, which made Lois shriek and crush the pillow down on his head harder. The end result was that they were sprawled out, heads at the foot of the bed, gasping for breath.

"Okay," Lois compromised, "off the record."

"This would be so much easier," Conner gasped, "if we didn't have to do that every single time before you agreed."

"What's the fun in that?" Lois asked, and turned to grin at him. "Spill."

"My dad is in this weird relationship," Conner admitted. He reached one hand up toward the ceiling, watching the blades spin through his spread-opened fingers, one eye squeezed shut, focusing on the pinpoints of light. "And I know he's with this person, but he totally refuses to cop to it--and it's driving me totally crazy."

"Is your father cheating on Clark?" Lois asked importantly, eyes flashing. "I'll kill him!"

"No!" Conner said urgently. "No! And I didn't say it was Clark!"

Lois made a dismissive noise. "Please, Conner, don't insult my intelligence. Clark's emotions are a Dick and Jane book, okay? Everybody can read, ages three and up."

Conner damned his mother's transparency, because even if his dad didn't have any official family party lines about what not to say, Conner had enough common sense that certain pieces of information were kept private. The fact that his father was sleeping with a man, the fact that said man was Conner's mother, etc. etc., that thing about the missiles that were mounted in the observatory.

"The point is," Conner went on hurriedly, "they're just not admitting to being together. Even though I know it's true--I mean, I live there, I can tell. I'm not brain damaged or anything."

Lois squirmed a little at that. "Of course not," she said. "I mean, okay, from their perspective, maybe they're not very committed about it yet. Maybe they don't want you to get all invested in something that may not last. That's pretty fair, right?"

"Is Clark cheating on my dad?" Conner exploded, scrambling out of Lois' hold to glare down at her. "I'll kill him!"

Lois snorted. "Clark couldn't cheat on anybody, he's not clever enough," she reassured him. "Look, all I'm saying is that maybe they're not ready to tell you about it yet, okay? Don't freak out about it. It's not really your business and you're giving yourself ulcers for nothing."

Conner made a disgruntled noise, and glared at Lois' aloe plant, which seemed to wilt a little under his scowl.

"And besides," Lois added, "it's Saturday, David's not perving on your ass, and here we are, our very own sleepover while Goldilocks and his little bear are trekking through a thunderstorm."
Frowning, Conner glanced out the window, and realized for the first time since stepping inside that it'd started pouring. Rain slapped against the half-closed window and drizzled in a metal slither of sound down tin gutters, making the sidewalks slick and shine, puddling up in greasy black wells along the asphalt. From the window, Advent Circle looked like the set of a film noir detective flick, like Dick Tracy and a girl Friday could show up out of anywhere, all curious reporter instincts like Lois on an adrenaline high.

It suddenly seemed small and stupid to be so irritated. Conner was curled up on Lois' bed, and should he lay back down, it was a fair bet that she'd start stroking his hair again. At some point, they'd probably eat Fudge Rounds.

"I hate it when you're reasonable," Conner muttered, flopping back down onto the bed.

She laughed, and it bounced off the walls of the room. Lois had a great laugh, it was booming and unafraid and warm, and Conner loved watching her when she laughed, her eyes crinkling shut and her curving, pink mouth opening.

"Come on," she said, and her smile was light again, "you've had a long night."

Conner blinked in surprise. "Are we going to sleep?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Not a chance." She pointed at a row of DVDs that were on the shelf next to the bedroom television. "Pick something to watch. I'm going to go make some popcorn and grab my nail polish."

Conner obeyed, picking through the collection for a bit before he came across a box set, and as he heard Lois padding back into the room, he turned to ask, "Hey, what's *Queer As Folk* about?"

"I like Michael better," Conner mumbled around the end of the nail file in his mouth.

"You're out of your mind," Lois retorted, rearranging a few fingers. "Clearly, Justin is the hottest piece of ass ever."

Brian had already seduced an unsuspecting and married client in the men's room before Lois had blinked, glanced at Conner's glazed expression, and reassessed her current company. She'd paused the video and said, "Are you old enough to be watching this?" to which Conner had gurgled in reply and motioned rapidly toward the remote control. She'd shrugged her shoulders and hit play. It wasn't that Lois didn't have any concept of age-appropriate television, just that her moral dipstick hadn't given her any accurate readings since she'd gone to that one indie music club in Chapel Hill during college when she was supposed to be at a journalism seminar.

"And what's wrong with Michael?" Conner protested, pulling the nail file out of his mouth and attacking Lois' ragged thumbnail. He'd told her that if she was going to destroy her cuticles on purpose, he wasn't going to play manicurist, but then she'd smiled and stroked his neck, and Conner's personal dignity had flushed itself down the toilet.

"What, aside from the fact that he's short, neurotic, and dorky?" Lois shot back.

Conner scowled at the television, where Justin was being a filthy, blond slut. He wasn't sure what bothered him more, the fact that Justin was so pretty or that Lois was right.

"But he's Brian's best friend!" Conner argued. "He's put up with him since high school! That needs to count for something."
"Okay," Lois said patiently, "I thought we agreed not to project here, Conner."

He pointed the nail file at Lois. "I am not projecting."

"Whatever," Lois said dismissively, and added, "Hey! Look, nudity!"

Conner glazed over again, nail file going slack in his hands. "Is this really what gay people do all the time?" he asked, watching Brian shove somebody into an alleyway.

"God," Lois said, moaning around a Sno-ball, "I hope so."

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Conner's hands were sore by the time he'd finished up Lois' manicure, so he'd let her rub sweet-smelling lotion into his palms until he was practically groaning from it. By then, they'd finished the third episode of *Queer as Folk* and Conner was fighting for consciousness, and when Lois noted his drooping lids, she'd turned off the lights and the television and dragged him under the quilt, saying, "Come on, everything will be better in the morning."

He'd nodded and curled up next to her, because Lois never lied to him.

And sleep was soft, floating him upward and holding him suspended. Conner had never slept very deeply, and sometimes, he surfaced enough to hear the sound of rain still tapping on the ground, rolling down the windowpanes, washing out Metropolis. Mostly, he heard Lois' breathing, deep and even in her chest, which was warm next to his half-curl fist.

it was quiet and warm, and Conner didn't dream, because there was finally, finally silence.

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Lois' telephone was shrill and shrieking and right next to Conner's ear, which was why he moaned and buried his face in his pillow as Lois reached over his shoulder, and fumbled with the handset, dragging the curly cord over Conner's shoulder.

Her voice was husky as she said, "Yeah, Lane--"

The shrieking in the phone was louder than the ringer and it made Conner's eyes snap open in horrified recognition.

"What the hell are you doing to my son?"

"OhGod," Lois said, eyes opening wide and scooting up in the bed. "Lex?"

Conner just stared in horrified silence, frozen under the sheets.

"What have you done to him? He's only fifteen! I haven't given him the talk yet!"

Lois' eyes bulged, and she held the phone a little away from her ear, staring in blank horror at Conner, who tried very hard to suffocate himself with a pillow. He didn't know what was worse, having his father bust in on his sleepover with a much older woman, or--actually, Conner figured it didn't get much worse than that.

"I--what are you talking about?" Lois shouted hotly. "He just spent the night!"

"He's been there all night?" Conner heard his father yell. "Oh my God!"
"Bad move, Lois," Conner muttered and covered his face with his hands. Clearly, this was one of those situations that called for seppuku. Lois never cooked but she had to own at least one knife. Or, he could just use a pair of her Jimmy Choos, though she'd never forgive him for getting entrails on her shoes.

"Freak much, Lex?" Lois demanded, sitting up in bed, scowling into the air. "We watched a movie! He told me about his day! Which, from what I hear, is more than he's been--"

"Watched a movie?" his dad bellowed, "What is that--code?"

"Yeah!" Lois yelled back, "For you're batshit insane!"

Conner had experienced many, many moments when the situation spiraled so far out of control that really, the only option was to look at it subjectively and laugh, because clearly, the universe was out to get him, and there was really nothing he could do about it anyway.

"Conner! Can you hear me? Are you still a virgin?" Lex said loudly through the line.

Lois took one look at his laughing face, slapped a hand over the receiver and hissed, "Conner Clark Luthor, if you say one word--"

"It--" Conner gasped, laughing so hard his stomach hurt, "it was really--" he wiped at his tears "--special, Dad. She said I'm the prettiest Catholic schoolboy ever--"

"What?" Lex shrieked, nearing hysteria.

"Conner, you little shit!" Lois said, dropping the phone and tackling him into the mattress, which made the springs squeak significantly, pushing his father that much closer to the very edge of sanity, Conner assumed. Still, Lois was straddling his chest, shoving one of her purple throw pillows into his face and yelling for him to take it back, and his dad's disembodied voice yelling from the phone was really of lesser importance.

"Don't deny our love," Conner yelled, gasping for breath as Lois started beating him in the face with the pillow, using her weight to hold him down.

Lois let out a shrill scream that melted out into a laugh, and she said, "Conner, you asshole!"

Conner let out of a huff of air and said, "Okay--now it's war," and reached for her wrists--

Which was when they both felt the blast of freezing wind in the room.

"What the hell?" Lois asked, turning slowly, knees digging into Conner's ribcage.

From his vantage point, flat on his back in a rumpled bed, with Lois practically sitting in his lap, Conner had just enough time to register his mom's horrified face and a red cape waving behind a very familiar blue uniform.

The trip home was interesting.

"I heard...yelling," Clark said vaguely.

Conner nodded supportively. "Dad was being loud," he answered meekly.

"I heard the yelling in...Bolivia," Clark said, voice strange.
"Well," Conner compromised, looking down over his mom's shoulder, at the city like an ocean of flickering lights, "you are super."

There was a long pause, where the only sound was the wind shrieking past Conner's frozen ears. Being flown around by Superman was undeniably cool, but altitudes were not necessarily temperate, and even with his very warm coat, Conner was feeling the chill, especially with his mom speeding toward West Eden like a proverbial bat out of hell.

"Nothing happened?" Clark asked again, giving Conner his evil eye.

When Lois had finally realized that the Man of Steel was staring while she was, essentially, mounting an underaged boy, she'd removed herself from the position so quickly she'd nearly fallen off of the bed. The following explanations and hand motions made by both Lois and Conner would probably be very good comedic fodder, if both parties hadn't been convinced they were about to be lasered into oblivion.

So now, three angry phone calls from Lex to Conner's cell phone to complain about Superman's customer service and threaten Conner's continued exposure to the outside world, Clark and Conner were on their way to the penthouse.

Conner rolled his eyes. "She gave me a manicure and we watched TV, seriously, Clark."

Clark's narrowed eyes thinned to slits. "This is Lois." Pause. "And you're a teenaged boy."

"Manicure, television," Conner said again, looking his mom in the eye.

Clark's shoulders loosened, and Conner grinned: triumph.

After a beat, Clark asked suspiciously, "She gave you a manicure?"

"Yeah," Conner said eagerly, holding out a hand for Clark to inspect. "Looks pretty good, huh?"

"Dear God," Clark muttered, and started dropping altitude, approaching the roof of the building, where Conner could see his father waiting, a poisonous expression on his darkened face.

There were accusations and shouting and a lot of pointing fingers once Conner and his mom touched down. Then, Conner played his trump card and yelled about how he had come home, and found his parents fighting, which was why he'd left again. Predictably, it threw his mom and dad for a loop, and Conner saw them looking stunned and silent before he huffed off to his room, shutting his door and throwing himself down in bed, feeling jittery all over, fingers itching to call somebody.

He thought about the Rialto's midnight matinee, about Eve and Geoffrey, and about them exchanging fluids, and decided against calling anybody.

But Lois was right, though, and by the time Conner woke up for the second time that day, everything seemed better. Afternoon sunlight was golden and arcing all through his room, pouring through the enormous porthole window over his desk and making everything gleam.

Later, in the shower, leaning against the tiled wall, Conner decided that it had been an extraordinarily uneven two days, with alternately awesome and truly horrible moments, and that on Monday, everything would look up--everything would be better.

"It'll be fine," he told himself, and shut off the water.
It was raining Monday morning, the sort of downpour that had settled over Metropolis that Saturday night and lingered in sporadic drizzles throughout Sunday afternoon. The tension that had blanketed the penthouse all throughout Sunday had not dissipated, and since he had inherited the passive-aggressiveness that his dad furiously denied, he'd spent Sunday at the Carmichael Library, going through old microfilm of Metropolis' newspaper of record.

He'd snuck around looking for stuff about his dad's past before, he'd just never bothered to read the society pages, which meant he'd found a birth announcement, several articles that mentioned Lex Luthor offhand, and then an explosion of reporting after his dad had turned twenty-one and ambitious, or at least the paramour of many, many psychotic murderers. Also, there were about a million car accidents, which may or may not have affected Conner's ambivalence toward driving, but definitely made him go home and clutch his dad's arm for an hour when he was ten.

On Sunday, sulking and prickly and sleep-deprived, he'd gone straight for the lifestyle section, and looked on, horrified, as his dad dated what looked like every attractive woman in a four-state radius. Lex wore good tuxedos and smooth suits and looked like a billion dollars, with a girl on his arm every time with dark hair, great skin, and wide, luminous eyes. He had a thing for brunettes and curves, and Conner had tried not to read the sketchier stuff, because there was a limit to the things he could handle, and reading about public speculation on his father's sex life was one of those.

When Conner had been about negative eleven years old, though, the pictures and articles stopped. The society pages became preoccupied with somebody else for a change, and for months and months worth of microfilm, Conner had only seen blather about other people.

It had made the sudden, renewed explosion of articles a dead shock, especially when it came with blurry photographs of a dark-haired man, seen laughing at Lex's side. That photograph was like a still capture of Conner's many memories, an image stolen straight out of his head, where those profiles were as familiar as the Metropolitan streets and comforting as the 5 line, circuiting the city. Those big, bright smiles that came through the pictures like light, as if the moment was porous, like it was about to come right off of the page.

Which had gotten Conner kicked out of the library when he shouted, "Oh, no, you two bastards did not!" loudly enough that it echoed throughout the entire reference section.

It had only deepened Conner's gloom for the evening, and by the time he'd gotten home, his dad was presumably at work--there wasn't a note anywhere--so he'd made a sandwich and stubbornly forced himself to watch hardcore porn for the rest of the night. Partially to distract himself, partially because he knew that if his father knew, he'd just die.

But because Conner was almost as much of a wuss as he was a moron, he'd stopped the video and turned off his computer monitor when he'd heard his dad's footsteps coming down the hall.

"You're up late," Lex had said, voice soft, leaning in Conner's doorway.

"You were out late," Conner had said back, because he know a level tone of voice would make that more damning than any amount of shouting he could do. It was true, though. Since Friday, Conner had barely seen his dad, whether by fate or friction or just because this whole weekend was supremely fucked up. Conner was too tired to ask.

The slump in Lex's shoulders had been exhausting just to watch, and Conner had turned sharply to his father, noted with renewed distress the dark circles under Lex's eyes, the pronounced paleness of his skin, the way he looked like he'd lost ten pounds in three days. It made Conner jittery,
scared, worried, because Lex had looked like that for three business crises to date, and Conner had hated it, every single minute. If his dad was calling Saturday board meetings and pulling all-day office junkets Sundays and not answering Conner's phone calls, then Conner wanted to know what was wrong, and go into the office and do his father's Xeroxing for him, because at least that way, he could interrupt every few hours, and make his dad eat something.

"I haven't been a very good parent a lot of times, Conner," Lex had said, tired-sounding, and after a pause, he'd started down the hallway, throwing over his shoulder, "I'm sorry I didn't say anything about Clark earlier."

But by the time Conner gotten over the dumb shock and darted into the hall, the bedroom door had already closed with a 'snick' and Conner had only stared with his mouth agape.

Which brought him to Monday, and rain, and Geoffrey looking hopeful and sorry in the hallway, when really all Conner wanted was a shot of that goddamn whiskey which had made him promise Geoffrey his ass cherry in the first place and to go to sleep for about a hundred years.

"I loved your present," Geoffrey started brightly, eyes huge.

Conner rifled through his locker, looking for his Algebra II book. It was green. He hated it.

"Thanks," he said dully.

"It was perfect," Geoffrey said. "It must have taken a lot of planning."

Conner usually got Geoffrey two gifts: one he came up with over the course of weeks and weeks and took a lot of organization to pull off, and one he picked up at a store to hand Geoffrey during the party. It was tradition. So while he told his mom and dad about not knowing what to buy Geoffrey, the whole week leading up to the big day, Conner was usually making last minute phone calls to architectural firms and asking weird questions or ordering stuff from the art store over the internet. But this year, everything was about busting tradition to pieces, apparently, so Conner had foregone the face-value gift and had slapped the hard hat and the metal lunchbox with the ID tag in it he'd spent three weeks wheedling out of the site manager at LexCorp's latest building project onto the kitchen table and hadn't said a word.

"I thought of it at the last minute," Conner said sourly.

"Oh," Geoffrey said awkwardly. "I--I went and visited on Sunday. It was really neat--I mean, watching them put up the frame of the building like that."

Conner finally found the Algebra book. It was underneath his wadded-up gym pants. He grabbed it and shoved it into his half-opened backpack, hanging from his shoulder by one strap. There were students milling all around them, making the hallways claustrophobic, and it was moments like these that made Conner think that the school couldn't possibly be exclusive enough--not if there were that many people shoving around a small, contained space.

"That's great," Conner said flatly. "We're going to be late for class."

"You're still mad," Geoffrey sighed.

Conner turned around to stare at him, mouth opened to say that yes, yes he was, why, what a huge surprise that he'd be angry that his best friend ditched him. But then he saw the mouth-shaped bruise on Geoffrey's collarbone, where his tie was loose enough that the white wingtip collar opened and let it peek out, damning and purple against Geoffrey's pale skin.
"I--that's a hickey," he said stupidly.

Geoffrey's eyes got huge, and he slapped his hand over the left side of his neck, which only made Conner's eyes bulge as he hissed, "Your collarbone, you moron! How many do you have?"

His mind suddenly filled with horrifying images of Geoffrey and Eve holed up in Geoffrey's bedroom, which was still decorated to look like a sailor's cabin because Geoffrey was a loser. Conner tried not to claw at his eyes, but it was very hard, what with the thought of Eve flopping around horrifyingly naked and pawed at in Geoffrey's sheets, with all the little model boats in glass bottles shaking on his nightstand. He covered his face with his hands instead.

"It's--um," Geoffrey stuttered, struggling with his tie, "look, I get that you're pissed."

"Who says I'm pissed," Conner demanded, whipping up to glare at Geoffrey. "I am not pissed. I am a paragon of calm acceptance."

Geoffrey winced. Conner slammed his locker shut and started down the hall, and he felt several pairs of familiar eyes on him as he stalked toward classroom 103, people who knew him well enough to read the knot in his shoulders, to recognize the way that Geoffrey was shuffling behind him as a sign of Bad Things To Come.

"You've been very patient," Geoffrey agreed.

"I was, in fact," Conner continued, ducking into the classroom and stomping to his seat toward the back, "contacted by the Vatican last week and informed that though the traditional process to be sainted requires about a hundred years, they're giving me a rush job. He turned to scowl at Geoffrey, who looked a little hamstrung. "Who can be pissed when they're about to be sainted."

"Apparently," Geoffrey snapped, eyes flashing, "you. You're out of line, Conner."

Conner threw his bookbag down on the ground and leaned over the desk.

"Reassess this week and tell me if I'm out of line, or if you're out of line," Conner yelled.

They glared at one another over their desks, pushed together into pairs and set into long aisles, the way it'd been since kindergarten, and listened to everybody in the classroom hold their breath.

Sister Hyacinth, who was somehow still alive, shuffled into the room at that moment, though, and Conner spent the next hour ignoring Geoffrey and staring at his math book, watching all the numbers blur together in front of his tired eyes. It was only at the end of the period that he realized there was a stack of photocopies in front of his face, and that the top line on them read, "PSATs FRIDAY--HOW TO PREPARE." When Conner numbly took a copy for himself and passed the stack to Geoffrey, his best friend caught his wrist.

Geoffrey looked at Conner hard, fingers tight around Conner's pulse-point, like he was trying to regulate Conner's wild heartbeat, shattering out of his chest.

"I can't always pick you, Conner," Geoffrey said precisely.

He didn't sound particularly sorry about it.

"That's fine," Conner bit out, because it hurt a little to breathe at that exact moment, "I was getting sick of picking you anyway."
It turned out to be the worst five days of his life to date. Clark was evasive on the phone and finally poured out a lame excuse about a First Amendment conference in New York City, disappearing into the proverbial ether. He and Geoffrey were still passing one another arctic glances and being ridiculously polite, which made the nuns nervous and their classmates subdued, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. His father was basically absent the entire time, disappearing early in the morning and returning late into the night—if he came home at all. Charity refused to patch Conner through and nobody in the offices had anything helpful at all to say about what the hell was happening. Mrs. Banner, for all her best efforts and her sublime pumpkin pie, could do nothing to alleviate the situation.

So when Conner found his father in the apartment Friday afternoon, weary and thin and sallow but smiling, he nearly cried with relief.

"Hey," his dad said hoarsely. "You look like you had a bad week."

"It ate shit," Conner said, not bothering to cover his language. "Where've you been?"

His dad shook his head, palms flat on the kitchen counter. "Nowhere good," he said mildly. "I hear you had your PSATs today."

Conner sighed. "I think I flunked them," he muttered.

"We should toast to that," Lex said, weirdly upbeat, a little wild around the eyes. He walked to the refrigerator, footsteps slow but even, saying, "How about this: I get orange soda and order pizza, you set up the Xbox, and we play until all four of our eyeballs fall out of their sockets."

Conner dropped his backpack. "For serious?" he breathed.

"For serious,"Lex said, smiling. "It's been a while since I kicked your ass."

"You wait here," Conner said urgently, grinning hugely, holding up his open hands in the 'stop' gesture, "I'll go get changed. When I come back, we're going to be really unhealthy pop culture addicts together--and if you get really lucky, I might even let you win a game."

He heard his dad laughing all the way into his bedroom. Conner thrashed around a little, looking for jeans and a tshirt and throwing a hoodie over all of it, and he was still tugging it on when he re-emerged into the living room to find the apartment silent and deserted.

He'd only been gone five minutes, and it took that long for Conner to find Lex where he was passed out on the kitchen floor, body shaking and sweating with fever so high that Conner felt his skin burn all over again when he touched his fingers to his father's forehead.

Conner didn't remember dialing 911, or hitting the panic button in the apartment to null the security so that the EMS could come up the elevator. He remembered running back to the kitchen floor and falling to his knees, digging ice out of the refrigerator and wrapping it in a dish towel, pressing it to his father's neck, his forehead, to his hands, which were hot and shaking. Conner remembered saying, "Please, please, please," over and over again, watching his dad's face pale as death but his skin burning up, like he was immolating, inside out.

When Conner heard the elevator open and Mercy and Hope rush into the room flanking an EMS crew, he started shouting, "Over here!" and then there was a flurry of hands, of bodies, but mostly Conner saw his dad, shaking on the gurney, being strapped in, his vitals measured while Hope kept one hand on Conner's shoulder, one eye on the elevator door, as if anything that could possibly happen to them now could be worse.
"What's wrong?" Conner kept asking, but nobody had the time to answer any questions before he and the EMS crew jammed themselves into the elevator. Mercy stayed to secure the penthouse, and Hope nodded and entered a security key, putting the building at high alert lockdown. These were all familiar to Conner, from so many drills when he was younger--he just never thought he'd have to know them, remember them by sense as he did.

His dad was still shaking in the gurney, eyes closed fitfully and tight, lids sweating and purpling and sick. Conner didn't know what to do--this wasn't like last time. Superman wouldn't come to save them, there was no green dragon, and if there was, it was somewhere inside, where nobody could aim and Conner couldn't see.

Conner grabbed onto his father's hand, the few free fingers that weren't pressed down along with Lex's palms to the flat, cushioned surface of the gurney, and he tried not to listen to the medics and their gibberish, the big words that only made him more frightened with every extra syllable.

"Dad, come on," Conner said desperately, seeing the numbers on the digital readout scale down. "Dad, please wake up. This isn't funny."

And when the doors of the elevator opened it was to twenty armed guards in dark suits making a pathway in the lobby of the building, to twenty more making a pathway on the sidewalk, to the ambulance--to a pulsing ocean of no less than four news trucks, what felt like hundreds of people, and dozens of reporters, shoving at one another at the edges of the carefully constricted crowd, and Conner felt his throat close up in sheer, blind terror.

He tightened his hand around his dad's and leaned in close to the gurney, ducking his head and rushing along with the creaking wheels, the shouting medics, his dad who was still sick and feverish and unmoving, skin clammy now. He remembered the lessons, from long ago, about what to do when everything went wrong, because he was a Luthor--and sometimes, he forgot what that meant, and wasn't that just another gift his father gave him, the luxury of being ordinary--and that meant whatever went wrong went wrong on national television.

"Duck your head, lose your pride, keep your nerve," his dad had said, only Conner stared at his father's face now, closed over and white, tilted now and shadowed as he was lifted up into the back of the ambulance, and he couldn't see a trace of the man who'd lectured him so minutes before his first public appearance.

He scrambled up into the back, but hesitated when he heard the shouting, and turned back just in time to see one of the guards shoved over by the crowd, the surge of people rushing forward, and his eyes must have grown enormous because he thought he saw a single breath of pity on the face of a channel 4 reporter before Hope grabbed him by his collar, jerked him into the ambulance, and they roared off into the city.

There was an equal-sized throng of people at Metropolis General but no security, and Conner felt their grabbing hands and microphones pressed against his arms, to the sides of his face, jabbing at him from every side, because Hope was only one person, and there were too many cameras around for her to use any of Mercy's trademarked tricks. But Conner clung onto his father's hand, followed the jerking gurney and infuriated doctors through the crowd, shoved people away and yelled "No comment" like an old pro, and hoped, hoped, hoped that everything was all right, that everything would be fine, that tomorrow, the last memories of this would be the news reports.

"I don't understand," Conner said dumbly.
Fifteen was a terrifying age, suspended between being a child and expected to act like an adult. Nobody really knew what to do with fifteen year olds, least of all themselves, and Conner sometimes felt like an adult because he could get where he wanted to go on his own, but then felt like a moron when his dad told him to fill out his own forms and he had to triple-check his social security number. He woke up hard like he had grown-up desires but panicked that one time some girl at a party tried to kiss him; his life was a huge question mark and Conner was a moron--an extraordinary moron, Eve said it every damn day.

And he felt like he was going to throw up, felt the nausea rolling in his stomach and up his throat and through his skin, pouring off of him, making him as sick and sallow and pale as his father was, laying in a sterile hospital room in a private wing with Hope and Mercy guarding the doors.

He couldn't breathe right, his head was pounding, and he thought he was going to fall down he was so weak in the knees. But he was family, and nobody else could be there for this, Conner knew his father wouldn't stand for it.

So Conner was doing the right thing, he was being the long end of fifteen, standing next to Lex's hospital bed and clutching one of the iron railings, wobbling back and forth and trying not to throw up or cry or faint, but he could barely keep his vision straight, he could barely keep his voice steady. He didn't know whether his success was zero or marginal or pointless, anyway, but he was doing it, because his father expected it, expected exemplary performance.

"I don't understand," he rasped out again.

The doctor looked down at him, over his arching, Roman nose, and said gently, "Mr. Luthor, did your father tell you he'd begun undergoing treatment?"

Conner stared at his dad's hand, which was laying still on the white sheets. There was a heart monitor somewhere in the room, he could hear it beeping steadily.

"I hadn't--" Conner started, voice like a high gasp, "I didn't know there was anything--"

But there were signs, weren't there? That there was something wrong? Lex had been white and sickly and thinner than usual, short with Conner and angry at Clark and distressed--that was the word--his father had been distressed. And Conner hadn't looked, or hadn't looked right, perhaps had never learned the language as well as he'd thought, never picked up the native tenses, the slight nuances, all the indications that there was something more there, something he should have been looking for.

"He was at the office a lot," he finally whispered. "He said he was at work. I thought he was tired."

The doctor sighed. "He is, Mr. Luthor," he said softly. "Your father is running a fever. It should break overnight, and there won't be any permanent damage, but he's exhausted. We'll have to keep him for a few days, to continue the chemotherapy and monitor his progress."

Conner nodded, blinked, felt the lids of his eyes scrape against the lenses, realizing he'd been staring at his father's hand without blinking for a long time now.

"How long?" Conner asked finally. "I mean--how long has he been sick?"

The doctor--Dr. Liebhart, Conner thought dully, the Dr. Liebhart who his father had been seeing, the one he said was giving him his physical--looked tired, nearly as tired as Conner thought he must look, small and scrawny and useless, bracing himself against his father's sickbed.
"We've known for some time now," Dr. Liebhart admitted.

Conner nodded again, it seemed to be the only thing he could do.

"What is it?" he finally asked. "I mean, what does he have?"

Stupid to have waited so long, after all the flurry and fuss, to hear about side effects being fevers and doctors who were actually oncologists, to ask what his father had. It should have been his first question. If Conner were really an adult, he'd have known to ask it, if he knew what the hell he was doing, he'd have done it right.

Dr. Liebhart rubbed the bridge of his nose, and looked a little bit incensed, or so Conner thought from the corner of his eyes. He still couldn't look away from his father's still, white hand, which had been moving and alive and writing things, not very long ago. How could I have missed this, Conner asked again, feeling a renewed lurch of nausea, how could I have not seen this?

"It's called ALL--adult Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia," Dr. Liebhart said.

"That's AALL," Conner said automatically, felt horrified, and whispered, "Sorry."

"Not at all," Dr. Liebhart murmured, almost smiling, "it's good that you're staying sharp."

"Yeah, I'm good at making stupid comments," Conner said, sitting down and putting his head on the edge of the mattress. "What's ALL--I mean, what does it do, how does it happen?"

"Well," Dr. Liebhart said, looking like he wanted to sit down, and wasn't sure what to do about that, "it's a cancer of the blood and bone marrow--"

"Great," Conner interrupted, hoarsely, talking into the mattress. "Awesome, Dad, you just have to be a hardass, get cancer in something that's all through your damn body."

"--and happens when too many stem cells develop into a certain type of white blood cell," the doctor continued smoothly. "Lymphocytes, they're called. With an overpopulation of them, there isn't enough room for healthy white cells or red cells. If not treated quickly, ALL can worsen very fast, and can also spread to the brain and spinal cord--"

Conner's head shot up at that. So did the lamp, hovering in midair.

"--however, we've taken care to conduct the proper tests and there's no indication of that in your father's case."

This time, Conner slumped back into the chair, casting a wary expression at the lamp which had settled back to the surface of the nightstand before staring at his father's prone form, wrestling with something that was boiling in the pit of his stomach.

"As to how it developed," Dr. Liebhart went on, "your father was exposed to a great deal of radiation when he was young. As a result, he's always had an elevated white cell count and--"

"The meteor shower," Conner breathed, covering his face with his hands. "Oh, God."

"Yes," Liebhart said, "the meteor shower. There were initial concerns but no childhood leukemia developed. I suppose the radiation is one of the influences that unfortunately caught up with him."

Conner was quiet for a long time before he said, "Okay. How do we fix this?" like it was scraped out of his throat, cut from his flesh.
"We've already begun the first round of chemotherapy," Dr. Liebhart said sympathetically. "The sickness, the pallor, are likely just side-effects from it. Your father's been spending a lot of time here when he wasn't feeling up to going home."

It made something Conner burst open, and he managed, "Can you please go away?"

If the door opened and closed behind Dr. Liebhart, Conner couldn't hear. He leaned over his father's bed, clutching at the sheets and sobbed, gasped for breath, wailed and keened like a mourner, and didn't know what to do, reached out and found nothing with his empty hands, and felt so young and small and helpless, as if he was behind the sheer wall of metal again, with his father on the other side, bleeding out, poisoned, and drowning in red.

Conner would have scars later, he supposed, but at the moment the cuts on his palms were red with new blood and aching.

It was the worst of his little arsenal of failsafes, tricks he'd accumulated over the years. They were nearly habit now, fallbacks that he tried not to let his father know about, lest he forbid Conner from exploiting them when everything got too noisy in his head. It would always be easier to bite in the inside of his mouth than to learn how to control his wandering, wild mind; it would always be faster to stab the webbing between his thumb and first finger with a pencil. When the sharp prick of pain wasn't enough to disrupt him, then really, the only option was to draw blood, and so Conner was, tiny red wells of it, dotting his palms--he'd regret it later, he wouldn't be able to hide it this time, and everybody would start to ask questions.

In the seventh grade Geoffrey had once grabbed Conner's hand to drag him toward a particularly uninspiring exhibit full of hideous sackcloth onto which somebody had defecated (Geoffrey maintained that it was unbleached canvas and brown paint, and that Conner should stop being such a bastard about Geoffrey's attempts to give him a little culture), and frozen there, in the underground revolving exhibit of the Rodman Museum of Modern Art. He'd frozen and then turned and then tugged Conner's hand to his face and turned it palm-up, and stared with a blank expression at the moon-shaped scab that was on the inside turn of Conner's wrist.

That was the first time Conner had ever seen Geoffrey lose his temper, turn so red in the face Conner thought Geoffrey was going to explode. Geoffrey had dragged him into the nearest restroom and shoved him into a stall--because despite all outward influences it was still Geoffrey who was the more discreet between the two of them--and slammed Conner against the door, growling, "What did you do?"

In retrospect, not quite so young and terrified of his powers anymore, Conner saw that the red-moon scar on his wrist was frightening. He must have known it at the time, too, for he'd gone out of his way to make certain his cuffs were buttoned, never to open his palms for his father to see. It must have seemed like something else entirely--something that was much more sinister than an attempt to control his electric thoughts. And Conner was sorry he worried Geoffrey, he'd said as much even then, shoved against the doorway with his heart shuddering.

Now, there were eight, nine, ten cuts on his palms, red and welting, skin hurting and bleeding, blood smeared. He hoped that nobody walked in anytime soon, before he had time to clean off his palms, before he had a chance to make himself look respectable again. Most of all, he hoped his father didn't wake up to see this, as it would only upset him more, and that was the last--

It was a thought that stopped Conner in his tracks, froze his whirling doubts and concerns, made him suddenly forget the ocean of photographers and news vans outside the hospitals, the televisions mounted at every nurse station spooling out CNN on mute, with black ribbons at the
Once, many years ago, he'd seen the same thing, in this same hospital, on a different floor.

Mrs. Banner had been there, then, and the crowd of press at the door had been impressive but much smaller, scattered to the four corners of a ravaged Metropolis, torn to pieces and still-burning, a disaster area. Superman was missing, Conner knew, he'd seen the blood, the trail of it from where Superman had been thrown into the penthouse apartment, leading to a broken window. Then, Conner had hoped that Superman was all right, that wherever he'd gone, it'd been safe and warm and clean, because Superman had saved them, Conner believed, no matter how much Lex said that when it came to savior, the only messiah was ones own desire to survive.

Once, many years ago, Conner had been in a hospital room like this, and his palms had been bleeding then, too, wrapped in layers of white, gauzy bandage, and he was pleasantly fuzzy around the edges, shot full of drugs because everybody said he was in shock.

His father had been sleeping then, too, his eyes closed and still, dreamless.

The green monster--Conner never knew what it was, only that its wings were enormous and leathery, made a horrible noise against the wind, that its eyes were bright and yellow and that it had come for them --was dead though, draped in three pieces over the top of their building, body throwing the observatory into pieces of shattered glass, concrete broken in rocky chunks, the ceiling punched through from the sheer weight.

But they were alive, and they would be fine, Conner believed that, because they were in a hospital now, and Conner could do his own saving, had been practicing his whole life for a moment like this.

"Metropolis is too dependent on Superman, Conner," his father had said to him, when he'd been small and impressionable. "He's just another person--like any of us. He makes mistakes, he may not even always be around--we can't get too comfortable and forget how to save ourselves."

And Conner had taken the lesson to heart, because his father was right, and it'd been cars and people and doctors and the citizens Metropolis who had pulled the city upright again after Superman had thrashed the monster into pieces. It was people that made a city live, Conner knew, not luck or fate or any benevolent, superhuman being. Conner believed in the persistence of life, of the desire for better things, in human equilibrium.

Conner would never intentionally upset his father--not under normal circumstances, not under most circumstances he could imagine. It was foolish, and cruel besides. His father was a good father, and even when he wasn't, he tried very hard to be. Conner firmly believed in grading on effort, and even when he didn't love his father, he did, because the heart was a contrary creature.

But Conner had always loathed secrets, though he had many to keep and contain his entire life, not by any fault of his own, but by circumstance, the trappings into which he'd been born. He led a wildly privileged life, had received for his tenth birthday a twelve day trip around the world which he had taken with his father and his best friend and seen the edges of the Earth. He rarely wanted for anything, and was always provided, like he lived a ceaseless harvest.

And still Conner thought privately and selfishly that plenty came with a certain weight, a heaviness
which held him down, pressed into his skin and his shoulders and locked him in place. It gave him an identity for which he could take no responsibility, as it was foreign and unknown to himself, just a face that the fourteenth floor Public Relations Office had generated for Conner's few and far between appearances for a curious crowd.

So there, in the cold and ever-expanding hospital room, Conner felt as if he was looking at the hands of a stranger, smeared with very familiar blood, and it made it easier to be angry.

It was one thing that his father didn't want to discuss his relationship with Clark, after all, Lois had been right--as she generally was--that maybe they weren't that serious, maybe it was some bizarre booty-call thing (which Conner really didn't want to think about), maybe it was something else entirely, but mostly, it wasn't his business. Besides, as long as they were making each other happy, he found he didn't really care. The Parent Trap was a movie for a reason.

It was another that he'd lied about this, about being sick, as if Conner was still a baby and couldn't understand what cancer meant, what AL fucking L meant.

Conner was out of words, and too tired to shape the thudding in his head into any sort of coherent thought, so he closed his eyes and fisted his hands and laid his head down on the edge of his father's bed.

The last thing he saw before he slipped over the edge into black was gray light swimming outside the window as rain started to pour down in earnest, shrouding Metropolis in a cobwebbed veil.

In the aftermath of Metropolis burning before his eyes, his father had forced Conner to visit a nice lady, twice a week, for nearly a year. She'd had a soft, pale green-colored office, and kept a vase of wheat stems on one of her many, orientally-carved bookshelves which lined the wall. The floors were dark, rich wood, with deep rugs and large pillows, and she and Conner sat cross-legged there, facing one another. Every week she started off their hour together with some new discovery she'd made, and in turn he told her one of her own. It was pleasant and reasonably mundane. She smiled at him kindly and she seemed to like him, though Conner was never really certain if that was genuine or simply out of professional respect.

She'd asked him about his dreams, and he'd drawn her pictures, terrible ones, since he was four and never had Geoffrey's steady hand--and never would, about when he fell out of bed screaming and pouring sweat, watching the city crumble to pieces over and over again. They'd been sketchy, waxy black from exuberant application of crayon, and around the fringes of falling buildings he'd haloed red and yellow and blue at the hearts of the flames, just as he remembered in vivid, echoing horror.

It was not, he had explained to her then, as well as he could in a four year old's words, that the memories plagued him by day. Conner lived a very normal life, and when he was upset or discomfited by some memory--an empty lot undergoing construction where there'd once been a neighborhood, the barest snippet of a news report before his father firmly changed the station, a tiny shard of glass the cleaners had missed--he and his father talked about it, discussed at length how it had happened, and why it wouldn't again.

Conner believed above all things in the sincerity of his father's best intentions, and knew that it was not so much his father's capability that created masterpieces, but his sheer want of doing so. Lex had wanted Conner to lead an ordinary life, unplagued by the lacquered, suffocating expectation that Lex sometimes bitterly spoke of about his own childhood, and it'd been so. Lex had wanted Conner to excel, and Conner had, because it pleased his father. Lex generated miracles, lived up to his namesake, and Conner lived in awe of it all.
So his father's explanations of the city's new fortifications, the defenses that had been put into place, the lessons the people of Metropolis had reaped from the experience had more than placated his four year old heart.

What haunted him and drug him into the very darker corners of his mind, ones which the lady in the green room had helped him to organize and box, to put away into a comfortable, cool space in his head was not the fact that it could happen again--because Conner knew it wouldn't--it was simply that it had happened at all.

He woke up to the sound of shouting in the hallway, and an automatic lurch of nausea came, a heart-stopping fear that maybe somebody had made it all the way up to the oncology ward, reached their door, would burst in any moment and take photos, ask questions, push a microphone in his face. Conner was afraid of reporters because he knew what it was like to want to know and be willing to do nearly anything to find out.

But when the door opened it was Mrs. Banner, hand tight around Clark's wrist, dragging him into the room through an ocean of security personnel and wary-eyed doctors. The room was filled with a terrible racket for just a moment before the door fell shut and everything went silent, Mrs. Banner's hand dropping from Clark's.

"Conner," she said urgently.

Clark stared, red-eyed and silent.

Conner fisted his hands in the white sheets of the bed again, and asked, with as little hostility in his voice as possible, "Did you know?"

Clark kept staring, eyes wide and sinking and dark, heavy with something Conner felt would be reflected on his own face. He watched, morbidly curious as Clark stepped away from Mrs. Banner and edged toward the bed, as if he were afraid the same way that Conner felt afraid.

"He--I asked him why there were--" Clark started, and his voice seemed to drift away, float off into the quiet hum of the hospital room like Conner's rational thoughts, dismissed. "He was always so busy, and he wouldn't tell me where he was going--I thought--"

Conner turned back to his father on the bed, watched him and felt everything in his chest hollow out, echo with it, and suppressed the urge to run from the room, run as fast as he could, and never come back. He felt too young and stupid to be standing there between his mother and father who was laying on a hospital bed, too young and stupid to be the bearer of bad news, but when Clark asked, "What's wrong? They--they wouldn't tell me anything. They wouldn't let me come up," Conner said, "He has acute lymphoblastic leukemia. That's where he's been," as if his heart wasn't racing out of his chest, terrified and shaking like his hands would be if they weren't knotted in the sheets.

Clark had always been one of the strongest people Conner had ever known, and watching Clark's knees give out on him, watching Mrs. Banner reach for his shoulder, grab his arm to hold him up made Conner's chest turn inside out.

But today was all about inversion, Conner though wildly, because his father was laying comatose on a hospital bed, defeated by something as commonplace as cancer, and his mother was barely standing, eyes huge and red and frightened--frightened the way that Lex never let Conner see when
he was younger, because children can know the contents of a parent's heart.

And when he was much younger, Conner remembered asking his father if he was ever sad, and Lex's strong face smiling as he had regarded Conner with amused affection, saying, "If I was, Conner--I'd never let you see."

But that, like many things, Conner was realizing, was a kind-hearted lie, and he felt dozens of them closing around him like the teeth of a trap, metal digging into soft flesh.

The thing was, Conner initially had no intention of starting a fight in his father's hospital room, not in the least because of the fact that there were reporters twelve deep around the building, or that there was security four deep around the ward.

But also there was something frightening and simmering, just beneath the surface of skin holding it all inside. He could feel the heavy crawl of something moving and struggling, and he knew that if there was an argument, it'd be one he could never take back, one during which he'd say things that he'd mean--and that was what made its possibility so dangerous. He'd learned the fine and dangerous art of words from his father, who always spoke with an elegant reluctance, talking in beautiful circles but never really saying anything. And he'd learned from his father also how words, unlike physical wounds, exist on a frictionless plane, and they return over and over again--so Conner has always been very careful.

So Conner had continued to stare at the place where his cut-up hand was knotted in his father's white sheets, and didn't speak, listened to Clark breath from the other corner of the room where his mother was perched in a plastic chair, awkward and huge in the room.

He was sore from sitting and the pain in his hand had lessened to a dull throb. The swirling in his head had stilled to a slow, sickening sweep every few moments and Conner realized with a horror that he could time the distinct darkening and lightening of the room to it, from the motion of the gray clouds outside the window to the sunset that stained the room orange. There was a perverse irony in all of this, in the place where Conner's unbridled abilities intersected with what seemed to be his control over the weather.

So he just laid his head down and pressed his cheek over the back of his father's hand and stared at a wall, seeing Clark's profile out of the corner of his eye.

"You should go home."

It took him nearly a minute to process that.

"Conner?" Clark asked, and when he realized Conner was blinking at him with a detached sort of amazement, he said again, "You should go home."

It was stupid, but Conner hadn't thought of that. He'd thought that he was so tired he could cry and that he was going to cry and that he couldn't do it--which only made him angrier and more frustrated and more grossly fifteen, which was becoming an ever more abominable age to be if one's father were to suddenly develop some sort of life-threatening cancer and decide not to tell anybody about it.

Home sounded good, and home sounded warm--and Conner was sort of losing feeling in his fingers, but that happened, he supposed, when you bled a lot and never unclenched your hand. But home, Conner remembered with a shock of discomfort, was out of sight, and what would Conner do if he couldn't watch over his father? Lex had always watched over Conner, with the sort of
benevolent omniscience of a father and mother and the world's best spy technology combined, and Conner, though he was a poor substitute, would like to try and do the same for his father.

He shook his head, "I want to stay."

Clark sighed and straightened in his chair, and Conner heard the creaking of the furniture and the cracking of Clark's back from a long time in the same place, the same position. Conner wondered what his fingers would sound like when they finally uncurled from the sheet, when he finally let go. Conner wondered above all when his father would finally wake up, because even if the doctor had reassured Conner over and over again that it was only exhaustion and medication taking their toll, Conner thought that the way his father's face was lined and pallid in the hospital light looked too much like dead. The thought made his stomach roll because he hadn't even touched the possibility, not in a tangible sense, since he'd found Lex on the kitchen floor.

Logically, Conner knew he must have been thinking it since the first moment, but the words had never crossed his mind. Death was a huge thought, an intangible one because it was not a structured concept like medicine seemed to think, but the vast and surprising lack of something which had always been there, and Conner tried to imagine what it'd be like to be around but without the presence of his father, to exist in a world where his dad didn't.

There was a logical flaw in that, some sort of breakdown in the laws of the universe, because it wouldn't work that way, how could it possibly? What would Metropolis do? What would LexCorp do? What would the hundreds of thousands of employees in dozens of countries do? What would Conner do? He'd make a terrible orphan, and he'd miss his father so much that the suggestion of it trilled up his spine like claws and he felt his head go hot and furiously frightened for a moment before he felt Clark's hand on his shoulder, shaking him hard.

"Close your eyes, Conner," Clark said, and his voice was terrible and still and firm. He sounded more like Superman than Conner's mother, so Conner closed his eyes, and took a shuddering breath. "Good," Clark said again. "And now I want you to let out a deep breath, just feel everything in your chest unknot, okay?"

He tried, and he tried very hard, but he knew there would be casualties, because the last time that Clark had to talk him down was the time he'd accidentally smashed all the glass in the conservatory, when he'd heard that his grandmother had been in a car accident.

"Stop thinking," Clark instructed. "Just listen to my voice, and let it go, okay?"

So Conner did, seeing knots in his head, tangled, rotting rope and he picked at it with shaking fingers, hands still oozing blood from the cuts, and it made dark spots on the ropes, which he found appropriate as he pulled at them. It took him one minute, two, onto four and five and six but he finally felt the pressure in his chest lessen, the weight on his neck disappear, and then he pulled apart the last two strings and heard a soft thud, felt the legs of his chair settle back onto the ground, before his eyes flew open in horror.

All the furniture in the room was out of place, like everything had been tossed up and then landed, luckily on its feet on the right sides. The machinery was not much better, and Clark was holding some of them in his arms like featherweights, carrying them with a sad, resigned expression on his face that said that Clark was as tired as Conner was.

It took a full minute to process what had just happened.

And then several things happened very quickly, in confusing succession.
Conner said, "Oh, God," and jerked his hand away from the bed, as if he was afraid that by touching anything near his father he was going to do it again, let it all get out of control and float everything in the room to the ceiling, kill his dad, burn down the hospital, ruin his whole life.

And then Clark gasped or hissed or something and rushed over in a way that only Superman could and jerked Conner's hand away from where it was clasped on his thigh, shaking, and stared in blank-faced horror at his palm, and all of its scarred-up, half-closed cuts. Conner wanted to say how it wasn't as bad as it looked, but it looked really horrible, and not as bad was still terrible.

"What did you do?" Clark asked, voice hushed and frightened.

"It's nothing," Conner tried to say, and he didn't bother to pull his hand away, because Superman had been his mother long enough for Conner to know that it was useless. "I just--I didn't want to do anything stupid," he babbled. "It distracts me. I know it's bad. I never do it unless--"

"Unless what?" Clark shouted, and Conner felt a flare of anger in his chest, separated it into four boxes, put it away in opposite corners and left them impotent and harmless there, apart like chemicals in storage.

"Unless I have to!" Conner said back, humiliated and caught. He'd never wanted anybody to see this, it was bad enough that Geoffrey had seen it, that it'd scared him and that he'd been so upset with Conner that he'd left bruises. "I don't do it unless I have to, okay?"

It seemed to rock Clark back--and it may have ended it there if Clark hadn't seen the blood stain on Lex's sheets, dark and messy and damming.

That's how the fight started, Conner realized later.

He didn't, actually, remember what he said during the fight. But he knew he ended up crying and screaming about on what grounds did Clark and Lex have to get angry with him about keeping secrets, about hurting himself, when all that they ever did was lie to him and think it would be okay. Conner had a place, carefully set aside in the furthest back corner of his mind where he pushed all of the things in his head when the noise got too much, and he felt a roar of nausea as he realized all the doors in his head had unlocked, and the complex series of checks and balances, locks and ropes and pretend he used to separate his explosive thoughts had come undone.

And he screamed at Clark's white face about how they'd been fucking--and Conner actually said the word fucking, here--for months and never said a word, about how they'd never mentioned that they'd been together before, about why was Conner never told anything, as if he didn't warrant the attention or hadn't earned the trust.

But mostly Conner remembered screaming about how he was furious and fucked up and sick because his father was dying, he was dying, and nobody, nobody, could do anything about it at all.

It was inevitable that he would get kicked out of the hospital, because there was only so much any oncology ward with reporters hovering in the corners could bear, and so Conner was rushed through the heaving mass by doctors and nurses and Mrs. Banner, who clutched his shoulder tightly enough to hurt. And he wound down twisted stairwells and shuttered though the back hallways of the hospital until they burst out into the mid-dawn light, when the sky was gray and
pink and deserted, cloudless and desolate.

He got home an hour later, and when he did, he crawled onto his father's bed, laid in the center of it and stared out the window at the morning, where the light was going golden and soaking into the edges of buildings--into Metropolis.

And then Conner's aching hands felt so empty and small that the only thing he could do was curl into a ball, draw himself in as tightly as possible, plunge his mind into black and cry and cry and cry.

At some point, Conner realized that his father had never bothered to have a locked liquor cabinet, and Jaegermeister, Conner found, did fantastically well for dulling his senses, and he woke up the morning afterward too fucked up to care. And this went on for the three days that Mrs. Banner drifted in and out of the penthouse like a ghost, and she must have seen--she must have seen him--nursing the bottle but she never stopped him. She was angry with him, he could tell, he'd known her all of his life, but she was also scared of him--had she seen the hospital room? God, Conner hoped she hadn't seen the hospital room--and that cut like a ragged edge, wore at him. He didn't blame her, he was scared of himself.

And when he woke up on the fourth day hung over and sick and stared at himself in the mirror, a disgusting mess and incapable of taking care of himself--much less his father--he threw up again.

It occurred to him somewhere in between wiping up his own puke and avoiding Mrs. Banner's pitying gaze that he didn't have the luxury of being normal anymore, that though it was earlier than expected, he was going to have to be an adult.

He tried calling Geoffrey three times, but he never managed to dial the last number, and so he dialed another number instead, and by mid-afternoon, the finest home care provider in Metropolis was showing Conner how to take care of a patient undergoing chemotherapy and radiation, how to deal with the side-effects of medications. He was also showing Conner some neat tricks to deal with the side-effects of Jaegermeister.

On the fifth day his father came home, and Conner was ready.

It was quiet, it was civil, and Conner said none of the things he'd said to Clark--who looked red-eyed and hollowed out at Lex's side, watching Conner like a hawk, waiting for the explosion that wouldn't be coming--but Conner kept his distance, didn't reach out like his shaking hands wanted to and latch onto his father's thin chest, to hold him close.

"I helped the nurse set up your stuff," he explained. "You don't have to do that at the office, you know? You'll be more comfortable here."

Lex looked at him, tired and sad and guilty. "Thank you, Conner."

"It's fine," Conner said shortly. "I learned how to give a shot."

He pulled down on his sleeve as he said this, and he noted that Clark noticed it, and didn't care if his mother x-rayed his clothes to see the needle marks from where he'd practiced all of Thursday, so hung over he could barely breathe.

His father looked like he was going to vomit. "Conner--"
"I've got to go to school," Conner interrupted, brisk and efficient. "I'll be home by three o'clock, though. I quit the literary magazine," he explained, "it'll free up more time in case you need me here." He checked his watch and didn't see any of the numbers. He'd be early and he'd have to see Geoffrey and Conner had no idea what to do.

But it was better than being inside the house, and so he left with a forced smile, and didn't look back when he felt the air move around Lex's seeking hand, reaching out to him.

He had made it all the way out to the nearest subway stop before he dropped down to a squat and forced himself to breathe normally, forcing air into his constricted lungs.

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Conner had made it twenty-eight steps out of West Eden station before he had a total meltdown.

When he looked up half an hour later, he was sitting in a dimly lit bathroom in the boulangerie six blocks away from campus, three cross streets away from the sprawling holdings of St. Ann's. Conner surveyed the room for any notable damage, put away a few items that had been tossed roughly around the room, and hoped that nobody would notice that he'd added another crack to the already lined glass. But after he washed his hands and splashed some cold water on his face and ventured out into the store again, the fortysomething French baker gave him a cup of hot tea with lemon and a pastry on the house, and forced him to sit by the window, where he inspected Conner warily.

"I'm fine," Conner started, and the baker narrowed his eyes.

"No, really!" Conner insisted, and took a large bite out of the pastry to prove it. "See?" he said through a mouthful of crumbs.

The baker pointed at Conner's uniform, which was in worse condition than usual, and then motioned out the window to the left, where Conner would have walked to reach his school if he could possibly force himself to go. He swallowed the bite of pastry, which tasted like rancid sawdust.

"It's closed today?" he tried.

At that exact moment, three girls from two grades below rushed past, shrieking, "We're going to be so late!" their navy, pleated skirts flapping.

"Okay, seriously, what the hell?" Conner said while the baker snorted, straightening and pointing to the doorway with a veiled sort of threat that made Conner pick up his backpack and surrender himself to the possibility that maybe there were things aside from forces of nature and his father which were utterly, painfully unavoidable.

"Thanks for the pastry," he said sourly, and the baker said something French in reply that sounded hugely insulting, waving his big, brown hands at Conner and then the door.

All in all, it took five more minutes for Conner to force himself out of the pastry shop, but when he stepped out onto the street he realized in quick succession that he was in no shape to go to school that day, that the last place he wanted to be was home, and that in front of him, standing at the steps of the West Eden subway station looking sallow and heartbroken and weary was Geoffrey.

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The heart of the matter was a matter of the heart, Conner had known for a long time, and whether
or not he was in love with Geoffrey as he was beginning to become afraid he was, he'd always loved Geoffrey, with a wild sort of protectiveness that made Conner feel like he could be dangerous long before he really was.

They'd met when they were barely children, just babies who'd learned to talk and sound out large words from their very smart fathers and very good teachers. They'd shared band-aids and stories and disjointed lives until they'd been able to outline them all in good, grammatically-sound English and found themselves best friends. They'd worn down one another's edges and hurt each other and Conner had, though he'd promised never, ever to tell anybody about it, helped Geoffrey measure his penis once because he'd been desperately curious and neither of them had been able to guesstimate--"It's a weird angle!" and "Oh my God, this is so wrong."--whether or not his dick had been the typical length while flaccid.

Over the years, Conner learned how to wipe Geoffrey's tears and tie his tie and Geoffrey learned how to make Conner's favorite waffles and how to distract Conner from the fact that his life was a bona fide freak show. They had a living history between them, and Conner knew enough about investment and capital and profits to know that their friendship was a struggling enterprise, that it needed more, always more from them, to grow to fit their relative ages.

It was hard and hurt and sometimes not worth the effort and agony and when Geoffrey jerked him around the corner and said, "Oh God, I've been so worried. I'm so sorry--I'm so so sorry, Conner," and pulled Conner into his chest, wrapped his long arms around Conner's shoulders, it felt like the world was shaking apart at Conner's feet.

But it was all right--Conner had put so much of himself into Geoffrey over their years that Geoffrey would know where to place all the mixed-up shards when Conner was done falling apart, with nothing out of place.

"I almost called you," Conner said awkwardly, words muffled into Geoffrey's shoulder. He couldn't get his fingers to release Geoffrey's shirt.

"I should have come over," Geoffrey said, quietly furious. "I didn't know what to say. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." 

Conner thought about Geoffrey pacing his small, crowded bedroom, still plastered with pictures of sailboats and dressed as it had been when Geoffrey was five and nearly smiled. But his father still had cancer and Conner was still losing his mind so he didn't, and just closed his eyes, breathed into Geoffrey's neck and said, "I don't think I can go to school today."

"You shouldn't even be here," Geoffrey murmured, finally pulling away enough so that he could peer at Conner's face, worried. "Are you okay? You look like shit."

"I feel like shit," Conner admitted, and made himself let go of Geoffrey's shirt, because the last thing he needed to add to his list of reasons this was a bad week was being strangled to death by Eve's school tie.

"Can we go somewhere?" he asked, feeling desperate and stupid. "I just--I don't want to deal with everybody today, you know?"

So Geoffrey made a face that meant his heart was breaking and took Conner to the art museum, where they looked at rotting wood panels ripped from the walls of medieval houses and Conner let Geoffrey explain to him why they were important.

"Art was expensive back then, prohibitive to most people," Geoffrey said, "let's not even talk about
books. So the fact that these people had these panels in their house, and they show a love story instead of just a religious text means they valued it, and I'm telling you about it because--"

"This shit is just as ugly now as it was that time we were almost killed here," Conner complained, thinking that being shot by incompetent art thieves might be a welcome distraction to his very own personal Art History 101 lecture.

"--I love you," Geoffrey said, rapidly changing tracks, shocking Conner enough to make his breathing hitch a moment, "it means that I love you and that you're my best friend and I'm a moron. I'm a total fucking moron and I'm so sorry."

Conner swallowed hard around the ball lodged in his throat. He said, "Okay."

Geoffrey nodded solemnly. "Good."


And later, when Geoffrey and Conner were waiting for Mercy to pick Conner up from Geoffrey's house, late in the afternoon when the sun was a melting red in the orange sky, Conner thought that if everything was going to go straight to hell, he was glad that Geoffrey would be there to see it all fall down with him.

"I should," Geoffrey said faintly as they watched Mercy's dark Benz roll up to the curb.

"What?" Conner asked distractedly, shouldering his backpack.

"I don't always pick you," Geoffrey murmured again, some of the words distorting around the sound of the doorbell, "maybe I should."

Conner thought about that all the way home.

But home smelled like sickness and Conner found his father sleeping feverishly, so he put away his things and spent the night at his bedside, checking his temperature and making frantic phone calls to Carl, who'd taught Conner how to give shots and not drink Jaegermeister ever again just to make sure his father was actually okay.

"But he's hot!" Conner whispered, agitated.

"How hot is he?" Carl asked patiently and then sighed when Conner set the phone down on the ground to tiptoe back into his father's room and check.

Conner touched his father's forehead again, very lightly, edged away from the bed and sneaked out of the room again, picking up the phone to admit, "Well, not--um, really at all. But--"

"No buts, Conner," Carl interrupted, affectionate if homicidal, "and I love you, kid, but my wife is gonna rip you a new one if you don't stop calling."

When Conner hung up the phone for the fifth and final time that night, it was half past one in the morning and he figured there was a sixty/forty chance that his father was actually awake and either humoring him or doing that thing where it was easier to fake it than to deal with a problem that appeared insurmountable at the moment. But Conner was nearly as good as his father when it came to calculated denial so Conner called Geoffrey, because he was allowed to do that again, and God,
it felt so good to dial the last four numbers to Geoffrey's personal line.

Halfway through the first ring Geoffrey picked up.

"Hey," came Geoffrey's answer. He sounded totally awake. "What's up?"

Conner was silent for a moment, because all he heard was echoing reality in his head and he could barely stand the thought that if Geoffrey didn't fill up the space with his voice he'd have to sit in his huge empty apartment and think about his father.

"Tell me about art," Conner said.

"You hate art," Geoffrey reminded him gently. Conner could hear the sheets rustling and thought about Geoffrey's dark blue comforter bunched up around Geoffrey's feet, the way light fell into Geoffrey's bedroom in silver-blue stripes through the always-opened blinds.

Lex had always told Conner about the knowledge of the privileged in a snide, educational way that had infiltrated as a suggestion even very early in his childhood. His father spoke of the unspoken bonds that formed between two people when they shared what were not necessarily secrets, but honesty, candor, pieces of themselves. So Conner had learned to keep his father's secrets early, things about his girlfriends when Conner had been younger and things about his mother when he'd been older.

And Conner thought about Geoffrey's bedroom, about silver-blue stripes of light through always-opened blinds and realized with a sudden pang that Eve must know about it now, too, that it was no longer just Conner's privilege in knowledge--that they shared something Conner had never known would split two ways.

"Then tell me about Eve," he said, desperate.

It made Geoffrey laugh, wild and young and like somebody who had completely forgotten that the walls to the 1925 Brownstone in which he lived were paper-thin and that his father was right next door. Conner and Geoffrey had been banished to the cellar enough times for both of them to know when Mr. Archer was waking up at that exact moment.

"Wow--the one thing you hate more than art," Geoffrey said, a smile in his voice.

"I'm desperate, man," Conner snapped, irate.

"Then I'll tell you about art," Geoffrey settled.

Sometime in the sixth grade, Geoffrey had been so fed up by Conner's greater appreciation of the artist of Full Metal Alchemist than Monet that he'd started something called Better Living Through Stop Being Such An Uncultured Moron And Look At The Goddamn Painting, Conner, an enterprise of which Lex had wholeheartedly approved. So far, their only real success had been Conner's continued fascination with Chagall, both his famous works and his hundreds of scrawls and sketches, which had a discontinuous, emotional staccato which had captured Conner's attention.

"Do you remember when my mom died?" Geoffrey started, very carefully, because he had to know what dangerous ground he walked on, with Conner sitting in the hallway outside of Lex's room and talking about dead parents.

"Yes," Conner said woodenly.
Of course Conner remembered when Geoffrey's mother had died. It'd been the single most terrifying memory of his young life prior to this whole living nightmare.

Conner had never met Geoffrey's mother, they having only been friends several short months before she passed away after collapsing in a grocery store, her weak heart failing her after a lifetime of high blood pressure and the devastating effects of a turbulent pregnancy. Geoffrey had been six and Conner had been five and Geoffrey had stayed with the Luthors for nearly a week after her passing, Mr. Archer being too shattered to do much more than let his relatives force him to eat and not die along with her. And in those days Conner had seen Geoffrey, who was always smiling and easygoing and kind and funny disappear, crawl somewhere deep inside his own head and miss his mother terribly, yearn for her so much that even at five Conner had held Geoffrey's hand tightly when they'd gone onto the roof for things, afraid in the marrow of his bones that Geoffrey would try to fly and catch his mother's hand where she was probably waiting to steal Geoffrey away. Conner, because he'd never really felt loss, feared it immensely; it was uncharted territory, and there might be monsters.

"I remember it was going to be her birthday soon, and so I wanted to draw her a nice picture."
Geoffrey paused to laugh, because it had been nine years and the deep, cruel cuts his mother's death had left on him had closed over, to scar tissue that Conner knew with a great intimacy, like the skin on the palm of his own hand, marked with half-moon scabs.

"My hands were really shaky back then, I couldn't draw a straight line to save my life, but I had this sixty-four color box of Crayola crayons, and I colored everything as carefully as I could. I couldn't wait to give it to her," Geoffrey said, with the affectionate tone of a boy who still loved his mother, as best as he could with his cobweb memories of her.

"So I didn't, and like, three weeks early, I slid it to her at breakfast and--"

There was a hitch of breath that knocked something loose in Conner's head, and it was probably a combination of desperation, boredom, and teenaged hormones that made Conner wonder what it would be like to draw that hitch of breath out of Geoffrey with his teeth.

"--Conner, her eyes just lit up, it didn't matter what I'd been trying to draw, she saw something completely different in it, and I don't know what, but she said she felt how hard I'd tried, and how much I cared about her, and that was the best gift of all."

When Conner had been young, he'd made his share of ugly artwork--far uglier than anything to which Geoffrey's natural-born talent could aspire despite his gross embellishment of his own past failures in art lab--macaroni glued onto sheets of paper, grotesque pots, construction paper tribal masks and one awful tempura painting of the ocean, which looked more like an ocean of blue vomit. His father had had all of it tastefully framed and put into various bathrooms in the penthouse, because no matter how much Conner was loved, Lex had the entire penthouse color-coordinated, and the neon green boogie man mask did not match the Chagall in the living room.

"That's why I love art," Geoffrey finished.

"Because your mom liked crap you drew when you were six?"

Conner heard the sound of motion behind his father's bedroom door, and had it been like any of the other extraordinarily rare occasions when his father had fallen ill and Conner had accordingly freaked out, he would have opened the door and scowled into the bedroom until his dad crawled meekly back into bed. But his hand froze on the wooden surface of the door and his fingers curled inward, nails scraping against the grain, too afraid to do anything.
The real problem would be talking to his father. Who had, Conner could not help adding, lied horribly about his illness, deceived his family who loved him, denied Conner the truth about his present and his past with Clark Kent, and put his childhood artwork in the bathroom.

"Because it tells more than just the picture," Geoffrey explained patiently. "I put everything I wanted to say but couldn't and didn't really know how to draw into some cruddy scrawls but the message got through. No long-distance charge or anything."

Conner wanted nothing more than to scream at his father, "I love you, I love you so much and you've broken my heart. I'm so scared for you and I'm too young to fix things. I don't know what to do but I'll try, please don't be sad that I'm angry with you--I'm just so scared," but he knew it'd come out all wrong, just like it'd come out all wrong with Clark at the hospital. He could draw a picture, but where his talent with verbs and adjectives was becoming enviable, he'd be reduced to scrawling a heart cracked in two with his clumsy hands, large, comical teardrops and a sun, peering from behind cartoonish gray clouds, because he wanted his father to know that there was hope, and that if Lex couldn't find it on his own, Conner would bring it to him--no matter the cost.

His father had taught him over the years the value of things, the price of gold and rubies and a good employee, the amazing worth of friends, and how to be generous, how to be grateful, to pay in platinum or silver or a pound of flesh for all of these things. Though Conner didn't know how to stop being angry, how to stop being fifteen, he knew how to strip himself to bone and give everything, everything he ever had or wanted or could to his father if it would help--and it had to, after all, Conner was Lex's miracle, his penicillin, his saving grace, and Conner would do it again, willfully, desperately, now.

"I kind of get that," Conner said hoarsely, which made Geoffrey sigh into the phone and whisper:

"I'm really worried about you."

"I'm fine," Conner lied.

"You're shipwrecked."

It made Conner smile. "Always with the sea metaphors. Your room looks like that for a reason."

"Yeah, and good thing you're the only one who sees it," Geoffrey laughed, rumbling and raspy.

It flicked a wavering switch and Conner felt a lick of heat down his belly and under his skin, like all the times Geoffrey had put a hand on Conner's back in the change room before gym, his hands volcanic against Conner's ridged spine. Conner's mouth went suddenly dry, and he realized with a dumb horror that his problems were twofold, and that perving out on his best friend was no longer just an idle distraction.

"I should go to sleep," Conner said, a little frightened by the sudden realization that perhaps when he said that Geoffrey was his best friend, he actually meant that he'd like to stick his hand down Geoffrey's pants and touch his special places. "Thanks for talking to me," he finished oddly.

"Go," Geoffrey agreed. "Will I see you at school tomorrow?"

"I don't know," Conner said honestly, shifting on the floor.

"Okay," Geoffrey said gently. "Night, Conner."

Conner heard footsteps, soft and fleshy, pad to the door, and wondered if his father was like him, one hand pressed to the wood and too afraid to push.
"Good night, Geoffrey," Conner choked out, and hung up the phone.

The footsteps padded away, and Conner sat in the hallway all night, watching the reflection of the sunrise in a Degas sketch, framed in heavy gold, which was on the wall in place of a very poor drawing Conner had done in the second grade which he'd titled in all capital letters MY FATHER AND ME AND HIS NEW CAR.

The last thing Conner wanted to think about was his father being ill, but that drove his ever-rumbling mind to the flashing, shaking images of Geoffrey he'd stored away, pictures of his best friend haloed in rose-gold at the end of a day, laughing and slapping Conner on the back, his tie flying over his shoulder. It made him flush and it made him frightened, because for as long as he could be bothered to remember Geoffrey had been a piece of him, the keystone which balanced all the precarious, ridiculous things about himself and made it into one smooth, architecturally-sound curve. To reshape it, to redesign it was suicide, and Conner didn't want to lose Geoffrey, not even the safe, beloved version in his own head.

So Conner thought about his father being sick, and wondered where Clark had gone, and what he would do if his father died, because it was a thought that refused to leave him.

Would they sell the penthouse? Would he move into Clark's ratty, one-bedroom apartment on Underwood lane, where the closest Metro stop was nearly twenty minutes away by foot? Conner loved the penthouse, had always lived there, was as familiar and comfortable calling the edge of Millionaire Mile his home as other people were comfortable working there day to day, and he'd hate it if he lost his father and the home where he and his father had lived, too.

But mostly, Conner wondered what would happen then, with a perverse sort of horrified interest, like those third-person dreams where he had seen himself get killed, when he'd been having his loud, black nightmares after the green dragon had burst into his life.

With Lex gone, Conner couldn't imagine anything else existing, either. How could he possibly continue to go to school? His father had died, and taken everything with him, sucked it down into the underworld to serve him in death as it had in life, and Conner had a passing belief that he'd willingly go, curl under the dark earth because it would be too hard--far, far too hard to outline a life without the familiar shape of his father in it; his hands would trip over the lines and the composition would be skewed.

But that was all terrified speculation, and there was a part of Conner that was still disbelieving, incapable of incorporating the idea of his father not being fine into any possible construct of reality. Lex would survive, Conner thought, privately and with not a little fear, as if voicing it out loud even in his head would strike it from possibility. Lex would be fine and they'd all be fine and it could be as if it'd never happened. His father and his mother and everybody in the world could keep their secrets for all Conner was concerned, but there would be life, and where there was life there was possibility, and perhaps one day, his parents would want to tell him everything--Conner would be ready to listen.

And it was thoughts like those that chased through his head all the time, unendingly, without rest for the weary or time for sleep and it happened like that for days, until they melted into weeks and Conner forced himself to go to school again, even if he spent most of the time staring out a window and failing all of his classes. Geoffrey had taken to doing his homework and forging his essays, making Conner eat and fixing his tie before class, to wearing that scared look on his face all the time, as if he was watching Conner disappear before his eyes.
It became, after a time, routine.

He dreamt feverish, hazy things about Geoffrey and Geoffrey's hands or woke up shaking and crying from the black images of a funeral, and crawled outside his father's door, ear pressed against the wood, listening for breath.

During the day, he went to classes and did remarkably poorly and then appeared at his father's side when there were radiation or chemotherapy sessions, listened attentively to the doctor's suggestions, warnings, and explanations, and made friends with all the nurses in oncology. He became an overnight expert in ALL and spent a day taking notes off of government information sites about cancer treatments and side-effects. He forced himself to be a walking encyclopedia on ways to lessen the suffering during treatment and made himself forget geometry and science and English to make room for more important things.

"You've lost a lot of weight, Conner," Geoffrey said, pushing a pudding cup in front of Conner.

"I'm getting plenty of food and rest," Conner said automatically, even though they both knew it was a total, filthy lie.

Geoffrey seemed to be worn thin, too, and Conner had noticed, because he couldn't help noticing Geoffrey, it seemed, hadn't really been speaking to Eve recently, and that she'd been seen staring longingly from the other side of rooms. The old Conner would have cracked a joke about trouble in paradise, the new Conner ate the pudding cup because he knew otherwise Geoffrey would harass him all afternoon, and the last thing Conner needed to do was think about how hot Geoffrey was when concerned.

"Then why have you lost a lot of weight?" Geoffrey demanded.

Conner sighed. "I worry I'm not pretty enough for you, Geoffrey," he said, and once upon a time, that would have been less uncomfortably true.

"Don't break my heart, Conner," Geoffrey warned.

Conner closed his eyes and covered his face, whispering, "I'm trying, Geoffrey. Oh my God, I'm trying."

Conner woke up at six o'clock in the morning to start laying out his father's medication and figure out what the hell to do about breakfast. He and Mrs. Banner were in cahoots; she found strange things in Chinatown and on Reuben street, and if she was feeling Balkan went down to the one block framed by Warton, Martin, Chadwick, and Browne streets where Conner found the most bizarre food ever. Lex was too old to effectively have aversion therapy, but Conner figured that of seven continents, 1.6 billion (and counting) people, and all the respective Weird Shit that they ate, he would be damned if he ruined Ty-Nant and peaches for his father.

At half past six, when he could hear his father's breaths go unsteady, Conner scrubbed out one of the bathtubs, rinsed it twice to make sure any skin irritants were gone, and ran a tepid bath, setting a bar of pure Glycerin soap he's rinsed off by the tub. There were newly washed towels--all that time spent in the laundry room was beginning to pay off—to the one block framed by Warton, Martin, Chadwick, and Browne streets where Conner found the most bizarre food ever. Lex was too old to effectively have aversion therapy, but Conner figured that of seven continents, 1.6 billion (and counting) people, and all the respective Weird Shit that they ate, he would be damned if he ruined Ty-Nant and peaches for his father.

Conner got Mrs. Banner to drive him to school, because Lex didn't like anybody to be there when he was doing his early morning routine, and Conner didn't want Mercy to see the times he broke
down and cried all the way to class.

He was so tired he could feel it in his bones, ached the way he thought his father must, when he came back from his treatments exhausted and miserable and stubborn and angry. His grades were hopeless and he was sleeping three or four hours a night, making up the difference with caffeine pills he'd been buying on the sly and tossing with double-espressos and Jolt Cola from the shop next to the boulangerie owned by the hostile French baker.

It wasn't always going to be this bad, the doctors promised, it was only during rounds of chemo, only during rounds of radiation, only sometimes when they were adjusting the medication.

Conner didn't really care about it being this bad--though sometimes it made the idea of flying off the roof and not yelling for help seem spectacularly attractive--Conner just hoped it didn't get worse.

It was a manageable kind of miserable, and even at his very, very best, Conner was only a filthy rich fifteen year old. He didn't have God on speed dial four.

And over the years, Conner had realized, neither did his father.

After a while, Conner wondered where Clark was through all of this, and it turned out the answer to that question was "getting fired" and "breaking his lease" because on a Friday afternoon in early November about three weeks after the sky fell down on Conner's head, Clark was at the penthouse carrying several large boxes with one hand.

Conner set down his backpack and stared. "What are you doing?" he asked stupidly.

He'd spent most of the day in the guidance office, listening to Father Greer offer to listen to him, but since Conner had been born contrary, he'd remained silent, and Father Greer had eventually given up, provided Conner with a mug of coffee, and they'd sat in companionable quiet for the rest of the day. When the last bell had run, Father Greer had wished him a good weekend and seen him off, where Geoffrey was waiting for him at the carpool lane.

The ride home had been surreal, with Geoffrey at the wheel of his father's car and Mr. Archer clutching a bottle of Xanax and the dashboard while they came to sudden stops at red lights. It was Geoffrey's first week on road with his permit, and Conner had appropriately covered his eyes and curled up, praying for the best from the backseat. Geoffrey, who seemed to have forgotten the dramatics from his birthday, was upbeat about his driving skills, even when both Conner and Mr. Archer threw themselves out of the car as soon as they reached Conner's street and nearly hugged the ground, unspeakably grateful to have survived.

And Conner had walked around the building on shaky legs until he'd made it up the elevator and into his house, which smelled, suddenly, somehow, like his grandmother's apple pie and newspapers instead of medicine. He'd turned the corner out of the foyer to find Clark there, looking ragged and dressed down. His tie was loose and his shirt was untucked and he was covered in dust.

"Your dad would probably be mad if I put up any Remy Zero posters, huh?" Clark asked, distracted, concentrating on several other boxes, half-opened on the ground and filled with what looked like the entire contents of his bedroom--clothing included. Sometimes, the fact that Clark was, in fact, neither a mother nor a woman was profoundly underlined in Conner's life.

"I think so, yes," Conner said oddly.
It was the first time they'd really spoken to one another since Conner had gone ballistic at the hospital, and he still felt a little awkward about it, unable to meet Clark's eyes. For days already, he'd agonized over what to say or how to apologize, though nothing he'd scripted in his head seemed to be appropriate, and they mostly ended with Clark saying, "I wish I'd never found a son like you," which wasn't exactly making Conner run for the phone.

"Who's Remy Zero?" Conner asked, watching his mother.

Clark pulled a face. "Don't make me feel old, Conner."

"Sorry," Conner said, and kicked the box closest to his feet. There were pots in it--crappy pots with the bottoms burned out from when Clark attempted to recreate Kent family favorites. "If you're finally going to move in," he said casually, "you could have done without bringing things you know Dad's just going to throw away anyway."

Conner didn't really realize that Clark was moving in until he'd said it out loud himself, as the idea of his small, two-person existence suddenly becoming three had been overwhelming enough when he was in the fourth grade. Now, he felt a resigned sort of acceptance pushing aside the jealous, tangible fear he'd kept to his chest all of these years.

When he'd been young, the thought of having a mom had been all about himself, the possibility that having a mother meant dividing his father's attention had not settled into reality until later. He'd never been wild about the idea of sharing his father, but he'd seen it when he was young and he saw it now and knew that his father was happier with Clark than without, and Conner had done all manner of stupid and ridiculous things in order to please Lex Luthor. So he'd encouraged their relationship, dropped not-so-subtle hints that got him grounded and embarrassed his mother, who still blushed like a little kid.

The mom he'd shouted horrible things at in a hospital room not too long ago, Conner winced.

"The persistence of hope, Conner," Clark said lightly, and after a beat, murmured gently, "You can stop torturing yourself over it--I've said much worse to my parents in my lifetime."

Conner looked up hopefully, and found Clark smiling, if weary, standing in front of him.

"Are you really moving in?" Conner asked, feeling his heart thud.

"Well, I broke the lease on my apartment," Clark muttered.

Conner blinked. "Oh," he said shyly.

"Plus," Clark added ruefully, "I got fired, so I couldn't afford it anymore, anyway."

He handed Conner a box filled with stuff Conner had seen on Clark's desk over the years, ugly paperweights and cheap ballpoint pens, a red, cordless mouse Conner had purchased him for his birthday last year. It was heavy in his arms.

Clark said, "Can you go put that in the guest room?"

Conner shouted, "You what?"

Clark sighed. "It's not a big deal," he promised.

"They fired you from the Daily Planet?" Conner said, aghast. "For what?"
"I'm going to assume for gross violation of the conflict of interest policy," Lex said, and when Conner turned around, Clark's desk in a box still clutched in his arms, he saw his father dressed in black slacks and a loose, long-sleeved gray shirt, leaning against the doorway to his study.

He looked better than he had in days, a little rounder around the edges and less like he was going to sleep forever. Conner knew his father had been sneaking around to work, but had hoped Lex would respect his own limits since Conner couldn't make him do it, and was gratified to see that he had. But for all his new-again softness, Lex's eyes were hard.

"Sorry, I tried to keep it from happening," Lex said, apology edged with a sharp edge, as if he was sorry, but more than that, he was mad.

Clark grinned, wry. "I appreciate the effort."

"What violation?" Conner argued, whipping back and forth between his mother and father. "He's never written anything about you! You do the cops beat! If he was doing business or city council I guess I could--"

"Conner," Clark interrupted. "It's not a big deal, okay?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Conner saw his father walk, puzzled and mildly disgusted to the boxes Clark had dumped all over the floor. Lex poked them with the same cautious curiosity that adventurers had for new and theretofore unknown life forms--given Clark's propensity for letting things sit in the fridge until they became sentient, it wasn't entirely out of the question that his father's reaction was correct.

"You got fired!" Conner shouted, furious. "That's a huge deal! Those bastards! They--they--!"

"We write the news, we don't make the news," Clark said gently, putting a hand on Conner's shoulder. "It's okay--really."

Conner opened his mouth to ask, "Really, really really?" but his father beat him to it and said instead, "In that case, I'll have Mrs. Banner throw out these boxes of accumulated garbage."

Clark looked up, startled, hand still on Conner's shoulder. "Lex, those are my clothes."

"Yes, and every member of the paparazzi and legitimate news alike will thank me for having them burnt," Lex said easily. He looked at Conner and said, "What's in that box you're holding?"

Conner clutched the box close to his chest, because his father's persistent battle against kitsch and mismatched textiles sometimes felt like a personal vendetta. Conner had tried to explain once that for some people, matching really wasn't all that important, at which point his father had just looked tragically saddened and said, "At least you have a school uniform."

"It's stuff for my science project," Conner lied easily.

Lex gave him a narrow-eyed look, but let it pass, turning back to Clark.

"So you're staying?"

"Unless you have any objections," Clark said demurely, but the way somebody who already knew the answer would, because he had already started unpacking his Smallville High School varsity football memorabilia on the coffee table.

Lex smiled, tight and small, and said, "No," before he turned around and disappeared back into the
study, where Conner heard the clacking of Lex's keyboard for a moment or two before his father's voice rang through the house intercom system saying:

"Thanks to camera number forty-eight in the living room, I have successfully identified the box you're holding as Clark's ugly belongings instead of science project materials, please surrender them to the proper authorities and get Clark to Horton's to meet a personal shopper."

"Crap," Conner said, swiveling his head to look for camera forty-eight, because the last time he'd checked, there'd only been forty-three.

Clark just laughed. "It's okay," he said, "I know you tried."

It would be better like this, three instead of two. Conner still felt the bearing weight of fear, but imagined that now, he did not have to live in a constant state of fear for his reckless mind, that he wouldn't blow up the building or tear up his own flesh.

But Conner could feel the building pressure of disaster in the back of his mind and he was too busy and too frightened to invest too much time in fixing it. He spent little time sleeping and no time eating and felt himself start to snap under his own pressure. He'd always needed to be more careful of himself than other people, but the effort was starting to grind down on him, wear him to the bone, and he could feel the uncomfortable scrape against his throat, along his spine.

Having Clark there helped, but having Clark there meant having Clark there constantly, no longer the occasional, comforting presence to which Conner had become accustomed in the last years, and by the time Geoffrey hared off on his own to grieve for his mother, Conner was worn to his last, trembling nerve. He woke up to hear voices in the penthouse talking without him, fell asleep to people who were concerned with other things, and realized with a huge, horrifying sort of weight that the visceral fear of being useless had be gruesomely realized, and no amount of scrubbing the tub would replace all the adult confidence that Clark had brought into the picture, having shouting matches with Lex and stealing his office supplies.

Maybe he'd never really realized it before, but fifteen wasn't only helpless and stupid, it was a child, and he looked down at his own hands to find that they were small, thin, and smooth. He couldn't move mountains, much less his father.

So when on no particular night or morning he saw his mother stroking his father's back soothingly as Lex gagged into an emesis basin, Conner, instead of rushing to the bed and being no help at all, walked to the solarium and blew out every piece of glass in the room, drew up a nor'easter wind and destroyed everything, felt a blinding, agonizing power behind his eyes, and finally, finally let it free.

Several hours later, he woke up to find his hands and knees bandaged, dark red spots seeping through anyway. He'd been flat on his back in his bed, and Mrs. Banner had been sitting at his side. The penthouse was quiet.

"You were on your hands and knees in the glass," he'd hear Mrs. Banner tell him later, tearful and shaking, stroking his forehead with desperate tenderness. "Oh, sweetheart."

"Where's my father? Where's my mom?" Conner croaked. His throat hurt and his head hurt and something his chest hurt and he wanted his parents and needed them immediately.

"Your dad's asleep," Mrs. Banner demurred. "Clark's on the phone."
"With who?" he asked groggily, feeling hollowed out, feeling exhausted. "With who?"

And the only thing Mrs. Banner would say as she smoothed his hair was "Oh, sweetheart, oh, sweetheart," and "I'll miss you so much."
Chapter 2

Smallville Senior High School was built in 1976 and remained a picture of Midwestern wholesomeness, dazzling in its red and gold finery, stylized crows on every available flat surface. The trophy cases were shiny while the back shelves in the library carried nearly an inch of dust. The computers were out of date, the lab equipment was cracked from age and poor maintenance, the school calculators were TI-80s in a world of TI-94s, but the gym facilities were slick and new. There was no art room, and the only reason that the band remained was to march during halftime at football games and play to the spirit club during basketball season.

Conner decided immediately that by burning down the entire school, he'd only be doing Kansas--and the world in general--the kindest sort of favor. But before he could find scrap newspaper and a lighter and indulge in his pyromaniac tendencies, Principal Hathaway was ushering him down a horrifyingly red and yellow hallway toward what Conner hoped was the real school, what he'd seen so far being a hideously cruel joke played on out of town transfers.

"Smallville is a very welcoming town," Hathaway said jovially. "I'm sure you'll be happy here."

In all actuality, Conner felt bitter and deranged and very hostile, with an uncomfortable side of persistent, inflammatory sexual frustration. He forced himself to smile, his very best LexCorp Benefit Slash Charity Concert Or Maybe Some Sort of Auction smile, and ground out, "I'm sure."

"To that end," Hathaway went on as they passed through the catacombs of the gym, possibly oblivious to the considering looks Conner was giving the pool as a viable option for painless suicide, "I'm introducing you to one of our school's most exemplary students." He smiled brightly. "She's the head of the cheerleading squad and the secretary of the philanthropy club."

Conner could not keep the stricken horror from his face.

"Miss Ross will be a wonderful guide for you," Hathaway said blithely.

"I--it's not that big a school," Conner said desperately.

"Don't be ridiculous," Hathaway laughed. "We have the largest sports facilities on this side of Kansas. What'll happen if you're in the mood for racquetball and end up stuck with the football team?"

Conner bit back his knee-jerk desire to say something very offensive about football teams, gay pornography, and bear stereotypes, and what he'd do if he came upon some (lucky) combination of those factors.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," he ad-libbed. "There's really no need to trouble her."

This was all going so much more wrong than he'd anticipated.

When he'd gotten caught cutting himself, exploded at his mother, lost fifteen pounds, started drinking Jolt in lieu of sleep, blown up the solarium, and made Mrs. Banner cry--he hadn't been (too) surprised that he had gotten shipped to Smallville. If what he knew about the Luthor family line was correct, it seemed like the historically-accepted method of dealing with disaffected, prodigal offspring.
And aside from a liberal dose of deep, horrified bitterness, he'd been grateful to find himself tumbling out of Lois' white Chevy Seabring onto his grandparents' dusty driveway, to find Grandma Martha's opened arms turned toward him, clutching him to her warm chest. He'd even been happy to see his grandfather and his awkward, halfway-worshipful, halfway-disapproving affection as he'd been ushered into the farmhouse, given six kinds of pie and cake immediately, and had his things placed into his mother's old bedroom while his grandmother said, "We're so glad you're here, Conner. Don't you worry about a thing. This will be good for you, you'll see."

And since he was not at all interested in accepting his fate, Conner was a big fan of hiding, and embraced the idea of running away with Lois and burying his head in Smallville until the world realigned itself. The doctors would say, "All the tests were wrong. You've got allergies. Sorry about that, Mr. Luthor," Geoffrey would develop a sudden awareness that he was gay and wanted Conner's ass desperately. His parents would provide Conner a highly edited--because somewhere in his head, Conner knew that his dad and mom didn't look all glazed in the mornings because they'd been up all night talking about the tax code, and Conner really just didn't want to know--version of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help them Mrs. Banner.

So Conner had said, "Thanks, Grandma," and eaten the six kinds of pie and cake and gone to bed. He had not anticipated that in a stroke of unparalleled cruelty that those bastards would register him for school. So instead of the comforting, nonjudgmental arms of his grandmother's baking, he was thrown into the fiery pit of Smallville's origin of vapidity. "Maybe I'll die," he muttered comfortingly to himself.

Hathaway slapped him heartily on the back, saying, "Don't be ridiculous--student mortality's at its lowest since 2005," and disappeared around a corner.

Conner stared.

"Come along, Conner, you can get lost down here, and the squash team hates it when they find students wandering around on their courts," he heard called through the hallway.

Conner didn't see any squash courts, but couldn't tell if Principal Hathaway was joking, either.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I motherfucking hate this town."

It was not, altogether, an unwarranted feeling.

Conner imagined that his own father must have hated it, too, when he was much younger and first exiled here; though, his father had met his mother in Smallville and the only person Conner had met so far was Whitney Ross.

"We're really excited to have you here, Conner," she said, in perfectly enunciated English.

"That's great," he said, agonized.

Whitney was very beautiful, and even Conner's bent sense of aesthetics could recognize that. She had lovely, cocoa-colored skin and eyes fringed by dark lashes and a curving mouth. She had dark hair pulled into thousands of tiny, intricate braids and then bound into a ponytail and wore trendy jeans and a casual, sporty shirt. And apparently the combined activity of being in the Philanthropy club, the head of the cheer squad, and a part-timer at the coffeehouse her mother owned did a body good, because if Conner were about female curves, he'd be all about hers.
She waved at the walls, which were covered in gold and red paper-pulp gore.

"I'm sure it's not anything like your school in Metropolis," she said, with the shy, thrilled sort of hush over the word 'Metropolis' that just meant she'd never stepped in piss in the subway the way most people who lived in Metropolis had, "But we have a solid honors and AP program and we have one of the best vocational programs in the state. Plus, we have one of the prettiest campuses around here."

Conner wanted to say something about how they had to or they'd have one of the lowest ranked and ugliest schools in Kansas, but bit his tongue and managed to say instead, "That's really impressive."

"Thanks," she said proudly, blushing prettily. "Student council does what it can, you know?"

Conner didn't, but he nodded. "Yeah, totally."

She smiled 100% of the time. It made him seriously consider looking for a Kryptonite-covered field. They had those in Smallville.

"There're a lot of student organizations, and even if you're feeling a little shy, I'm sure all of them would be thrilled to have you," she confided in Conner, turning the corner into what appeared to be the main hallway of the high school. There was a sudden, horrible clanging from the period bell, and oceans of people streamed out of doors on either side of them and turned into a living sea, moving around Conner and Whitney, giving them a small, if much-appreciated berth.

Two things hit Conner in quick succession:

Secondly, all of them were in casual clothing. He'd been zoned out that morning when his grandmother had dropped him off at the high school, and so even though he was dressed in casual jeans and a black, long-sleeved shirt, he hadn't really processed that nobody would be wearing ties and blazers. He'd always been fascinated by the prospect of being able to wear whatever he wanted to high school, but now realized sadly what a tragic mistake it would have been to indulge in the fantasy, because the moving mass of teenagers around him were all tricked out like carnival prostitutes or horrible catalogue accidents. Whoever had informed the boys of Smallville High school that wearing a "SURF PATROL: AHOLA WAVES, BABES" t-shirt from Abercrombie and Fitch made them instantly cool needed to be dragged out into the street and shot.

Secondly, he had to get out of there.

But Whitney was still talking, as if she were one of those mutant, amphibious creatures with hidden gills and didn't actively need to pause her mouth to inhale. They had those in Smallville.

"Class periods are fifty minutes long, with five minutes in between. There're eight periods a day and you either have fifth or six period lunch." She made a face. "I'd recommend bringing a sack lunch--"

Oh my God, Conner thought, she just said 'sack lunch.'

"--but if you're brave, you can try the cafeteria food, though it's been known to strip paint."

Conner didn't doubt it; just being in the school was stripping the marrow of his soul.

"That's tragic," he said moodily.

Whitney paused, looking at him with a thoughtful expression before it softened into something
uncomfortably similar to pity, which Conner had never gotten at home, rarely got at school (because they were nuns--bitter ones), and found fascinating in a horrifying way. So he said, "Oh, God, what?"

"You seem to have a lot of conflict in you," Whitney observed gently, with the tone of a prophet.

Conner wanted to belt her with one of his shoes, and thought about actually bending down, unlacing a sneaker, and whacking her with it, and if the entire football team would kill him if he did--and then he wondered if it wouldn't be worth it anyway.

He made a face. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, your dad is Lex Luthor--"

"Oh my God," Conner said, "we're not going to have this conversation. Weren't you warned bysomebody that I don't have this conversation?"

Conner had never had that conversation, not unless the person trying to start it had an active death wish. He'd gone to a school so private that everybody had fathers you didn't talk about: judges and high-priced defense lawyers, cosmetic surgeons and captains of industry. They had a code--emphasis on "unspoken"--that nobody asked too many questions and they had all been in the same boat: well-moneyed kids who were impoverished of their parents' time. They had been horrible and spoiled and maladjusted, but they'd all cared for one another in the most important way possible, and they'd known how to sidestep all the dangerous questions, how to talk about Full Metal Alchemist instead of how Conner's father was Lex Luthor, how Geoffrey's father was rumored to be up for a position in the Supreme Court one day, how Randall's dad was in court for illegal logging.

At least she wasn't giving him her condolences, Conner thought darkly.

Whitney smiled at him encouragingly. "Conner, it's okay. You're just a normal kid, right?"

Conner was as normal as possible given his fairly remarkable circumstances, though the ability to kill people with his mind--which was looking to be a much, much more attractive possibility by the moment--put a damper on an absolute evaluation. Still, the all-knowing, overly-interested way Whitney Ross was looking at him made Conner feel more than a little tired, so he said:

"Look, Whitney, I really appreciate you being all--" he made a nebulous hand gesture in her general direction "--really, but all I really need is my schedule and lunch, all right?"

He wondered if he would have said, "and for you to drop dead and leave me alone," if he'd gone to public school, but chalked it up to the urban legends he and Garrison had traded when their entire class had taken their spring seminar on horsemanship, dressed in identically stupid riding pants and not making eye contact with one another.

Whitney looked, for just a moment, defeated, but brightened immediately, beaming and saying, "You're right. You're absolutely right."

Conner breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks," he said genuinely.

She shook her head, hair slapping her cheeks, and smiled wildly. "I was planning on going to the Talon for lunch anyway--come on," she said, grabbing him by the wrist and presumably jerking him toward the parking lot.

"Wait--oh my God," Conner managed, but followed along miserably passive and blinked the
Smallville sunshine out of his eyes when he stepped out of the main school doors into the brilliant afternoon light. It was chilly and there was a breeze and the sky was crisp and perfectly blue, like something out of a fairytale--like everything in Smallville was out of a fairytale spun by the brothers Grimm.

The Talon was cozy and packed with raucous teenagers from Smallville High during lunch; they crowded together at tables and on the sidewalk, spilling out into the parking lot behind the store and eating in their cars, laughing and sitting awkwardly on the steps leading to storage upstairs, chewing on their sandwiches and eating their pastries, drinking their five dollar coffees. Conner knew a lot--unfortunately--about small town economics, and how they were dying, and wondered distant ly how on earth any of the farm kids here afforded to spend ten bucks a day on lunch when their entire town was withering.

Whitney had taken their orders and served them herself, and Conner had to admit that the corn chowder was, actually, very good. Whitney had beamed at the praise in a way that had completely disturbed Conner, who had only grudgingly complimented it.

Though the decorating was in desperate need of help, the Talon did have a comfortable, worn-in feeling that Conner could understand as attractive, though it made him miss the Old Europe cafe with a phantom ache of the newly-bereaved.

"So how do you like the place?" Whitney asked, jittery.

Conner was totally puzzled as to why his approval seemed to mean so much to her, but figured that really, she probably had her own things going on, and he just didn't want to know.

"It's really nice," he said nicely. "Your mom did a good job with it."

Whitney laughed nervously. "It's kind of her life, you know? She managed it all through high school--one of these days she says if I want I can inherit it." Whitney looked around the room, speculative and seemingly deaf to the bubbling sound of dozens of teenagers jammed together on the premises. "I sort of grew up here."

Conner knew that feeling, the strange, affectionate way one had two homes. He'd seen LexCorp come from once upon a time, where it rented six sprawling floors on the top floor of a sleek black building on Millionaire Mile to buying the whole thing, to gutting it and remodeling it. He'd seen people come and go and the carpet change three times, the computers change what felt like twice a year. Conner had watched something grow, and that was an intimate awareness.

The way Whitney looked at the Talon made something on Conner's chest soften for her.

"It's cool that--" he started.

"Whitney! Who's your friend?"

And it was asked in such a bright, breathless voice that Conner whipped around, slightly cross-eyed for a second before his vision cleared into the image of a lovely, fortysomething woman, the crow's feet around her dark eyes giving her age away. Her mouth was almond-shaped and she must have been very pretty when she was young, her long, dark hair swishing to her waist, around her smooth, high cheeks.

"Hey!" Whitney said, nearly as bright as the woman. "Mom! This is Conner Luthor--"
"--he just transferred into our school. Conner, this is my mom, Lana Ross."

Mrs. Ross's eyes were awed and fascinated as she said, "So you're Lex's son," to which Conner took instant offense, which must have showed on his shellshocked face, so Mrs. Ross went on to add, "Oh, I'm sorry, you probably didn't know. Lex was one of my very good friends when he lived in Smallville. Actually, he was my silent partner for the Talon until I bought it off of him a couple of years back."

One day, Conner was going to force his father to write down a list of all the people he knew, just so Conner would stop nearly giving himself heart attacks.

"I--uh, didn't know that," Conner admitted stupidly.

"Call me Lana," Mrs. Ross said soothingly, and in a much gentler tone of voice, she murmured, "I've been following the news--I'm sorry it's been so crazy recently."

"Thanks," he said automatically. Long ago, the publicist at LexCorp had drilled him for over an hour on how to react in case of total disasters. Conner imagined that his father being diagnosed with cancer probably fell into that category and shifted comfortably into sense memories of what to do. "I'll pass along your regards."

Lana smiled supportively. "Good," she said, and she seemed genuinely pleased, patting his hand. "It's great to finally meet you, Conner."

"Nice to meet you, too," he said.

He was starting to remember something his dad had told him once, about his mother and how his mother had spent most of his golden, teenaged years obsessed with some girl named Lana. He was forcing himself not to say anything unforgivably rude here, like, "Hey, did you ever do my mom?" or "I think my dad actually hates you. Sorry."

Thankfully, Whitney tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Hey, Conner, we better get going, or else we'll be late for seventh period."

They got going.

Conner hadn't had to meet new people since kindergarten, and the sudden shocking realization that not only was he going to have to start over, he'd have to do it in Smallville made his chest crush inward, made him gasp for breath, feel a little overwhelmed and lightheaded.

It did not help, he thought sullenly, that he was standing up in front of the class while the middle-aged chemistry teacher rattled off his entire life story.

"Â…Either way, I want us all to make Conner feel very welcome here--he's a year younger than most of you and he's going through some tough times, which I'm sure most of you guys have already heard from the news," the teacher said, infinitely sympathetic.

Conner focused some of the flammable materials toward the back of the room, and saw with great surprise that they shifted in the directions he'd willed them, but not enough to mix with one another, set the school on fire, and end it all in a blaze of blessed melodrama.

"Conner, would you like to say anything to the class?" she asked him.
He stared at her, and felt true hatred for the first time. "Not particularly, Mrs. Funt."

It also did not help that her name rhymed with a base, tasteless word for a female reproductive organ, which empowered Conner to think of filthy insult after rhyming filthy insult.

She smiled charitably. "Your seat's in the back, dear. Lab table twelve."

Conner dashed for it, making no eye contact with anybody else in the class and basically throwing himself onto the lab stool closer to the aisle, and by the time his shaking hands had deposited his backpack--newly purchased from Fordham's store, because he sure as hell wasn't taking his St. Ann's messenger bag into Smallville High--and realized there was somebody on the seat next to him, it was too late, any chance of being cool was totally destroyed.

He peeked up through his overlong bangs to see a bored Greek god staring at him. The teenager was muscled and tall and lean, with bronze skin and dark hair and devastatingly good cheekbones. He looked like Geoffrey, if Geoffrey was buff through manly, sweaty activity instead of scrawny and thin and milky-white from long hours in the art lab. It was all Conner could do not to cry about the unfairness of it all.

"So you're the Luthor kid," the god said, thick fingers toying with a test tube.

"Conner," Conner corrected instantly, wincing and examining the lab procedures Mrs. Funt set down in front of him, complete with another encouraging smile.

The god rolled his eyes, which made Conner's fluttering, teenaged heart skip a beat in fear.

"Sorry, Conner," the god said, emphasizing the roll of the 'n' off of his tongue in a way that made Conner flush.

"It's fine," Conner said, sounding squeaky. "So uh," he started awkwardly, gave up, and picked up the lab procedure. "This is just a simple titration," he said, resorting to academics where no amount of personality could save him. He shoved a beaker at the god with his free hand. "You can condition, and I'll measure."

"Meanwhile, my name is Terry," the Greek god informed Conner, transferring his large brown hands to the beaker and abandoning the test tube, all marked and molested-looking, by the sink.

"Sorry," Conner muttered.

Conner was willing to bet a hundred thousand million dollars that Terry was the kind of guy who called kids like Conner cocksucking faggots and then beat them up behind the school. It was his luck that he'd end up paired with Terry for lab. It seemed to be one of the overarching themes of his life: artificially conceived by deranged grandfather, possess two fathers possessed of equal and increasing psychosis, realize that one father has developed cancer while the other one wears primary colored spandex, get sent to rape-you-in-the-ass-maybe-literally, Kansas, and get paired with the star quarterback of the Neanderthal squad.

His hands fumbled with a beaker. Around them, the other lab groups were well underway, giving them ample time to point and stare at Conner from their goggled vantage points.

The only thing that was keeping him from trying to throw himself out of the window was that he and Terry looked equally stupid in the required safety goggles.

Terry grinned, wide and friendly and surprisingly honest. "Hey, guy, don't get nervous, right? Whitney's a one-woman welcome wagon. I'm like a little baby cat compared to her."
Terry, in no way whatsoever, looked like a little baby cat, though he did bear an uncomfortably delicious resemblance to a lot of attractive brunette men Conner had watched having sex with other attractive blond men in pornography. He was all shining and gold from the sun and had dark brown eyes, an easy grin which made him much more approachable than other potential gay porn stars had been on the streets of Metropolis, and had a slight overbite, which Conner found distractingly adorable. If Conner wasn't scared shitless and feeling a little trapped and claustrophobic, he might have said he was developing a little bit of a stupid crush.

When Conner didn't answer, Terry narrowed his eyes at him for a speculative moment. "They jumped you a grade?"

Conner almost, but not quite, repressed his automatic snort at the horrific abuse of diction, but noted with gratitude that Terry didn't seem to notice. Conner said, "Yeah," thinking about sitting in Principal Hathaway's office and listening to the man mutter about how Conner had already taken everything up through the eleventh grade curriculum, and how they may as well.

"Figures," Terry said dismissively. "Whatever, let's just get this over with."

But apparently, it was also easier said than done, because despite the fact that it really was just a simple titration, Terry had three left feet attached to his wrists and absolutely no grasp of the finer points of basic knowledge in chemistry, such as how to properly measure and what a meniscus was. It was funny, in a tragic way, watching Terry scrunch his huge body up into the small lab table and break everything--twice.

At the end of the period, they'd lost two beakers and three test tubes to the cause, and no matter how many times Conner muttered the word "stopcock" in his head it did not change the fact that Mrs. Funt no longer looked amused and he was going to have to stay after class with his giant, grossly attractive lab partner to redo the whole thing.

He tried bargaining, he tried begging, he nearly threatened her with his mind, but in the end, because deep down inside he was just a kid who'd read too many graphic novels when he was young, he sulked and did as he was told. It was gratifying to see that Terry did the same thing.

It was nearing three o'clock, and they were--again--on step two, when Terry said under his breath, "Wait, is the meniscus…?"

Conner jerked all the lab materials out of Terry's hands. He pointed at the other side of the lab table.

"You stand there," he instructed, furious. Terry stood.

The lab was finished in twenty minutes, and Mrs. Funt released them with a scowl.

Of course, as Conner stood in the doorway of the main building of the school, it started to pour, and Conner watched rain stream down from the sky like ribbons, flooding out the parking lot, misting the trees, making Smallville gothic and gray and gaunt.

He said, "Fuck fuck fuck. Fuck."

The buses had left ages ago, and his remaining options were to call his grandparents, who had informed him they'd be out on errands until dinner, but to call their cell phone if he needed them, or to walk home and really drive in the point that he was a disastrous teenager once and for all.

A car horn honked at him, and Conner jumped three feet in the air before seeing a beautifully restored Cadillac convertible, top up, finished in a glassy, onyx black that made Conner think of
sleek jungle cats and his father's office, unmarred and sheer, with rain beading on the hood. Terry's dark head was visible through the half-opened driver's side window, and he shouted:

"Hey, sorry I was such a shit. Get in the car."

On the way back to the Kent farm, Terry had talked about football. He'd talked about being the starting quarterback; he'd talked about how much he liked practice; he talked about what a bear the coach could be, but how it was all for their own good.

"We're going to the championship this year," he'd assured Conner. "And we're going to plow Wilson," he added, "get 'em back for last year."

Depressingly, Terry had been even more attractive up close.

"We're really going to bend them over and make 'em take it," Terry had promised.

Conner had suddenly blurted, "My school didn't have any sports," and been unable to keep himself from going on to say, "I mean, we had sports--but it was all like, horseback riding and water polo and squash and tennis and stuff."

He had forced his mouth shut and watched stare at him in something akin to wonder. "Um," he'd said, high-pitched, "sorry I'm such a freak."

Terry had just shrugged and changed lanes. "It's cool. I hear it fucks you up when you get jumped a grade." He grinned at Conner, sideways and very handsome. "Plus, you saved my ass in chem today--let's just let being a freak slide."

Conner had nodded, and somehow they'd been all-of-a-sudden at the Kent farm, and he'd waved goodbye to Terry, who'd laughed and waved back through the windshield, and Conner had barreled into the house, soaked to the skin from the short run from Terry's car to the porch.

The whole world was a dark, luminous blue from the windows of the deserted farmhouse, and it cast over Conner a suspended sense of unreality, as if he'd taken a sudden detour from his real life and found himself somewhere familiar and yet completely alien. He knew all the details of the farmhouse with a cursory awareness, but found things that didn't quite fit, as if he was living out a thick, slow dream, and his brain was simply plugging the blanks, dropping random letters and postcards and a flash drive onto the white space on the kitchen counter.

He took a long shower without turning on any of the lights in the bathroom, and stood in the tub naked and wet after he'd turned off the water, watching the rain streak the window and feeling otherworldly, far outside of himself.

And when his grandparents finally returned home around five, it would be to the sight of Conner wrapped in an enormous SMALLVILLE CROWS afghan, asleep on the living room couch, where he'd crept out of wakefulness, watching the ocean drain over the world in choppy, desperate waves.

He'd woken up to the smell of dinner and stumbled into the kitchen to find his grandfather pulling something out of the oven while his grandmother set the table. They both looked up at him and smiled when he said, "Hey."
"Perfect timing," his grandfather said, grinning. "I was just about to go in there and throw a bucket of cold water on you."

Conner raised his eyebrows at his grandmother, who only laughed, and motioned Conner toward her, at which point she set down the napkins and spoons in her hands to cup his cheeks, turn his head left and right, to feel his forehead and stroke his hair with motherly concern that Clark's enormous, brown hands had nearly mastered over time.

"I think that nap did you good," she decided. "You look better."

"I feel a little better," Conner said, mostly because he thought it was what she wanted to hear.

Grandpa Kent set a casserole on the table and tugged off the oven mitts, saying, "Conner, how about you go fill the pitcher and we'll get dinner started?"

The Kent's had the kind of kitchen that Conner had read about in his *Little House on the Prairie* books, with mismatched utensils and glassware that was different sizes, plates with different designs--a set of nice china and everyday tablecloths, made out of gingham, and eyelet curtains. It was comforting and warm and orange-lit in the evening dark, and Conner filled the glass pitcher from the tap, because Grandma and Grandpa Kent would have none of the Brita filters Lex had offered over the years.

He settled the pitcher onto the table with a clink, and Martha said, "Thank you, Conner," just as John began filling cups and Conner reached for the dish of green beans near him.

"How was school today, Conner?" Martha asked, scooping casserole onto her plate and passing the serving spoon to John, who looked up with supportive interest.

The question caught him off guard. While he and his parents did manage to have dinner together at least once a week, neither Lex nor Clark had ever bothered with pleasantries; it was one of many downsides to having two wildly paranoid fathers endowed with X-ray vision and technology beyond the wildest dreams of most men. Conner had long surrendered himself to the reality.

"I met Whitney Ross," he said, because he figured "It sucked cock" would be inappropriate.


"Ah," Martha demurred, but her eyes twinkled. "I see she's made an impression."

Conner scrunched up his face. "Yeah, and it'll hurt for years," he said under his breath.

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Conner hadn't met his grandparents until he'd been nearly eleven, and their first meeting had involved a lot of whispered shouting between his grandfather and his father, and awkward smiles from Clark. His grandmother had adored him on sight and that had not changed in the intervening years, though she'd started offering him coffee with her cookies instead of milk. Martha and John Kent were good people, the kind of good people who raised good children like Clark and who were more than a little bit bemused by Conner's city sensibilities. When Conner made his once-monthly visits, he generally found himself relegated to some sort of farm labor, though he couldn't imagine why but for his father's amusement, because it wasn't like Conner's weak, girly arms could actually bale hay, muck stalls, or effectively catch chickens.

And Conner, for the most part, treated their home as his temporary escape, a nice, long breath
outside of Metropolis, where it sometimes felt he was so busy trying to keep his head above water it'd be more worth it to drown in peace--thus, Smallville, and all the historical sites therein.

He'd first walked over the bridge where his parents had met when he'd been twelve, totally awed by the places where he could feel the ridged welding where new metal had been put into place after the car accident, where he could imagine the scrape of tires on the wood, where he could nearly see his father's Porsche flying through the air, his mother's shocked face. He'd explored his father's castle in greater detail, but the house frightened him, left him feeling as shadowed as it was with all its gothic towers and dark corners, all the memories he had of the last time he'd been there, when he'd been waiting to see if his father would die after Metropolis had burned. He'd walked through fields and forests and been into the town, though he'd never stopped in any of the quaint stores--his weekends in Smallville were devoted to the farm, to sleeping long, lazy days, and to scraping up his elbows and knees in the back forty of Kansas.

His parents' story had started here, he knew now, though all the details were sketchy. He'd asked a hundred thousand times, and still all he ever knew was that they'd met on that bridge when his mother had been a freshman in high school and his father newly-banished.

"He hit you with a car?" Conner had asked, horrified, standing on the bridge.

Clark had just grinned, a little nostalgic and lovesick, but then, when he was twelve, his parents had just started dating (in secret) (again), and as a result Clark always looked a little nostalgic and lovesick. So while he could admit that he probably shouldn't call his mom "mom," he would never ever believe that Clark was anything but an infatuated teenaged girl.

"Yeah," Clark had sighed dreamily. "He was dodging a roll of barbed wire."

It wasn't that Conner hadn't known before that his parent were freaks, it's just that their depth of freakiness never failed to surprise him.

"And--you became friends?" Conner had asked, thought process completely derailed. In his admittedly cursory understanding of the subject of dating, hit and run had never equated years long relationship and eventual offspring, though honestly, neither his father nor mother had been very good at the years-long relationship or were aware that said offspring was being created.

Clark had grinned, huge and stupid, and ruffled Conner's hair, which was as good a sign as any that their conversation had been about to end.

"Well," Clark had said, starting down the bridge, walking away from town and out toward the farm again, "then he sent me a truck."

"I knew it!" Conner had yelled, running after him. "I knew your affection could be bought!"

His second day of school was marginally better than his first. It turned out that Whitney was--thank God--a senior, and as such in none of his classes, as she--unlike Terry--had taken Chemistry her junior year like she was supposed to, instead of being hit in the face by other enormous Neanderthal men as Terry had done.

So Conner spent most of homeroom with his face buried in a book, ignoring the blatant stares of his classmates and exercising a zen and restraint that had taken weeks of intensive seminars with very expensive public relations coaches to master. He had nothing on his father, but Conner could fake it if necessary, and considering the ravenously curious looks from his classmates--all of whom
were at least a year older than he was—it seemed necessary. First period math had been boring, and thankfully the Smallville juniors were covering something Conner had just been learning the week before, so he followed along well and kept his mouth shut when it came time for class participation. He'd read enough young adult novels when he was eight to know what happened to the smart-mouthed kid who got bumped up a grade, and he had no desire to acquire intimate knowledge of the inside of his locker. Second through fifth period—French, English, US History, Art History and French—flew by and he ate his lunch discreetly in the back of the library, tucked among the nonfiction books about dead presidents and the Teapot Dome Scandal.

He was the first person in the lab for seventh and eighth period chemistry class, and when he heard shuffling at the door, he looked up to see that Terry was second.

Conner nearly managed to suppress his immediate full-body flush, but didn't.

"Hi," he squeaked. One of these days, he was going to commit seppuku.

Terry flashed him a grin, easy-going the way he'd been in his Cadillac the day before when the rain had melted the windows of the car and blurred Smallville beyond the glass.

"Hey there, Metropolis," Terry said. A stack of his messy books and papers scattered onto the table and Conner stared at Terry's very messy handwriting and fair to middling grades which peeked out in red pen from the edges of papers. "So you're gonna cover my ass when I fuck up our experiment again today?"

Conner frowned. "Or you could not fuck up the experiment today," he suggested.

"Hah," Terry said, laughing but with a slight, self-deprecating twinge that made Conner blink in surprise. "Quarterback and quarks don't mix."

"Then good thing this is Chemistry and not astrophysics," Conner shot back, but before Terry could say anything else, three very vapid looking girls filed into the room, mid-shrieking conversation about one thing or another that basically amounted up to total crap, and Conner looked away, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Smallville had a weird educational mentality. Though Conner had always known that private school effectively changed the way you viewed education—it was one of the primary reasons his father claimed for sending him to Catholic school all of those years—he'd always assumed the changes were superficial: not paying for your own textbooks, having teachers who were not brides of Christ, no uniforms, nicer facilities. Smallville was newer and nicer than St. Ann's, and though the assumptions about books and brides had been valid, the largest, most shocking part of it all was Conner's growing awareness that people were allowed to be stupid. It was a radical idea.

At St. Ann's, whenever somebody had seemed lacking in one kind of academic excellence or another, one or another nun would tell and then there'd be a full scale attack of tutoring or changes in learning environment until it was utterly impossible to remain in a state of ignorance. Conner had been spared all such treatment thus far, but given his deplorable grades in French (which he'd stopped taking), German (which he'd given up on), Japanese (which escaped his feeble understanding), Chinese (which had just been stupid to try), and most recently his incompetence with Urdu, it looked as if Gemma the foreign studies advisor nun would get him sooner or later.

Anyway, it had looked, because in Smallville, being stupid was just another fact of life, one which, apparently, Terry embraced with a grimace and a wink.

"I've been hit in the head a lot," Terry added, but Conner only stared at the lab table.
Class started, but Conner had nothing to say to Terry or anybody else in class, and for the rest of the two period Chemistry class, the only words they exchanged were, "You're doing that wrong," and, "Then you do it, Metropolis."

In the six days since Conner had been summarily shipped to Smallville, he had exchanged exactly four phone calls with his parents. The first of which had been a perfunctory, "You've reached Smallville safely? Lois didn't drive you into a tree--or a tractor-trailer--or a building?" The second, third, and fourth were simple correspondence calls, less than ten minutes long, to make sure he was neither slashing his wrists nor finding small animals on and around the farm to torture. (Clark had a worrisome preoccupation with worrying over whether or not Conner was going to turn into a serial killer; given Conner's considerably fucked up background, Conner couldn't exactly blame him.)

Conner had spoken to his father for exactly thirty seconds, the second time he'd called.

"Conner?" Lex had said, answering the home line. Conner had been able to imagine his father, barefoot in black slacks and a gray shirt, reading the display on the caller ID.

"Dad," he'd said. "Hi--how are you?"

"I'm well," his father had said placidly.

Conner hadn't been able to believe that once upon a time not so very long ago, he had said things to his father like, "It ate shit" and "I'm going to wipe the floor with you" and "I could streak during Mass." It was like he'd forgotten how to be comfortable with his father, and it carved across his chest a new wound, something which hurt so badly Conner barely remembered what he'd muttered at his mother once the phone had been passed off, barely remembered wandering into his bedroom and curling up in his bed, staring out the window.

In Metropolis, Conner had carried with him a slick cell phone wherever he'd gone. It had been permanently set on vibrate so that he could discreetly pass text messages to Geoffrey during history classes--they'd upgraded from passing notes; deleting his inbox was much easier on his stomach than swallowing paper. Given his father's penchant for elegant stalking and compulsive text messages, Conner had felt as if he'd had his finger on the pulse point of his father's life all the time, and it had become a comforting rhythm, to know the ins and outs of his dad so well that he never worried--always knew.

He still had the cell phone, it just never rang. He still tucked it into his pocket when going to school, even if it was against Smallville High's backwater rules. Something could happen--any minute, something could happen, and it was bad enough that he was three hours by car from the city where it was happening, but not to know about it made a shudder run down his spine. So the awkward shape of it in his back pocket was a comfort, and though there were whispers that he was just showing off how rich he was whenever he pulled it out discreetly between classes, he shrugged them off.

His father had instilled in him at a tender age the awareness that wealth was neither a sin nor a matter of particular shame, only an adjective, a fact of life and society; wealth didn't make him any better than anybody else, Conner knew, it just meant that he could buy more. Actually, it meant that his father could buy more, as Conner spent most of his life surprisingly destitute for the only son of the wealthiest man in the Western world.
Clark had divided his time between looking horrified and amused, saying, "He's just joking, Conner. Of course he's just joking. Your father would never mean that. I mean--have you seriously considered it?" His eyes had been huge and imploring, which had signaled for Conner to sigh and assure his mother that no, he had not actually staked out a strip in Metropolis where he could bend over, clutch the edge of a dumpster, and earn some pocket money.

Next to the black appointment book had been a note in his father's slanting, smooth hand however, and it had said, "Because keeping track of your Johns is hard work."

Mrs. Banner had tittered at Conner's ensuing theatrics.

"We have a communication problem," Conner had shouted, making huge arm motions as Mrs. Banner had basted a turkey, sharing a fond, knowing look with Clark, who'd been lounging in the kitchen. "That's what our dysfunction is--we have communication problems. I say that I would like to borrow twenty dollars so that I can go to this thing--"

"A foam party is not a thing, Conner," Clark had interrupted. "Besides, you don't like strobe lights and it'd be a shame if your father had to kill everybody in the club if somebody tried to give you drugs."

"--and what does he do? He overreacts!" Conner had finished angrily.

"Yes, and clearly, it's genetic," Mrs. Banner had said pleasantly before hustling them all out of the kitchen, whereupon Clark had awkwardly tried to talk to Conner about premature sexuality.

It was then and it was still their greatest strength and greatest failing, for as much as Conner loved his father, with a reasonless faith and ferocity, he loved a father who hid himself, buried it beneath a smooth, comfortable exterior with which Conner had grown up. But Conner was no longer the four-year-old child who woke up screaming in terror, grasping at his father's chest, body shaking out the last shattered memories of dragons that spiderwebbed his sleep. Nor was he the curious, fearless boy who had ignored all the obvious dangers of the city to find his mother, who had broken up his well-ordered life for a newer, less efficient version, one desperately wanted.

There was a part of him, a very large part, which wanted nothing to do with what was happening in Metropolis, which was happy to be gone and glad to be in Smallville, where under the November sunshine it felt like nothing could touch him. It was separate from reality, weirdly fairytale and episodic, life like an hour-long television series, and he finally understood what his father had meant when he'd said that Smallville had seemed like a series of scattered memories in between head injuries. (Conner had never quite understood the head injuries, nor why his mother had looked so shamefaced about it, but knowing what he knew about what his parents had hidden in the bottom drawer of his father's nightstand, Conner figured that this, like the studded collar and the ball gag, was something he just didn't want to know about.)

But that was all very elementary of him, very safe and irresponsible, the opposite of what he'd tried to become, and it frustrated him, made something boil underneath his skin, made him panic. He'd wanted to become somebody his father could lean on, not to be kept safe from all of it like a child, and in his heart he knew that knew he couldn't handle it, but it felt unfair that they wouldn't even let him try. He'd never felt replaced by his mother before--he'd always loved Clark so well--but he felt shut out, uninvited, and it made something shriek, fever-pitch in his chest.

Conner was now, he realized uncomfortably, becoming a man, with so many things changing around him that his body was the least of his worries, the last of his cares. At four days shy of sixteen, he knew how to give shots, how to care for a chemotherapy patient, where to cut himself if he didn't want to be caught for it, how to be sent away, how to be part of the problem instead of
part of the answer, and most of all, above all, consuming all, Conner knew how to hide his broken heart.

On the third day of school, Conner got caught taking his lunch into the library and was summarily banished to the cafeteria, where he was miserable and tried to sit by himself in a corner until Whitney sussed him out, with a hopeful glint in her eyes.

"Conner!" she shouted, waving and jogging over to the empty seat across from him.

He forced a smile to his face and wiggled a few demoralized fingers in response. "Hi."

She beamed at him, and dropped her textbooks on the table, where the noise of their landing made Conner look at her fingernails—which had been painted black sometime since the last time he’d seen her in her sporty clothes and smiling expression. He glanced back up at her in blank surprise but she looked otherwise unchanged, so Conner just pasted an artificial expression on his face as she said:

"My God, you're a hard guy to track, you know," she said, and plopped down in the seat, tugging a brown bag lunch out of her backpack.

"I like being mysterious," he said, picking at his sandwich and wondering if Geoffrey and Eve were making out in the back stacks of the St. Ann's library. He crushed half of the bread in his fingers and added, "You should probably be sitting with your cheer squad friends, you know."

From his vantage point opposite Whitney, he could see them, small in the distance against the soft curve of Whitney's cheek, scowling at him in a way that made Conner desperately miss the comfortable, familiar arms of parochial school.

Whitney made a face. "Please, Conner, they talk about makeup and movies all the time--me? I want something bigger."

If this was going to be followed by a proposition like, "I want you to take me there, Conner" and "Don't worry about being small--I like 'em young," Conner was already formulating an elaborate plan to blind her with his Coke and throw himself out of the nearest window and hitchhike to Edge City, where he'd hustle in a pool hall and never speak of this moment again.

"I want to get out of this town," she said, and there was something more sober in her voice.

Conner blinked at her, because she seemed sad, and it disarmed him, the way it had disarmed him when Eve Anthony had tackled him into the study room in the St. Ann's library, red-eyed, saying, "Does he like me? Just tell me--he just, he just keeps breaking my heart." It had shaken him enough then that he'd walked all the way to Geoffrey's house on that Sunday and told him, "Just ask her--she'll say yes," and then walked all the way back home. He'd whined about it, later, to Mrs. Banner, who had smiled at him sadly and kissed his temple, said he had his mother's soft heart beating in his father's iron chest.

Here, it shook him enough to make him say, "There're buses, I hear."

And Whitney laughed, all new again, and Conner breathed a sigh of relief when she said, "Yeah, so I hear, Conner." She grinned. "So I hear you got stuck with Terminal Terrence in Chem."

Conner winced, and popped open his Coke. "Terminal?"
Whitney unpacked her lunch, which turned out to be tuna salad and cucumber slices and a fruit roll-up, a touch which greatly endeared her to Conner. She smirked, saying, "Terrence is--don't get me wrong--a great football player and he's not even as stupid as he likes to tell himself he is. But the guy's a moron, I mean, I could give you the laundry list of stupid shit he's managed to do, and telling you about the time he got drunk and bricked the Sheriff's car would only get you about a quarter of the way through the list."

Conner stared in silent fascination.

Whitney grinned, satisfied. "Yeah, so you see my point."

"He bricked the Sheriff's car," Conner said uncertainly.

Laughing, she said, "Yeah, totally smashed the windshield to bits--oh man, he got in so much trouble over it, Coach Garrety nearly bashed him over the head with the tackle dummy when he heard." Her eyes were sparkling. "Bet you can't top that one."

Conner looked thoughtful. "Well," he admitted, "there was that time I set my school on fire."

He took a sip of Coke calmly, watching Whitney's jaw fall open with not a little satisfaction.

And when Conner found that he and Terry the first people in the Chemistry room again at the beginning of seventh period, he opted not for silent hostility this time so much as an awkward, "So Whitney tells me you bricked the Sheriff's car."

To which Terry replied with a huff and a, "Jesus, that story gets around, stupid bitch Whitney."

Conner decided that Terry and Whitney were probably not dating. "Sorry, was it a secret?"

"Hah," Terry laughed, genuinely amused now, turning shining eyes set attractively on his devastatingly handsome face to Conner, who clasped his knees with his hands to keep from doing something unforgivable and stupid. "As if it could be, they had me doing public service on the main drag for like, a year for that one."

Conner laughed, because the image of Terry in an orange vest staking trash was just that good.

And Terry, apparently endowed with a far better sense of humor than certain, unnamed artistically-inclined sons of Kansas Superior Court judges, laughed, too, saying, "Oh, man, it was awful. Every time Sheriff Hutchin's walked by me he would just give me this totally scathing expression, like he was waiting for me to go batshit on one of the meter maids or something."

"My dad did that," Conner blurted out suddenly, and strangely didn't feel mortified, because Terry perked up, eyebrows raising, saying:

"Yeah? Seriously? Lex Luthor went--"

"--Batshit on a meter maid, yeah," Conner said, feeling weirdly shy, "he apparently bashed in the little cart with some golf clubs he had in the back seat. I don't know--he doesn't even play golf."

Terry laughed, slapping the table. "That's awesome, Metropolis."

"Yeah and--" Conner started, but cut himself off, because a blonde girl with a vicious look on her face came into the room and flashed Conner an expression that seemed to cut off all his circulation. She regarded his silence with a satisfied expression before settling in her seat toward the back of the room, and when Conner glanced to his side to see Terry's frowning expression, he
almost managed to say something, but didn't.

"Don't let them get to you," Terry said, later that afternoon, hustling Conner away from the line of yellow buses waiting, wreathed around the parking lot and toward his glorious car.

"They're not--you don't have to drive me," Conner pleaded, feeling the stares of everybody else in the parking lot, ranging from mild curiosity to mild disgust to blatant hostility. While he was grateful that of the two people at Smallville High School who were speaking to him, at least one wasn't Whitney, but he wasn't sure how he was going to handle being the pseudo-buddy of the star of the football team.

Terry just shoved Conner across the driver's side seat, shutting the door and reaching over to take down the top, and as the cloth folded away, the afternoon sunshine burned down on Conner and he felt the wind brush the hair at his temples, a teasing suggestion of flying down deserted back roads. He closed his eyes.

"Hah," Terry said, triumphant, the car bouncing with his weight as he threw himself into the driver's seat. "I knew you'd like it--we're not even moving and you're like, having a moment in my damn front seat."

Conner scowled, but before he could come up with a witty response, Terry had shifted into reverse and then suddenly they were flying out of the parking lot, out of the town proper, and into the golden and green rolling fields, where all the wheat was waving like an ocean and frothing like the sea, stroked by the wind. It whipped through Conner's hair and made his eyes water and he reached his hand out, out of the window of the car and felt the air shove at his fingers with its soft, pliant skin, moving his palms back and forward as Terry took turns and sped up and slowed down and drove the long way around to the Kent farm, grinning and different than anybody Conner had ever met.

Conner felt, for the first time in a long time, totally free.

It turned out that Terry was nice to Conner because Conner reminded Terry of his brother.

His retarded brother.

"Your brother?" Conner asked as Terry's car had skated around the perimeter of a deep forest toward the back of the former Ross family's property, close enough that Conner felt the dappling of shade and the temperature change.

"Yeah, he's retarded," Terry said.

"That's too bad," Conner said, wondering what it'd be like to have a sibling to call retarded.

Mostly, he was leaning back into the seat, exhaling long and easy, feeling the wind blow into his lungs, feeling Smallville melt him out of his skin. Driving like this was almost like flying, and riding along felt like floating, with no responsibility at all, just to close his eyes and feel it streaming through him like a frictionless river.

"Naw--he was born like that, can't help it, it's not a severe form of Autism, anyway," Terry said.

Conner choked.
By the time they'd reached the Kent farm nearly twenty minutes later, Conner had decided that to be insulted was probably pointless, and so settled and feigned a sulk just to see whether or not what Whitney said about Terry actually being a hopeless softy was true. It was, and somehow Conner had ended up telling the poor bastard to go into the farmhouse and eat a damn muffin before he sprained something trying to apologize.

"I didn't mean it like that, man," Terry whined, thumping into the kitchen. "You're the smartest little bastard in our class--and you're like, what, two years younger than me?"

Conner rolled his eyes. Over time and extended exposure, though Terry became no less crushingly sexy or obliviously cute or ridiculously athletic, he was becoming more real, prone to dropping lab equipment and mixing up "your" and "you're" when he was writing fast and really determined to make sure Conner never rode the bus again, for reasons Conner wasn't clear on himself. Whitney, who still persisted on eating lunch with Conner every day--and who was, gradually, wearing more and more black, much to Conner's alarm--said that Terry had been telling Conner's Metropolis stories at practice the other day, and that he'd said that Conner was a good kid, funny as hell.

Conner had barely contained his pleased blush. Whitney had rolled her eyes, "Oh for God's sake. Keep that up and you'll immolate when he asks you to the Snow Ball." Conner, because he was still fifteen--at least for a few days--had felt justified in throwing at balled-up napkin at Whitney's head.

By accident, he'd made two friends without trying, and he was all too relieved for them, even if one of them was Whitney, who seemed to be looking for something from Conner that he didn't exactly know how to give, stardom or a roadmap or permission to change--nothing she really needed and nothing Conner had ever had anyway.

"I'm only going to be one year younger than you in like, three days," Conner said, and handed Terry the muffin tin, motioning that he should help himself. "Anyway," he said nervously, "I don't know why you care--I mean, I'm loser transfer scum."

It was amazing what being shut out of his father's life had done to his self-esteem.

Terry was ravaging a blueberry muffin, but mumbled, "Okay, I'm not going to pet your damn ego here, Metropolis, but you're pretty cool, and you piss off Melanie, which can't be bad."

Melanie was apparently the blonde vampire in their seventh period Chemistry class and Terry's embittered ex-girlfriend who spent the time she wasn't practicing for cheerleading regionals trying to launch a mutiny against Whitney and writing Terry tortured email about how he'd ruined her for life.

"Everybody pisses off Melanie," Conner muttered.

"She's got a complex, man," Terry said vehemently, but got no further before Jonathan Kent stomped into the kitchen, surprised and happy to see Terry there, too. They exchanged manly backslaps--the kind Conner had instructed Terry never to bestow him because God damn it, he bruised--and then shot the shit about local agribusiness, Terry's retarded younger brother--God, had everybody known?--and the football team's prospects for winning the championship that year, which both his grandfather and Terry pronounced as "Damn good."

Terry begged out of dinner, but punched Conner in the shoulder before he left.

"Hey, Metropolis," he said, "remember to do our lab report."

"Get out of my house," Conner instructed, but he was grinning.
"I think it's great that you're friends," his grandmother said later, passing the mashed potatoes. "Terry's a wonderful boy and taking care of his brother's taught him a lot about being good and accepting other people for who they are."

Conner snorted. It figured. He finally got a crush and it turned out it came part and parcel with a learning disability and a weirdly incestuous overtone. It wasn't anything to write home about, which was how he justified it to himself when Geoffrey IMed him asking if he'd made any new friends later that evening and Conner said "No."

On Conner's sixteenth birthday, his grandparents made an elaborate chocolate cake, a huge dinner, and rented exactly four stupid movies, which they all watched together. Geoffrey called to send his best wishes, to say that there was a gift in the mail and that it'd be there by the end of the week. Clark and Mrs. Banner speakerphoned to sing "Happy Birthday to you" off-key, though there was a strain in their voices that had nothing to do with the fact that neither of them should ever, ever sing.

Earlier that day, at lunch, Terry and Whitney had frogmarched him to Terry's car, effectively kidnapping him and dragging him out to Tony's, a pizza joint thirty minutes out of the town limits but where they made a pie so divine that Conner was too busy moaning around the cheese to complain about being forced to skip seventh and eighth period.

"Like it?" Terry had asked, smirking. Whitney had been playing with her new wristband. Conner was going to seriously have to have a conversation with her about the dangers of being emo, but at the moment he'd been otherwise distracted.

"This is the best thing I'll ever put in my mouth," he moaned, and ate some more.

Whitney had gotten him a copy of Football for Dummies and Terry had brought him a Smallville Crows shirt, and Conner was informed he'd be attending the next home game. It was apparently near sacrilege that Terry drove him home almost every other day, that Conner ate lunch with Whitney all the time, and had never deigned to see them in their natural habitat, so his begging had been useless.

"I don't even know the rules," he'd whined.

Whitney had tapped the book. "And that's what this is for."

"Shirt's so you don't get assraped in the stands," Terry had said around a wicked grin.

They'd returned him stuffed and smelling like Italian food into the bemused care of his grandmother, who clearly knew that he'd been Shanghaied from school and thus had not bothered to attend his last two periods, but was neither angry nor surprised.

"That was the first time I've ever skipped class," Conner had said.

"Well, Tony's is worth it," Martha had said, and handed him a stack of letters.

Also, Conner received a card in the mail.

It was dark purple, with no designs on the front or back cover. On the inside, which was pure white and matte, was a brief note in his father's handwriting.
"Happy birthday, Conner. Lex."

There was a P.S.:

"Your mother is irrationally frightened of needles. I'm using this power for evil, not good."

Followed by a P.P.S. in smaller, shakier letters:

"You were, and are, and will remain to be, a miracle."

Conner tucked it under his pillow and slept like that, a stupid, hopeful smile on his face.

And because he was at heart his father's son, he believed that it would all end well. He cradled the flickering thought somewhere deep in the hollow of his chest, where over time he had kept his many precious things, and laid it next to Geoffrey's smile, Mrs. Banner's hands, his father's eyes, and his mother's flight, free and weightless and endless, sailing over land and sea and the world, spread like a silk sheet beneath Conner's memories.

Over the course of days, which seemed to slip out of his grasp with surprising fluidity, Conner stopped obsessing over the newspapers, scanning for every piece of news about his father, which turned out to be a bad idea because one random Wednesday he stepped into the science hall to go to the bathroom and got body checked into a wall.

"Hey, it's fagboy."

In medias panic, Conner had three default settings: hostile, useless, and polite. Given that guy who had him pinned to the wall was twelve feet tall and composed of seven hundred pounds of titanium and looked like he could crack walnuts with his buttocks, Conner opted for polite.

"Excuse me?" he said, wide-eyed.

He tried to remember if he'd done anything obviously gay since he'd arrived in Smallville, aside from nearly coming all over himself when he'd first met Terry. And then again in Terry's car. Still, he was certain that there'd been enough stuttering and shyness and logical circumstances that it'd appeared as if he was just nervous and not desperate to gain carnal knowledge of his lab partner. He hadn't dressed in mauve or fluttered his hand or called anybody "sweetheart."

The goon in front of him sneered, and Conner watched in horrified fascination as light glinted off of two gold-capped teeth.

"I saw the news last night, you little cocksucker--just like yer daddies, right?"

That explained it. He'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop since he'd come to Smallville; it alternately surprised him that it'd taken so long for people to make the Conner Luthor and Grandpa and Grandma Kent connection and filled him with dread that the moment had finally come.

Something like this had happened before, years ago, when the first rippling rumors of a reconciliation between Lex Luthor and his longtime boyfriend had emerged on the Metropolis gossip pages, but there was nothing Lex could do to shield his son from reality, and Conner loved his parents too much to be ashamed of them. He could still be afraid of the consequences, however, but that was his own burden to bear, and he'd never told his parents about the cold stares he'd gotten at school, the whispering that had sometimes waylaid nuns, uncertain of how to handle
the child of an abominable relationship. But the weight of time was very nearly like acceptance, Conner had realized with grateful awe, and so he hadn't felt stinging glances in years.

He shifted back to his first line of defense.

"I don't see how my parents have anything to do with you," he snapped, narrowing his eyes.

The gorilla leaned in, breathing hot on Conner's defiant expression.

"Little shit's got spunk," the bastard commented, chuckling.

Conner had, since he was in the fourth grade and the shortest kid in the class, grown like a weed and was now a not-unacceptable five foot seven inches. He was still scrawny but Mercy, Hope, and Mrs. Banner had taught him the Singapore slam, and the traumatizing memory of it was burned deeply into Conner's mind, enough so that Conner could kill this genetic throwback if necessary.

"Bet you grew up sucking cock, huh? All fags are the same."

And that's when it happened; Conner vaguely remembered saying "oh, shit!" and then the same damned temper that had blown up the solarium and levitated an armored car and that could barely shift a mug when required to play nicely threw the offending teenager across the hall like a rag doll. Conner watched in dull detachment as the boy hit the ground dazed and stared at Conner in renewed fear, noting with total incomprehension that Conner's hands hadn't so much as shifted from where they were pressed palms-flat against the wall.

"What the fuck did you just do?" the gorilla demanded.

Conner batted his lashes, feeling a little lightheaded and crazy--and above all, powerful, like he could rule and enslave the whole world. It was awesome. He wondered if his father felt like this all the time, and decided that if Lex did, that Conner's future plans in journalism were overrated and perhaps an MBA really was the way to go.

"Nothing, man, remember--pansy cocksucker here," he said innocently.

The gorilla rushed to his feet and started toward Conner again, shouting, "The fuck?" and Conner narrowed his eyes and felt, like a spray of rain focused to one central point, aligning rays in his head just as he murmured:

"Now."

Later, after the gorilla, who was apparently a benched linebacker for the team, was summarily reamed by the assistant principal, Mrs. Funt, and Terry, who was--and Conner didn't know how he'd managed to miss this one--the captain of the football team, he was allowed to visit the nurse to have his bleeding hand bandaged. The janitor came to sweep up the remaining detritus of 432's classroom door, and Terry watched Conner with a strange sort of curiosity.

"So he just threw himself through the door of our chem. room," Terry said, deadpan.

"I think he saw the error of his ways," Conner said snippily.

"What, in bullying people?" Terry said, disbelieving. "Walden bullies everybody. He probably bullies his mom. Give--Metropolis, what'd you do?"

"I didn't even move," Conner said honestly, but did not manage to keep the thousand-watt smile off
of his face long enough to make Terry buy it.

Something--through no effort of his own--had finally clicked, and upon reaching home, he jumped out of the yellow school bus and bolted for the barn, where he proceeded to try flinging around bales of hay and then *actually* flung around bales of hay for hours, until he had given himself a roaring migraine and a renewed sense of accomplishment. What he had lacked in accuracy he'd made up for (sort of) with enthusiasm and power, and he felt jittery, flushed, shot through with new discovery. He tumbled back into the kitchen red-faced and thrilled, terrifying his grandparents by almost but not exactly managing to levitate the roast chicken they were having for dinner onto the table.

Later, over pizza delivered by Tony himself (in a tractor), Conner apologized profusely for having broken almost all the glassware and plates in the house, and for wrecking dinner, but his grandmother and grandfather, who had far too much experience dealing with freak teenagers, weren't even fazed.

His grandfather said, "Work on that a few more weeks and we'll see if you can help me clean out the shed--that place is a wreck and my back's going."

"He's your grandson, not a convenience service," Martha said disapprovingly, and topped off Conner's Coke. "How's your head, sweetheart?" she asked him gently.

Conner rubbed his temple, chagrined. "I think I overdid it," he admitted.

His grandfather smirked. "Make Clark tell you about when he figured out he could shoot fire out of his eyes." There was an amused light in Jonathan's eyes that meant Conner *definitely* wanted to ask about that one as soon as possible.

"I don't even know what happened, you know?" Conner said thoughtfully. "I used to not even be able to move like, a cup. But suddenly I get pissed and calm and woosh." He threw out his arms, smacking his left hand into the couch leg, and so he pulled them back in, rubbing his tender hand and embarrassed.

His grandparents graciously pretended not to have seen it.

"Anyway," Martha segued, "every new power is a new responsibility. Now that you know how to use it--"

"Sort of know how to use it," Conner corrected.

"--right, sort of, then you'll just have to be that much more careful at school," she finished smiling. "Though I get the impression that you're less of a trouble-magnet than Clark."

His first years visiting his grandparents had been filled with endless stories about escapades during his mother's youth, how he'd managed to do one or another stupid, illogical, or breathtakingly brave thing over and over again, though his grandmother and grandfather had looked uncomfortable and demurred when Conner had drilled them for details about his father in Smallville. It was a subject it seemed nobody liked to talk about, despite it being common knowledge. Everybody who was anybody in Smallville knew about Clark Kent and Lex Luthor, leaving Conner as the odd duck out, more than mildly disgruntled that he was the only one not in on the least secret secret ever, a gross insult made that much more insulting by the fact that he was their spawn.

"Conner's too smart for any of that," Jonathan said confidently.
His grandfather, though he'd harbored initial fits of rage and alcoholic tendencies, had over the years come round to see that just because half of Conner's genetic material came from Lex Luthor, who in many and various ways was still Jonathan's sworn enemy in life, half of Conner was also Clark--and that Conner was smarter than either of his parents. As a natural result, Jonathan Kent had attempted to take Conner under his wing, show him around the farm, teach him how to farm, and give him all the agricultural basics. To date, Conner had managed to scare one horse, kill seven plants, chase what felt like thousands of chickens, and lose a hog, but his grandfather seemed to appreciate his effort.

Jonathan grinned and patted Conner's shoulder. "Unlike your father, I'm sure you'll stay away from trouble."

Conner smiled weakly at that, mostly because he hated lying to his grandparents but there was no way in hell he was going to explain about the burning down the school, petty theft, accidental solicitation of a she-male hooker, or any of the other colorful things that he'd managed to attract over the years.

"Something like that," he compromised, and ate another slice of pizza.

The problem, like it had been with his mother and father, hadn't been staying away from trouble so much as it coming to him, and after the debacle with Harry Walden and the amazing collapsible door, there were more whispers and curious eyes than ever. Conner had taken to dashing to class thirty seconds before the late bell rang, bursting into his classrooms gasping for oxygen and catching everybody's attention instead of making his way through crowded hallways and susceptible to jeers and inappropriate questions, about two thirds of which now were regarding his parents and their love life, which was scary enough when he thought about it in his head, much less heard it needled out loud.

And Terry, roped again into the gruesome daily torture ritual that was football practice, could only offer Conner an apologetic smile come the eighth period bell and say, "Hey, if you'd be willing to hang out an hour or two, I could still give you a lift." He winked and add, "Added perk: you get to watch the cheer squad practice."

Clearly, Terry was either more oblivious than Conner had imagined or as terminal as Whitney claimed. If after a month and a half of Conner touching him too much and laughing too loudly at his jokes and blushing when Terry said nice things about him the bastard hadn't noticed that Conner didn't exactly do the girl thing then maybe Terry's brother wasn't the only retarded child in that family.

"I'll be fine," Conner said, and steeled himself for the bus.

Terry punched him on the shoulder with an expression of manly pride. "Onward, brave knight," he said with a grin, and left, waving at where Conner scowled at him from their lab table.

On the bus, Conner sat in the seat directly behind the driver and read increasingly incomprehensible titles in order to distract himself from all the talk about himself by trying to parse the sentences correctly in his head. Current selection was The Scarlet Letter, he'd been trying to decode the platform scene for nearly three days, which made it a notable success among Conner's choices thus far, which had included A Dream of Red Mansions (which he'd abandoned once he'd realized that "dance of the clouds and the rain" would be as explicit as the many sexual encounters would get) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being (which had been detached and weirdly disturbing).
On the one hand, if this kept up, he was going to be incredibly well-read, on the other, it was wildly annoying. His only real comfort was the pale green mini iPod that had been mailed to the Kent residence, courtesy of one Geoffrey Chaucer Archer, which was preloaded with a totally obscene amount of music, all of which Conner adored. There'd been no note, but when the when the randomized playlist had skipped to a techno remix of Duran Duran's "Save a Prayer" Conner knew that the only person in the world sick and twisted enough to do it was Geoffrey, and tapped his foot to it while writing a history paper.

So all of his new memories of Smallville, of her straight-line streets and curving properties, of her farms and farmers, paused on the side of the road on their John Deere's, waiting for the schoolbus to pass, were set to music. The main drag to "Ooh La La," the school parking lot to Jimmy Eat World and "The Middle," the rare, delicious rides home from Terry to the Yeah Yeah Yeah's, wind rolling off his skin like their lyrics, ghostly and high.

Somewhere in his head he had to know that he looked like the emo kid, always clutching a weird book and listening to his music, making zero effort to fit in and keeping his head down. The fact that he'd found his rainbow wristband and started wearing it around in case he needed a scrunchy didn't exactly help--nor did the fact that it was rainbow.

Then again, Conner was clearly losing the emo contest to Whitney by a mile. Since they'd first met, she'd changed her hair (to thick, but not unattractive dreadlocks), kept painting her nails black, started opting for a totally black and denim wardrobe, and listening to the White Stripes. Conner didn't know what was happening, but it was vaguely terrifying watching her go over cheer routines at lunch and retouching the dark eyeliner she'd started wearing with a compact with a skull and crossbones on them. Where the hell did you even buy that shit in Smallville, anyway? Fordham's carried Cover Girl, and on a clear day when you could see forever, the occasional tube of Maybelline mascara.

"Why are you dressed like that?" Conner finally asked one day, when she had arrived wearing a t-shirt which had clearly been purchased at a Hot Topic and he could bear it no longer.

She blinked at him in surprise. "What?"

He motioned at her outfit, which now included a wallet chain. "That," he said, choked.

"Oh," she said, surprised, as if she'd only just noticed now that the black sheep of the Gap family had tarted her out like she was their prize pony. "I wanted to make a change, you know? This seemed like the easiest first step."

Conner was pained. "Whitney--really, you're too good for that. You need help. Professional help." Somewhere in his wallet there was a card for an image consultant, he just knew he had one, and it had very probably come from his father along with a very sincere plea that Conner visit one.

She rolled her eyes at him, saying, "You're such a drama queen, Conner," and turning back to the latest stack of paperwork from the Philanthropy club for the barest moment before her head shot back up, and she said, "Oh, yeah! I got the new White Stripes CD, want me to copy it for you?"

Conner muttered, "Gag me with a spoon."

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At two and a half months in Smallville, when Conner had almost fooled himself into thinking that he was used to the entire state of affairs, Clark came to visit and wrecked the entire thing.

Clark came with charts and graphs he leaned against the wall, shooting them nervous looks every
few moments, annoyed. He appeared with pamphlets about Lex's most recent treatment and the latest news clippings from the Planet and a note from Lois with a lipstick kiss on the fold. He had video conferencing equipment and he had a grim expression on his face. He said:

"Conner, I'm really sorry."

Conner gasped, turned white, and felt his heart stop. "Is Dad--?"

Clark shook his head. He opened the laptop with an even more severe and tragic expression on his face. He said, "Conner, I'm so, so sorry."

Conner's eyes widened. "No--there's no way--!"

As the black faded from the screen, a video conferencing prompt appeared. His father's face was in the window, and though it looked paler than Conner had remembered and perhaps a little thinner, he seemed no worse for wear, and it gave Conner heart.

"I have to leave the room now," Clark said faintly, and disappeared toward the kitchen, which sent Conner reeling in panic before he heard his father's voice, tinny and strange from the speakers on the laptop, saying:

"So you're sixteen now, and it's time we had The Talk."

Conner barely had enough time to scream in horrified understanding before Lex indicated that Conner should look at chart A, which was, he realized with blank horror, a cross-section of a uterus.

"Conner, please," Lex snapped, a little of his old color back in his cheeks. "If you're going to overreact so badly right now I don't know how you're going to get through anal sex and safe bondage."

Conner kept screaming.

"Traitor," Conner gasped, nearly three hours later. "Betrayer."

"I told you I was sorry," Clark said faintly, looking flushed and mildly nauseated. "And don't think I got off easy. I got the, 'So what if he has follow-up questions that I haven't prepared an answer for in the Sex Packet' talk before I came here."

Conner covered his face with his hands. "Oh, God, oh--God."

Clark patted him on the shoulder comfortingly. "If it makes you feel any better, I already told your grandma and grandpa that they're not allowed to make fun of you for it for at least an hour."

Jonathan and Martha, to their credit, did not make fun of Conner at all, though they did spend an inordinate amount of time choking on their dinners and needing to leave the room. The only thing that made the situation bearable at all was that they seemed to be not-laughing at Clark just as much as they were not-laughing at Conner, and it was gratifying to see his mother's crimson face when Grandpa Jon had said, "Not so funny when it's your turn is it?"

Toward the end of the evening, when the late-autumn sky darkened to blues and submitting purples, Clark found Conner on the back porch, sitting on the creaking swing with one toe on the paint-split wood, watching the universe shift perspective as he moved, seeing the lights distant from the next farmhouse over. Conner felt his mother sit down next to him, and closed his eyes,
breathed in long and deep, smelling the cold on the edges of the air, like Kansas was on the edge, about to take a plunge into a long and drowsy winter.

"Are you still angry with us?" Clark asked, soft and sudden and a little frightened.

Conner felt the rough seam of Clark's jeans slide against the side of his own pants, the awkward slump of his mother's shoulders. There was tension and tightness and uncertainty here, in the air between them that made Conner think that this conversation would be too hard to have. He'd been prepared from the moment he'd seen Clark to ignore everything, skim the simple, smooth surface of it and think about it later.

"How'm I supposed to stop being angry," Conner said, monotone. "You kicked me out. You guys thought I couldn't handle it."

Clark was silent for a long time.

"Your dad moved out of our apartment when LexCorp failed to IPO the first time," Clark said conversationally. He leaned back and stared up, out over the treeline and into the darkening sky. Conner stared at Clark and felt his heart pound.

"Millions had been invested in the work and Lex had been--" Clark made a vague but emphatic hand motion "--just killing himself doing it. But his father intervened at the last minute and the whole effort went to waste."

Conner blinked in surprise; it was the first time he'd ever heard Clark talk about his grandfather. Like Conner's father, Clark didn't call Lionel Conner's grandfather, either, like his parents were trying to maintain a certain distance between Conner and his roots.

Clark laughed, and the crow's feet developing around his eyes deepened in a friendly, timeworn way, and they seemed to tell Conner that Clark had laughed a lot this lifetime.

"Oh, man," Clark said, like he was remembering all of this as he explained it. "Oh man, it was bad. Your dad was so ripped up over it, and I was just a stupid college kid--what was I supposed to do to make him feel better, right? But it was killing me to watch him be miserable like that and I guess it killed him to let me see it."

Clark paused, and said, more softly this time, "It was after my copyediting final. I came back home and found this note on the kitchen counter, saying something about how he needed his own space, garbage, all of it."

"This was," Conner ventured carefully, "the first you guys were together?"

"Something like that," Clark said with a wry grin, "we've always been...really bad at being together and even worse at being apart, if that makes any sense." He shook his head. "Anyway, I was infuriated. I busted into his new apartment all ready to pick a huge fight and I caught him sitting in his suit in--" Clark giggled crazily "--in the bathtub in this huge empty apartment, drinking Sherry out of a Dixie cup and reading Star Wars novels, sulking."

Conner couldn't hide his shame. "Dad's such a loser."

"He didn't want me to see him like that," Clark explained fondly.

"I wouldn't want you to see me in the bathtub reading Star Wars novels either," Conner said crossly.
"So what do you think he feels like now?" Clark asked flatly and the world bottomed out.

Conner stared in silence for a long time before he felt his jaw moving, his mouth moving around, making noises that sounded like he was trying to say, "This isn't--"

"He's not just embarrassed this time, Conner. He's sick and he's skinny and he doesn't like you seeing him all marked up by needles and throwing up all the time," Clark said.

"It isn't the same!" Conner protested, jumping to his feet. "He can't--I'm his son--!

"And he loves you," Clark interrupted firmly, grabbing Conner by the wrist, and holding him still, looking at Conner hard, until Conner felt Clark's green eyes burning into his own, until he felt small and stupid and the understanding, like the creeping light of dawn, seeped into his skin. "And he loves you, Conner, more than he ever did or ever will love me," Clark whispered, "he likes you best and watching you watch him fall apart was killing him, Conner, more than anything else was--did you know that?"

Conner's mouth opened and closed a few times weakly. "I don't--but I want to be there."

"I know," Clark agreed.

"I can help," Conner babbled desperately, making a renewed effort, even though he saw Clark's face close over with a heavy finality. "I can help and I can help you--I learned all of it!"

Clark tugged Conner toward himself, pulled Conner into an awkward hug as Conner's words dropped out and said, into the air above Conner's head, in a very soft and sad voice, "You're smart, Conner, and your dad made you that way, but he never had the heart to teach you that sometimes the best that you can do for somebody is to let them hurt."

That's bullshit, Conner wanted to say, and felt hot tears squeezing out beneath his shut-tight eyelids, digging his nails into Clark's shoulders. But he managed silence, and Clark seemed to get it, just stroked the back of Conner's neck until Conner stopped shaking and the night around them was dark and foreign.

"You were lying," Conner said bitterly. "That's the only explanation."

Terry just laughed and high-fived his brother George, who grinned happily at the attention, and looked up at Terry with the same worshipful eyes Conner had always seen on the fourteen year old boy. It took the sting out of losing--but only a little bit.

"Naw, man, you just suck at poker," Terry crowed.

Conner pointed at the quarterback, scowling. "You go straight to hell, Daniels!"

"Sorry you lost, Conner," George apologized sincerely.

"Um," Conner said, suddenly losing steam in the face of George's expression, but was distracted again by Terrence's hysterical laughter, which made Conner point emphatically at him again, shouting, "Straight to hell! Right now!"

Around them, the scattered patrons of Sunday afternoons at the Talon were grinning at them affectionately, Terry and George being well-liked members of the town community. Paired with Smallville's latest oddity, they were nearly afternoon matinee. Conner's open-faced turkey sandwich was untouched and his phone was abandoned on the table next to Terry's half-finished
milkshake and George's half-eaten brownie, which had been almost literally the size of his own head. "That's disgusting," Terry had said, awed, but Conner had insisted, saying that he'd heard about George for so long that their finally meeting was a momentous occasion.

One to be punctuated by George's total domination of Conner in Texas Hold'em.

"He just learned," Terry had insisted innocently earlier, "so go easy on him, Metropolis."

"I hate you," Conner hissed at Terry, who only beamed in response.

George cackled gleefully, and Conner sighed, abandoning his cards on the table.

"He's really not that good," Terry insisted later, after George had excused himself to the bathroom. "It's probably just that you suck like, just unbelievably."

Conner scowled. "It's just amazing that you're single, Terry, just mind-blowing."

Terry smirked in a way that was simultaneously self-deprecating and irresistible, Conner resorted to grasping the edge of the table.

"Let me remind you that I broke up with Melanie."

"Melanie is not human, Terry," Conner said seriously. He meant it. "Melanie is some sort of nuclear accident. Melanie is living toxic waste."

Terry smiled at Conner fondly, and George clambered back up to the table, grinning, hands still wet, saying to Conner, "My brother says that you're--" before Terry slapped a hand over his younger brother's mouth, eyebrows nearly at his hairline, saying:

"That's just enough outta you, buddy." He pulled his hand away and pawed his brother's hair with his huge, brown hands, smoothing George's ruffled feathers easily, and Conner only had a second to wonder about what Terry said about him before somebody at a far table yelled:

"Hey, Daniels--aren't you supposed to be at that game this afternoon?"

It turned out that Terry was supposed to be at a football game, only it didn't start until half past four, which was why he had been sitting in the Talon at quarter past three with Conner and George, playing cards and eating everybody's food but his own, which Conner ate, more out of spite than any real hunger. Even George's brownie had not escaped unscathed, and for all the Perfect Big Brother façade, a little of Terry's true nature came out when he only stuck his tongue out at George when the boy protested being robbed of his dessert.

And as the clock ticked toward four o'clock, Terry said, "Okay, quick stop at your farm--"

"Why?" Conner asked, puzzled.

"--to get your Crows shirt so you don't get assraped in the stands," Terry continued, somewhat less than patiently, "and then a quick stop at the Ross's to pick up Whitney, and then, we're going to the game."

"I'm going to the game?" Conner asked stupidly.

"You're going to the game," Terry confirmed, smiling brightly.

Conner suddenly remembered the *Football for Dummies* book (which had been sitting under a
stack of printed A.P. US History notes since he received it) and the Smallville Crows t-shirt, all omens of possible participation in Smallville sports culture, though he'd mostly managed to forget about it, what with his father having leukemia and his being completely incapable of understanding conics and all.

He made a pitiful expression and blinked his eyes hugely at Terry. "Do I have to?"

Terry stared at him for a moment before saying, "Uh. Yes. Um, yes you do." He frowned, seeming to gather himself again. "It's the championship game, Conner. You have to be there, I'm really just doing this for your own good."

"I don't see how watching you get bashed around by a bunch of large, sweaty guys will do me any good," Conner sulked, though he immediately regretted his wording at Terry's cocked eyebrow and his own insipient flush. He was having post-traumatic stress flashbacks to his father's sex lecture, the five minute briefing about group intercourse, and how really, it was terribly overrated. He covered his face and mumbled, "Anyway, I don't think I'd--"

"I'm not listening to you," Terry said, blithely cheerful, and Conner heard George laughing, too loud in the relative quiet of the Talon.

And then Conner felt Terry's huge brown hand on his arm, jerking him out of the chair, out of the Talon, into the midday sunshine and toward the Cadillac, deaf to Conner's spirited protests.

Which was how he had ended up sitting in front of the forty-yard line of the Smallville High School football field, with George sitting in the seat next to him.

He was wearing the Smallville Crows t-shirt and scowling at the green grass in front of him. He was sitting on his copy of *Football for Dummies*, which he'd realized had been stupid to bring only after they'd already arrived at the field. He craned his neck hesitantly to survey his surroundings and realized with a sudden shock of discomfort that aside from himself and George, the nearest males were at least four or five people away, and that he was blocked in by three or four girls in front, beside, and behind him.

Some sort of buzzer sounded and the broad, irritating voice of the local sports announcer blared over the loudspeakers as cheerleaders, football stars, and the rival team poured out onto the green, green grass.

While Whitney's huge, amused eyes from her vantage point at the top of the pyramid were clues, it was the unrestrained shrieks of "I love you, Bobby!" and "You're so hot, Dylan!" and "Kick some ass, Parker!" that really clued Conner into the mortifying fact that apparently Terry had seated him with the rest of the team girlfriends in their unspoken, designated section.

"I'll kill him," he muttered under his breath, digging his nails into his thighs.

"Don't be too mad," George said, though his face was still the mask of placid, sincere attentiveness, there was something in his eyes that seemed a little sad.

George's Asperger flattened him out, Terry had explained, and though his brother felt as much as anybody, George had trouble expressing it. The struggle between all the words that bubbled inside George and how little he was able to say out loud to others had always frustrated George. Conner wondered if this wasn't another moment, and did as Terry suggested, waited quietly until George found his own voice to say, "My brother likes you a lot, Conner," and "He's just not allowed 'cause of me."
Conner stared at George with wide, uncomprehending eyes until the shout of the surrounding crowd broke his concentration, and he looked up in time to see Terry's broad shoulders flex beneath the shining material of his uniform, his arms move the brown ball in his hands, and his blue eyes flash for one single second toward the stands, where they met Conner's.

They won the championship game.

When Terry bounded up afterward, shining and sporting a new bruise on the corner of his mouth and said, "I told you! I told you we'd kill them!" and hugged George and Whitney, who was still tearful over their success and finally, Conner--for a long time, Conner thought crazily, feeling his fingers on the strong line of Terry's back, his mouth on Terry's shoulder, ultra-aware of every place where they touched--Conner was nearly bowled over by it.

"That was a good day," George said later, in the car on the way home.

And Conner, half-asleep in the seat, seeing Terry framed by evening light from the corner of his eyes, said, "Yeah, yeah it was."

The next-to-last thing he remembered before passing out was Terry draping his letter jacket over Conner, his large hand stroking over Conner's shoulder longer than strictly necessary. And the very, very last thing Conner remembered was knowing that he was maybe beginning to fall a little in love with Terry, his awkward hands and his graceful run, the way that he loved his brother and embraced mediocrity--that Conner, in a life less ordinary, had finally found something normal.

And the next thing Conner knew it was Christmas, and the farmhouse was bursting with good food and presents which came daily from Metropolis, huge, extravagant crates of them, large wooden shipping containers via tractor-trailers, and smaller, finer things which were wrapped in gilt paper and newspaper, with Lex and Clark's slanting handwriting all over them. Conner looked at his own Christmas present, a largish box with "Merry Christmas" and "Good luck in freakville," written on it in his mother and father's handwriting respectively, he'd rolled his eyes. If his parents thought they were fooling anybody about the status of their relationship while giving joint presents, they were clearly out of their minds.

Smallville decked out in holly and trees, with everything glittering so much Conner nearly forgave the town for being so provincial. Both Whitney and Terry spent most of the break with their families, but managed to drag Conner out of the house once before Christmas Eve for a quick lunch and gift exchange at the Talon. Conner reflected that for two people who never said anything nice about one another, Terry and Whitney were awfully good friends, and he smirked at the two of them when they sniped at one another over their sandwiches and drinks.

"What are you grinning at, Metropolis?" Terry demanded to know, but he was grinning, too.

"You two are just too cute," Conner laughed, and before either of them could protest, he gave them their presents.

Conner had learned, as he learned many things from his father, the art of giving gifts. Lex never used money as the barometer of a present, and had given Conner over the years second-hand books, old board games, a framed collection of reproduction Chagall sketches, a subway pass on Conner's twelfth birthday, when Lex admitted that it was time Conner have his full mobility. Lex always gave presents with care and a thoughtfulness that had taught Conner the value of planning, and Conner had spent the time he'd been in Smallville watching Whitney and Terry and his grandparents, wondering what would make them smile.
He gave Whitney a bracelet made out of an antique silver spoon that Conner had found in the attic and curled exhaustively around one of the bathroom pipes until it'd been a loose, beautiful circle. She slipped it on and stared at it as it winked brightly against her wrist, saying finally, "Thank you so much, Conner," in a quiet, soft voice, leaning over to press a kiss to his cheek.

Conner gave Terry a set of old Bellagio poker chips, worth about five thousand dollars before the Bellagio had updated and destroyed most of their old chips--the remainder of which Lex had purchased on a whim and decorated with, and a large portion of which Conner had pilfered long ago and asked Mrs. Banner to mail to him. Terry just stared at them until Conner laughed and said, "They're totally worthless now, you know, just cool to look--"

"They're great," Terry had interrupted, fierce. "They're--they're really great."

His eyes had been big and Conner swallowed hard under Terry's gaze.

Whitney gave Conner a White Stripes CD case with a mix CD titled "I'm Too Cool For Popular Music" in it and a paperback copy of David Sedaris' latest book with a story about popular sports-related sexual fantasies dog-eared. (She'd winked at Conner meaningfully when he'd registered it with a deep blush.) Terry had brought Conner all three books in the Jedi Academy series, and though Conner battled a combination of mortification and glee at the sight of them, joy eventually won out. He thanked them both profusely.

Evening was starting to creep across the sky and Whitney declared that she needed to close up the Talon for the holidays, and could Terry and Conner please excuse themselves? Terry called her something rude and Whitney implied he was stupid and they parted with broad grins, Terry shuffling Conner out of the café, pushing him by the shoulders while Conner called out, "Bye, Whitney! Merry Christmas! Happy Kwanza!"

"Oh my God," Terry muttered, opening the car door for Conner and jogging to the driver's side, rolling his eyes and rubbing his hands together in the sudden cold snap. "You're just so grossly politically-correct and attentive."

"It was one of those classes they taught in pretentious, rich people school," Conner said tartly, snuggling down in his warm scarf and coat, jamming his hands into his pockets. His father and mother would be in Smallville the day after the next, and nothing could bring him down.

"I'll bet," Terry said affectionately, and put the car in drive.

It was snowing by the time they reached the Kent farm, and the flakes looked ghostly against the dark blue of the sky. Beneath the wide, wide Kansas night, Conner stood next to Terry's opened car door and stared upward, a little amazed by the sight of snow and nothing else, and felt humbled by it, alive all over again in the cold, and when he turned to catch Terry's eyes he saw the same expression on Terry's face.

Conner had barely a day to stew over what it could mean before his father and mother arrived with the rest of the holiday trimmings (which included an eight-foot illuminated Santa Claus that Lex put in the front yard, deaf to everybody's protests) and all hell broke loose at Kent farm. There were too many bodies in too small a space and Conner couldn't seem to detach himself from his father's side, constantly attentive and concerned and overwhelmingly fond of his dad, glad that he was there. Conner had missed him; it was the "how much" that surprised him.

Christmas day, with the living room a wreckage of wrapping paper, plank wood, and ribbon and all of their new gifts scattered around, Conner wore the extraordinarily ugly scarf his father had made for him--"Your mother would hide my work, Conner, I was desperate for something to do. Mrs.
Banner identified a moment of weakness and I'll rue this until the day I die. Oh, God, you look terrible in that color."--to the hugely rowdy dinner, which fairly spilled off of the table.

Hours later, stuffed to the gills and sleepy, Conner fell asleep on his dad's shoulder on the living room couch, watching the fire. They had not talked about the leukemia or the treatments or anybody's broken heart, and Conner was grateful for that, happy to let it be silent for the holidays.

Lex and Clark stayed through New Years, and when the ball dropped and his father said, "Thank fucking God," and chugged what remained of the champagne, careful with his elbow not to knock Conner's mother, who had passed out at ten thirty, Conner thought it was a good day.

That all in all, he still had a very good life.

But that was the last good day in a long time.

Shortly after his parents had returned to Metropolis, his mother called to say that the first round of chemo hadn't done as much good as had been hoped. "Your father is totally unconcerned and he's starting radiation day after tomorrow," Clark had reported dutifully. "He says that more than anything, he's sick of me hovering." At that point, Lex had forcibly taken the phone out of Clark's hands, and Conner, though he was worried and heartsick and tired on his father's behalf, was grateful to hear that Lex's voice was even and strong. Conner was also reminded to remain vigilant about his schoolwork, because whether or not he was in a backwater--"Hey!" Clark had yelled, "I went to school there!"--it was no reason to let his previous eleven years of very expensive private education go to seed.

Three days after that, still reeling and sleepless from the bad news, Grandpa Kent got sent to the hospital with chest pains, which had Conner, Clark, and Grandma Martha in the hospital emergency room at three in the morning when the doctors came out and said that Jonathan Kent was all right. His grandfather was all right, Conner was told, but his blood pressure was too high, his cholesterol too high, and his body too tired to do all the things he tried to do around the farm. That night, Conner did all the farm chores he knew how to do, and fell into bed exhausted and still-filthy, and woke up nearly three hours later in the middle of the night when his grandmother shook him gently, saying, "Conner, Conner, here--let's change into your pajamas, all right?"

What made all the bad stuff that much worse was that Terry, ever since Christmas, had taken his personality for a total one-eighty and transformed into a total jackass. And though the occasional glimmer of humanity still emerged, he was more frequently than not found flirting obscenely with Melanie the vampire and touching her on the arm, the shoulder, one finger on the undercurve of her padded breasts when he thought nobody but Conner was looking. Football season was over and so were practices but Terry hadn't so much as offered Conner a ride home, and spent Chemistry as clueless and unhelpful as ever.

All of it boiled over on the second Friday after break.

Terry had spent most of chemistry leaning over to Melanie's lab table, whispering things into her neck and making her laugh, which, Conner told himself, he was fine with, because as long as Terry was molesting his ex-girlfriend, he wasn't fucking up the lab. Actually, what Conner suspected he felt was gut-wrenching jealousy and a distinctly violent inclination, and in his head he imagined what it would feel like to shove a pipette in Melanie's eye, to punch Terry in his perfectly kissable mouth. But he steeled himself and worked diligently, not saying a word all throughout the period, finishing up and passing up the last worksheet just before the bell rang.

Terry had still been occupied touching Melanie's neck so Conner had just shoved his books in his
backpack and started out of the classroom when he heard Melanie saying:

"Aw, poor little rich boy, feeling neglected."

It froze Conner in his tracks, and he debated, fisting his right hand, how good it would feel to throw her out of a window, weighing it with the inevitable public humiliation of wearing an orange jumpsuit and being chained to his new prison boyfriend Horton. So Conner took a deep breath and said, taking another step:

"At least I don't have to let him touch my tits to get his attention."

It wasn't that Conner had no sense of self-preservation, it was just that he was more likely than not to ignore the clear and calm voice in his head telling him in very small words to shut up.

And he was so very tired of this, whatever it was. For a boy who'd welcomed Conner to Smallville with a wry smile and his car, Terry had changed a lot in a very short period of time, disappearing into the stereotype Conner had always gotten the impression Terry loathed. And between the muted snubs, the silence that lingered between them now, and the way that Conner caught Terry looking at him, out of the corner of his eyes, when Terry seemed to think that Conner wasn't paying attention, Conner was tired.

He hadn't come to Smallville for somebody to make him more miserable than he'd been before.

So he said, "At least I don't have to let him touch my tits to get his attention," and waited for the boom.

It came in the form of Melanie's high-pitched shriek, a sudden sensation of motion and the sound of chairs jerking against the floor and people shouting all around them as Conner felt himself shoved into a lab table, felt pain explode in his side, knocking all the air out of him.

"Oh--" Conner started, trying to say fuck but realizing his mouth was opening and closing and that no sound was coming out, and when he levered himself up he realized Mrs. Funt had run toward the back of the classroom yelling over Melanie's screams, her hisses.

And Terry, where he held her against a wall by her wrists was staring at Conner with a wild-eyed sort of vulnerability, a world of words in that one moment that made Conner think--crazily--that if Terry wasn't holding Melanie there he'd stride across the room and stroke Conner's face, kiss his hands, his shoulders, the butterfly of Conner's ribs and murmur, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

But at the moment all Conner could think about was that it felt like Melanie's shove had managed to break a couple of ribs and that he was so angry and tired and irritated that he could burst into tears--only he'd never give her the satisfaction. He only smiled darkly as she was jerked bodily out of the classroom by a furious Mrs. Funt, and the rest of the students started to file out, a roar of whispers as they passed by Conner, asking in concern if he was all right.

He shook his head at all of them, pushing himself upright and saying, "I'll be good. I'm just--" he paused, glancing at Terry, where he stood, hanging back from the crowd in the corner "--really fucking glad she's going to get hell for this."

His classmates laughed and waved, chattering brightly as they squeezed out of the classroom until the only people left in the room were Conner and Terry.
Conner didn't turn around, didn't look at Terry, and felt his hands tighten around his bookbag. He thought about Terry's bored expression that first day of chemistry, thought about Terry's cocky grin, half-visible through his car window that rainy afternoon. He thought about Terry's big hands and his big heart and his big eyes when he was telling Conner Oh Man, This One Time I Fucked Up So Bad stories. Conner thought about Terry and the resigned affection Terry had for George, thought about the Smallville Crows t-shirt Terry had given him for his birthday and the championship game, the hug Terry had given him afterward and how the letter jacket had smelled against his skin when he'd woken up. Conner thought about Christmas and Jedi Academy books and thought that he was sick of this.

"Whatever," he said under his breath. "Just--whatever," he said again and bolted.

"Fuck! Conner--wait!"

He was all the way in the parking lot, nearing the row of buses when Terry's much longer legs caught up with him and he felt Terry's hand close around his arm, jerk him to a halt with a shock of pain to his shoulder that had Conner stumbling until Terry righted him with his other hand. Until Conner was half leaning into the big football player and staring, looking as lost and upset and betrayed as he'd been feeling this week.

But he was showing his cards and Conner had been trained never to do that, so he narrowed his eyes and said, "What?"

Terry was showing his cards, too. Too bad Conner couldn't read them, only saw a blur of regret, of shame and a little sadness, tinged at the edges of whatever Terry was feeling. And whatever Terry was feeling, it wasn't making him let go of Conner's arm.

It took a long time before Terry managed to say, "I'm sorry."

Conner sneered, because he'd learned mean before he'd learned polite. "For what? Your crazy bitch attacking me?"

Terry's face hardened for a minute and his fingers tightened on Conner's arm, the pressure going painful--and Conner's instinct was to wince, but he didn't, he didn't want this to get more complicated than it already was--before Terry's eyes darkened and he loosened his fingers again, as if remembering himself. "Yes--no. I don't know," he said quietly. "Just, sorry."

Conner stared past Terry's left shoulder. "That's fine. Let me go, Terry."

"You're still mad at me," Terry accused.

"I'm not mad," Conner said honestly. He wasn't, anymore, it had disappeared like a mist and now he was just tired, hollowed out. "Just let me go, Terry."

"ConnerÂ…" Terry said, a low murmur, nearly a whine, as if he waiting for "I forgive you," as if his half-assed apology for God knew what earned it, and Conner was furious again, mad enough to punch Terry's round, thick mouth--the one he'd dreamed about earlier that week, kissing his stomach, pressed against his own.

Conner started shaking his arm, knowing it wasn't the most manly move, but needing to break their contact--and he was determinedly not looking at Terry's face as he did it, scowling every which way but directly in front of him. God help him, if Terry did not let go in fourteen milliseconds, Conner thought, incensed, somebody was getting kicked in the nuts.

And Conner was so intent on shaking Terry off that he only heard his name distantly the first two
times; it was only when the voice escalated that something broke through:

"Hey, asshole!"

And Conner whipped around in the parking lot, ready to tear somebody's head off, at the very, very end of his rope, and--

Saw Geoffrey, leaning against a parked car, a dusty old Toyota.

He was smiling, beautiful and golden in the sun, familiar and well-loved, longed-for, and in that moment Conner's loneliness seemed to well up in a great wave, breaking over him, and when Conner blinked again and saw Geoffrey was still there, he felt the smile on his face before he realized he was smiling, and his heart gave one, two, three skipping beats before Conner thought, in a reverent hush: I'm home--home's finally here.

"Geoffrey," Conner murmured, soft and amazed, and shoved away from Terry, whose fingers seemed to have suddenly gone numb, to bolt across the parking lot, throwing himself with a whoop into Geoffrey's opened arms, smiling up at Geoffrey's laughing, shining blue eyes.

According to the Kansas Department of Motor Vehicles, Geoffrey had enough on-the-road experience to drive without adult supervision, and Geoffrey had decided that his maiden trip would be to Smallville, carrying with himself nothing but a poorly-packed backpack full of his meager belongings and a sketchpad.

The way Geoffrey rolled his letters off of his tongue made something in Conner's chest loosen, ease, and like his first thought, it was home, the home Conner had known best.

Geoffrey talked with his hands--or at least he tried to, fingers moving along the surface of the steering wheel, still a new-enough driver that his hands stayed at ten and two, eyes flicking over to catch Conner's. Geoffrey talked about St. Ann's, and how all the students there had asked after Conner and wanted to know what it was like to live in such close proximity to farm animals. He talked about Metropolis changing and the new Wayne Enterprises subsidiary that had opened up next door to the LexCorp building and about maxing out a year's worth of advanced allowances buying yards and yards of premium canvas at Aster's Art and Artistry. He talked about painting the cityline and how it'd be orange and glowing. He didn't talk about Eve, just filled the air with his own voice, so that even if they were going thirty-five on turns and hurtling inevitably toward their fiery deaths, Conner was grateful for it.

"Dad thinks I'm going to die out here," Geoffrey said conversationally.

"You are you know, going thirty on a right turn," Conner said, slumping down in his seat and bracing his feet against the floor, wincing, feeling the seatbelt digging into his neck comfortably.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," Geoffrey soothed, and jerked the car around some more.

"Anyway, I didn't come out all this way just to kill us both."

Conner covered his face and said, artificially bright, "Well, how am I supposed to know that? You never call, you don't write--I thought you'd started hating me."

"Didn't know what to say," Geoffrey admitted, and the car tires made a noise that made Conner murmur a Hail Mary in his head, "and I never know what to write. You get the iPod I sent?"

"I sing myself to sleep every night with 'Save a Prayer,' you sick bastard," Conner said affectionately, and braced his left foot against the dashboard, whimpering as he saw a road sign
streak past so quickly all he registered was a faint impression of a dizzying shape, lost in a blur. He didn't even get a color, not even Conner's dad drove this fast.

Geoffrey grinned. "I knew you'd like it, you little girl," and added, "Oh, hey, did I just miss your turn?"

Conner hazarded a glance at his surroundings, and had barely said, "Yes," before Geoffrey was doing a one eighty on the mostly-deserted street, tires shrieking in agony as Conner's voice melted into a high-pitched scream.

Conner barely stopped himself from falling to the ground and kissing it when he reached the farmhouse. Geoffrey had a mild, affectionate look on his face that meant should Conner start any of his usual theatrics, Geoffrey wouldn't be surprised, and Conner endeavored to keep Geoffrey on his toes--if only to keep Geoffrey's attention.

His grandparents were out for the afternoon, and had left a note on the kitchen counter. The paper was green and had a pattern of lemons along the bottom edge; his grandmother's curling handwriting informed Conner that they'd gone out to an exhibition on new organic farming techniques, and that Conner would probably need to fend for himself for dinner. In parentheses, she suggested that he fend with the leftovers in the fridge, and not attempt cooking on his own.

Geoffrey, who had dropped his bookbag near the couch in the living room found the note hilarious, and grinned while asking Conner how many times he'd blown up the kitchen already. He moved his hands when he talked like he was shaping words the way he shaped things on notebooks and sketchpads and watercolor paper, he smiled and he was familiar and so well-loved that Conner, watching his best friend stand in this still-foreign place, felt a renewed surge of gratefulness, utter relief, that he knew somebody as good and good for him as Geoffrey.

"--told Dad I'd be here for the weekend, and he seemed to have no objections," Geoffrey finished, and then furrowed his brow, adding, "Though I don't know how your grandparents would feel about it. Do you think they'd mind? I mean, I hadn't thought--"

"Don't worry," Conner assured him, winding around the kitchen counter and dropping a reassuring hand on Geoffrey's elbow and leading him into the living room, where they crashed onto the sofas. "They'll be so glad that I'm not sulking in the barn that they won't even care that you're here having post-traumatic stress flashbacks to the first time you milked a cow," Conner said smoothly, turning his head to catch Geoffrey's expression.

His friend's grimace was enough to tell Conner that the scars of many years previous had not yet totally faded.

"I touched…" Geoffrey ran out of words. He wiggled his fingers instead.

Conner nodded solemnly. "Yes, yes you did. And your hands didn't fall off--hey, surprise!"

"Let's not talk about that anymore," Geoffrey suggested in a rush, and brightened immediately, looking around the room, dark from the early winter evening. "Can we get some lights on? This feels like bad farmhouse porn."

"You--! Fine," Conner said, losing steam incredibly quickly in the face of Geoffrey's glittering eyes and horrible grin, sulking as he hauled himself off the couch to turn on all the lamps in the room. It lit the farmhouse soft and orange, rounded with sienna shadows and he had to admit it was better, made the space seem smaller and kinder.
And when he sat back down again, Geoffrey threw a pillow at him and said:

"Hey, I really, really miss you, you bastard."

Conner had to look away, so Geoffrey couldn't see the way Conner's face went all funny and his eyes got red, just so he could say, "Yeah, well."

Dinner was leftovers, but something about dishing out food onto real plates and distributing silverware, getting up to refill Geoffrey's glass of juice and then settling back down in his seat and talking over a meal with his best friend--and only his best friend--made it all the more intimate. Made something in Conner's chest thump happily, with great satisfaction.

Conner felt bad about running the dishwasher when there were only a handful of plates, and bullied Geoffrey into helping him, elbows and hips bumping like they had in chemistry and home economics, looking out the window over the sink and seeing the stars appear one by one in the Kansas sky. Then Conner set up the cot in his room, made it up with hospital precision and gave Geoffrey a refresher course on the shower, said, "You've had a really long day, how about you shower first?" before backing out the bathroom and giving Geoffrey his privacy.

They watched movies and then Conner whined until Geoffrey sighed and said, "Fine," and they watched a syndicated rerun of *Stargate: Atlantis*, but he enjoyed it, too, so Conner didn't feel all that bad. Eventually, they let the TV be white noise and they just talked, in low, scratchy voices until they were drowsy from a long, long separation.

And half-asleep Conner could finally tell Geoffrey all the things he'd been thinking, everything that had flashed through his mind when they'd been flirting with disaster in Geoffrey's substandard car. He talked about his father and the unsuccessful treatment, he talked about starting another six week round of chemo and how his chest hurt just thinking about it. He talked about how he wanted to be home and he was afraid at the same time. He talked about his grandfather's cardiac episode, how Clark had finally put his foot down, and rented out the last fifty acres to be sharecropped by a few small organic cooperatives and harassed his father into hiring two farmhands at Clark's expense. Clark hadn't mentioned, Conner pointed out, that he'd been fired, but Conner figured that was yet another in a long line of secrets that were probably better off kept than clean.

Conner told Geoffrey about Whitney and Terry and then how much he hated Terry and alternately how much he didn't understand what Terry's problem was, until he saw a strange shadow on Geoffrey's face and said, "So yeah--I'm glad you're back. Nobody understands me the way you do," and the shadow had lightened, faded, disappeared into an expression of soft delight.

Conner promised himself if the words "playing house" crossed his mind at all at any point the duration of Geoffrey's visit, Conner would throw himself off the top of the barn in a dramatic but necessary display of apology.

It didn't work, because that night right before Geoffrey dropped off to sleep in the cot next to Conner's bed, he murmured, "Night, Conner. See you tomorrow," and then his eyelashes were heavy and dark on his cheeks.

Conner said, very quietly, into the dark, "Good night, Geoffrey," and found himself achingly curious about what it'd feel like to fall asleep next to Geoffrey, curled up along Geoffrey's long, lithe body, to rest his hand on the angle of Geoffrey's hip and to breath into the curve of Geoffrey's neck. To wake up in the morning like that, warm and fit together.

Conner said, "Fuck!" very quietly and then proceeded to spend the rest of the night attempting to
smother himself with a pillow, wallowing in miserable, self-pitying lust until he fell into an unsatisfying, half-hearted sleep.

Geoffrey wasn't there when Conner woke up, but he was in the kitchen with Conner's grandmother-and he was standing over a waffle iron.

"Oh my God. I love you," Conner croaked, alerting Geoffrey and Martha to his tousle-haired, barefooted presence. He thought he was about to cry. His grandmother pressed a hand to her mouth, eyes dancing with laughter, shoulders shaking despite her obvious effort not to burst out into giggles.

Geoffrey cocked his brow and said dryly, "There're fresh strawberries, too."

He was dressed in old jeans that were worn white in the knees and a baseball shirt, with a dark blue collar and sleeves. He looked well-rested and happy and exactly the way that Conner's very best friend in the world was supposed to look: good and making waffles.

"I love you so much right now, Geoffrey," Conner said fervently, taking a few shaky steps forward and reaching out his hands. "So much."

Geoffrey looked horrified and backed away, saying, "Conner--your hair could be registered as a disaster area. You haven't brushed your teeth."

Conner frowned and Martha tittered, unable to help herself. "That…those were big words," Conner finally decided. "I'm going to go--" he made a vague gesture "--you make waffles."

"I can do that," Geoffrey said amiably.

Conner swore he heard his grandmother say, "He's always been like this," and Geoffrey say back, "This is probably one of his low points--though, this one time…" as Conner tottered toward the stairs, struggling against gravity. He tried not think about the implications of Geoffrey gossiping with his grandmother and succeeded when he stubbed his toe (twice) getting into the shower.

Twenty minutes later, he was awake, his damp hair was sticking to his neck, and Geoffrey was picking at the last eggs on his plate and chattering with Conner's grandmother, about art and architecture and the galleries that had appeared on North Street when all the warehouses had been shut down in Metropolis' sea change from industrial to high tech. Conner ate his fourth waffle and watched his grandmother's kind face, Geoffrey's kind eyes, the way that they talked fast and both used their hands, how Geoffrey was being his most polite and then his most charming, and how he slipped up sometimes and made jokes the way he would in front of Conner--and was flushed with surprise when Martha Kent laughed.

Conner generally wasn't one for sitting back and letting the conversation swim around him, but he'd been starved of this easy camaraderie, lost without his anchors and now that most of them were in place he was still long enough to catch his breath. He felt as if hidden tension was slowly melting out of him, replaced with something warm and comfortable and good.

"Speaking of cold," Geoffrey said, glancing at the window to where the morning frost had knit lines and lines of intricate, spidery lace across the glass, "did Conner ever tell you about the thing with the freezer?"

The kitchen warm against the chill of a frosty, Kansas February; the air had puffed like tiny, despondent clouds when Conner breathed out during his one brief, harried trip to the barn, peeking
in to make sure his grandfather was merely supervising the new farmhands, and not tricking them into letting him do all the work. Jonathan Kent had been behaving, obediently mucking a stall and not making his wife fly into a rage by trying to do something really stupid, like bale hay. He'd been laughing and happy and waved good morning to Conner as he said, "Go on in, I'll meet you guys inside in a little while."

Conner winced. "I don't think my grandmother needs to know about that, Geoffrey."

Martha's eyes sparkled, and she set down her coffee cup, palms still wrapped around it.

"I think I need to know about it," she said solemnly.

"I think you're wrong," Conner protested, though he knew from the way Geoffrey was shifting himself in his seat that it was pointless.

"So Conner was on one of his little crusades to get us in as much trouble as humanly possible," Geoffrey started, gleeful, because even if Conner was the one who liked to write, it was Geoffrey who liked to tell stories. "And he came up with this list of twenty-three viable options to achieve his goals."

Martha laughed. "How very organized."

"Meanwhile, I'll be digging myself into a hole through your floors," Conner said sarcastically.

Geoffrey ignored him, going on blithely. "Most of them are like, total flops. His dad's allergic to one of them, a couple of them aren't even scientifically possible. Oh, and then there was my premature reception of the Talk from like, four nuns and a Father when your grandson here convinces me to distract Sister Tabitha with my newly emerging special feelings."

His grandmother slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes darting between Conner--who was covering his face, partially to hide his flaming cheeks, partially to hide the fact that he was laughing just as hard--and Geoffrey.

Geoffrey waved his hands. "So anyway, the shining moment of this whole thing is when he figures that there's some sort of back route out the kitchens, and we sneak in there during recess and poke around until this genius--" Geoffrey elbows Conner "--says that he hears the law and shoves me into the meat locker."

"In my own defense," Conner managed, a deranged grin on his face, "the law was coming."

"The law was nuns," Geoffrey said disdainfully, leveling him a glare.

"Okay, you only think they're harmless because you never had language tutoring with Sister Gemma," Conner argued, and then turned to his grandmother. "He's totally mischaracterizing this whole thing--I mean, I shoved him in there to save both our butts. We were already in loads of trouble for a couple of other things that were definitely not my fault--"

"So Conner pulls the door shut on both of us, the room goes dark, and after the footsteps fade three things become very clear very quickly," Geoffrey interrupted. He held up his index finger, saying, "One, it's really cold," then another, "two, we're going to die," and another, "and three, I'm definitely going to kill Conner first because your grandson here says, 'Well, at least we don't have to eat each other' and starts feeling around for the frozen meat."

At this point, Conner's grandmother was laughing so hard she was supporting herself on the kitchen island, wiping her tears and struggling to say, "Oh, Conner."
"So I wasn't in for cannibalism!" Conner said, heated.

"Oh, man," Geoffrey said, laughing, "we had a fun time explaining that to your dad when he came to pick us up. We were wrapped up in these spare habits they kept in storage and we looked like tiny, shivering angels of death in the back seat of Mr. Luthor's car."

"Thanks for ruining my life," Conner said brightly, kicking Geoffrey under the table without any real venom.

"Anytime," Geoffrey agreed sincerely.

"Geoffrey," Martha said, huffing for breath, "in the future, please feel free to drop by any time and embarrass Conner. It brightens my day so much."

"There's something wrong with this whole family," Conner concluded hotly, and he was probably right, too, but he'd known that since day one and loved it since day one and he leaned back again as Geoffrey started in on some other hugely embarrassing escapade and his grandmother refilled her coffee. His grandfather came through the back door, a gust of cold wind following him, stamping into the mud room to kick off his icy boots and peel off his coat and emerged rosy-cheeked and hungry for another serving of breakfast.

So Martha Kent laughed and made more eggs and Conner bugged Geoffrey into making more waffles and they ate breakfast for lunch and when the white, afternoon sun slanted into the farmhouse, Conner fell asleep on the couch with his head next to Geoffrey's leg, where his best friend was resting an old copy of *Mattimeo*, and reading to himself, mouth murmuring the words as he went.

"Are you going to be okay going back?" Conner asked urgently.

"I got here all right," Geoffrey soothed, swinging his backpack into the backseat.

"Yeah, but, the road conditions have worsened," Conner invented rapidly. Geoffrey could stay, register at Smallville High. He could partake in various sports where large, sweaty boys could bash him and Conner could stare in drooling distraction.

Geoffrey rolled his eyes. "Conner, it's beautiful, the roads are dry, and you're worrying for no reason. I'll be fine."

"If you're sure," Conner compromised.

"I'm sure," Geoffrey reassured him, and opened the driver's side door, pausing long enough to shift the weight in his hips and jerk Conner in for a one-armed hug, saying into Conner's shoulder, "Hang in there, okay? You said you wouldn't break my heart."

Which Conner interpreted as permission to clutch at his best friend and murmur into Geoffrey's neck, "I'll try. I'll try really hard."

Then Geoffrey drove away.

Conner knew how much it had cost Geoffrey not to grab Conner's wrists, push up Conner's sleeves, not to stare too long at the horrible scars that had found their way onto Conner's palms. Geoffrey had learned the basics of inspection as Conner had learned new ways to hide his dirty little trick, but Geoffrey was better, and thorough, and right, Conner knew grudgingly, and Geoffrey had trusted him this time to take care of himself, not to slice skin or bruise or break himself. And most
of all, Geoffrey had kept it a secret, for Conner, because Conner had begged him not to tell, and Conner didn't want to make that for nothing.

But the same wave of loneliness that had crested when he'd seen Geoffrey in the parking lot came back and sucked him under with a tidal pull, and Conner found himself laying on the living room floor at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon staring at the boring, stucco ceiling of the farmhouse, wondering how the hell he was going to do this, what Monday would bring, if Terry would hit him or speak to him, what Conner would do without Geoffrey to prop him up.

Conner knew all about indulging in his weaknesses, but figured that it was all right for one night, so he curled himself around a pillow and fell asleep, face buried in its side, thinking about the curve of Geoffrey's spine, and the way the bumps of his vertebrae felt against the pads of Conner's finger when they had touched.

The next day was blessedly uneventful.

He got to his classes early and took notes silently in all of them. Conner wasn't sure, but he had a sinking sensation that the schoolwide rumor mill was a couple of hundred times more effective than the LexCorp interoffice memo system and that everybody already knew what had gone down on Friday afternoon, the whole gory debacle, from Conner's little verbal peccadillo to Terry's manhandling in the parking lot.

At least the other rumors that were getting him stares had all but died down, Conner thought bitterly. It seemed that the residents of Smallville weren't such assholes that they'd keep harassing a kid for having gay parents when one said parent was very publicly suffering from a life-threatening illness.

But as the day crawled by and chemistry edged ever closer, Conner could feel his stomach in revolt. He'd considered making his grandmother call into the school for him that morning but sighed and figured he couldn't hide from it forever, and it was better not to let a wound fester.

So Conner was bracing himself for seventh period impact, which was part of the reason why he nearly crapped himself in public when Whitney met him at the door of the cafeteria, her expression volcanic.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded, grabbing his arm and jerking him out of the cafeteria, outside to where the twin, enormous AC units sat behind the building. "If Terry was being a jerk--"

"It's none of your business," Conner said, removing his arm from Whitney's grasp, pasting on his PR face, all calm and sophistication, insusceptible to ordinary human fallacy.

"I'm your friend, Conner," Whitney said quietly, her voice low, "and I thought Terry was, too. But if he's being a dick you don't have to take that, all right? Don't let him push you around."

Conner saw something in her expression that made his throat close up. "Whitney?"

She frowned, and plowed forward, "He likes you a lot, okay? Don't let him chicken out of this."

The thing about Whitney and Terry that Conner very rarely considered was that they'd known one another basically since birth. Whitney and Terry were Geoffrey and Conner, only nobody had a crush on anybody and Conner imagined that allowed Whitney an amazing amount of perspective that Conner pretty much didn't have, since deep down inside he wanted Geoffrey to marry him and buy him manga and make him waffles every morning forever and ever.
Whitney spoke eagerly about what an asshole Terry was, how he never brushed his hair and that the only reason he was hot was that she hadn't punched him in the face as many times as she should have when they were younger. She also complained about how Terry liked to scare Whitney's boyfriends—which Conner found endearing—and how he was psychotically overprotective of his little brother, who wasn't even technically autistic, since Asperger's didn't really count. "And anyway, George is smarter than Terry--" she'd smiled "--not that that's hard to do, but the point stands." She thought that Terry needed to cut it out, whatever it was, and get on with his life; he couldn't use his little brother as a crutch forever. Conner had never exactly figured out why Terry needed a crutch, only that Whitney ardently disapproved.

Conner was about to ask her what she meant by "chicken out" when Terry burst onto the scene practically frothing at the mouth, yelling, "Whitney, don't you fucking dare--!

At which point Whitney narrowed her eyes and shouted, "Fat lot of room you have to talk you God damn coward--!"

Which was when Terry threw his bookbag on the ground and got in Whitney's face and incidentally the exact moment when Whitney pulled back her left fist.

"Um," Conner said, and handed Terry a towel full of ice.

Terry said, "Thanks," and held it on his nose, which had stopped bleeding and started swelling and turning purple.

"Do you think it's broken?" Conner asked tentatively.

Terry snorted. "No, it just hurts like a motherfucker."

They were hiding in the Barn Loft, Not The Fortress of Solitude Because That Is A Stupid Name, as Conner called it, sitting on the old couch with a bucket of ice Conner had liberated from the kitchen, emptying every single ice cube tray in the freezer. It was technically still seventh period, but Conner figured that since Terry's nose had been bleeding profusely after Whitney had punched him in the face, they'd had a pretty good excuse not to go to class. Whitney had even felt bad enough to drive them home in Terry's car.

"Oh my God your face is hard," she'd whined, flexing her hand.

"Your hand hurts?" Terry had shrieked in a muffled, nasal voice, holding an old t-shirt Conner had dug out of the duffle bag in the trunk of the car to his face. "Your hand?"

"Stop being such a girl, Terry," Whitney had sing-songed and then Conner had threatened to grab the wheel and kill all three of them if Whitney and Terry didn't shut up.

He'd planned on making the two of them talk it out, because if it was bad enough to come to blows, it was bad enough that the only way to resolve it was one of those agonizing, heartfelt conversations. But Whitney had simply deposited Conner and Terry at the farmhouse and started driving away, saying that she'd return the car in the morning and flipping Terry the bird as he shouted imprecations at her from Conner's driveway, watching his car disappear into the distance.

Which was why they were hiding in the barn loft with a bucket of ice between them while Terry sulked and Conner wondered what the hell had just happened.

"God, she's such a bitch," Terry moaned, taking the towel off of his face to touch his nose gently, wincing as his fingers brushed against the swollen flesh.
Conner grimaced and pulled his hands away, replacing the towel himself and gently brushing
Terry's bangs out of the way, saying quietly, "I don't know what just went down, Terry, but you
and Whitney have got to learn how to let each other finish your sentences."

"Wouldn't help," Terry said stubbornly.

"Have you ever tried?" Conner asked dryly.

Terry stared hard at Conner's face for a long time before he said abruptly, "I'm sorry."

Conner almost opened his mouth to ask for what when he remembered Friday and the parking lot
and that all things considered, he probably should have been the one to deck Terry. But Conner
had his own Very Special Issues with physical violence, and every time he was tempted to hit
somebody he thought about his father's broken wrist, the dark, terrifying bruise that had manifested
on Geoffrey's arm one time when they'd been very small, and the desire shot through with fear and
nausea. Conner focused on rearranging the towel on Terry's face, not making eye-contact and
saying:

"I already told you: I'm not mad."

"I think that's almost what's killing me the most," Terry croaked.

Conner's brows knit together, and when he looked up, Terry's face was as red as his nose and his
eyes looked huge and he seemed scared, taking huge, gulping breaths. Conner let his hand fall
away from Terry's face, dropping the towel and the ice into the bucket and frowning.

The thing is, Conner thought to himself quietly, the thing is that even if Geoffrey was here and
Geoffrey made me happy, Terry's here now and Terry makes me unhappy. So if this was a crush
Conner wasn't over it, and he really didn't need Terry sitting in the barn loft, making those horrible
eyes at him and saying Â’sorryÂ’ like he meant it, not if he was just going to run hot and cold, be
Conner's friend one minute and touch Melanie the vampire's breasts another. Conner had almost
been sucked into normal but normal hadn't wanted him, and he was okay with that--sort of, or at
least, he would be in the long run--but he wasn't okay with Terry doing this to him again, especially
not since he knew that he'd let Terry get away with it.

"You know," Conner said, modulating his voice carefully, "I don't get you."

He'd already showed Terry his hand once, and he wasn't prepared to do it again, not when he felt so
confused, all soft from where Geoffrey had unknotted him over the weekend, opened all of
Conner's windows and doors.

So Conner didn't look at Terry's face when he went on and muttered, "You're so nice to me when I
just get into town, you give me rides home, you trick me into being social. You're not even terrible
at Chemistry when you really try, and then you turn into this total stereotypical asshole overnight
almost." Conner rubbed his face, tired of this conversation already. "Look, I already said I wasn't
mad, and I mean it so--"

"I really like you," Terry interrupted solemnly, voice serious enough to make Conner's eyes dart up
in shock, only to find on Terry's face a sort of open fear that shook him out, made Conner's fingers
go limp. "I really, really like you."

Conner's mouth fell open. "Um."

"It's almost embarrassing how much," Terry went on, suddenly feverish. "You have no idea. I
even like how you correct my grammar, it's so sick I can't stand it."
Conner choked. "Uh."

"I punched a hole through one of those poker chips you gave me with a drill bit," Terry babbled, eyes shining with manic light, digging through his pocket all of a sudden and shoving his key ring in Conner's face, Conner's eyes focusing on the Bellagio emblem when they stopped crossing. "I play with it all the time and I get this stupid look on my face and George says I'm so obvious that everybody's going to know and then I'll be fucked. I never should have taught him to cuss when he was four," Terry added, all in one breath.

"I," Conner said feebly.

"You totally think I'm stupid but I don't even care," Terry continued, desperate, dropping the key ring to latch his large, brown fingers on Conner's shirt sleeve. "I skipped the post-game bonfire after we won the championship game and everybody in the entire school was pissed off at me about it and all I could do was think about you asleep in my car."

Conner cleared his throat, but it didn't help and when he said, "So you like me?" it came out as a high-pitched and totally embarrassing squeak.

Terry said, "Can I kiss you?"

"Um," Conner said, but didn't manage to get out a "yes" or a "no" or a "you're gay?" before Terry had his hand on the back of his neck and was pulling Conner in, close, his mouth closed over Conner's. It was hard and sort of uncomfortable and really strange and Terry jerked back with a hiss because their noses bumped, but then Conner said, "Oh my God, you like me!" and Terry yelled, "Oh my God, you didn't know?" but before they could start pointing fingers and arguing, Conner said:

"Oh my God, shut up!" and grabbed Terry by the front of his t-shirt and jerked him in again, careful to tilt his head a little so Terry wouldn't pull away again and then Conner opened his mouth.

Conner thought he was going to say, "yes, yes, yes to everything" but instead he just slid his tongue over the line of Terry's perfect, All-American teeth and made the kiss wetter, slicker, hotter and messier and he loved it, loved it so much. He'd kissed exactly one person before and that had been in a dark closet at a terrible party with Geoffrey outside the door keeping time for Seven Minutes in Heaven so he probably didn't know what the hell he was doing, but Terry was making low, grunting noises in the back of his throat, so Conner figured he was doing okay.

And then Terry's hand knotted tightly in his hair, which probably should have hurt but was actually incredibly hot, so Conner moaned into Terry's mouth threw his arms over Terry's shoulders, sliding their bodies closer together. The ice bucket was still between them and Terry's nose was going to be the size of a football soon and this totally wasn't hot at all except it was the hottest thing ever, which basically proved what total whores boys were.

Terry remembered that they had to breathe first, and when he pulled away, his mouth was wet and swollen and his chin was wet and his eyes were glazed and Conner wanted to kiss him again immediately--no more of this silly oxygen--but Terry said, "Can I--?"

"Yes," Conner snapped, shoving the bucket onto the floor, where the ice scattered across the old boards with a plastic, hollow sound, skidding across wood.

Terry frowned. "I didn't even--"
"Terry, I'm sixteen. Yes, go ahead, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars," Conner muttered feverishly, tugging up the hem of Terry's shirt only to find another one underneath and throwing him a dirty look, nails scrabbling against the cloth until his hands met skin.

"Oh my God," Terry moaned and pulled Conner in for another kiss, possibly messier than the one before but Conner's hands were mapping out the flat plane of Terry's stomach and mostly his thought process was "wow!" and "hot!" and "this rocks!" with a lot of "oh my God, what am I doing?" in between incoherent glee.

At some point Terry's hands slid up inside Conner's shirt and Conner's rational mind promptly left the building, which left him with lots of teenaged lust and just enough mental acuity to shove Terry down on the couch, straddle Terry's hips, and tug Terry's shirt over his head. Conner ran his hands over Terry's chest curiously, feeling Terry's hard-on digging into his thigh, and fear and adrenaline made Conner lightheaded. He was either going to come in his pants right then or puke and it was the best feeling ever.

"Okay, this isn't a bad thing," Terry panted, looking glazed and happy, "but you're kind of a slut."

"I went to Catholic school for a really long time, Terry," Conner said. Then, he took a huge breath and blurted out, "Also, I'm a virgin so I'll probably suck at this, okay?" which proved that not only was Conner sort of a whore he was totally a moron, too.

Terry neither laughed nor frowned nor sighed in disgust and did not reach up to shove Conner off of his lap, he only grinned and reached up to stroke Conner's arm. For no good reason at all, it made Conner shudder out a breath, made it easier to relax, stop rushing. Terry was smiling and something about it made Conner less scared, and Conner smiled, tentatively.

"Hey," Terry said quietly, and the whole room stilled, like he'd reset a metronome, and the beats of Conner's heart slowed. "We don't have to do this right now."

And when he pulled away, he murmured, "I really want to."

Terry's smile got softer and so did his voice and he said, "Okay," and kissed Conner again, soft and sweet and slowly, with aching gratitude, his palms smoothing up and down Conner's sides, moving over Conner's thighs, stroking Conner's back.

And by the time Terry was sliding his big hand into Conner's jeans Conner wasn't scared at all, just amazed and happy and turned on and really excited, tightening his own fist around Terry's dick, which was huge and hot in his hand. It made Terry yelp in surprise, which made Conner laugh, and then Terry said, "You--!" and kissed him hard so that when they came all over each other's hands, rubbing together, the maddening friction of denim and new skin and the cotton of Conner's pushed-up shirt pushing them over the edge, Conner still smiling into Terry's mouth, saying "yes, yes, yes to everything" without saying a word.

Later, after Conner had rationed out tissues to clean himself and Terry up and then used up the rest of the box to soak up the water and slivers of ice all over the loft floor, after they'd zipped and tucked and curled against one another on the couch again, Terry tightened his hand where it rested on Conner's hip and asked strangely:

"So who was that blond guy?"

"He's my friend from back in Metropolis," Conner started carefully, and then blinked in amazement. "Wow."
Terry pinked. "I'm just curious."

"Wow," Conner commented again, and picked up Terry's hand to look at his watch, saying, "It's been like, twelve minutes since we had sex, you know."

Terry scowled and tugged at Conner until Conner was sprawled over Terry's larger frame, draped decadently over Terry's chest, which put Conner in a perfect position to appreciate the rumble when Terry growled, "You were all over each other."

"I hugged him," Conner pointed out, "it's not like we made out in front of you."

Conner imagined that Terry probably didn't really want to know Conner's entire back-story with Geoffrey, or about how Conner had wanted Geoffrey to marry him and buy him manga and make him waffles forever and ever and ever. Conner also didn't really want to think about it, in part because Geoffrey was terminally heterosexual and also because he really, really liked Terry, and there was that thing where they'd just had sex. Sex, Conner thought stupidly, he couldn't believe people ever went to work or read books or watched movies or anything when they could be having sex. It boggled the mind.

"Did you make out not in front of me?" Terry demanded, but more playfully.

"No, and I'm not going to tell you how that sentence doesn't really parse," Conner said tolerantly, grinning wildly, "it'd only turn you on so much that you'd probably ravish me again."

"Yeah, that'd be terrible," Terry sympathized.

They were quiet for a little while, and Conner put his head down on Terry's shoulder, heard the faint thud of Terry's heart through his clothes and thought about how he'd memorize Terry's heartbeat, too, now, learn it the same way he'd learn Geoffrey's.

Total panic didn't really set in until he woke up four hours later in a pitch-black barn loft alone.

There weren't any paper bags to breathe into and Terry wasn't there to yell at so Conner did the only rational thing and called Lois from where he'd decided to curl up in a corner as far away from the couch as humanly possible without leaving the room. Conner's knees were pulled up to his chest and he scowled at the desecrated piece of furniture as hard as he possibly could.

"Lane," she said.

"I just had sex in the barn," Conner said very quickly. "I mean--not just now, but--"

"Wait," Lois cut him off. "You just had sex in Clark's barn?"

It was getting kind of cold and he was kind of sniffing, and he didn't know whether it was because Terry had just left him or because it was getting kind of cold.

Conner moaned. "Yes, Lois, listen, I'm kind of freaking out--"

"Oh my God!" Lois crowed, overjoyed. "You lost your virginity in Clark's barn!"

"Lois!" Conner wailed.

"Can I tell him?" she asked urgently, pleading. "I mean, only a little bit. Please?"

"No!" Conner shouted. "Lois, focus! Focus!"
"Okay, okay," she said sullenly before she brightened and cooed, "My little boy, all grown up and popping his cherry in his mom's Fortress of Solitude--I'm so proud of you."

Conner buried his face in his knees.

Lois drilled him about Terry--"Conner, you scored with the star quarterback, this is probably the coolest way to lose your virginity ever," she consoled him--and then cursed Terry--"He left you? How could anybody leave you? You just put out!" she shouted, enraged--and then begged some more to tell Clark--"Please? Please please please?" she asked--before she said:

"Look, Conner, based on what you've told me, this guy doesn't sound like an asshole. Something probably came up, so breathe in and out and talk to him tomorrow, okay? Besides," she'd added after a pause, "if it comes down to it, I know some guys who know some guys and you know where he lives."

At which point his grandmother came up to the loft--where I just had sex, Conner thought in horror--to call him to dinner. He managed to choke down his food but was sent to bed early on account that he, to quote his grandmother, "looked awful."

Buried beneath the covers, he moaned into his pillow and tried not to let his mind run wild.

Terry hadn't appeared to have freaked out during or after and it made absolutely no sense that he would have suddenly had a panic attack after Conner had fallen asleep and run away. Only it did make sense, Conner moaned, because he was doing the exact same thing, only it was because Terry was a bastard.

By the time Conner finally fell into a fitful sleep, he'd decided he'd set Terry's car on fire and vow celibacy and join a monastery, because seriously, it wasn't worth it. Only when he woke up it was to Terry's concerned face.

"What?" Conner said blurrily, and he sat up, leaning against his headboard and stared at Terry. He was angry, or he had been last night, only he couldn't quite remember all the details and it was really early and Terry looked really hot. He was wearing the jeans that were all worn on the thighs and Conner wanted to reach out and touch the cloth.

"Your grandmother said you were sick," Terry said gently, and sat on the edge of Conner's bed, stroking Conner's matted bangs away from his face. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Conner's brain kicked into gear and he smacked Terry's hand away. "You!" he hissed.

Terry's eyes widened. "What?" he asked, sounding hurt.

"You left me!" Conner accused. "In the barn! After we--you know!"

For a moment, Terry looked like Conner was speaking in a totally different language before understanding washed over his face like a particularly slow wave and he tucked Conner's hair behind his ear and said feebly, "I didn't want to wake you up!"

"You asshole!" Conner said, but without any real vehemence, since his whole body had gone soft from relief. "That--you--!"

"And I had to get my car back from Whitney," Terry went on, and frowned. "I left you a note."
Conner had opened his mouth to steamroll Terry and yell at him about how you didn't just *do* that to a person and how Terry was clearly going to have to make this up to Conner and how he was a jerk but at least he was hot but now his jaw was left hanging as Conner's mind braked rapidly.

Terry frowned. "You didn't see the note," he said.

"You--! I--!"

"Ah," Terry corrected. "You didn't *look* for a note. You just freaked out."

Conner sputtered for a few seconds before he narrowed his eyes and pointed at Terry, saying, "Okay. I'm going to let this one go because I'm so totally, stupidly grateful that it wasn't anything bad but this is the *only time*."

Terry rolled his eyes. "Okay, sure," he said tolerantly and Conner thought, it must be love.

Then Terry smirked and opened his mouth to talk and Conner totally had to kiss him to make sure he didn't say anything to wreck the moment.

Later, after a day of classes were Conner made a total ass of himself fourteen (14) times, he and Terry made out in the barn for an hour before Conner found the note stuck in between the arm of the couch and one of the cushions.

It said, "I've got to go save my car from Whitney, the whore, didn't want to wake you up. You look really nice when you're sleeping. I'll pick you up for class tomorrow okay? T."

"I guess I'll keep you," Conner said between kisses, mouth swollen and red, arms looped over Terry's broad shoulders.

"Yeah, cause I was really worried about that," Terry muttered, and slid his hand up Conner's shirt.
Chapter 3

III.

Whitney had been predictably insufferable After, which was how Conner referred to his entire relationship with Terry.

"That…sounds weirdly bad," Terry had said over pizza at Whitney's once.

Whitney had snorted and stolen the pineapple bits off of Conner's slice, muttering, "Hardly. It's so male it hurts my head, dividing the entire space-time continuum to before sex and after sex."

Conner hadn't started calling it a "relationship" out loud. It seemed safer to leave it in the comfortable region of simple action; he'd realized years ago sometimes words spoke louder and echoed longer than any action could ever hope, and Terry had a skittish fear in him, Conner knew. He sensed it in the way that Terry tried not to but managed to still keep his distance at school, the way that he gave Conner rides home but also offered them to Whitney, who only rolled her eyes disapprovingly but got into the car anyway.

She always said, "I'm not going to be your stupid buffer forever, Terminal."

And Terry always growled, "Don't think I'm doing this 'cause I like you, you fuckin' pom-pom."

Their relationship had only gotten more verbally abusive since Whitney had almost outed him, Conner thought affectionately.

But Conner had been not-dating Terry for exactly two months, four days, sixteen hours and, he thought, glancing at his watch, twelve and a quarter minutes. He knew it was stupid to keep time, but he couldn't help it. Whitney promised the "delirious stupidity" part of a new relationship would eventually wear off, but when she'd observed Conner's flushed, giddy expression, she'd muttered, "Maybe you're an exception. Oh God, I hope you aren't an exception."

So they were together, incognito, anyway, and if Conner occasionally pricked at the idea of being anybody's dirty secret, Terry's dirty smile more than distracted him from his teenaged angst. Conner also knew it was stupid to keep track of all the times they had sex in his head, because that was the kind of ridiculous, obsessive thing that having two (2) megalomaniacal fathers tended to do to a teenager.

And every other week, Geoffrey made a trip down to Smallville, which had the benefits of Conner seeing his best friend and the additional if unintended consequence of driving Terry to such a jealous sulk that Monday afternoons in his car had become a sacred time of total debauchery in Conner's mind.

"So, he sleep over again?" Terry would ask, mouth slick and pink and bruised, hovering over Conner's left hip.

Conner would make some sort of disoriented noise that meant, "Keep doing that. Oh God."

"Figures," Terry would answer, and go down on him again.

There were fractures, but they were small, and if Terry could ignore George's occasional caustic comments and ignore the fact that he was putting his entire life in Smallville on the line, then Conner could ignore that for the first time in his life he was keeping a huge part of himself away
from Geoffrey and that for the first time, somebody was ashamed of him. He wasn't frightened, didn't get it, not the way that Terry probably felt fear biting into his skin every time somebody asked him how come he and Melanie hadn't gotten back together after all.

"It's not that I don't want to tell people," Terry would start, and Conner would cut him off, because he hadn't kissed Terry back because he'd wanted Terry to raze himself for whatever they had between them. All Conner had ever wanted or expected was the chance to be happy, for Terry to be good to him, and mostly, Terry was, even if he was terrible at making waffles and lost his temper more than Conner was totally comfortable with.

Conner had been raised by Lex Luthor, who had made him promise never to be ashamed of himself, and Conner had mostly held himself to it; Conner didn't think it was wrong or strange for anybody to be in love, and he hadn't thought about it much before. But Smallville did--so much so that the story of Clark Kent and Lex Luthor was still big news in the small town, enough that his grandparents mostly kept to themselves these days, unbending and unwilling to be anything but proud of their son.

"I just don't want them to wreck this, make it hard," Terry said, and it was probably at least in part truth, but Conner could smell a lie, he'd heard them all his life.

In a strange and foreign way, Conner worried that he was doing the only thing Geoffrey had ever asked him not to do, but then it seemed that breaking Geoffrey's heart felt a lot like fixing Conner's own.

Lois sometimes talked about legitimate stuff, and she had said once that love never fixed all the cracks in a relationship. It wasn't that people stopped loving one another, necessarily, mostly it was just that they couldn't be together anymore.

"Other things come up, Conner," Lois had said, almost solemnly, though she'd always seemed to take her personal tragedies in detached stride, with a gallows humor so vicious sometimes that Conner wondered if feeling everything she was hiding from could possibly hurt as much as the jokes she was making at her own expense. Conner remembered the day her father had died, the day she'd been mugged, the time some bitch named Anthony had left her for good.

"You won't get it the first time, and probably not the second time, but you're never going to meet anybody you love more than yourself," Lois had told him, and her dark eyes were feverish and heavy with lashes and she'd been so shockingly beautiful and earthy that Conner forgot her point all over again. "When you decide to stay, you have to stay for yourself, nobody's good enough to live for only somebody else."

It was a concept that Conner didn't quite understand, and even with the image of Lois' dark eyes burning into his own, Conner realized he only had to look to the driver's seat to see Terry humming along to the music on the radio, his hair flying in the cold February breeze and his sideways smile when he caught Conner's eyes on him to forget she'd ever said it.

Conner was sixteen and stupid and maybe a little in love, and the sky was limitless.

"Is George okay?" Conner asked urgently.

Terry rolled his eyes and put another box of Stoufer's lasagna into the shopping cart, saying, "Okay, for the four hundred and sixty-seventh time already: yes, George is fine. It's a routine
EEG. It's a routine MRI. Just a precaution." He shut the freezer door and turned back to Conner, who was wringing his hands near the frozen broccoli. "It just means that my mom and dad go out with him to Metropolis for the procedure and I get to do some boring household stuff, not the end of the world, Conner."

It was Friday afternoon, four o'clock, and Conner and Terry were wandering around the grocery store. Despite the constant jokes and uncomfortable fascination with Martha Stewart, Conner realized that he'd be a terrible wife, given that he was far more interested in purchasing as many boxes of Gushers as possible and incapable of remembering to buy milk. Terry on the other hand, was doing a stand-up job, and Conner tried very hard not to picture him in an apron.

"And how come you were never this worried about me when I got hurt?" Terry asked.

Conner snorted, pain forgotten. "Firstly, you chose the extracurricular that meant you had to get head injuries all the time--" ticking it off on one finger "--and secondly, you totally deserved it when Whitney punched you."

"Thanks, Conner, you're such a great girlfriend," Terry said sarcastically.

And Conner was halfway through a snotty comeback before he realized what Terry had said. At first bewildered giddiness filled his chest until his brain finished processing and then he felt a roll of nausea, and he leveled a serious gaze at Terry, putting a hand on the grocery cart and stopping it in the aisle. Terry's eyes, when they met Conner's, were guileless and clear and Conner didn't know how to let Terry know that unspoken was one thing, misrepresented was another, but he wasn't going to be anybody's sublimated lie.

"That's--what did you call me?" Conner demanded.

Terry blinked. "I called--wait. It was just a joke," he said lightly, frowning. "What's wrong."

"That's not funny," Conner said with a scowl.

"I'm sorry," Terry said, using the same tone of voice Conner had heard forming out apologies to Whitney and Melanie and Mrs. Funt. "I didn't know you were sensitive about it."

Conner's eyes narrowed. "Okay, look, seriously. Not funny, all right?"

Terry raised his eyebrows. "Fine."

"Fine," Conner said, but still felt queasy.

Smallville's Kroger was stocked with some forty billion varieties of food and Conner felt suddenly nauseated by all of it--even the coagulated TV dinners that he'd always been weirdly fond of eating, just for the downmarket appeal. There were too many advertisements and icons and pictures of sports stars on the boxes of cereal and the loudspeakers overhead were listing out that day's specials. Conner closed his eyes, let go of the grocery cart and started to walk again, silent, and listened to Terry pulling things off the shelves and putting them into the cart, blanching at the tension in the air.

"It--" Terry started, frustrated. "It's just something I say, you know?" He waved in the air, flushing a little. "People ask me where I go, what's keeping me, and I say, new girlfriend, you know? It's not--it's not anything."

"What you tell people?" Conner croaked.
Conner had always been somebody's secret: his father's, his mother's, Geoffrey's. But it was a gift and a grievance, because his father kept him jealously, with riveted, all-consuming love, his mother kept him in overprotective worry, and Geoffrey kept him out of heartsick concern, eyes flashing when he remembered Conner's little cracks and tears. Conner was a secret, always had been, but never out of shame--and Conner liked Terry enough to gloss over the fact but not enough to have it thrown in his face.

Conner knew that it would be hard, even with parents who understood him and Lois who would enable him and Geoffrey who would probably love Conner no matter what he did--it would still be hard, and he was sort of okay with that, in the nebulous way one is forced to be okay with things like sexuality, death, and natural disaster. He was braced for impact. But Terry was a classic example of a total fuck-up, and Conner wondered perversely if through the filter of Terry's mind, he'd become a she and that's how Terry was adjusting to all of this so well.

He wondered now if that's what Terry was telling people, that he was fucking some cute, girl with auburn-brown hair from the next town over. "A little skinny," Conner could imagine him saying in the locker room, "but great lips, great skin, and her knees fall apart like she was trained in the best little whorehouse in Kansas."

Conner felt his stomach turn, thinking about Watson and Deter and the other huge, monosyllabic bruisers who could be hearing about him every day. And worse--the though of Rydell and Constance, who were funny and smart and who Conner really liked, because they'd surprised him and befriended him like Terry had, hearing this crap. And it suddenly seemed very important that he and Terry have that particular fight immediately.

"Check out," Conner said.

Terry blinked. "What? I haven't--"

"Check. Out," Conner said furiously, quietly.

Terry frowned.

In the car, Conner was about to start a totally roaring argument about arbitrarily assigning gender roles and about how even if he didn't say anything out loud he was still prone to fits of insecurity and that this was hard for him, too--but his phone rang.

It was L'arc en Ciel and READY STEADY GO which was (a) a great song to listen to on repeat if one needed rock motivation to get out of bed and go to Catholic school and (b) the mp3 ringtone Geoffrey had requested when Conner had dropped his old cell in a toilet and gotten a newer, sleeker, sexier Motorola Razor, evolution three.

So Conner pointed at Terry, who was looking increasingly irate in the driver's seat and said, "You sit there and appear pensive--I will deal with you in a second," and plucked the phone out of his pocket, saying, "Yeah?"

"You need to come to Metropolis," Geoffrey said immediately. No prelude. There was the sound of wind in the background.

Conner's eyes rounded, and he must have looked scared, because Terry reached over and squeezed his hand. "What's wrong? What happened?" Conner croaked. "Is my dad--?"

"Breathe," Geoffrey instructed, businesslike. "Your dad is fine. He had like, pneumonia or something--"
"Nobody told me he had pneumonia!" Conner shouted, horrified.

"--Okay, yes, and that's because you would overreact and steal somebody's car and kill yourself coming back to Metropolis or complain until I came and got you," Geoffrey said easily. "But the point is, your dad had pneumonia, and he's better, but now I think he's going to kill your mom."

Conner opened his mouth but Geoffrey cut him off:

"Clark's been hovering nonstop these last two weeks. I mean, Mrs. Banner called me to call you and do something. I really think there's going to be some sort of fatality if you don't come back for the weekend and remind them why they're married to begin with." There was a pause. "I sent a helicopter after you--where are you? I'm just gonna tell the pilot to come get you. Smallville's flat. Sort of."

"I'm at the Kroger," Conner said distantly, and Terry made a confused face.

"Okay," Geoffrey said, and Conner heard the static buzz of a walkie-talkie in the background and wondered if his life had always been this strange. After a few months of being mostly-ordinary in Smallville, it struck him as very odd that his best friend was running interference between Conner's gay parents, and had the luxury of sending a helicopter after Conner in order to do it; it wasn't normal, not in the scope of reality; when had his life become a big budget yuppie movie?

"Juan--" Geoffrey started.

"How is Juan?" Conner asked suddenly, ignoring the perplexed look on Terry's face. "I haven't seen him in months."

"Juan is fine," Geoffrey said soothingly, "and says he'll just go ahead and touch down in the parking lot."

Conner looked around the deserted parking lot. What the hell, he thought.

"Okay," he said strangely. "ETA?"

"Probably three to five minutes," Geoffrey answered, and there was that sound again: wind whipping something--plastic sheeting? paper? Conner couldn't place it exactly. "Don't worry about bringing anything with you, I cleaned out my closet and brought over all the stuff you've left over at my place since like the fourth grade."

Conner frowned, craning his head to look up at the sky through the windshield--no sign of any helicopter, and then turned to Terry and mouthed, FAMILY EMERGENCY. Terry's eyes widened, and he nodded supportively. Then, Conner thought, oh, hey, and mouthed, WANT TO COME WITH ME?

Terry said out loud, "What?"

Just as Geoffrey said, "So yeah, apparently I own a lot less clothing than I originally thought once I weeded out your stuff. I was wondering why my closet was so ugly."

"My clothes," Conner said hotly, "are not ugly." He glanced at Terry again, mouthing again, WANT TO COME WITH ME?

Terry stared and said, "Is that okay?"

"Is somebody else there with you?" Geoffrey asked, surprised.
"Yeah, it's--it's, um, where are you?" Conner asked, face turning bright red, looking away from Terry and out the windshield again, where against the blue sky, a tiny dark speck was forming.

Geoffrey snorted. "I'm hiding on the roof. Your father's locked himself into his office and said that if your mom tries to break in he's lining his underpants with lead, which, thanks for this special moment, Conner, was way more than I ever needed to know about your parents."

Conner sighed and rubbed at his face. Of course. He looked at Terry and smiled wanely, mouthing, YEAH. COME, and Terry's face shined and brightened and suddenly Conner felt a weight off of his chest, and whatever he'd dragged Terry out to the parking lot to fight about mattered a lot less.

"I've already told you sorry in perpetuity," Conner said sulkily, and then the sound of helicopter blades filled the air, whipping, loud, and horrifyingly close. Conner said, "Oh, look, it's one of Juan's classic lawsuit landings," sighed, and added, "Okay. I'll see you in a bit."

"Tell Juan to land at your dad's office," Geoffrey warned. "I am not getting squished for this."

"You're just a saint, aren't you," Conner muttered, and hung up.

"What's going on?" Terry asked, and he touched Conner's face as he said it.

Conner had a blank moment, one where he thought about what Lois said for no good reason at all and one where he thought about Geoffrey because he was the only one who had ever been allowed to do this--and he hadn't, really. And he felt something in his arms and legs go weak and grateful and stupidly happy all over again before he put a wavering smile on his face and leaned into Terry's touch.

He grinned wryly, and shouting over the rising sound of the helicopter, and said, "You're really okay with coming with me? Think fast!"

"Is there a helicopter coming here?" Terry yelled, half-hysterically.

"Don't worry, the cops probably won't get here in time to give us a ticket!" Conner yelled back, eyes sparkling. Okay, yes, his life was weird, and yes, he had his own personal airlift service, but hell, what a thrill, and Terry had a shine in his eyes Conner could get addicted to. "You coming or not?"

Terry shook his head, grinning wildly. "Okay, sure, fine, what the hell, right?"

Which was the exact moment when an enormous black helicopter with the purple LexCorp symbol on its door touched down in the deserted parking lot. Three people on the other side of the lot hit the deck, groceries spilling everywhere. Store employees spilled out onto the asphalt, pointing. Terry yelled, "Holy fuck!" loud enough to be heard over the propellers, and Conner just laughed and opened the car door, yelling behind him:

"Hurry up! This is totally illegal!"

The ride from Smallville to Metropolis was always one of Conner's favorite examples of urban evolution, and he pointed out the patchwork squares of green and gray and brown and talked about how they became smaller and smaller until they fragmented into warehouses, factories, industrial complexes satellite to the city center.

"There's Gilead labs!" Conner said excited, pointing down at a very white, geometric series of
buildings, and Terry stared in wonder--still trying to shake off altitude-induced deafness.

Terry had looked more than a little uncomfortable from the moment they'd gotten into the helicopter, and it'd taken about ten minutes of coaxing before Conner had gotten him to admit that he'd never flown before--and definitely never like this. Conner had smiled at him and assured him that it wasn't a big deal, that it was like a really expensive cab, and tried to distract Terry from the part of Conner's life that he had taken for granted was normal when he'd gone to St. Ann's, where practically everybody had a family helicopter or at least time-shared.

I mean, Conner had thought crazily, Geoffrey was practically the poor kid, and that was really fucked up, since Geoffrey's dad was a Kansas Supreme Court judge.

And it was right around then that Metropolis appeared beneath him, like an outward breath of relief, and Conner stared down at it in wonder. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed it, how much he'd missed home, when he was a meager three hours down a highway. He memorized her streets and overpasses all over again, in miniature from a great distance, and he felt the darkness crushing around the edges of the sky as the lights started shining, dotting the cityscape. There was a huge, stupid smile on his face and he couldn't seem to keep himself from pressing his face to the glass and grinning, huge and bright and hopeful, because he was going home.

Speaking of which.

Conner pulled himself away and cleared his throat. Terry looked up from where he was staring down and out the window pensively and asked, "Yeah?"

"Um, just a few preliminaries," Conner said diplomatically. He smiled encouragingly when Terry narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Mercy and Hope--uh, I guess you could call them bodyguards--are going to want to put you through a security check."

Terry's face brightened. "Your bodyguards are girls?"

Conner winced. "You really, really don't want to go there," he promised Terry.

Juan radioed the cabin and said, "We'll be landing shortly, Conner, Mr. Daniels. Buckle up. Miss Mercy and Miss Hope have already radioed up to say that they'll meet us on the helipad on the roof."

Terry stared at Conner, looking vaguely ill. "You have a helipad on your roof?"

"No, no," Conner soothed, buckling his seatbelt. "That'd just be ridiculous. It's on my dad's work building."

"Oh," Terry said sarcastically, "that makes it much less ridiculous."

Conner scowled and was about to say something about how Terry's negative attitude wasn't going to make this any easier but they landed with a jolt and the slowing flat of propellers on the roof, and Conner nearly burst out of his skin waiting for somebody to open the door--

And when Mercy did, it was to Metropolis, glittering and golden and alive, shining just within reach, the penthouse apartment three blocks away with all its windows ablaze, the lights in the observatory glowing against new glass, and Conner felt the city breeze, closed his eyes, and thought, finally.

When he turned to catch Terry's eyes and give him an encouraging smile, he saw only surprise and shock and a little dumb wonder, and before Conner had an opportunity to say anything at all,
Mercy said:

"Welcome home, Mister Luthor. Your father's waiting."

The helipad was exactly ten minutes away from his building and twelve minutes from the top floor penthouse, where his mother and father and Geoffrey were waiting.

So Conner had leapt out of the helicopter, dragging Terry toward the service elevator and keying in his passcodes. He didn't see Terry's face as they dropped with the speed of a bomb toward the ground level, where he hit the lobby attempting to run, tugging on Terry's arm impatiently. Conner's sneakers squeaked on the marble floors and the receptionists acknowledged him silently, murmuring into their earpieces so that the doormen were smiling tolerantly and holding open the heavy glass doors for him as he practically shoved Terry through them, tossing out a, "Hey, Bob, Lou!"

Hope was holding open the door to the black Benz by the time Conner and Terry made it down the ten steps and Terry managed a disoriented "What?" just as Conner grinned, pushed Terry into the car, and said, "Hey, thanks, Hope!" and scooted across the leather seats.

Barely a minute later they were driving down the street and around the corner and again, into the building where security gave him green lights all through it.

"Okay, I'm going to be lame and totally honest here and say that your life freaks me the fucking fuck out," Terry managed when they were in the glass elevator, shooting upward to the Luthor family penthouse.

Conner smiled at Terry fondly. "It's cool. It freaks me out, too."

The elevator came to a soft, easy stop, and there was a low, harmonic charm that made Conner's heartbeat quicken for barely a second before doors came open and Conner came face to face with Geoffrey's very put-out expression.

"They're doing it again," Geoffrey snapped, in a terrifying mood, the kind that made Conner edge away from him and toward the nearest exit, because while Geoffrey whined a whole bunch about his birthday he was otherwise like a smooth and forgiving ocean. Conner knew better than to Go There when Geoffrey was quick like a razor.

So it took him a stumble and half a second to say, "Um--oh God, again? Are you serious?"

"I'm unfortunately serious," Geoffrey muttered, and his eyes flicked over to Terry for the barest second, icy cold, before he said, "Oh, and Mrs. Banner wants to talk to you, Terry."

Terry blinked hugely. "How do you know my name?" he asked.

Geoffrey sighed and put a hand on Terry's arm, steering him toward the kitchen. "I'll explain how this whole family works in a little bit. For now, Mrs. Banner has to ask you a few questions."

Conner got a sudden flash of a cement interrogation room, a metal chair and table, a single, naked bulb overhead and Geoffrey and Mrs. Banner playing Bad Cop, Killed Charlie In The Bush With Her Bare Hand (Emphasis: Singular) And Lived To Cross-Stitch It On Your Pillows, Motherfucker Cop and felt vaguely doomed. His whole face started to burn in awareness, because of course he couldn't have thought of the possible consequences of bringing Terry home before he'd gotten there could he? Conner reached out to grab at Geoffrey's shoulder, saying, "Wait!"
At which point Geoffrey swatted Conner's hand away, and firmly dragged Terry off, saying, "The thing about Conner's parents is that they own more spy technology than the CIA--" and with exaggerated carelessness that meant that Geoffrey and Mrs. Banner had probably been screening security reports and Oh God how mortifying was that? "--I mean, I hope you haven't been doing anything that could piss them off."

Terry said, "Um," very shakily.

Conner rubbed his face with his hands, then, he heard his mother's voice and persistent knocking, which reminded him why he was here in the first place, which in turn reminded him that for every one thing that he loved about Metropolis, there were at least two determined to give him a migraine.

Conner had been thirteen when he'd found out, during one of those innocuous weekend farm visits when he'd been struck by a sudden and unrelenting case of insomnia and was wandering around in the storm cellar at three in the morning; he'd found pieces of his mother's ship, all shiver-gray and dusty, old files, rotting with age and eaten through by bugs, a metal box with a gun in it, four bullets in the chamber, the letters L.L. engraved into the handle. There was a yellowing tag on it, with messy writing, marked in a series of numbers and jumbled shorthand Conner would eventually realize was an evidence marker.

Conner had wondered what that meant for months, weeks, thought about it late into the night because the blank space, the absence of it lingered in his mind until he was poking around his father's things weeks later and found Lex's gun, similarly engraved. It had no bullets in it.

Conner wasn't a stupid child, and all of the Luthor family history was vivisected on the internet, available as pay-for stories on the Daily Planet website or searchable across the internet, on gossip databases and starfucker forums. But Conner had learned early on that if he didn't want to upset himself and his father by reading up on Lex Luthor's youthful indiscretions and then giving himself nightmares over his father overdosing on designer narcotics, the best thing to do was look away.

But when he was thirteen he was curious, and he'd looked up all the sites, the conspiracy theorist webpages, the backdated articles, and he'd read as much as he could bear about his grandfather's death, just a few days after his own birth, from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. There were disputes, accusations, implications of something far more sinister than an old man who'd simply bent and broken. There were convincing coroner's reports about body placement, the dearth of blowback on his hands, the exact angle of entry of the bullet, the way blood had splattered, and Conner had realized with horror about two days into his research that he was reading about a person--a person who was, in no matter how small the measure, a part of his life.

The very next day, three reporters jumped the fence at St. Ann's and cornered Conner for an interview, which he'd tried to handle as well as he could until Geoffrey came back with the cavalry, who'd bodily removed the reporters. A few nights after that, Conner heard about firings, bankruptcies, lawsuits being filed, lives being destroyed and an entire magazine going under and he'd looked across the dinner table to see his father reading the Financial Times with a scary sort of serenity, peacefulness after a job well done.

And the tickling thought had pushed itself so forcefully to the front that Conner had to step back for a few days, walk away from the possibility, and when he came back it was to seeing Mercy neatly intercept a crowd-rusher at a charity event, two swift motions of her hands and the man was unconscious on the ground.

And Conner had winced and walked away from the suspicion but he remembered the look on his
father's face, Mercy's expressionless eyes and how they'd intersected, like drawing the outline of a chalk body on a sidewalk, and he was beginning to understand.

In one way or another, Conner had always known his father could do great and terrible things--for LexCorp, for Conner, for Clark, for all the things he wanted for himself, but it wasn't until he'd said to Mercy, "My grandfather. Did he--my dad, did my dad have to--did he have to have it done?" and she'd said, "Yes, there was no other way," that Conner really understood the depth of it, the direction of it. It was scary, but it was for him, and Conner couldn't be frightened of things his father had done for him.

With that tear, Conner had started peeling away the veneer, and he'd found with a lot of very careful poking an ocean of other things, extensive files, hazardous materials, a vault which he couldn't open, wasn't on the apartment blueprints, and wasn't accessible even through the panic room (which contained cyanide pills, Conner discovered with shocked stupidity).

And beyond these things, earlier than that, in the decades before LexCorp's meteoric rise, before Lionel Luthor (was killed) died, before everything, there was his father and a Porsche and a bridge, an accident that Conner had heard about a million times but hadn't understood. He'd looked up all the old articles, the gossip columns and columnists who had been subsequently ruined, all tiny pieces of evidence of Clark and Lex, dropped like forgotten, green-rusted pennies at the bottom of a fountain. Conner found old photographs, ran his fingers over the surfaces, saw his father and his mother as whole different people, familiar faces in different light.

He was grateful that he hadn't known these things when he was younger, that his father had always worked so hard to hide that part away, because Conner knew about the luxury of being ordinary, though he'd never really understood at what price it had come.

The thing was, Conner wasn't frightened of his father--maybe frightened for him, for what he was willing to do for Conner, for Clark.

So after the conversation with Mercy, and after he'd catalogued the many wrongs he'd been able to find on the bare surface, he'd been able to, just as always, smile up at his father, guileless and honest, because Conner loved his father, the same way Clark loved Lex--and it was not pretty or harmless and maybe it wasn't even good, but it was love, and Conner knew it like he'd always known the sun, always known Metropolis.

Conner's mother was packing his things loudly in the bedroom, making sure to knock his elbow (gently) against the wall as he dramatically folded and refolded the four shirts that Clark hated anyway, and never wore. Conner smiled faintly, leaning against the door frame.

He said, "Deja vu all over again."

Clark looked up, and his eyes lit up, all bright green and shining like Conner's own, and Conner felt a moment of shocking familiarity, of belonging, and it made the smile on his face waver for a second before Clark had his arms wrapped around Conner's thin shoulders, pulling him in.

"It's so good to see you again," Clark said, pulling back, grinning.

He patted Conner down, feeling Conner's shoulders and arms, his face and his hands, like he was checking that everything was as it should be, and Conner swore he felt a vague shivery sensation when his mother did a bone scan, as if any major injuries could be hidden from a family like this. For God's sake, his best friend and his housekeeper were in the next room interrogating his boyfriend, probably about how frequently and what kind of sex he and Conner had been having.
"It's good to see you, too," Conner said, grinning wildly. "Twenty seconds."

Clark pursed his mouth. "I'll give him thirty-five."

Conner grinned, feeling a little reckless. "Twenty seconds--at a dollar a second."

Rolling his eyes, Clark said, "Fine."

Conner cocked his brow, and started counting. He was up to eighteen before he felt his father's hand on his shoulder, and heard his father's voice speaking over Conner's head, "I think you owe the boy some money, Clark."

"I think you guys are in cahoots to ruin me," Clark said, and did not reach for his wallet. Instead, the scowl that had been on his face when Conner had come into the room tried valiantly to creep back, but mostly failed, because Clark was looking at Lex and Conner in a way that made his whole face shiny and wholesome like a department store catalogue selling blue jeans and 100% cotton t-shirts, bright and comfortable and good.

Conner craned his head, saw his father's face, still pale and definitely thinner but healthier than the last time Conner had seen him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been updated, of course, in careful words by his grandparents, who continued to insist that Conner shouldn't be so fatalistic about the whole thing, that Lex would be fine, but it was better to see it with his own eyes, Conner thought, it was really, really good.

Lex looked down, and he smiled, all gray-eyed like Athena and playful, and he seemed simultaneously younger and older than Conner remembered, a little more worn from illness but happier than Conner had seen in a while--and he wondered why that was, that they were keeping from him, but he didn't get an opportunity to ask before Lex said:

"So, should I be looking forward to a fine from Smallville about Juan this time around?"

Conner snorted. "You should really just pay for him to go to flight school again."

"Your dad thinks Juan's flying has real personality," Clark said snippily, but without any venom.

"I think it's important to foster individuality in employees. The initiative makes them more productive workers and happier," Lex said, half by rote, and added for Conner's benefit, "Besides which, he's still a far better flyer than Clark."

Conner managed to choke his immediate bark of laughter but Clark didn't bite back his yell of insult, and suddenly it was okay again, the cloud of tension that had blossomed between the three of them like a heavy, unforgiving fog starting to dissipate. And Conner watched his parents bicker cutely for a bit before he let himself join in, playing devil's advocate against both sides and then professing his total innocence when they wised to his ways and narrowed their eyes. Eventually, some people said some really heartfelt but short apologies and Conner said, "It's okay--I sort of understand now. I'm sorry I made it harder," and there was some revoltingly saccharine hugging, which Conner endured because it made his parents feel better, and not because he'd been aching for reassurance or anything like that.

Finally, Lex said, obscenely bright, a little bloodthirsty, "I noticed you brought a friend."

There was a running joke in the family that if Conner ever brought anybody home in a romantic context--and it was kind of depressing now in retrospect that everybody had always said "somebody" instead of "her," which basically proved that Conner was the last person in probably all of Metropolis to know his own sexual orientation--that Lex would go instantly insane and try to
colonize something. It had been funny when Conner was twelve and joking about it just to see the color go up in Clark's cheeks and his dad's eyes get narrow—but at sixteen it seemed a little bit more frightening, and he battled a desire to go turn on C-SPAN and see if Lex Luthor had been redrawing any maps.

"He's just a friend?" Conner tried lying, but he could feel himself raise his voice in questioning at the end of his own sentence, and the razor-sharp glint in his father's eyes basically confirmed that after Mrs. Banner and Geoffrey were through with him, Lex Luthor was in line. Conner swallowed hard.

Then Clark said, "If--it's--anyway, you should know you can tell us anything," and turned red. Conner moaned miserably. "You guys," he said pitifully.

"It's not anything I won't find out anyway," Lex said in what was probably supposed to be a sympathetic way.

Clark frowned. "What he means is that we're supportive and you can tell us anything." He stared at Conner balefully. "Anything," he emphasized, and then added, "Is there--um."

"I can think of absolutely no conversation that I want to have less," Conner said grimly.

"Even the--?" Clark started.

"Yes," Conner interrupted, and Lex smirked, saying:

"Well, I trust you've taken into account the information I provided--"

Conner held up his hands in a quelling gesture, gathering up all his inner reserves of strength, dignity, and the ability to fake it in moments of true hysteria, and said with as much measured grace as he could muster, "You guys are clearly double teaming me for fun. Despite this, thank you for your concern and if we don't stop talking about this right now, I think I might die." His parents looked at him fondly. "Now, I have to go save Terry from Geoffrey, who I think might rip off Terry's arm and beat him to death with it or something."

Lex blinked. "Why would he do that?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Clark snorted. "I'll explain it to you later."

"You know what," Conner said, heading out of the room, "I don't even want to know."

Lex liked Terry.

"Quarterback, huh," Lex said thoughtfully. "I sponsored your team once, long ago."

Terry's eyes were bright, he said, "Oh, yeah! I read all about it! When I made captain they gave me this huge set of files that went back ten, twenty years." He grinned. "Got boring sometimes and I just went through all the old paperwork--really fascinating stuff, Mister Luthor."

Lex beamed. "Captain of the football team, too, huh?"

Conner gaped, his half-peeled orange abandoned in his hands, juice running down his fingers. It was making his jeans sticky where his wrists were on his knees but seriously, who cared?
Lex liked Terry.

Geoffrey and Clark on the other hand, were sitting together on the gray loveseat, scowling deeply and casting betrayed glances at Lex, who either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Meanwhile, Conner continued to stare, torn between horror and gratitude that there had been no blood shed, and that—unbelievably—Lex liked Terry.

"Daniels," Lex said, distracted for a second. "Daniels—oh right! I think your brother came up to the state senate once to petition for more special education in rural schools--" Terry froze for a second, instantly defensive and squaring his shoulders and Conner—instinctive, knee-jerk at this point, reached out to him, put a sticky, sweet hand on Terry's knee "--he made a really impressive speech, I remember. The entire senate was talking about it for weeks." Lex smiled easily and Terry slumped visibly in relief, making Conner beam at his father like the sun.

"Your brother's a brilliant young man, Terry," Lex continued. "I've been hearing rumors about this year's secondary division science fair."

Terry blinked in surprise. "How did you know about that, sir?"

Conner rolled his eyes, pulling his hand back, and Terry followed the motion, digging through his left pocket until he produced a crumpled, linty napkin and passed it to Conner. He took it gratefully and started to wipe off his hand, saying, "Oh, you have no idea. My dad's the biggest science nerd in the Western Hemisphere. I swear he starts recruiting out of elementary schools."

"I think it's great," Terry said, his smile practically incandescent, and he frowned a little at Conner and took the napkin away, wiping down Conner's fingernails and thumb with a disapproving look before scrubbing his own knee with it. So much for cute, emotional support, Conner thought in mild annoyance as Terry balled up the orange-stained paper and set it on the coffee table next to Conner's abandoned orange.

When Conner looked up, Lex was beaming at him—at them, and it made Conner more than a little uneasy, especially when coupled with the fact that the scowls on Geoffrey and Clark's faces had only seemed to deepen exponentially since the last time he'd checked.

"Well, your brother has huge potential. The computer model he made for the elementary science fair was so many years beyond his age--I don't know anybody who isn't looking forward to his development," Lex added.

Conner sighed. "You're such a stalker, Dad."

Lex looked unashamed, just grinned and said, "Hey, nobody's going to be complaining when I start offering distinguished scholarships."

"You offer--you'd give George a scholarship?" Terry said, a little amazed.

When Lex smiled this time, it was half-predatory, though Terry clearly didn't recognize it because there was no flinch, no wince, no shiver—which Conner recognized in himself, in Clark, and Geoffrey respectively. The latter two were still glaring hatefully at Terry, and Conner wondered what Geoffrey had against the guy for a second before he remembered that he hadn't mentioned anything about a boyfriend beforehand. It just hadn't fit in with all the other pedantic information they'd been exchanging: classes, books, movies--boyfriend and sex in the barn just didn't seem to flow very well anywhere in the emails.

Still, Conner thought sullenly, it seemed a little meanspirited to hold it against Conner when
clearly, Geoffrey and Mrs. Banner knew from security reports that must have been released contingent on Conner's return to Metropolis. It wasn't like they hadn't had any forward warning at all. Conner was abundantly certain (and abundantly humiliated) that Mercy had provided an in-depth, comprehensive report, which, for probably the first and last time ever, was more comprehensive and in-depth for Mrs. Banner than Lex--who would have exploded by now if he knew about the thing that Conner totally hadn't done at all because he wasn't that kind of boy in the supply closet at school the other day because Terry was so painfully hot when he was disoriented.

Then, Conner caught Geoffrey catching Conner staring dumbly, mouth half-open and possibly even drooling. Conner snapped his jaw shut, flushed briefly, and started to smile in apology but then Geoffrey went and mouthed angrily: He's a moron.

Conner glared. He mouthed back: Eve!

_Do not_, Geoffrey enunciated, moving his mouth hugely, even go there.

"...a LexCorp scholarship would be very generous, and we'd love to foster your brother's love for system statistics, in fact, one of my thinktanks is currently--"

Conner narrowed his eyes at Geoffrey and said, "Dad--stop recruiting." He turned to Terry, and pasted on his very sweetest smile. "Want to go out to dinner?"

Terry looked momentarily confused, glancing between Lex's approving, indulgent smile and Conner's semi-desperate expression and finally saying, "Um. Okay."

"Good," Conner said, pulling Terry up to his feet as Terry waved awkwardly and said:

"I--I guess we're going out for the evening."

Lex beamed. "Have fun," he said, and added pleasantly, "Mercy will be watching your every move."

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Once upon a time, Conner had thought that the most uncomfortable dinner of his life had been with Donald Trump, whose new wife had been drunk and more made-up than any woman Conner had ever seen. They'd been in a Kansas City restaurant and she'd been leaning over Conner, with a terrifyingly interested gleam in her eyes and she'd kept commenting on how cute he was, his little button nose, asking him when he got out of school on Wednesdays. It'd taken three showers and four therapeutic hours of watching really embarrassing anime like _Kyou Kara Maou_ before he'd managed to feel clean again, though Geoffrey claimed that watching anime about getting flushed down toilets and being molested by all of your senior staff completely defeated the point of a cleansing ritual.

He now knew he was wrong, wrong, wrong, because he was sitting at a table with Terry, waiting for Geoffrey and Eve to show up and trying not to have a panic attack.

Earlier that evening, when Conner had finally escaped his parents and gone to rescue his sort of boyfriend, he'd seen Terry wobble out of the dining room with Geoffrey and Mrs. Banner hot on his tail. None of the parties involved looked happy but nobody was dead and Conner couldn't see any visible injuries; also, Terry had all four limbs and Conner counted that as a positive sign. He'd smiled winningly at Geoffrey only to receive a withering stare in return, and Mrs. Banner had gone all soggy and tearful and excused herself for the weekend, saying she wasn't emotionally prepared to deal with this period of Conner's life and this hadn't been the way she'd planned it at all.

_Then_ his parents had come out to join the party and in a terrifying twist of fate Lex liked Terry and
Clark and Geoffrey seemed to loathe him, which was a 180 from what Conner had been emotionally prepared for but not altogether bad.

At least not until Geoffrey had said, "If you're going out to dinner, why don't we make it a double?" and Clark had said, "Hey, that's a great idea," with the manic determination of a parent who was going to make you like it, or kill you trying.

So Conner and Terry were now in a booth at Walden's, a very small, very quiet, very subtly upscale restaurant with no dress code and no reservations but seemed to have, no matter when Conner and Geoffrey arrived, with or without their famous families, a table for exactly the number in their party in the most discreet of booth locations. Terry stared at the heavy damask tablecloths. He stared at the settings. He stared at the votives and flowers on their table. He stared at the celebrities, all dressed down, sitting around them, and then he stared at Conner for a little bit and reached under the table to squeeze Conner's hand.

Conner squeezed back apologetically, and rubbed his palm against Terry's knee. He hadn't picked the restaurant, and he hadn't wanted to eat here, because in his time in Smallville he'd realized that his life, no matter how ordinary from his own frame of reference, was intimidating. He hadn't liked the way Whitney and Terry had reacted to the idea of press, to Conner's publicist who'd stopped in one afternoon for a routine session, to the high technology and lack of everyday concerns--he'd made himself normal and now he missed it. He missed getting pizza delivered via tractor and bitching about the bus and using double coupons at the Kroger.

He missed being Conner instead of Lex Luthor's son, Conner Clark Luthor.

He smiled at Terry in what he hoped was an encouraging way, and leaned in to whisper, "Don't worry: just eat outside to inside with the utensils, and save the horizontals on top for last."

Terry managed a weak smile. "I feel like I should make a Pretty Woman joke."

"But you won't," Conner said, "and that's why I love you."

The moment it was out of his mouth he regretted it, went all white and all red at the same time, which made him all splotchy. His jaw was still agape and he tried to pull his hand away from Terry's because Conner had promised himself he wouldn't make this a big thing.

Conner was about to start apologizing when Terry put his palm on Conner's face and forced him to look up--

To see the most brilliant, beautiful smile on Terry's face. It was wide and honest and simple and so happy it made something in Conner's chest shout, run in circles, want to cheer, because he hadn't known he could do that--make another human being that happy, and it was amazing, intoxicating, as joyful as Terry's expression.

"You've been holding out on me, Metropolis," Terry said softly.

Conner flushed. "I didn't want to make it a thing."

Which was when the second amazing thing happened, and Terry broke his perfect smile with a laugh that made Conner smile in response. And Terry leaned in so he could say against Conner's lips, "Conner--it's always been a thing," before he kissed him, so sweet and slow and good that Conner swore he forgot he was in the restaurant.
At least until Eve said:

"Shouldn't you two be past the stupid couple phase already?"

Terry and Conner broke apart guiltily in time to see Eve smirking hugely and Geoffrey wearing a dark, venomous scowl. Conner wiped at his mouth self-consciously.

"Hi," he said lamely.

"Um," Terry repeated faintly.

"I hope you know your father's watching," Geoffrey snapped.

"I hope you know he thinks it's cool I bagged Terry," Conner hissed, and then turned to his side to apologize, at which point Terry cut him off with a shake of his head, grinning and agreeing:

"No, no, you're absolutely right. I was totally bagged."

Conner wondered when absolutely anything that came out of Terry's mouth started sounding incredibly sweet and wonderful, and figured it was some sort of hormonal problem associated with adolescence. Otherwise, he'd be forced to confront the depressing fact that he really was part of a stupid couple, and he'd seen enough of those at Smallville High to know that he wanted no party in that sort of thing.

"Bagged is such a strong word," Conner prevaricated, turning colors of red he didn't know existed in the spectrum of visible light and watched Geoffrey's face go from threatening to pure malevolence. Conner ignored him.

Terry grinned, and it was a huge, shit-eating expression. He stretched his arm out across the back of the booth and stroked a few fingers along the nape of Conner's neck, and Conner squeaked while Terry said, "He's just being modest. It was bagging. He gave me a poker chip and I totally caved."

Conner couldn't help but stare, because while he'd always known that Terry was funny and smart and good, Terry had never been this funny and smart and good. Beyond that, he was loose all over, arms and legs lengthening, knee touching Conner's, their arms close together, and the hand on Conner's neck hadn't disappeared in an afterthought--it was like something in Terry's chest had unwound.

Conner had noticed the precise moment of change when they'd stepped out onto the street about an hour ago and Conner had said, "Oh, don't worry. My father has full coverage--the press won't get near us as long as we're in the city." It was like the promised anonymity of it had unlocked something, and Conner found it surprising and alternately crushing, because it was eight thirty at night and Conner felt, for the first time, like he had a boyfriend, and he knew that once the clock struck Sunday it was all over, all over again.

"You guys should sit down," he said, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

Geoffrey snorted. Eve beamed, and then she sat--unassisted, Conner noted with some interest. While he'd been in Metropolis, Geoffrey had always pulled out chairs for her, waved her into her spot at the booth, and now they seemed just to work around one another with a comfortable forgetfulness that made it that much more horrible see them together--though Conner figured that since he had his own boyfriend, he really ought to shut the hell up and let that go.

"Somebody's easy," Geoffrey snapped.
Conner glared. "Yeah, somebody sure is."

Geoffrey glared back. "You're so petty," he hissed.

Terry flashed the two of them an expression that meant he really, really didn't want to know.

Eve tossed her hair and batted her lashes. She smiled with her curvy, sweet mouth. She stroked a finger over the back of her hand. She smiled at Conner and smiled at Terry and Conner thought for a minute that maybe she wasn't all that bad, because she said, "I was just teasing. Anyway, Conner, congratulations. Terry, it's good to meet you."

She sounded like she meant it, and Terry responded to genuine affection with the helpless gratitude of a drowning man. He shook her hand and then he put his huge palm on Conner's knee again, his smile less awkward now, if flushed.

"It's good to meet you, too..." Terry trailed off and Conner broke in.

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that," Conner said, distracted. "Terry, this is Eve, Geoffrey's girlfriend." Then, he glared at Geoffrey. "You've already met Geoffrey--" and pausing, he added in a dramatic stage whisper "--he's an artist, so you'll have to pardon the temper tantrums."

"Conner likes tentacle porn," Geoffrey snapped back, spreading his napkin over his lap.

A waiter that had been approaching them took a sharp, obvious turn left and scurried as quickly away as possible.

Terry and Eve ignored them. She extended her hand, palm down, and Terry took it in a fumbling, gentlemanly way, shaking it delicately, and she laughed at him, pulling back her fingers and saying, "So what do you think of Metropolis so far?"

"It's a little different when you're seeing it from the Luthor penthouse," Terry admitted ruefully. "But you know," he said, and glanced over at Conner, "the view's incredible."

Conner smiled at him, and he knew he looked dopey and stupid and almost as bad as the condescending, touched expression on Eve's face. Her lips were pursed at them and she looked as if she was barely resisting the urge to reach out and ruffle Conner's hair.

"Oh my God--I'm going to go into diabetic coma any minute now," Geoffrey complained.

Terry winced. Eve glared. Conner narrowed his eyes and put his hands on the table, palms down, and then pushed himself to a standing position.

"Geoffrey," he said, voice measured and calm.

"Yes, Conner?" Geoffrey said, with an exaggerated, placid voice.

"Can I see you in the restroom for a moment?" Conner asked, still painfully polite.

Geoffrey raised his eyebrows, and his eyes were very, very blue. "Is it important?"

"Yes," Conner hissed in as civil a manner as possible, and the waiter who had started to venture over again detoured again. "Yes, it is."

"Well, I suppose," Geoffrey finally said, and stood.

Conner threw his napkin down on the table and started stalking toward the men's room, Geoffrey's
footsteps just behind him--and over his shoulder he heard Terry ask:

"Are they always like this?"

And Eve answer, "Oh, you have no idea. Geoff and Conner are like twelve year old girls who both
think they're going to marry Tom Cruise when they grow up."

When Conner and Geoffrey were eleven they had a slap-fight in Aubrey's Diner that had been so
hugely and unendingly embarrassing that Mona the career waitress still talked about their wicked
little hair-pulling sessions.

Things had not, apparently, improved with age.

Because the moment the bathroom door shut behind them, Geoffrey grabbed Conner by the
shoulder and shoved him against a wall. The tile was cold beneath his shoulders and the impact
knocked the breath out of him, made Conner's eyes go wide with mute shock and then narrow in
fury before Conner shoved back, sent Geoffrey skidding until he was against the other side of the
narrow entry to the bathroom, hands almost shaking.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Conner demanded.

He and Geoffrey had never thrown a punch. They didn't scuffle when they were kids. They
shoved, sometimes, but mostly if they made each other cry it was by saying stuff out loud that hurt
more than a fist ever could. Conner wondered if this wasn't going to be another one of their many
firsts: first girlfriend, first boyfriend, first separation, first fight, first broken nose.

"You don't get the moral high ground here, asshole," Geoffrey snapped, and his eyes were bright.

"What," Conner hissed, "because I'm gay? Because I'm a fag?"

Geoffrey's face went slack and horrible and lost for a second and Conner forgot that despite all the
horrible things he sometimes thought, most people were never as bad as Conner liked to think.
And Geoffrey had never put up with the sharp words and slurs the way that Conner had been
trained to accept, and Conner realized with a sickening sense of guilt that there was a very good
chance that Geoffrey had never even heard anybody say things like that.

"I--" Conner started, and he had no idea why, because an apology would be so completely
incongruous they'd lose all their momentum--and what the fuck did he want to fight about,
anyway?

Geoffrey seemed to shake himself out of it, and when he did, he yelled, "You didn't tell me, you
asshole! I was in Smallville how many times and you never said a word!"

Geoffrey grabbed Conner by the shoulder and jerked at the collar of his shirt harshly, a mean,
violating move that made Conner flare up a little: cold fear and still surprise and heat, undeniable
heat, as Geoffrey's palm made contact with the white skin on his collarbone.

"What are you--?"

"What're these?" Geoffrey said, voice all dark and mean and all the things Conner knew Geoffrey
could be--but never to Conner, at least never before. Geoffrey pressed his thumb into a bruise on
the nape of Conner's neck, and Conner hissed.
Conner had been looking at it in the mirror earlier. It looked like a purpling flower, and the indistinct edges had already started to melt away into his clear skin. It made him flush all over in memory. The hazy memory of Terry's face, the sweaty, regal line of his nose, his mouth wet and slick from kisses, dark with the taste of the two of them in his mouth. The more vivid thoughts of Terry's hands, calloused and broad and clumsy on Conner's thin frame, his hoarse voice and Conner's murmured assurances, promises, encouragement. The way Terry had bitten down on Conner's shoulder and come, the way he'd sighed into Conner's skin, breathed outward, the way it felt laying together afterward.

Conner felt Geoffrey's hand, painful on the mark Terry had left on him and thought for the first time he didn't really like Geoffrey very much.

So Conner looked away, at the gleaming row of sinks and said, "It's none of your business."

"What--so he can bite all over you and--"

"No," Conner said gently, and he looked at Geoffrey again to find that lost expression back on his best friend's face. He smiled a little bit, and it was lopsided and imperfect--a little off. "I mean it's--it's not bad."


"It's not bad," Conner promised him, and the smile got a little crazier, a little wider.

He knew, he just knew he was baiting Geoffrey, because if Geoffrey had ever had a dangerous streak, it was in the way he was fierce about the people he cared about and Conner knew better. If Conner traced their shared history--and so much of it was shared--he'd find black pockets, dark corners, where Geoffrey had been angry or miserable or a scary combination of both. They happened so rarely that they always stuck out in Conner's mind, like the raised skin at the heart of a scar, soft and foreign against fingertips.

"It's really not bad," Conner insisted.

Geoffrey's eyes got dark and luminous, shining for a second and Conner held his breath, waited for it, because something was coming, he knew it. He'd always known Geoffrey with the intimate understanding of a cartographer and a raised map, felt the hills and punishing edges of mountains of Geoffrey's moods. Conner almost smiled, because after everything, after all of it, something was finally coming and he'd be gracious about it, he'd be good about it, he'd work out the ugly details later, but first, something was coming--

And Geoffrey let go, like he was letting go of everything, and something in Conner's chest lurched in sudden, shocking nausea.

"Okay," Geoffrey said lightly.

"Okay?" Conner asked.

Then Geoffrey smiled and Conner thought: I was wrong. I was wrong. We weren't fighting the way I thought we were fighting.

"Okay," Geoffrey said and how could Conner had been so stupid--how did he forget that Geoffrey loved him and was good to him?

"Geoffrey--"
"Let's go back out," Geoffrey suggested, and he was grinning. "Sorry I was freaking out."

Conner thought he was going to throw up. "It's fine," he said.

Then Geoffrey touched Conner's shoulder and it was somehow entirely different than any other time Geoffrey had ever touched Conner at all and they walked back into the restaurant, a sudden ocean of noise drowning everything Conner was thinking until they got close enough to their table to see Eve and Terry talking in low, conspiratorial tones, their guileless laughter--

And the way that Terry turned and caught Conner's eye, how his whole face brightened, and how like magic Conner felt better and worse at the same time.

"You always go to the bathroom in pairs?" Terry asked later.

"Like Eve said. Twelve year old girls. Mrs. Tom Cruise," Conner mumbled.

Eve laughed, and Geoffrey said, "I totally win though, we decided this ages ago."

Conner moaned. "Please don't say it," he begged.

Eve shrieked laughing. "That's right! You did decide this!"

Terry put his hand on the back of Conner's neck and Conner leaned into his side, because apparently he'd still been in the process of breaking up with Geoffrey and now it was official. He felt like shit and like there was a weight off his chest and he wondered strangely if this thing between Terry and him was going to be less sizzling since Conner wasn't cheating on anybody anymore. But then Terry rubbed his thumb in a circle on the side of Conner's neck and that thought went right out the window.

"GeoffTom, or Tomfry," Geoffrey said, smug, "both of which sound completely stupid--"

"Wow, service sure is slow tonight," Conner said, unnaturally loud, but Terry wasn't so much listening as ignoring him so he could laugh with stupid Eve and stupid Conner's sort-of-ex-boyfriend, that asshole.

"--but are still better than ConTom, which, if you will notice, sounds basically like--"

"Oh my God," Conner wailed, "where's our food? Why isn't it here?"

If anybody heard him, it wasn't apparent from the way they were laughing themselves sick, and the waiter, carrying a platter with all their orders on it, took one look at the table, sighed in frustrated resignation, and turned away again.

Terry begged out of staying the night, and Conner wasn't sure if it was because of the looks that Clark was giving Terry or the looks that Lex was giving Terry.

"You didn't have to scare him away," Conner said accusingly.

Lex had sent Terry off with Mercy, since she was less scathingly hostile to him than Hope, and he was being helicoptered back to Smallville. Conner had managed a quick squeeze of his hand before Terry left, and though his father had looked a little bit like a starry-eyed mother on prom night, Conner had enough dignity not to let emotion overwhelm him and kiss Terry where his dad would have ready photographic evidence--and Clark was easily within killing range.
"He's on the football team," Clark said desperately, taking the Coke Geoffrey passed over.

Conner rolled his eyes and glared at his dad, who was doing something that looked worrisomely like beaming. "And you! You didn't have to scare him away either!"

"I approve of him, Conner," Lex said charitably. "I was simply expressing that approval."

"Not by making him think you were going to force us to get married if he stayed you shouldn't," Conner complained.

Geoffrey, who was being no help and raiding the refrigerator made a noise that sounded like he was strangling off a laugh, and Conner thought not for the first time that Geoffrey was basically all the worst parts of both of Conner's parents in very nice packaging.

"Stuff it," Conner snapped. "Don't even get me started on your behavior tonight."

Geoffrey pulled the most angelically innocent expression Conner had ever seen and then Clark and Lex laughed and excused themselves to bed. Lex pressed a kiss to Conner's temple and Clark ran a paternal hand over the crown of Conner's head and gave a lingering smile for Geoffrey--kind and strangely sad.

And then the house was dim and sweetly quiet, with Metropolis a million miles beneath their feet, the city lights glittering outside of the wide glass windows and Geoffrey close and familiar--and just like before, the boy who knew everything about Conner and forgave him for all of it.

Geoffrey was putting the last cups into the dishwasher and wiping his hands on his jeans, sliding his palms against the seams and Conner thought with a sudden shock of sadness how tragic and bad it was that Geoffrey wasn't his anymore. That, after all these years between them, they'd reached a fork in the road and they'd taken somebody else's hand to navigate the path.

Conner thought that he'd never get over the fact that he knew the way Geoffrey dried his hands on his pants--the exact way he slid his fingers over denim--and not be with him. It seemed wrong and unnatural, different than the way Conner had always planned it, but everything had turned out differently than expected, Conner thought bitterly.

And then Geoffrey was looking around the kitchen, like he was taking in the sights one last night before he left, and it made something in Conner's throat tight and something in his chest hurt.

"Hey, long time no see," Geoffrey finally said, his voice soft and quiet, breaking the stillness.

When Conner smiled in answer, he saw Geoffrey's eyes and they were blue, like Conner had always known they were blue and that hurt, too, for no good reason at all. "Hey," he said hoarsely. "And--yeah. Something like that."

Then Geoffrey ran a hand over the countertop, smiling privately down at the surface, and glanced up, lashes throwing deep, dark shadows on his face in the vaguely orange light of the room--shadowed by sienna and brown against the walls and hallways, the single light over the sink struggling against the overwhelming night in the room.

"Are you okay?" Conner asked, because he genuinely wanted to know.

Geoffrey laughed, and shook his head, said, "Yeah--look, sorry I've been--" he waved his hand in the air, long, pale fingers blurring in the dark "--weird about this. It was a surprise."

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything," Conner murmured, looking at his feet.
"It's fine," Geoffrey said, in a way that let Conner know exactly how much that peace had cost.

Conner fisted his hands in the hem of his shirt, and felt small and like a shit and didn't know what to do for probably the millionth time since the beginning of the year and was so tired he just wanted to go to sleep, to wake up in the morning and feel Geoffrey's breath on his neck--for it to be the before before the after. Because it'd been easier then, easier and safe and comfortable and there was no risk.

"It's late," Geoffrey finally said, and it sounded like the words were pulled out of him despite the smooth tones, the flawless timbre. "Wanna walk me to the door?"

Conner blinked, and opened his mouth twice before he could say, "You're such a girl, Archer," and took a step toward the foyer, felt his feet cold against the floor, heard Geoffrey's sneakers pad across the wood, so familiar with the walk he could do it in the dark, by sense alone.

"Whatever, Luthor," Geoffrey said, with a ghost of a smile around the corners of his mouth as they stood in front of the elevator, Geoffrey's hand smoothing the metal above the button. "I think we both know who's the princess between the two of us."


Geoffrey only grinned, small and sweet and reached out one arm, hand hanging midair for a moment before he stroked his knuckles over Conner's check--in a move both shockingly new and intimately familiar and old like a heartbeat Conner had memorized.

"Geoffrey--" Conner started.

"I just never thought it'd happen this way," Geoffrey admitted, interrupting him, and that smile was still on his face. It was incandescently sad and Conner didn't understand, and it was making something in his chest sink. He thought he'd already done this, in the restaurant bathroom, been as sad as he knew how to be over Geoffrey but maybe he'd been wrong, because he could hear something in the space between them that sounded like an apology for something neither of them had known was wrong.

"Geo--"

And then just like it had never happened before, Geoffrey was smiling against his mouth--lips soft and sweet and tasting like orange juice against Conner's own. But what Conner almost felt more was Geoffrey's hand, still very gentle on his cheek, and the other on Conner's hip, soft and possessive, like this, at least, was his, and Conner wanted Geoffrey to have it, wanted to give him everything, and in a desperate, furious panic he knotted one hand in Geoffrey's hair and licked his way into Geoffrey's mouth.

Geoffrey kissed like he painted, smooth and skilled and with a surprising recklessness, biting at Conner's mouth and running his tongue over Conner's teeth and Conner wanted it so much and so badly and had been gone so long--he scraped his teeth over Geoffrey's lower lip, sucked at the bow of his upper lip, wrapped his other hand around Geoffrey's bicep, tight enough--Conner hoped--to leave bruises. So they'd remember. So they'd remember something--so they'd remember this.

And then they needed to breathe and Conner tried to put it off as long as possible because this wouldn't end the way it always had with them, but Geoffrey--

Geoffrey was kissing his lower lip now, sweet and closed-mouthed, and then the corners of Conner's mouth, so gently it made Conner feel naked.
"Okay," Geoffrey gasped, forehead pressed against Conner's, and his eyes were closed as they panted at one another, too close for friends and now too far apart. "Okay," Geoffrey said again, and this time he looked up and looked at Conner, his mouth all swollen and red and bitten and wearing all of Conner's bruises and said:

"I just never thought that--" and he took a step back, knees shaky like Conner was feeling and stared at the space just over Conner's left shoulder, hands fumbling with the elevator button before finally managing to light it up "--never thought that if I kissed you it would go like this."

And then the elevator door opened and Geoffrey smiled at Conner again like it was all forgiven, like he'd finished this chapter of his book and that was fine because there were dozens more to go and said, "Okay--goodnight," and left, disappearing behind the elevator doors as Conner felt his knees give out and he slid to the floor, watching light arc off of the metal.

Conner spent the night in the observatory. By sunrise he couldn't feel his face and his hands or his legs or his chest but he couldn't feel Geoffrey's mouth on his either--and that had been kind of the point.

When Mrs. Banner found him out there, she helped him up and wrapped him in a blanket, poured him into bed and bought him tea and brushed his hair out of his face and said, "I know, baby. I know."

Conner and Geoffrey silently avoidance was the better part of valor on Sunday, and Conner spent Sunday at home with Clark watching *Lifetime*, because he figured there really wasn't much lower that he could go. At least, that was what he thought until he pulled the tub of strawberry ice cream out of the freezer and started hacking at it with a spoon in front of the television, at which point Lex had come out of the study, looked extremely disturbed, and turned right back around without saying a word.

"Did something…" Clark tried.

"I'm watching *Lifetime,*" Conner snapped, and stuffed another spoonful of ice cream in his mouth.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" Clark said primly.

"I fucking hate this movie," Conner muttered around the spoon, but did not reach for the remote control, instead channeling all of his hate at the television screen.

The problem with being emotionally unstable on top of having telekinetic powers was that Conner tended to forget said telekinetic powers until things like televisions exploded--at which point Clark started shrieking about Conner using his powers for good instead of evil and Lex rushed out, first to point out how incredibly cool that was and then make a feeble attempt at scolding Conner under Clark's death glare.

"I'm very, very, very sorry," Conner said.

"You really, really aren't," Clark scowled, and checked Conner over for injury. It was amazing how far Sony shrapnel could air.

"But I really, really want you to think I am," Conner said.

"Don't even start that with me, buster," Clark said, managing to hold his frown for a whole five
seconds before he rolled his eyes, sighed and threw up his hands. "I guess it was an accident."

Conner snorted and hopped off the kitchen stool. In the background, his father had a Geiger counter over the sparking remains of the television, bearing a disappointed expression when the clicks remained even and unexcited.

"Whatever, Grandma's outed you like crazy," Conner said meanly, and Clark winced at that.

"Right," Clark agreed, and said, "All right, fine. Go pack your stuff, the helicopter will be here any minute."

Which was exactly when they heard the flap of chopper blades, and Mrs. Banner's shriek--audible even in the living room--telling Juan not to land in the pool again.

"You have to come, Conner. It's the biggest event of the year, Conner. It'll be like slap in the face for Melanie, Conner. I'm the head cheerleader, Conner. I'll protect you, Conner."

Whitney glared. "I have protected you, haven't I?" she demanded, shoving a Dixie cup of spiked punch into Conner's hand.

He took one sip and gagged. "What the hell is in this?" he choked out. He rubbed his tongue with his hand feverishly, trying to get the taste out of his mouth.

Whitney took a sip and winced. "Kool-Aid and--" she ran her tongue over her mouth "--Aristocrat vodka, I think."

"This is the most disgusting thing I've ever had in my mouth," Conner said, between licking the sleeve of his shirt.

"Frankly, I think Terminal would be the most disgusting thing you'd have had in your mouth, Conner," Whitney snorted, and as Conner was choking on the punch and his shirtsleeve, she waved across the orange-lit patio of Melanie's house as a few of the school's social elite wandered past, already slightly-drunk and embarrassingly loud.

Even in Metropolis, Conner had never seen the attraction of rubbing elbows with the social elite. Partially, it was because he'd been forced to do it since he was very young, spent more time in and out of tuxedos and charity balls than was healthy for a kid--and to take a page out of his father's book, he'd spent a lot of time in the coatroom with his portable Playstation playing Final Fantasy XXIII because even losing repeatedly to a girl-man-squid thing was less traumatic than having to smile at rich people who wanted your father to run for Senate.

Smallville's social echelons were different though--it had nothing to do with good breeding and who you were related to. Instead, the people who mingled and laughed together, got drunk off of cheap liquor were all bound by Smallville High School's bizarre social strata: varsity sports, cheering, and student government. All the popular kids wore the right kinds of jeans and t-shirts with tiny polo players sewn over the left breast and looked so pressed and powdered Conner was a little bit horrified, though honestly, since he'd had a publicist since he was three, he didn't have a right to mock them for commercializing themselves.

"Why did I have to be here again?" Conner asked, indiscreetly pouring the rest of the Dixie cup into the ugliest bush within reaching distance.
Whitney shrugged and sipped at the toxic punch some more. "To see how the other half lives."

"Please," Conner snapped. "If you're trying to show me discrimination and people being assholes, I was kind of raised among the gems of this practice."

"And it so shows," Whitney said affectionately, crinkling her eyes at him. "What with your snooty vocabulary of words like 'phooey' and 'blargh!' and your wearing t-shirts that look like they were abandoned by the Salvation Army."

Conner put a hand on his chest. "Hey," he said feelingly.

"Chill, Conner, I just wanted you to lighten up, I thought watching the zoo of Smallville would be kind of anthropologically hilarious," she said with a real smile, and rubbed her shoulder against his affectionately. "You've been kind of wound up tight recently," she added carefully.

Conner stared at his hands. 'Wound up tight' was the understatement of the century.

In a little over a week and a half since he'd come back from Metropolis, he'd picked three fights with Terry, who seemed equal parts bewildered, hurt, and frustrated, and Conner felt worse every time he did it. But there was nobody else he could snap at and Lois was MIA--doing an in-depth story about the disappearance of small farmers in the American Midwest, according to Clark.

Conner wanted to scream at the top of his lungs and tear at his hair and had spent a large portion of Monday afternoon, after fight the first--which had ended with Terry storming out of the barn loft, yelling, "Get the fuck over yourself, Metropolis!"--throwing stuff around the room with his mind until he gave himself a screaming migraine and drugged himself to sleep with NyQuil.

To add insult to injury, Terry had all but blown him off when Conner had finally shored up all his decency and apologized Tuesday afternoon, saying, "Whatever," and driving a little too fast on the turn into Conner's grandparents' driveway--which of course had led to fight the second which had concluded with Conner throwing his bookbag into Terry's face and calling him a fucking cunt and really not improving matters.

They'd called a tentative truce on Wednesday after Conner had literally been on the verge of frustrated tears, furious with himself and Terry and wanting nothing more than to go back to Metropolis and punch Geoffrey in the fucking face.

"Hey--look, can we please stop fighting?" Terry had asked, and his voice had been sweet and low and kind, which had been enough to break the dam and send Conner tumbling into his arms, muttering apologies for being a dick before he'd tackled Terry to the couch and apologized in the most sincerest way he knew how.

Now, four days later, Conner was still all knotted up inside and even if Geoffrey had kissed him goodbye, it had felt like being kissed good morning.

If it was one conversation he never, never, never wanted to have with Terry, it was the "So my best friend toward whom I have been making vaguely and confusedly homoerotic overtures, possibly my entire life, kissed me hard enough to suck an orgasm out of my face--and I'm feeling kind of conflicted." Conner knew himself well enough to know that he'd add, "Uh--not that I don't love you and stuff," to the end of that confession and just make it all the worse.

He moaned and let his chin fall to his chest, and Whitney made soothing noises and rubbed the space between his shoulder blades, saying, "Aw, honey."

"I'm just so bad at life," Conner whined.
"But it's okay!" Whitney said. "Because we're young! And Terminal will forgive you."

Conner cast a jaundiced expression in her direction. "Yeah?"

Whitney's expression went maternal and she stroked one hand over Conner's tousled head, saying, "Conner, don't be stupid, all right? He's crazy about you. I've never seen him this happy."

"Not even with Melanie?" Conner asked snottily, though he couldn't keep the smile off his face.

Whitney made a face. "She really is a vampire, Conner."

"Yeah, only it wasn't his neck she was sucking on," Conner snorted.

And Whitney's mouth was open and grinning to say something when it suddenly snapped shut and her eyes went hard and dark, and Conner turned his head to see what was going on just in time to see--

"Oh hell no," Whitney said.

"What the fuck," Conner snapped, and in the grass went the Dixie cup and his feet started walking him over to where Terry had Melanie pinned to a wall, his mouth covering hers in one of those disgusting open-mouthed kisses that Conner was unaware that Terry was engaging in with people other than himself.

Whitney may have yelled something like, "Wait! Stop!" and reached for his arm, but what Conner lacked in coordination and athletic ability and coolness he made up for in speed, and suddenly he was jerking Terry away from Melanie by the back of his shirt.

"What the fuck," Conner repeated, and he looked at Terry's bruised-red mouth, the way his t-shirt was slightly rucked up, the smooth stretch of skin Conner could see under the cotton cloth and the glazed look in Terry's eyes.

Terry smiled dopily at him. "Hey, Metropolis."

"Hey, asshole," Conner hissed and he was about to rip Terry a new one when Melanie slammed him into the brick wall behind them, her face dangerous and beautiful and flushed and Conner noted for not the first time how scarily pretty she was, all painted lips and kohl-rimmed blue eyes. She was a porcelain and sharp and preternatural and a fucking vampire.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, you little shit?" she barked.

"Stopping him from doing something he'll regret," Conner snapped and shoved her hand off of his shoulder, and glanced over at Terry, who had stumbled into a wall, leaning against it heavily, eyes misty and looking off into the dark treeline, mouth hanging open, still obscenely wet from Melanie and her vampire kiss.

"Hey, jackass," Conner said in Terry's general direction, which only managed to get Terry's attention for maybe two seconds, which was when Conner realized that there was something seriously wrong.

Conner furrowed his brow as Whitney jogged over, shoving Terry against a wall and narrowing her eyes at his foggy expression, peering into his face. "Hey, Terminal! Terrence!" she yelled, and turned to Whitney, eyes huge and scary, shouting:

"What the fuck did you give him, Melanie!"
Which made Conner worried enough that he shoved past Melanie over to Terry, who just grinned stupidly at both of them and bobbed his head up and down, laughing threadily, face flushed and sweat beading in a way that made Conner flash suddenly to the six hour lecture he'd gotten on his twelfth birthday about party drugs and it made Conner's mouth go dry.

"Terry," Conner said. "Terry!"

Behind them, Melanie laughed, and said, "Christ, guys. Lighten up. It's just a little E--"

Which was when several things happened at once:

Whitney yelled, "Fuck!" and ran off into the house.

Melanie's eyes went huge and scared and she took off after Whitney, saying, "Shit! Ross! Calm the fuck down! It's nothing--!" before her voice faded in a clatter of footsteps over linoleum.

Conner held Terry against the wall, staring at him and promising himself that nothing would happen, that it'd be fine, that Whitney would get the car and they'd drive Terry home and they'd never talk about it again and Terry wouldn't die in some horrible drug-related accident because that shit didn't happen in real life, they only said it to scare stupid teenagers.

And Terry, who was still smiling, loose and huge and happy, put his big hands on Conner's cheeks and said, "Hey--I was looking for you. I wanted to give you something." And before Conner could ask what, Terry was kissing him, hard and a little mean and sloppy, turning them so that Conner was the one up against the wall and Terry's familiar breadth was holding him here, all warm chest and broad shoulders and thigh between his knees--brick behind Conner's shoulders.

It was hard to kiss back, Conner realized, when you were terrified and furious and worried, so he was pushing Terry away when he saw people standing behind them and thought, "Oh. No."

Conner remembered Walden from the hallway outside of the Chemistry classroom, when Walden had called him a faggot and Conner had thrown him across the hallway and Terry had smiled at him, drowsy and amused and intrigued. It seemed very far away from where Conner was watching--horrified and frozen--as Walden's monstrous fist was pulling Terry away from Conner and slamming Terry into the dust with a bone-shattering punch.

And then Walden's eyes went to Conner and Conner barely had time to register Melanie saying, "I fucking knew it," before his head was slammed into the brick wall and it all went black.

Conner woke up ready to beat the living hell out of Terry, because, you know, sexual eagerness was hot and rough fucking was definitely a turn on but could he stop ripping at Conner's fucking pants? It was just so crass and it wasn't like Conner was going to spontaneously develop a headache on him if they didn't have sex right fucking away--

So he was about to open his mouth and punch his boyfriend in the hip but then he realized he couldn't open his mouth which was when he woke the fuck up real fast and moaned, low and bruised, through the duct tape over his mouth.

The hands jerking at his pants were still jerking at his pants and Conner was having a hard time forcing himself to breathe around the panic that had swelled up in his throat. When he managed to blink his eyes open it was to the double-image of sneakered feet in front of his face, to the feel of cold dirt and rocks digging into his arms and to the distant sight of his KEEP METROPOLIS WEIRD t-shirt, ripped into two pieces near his head, and the blurry sound of voices over his head.
"I think he's up," somebody said, and it sounded like the voices were filtered through water.

A rough scrape of nails shocked Conner out of his dizzy stillness and it was like a tsunami of sensory perceptions crashed down on his head all at once: the frigid air that prickled his skin and made his fingers and bare toes ache, the smell of loamy, dead wintry earth beneath his face, the jagged edges of all the rocks in the dust, the dead brown stalks in front of his face--cornfield, Conner thought, I'm in a cornfield--and the fiber brush of them on his legs; how his head ached, like it was overfull and cracking, and God, it was freezing, he couldn't feel his eyes opening and closing.

And then his hips were coming off the ground and his jeans were coming off his hips and sheer panic hit him like a ton of bricks, and Conner flailed until he realized his hands were taped together, so he kicked blindly until three guys--where the fuck had they come from? he thought, panicked and high-pitched in his head and oh God, he was going to die in that field, they were going to kill him and do God knows what before they killed him and he was going to die--growled and held him down and Conner kind of recognized them through the haze of pain and fog of panic and their expressions were familiar and so were their huge shoulders and oh fuck these were the varsity football players and Conner was going to die.

"Fucking--hold the fuck still!" somebody yelled and Conner gave a vicious kick just for stupidity.

"Ow!" the voice yelled and then Conner got backhanded, which apparently was even more not-fun than Conner had always imagined it to be, and he tasted blood in his mouth and felt nauseated, swallowing it and trying to breathe through his nose, head swiveling around and wincing as the hands on his hips started tugging at his--oh fuck no--boxers, jerking them down his legs as the three guys all but sat on him, holding him down into the dirt.

"Little faggot has leg strength," somebody said grudgingly and Conner saw numbly that somebody had dropped his boxers in front of his face, the blue cloth with oranges on it near enough to see the green leaves and he flushed all over in humiliation, felt himself try to curl in on himself in spite of the weight on his chest and he couldn't move--he couldn't move and he'd never been so scared in his life.

Which was when it all blurred out of focus, because Conner couldn't breathe and he couldn't move and he was freezing and naked and somebody--he was going to throw up, he was going to throw up and it'd be that much worse--was sliding one hand down his back, over his goosebumped skin and over his hips in a revoltingly intimate way and the only person who'd ever touched him like that was Terry and the murmur of voices over his head turned interested and holy fuck Conner was going to be raped to death in a fucking cornfield--

And like the tick of a clock, everything narrowed to a very dark and small place in Conner's head.

He closed his eyes because he didn't need to see to do this and suddenly it wasn't him doing it anymore--it was so huge and hugely out of his control that all he could do was feel the ripple outward as he forced his eyes open to see the wind rise, to hear the beginnings of an inhuman shriek and the hand disappear from his skin, the bodies lessening their weight on his chest, to the sight of the sky overhead gathering violently purple--unnaturally deep and crushing and poisonous, clouds scattering.

Conner blinked, his vision clearing and the sounds around him crystallizing with a sudden, intense sharpness in time for him to think, Yes.

And the tornado slammed down around them, Conner in the center, curling into himself and feeling the wind whip at the deadened cornstalks around him, heard the terrible noise like a
screaming train and the fractured sounds of people shouting around the storm so Conner thought, *More*.

So this time when he opened his eyes, it was flat, flat earth, with the sound of the train still drowning out any other noise. The sound was so huge that Conner winced at the sheer enormity of the silence in his head, like it had tipped over into nothingness, like the universe was too small to contain it and Conner's head was emptied out, like all the fear and horror and revulsion and anger had melted into the air around him, whipped it into a frenzy, into a storm--

And the corn was flattened, so Conner could see for miles around, see the huddles figures of people scattered, the overturned shadow of a truck in the distance, see houses and trees far away and he hoped they wouldn't be consumed, too, but it was out of his hands, really and it was very, very quiet in his head.

Quiet enough to sleep but then Conner saw something at the edge of the field--far too close for it to be safe, he thought distantly--and saw that it was Whitney, her hair flying and her body struggling against the outliers of the wind and grasping posts in the field to make progress and Conner realized what he was doing with a sudden, riotous panic that made the wind flare more, blow up a wall of dust from the ground that blinded him.

Which was when the panic got really undignified because oh God, Whitney could be dying. Whitney could be like those bodies in the fields and all broken in two like the corn stalks and Jesus fucking Christ Conner couldn't stop the wind--it had all spun out of his control and he didn't know what to do and it was so huge he couldn't find the edges of whatever he'd thought to make it start, couldn't find the beginning and wouldn't find the end.

So he did the only thing he *could* do and thought black, black, black and deep, went deep inside and started to turn things off, like walking through a house and turning off the lights--a jolt there, a dimming there, vision started to blur again, but that was okay, because his breathing was slowing and his heartbeat was thunderous and rolling in his chest, slowing.

And it was working, he knew it was working even as his vision butterflyed black at the edges because he heard Whitney screaming his name and the thud of her knees hitting the ground, felt the way she dragged him into her lap, wrapped her arms around him, how she leaned them against a post behind her back--where Conner saw, the last thing before it all went dark again, Whitney's face, red and covered in tears and dirt and the shape of a scarecrow, forgotten in the fields, behind her wild hair.
IV.

The first time Conner woke up he fought the respirator and hurt himself something awful between the gagging and tugging and the nurses trying to hold him down--which made him scream and got him sedated.

The second time Conner woke up, he almost started it up all over again but Clark was at his bedside, holding Conner's hand so hard Conner thought his hand would be broken. And Conner stared into his mother's eyes the whole time he was awake, which must have only been a few seconds because Clark didn't say anything, just stared at Conner like the world was ending until Conner went back to sleep.

The third time Conner woke up he saw his dad crying at his bedside so he closed his eyes because it made him want to die--again, Conner thought, because he had died, hadn't he?--to watch his dad's hands covering his face, shoulders shaking.

Conner knew--the same way he knew the sky was blue and that Geoffrey shined and his mother and father loved him--that he was fine, that there was nothing physically wrong with him that ibuprofen and time couldn't heal. He could feel bruises, bleeding along his pale, pale skin; he could feel the cuts knitting together with an aching he liked to brush against cool hospital sheets. He felt a low throb and a numb grayness and he could hear his blood rushing in his ears.

Conner knew he could wake up, but it was hard to fight the undertow of seeking fingers, the curling claws of dreams that were chained to him, and when Conner slept he did it fitfully, waking up in damp sheets, panting for oxygen, staring everywhere but at his parents' expressions, watery and bruised, broken-hearted.

Conner dreamed.

Sometimes it was a hazy golden Smallville day, with the sky a piercing blue over the distant treeline and the tattered windmill circling lazily, clouds crawling across Conner's field of vision. There was a cold wind, sweet and tart like apple cider and he would lean over, press his head to Terry's shoulder, feel the knobby bone of Terry's elbow and the warmth of his thigh and Conner would press their hands together and close his eyes.

Sometimes it was Metropolis, slick with rain and gilded in all its neon jewels, square and sheer and shaped like reflected signs, like enormous ever-changing screens, advertising electronics companies and displaying the weather. And Conner could hear the sound of choppers overhead, traffic murmuring below, feel the oxygen wrap all around him, suspended like Conner's mother must have felt when he was flying--watching the city in a wash of lights. And then Conner would hear Geoffrey say his name and look over his shoulder, feeling his mouth tug up in a smile as he reached out for his friend's hand.
Most of the time, Conner dreamed of the field and the jagged dig of rocks into his legs, his back, his arms. Conner smelled the dirt, pungent with sleepy winter and the putrid scent of last season's fertilizers and chemicals, the green afterimage of rows of corn, the disaster in the air sharp and acrid. Conner tasted the blood in his mouth and nausea rolled his stomach and he saw the blurry feet in front of him, felt the rough hands on his shoulders, his face, cupping his chin and stroking the backs of his knees, the insides of his thighs, the arches of his feet, and each touch made him shake until he woke up, tears soaking into his pillow and choking, mouth sealed tightly, grinding his teeth so hard his jaw hurt.

The fourth time Conner woke up, Geoffrey was there.

The light in the room was gray and watery and warm, slanted across the sheets on the hospital bed, and Conner was on his side, IVs still running into his arm—but Geoffrey was running his long fingers between Conner's wrist and the naked curve of his elbow, where needles were bruising translucent skin.

"It's okay," Geoffrey whispered, kissing Conner's wrist, his mouth the only warm thing in the whole room. "I'll be here when you wake up."

Geoffrey was there when Conner woke--every time he woke, after that. Either at the bedside or in another corner of the room, or hanging in the background, hair sticking up six ways from Sunday and scribbling across what Conner recognized as his school notebooks, absurdly cute and cow-printed, a throwback to an era where people took their books to school wrapped in a leather strap. Conner's parents drifted into and out of the room like ghosts.

Conner was grateful for the silence after the deafening noise of the storm, and he sometimes wondered if he'd damaged his hearing permanently, if the tornado had simply whited out all the sounds around him.

Around the eighth or ninth time Conner woke up, he tried to talk and a hollow rasp came out.

"Good morning," Geoffrey whispered, appearing suddenly at Conner's side, his face pale and tired and so happy it made Conner blink.

"Morning," Conner croaked. "What--" he started, and stopped himself, swallowing hard, throat achingly dry for just a second before Geoffrey shushed him, disappeared, and came back a moment later with a cup in his hands.

Geoffrey's calloused fingers pressed at Conner's mouth, cold ice sliding against his lips and Conner opened his mouth gratefully, tasting salt on Geoffrey's skin as the water rolled down his throat—a trickle of relief.

"First time I've ever seen you so quiet for so long," Geoffrey said, voice still low, setting away the cup of ice chips with a plastic thock against the bedside table.

"What are you doing?" Conner croaked.

And Geoffrey, who appeared neither surprised nor distressed, only scowled and said, "English--we're doing British poetry--T.S. Eliot."
Conner closed his eyes again, swallowing hard and shaking his head.

"Eliot is American," he rasped.

" Apparently, there's some debate about that," Geoffrey said, and sat on the edge of Conner's bed, hand on Conner's hip, and it was a safe, warm kind of touch, the kind that helped push away the dreams a little, shoved them into dark corners on a warm day.

"You are what you're born into," Conner said by rote, and blinked drowsily. "What poem?"

"Love song," Geoffrey answered, and his voice dropped down to a whisper again. "Footmen for death and eating peaches. Rolling up linen pants and walking on beaches."

"Mermaids singing," Conner said, dazed, slipping back into the dark, "each to each."

Geoffrey smoothed a hand over Conner's forehead and Conner leaned into the touch--starved for it, longing for something other than the clinical lines of the hospital room. "They singing to you?"

Geoffrey asked, palm huge and warm on Conner's temple.

Conner shook his head faintly, words slurring as he murmured, "Human voices, Geoffrey."

And the last thing he heard before he tipped over into the black again was Geoffrey saying, "You're not going to drown, Conner."

So Conner slept again, dreamless and deep like a velvet ocean, tumbling down into the waves and looking upward to see the glimmer of Geoffrey's smile like golden sun shimmering on the skin of the sea.

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The first time Conner spoke to his father after he woke up, he said, "Hi, Dad," and Lex had come to him with trembling hands, kissed Conner's cheeks and eyelids and brow, stroked Conner's hair and touched his neck, his shoulders, rubbed Conner's hands and touched all of his fingers. Lex murmured, "Oh, thank God, thank God," until Conner finally pulled his father into an awkward hug so he could hide his red face in Lex's shoulder and mutter, "You don't believe in God." Then Lex said:

"But I believe in you."

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It took another four days before Conner managed to harass Lois into getting him a copy of the second-day, and when she arrived with it clutched in wary hands, Conner jerked it out of Lois' grasp and smoothed his hands over the familiar broadsheet, the text and dropeds and color photos on the front page. He did it until his eyes focused on an image of his father with his face in his hands, Clark bent over him, standing in the shadow of a lobby, all cloaked in shadow. There was a sheer arc of light, like the photographer had captured the image through a window, but Conner could see the slouch in his dad's shoulders, the tension in Clark's, their faces crushed and miserable.

Everything left of column A down the center was making Conner a star, and he felt a doomed sense of realization that the news cycle was going to eat this up--that he was going to be famous in all the wrongs ways for a very long time.
His hands were kind of shaking but he pressed his palms down into the newspaper on his lap long enough to find Lois' byline: LOIS LANE, STAFF REPORTER under a headline that read LUTHER HEIR VICTIM OF HATE CRIME.

The story went like this:

Conner Clark Luthor -- son of heartland business baron Lex Luthor -- was hospitalized at Metropolis Mercy-Wade Hospital Monday morning following an assault in Smallville Friday night.

Police reports obtained indicated that Luthor had been at a local, Smallville High School party when five members of the varsity football team and one member of the varsity cheerleading squad spied Luthor and another football player embracing -- leading to a struggle which left both Luthor and his beau unconscious.

Luthor spent the past several months in Smallville after his father, Lex Luthor, was diagnosed with leukemia and began undergoing treatment. Sources close to the family claim the move was to ease family stress generated by the disease. Luthor was living with Martha and Jonathan Kent -- parents of Clark Kent, Lex Luthor's longtime partner.

Whitney Ross, an 18-year-old senior at Smallville High School, contacted the police immediately, saying in her 911 call that somebody had been drugged and beaten -- but by the time law enforcement arrived, Luthor had been whisked away by the football players for a "scarecrow," a Smallville tradition banned more than a decade ago, where the victim is first stripped and then tied to a post in a cornfield overnight.

Police arrived on the scene at Jonas Carter's farm about an hour later after braving a freak tornado to find an entire cornfield flattened, four unconscious football players and Ross performing CPR on Conner Luthor, who was taken immediately to Smallville Medical Center and then medivacced to Mercy-Wade several hours later. Ross was kept overnight at Smallville Medical to be treated for shock and assorted bruises and cuts garnered in the storm.

"I was horrified," Jonas said. "Things like this -- I thought they didn't happen in this town anymore. I thought we'd moved past that."

Police disagree.

"There're questions as to whether or not this was premeditated," said Smallville Sheriff Gordon Hutchins during a press conference Thursday morning. "There is not, however, any question that this was a hate crime."

"It was an unconscionable act, and we will get to the bottom of this."

Although Lex Luthor has yet to make a public statement, doctors at Mercy-Wade said Luthor was in stable condition, though they were unwilling to speculate on when he would be released and did not reveal the nature of his injuries. Hospital officials added that Luthor's companion would be transferred to Mercy-Wade later today.

Conner pasted a smile to his face and glanced at Lois, who was peering at him from between her fingertips, hands splayed out over her face and wincing.

"My beau," he said stupidly, because if he thought about anything he'd throw up, and Lois looked like she was wearing her tan Jimmy Choos, the ones she loved more than bylines.

"Your beau is under eighteen," Lois pointed out.
"You and your ethics," Conner said, because in a way, this was completely hilarious.

In the sterile language of news, everything seemed less terrible. The article was well-sourced and calm, detached and revealed nothing of what Conner imagined was high-pitched fury on Lois' part as soon as the story broke, Perry White's resigned abuse of painkillers as she'd started in on her tirade in front of his desk. And sources close to the Luthor family were not described as deadly and organized, knives glinting in their eyes. Only Lois could have done the story--despite past conflicts of interest--Conner realized, because no one would have spoken to anybody else. Lois was compromised, and that was the only reason she had access at all.

"How is my beau, really?" Conner asked strangely, and his mouth was dry.

Lois rubbed her temple. "He's about two floors down."

Conner nodded, slowly. "Can I see him?" Conner wanted to ask, why hasn't he been up here?

According to Lois' sources, who were Jeremy, the omnisexual male nurse in trauma, and Helen, apparently Terry's attending, Terrence Daniels had been transferred to Mercy-Wade after Smallville kicked up a fit that its native son was caught swapping spit with another boy. There were snide comments, a media circus, and small-town hospitals unaccustomed to the attention had thrown up their hands and ordered a helicopter. So Terry was two floors down from Conner's room, recovering from three broken ribs and a broken wrist, bruises and cuts all over and just hearing about it made Conner sick all over again, felt himself nauseated like he was rocking on a boat.

It wasn't like Conner hadn't known--intellectually, anyway--that Terry had been hurt. He'd been there, at least briefly, when Walden had thrown the first punch. And for all of the bruises and scrapes Conner had seen on Terry's pale skin, he gagged thinking about Terry wearing all the same scars Conner did.

"I'm kind of tired," he whispered.

And Lois touched his face, said, "I thought you might be."

On the sixth night Conner was in the hospital, he crept out of his bed and pulled on Geoffrey's Metropolis Rocket's sweatshirt--it smelled like ink from Geoffrey's technical pens and the soap in the St. Ann's bathrooms and like Geoffrey's reassurances--and toed his feet into the slippers Lois had brought him: Steve Madden, blue terrycloth, embroidered with the words BAD NEWS wearing devil horns--classic Lois. He pushed open his hospital room door and caught Hope raising one beautifully curved eyebrow at him, and he looked at her hopefully before her face softened and she nodded, pointing at her watch and holding up one finger: one hour, Conner knew, from long experience of conspiring with Hope throughout the years.

He got in the elevator at the end of the hall and listened to the muzak echo in the hollow metal cube and felt colder and more far away from home than he ever did in Smallville--before.

And when the metal doors opened like the teeth of a metal jaw, he stepped out onto the trauma ward, tiptoed down the hall, wandered around aimlessly like another gray ghost in pajama pants and his scars, searched the corridors up and down until he saw room 3312 and touched the handle, cold from the hospital's circulated air. After a long time, he opened the door and saw Terry, his profile so familiar and dear and framed by Metropolis' artificial light from the opened-blinds in his
room. He was alone and he was small in the bed and Conner felt his chest cave in.

Conner said, "Hi," because he knew Terry wouldn't be asleep either.

"Hey," Terry said, voice hoarse like he was just relearning how to talk, too.

"You don't look so good, Terry," Conner sighed, and shuffled toward the bed, grateful for the sweatshirt, for the smell of Geoffrey's pens wrapped around him.

Terry reached over to stroke Conner's palm with his thumb, saying, "You don't look so hot, either, Metropolis," and added, "Wanna climb up?" because somehow they both knew this would be the last time they would do this.

So Conner did, and he curled himself into Terry's bruised and battered side, careful of his broken ribs and wrist, and he reached up to knot his hands gently in Terry's dark hair, the soft, sweet curls at the base of Terry's neck, where Conner had liked to drop kisses, once upon a time. He breathed the smell of bleached hospital sheets and listened to the papery rustle of Terry's hospital gown and squeezed in closer, closing his eyes against the incandescent white.

Terry stroked his palm over Conner's hip, with the intimate kindness of a lover and the wistful longing of a widow.

"My parents are transferring me to a school in Metropolis," Terry said. "Finish out senior year here--MetU wants me to play for them, I think."

"MetU has a crappy team," Conner muttered.

"Maybe I can fix it," Terry said brightly.

Conner thought that if anybody could do it, it was Terry, who was disarming and smart when he wanted to be, fast and strong and good at what he did. "Okay," Conner said, and added, "I think I'm going back to St. Ann's."

Conner felt Terry's grin against his hair.

"Shut up," he said hotly.

"You know I love that uniform," Terry said.

"Because you're a pervert," Conner hissed, but without any heat. "I'm gonna have to do junior year all over again."

Terry laughed at that. "Maybe you'll bag another guy in Chemistry, then."

Conner was silent for a long time before he said, "They said this was Smallville tradition."

Shrugging against him, Terry murmured, "I heard about it. They haven't--hadn't done it in ages."

"Not many queers in Smallville," Conner said quietly.

"Not anymore, anyway," Terry answered, and clutched Conner a little more tightly. "I--did anything--they didn't. You're okay though?" He pulled away, looked at Conner through a wince of pain for his ribs, stroked Conner's cheeks and touched his hair and asked, "They didn't?"

Conner's eyes went huge and scared for a minute because he knew what Terry was asking and wanted to say, "Almost--they--but I made a tornado," but he said instead, "No. I'm fine. Really,
"Here," and put Terry's hand on his chest, and they listened to one another's heartbeats for a very long time.

"This is so fucked up," Terry finally said, and the words were ripped out of him.

It was, and Conner had nothing smart to say to it, so he just pulled himself close to Terry again and put his face in Terry's neck.

The thing was--and it was the thing nobody and neither of them were saying--the thing was that this would never work again. They'd lost their rhythm, fallen out of step, fallen down, and when they looked up and across at one another it was with the horror of somebody who knew how it had felt to be broken down like that, to bear all thebraceleted bruises of victims.

Conner couldn't fix Terry and Terry couldn't fix Conner and they couldn't be broken together, Conner knew--they weren't those kind of people, but they could do this, for an hour at least, before Hope would come down the stairs and quietly pull Conner from Terry, untangle Conner's hands from Terry's hair and pull Terry's arm from over Conner's narrow chest.

Before, Conner had thought he was all cried out, like a parched desert in wintertime, still and dry, wearing intricate cracks on his skin, across his face, but he was wrong because after Hope all but pried him out of Terry's arms he heard Terry sob and by the time he was back in his own room he was crying so hard he couldn't breathe.

The metaphor was wrong, Conner realized, because he wasn't a desert frozen in geologic time but a deep and still lake, muted by winter--but the ice was cracking and all the noises of a world coming alive were drowning him in a cacophony. And Conner thought he saw light, filtering dimly through the broken-up ice overhead, so close he could reach his hand out to touch the ragged bottoms of it, and look down to see blackened water and dead corn, a purple the color of the sky.

He cried himself to sleep again and cried himself awake and then Geoffrey was smoothing a hand over Conner's forehead, smiling at him so brightly and with such an alien expression that Conner didn't understand, lost his train of thought and forgot that he was miserable.

"Good morning," Geoffrey said.

"You look happy," Conner said inanely.

And that was when Geoffrey laced their hands together, fingers sliding together like old puzzle pieces--because Conner had always known how to hold Geoffrey's hand--and said, "Conner--your dad. He went into remission. The tests came in while you were sleeping."

Conner was quiet for a long time until he realized he was smiling and he had forgotten he could do that.

"It is a good morning, then," Conner said, talking around the lump still in his throat and Geoffrey scrubbed at Conner's cheeks, the swollen corners of Conner's eyes, with the corner of his shirtsleeve.

Geoffrey pushed Conner's hair out of his eyes and said, "Yeah, it is."
Eventually, Conner got out of the hospital. Geoffrey drove him home and they reached the penthouse just in time to hear the tail end of an argument that Clark and Conner's grandmother were having in the kitchen, about selfishness and bad-parenting and placing blame, about being cruel and being weak and being good enough for the people who were good enough to love you. Conner and Geoffrey looked at one another and went down the hall, around the corner, where Geoffrey helped Conner climb into his bed--soft and crisp and luxurious with clean sheets and soft pillows and thick blankets--and then sat at the foot of it, reading Conner the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," because, as Geoffrey told Conner, Conner was no coward, and he would eat peaches, let their summer-sweet juice roll down his chin.

"What does that even mean?" Conner asked, drowsy.

"I have absolutely no idea," Geoffrey said confidently.

Conner laughed, and he felt a little lighter, and when he fell asleep, he saw Geoffrey climbing off of his bed, saw Lex hovering in the doorway, looking more drawn than he had the last time Conner had seen him, and Clark, a dark, hollow-eyed shadow in the corner.

When he woke up, it was to a copy of the Daily Planet set on his bedside table. It was several days old, and on the front page, above the fold, there was an article from Clark Kent, former Planet staff reporter, who talked about hate-crimes and Smallville and being tied up to a cross overnight when he was fifteen years old. Clark wrote about thinking he'd die either from humiliation or cold and how it had changed him, changed the person he wanted to be. Clark talked about being saved, being pulled off of his crucifix when Lex Luthor drove past and unknotted all the ropes--set him free. He talked about what it was like to get the phone call from the Smallville Sheriff's office, about how he went catatonic, about sitting around and not being able to say a word, about staring at Conner and feeling like tearing the town apart, burning it to the ground. And then he talked about hating himself, about hating Lex, because it had happened to Clark and they had let it happen to their baby--Conner was still their baby--and God knows how many other people, who would always remember it, like the cold shine of a knife on their skin.

By the time Conner finished reading and looked up, it was to Clark again, all shadows and lines in the doorway and Conner finally got it, knew what he'd missed, and he said, "I'm really sorry," and Clark choked as he said:

"I'm--we're really sorry, too."

Conner was, despite what sometimes felt like the best efforts of his parents, a normal boy, and if he didn't get over it, he got over not being over it.

Spring crept into the city like a thief and on Conner's first day back at St. Ann's, he walked into his familiar, tenth grade classroom to Eve Anthony's rolled-up skirt, flashing the long, smooth curves of her thighs, her calves, her beautiful ankles. Julie's shirt was opened to three buttons and her tie was a disaster. Garrison was laying in the back of the room, a piece of ice from the science lab across the hallway on his forehead, moaning obscenely.

Geoffrey was in the counselors office, a mandatory meeting after all the school he had missed and after what was apparently the biggest and most embarrassing fight ever in the history of time, during which (a) Geoffrey and Eve broke up (b) Eve punched Geoffrey in the left nipple, because she was that kind of evil bitch and (c) Geoffrey actually threw his sketchbook at somebody--dozens of half-finished sketches of a sleeping boy falling out.
Conner heard it from Randall who heard it from Julie who was using Garrison for her carnal needs which Conner totally didn't need to know but found out anyway because when you went to school with the same fifteen people for your entire life, things like that happened.

"It was a disaster," Randall said.

"Disaster is such a mild word for it," Julie agreed, making a face.

Garrison, who had been the first one to flag down Conner that morning, nodded. "It was like--you know--seeing the sheer fury of God or something." He shuddered. "I mean, I thought Jules here was bad when she was on her moon time."

Julie punched Garrison in the arm and said, "I mean, you remember when Rebecca Hornby and Rob Kirk broke up a year before us?" Conner nodded, because Rebecca Hornby had set Rob's car on fire. "Well, Geoffrey and Eve didn't outdo them, but that was only because Sister Hyacinth managed to separate them before Eve could start weeping and accusing you guys of having illicit gay sex on the side and pounding him with her history textbook."

Conner paled. "Uh, guys," he said.

Garrison waved his hand dismissively. "Please, Conner, don't insult our intelligence."

"No, seriously," Conner insisted. "I don't know where you guys got this idea, but."

Julie rolled her eyes. "Well, if you're not going to be honest, then we're just not going to tell you about what Eve did to Geoffrey's locker."

"Hey," Conner protested. "I just got like, gay-bashed. Not two months ago."

"Oh my God," Randall said, "That's so old news. How long are you going to keep bringing that up? Blah blah blah, I got tied to a stake in a field. Blah blah blah, Randall's dad illegally cut down a tropical rainforest and contributed to the extinction of two protected species. It all gets so boring."

"Yeah, Conner," Julie said, but there was a twinkle in her eyes. "Boring."

Conner stared at them for a minute before he broke out into a smile. "You know what? I think you're right."

"I'm always right," Julie said charitably, and she put her hand on his.

"Now--dish," Garrison demanded just as Geoffrey burst into the room, shouting:

"That crazy bitch filled my locker with extra small lubricated condoms!"

On May 16th, the five varsity football players and one cheerleader were officially charged with conspiracy, kidnapping, and assault. The media argued endlessly over whether their one million a head bail was predicated on one of the victims being the son of Lex Luthor or just for the cruelty of the crime--both sides had good points but Conner didn't much pay attention to them.

Weeks ago, Lex Luthor had called the Smallville Savings and Loan and reminded the entire town that he had a majority stake. By May 18th, Smallville was a ghost town, all empty store-fronts and repossessed houses, and if Martha and Jonathan Kent were angry or felt betrayed by the turn of
events, they kept their silence. The Ross' moved, and Conner told them they should buy out the French boulangerie near St. Ann's, since they were considerably nicer people than the monolingual glarer who worked there. Whitney got accepted to UC Santa Barbra and wrote encyclopedic emails about every detail of her life—including all of the concerts she went to and how the White Stripes had sweated on her. Conner kept them in a file on his laptop called, "crazy son of a bitch."

May 20th, a public high school in Metropolis had its graduation ceremony and Terry walked the stage to get his diploma. No members of the media were present to capture the event because Conner kept his mouth shut, through interviews and Barbra Walters' phone calls, because it wouldn't help anything for both of them to be miserable under the washed-out glare of a flashbulb. At least Conner had bodyguards.

Sometime after that, Conner went to Geoffrey's house and kissed him against his bedroom door. Geoffrey had pushed Conner's hands to the wall, held them palm to palm, and he kissed the corners of Conner's mouth, the bow of Conner's upper lip, just like he had the first time, when he was saying goodbye or good morning. This time, Geoffrey kissed him hello.

"What are we doing?" Conner asked.

"I'm not really sure," Geoffrey answered. He looked at the floor. "I--got a lot of lubricated condoms, though."

"I thought they were extra smalls," Conner said, feeling the beginnings of hysterical laughter curling up in his belly, because he was definitely too fucked up to do this yet, but he was glad he was here, because Geoffrey would smile and kiss him and read him poetry Geoffrey didn't understand, tell Conner to eat peaches and not break Geoffrey's heart--and they were all things Conner would take gladly, do gladly.

Geoffrey's eyes narrowed. "She ruins everything."

On May 22nd, Conner started seeing Dr. Willis, who had coral-red walls and every single Brian Jacques book ever written lining his built-in bookshelves. For the entire first hour-long session, Conner read from Mattimeo, which was his favorite book, and when Dr. Willis asked why Conner had chosen it, Conner said, "When I was a kid, I did a book report on it. Geoffrey--my best friend--did Go Jump in the Pool. He threw water at our class. I wasn't allowed to bring my sword." Dr. Willis smiled at him and said, "Hour's up. I'll see you next Friday."

June 1st, Conner realizes he hasn't had a nightmare in a very long time, and that all the broken, cracked pieces of himself are starting to make sense again, that he's not quite so fragmented anymore.

On Conner's birthday, Lex gave him a t-shirt.

It was a fetching shade of fatigue green and the annoying font spelled out "Keep Metropolis Weird." Conner held it in his hands for a long time before he looked back up at his father, who was looking back at him--a soft expression Conner hadn't seen for a very long time on Lex's face.

Conner opened and closed his mouth a few times before Lex sighed and pulled Conner into a hug, huge and worried and tight, and Conner felt the way he had when the dragon had torn Metropolis to shreds, left his father bleeding in a profile in front of Conner's young eyes.

Lex had called Conner his miracle once, his anodyne, his penicillin, his unexpected lifesaver, had
held Conner's face in his hands and kissed his brow, his eyelids, touched his hands and shoulders and marveled at him--

The same way Conner had done to Lex when he'd visited Conner after news of the remission. Conner had held his father's face in his hands, touched his father's hands and his shoulders and clutched him close, been astounded by him, because if Conner was Lex's unexpected miracle, then Lex was Conner's sun, his skies, the framework of the universe. Lex had always been there and Conner had to believe Lex would *always* be there. Lex was Conner's father, his teacher, his worst enemy and best friend--Lex was Conner's hero.

And when Conner finally managed to tear himself away, he said, "I'm told these are really popular these days."

And Lex laughed, pressing a kiss to Conner's forehead, and said, "Yeah. Nice shirt."

Chapter End Notes

Conner Clark Luthor is, in many ways, like my own child, since even though I've only really written snapshots from distinct parts of his life, I've carried him around in my head day in and day out for the past three years.

"Conflicts of Interest" was a whim; I can't say the same thing for "Visiting Hours," which was a project that took more than a year in and of itself. The hugeness of the plot and the scope of the universe in Metropolis that got built between these two stories is dizzying, and just like learning history throughout your primary education, I started with the idea of Conner as a child in Metropolis, to Conner Clark Luthor as the sole heir of the Luthor empire in a city that resonates with him--sometimes literally. I took notes on my own writing, about subway lines and names of coaches, oddball side characters I didn't think about much but who showed up much, much later in the text. The complexity of the whole thing was dizzying.

And I never could have kept any of my facts or characters or even timelines straight if it weren't for the truly and unbelievably amazing Lyra Sena, who was my beta for both "Conflicts of Interest" and "Visiting Hours." No small task, I assure you, given that between the two stories there're more than 300 pages of single-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman text and cast of characters that would scare the shit of Vaudeville. Plus, I spell everything wrong. Everything. She's a superhero.

The final thanks goes to everybody who's stuck to this story through its inception and its progression, all the time I took to write it and edit it and finally throw it up on HTML and reveal it to the world. You've all be (mostly) patient, and I'm grateful for your support.

Keep Metropolis Weird -- Pru. (2/14/06)

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