Snips and Snails and Puppy Dog Tails

by Lanning

Summary

Part Eleven of the Identical Series. What are little boys made of? Clark and Lex confront their pasts, and fight for their future.

Notes

For the first time, I'm posting an Identical story as a work-in-progress, in the hope that the sense of accomplishing something will demolish the Wall of Anxiety that has prevented me from writing for so long. Thanks to you all for your patience.
Chapter One

"I want overtime."

Eli grimaced as the voice floated out of the darkness, and gave the swing another push. He found the pastime soothing, and there was little enough to soothe him these days. "The accent, Max."

"Oh, bloody hell. No one can hear me but you."

"You assume too much. The household have retired, but are not asleep, and there is one among them who could hear your watch ticking, if he were so inclined."

"If he's with Alexander, I guarantee you he's not inclined."

"Once again you assume too much. And you continue to assault my ears with the excruciating accent of your native country. Attend to it, Max."

Max chuckled as he approached the Kents' porch. "I don't see you trying to conceal your origins."

"That would be pointless. Enemy and friend alike know my origins."

"That must be inconvenient."

"Not nearly so inconvenient as employing a careless operative. I heard your breathing a full fifty feet away. I could have shot you without so much as a glance in your direction."

"Allow me." A woman's voice rose from the darkness with quiet peevishness.

Eli gave the swing another push, stifling a sigh. "The glass house, Moira. It does not like stones."

Moira muttered an unladylike obscenity. "Let me guess. I snapped a twig."

"This levity is inappropriate. Report."

Max cut in. "No sign of surveillance activity in the immediate vicinity. No sign of surveillance activity within the perimeters established around the Ross and Sullivan residences. No sign of surveillance activity in the vicinity of Castle Anthrax."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what Chloe calls Luthor's Scottish monstrosity."

"Miss Sullivan has a peculiar sense of humor," Eli replied pointedly. Always Max and the ladies. It was not conducive to achieving mission objectives. "And—"

"And of course, no sign of surveillance activity in the vicinity of the love shack."

Moira snickered, and Eli glanced upward, reminding himself that patience was a virtue. "I would very much appreciate not hearing Alexander's residence referred to in that manner."

"Sorry," Max replied, sounding cheerfully unrepentant. "Eli, they've pulled up stakes and scampered, the lot of them. Luthor's boys and...the unmentionable's little crew."

Eli snorted. "And what conclusions do you draw from this development?"
"That they've heard you're carrying your throwing knives again?" Moira's tone was painfully dry.

"Do not provoke me."

"I'm dead serious."

"You are neither. You are alive and annoying. You are playing the fool, and I do not employ fools."

Moira's tone changed. "Eli, they've either given up or—"

Eli sat bolt upright on the swing, causing the chains supporting it to creak in protest. "Or the worst is yet to come. Do not tell me that you cannot feel it in the air. A storm is coming. *The* storm."

Max snorted. "I take it you're referring to a metaphorical storm, Sunshine, since there's no sign of rain where I'm standing."

"You know I am right."

Max sighed. "They're regrouping."

"They are. There will be a major shift in tactics, and soon. A dangerous shift."

"Too bad Kinky Knickers went over to the dark side. She'd be handy about now."

Eli scowled in Max's general direction, ignoring Moira's muffled laugh. "It is ungentlemanly, Max, to refer to a lady in such terms. Miss Graves is handy exactly where she is."

Silence. "I see. I suppose Taz is—"

"Miss Teskey is perfectly suited to the task at hand."

"She's a bloody harpy, and why you'd inflict her on a sick woman is—"

Moira cut in. "How is Miss Jenkins doing?"

Eli leaned back into the swing, regulating his voice carefully. "She has stopped eating."

Max was uncharacteristically silent.

"I'm sorry, Eli," Moira murmured.

"Death finds us all," Eli said, in a tone he knew was a little too brisk. "If I can face Him with half as much grace and courage as that lady does, I will be satisfied." He glanced at his watch. "It is time for you to return to your duties. And if you will be so kind, pay special attention to a young man named Whitney Fordman."

"Fordman?" Max's voice was sharp. "Yeah, he's been underfoot lately. What's his game?"

"Unknown at present. He has frequently been observed in the vicinity of the residence of Mr. Eddie Cole, a semi-employed crop-dust pilot of rather unsavory reputation. He has also taken part-time employment with an as yet unidentified firm well outside Smallville. If any other pertinent information should come my way—"

Moira sniffed loudly. "Meaning any you feel inclined to share—"
"I shall inform you."

"You're a right bastard, you know that?" Max said in an exasperated tone.

"Good night, Max. Moira, remember to change into something more appropriate tomorrow. We do not wish to frighten your patient into yet another cardiac arrest."

"Speak for yourself. If frightening him would shut him up for five minutes—"

"This attitude is inappropriate for a healer."

"I'm not Jonathan Kent's healer. I'm his keeper. I leave the healing to God. I'm sure He can deal with that pigheaded brat a hell of a lot better than I can."

Eli contained his amusement. Somehow he imagined that Jonathan was no better pleased by Moira's presence than she was, and that satisfied his sadistic impulses immensely. "Mrs. Kent seems to have no difficulty putting up with him. You should ask for some advice. Over coffee, perhaps." Sweet innocence oozed from his tone.

"You are a wicked old man, Eli Cohen." Moira's tone was deadly.

"I should be something else? Run along, Moira."

Eli heard Max and Moira turning to make their way toward the Kent's lane. Max was muttering what Eli suspected were profanities under his breath. "Breathing, Max," he called after him. "And kindly mind your accent from now on."

Eli's suspicions concerning the nature of Max's muttering were confirmed, and he gave the swing another push, watching moon rise above the tree tops. The quiet might have reassured another man, but not Eli. A scorpion did not refrain from biting because the night appeared to be peaceful. A viper was no respecter of ambience. He returned to the living room to keep watch.

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*Despite persistent misgivings on the part of the neurological specialists brought in to assist Dr. Hamilton, a man woefully ill-equipped, in my opinion, to manage such a project, Mr. Luthor insisted that coalescent matrices be attempted. This before, I may add, the first matrix was deemed stable enough for even the most rudimentary experimentation, which in itself should have caused me to see which way the proverbial wind was blowing and submit my resignation...*

"What the hell are coalescent matrices?" Clark's head rested against Lex's, his free hand roaming soothingly up and down Lex's chest and stomach, easing him back against the pillows and away from the laptop.

Lex resisted the attempt at soothing. "Moby Dick." He tapped the paperback in Clark's left hand. "Bor-ing."

"The duality of the divine is boring?"

"The lists of fish are boring."

"Exam tomorrow, Clark."

"That's boring, too. What are coalescent matrices?"
The thought that Clark might understand coalescent matrices better than Lex could at present made Lex sigh and lean back to rest his head on Clark’s shoulder. The text from the laptop screen danced mockingly on the insides of his eyelids. "Damned if I know."

"Oh, come on." Lex heard _Moby Dick_ drop to the floor. "You're the brains of the outfit, remember?"

"The brains want to know why your mother hasn't hauled me out of here by my...ears. It's a school night." Standard diversionary tactics deployed; nevertheless, Lex did wonder why he was still lying on Clark's bed on a Thursday night. It was a major violation of house rules, and one Martha Kent was not a woman to ignore.

Clark was silent for a moment, and Lex knew what was coming. "She's worried about you." Clark's voice was subdued. "So is Dad."

Lex managed not to curse aloud. He'd been that transparent. Again. Could he hide nothing from these people? They were impossible. They were... He felt Clark's hand pulling Lex's away from the keyboard to hold it. "So am I," Clark whispered in Lex's ear.

Unconditional surrender beckoned; Lex sent it about its business. "Eyestrain won't kill me, Jiminy."

"Eyestrain isn't what I'm worried about. You don't eat. You don't sleep. All you do is decrypt and read those damn files. You can't keep this up."

"What a lovely little mother you'll make."

Lex almost gasped as Clark folded himself firmly around him; the laptop slid off his legs onto the bed.

"Memo from junior partner to senior partner." Clark's voice had an edge that Lex knew better than to ignore. "You're in violation of our agreement. Spill it."

Unconditional surrender was a persistent bastard when Clark Kent was on the job.

"No secrets," Clark whispered in his ear, and Lex made a mental note to subject future agreements to more thorough scrutiny. He let go of the breath he'd been holding.

"I've finished decrypting my father's files on Karloff."

"And?"

"And too many cooks spoil the asshole."

"How?"

"I'm not certain within an acceptable degree of scientific--"

"Guess."

"Clark, I don't understand the memory transfer process they used. It's fucking arcane. Every scientist on that team had a different theory and a different methodology and their documentation sucks. Clone a neuron, enhance it with a little eau de meteorite, sift it for usable engrams, marinate the engrams with un soupçon de meteorite radiation, transmit engram-flambé to exanimate dickhead -- exact method indeterminate -- lather, rinse, repeat. There's no way in hell this should have worked."

"They did all that to build Karloff's memories?"
"Yes."

"A matrix of memories."

"That's right."

"Is that what we have? A matrix of memories?"

Lex opened his eyes to watch Clark bending over him. "What we have?" he murmured, stroking Clark's hair. Oh, God, he was so fucking beautiful. He drew Clark's hand down to his crotch. "Hell, no. We have a--"

"I'm talking science, here, mastermind." But Clark was already smiling, slipping his hand inside Lex's sweatpants, his warm, eager fingers circling Lex's cock.

"So show me science," Lex whispered. "Show me cause and effect." Pulling Clark's head down, he took Clark's mouth with his own before Clark could reassert his newfound interest in scientific inquiry.

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Jonathan leaned over the schematics spread across his and Martha's bed, the precise lines blurring as he tried to comprehend them. "A meteorite weapon," he repeated. Maybe he'd understand it if he kept repeating that phrase like a moron.

Martha's arms went around him, and he leaned back into her embrace, her touch. Jonathan had never appreciated the comfort of this woman's touch as much as he had in the past three weeks. "Jonathan. It's not going to happen. Lex said the technical problems in pulling it off were staggering. And Lionel told Lex that the project had been abandoned."

"Oh, well, that's all right, then," Jonathan snapped, trying to recover his composure. "As long as he's working on some other crackpot gadget to murder our son, that's just peachy keen. And what happens when Black Lagoon Boy gets some refined ore of his own?"

"I don't want to think about it. We just can't let it happen." Martha sighed. "But I don't think murder was what Lionel had in mind. There would be no profit in that." Martha slipped around to sit beside him on the bed; her voice turned hard. "He's done dozens of crackpot experiments with the meteorites over the years, just on the off-chance they might make him some money. Just look at poor Earl."

Jonathan didn't want to look at poor Earl. The last time they had visited him in the hospital, he had been a skeletal wreck, despite the fact that Lionel's medical team had managed to control the tremors. Christ, the things Lionel Luthor had done... and would do. Jonathan fervently hoped there was a hell. "Our son is not going to wind up like poor Earl," he snapped, snatching up the pile of photos. "And I hope to God Lex had a good cover story for how he knew about this damn thing in the first place."

"Lex told him the truth. That one of his operatives had broken into the mansion and stolen the plans, and that Lionel had better see to security. He said Lionel was amused."

"An operative?" Jonathan shot his wife an astonished look.
Martha looked back gravely. "I think that's what we all are right now."


"Jonathan, I'm worried about Lex. He—"

"I know. I don't know how he's doing it, but Lionel is messing with his head. Lex gets worse every time he sees the bastard."

"You're certain it's Lionel?"

"What else could it be?"

"You can't be serious. He barely sleeps. He barely eats. When he's not with Pamela, he's poring over the files on Lionel's laptop, or the clone's, or talking to his father. The time he spends with Clark is the only break he gets."

"Which is why you've suspended the weekends-only rule?" Jonathan regarded her with raised eyebrows. He was bypassed, not blind.

Martha glared. "Which is why I've suspended the weekends-only rule. Clark is the only thing keeping that boy in one piece, Jonathan."

Jonathan snorted. "Fine. Just keep him away from the laundry. And while you're at it, keep him away from Lionel Luthor. It's time for these 'status meetings' to stop."

"Lex will never agree to that. He thinks humoring Lionel is keeping Clark safe. Jonathan, he's so close to the edge—"

Jonathan flinched at the phrase, the image of Lex falling backwards from the terrace wall into the dark assaulting his mind's eye. "I know. It's time for a talk." The top photo in the pile in his hands caught his attention; it was a shot of him and Martha loading the truck. Clark was nowhere to be seen. Most of the early photographs were of the farm itself, of Martha, of him. The bastard had been watching them before they'd even found Clark. Even after Clark had arrived, Lionel obviously had had no clue that there was anything special about him. It wasn't until the last few years – since Clark had started high school – that the photographer had gone out of his way to capture Clark on film.

Most of the pictures were not incriminating. A lot were. Jonathan flinched at one of Clark lifting the tractor with one hand. What had the boy been thinking? He sighed. Teenager. Thinking didn't enter into the equation. He should probably be grateful there were no pictures of Clark jumping over the barn, or of the screaming match between Jonathan and Clark that had followed. "And these—"

"Most of the pictures from the penthouse were copies of what I found at the mansion." Martha's voice took on the peculiar timbre that Jonathan knew was suppressed rage. "Years, spying on Clark. A baby. Violating our private time with our child—"

"You've been stewing about this, haven't you?"

Martha was glaring again. "Define 'stewing.'"

Jonathan snorted. "Don't give me that. You know damn well what 'stewing' is. You're winding yourself up for something, aren't you?"

"That man violated our privacy, tried to exploit Clark—"
"A lot of these don't even have Clark in them," Jonathan cut in, manfully attempting to derail the Martha Clark Kent express. God only knew what she was planning. "It's just us. He was spying on our whole family."

"He was probably spying on everyone in Smallville. I saw a lot of files on people we know. I wish I had been able to carry them all." Martha smacked the mattress with her fist. "Someone ought to tell him exactly what kind of man does something like this."

So that was it. "That someone is not going to be you. You took enough of a chance just getting these." Jonathan kissed her lightly on the cheek, trying not to think about what might have happened had Martha been caught prowling around the mansion at night. "He was probably just watching to see what the radiation would do. Cold-blooded son of a bitch." Jonathan tossed the pile of photos to the foot of the bed and picked up the envelopes they'd come out of, fishing for the negatives. "Do I even want to know what's on the video?"

"Us," Martha said, voice taut. "And Clark. The CDs have family histories on both of us, financial records—"

"Jesus Christ!" Jonathan closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe normally. Light exercise but no excessive exertion, the doctor had said. Hell. That doctor had no clue that his patient's life was a comic book. No clue at all. "Martha. There aren't any—"

"Lie down." Martha was already lifting his legs up onto the bed. "I knew I should have waited longer to show you all this."

"Bullshit. You should have told me right away." Jonathan snatched up another envelope and plunged his hand inside. "Were the negatives in a separate envelope?"

Martha cleared her throat. "Negatives?"

"There aren't any—"

"They must be in another envelope," Martha said. She wasn't looking at him. "Maybe Lex has them. He's been going over everything we brought back with a fine-tooth comb."

Jonathan regarded her with narrowed eyes and said nothing. The long silence was broken by Martha's soft sigh.

"We don't have them," she said finally, barely audible. "They weren't in the files."

Shit.

Martha shook her head with a lost expression that made Jonathan's chest tighten. Martha was never lost; she was the compass. "I was an idiot," she whispered, finally looking up. "I didn't even stop to think—"

"Martha. If they weren't in the files, then there's nothing you could have done."

Martha sank to sit beside him on the bed. "It was all for nothing. Lionel knew it would all be for nothing. He must have been laughing himself sick."

"It wasn't for nothing," Jonathan said, as steadily as he could. "We got the prints, the CDs, the video. We got that piece of the ship away from Black Lagoon Boy, and Luthor never laid eyes on it."
"I sat around congratulating myself for two weeks before I realized."

"Martha, it's not your fault."

"And Lex let me. He let me think that Clark and I had gotten everything we needed."

Jonathan scowled. "Maybe he didn't think of it either."

Martha looked at him, eyebrows raised.

Jonathan sighed. "All right, all right. So he thought of it."

"And so did Eli."

"Oh, that rat bastard definitely thought of it."

Martha sighed. "They didn't want to worry us."

"They didn't want to worry me," Jonathan snapped. "Poor invalid Jonathan, with one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel."

"Jonathan."

"Lex Luthor is going to stop treating me like I'll break if he looks at me the wrong way. And so are you."

"He did this because he cares about you. About us."

"That is exactly when he's a complete dumb-ass. When he cares. When he doesn't, he's a goddamned genius. That boy is going to drive me to drink."

"Shhhhh. Lex is helping Clark study for his exam."

Jonathan gave her a look over the tops of his glasses.

"He is," Martha said firmly. "I trust them, Jonathan."

"Martha, do you have any memory at all of what I was like at their age?"

Martha slowly turned a lovely shade of crimson and rose from the bed. "Point taken. Excuse me."

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"God don't stop please don't stop fuck that's so good damn what are you doing?"

Clark lovely mouth slipped from Lex's cock and disappeared from view as he lunged over the side of the bed. "The covers, pull the covers up, pull them up, you dumbass—"

Christ. Lex yanked the covers up, concealing the undignified wad of sweatpants around his knees and the even more undignified weeping erection he was sporting, thanks to his star pupil's exquisite technique. Clark reappeared with the dog-eared copy of Moby Dick in his hand and sprawled across the bed on his back with his head in Lex's lap as a gentle knock sounded.
Lex gritted his teeth against the discomfort. There were good reasons for the weekends-only rule. This was one of them. "Come in," he said, struggling for a normal tone.

"So the whale doesn't swallow the boat?" Clark asked in an excruciatingly innocent tone.

Lex imagined, for a fleeting moment, having a ring like Karloff's. Just for emergencies, or cases of toxic smartassery. "No, Clark. The boat is too big for the whale to swallow."

Martha stuck her head in, smiling. "Hard at work, I see."

"Very hard," Clark sighed, "Sometimes I think the boat is too hard for me."

"The boat is exactly as hard as it needs to be," Lex said in a deadly tone, wondering if all teenagers from outer space were this much of a pain in the ass. "I think we should get back to the duality of the divine."

"How is it coming?" Martha asked, showing no signs of leaving, and Lex briefly considered the facts that this woman was no fool, had known Clark since he'd arrived on the planet and had an uncanny ability to deactivate the most intricate of Luthor bullshit apparatuses. In short, they were doomed.

"It stopped coming," Clark sighed mournfully. "I think it's too hard."

"It is not too hard," Lex growled. "It's getting less hard all the time."

Martha's smile never wavered. "Clark, listen to Lex. I'm sure he'll help you through this. I'll be expecting an A on that exam."

"Yes, ma'am." Clark craned his neck to look up at Lex as Martha left and closed the door behind her. "Are you sure the boat is that big? I think the whale could swallow that boat any damn time it want—"

Lex seized a pillow and walloped Clark across the side of his head. "I have created a sex fiend," he hissed. Without warning, he found himself on his back and stripped of his blanket. "Christ, Clark, have you lost your-- Oh, no, no, no, yes, yes, yes, just like that don't stop oh God don't stop—"

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"Well?"

"I left a note on the door," Martha said grimly. "Pots for Clark. For the week. Lex sleeps on the couch. Forever."

"Told you."

Martha glared at him as she climbed into bed beside him. "A gentleman doesn't say 'I told you so' to a lady, mister."

"Boys are boys." Jonathan started sorting the photos into neat piles. "And this boy needs watching. I will bet you real money that Lex has one of his screwy plans for getting the negatives for these himself. Cash on the barrel head, Martha."

"I'm not a betting woman," Martha said dryly. "But he certainly hasn't shared his thoughts on the subject."

Jonathan forced himself upright again, annoyed. "We agreed to no secrets, and he's broken the agreement."
Martha gave him a droll look. "So we sue?"

"Hell, no. Make him scrub the pots."

"He likes scrubbing the pots."

Jonathan grunted. It was positively unnatural that Lex liked housework. Yet more proof, if any were required, that the boy was downright peculiar. "We're going to have one hell of a serious conversation. And that boy is going to converse until he's coughed up everything that's going on, or I'm going to make him wear my pink boxers."

Martha pushed him back onto the pillows. "I'll talk to Lex."

"Oh, no. His ass is grass, and I am the—"

"Just put away the lawn mower, mister. You can never talk to Lex without getting worked up, and the doctor said—"

"Oh, I'm worked up all right." Jonathan murmured suggestively, pulling Martha closer. "You always get me worked up." Jonathan pulled his wife on top of him, knowing a good opportunity when he saw one. It was about time Martha got it through her head that he was going to recover from this minor ticker-repair, recover fully, so that he could be there when Lionel Luthor was roasted alive on a spit by someone with no lines. So that he could be here, in this bed, with this woman, for a few more decades.

Martha gave him a stern look that was appallingly unconvincing. "There's not going to be any of that, mister. Not until—"

Jonathan pulled her head down and kissed her. "Until…?"

"Until I close the door," Martha said, breathless.

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"He won't stay with you."

"He will."

"Not when he sees you. When he really sees you—"

"Shut up." Lex kicks the stake. Blood spatters on his white suit.

"—he'll leave you to rot. He's just like everyone else, Lex. Everyone but me."

"He won't," Lex says, trying to be loud, but the corn swallows his voice.

"Let him see you, then. Let him see Julian."

Lex comes full circle to stand before Lionel, silent.

Lionel laughs, and the corn shivers. "You won't, will you? You'll continue to savor your little fairy tale – until that inevitable moment when he sees you for what you really are. That moment when he can't stand to look at you anymore."
Lex says nothing, listening to the shivering corn, the hiss of the breeze and the barely discernable chirping of crickets.

Lionel smiles, but there's blood on his white teeth now. "I know you, Lex. We're family. We're close."

"We've never been close."

"We've never been closer. You let me touch you. You let me call you son. We have an alliance."

"Why are you bleeding?" Lex watches the blackened sunflowers rising from the bloody earth, lifting their shriveled faces to the red moon.

"You'll bleed, too, when the time comes," Lionel rasps.

"I won't," Lex whispers.

"Because I'm part of you. You know that, don't you?"

"The part that loses."

"Don't be absurd. You'll never lose me. You'll take me wherever you go."

Lex turned away, only to find an impenetrable forest of quivering, bladed stalks in his path.

"Imagine thinking that I'm something you could kill."

"Let me go."

"Imagine."

Lex woke to find himself clutching Clark's blankets, sweating, shaking. A quick glance told him that Clark was still sound asleep. Unable to restrain himself, he slipped from the little twin bed, out of Clark's bedroom, and down the stairs.

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"So...do I have to do pots, too?" Jonathan breathed in her ear.

Martha let loose a giggle that would have made her son stare, running her hand over her husband's chest, until the scar there cut her giggle off at its metaphorical knees, and turned it into something ragged that tore at her lungs. She had almost lost this man. It had only been three weeks. They should have waited. What had she been thinking—

"I'm fine," Jonathan whispered. "Martha, I'm fine. Don't look like that. The day I can't make love to the most beautiful woman on this planet—"

"Don't think your sweet-talk is going to—"

"—is the day you can put me in the ground."

Martha drew her arms around Jonathan's neck. "Don't," she said, breathing too hard. "Don't say that. Don't even think that. I couldn't get through the day without you, don't you dare start talking
Jonathan was kissing her before she could finish.

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Clark woke with a start, struggling to breathe, some half-remembered nightmare sitting like a football-sized meteor on his chest. He groped for Lex and only came up with empty covers. Aw, damn. What was he doing now? Patrolling the perimeter? Couldn't he leave security to Eli? 4:30 a.m. Geez Louise. Clark slipped out of bed and pulled a t-shirt on, then opened the door and walked down the hall toward the stairs.

As he reached the darkened living room at the bottom of the stairs, he caught sight of Eli sitting in Jonathan's chair. The man was perfectly motionless, silent, and staring in the direction of the kitchen. He was like a rock. Clark knew that if he weren't a little enhanced in the vision department, he would never have seen him. He opened his mouth to say something, but Eli lifted one arm to point to the kitchen. Clark sighed. Now what?

Following Eli's sharp gaze, Clark turned the corner into the kitchen to see Lex, dressed only in some boxer briefs and one of Jonathan's old tank tops, on his hands and knees with a bucket and a scrub brush, scrubbing the kitchen floor as if his life depended on the quality of his work.

Jesus. Jesus God. Clark strode quickly across the kitchen, knelt beside Lex and wrapped his arms around him tightly.

Lex continued to try to scrub for a few seconds, then paused, holding the brush tightly in his left hand. He was breathing very hard.

"Let it go, Lex," Clark whispered.

The brush clattered to the floor, and Lex turned toward Clark. "I had to clean something," he said in a savage tone.

"It's clean. You can stop now."

Lex turned toward him, his icy expression melting, to lean his head against Clark's.

Clark started breathing again. "No more meetings, Lex."

"What do meetings have to do with—"

"No more meetings."

Lex was silent for a moment. "That was the agreement," he said finally.

"Fuck the agreement."

"Language." It was no more than a murmur. "It's working, Clark. He's doing what he said he'd do."

"Lex—"
"The windmills are under full-scale attack. The meteorites, the dumps, the foreclosures—"

"He can't stop that now. The feds are—"

"He can stop anything he likes." Lex's voice was toneless.

Clark gently caressed Lex's back. "Tell me, Lex. Please."

"There's nothing to tell. Everything is proceeding according to plan."

"Whose plan?"

Lex barked a surprised laugh. "Ah. Now that's the question, isn't it? Twas brillig, and the slithy toves—"

Clark pulled Lex to his feet. "We're going out for a while, Eli."

Eli frowned, rising from his chair. "I will accomp—"

"I'm armed." Clark snatched up his backpack. "Tell Mom we'll be back in time for breakfast."

"Vigilance, cricket." Eli's voice was stern, and gentle.

"I'm on it." Clark pulled Lex out the door and to the edge of the porch, doing a visual sweep for any witnesses.

"Clark," Lex said quietly. "Why are we outside in the dark in our underwear?"

Clark drew the straps of his backpack over his shoulders and scooped Lex up into his arms.

"Allow me to amend my question. Why are you carrying me outside in the dark in our underwear?"

Clark took a flying leap from the porch and catapulted them both into the sky, the first hint of dawn light drawing Clark's sharp eyes as the horizon came into view.

Lex sighed wearily. "Jiminy. Why the hell are we flying in the dark in our underwear?"

"I'm taking you someplace."

"You amaze me."

"Someplace special."

"I didn't think Dunkin' Donuts was open this early."

"Someplace...clean."

Lex's arms went around Clark's neck as he buried his face against Clark's cheek. "Clean?" he whispered.

"Uh-huh." Clark skimmed just above the treetops, cradling Lex gently. They'd really gotten this flying thing down, although Clark still needed to concentrate during landings.

"Clark."

"Yeah?"
"How far does this forgiveness thing go?"

Finally. "I guess that depends on who's forgiving who, and for what."

Silence.

"Lex?"

"I feel…dirty." The last word was spoken in a raw tone.

Clark slowed them to hover over a small clearing in the trees, one that sparkled with the light of the rising sun. Dirty. Lex felt dirty. "You're not dirty," he said, his voice cracking. He started to descend, feet first. "You could never be dirty."

Lex drew a breath that shook like an aspen leaf in the wind as they approached the ground. "I remember watching your father fight for his life when he was poisoned by the…by my Nicodemus. I remember saying I was sorry, but of course you didn't know what I'd done, didn't know I was responsible for your father's death, so you said it wasn't my fault."

"Lex, what the hell—"

"And I remember wanting to tell you everything. Not just about Hamilton, but about every underhanded, illegal, selfish, thoughtless thing I'd ever done, because you deserved to know what kind of man you were standing next to. But I didn't. I couldn't risk it. Because I knew what I'd done was unforgivable. That even you wouldn't be able to forgive—"

"I would have forgiven you," Clark cut in as his feet touched the soft earth. "I have forgiven you, and so has Dad."

"My father's part of me. I'm part of him." Lex lifted his gaze to Clark's as Clark set him on his feet. "Imagine thinking—"

"You're not part of him," Clark said fiercely. "You're part of me."

Lex studied him with a blank expression. "Part of you."

"Part of us. Mom and Dad and Pamela and Eli. You're part of all of us. And we're part of you. You're not dirty. You're not like him. You—"

"What would you say," Lex cut in harshly, "if I told you that I was starting to remember some rather unpleasant events in my childhood that would prove otherwise?"

"I'd say it's a hell of a coincidence that you started to remember them a couple weeks after you started spending time with your father."

Lex's eyes widened, and a weak, crooked grin touched his face. "Touché."

"What bullshit has he been telling you?" Clark wondered wildly why Jonathan or Martha would have allowed any mind-whammying on their watch; he could picture Martha clobbering Lionel with her broom so hard he'd wind up in the corn field.

"He hasn't told me anything." Lex looked away to stare at the pond. "I've just started remembering."

There was no way in hell Lionel wasn't behind this. "Can you tell me what you remember?"
Lex closed his eyes. "How far does forgiveness go, Clark?"

Clark drew him close. "You mean between you and me?"

"Yes," Lex whispered.

"It just goes, Lex. It doesn't stop."

"For anything?"

"For anything."

"I've been remembering things about my mother. And my brother."

"Julian?"

"Julian. I think I killed Julian, Clark."
Chapter Two

"He was scrubbing the floor." Jonathan rose from the swing to pace the length of the porch. Christ Jesus. That image of Lex toppling back into the dark rose before his mind's eye for the hundredth time in the past three weeks. He'd be damned if he'd let that idiot Lex Luthor put him through that again.

Eli was standing at the railing with his back to Jonathan; he didn't turn around. "He was."

"Where did Clark take him?"

"Unknown."

"That doesn't worry you?"

"Clark is armed."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

Eli was silent for a moment. "Your son has a gift for defeating other men's demons."

Jonathan shot him a sharp look. Eli wasn't just talking about Lex. "What the hell is going on, Eli?"

"You know what is going on."

Oh, yeah, he knew what was going on. And he'd hated the idea of Lex exposing himself to lethal doses of Lionel Luthor from the moment Lex had told him about it. He'd hated it all the more because he knew perfectly well that Jonathan's little ride in Lionel's goddamned corporate helicopter was the reason Lex had agreed to it. What he didn't know was how the son of a bitch was making the most of his opportunity to mess with Lex's mind. "How is the bastard doing it? It's been all business, as far as I can see."

"We both understand the true nature of Lionel Luthor's 'business.'" Eli stood at the porch railing, his gaze fixed on the lane.

Jonathan scowled and perched on the porch railing beside Eli, trying to see what it was the old devil was looking at. The lane was empty, of course, but that didn't mean anything. Clark might be able to see through walls, but Eli could see through everything else. There was probably a bomb in the mailbox or something. "Yeah, we do. And he understands the true nature of a double-barreled shotgun. Believe me, it's been nothing but EPA this and Savings and Loan that."

Eli swung around to face him with a grim expression. "No. There must be something else."

"If there'd been anything else I'd have blown his goddamn head off," Jonathan snarled, unable to restrain himself.

Eli raised an eyebrow. "Lines, Jonathan."

Jonathan gave him his dirtiest look. Getting advice on lines from Dirty Harry was like getting advice on laundry from Lex. "Someday Luthor's luck is going to run out."

"It is."

"And I want to be there to see it."
Eli got that look on his face, and Jonathan hastily glanced the other way. "You do not," Eli said in a deadly tone. Jonathan had heard Lex say once that Eli was a scary son of a bitch. That didn't cover half of it. "Think carefully, Jonathan. Think of everything the dog has said to Alexander, no matter how trivial it may seem."

Trivial. "Apart from hello and goodbye?" Jonathan sighed. "He asks about everybody's health, of course. Probably hoping one of us has dropped dead overnight."

"No doubt."

"He asks about...you know, Lex and Clark. Says he wants to understand."

"Indeed. I can imagine he wants very much to understand."

"He wants to understand why Lex would rather be here than over at that pretentious pile of rocks on Beresford Lane, too."

Eli laughed humorlessly. "I think it safe to assume that this will remain a mystery to him."

"He talks about Lex's mother sometimes."

Eli uttered something like a growl.

"Just nostalgic stuff. At least it sounded that way." Jonathan paused. Personally, he'd like to understand Lillian Edouard, but he didn't say so. "And he mentioned Lucas a few times."

"Lucas?" Eli shot him a startled look. "In what context?"

"He asked if Lex remembered him the other day."

"Remembered him." Eli turned his dark gaze back to the lane, eyes narrowed.

"Yeah. For a second I thought it was some kind of threat, but Lex didn't seem to take it that way."

"How did he take it?"

"Like his old man was on drugs. He said yes and changed the subject. Some poor kid being shot in his hospital bed isn't the kind of thing you forget."

"Indeed. It would be prudent at this juncture to eliminate the possibility that Lionel Luthor is manipulating Alexander's body chemistry as well as his mind."

Jonathan swung toward Eli, startled. "Not a chance in hell. Luthor doesn't touch Lex's food, Lex's drinks or Lex, and if you think I so much as blink when we're out here, then you don't know me."

Eli surprised him with a genuine chuckle. "I know you, Jonathan."

What the hell did that mean? Jonathan scowled. "He's going around us. He's talking to his old man when we're not around to kick his ass."

"Very likely."

"That's got to stop, Eli."

"We are in agreement."
"I know Lex is trying to do right, here, but—"

Eli glanced heavenward. "Always he is trying to do right. Never have I seen a man do more wrong trying to do right than Alexander."

Jonathan snorted. "No kidding. Glad you finally noticed. And since we're talking about doing wrong—"

"Is this what we are speaking about?"

"When were you two planning to tell us about the negatives?"

Eli sighed. "You have begun your day early, Jonathan."

"I'm a farmer."

"I will assume that Mrs. Kent is now aware of this problem?"

Jonathan grimaced and perched on the porch railing. "You assume right. Martha and I don't keep secrets from each other."

"Jonathan—"

"And I thought those were the house rules we all agreed to." Jonathan tried to stare Eli down, and failed for the hundredth time.

Eli returned his stare with a strangely benign expression. "Alexander and I agreed that your recovery should remain your primary concern."

Jonathan fought the urge to club someone, preferably Eli, over the head with a blunt object. "I'm not a goddamned invalid, Eli! My recovery—"

"In fact, we agreed that your recovery should remain our primary concern."

Jonathan folded his arms across his chest with as much defiance as he could muster. "I already have a nurse, Callahan. You and Lex Luthor need to find a new line of work."

"This is not a joking matter."

"Who's joking? I'm fine, and I don't need—"

"You are recovering from major surgery. And I should tell you, Jonathan, that Alexander is quite determined not to lose you."

Jonathan felt the heat rise to his face. Damn the boy. "He's not losing me."

"No," Eli said mildly. "He is not. Tell me, have you considered the possibility that concealing the extent of your disability might be construed as a violation of the house rules?"

"I am not disabled!"

"Your temporary disability."

"Damn it, Eli, I'm not the one you need to worry about! Lex is—"

"Sit down."
"I'm not going to—"

"Sit down immediately." Eli took Jonathan by the arm and guided him firmly into the porch swing. Jonathan closed his eyes and struggled to get his breathing under control. Damn. Damn.

"You must pace yourself. Your family needs you, Jonathan. Alexander needs you. You must pace yourself, or they will lose you when they need you most."

Jonathan leaned back in the swing and opened his eyes. Eli was regarding him with a worried frown. "Okay, okay. I take your point. Just...do me a favor and keep me in the loop from now on."

Eli's face relaxed into a smile. "Agreed. Although I tell you now that Alexander will not be pleased."

"Alexander will not be pleased if I put my boot to his ass either," Jonathan growled. "You're in a no-win situation, Callahan."

"Yes," Eli said gloomily. "This is life."

"Those damn meetings have to stop."

"We are in agreement."

"How do we convince Lex?"

"We do not, for we cannot. We must therefore convince Mr. Lionel Luthor."

"How?"

"You are very inquisitive regarding detail, Jonathan. It is not always conducive to one's peace of mind, being inquisitive."

Jonathan sighed and closed his eyes again. The comic book really did write itself.

***

Lex looked out across the blue water of the tree-ringed pond, then turned back to the more inviting sight of Clark stripping off his underwear at the water's edge. "We're going to what?"

"Skinny-dip," Clark said cheerfully. "It's been warm enough for a week. The water will still be a little cold, but—"

Lex grimaced at the blatantly diversionary nature of the proposition. "We are not skinny-dipping in this watering hole."

"I thought you liked skinny-dipping."

"In its proper place."

"And where's that?"

Lex glared. "In a heated, well lit, nicely chlorinated indoor pool."

"Wuss."
Lex gestured toward the water in distaste. Nature was all very well in its place, but there were limits. "There are probably things living in there, Clark."

Clark approached him, grinning.

Lex held his ground. "Killer beavers. Mutant fish with four-inch fangs."

Clark gently drew the tank top over Lex's head and tossed it aside. "Do you trust me?"

Lex closed his eyes as Clark kissed his shoulder, his neck. "Without reservation. It's the mutant fish I don't trust."

"There are no mutant fish."

"What about—"

"Or killer beavers."

"Vampire frogs?"

"Jesus, Lex, didn't you ever swim in anything but a pool before?"

"I certainly wouldn't appreciate other life forms swimming in my toilet, and I therefore refrain from swimming in theirs. Courtesy, Clark, is the hallmark of kings."

"It's not a toilet, you spaz." Clark pulled Lex against him, laughing, and pushed Lex's boxer briefs past his hips. Lex shoved them down and kicked aside the last vestige of his dignity, sighing. Clark pulled him closer to the water. "The pond has a spring at the bottom. The water's probably cleaner than your pool. Come on. It'll feel good."

"I feel good right here," Lex whispered, holding on to the beautiful enigma that was Clark Kent. Even fratricide failed to faze this boy. This situation was simply impossible.

"You'll feel better," Clark murmured in his ear, pulling Lex along.

The cool water lapped against Lex's feet, which instantly sank into a thick ooze. "There's mud, Clark," Lex said through gritted teeth, trying to ignore Clark's laughter. "Mud."

"Ah, yeah, that's what's usually on the bottom of a pond, mastermind."

"This is all because I took the last muffin at dinner, isn't it?"

"Damn. You see right through me, Lex."

Lex looked up at Clark's grin and bright green eyes. "No," he said softly. "You see right through me."

Clark sobered, studied Lex's face for a moment, then drew Lex away from the shore, where the bottom fell away into deeper, purer water. It was cold, but Clark was warm, and Clark held him close, treading water for both of them. "I used to come here when I was a kid," Clark murmured. "It made me feel...like I was part of it."

"Part of what?" Lex lifted a wet hand and smoothed Clark's hair out of his eyes, the sensation of weightlessness enchanting him, penetrating his body to the core.

"This. The pond. The, uh, world. Like I belonged to it. To everything and everybody. You
"Yes," Lex said unsteadily. "I know." Clark was right. He did feel better. Clark kissed him. "Tell me what he says. The things that make you start remembering."

Lex drew a breath. "Clark, this has nothing to do with my father."

"Fine. Tell me what he says anyway."

Lex grimaced. "He says that he wants to understand."

"Understand what?"

Lex met Clark's gaze with difficulty. "Us. Your family."

"Our family," Clark said softly. "What else?"

"He talks about my mother. About Julian. He asked me—" Lex started laughing raggedly. "—if I remembered him. If I remembered my brother. I've started to have dreams about him. About Julian. They're..." Lex could find no appropriate adjective. "Nightmares," he said finally.

Clark scowled. "I don't believe this is real for one second, Lex. You loved Julian. You're the best man I know. It's impossible."

Clark was demented. "I was a twisted little fuck even then, Clark."

"You're not a twisted little fuck. You're not your father, Lex. Have you asked Eli about this?"

Lex shook his head. Eli. Eli and fratricide could not coexist. But then Clark and fratricide shouldn't coexist either. Perhaps his perceptions were not what they should be. Or perhaps he was just losing his mind.

"Or Pamela?"

Lex lowered his head as he choked back a groan. "No. No. For God's sake, she's dying, Clark. Leave her out of this."

"Lex, she was there. She could—"

"Promise me you'll leave her out of this, Clark."

Clark hesitated, then sighed. "Okay. I promise. But there's something too damn convenient for Lionel Luthor in this. I know it's hard, but think. Here you are, freaked out, afraid to talk to any of us...what was it you told me once about divide and conquer?"

Divide and conquer. Lex's head jerked up; he stared at Clark as if he were seeing him for the first time. Clark had grown up a lot in the past few months. Maybe too much.

The determination in Clark's face was solid granite. "We're going to sort this out. Together. There isn't anything you haven't told me, is there?"

"No," Lex lied softly, feeling the pure waters protest. "No, that's all."

***
Max has spoken the truth. There was certainly no sign of competent surveillance activity. Of course, Max was accustomed to some vestige of professional standards in such things, and had not as yet come to appreciate the ineptitude, the idiocy, the scheiss-for-brains antics of their enemy. Eli did not blame the boy. He himself had been taken aback and caught unawares more than once in the past few months, led astray by the wanton disregard for anything resembling intelligence. How this reek of stupidity had failed to reach the noses of Lionel Luthor and his creature eluded him.

Ah. Case in point. Here it came again, this very respectable blue sedan, and for the third time this week – moving at such a slow speed as to arouse the suspicion of even the surrounding roadkill. When a car moved that slowly it was usually because its driver was inexperienced, preoccupied or both. When a car moved away from town at an hour when every other vehicle in the vicinity was moving toward town, it was usually because its driver had an agenda. Given the location of the aberrant behavior, the driver might just as well have fixed a sign reading "I AM SPYING ON THE KENTS, PLEASE PASS" on his rear bumper.

Eli lifted his eyes to heaven as a telephoto lens emerged shakily from the driver-side window. It was a disgrace. There was not enough black shame in the universe to sufficiently burden the soul of this amateur. It was long past time to curtail this painfully inept exercise. Eli rose from his cover in the drainage ditch, climbed the incline, and planted himself in the car's path.

For a few seconds, Eli wondered if the idiot would run over him in his bumbling efforts to get the camera to work. "Good morning, Mr. Fordman," he called, loudly enough to be heard over the car's engine.

The car came to a screeching halt a foot away from Eli, and the camera dropped to the ground, breaking in what Eli hoped were irreparable places. Whitney Fordman stared at him through the windshield, mouth open and fingers curled around the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white.

"You are lost?" Eli continued, laying his hands on the hood of the car to lean forward with an amiable yet menacing air that had taken many years to cultivate.

"No! No, I'm not fucking lost," Whitney replied with considerable irritation. "What are you doing here?"

"I? I am taking a stroll before breakfast; it is good for the digestion."

"Get out of the way!"

"And then I am going to breakfast with the Kents, who have been kind enough to extend an invitation."

Whitney swallowed. "I'll run you down. I swear to God."

"What I am not doing is taking photographs of people and their private property without permission." Eli strolled around to the driver's side of the car, picked up the body of the camera, and popped open the back, producing a squawk of protest from the photographer.

"Are you crazy?" Whitney struggled to get the door open, but Eli leaned back against it as he exposed the entire roll.

"I am not. Kindly remain in your car, Mr. Fordman."

"Son of a bitch! You've got no right to ruin my pictures!" Whitney slammed his shoulder against the car door in vain.
Eli shrugged. "You had no right to take them. You have not only offended my muse, but my sense of propriety as well." Eli examined the camera grimly. "A very expensive piece of equipment, Mr. Fordman. Pardon my frankness, but I was not aware that your family's circumstances could accommodate the purchase of such a luxury."

"It was a present," Whitney snapped, snatching the camera out of Eli's hands.

"Ah." Eli bent down to lean through the window, and Whitney pulled back, clearly nervous. "A word of advice, Mr. Fordman. The gentleman in question does not give, unless he expects to receive something of greater value in return. Take care that his gifts do not become too expensive."

Whitney was white to the gills. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

"Then you have the pleasure of anticipating an enlightening experience. If I see you here again, I will inform not only the Kents, but the police as well."

"Fucking kike." Whitney's face and voice were a snarl, and the poison Eli saw there was all too familiar. "I'll get you fucking fired."

"You are heading the wrong way, Mr. Fordman." Eli drew back from the car. Poison. "Turn around before it is too late."

Whitney threw the car into gear, pulled a U-turn, tires screeching, and roared toward Smallville as fast as the Fordman family car could move.

Eli snorted, turning toward the house. "The young are always so literal."

***

"So where did you two disappear to so early?"

Martha looked up from the cooking bacon to see Jonathan looking at Clark over the top of his paper with a cat-that-swallowed-the-canary look. She was surprised to see Clark redden slightly. Lex, who was standing beside her pouring out the coffee, sighed and glanced at the ceiling. "You boys were out?"

"Came back with wet hair," Jonathan informed her blandly.

Clark cleared his throat. "We just went over to Harrison's Pond for a little while."

Oh, good Lord. Martha shot Lex an inquiring look, but he avoided her gaze as he carried several mugs of coffee to the table. Eli watched him with considerable interest, one corner of his mouth quirking upward.

Jonathan's eyebrows rose as he folded his paper. "A little early in the season, isn't it, son?"

"The water's warming up fast."

"Liar," Lex said calmly, setting the mugs down. "We had to scrape the ice off to jump in. The killer beavers will be laughing for weeks."

"Killer beavers my ass," Jonathan growled, dumping his artificial sweetener and skim milk into his decaffeinated coffee as if it were arsenic. "You city boys are all wimps."

"That's what I told him," Clark put in, grinning. "He only swims in heated pools, you know."
"I see I have once again transgressed the unwritten laws of Kansas country manhood." Lex retreated into Martha's territory, looking mildly amused. Eli was chuckling into his coffee.

Martha gave Lex a sidelong glance as he took up his place beside her, forked some butter into the frying pan, and starting cracking eggs into the mixing bowl with extraordinary energy. Martha stifled a sigh. Her eldest, as usual, was going to prove a challenge. She stabbed at the bacon and briefly considered fetching a crowbar from the barn. "You never mentioned our little negative problem," she murmured, deciding to start small and build.

Lex stopped scrambling the eggs for a fraction of a second, then continued, not looking at her. When he spoke, it was in a whisper. "Jonathan—"

"You should have told me. We agreed to no secrets, Lex."

Lex swallowed. "It was my mistake, and I didn't want you to think anything else. I should have realized that neither of them would keep the negatives with the prints. They've probably scanned and stored them by now."

"I know. I hope you're not planning on doing anything about this yourself. We don't expect perfection, you know." Martha touched his shoulder gently. "Just honesty."

Lex took an odd little breath. "Honesty can be problematic. I've always had trouble determining where the line between acceptable and unacceptable imperfection is drawn."

"There is no line," Martha said softly, turning away to flip the bacon. "We're not testing you, Lex. We're not going to send you away if you don't measure up to some stand—" Martha cut herself off, and carefully laid her fork down, horrified. "Lex."

"I believe you," Lex murmured. "And yet conditioned response will have its charming little way with us all."

"Conditioned," Martha repeated unsteadily. She drew a deep breath. "You're part of this family, Lex. We trust you."

Lex turned blue eyes full of unspoken anguish to her. "I know."

"Nothing is going to change that."

"Nothing?" Lex laughed oddly. "It's unwise to employ absolutes, Martha."

"Lex. Is there something else you want to tell me?"

Lex struggled visibly to maintain his composure. "No. I'm… No."

Oh, she could see where the wind was blowing now. "There is nothing in this world that could change how we feel about you," Martha said emphatically, abandoning the sizzling bacon to put both arms around the boy. If it took her the rest of her life, she was at least going to convince him of that.

Lex dropped his whisk into the bowl and hugged her tightly, burying his face in her hair. "Martha—"

"Hey. Hey!" Jonathan's teasing voice rose from the table a few feet away. "A little more cooking and a little less making time with my wife." Eli's chuckle was now clearly audible.
Lex hastily pulled back, his face slightly pink, and picked up his whisk again, all grave concentration.

Martha picked up her fork, managing to conceal her exasperation at Jonathan's excruciating timing. There was no doubt about it: the family enigma was considering haring off to correct his unacceptable imperfection. It was time to start establishing roadblocks in all likely directions.

"Cold water is good for the circulation," Eli remarked in a tone clearly intended to be audible in the kitchen. He took a sip of his coffee. "Or so my mother once told me."

Clark rolled his eyes, and Lex shot him a wry look. Martha couldn't hide her smile. Eli had obviously come to some similar conclusions, and diversionary tactics had been initiated. Well, the boys should have known that their little adventure would get them some chain-pulling, even if it was good for the circulation.

"Yeah, my mother told me the same thing," Jonathan said sourly. "Usually when the water heater was on the fritz."

"My circulation remains unaffected," Lex retorted. Martha watched as he regained his balance at the rather obvious maneuver. Someday she'd understand this boy. Catching Clark's slightly relieved smile, Martha was reminded that someone in the room already did. Thank God for that.

"I hope the poison ivy hasn't taken over Bud Harrison's woods again," Martha said pleasantly, dishing out the bacon. She saw Eli shoot her an admiring glance.

Lex sighed the sigh of the long-suffering. Clark looked at his mother with a pained expression, his face reddening again. "Mom. For crying out loud."

"Yeah, that would be a shame," Jonathan agreed, slurping his coffee. "Especially if some damn fools went tramping around in there butt naked."

Clark went scarlet. "Dad."

Eli managed to contain the guffaw Martha saw in his eyes. "Indeed. That would be most unfortunate."

"You're all developmentally arrested," Lex observed calmly, and Martha started laughing in spite of herself. "And I hope you realize that there's help available. I'll get the yellow pages."

***

"A school?"

"That's right."

"A school."

"You heard me."

Pete sighed as he took the turn into the juniors' parking lot. "Okay. Chloe? As a friend, I'm here to tell you that your Froot Loops have gone soggy."

Chloe glared at him. "You know it's a good idea. You're just jealous that you didn't think of it."

"News flash! I never would think of it. Tell Lionel Luthor that he's got to build a school for kids of the radioactive persuasion? After all the money he's shelled out on cleanup? I'd stand a better
chance of survival throwing myself in front of a combine.” Pete pulled into the first empty spot and parked the car. This day was not looking good. In fact, he had a distinct feeling it would suck meteor rocks.

Chloe lowered her voice. "Do you want those kids to have to go through what Clark does every day? Worry about getting hauled off to some lab?"

Pete made a rude noise, trying not to think about Clark being hauled off anywhere, let alone to a fucking lab. "And how exactly does a school keep that from happening?"

"Not just a school. A resource center. You know. Medical staff. Legal staff. Think of it as an ACLU for the genetically challenged."

Pete stared at her in fascinated horror. It was like watching a train wreck, if the train was carrying weapons of mass destruction. "You're going to tell Lionel Luthor that he has to pay for protection for the kids he wants to fucking dissect?"

"I think it's poetic justice," Chloe said archly. "Clark thinks so, too. In fact, he thinks it's a great idea."

Pete groaned. "Oh, Mr. Zero Life Management Skills thinks it's a good idea. That's just great."

"Clark knows what he's talking about."

Pete smacked the steering wheel. "We are talking about the guy who thinks he's in love with fucking Lex Luthor, aren't we? I mean, that shoots his credibility to shit as far as I'm concerned."

Chloe got that look on her face, that I'm-on-a-mission-from-God look, and Pete knew it was over. The Froot Loops had gone down for the third time. "Clark lives this. There's nobody else who knows what these kids are going through better than him. You know that. It's justice, Pete. That's the truth."

Pete drew a breath and tried again, because he loved to suffer. "Lionel Luthor doesn't give a damn about truth and justice, Chloe. You're making even more of a target of yourself than you have already. Do you get it? He's not going to take much more."

"He wouldn't dare do anything to us," Chloe said, with a confidence that stamped all over Pete's last nerve. "He'd be the prime suspect."

Pete exploded. "What the fuck planet are you living on, Chloe? He's Lionel Luthor. He owns third world countries. He's never going to answer for anything he does, not to the cops, not to the government, not to the Kents or A.J., and sure as hell not to you. Do you get it? He might as well be God."

Chloe hugged her books to her chest with one arm as she flung the car door open, flushed and defiant. "If Lionel Luthor is God, then I'm going atheist. And if you want out, just say so." She slammed the door behind her and stormed off across the parking lot, ignoring everyone who tried to talk to her.

"I want out! I want out!" Pete yelled after her. God, she was a maniac, she was a looney toon, she was a fucking tsunami of crazy. Shoving open his door, he climbed out of the car and slammed the door behind him. Striding after her, Pete was brought up short by the sight of Whitney Fordman sitting on the hood of his dad's car. He was drinking a beer – it was 7:30 in the morning, for Christ's sake – and staring at Pete as if he were a cockroach he'd just found in his Wheaties.
Whitney's mouth twisted into a sneer. "You got something to say to me?"

God, he didn't even look like the same guy anymore. Of course, knowing that this size eleven asshole had nearly gotten your best friend killed by a psycho reporter might tend to affect how you saw someone. Yeah, well. Screw objectivity. "Nobody's got anything to say to you, Fordman." Pete stalked past him, crossed the parking lot and headed for the school's front entrance, feeling Whitney's narrow-eyed gaze boring into his back every step of the way.

***

"Looking forward to that A," Martha said archly, kissing Clark's cheek as he pulled his jacket on.

"If I get the A, can I get out of—"

"Pots. Keep talking and I'll come up with a few other things to keep you busy." Martha shoved Clark's backpack into his hand and gave him a gentle shove toward the door.

Clark glanced at Lex, who was busying himself by clearing the table. The bastard was whistling. Clark opened his mouth to point out the inequity of sofa versus pots, but caught the look on his mother's face and thought better of it. "See you, mastermind."

Lex glanced up, a smile lurking in one corner of his mouth. "Relax, Jiminy. The A's in the bag. All you have to remember is that ships never encounter whales on school nights."

"You. The bathroom," Martha said sternly, pointing toward the stairs. "Make it shine."

"Yes'm." Lex sprinted up the stairs, grinning.

Jonathan watched him go with an exasperated expression. "Has anyone explained to him that he's not supposed to like doing that stuff?"

Eli cast his gaze heavenward and opened the door. "Come along, Clark. We will be late."

"Have a good one, son."

Clark glanced back over his shoulder as he moved through the door; his parents were already in each other's arms. Sighing, Clark ran down the steps and strode toward Eli's car. "Geez. They're always —"

"Yes?" Eli's tone was suspiciously bland. "Always?"

"You know."

"How surprising. When their son is such a model of restraint." Eli had the gall to sound amused.

Aw, hell, fuck and damn. Clark opened the car door and slid inside, slamming it behind him. His ears felt hot. Never, never again. Lex could just keep his hotness to himself when he came over.

Eli started the car and proceeded down the lane at his usual sedate pace. "Your parents are blessed," he said, his voice suddenly soft. He turned from the Kent's lane onto Hickory.

"Yeah, I know." Clark started to smile. "They're—"

Clark found himself flung against the dashboard as a large, long black vehicle roared around the curve to their right and cut them off. Eli swerved, but the limousine swiped Eli's front bumper and blocked their path, bringing both cars to a halt. "Down, down," Eli snarled, and Clark dropped onto
the seat, heart pounding. Who? Who? Lionel? Some...some lab person finally come to take him—
Eli forced his door open and took cover behind it, his gun aimed at the driver's door. "Out! Hands
first, if you please."

The tinted window rolled down. "Relax, old man. Here, see?" A woman's hand emerged, waving
a Kleenex. "We come under a flag of truce."

Mercy, thought Clark numbly.

"We?" Eli snarled. "Do you mean to say you have the effrontery—"

We. Clark sat bolt upright to stare at the car.

It was Karloff's limo.

Fucking Karloff's limo.

Here, a few yards away from Lex. A few yards away from Dad....

Clark had kicked the door open and strode around the back toward the passenger door of the limo
before he could fully realize what he was doing. He could hear Eli shouting at him to get back in the
car. He didn't care. There was only one thing he wanted to do, and there was nothing on this planet
that could stop him doing it.

Wrenching open the limo door, Clark stared at the man inside, panting and speechless.

"Good morning, Clark." Luthor removed his sunglasses, looking amused. "You seem to be in an
awful hurry to see me. I knew you'd come around eventually. I always—"

Clark grabbed Luthor by the lapels of his suit jacket, hauled him out of the back seat, and dealt him a
right hook on the jaw that sent him flying several feet to land in the dust of the road on his back.
"You son of a bitch! You sick son of a bitch!" A familiar orange haze colored his vision.

"Move, Miss Graves, and I will begin inflicting flesh wounds. Your employer knows that I am quite
adept at this."

Clark heard the words, but they made no sense to him. "You nearly killed Lex. You nearly killed
my father."

Luthor sat up, touching his jaw gingerly. "Yes, I do seem to recall something of the sort. I was
having a very bad night. Sorry."

"Sorry?! You prick! You sick fuck! Get up!"

"So you can knock me down again?"

"Yes!"

"I don't think so. You may have broken some teeth. But I don't blame you." Luthor stared up at
him. "If someone had tried to kill you, I'd have done the same. And then I'd have done worse."

"The purpose of this drama, if you please?" Eli's voice finally cut through the orange haze, and
Clark stepped back, suddenly realizing just how close Luthor was to becoming barbeque.

"A peace mission." Luthor struggled to his feet, leaning heavily against his limo. "Clark, you have
Clark let the full force of the fire return to his eyes and said nothing. He felt a hell of a lot of satisfaction when both Luthor and Mercy backed up against the car with wide eyes.

"Just imagine," Eli said softly, "how much less danger he would be in if the both of you were not seen again. Can you imagine that, Clark?"

"Yes," Clark whispered, knowing he was too close to the edge and not caring.

Luthor swallowed. "I have a peace offering." He opened his jacket, displaying the contents of the inner pocket to Eli, and carefully pulled a white envelope from it. He held it out to Clark.

Clark hesitated for a moment, then reached out to take it. Opening it, he saw negatives. "What the hell is this?"

"All the negatives of the photographs I had taken of you. And…Alexander had taken of you. You do know that he'd been spying on you, don't you, Clark?"

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," Luthor said softly. "Like I said. It's a peace offering. Oh. And there's a password written on the inside of the flap. Don't lose it."

"A password to what?"

"The encrypted files on my laptop. My personal files."

Clark snorted and shot Eli a triumphant glance. "Lex has already decrypted those files."

Luthor's expression went suddenly and frighteningly grim. "And you're still with him?"

"Get back in your car and leave," Eli snarled. "The truce is over."

Something in Luthor's face wouldn't let Clark look away. "What do you mean? Of course I'm still —"

"Enough! In the car at once!"

Mercy glanced at Luthor, who nodded. Mercy climbed back inside and shut her door. Luthor slid back into the back seat, his gaze never leaving Clark's face. "He hasn't told you about those files, has he?" he asked softly.

Clark slammed the door shut. "Get out of here. Don't ever come back."

Luthor leaned out the window as Mercy started the engine. "Clark. Listen to me. You need to read those files. You need to know the truth about who he is – hell, who we both are. Your life might depend on it."

Eli strode to the window and shoved his gun into Karloff's face. "Drive, Miss Graves. The decapitated are notoriously unreliable employers."

"Go, Mercy," Luthor said, looking at Eli as if he was ready to rip his throat out. With a screech of metal against metal, the limo took off down Hickory Lane toward Smallville, raising a cloud of dust in its wake.
Clark and Eli watched it go, then turned to each other. "What do we do now?" Clark managed to get past a clenched throat.

Eli glared and holstered his weapon. "We go to school, of course. You were thinking of more swimming, perhaps?" He walked past the front of his car, glaring at the damage and muttering. "Another day for the desert. It will get worse. Always it gets worse. Today there will be wasps."
"There's something going on, Pamela. It's not just the negatives. I can feel it." Martha realized that she was clutching the phone tightly enough to make her hand hurt, and tried to relax. "He's hiding something again."

Pamela actually chuckled. "Of course he is."

"Why? He must realize—"

"Martha. He's either protecting you, or protecting himself. Or both. Keeping secrets was a survival mechanism Alexander learned by the time he could walk. It will take a long, long time for him to learn that it's not always necessary."

Martha sighed and took a sip of her coffee. "Jonathan thinks that Lionel is messing with Lex's mind."

"Oh, for God's sake. When has Beelzebub *not* messed with Alexander's mind? That's a given. But I don't think that's all that's going on."

"What is it? Do you know?"

"He's been spending an awful lot of time with those damn laptops."

Martha slapped her coffee cup down on the table. "The laptops. He's found something."

"He's Alexander. That's also a given. He hasn't talked to you about it?"

"Not a word. So help me, I will have that boy clean the storm cellar with a Q-tip if he doesn't stop keeping things from me."

Pamela laughter turned to a fit of coughing, and Martha froze. "Pamela? Are you all right? Is Siobhan—"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Pamela wheezed. "Oh, go away, you spider. I'm plotting."

Martha heard a disapproving noise in the background, and a door closing. "Is she working out all right?"

"She's a pain in the ass, but she's a damn good nurse. Now listen to me. Lionel's laptop is full of research files on Karloff."

"Lex told you that?"

"Of course not. He left the laptop in my room without shutting it down."

Martha cleared her throat. "Pamela, wasn't that a little—"

"You think I'm worried about Lionel Luthor's privacy? Dream on."

"I was thinking more of Lex's privacy."

"We agreed to no secrets in strategic matters."
"But—"

"Besides, I have special dispensation."

"Special—"

"I bathed him until he was six. He has no secrets from me, period."

Martha couldn't help laughing. "Dispensation noted. Let's hear it."

"I knew you were a woman after my own heart. The files he left open were about the memory transfer process. God knows I'm no expert on unsanctioned medical experimentation, but it seems to me that Lionel was up to more than transferring Alexander's memories to Karloff."

"What else could he have wanted to do?"

"The devil only knows. But the records said that something called a 'memory matrix' was transferred to Karloff twice in an effort to create something called a 'coalescent matrix'."

Martha sighed, and for the first time in her life wished that she'd majored in Biochemistry rather than Business Administration. "Pamela, what on earth does that mean?"

Pamela chuckled. "Sorry. I don't speak mad scientist. It's certainly not a term I ever heard in med school."

Martha blinked. "Med school? You're a doctor?"

"Shrink. Retired."

"You never—"

"Martha, Lionel didn't just do this to Karloff."

Martha felt her stomach turn. "You mean there are more clones?"

"No," Pamela said quietly. "Not clones. People. He transferred a 'memory matrix' to people with memories of their own."

Martha sat speechless, counting her breaths. "He transferred Lex's memories to other--"

"It doesn't say whose memories were transferred to the other subjects. I wouldn't assume they were Lex's. When dealing with Beelzebub, think big, Martha."

"Why?" Martha croaked finally. "Why would he do such a...a—"


"Even Lionel Luthor has reasons for what he does. Sick reasons, but reasons."

"True. These procedures were performed months before Karloff received his memories. I can only assume—"

"They were guinea pigs."

"Yes."

"My God. Are they... Did they survive?"
"Some didn't. A few did."

"He's...he's a monster," Martha said faintly.

"You have no idea." Pamela's voice was ice.

"But why? What was the point? I mean, of the whole thing? Why would the clone need two sets of memories?"

"I don't know. I don't think Alexander knows, either."

"Who were these people? Did they know what they were getting into?"

"There are no names in the files, only ID numbers. Oh, damn it, Teskey, no. No, Alexander will be here soon. You can just wait until after he leaves."

Martha could hear some rather heated swearing in an Irish accent. "I'll let you go, Pamela."

"Oh, no, you don't. It's time to put the fear of God into Beelzebub, Martha. It's time to flank the devil."

Martha sighed. "With an army of two?"

"Think of us as an elite commando squad."

"I'm thinking of us as defendants in a civil suit."

"Really? I'm thinking of us as Boudicca, crushing the Romans beneath our chariot wheels."

"Pamela, Boudicca lost."

"Not to the guys under her chariot wheels. Start sharpening your spear, Martha."

***

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Lex paused, shifting in the desk chair he had rolled in from the lair, and regarded the silent ship with a frown. "Of course brillig is a real word. It must be. It's right here, prominently featured in one of the classics of English literature." He continued in an annoyed tone.

"'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!'"

Bessie's silence took on a note of skepticism.

"Yes, frumious is also a word. Granted, it's a word invented by a demented professor of mathematics with inclinations toward pedophilia, but it's a word nonetheless."

Lex drummed his fingers impatiently on the book in his hand. "Of course there's a Jabberwock. May I ask what you would know about it? You've spent the past twelve years in various storm
cellars in the vicinity of Smallville, Kansas. Scarcely a position to enhance one's knowledge of the
local wildlife."

Flagrant disbelief.

Lex leaned forward belligerently. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I have seen it. It has long hair and a beard, and wears three thousand dollar suits. It eats its young. Wherever it treads is dust and darkness, and it finds that good."

Triumphant accusation.

"I did not steal that line. I borrowed it in homage, and bestowed it upon a deserving recipient. How is it that a mechanism from such a supposedly advanced culture is familiar with dialogue from Dr. Who episodes and knows nothing about Lewis Carroll?"

Cautious assessment.

"Nonsense. Luthors never lose their minds." Lex laughed hollowly. "Their family, their friends, their dreams, their morals, their souls…but never their minds. Now listen.

*He took his vorpal sword in hand:
   Long time the manxome foe he sought--
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
   And stood awhile in thought.*

*And, as in uffish thought he stood,
   The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
   And burbled as it came!*

Now here," Lex explained, holding the book to display the illustration, "we have an inaccuracy. The Jabberwock has no eyes of flame, as that is solely the province of someone near and dear to us both, and it wouldn't be caught dead in that waistcoat." Lex paused. "Ah. Why don't I take my vorpal sword in hand? Well, we're allies now, it and I. It's going to make this little corner of the world safe for the boy with eyes of flame. And I am going to let it call me son, and let it touch me." Lex's voice fell to a whisper.

He cleared his throat. "It doesn't burble, either. Such an undignified sound would never pass a Luthor's lips. It speaks calmly and sensibly, and I do what it tells me. I want to do what it tells me. Despite the fact that it's managed to design an application for the particle accelerator – my particle accelerator – that would release, channel and amplify the radiation of the meteorites, thus obliterating my boy with the eyes of flame."

Lex blinked and lowered his head to read, ignoring the alarm in Bessie's silence.

"And mutating or killing just about everyone else. Why? The latest in international blackmail technology, I imagine. Hand your government's assets over to Lionel Luthor or have your nation's entire gene pool mutated. Of course, he says that line of research has been abandoned." Lex kept reading, despite the fact that he had memorized this manifestation of Charles Dodgsons's insanity years ago.

*"One two! One two! And through and through
   The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head*
He went galumphing back.

Oh, no," Lex whispered. "It would never be that simple. There's the Bandersnatch, after all, and for all I know he has a Jubjub bird somewhere. Too many heads to galumph back with, you know? Mind you, I'm not saying it's impossible. I've had more than one person whose opinion I respect recommend that course of action.

'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
   Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!'
He chortled in his joy.

It would never be like that." Lex felt his breath catching in his throat. "There wouldn't be any 'Callooh! Callay!' from the Kent family, even if it meant the bastards were dead and Clark would be safe forever. Because they don't cross that line. Even though no one on this planet knows how to protect Clark from that radiation, they don't cross that line. Unless, of course, the Jabberwock starts re-drawing their lines. He's very artistic that way. Then anything is possible."

Lex's hand strayed to his breast pocket; he pulled out an octagonal piece of metal. "But you could put a stop to all that, couldn't you? You know how to protect him. You must know his one weakness. You must have technology that could shield him. But he says he's not ready to find out about his past. He trusts me not to use this until he is. He trusts me." His voice shook and he gestured wildly toward the stairs to the kitchen. It was nearly time for his morning visit. Morning visits were slightly less painful than their afternoon counterparts. Slightly. "Not everybody has that choice. Nothing can shield her. Cancer, you know. It eats humans alive from the inside. No shield. No rescue."

Lex rose unsteadily to his feet, shoving the bit of metal back into his pocket and closing the book. "But you could rescue Clark. It only stands to reason." He stooped to pick up another volume lying on the floor. "A delusion?" He clutched the books tightly. "Don't underestimate delusion, Bessie. Without it there's only the Jabberwock."

***

"It's a bird."

"It's a plane."

"It's Whitney," Clark sighed.

The sputtering sound of an eggbeater motor had attracted the attention of everyone on the field, effectively bringing several gym classes to a halt. Three teachers gathered in a huddle, nervously watching as the plane's altitude decreased and its flight path lurched from left to right of the playing field and back again.

"Did you say Whitney?" Pete shot Clark an amazed look.

"Whitney doesn't know how to fly a plane," Chloe said incredulously.

"You're telling me," Clark replied in a sour tone, watching the wild veering. Geez, he could fly better than that without a plane. He could see Whitney in the cockpit, could see him laughing.

"Maybe one of his buddies over at the air base taught him. What I want to know is how he got hold of Eddie Cole's crop duster."

"Is he about to do what I think he's about to do?" Chloe started backing away in the direction of the
bleachers just as three teachers started blowing their whistles and gesturing frantically toward the growing crowd of students.

"Off! Off the field!"

"Aw, shit," Pete muttered, hastily following Chloe. "He's buzzing the field. I don't fucking believe it."

Clark jumped as a firm hand was laid on his shoulder. "Geez. Eli, don't do that."

"Did you not hear your teacher? Move off the field. Now." Eli's eyes were fixed on the rapidly descending plane.

"It's only Whitney," Clark replied in an undertone.

"Whitney Fordman." Eli's eyes narrowed. "A young man of many talents, and a sense of the dramatic. I imagine Mr. Cole may finally voice an objection, provided he still has a voice with which to object."

Clark stared at him. "What do you—"

"Kent, off the field!" Coach Altman ran toward them, red in the face and blowing his whistle between every word. Students scattered around him, yelling and seeking the shelter of the bleachers. "Now!"

Clark sighed and complied, backing slowly away. The plane's wheels barely missed the goalpost as it swooped lower to the ground. Very low. Its wheels were almost touching the ground, the wings teetering back and forth as the pilot struggled to keep them level. Oh, man. Whitney wasn't really going to… "Coach, I think he's landing."

Altman whirled, his whistle falling from his mouth. "Jesus. Cole's lost it. He's lost it."

"Perhaps a call to the police would be in order," Eli suggested softly.

Swearing, Altman pulled his cell from his belt and dialed, shooing Clark off in the direction of the bleachers. "Ethan? Get yourself down here, we've got a situation."

"You will join your friends now." Eli had that look on his face, and Clark moved reluctantly toward the bleachers. He cast a look over his shoulders to see the crop duster touch down, bounce up, and touch down again, rolling to the other end of the field, where it came to stop. Clark could hear Whitney's rebel yell all the way down the field.

Boy oh boy was that asshole going to get it this time. Clark tried to not to feel smug, and failed miserably.

Clark jogged over to the bleachers, but everyone who had taken shelter there was already popping out to watch the spectacle, talking excitedly. Pete and Chloe made their way in the direction of the bleachers. "Ethan? Get yourself down here, we've got a situation."

"Is it really—" Chloe began, then stopped as the pilot swung out of the cockpit to slide to the ground, waving a bottle and yelling. "Yeah. It is. Holy shit."

Clark suppressed a smile as the sound of a siren reached his ears. "I think Whitney's police escort is about to arrive."

Chloe made a rude noise. "What is with him lately? He's even worse than usual. I never thought I'd actually feel sorry for Princess Woe-is-me."
Clark shot Chloe a glare, and Pete elbowed her, jerking his head in Lana's direction. Clark stifled a sigh at the horrified realization dawning in the girl's face as she recognized her boyfriend. Lana _would_ have to have gym right now. Hearing about this would have been hard enough; seeing it was…oh, hell.

Whitney sauntered toward them, yelling at the crowd and ignoring the efforts of the teachers to intercept him. "What the fuck are you brats looking at? Hey! Hey, beautiful! Aren't you going to congratulate me on my landing?" Whitney let loose with an inebriated and lewd cackle that Clark had never heard before. The sound made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Lana reddened and turned away to disappear into the crowd.

Coach Altman took Whitney by the arm and snatched the bottle from his hand. "Fordman. What the hell—"

"Pass it around, Jack. There's plenty more where that came from. I still owe you a few, remember?" Whitney relinquished his bottle, slapped Altman on the shoulder, and continued toward the bleachers, leaving a visibly stunned Altman behind him as Sheriff Millar's car rolled slowly onto the field.

Clark watched in amazement as Whitney strode toward the crowd, grinning as if he'd just won the Superbowl all by his damn self. This was weird. This was beyond asshole behavior, this was something else. Something… Clark suddenly realized that his stare was being returned, and fought the sudden impulse to duck out of sight. Whitney's grin slowly faded as he came to a halt in front of Clark.

"Tell Jonathan no hard feelings," Whitney said softly.

"Hard feelings?" Clark repeated in confusion.

"I got…plenty of clients. Don't need his business. I am flush."

"Whitney," Clark said, getting more creeped out by the second, "Maybe you should go sleep it off, huh?" He could see Sheriff Millar talking to the teachers, and wished to God he'd get his ass over here and take this crazy guy away. Far away.

Whitney smiled and laid his hands on Clark's shoulders. "So. Does your old man know?"

Something in Whitney's eyes made Clark's skin crawl. "Know what?"

Whitney's grin was back, and it was a twisted thing. He leaned forward to whisper in Clark's ear. "Does he know that you take it up the ass for Lex Luthor?"

Clark shoved Whitney away in something close to panic, shoved him hard enough to make him stagger, but Whitney only cackled. "No, no, I'll bet he doesn't!"

"Break it up, you two." Sheriff Millar strode toward Whitney, looking like he meant business, and Clark took a couple steps back, breathing hard. "Come on, Whitney. We're going to talk to your folks now." Putting an arm around Whitney's shoulders, Millar steered him toward the car.

"Dead. Long dead," Whitney mumbled, but offered no resistance.

"Jesus," Clark whispered, watching them go. "He's crazy."

"What did he say?" Pete hissed. "Clark?"
"Nothing that makes any sense," Clark said, turning away.

Unless things had just got worse again.

***

The thud of a foot-high stack of folders striking mahogany echoed in Martha's ears, drowning out the pounding of her heart.

"Mrs. Kent, sir." The servant who had opened the door appeared determined to announce her, even though she was already eyeball-to-eyeball with Lionel Luthor, who was seated behind what used to be Lex's desk.

"So I see." Lionel's gaze went from the folders to Martha's face. He was smiling.

"She wouldn't wait, sir, she just pushed past me—"

"It's quite all right. Mrs. Kent and I are old friends. She's welcome here at any time."

"Yes, sir."

"Close the door, David." Lionel leaned back in his chair as the door shut, his smile becoming a grin. "Won't you have a seat, Mrs. Kent?"

"I will not have a seat," Martha replied, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "I'll have the negatives. And I want to see you delete any scans you've made of these prints with my own eyes."

Lionel laughed delightedly. "My dear Martha, I believe you are in possession of stolen property."

"That usually happens when you steal something," Martha snapped.

Lionel's eyes widened slightly, but he laughed even harder. "Good…good God. Congratulations, Martha. Welcome to the dark side."

"Mr. Luthor—"

"Would you like your Junior Evil-Doers pin now?"

"We are going to have a serious conversation whether you like it or not."

Lionel reined his laughter in to a chuckle. "I beg your pardon. You're quite right. But you surprised me, and that doesn't happen often. You're obviously a woman of many talents."

"I want the negatives." Martha spoke slowly and distinctly, managing not to scream, and shocked that the compliment had pleased her. Pleased her.

Lionel sobered. "I'm afraid I don't have them."

"Don't bother lying to me. If you had the prints, you must have—"

"Oh, I had them once. But as you can see, the replicate appropriated them long ago. His duplicate prints—"

"How did you know he had duplicates?"

Lionel raised an eyebrow. "He told me. He was quite pleased with himself. In any case, I don't
recommend asking for them. His obsession with your son is almost as disturbing as Lex's." He rose to walk to the bar. "May I offer you something? A glass of wine? You look upset."

"I'm not upset." Martha followed him, struggling for control. "I'm angry, Mr. Luthor. If you find your…your replicate's obsession with Clark disturbing, how do you characterize your own?"

Lionel paused in the act of pouring himself a glass of whiskey. "My own?"

"Years." Martha gestured toward the pile of files on Lex's desk. "Years of spying on a child. On a baby. It's sick. It's—"

"My dear Martha," Lionel said softly. "I ordered photographs to be taken of your home and family long before you adopted Clark."

"What?"

"He was not the object of my interest. You were." Martha stood dumbly, wondering when exactly the floor had dropped away from her feet, as she watched Lionel pour a glass of white wine. "I believe you prefer Chardonnay."

"What…what sort of game are you playing now?" Martha managed to stutter.

Lionel chuckled. "The oldest one in the book. I'm only human, Martha. You intrigued me."

That small, pleased part of her reared its ugly head again. "Intrigued?"

"We met at that little gathering of Lillian's to introduce me to her acquaintances, do you remember?"

"No," Martha said flatly, remembering all too well.

"You were ice. Courteous and cold. You shook my hand and had nothing further to do with me for the rest of the evening. Tell me, did you run into the kitchen and wash your hands?" Lionel handed her the glass of wine, still smiling. "How demeaning it must have been, to be forced to have physical contact with upstart trailer trash."

Martha took the wine, numb. "You were married."

Lionel chuckled. "Indeed I was."

"I was engaged."

"And the general consensus, my dear, was that you married far beneath you. Be that as it may, I will state again, for the record, that I'm only human. You were the only guest that night who didn't— metaphorically or physically—throw themselves at my feet. I wanted to know more about you."

"I am happily married." Martha retreated to bedrock.

Lionel looked surprised. "As was I. But my wife was a very wise woman who understood that no one person can satisfy another's needs completely." Something about the way he was looking at her made Martha incapable of moving. "Are you a wise woman, Martha?"

He was suddenly and uncomfortably close, this man who had betrayed his wife and raped his own son. But she found herself unable to move, to look away. "Is this…is this why you did that to Jonathan?"

Lionel regarded her with an exasperated expression. "And what precisely did I do to Jonathan?"
"You forced him to betray his principles."

"Oh, please."

"You nearly destroyed him."

"If I had wanted to destroy him, he'd be destroyed." Lionel's tone sharpened. "I didn't. I protected him. I protected all of you."

"Protected us from what? You're the only thing we ever had to be afraid of!"

Lionel laughed outright. "What charming naïveté. Do you imagine that I'm the only businessman interested in the land around Smallville? That is an extremely valuable piece of real estate your family is squatting on, Martha."

Martha bristled. "We are not squatting. Jonathan's family has been working that land for five generations."

Lionel rolled his eyes. "I stand corrected. Do you imagine that I'm the only scientist interested in the meteorites and their effects? That the mutations, which are common knowledge now, thanks to my son and yours, haven't been being discussed, and subjects being studied, for years?"

Martha took a step back, trying to control her breathing. "Subjects."

"You might very well have woken up one morning to find Clark missing from his bed, if it hadn't been for me."

"No." Martha couldn't have suppressed that reaction for her life.

Lionel regarded her with a somber expression. "I'm the best friend your family has ever had."

Focus. Focus. He was trying to distract her. "The negatives—"

"God save us all from single-minded women." Lionel snorted and took a long sip of whiskey. "I don't know where the replicate keeps them now. I don't even know where he keeps himself. But if you're worried about him making those pictures available to the military industrial complex or on farmstuds.com, I think your concern is misplaced."

"That's not what you told Eli."

"I have reassessed the situation."

"Why?"

Lionel met her gaze. "Because he wants Clark all to himself," he said softly. "All to himself, all by himself. He won't share those pictures with anyone, no matter what threats he's made."

"Not even to force Lex to give him the security codes for the particle accelerator lab?"

Lionel sighed. "Why are you are all so obsessed with that lab? The replicate has probably forgotten all about it by now."

"Have you?"

"Certainly not."
"Where are your scans, Mr. Luthor?"

"I never made any."

"I don't believe you. You want that lab. Probably more than your monster does."

Lionel shrugged. "That lab represents a large investment of LuthorCorp capital."

Martha couldn't resist. "Large enough to justify torturing your son to gain access to it."

Lionel's eyes went hard. "I've explained what happened more than once. I won't explain it again."

"No explanations are necessary," Martha snapped. "I don't think your monster has forgotten that lab any more than you have."

"That is a matter you'll have to take up with him, given the opportunity, and I hope for your sake the opportunity is not given." Without warning, Martha found her hand in his, found his blue eyes searching her face. "Please, Martha. I realize this must be difficult to accept. But I am your friend. Your family's friend. I want to help. Don't blame yourself for those photos."

"Blame myself," Martha repeated dully, unable to look away.

"It wasn't your fault that Clark's abilities were documented. I just couldn't resist you."

For two seconds, Martha listened to her heart beat as Lionel leaned in to kiss her. Then she tossed the contents of her wine glass into Lionel's shocked face, dropped the glass, picked up the folders, and stalked out of the house.

"God damn it to hell!" Lionel shouted after her. "You are all certifiably insane! Every last one of you!"

"Conditioned response," Martha breathed as she tossed the folders through the passenger-side window onto the seat and leaned against the truck, trying to stop her knees from knocking. "Conditioned response. Oh, God, Lex."

***

Clark leaned against his locker, his gaze locked on the stupidest guy in the county. He wasn't jealous. He wasn't. He was in love with somebody else and he was going to get old with him, and watching Pete flirt with Lana Lang in a school hallway in front of God and everybody did not make him jealous. It just made him...concerned. Yes. The fact that she seemed to be flirting back didn't make him jealous, either, just...concerned.

He was concerned.

The bell rang and Clark waited impatiently as Pete and Lana went through what Lex would call "an extended leave-taking ritual," trying not to tap his foot. He didn't want Pete to think he was jealous. He was concerned. Lana finally turned to walk quickly in the direction of her next class, and Pete joined Clark, strutting and grinning in a way that stomped all over Clark's last nerve. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," Clark snapped. "We're going to be late for French." He turned to stride down the hallway, Pete half-running to keep up with him.

"It's never too late for French, Clark."

Clark realized he was grinding his teeth. He cleared his throat. "It might be a good idea not to move
too fast with Lana, Romeo. In case you've forgotten, she has a boyfriend."

"After what just happened? You've got to be kidding. I think it's over between them, Clark. I think —"

"What you think doesn't mean squat. It's what Whitney Fordman thinks that matters." Clark tried not to imagine Pete hanging out in the middle of a corn field somewhere. "Be careful, Pete."

Pete snorted. "Whitney Fordman is a joke."

"He isn't."

"He doesn't even show up for class half the time. Or practice. I've heard the coach might knock him down to second string. I heard he might even get suspended."

"You hear too much. His dad's been sick, Pete."

Pete sighed. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry about Mr. Fordman, he's a good guy. But his son is an asshole and a drunk, and you know it."

Clark stopped outside their classroom door, lowering his voice. "What I know is that he's a jealous guy, and jealous guys do crazy things sometimes. For God's sake, Pete, slow down."

Pete's eyes narrowed. "Does this advice come from personal experience, Clark?"

"It comes from common sense." Clark yanked open the classroom door and walked inside, grateful that the teacher hadn't arrived, and that the resulting babble of voices made conversation difficult. "God, you're a dumbass."


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"This place is a dump."

Eli cleared his throat, continuing to clean off his gardening tools as he cradled his cell phone between his shoulder and his ear. There was an inappropriate edge to Max's tone that bordered on a lack of professionalism. "Mr. Cole will be mortified to hear your opinion of his home, I am sure. Specifics, if you please, Max."

"Dump. Rathole. Shit—"

"Report!"

Max sighed. "Eli, no one's lived here in months. The place is trashed. It looks like there's a lot of stuff missing, too."

"The locks?"

"Were intact. No sign of a break-in. If someone's getting in here, they have a key. Oh. And you may find this interesting."

Eli waited. It was a beautiful day, and his position afforded a perfect view of Clark, sitting in his seat in class like the fine, upstanding flying alien he was. Max was being trying today. He should know better than to be trying.
"There's a pay stub here from last summer. Eddie Cole was working at Belle Rêve."

"Ah," Eli said softly. "You are right, Max. That is interesting."

"I thought you'd like that. Do you think Luthor is pulling the strings here?"

"You are joking, yes? Please return as quickly as possible. Sheriff Millar will not detain Mr. Fordman more than an hour, and he will no doubt return his attentions to your charges."

"No doubt." Max's tone was sour. "But hell, Eli, I can't watch all three of them."

"Nonsense. It is all a matter of organization."

"Uh-huh."

"I myself have watched an entire army with little difficulty."

"You had it easy. Try taking on Pete and Chloe for a while. You'll be wishing you were back in the desert inside an hour."

"On the contrary. I would accomplish my mission in exemplary fashion, and without the whining, philandering or other extracurricular activities you seem to find essential to your function. I would then go home to a cognac."

"With these two, you start with the cognac."

"Kindly get back to work." Eli flipped the cell phone shut and continued cleaning his tools, glancing through the window now and then to see Clark sitting in class, dutifully repeating French in a ghastly accent that was only slightly worse than that of his teacher.

Eli grimaced. There were times, indeed, when the desert had a powerful allure.

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"And mother rabbits would tell their kittens that if they did not do as they were told, the General would get them—the General who was first cousin to the Black Rabbit himself. Such was Woundwort's monument: and perhaps it would not have displeased him."

Lex paused at the rattling sound that passed for laughter with Pamela these days. "What?" he demanded.

Pamela was still laughing. "It…wouldn't displease your father either."

Lex forced a grin. She was all bones. There was nothing left but the soul in her eyes. "Displease him? He'd love it."

The rattle became ragged. "Oh, damn…"

Lex snatched up the oxygen mask and settled it over her face gently. "No more laughing."

Pamela pulled a face. "I'm casting Lionel Luthor as a killer rabbit and you say no laughing?"

Lex maintained his composure with difficulty. "Behave. Dr. Weiss will skin me alive when he finds out I haven't been a calming influence."

"He's a quack."
"And I don't want to think about what Taz will do."

"She experiments on humans."

"Careful, Pamela. You're starting to sound like Eli." Lex abandoned his chair and sat on the bed beside her, leaning over her.

Pamela snorted. "It's the drugs."

Lex caught her gaze and held it.

Pamela stared back at him for a moment, then swore softly and pushed the mask away. "It always hurts less when you're here, Alexander."

"Then I won't leave." But she would. They always left. What was it about him that made them leave?

Pamela smiled, and for one second the approaching shadows fell away from her face; it lit up like fireworks. "I'd like nothing better. But you know you have to go. Your father will be waiting for his pre-meeting phone call."

"Fuck my father."

Pamela grimaced. "What an unsavory suggestion. What's Beelzebub up to now?" She took the book from Lex's hand and set it on the nightstand.

Lex shrugged, watching, aching as the shadows returned. "Abiding faithfully by the terms of our agreement, of course. I don't think there's an EPA agent or contractor in the country that hasn't descended on Smallville. The cleanup is actually ahead of schedule."

"And the mortgages?"

"Have all been refinanced. Lionel Luthor is, after all, the very soul of honor." Lex couldn't for the life of him remove the acid from his tone.

Pamela looked amused. "You doubt your father's sincerity?"

"I doubt my father's humanity."

"Has his attitude toward the Kents improved?"

"Of course not. But I let him pretend that it has. Diabolical deception makes him so happy."

"You could always send him over here." Pamela watched Lex's face with thoughtful eyes. "Let him try to diabolically deceive me for the few seconds he'd last."

Lex took a steadying breath, hoping to God she was joking. "You do know that my father's been trying to wheedle an invitation to this house ever since he found out about it."

Pamela snorted. "Is this supposed to surprise me?"

"By this time, he must be considering the possibility that I was never in Europe at all."

"No doubt."

"Eli wouldn't allow him in the house, and neither would I. Apart from the fact that I don't want the
bastard within a mile of you, there are some things in this house he shouldn't see."

Pamela waved dismissively. "You can drop the cloak and dagger. Clark carried me down to meet Bessie the first day I moved in."

Lex felt his jaw drop. "He did what?"

"Took me upstairs to see the stars, too." Pamela was looking entirely too pleased with herself.

Lex pulled himself together. "And where the hell was Taz when all this—"

"That was a lovely gift, Alexander."

Lex felt the heat rise to his face at her smile, and muttered something about $5.99.

"He was glowing when he showed it to me. You made him very happy."

"I'm…highly motivated," Lex whispered to the bedclothes.

"Good." Pamela's approval was emphatic. "This is the only one of your many obsessions that's done you any good, Alexander."

Chuckling now, Lex bent to kiss her forehead, and something slipped from the breast pocket of his shirt to land among the folds of the blanket. Shit. Lex met Pamela's gaze as she picked up the pretty thing.

Pamela's expression was wry. "Speak of the devil."

"I beg your pardon?" Lex attempted a bewildered expression that he knew damn well wouldn't deceive this woman on her worst day. He resigned himself to the oncoming inquisition.

"You keep this with you." It wasn't a question.

"Yes." This had been inevitable. He had been tempting fate for weeks. Lex briefly considered the possibility that he had wanted to be caught.

"Always?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lex shrugged. "Clark asked me to take care of it."

Pamela raised an eyebrow. "I see." Her thin fingers glided over the octagonal bit of metal. "Did he ask you to carry it around with you 24/7?"

"Your point?"

"The behavior pattern is disturbingly familiar."

Lex barked a bitter laugh. "Yes, well. That's to be expected, isn't it?"

"Don't give me that crap." Pamela raised herself into a more vertical position, and Lex saw the cost in her eyes.

"Pamela, for God's sake, stay still." Lex straightened in a panic.
"You're obsessing about this thing."

"So? Last month I was obsessing about my collection of pink socks. I even arranged them by shade. Let me call Taz."

Pamela seized him by the wrist with astonishing strength. "Oh, no, you don't. Tell me."

Lex wearily lowered himself back onto the bed. "There's nothing to tell. I've been trying to decipher the markings."

Pamela's eyes narrowed. "You already know what this thing is for."

"I suspect I know what it's for."

"What do you think is inside her, Alexander?"

Lex shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Does Clark want to know what's inside her?"

Damn her. "No. He's not ready. I don't blame him. There are things about my family I wish I didn't know."

Pamela's expression became grimmer. "But he trusts you with this."

"I told you. He's a lunatic."

"I've found Clark's judgment to be amazingly sound for someone so young."

Lex was silent. So had he.

"Tell me what you expect to find."

Lex took the bit of metal and ran his fingertips over its smooth surface. "It could be nothing. It could be...everything."

"Everything?"

"Technology that could protect Clark." Lex spoke quickly, knowing he was a fool. "From the meteorites. From my father. From everything."

"Ah." Pamela sighed and leaned back. "Leave deus ex machina to Euripides, Alexander. There is no simple solution. I told you. It's a life to be lived."

"That technology could help us live it."

"Assuming that this technology exists – which is by no means certain – what in God's name makes you think you'll be able to understand and operate it?"

Lex snorted dismissively.

Pamela rolled her eyes. "Forgive me. I forgot I was in the presence of a towering intellect. Believe it or not, there are some things beyond your comprehension."

Lex uttered a rueful laugh. "I've known that since the first time I laid eyes on Clark."

Pamela's face relaxed into a smile, but her eyes were grave. "Be careful, Alexander. Think it
"Pamela—"

"There are so many points of possible failure in this plan that it staggers the imagination."

"It's not a plan. I have no intention—"

"The first being breaking your word to Clark."

"I've never broken my word to Clark," Lex said flatly. He hadn't. He wouldn't. "Never."

"Alexander. I want you to promise me that you'll talk to Clark about this."

Lex hesitated, but those eyes would not take no for an answer. "I will."

"I want you to talk to him about everything."

Lex stiffened. "Everything?"

Pamela's answer was cut short when the door to the room burst open. A large, middle-aged woman with short red hair and a face like the wrath of God, most incongruously dressed in a nurse's uniform, appeared in the doorway to glare at them both. It was a sight to strike terror into the bravest of souls, but Lex assumed a casual posture, smiling pleasantly. "Good afternoon, Ms. Teskey."

"I will be having no 'good afternoons' from you, Alexander Joseph." Her lethal gaze raked over him, but Lex was oblivious to its effects; he had had too many years battling Lionel Luthor to wilt under the regard of an incensed Irishwoman, no matter how many guns and knives were concealed about her person.

"Middle name treatment," Pamela remarked, relaxing against her pillows. "Your affairs are in order, Alexander?"

"Always."

Teskey continued as if they hadn't spoken. "You will be leaving now. You have vastly overstayed your welcome—"

"There are no limitations on Alexander's welcome," Pamela cut in firmly.

"One hour was the agreement." Fierce blue eyes blazed accusingly at Pamela. "One hour. It is now one hour and twenty-three minutes you have been without your medication, and I'll not allow this stupidity to continue any longer."

"I'm enjoying my stupidity," Pamela retorted. "You're a tyrant, Teskey, and I'm officially staging a revolt."

Teskey appeared completely unfazed. "Must I carry the scarecrow out of this room kicking and screaming?"

"You're into some kinky stuff, Taz." Lex rose from his chair, grinning. "I'll come back later." He raised Pamela's hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Talk to Clark," Pamela whispered as she folded Lex's fingers around that damned piece of metal. Lex could plainly see now what those twenty-three minutes had cost her. "Promise."
"I promise," Lex said around a tightened throat, and strode quickly around the bed toward the door, trying not to see Teskey brush past him with a grim expression and a hypodermic in her hand.
Chapter Four

"How the hell could I be doing too much? I sleep in bed, I eat in bed, I watch TV in bed, and if I'm a very good boy you let me go sleep, eat and watch TV in my recliner." Jonathan glared up at the woman taking his blood pressure. These people were clueless. He had a farm to run, two sons to raise, and a comic book to write if he made it through this. He had no time for "you're doing too much."

Moira glared back, unfazed. "Your blood pressure is gruesome. You've been doing the stairs again, haven't you?"

"My blood pressure is gruesome because you come in here to poke and prod—"

"Maybe it's time we started complete bed rest."

"—and aggravate me—"

"I'll bring in the bedpan, shall I?"

Jonathan growled an obscenity. This woman was going to make him lose his undeniable cool. "We are not doing bedpans, Moira. Got it? There are no bedpans in my future."

Moira met his gaze with steely gray eyes. "There will be once Martha finds out what your blood pressure is today."

Jonathan slammed his fist on the mattress. "You are not telling Martha."

"Oh, no," Moira said sweetly. "I'm telling Eli. And Eli will tell Martha."

Jonathan stared up at her in horror. She'd do it. She'd do it because she'd been hand-picked by Dirty Harry and the Great Laundry Assassin to drive him stark raving mad. "You're related to him, aren't you?"

"Who?" Moira asked in an airy tone, packing up her bag. It was almost the end of her shift; Martha would be back any minute. If there were really a God, she would have been back half an hour ago.

"You know who! That bastard Eli Cohen."

Moira clicked her tongue. "Such language. And here I thought you were related to him."

"What the f—"

"So much alike."

Jonathan groped for a response that didn't have four-letter words in it.

Moira turned toward him, bag in hand, with an expression that would put the fear of God in ninety-nine-point-nine-nine percent of Kansas farmers. "You listen to me, Jonathan Kent. If you keep pushing yourself this way, you will be back in the hospital inside a week, and this time you may not make it out again. Am I clear?"

Jonathan, a proud member of the point-o-one percent, muttered an affirmative under his breath, grateful beyond measure that he could hear the truck pulling up in front of the house. Martha would shoo this she-Eli away.
"Jonathan?" Martha's voice floated up from the stairs. "Are you awake?"

"Awake and in high dudgeon," Moira called. She leaned closer to Jonathan and spoke quietly. "I am dead serious. Stop pushing yourself, or you'll find someone else pushing you back into intensive care."

"You want a bribe, don't you?" Jonathan hissed.

"A bribe?" Moira straightened with an amused expression. "All right. I'll take one night alone with your wife."

Jonathan felt his jaw drop.

"See you tomorrow, Jonathan." Moira sailed out the door, advising Martha to procure a whip and chair before entering.

Martha appeared, jacket still on, and with a breathless air that made Jonathan sit straight up.

"What? What's happened?"

"Nothing," Martha breathed, crossing the room to sit on the bed. She put both arms around Jonathan's neck and held him tightly to her. "Just... just a bad day."

"You're shaking," Jonathan whispered, alarmed. He stroked her hair. "Tell me."

"I'll tell you later." Martha pushed him back on the pillows, and curled up beside him, her arms around him.

"Promise?" Jonathan kissed her temple.

"Promise."

Jonathan fell silent. He was beginning to think this family had scrapped the no-secrets rule altogether.

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"He's drinking. He never used to drink at all. And he talks about doing crazy things, like robbing the Savings and Loan and taking me to live in Canada and he's serious." Lana wrung her well-manicured hands.

Chloe nodded in what she hoped was a sympathetic manner. She even managed to refrain from observing that walking around with part of the meteorite that killed your parents around your neck, to say nothing of visiting their grave in the dead of night, might be considered pretty crazy, too, if not downright kinky. "Don't his parents know what's going on?"

Lana waved her pretty hands, the very picture of a fairy princess in distress. Chloe wondered if any mere mortal could have a conversation with Lana Lang without being fatally punctured by ballistic pixie dust. Since when did the head cheerleader risk being seen in the Torch office without a stake through her heart, anyway? "His mom is so wrapped up in his dad right now that I don't think she's even noticed. And Mr. Fordman... he isn't well enough to handle it."

"I didn't know he was that bad," Chloe said in surprise. "He's going to be okay, isn't he?"

Lana didn't answer, her gaze now riveted to Chloe's desk.
"Oh," Chloe said softly. "I'm sorry."

Lana drew a shaky breath. "It's killing him. Whitney, I mean. He's falling apart. His grades have gotten so bad that he's lost his scholarship—"

"He's lost his scholarship?"

"And he's hanging out with some really weird people. Those people that he met working at Belle Rêve."

Belle Rêve. Lionel Luthor's home for the reality-impaired. Chloe found her interest piqued. "No kidding."

"And the coach has decided to take him off first string."

So much for interest. Chloe restrained herself from congratulating Lana on her sense of priorities. "I didn't realize. What on earth was he doing at Belle Rêve?"

"He started out just doing security. You know, night watchman stuff. Then his boss told him there was big money in volunteering for clinical trials."

"What kind of clinical trials?"

Lana's hands waved helplessly. "Some sort of treatment to tranquilize violent patients. Whitney didn't understand it, really, but the money was so good, and his dad's bills are…well. You know. Medical bills. But he was never the same after those treatments. It's like he's just not the same person anymore. Sometimes I'm actually afraid of him."

"He hasn't hurt you or anything, has he?" Chloe asked sharply.

"Not me. No." Lana shook her head, not meeting Chloe's gaze.

Chloe sighed. Time to cut to the chase. "Lana, why are you telling me all this?"

"I just needed to—"

"You haven't deigned to speak two words to me in the past three years." Chloe was so glad she wasn't bitter about that. Being bitter would make her small, and she was not small.

Lana lifted her head, eyes widening. "That's not true."

"And now you come to me? Why aren't you talking to your friends about this?"

"I don't have friends," Lana returned in a hard voice, a voice that was as far from Lana Lang as Chloe could imagine. "I have groupies."

Chloe knew her mouth was hanging open, but found herself quite unable to do anything about it. Of all the things she's never expected to come out of Lana Lang's mouth, that was the last.

"You have friends, Chloe. You have Pete and Clark. You're even friends with Mr. Cohen."

"Mr. Cohen?"

"They'd do anything for you."

Chloe pulled herself together. "And you want me to do something for you? Is that it?"
"I need your help."

"To do what?"

"No one at Belle Rêve will talk to me. They say Whitney signed something, that they're not responsible for any ill effects of the trial."

Chloe sighed. "I'm not a doctor, Lana. Or a lawyer."

"You have friends. Friends that could persuade Lionel Luthor to help Whitney."

Chloe almost laughed. "You think Clark and Pete can make Lionel Luthor— Lana, Clark barely knows him, and Pete doesn't know him at all. Are you high?"

"I think Mr. Cohen could persuade Mr. Luthor." There was something funny about Lana's eyes, something that made the hair on the back of Chloe's neck stand up. "He used to work for him, didn't he?"

"Lana, where are you getting this—"

"I read your article."

This chick was shifting gears so fast she was in danger of stripping her transmission. "My article?"

"About the meteorites causing mutations. All kinds of mutations."

Chloe knew this feeling. This was the same feeling she'd had listening to Clark talk about clones and bouncing bullets that night at the love shack. Damn, she hated that feeling. "Um…yeah?"

"You have a pink dress you've never worn hanging in your closet. It's beautiful."

Chloe blinked. "Ah…thank you?" Her voice sounded faint to her own ears; she was watching the soft, barely perceptible green shimmer in Lana's eyes.

"Lex Luthor is living at the old Wilson place."

Oh, shit. Oh, holyshitmotherofGod.

"And…he's not. He's living in a country house closer to Metropolis. He's wearing a ring of meteorite stone."

Lana's eyes were far away, and her voice had become a sing-song little chant that was escalating the creep-out factor to critical mass. Chloe found her voice with difficulty. "Lex Luthor is hitting the clubs in Metropolis. Are you on something?"

"Mr. Cohen tried to kill you last month." Lana paused, coming back from wherever she had been, searching Chloe's face with something like desperation in her own. "And a few days later, you were having coffee with him in Lex's kitchen. Do you still want me to talk to my 'friends' about this, Chloe?"

Chloe pulled herself together. It took a few seconds, and she wasn't quite sure she'd found all the pieces, but it was enough to stammer out a few words. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

"If you don't help Whitney, he'll kill Clark." The words were bare, stark, devoid of emotion. Lana's face was a cipher. "He'll kill Pete, too. Mr. Cohen won't be there to stop him."
Chloe could count her heart beats in the silence that followed. "I'll be there," she heard herself saying. "Whitney's not going to kill anybody, because I'll fucking kick him in the nuts if he tries."

"You're already down."

Chloe rose to her feet, feeling for her stapler. It might not be a baseball bat, but it would leave a hell of a mark. "If this is how you ask for help, I'd hate to see you threaten somebody. Maybe I'll just call the sheriff and see what he thinks about this Bonnie and Clyde act you've got going with your psycho boyfriend."

Lana drew in a breath, her eyes flying wide open. "I'm not threatening you! I'm telling you what's going to happen if you don't undo whatever those people at Belle Rêve did to Whitney! Please, Chloe, you're the only one who'll believe me!"

"And what if it can't be undone?"

Lana started crying. "Then a whole lot of people are going to die. A whole lot of people."

Chloe stared at her for a moment, then relented, and tossed her the Kleenex box. "Jesus. I should have let Dad send me to convent school."

***

"We're going to talk, Ross." Someone shoved Pete away from the drinking fountain, and he staggered back, swinging around to face the unidentified asshole.

"The hell?" Pete brushed the water from his shirt, glaring at Whitney Fordman, who leaned against the wall of the corridor as if he couldn't stand upright, getting curious stares from the kids who were just getting out of class. Christ, he smelled like he'd fallen into a vat of gin. " Aren't you supposed to be in jail or something?"

Pete turned away, but Whitney grabbed Pete's shoulder and turned him around. "My father's an important man in this town. You think Millar would hold me for a joy ride?"

"I think he'd hold you from stinking up the whole town," Pete snapped, fanning the air in front of his face. "Geez, go sleep it off, will you?"

"You've been stalking Lana again," Whitney rasped. "All my friends saw you."

"You have friends?" Pete shoved Whitney's hand away. "Come on, Fordman, how long are you going to play this game? I'm not stalking anybody. I talked to Lana. Lana is allowed to talk to anyone she wants."

"She's my girlfriend."

"She doesn't belong to you, Fordman. She's not, like, your property."

"She's mine, and no porch-monkey is taking her away from me. You keep up this stalking, Ross. Just keep it up, and she won't be pressing charges. There won't be enough left of you to put in jail."

"If anyone's being stalked here, it's me," Pete snapped. "You got a secret boy-crush on me or something? Cause every time I turn around, there you are."

Whitney's eyes widened. He straightened enough to pull back his arm, fist clenched, but before he could let fly with a blow, he was up against the lockers with his arm pinioned behind his back.
"No fighting in the halls, Whitney," Clark said in a calm tone, but Pete saw a red glow in his friend's eyes, and knew that Whitney had just come this close to becoming a human Slurpee. "Run along, now." He shoved Whitney in the direction of the nearest exit.

Whitney favored Clark with a lethal stare, refusing to budge. He leaned forward to speak quietly. "Your day's coming, Clark. You just don't know it yet. Your day's coming, and you are your little friends are going to be meat on a stick when he's through with you."

What the fucking hell? Pete shot a look at Clark, who looked as if he'd seen a ghost. "When who's through?" Pete demanded.

"Ask Clark. He knows. He..." Whitney trailed off, his expression softening, his eyes losing their focus. "You have to help me," he whispered. "Clark, you have to help me."

"Whitney?" Obviously shaken, Clark reached out to touch Whitney's arm. "What's wrong?"

Whitney's eyes snapped back into focus, and he slapped Clark's hand away. "Don't touch me, you fucking fag. Wait until Jonathan hears about his boy going fag. Just wait." Whitney swung away and fairly ran down the hall, disappearing from sight.

"Jesus Christ," Pete muttered, thoroughly rattled. "What the hell was that?

Clark swallowed hard. "That was things getting worse."

"Fuckin' hell, Clark. That's not just booze talking. That's something else, something—"

"Yeah. I know."

Pete sighed. Obviously Clark wasn't in the mood to share. "Thanks. For the rescue."

Clark gave him a sour look. "Still think Whitney's a joke?"

Pete grimaced. "Fine. He's not a joke."

"And?"

"Jealous guys do crazy things."

"And?"

"I'm a dumbass."

"Bingo."

Pete shot Clark a disgusted look as he turned toward the cafeteria. "Heroes aren't supposed to say I told you so, Clark."

Clark rolled his eyes as he fell into step beside him. "Guess it's a good thing I'm not a hero, then, isn't it?"

Pete lowered his voice. "Have you told A.J. about Whitney and your allergy?" Clark grimaced, but Pete persisted. Somebody had to pound some life management skills into this guy's head. "Clark, you just slammed the guy into some lockers. I mean, I appreciate you painting a target on your back and everything, but a little of that goes a long way, you know?"

"I wasn't the one making a target of himself," Clark retorted.
"He knows about your allergy, and he's going completely psycho. He's told someone about you once already. If he gets pissed off enough, or crazy enough, he might tell somebody else." Pete glanced around, but the hallway was almost empty. "For God's sake, Clark. Tell A.J., so he can do something about it."

"No."

"Then tell Lugosi."

"Eli will tell Lex."

"Jesus, Clark—"

"Lex said he'd kill him. Whoever it was." Clark took a deep breath. "I think he might mean it. He might wind up in prison. He might wind up dead. He might wind up hating himself for the rest of his life. It's not worth it."

Pete made a disgusted sound. "You're mental."

Clark's face went grim, and his voice dropped to an appalled mutter. "You can't seriously want Whitney dead."

Pete managed not to tell the idiot just how much he didn't care about Whitney's health or where Asshole Junior wound up. "Who said anything about dead? A.J. can just have Lugosi keep an eye on him, that's all."

"Drop it, Pete. I'm not going to risk it. Lex is never going to know. Just get it through your head."

"So you don't trust him." Maybe Clark wasn't as far gone as he'd thought.

Clark ground to a halt and stared at him with an incredulous expression. Aw, Jesus God. The goo-goo eyes. He could just see the goo-goo eyes. "Don't trust him? I trust him with my life. I trust him with your life, you asshole."

Pete snorted. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Because you looooove him."

Clark flushed. "Because he's the best man I know. You are totally clueless. Someday you're going to find out how wrong you are, and you're going to feel like a smacked ass. Or worse."

Pete sighed. There just wasn't enough brain tissue to work with. "Calm down. If you trust him, you can tell him. That's all I'm saying."

Clark stared at him blankly.

Pete lost it. "Jesus, we're talking about your life here, Clark! For once, can't you at least pretend you weren't repeatedly dropped on your head when you were born?"

"Remind me why I don't drop you on yours." To Pete's astonishment, Clark made an abrupt turn and started striding away. He was heading toward the exit.

Pete turned to watch him, aghast. Christ. Now what? "Where the hell are you going?"

"To visit a sick friend." Clark shoved open the door and disappeared into what was becoming an all-too-familiar blur.

Pete turned toward the cafeteria, muttering under his breath. His two best friends had gone totally
bugshit, and it was only a matter of time before he hugged the bug himself. "Kill me. Kill me now."

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"Houston, we have a problem."

Eli sighed, grateful for the privacy of the school's tool shed. "Miss Sullivan, you must cultivate brevity. It is highly desirable in both verse and prose, and essential in conversation."

"Lana Lang is psychic, she knows there are two Lexes, and she says Whitney Fordman is going to kill Clark and Pete."

Eli felt his stomach roll over as he counted to ten. Always it grew worse, this situation. It defied statistical probability. It was expected, of course, that things should get worse before they got better, but better was evidently on vacation on the peak of Everest, or at the bottom of the Mariana Trench. It was possible that Max was right, and the cognac should come first. He sighed into the cell phone. "Miss Sullivan—"

"Oh. Too brief for you?"

"You are trying my patience."

"It's a meteorite mutation. She's seeing visions. She knows Lex is living at the Wilson place. She saw us there, too."

"Miss Sullivan—"

"Did you know that Whitney's been working at Belle Rève on the weekends for months now?"

Eli stiffened. So. Belle Rève was Mr. Fordman's mystery employer. That Fordman and Cole were both employed by Lionel Luthor's den of nightmares could not be coincidence.

"She says Whitney was volunteering in some sort of clinical trial at Belle Rève, that they fried his brain, and she wants your help to get it un-fried or a lot of people are going to die."

Another preposterous threat. Another security risk. Another innocent who knew too much. Eli started counting again.

"She knows about what-we-don't-talk-about, too."

Better was a myth. There was no better. There was only worse. He must embrace this concept if he were to function in this preposterous world Lionel Luthor had created.

"And she's seen the dress I'm wearing to the formal! Do you believe she has visions about my closet? My closet! I mean, is that Lana Lang, or what?"

"I trust you did not confirm these fantasies."

"Of course not! I told her that she shouldn't tell anyone else about it. That she couldn't trust everything these radiation-induced visions showed her, and not to freak out. She calmed down a little. But that won't last long. She's dead set on saving her boyfriend, and she thinks you can do it. Sooner or later—"

"Miss Lang will have to be dealt with. Yes, thank you, Miss Sullivan, I have surmised that much."

"No guns, Mr. Cohen. I will have Clark turn your eyeballs inside out if there are guns, got it? Even
if she has seen my formal dress."

Eli wondered briefly if the cricket had the ability to turn eyeballs inside out. He would ask at the first opportunity; such a thing could be quite useful. "We will discuss this matter this evening. Miss Lang may have to be taken into the fold."

"Mr. Cohen?"

"Yes?"

"She's really scared."

Eli sighed. "Then she is a very sensible young woman."

***

Clark lay on Lex's bed, staring up at the stars. He was missing lunch. He'd probably be missing his last three classes, too. There'd be hell to pay. He didn't care.

He could still hear the soft voices in Pamela's room. Lex was probably still reading. Clark wondered if Lex would ever want to read aloud again after this, and how much Clark would miss it. He wondered how bad Pamela was today. He wondered how bad Lex would be. If he had told Lex about Whitney three weeks ago, at least he wouldn't be dumping it on him when he was at his breaking point. Could he have chosen a worse time to be pulling this shit? Maybe he should hold off for a while. What Lex had to face every day was too much for anybody to take, even a guy as strong as Lex. Julian. Lionel. Karloff. Pamela. Clark wondered for the millionth time in the past five months how Lex kept from going completely nuts.

Clark sat upright at the sound of a door closing, and listened to the sound of Lex's unmistakable stride as he moved down the hall and toward the staircase. Good. He was coming up. If Lex had headed for the storm cellar or the bathroom it would have been a really bad sign. The stride grew markedly uneven as Lex climbed the steps, though, and Clark sprang off the bed in alarm. Bolting to the staircase, he managed to catch Lex as he tripped over the last step, nearly winding up on his face. Clark eased them both into a sitting position on the floor and wrapped his arms around him.

Now he knew how bad Pamela was today.

"Catching me again," Lex muttered, lowering his forehead to Clark's shoulder.

"Always," Clark murmured, cocooning himself around Lex.

"You shouldn't be here."

Clark sighed. "Yeah, right. I should be in the caf eating meatloaf."

"Yes."

"Because that's part of Clark's Normal Life?"

"Yes," Lex whispered, drawing his arms around Clark's waist.

"So are you."

"Clark—"

"You're more important than meatloaf, Lex. Deal with it."
Lex uttered something like a laugh.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want. But I'm not going anywhere for a while." Clark lowered his head enough to lay his cheek against Lex's.

Lex was silent for all of five seconds. "I love you," he said.

Clark nuzzled him gently, aching at the desperation in that voice.

"Although the insipidity of the statement boggles my mind."

Clark couldn't restrain a chuckle. "I'll take insipid, Lex. Insipid is just fine."

"I don't have a word for what you are for me. I keep looking for one, but I have to confess that the project has thus far met with abject failure."

Clark's chuckle became laughter. "Lex, for God's sake."

"'I love you' is as trite and hackneyed an expression as is possible to imagine."

"The reason it's trite and hackneyed is that it says it all."

Lex fell silent again. "I don't say it enough," he said finally.

"You don't have to say it," Clark whispered. "You live it."

"I don't live it enough, either."

"Uh-huh."

"There's a lot you don't know."

Clark sighed. That's it, Lex. Make me feel more like a shit than I do already.

Lex lifted his head. "I lied to you this morning."

"Lied?" Clark searched his face, startled.

"There's more."

"Oh." Clark relaxed. Lex couldn't really think he had fallen for that. "Yeah, I figured there was. There's stuff you don't know, too."

"Yes." Lex studied him with a hint of a wry smile. "I figured there was."

So Lex hadn't fallen for that, either. "I'm sorry, Lex. I'm more of a jerk every day."

"We all have our talents."

"I was just afraid of what might happen to you."

"I see." Lex's gaze became painfully sharp. "Would this as yet unrevealed information have any bearing on your safety, Clark?"

Clark squirmed inwardly, beginning to understand why Lex constantly freaked over being known too well. "I don't think so. But Pete does."
"Pete does?" Clark could feel the tension building in Lex's muscles, putting the lie to his calm expression. "Despite our differences, I have a healthy respect for Pete's opinions when it comes to keeping you alive. I think you'd better tell me."

"Promise me you won't do anything crazy, Lex."

Lex raised an eyebrow. "I make no such assurances. Spill it."

Clark drew an unsteady breath. "I know who told Nixon about my allergy."

Lex's eyes widened, lips parting in a few moments of un-Lexlike speechlessness. "Oh, is that all," he snapped, going pink all over. Pink was bad. "That minor detail."

"I'm sorry, Lex." Clark took Lex by the shoulders, afraid for one second that he might walk out. "It's just...you said over and over you would kill him."

Lex's jaw was set at a dangerous angle. "I was unaware that my murderous impulses had made such an impression."

"You don't have murderous impulses! You freak out whenever you think I'm in trouble. And then you do the stupidest things I've ever seen anybody do."

"Are we exploring the concept of black shame today, Jiminy?"

"Is it black shame that stirs up your death wish?"

"My death wish doesn't require stirring up. It's operational 24/7."

"Like the drive-through window at Burger King?"

"You're going to tell me who this bastard is."

Clark closed his eyes. Lex was already looking like he was on a mission. "It's...it's Whitney."

Silence. "Whitney."

"Yes."

"Whitney Fordman."

"Yes."

"The prick who hung you up in a field to die. We are talking about the same Whitney Fordman, aren't we, Clark?"

Clark sighed, opening his eyes. Lex had gone magenta. God, he was pissed. "Lex—"

"Because it would be painfully obvious to anyone with half a frontal lobe and a molecule of instinct for self-preservation that this is a major threat to your continued existence."

"It isn't."

"I refuse to believe that this is an accurate description of your cognitive state. Obviously we're talking about someone else."

"Breathe, Lex. You're starting to sound like Pete."
"Insults are highly unwise at this juncture. How long have you known this?"

Clark cleared his throat. "Since Pete and Chloe came to the house."

Silence again, and that sharp ice-blue gaze searching Clark's face for God only knew what. Oh, yeah. He was in deep shit now.

"Three weeks."

"Yes." Clark flinched at the meek tone of his voice and cleared his throat again.

"You've known about this for three weeks.″ Lex was rapidly losing his rather flamboyant color. "Jesus Christ, Clark!″ Tearing away from Clark's embrace, Lex staggered to his feet and strode to the night stand to snatch up his cell phone.

Clark hauled himself up and followed him. "No. Lex, don't. It's all right. It's been six months. If he hasn't told anybody else in all that time, then he's not going to." Clark wondered if he really believed what he was saying at this point.

Lex shot him a furious look as he dialed. "How the hell do you know he hasn't told anyone else? How do you know who he'll tell next? Or when he'll get an itch to hold a meteorite to your chest like our friend Roger and watch you die by inches?"

"That isn't going to hap—"

Lex held up an imperious hand for silence, and Clark could hear Eli over the phone.

"I am planting pansies, Alexander."

"Eli—"

"It is a very demanding discipline requiring my full attention."

"Whitney Fordman knows about Clark's allergy." Eli was ominously silent, but Lex continued as if ominous was just what he wanted. "He's to be placed under constant surveillance."

"You are certain of your facts?″ Eli's voice was low and grim.

Lex shot Clark a demanding look, eyebrows raised.

"Pete was there when it happened," Clark said wearily. "Whitney was joking, Lex."

Lex grimaced, obviously not appreciating Whitney's sense of humor. "I'm certain. I want—"

"Sasha. Mr. Fordman has been under surveillance for some time. What I have observed thus far has been reason for concern. What you tell me now is reason for alarm. Measures may be required."

Clark, unable to stand any more, snatched the phone from Lex's hand. "There aren't going to be any measures, Eli. Do you hear me?"

Lex grabbed for the phone, and Clark seized his wrist. Lex froze, eyes narrowing, but made no effort to free himself.

"An octopus could hear you. Kindly lower your chirp, cricket."
"Fuck my chirp. Do I have to remind you what happened the last time you started talking about—"

"You do not." Eli's tone was sharp.

"Then count to ten."

"I count to ten twenty times a day. And every time I do so the security situation grows more untenable. The efficacy of this strategy eludes me."

"Clark," Lex said quietly. "Give me the phone."

Clark handed it back to him, numb. This was worse than he had ever imagined. No matter what he did, it was wrong. Pete was right. He must have been dropped on his head. Repeatedly.

"No measures, Eli." Lex's gaze was locked on Clark's face. He had gone alarmingly pale. "Just keep an eye on him."

Clark realized that he was holding Lex's wrist much too tightly and let go, horrified. He ran his fingers over the wrist, scanning it for any sign of injury, but Lex took his hand, weaving his fingers through Clark's and pressing their palms together reassuringly. Clark blinked a few times. He'd made Lex prove himself again. Again, for God's sake. Clark pulled Lex closer and slipped his free arm around Lex's waist. Lex gave him an odd little half-smile.

"Sasha. There is much you do not know."

Lex cast his gaze heavenward for a second. "I don't doubt it for a moment. It's become a recurring theme. We can talk later."

"It will be a long talk."

"I'll bring a pillow. Do me a favor, though, and forget the pansies."

"Do not insult me. My pansies are very conveniently situated. Mr. Fordman is in plain view."

Lex closed his eyes and swallowed visibly. "Uncle. Sometimes I forget that Clark is in very good hands."

"He is in all our hands, Sasha. We will not let him fall."

Clark gave up and rested his head against Lex's. There was absolutely no doubt that Clark Kent was lower than whale shit.

"Thank you," Lex whispered.

"Despite his asinine behavior. Kindly tell him to be more discreet in his choice of launch sites."

Clark couldn't restrain a groan.

Lex sighed. "Later, Eli." He pressed the call button and tossed the phone onto the bed. "Launch sites, Clark."

"I was in a hurry," Clark mumbled into Lex's ear.

"To come here."

"I had to tell you. No matter what. Not just about Whitney, but about everything that's happened"
today. There's so much I have to tell you. Pete said...if you trust him, you can tell him. He was right."

Lex pulled back to stare at Clark, clearly astonished. "I take it Pete forgot his medication this morning."

"He was right," Clark repeated, ignoring the bait. "I've spent the past three weeks telling you I trust you and all the time I was holding out on you. And Whitney has been getting crazier and crazier the whole time. I'm an asshole, Lex."

Lex studied him with a somber expression and said nothing.

Clark forged ahead. "I know this is the worst possible time for me to start being honest."

"No," Lex said quietly. "It's the best possible time."

"And I know I've only made things harder for you, but once I got what I jerk I was, I couldn't let it go. Especially not after this morning."

"This morning?"

"You set the bar so damn high."

Lex stared at him for a moment, then drew a shaky breath. "Clark. I haven't set the bar high. You have no idea how low my bar is set right now."

"Aw, Lex."

"You set the bar in this partnership."

"I don't—"

"I depend on you to set the bar. I don't know how to do that. I'll probably never know."

"You do. You just don't believe—"

"Promise me you'll keep setting the bar." Lex's voice went raspy.

"I'll try," Clark whispered, reaching out to touch Lex's face. "Lex. If there's something you need to tell me—"

"There is. And for God's sake, promise me you'll stay away from that fucking sadist."

"We don't exactly hang out, Lex."

"Clark." Lex's voice broke.

"I'll stay away from him. I will."

Clark wrapped his arms around Lex and lowered him to the bed, spooning up behind him. The Whitney weirdness could wait. Whatever Lex hadn't told him could wait. Because Lex was closer to the edge right now than Clark could stand him to be, and so was he, and it was all too much, and it could all just fucking wait. Clark closed his eyes, holding Lex tightly, and lay still until Lex relaxed against him and his own eyes drifted shut.
An annoying metallic sound dragged Jonathan from a pleasant doze, and he swatted at it in annoyance. "Martha," he mumbled. "Get the phone."

No response. Jonathan fumbled about for her on the bed, then pried his eyes open. No Martha. Well, damn. He spied a piece of paper and snatched it up.

Dear Snore-King,

"Oh, that is rich, coming from you, lady." Jonathan made a rude noise, holding the note in one hand and groping for the phone with the other.

I'm running over to see Pamela for a few minutes. Stay in bed. Or else. Failure to follow these instructions will result in immediate initiation of broom protocol...

Jonathan was laughing when he answered the phone. "Hello?"

A mix of harsh breathing and eerie whimpering echoed across the line.

Jonathan felt the hairs on the back of his neck go up. "Who is this?"

"Who. Is. This." The words were sighed into something that ended in a faint moan. Thoroughly unnerved, Jonathan started to hang up, but froze as the voice spoke again. "Jonathan?"

Jonathan struggled to identify the voice. He hadn't heard it in years. "Eddie?"

"Punk fucking killed me, Jonathan. Punk fucking buried me under my own wood pile." Rattling breaths punctuated every word.

Jonathan sat bolt upright on the bed. "What? Eddie, is this your idea of a joke? It's not fucking funny!"


"Damn it, Eddie, knock it off. What do you want?"

Sudden silence. "I want to talk to Clark, Mr. Kent."

Jonathan blinked. The voice was young, and as unlike that of Eddie Cole as it was possible to be. It was also a voice he knew. "Whitney?"

"I need to talk to Clark."

"I don't appreciate the joke, son," Jonathan said sharply. "What's going on? You and Clark should both be in class right now."
"Clark can get him there. Clark can make him stop this. Stop this."

"I'm hanging up, now."

"I'm sorry. Tell him I'm sorry. About the scarecrow. Tell him he has to help—" A loud curse thundered across the line, cutting Whitney off and making Jonathan jump as the connection went dead.

"Jesus," Jonathan breathed. It was official. The comic book had just turned into the Twilight Zone.

***

"He did what?"

Martha sighed. "Pamela, don't get yourself worked up. Dr. Weiss will—"

"Screw Dr. Weiss!" As if on cue, Teskey opened the door and peered inside, scowling. "Out! Out! Out now if you want to live!" Teskey rolled her eyes and, after a stern look at Martha, retreated, leaving the door open behind her.

Martha sat down on the side of the bed, taking one of Pamela's frighteningly thin hands in her own.

"Just calm down. He didn't touch me. He just—"

"Tried! Damn it, I knew you should have borrowed Clark's tazer."

"I did throw my glass of wine in his face."

Pamela snorted, visibly calming and leaning back against her pillows. "Use of materials at hand. Eli will be proud of you. Now, tell me, precisely what were you talking about when he suddenly found you irresistible?"

Martha restrained a shudder. "Would you please not put it that way? And does Eli have to know?"

"How else do you expect Lionel Luthor to be skinned alive?"

"Pamela."

Pamela sobered. "If Jonathan doesn't hear about someone receiving satisfaction, he's likely to try to get some himself."

Martha felt her stomach plummet. Jonathan. Oh, Jonathan would…

"Don't worry," Pamela said gently. "Eli will handle this, Martha. Jonathan will be all right. Now, tell me."

"I asked him where his scans of the photos were," Martha said slowly, trying to remember. "He said he never made any. I told him I didn't believe him, that…" Martha drew a sharp breath. "The lab."

"Which lab? With all these mad scientists mucking about, there must be dozens between here and Metropolis."

"Lex's particle accelerator lab. The one Lionel and the clone can't get into. I think he wants that lab more than anything."

"Maybe not more than anything," Pamela said thoughtfully. "But it's a chunk of LuthorCorp resources he can't either use or liquidate. It's possible there's something in there that he wants more
"Well done? All I did was get myself sexually harassed." Martha suppressed a desire for another shower, and resolved to ask Eli for her own tazer.

"No. You found a soft spot. And you ascertained that the clone stole all Lionel's negatives."

"I ascertained that Lionel says the clone stole his negatives. Really, Pamela, I don't think Boudicca would be singing songs of victory over this."

"Boudicca takes her singing when she can get it. As far as—"

The sound of a door closing at the end of the hall made both women pause; Martha blinked as a familiar blur streaked past the door. "Clark!"

A muffled mumble of dismay was audible from the hallway, and Martha strode to the door. Clark, cutting classes? This day was spiraling into the septic tank. "Just what do you think you're doing here, young—" She broke off the moment she set her eyes on her delinquent son. "Clark, what's wrong?" She held out her arms, and Clark shuffled the distance between them to bury himself in her embrace.

"Mom."

Tired. And scared. Martha wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Sweetheart, what is it? Did something happen at school?"

Clark grated a little laugh. "Yeah. But that's not… It's Lex, Mom. He's so…"

"Get in here," Pamela said very gently. "Come in and sit down, Clark."

"I have to get to school."

"School's over," Martha said soothingly, firmly squelching the panic rising in her at the lost look on Clark's face. "I'll write you a note on Monday."

"Chloe's meeting with the mayor and…Mr. Luthor. I promised to be there."

"Then you'll be a little late," Martha said in her firmest tone, feeling less firm than she'd felt in the past decade. She guided Clark inside and forced him into Lex's chair by the bed. Perching on the bed beside him, she could feel Pamela's sharp eyes taking in every detail.

"We're going to talk," Pamela said in a voice that made Martha tighten her grip on her son's arm. "Martha, please close the door and lock it. I don't want that Belfast gargoyle in here telling me about nap time."

Martha swallowed and obeyed, wondering if this was what she sounded like when Clark was in danger. Probably. In fact, she flattered herself that she could be scarier.

"Now," Pamela said as Martha sat down again, "You are going to tell us about Alexander. The no-secrets rule is in full effect. Am I right, Martha?"

"Yes," Martha tried to keep her voice gentle; Clark looked unnerved enough. "We're worried about him, Clark. If you know something that could help him, tell us."

"I don't know what will help," Clark muttered.
"Then tell us everything, and we'll figure it out."

Clark swallowed visibly, his gaze darting to Pamela and back to his mother. "I promised him—"

"Clark, you're going to have to decide which is more important: your promise or his well-being. Make it fast, because he's in real trouble." Pamela caught Clark's gaze and held it.

"How...how do you—"

"Please. Do you think I don't know when Alexander is coming unglued? I suspected it was Beelzebub's daily manifestations, but—"

"It's not just Mr. Luthor." Clark swallowed again, then forged ahead. "It's Julian."

Pamela's eyes widened; she leaned forward. "Julian?"

Martha frowned. "Lex's little brother?"

Pamela shot her a surprised look. "You remember Julian?"

"I remember the birth announcement, and the funeral. God, poor Lillian. What a horrible tragedy. What could Julian have to do with—"

"Lex says...he says he thinks he killed Julian." Clark's voice was barely audible.

The silence in Pamela's room was so profound that Martha could hear the normally silent Siobhan Teskey pacing the hall outside. Pamela looked like chiseled marble, pale and still.

"And he's never... Never going to forgive me for telling you." Clark's voice gave out.

"That... That is impossible," Martha said harshly. "Impossible. Why in God's name would he think —"

Pamela held up a shaking hand. "Because someone made him believe it. Ancient Luthor family history, Martha, and I'll tell you everything you need to know. But for now—"

"Lex loved Julian." Clark's voice was thick. "I mean, so much. But he gets more and more sure this happened and I don't know why."

"When did this start, Clark?" Martha put an arm around his shoulders.

"When he started having those meetings with his father," Clark said, venom creeping into his tone. "It has to be him. It has to be."

"Either Jonathan or I have sat in on these meetings, every single one," Martha said firmly to Pamela. "Julian has never...ohhh."

"So much for never," Pamela said grimly.

"Lionel asked Lex if he remembered his brother. It was a bizarre question, but I assumed he was talking about Lucas. One of his jabs, to keep Lex off-balance. I never thought of Julian."

"It would seem Lionel is once again baring his fangs."

"It doesn't seem like enough to convince Lex that he's a murderer, Pamela."
"Don't underestimate Lionel's powers of manipulation, Martha." Pamela shot her a look that made Martha's face go hot.

"I don't. I just...I don't think it's enough. Clark. Was there anything else? Something else around the same time?"

Clark shrugged. "He spent a lot of time going over the stuff from his dad's files, and Karloff's. And the laptops. He's spent hours on those, especially Karloff's." Clark's eyes widened. "Oh. Oh, damn, I nearly forgot." He began rummaging in his backpack.

Pamela leaned back, stretching. "I love these uneventful days, Martha, don't you? Just enough diversion between brunch and tea-time to stave off the monotony."

Martha scowled at her. "Boudicca would not approve of sarcasm in this situation, Pamela."

"Bull. Boudicca had her chariot decorated with sarcasm, along with the severed heads of her fallen foes. It was her favorite motif."

"Here." Clark pulled a white envelope from his backpack. "I can't believe I forgot. So much has happened today..."

Martha took the envelope. "Negatives?" It took a moment for the significance to dawn on her. "The negatives? Did Lex find them in—"

"Not Lex. Karloff. He cut us off on the way to school this morning and gave them to me. A peace offering, he said."

Martha stared wordlessly from Clark to Pamela.

"Then, I, uh, punched him in the face."

Pamela burst into laughter.

"Do not encourage him!" Martha fought to keep a straight face. "Clark, I know you were provoked, but violence—"

"I knew I liked this boy. I knew I liked him the minute I laid eyes on him," Pamela wheezed. She snagged the oxygen mask and took a few breaths.

"Are you all right?" Clark leaned toward her anxiously.

Pamela gave him a dismissive wave. "Fine, fine. Don't fuss. Martha, what's that written on the flap?"

Martha turned the envelope around and eyed the combination of letters and numbers, puzzled.

"Oh, that's the password to Karloff's personal files," Clark said, unaccountably flushing. "He said... He said it was important for me to read them. So that I'd know who Lex really is." Clark rolled his eyes. "Like I don't know."

Martha raised her eyes to Pamela's. "And Lex has been reading these personal files?"

"Oh, sure. He broke those codes weeks ago. Lex can hack anything."

Pamela slowly removed the oxygen mask from her face, nodding. "All right. We may be dealing with another two-pronged offensive here."
"Looks like it," Martha said softly.

"We need to do something," Clark said. Martha restrained a wince at the desperation in his tone. "Lex is having nightmares. I mean, really bad. We need to do something now."

"Lionel speaks the language of nightmares," Pamela said evenly. "We need to take that weapon away from him."

"Yeah." Clark let out the breath he'd been holding. "I've never hated anybody before. Not even Karloff. I mean...I don't know what to call how I feel about Karloff. But I hate Mr. Luthor. I hate him and I'm not sorry." He shot a defiant glance at his mother, but Martha felt ill-equipped to rebuke him.

If Pamela was shocked, she sure as hell didn't show it. "Don't be sorry. Just don't let it rule you. You have to keep a clear head. For Alexander."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"You can," Pamela said gently, "If you remember that you love Alexander more than you hate Lionel."

Martha was surprised to find herself smiling.

Clark managed a faint smile, too. "Yeah. Okay."

"It's time to pull one of Lionel's teeth, Martha."

"Pliers?"

"Dynamite."

"Can't we just stop the meetings?"

"You've had exactly how much luck with that?"

Martha sighed. "None."

"Neither have I. And Eli doesn't think he will, either. So, Clark, I want you to listen to me very carefully. I want you to remember every word I say. Write it down if you have to."

Clark swallowed. "I don't need to."

Pamela leaned forward, eyes glinting. "Then listen. Tomorrow morning, when he shows up for his status meeting? I have a message for you to deliver to Lionel Luthor."

***

"A school?" Pete hadn't thought anybody could get that purple, but Asshole Senior was setting new records in pissed-off.

"School. Community center. Clinic. Youth hostel. Whatever you want to call it." Chloe glanced up from her notes to meet Lionel's eyes without so much as a blink, and Pete sighed.

The girl was gone. She was a white knight charging the dragon, and nothing was going to stop her until the dragon tail-whipped her back into reality. And Clark obviously wasn't going to be any help. He hadn't even bothered to show up, which was a bad sign in more ways than one. Pete tried
not to imagine Clark making goo-goo eyes at his "sick friend," let alone any of the other I'm-so-in-love-with-a-size-eleven-asshole behavior he knew must be going on. It was enough to make a guy puke up his meatloaf.

Mayor Tate shifted nervously in his chair. "I'm sure you have all the good intentions in the world, Chloe, but we mustn't take advantage of Mr. Luthor's generosity. This...school would be enormously expensive to build, let alone operate, and Mr. Luthor has already—"

"Mr. Luthor's partner is very enthusiastic about the idea," Chloe cut in without a glance in Tate's direction. "He suggests the house on Beresford Lane would make a fine school."

Aw, shit. Shit! Asshole Junior just had to stick his two cents in. Like Lionel was going to take that lying down. Yeah, he'd just gone from purple to some kind fuscia deal; he laid his hands palms down on the conference room table as if there were somewhere else he'd like to put them. Probably around Lex's neck. "The house on Beresford Lane is the Luthor ancestral home." Pete gave him points for not shouting. "It is not available."

"These kids need someplace to go." Chloe's voice was low, but it had the undivided attention at everyone at the table. "Most of them are afraid to tell their parents, especially after what happened to Eric. They're scared of what's happening to them. They think they're alone. They need guidance and medical help and...legal protection."

"Legal protection?" Lionel's voice was sharp.

"There are a lot of people who would try to exploit kids like these." Chloe turned her head to stare at Lionel. "They're human beings, Mr. Luthor. They shouldn't have to worry about winding up in a lab somewhere."

Tate leaned back in his chair with an exasperated expression. "There can't be more than a handful of—"

"A handful of kidnappings and false imprisonments are too many."

Pete kicked Chloe's shin under the table. Dude. Did they have to take on the entire political power structure of Smallville at once? Couldn't they ease into it? Maybe start with the Justice of the Peace and work up? Chloe crossed her legs, pulling her shins out of firing range.

"Over forty kids have contacted me privately since my article was published." Chloe narrowed her eyes at Tate. "Given the fact that the majority of the radiation victims are probably too scared to tell anyone, that puts my estimate in the neighborhood of several hundred county-wide."

Tate went white. "Hundreds? Of those freaks?"

Ooh, mistake, considering the father of one of those freaks was sitting at the head of the table. Lionel fixed his icy stare on Tate, but before he could speak, Pete found himself opening his mouth. "Hey! Those freaks are somebody's kids, Mr. Tate. Maybe even yours. And they got that way because the government of Smallville—" Pete paused to take a breath, wondering what the hell he was doing, and where the fuck Pete Ross was, anyway, Greenland?

"Testify, Pete," Chloe murmured, studying her notes intently.

Pete launched back into it. "—was incompetent and negligent and didn't do anything to warn us or to remove all these goddamn radioactive rocks. Oh, I see a lot of lawsuits, Mr. Tate. In fact, I see a big-ass multi-million dollar class action suit. My dad is going to have more cases than he knows what to do with." Pete stopped, horrified. Chloe Sullivan had created a monster, and he was it. He
lowered his head to his hands, sighing. Still. Pete Ross was the only person who was allowed to say "freak" within a ten-mile radius of Clark Kent without getting his head kicked, and Pete had every intention of defending his perks.

"Personally," Chloe continued archly, "I see a lot of criminal prosecutions, unless this situation is handled very carefully. Now that the feds are involved—"

"Crawling all over the county in radiation suits," Tate snapped. "Yes, calling in the EPA has done Smallville so much good. Everyone is terrified!"

"Everyone should be terrified," Chloe snapped. She knew no fear, even of Lionel Luthor's pet mayor, which proved without a doubt that she was from Planet Mental. "We've been living in a radioactive hotspot for over a decade. We have no idea what other damage has been done."

"Amazing that these radiation levels were never detected before." Lionel was almost smirking. Almost. "One would think that a simple soil analysis must have been commissioned by someone in the vicinity in the past ten years. The results never reached your office, Mr. Tate?"

Tate's eyes widened. Like a man who'd just had a ladder pulled out from under him. Pete grimaced. Well, if you climb into bed with Lionel Luthor, God only knew what you'd crawl out with. Especially if you whomped on the hairless apparent. "I can't speak to what my predecessors did or didn't receive," Tate stammered. "But I certainly never saw such a report."

"Is that a fact," Lionel murmured, leaning back in his chair. "Well. The cleanup of the plant waste is well in hand, and I'm certain that the EPA will remove the meteorites in their usual efficient manner. It will be several years before the area is completely clear."

"At least it's been classified a hazardous material." Chloe glanced up at Lionel, her expression unreadable. "That should make it harder to transport the stuff."

Lionel gave her a benign smile that made Pete's skin crawl. "Miss Sullivan. A determined and resourceful man can always find ways to circumvent such restrictions."

"Why the hell would anyone want radioactive rocks?" Tate was at the end of his patience. "We're not talking weapons grade plutonium here, Chloe. Now don't misunderstand me. You and Pete and Clark have done this town a great service by bringing these problems to our attention. But let's not let our imaginations or our ambitions run away with us, hmm?"

"I'll discuss your proposal for a school with my partner." Lionel snapped his briefcase closed and rose.

Tate hastily followed suit. "Mr. Luthor, you've done so much already. The kids are just a little overenthusiastic. It's not necessary—"

"I think it's a fine idea." Lionel stared at the man, stone-faced. "Not all the freaks of Smallville are fortunate enough to be my son. Provisions should be made."

Tate's expression turned to horror. "Mr. Luthor, I certainly didn't mean to imply that your son—"

"Good afternoon." Lionel yanked open the door and strode down the corridor toward the front door of Smallville High, ignoring the stares of the few stray students who had stayed after school. Tate followed him, babbling incoherent apologies.

"Well," Chloe said in an acerbic tone. "Looks like that honeymoon is over."
Pete snorted as he tilted his chair back and propped up his feet on the table. "And they were such a pretty couple, too." He caught sight of Clark in the hallway, watching Lionel and Tate disappear down the hall. "Well, look who bothered to show up."

"Sorry," Clark said quietly. He entered the conference room and approached the table.

"Don't sorry me. Sorry the principal when he gives you ten years of detention for skipping three classes." Pete leaned back in his chair, noting Clark's disheveled appearance. Jesus Christ. Again? How horny could a guy get? "How's your sick friend, Romeo?"

Clark sighed and sat down at the head of the table. "She's bad today."

Pete felt his face going hot. "Shit. I didn't mean—"

"And so is Lex. I don't know how much more he can take."

"How bad is bad?" Chloe asked softly.

Clark stared at the table. "She's stopped eating."

"Damn," Pete muttered. He knew what that meant. "Sorry, man."

"Yeah." Clark turned his head sharply toward the door, frowning. "Me, too."

"Yeah, here they are." Pete swung around to see Whitney Fordman leaning against the doorjamb. Aw, Jesus. He really needed this. Not. Lana was at Whitney's elbow, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "The bitch, the fag and the nigger. The fucking heroes of Smallville."

"Don't use words you can't spell, Fordman," Pete advised him, noting Lana's shocked expression.

"Get out." Clark's voice had a raw edge as he rose to his feet. He needed this even less than Pete did, and Pete could feel disaster coming at them like an extraterrestrial freight train.

"I'm sorry." Lana sounded almost breathless. "I'm sorry. He doesn't mean it. He's going through a lot right now—"

"Are you going to make me get out, faggot?" Pete almost laughed as Whitney swaggered into the room. Seeing this dickwad try to take Clark, especially today, would be so fucking educational he couldn't stand it. Looking at the arrogant sneer on Whitney's face, Pete considered the remote possibility that Lex Luthor was not the biggest asshole on the planet.

Chloe regarded Whitney with a disgusted expression. "What the hell have you been sniffing? Go home, Whitney."

"I'll make you get out." Clark strode around the conference table like a man with a mission, and Pete pulled his feet from the table and rose hastily.

"Whoa. Clark, don't do anything stupid."

"You don't have the entire defensive line with you this time." Clark planted himself in front of Whitney. "Apologize to Pete and Chloe and get out."

"Whitney. You're not thinking straight." Lana's voice was shaking. "Just go."

Whitney ignored her. "Apologize? I don't think so. That bastard has been stalking my girlfriend."
Lana's eyes widened; obviously this was the first news she'd had of her status as stalking victim. "Stalking?"

Pete sighed. "We've been over this before, Einstein. I haven't stalked. Lana hasn't been stalked. There is no stalking going on here, okay?" He briefly wished that he had stalked Lana, if he were going to get beaten up for it anyway. "Exactly how long did it take you to get this stupid?"

Whitney lunged toward Pete, but with one hand Clark shoved him back with force enough to make Whitney stagger, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Like I said," Clark said quietly. "You're on your own this time."

"This time?" Chloe's voice was sharp.

"You keep your damn hands off my girl, Ross. There are still a few good old boys around here who'd love an old-fashioned lynching—"

Clark punched him. Right on his Aryan nose. By the time Pete made it around the table and arrived at Clark's side, Whitney was holding his bleeding nose and cursing.

"You seem to know a lot about lynching." Clark's voice was like ice.

"You should have died in that field, scarecrow," Whitney snarled. "I wish you had."

Jesus Christ. Clark had been scarecrowed. Whitney had scarecrowed Clark, and Clark hadn't said a damn thing. The boy had zero life management skills. Zero.

"Hell, I wish you'd died when you crashed. You should have died then, you should have died, you fucking freak."

Pete found himself surging toward Whitney, itching to land just one punch, but Clark dragged him back. Pete opened his mouth to protest, but fell dumb as he caught sight of the knife in Whitney's hand.

A silence fell that was broken only by the sound of Chloe's chair toppling over as she sprang to her feet, by the sound of Lana's books falling to the floor.

"Not so tough now, huh?" God, he looked like some kind of monster, with blood smeared all over his twisted face. Pete felt Clark inching in front of him.

"Whitney." Lana's voice was faint, but she was coming towards them. "For God's sake, put that away. Don't make things worse than they already are."

Whitney shot her a wild glance. "Worse? Things can't get worse. They can't. He's in here all the time; and sometimes they're here together and sometimes I can't remember my days or my nights. I've lost it all, and now this nig—"

"Say that again and I'll hang you up in Reilly field." Clark meant it, Jesus, he really meant it, and that was even scarier than Whitney's knife.

"Go for it." Whitney sprang forward, knife raised awkwardly in front of him. Clark shoved Pete behind him hard enough to land him on his ass, and as he landed, Pete saw something like a gray streak appear out of nowhere to strike the back of Whitney's knees with the handle of a garden spade. Whitney yelped and fell to his knees, where the gray streak solidified at his side. Eli pressed his fingers mercilessly into the inside of Whitney's wrist. Whitney gasped as the knife fell from his
Eli bent close, studying Whitney's face. "When I was five years old, a man like you took my father away," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "The next time I saw him he was lying dead in the street with all my friends' fathers. I have met many such men since. I have killed them all."

Whitney was white-faced and shaking, his eyes wide.

"It is foolish to brandish a weapon one does not know how to use, Mr. Fordman. It is even more foolish to do so under the influence of alcohol. You will go to the nurse. You will tell her that you drank too much gin and fell down the stairs face-first, like the idiot that you are. And you will remember that I know you."

Eli released Whitney's wrist, and Whitney staggered to his feet and toward the door, passing Lana as if she didn't exist. "Go with him," Eli said.

Lana backed away with obvious reluctance. If she was in any way frightened by Eli's behavior, she didn't show it. "He's not himself. He didn't mean any of that. He's...he's been drinking a lot. I'm so sorry."

Clark gave Pete a hand up, and Pete brushed off his pants. Psycho jocks. Like flying saucers and mad scientists weren't enough; he had to have psycho jocks, too. "It's not your fault, Lana."

"Pete. I'm...I'm not that kind of girl, either."

Pete looked up, surprised. "I know that."

Lana let out a little breath, as if she had been holding it. "Good. That's good." She turned and hurried after Whitney, leaving her books lying on the floor.

"Well," Chloe said finally. She sounded like she had been holding her breath. "Are we having fun now?" She moved around the table to join them, stuffing her papers into her backpack.

Clark sighed. "Thanks, Eli."

Eli picked up Whitney's hunting knife and examined it with palpable contempt. "This weapon has no balance, no finesse. It was made by barbarians. To kill rodents, perhaps. Or to chop kindling."

Clark glanced upward briefly. "Are we going to critique the attempted murder now?"

"I should be ashamed to be seen with such a thing."

"Well, then I guess it's a good thing it wasn't you trying to kill me this time," Pete growled. "Wouldn't want you to be embarrassed or anything."

"Pete," Chloe hissed. "For God's sake."

"I should never offer you such an insult, Mr. Ross," Eli said calmly. "I should employ a garrote. It has the advantage of silencing the target instantly." Pete made a rude noise as Eli dropped the unacceptable weapon into his backpack. "Come. It is time to put some distance between yourself and the young man who talks of dying in fields."

"And crashing in fields," Chloe said softly. "Clark, how—"

"I don't know." Clark was too pale.
Pete snorted. "Uh-huh. Do you know what *scarecrow* means? Because I think that's something we all need to hear."

Eli grimaced as he shepherded them through the door into the empty hall. "We need not discuss Smallville's barbaric traditions. I have heard all I need to hear on this subject from Alexander."

"He told you," Clark sighed wearily. "Great." He turned to lead the way to the exit.

"More secrets," Chloe said in a disgusted tone. "Don't you ever learn anything, Clark?"

"No. I'm brain dead."

"Oh, now he gets it. Good timing, dumb-ass." Pete regarded Clark sourly.

Clark shot him a tired look over his shoulder that shut Pete up. You knew things were bad when Clark looked like that. His voice was barely above a murmur. "I don't know what's going on with Whitney. I can't think about that now. I've got to get back to the house to see if Lex is awake yet. Leaving him alone's not a good idea."

Pete blinked as they emerged from the building into the bright afternoon sun, following Eli and Clark toward the parking lot. Chloe brought up the rear, muttering under her breath.

Clark gave her a glance over his shoulder. "He's...he's in bad shape, Eli."

"He is Alexander. He would be in something else?"

"There's something going on you don't know about."

Eli glanced heavenward. "He is Alexander."

"It's serious, Eli." Clark hesitated. "It's about Julian."

Eli came to a dead halt. When he turned to look at Clark, Pete took an involuntary step backward. Lugosi looked like he was about to go for his gun. Damn, this guy was scary. Even when you knew he was on your side, he was still scary as hell. "Do not say anything else."

Chloe piped up in a voice as close to meek as was possible for Chloe Sullivan, Teen Crusader. "Who's Julian?" And got no answer, of course. Well, you couldn't expect Lugosi to tell you anything. With Lugosi it was need-to-know, and nobody ever needed to know.

Clark kept right on talking as if Chloe hadn't said a word. "We have to do something, Eli. He's going to do something crazy if we don't."

Pete cleared his throat. Maybe Clark wouldn't answer Chloe, but he sure as hell was going to answer him, or there was going to be major spaceboy ass kicked. "Clark. Who the hell is Julian?"

"I will do something," Eli snarled, walking so quickly that Pete had trouble keeping up. "I will remind Lionel Luthor that I know him as well."

***

*Dear Lex,*

*Sorry I wasn't there when you woke up. I have to go to that meeting with the Mayor and your father, if I can make it in time – I fell asleep a few minutes after you did. I'll be right back after it's over. Don't even think about getting out of that bed. I'm bringing blueberry pie.*
Lex started laughing, leaning back against the pillows. A love letter from Clark Kent. It just didn't get any better than this.

I love you. I don't care how trite and hackneyed it is. I love you more than anything. I trust you more than anything. I really hope you're starting to get this concept, mastermind.

"I get it, Jiminy," Lex murmured.

I know there's more you haven't told me. Tell me when you're ready. I can wait.

Lex couldn't help flinching.

Because I'm going to get old with you. You asked me once if that was a proposal. I guess it was, because I'll never want anyone else but you.

Lex drew one shaking hand over the scrawled words. Clark needed to work on his penmanship. Clark needed to… God, he needed Clark.

But you're still not getting diamonds. Just get that idea out of your head now. Or roses. I have to draw the line somewhere. Maybe I could do tulips. I've done that before. You did know those were really for you, right?

"For me?" Lex stared at the paper. It had obviously been torn out of one of Clark's notebooks and the words written at Clark's top speed. The script staggered across the page at a preposterous angle, crossing the lines at every opportunity. There was some sort of silly doodle in the upper left corner, full of spirals and triangles and shapes of unknown origin or meaning, no doubt signifying a Clark Kent bored to tears in an AP Chemistry class where he already knew more than the teacher, thanks to Lex's tutoring. There were tiny ink blots all over it, as if the pen had protested being pushed past the established speed limit. It was a ghastly specimen.

It was beyond price.

You probably didn't. I really didn't, either, until a lot later. See? I haven't told you everything either. But you already know what a dork I am, so I figured I might as well tell you. God, it's easier to write this stuff than it is to say it.

Maybe it was. Lex forced himself to breathe. Maybe Lex Luthor should be doing a little writing of his own.

So anyway – stay in the bed. Rest up, because I swear to God you're going to need all your strength. And no masterminding. The phone is going to be turned off. Tonight is just us. Like normal boyfriends, okay? There are no threats, no measures, no launch sites. Just us.

Lex closed his eyes and tried to imagine what constituted being normal boyfriends in Clark's world. Walking down the street holding hands? Making out in the back row of the movie theater? Dancing the last slow dance at the Spring Formal? Probably. Clark's ideas concerning romance were absurdly enchanting. He opened his eyes to finish reading.

Try to sleep a little more.

After reading this? The lunatic had to be kidding.

And I promise I'll be there when you wake up.

Clark
P.S. You're drooling again.

Laughing, Lex carefully laid the letter on his chest and held it there, looking up at the stars. He would consult the internet for some way to preserve it for a thousand years. Ten thousand. And then he would order some tulips.
"I had Clark hide the shotgun."

Jonathan whirled away from the closet to see his wife and son standing in the living room with their arms crossed across their chests, regarding him with identical defiant expressions. Damn, they were alike. Two peas in a pod. Steel peas. In a titanium pod. And Martha was always saying Clark took after him. What a load of bull. "I've got business to take care of," he said in his most menacing tone.

The steel peas appeared to be unimpressed.

"Chair, mister. Now." Martha tilted her head at Clark, who came forward to take his father by the arm with a sober expression.

"Come on, Dad. You know Eli's better at scaring Mr. Luthor than you are."

Jonathan allowed himself to be seated in his recliner, still snarling. Bastard Luthor. Bastard Luthor had tried to kiss his wife, God damn it, and he was supposed to freaking sit like a good boy? Yeah. Because he couldn't do a damn thing to protect her, could he? Or his son. "Scare him? You think I want to scare him?"

"Be quiet and breathe." Martha perched on a stool by his side, stroking his arm soothingly.

"I don't want to be quiet. I want to blow Luthor's head off—"

"No, you don't."

"And then wale the tar out of that thug Whitney Fordman—"

"Dad, Eli and I already did that once today. Don't you think that's overkill?" Clark had the nerve to be smiling as he knelt on the other side of the recliner.

"I shook that little bastard's hand the day after he scarecrowed you." Jonathan wanted to hit something, anything. "And I blew Lex off like he was—"

"Dad, Lex got over that a long time ago."

"Scarecrowing." Martha regarded her son with narrowed eyes. "And not one word from you."

"That was before the no-secrets rule," Clark said hastily.

"There has always been a no-secrets rule in this house, young man." Martha relented with a sigh, leaning her head on Jonathan's shoulder. "I can't believe something like that is still going on in this day and age."

Jonathan snorted, feeling the tightness in his chest begin to ease. "You do know that in my day somebody would sneak back and untie the scarecrow after about half an hour. They were never meant to stay out there all night."

"Looks like somebody's forgot that part," Clark muttered. "Eli says it's barbarism."

"Eli's right," Jonathan said quietly. "But Whitney Fordman… Of all the kids to go wrong, I would never have thought—"
"He started to change when his dad got sick," Clark said in a subdued tone. "But not like this."

Martha nodded wordlessly, and the look on her face made Jonathan wonder if she worried about that happening to Clark. Another boy with a sick father. Jonathan's hands itched for his shotgun.

"Whitney doesn't sound like the same guy anymore, Dad. He's even starting to look like a different guy. And I've never heard him say racist stuff before. Stealing airplanes? Drinking gin at school? He did everything he could to lose his scholarship, and that used to matter to him more than anything."

"Something is wrong. This isn't just a reaction to his father's illness." Martha raised her head to look at Jonathan. "A decent boy doesn't change into a violent racist in a few months. We know Whitney, Jonathan. We know his parents. That isn't how he was brought up."

Jonathan swallowed. Ever since he'd heard Clark's story about Whitney landing Eddie's plane on the football field, the idea wouldn't leave him alone. It was that damn phone call, he supposed; he'd probably never be able to think of one of those guys now without thinking of the other. It didn't make any sense, of course, but nothing in this comic book ever did. "Martha, do you remember Eddie Cole?"

"Of course I do." Martha made a wry face. "There was always something about that man that made my skin crawl."

"I think Whitney must have been hanging out with him lately," Clark said thoughtfully. "I mean, to get hold of his plane and learn how to fly it."

Martha gave him a sharp look.

"He used to dust crops for my dad," Jonathan said, clearing his throat. Well, it was no-secrets night. "He was around the place a lot when I was in high school. I remember Dad telling me some pretty ugly stories about him. When we decided to try organic farming, I wasn't sorry to tell him we weren't dusting anymore."

Martha leaned forward, frowning. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying he was a hard-drinking son of a bitch with a mean streak a mile wide. There were rumors he'd been Klan back in the day."

Martha stared at him, horrified. "Jonathan. You never told me—"

Jonathan gave her a weary look. "He wasn't part of our lives anymore, Martha. I didn't see the point."

"You think Whitney's been hanging out with him, too?" Clark was frowning. "But why? I mean... Whitney had friends. A girlfriend. The team. Why hang around with a guy like that?"

Martha searched Jonathan's face, her own rapidly losing color. "He drank gin. He always drank gin."

Jonathan nodded, surprised by her reaction. "That's right. I had to send him home a few times; he was too damn drunk to fly."

Martha rose to pace past the front windows. "He used to dust all the fields between here and Baker's Field."
"Sure. He used to be a good pilot, when he was sober."


"Something like that," Martha said vaguely, and Jonathan could tell she was thinking nothing like that at all.

"But why would Eddie tell Whitney about the crash? Or anything else?" Clark anxious gaze traveled from one parent to the other, and Jonathan wished to God that he could reassure him.

"I don't know, son. Martha, Eddie's almost a hermit up at that rat-hole of his. Folks in town see him a couple times a year at most."

"Someone nobody would miss," Martha said softly, stopping to stare at Jonathan.

Jonathan felt his stomach turn over. "Oh, no. No, honey, that call was just a sick prank. Eddie used to go to ground all the time."

"No pun intended," Martha said wryly.

"He's got a brother in Metropolis, he could be—"

"You think Eddie Cole is... dead?" Clark swallowed.

"I don't know, sweetheart. I hope not. I'm just trying to think things through." Martha picked up the phone.

Jonathan slapped his hand against the armrest. "Jesus, Martha, you're not calling the sheriff's office over a couple of coincidences and a crank call!"

Martha shot him an exasperated look. "No. I'm calling Eli over a couple of coincidences and a crank call."

Jonathan sighed and leaned back in his chair. There were definite drawbacks to the no-secrets policy; he began to understand why Lex avoided it so scrupulously. He felt Clark pulling a comforter over him and smiled. "Relax, Clark. It's just your mother's over-active imagination. Everything will be fine." He raised his voice. "You tell Dirty Harry that if he wants to go digging under Eddie Cole's wood pile, he's doing it without me."

Jesus. It'd be zombies next.

***

"Thank you, Martha." Eli flipped his phone shut and returned to the farmhouse kitchen, reseating himself across the table from Lex. He waited for an explosion at the interruption. Indeed, an explosion would be preferable to the preternatural control the boy was exhibiting.

"Martha?"

"Yes."

"Is Clark all right?" The boy's voice crackled with suppressed emotion.

"He is fine, Alexander. You were saying?"
Lex paused, regarding him with narrowed eyes. "Let me see if I understand what you've told me. You began the day by catching the redneck thug who tried to murder Clark last fall conducting surveillance on the Kent house."

"Surveillance? Never did I use this word. Never would I use this word to describe the inept fumblings of—"

"You caught him taking pictures of the house."

"Yes."

"But you haven't been able to determine whether he's working for my father or Karloff."

"Or another party," Eli agreed calmly, watching Lex suppress his surprise. "The matter is under investigation."

Another pause. "You then proceeded to be assaulted by Karloff—"

"Inconvenienced."

"Pardon me, inconvenienced by Karloff, who handed Clark the missing negatives and a password for the personal files on his laptop, which, by the way, I gained access to weeks ago—"

"It is often said that it is the thought that counts."

"Clark took the negatives and punched Karloff in the face. I trust you would classify that as an assault?"

"Oh, yes," Eli said blandly. "The creature bounced. It was most gratifying."

"You then drove Clark to school, where the aforementioned redneck thug landed Eddie Cole's crop duster on the football field, behaved in a deranged manner, and accosted Clark in such a way as to force Clark to shove him into the arms of law enforcement."

"Sheriff Millar was most obliging."

"You then received a call from Max, who informed you that Eddie Cole's residence has been deserted for some time, and that he had evidently been employed at Belle Rêve—"

"Miss Sullivan has also informed me that Mr. Fordman has been working at Belle Rêve."

Lex's face went gray. "In what capacity?"

"According to Miss Lang, he was being paid quite generously for work as a subject in clinical trials."

Lex swallowed. "Where is Eddie Cole?"

Eli met Lex's gaze, his concern escalating by the second. This was not the reaction he had been expecting. "He has not been seen in some time."

"He has to be found."

"Sasha. He has not been seen. In all likelihood, he will never be seen."

"Do your best."
"Of course." Eli held his questions, and his answers. Martha was becoming a first-rate operative. Oh, yes, there would be many questions about Alexander's interest in this reputed racist and drunkard.

Lex gave a curt nod and continued his catechism. "Just before noon, you witnessed Whitney Fordman—"

"The redneck thug, yes?"

"—assault Pete—"

"Inconvenience." Surely this constant flippancy would break the boy's ice, but there was not a glimmer of amusement in Lex's face. Eli's concern became alarm.

"Which then necessitated Clark to throw Fordman against some lockers. Words were passed which you could not hear, but which appeared to leave Clark shaken."

"Correct."

"After the meeting with my father and the mayor, Fordman attempted to provoke Pete again, and Clark intervened, which caused Fordman first to refer to Clark dying in a crash, and then to pull a knife—"

"This object I would not call a knife. This object I would call a piece of scrap metal with cheap plastic bolted to one end. Rather I should attack someone with a fish head or a potato."

"Which then precipitated your assault on Fordman. Do I have my facts straight?"

"You do."

"Eli, are you aware that you are supposed to be protecting Clark?"

Oh, he was furious. Always fire and ice when he was furious. His eyes were just like his mother's. "Yes, Sasha, I have a passing familiarity with this fact."

Lex leaned forward, his face like marble. "The moment you laid eyes on Karloff, you should have turned around and taken Clark home."

"To do so would be to grant our enemies a victory they have not earned, and deny Clark what you have told me you want most for him."

The ice in Lex's face threatened to shatter. "A normal life?"

"Yes."

"He's under attack. He's surrounded. The risks have to be weighed on a day-to-day basis, Eli, and I won't have either of those fucking sadists laying hands on him—"

"I think today was an object lesson in the cricket laying hands on the sadists, with praiseworthy effect."

"God damn it, Eli, I won't have—"

"There is some information you should add to your timeline." Eli abruptly decided to throw more fuel on the fire hidden beneath Lex's ice. An explosion would, at this point, be therapeutic. "During the late morning, Martha went to the mansion and confronted your father about the missing
Lex's eyes widened. "Alone?"

"Yes. Ms. Teskey informs me that Martha and Pamela have bonded over a philosophy of female empowerment and unilateral action." Eli managed not to roll his eyes at female empowerment and unilateral action, although, between himself and himself, his admiration for Martha Kent's courage was only enhanced by the venture.

"What happened? Is she all right?"

"What happened is not entirely clear. My informant could not hear the entire conversation."

"You're going to tell me what they heard." If Lex's hand clutched his coffee mug any tighter, it would shatter. Eli sighed.

"The conversation concerned the location of the negatives and the creature's motives for hoarding them. Violation of privacy was discussed. The particle accelerator lab was discussed. Your abduction was mentioned. A certain social gathering in Metropolis where Martha and your father first met was discussed."

Lex's expression of surprise quickly disappeared.

"When the servants entered the room after Martha left, your father had wine on his face and was shouting after Martha that she was insane."

Nothing could have prepared Eli for what the boy did next; proof positive, if any were needed, that the strain of the past few months had pushed Alexander to the breaking point. Lex lunged forward, thrust his hand inside Eli's suit jacket, yanked out his weapon and turned to sprint toward the door.

Eli had him up against the wall with his arm behind his back in two seconds, his fingers pressing into the inside of Lex's wrist. "Drop the weapon, Alexander." Lex's only response was an anguished gasp as Eli's fingers pressed deeper into his wrist. "Drop it at once!"

Lex uttered a snarl and dropped the pistol; Eli released him at once and retrieved the weapon, eyeing the boy as one should any dangerous man driven to extremes. "That is better."

"Better?" Lex was shouting, and Eli could not have been more relieved to hear it. "You know what happened! He tried-- He put his fucking hands on Martha!"

"We do not know this. Her family was with her when she called, therefore I have not had the opportunity to speak to her alone. Pamela is medicated and asleep."

Lex stepped closer, every muscle poised to strike, and Eli prepared for the possibility of another inconvenience. "You know him! Damn it, Eli, this is Martha. She's family. And if he's hurt her, I will blow his balls off, and there will be nothing you or anyone else can do to stop me."

"And as entertaining as that might be, it will not further our goal of safety for the Kent family," Eli said sharply. "In fact, it will only place them in greater danger."

Lex stared at him, still panting. Eli came closer, laying his hands on Lex's shoulders. "Sasha. You know this. What is it you are not telling me?"

Lex's gaze became anguished, and with a muttered "nothing" he turned toward the pantry and disappeared inside. Eli heard him descending to his lair below, and sighed. Now the boy would
pore over his hacked data files, his surveillance feeds, his floor plans and network architecture
documentation, or stare at the silent machine from another world, as if it could give him answers and
not simply more questions. It seemed that his effort to release some of the pressure on Alexander had
only increased it.

Well. There was one source of pressure that could be eliminated, and Eli would take great pleasure
in doing so. Eli slung his coat over his arm and stalked toward the front door.

***

"Oh," Chloe scanned the Daily Planet article on the computer screen, wondering why, for once, it
didn't feel quite right. After all, this was public record. It wasn't as if she'd opened up a grave or
something. She shifted uneasily in her chair, glancing around her bedroom as if she expected the
privacy police to materialize through the walls. She'd never felt that way before.

"Oh, what?" Pete snapped with more impatience than was usual even for him. "Did you find
something or not?"

"Julian was Lex's brother," Chloe said quietly.

"Was?"

"He died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome when he was a couple months old."

Pete looked away. "How old was—"

"Seven." Her mother had left when she was seven. She knew about seven. "Seven."

Pete said nothing for a moment. "Too bad," he said finally. "And then his mom—"

"When he was eleven."

Pete made a visible struggle to regain his balance. "Well. Sucks to be Lex Luthor."

Chloe tore her gaze from the computer screen to rake it over Pete's face, shocked.

Pete sat up straight on the end of her bed with an annoyed expression. "What? What?"

"Could you get any colder?" Chloe snapped. "We're talking about a dead baby here."

Pete looked a little embarrassed, but it didn't stop his stupid mouth. "A dead baby who died years
ago, Chloe. Why would Lugosi be so worked up over that? Why wouldn't Clark talk about it?"

Chloe turned away, hands clenched. "You've never lost anybody, have you? Never."

Pete fell silent.

Chloe was glad Pete couldn't see her face. She blinked impatiently. "I still have nightmares about
the day I couldn't find my mother. A mother who left years ago. Do you get it?"

"No." Pete's voice was quiet. "But I believe you."

"So why wouldn't Eli get worked up over it? He was Mrs. Luthor's friend, like, forever. And if Lex
has been talking to Clark about what happened, do you think Clark should shout it to the world?"

"Why not?" Pete snapped. "It's about the Luthors, isn't it? Public Enemy Number One? It's the
truth, right? I thought that's what you were all about."

Chloe turned to stare at her monitor. "There are lines," she heard herself saying.

Pete snorted. "Since when?"

Chloe thought about since when. Since when was a good question. "I guess," she said softly, "Since I found out I had a friend who might die if I crossed the wrong one."

***

"Where the hell have you been?"

Lex turned off the lights. Somehow it was easier talking to Beelzebub in the dark. "Good afternoon, Dad. Have you had a nice day?" He lit the first candle.

"What game are you playing now? I've been calling you all afternoon! I must have left half a dozen messages—"

"Seven. I do apologize, but I'm afraid I was otherwise engaged. Shall we proceed to business?"

Lex lit another candle.

"Otherwise engaged." Lex could almost see Lionel's sneer. "Meaning you were indulging in yet another sordid liaison with your...friend."

Lex paused in the act of lighting the third. Sordid. Sordid and Lex's relationship with Clark Kent were simply not in the same universe. Lionel knew that, of course. If he truly believed that Clark was no more than a cheap screw, he'd have given Lex his blessing with a song in his heart. "I would very much appreciate it if you would refer to Clark in the appropriate manner."

Lex was gratified to hear a startled silence of almost a full second. "And that would be?"

"Clark," Lex said, very slowly and distinctly as he lit the third candle, "Is my partner."

More silence. "Partner. In what context?"

"In every context."

"As the temporary administrator of a large portion of your estate." Lionel sounded supremely confident in his assessment.

Lex chuckled. Poor, bleeding bastard. He had no clue. "As the permanent administrator of my life." Yet more silence. There were indeed moments in life worth savoring. "Shall we discuss tomorrow's agenda?"

When Lionel finally spoke, Lex could have sworn he heard an aghast splutter. "You've lost your mind. These people have, inadvertently or not, robbed you of—"

"On the contrary, it's I who am hopelessly indebted to them. I'm considering bankruptcy proceedings."

"Lex. For God's sake, try to see this situation for what it is. I realize that the Kents entered into this absurd agreement with the best of intentions, but we both know they've been shamelessly manipulated by Pamela Jenkins for her little campaign of retribution."

"Yes, it was a lovely little check, wasn't it? I anticipate checkmate in less than three moves."
"You're trying my patience, Lex. I thought we had an understanding. An alliance."

"We do. However, Pamela Jenkins' actions do not fall within the purview of our agreement. I was merely expressing an aesthetic appreciation for the lady's skill."

Lionel sighed. "Her hatred of me has blinded her to your interests."

Lex lit the next candle, unperturbed. Lionel was interesting today. "How so?"

"We're talking about dirt-poor farmers who will very shortly have a respectable fortune dropped into their laps. They don't have any idea how to administer that much wealth, Lex. You won't have a penny left by the time they're done."

"You have a bad habit of underestimating your adversaries, Dad. It'll do you in in the end."

"And I hardly need add that no one in their position, not even the incorruptible Kents, could resist the temptation of dipping their hands in the till for any significant length of time."

Lex smiled. There had been a time not long ago when Lex would have believed that. But wherever else Lionel held sway, it was not here, on Kent terra firma. "Ah. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Lionel laughed. "Surely the old man is proof positive of the adage."

"No, I don't think so. I think Frank Herbert put it more accurately."

"Oh?"

"Power attracts the corruptible."

Silence. "What is this nonsense about a school, Lex?"

Lex howled in silent laughter. Game, set, and match to the unsuitable heir. "I'm sure Chloe made the proposal in a perfectly coherent manner. She's very well-spoken. In fact, she has a first-rate mind."

"I'm not interested in Chloe Sullivan's mind or manner. This exceeds the boundaries of our agreement, Lex. By several light-years."

"In specifics, perhaps. But I believe the request lies well within the spirit of our agreement."

"You evidently have a far broader definition of spirit than I do."

"I think it's safe to say that's a given."

"To offer our ancestral home as a shelter for the genetically defective was deliberately provocative. The resulting discussion has cost me a convenient political alliance."

Oh, sweet Jesus. Better than he'd hoped for. Lex wondered how long it would take Smallville's beloved mayor to clean out his desk. "Kindly spare me the ancestral home routine. I thought I had made it clear that I am quite well-informed on that subject, along with several others of an even more unpleasant nature."

Lionel sighed. "All right, Lex. You wanted my attention? You have it. What do you really want? Besides the replicate's head on a platter; which, of course, we both know is a mutual goal."
Lex stared into the flame, focusing. Focusing. "A little bird told me that Martha Kent was at the house today."

Lionel chuckled. "Your little bird flies quickly. I congratulate you."

"That there was a rather animated discussion about certain negatives."

"Your little bird also has excellent hearing."

"That Mrs. Kent left without the negatives, and you were left standing with wine all over your face."

Lionel began to laugh again. "Correct again. The lady has a formidable temper."

"Did you touch her?" Lex asked pleasantly. "Because I believe I told you what the consequences would be if you—"

"Sullied her honor? Don't be absurd. She was in the office for no more than ten minutes. Even I can't work that fast."

Lex sent himself inside the blue heart of the flame. "I want you to understand this. Martha will tell me exactly what happened, because she considers me her son, she trusts me without reservation, and she knows that I will take appropriate and proportionate action. I will know everything I need to know by tomorrow morning."

Lionel paused. "For God's sake, Lex. I was trying to be kind."

Lex struggled not to choke on the preposterous nature of the concept. He nearly lost his focus. "I beg your pardon? You were trying to be what?"

"She was incensed that I would violate Clark's privacy when he was so young. So I explained that Clark had not been my interest."


"I'm only human, Lex. I tried to reassure her. To tell her that it wasn't her fault. That Clark's abilities would have been documented sooner or later by—"

"Do you really imagine," Lex rasped, "That you are capable of undermining Martha Kent's convictions in the same way you destroyed mine? If you do, then you're further removed from reality than I had previously imagined. She is a hundred times stronger than any Luthor. A thousand times."

"Your paranoia is romping again, Lex."

"I know this woman. Martha Kent sees your remarks for what they are: a sorry attempt to deflect the blame for those photographs away from the responsible party."

"Is that what I was doing? Good heavens."

"To say nothing of attempting to gain influence over the woman who will control Pamela's fortune until Clark is of age. I'll ask again, and I want an answer this time: Did you touch her?"

"Well. I did touch her hand." Lionel sounded distinctly amused. "Before I tried to kiss her."

For the thousandth time, Lex imagined choking the living shit out of his father. He capped off the image with blowing Lionel's balls off. He maintained an even tone with difficulty. "I assume it was
at this point that the lady made her displeasure known. Was it red or white?"

"It was a fine Chardonnay, and I intend to send Jonathan Kent the dry cleaning bill."

"I think you're going to eat the dry cleaning bill. Start praying that you don't eat the business end of Jonathan's shotgun as well."

"I tried to comfort the lady and she misunderstood me. That's all that happened. I'm a man, Lex, not a saint."

A saint. So many responses crowded Lex's mind that he had to close his eyes for a second. He ruthlessly silenced them all. "Fine. You're not a saint. The very stars are displaced by this towering revelation. We're going to have a discussion about your memory transfer process now."

"Excuse me?"

"Which word didn't you understand?"

"What does that have to do with the Kents?"

"Everything about your redundant wonder affects the Kents. He paid Clark and Eli a visit this morning, and made several odd references to events from my childhood which I confess intrigued me."

Lex could almost see Lionel back stiffen. "He's not stable, Lex."

"So you keep telling me."

"His memories are not reliable."

"As long as these unreliable memories compel him to stalk Clark on his way to school, they will lie within the sphere of my interest. Talk to me about discrete and coalescent matrices, Dad."

Lionel barked a forced laugh. "You've gained access to my files. Well done, Lex."

"I've gained access to Karloff's files, too."

"I doubt he has a firm enough grasp of the principles involved to understand the process in any meaningful way."

"I was referring to his personal files."

Silence. "Scarcely a credible source of information."

"Matrices, Dad."

"Lex, this is pointless. The technique is deeply flawed at best, as is painfully obvious. The replicate's cognitive deterioration will continue. Other brain functions will follow suit. He'll be dead in months."

"Obviously this wasn't the original plan for his demise."

"No. No." Lionel sounded unaccountably uncomfortable. "The TERC gene was manipulated."

One of the genes controlling aging. An odd choice. "Using the meteorite radiation."
"Yes, of course. It's only a matter of time now."

"It may be a long time. A very long time, being eaten from the inside out."

"A rather emotionally charged description for such a clinical process. Don't tell me you object."

"I won't. Your team did take into account the mutated state of the gene before they began tinkering with it."

"You're assuming that your TERC gene is mutated. It isn't. I had my best men on this, Lex."

"Karloff's lack of physical symptoms would indicate that either the mutation didn't take, the original itself is mutated, or both."

"Your conclusion is that our methodology is flawed?"

"My conclusion is that you need better best men. Tell me about Whitney Fordman, Dad."

"Who?"

"You are skating dangerously close to a breach of our agreement."

"Oh, for God's sake. I believe he took part in one of the clinical trials at Belle Rêve. What are you —"

"Now tell me about Eddie Cole."

Silence. Then laughter. "Oh, Lex. Lex. This really has brought out the best in you. All right, fine. They were subjects in one of the later preliminary trials of the memory transfer process."

"Details, please."

"Some random memories of Cole's were duplicated and transferred to Fordman. The two matrices coalesced without incident, and Cole and Fordman were completely unharmed. Hardly anything to excite your ever-present righteous indignation."

Lex backed away from the candles to sit on the bed. The bed still held Clark's scent; Lex grabbed Clark's pillow and hugged it to him. "Explain coalescent memory matrices."

"Lex—"

"To be specific, explain why you'd need them in the first place."

"There is a great deal you don't understand about this particular field—"

"If your ultimate goal was to save Lucas by cloning him and transferring his memories to the clone, why would you want to—"

"There was almost nothing left." Lionel's voice was harsh. "It was obvious that to have a chance at creating a reasonable facsimile of the original, more than one attempt would be required, and those results would have to be networked in such a way as to forge one neural—"

"May I ask exactly which idiot you think you're talking to? You created multiple clones of me, knowing that the memory transfer process was untried and likely to fail many times. You would have done the same with Lucas. At no point would transferring memories to an active matrix be necessary."
"What is this really about, Lex?" Lionel's voice was almost gentle; Lex ignored it.

"Are you continuing to monitor Whitney Fordman?"

"Not personally, no. The man in charge of follow-up data may be. Why?"

"Who is in charge of follow-up data?"

"Your old friend Stephen Hamilton."

Lex clutched the pillow tighter. "And would my old friend Stephen Hamilton be monitoring Eddie Cole as well?"

"More than likely."

"I want to talk to him."

Lionel barked a sardonic laugh. "So would I. He defected to the replicate's camp months ago."

"I'm sure they have phones in whatever mad scientist's lair they're holed up in. Get me a number."

"Why?"

"I will not tolerate interference with Clark's life, Clark's future or Clark's family. I thought I had made that clear to you."

"What you have not made clear is what any of this has to do with—"

"Don't insult my intelligence. The next time one of your post-op zombies commits trespassing, assault or anything else in the service of surveillance within ten yards of Clark or his family, I'll fucking blow them away, and then I'll come for you."

"Christ Jesus, Lex! Why would I do this? I've seen the boy fly. If you think some second-hand information that could easily be written off as fake for the right money could trump that—"

"Don't be absurd. You saw no such thing. If you start talking about flying farmboys, Dad, somebody's going to put you in a straitjacket."

Lionel's voice went cold. "Clark's future is now beyond your control. It's almost beyond mine. Too many people know too much. Attempting to shield this boy from his fate is an exercise in futility."

Lex ignored his plummeting stomach. "We make our own fate. You will tell Fordman to back off. Whether or not he is currently reporting to you is completely irrelevant to me."

"You're implying that I still have contact with the replicate."

"Your perceptiveness astonishes me."

"After what he did to you. After what I've done to him."

"Business is business," Lex said coolly.

Lionel's voice grew harsh. "Even if you, or he, were to consider me capable of having business dealings with a man who molested my son—"

"I wouldn't go there if I were you, Dad. Bad salesmanship."
"I have nothing left to bargain with, unless you wish me to reinstate him at LuthorCorp."

"You have me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tell the redundant wonder that you'll trade me for putting Cole and Fordman and whoever else he has terrorizing the countryside back in their padded room."

Lionel's breathing was strangely erratic. "I am beginning to have serious concerns about your mental health, Lex."

"Welcome to the club."

"He wouldn't be fool enough to believe I would propose exchanging my son for some—"

"Why not? He has good reason to believe that you want control of Clark, if for no other reason than the fact that he is the temporary administrator of a large portion of my estate."

"Lex—"

"He certainly has reason to believe that you consider me unsuitable for Luthor greatness."

"You are entirely suitable for Luthor greatness."

Lex closed his eyes. "Tell him you'll throw in a cure for his little genetic problem. There's no reason to suppose that he would suspect anything, given your behavior thus far. Set it up. Tell me where he is, and I'll go."

"I will not hand you over to that monster to be killed."

"Have you considered the possibility that I might kill him?"

"I will not risk your life for the future comfort of a mutant farmboy."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss. I'll find him myself. Thank you for your time."

"I'll find him. I'll handle the matter personally."

Lex's eyes flew open. "What?"

"I'll convince him to back off. This absurd self-sacrifice in the name of true love is unnecessary."

"I see." Lex struggled to see. "He'll do this for the asking. Your claims of not being on amicable terms—"

"Are entirely truthful. I'll find him and I'll convince him; if he refuses, one of us will wind up dead."

No rules. There were no rules to this new game. Lex struggled for speech.

"Either way, my son might begin to understand that I love him. Kindly don't mention this to your little adopted family."

Lionel hung up.

Lex sat in the dark with the silent phone to his ear for a long time, until his muscles finally went limp. He eased himself to the bed on his side, clutching Clark's pillow, breathing deep, and let the phone
fall from his fingers.
"Mom."

"Just a second," Martha said a little too brightly, donning her oven mitts with more energy than was necessary. "Time for the pie to come out."

She felt Clark standing very close, watching her as she pulled the pie from the oven and placed it on top of the stove to cool. She pulled off her mitts and tossed them on the counter. "There. Now if you'll just get that picnic basket down for me, we can—" She was cut off as Clark reeled her into a hug, and kept her there.

Martha let out a shaky sigh, wrapping her arms around her son's waist. "I'm all right, Clark."

"I want to beat his face in," Clark whispered fiercely. "I know how Dad feels. I don't care how good Eli is at scaring him. I want him to be scared of me."

Martha caressed Clark's back soothingly. "My protectors," she said lightly.

"Yeah, we are," Clark said, leaning back to look into her face with a grim expression. "And I don't care how good you are at throwing wine glasses, I'm still going to protect you. So is Dad."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Martha laughed, blinking back tears. "Although you shouldn't underestimate wine as a surprise attack. If you could have seen his face—"

"Mom, promise me you won't talk to him again. Alone, I mean. Please."

Martha smiled and reached up to touch his cheek. He'd grown so tall. "I promise to avoid it."

Clark scowled. "That's not the same thing."

"No, it isn't. Now help me pack this up for Lex. And you make sure he eats it. That boy is nothing but skin and bones. And Clark."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For not losing your temper in front of your father."

Clark let loose a little laugh. "Yeah, well. I guess you have to 'maintain' the Kent temper too, sometimes."

"You're getting so grown-up." Martha wiped her eyes.

"Aw, Mom, don't start that again! I'm an infant, I swear."

The exasperation in Clark's voice turned her tears into laughter; she gave him a little shove. "Basket. You'll be late for your date. Oh. And Clark. There's something you need to know about Whitney."

***

Eli brushed aside the underling who had the audacity to bar his entrance and strode into the room Lionel Luthor had chosen to haunt. God only knew what the dog thought he would find there. A member of the kitchen staff had let it be known that Lionel spent hours at a time sitting behind Lex's
desk, staring into space. Sometimes the door would be shut and locked as the sounds of moving furniture, knocking on wood panels and emptying of drawers echoed down the main hall. Perhaps the man was as mad as his monster. Or perhaps not. Too much was unknown. Eli found himself thoroughly detesting the unknown.

When Eli entered, however, neither madness nor mayhem was in evidence. Lionel was sitting quietly on the sofa, studying a file so intently that it took him a fraction of a second to realize that someone else was in the room. He snapped the manila folder shut as David squeezed past Eli, his hands gesticulating wildly. "It's Mr. Cohen, sir. I couldn't stop him."

"David," Lionel said icily, "Mr. Cohen is not an old friend."

"No, sir." David shot a triumphant look at Eli. "Shall I call security?"

Eli barked a laugh. "By all means. Doing so would be an entertaining experience for me and an educational experience for Mr. Luthor. Mr. Luthor is always in great need of education."

Lionel cast his gaze heavenward for a moment. "Close the door, David. Make certain we're not disturbed."

David left with a decidedly sulky expression on his face, shutting the door behind him.

"You're becoming more of a drama queen every day, Eli." Lionel rose to pour himself a whiskey. "No doubt the influence of the Incorruptible Kents."

"There will be no meeting tomorrow," Eli said flatly.

Lionel sighed and made no response, sipping his whiskey.

"Your meetings with Alexander have been suspended indefinitely."

Lionel maintained his composure, but Eli could see a slight flush of anger rising to his face. "The agreement with my son—"

"Was exacted under duress. Kindly do not imagine me ignorant of your methods. He will tell you nothing you wish to hear. The Kents will tell you nothing you wish to hear."

"What is it you think I wish to hear, Eli?"

"We will not discuss the obvious."

"You're mistaken." Lionel reseated himself on the sofa, smiling pleasantly. "Martha told me some rather remarkable things today. Did you know that she was responsible for my missing files and laptop? Of course you did. I withdraw the question."

Lionel Luthor was a demon. How he had managed to coerce or cajole this admission Eli could not imagine. A conference with his newest operative was imperative. "You are once again hallucinating. Mr. Luthor; the result, no doubt, of excessive alcohol consumption. Alexander has informed me that counseling is available."

Lionel's smile deepened. "I must compliment you on your taste in operatives, Eli."

"Your meaning eludes me."

"I know a diversionary tactic when I see one. And Martha is extremely diverting."
The dog's suggestive tone was obviously an attempt to provoke. It was a successful attempt. Eli tried to count to ten. He succeeded in reaching five, and congratulated himself in getting that far. "You will refer to the lady as Mrs. Kent. And I tell you that if you have so much as laid a finger on her I will kill you now." One of the perquisites of age was to disregard advice given to others. Killing Lionel Luthor would be worth the price.

"I've heard enough of this homicidal gallantry from Lex. These threats are becoming tiresome, Eli." Lionel lifted his whiskey glass.

Eli promptly seized the first heavy object at hand, which happened to be a ghastly reproduction of a classical Greek bust of generic divinity, and sent it sailing across the distance between himself and Lionel, smashing Lionel's glass and propelling whiskey and glass shards across Lionel's preposterously expensive suit before sailing over the back of the sofa to land on the floor behind it.

Lionel didn't so much as flinch. "Twice in one day," he remarked. "My laundress will begin to suspect me of unsavory habits."

Eli stepped closer. "I have your attention?"

Lionel turned his head to regard Eli with narrowed eyes. "You've had my attention from the first day I laid eyes on you."

"Then you will listen. First: if you ever again lay hands upon or make advances to Mrs. Kent, I will geld you and nail your bloody testicles to a tree for the crows to eat."

Lionel's mouth opened, but nothing emerged. He drew an uneven breath, but Eli proceeded before Lionel could speak.

"Second: Your son has had more than enough of your nonsense. There are to be no more meetings."

Lionel found his voice. "I imagine Lex will have something to say about this."

"There are to be no more clandestine attempts to acquire control of Miss Jenkins' estate."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"There are to be no more references to Alexander's brother. To anyone."

The color in Lionel's face began to fade.

"There will be no more 'gifts' to Mr. Fordman."

Lionel stared. "Gifts?"

Eli noted the startled confusion of Lionel's manner and stored it away for future consideration. "You will sever all contact with Alexander."

Lionel pulled a linen handkerchief from his breast pocket and began to soak up the whiskey that remained pooled in the folds of his silk. He seemed unconcerned by the razor-sharp glass shards. "I think not. Lex and I have a great deal to discuss."

"If you have any messages for Alexander, you will give them to me."

Lionel smiled, sparing Eli a brief glance. "Tell me, Eli. Are you the party responsible for Lex's proposal regarding our ancestral home?"
"This is no more your ancestral home than it is mine. And I assure you that despite your deranged inability to perceive this, Alexander is quite capable of formulating and fielding his own proposals."

"The Incorruptibles, then. Or my soon-to-be-stone-cold nemesis. I refuse to believe that Lex would simply give away the crown jewel of his birthright."

"I should think it would be painfully obvious to you by now that Alexander's definition of his birthright differs considerably from your own."

Lionel said nothing for a moment. "Perhaps," he said quietly. "But if Lex is capable of formulating and fielding his own proposals, he's certainly capable of organizing his own schedule. We will be meeting tomorrow."

"Not if you value your life."

Lionel shrugged. "This is Lex's decision. If you or the Incorruptibles prevent our meeting at the Kent house, then we'll meet at Lex's little shack in the woods."

Eli started counting again, but he barked a laugh, imagining the scene Lionel was likely to encounter should he make this attempt. "It is plain that you do not value your life."

Lionel began picking the pieces of glass from his suit as if he were plucking petals from a daisy, placing them in the damp handkerchief with great care. "I have some experience in circumventing security systems. And if you imagine that Siobhan Teskey holds any terror for me, then you do not know me."

"I know you. So does Miss Teskey. Should you attempt to gain admittance to Alexander's residence, the lady may well deprive me of the pleasure of placing your head on the spikes on your gate."

"If all you have to say to me are yet more dire predictions of my imminent demise, then I see no purpose in continuing this conversation." Lionel tossed the silken bundle of glass shards onto the side table. Two of Lionel's fingers were bleeding.

"I have this to say. Alexander entered into this agreement with you in good faith. You have perverted its original purpose to suit your own ends."

"The facts of the case indicate otherwise."

"The facts of the case are these: a violator of children seeks to regain unrestricted access to his son; a thief claws to regain control of a fortune that was never his; and a madman still howls in the night that his son murdered his infant brother."

Lionel stared at him, speechless.

"There will be no more meetings." Eli turned on his heel and left.

***

The minute Clark reached the top of the farmhouse stairs, he was stopped in his tracks by the sight of Siobhan Teskey, blocking the hallway. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she was wearing her fiercest scowl.

Oh, crap.
Teskey glared at him as if he were some cockroach she'd found under the bathroom rug. "What in the devil's name do you mean by making such a racket?"

Clark winced. He should have known he'd have to get past Taz. "I'm sorry, Ms. Teskey. I tried to be quiet."

"Sure and it's a herd of elephant passing by this door and phones ringing day and night. How is a sick woman to get any rest? I might as well set up her bed in LuthorCorp Plaza."

Clark heard a sigh and an unmistakable cussword from inside. "Teskey, for God's sake. Yes, he's here, Eli."

Shit. This couldn't be good.

"I'm sorry," Clark said meekly. "I'm just going to see Lex. It's kind of important."

Teskey assumed a skeptical expression. "It's always important. The world revolves around the whims and tribulations of Alexander Joseph Luthor."

Pamela's laugh was a little wheezy, but it was there. "She sees the light. We have a convert, Clark. Yes. Call me in the morning, Eli." Clark heard her hang up the phone.

Teskey's scowl deepened. "It's always Alexander. Everything is Alexander. The world is Alexander, and everyone and everything else is but a boil on his bum."

"Ms. Teskey," Clark said, in as polite a tone as he could manage, "Lex doesn't have a boil on his bum."

Teskey's eyes widened, but Pamela laughed so hard she started coughing. Teskey shot an alarmed glance over her shoulder.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. You're a damned tarantula, Teskey. Let the boy in."

"I suppose His Highness has discovered a hangnail or a—"

"Teskey, let that boy in now." Pamela's voice was weak but emphatic.

Clark fought the urge to run away. The only time Pamela didn't sound weak and spacey like this was when Lex spent any time in her room. She didn't let Teskey give her the morphine then. "I didn't mean to bother you, Pamela. I was just—"

"Don't let that holy terror twist your impressionable young mind. You're never a bother. Damn it, Teskey, get out of the way!" Her voice was almost normal now. Probably because she was mad.

Teskey grunted and stepped back, muttering what were probably swear-words. Maybe Gaelic swear-words.

Clark sidled past her and walked in, trying not to let how bad Pamela looked do anything to his face. Afternoons were always worse. "Hi."

"Hi yourself." Pamela gestured to Lex's chair at the side of the bed. "Sit yourself down, Mr. Kent. We're going to talk."

Aw, shit. This could be nothing but trouble.

"This is the time you should be sleeping." Teskey's voice was so fierce that Clark fairly scooted
across the room to sit in Lex's chair, setting the picnic basket on the floor beside him. "It is the time that was agreed upon by all concerned that you not be disturbed. You are a menace to yourself, Pamela Jane Jenkins. You should be bound and gagged, so you should. And I—"

Pamela reached down to seize one of her slippers, which she promptly hurled at Teskey, smacking her on the hip. Clark stared at her, startled. "Oh, go back to Belfast, you gargoyle. And close the door on your way out."

Muttering what were now definitely swear-words, Teskey retreated, shutting the door behind her. Clark could see through the door that she had taken up a position just outside, arms crossed as if to bar the next invader.

Pamela sighed and settled against her pillows. "You're going up to see Alexander."

"Yeah. He's... had a rough day."

Pamela gave him a wry look. "From what I hear, that's been going around. Don't worry. Things are going to get better."

"I'm ready for that to start any time now."

"Eli just delivered his messages to Lionel."

Clark managed not crush the arms of his chair at the mention of Lionel's name. "Did he kick his ass?"

"Unfortunately, no, but he did mention that Lionel wound up with more liquor in his face."

"Good," Clark said darkly. "Should have been worse."

"Oh, it will be. I've been thinking a lot about those laptops Alexander is so fond of."

"Yeah." Clark tried to relax again. "Me, too."

"Has he shown you what's in them?"

"Some of what's in his dad's. Mostly that memory matrix stuff. Nothing from Karloff's, though. He'd close it whenever I got close."

Pamela smiled grimly, as if she wasn't surprised. "You need to read whatever's in Karloff's laptop, Clark."

Clark shifted uneasily in his chair. "That's what Karloff said. He said it would show me who Lex really was."

Pamela snorted. "Did he, now. Well, the little swine may be right, because I'll lay you even money you'll find what's taking Alexander apart in there."

"You still don't think it's his dad?"

"The two aren't mutually exclusive, Clark. Lionel Luthor has his greasy fingers in every nasty piece of business we have to deal with."

"I won't go behind Lex's back."

Pamela smiled. She almost looked well. "You've been good for him, Clark."
Clark flushed and looked at his feet. "I want to be."

"And I'm very grateful that you two met."

"Well, he did sort of hit me with his car, so that part wasn't hard."

Pamela's laughter brought Clark's head up again. "You'll always stand by him, won't you?"

"Yes." Clark swallowed. Something in Pamela's eyes was a little scary. Like...if he didn't stand by Lex, she could come back and do something about it.

"Sometimes you might have to bend the rules to do that." She was still smiling, but there was nothing but dead serious in her dark eyes. "It would be better if Alexander showed you what's in the swine's laptop. But if he won't—"

"Yeah," Clark said glumly. "Great. Another reason for him to hate my guts."

"Don't confuse anger with hate, Clark," Pamela said gently. "Alexander could never hate you. He'll always be there for you, too. Now run along, and tell Alexander I'll see him in the morning."

***

Lex heard Pamela's door close and sighed softly as Clark approached the stairs to the bedroom, keeping his eyes closed. He should have known Clark wouldn't make it past Pamela. The woman was an inveterate conspirator on a mission of salvation. It was no wonder she and Clark had been mind-melded from the moment they met. She was probably attempting to ascertain whether Lex had attended confession and made the appropriate penance. Unless there was some other campaign to save Lex Luthor from himself underway. One never knew.

Lex ran his hand over the note still pressed against his chest, shifting against the pillows as he listened. He smiled as Clark's footsteps came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs.

"Aw, Lex." It was a resigned murmur. "You weirdo."

Lex couldn't help grinning as he listened to Clark climb the steps, stopping to pick up the single tulip Lex had laid on each one. "I overdid it, right?"

"You overdo everything." The tenderness in that voice made Lex glad that the room was dark. "Don't stop, okay?"

"So noted," Lex whispered.

Clark approached the bed, and Lex opened his eyes, trying to see Clark's face in the dim light of the three candles. Clark laid the bouquet of tulips on the night stand. He sat down, leaning over Lex with one flower in his hand.

Lex could see his smile, now. It was a healing experience. "So. How was your day?"

Clark rolled his eyes. "Ha-ha. I guess Eli rattled me out, huh?"

"It's Eli's sworn duty to rat you out. He also—"

Clark laid a finger on Lex's lips. "Normal boyfriends." He hoisted the picnic basket. "See?"

"Blueberry pie," Lex murmured, catching the scent. "You're a man of your word." He felt soft flower petals being drawn across his upper lip.
"Chicken soup, too."

"Ah." So this was a mission of mercy. He should have known.

"And ham sandwiches."

Good Lord. Martha was on the case. "How appropriate."

Clark shimmied up to Lex on his side, leaning on one elbow as he teased Lex's nose. "Red tulips? Not white?"

"Just updating the botanical symbolism."

"What?"

Lex laid his hand on Clark's cheek. "White tulips symbolize a lost love," he said gently.

Clark's eyes widened. "Lost?"

Lex took the red tulip from Clark's loose fingers. "Found now." He moved his other hand across the warm paper lying on his chest.

Clark got that bewildered look that inevitably twisted Lex's gut. "Geez, Lex. What have you been —"

"Just some ruminations on the subject of the toppling of cosmic dominoes, and the unintended benefits thereof." Lex touched the tulip to Clark's cheek. "Nothing to worry about."

"You're punchy."

"You're late."

Clark blinked. "Yeah. I'm sorry. Pamela wanted to talk." He ducked down to lay his head on the pillow next to Lex's, his gaze fixed on something over Lex's shoulder.

Lex stifled a sigh. An operation was definitely underway, and it was strictly need to know. "Details," he murmured.

Clark nuzzled him. "Normal boyfriends."

"Details first."

"Why?"

"Details now."

Sighing in exasperation, Clark reached across Lex to pick up the open cell phone from the night stand, bringing it into Lex's field of vision. "You first."

Damn him. Of course he'd notice. He noticed everything. "Excuse me?"

"Details."

Lex regarded him through narrowed eyes. "You have dark powers, Clark."

Clark's eyebrows rose. "Details now."
Lex sighed and took the phone from Clark, flipping it shut. "Can we go back to normal boyfriends?"

"Depends."

Lex tossed the cell phone away, smiling as it hit the rug. "I'm prepared to hear your terms. However, I'm compelled to point out that 'normal,' in our case, includes discussion of any number of childhood traumas and blood-curdling events."

Clark rolled his eyes, but there was a strained look to him that confirmed Lex's suspicions. "I think you're kind of missing the point, here, mastermind." He slipped a hand down to tug on the waistband of Lex's sweatpants.

"Which is?"

"To avoid trauma and blood-curdling. At least for a little while."

"Ah." Avoidance would seem to be the theme of the evening. "This would constitute a significant alteration in the dynamics of our relationship."

"Very funny."

"Have you given this drastic course of action sufficient thought?"

Clark started laughing. "You are such a pain in the ass." He took hold of the edge of the piece of paper resting on Lex's chest and tried to slide it away, but Lex seized his wrist before he could stop himself.

"No," Lex rasped. "Don't take it."

Clark bent to peer into Lex's face with a startled expression. "I was just going to—"

"Don't take it back." Lex cursed inwardly. God, he was pathetic.

Clark gently pulled his wrist free and pulled Lex into his arms, cradling his upper body. "I don't want to take it back." He kissed Lex's temple as Lex relaxed against him. "I just want you to put it down so we can, uh, do normal boyfriend stuff."

Lex drew a steadying breath. "Do normal boyfriends write notes like this one, Clark?"

Clark gave him a small smile. "Probably not. I guess I mean normal for us."

"I've never written a note like this."

"You don't have to write anything, Lex."

"Nobody has ever written me a note like this."

Clark peered into his face, clearly at a loss. "Did you want them to?"

"No. Yes." Lex paused, reflecting on the undeniable degeneration of his mental faculties. "May I respond within thirty days?"

"Lex."

"In writing?"
Clark cradled him close, still smiling. "You can respond any way you want."

Lex considered the statement for a moment. The fact that Clark persisted in his laissez-faire policy when it came to Lex Luthor's responses was a matter of some fascination. Any sane human being would have had more than enough Luthor psychological pathology and ugliness for one lifetime. Lex very carefully laid both the note and the tulip on the pillow beside him, then yanked Clark down and kissed him long and hard.

Clark groaned and came out of the kiss with wide eyes. "Whoa." Clark slid his hand up the inside of Lex's thigh with gratifying eagerness and an amazed expression, laughing. "Great response, Lex."

Lex sighed resignedly as he went hard at the touch of those warm fingers through the fabric of his sweatpants. That's all it took. That's all it had ever taken. He'd never in his life been as easy as he was for this impossibly beautiful boy. He opened his mouth to make clear, in no uncertain terms, that this was by no means the limit of his response. He was cut off by the shrill sound of his cell phone.

Clark stiffened and raised amber-tinted eyes to the source of the sound. Something in his face, something new, made Lex freeze. "Clark, we're not answering—"

Clark lunged across the bed and snatched the phone from the floor. "What do you want now?"

Lex stared up into the rage in Clark's face, breathless.

There was a split second of startled silence, then a chuckle. "Back again, Clark?"

"What the hell makes you think I'm ever anyplace else?" Clark sat up and swung away from Lex.

Lex immediately sat up to lay a hand on Clark's shoulder. "Clark. Give me the phone."

"Your point is well taken. May I speak to Lex, please?"

Clark actually shrugged Lex's hand off his shoulder. "You've spoken to him enough."

"You're being extremely rude. Let me speak to Lex."

Clark struck the mattress with his fist. "You're not ever going to speak to him. You're not going to get anywhere near him again."

Christ. Lex scrambled around on the bed to face Clark. "Give me the phone now." Clark met his gaze, and Lex fell silent and leaned back, stunned by the fury in that face.

"That seems to be Eli's opinion as well. However, it's Lex's decision, not yours."

"You're right. And he's decided not to have a damn thing to do with you."

Thoroughly rattled, Lex forced himself to speak. "Let me talk to him, Clark."

"That's neither in his interest nor yours. Calm down, boy."

"I don't want to calm down! I'm done being calm."

"Clark. You're Lex's...partner. I'm his father. We're going to be part of each other's lives for a long time."
Clark's gaze went unfocused, and Lex felt an unaccountable chill touch his shoulder blades. "Yes," Clark said in an eerie monotone. "A very long time."

"Don't you think we should come to an understanding?"

Clark snapped back from wherever he had gone. "I understand you," Clark rasped. "I know you."

Lex caught his breath and snatched the phone from Clark's hand. "You're rapidly becoming the houseguest that wouldn't leave, Dad."

"I apologize for the intrusion. Your partner seems a little frustrated, Lex."

Lionel sounded distinctly amused, and Clark gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. Lex hastily glanced about for the fire extinguisher. It was standing reassuringly close by. "My partner isn't frustrated," Lex said pleasantly. "My partner is pissed off." He guided Clark's hand to the extinguisher, and saw Clark relax visibly.

"Thank you for the clarification. I received a visit from Eli a few minutes ago."

"It really isn't necessary to keep me apprised of your social engagements."

"I'll assume that was an attempt at humor. He tells me that our meeting tomorrow morning has been cancelled."

Lex sighed. "Not to my knowledge." He regarded Clark with raised eyebrows.

Clark pinched his eyes shut even tighter, clearly fuming.

"I thought as much. You've acquired quite the little army of protectors, Lex."

"I think it's more accurate to say they've acquired me. Trifle with their protective natures at your peril."

"I wouldn't dream of it. However, in the interests of our alliance, I suggest that you tell them to restrain themselves."

"I'll assume that was an attempt at humor."

"Eli mentioned some issues we need to discuss, Lex."

"My amazement exceeds all bounds. I'll see you in the morning." Lex hung up and regarded Clark in silence for a very long second.

"For God's sake," Clark said without opening his eyes. "Stay away from that sadist."

Lex felt the phone slip from his fingers. "I'm not—"

"Isn't that what you said to me?"

"That's what I said." Lex sighed. Clark really needed to learn how to embrace the concept of hypocrisy. "My father doesn't represent an immediate threat to me." Lex wondered briefly who he was trying to convince.

"He's ripping you apart." Clark voice started to wobble. "He likes ripping you apart."

Lex draped an arm around Clark's shoulders and pulled him closer, cursing his weakness. He should
never have told Clark about Julian. "I don't rip that easily. Breathe, Clark."

Clark opened his eyes carefully and blinked a couple times before turning fiery eyes toward Lex. "I won't just sit here and let him hurt you."

Lex pulled Clark close. "You're not taking my father on. This is non--"

"I took your father on the day I met you. I just didn't know it." Without warning, Clark took Lex by the shoulders and pushed him down onto the bed, pinning his arms. Lex watched him, going painfully hard as Clark pressed Lex's wrists into the mattress. God, he loved this. He loved Clark like this. Clark bent low over Lex, so close that his hair brushed Lex's forehead. "Now I know it," he whispered. "And we're in this together, Lex. For all of it. Whatever it is."

Lex found part of his voice. "I see. The junior partner is staging a takeover of the moves division."

Clark kissed him. "The junior partner has always been in charge of moves. You know why?"

"Because the senior partner's moves suck?" Lex managed to rasp.

"Normal. I'm on it." He peeled off his t-shirt and tossed it aside, only to be pounced on and pinned again by a stark naked Clark Kent. Lex suppressed a gasp, staring up him. Good God, the boy could get naked fast these days. He managed to restrain a remark, borne of sheer perversity, that normal boyfriends did not engage in supersonic stripping. "Are we on a schedule?"

Clark's only answer was a deep kiss, and Lex forced himself to relax under the power of it, under the power of Clark's grip on his wrists. It crossed Lex's mind that if Clark ever wanted to make Lex do something he didn't want to do, there wouldn't be a damn thing Lex could do about it. He found himself remarkably unconcerned by the thought. He pulled his mouth away. "Fuck me," he said hoarsely.

"Hold your horses," Clark muttered, pressing lips and tongue down Lex's chest.

"Fuck me now."

Clark uttered something that sounded suspiciously like a giggle, which was definitely not the effect Lex had been going for. "What's the rush?" Clark murmured in his ear. "You have some other date lined up?"

Lex snorted, relaxing despite himself. "Yeah, that must be it."

"They're going to be waiting a long time." Clark swung one long leg around so he was kneeling beside Lex, then gently rolled Lex onto his stomach.

Lex pulled a pillow closer and rested his cheek against it. "They may storm the place." He heard Clark open the bottle of oil. Well, this was new.

"Good luck with that. You're all mine tonight." Clark straddled Lex and sank oiled hands into the knotted muscles of Lex's shoulders. Lex nearly cried out in surprise and relief. As if sensing it, Clark stopped and leaned down to look into Lex's face, his hair falling against Lex's forehead. "Okay?" he whispered.

Clark kissed him and started moving again, his fingers finding every twist and strain, every injury Lex's mind had inflicted on himself for the past month.

"Oh, God," Lex said faintly.

"If it's too much, tell me." Clark's voice sounded very far away.

"Not. Too. Much. Where the hell did you learn this?"

"From you," Clark said in voice that sounded more like a purr than anything else. "Am I getting it right?"

"From me?" Lex could barely hear himself. "Damn, I'm good."

Clark's chuckle rumbled through his hands as they worked their way down from Lex's shoulders to his spine, between his shoulder blades, and Lex felt himself melting into the mattress. "You are. You're good." Clark's thumbs slid deeper, and Lex drew a sharp breath. "You're the best man I know."

Ah. So this was Clark's idea of brainwashing. It was fiendishly clever. Lex doubted that even he could resist it, as long as he didn't think about anything but normal boyfriends. Lex let his eyes drift shut and nature take its course. Normal boyfriends…

"I believe in you."

Oh, God, Clark.

"No, don't tighten up like that." Clark was coating his hands with more oil. "I want you nice and loose and limber, for all the things I've been thinking about doing to you all day."

Well, damn, that was highly motivating. Well played, Jiminy.

"All day, all I wanted—"

"Between punching bad guys in the face?" Lex managed to mutter into the pillow.

Clark made a rude noise and slid his hands further down Lex's slick back. "Between the punching, yeah. I'd punch Karloff and think 'damn, I want to suck Lex until he starts yelling about beautiful alien princes again,' and then I'd punch Whitney and think 'damn, I want to fuck Lex until he walks funny,' because, you know, that's how us spacemen think about normal boyfriend stuff. Get with the program, dumbass."

"Sorry," Lex breathed. "Tell me—" He gasped as Clark's fingers probed deeply into the muscles of his lower back.

Clark instantly eased back. "Sorry," he whispered tenderly. He bent over to press his lips to Lex's spine. "Are you okay?"

"Don't stop."

"Lex, are you okay?"

"Of course I am," Lex mumbled. "Get back to it, slugger."
Clark sighed in obvious exasperation, but worked his fingers into the tight places with unspeakable gentleness.

"Clark," Lex growled.

"No front seat driving." Clark sounded smug, now. Oh, he was getting too good at this. If such a thing was possible. "Now what was I saying?"

"All the things you're going to do to me, if I don't do them to you first."

"You're not doing anything to me, mastermind. I'm in charge of moves, and you're in charge of lying there and taking it." Clark's fingers slowly worked their way through the knots at the base of Lex's spine.

Lex considered the possibility that passivity had, in certain situations involving massage oil and beautiful alien princes, perquisites previously unconsidered, and stored the thought away for later consideration. "Oh, God," he breathed, as a muscle twitched rebelliously and let go. "Clark—"

"Shhh." Clark's hands slid down to Lex's ass, kneading his way closer to what was obviously the objective of this rather protracted campaign. His finger slipped inside Lex, so gentle, so warm, that Lex let out something he refused to describe as a whimper. Clark leaned down to kiss him, his finger pressing deeper, pushing against him, stretching him, stroking his prostate until Lex cried out and slammed his hand against the bed.

"Clark!"

"Lex?" Clark kissed him again, slipping in another finger, starting the whole, fucking, maddening thing all over again, until Lex gave up.

"Please," he rasped into the pillowcase.

"Please what?" Clark had the gall to sound innocent. *Innocent.*

"*Please fuck me.*"

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

"*Fuck. Me. Now. Smartass.*"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'll just do this to you all night."


"Now that's just rude."

Lex could hear the suppressed laughter in that voice and felt Clark slowly draw his fingers out of him. He let out a long, slow breath. "Clark—"

Clark moved before he could say another word, and *God* did that boy know how to move. Just enough, just hard enough, just deep enough, just long enough, just fast enough, and Lex knew it was because Clark had to be careful. Careful not to rip his human lover to shreds. He'd learned exactly how much Lex could take before it was too much; and how much Clark could take before he'd lose control. Lex wondered if Clark's eyes were shut, or if he'd start to feel the heat on his back; wondered if those hands that could bend steel would bruise his wrists or break them.

Neither. It would be neither. Because Clark was always careful, his beautiful boy was always so
careful; they’d played harder than this and Lex had come through it with barely a bruise, because Clark loved him.

Clark loved him.

He was babbling again, of course. Something about flying and harder and deeper, about eyes of flame and springs of stars. God help him if Clark ever made good on his threat to record his coital blank verse; he'd never live it down. Clark came, keening Lex's name in his ear, and something about how beautiful Lex was, and Lex could feel every inch of him, still moving, more gently now, as if he knew that Lex couldn't take much more, even though Clark could give all night.

Clark rolled them onto their sides and slipped one hand down Lex's belly to take Lex's weeping dick gently in one hand, stroking it until Lex shouted something completely unintelligible and came, unable to stop his body from bucking until Clark let go of his dick and wrapped his arm around Lex's waist, holding Lex against him.

They lay together, breathing hard, Clark nuzzling Lex and murmuring things like he'd love Lex forever, and want Lex forever, and that he wanted to get old with Lex and nothing could stop them if that's what they wanted.

And Lex kissed him, and told him that he'd love Clark forever, too, and knew that soon Clark's I'll love you forever would end, and getting old with Lex would be no more than a bitter memory.
"I've never seen a child so attached to a baby." Pamela's voice was weak, tired, and Martha tried to convince herself that it just meant that it was the end of a long day, and nothing else. "Alexander wanted to do everything. Feed him, diaper him, hold him. He could always get Julian to stop crying, even when Lillian or I couldn't. Lillian was thrilled; she'd been concerned that Alexander would be jealous."

Martha cocked her head, holding the phone against her shoulder as she poured her coffee. "That wouldn't have been unusual."

"Of course not. And it's what Lionel expected. What he wanted."

Martha slammed the pot back into the coffeemaker. "He wanted Lex to be jealous of Julian?"

"He wanted his sons to be devoted to him, not to each other."

Martha sank into her chair at the kitchen table. "That is…it is…" She sighed. "I'm running out of words for him."

"Start making up your own. You should have seen his face when he watched Alexander hold Julian, Martha. It was Old Testament wrath of God, let me tell you."

"Did he ever say anything?"

"The usual swill. He asked Lillian if this was how she intended to raise Alexander to manhood. She said she absolutely intended that her sons should care about each other, and if that made them less manly, then Lionel's definition of 'manly' required revision."

"Oh!" Martha couldn't help laughing. "Good for you, Lillian. I wish I'd known her better."

"So do I," Pamela said softly. "We'd have had some times, Martha, the three of us." She cleared her throat. "I wasn't in Julian's room that night; I was in Lillian's. Lionel's pet physician, and I use the term loosely, was trying to dose Lillian into oblivion again, and I was getting between them. We were both making a lot of noise, and I doubt we'd have heard Air Force One landing. But evidently, that's when it happened."

"Was Lionel in Lillian's room?"

"No. Which I confess struck me as odd at the time."

Martha felt a chill touch her shoulder blades. "Pamela—"

"A few minutes after Dr. Chambers left to complain to Lionel, we heard Alexander screaming. We ran to Julian's room. Alexander was kneeling in Julian's crib, holding Julian in his arms, screaming at him to wake up. Lillian collapsed."

"Oh, dear Christ."

"I took Julian from him, and it wasn't easy; he was crying and promising Julian he could have all his toys if he would just wake up. Julian had no pulse, and he wasn't breathing. He was blue around the mouth."

"Pamela, that's—"
"I laid Julian on the floor and started doing mouth-to-mouth and CPR. Alexander was still kneeling inside the crib, begging me to help Julian. That's when Lionel showed up with Dr. Chambers."

"What did he do?" Martha whispered.

"He told Chambers to take over. And then he turned to Alexander and shouted at him 'What did you do? Haven't I told you over and over not to pick him up? What have you done?' He hauled him out of the crib, and dumped him on the floor."

Martha could hear the tears in Pamela's voice; she could feel them on her own face. Lex. Oh, God, if she'd known that, she'd have scratched Lionel Luthor's eyes out with a broken wine glass. She would have. She would.

"Still with me?" Pamela's voice was very quiet.

"Yes," Martha said, wiping away tears.

"No one was seeing to Lillian, so I went to her and managed to get her sitting up. She was hysterical. I called to Lex to come to us, but Lionel stopped him. He said 'Let him see what he's done. Let him see what happens when he doesn't listen to me.'"

Conditioned response. Conditioned response. Martha couldn't say anything.

"It was then that Eli showed up."

"Eli?"

"We were all going to the christening the next day. Eli was going to bodyguard Lillian, so he'd been sleeping downstairs in the servants' quarters. He grabbed Alexander and brought him to me, then picked up Lillian and carried her back to her room. I gave her a mild sedative. Pamela paused. "Chambers pronounced fifteen minutes later."

"I'm...I'm so sorry, Pamela."

Pamela sighed. "I don't think Alexander ever fully recovered from that night. I know Lillian didn't."

"And Lionel?"

"Was a pillar of strength," Pamela said, in a voice so full of venom that Martha flinched. "You have to admire a man who can attend a Board meeting the day after his two-month-old son dies."

"And the coroner said it was SIDS?"

"The coroner said what Chambers told him to say."

Martha stiffened. "But the autopsy—"

"There was none."

"Pamela, that's required by law, you can't just—"

"Have you forgotten who we're talking about?"

Martha leaned on the table, feeling like she'd run a marathon. "No. No, I haven't."

"I was no forensic pathologist, Martha. Or a pediatrician, for that matter. But my med school was
just as prestigious as Chambers'. I knew my stuff. And if I'd had to testify in a court of law, I'd say that child was suffocated."

Martha leaned her head on her hand.

"Do you believe in an afterlife, Martha?"

"Yes," Martha said thickly. "I do."

"I thought you would." Pamela's voice went ugly. "I wonder if Lionel does."

***

"How do you do it?" Pete whispered in Chloe's ear. "How do you talk me into sneaking around these creepy places in the dark? Is it some kind of girl-whammy or—"

Chloe grimaced and shoved him away, her back pressed to the equipment shed she was certain was infested with black widows and recluse spiders. It would be just her luck. "Quiet," she hissed. "Just because it's dark doesn't mean Cole isn't here." Glancing about at the dilapidated outbuildings, she saw no sign of life. Rusting equipment and oil drums littered the ground, illuminated by a pale moon. Cole hadn't had steady work in years, but things must have been bad for him long before that to turn this place into the Metropolis City Dump.

"The sheriff's been out here. The newspapers have been out here. Even Max has been out here, and—"

Chloe swung around to look at him, surprised. "Who told you Max was out here?"

Pete looked smug. "I saw him report to Lugosi when he got back to school, when we were all piling into our cars."

"And?"

Pete shrugged. "He handed him a W-2, said Cole's place should be condemned by the Health Department, Lugosi gave him The Look, and that was it. Chloe, what is with the Eddie Cole obsession? What does he have to do with anything?"

"It's a hunch," Chloe said archly. "Reporters get hunches."

"Reporters get arrested and sent to Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, and their friends get sent to Beat You Twice a Day Military Academy."

"Wuss. Don't you get it? Whitney was talking about Clark's crash. How the hell would he know about that?"

"He was drunk."

"And being drunk, what, gives him visions of the past or something?"

"He was drunk, Chloe. That's it. He's a drunk who may or may not have been working over at Lionel Luthor's looney tank, depending on whether he was lying to Lana or not."

"And since when does Whitney Fordman drink gin? Since when does he know how to fly a plane?"

"You think Eddie Cole taught him how to fly his plane and drink gin?"
"Do you have a better theory?"

"Sure. My theory is it's better to go home and watch TV then to get shot for trespassing."

Chloe suppressed her annoyance and lowered her voice. "My theory is that Eddie Cole was crop dusting when the meteor shower hit, and he saw Bessie. Now are you going to come with me, or hide here with the rest of the arachnids?"

Before she could take a step into the open, a strong hand clapped across her mouth and she was dragged down to her knees in the shadows. A frantic glance in Pete's direction told her that he was getting the same treatment; in any other situation, she would have paid cash money to see Pete with his mouth sealed shut, but this wasn't her idea of entertainment.

Before she could even think about struggling, a familiar voice spoke in her ear, pitched so low that she could barely hear it. "Miss Sullivan. Mr. Ross. I see I must take your training in hand, or your ghastly surveillance technique will be the death of us all. Kindly keep your voices low. I could have shot you six times in the past five minutes. Blindfolded." Eli removed his hands slowly, ignoring Pete's dirty look, and pointed, his arm close to his body, toward the ramshackle house several yards away.

At first, Chloe saw nothing; but as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she saw someone pacing back and forth past the windows. A man. "There's someone in there," she whispered in as tiny a whisper as she could manage.

"Cole?" Pete breathed.

"No. It is Mr. Fordman. I followed him here from his house." Eli paused, giving Pete a sidewise glance. "Miss Lang is with him. You are fortunate indeed that he is distracted, and did not hear you shouting so that my uncle's eucalyptus trees on the Golan Heights could hear you."

"I was not—"

"They are very sensitive, the eucalyptus trees."

"Why is Whitney here?" Chloe asked softly, deciding to cut the lecture on horticulture short.

"Undetermined. But it would appear that he is meeting someone."

"Now how the hell do you know that?" Pete demanded in an undertone.

Eli pointed again, this time toward the woods along the lane. Chloe turned to look, then froze. Something was moving among the trees, something that glowed a neon green. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman; the outline of the form was broken, not by the trees around it, but by black space, if there were parts missing, parts that shifted as the figure strode nearer and nearer to the house.

"What—" Pete choked. "Who—"

Eli made a furious gesture across his throat as the figure stepped out of the trees and strode with the confidence of familiarity toward the house. Chloe stared, hands over her mouth (just in case), as whoever-or-whatever walked up to the door and through it. It took her a full second to realize that the door was closed. It had walked through the door itself.

Oh, this day just sucked so hard. It had started sucking the minute she'd dropped her toothbrush in the toilet this morning and it had just slid right up the suck-scale ever since. She became dimly aware
that Pete had hunkered down on the ground.

"I do believe in spooks. I do believe in spooks, I do, I do, I do, I do…"

"Silence." Eli adjusted the straps of his backpack. "Stay here."

"What the hell was that?" Pete hissed, raising his head to stare at the house. "Damn it, Lugosi, start talking."

Chloe could see the green glow moving around the house inside, close to the man they had seen before, but she couldn't hear a thing. What she needed was a decent audio surveillance set-up. She bet Lex could get her one. "Mr. Cohen, what—"

Eli took off, and Chloe watched in disbelief as he became no more than a shadow, flitting from one moon-cast shadow to another in perfect silence. "Ohhh," she whispered, as Eli reached the side of the house near the window where they had seen the man and the…whatever. He blended seamlessly into the shadows there. "Oh, he has got to teach me that. Come on."

Pete looked at her warily. "You're whacked," he said calmly. "No, really, you're whacked. We just saw the Human Glow-Worm walk through a fucking wall and you want to get closer?"

"Stay here if you want." Chloe crouched as low as she could and started darting from shadow to shadow, following Eli's path as closely as she could until she reached the wall of the house. She peered into the darkness on either side of her, trying to spot him, but he was nowhere to be seen. She nearly jumped out of her skin as a hand gripped her shoulder.

"Not in forty years have I met a young lady so averse to following simple instructions," Eli breathed in her ear. "Say nothing. Do nothing. The situation is—" Eli paused as a voice rose inside the house.

"Nothing. You got nothing! How the hell could you have nothing, you've been watching them for weeks!"

Chloe knew the voice, but it wasn't Whitney. Damn it, she knew that voice. Who was that?

"Where are the pictures?"

"The old man took my camera and broke it." Whitney sounded scared. He should be scared, being yelled at by some glow-in-the-dark guy in a deserted house in the middle of nowhere. What the hell was he doing here? "It wasn't my fault!"

"Oh, nothing's your fault, is it? You want to stay this way? You like the company you're keeping in your own skull these days?"

Oh, my God. She did know that voice. Groping for her keys in her jacket pocket, she pulled them out and turned on the tiny light on the end of the fob. Even in that light, she could see Eli's furious expression, but she hastily scribbled the word 'HAMILTON' in the dirt at their feet, waited a second to see Eli's grim reaction, and turned it off again.

"He's taking over." The panic in Whitney's voice was palpable. "I don't have much time!"

"Then you'd better get moving. You'd better tell me what I need to know. There's only one man who can help both of us, and only one reason he will. You need to bring me Clark Kent."

Chloe managed not to make a sound, barely. Oh, God, they had to warn Clark. They had to…
"We should just grab Luthor."

"Grab Lionel Luthor. The man with a private army of security guards guarding him night and day. I don't think so. We'll stick with my plan."

"Clark's guarded night and day, too!"

"By one pathetic old man." Chloe could have sworn she heard Eli chuckle. "No one's guarded every minute of every day when they have one bodyguard. Find the hole in their schedule."

"Even if I got him alone, he can take me."

"Don't waste my time. I've given what you need to bring him down. Do it."

"You don't know that Luthor will help us if we give him Clark. You're guessing."

"You don't want to provoke me right now."

"Just like you were guessing when you told me to kill Cole. It didn't stop him! It only made him stronger! You don't know what the fuck you're talking about!"

"Doctor, no!"

Chloe barely recognized Lana before the screaming started. Whitney's screaming. Unable to restrain herself, she raised herself on her knees and peered over the windowsill. In the split second before Eli yanked her down again, she saw Whitney convulsing like a fish on a line, his chest impaled by Hamilton's glowing green arm. Chloe could see his hand protruding from Whitney's back as portions Hamilton's face, twisted by a grim smile, faded between virulent green and opaque black.

Chloe clutched Eli's arm, her eyes pinched shut, her body curled against the horror.

"I know when Clark will be alone!" Lana was screaming, now. "I know when you can take him, I've seen it!"

Whitney's screaming ended abruptly; a soft thud of a body hitting the floor made Chloe flinch.

"You'd better be right this time, girl, because you have been goddamn useless so far."

"Tomorrow afternoon." Lana was crying. "At his house. There won't be anybody else there."

"There's always someone else there!"

"Not tomorrow afternoon. You'll see. He'll be there alone. I swear."

"We'll see. I want...what the hell is that?"

For one fraction of a second, Chloe's heart skipped; she was certain that this psycho had seen them, heard them, smelled them, for God's sake, who knew? She opened her eyes, but was grabbed from another direction; it was all she could do not to scream.

"There's a chopper coming," Pete hissed in her ear. "It's got fucking search lights on it, and since the only people around here who own choppers are named Luthor, maybe we should get the hell out of here so we don't, you know, die?"

Chloe listened, heard the rotors, and shot a wild look over her shoulder. She could see the helicopter, its brilliant lights swiveling this way and that as they swept the ground, searching for God
knew what. She whirled toward Eli, who — goddamn it, he was not sitting there with binoculars looking at this black monster thing in the sky that was coming their way very, very fast. He was not. Didn't they have enough to deal with? "Mr. Cohen," she snapped, almost relieved at the sound of the rotors, because, damn, all that whispering did not come naturally, "Don't you think it's time to go?"

"Dr. Hamilton appears to think so," Eli said calmly, jerking his head in the direction of the lane, where Chloe managed to spot Dr. Glow-Be-Gone moving through the trees very fast indeed. Whitney was staggering down the lane, leaning heavily on Lana. "Well. This I do not see every day. An Apache helicopter, with none of the requisite registration numbers, carrying a generous complement of Hellfire missiles."

"Missiles?" Chloe fairly shrieked, leaping to her feet.

"Oh, relax, Chloe. It's probably just a training flight out of McConnell." Pete actually looked relieved. "At least it's not Karloff or Asshole Senior."

"I should make no rash assumptions, Mr. Ross." Eli put away his binoculars and slung his backpack over his shoulder. "In fact, I should run. " Eli took off in the opposite direction from Hamilton, Whitney and Lana, and plunged into the woods at the side of the house, moving so quickly that Chloe and Pete had trouble keeping up with him.

"Why are we running?" Pete panted, obviously annoyed.

"Why would a fully armed military attack helicopter be operating with search lights and no tail numbers on a training flight?" Eli returned rather testily.

"I give up. When?"

"When it is not a military attack helicopter on a training flight. Do not be obtuse, Mr. Ross."

"Why the search lights, then?" The sound of automatic weapons fire from a short distance away made Pete yelp and run faster.

"Night vision equipment is so expensive," Eli said dryly, pulling both Pete and Chloe into a shallow gully that offered shelter from both the chopper and the house. "And lights are so festive, yes? They give the aircraft that little something when one is attempting to hunt someone down and slaughter them like a mad dog."

Chloe sat with her knees drawn to her chest, trying not to let her teeth chatter. "Whitney. Lana." Oh, God, let them run fast, let them hide, let them get away from this nightmare.

"Or our Technicolor friend, Dr. Hamilton. It is difficult to know whom the target is when one does not know who is shooting."

"Oh, come on!" Pete snapped. "The only people around here who could pull this off are Luthor and his—"

A series of high-pitched whines concussed the air, causing the treetops to flail wildly.

"Down." Eli forced them both to the ground. "Close your eyes, cover your ears and open your mouths."

Chloe wanted so badly to say something snarky about that, but her brain seemed disconnected from her mouth, and in the next second a world of noise and white blindness and heat sent her rolling in a
small ball to the bottom of the gully.

***

"Can't sleep?" Martha's arms went around him, and Jonathan sighed in relief and turned to her, relishing her warmth.

"No. I can't get that damn phone call out of my head."

"Try to think of something pleasant."

"I've tried that," Jonathan murmured in her ear. "Something pleasant turned me down."

"You've had enough excitement for one day, mister," Martha said tartly, but he could see she was fighting a smile. "Pleasant and otherwise."

Jonathan snorted and rested his head on her shoulder, trying to drop off, but it was no use. That voice – those voices – rang as clearly in his head as if they were in the room with him. "Martha," he said quietly. "It wasn't just a crank call, was it?"

"I want you to sleep."

"I want you to tell me the truth."

Martha pulled her gaze from the ceiling to look him in the eye. "I don't think so."

"That memory transfer mad scientist crap of Luthor's you were telling me about. Eddie is…in Whitney's head?"

"Probably." Martha took his hand between both of hers.

"And what he said about…the woodpile?"

"It may be true, Jonathan."

Jonathan sighed. "I didn't like the son of a bitch, but I wouldn't wish that on him."

"I know you wouldn't."

Jonathan studied her. "I don't suppose you and Pamela have figured out who killed him."

Martha grimaced. "This is a really goddawful conversation to be having in the middle of the night, even for a woman with a chariot."

"Come on, Boudicca, let's hear it."

"It's not that much of a mystery," Martha said gently.

Jonathan's mind rebelled at the idea. "Good God, Martha, he's just a boy."

"Whitney's not in his right mind, Jonathan. Lord only knows what he was thinking. But if that body is ever found, Ethan is going to have questions for him. It doesn't look good."

"This could not come at a worse time for that family."

"Christ, Martha, is there anyone the Luthors haven't fucked over?"

Martha regarded him with raised eyebrows.
Jonathan scowled. "You know I meant Lionel and the science experiment."

"Lex's name is still Luthor."

"Well, his name may be Luthor, but he's no more Lionel Luthor's son than I am."

Martha laughed softly and drew him closer. "Tell me whose son he is."

"You know perfectly well whose son he is," Jonathan said softly, kissing her. "And if you hadn't fed him that damn chicken soup, it would never have happened."

***

Clark became vaguely aware that his phone was ringing at around 3:30 in the morning, and swore at it.

"Normal boyfriends," Lex murmured sleepily in his ear. "No trauma until sunrise."

"It might be Mom," Clark muttered, groping in his jeans, still lying inside out on the floor. He found the phone and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Don't hang up."

Clark's eyes flew open. He opened his mouth to say something obscene, then remembered that Lex had had too few moments of peace as it was. "You have the wrong number."

"You're in danger! Hamilton's gone completely insane, and—"

Clark turned off the phone and dropped it, draping his arms around Lex.

Lex was silent for all of two seconds. "What did he want?"

"Wrong number."

"Clark. What did Karloff want?"

Aw, shit. "The usual. To warn me that I'm in terrible danger. How did you know it was him?"

"From the look on your face," Lex said softly. "What else did he say?"

"Something about Hamilton going insane. Like he wasn't already. What's he up to?"

"Something sadistic and overcomplicated, I imagine. I'll get you a new phone."

"So you're not worried."

Lex chuckled and stroked Clark's hair. "That's your main concern?"

"You're always my main concern."

Lex's face softened; he leaned over and kissed Clark gently.

"Lex," Clark murmured. "You know you can tell me anything, right?"

Lex swallowed. "Normal boyfriends."

"Please, Lex. Talk to me. You said—"
Lex rolled on top of Clark, his kisses becoming more insistent, his hands becoming more demanding, and Clark's heart sank. Looked like Lex would be hating his guts after all.

***

Eli flipped his cell phone shut. "Ms. Teskey tells me that all is quiet at Alexander's house."

Martha let loose the breath she'd been holding. "Thank God."

"It was…it was like a war zone," Chloe said dazedly.

Martha curled her hands around Chloe's and lifted her cup of chamomile tea to her lips. "Drink."

"Never heard anything so loud," Pete muttered. "And there was nothing left. Everything on Cole's property, just burned to the ground."

Martha refilled his cup of tea, trying not to let her shaking hands show. Attack helicopters. This was not something Boudicca could handle.

"Very effective," Eli said gently, taking the tea pot from Martha and drawing her a chair. "Please sit down, Martha."

"I'm fine." Martha sat down anyway.

"There is no 'fine' here tonight."

Martha glanced at Jonathan, who was busy scribbling in his notebook. "Jonathan, what on earth are you doing?"

"Taking notes." Jonathan shot Eli a look. "An Apache with no tail numbers?"

"And Hellfire missiles," Eli added, looking amused. "You are writing a book, Jonathan?"

"A comic book."

"I can think of no expression of creativity more suited to this situation."

"Will you two please be serious for two minutes?" Martha slapped her hand on the kitchen table, wincing when both Pete and Chloe jumped. "Do your parents have any idea where you are?"

"We, uh, told them we were spending the night here, hanging with Clark," Pete said, looking more than a little sheepish. "Of course, we wouldn't have had to do that if spy chick here hadn't dragged me—"

"I had a hunch," Chloe said, all determined defiance. "And I was right."

"What right? The only connection I saw was between Grand Dragon Fordman and the Man-Sized Glow Worm."

Jonathan sighed, scribbling away. "It really does write itself."

Martha snatched the pen from his hand. "Jonathan Kent! In case you've forgotten, there are two children missing out there."

Jonathan grimaced and rubbed his eyes. "All right, all right. I'm barely awake here. Give me a second."
"They got away," Chloe said hopefully. "I mean, they were pretty far down the lane when…” She trailed off and bit her lip. "I wish I hadn't been so bitchy to Lana when she came to me. If I'd known all the trouble she was in…." Chloe's eyes filled and she blinked rapidly, folding her arms across her chest.

Pete stared out the window. "They were shooting at them from the copter."

"As soon as it gets light enough, we'll run the roads up there and see if we can find them," Jonathan said quietly. "They probably took cover in the woods, and if I were them, I'd still be hiding."

"Someone closer to Eddie Cole's place than we are must have heard the explosions," Martha said wearily, stealing Jonathan's cup of coffee. "Someone must have called Ethan. He's probably out there right now."

Eli snorted, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "The sheriff has been so effective dealing with such things in the past, yes? Glowing green men and Hellfire missiles should be nothing."

"Chloe, the bed upstairs in the guestroom is made up," Martha cut in, silencing Eli with a look. "Pete, you can have Clark's room."

"Sounds great, Mrs. K. Thanks." Pete pulled himself out of his seat and wandered up the stairs, yawning.

Chloe watched him go, then returned her gaze to Eli. "You think they're dead, don't you?" she asked in a flat, exhausted voice.

Eli regarded her gravely. "It is possible. It is also possible that they survived. Dr. Hamilton may have been the intended target."

"Eli. Enough," Martha said firmly, guiding Chloe out of her chair and toward the stairs.

"This is what it's been like for you, hasn't it?" Chloe stumbled on a step, and Martha steadied her, leading her up. "Ever since December."

"Pretty much, off and on." Martha made an effort to keep her voice light as she flipped on the light in the guest room.

Chloe stared at her. "I don't know how you do it. I didn't think about what it would really be like. I thought it would be just…you know, an adventure or something. I never thought about people really…dying."

"Nobody's died tonight, sweetie." God willing. Martha put a hand on her shoulder as Chloe sank to sit on the bed. "I'm sure Jonathan's right. Whitney and Lana are probably still hiding in the woods. We'll find them, or the sheriff will."

"Until the next time Karloff or Mr. Luthor goes crazy and decides to blow something up."

Martha knelt in front of her and slipped off her muddy shoes. "You're exhausted, Chloe. You can't see things clearly right now. I want you to try to put this out of your mind and sleep."

"Mrs. Kent. I don't know if I can do this." Chloe's voice broke, and Martha sat beside her and put an arm about her shoulders. "Mr. Cohen talks all the time about being soldiers…"

"Eli Cohen talks too much," Martha said tartly. She gentled her voice. "You're not a soldier, Chloe. And no one expects you to be. Do you hear me?"
Chloe looked at her with tears in her eyes. "But Clark needs us."

"Clark needs your friendship, not your combat skills. And that goes for Pete, too; I don't care how tough he thinks he is."

Chloe actually smiled, evidently amused at the idea of Pete being tough. "I guess I'm not as tough as I thought I was, either."

"Oh, honey," Martha said wryly. "You never find out how tough you are until you're sure you aren't."

***

Clark rolled over, groping for Lex, but found nothing but pleasantly warm sheets. Sighing, he forced his eyes open. Dawn's first light was filling the room; the clock read 5:50. Listening carefully, Clark could hear the shower running downstairs. Lex's meeting with his father wasn't until ten, but damn if he wasn't up already, getting ready for more goddamn abuse. Fine.

Suddenly and thoroughly angry, Clark swung out of bed and threw his clothes on, then groped under the bed for the laptops. He pulled out Lionel's and pushed it aside impatiently. If what he was looking for had been in there, Lex wouldn't have let him anywhere near the screen. It had to be Karloff's. Clark yanked it from under the bed, staring at it like it was a rattlesnake. It wasn't like Lex was even trying to hide them, for God's sake.

Or maybe he just trusted Clark not to look. Not to go behind his back. Not to break his word.

Aw, God.

No. No, dammit, there was no other way. Clark opened the laptop and turned it on, waiting impatiently as it began to boot up.

***

"My blood pressure is fine," Jonathan hissed, shooing Moira away with one hand and holding onto the phone with the other. "No, still here, Ethan. My doctor thinks she knows something I don't."

"House call this early? That's what I call service."

"Maybe it's what you call service. It's what I call harassment. Damn it, woman, I'm on the phone!"

Martha, passing on her way into the kitchen, smacked him on the side of the head. "Manners," she said, as if she were talking to Clark.

"Yes, Jonathan," Moira said sweetly, securing the cuff around his arm. "Manners."

Ethan's laugh grated in Jonathan's ear. "Sounds like you've got your hands full."

"You could say that." Jonathan gave Moira his dirtiest look and then decided to ignore the she-Eli.

"You seriously didn't hear anything?"

"Not a damn thing. Slept right through it. What caused it? Did Eddie—"

"Bad news there," Ethan's tone sobered abruptly. "We found some remains. They've got dog tags, but we can't read them—melted right into the...well, you get the idea."
Jonathan closed his eyes. Chalk up one more life taken by Lionel Luthor. A fucked-up life, but still. "Yeah, he flew in Desert Storm."

"I don’t suppose you still have his brother's number in Metropolis?"

"We probably have it somewhere around here. Damn, Ethan, what happened? Propane tank?" He was getting much too good at lying.

"Jonathan, there is a goddamn hole in the ground where that house used to be. If I didn't know better, I'd say someone came in here and took this place out."

"If you didn't know better."

"There are scattered reports of an unidentified aircraft in the vicinity last night."

"You are kidding me. What are you thinking? One of the boys at McConnell missed the target range or something?"

"God only knows. So you didn't see anything?"

"Nope. No suspicious characters lurking in the bushes?"

"If only my job were that easy. We'll do a sweep, but I doubt there's anything to find. I, um, don't suppose you've heard from your friend Lionel Luthor recently? We haven't been able to reach him."

Jonathan straightened in his chair, ignoring Moira exasperated expression as she pulled off the cuff. "Luthor? No, why? Has he taken up demolition in his spare time?"

"He put in a bid for this place. It's going into foreclosure, you know. Eddie hadn't made his payments in months. Now before you ask what Luthor would want with a dump like this—"

"Maybe he's into other cockroaches."

"—I don't have a clue. Just one of those little details that bug the shit out of me in the middle of the night."

"Well, if you decide to arrest the SOB, let me know so I can laugh myself sick."

Ethan started laughing. "Will do. If you see anything odd up your way, let me know, okay?"

"Absolutely. I'll give you a call as soon as we find that number." Jonathan hung up and sighed, glancing over at Martha. "They found him."

Martha came into the living room and sat down. She didn't say anything.

"Under the woodpile?" Moira asked in an acerbic tone.

"I don't think there was much left of the woodpile or anything else, Moira," Jonathan snapped.

"Those children," Martha said unevenly. "What if—"

"If anyone can find them, it's Eli and Max," Moira said confidently.

"I should be out help—" Jonathan began, then found himself staring at the ceiling as Martha flipped his recliner all the way back.
"I didn't hear that, Jonathan Kent." She stood over him, glaring.

Jonathan glared back, pretending not to hear Moira snicker.

***

"Surprise. I left you some hot water." Lex took the steps two at a time. "I'm thinking we should get over there early and..." He froze on the top step, staring at the figure sitting cross-legged on the floor with an open laptop in front of him.

Clark raised his eyes from the screen; they were wet.

Lex felt the blood drain from his face; his legs were ridiculously heavy as he took the final steps into the room. He felt stark naked, even with boxers on. He stared at Clark for a full ten seconds before he found his voice. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Done." Clark's voice wobbled as he snapped the laptop shut. "I'm done. You can have it back. I've read everything."

Lex groped for words. "You went behind my back."

Clark swallowed. "I know. I'm sorry. But you—"

"I don't want to hear it." Lex swung away, toward the wardrobe. "I have a meeting to prepare for, so if you'll excuse me—"

Something flew past his ear, and Lex gasped, whirling toward the sound of an impact. The laptop was imbedded several inches deep in the plaster of the wall beside the wardrobe; it quivered there as if it were as shocked as Lex was. Lex turned back to Clark; he was on his feet, all flushed face and fiery eyes. It was the first time Clark had ever looked like an alien to him.

"You asshole." Clark's voice shook. "You stupid asshole. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did tell you," Lex said coldly. "But if you're referring to the details in Karloff's little journal—"

"The details? Jesus Christ, Lex! You're getting details from Karloff?"

"I assure you, they're correct in every respect. I am, after all, his source."

"You're lying. You're even lying to yourself. I can't believe you fucking did this. You put all of us through hell. We've been scared to death for you for weeks because you wouldn't fucking talk to us, and it's all—"

"You should be scared." Lex felt himself smile, and knew that control was no longer an option. "Now you know what I'm capable of. Now you all know what my father has known since I was seven years old."

Clark stared at him, clearly aghast.

Lex smiled some more. "Can you imagine, Clark? I always thought it was an accident. Until Karloff provided me with proof to the contrary. Proof from my own mind. No accident. I'm better than that. I'm a true Luthor prodigy."

Clark drew breath and started again. "Pamela doesn't believe that crap, and she was there. I don't believe it either."
Lex's breath caught in his throat. He stopped smiling. No. Clark wouldn't have done that. Not Pamela. "You talked to Pamela."

Clark looked even angrier. "Yes! I talked to Pamela. Why the hell didn't you?"

Lex had a brief, shocking vision of strangling his boy with eyes of flame. "You broke your word to me. You'd do that to me, to her—"

"What the hell do you think you've been doing to her? She's been up night and day trying to figure out what's wrong, trying to fix it, because she loves you like her own son. Look. I'm sorry I broke my promise, I'm sorry. But you can't expect us to just stand by and watch you self-destruct over some fucking trick of Lionel Luthor's—"

"This has nothing to do with my father. I've told you that before. The fantasy's over, Clark. This is reality. Deal with it."

A blur of dark hair and amber eyes materialized in front of him; angry hands took him by the shoulders and shoved him up against the wall. "Oh, God, I could slug you right now," Clark said, breathless and broken. "How can you be such a genius and such a moron at the same time?"

"I'm sorry if what you read behind my back upset you." Lex took no trouble to conceal his sneer.

Clark shoved him against the wall again. "Don't even go there. It's a lie, Lex. Christ, it's such an obvious lie—"

"And I'll tell you again it isn't. I was there, too, and every action, every word spoken—"

"Not every action. No. That part's a lie, Lex."

"What makes you think so? That I managed to deceive a bunch of naïve hicks into believing I'm a decent human being? Hardly a challenge."

"That's not going to work." Clark shoved him against the wall again for emphasis, but there were tears in his eyes, and Lex was glad. He was glad. And he'd never hated himself more.

Clark locked eyes with him for a moment. "I took a piece of twelve-inch-square plastic wrap from the kitchen—"

"No," Lex snarled, trying, and failing, to break Clark's grip.

"I made certain that everyone was distracted. Then I entered his room. Julian was asleep—"

"Shut up, just shut the fuck up! I know what it says."

"I bent over the side of the crib; the top rail dug into my stomach, but I didn't care. Lowering it would make too much noise. I pressed the plastic over Julian's face—"

"He struggled, and tried to cry, but it didn't last long. I had saved him."

"You fucking bastard." Lex shoved at Clark, and Clark let himself be pushed away. "Do you think I don't have every word of that memorized?" He was breathing too hard and made a desperate, pointless attempt to regain his composure.
"Then you're even more stupid than I thought," Clark said in a fury; God, he sounded like Jonathan. "Taking Karloff's word for anything—"

"Have you forgotten who Karloff is? Those are my memories."

"Memories which you didn't even have until you read this! You still don't have them, do you?"

"It's not uncommon to block memories of a traumatic event. Any competent shrink will—"

"A competent shrink is who sent me here."

Lex swallowed, trying to get his breathing under control.

"How old were you when Julian died?"

Enough of this. Lex turned away and grabbed a shirt from the wardrobe. "You know damn well how old I was."

"How tall were you?"

Startled, Lex turned back to Clark, half in and half out of his shirt. "What?"

Clark stared back at him, his eyes still threatening a wildfire. "How tall were you? Because when I was seven, the top railing of my old crib came up to my neck. Bending over it would have been a neat trick."

Lex froze. No. That had to be wrong. "I must have…stood on something…."

"Strange that with all this detail about the size of the plastic and the timing and the shade of blue—"

"Shut up!"

Clark's voice was wobbling unsteadily. "—that standing on something wouldn't be mentioned."

Lex put on his shirt, mechanically buttoning each button with great care, his mind flitting from one impossibility to another. "I think it would be best if you left now."

"So tell me, Lex. When you were going behind our backs to talk to your father, did he ever tell you whose memories got downloaded into Karloff the second time?"

Lex turned to face Clark very slowly. "This recent and unhealthy obsession with my father you're developing—"

"Did he?" Clark's voice was low and persistent; his expression feral. "Did he tell you about discrete matrices, and how long they stay that way? No, I'll bet he didn't. I'll bet you didn't even ask, did you?"

"What is this thing you have going on with my father, Clark?"

"Because you were all alone, and he had you right where he wanted you." Clark swallowed visibly. "God, Lex, can't you see—"

"I see. I see you're developing a private vendetta with my father that has nothing to do with me and everything to do with your family's history with him."

Clark stared at him blankly.
"Am I just a way to get to my father, Clark?" Lex hurled the snarled, irrational accusation, knowing what it was and not caring, because it would make this stop. It had to fucking stop, because he couldn't stand one more word. "Whose side are you really on? Do you—"

A gust of wind, the sound of shattering glass and the whine of twisted metal silenced him. He found himself staring at the battered French doors that led to the balcony, swinging drunkenly on their broken hinges, and the small blue blur disappearing into the morning sky, while his last words were still on his tongue.

"—really give a damn?" Lex whispered to the damage, sinking to sit on the floor.
"Young man, you are not going anywhere until Eli gets back, and that's final."

Pete stared at Martha Kent in awe. Man, she could go from have-some-tea to warrior woman in two seconds. "But, Mrs. Kent—"

Martha blocked his move toward the kitchen door. "We have no idea where those lunatics are, and until we do, you're staying right where you told your parents you'd be."

"Mrs. Kent, Lana's out there with those lunatics." His voice got a little weird, and he cleared his throat.

Martha's face softened. "I know."

"She could be—"

"Eli will find her."

God, she sounded so sure. "You really trust that guy?"

Martha smiled a little. "Yes. You will, too, when you know him better."

"I don't think so," Pete said sourly. He thought about saying he wouldn't trust Asshole Junior either, but since Mrs. Kent actually liked the guy -- Jesus, who'd have expected that? -- he held off.

"Sit down." Martha pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I couldn't. It's just… I keep thinking about what could happen. Whitney's nuts and I don't know what the hell Hamilton is. They could do anything."

Martha hugged him on her way to the kitchen counter. "Try not to think about that. I know it's hard. But I promise we'll bring her back to you."

Something about the way she said that made his face go hot. "Um…Mrs. Kent, Lana and I aren't…I mean…"

"Of course not, sweetie." Martha sat a piece of cherry pie in front of him, then glanced up, startled, as a gust of wind from the front door ruffled her hair.

Pete craned his neck to see if anything was out front, but there was nothing there. Then he got it. "Oh. Was that who I thought it was?"

"Clark is back," Martha said, frowning. "I wasn't expecting him home so early."

"Where did he go?" Pete asked around a mouthful of pie. Damn, Mrs. K could cook.

"I think he went up to the loft." Martha sighed. "Oh, that's not good. That's not good at all."

***

Clark fairly flew up the steps to the loft, and seizing the end of the sofa with both hands, flung it into the opposite wall and let it topple to the floor. He did that a few more times before he could be sure he wouldn't set the damn barn on fire.
God! Lex Luthor! Why the hell did he have to be in love with Lex Luthor? Lex Luthor was a prick. With issues. A big, bald prick with issues. God damn it!

Clark threw the sofa again and slid down to sit on the floor, panting from sheer aggravation. And of course he'd done it again. He'd run. Well, flew. Same thing. Why did he always run? It was like he was fucking programmed or something. Scared? Run. Pissed off? Run. Hurting? Run. He was a goddamned basket case. He was a basket case who'd just left the guy he wanted to get old with alone to deal with Lionel Luthor's mind-whammying. He'd run out on Lex. And yeah, Lex had said some shitty stuff, but he'd also been right.

Clark pinched his eyes shut. Lex had been right. He'd gone behind Lex's back. Clark had known that before he talked to Mom and Pamela. He'd known it while he'd talked to Mom and Pamela. He'd known it after he'd talked to Mom and Pamela and he'd done it anyway, because he couldn't stand the look of razor blades and pills in Lex's eyes. To let Lex think he'd murdered a baby, to let that bastard father of his do that to him…. God. He'd have been wrong no matter what he'd done. But whose side are you on had still been shitty.

Not that what he'd said had been much better. Oh, hell, they were both pricks with issues. Obviously they were made for each other. Giving the sofa one last kick, Clark fell back to stretch out on the loft floor and closed his eyes, trying to breathe normally, to kill the fire, and to erase the memory of the cold contempt in Lex's face.

***

"The top rail dug into my stomach," Lex said to the ceiling stars, stretched out on his back on the floor. "The top rail dug into my stomach."

The statement hadn't made any impression on him at all. It had seemed entirely plausible in a sea of other plausibilities.

But it wasn't.

He could not have felt the top rail dig into his stomach. He could not even have bent over the rail. It was an anomaly in an otherwise accurate account of that night. What he could remember of it.

An anomaly.

Or a lie. Clark had said it was a lie. Oh, God. Clark.

Lex rolled over onto his stomach, feeling strangely drained, and hauled himself to his feet.

Clark. Lex wandered over to the destroyed doors and stared bleakly out into the sunny morning outside, at the spot in the sky where he'd last seen him. Clark wouldn't come back. Not after this. He turned to stare at the bed. No more normal boyfriends. That letter was all he'd ever have of Clark from now on. His last gift.

"I don't know what to do," Lex said calmly.

The meeting. The meeting with his father.

"I don't know what to do, Clark."

Lex stood silently for a moment, then scooped up the t-shirt and sweat pants he'd been wearing when Clark arrived the night before and put them on. He walked down the stairs slowly, not quite certain where he was going, then moved unsteadily down the hall. He stopped at Pamela's door and froze
there. "I don't know what to do," he whispered. Forcing himself to breathe, he raised his hand and knocked.

The door opened almost immediately, and Teskey's fierce expression actually, for once, silenced Lex completely. Teskey's expression almost immediately turned to puzzlement. "It's early, Alexander."

"Yes," Lex said.

Puzzlement became concern. "Are you all right?"

Lex regarded her dumbly for a second. "Could I see her, please? Just...for a minute."

Teskey regarded him solemnly for a moment, then nodded. "She didn't sleep well. She's drowsy."

"One minute," Lex whispered, and Teskey moved out of his way, watching him with a thoughtful frown. He moved to the side of the bed and slipped into his chair, watching the woman who had wanted to help him grow up struggle to open her eyes. She turned her head to look at him.

"There you are. Seems to me I heard something in the way of raised voices a while ago." Pamela's voice was a raspy whisper; Lex leaned down to hear her.

"Yes," Lex whispered back.

"Your moral compass chirping again?"

Lex closed his eyes. "He's gone."

"Gone?"

"He...I..."

"Ah." Understanding registered in her blue eyes. "He read Karloff's files."

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

Lex struggled to speak for a moment. "Julian. Plastic from the kitchen. He tried to cry and couldn't."

"Oh, Alexander." Lex felt her hand caress his cheek, and he opened his eyes. Pamela looked up at him with so much tenderness that Lex found it difficult to meet her gaze. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"I thought it was proof," Lex whispered.

"It is. But not proof of anything you did."

"I need you to tell me the truth."

"I would never lie to you."

"I didn't kill him."

"No."

"It wasn't an accident."
"No."

"It wasn't SIDS."

"No."

Lex rested his forehead on Pamela's shoulder. "My father," he rasped.

"Your father," Pamela said, draping her arm around his shoulders.

"Clark tried to tell me. I wouldn't believe him. I couldn't believe him."

"You've been getting too close to Lionel, Alexander. He's poison to you. He's poison to your mind."

"Clark's been telling me that for months. I thought I could handle it. I thought I could—"

"Beat him at his own game?"

"That wasn't the plan," Lex whispered. "I wanted—"

"I know. To undo what he had done to Smallville."

"Yes."

"To protect the Kents."

"Yes."

"Both good causes. Which is why involving your father is self-defeating."

"There was no other way."

"Find another way, Alexander. You have to find another way. For you. For Clark."

Lex raised his head, breathing hard. "There is no Clark."

Pamela almost glared. "Nonsense."

"The things I said—"

"I can imagine. So could Clark. He knew how you would react. He did it anyway. For you. That's how much he loves you."

"He told me...forgiveness just goes. It doesn't stop. But that was before—"

"You should listen to that chirping more carefully, Alexander." Pamela's eyes drifted shut, but she was smiling. "He was telling you something. Now go call him."

Lex swallowed. "You don't understand. I told him that—"

"You are being extraordinarily thick, Alexander Joseph Luthor." Pamela opened one eye. "Go call that boy now. And when he forgives you, you can come back here and tell me that I was right. Again." She closed the eye, her smile even deeper. "Now let me have my nap. I'll see you this afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am," Lex murmured, kissing her cheek. "I'll be back."
Numb, Lex rose and moved as quietly as he could to the door, where Teskey was watching him with suspiciously bright eyes. "Come back soon, Alexander," she said softly, gently ushering him through the door.

Lex nodded mutely and left, resisting the urge to look back.

***

Martha watched Clark's lack of reaction to the night's horror story with growing alarm. "Chloe's still sleeping, and Pete is in the kitchen eating pie."

"Pie." Clark barked a harsh laugh that echoed off the loft's rafters. "And Whitney and Lana?"

"We're waiting for Eli to call. Hopefully he'll be able find them."

Clark nodded, his gaze far away. "Should I go look?"

"Clark, Hamilton and Whitney want to turn you over to—"

"I don't think they can catch me hanging a few hundred feet in the air."

"They might see you, sweetheart."

"Lionel Luthor's already seen me. Does it matter?"

Martha put an arm around her son's shoulders, frightened. She doubted the phrase *does it matter* had ever passed Clark's lips before. "Tell me what's happened, Clark."

Clark turned to her with a closed expression that chilled her. "What we all knew would happen. I found Karloff's laptop. I read his journal."

"A journal?" Martha was surprised. "What was he writing about?"

"His memories. I think he was writing them down because they come and go so much." Clark swallowed. "God, Mom, it was horrible. The whole thing. One miserable memory after another. And it was like three people were writing it. Sometimes it sounded like Karloff, and sometimes it sounded like Lex, and sometimes it was...Mr. Luthor."

"It's true, then," Martha whispered. "Some part of Lionel is—"

"It's true. Mom. The things he did to Lex. I thought I knew the worst, but I didn't. Not even close. Over and over again, just...his *games* and his meanness. He never let up, he never let Lex have a minute's peace. Even when Lex was away at school, that bastard found ways to hurt him. I wanted to... And then Julian."

"Pamela was right," Martha said shakily, completely unable to summon a reproof for bad language. She wanted to indulge in some herself. "It was Lionel."

"He...he suffocated his own baby. With a piece of plastic. And then made Lex think he'd killed him because he liked to hold him. Oh, God, Mom. I wanted...I wanted to *kill* him when I read that." A flash of amber lit Clark's eyes.

"No." Martha gave him a little shake. "No, Clark, don't let yourself start thinking that way."

"Don't *you* think that way sometimes?" The challenge in his voice made Martha meet his gaze sternly, and Clark lowered his head.
"Yes." Martha forced the admission from herself. It was easier to deal with out there.

Clark looked up again with an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to—"

"And then I stop, Clark, because that's not who we are. If we go down that road, then we're no better than he is." And most of the time, this litany worked. Most of the time.

Clark leaned back into the sofa with a frustrated expression. "I know."

"Did you tell Lex that you'd read the journal?"

Clark flashed her a bitter smile. "He found me just as I was finishing."

"Oh," Martha sighed in sudden understanding. "He didn't…take it well."

"He hates my guts," Clark said flatly. "I told you and Pamela he would."

"He doesn't hate you, Clark," Martha said gently. "He's angry. There's a difference."

"You didn't hear the things he said." Clark's voice shook. "He asked me…he asked me whose side I was on."

Martha firmly repressed her instinctive response to slap Lex silly and demand to know whose side he was on. "I'm sure he was sorry for that the minute it came out of his mouth, Clark. You know how Lex is when his temper gets the better of him."

"I know. I said shitty stuff to him, too." Clark's eyes brightened and he looked away. "I got so mad. He wouldn't believe me about Julian no matter what I said. I said really shitty stuff, Mom."

"When your father and I had our first fight, I thought I'd never see him again." Martha couldn't help smiling a little. "That was twenty-five years ago."

Clark gave her an uncertain glance. "Do you still fight? I mean, really fight? I don't think I've ever heard you—"

"Oh." Martha laughed a little. "Yes. We still fight, Clark. We're just not as loud as we used to be."

"I don't think I've ever heard you yell like Lex and I did."

"When you were little, we used to fight in the truck. Loudly."

Clark's eyes widened. "In the truck? Why?"

"Because we didn't want our little boy thinking Mom and Dad didn't love each other. Children have trouble making the distinction between anger and not loving even more than adults do."

Clark was laughing, but there were tears in his eyes; he hugged her tightly. "Aw, geez, Mom. You guys are too much."

Martha settled her head on her son's shoulder, relieved. "He'll come to his senses, Clark. Give him some time."

"Do you think I should call him?"

Martha scowled. "No, I most certainly do not. Whose side are you on warranted stern measures. I'm sure he'll call you soon."
Clark bent his head to look at her, smiling affectionately. "Did you make Dad call you, too?"

Martha raised an eyebrow. "I didn't make him do anything, Clark. I would never manipulate your father."

"Uh-huh."

"I just gave him the time he needed to realize how wrong he was."

Clark snorted. "And how he should call you up and tell you how wrong he was?"

"It was very educational."

"I don't think Lex wants to be educated, Mom. I don't think he cares anymore."

Martha raised her head and stroked his hair away from his face, but he only looked older and sadder that way. "I don't believe that. He's been through a lot. He's confused. Try to be patient, Clark."

Clark cast her a skeptical glance. "Were you patient?"

"Of course. I only checked my messages once an hour."

Clark kissed her cheek and buried his face in her hair, and Martha held on to him, trying to tell herself that her son wasn't nearly as grown-up as he seemed.

***

Belle Rêve. Always matters returned to Belle Rêve now. It was significant, and ominous. Its bleak cement exterior and barred and shuttered windows would have confirmed every ugly rumor about the place for a stranger, but Eli required no such assistance. He knew full well what went on here. The den should be blown back to hell, where it belonged. That indeed would be a righteous use of an unmarked attack helicopter, but Eli doubted he should be given the satisfaction of such a sight.

Eli scowled as he watched Whitney park his family's car and walk unsteadily toward the employees' entrance. The parking lot was almost empty. A skeleton staff was on duty, apparently. Eli could see security cameras at the main and employee entrances, but nowhere else. The facility was surrounded by a chain-link fence that a brisk wind might topple if it had the mind, and the gate was secured by a simple five-digit electronic lock.

Amateurs. If there truly were dangerous lunatics inside, the entire environs of suburban Metropolis were in dire danger every moment of every day, for Eli seriously doubted that security within the facility would be any improvement on the exterior.

Eli laid a hand on his car door, but his phone vibrated in his breast pocket. He grimaced; it would be Max, of course. Always Max had magnificent timing. Eli pulled his phone from his pocket. "You have discovered something of significance, yes? For I am certain you would not disturb me otherwise."

"Has anyone ever told you you're a foul-tempered pain in the ass?" Max sounded somewhat at the end of his tether.

"Once. I decapitated the oaf and hung his head from the eaves above his front door. Report."

"She's here, Eli. Somewhere. I finally cornered the gas station attendant on the main drag, and he told me that while Fordman was filling the tank, she bolted out of the car holding a box of some
“Oh, yeah, he remembered real well. Because Fordman took off chasing her on foot, and when he lost her, he came back and peeled out of the station without paying. Evidently that's frowned on in these parts.”

“You amaze me.” It seemed Miss Lang was entertaining second thoughts about her role in the ill-advised abduction attempt; it spoke well for the young lady's intelligence. "Find her.”

Something like sputtering came across the line. "You think I haven't tried? I've been all over this postage stamp of a town – which I'll have you know doesn't even begin to open its doors until seven – and I haven't been able to spot her anywhere.”

"Then you are wasting your time. She would not stay in town. She resides in the countryside, not far from the Kent house.” The Kent house. Ah. Perhaps Miss Lang's thoughts were not so intelligent. "Go to her house at once. I am returning to the Kents. Contact me with any relevant developments.”

"Understood.”

Max was muttering profanities again when Eli hung up on him. Making a mental note to speak to Max about his unprofessional language, Eli slammed his car into gear and pulled a U-turn, heading back toward Smallville.

***

It took Lex a full thirty seconds after turning on his phone to summon the will to dial the Kents' number, and seven attempts before he could actually let it ring. It was beyond absurd. He had survived being abducted, tortured, starved, shot, knifed and enthusiastically encouraged to leap off a skyscraper in the past few months, and here he was afraid – there was no other word for it – to call Clark Kent. He could survive anything, it would seem, except losing Clark. He wondered if Clark would come to the phone. If he would speak to him. If… Lex grit his teeth. The worst had finally happened. He had become a thirteen-year-old girl. This was brutally confirmed when Lex found himself holding his breath as someone answered.

"Hello?”

Whoever it was was in the middle of eating something. It took Lex a couple seconds to recognize the voice. "Pete?”

"A.J.?”

Lex suppressed annoyance at the recurrence of the baffling nickname, but before he could speak again, Pete was off and running.

"Oh, man, you totally missed it. An Apache chopper! Hellfire missiles! A crater half-a-mile wide where Eddie Cole's house used to be!”

"Are you drunk?” Lex snapped. "What the hell are you talking about?”

"Hamilton has totally mutated! Half glow-worm, half ghost, you know?”

"No. No, I don't know, and I seriously doubt you know, either.”
"He and Whitney were arguing about how to hand Clark over to your dad, and so Hamilton shoves his arm right through Whitney! His hand was—"

"What?" Lex's knees gave way; he sat down on the bed hard.

"All like, wriggling on the other side, you know? And Lana told him she'd help—"

"Where's Clark?" Lex rasped.

"But I know she was lying to save Whitney, because she would never—"

"Tell me where Clark is right now."

"And then the chopper comes, and everybody scatters, and Lugosi just called and said that Whitney is okay at Belle Rêve, and Lana is okay somewhere in Smallville, but Max hasn't found her yet. And—"

"Where the fuck is Clark?" Lex shouted into the phone, imagining strangling Pete Ross with his shoelaces.

"Jesus! Calm down. How much coffee have you had, asshole? He's in the loft, talking to his mom about something."

In the loft with Martha. Lex let out the breath that had been strangling his lungs. "I need to talk to him."

"Now? I'm having my breakfast pie."

"Pete," Lex said between clenched teeth, "So help me God, if you don't put Clark on this phone in ten seconds, I'll pull your fucking lungs out through your ears."

"Okay, okay. Jesus."

Lex winced as the receiver rattled on the kitchen table. "CLARK! THERE'S A SIZE ELEVEN ASSHOLE ON THE PHONE FOR YOU!"

Great. Just great. Now Clark would either refuse to come to the phone or take his sweet time—

"Hello?" Clark's voice was unnaturally subdued, strained. It hurt just to hear it.

Lex opened his mouth, shocked that Clark would actually run to the phone, but nothing came out.

"Lex?" Clark's voice sharpened. "Are you okay?"

Was he okay. "Clark," he croaked. Oh, for God's sake, this was pathetic. Lex cleared his throat. "I want you to stay in the house. When will Eli be back?"

"I don't—"

"Christ, my father will be there at ten. What the fuck was I thinking?"

"Lex—"

"I'm coming right over, just stay in the house, and—"

"Lex, I'm okay. Breathe."
"What the hell does Eli think he's doing? I'll contact Max and Moira and get them there to cover—"

"Moira's here already. Are you breathing?"

"I didn't—"

"I'm not hearing breathing yet, Lex. Get with the program."

"Mean it. I didn't mean any of it. Christ. I know whose side you're on. I've always known. It's what I hold on to. It's what keeps me alive."

A gust of breath whispered across the line. "Lex, it's okay. I knew you'd be mad. I just didn't know what else to do, so I—"

"I'm sorry. I know you give a damn." Lex forced himself to breathe. "It was all a lie, Clark, everything I said was a lie."

"Lex. It's okay, I get it. I went behind your back. I'd have been mad, too."

Clark's forgiveness thing did indeed just go and never stop. It was apparently powered by an inexhaustible energy source of an as yet undefined nature, made a habit of plowing through steel walls at will, and was stone blind. "I'm sorry, too. Some of the things I said—"

"They were true."

"Well, yeah, mostly. But still."

Lex could hear the grin in Clark's voice and felt every muscle in his own body go limp. He flopped back on the bed. "I love you." It didn't sound quite so insipid anymore.

"I love you, too."

"Aw, God. God! I'm eating here!" Pete's indignant voice faded into the distance, accompanied by Martha's firm tones.

Lex took another breath, the interruption barely registering on his consciousness. "I didn't hurt him, Clark."

"I know."

"Ever since I can remember, I thought I'd killed him. Maybe I picked him up the wrong way. Maybe I held him the wrong way."

"But you didn't," Clark murmured. "You were a great brother."

"But when I read that thing—"

"You know who that was."

"I thought it was proof, Clark. I thought it was...what the hell was I on?"

"You know that, too."

Lex said nothing, just breathing, only breathing.

"Lex, it has to stop. This...alliance. It's no good. It's killing you."
"I know," Lex whispered. The one plan he'd come up with to save Smallville and protect Clark was a complete failure. Now what? What was left?

A sigh of relief. "Pamela gave me a message to give your dad."

A message. What was she up to now? Why Clark as the messenger? Damn it. Lex's guts twisted at the idea of Clark within a mile of Lionel Luthor. "Pete just told me—"

"I know." Damn that hearing of his. "I won't be alone. Eli will be back before your dad gets here. So will you. My whole family will be here. Nobody's delivering me to your dad today." He sounded too damn brave. Brave was dangerous.

"I don't like this, Clark." Lex was impressed by the extent of his understatement.

"Lex, I'll be the best protected guy on the planet."

Lex knew there was no way in hell he would win this fight today. Not after he'd just been impossibly, astonishingly forgiven by a beautiful alien prince. "Yes. You will. I'm coming armed. Deal with it."

Clark actually chuckled.

"I mean it!"

"I know you do," Clark said tenderly.

Lex firmly tamped down some inconvenient physiological responses to that voice. "Is this message important, Clark?"

"Pamela thinks so. She thinks it will make Lionel leave you alone. At least for a while."

"Leave me alone? That's our priority?"

"Uh, yeah, Lex. Right now, that's our priority."

"Clark, things just got worse."

"They do something else?"

"Stop that. God, you're starting to sound like him. Things just got worse for you."

"I promised Pamela, Lex. It's something we need to do." He paused for a second. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Lex whispered. Damn, he wished he didn't. It would be so much easier.

"Are you still my bastard?"

Lex laughed raggedly into the phone, blinking. "Now and for all time, Clark."

"I need you here."

"I'm on my way."

***

"Is it me, or does he seem a little nervous today?" Jonathan's voice was laced with venomous
Eli glanced toward the windows opening onto the Kents’ front porch to see Lionel pacing past, all set jaw and narrowed eyes. Clark was sitting at the picnic table that he had set up on the far end of the porch for Lionel’s and Lex’s “meetings,” alternately reading one of his textbooks and watching Lionel. "If one insists on arriving before the agreed time, then one should expect these minor annoyances."

"Uh-huh. From the look on one's face, one expects Simon Bar Sinister to blow a gasket. King me." Jonathan leaned back in his recliner with a smirk.

Eli restrained a rare urge to indulge in profanity, glaring at the checkers board. "This game is a child's pastime. It is not a challenge for a grown man."

"You didn't think so before I started kicking your ass."

It occurred to Eli that Moira was quite correct in her assessment: two weeks in the intensive care unit and a week of house arrest had done nothing to render the farmer more pleasant company. Indeed, he had been supremely annoying during every moment of his hospital stay, and had become positively obnoxious since his homecoming. Only Martha had thus far been able to tame this beast. "You have not kicked my ass. Reassess your position. Overconfidence inevitably leads to tactical errors, Jonathan."

Eli slid his man carefully to the next square, only to watch in horror as Jonathan leapfrogged over every one of Eli's men and swept them off the board, cackling. "You said it, Callahan."

"This game is absurd!" Eli snapped, resisting an unbecoming impulse to knock the board to the floor. "It is infantile. It is a game for trained monkeys and the frontally lobotomized."

Jonathan was grinning ear to ear. "Nobody likes a sore loser, Eli."

"But you will never learn a better one, since you are afraid to face me over a chess board."

"Chess," Jonathan said in the tone reserved for the worst of his platitudes, "is for sissies."

Eli was rendered momentarily speechless in his indignation. The game of princes, of generals, of great minds since Persia ruled the western world -- that this Kansas barbarian would impugn the manliness of such a game was beyond belief. He opened his mouth to speak, determined to enlighten the dullard even if it meant raising his voice in Martha Kent's house, but caught the amusement in Jonathan's blue eyes and snorted. "As I said. You fear to face me."

Jonathan made a rude noise and began setting up the board again. The cricket would have said his chain was being pulled. Eli supposed it to be a compliment of the backhanded Jonathan Kent variety. One did not jest so with one's enemies.

As if on cue, a curse and someone wrestling with a latch made both men turn toward the screen door. "Remove your hand from that door, Mr. Luthor," Eli said in a mild tone. "Or I shall remove it from your arm."

Lionel glared at them through the screen. "You can't possibly expect me to stand out here in the cold —"

"It's seventy degrees out there." Martha's tone, however, was decidedly chillier. She descended the stairs, nodding to Eli. Eli nodded in return. So, she had managed to convince the Marines that discretion was the better part of valor. So much the better. The less Lionel Luthor knew about Pete
and Chloe the better.

"It's a real nice day out." Clark's voice was like knives. "Come have a seat, Mr. Luthor."

"A very mild day for late April in this wilderness," Eli agreed, his gaze fixed on the frustration in Lionel's face. Yes. It had grown in the past three weeks. The change in the wind would be a violent one. "Breathe deeply of the fresh air, Mr. Luthor. Enjoy what little time is left to you."

"Don't be absurd. You know perfectly well you aren't going to kill me. Empty threats undermine one's credibility, Eli." Lionel yanked the door open and rested his hand on the door jam, only to leap back as a quivering knife appeared embedded neatly in the wood between two of his fingers. Eli leaned back in his chair, unable to resist a smile as his fingers danced across the handle of the second knife in the breast pocket of his jacket.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "You missed, Callahan."

"I never miss." It was good to throw a knife again. It was even better to throw a knife at Lionel Luthor. Lionel stared at the weapon, silent and white-faced. Yes, let the snake see that this mongoose still had his teeth. "As you see, Mr. Luthor, my credibility remains intact. Close the door."

Lionel let the screen door swing shut, but did not move.

"I'll show you how to use the wood putty later," Jonathan said to Eli, returning his attention to the checkers board. He lowered his voice. "He's right, you know."

Eli couldn't help smiling as he watched Lionel retreat from the door. "Is he?"

"If you keep threatening him and don't do anything—"

"He will cease to take me seriously."

Jonathan shot him a sharp look. "Yeah."

"He will no longer consider me a threat."

"What are you—"

"He will become careless." Eli met Jonathan's gaze.

Jonathan stared back at him, one hand frozen over the checkerboard. "You know," he whispered, "Lex is right. You are one scary son of a bitch, Callahan."

Eli chuckled and rose, touching Jonathan's shoulder as he passed.

"Be careful," Jonathan said under his breath.

"I am a very careful man." Eli moved through the door onto the porch, and assumed his favorite seat on the porch swing, at the other end of the porch from the picnic table.

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Lex slammed the car door shut behind him and started the engine, taking off down the curving wooded drive at a pace that would have sent Jonathan off on one of his patented safe-driving pontifications had he seen it.
He hated this idea. The fact that Pamela's success rate when dealing with Lionel Luthor far exceeded his own did not make him hate it any less. He couldn't imagine anything that would make his father leave him alone, for however brief a time. And the idea of Clark starring in some off-off-Broadway production written by Pamela Jenkins and stage-managed by Eli Cohen made his stomach turn over.

Lex tried to relax, with limited success. Clark wouldn't go too far. Clark Kent, Conscience Emeritus and Officially Sanctioned Voice of Reason, would certainly avoid bloodshed. Provided, of course, that his ridiculous yet endearing ambition to protect Lex from his father didn't prevent his consideration of more important matters. Lex took the last turn in the drive at top speed and immediately slammed on the brakes, gasping, as a slight figure appeared in the center of the road. The Saturn came to a screeching halt just inches short of vehicular homicide, and Lex laid his forehead on the wheel. Destiny was obviously trying to tell him something.

He took a couple shaky breaths and looked up again, only to realize that the idiot hadn't moved. "The hell?" Lex turned off the engine and scrambled out of the car, pausing only to pull the brim of his baseball cap over his eyes. "Are you drunk, insane or both? What kind of epsilon-grade stands —" Lex broke off. "Lana?"

Lana stood staring at him with a blank expression. She had a black eye, a cut lip, no jacket, and was clutching a metal box approximately the size of a shoebox. "I got it away from him. There may be another one, though."

Lex blinked. "Got what away from whom?"

"Whitney," Lana whispered.

Lex stood stock-still for two seconds, absorbing the thought that one of the conspirators in an alleged plot to abduct Clark Kent had just turned herself in at a very inconvenient time and place. Then, sighing, he strode to Lana's side, stripping off his jacket, and put it around her shoulders. "Jesus. Do you need a doctor? Come up to the house." Lex realized what he was saying a little too late and grimaced.

Well, hell, he couldn't leave her standing in the road. Clark would give him seven kinds of Rockwellian hell.

"Have you talked to Chloe today?" Lana refused to budge, turning her head enough to meet his gaze.


"I need your help. We're in trouble. Clark's in trouble."

"Really?" Lex hoped his sarcasm was below detectable levels.

"I tried to find Mr. Cohen, but he's always moving."

"He's a less tempting target that way."

"The other Lex is trying to find him, too."

Well, this was fun. "I don't know what you mean." Lex guided her firmly to the car and forced her to perch on the driver's seat, then yanked open the rear door and started rummaging through vehicular flotsam and jetsam for the first aid kit Jonathan had insisted on giving him. "Did Whitney do this to you?"
Lex felt more than saw Lana turn toward him. "No. No! Whitney would never—"

"We are talking about the same Whitney Fordman who hung Clark up in a field to die, aren't we?"
Lex yanked at the metal box savagely, dragging it from under the front seat. Five minutes alone with
the quarterback, zombie or not, that's all he wanted.

"Whitney didn't do this."

"Uh-huh." Lex knelt in front of her, pulling a small piece of gauze from the box. "Here." He held
the gauze to her bleeding lip and guided her hand to it. "Hold that there. And give me that." He
tried to pull the box out of her lap, but Lana clutched it with her free hand, eyes wide.

"Dr. Hamilton said this could kill Clark."

Lex studied that bruised face for any sign of duplicity, and came up with the same absurd dewy-eyed
innocence that he'd seen in almost every face since his arrival in Smallville. It had to be the water.
Lex sighed. "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

Lana shook her head. "No. I'm all right. Really."

"That's quite a shiner. You need some ice." God, he was starting to sound like Clark. Could dewy-eyed
innocence be far behind? Lex shuddered inwardly.

Lana shot him an impatient look. "You do know there's a mad scientist who used to work for you
who can walk through walls running around, right?"

"I have a passing acquaintance with that fact, yes." The black shame that Eli would force-feed him
for this insanity simply boggled the mind.

"He hates you, Lex."

"I have a passing acquaintance with that fact, too."

"Well, now he hates the other Lex, too."

"There's no other Lex," Lex said curtly, wondering what the hell security was anymore when
Smallville High's head cheerleader knew what went on in LuthorCorp's Biotech Division.

"Lex, I swear I won't say anything. But I've seen him, more than once."

"What makes you think it wasn't me?"

"It wasn't you." Lana spoke quietly. "I knew it wasn't you from the first time I saw him."

Oh, fuck. Lex gave up. "You must an extraordinarily discerning individual." He couldn't keep the
bitterness from his tone. "He has the rest of the world eating out of the palm of his hand."

"I have a little advantage over the rest of the world."

Lex looked up at the edge in Lana's tone, only to see a faint but familiar green glimmer in her eyes.
"Ah. I see." He didn't see at all, but what was the appropriate phrase on such an occasion?
Condolences on your recent mutation? God, he needed Clark. "You're coming to the Kents' with
me and have that eye looked at. I mean...your injured eye."

Lana surprised him with a weak laugh. "I knew what you meant."
Lex blew out a breath. "And then you're going to tell me the story from the beginning."

Lana nodded.

"But first, we're going to see what's in here." Lex managed to pull the metal box away from Lana. It was surprisingly heavy. Lana was stronger than she looked.

Lana rose to her feet as he turned toward the woods. "Please don't open it. If you could have seen the look on his face when he gave it to Whitney—"

"I can imagine."

"Lex—"

"It'll be all right. Pit vipers or incendiary devices aren't Hamilton's style. Just stay here for a minute." Lex carried the box several yards into the woods and set it down on the ground, kneeling beside it.

"If you don't think it's a bomb, why are you taking it so far away?" Lana was standing at the side of the road, her voice rising with anxiety and a touch of exasperation. "And if you do think it's a bomb, why are you opening it?"

"My death wish needs to be walked three times a day." Lex undid the latch and lifted the hinged lid carefully. Even the lid was heavy, and Lex realized that it was lined with lead.

Lead. If they were lucky, this would be just another meteorite, and he'd celebrate with some of Jonathan's cheap American beer, even if it was eight-thirty in the morning.

He lifted the heavy lid gingerly, trying to ignore the fact that even the smallest booby trap could blow his hands off, and stared at the gently gleaming contents.

"Lex?" Lana was coming closer. "What is it?"


"What?"

Lex reached inside, picked up one of the cartridges and held it up to the light, scrutinizing the glowing green bullet at the tip of the jacket, then lifted out what looked like an antique revolver. It was heavy, unwieldy, and obviously modified for use with the ammunition.

Christ Almighty. Yet another possibility he hadn't considered. Clark.

"A gun? But I thought—"

Lex snapped out of it. He tossed the revolver and cartridge back into the box and slammed it shut. "Get in the car, Lana. We're going."

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Sighing, Lionel laid his briefcase on the table and sat down across from Clark. "I suppose you spent the night with Lex?"

"Where I spend the night is none of your business." Clark reined in his temper with difficulty. No wonder Lex had learned how to maintain.
"I was just wondering how he was doing. He seems to have been under a great deal of stress lately."

Clark shot a lethal look at Lionel and said nothing.

Lionel leaned back in his chair, smiling. "Satisfy my curiosity, Clark. If you didn't drive back, how did you get here before I did?"

"I flew," Clark said.

Lionel barked a laugh. "And I suppose you told Lex to be fashionably late for some purpose?"

"He isn't late. You're early. I don't tell Lex what to do."

"Don't you?"

"No. Lex does what he thinks is right."

Lionel smiled. "I see." He leaned forward. "Tell me how you did it, Clark."

Clark regarded Lionel with narrowed eyes, seething. "Did what?"

"Attach yourself to my son. How did you win his trust?"

Clark imagined beating Lionel's head in. "I stopped lying to him."

Lionel laughed as if he truly found the concept amusing. Clark saw Eli shift slightly on the swing, keeping Lionel in a direct line of sight. The bastard might get himself shot if he kept this up. "Ah! Total honesty. Is that the way to my son's heart? Because I have a few—"

"I don't think you give a damn about your son's heart," Clark said in a low voice. "I don't think you know what a heart is."

Lionel leaned forward, speaking in an earnest tone. "You don't like me very much, do you, Clark?"

Clark felt his face flush bright red, and he opened his mouth to tell Lionel Luthor exactly how much he hated his guts. But he shut it again and leaned back. Maintain, damn it, maintain. "I object to you," he said coldly. "I object to intellect without discipline. I object to power without constructive purpose."

A wild cackle of laughter from the living room told Clark that Jonathan was as familiar with the words as he was, but both Eli and Lionel looked puzzled.

"I see," Lionel said softly. "I wasn't aware that you were such a devoté of discipline and constructive purpose."

"I'm trying to be."

"Is Lex a disciple of this creed?"

"You'd have to ask Lex."

"Clark, my son isn't who he appears to be. He's deceiving you."

"Uh-huh." Clark flicked his gaze back to his textbook dismissively. "Whatever."

"Tell me, does this total honesty go both ways? Has Lex told you everything about his past?"
A familiar amber filter began to tint Clark's vision. Lionel Luthor would make really interesting barbecue. "He's told me a few things."

"Did he tell you about...our family tragedy?"

Clark struggled to keep his eyes on the page. Jesus, he was really going to bring it up. How the hell had Pamela known? Why would Lionel talk to him about this now? Just more divide and conquer? "Which one? Your family is one tragedy after another."

"I'm talking about my son Julian's death."

Son of a fucking bitch. Out of the corner of his eye, Clark saw Eli rise to lean against one of the porch posts as if he were merely stretching his legs.

"I have a message for you from Pamela Jenkins," Clark said, lifting his gaze to Lionel's face.

Lionel drew back, clearly startled. "A message?"

"She wanted me to ask you if you were familiar with a genetic disorder called Williams' Syndrome."

Lionel went several shades paler. "I...I don't think—"

"She wanted me to remind you of how often you spoke of having genetically undamaged children to carry on the Luthor name."

"You're not—"

"She wanted me to remind you that she was a damn good doctor who knows a suffocation victim when she sees one."

"What are you saying?" Lionel hissed.

"She wanted me to remind you that you were nowhere to be seen during the estimated time of death, while everyone else in the family was accounted for."

"Pamela Jenkins is—"

"She also wishes me to remind you that an exhumation and autopsy may reveal facts that you would prefer not to come to light."

"My God, are you accusing me—"

"She wanted me to tell you that she has given a sworn deposition to everything she witnessed that night, and placed it in the hands of a trusted friend, who will know what to do with it if this subject is ever broached in Lex's presence again."

Lionel stood up, placed both hands on the table, and loomed over Clark with an expression that made the hair on the back of Clark's neck stand up. He was subliminally aware that Lex's car was pulling up in front of the house, and the sense of relief that the cavalry had arrived got his breathing started again, even if Eli was only a few feet away. Jesus Christ, how had Lex ever stood his ground against this?

Lionel's dark gaze bored through Clark's eyes into the back of his skull. "Boy, if you think you can intimidate me with the ramblings of a morphine-addled bitch, then you don't know Lionel Luthor."

"Oh, I know Lionel Luthor," Clark returned, low and venomous. "I took a piece of twelve-inch-
square plastic wrap from the kitchen. I made certain that everyone was distracted. Then I entered his room. Julian was asleep—"

With something between a roar and a howl, Lionel overturned the picnic table, sending his brief case sliding across the porch floor. Eli crossed the distance from the post to Clark in less than a second, his weapon drawn; Clark could see Lex sprinting across the yard toward him.

Lionel was screaming. Screaming, for God's sake. Like a crazy man. "That is enough! I have taken all the insults and threats any man can take, and this is over!"

Clark looked up at him with a calmness he absolutely did not feel. "Pamela wanted me to tell you to have a nice day."

"You have not played well with others today, Mr. Luthor," Eli said coldly. "You will be leaving now."

Jonathan and Martha appeared in the doorway as Lionel stormed down the steps. "Short meeting today, Luthor?" Jonathan called after him.

Lex planted himself between Lionel and the house, and Clark vaulted over the railing and ran to Lex's side. "Morning, Jiminy." Lex shot Clark a wry look that made Clark grin back at him, even with a crazy Lionel Luthor five feet in front of them.

Lionel whirled to point at Jonathan, ignoring Lex and Clark. "You preach to everyone and anyone who'll listen about fairness and giving people a chance. Earning respect. But if I were to bankrupt myself restoring the pristine beauty of Smallville and treat my son like a god for the rest of his life, it wouldn't be enough for you to give me a chance, would it? A man can change if he wants to, my son says. I know where he learned that, Kent. But it doesn't apply to Lionel Luthor, does it?"

Jonathan gave Luthor a hard look over the tops of his glasses. "You're kidding, right?"

"Alexander. Clark." Eli moved down the porch steps, his weapon trained on Lionel. "Step away from him."

Ignoring Eli, Lionel pointed at Martha wildly. "I told that woman the God's honest truth today, and paid her a simple compliment, and what did I get? A glass of Chardonnay in my face."

"Mr. Luthor," Martha said icily, "You are damn lucky that's all you got. And if you imagine that this is news to anyone here, then you have sadly underestimated this family."

Clark glanced over his shoulder to see his father swing his shotgun up to rest on his shoulder. It was all he could do not to punch Lionel in the face himself. Someday. Oh, God, yes, someday.

"Leave," Lex said flatly. He was starting to look dangerous, and Clark realized that Lex was having some punching thoughts himself. Hopefully those were the only thoughts he was having; Clark could clearly see the x-ray profile of the handgun in the pocket of Lex's jacket.

Eli came to a stop a few feet away, his aim never wavering. "You are not behaving in a manner conducive to your own safety, Mr. Luthor. You will get back in your car now."

Lionel turned to face Lex. "I have pushed my company's resources to the brink of insolvency in order to earn your respect. I have come here every day to work with you, to help you bring about these ill-advised acts of benevolence that you seem to think so necessary — and every day I have endured insults and threats and — and knives. And now this boy—"
"So how's your day been so far, Clark?"

"Great, thanks, Lex."

"—has the unmitigated gall to accuse me of murdering my infant son!" There were actually tears in Lionel's eyes; he paused, panting, his sharp eyes sweeping his audience for reactions.

A couple seconds of silence fell.

"Well. That must have been one hell of a message." Lex shot Clark a sidelong glance.

"Yeah." Clark hesitated, then barreled on. "Julian had something called Williams' Syndrome."

Lex looked at him again, expressionless, but Clark could see the comprehension and misery in his eyes. "I see. A genetic disorder affecting cognitive abilities and fine motor skills, among other things." He turned back to his father. "Scarcely a suitable Luthor heir."

Lionel uttered something like a growl. "Lex. You can't believe this. It's ridiculous. Your brother died of SIDS. There isn't a scrap of evidence or a single witness to indicate otherwise."

"Except you," Lex said softly. "And you've already confessed."

Lionel tried to laugh, shooting a nervous glance at Clark. "I've what?"

"You just couldn't resist, could you? Even the risk of exposing your crimes to the world didn't stop you. Did you simply assume that your matrix would overpower his, and prevent him from revealing your secrets? That was a major miscalculation, Lionel."

Lionel stepped back at the sound of his given name, and Clark tensed in anticipation, but Lex moved too quickly for Clark to stop him, even if he'd wanted to. Lex's fist smashed into Lionel's face and he went down on his back in the grass, bleeding from his nose. Lionel looked up at them, dazed, blood dripping into his beard and onto his collar. Clark managed not to cheer.

"This alliance is dissolved." Lex's voice was glacial. "Don't ever come here again."

Lionel coughed and tried to sit up. "When you have children, you'll understand."

"Mr. Luthor," Clark said quietly, seeing murder in Lex's every muscle, and Eli's finger curl around the trigger. "Shut up and leave."

"He would have been useless. A defective, an outcast for his entire life."

"Not to me." Lex was barely audible.

"He would have suffered, Lex. Don't you understand? It was an act of compassion."

Lex reached down, seized Lionel by the coat lapels, propelled him to his feet and dragged him to his car. Clark and Eli followed them closely.

Lionel staggered along, talking every step of the way. "Lex. Think about what you're doing. The people of Smallville. The cleanup. The mortgages. The school."

Lex rammed Lionel up against the Mercedes. "You're useless. You're defective. You're an outcast. Come near me or mine again and I'll cut your fucking throat."

Whoa. Clark hastily put his arm around Lex's shoulders and pulled him away. "Lex. Enough. He's
"I'm not going anywhere," Lionel snarled.

Lex turned away from Lionel; Clark could feel his struggle for control. "Eli, if he's not in his car in five seconds, blow off his kneecaps."

"It is my pleasure." Eli altered his aim. "It is not what we have discussed, Mr. Luthor, but let us consider it an *aperitif*, yes?"

Cursing, Lionel opened his door and vaulted inside, slamming it behind him. "I made you a promise, Lex. I'm going to keep it."

"I've made you a promise," Lex shot back over his shoulder. "And I'm good with a knife."

Lionel started the car and took off at top speed, nearly wiping out as he made the turn onto the lane. Lex turned and stalked away toward his car.

Clark caught up with him and took him in his arms. "Whoa. Whoa. Easy."

Lex came to a standstill in Clark's embrace, breathing hard. "Clark. I want to kill him. I want to kill him now."

"But you won't." Clark pulled him closer, half afraid he might chase after the bastard. "You're staying here with me."

Lex turned his head to watch Lionel's car disappear into the distance, then rested his head against Clark's. "Yes." He put his arms around Clark's waist. "With you."

Clark tightened his arms around Lex's shoulders and shot a quick look over Lex's shoulder toward the house. Jonathan and Martha were watching them with anxious expressions. "I, uh, think we scared Mom and Dad."

Lex let out a breath he seemed to have been holding. "Jiminy, for future reference: the next time I'm facing off with an enraged lunatic, try not to attract his attention by leaping into the line of fire. It's bad form."

"Uh-huh."

"And no more messages."

"Whatever you say, mastermind."

"Sasha?" Eli's voice was pitched at surveillance volume, and both Clark and Lex lifted their heads to look at him.

"What?" Lex demanded, tension flooding back into his voice.

"Stowaway, or passenger?" Eli flicked a glance in the direction of Lex's car. His weapon was still in his hand.

"Oh." Lex relaxed again. "Passenger." He turned toward the car. "It's all right, Lana. You can come out now."

To Clark's amazement, Lana Lang slowly appeared from behind the front seat of Lex's car. "Lana? What are you doing here?"
Lex tilted his head and gave him an odd smile. "She's here to save you, Jiminy."

***
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

Warning for the death of a supporting character. *sigh* Requiescat in pace.

"So…"
"Yeah."
"That was…"
"I don't know…"

Lex glanced at the people sitting around the Kent's kitchen table. He knew shell-shock when he saw it. He wouldn't deny feeling it himself. A little. He should say something. He should snap them all out of it. He was responsible for this mess, and he should be cleaning it up. You don't lead from behind. That's what his father…what Lionel Luthor would say. Lex lowered his head and stared at the table. He felt Clark's arm go around his shoulders.

"Lex. I'm sorry." It was Chloe, and Lex wondered what on earth she should be sorry for. "I mean, about your brother."

Oh. Lex forced his head up and tried for his tried-and-true casual smile. It didn't come. Not even close. The dismissive remark he attempted died somewhere between his parietal lobe and his tongue. He nodded at Chloe. "Thank you."

Pete fidgeted in his seat as Chloe turned to regard him with raised eyebrows and an expectant expression. "Nice left hook."

Chloe sighed and rested her head in her hand, but Lex actually felt part of a smile teasing one corner of his mouth. "Thank you, Pete. I had an excellent teacher."

Eli snorted. "Had you an excellent teacher, the dog's nose would be inside his frontal lobe. When he was breathing his brains I would be excellent."

"God, Mr. Cohen, that's just gross." Chloe grimaced and took a sip of her tea.

"I think we've had enough of that for one day, Callahan," Jonathan said from the other end of the table, glancing up from his notebook.

Eli actually looked contrite, glancing at Chloe's pale face. "I beg your pardon, Miss Sullivan."

"It's okay, it's okay. Are brains any worse than Dr. Glowsticks shoving his arm through somebody?" Chloe rolled her eyes. "I can't believe you guys have been dealing with this Twilight Zone stuff for months."

Pete glanced at the stairs. "Do you think Lana will be okay?"

"Moira is an excellent physician," Eli said gravely.
Jonathan made a rude noise.

"She is," Clark said, giving his father a firm look. "She's taken great care of you, Dad."

"Oh, she has," Jonathan growled. "In fact, she's inspired me to get well as quickly as possible so that she'll get the hell away from me."

"She is also an excellent interrogator," Eli said in a mild tone.

Lex sighed. "Eli." Damn, he wasn't up to this.

Clark bristled. "Interrogator?"

"Lana doesn't need to be interrogated. What the hell are you talking about?" Pete leaned forward with a belligerent expression.

"Eli, the girl's been beaten up." Jonathan tossed his notebook down. "I'm pretty damn sure she doesn't need to have bamboo shoots shoved under her finger nails."

Eli shot a wry glance at Lex. "Excuse me. Perhaps I should have said interviewer."

Lex shook his head. "Given her current state, I don't think she's likely to respond coherently to questioning whatever techniques you use. I was only able to glean a few pertinent details from her on the way over. I think she's in shock."

"Gee, I wonder why." Chloe drained the last of her tea.

"And these pertinent details are?" Eli regarded him with remarkable patience, given the circumstances.

"I don't think I like where this is going, Eli." Jonathan rose from his chair and walked to the refrigerator, scowling. "Lana isn't the enemy." He yanked the door open, rooted for a moment, and reappeared holding two beers.

"Perhaps not. But she has been aiding and abetting the enemy, willingly or not—"

"Not," Clark said in his most truculent tone. If his arm hadn't been around Lex, Lex might have let his non-existent jealousy run away with him. But Clark's arm was around him, and jealousy required energy he didn't have at the moment. Clark leaned toward Eli. "You don't know Lana, Eli. She'd never hurt anyone."

"She gave the man who wishes to abduct you a time and place where you would be alone and unprotected."

Lex shot a sharp look at Eli. "And strangely, this is the first I'm hearing of it. What time and place?" He looked up in surprise as Jonathan set a beer in front of him.

Jonathan smiled at him. "Never saw a man more in need of cheap beer." He went back to his seat, and Lex opened the can, blinking hard.

"She made it up," Pete cut in angrily. "She made it up to save Whitney."

"There's no time or place when Clark is alone or unprotected," Jonathan said, sliding back into his chair. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Eli."

"She said here, this afternoon." Chloe was playing with her mug. "It doesn't make any sense.
There's like an army here."

"Duh. That's why she told Glowsticks that." Pete leaned back with his arms crossed over his chest, glowering.

Lex sighed. "Eli, there's a small metal box under the driver's seat of my car. I want you to have a look at what's inside."

Eli gave him a quizzical look as he rose. "Certainly. I will bring it—"

"No!" Damn it. "No. Just...examine it outside. I need to know everything you can tell me. And find a safe place for it when you're done."

Eli nodded and disappeared into the living room; the screen door closed softly behind him.

"Lex? What?" Clark's head nearly touched Lex's. "You're not breathing again."

"Occupational hazard, Jiminy." Lex rested his hand on Clark's. His gaze went from Clark's anxious face to Jonathan's grim one.

Jonathan drained the last of his beer. "Let me guess. Things just got worse again."

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"He was angry. When the helicopter showed up, he thought I'd told someone where we'd be meeting."

"Whitney?" Martha asked gently, slipping off Lana's shoes and tucking her into bed.

"No! No, Whitney would never..." Lana swallowed. "Dr. Hamilton."

"Keep that on your eye," Moira said, firmly guiding the ice pack to Lana's face. "Some bruises, but nothing broken. I still think a quick trip to the ER would be prudent—"

"No. No. I'm fine."

Martha and Moira exchanged glances. Lana kept repeating that like a mantra. Martha was beginning to suspect that the girl had been saying that to herself for a long time.

Moira shook her head, frowning. "If you start feeling worse, I want you to tell me immediately. I don't think there's any permanent damage, but you need to rest."

"I need to find Whitney. He's in trouble. When Dr. Hamilton finds out I took the box—"

"Whitney is at Belle Rêve." Martha stroked Lana's hair as she perched on the side of the bed. "If we can find a way to help him, we will. Would you like me to call Nell?"

"She's in Metropolis. She's always in Metropolis these days."

Martha ruthlessly squashed her opinion of Nell Potter, or anyone else who would leave a sixteen-year-old girl on her own for weeks at a time. "Well, you can just stay with us until you feel better."

Lana took a shaky breath. "Mrs. Kent, Clark's in real danger. I mean, now, today. I saw him, here, alone, and Whitney was—"

"Honey, we would never leave Clark alone. Not anymore. There's always someone with him."
"But I saw it." The soft shimmer of luminescent green in Lana's eyes became brighter with tears. "You have to believe me."

"I believe you," Martha said in her most soothing tone. She felt in desperate need of being soothed herself. "I just don't understand how it could possibly happen."

"Perhaps Whitney Fordman understands how it could happen," Moira said dryly.

Lana shot her a pleading look. "Whitney never meant for any of this to happen. He was just so desperate for the money. His father's medical bills… Mrs. Kent, he loves his dad more than anything."

"I know."

"And it seemed so harmless. The doctors at Belle Rêve were so nice."

Martha saw Moira roll her eyes as she turned away to pick up her medical bag, and resisted the impulse to throw a pillow at her.

"They said they were testing a new way to calm down violent patients. But Whitney…those tests changed him. He remembered things that made no sense. He started doing things that Whitney would never do. And when Dr. Hamilton explained what they had really done—"

"Wasn't that nice of Dr. Hamilton," Moira muttered.

"It must have been horrible for him," Martha murmured, pushing thoughts of Lionel Luthor's bloody face far away.

"He got even worse. I don't think he knew who I was, sometimes. He talked like a completely different person."

"Like Eddie Cole?" Moira was pulling a bottle of medication from her bag.

"Yes." Lana shuddered. "God, what a horrible man."

"And when did Whitney decide to eliminate this horrible man?" Moira's tone was horribly conversational.

"Moira." Martha put a hand on Lana's shoulder as the girl's eyes filled. "This can wait."

"Sheriff Millar might not think so."

"He wasn't in his right mind," Lana blurted, wiping her face. "Dr. Hamilton kept on him and on him, telling him that if Eddie Cole were…gone, then the symptoms would fade."

"What happened?"

"I wasn't there. Whitney said…he said he lost it, and hit Eddie over the head with some piece of metal junk he found out in the yard, until he stopped moving. And then he buried him under the woodpile out back. But he said…it was like…almost the minute Eddie stopped moving, he got worse."

"More like Eddie." Moira's tone raised goosebumps on Martha's skin. Now what was Moira thinking? Maybe Jonathan was right; she was a she-Eli.

"Yes."
"Take this." Moira handed Lana a glass of water and a small green pill.

Lana looked at it doubtfully. "What is it?"

"It'll help you sleep."

Lana sighed and swallowed it. "They're both at Belle Rêve, then. Together. That's not good."

Martha eased Lana back onto the pillows. "We'll think of something, Lana."

"Has Dr. Hamilton's temper always been so violent?" Moira took Lana's glass and put it on the
nightstand, her dark eyes locked on Lana's face.

"It got worse after the accident." Lana closed her eyes. "He hates the other Lex so much now."

The other Lex. Oh, Lord. "The accident?" Martha hoped her voice hadn't squeaked.

"He was working in one of the access tunnels. He said everyone knew he was there, but all the
doors shut anyway, and the particle accelerator—"

"Particle accelerator?" Martha knew she'd squeaked that time, and hastily closed her mouth.

"Lex's particle accelerator…they were…” Lana drifted off mid-sentence, leaving Martha and Moira
staring at each other.

"Well," Moira said acidly. "You folks don't stage your disasters on a small scale, do you?"

Martha rose, forcing herself to speak. Today was not a good day. Today was as far from a good
day as it was possible to get. "That lab has been locked down for months."

"I'm sure our Dayglo friend Stephen will be glad to hear it."

"Lionel and the clone have tried everything to force Lex to give them the access codes. Why would
they do that if—"

Moira raised her hand, shooting a sharp look at Lana. "Let's take this outside." She took Martha’s
arm and guided her through the door, shutting it firmly behind her. "That girl has got to go, Martha."

Martha bristled. "Go? She's been beaten and frightened within an inch of her life! She's not going
anywhere."

"Every minute she stays here she gathers more information for Hamilton."

"You think she's a spy? Oh, for heaven's sake. She's a child, Moira."

"She's no child. She's a woman with an agenda, and, oh yes, a mutation which enables her to see
into the future. Don't fall for the little girl lost routine."

Martha found herself assuming a battle stance. Maybe Pamela was right about Boudicca's chariot
motifs. "If I had made assumptions like that about Lex, he'd be dead now. Lana is not leaving this
house until she's well enough to do so. My house, my rules, Moira."

Moira raised an eyebrow. "Eli may have something to say about this."

Martha turned on her heel and headed for the stairs, fuming. "It's not Eli Cohen's house either."
Lex drummed his fingers on the kitchen table, scowling. "Worse?"

Clark knew the signs of a gigantic brain overheating when he saw them. "Lex. Maybe you should take it easy for a while, huh?"

"Yeah, Whitney said it got worse when he whacked Cole." Pete stretched.

Chloe smacked his invading arm away. "Does that mean something?"

Lex leaned back in his chair, but Clark refused to let go. "Insurance? That would be in character. Yes. A trigger. A dead man's switch. Ingenious." It was almost a chant; Lex's eyes were half-closed.

Clark tightened his arm around Lex's shoulders. "Lex. Enough."

"It's significant. These matrices never coalesced. They've been discrete from the beginning. Intentionally so."

"Lex," Jonathan said sharply. "Son, let it go."

"I think it's time for a break," Clark said firmly, rising from his chair and hauling Lex up with him.

Pete and Chloe glanced at each other, apprehension in their faces.

Lex didn't resist, but turned to Clark and continued to babble as if Clark had the faintest idea what he was talking about. "He needed information. All this time…the meetings…mentioning Julian…it was an intelligence mission."

Clark could see the intuitive leaps behind those blue eyes, but it did nothing to quiet his alarm. "Damn it, Lex, stop." He could hear Martha coming down the steps.

Jonathan rose, his eyes locked on Lex. "Martha, we have a situation."

"He knew we had Karloff's journal. He probably encouraged Karloff to write it in the first place. All that was required was enough pressure…"

"Lex?" Martha appeared and made a b-line to Lex's side. "Lex." She laid a hand on his cheek, and Lex fell silent; he turned to her with a lost expression. "You're overtired, sweetheart."

Clark watched as the calculations behind Lex's eyes melted away at the endearment. Lex swallowed. "I'm fine. I'm just… I'm fine." He was leaning into Martha's hand.

"Upstairs, now. Clark, make him rest."

"Upstairs?" Clark asked in surprise.

Martha fixed her firmest stare on him. "Upstairs. House rules in full force. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Clark said hastily. "Come on, Lex."

"There's work to do," Lex protested, but Clark knew one look from Martha would be enough, and it was. Lex sighed, letting Clark guide him away from the table and toward the stairs. Jonathan rubbed his shoulder as he passed, and Lex gave him a ghost of a smile, his gaze dropping to the notebook on the table.
"What are you going to call your comic, Jonathan?"

Clark rolled his eyes at the blatant delaying tactic. "C'mon, Lex."

Jonathan snorted and gave Lex's scalp a quick rub. "I'm thinking Infinite Crisis. That pretty much sums up life around here."

Pete and Chloe shot him doubtful looks, and Clark couldn't help laughing. "No offense, Dad, but that's pretty bad."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Most comics are named after the superhero," Lex said, his smile deepening.

Jonathan raised his eyebrows. "My comic has two superheroes," he said softly.

Clark tried to say something and couldn't.

"That does complicate things," Lex said unevenly.

Jonathan cleared his throat and sat down. "Now when you've figured out a title for that, smartasses, you just let me know."

"We'll work on it." Lex turned to Clark, wobbling a little on his feet, and Clark steadied him.

"Talk to you guys later, okay?" Clark shot Pete and Chloe a reassuring smile over his shoulder.

"No problem," Pete said, watching Lex's unsteady gait with narrowed eyes. "We'll catch you tonight."

"Is he all right?" Clark heard Chloe ask Martha in a whisper.

"He will be. Now you two need to go home and rest, too. No, I don't want to hear any arguments. I've had enough arguments today."

"She's sending the Marines home?" Lex murmured in Clark's ear as they climbed the stairs. "Good God, who will protect us?"

Clark shot him a dirty look. "Very funny. You're scaring the shit out of me, mastermind."

"I'm scaring the shit out of myself—"

Clark slapped Lex's hand away, relieved enough to be annoyed. "I swear to God I'm going to smack your shiny head, Lex. I swear to God." He pulled off Lex's shoes and hauled his legs onto the bed.

"What?" Clark looked up into Lex's ashen face, startled.

"I'm having the most incredible sense of déjà vu—"

Clark made vague gestures at the ceiling. "This has all happened before. I have a vision of—"
"Shut up!"

"Raiding your sock drawer, and being carried – thanks for not doing that in front of Pete, by the way – and this fisheye lens montage of injuries and altered states of consciousness."

"Move over, you asshole." Clark kicked off his shoes and climbed into bed, nestling close to Lex, almost nose-to-nose. He wrapped his hands around Lex's.

Lex took a deep breath. "It was all a ploy."

"Shhhh."

"He needed a status report on Karloff's development, and we gave it to him."

"Lex, I want you to stop thinking about your…Lionel Luthor."

"I'd have to stop thinking about Julian to do that." Something deep in Lex's gaze flashed. "I'll never forget Julian."

"No." Clark pressed closer. "You won't."

Lex's breathing became uneven. "He killed him. He killed Julian. Did you hear him, Clark? He fucking admitted it, admitted killing his own son. He justified it."

"I heard. God, Lex, I'm so sorry."

"Julian might have loved me."

"He did love you. He still does."

Lex closed his eyes. "You really believe that? That we go on?"

"Yeah. I do."

Lex was silent for a second. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?"

"Where do I start?"

Clark leaned forward and kissed him. "You're welcome."

Lex kissed him back with so much enthusiasm that Clark had to remind himself about the house rules. "You let me off too easy, you know," Lex whispered. "You should have broken my face."

"I like your face the way it is."

"You told me the truth. You knew I'd be a complete asshole, and you still told me the truth."

"All in a day's work," Clark said wryly.

"There's no one else in the world who'd care enough to do that, Jiminy." Lex hung onto Clark's hands as if it were a lifeline.

"Lex, there's a whole damn house full of people who care enough. I just get first dibs."

Lex smiled a little. "Tell me why."
"Because I'm the junior partner."

"And the junior partner is staging yet another takeover?"

"Nope. That's just my trite and clichéd way of saying I love you more than anything, and there's nothing I won't do for you."

Lex seemed speechless for all of five seconds, and Clark congratulated himself. Personal best. Lex opened his eyes and smiled at him. He kissed Clark again. "This seems like an opportune moment to ask for a favor."

"Anything." Clark said a little breathlessly. He wondered if Lex understood what "anything" meant when it came to Lex Luthor. He wondered if Lex knew what an amazing kisser he was, too, and whether a guy could come from his boyfriend smiling at him, but he wasn't going to think about that right now.

Lex gently pulled one hand from Clark's grip and fished something out of his shirt pocket. "Take this." He placed the warm piece of metal in Clark's hand. "Take care of it."

Clark frowned. "Why?"

Lex drew a shaky breath. "My judgment can't be trusted right now."

"I trust you, Lex. That's why I gave it to you in the first place."

"Clark. I have nothing left." Lex's voice wobbled.

"Nothing—"

"I don't have a plan. Not even an idea. We're surrounded and they're closing in and one of them has fucking built a gun that fires meteorite bullets and I have no idea how to protect you."

Clark clutched Lex's hand, pressing the key between their palms so hard that he could have sworn the thing vibrated. "Lex. We're not alone. We have a family. We all protect each other. We'll think of something."

"Lionel Luthor is now a complete wild card. He'll either take off the gloves and declare total war or stage some spectacular and dangerous stunt to maintain contact with us."

"Lex, you're doing it again."

"God only knows how, but Stephen Hamilton has been exposed to a massive dose of meteorite radiation and has wound up both mutated in a manner potentially lethal to you and mad as a march hare."

"I see. We're going to list the bad guys, now. Good for you, Lex, that'll help."

"Whitney doesn't have much longer to be Whitney; but like many of us he's in denial about his little identity issues and he'll do anything Hamilton tells him in a pointless effort to save his sorry ass."

"Do I have to tie you up and gag you?"

"I'll take a raincheck. Karloff—"

"Karloff warned us about Hamilton and told me about the journal."
"Karloff has a mutated madman in revolt on his hands and is probably trying to maneuver us into taking care of his problem for him."

"And how exactly do you take care of a guy who can walk through walls, mastermind?"

"I don't have any ideas on that subject, either. Just deus ex machina fantasies about that hunk of useless metal sitting in my cellar."

Clark let loose a breath of relief and understanding. So that was it. "Lex. Do you think I haven't thought about starting up Bessie? Seriously?"

Lex studied him. "You've thought about it."

"Sure I have. Who knows, maybe there's a photon torpedo or a phaser or something—"

"It is possible to carry Trek geekism too far, Jiminy."

"Well, what do you want to find?"

Lex uttered a weird laugh. "Anything. Anything that will protect you from these lunatics and their fucking meteorites. Do you know what I do every day before I go to see Pamela?"

"What?" Clark asked, trying to imagine what could put that look on Lex's face.

"I sit with Bessie. I talk to her."

"Yes," Clark said gently. "Does she talk back?"

"Sometimes."

"What does she say?"

"Whatever I want to hear."

"Aw, Lex." Clark kissed him again, and Lex blinked in obvious surprise. "You should have told me that, too."

"I thought I was going insane," Lex whispered, clearly taken aback by Clark's reaction.

"You weren't insane. You were alone. They feel the same sometimes."

Lex rested his head against Clark's. "We're in trouble, Jiminy."

Oh, man. Oh, man, things must be bad. "Yeah. So you want to go see what Bessie's got?"

Lex sighed. "No. I want you to talk me out of it."

"Why?"

"Pamela thinks it's a bad idea."

Clark frowned, surprised. "Pamela's usually right."

"She was right about you."

"Me?"
"She said you'd forgive me. I have an appointment this afternoon to tell her how right she was."

Clark laughed softly. "Well, I wouldn't want to wreck her batting average, but really, what's the worst that can happen? That there'll be nothing there, right?"

"Or something we can't operate."

"Something you can't operate? Come on."

"Or something dangerous. There's no way to know."

"Well, we know the bad guys are dangerous."

Lex said nothing for a few seconds. "I thought you'd debunk this fantasy, Jiminy."

Clark drew his arm around Lex’s waist. "I like your fantasies," he murmured as suggestively as possible.

Lex actually chuckled. "House rules."

"Let's see what Mom and Dad think. About Bessie, I mean. I already know what they think about house rules."

"Clark—"

"This is where you say 'yes sir whatever you say sir!'"

Lex buried his face against Clark's neck and kissed it. "Yes, sir, whatever you say, sir," he whispered. "Clark—"

"This is where you stop talking and start resting."

***

Jonathan sank to perch on the top porch step. "Destroy it."

"Jonathan—"

"Damn it, Eli, melt it down, blow it up, do whatever it takes!" Jonathan stared at the revolver and its glowing ammunition in horror. Somehow seeing the damn thing was worse than hearing Lex's brief description. Much worse.

"Jonathan, listen to Eli." Martha was looking like Martha always did when things were at their worst; pale, calm, and ready to fight the devil himself if he brought a meteorite anywhere near her son. She sat beside him and took his arm as she stared into the box.

"Ugly thing," Max said quietly, lifting the revolver out. "Heavy."

"I assume you test-fired it?" Moira pulled one of the bullets out and held it up to the light, scowling.

"I did." Eli looked like he could smell those dead fish on the dock he was always talking about. "It has no accuracy at any significant range. It would be necessary for the marksman to be only a few feet from the target to succeed. I believe it is a prototype."

"You mean there might not be any more?" Jonathan asked hopefully.
"Possibly. Yet."

"Who made this thing?" Martha took the gun from Max, with an expression that made Jonathan's heart ache. "Hamilton?"

"Dr. Hamilton has neither the skills nor the resources to manufacture such a mockery of the fine art of the fire arm."

"Luthor? Black Lagoon Boy?" Jonathan heard a car turning into the lane, and glanced over his shoulder. Oh, crap. Ethan Millar was coming up the drive. "Cheese it. It's the fuzz."

Martha laughed quietly. "And the boys think you're not cool."

"The boys do think I'm cool," Jonathan growled indignantly, weary of the constant assaults on his coolness. "That fuzz was ironic."

"Put the weapon away," Eli said, showing unmistakable signs that his patience was running thin with the amateurs.

Martha complied, and Moira tossed in the bullet she had been examining. "What is Deputy Dawg doing out here?"

"His job," Jonathan snapped as Eli closed the box and latched it. "Which sure as hell hasn't been easy lately."

"No offense intended," Moira said mildly.

"Martha, if you would be so kind." Eli stepped closer and handed her the box. "You are by far the least unsavory character among us."

Martha gave Eli an exasperated look and took the box. "I could be unsavory if I wanted to."

Eli's mouth twitched. "I have no doubt of this."

"So watch it."

"I am all attention."

The sheriff's car came to a halt in the drive, and Millar climbed out, looking like he hadn't slept in a while. "Afternoon, folks."

"Ethan," Jonathan said in as close to a normal tone as he could manage these days. "What's up?"

"Figured since I was out this way, I'd stop in and see if you'd found that phone number." Millar's inquisitive gaze swept over Max and Moira.

"Eddie Cole's brother in Metropolis," Jonathan said to Martha, and Martha nodded.

"I'll get it, Ethan. Just a second." Martha disappeared inside with the box.

"Don't believe we've met," Millar said to Max.

"I beg your pardon, Sheriff. This is my nephew Max and my niece Moira. They are visiting." Eli's pleasant smile was entirely too convincing. "It is so comforting to have the young people visit their old uncle. They are a blessing, yes? Always a blessing."
Strangely, Max and Moira didn't appear to be deeply touched by the sentiment, but shot dirty looks at their elderly uncle whenever Millar looked away.

"So it's definitely Eddie, then," Jonathan said, managing to keep a straight face, and kicking himself for having to try. He shouldn't be wanting to laugh when there was a man dead, even if that man had been a son of a bitch. He chalked it up to Eli's influence.

"So the coroner says. Dental records a match. Old Doc Wade wasn't very happy about opening his office on a Saturday, but there you go."

"Any clue yet what happened?"

Millar shrugged, his gaze sliding to Eli and back to Jonathan again. "Eddie was dead before the fire, that's for sure. Somebody smashed his head in. So it's homicide."

"Jesus. Who'd want to kill Eddie Cole? The man was a hermit."

"Believe it or not, he was working."

Oh, crap. "Flying?"

"No. Some kind of part-time gig at Belle Rêve. I'm going out there later."

Oh, crap. "Watch your step. I've heard stories about that place."

Millar snorted. "Urban legends, Jonathan. You ought to know better than to believe that scuttlebutt."

"Here you go, Ethan." Martha closed the screen door behind her and crossed the porch with a paper in her hand. "Address and phone. It's a few years old, though."

Millar took it. "Not a problem. At least it's a place to start. Thank you, Martha." He folded the paper and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"Is it true that someone blew up Mr. Cole's house?" Moira asked with wide, frightened eyes. "I thought this was a safe place for your retirement, Uncle Eli."

"The criminal element creeps in everywhere these days." Max looked appropriately disgusted. "The man was probably a drug-dealer or—"

"Now, now, Max." Eli gave him a reproving look. "Let us not speak ill of the dead."

"Oh, you'll find plenty of folks around here who are happy to speak ill of Eddie Cole, dead or otherwise," Millar said dryly. "He was a hell-raiser back in the day. But I can assure you, ma'am, that this is a peaceful community nowadays."

Jonathan dissolved into a fit of coughing.

Millar looked concerned. "You okay, Jonathan? Not pushing yourself too hard, are you?"

"Always," Martha said in an exasperated tone, sitting down beside Jonathan to rub his back, sneaking in a pinch or two. "Could I borrow some handcuffs, Ethan?"

Millar snorted. "Geez, Jonathan. Take it easy, will you?"

"Yeah, yeah." Jonathan caught his breath and cleared his throat.
"You should go inside and lie down," Martha said firmly. "Is there anything else you need, Ethan?"

"No, that's it for now. Oh, wait, there was something."

Oh, crap, crap, crap. Jonathan made a show of getting very slowly to his feet; Martha rose with him and put an arm around his waist. "Yeah?"

Millar turned to Max. "Why were you all over town looking for Whitney Fordman earlier, Mr…. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your last name."

"Cohen," Max said with a harmless smile that made him look a lot younger than he was. "Because the little bastard rear-ended me and took off before I could get his information. I finally found a gas station attendant who could at least tell me his name."

"I see."

"Please tell me you're looking for him, too. That would make my day."

"I wouldn't mind having a word with him." Millar glanced up at Jonathan and Martha. "Or Lana, if I could find her."

Martha actually smiled. "I'm sure when you find one, you'll find the other. I hope this has nothing to do with—"

"Oh, probably not. Whitney's obviously been spending time with Eddie if he's learned how to fly that old eggbeater of his. We're just trying to cover all the bases."

Jonathan grimaced. Ethan never could tell a lie to save his life. "From what I hear, he's probably pulled off the road somewhere sleeping it off."


"Thanks, Ethan." Jonathan realized he was holding his breath and let it go as Millar crossed the drive and climbed into his car. Goddamn. It was a hell of a thing when an honest man had to be worried about a visit from the sheriff, especially when he'd known the man his whole life. For the millionth time, Jonathan damned Lionel Luthor to eternal hellfire.

Max sighed. "Well, shit. Now I have to rear-end my car."

"I see I underestimated the good sheriff," Eli said softly. "He has intuition. They can be dangerous, men with intuition."

***

"I've come to ask whether you'd care to join my Owsla."

Lex knows he's flying, but not with Clark. He's flying like he did when his car flew off the bridge and into the river, alone over green hills and pale yellow primroses.

"If you're ready, we might go along now."

"Primroses aren't indigenous to North America," Lex said drowsily.

"Lex."
Lex felt a hand on his cheek and struggled to open his eyes.

"You need to wake up now."

Martha. It was Martha. And something was wrong.

Lex's eyes flew open. He knew immediately that he'd slept too long; the sun's angle as it shone through Clark's window told him it was late afternoon. Martha was bending over him, pale and poised, and Jonathan and Eli were hovering by the door. Eli was speaking very softly into his cell phone. And then he understood.

"Pamela," Lex said, feeling nothing.

"Siobhan says to come at once." Martha's voice shook slightly.

Lex tried to climb off the bed, but found Clark's arm around him, restraining him.

"Lex." There were already tears in that voice.

"Come at once," Lex repeated calmly. "Of course." He started putting on his shoes. "I can be there in ten minutes."

"We can be there in ten minutes. I'll get the truck," Jonathan said briskly, exchanging glances with Eli.

"You're not going anywhere!" Lex staggered to his feet, half--leaning on Martha. "You just got out of fucking heart surgery, and you're not—"

"Get his jacket on him, Martha." Jonathan turned toward the door, only to be blocked by Eli, tucking his cell phone into his breast pocket with a grace Lex found profoundly obscene.

"The sedan is waiting." Eli's voice was somber and gentle. "It can accommodate us all."

"They're not going.‖ Lex flinched inwardly as his voice rose, trying not to see Clark streaking into his shoes and seeing it anyway. "And where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Wherever you go." Clark took Lex's jacket from Martha and held it up. "Now, mastermind."

God. They were all insane. Lex grit his teeth and shoved his arms into his jacket, then followed them down the hall, ignoring Moira's nod of sympathy as they passed Lana's door. Lana must still be asleep. Lex wished he were. He wished he were still flying over green fields of impossible primroses. He moved mechanically down the stairs, feeling Clark's hand on his back. Martha started putting her coat on, as if she were going to church, for God's sake. "The weapon. Hamilton. Fordman. Lionel. For God's sake, it's not safe, Eli. Make them stay home."

"Lex. We're not any less safe at your house than we are here." Martha kissed his cheek. "The safest place we can be is together."

"Listen to your m-- Listen to Martha, Lex." Jonathan was pulling on his coat; Lex could see him wince. "Whenever I don't, I wish to God I had."

Clark put on his jacket, his eyes never leaving Lex's face.

"I'm going to get you all killed." Lex's voice went hoarse. "Worse than killed."

"Sasha," Eli said with gentle authority. "Now." He held the door open, revealing Eli's black sedan
sitting in the drive, and Max standing guard beside it. Lex could hear the engine running as Clark shepherded him through the door and down the steps into the dusk, Jonathan, Martha and Eli falling in behind them.

"You're not going to get anybody killed." Martha's voice was firm. "None of us have any intention of dying, Lex Luthor. Understood?"

The road to hell was paved with good intentions. Lex slid into the back seat after Clark, moving over to make room for Martha. She closed the door and instantly put her arm around him, as if he would either fly away or fly apart without her embrace. Eli and Jonathan climbed into the front seat, slammed their doors.

"Vigilance," Eli said to Max through his open window.

Max nodded, uncharacteristically sober. "Understood."

Eli took off at an unusually high speed around the drive and down the lane. They were on the road to hell.

"Come at once," Lex said musingly, feeling Clark take his hand. "Isn't that what was in the telegram Mrs. March received?"

"Mrs. March?" Clark's voice sounded far away, even though Lex could feel him pressing close.

"Yes. Little Women. God-awful sanctimonious, maudlin drivel, for the most part, but it had its moments. Her best works were her sensation stories – published under a pseudonym, of course. A proper New England young lady doesn't write about murder and drug addiction and madness. Not unless she experiences them first, and I can't recommend the experience."

"You haven't murdered anyone, Lex." Jonathan's voice sounded like it was echoing in cave somewhere. "And you're not crazy or a drug addict."

"You have them in the wrong order. First comes murder. Then drug addiction. Then madness. The order is very important." Lex watched the blood-red sun sink behind the black clouds on the horizon.

"You are not going to murder anyone." Jonathan said it in the same tone he used whenever he spotted Lex in the vicinity of the washing machine.

"Oh, I think I am."

"Lex," Clark murmured in his ear. "Don't do this to yourself. Please."

"And I'm going to enjoy it."

"You are not thinking clearly, Sasha." Eli's voice was like a rock. "This is not the time for momentous decisions."

"Momentous decisions. Yes, I suppose blowing Lionel Luthor's brains out would constitute something in the realm of the momentous."

"That's the last line," Martha said quietly. "You'd never be the same man again, Lex."

"I don't want to be the same man. I want…I want to be someone else. Someone else." Lex closed his eyes as Clark leaned his head against his.
"I'm in love with this man," Clark whispered.

"Come at once," Lex mused, watching as the house came into view. He saw Eli draw a small touchpad from his breast pocket and key in the code to deactivate the exterior security grid. "The phrase is rather archaic. What do you think, Eli?"

"That the phrase is archaic." Eli parked in front of the house. "That you are the man you decide to be. And that someone is waiting for you who has not much time left to wait. Go." His voice was rough.

Clark opened his door, took Lex's hand and pulled him out of the car and toward the house; Lex was vaguely aware that Jonathan and Martha were at their heels, with Eli bringing up the rear.

"It happened so fast." Clark sounded dazed as he pulled Lex up the porch steps and toward the front door. "How could it happen so fast?"

"It didn't." Lex clung to Clark's hand as they went through the door and across the main hall toward the staircase. "It's never fast." They both began taking the steps two at a time.

"She seemed fine yesterday." Clark's voice wobbled.

"She hasn't been fine for a long time." Lex's legs felt suddenly heavy. The second floor was looming into his field of vision. "Clark," he rasped. "Stay...stay where I can see you. Just stay—"

"I'm going to be right beside you." Clark's hand tightened around his.

"Beside me. Beside me is good." Beside him was essential. "Don't you think 'come at once' is an archaic phrase?"

"Yes." Clark pulled him gently up the last few steps. They had never seemed so steep before. Lex could hear Jonathan and Martha talking quietly with Eli below. "But it's the right thing to say."

Clark Kent, champion of all things archaic and quixotic. He could smell Pamela's room from here. It hadn't smelled that way a few hours ago, but it did now. It smelled like his mother's hospital room. He halted at the top of the steps, staring at the door to that dimly-lit room, unable to move. Clark turned toward him, his face drawn. Hurting when Lex hurt. It occurred to Lex that Clark had gotten the shitty end of the stick in that deal. He needed an agent.

"I don't know," Lex said, as if he were addressing the Board at LuthorCorp Headquarters. "I don't think—"

"Don't think," Clark whispered. "Remember." He pulled him down the hall.

Remember. Yes. Remember Pamela. Pamela lost, then found, and now lost again – but not in quite the same way. Now...now they'd always have Smallville. Lex suppressed a horrible desire to giggle.

Teskey met them at the door. Lex was numbly surprised to see that her eyes were red, although not a tear fell, and not a trace of emotion touched that stern face. "It is difficult for her to speak." The words boomed down Lex's ear as if the woman were screaming them. "She has been in and out of an unconscious state for the past half hour."

Lex pushed his way inside. Yes. They all looked the same, the dying. From the inside out. He found himself moving to her side, sinking into the chair there as if this were just another visit, just another meeting of minds and hearts, of memory and hopeful futures, of books and battles of will.
She looked dead. Lex had seen dead, and this was it. He understood now why Clark thought it had happened quickly. Without the spark that was Pamela, this was a husk, like the dried corn husks he had trampled and tripped over six months ago in the snow, trying to hide from his loving father. The loving father who had made him hate this woman who loved him. Lex wondered if his loving father would make him hate Clark someday. Or Eli. Or Jonathan and Martha.

Lex could see the barely perceptible rise and fall of the covers over her chest. Breathing, and on her own. Even though she thought that she'd done everything she could do – for him, always for him – she couldn't stop fighting completely. It wasn't in her nature. If Lionel were to appear at her bedside, she'd kick him in the balls again, or stab him with her IV needle. Lex wondered what his mother would think of that. If she knew what had happened since she...left, she'd probably cheer Pamela on.

"Don't look like that." Lex started, suddenly aware of his surroundings again, of Clark kneeling beside him, of the Kents and Teskey and Eli hovering in the shadows at the foot of the bed. Of Pamela looking at him with sunken, sharp eyes. "It's not the end of the world." Her voice was feeble and raspy. "I'm just going to meet your mother for a girls' night out."

"God help the Great Beyond." Lex managed a passable imitation of his most acerbic tone.

Pamela actually smiled a little. "You know it. Well?"

"You were right," Lex said unevenly.

Pamela's gaze traveled to Clark. "Not very bright about these things, is he?"

"He's a dumbass," Clark agreed, some of Pamela's smile mirrored in his face.

That smile faded quickly, and she groped along the bed until she found Clark's hand. She laid it over Lex's.

Lex knew he was breathing too quickly, too unevenly. Maintain. Maintain was a lie, a bad joke, a pointless exercise in hubris.

"I'll take care of him," Clark breathed. "I promise. We all will."

Pamela's weakening gaze swept the little group of people at the foot of the bed. "You're not alone. Take care of each other."

Lex nodded, not understanding a word.

Pamela drew a rattling breath. "Tell Lionel Luthor that every creaking door and cold draft is me."

"We'll tell him," Clark said with dark satisfaction.

"Eli."

Eli came forward to stand on the other side of the bed. "Tell me what I can do."

"Do not get yourself killed."

Eli barked a short laugh. "In this we are in agreement."

"Give him hell for me."

"He will know such hell as has never been experienced by mortal man."
"Keep them alive, Eli."

"I swear it."

"You've been a good friend," Pamela whispered.

"As have you. Always." Eli bent to stroke Pamela's hair, but a little choking sound from the foot of the bed drew Pamela's attention.

For one second, Lex saw a flash of the woman he had known. "Martha Kent, if you cry I will come back from the dead and kick your butt."

"Got it," Martha said shakily.

"There's no crying in the chariot."

"Okay, okay." Martha came forward to stand next to Eli. Her eyes were red, but her face was dry. "Boudicca has too many rules."

"Boudicca knows what she's doing. But it's your chariot, now, Martha."

"Where do I drive it?" Martha looked genuinely lost.

The light in Pamela's eyes turned wicked. "Right up Lionel Luthor's ass."

Martha visibly fought a smile, but the smile won. "I'll see what I can do."

"Jonathan Kent, you take care of yourself. I've heard about your shenanigans. If you show up in the Great Beyond before your time, you'll have me to deal with. Understood?"

"Yeah." Jonathan was grinning. "Understood."

"Do some good. You two have the power now. Do it."

"We will," Martha whispered. "I promise."

"Eli. The letters."

"I have them all."

"Good. Good." Pamela's gaze shifted back to Lex's face. She lifted her hand to rest it against his cheek. "Your mother will be so proud when I tell her who you are, Alexander. She will have bragging rights till the end of time."

Lex tried to say something, but his throat was closed.

"And so will I." Pamela's voice was fading. "No creaky doors. No cold drafts. Just a warm breeze and lavender for you. Remember."

"I'll remember," Lex croaked.

"Finish it."

Lex stared at her in confusion for a moment, then realized what she was asking. "The end?" he whispered.

"The epilogue," Pamela murmured. "Not the same as the end."
"But you already know the…epilogue."

Pamela started to gasp for air, but Lex had the oxygen mask in place before Teskey could move. He met Pamela's dwindling gaze, and knew that those were the last words he'd hear her say. Picking up the book on the night table, he opened it to the epilogue and began to read, barely hearing his own voice.

"One chilly, blustery morning in March, I cannot tell exactly how many springs later, Hazel was dozing and waking in his burrow. He had spent a good deal of time there lately, for he felt the cold and could not seem to smell or run so well as in days gone by."

Eli's voice was no more than a murmur.

"B'ya-do af-kid ru-chi,
b'ei i-shan v'a-i-ra
v'im ru-chi g'vi-ya-ti
Adonai li, v'lo i-ra."

Lex heard the translation as if someone were speaking it. Perhaps someone was.

"Everlasting God, Creator of all that lives: although I pray for healing and continued life, still I know that I am mortal. Give me courage to accept my kinship with all who have come before me."

"He had been dreaming in a confused way--something about rain and elder bloom--when he woke to realize that there was a rabbit lying quietly beside him -- no doubt some young buck who had come to ask his advice. The sentry in the run outside should not really have let him in without asking first. Never mind, thought Hazel."

"Alas, over the years, I have committed many wrongs; I know, too, I left much undone. Yet I also know the good I did or tried to do. That goodness imparts an eternal meaning to my life."

"He raised his head and said, "Do you want to talk to me?" "Yes, that's what I've come for," replied the other. "You know me, don't you?" "Yes, of course," said Hazel, hoping he would be able to remember his name in a moment. Then he saw that in the darkness of the burrow the stranger's ears were shining with a faint silver light. "Yes, my lord," he said. "Yes, I know you."

"And, as You are with me, so, I know, are You with my loved ones. This comforts my soul, O God my Rock and Redeemer."

"'You've been feeling tired,' said the stranger, "'but I can do something about that. I've come to ask whether you'd care to join my Owsla. We shall be glad to have you and you'd enjoy it. If you're ready, we might go along now.'

"Into Your hands I commend my spirit, both when I sleep and when I wake. Body and soul are Yours, O God, and in Your presence I cast off fear and am at rest."

"They went out past the young sentry, who paid the visitor no attention. The sun was shining and in spite of the cold there were a few bucks and does at silflay, keeping out of the wind as they nibbled the shoots of spring grass."

"Lex." Clark's voice was wobbling.
"It seemed to Hazel that he would not be needing his body any more, so he left it lying on the edge of the ditch, but stopped for a moment to watch his rabbits and to try to get used to the extraordinary feeling that strength and speed were flowing inexhaustibly out of him into their sleek young bodies and healthy senses."

"Lex, she's…she's gone."

It meant nothing.

"'You needn't worry about them,'" said his companion. "'They'll be all right—and thousands like them. If you'll come along, I'll show you what I mean.'" He reached the top of the bank in a single, powerful leap. Hazel followed; and together they slipped away, running easily down through the wood, where the first primroses were beginning to bloom."

Lex closed the book and laid it very gently on the night stand, as if it might shatter if handled too roughly. He raised Pamela's hand to his lips and kissed it, just like he always did. Then he released Clark's hand and rose to stride for the door.

"Lex, don't—"

"Let him go, son." Jonathan's voice was broken. "Give him a minute."

Yes. Yes. A minute was all it would take.

***
"That's going to wreck him."

Chloe stopped counting knot holes in the barn roof and turned her stare to Pete, who was still peering through Clark's telescope at the Kent house. "What?"

"If that's where they're going. To, uh, you know. Say good bye."

Chloe stretched to the full length of Clark's couch, wondering if the universe had just imploded without her noticing. "You're worried about Lex's emotional state?"

"What?" Pete swung his head away from the telescope so fast Chloe swore she heard his neck crack. "No! Are you mental? I'm talking about Clark. He really likes Pamela." He cleared his throat and went back to the telescope.

Chloe watched him with narrowed eyes. "Pete, why are we here?"

Pete sighed. "Is that a meaning of life question, or—"

"I mean, besides spying on your girlfriend with a telescope, which isn't creepy at all."

Pete gave her a truly terrifying glare over his shoulder. "One, she's not my girlfriend, she's a friend. Two, she's been beat up and had the crap scared out of her by Dr. Glowsticks. Three, Lugosi and his two ninjas think she's out to kill Clark or something and I don't trust any of them not to do something about it."

"Four, you're just praying to the God of the Pig-Men that she'll take something off." Chloe returned the glare, undaunted. "Mrs. Kent told us to go home. I want to go home, Pete. I want a shower. I want to sleep in my bed. I want to forget about the Twilight Zone for a few hours. Why am I here?"

Pete's glare became withering. "And you called me a wuss? What happened to 'Pete, we are the Marines'?"

Chloe sat up, slamming her hand on the arm of the sofa as if it were her sense of guilt. "Look. When attack helicopters start blowing up houses around us? It just might be a clue that we're in over our heads. We're metaphorical Marines, not literal Marines. There's a difference, and he who doesn't know the difference gets turned into red mist or impaled on some glowdick's arm."

"Look, Chloe, in the past month you've nearly gotten me shot by crazed Mossad assassins—"

"It was one crazed Mossad assassin, and you swore you'd never bring that up again."

"—and chased by Asshole Senior's security guards—"
"I told you to keep moving. But oh, no, we had to play with the hose—"

"—and fucking blown up by Luthor or Luthors unknown—"

"How was I supposed to know there was artillery involved?"

"—and now I am calling in my favors. You are going to stay right here and help me protect Lana from Lugosi's ninjas because you freaking owe me."

Chloe opened her mouth to say, uncategorically, that she did not owe Peter Thurgood Ross squat, but Pete beat her to it.

"And even if you didn't, you owe Clark."

Chloe folded her arms across her chest, so she wouldn't scratch his eyes out. "This has nothing to do with Clark. This has to do with your undying itch for Lana Lang."

"She's a friend." Pete finally turned away from the damn telescope to focus all his manly wrath on her. "She's Clark's friend, too."

"She's lying," Chloe said finally, because it was the truth, and it was about time someone besides Lugosi said it. "She's lying, Pete. There's something going on here that has nothing to do with her trying to help Clark. I can feel it."

"Special girl powers?" There was nothing friendly in Pete's sneer.

"Common sense," Chloe snapped, stung. "Stop thinking with your junk and try some." She snatched up her bag and stormed down the loft stairs, leaving Pete staring after her like the idiot she knew he was.

***

Clark tried to give Lex a minute. It was hard. It was hard to stand there in that room, even with his back to everybody, even not looking as he heard Teskey raise the sheet over Pamela, even not watching as his mother broke down and cried anyway, despite direct orders. Eli finished his prayer and started talking in a soft murmur to Teskey and his mom and dad; he could have heard what was being said if he'd tried, but he didn't try. He didn't want to.

It wasn't fair.

Pamela shouldn't have died. She was good. She loved Lex. Lex loved her and needed her and fuck it, Karloff and Lionel Luthor were still walking around, like they deserved to and she didn't. This was wrong. It should never have happened. And God only knew what it would do to Lex. He yanked the bedroom door open.

"Son," Jonathan said in a weird, wobbly voice. "He needs time."

"No," Clark said, and only then realized that he was crying, too. "He's had too much time."

If he could have flown up to their bedroom, he would have; running wasn't nearly fast enough, even though the wind he stirred up knocked a couple of pictures off the walls in the hall, and toppled some books Lex had dumped at the top of the stairs. Clark stared around the dark room as the damaged French doors creaked back and forth ominously in the night breeze. Lex wasn't there. Oh, that was bad. It was really bad, and he'd been stupid for thinking Lex would come up here. There was only one place he could be now. There'd be only one thing he'd be thinking about.
This time his backdraft was so strong it slammed Pamela's door shut all the way from the stairs, sent coats flying off the banister, overturned glasses in the kitchen. Clark flung open the pantry door and came to sudden halt, startled.

Lex was seated on the floor of the pantry, staring into the black of the open trap door. He glanced up at Clark, then slowly raised his right hand. Bessie's key gleamed at Clark from between Lex's index and middle fingers. "You should have taken it from me," he said calmly. "I nearly did it. Your trust is misplaced, Clark. It's badly misplaced, and I think it's time we reevaluate—"

Clark was on the floor hugging Lex to him before Lex could get another stupid word out. "Shut up," he breathed in Lex's ear, rocking him gently. "I love you, shut up." He shouldn't be saying that; he should be saying stuff about how Pamela was in a better place or how she wasn't hurting anymore. Lex's arms went around him. The key fell from his fingers and rattled on the wide pine floorboards. "Lex, I..." Clark groped for something to say that wasn't stupid, anything that would help, and came up empty. He bent to whisper in Lex's ear. "We don't have to maintain in the pantry, either."

Lex started to shake, then. For a second, Clark thought it was laughter, that bitter laughter that Lex summoned up when he had nothing else left. But it wasn't. Lex was crying. And he wasn't making a sound. And God, that was the scariest thing of the whole scary day.

Clark just held him, feeling stupid and helpless and what the hell do you do when the guy you want to get old with is beyond having nothing else left? God. Nobody should have to watch their mom die twice. "You're not alone," he muttered, hardly knowing what he was saying. "You'll never be alone, Lex."

Lex's forehead rested on Clark's shoulder. "She really liked you, you know," he whispered brokenly, the horrible shaking easing.

Clark swallowed, blinking hard. "I liked her, too. A lot. I'm glad I got to know her."

"So am I. Another unintended benefit of my father's God complex."

"That's not how I think of it, Lex."

"I'm...sorry. About the key."

"Lex, forget about the damn key. I know what you were thinking."

Silence. "Tell me."

"You were thinking...that if you lost one more person you loved, you'd go crazy."

Lex clutched him so hard that Clark knew it would have hurt anyone else. "Clark. I'm already there. I'm already—"

"No," Clark said flatly. He cradled Lex, kissing his cheek as Lex's grip loosened, and lowered him to lay Lex's head in his lap. "No, Lex." He wiped Lex's tears away. "You're not. Not now. I'd know if you were."

"And you'd tell me?"

"Haven't I always?"

That awful, bitter laugh came then. "Yes. You have."
Clark let himself breathe again. "We all go crazy sometimes, Lex. You've got more reasons to go there than anybody I've ever met."

Lex closed his eyes. "And you still want to get old with me?" He was barely audible.

"Yeah," Clark said gently, resting his hand on Lex's hot forehead.

"Still my boy?" Lex's voice broke.

"Aw, Lex." Clark bent down and kissed him. "Always."

Lex opened his eyes, and Clark almost flinched at what he saw there. "I want her back."

"Me, too."

"I want her back."

***

"They will be here by morning."

The sound of Eli's cell phone clicking shut made Jonathan jump; he nearly spilled his coffee on Lex's brand new sofa. Restraining an inappropriate oath, he sipped it down. "Good. I don't suppose you have any idea where—"

"They are in the pantry."

Jonathan glanced up at him, not sure if he was more startled by Eli's ability to read his mind, or the fact that Clark and Lex were in the pantry.

Eli met his gaze with a rueful shrug, barely visible in the dim light from the kitchen. "Alexander is not a man to make a display of his grief. Or his fear."

Jonathan grimaced. "That's not good. We need to get him out of there."

"I should leave that to the cricket, if I were you."

Jonathan sighed and slurped his coffee. Real coffee. Lex didn't keep that decaffeinated crap in his house. Martha would have his hide for it later, but right now it was the nectar of the gods. "He shouldn't have lost her, Eli. It's just...he's lost too much already. How much can a boy take?"

Eli turned away to stare out the living room windows into the dark. "As much as is required. So it has always been."

Jonathan set his mug down on the coffee table, irked. "Not everybody's a soldier."

"No." Eli's voice was quiet. "They are not. Until they must be."

"Not everybody must be. Hell, Eli, I've lived two-thirds of my life now and I've never had to go lethal on anybody's ass."

"You are a very fortunate man. I was a soldier by the time I was five."

Jonathan regarded Eli skeptically. "A prodigy, huh?"

Silence. "When I found my father dead in the street with the others, I ran home and hid. Under the
bed I shared with my brothers. They laughed at me, until a neighbor came with the news."

Jonathan groped for understanding. "Your father—"

"A friend of my father's was able to procure false papers, but only for two of us. I was the youngest. My brothers insisted that I travel to Palestine with our mother. They would join us later. They never joined us."

Jonathan understood, far too late. "God. Eli."

"On our way to the train station, our friend handed me a firearm. He said I must protect my mother now. I put the weapon in the pocket of my coat. I protected her."

"I didn't know that you—"

"Many times over the years I have returned to the town of my childhood. Many times I have asked questions, have searched the fields and woods. But there are too many graves, too many pits. My brothers are nowhere, and everywhere. My aunts, my uncles, my cousins. Nowhere, and everywhere."

"I am so damn sorry. I didn't realize—"


Jonathan was up and across the room before he realized what he was doing; he put his arm around Eli's shoulder and stood awkwardly by his side, trying not to look at Eli's wet face. "Just everywhere, Eli. They're all everywhere tonight."

***

Martha pulled up a chair to the other side of Pamela's bed, her eyes fixed on Siobhan Teskey's fingers as they moved down the length of her rosary. The woman's eyes were half-shut; her prayers no more than a whisper of breath. The dim light of the bedside lamp glistened on the beads.

"You're not a praying woman, Martha."

Startled, Martha raised her gaze to Teskey's pale face. "No, not really. Not since my mother died."

"I have been that angry." Teskey regarded her with a grave expression and red eyes.

Martha shifted uncomfortably. She'd never thought of herself as angry. "You've lost family, too."

Teskey smiled, but there was no humor in it. "I'm from Belfast."

It took a moment for Martha to understand. "Oh," she said faintly.

Teskey laid aside her rosary.

"Cumhthach labhras an lonsa, an t-olc do fhuar d'fheadarsa cídhe bé do théalaigh a theagh is fá éanaíbh do hairgeadh.

An t-olc fhuar íse an-nossa"
Martha didn't understand a word, but she could feel ancient mourning in the sounds. "Is that… Gaelic?"

"Yes. A poem from the 12th century, or so the scholars say. I think it's older.

*It is sadly the blackbird calls,*  
the wrong that is done him I know.  
The cowherd took his house  
and killed his little birds.

*The wrong done to him now*  
was also done to me.  
Well I understand you, blackbird,  
after the wreck of your house."

Martha felt her breath quicken. "Siobhan?"

"You're a fortunate woman, Martha Kent, to have your little birds." Siobhan met her gaze steadily. "Pamela understood this as well."

"Pamela." Martha folded her shaking hands and looked at the still form under the sheet. "Oh. She never said anything… Oh, my lord."

"A very fortunate woman."

"Yes, I am," Martha whispered, wondering how she could ever have forgotten the truth of that. She rose from her chair. "I need to find my son." She took a breath. "My sons."

Teskey nodded, and turned to look at Pamela. "It's a sore night, and a family should stay close."

"I'm so terribly sorry, Siobhan."

Teskey gave her that smile again. "Yes, I know. Thank you, Martha."

"I'll be back later."

Teskey nodded absently, smoothing the folds of the sheet that covered Pamela. "*If the oaks and stars could die for sorrow, it's a dark sky and a hard and naked earth we'd have this night.*"

Martha turned and fled.

***

Chloe Sullivan was full of shit. She was jealous. She'd never liked Lana. Jesus, all you had to do was *look* at Lana to see she was in trouble, or listen to her for five minutes. Pete squinted through the telescope. The lights were on inside the house now, but he could see nothing through the guest room window. She couldn't still be sleeping. Maybe something godawful was happening. Maybe Max and Moira had drugged her and were interrogating her. Or worse. Damn! What had Clark been thinking, leaving her alone with those two? He should have stayed…

Stayed. Here. Alone. Pete rubbed the back of his neck, scowling, and straightened to stretch his
back. There was no way Lana would hurt Clark, or anyone else. First, she had no reason to. Second, Lana couldn't hurt a fly even if she had a reason. Oh, hell. The only way this was going to make any kind of sense was to talk to Lana. Like, alone, without any international assassins around, fingering their thumbscrews.

Enough of this crap.

Pete clambered down the steps and strode past the Kent's truck and into the dark, heading for the kitchen door, but got no farther than a few steps before the sound of a crash and raised voices from inside the house brought him up short.

"Let go of me! You can't keep me here!"

Pete took off across the yard, wrenched open the back door and tumbled into the kitchen, only to be blocked by some overturned chairs. Everything on the kitchen table had been knocked over, the freezer door was hanging open for some jeebus-only-knows reason, kitchen chairs were everywhere, and there, in the middle of it all was Lana lying face-down on the floor, with Moira sitting on her.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Pete shouted, kicking the chairs out of his way. "Get off her!"

Moira eyed him with a sour expression. "My day is complete. Dudley Do-Right has arrived."

Lana turned her head to look up at him; her face was streaked with tears. "Pete, please, she's hurting me—"

"Oh, sweetie, if you think this is hurting—"

Pete charged Moira, making a wild grab at her arm, and found himself on his back staring at the ceiling before he knew which end was up.

"Playing with the kiddies, are we, Moira?"

Pete groped for a minute before he recognized the voice. Crap. Shit. Fuck! It was Max.

"Do not start with me! You're supposed to be on the perimeter." Moira stood up and pulled an openly weeping Lana to her feet.

Pete scrambled up and made another lunge at Moira, but Max seized the back of his collar and hauled him back. "Just cool your jets, lover. Moira, what the hell is going on here?"

Moira righted a chair and shoved Lana into it. "Oh nothing much. Check out who I found her calling." She snatched up a cell phone from the table and tossed it to Max, who caught it neatly with one hand and flipped it open.

Craning his neck, Pete managed to catch a glimpse of the most recent call, but the number meant nothing to him. It evidently meant something to Max, however, who regarded Lana with raised eyebrows.

"What?" Pete demanded, struggling to escape Max's grasp. "Who is it?"

Max righted another chair and sat Pete down so hard he grunted. "Our little princess has been talking to your friend Karloff."

Pete turned to stare at Lana in disbelief.
Max flipped the phone shut and tossed it back to Moira, looking thoroughly aggravated. "And more than she's talked to us, apparently. Damn it, Moira, you didn't search her?"

"With Mama Kent hovering like a—"

"It's not what you think!" Lana burst out. "It's not what you think at all!"

"What the hell could you have to say to Karloff?" Pete slammed his fist on the table, and Lana jumped. "Answer me!"

Lana looked at him pleadingly. "Pete, he said he could help."

"Oh, I'll bet he did! Are you crazy? Do you know who that guy is? He's a murderer! A murderer who gets his rocks off thinking about getting his hands on Clark and doing God knows what to him before he sells him to the highest bidder!"

"No," Lana said shakily. "You're wrong. He won't hurt Clark. He gave me his word."

"Oh dear oh me his word," Max said dryly, closing the freezer door. "Hear that, Moira?"

"I heard. Which, of course, explains why I caught her taking this out of the freezer." Moira hoisted a metal box, and Pete's stomach plummeted. That could only be one thing.

"What the fuck, Lana?" Pete knew he was shouting, and he didn't care. "Do you know what that is? Do you know what it could do to Clark?"

"He wants to destroy it," Lana whispered.

"I suppose you've seen that, too!"

"Pete. Enough." Max loomed over Lana. "There is no way you're as stupid as you're pretending to be. You're playing Hamilton against the clone. Why?"

"I'm not playing anybody. I'm trying to help—"

"Your boyfriend is dead meat," Moira said brutally. "Pretty soon he won't even remember who you are."

"No! It can be reversed, Dr. Hamilton—"

"Let me guess. He gave you his word, too."

Lana's gaze locked with Pete's, and something there made Pete lean away. "A man's word is his bond."

Pete scowled, uncertain. A man's word was his bond? "What?"

"What the hell are you playing at, girl?" Max's voice was low, now, low and deadly.

"The process can be reversed. The subjects must be saved."

This was too fucking much. "What the hell are you talking about?" Pete shouted at her. "Jesus Christ, Lana! You're risking your life, Clark's life, hell, all our lives! What the fuck are you doing?"

Lana tearful gaze went from face to face. "The moral imperative is clear. The experiment must be terminated. Both facilities must be shut down permanently."
"Oh," Moira breathed, stepping away. "Oh, Christ."

"Lana," Pete said shakily. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

Max laid a hand on his shoulder. "Lana's left the building, Pete," he said gently.

"Dr. Hamilton's actions are my responsibility. I should not have been swayed by Mr. Luthor's arguments. I knew better."

Moira knelt beside Lana's chair. "Who am I speaking to?"

Lana turned to look at her, tears continuing to roll down her cheeks. "Science unfettered by ethical constraints inevitably leads to disaster, and yet I convinced myself that opportunities for research I couldn't dream of in a traditional academic setting were worth the risk."

"Oh, God." Pete staggered up out of his chair and backed away. No. No, this was not happening.

"Mr. Luthor convinced me that there were magnificent discoveries waiting to be made by men who were determined enough to defy convention. All my instincts told me this attitude was dangerous to all concerned, but I could not resist."

"Who are you?" Max asked softly.

"Mr. Luthor meant well. He believed in this research. He could not have foreseen—"

"Who the hell are you?" Pete yelled, kicking his chair.

Lana blinked and looked up at him with a blank expression. "Dickinson. Dr. Michael Dickinson."

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Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which we have mourning at Lex's farmhouse, one welcome guest, and two unwelcome ones. Always things can get worse. This is what makes life interesting.

"It's too quiet," Lex whispered. "Is everyone—"

"Everybody's still here, Lex." Clark bent over him, stroking his forehead. "Nobody's leaving you alone tonight."

There had been a time, not all that long ago, when being alone would have been all Lex wanted. Now the thought was more than he could stand. Where the hell was Lex Luthor? Who the hell was Lex Luthor? He took Clark's hand and held it between both his own. "I can't think, Clark."

"Stop trying."

"There are...things that need to be done. Arrangements..."

"Eli is taking care of all that."

Lex took a breath. "I love you."

Clark smiled. "I love—"

"Shut up, I'm practicing normal boyfriends. I love you. I love—"

Clark cut him off with a kiss. "Weirdo. You don't need practice."

"Clark, am I lying on the floor of my pantry?"

Clark rolled his eyes. "Ah, yeah, mastermind. Points for noticing."

"I need practice. Why am I in the pantry?"

"Because this is where you stopped yourself from doing something stupid."

"I see. And why have I stayed in the pantry?"

"Because you needed some privacy, and we don't need to maintain in the pantry."

Lex sighed. "And you believe this is normal behavior?"

"Define normal."

"One: conforming with or constituting a norm or standard or level or type or social norm."

"Um—"

"Two: in accordance with scientific laws."
"Well, the gravity's still working in here."

"Three: being approximately average or within certain limits in intelligence and development."

"Can we separate intelligence and development?"

"Four: convention; something regarded as a normative example."

"You and convention have never got along very well, Lex."

"Five: forming a right angle."

Clark started laughing; it made Lex's aching throat relax and the steel bands around his chest fall away. "Oh, come on. It does not mean that."

"It does."

"You are so lying."

"An obscure meaning, certainly, but a meaning nonetheless. You asked me to define."

"Did you memorize a dictionary or something?"

"A photographic memory has its perks." And its disadvantages. Fortunately, the sound of a cupboard being opened and pans being moved distracted Lex from his most recent memories of the little room upstairs; he took another deep breath, and reached up to stroke Clark's hair. "Your mother is resorting to her most deeply-engrained coping mechanism."

"Feeding us?" Clark smiled down at him. "When was the last time you ate?"

"I don't remember. What day is it?"

"Friday. No—" Clark glanced at his watch. "Saturday, now."

Breakfast, yesterday. Before his entire universe had changed yet again. These events seemed to be occurring with increasing frequency. At this rate, another cataclysm must be imminent. Lex grimaced. Eli Cohen had definitely infiltrated his thought processes, such as they were.

Clark nudged him. "Come on. Let's get you fed."

Lex swallowed against a dry throat and nodded, letting Clark help him to his feet. Clark picked up the key, smiled, and offered it to Lex. Lex tried to summon an exasperated glare, and failed utterly. "Jiminy, exactly what part of the phrase 'your trust is misplaced' have you failed to—"

"Shut up," Clark murmured, slipping the key back into Lex's shirt pocket. "Shut up, you big dumbass. You're the only one here who's not getting it."

"Clark—" Lex was cut off by the sound of a knock at the door, but before he could respond, it swung open. Martha regarded them with red eyes for a fraction of a second; something in her gaze made Lex step toward her in alarm. "Martha?"

Martha drew a shaky breath and threw both arms around Lex's neck, murmuring something incoherent that sounded absurdly like "little birds."

"Mom?" Clark was instantly close, and Martha pulled one of her arms from Lex's neck to wrap it around her son, her forehead resting on Lex's shoulder.
Lex held her in confusion, shooting a desperate look at Clark, but he looked as lost as Lex was. "Martha, what is it? Has something—"

"I love you both." She sounded breathless. "You know that, don't you? You're my boys."

Lex rested his head against hers, some dim understanding dawning. "Yes," he whispered, amazed that he did. He knew it. "We know that."

"We love you, too, Mom. What—" Lex stepped on Clark's foot, and Clark fell silent.

They stayed huddled together for a few seconds, then Martha let out a shaky sigh and pulled back, wiping her cheeks and getting her game face on. "Would you mind helping me getting some soup and sandwiches together? I assume you have food in your house, Lex Luthor."

"I do," Lex said with a small smile. "I was trained by the best, after all."

***

Two seconds out of the shower and her cell was ringing, and god damn Chloe knew who it was. What she didn't know was why the hell she was hurrying down the hall toward her bedroom with a towel wrapped her, praying that her sleeping father wouldn't hear anything before she could answer it. She should have turned it the hell off. That's what voicemail was for, and voicemail was all Pete Ross deserved today. Tonight. This morning. Whatever.

Chloe closed her bedroom door behind her and snatched up her cell, flipping it open. "I don't believe your stones. I really don't. It's one o'clock. In the morning. Ante. Meridiem. I just got out of the shower and I've had about three hours of sleep in the past two days and I'm not talking to you and you call me? The world had better be ending. I'm serious."

Silence.

Chloe sighed and sank to sit on the end of her bed. "Fine. What is it?"

"You were right."

Chloe felt a chill that had nothing to do with being sopping wet touch the back of her neck. Pete had never sounded like that before. "What?"

"You were right. About Lana."

Maybe the world was ending. "What do you mean? Has something happened?" Pete started laughing. It was horrible. It wasn't really laughing, it was… "Pete, talk to me!"

"She's gone, Chloe. She's…she's like Whitney. Luthor's fucking mad scientists downloaded some guy named Dickinson into her head."

Chloe tried to say something, but nothing came out. Nothing.

"One minute she's Lana, next she's Dickinson, next she's…both."

"Oh, my God," Chloe said faintly. "I didn't…She seemed…I just talked to her yesterday. She was a little weird, but I thought…you know. She was stressed out over Whitney. Are you sure—"

"She's down in the Kent's kitchen right now explaining particle physics to Moira," Pete said, his voice all over the place. "She's gone, Chloe. Even when she's Lana, she's not. You know?"
"I'm sorry," Chloe whispered, hugging her damp towel to her. "I'm so sorry, Pete. Maybe...maybe there's some way to undo this. Maybe—"

"You were right. Score one for special girl powers."

Chloe's gut twisted. "I didn't want to be right! I was afraid I was right."

"Yeah." Pete was breathing too hard. "I know. Sorry."

"I'm coming over."

"There's nothing you can do here. I think you'd better go over to Lex's place."

Chloe blinked. "Why? What...oh. Oh."

"Yeah. About an hour ago."

"Clark called?"

"No. Max called Eli. They're still on the phone. Eli says Clark and Lex aren't up to talking."

Chloe tried to imagine Lex Luthor not being up to talking and failed miserably. "That's bad."

"Yeah."

"That's scary bad."

"You should go, Chloe. You'll know what to say. I'm no good like that."

Oh, this was absolutely unnatural. "You'd know what to say once you got there. It's Clark, Pete."

"I need to stay here for a while. Tell Clark...tell him I'm sorry about Pamela. And I'll talk to him later, okay? He'll understand. And tell Lex...fuck, you'll know what to tell Lex."

"Okay. Okay. I'll get some food together and go."

"Food?" Pete almost sounded like his old bitchy self for a second. "What do you need food for?"

Chloe sighed. "It's what you do, Pete. Just let me handle it. And...tell Lana...I mean...oh, hell."

"Yeah." Pete's voice got thick. "I'll see if I can get a message to her."

***

"And so we've been thinking, what about Bessie? What if there's something inside her that—"

"Whoa. Clark. Slow down." Jonathan forced his mouthful of ham sandwich down, casting a quick glance at Lex. The boy hadn't said a word in the past half hour. That was positively...unnatural.

"Who or what is Bessie?"

"He means the ship," Lex said flatly, fishing something out of his pocket. He laid a familiar metallic object on the kitchen table, and returned to his soup. Damn, Jonathan had never seen anyone so crazy about Martha's chicken noodle soup before. The boy was beyond weird. Well, there was always one in every family.

"Oh," Martha breathed, reaching out to touch the key. "You think—"
"I think it's bad idea," Lex said, his eyes fixed on his spoon. Clark sighed.

"It's a hell of a Hail Mary," Jonathan said softly, watching as Martha picked up the key carefully, as if it were some precious object. "There's been no sign that the thing isn't so much scrap metal, let alone something that could help us."

"But if it worked," Martha murmured, turning the key over in her hands.

Lex raised his eyes to Martha. "That's a gargantuan 'if'. I find it difficult to believe that even technology that advanced crash-landed without sustaining damage."

"It might," Clark said, low and insistent. "It might have been built for a landing like that."

"Whatever is inside might be dangerous," Lex continued, as if Clark hadn't spoken.

"Not to me," Clark returned, and Jonathan could see the Kent obstinacy rise in the boy's eyes.

"That's more than we know, Clark." Martha was firm, and Jonathan let loose a little sigh of relief and took a bite of his sandwich. Martha would nip this idea in the bud. "If it's damaged, it could be dangerous to all of us."

"Even if it's not damaged," Lex said quietly, finishing his soup. "We would have no idea how to operate it."

"They wouldn't make it hard. They'd want us to figure it out." Clark shoved his plate away in obvious annoyance.

"Who's they?" Jonathan demanded, abandoning the idea of eating when it was clearly comic book hour.

Clark looked at the table. "I don't know. Whoever sent me here."

Martha and Lex locked eyes for a moment. "I'm not comfortable with trusting the motives of whoever sent you here, Clark."

"You think...you think my people were monsters or something?" Clark's voice wavered as he locked his gaze on the table. Lex rested his hand on Clark's shoulder in silence.

"That's not what she thinks," Jonathan said emphatically, although he'd had a few unpleasant thoughts in that neighborhood himself. What kind of person seals a toddler in a spaceship and shoots it through space to God-knows-where? What the hell could justify that?

"No, that isn't what I mean." Martha shot Jonathan a look that told him she'd had a few thoughts in that neighborhood, too. "I just mean that we don't know why someone sent you here. We don't know who they are or what they want."

"Whatever they want, they'd have to keep me alive to do it," Clark said, his voice rising. "There could be a weapon in there, something we could scare the crap out of Karloff with."

Jonathan groaned inwardly. His old man had always told him he'd get his own back when he had kids. Karma. You can't run and you can't hide. Clark was every bit as stubborn as Jonathan had ever been. "I don't know about you, but that idea scares the crap out of me."

"I share your concerns." Lex's voice was quiet. "So did Pamela. She thought it was a bad idea."

"That's good enough for me," Jonathan said, locking eyes with the chip off the old block. Clark
sighed and slumped back in his chair.

"But we are running low on options, and the situation is…deteriorating." Lex was barely audible.

"This should be our plan of last resort," Martha said, turning the key over and over in her hands. Jonathan rested his head in his hand and eyed her wearily. Oh, he could just see the wheels turning. Time to keep an eye on Calamity Jane.

"A plan of last resort is generally one in which the chances of success at least match the chances of disaster," Lex said dryly. "And preferably exceed them. I wouldn't recommend relying on Bessie for either."

"But you think there's a possibility of success," Martha said, her voice soft as her fingers slid across the metal.

Lex gave her a weak, crooked smile. "I haven't thought about much else for weeks now." He glanced at Clark, and his smile faded. "Clark?" Clark was staring through the door into the living room with wide eyes.

Jonathan reached over and plucked the key from Martha's fingers. "Okay, that's enough of that. That busted toaster is no basket to put all our eggs in, that's for damn sure. And I don't think—"

"No," Clark said faintly.

Jonathan looked at him, startled. Now what?

"Clark."

Lex clutched Clark's shoulder, his face drawn. "Tell—"

The deafening wail of a security alarm pierced Jonathan's eardrums and he clapped his hands over his ears, but he could still hear his son loud and clear.

"Son of a bitch!" Wrenching free of Lex's grasp, Clark streaked out of the kitchen at top speed. Lex followed him, hitting the emergency light switch on his way out of the kitchen and plunging the entire first floor into darkness.

Jonathan heard the door being wrenched open, heard it bang mercilessly against the wall, and wondered wearily, and not for the first time, if Lex was properly insured.

"Cricket!" Eli's shout of alarm brought Jonathan and Martha to their feet; Martha darted through the darkness into the living room with Jonathan hard on his heels. Jonathan was just in time to see Eli moving at full ninja-speed through the wide-open front door, which was still quivering in protest at its rough treatment.

Martha paused in the doorway, took one long look, and closed it, blotting out even her silhouette in the darkness. "Lex, get away from the window!"

"I'll fucking kill him," Lex snarled, staring out the front windows onto the lawn.

Jonathan pushed him aside, only to see Clark coming to a halt in front of Chloe Sullivan, who had been marching across the lawn with a baking dish in her hands and the wrath of God in her face. The claxons fell mercifully silent. "Good Lord. Doesn't that girl have a remote…"Jonathan's voice died in his throat as Clark walked past Chloe toward the drive, toward the limousine parked there, toward the two figures standing beside it.

Lex bolted toward the door, but Jonathan grabbed his arm. "Don't! It's just what he wants. Eli will
handle him."

Lex tried to pull away again, but Jonathan felt rather than saw Martha get in his way. "Lex. Stay with us. Clark is safe with Eli."

Lex went still, panting, and Jonathan stared out the window, longing for his shotgun.

***

Chloe took the turn onto Lex's lane and slowed to a crawl. It was dark and narrow and as creepy as the last few days had been, and she did not want to wind up in a ditch or hitting a tree. Apart from the delightful prospect of hiking up the lane through what appeared to be a forest, which for all she knew was inhabited by a fleet of attack choppers, there was always the often-threatened remand to Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows hanging over her head for wrecking the car. Nuns trumped punctuality. Hell, nuns trumped attack choppers, if it came to that.

Chloe grimaced and took the final curve at a snail's pace, then slammed on the brakes in a panic. Oh. Shit. Oh, holy mother of God. There was Lex Luthor's limousine, and there was Lex Luthor's chick-bodyguard, leaning against Lex Luthor's limousine, and there was what was passing for Lex Luthor these days, sitting on the roof of Lex Luthor's limousine, smoking a cigarette like he was in Lex Luthor's living room and not in the middle of the woods a stone's throw from the real Lex Luthor.

It was all she could do not to try to pull a u-turn, despite the risk of creepy trees and attack choppers. Chloe took a deep breath. She could do this. She could at least warn everybody at the house that this twofer was within arms' length of the security perimeter. You know, by accident. Luthor didn't know that she knew anything. She was just sweet little Chloe Sullivan, coming to comfort her grieving friend with her father's lasagna dinner (and wouldn't there be hell to pay when he found that missing, grieving friend or not). She parked the car beside the limo and turned off the engine.

She saw Mercy give Luthor an inquiring look, but he just smiled and shook his head. Well, okay. She wasn't going to get shot, at least not right away. Yanking on the oven mitts, she picked up the extremely hot casserole dish of lasagna and fumbled with the door. Mercy approached her with what Chloe construed, perhaps uncharitably, as an extremely bitchy little smile on her face, and opened the car door for her.

"Thanks." Chloe climbed out of the car. "I don't think we've met."

"Mercy Graves," Mercy replied, shutting the door behind her. "Mr. Luthor's bodyguard."

"I didn't know he had a bodyguard, but I'm not surprised he needs one," Chloe replied in what she hoped was a breezy tone. "I'm Chloe Sullivan. Hello, Lex."

"Chloe Sullivan." Luthor smiled. Lionel's smile. Clark was right. There was no trouble telling the difference. "It's been a while."

"I haven't suffered." Chloe returned tartly, uncomfortably aware of Mercy behind her as she approached the limo.

Luthor chuckled and slid off the roof to land neatly on the road, like a cat. "Now, Chloe. I thought we agreed to let bygones be bygones."

"You and my father agreed to let bygones be bygones. I don't do bygones with pricks who try to foreclose on us."
"Ouch. That's not very nice."

"So who got to your face before I did? It looks like a street-cleaner parked on it with the brushes going."

"Little girl, watch your mouth," Mercy said in a soft, menacing tone.

"It's all right, Mercy." Luthor was still chuckling. "Chloe and I are old friends. Aren't we, Chloe?"

Chloe opened her mouth to tell him exactly what size prick he was, but changed her mind. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"One might ask you the same question."

Chloe hesitated for a nanosecond, trying to determine if that bit of information would give the creetastic wonder an advantage. "There's been a death in Clark's family, if it's any of your business."

Luthor's face changed; he glanced toward the house, jaw set. "Pamela? Pamela's dead?"

For one fleeting moment, Chloe saw something in his eyes; a flash of something, and she knew she'd seen what Clark had talked about. That piece of Lex. It was gone before she could study it. "Yes. Clark's very upset. I came over to keep him company."

"I didn't realize that Clark knew Pamela that well."

"Well, now you're enlightened." Chloe turned toward the house and blasted her loudest whistle, guaranteed to shatter illegally cloned eardrums at a distance of twenty feet.

"Surely," Luthor said between clenched teeth, "You have a perimeter control device, being such a good friend of the family."

"I'm a good friend of Clark's family, not Mr. Cohen's." Like she was stupid enough to take that thing out in front of this weasel. "Mr. Cohen's privacy is serious business."

"You don't say," Mercy drawled.

Luthor ignored her. "Haven't you ever wondered about Mr. Cohen, Chloe?"

"I wonder about everybody. Who was it who hit you, again? I want to send him a card."

"Cohen's a dangerous man."

"Yeah, that's what Mr. Cohen says, too. All the time. So far the only danger I've seen is to the weeds on the football field. 'You see this weed-wacker, Miss Sullivan? Do not touch it. It is dangerous. But so am I dangerous. Do not touch me, either.' Sometimes I think he keeps booze in his tool shed."

Mercy snickered, and this time Luthor gave her a look that reminded Chloe exactly who she was playing with. Mercy fell silent.

"When you get inside, I want you to tell Clark to come out here." Luthor fixed her with an icy blue stare. "He's not returning my calls. None of them are."

Chloe glared back at him. "Are you nuts? Did you hear what I just said? His friend just died. He's in no shape to be dealing with you."
Luthor stepped closer. "He'll be in even worse shape if he doesn't hear what I've come to tell him."

Chloe clutched her lasagna dish. "Are you threatening him? God, I don't believe you! You never were his friend, were you? All that bullshit—" She gasped as Luthor lunged forward to seize her upper arms in painfully strong hands, shouting into her face like a lunatic.

"I am a better friend to Clark Kent than any of you! You have no idea what's going on here, Chloe. And trust me, you don't want to. But if you want Clark Kent to make it through the next couple days alive, you'll send him out here. Now go!" Luthor gave her a rough shove that sent her staggering over the unmarked security perimeter, setting off every light and alarm on the place.

Chloe turned to walk toward the house, determined not to run, blinking in the harsh light, and wishing to God she'd shoved the damn lasagna down the asshole's pants. The front door was yanked open, and a strange blurry object like somebody's home video of a UFO hurtled toward her. Chloe drew breath, not to scream or anything – she most definitely did not do screaming – but Clark solidified in front of her before she could make a sound. She stared up at him, knowing her mouth was hanging open and not caring.

"Did he hurt you?" Clark snapped.

"Wow," Chloe said faintly.

"Chloe!"

Chloe snapped out of it. So that was Clark in supersonic mode. He was so going to take her along when all this was over. "No! I'm fine. He wants to talk to you. And you could have warned me that he's an obnoxious insane murderer-clone. You know, like a friend does."

Clark almost smiled. Almost. "Get inside as fast as you can."

Eli strode past them, gun drawn. "We are in your debt, Miss Sullivan, for the warning. Kindly take cover immediately."

Well, it was about time Eli started appreciating her. "Clark—"

"Chloe, go." Clark stalked after Eli, his eyes fixed on Karloff.

Chloe sighed and trudged toward the house, glancing over her shoulder. If she knew the look on Clark's face – and she did know the look – Mr. My-Mother-Was-a-Test-Tube was about to get his ass kicked, and at this point she heartily approved. She saw the front door open enough for Martha to stick her head out and gesture urgently. Chloe broke into a trot, glancing over her shoulder for one last look; Eli and Clark were squaring off with Mercy and Karloff.

Chloe grimaced. She really had to invest in some decent surveillance equipment.

***

Eli flung an arm across Clark's chest, barring his progress. It was not what he wished to do. He wished that Clark would dismember the creature; he wished that he himself would provide the coup de grace by firing five shots into its then partially-decapitated head. But this was neither the time nor the place, and the harm to Clark might be worse than to the thing standing entirely too close for Eli's liking. "This is a house in mourning. You desecrate it by your presence. Leave at once, or I shall deprive you of the use of your kneecaps." Eli saw Mercy roll her eyes, and comforted himself with the certain knowledge that Miss Graves had made the same tactical error that Jonathan and Lionel Luthor had: they thought his threats empty.
Luthor flicked a glance in Eli's direction, his expression for once unreadable. "Chloe told me about Pamela. I'm sorry, Clark. I didn't know you were so close."

Clark stared at him wordlessly; Eli could feel the boy quivering with anger.

"I had to come. You are in more danger than you have ever—"

"Yeah, the attack helicopter, the gun, Dr. Hamilton; is there any other damn threat to life as we know it that you and Lionel have set loose?"

Clark's voice held a harsh, strained tone Eli had never heard before; the pressure was pushing the young soldier beyond his limits.

Luthor raised an eyebrow. "Quite a few, actually, but congratulations on your intelligence network. Perhaps now you'll see reason and allow me—"

"I know who you are," Clark said flatly.

Luthor's mouth took a grim twist. "You read the journals. I really didn't think you'd demonstrate that much sense. Although considering it was he who committed murder and not me, it might be more accurate to say you know who Alexander is."

"He didn't kill anybody, and I've always known who he is. You're the only one who doesn't know. You don't even know who you are."

"Clark, people are trying to kill you! Don't you think—"

"I bent over the side of the crib; the top rail dug into my stomach, but I didn't care. Lowering it would make too much noise. I pressed the plastic over Julian's face—"

"Shut up!" Luthor's voice was a snarl, but he composed himself immediately. "This is hardly the time for a dramatic reading! When Lionel Luthor wants something, he gets it, and—"

Clark's laugh was all ice. "God, you're stupid. But you're right about that. He wanted Julian dead. He had Williams' Syndrome, and he wanted him dead. So now he is. Simple, right?"

"Williams' Syndrome?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you?"

Luthor flashed a forced smile. "I'm truly impressed by the extent of your denial, but that little exercise in fratricide is Alexander's memory. I—"

'I bent over the side of the crib; the top rail dug into my stomach."

Luthor stared blankly.

"You do understand that Lionel downloaded his memories into your oversized egghead on top of Lex's, right? You understand discrete matrices, genius? I can't believe you just assumed that was Lex. What, did you think he was on stilts when he bent over the side of the crib? Christ. You are SO. STUPID."

Luthor took a step back, breathing hard. Had this thing been any other living being, Eli would have pitied him. Fortunately, he was not anyone else, and Eli felt nothing but satisfaction. "Lionel's memories…Julian…"
"Oh, and there's a dead man's switch, too," Clark informed him, his voice becoming increasingly savage. "You get that, don't you? That means if – I mean when Lionel dies, he takes over. And you just get flushed."

"He killed…Julian."

"Clark oversimplifies the process," Eli cut in coolly, noting Mercy's sharp glance at Luthor. "There is a long period of excruciating side effects. An examination of the example of Mr. Fordman may be instructive."

Luthor went a whiter shade of pale. "Fordman…"

"Mr. Luthor's first successful attempt at the process, if success you call it. I doubt Mr. Fordman characterizes it so. The agony of feeling one's mind, one's self, slipping away over weeks, months, perhaps years—"

"That is not going to happen!"

"Oh, it will." Eli smiled. "And I find myself admiring the elegance of Mr. Luthor's design, despite my better judgment. For if you take your revenge, you will slowly cease to exist, and he will inevitably inhabit the body you claim as yours. And yet, if you stay your hand to extend your life, you will go slowly mad, and then he will kill you whenever it suits him. Madmen are so easily dispatched. Yes. Yes, it is quite elegant."

"Fuck his elegance," Luthor rasped. "And fuck you."

"I sympathize with the awkwardness of your position."

"This is all a tissue of lies. Who put you up to this, Clark? This relic? Or was it that superfluous loser squatting in some palais in the Loire?"

Eli allowed himself a contented smile. "Denial is common in such circumstances, yes? Perhaps—"

Luthor lunged forward.

***

"If he takes so much as one step in Clark's direction, I'm going to break his neck."

Chloe shot a startled look over her shoulder at the savage malice in Lex's voice; for one second, he had sounded like Karloff. And looked like him. She felt Martha's arm going around her shoulders. "Eli will handle this, Lex."

Martha was firm, but Chloe could have sworn there was a little shake in her voice nonetheless. She looked from face to face, and saw nothing but people about to break. She had thought it couldn't get any worse for them. And now this.

"No one is killing anyone tonight." Jonathan's hand tightened on Lex's shoulder as they stared through the living room windows at the ongoing drama on the lawn. "No one is killing anyone period."

"Lex," Martha said in a gentler tone. "Chloe is here."

The resemblance to Karloff drained from Lex's face; he turned to glance at her. "So I see. Are you all right?"
"I'm fine."

"You could have gotten yourself killed again." The strain in his voice was unmistakable; his gaze was torn between Chloe and the window.

"It's what you do," Chloe snapped. "Were you raised in a barn?" Oh, that was bad; that wasn't what you said to the bereaved, especially when their boyfriends were squaring off with serial killers and the entire universe was going to hell in a cloned handbasket.

"Unfortunately, no. I take it I've committed a Kansan faux pas?"

"Lex," Martha said, fixing him with a look that made Chloe glad she was on the woman's good side. "The appropriate response is 'Thank you for coming.'"

Lex met Martha's gaze, his mouth slowly twisting into a grim smile. "Thank you for coming, Chloe. You're sure tall, fair and redundant didn't leave any bruises? That was quite a shove."

Jonathan snarled quietly.

"No damage." Chloe hesitated, then barreled ahead. "I'm sorry about Pamela, Lex. So is Pete."

Lex gave her another odd smile. "Thank you," he said softly. He turned back to the window, blinking rapidly.

Oh, damn. Damn, if she saw Lex Luthor cry tonight that would be it. There had to be a way out of this. There had to be a way to scare the ever-loving crap out of that creepazoid out there. "I'll take this back to the kitchen," she said softly to Martha. "And start some fresh coffee."

Martha flashed her a smile and dropped an absent kiss on her cheek. "Thank you, sweetie." She wandered back to stand beside Lex, her gaze locked on the figures on the lawn. Chloe could actually hear Clark and Karloff yelling, although it was impossible to understand what they were saying.

Sighing, Chloe turned away from the entertainment du jour and made her way into the kitchen. She slid the lasagna dish into the oven and set it on warm, then took the pot from the coffee maker and turned toward the sink.

And that's when she saw it. Lying there, just lying there, all gleamy on Lex Luthor's kitchen table. It was as if God Almighty had parted the clouds and dropped it in front of her.

Chloe sprinted to the table and snatched it up, slapping the coffee pot onto the table. It was real. And it had to be what she thought it was -- it was the same kind of metal Bessie was sporting, and the perfect shape to fit in that slot in her side.

They had the key? These idiots had Bessie's key and they weren't using it? When they were surrounded with clones and mad scientists and attack helicopters? Oh, sweet mother of God, what were they thinking? That ship had to have computers and weapons and God knew what-all -- it could kick Lionel Luthor and his monster to Mars and back! And it was probably programmed to obey Clark -- it had brought him here, right?

Maybe they had tried it and it hadn't worked. No. Clark would have said something. Then again, Clark hadn't said anything about having the damn key, either, so that proved nothing. Chloe drew a breath. They were all fried, just fried; could anyone blame them with all this going on? They weren't thinking straight. Well, she was. And she was going to do some science.
Chloe strode to into the panty and heaved open the trap door to the cellar.

***

Clark watched Luthor wriggle helplessly as he dangled him over his head by the lapels of his expensive suit jacket. He looked like a bug pinned to a card. Clark briefly considered pinning Luthor to something, then thought better of it.

"Put me down," Luthor rasped, staring down at Clark with wild, wide eyes.

Clark watched him squirm. "Why?"

"Stay where you are, please, Miss Graves."

Eli’s cool tone steadied Clark a little. Just a little.

"Put him down!" Mercy snapped.

"I came here to help you, you damned idiot!" Luthor snarled. "And all I get in return—"

"Is the truth." Clark casually tossed him onto the hood of the limousine, relishing both the metallic thud and the grimace of discomfort on Luthor's face. "Now get the hell off Eli's property before we call the Sheriff."

Luthor scrambled off the car, pale and wild. "This is a mistake, Clark."

"Yeah, well. I've made enough of them not to be afraid of it anymore." Clark strode around the front of the car in Luthor's direction, enjoying the sight of a decidedly rattled Karloff backing away. Mercy darted around the back to open the limo's passenger door.

"We should be allies. We have the same enemy. Lionel Luthor will—"

"You. Are not. Getting it." Clark stopped, toe-to-toe with the…the creature. Yes. He leaned forward, staring into eyes that no longer seemed familiar in the slightest. "You are Lionel Luthor."

Luthor's lips parted slightly; he stared back at Clark in obvious shock.

"All his memories. All his craziness. All his…his fucking evil, that's been downloaded into you. It's been part of you from the very beginning – why the hell else would you have done all this? Murder? Poisoning our entire town? Trying to turn me into your boy-toy? Beating up women?"

Luthor actually twitched. "No. No, I'm not—"

"Thought I'd forgotten what you did to Pamela, didn't you? God, I should—"

"That wasn't-- I'm not him!"

"Pretty soon you won't even remember you were anyone else. Whatever isn't Lionel will just cease to exist—"

"No!"

"And Lionel Luthor will be walking around in your body."

"I am Lex Luthor!"
"You're nobody. And soon you won't even be that." Clark straightened. "Now go, before I break something you need."

Drawing a ragged breath, Luthor threw himself blindly into the back seat of the limo. Mercy, eyeing Clark with something akin to respect, slammed the door shut behind him.

And is if on cue, the ground shook. A low, uneven hum started to build; Clark whirled in the direction of the noise. The metallic cellar doors were rattling on their hinges. The **cellar doors**?

"I would recommend a hasty departure, Miss Graves," Eli said coolly, gesturing with his Glock as if he were directing traffic.

Mercy dove into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Beresford Lane," Luthor shouted over the noise. He pointed at Clark. "Don't think this childish trick--"

"Leave!"

"This isn't over! I--" Luthor was cut off as Mercy floored it, driving roughly over the lawn to pull a u-turn back onto the drive and roar off into the night.

Eli watched the retreat for a fraction of a second, then whirled to address Clark. "What in the name of all that is holy--"

"It's coming from the cellar," Clark said shakily, watching as light flooded through the cracks around the cellar doors. God. It couldn't be. It couldn't be...

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Chloe knelt and ran her hands over the cool metal of the ship, noting their nervous tremor with annoyance. What could happen? Either it wouldn't work, in which case duh, no hum no foul, or it would, in which case...what? It would hum and light up, presumably. It had to be run by a computer, right? Probably the most freaking brilliant computer this planet had ever seen. And logically, there must be a way to communicate with it. An interface. Well, maybe a way for **Clark** to communicate with it, she conceded reluctantly. After all, she didn't speak Martian. So once she got it working, Clark would have to get his Martian ass down here and put in his password or whatever. They could make this work, and once they did Lionel and his science project wouldn't dare come near any of the Kents again.

"Just so we understand each other," Chloe muttered, "you do have the specs for phasers on your hard drive, right? Or an equally scary equivalent? Because that's what we need right now."

Chloe lifted the key to the octagonal-shaped indented area on Bessie's surface, convinced as she did so that she felt an almost magnetic tug as it came close. "That's my girl," she breathed. "You be a good spaceship, now. You--" She slipped the key into the slot. "Talk to us nice."

The ship vibrated gently under her fingers, and a low, uneven hum began to build.

"Yes," Chloe crowed in soft triumph. "Come on, come on, come **on**, you can do it!" Oh, Clark and Lex would love this! The answer to all their problems in one package the size of a VW bug.

Red and blue light, dim at first, then brighter, began to fill each crack and crevice of the mechanism's surface, and a harsh sound erupted over the mechanical hum. Some instinct Chloe couldn't define made her pull her hands away from the machine. That had sounded almost...vocal. And it wasn't a
nice voice, either.

"H-hello?"

"AHLO." Was it really trying to talk? It definitely didn't sound very happy. A fleeting vision of the HAL 9000 darted at her mind's eye; she rose to her feet and took a step back. It was always possible that this had been a bad idea. Playing with space junk that said shit like *I'm sorry, I can't do that, Dave* and *We are Nomad* could reasonably be considered a bad idea, awesome notwithstanding.

She cleared her throat. "Look, if it's a bad time—"

Something like the sonic boom she'd once heard at an air show shook her, the floor, and everything around her, and a mass of what felt like hot, stinging air lifted her off her feet and flung her backward against the cold cellar wall. She slid down to lie on the floor, pointlessly fighting unconsciousness as the ship rose, leveled itself, and hovered in its alcove, its red and blue latticework of light now blinding in its intensity. "LUKAFIZAHBADTYM," it fairly screeched.

Chloe let her eyes close.

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