

# Some Things Are Meant to Be

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: A painful experience has made Clark fight his destiny, but he finally allows himself to pursue his dream of being a reporter. Despite his intentions to restrict himself, however, he finds out that some things are meant to be.

**Rating Explanation:** This story is rated PG-13 for mild language, mature themes, heavy angst, some violence, and mild sensuality.

**Disclaimer:** I don't own *Lois and Clark* (or the plots, situation, or dialogue taken from the TV series — in particular, I use a lot from the Pilot episode, though in most cases the dialogue isn't exact). I also don't own *Smallville* — which has been a bit of inspiration in a few places — or Superman or any of the works the fic references.

**Author's Thanks:** First off, thanks to my GE, Amy, for her great help in preparing this fic for the archive. Second, many thanks to KittandChips for helping me get this fic off the ground and for suggesting the present title. A hundred thousand thanks to Female Hawk, my wonderful beta reader. She not only helped smooth out rough sentences, but she also helped in-depth with several scenes extensively. This whole fic works a whole lot smoother than it did at first thanks to her, and I really appreciate all the work she put into it. Finally, thanks to DW for being so helpful with all of the South Africa stuff!

**Author's Notes:** Please forgive me if there are any historical or scientific inaccuracies. I did use <http://www.wikihow.com/Treat-a-Bullet-Wound> as a source for information on gunshot wounds, and I used Wikipedia for some information on Elvis Presley, and the chapter titles and the fic's title are from songs sung by Elvis (though they may not be ones he popularized himself). Both constructive criticism and general feedback are welcome.

**Notes on South Africa:** The Rand Afrikaans University was a real university, and it is now formed into the University of Johannesburg and located about 20 miles away from the Lion Park (<http://www.lion-park.com/contact/>). The university courtyard is my creation. I've taken a few liberties with the South Africa stuff, but you probably won't notice unless you're well acquainted with South Africa. I do want to note, however, that because of my South African setting for part of the story, I'm setting this story further forward than *Lois and Clark* normally is (not in a "futuristic" sense or a "they're older" sort of way, just that they were born later for certain scenarios to work better).

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*Like a river flows  
Surely to the sea,  
Darling, so it goes —  
Some things are meant to be.  
— "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You"*

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## Chapter 1: Trouble

*If you're looking for trouble,  
You came to the right place.*

*If you're looking for trouble,  
Just look right in my face.  
— "Trouble"*

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In the big city, everyone was a shadow on the ground.

As long as there was light, there would be light's antithesis: the shadow. But the life of a shadow wasn't an enviable one. Shadows had a sort of vague presence, and they came in varying lengths and shapes, yet they were always ignored and walked all over. No one ever tried to make out a shadow's features. A shadow just remained a dark blur cared about by none but the occasional artist or poet.

Of course, the rudeness of the woman at the front desk of the hotel where I had just checked in might have had something to do with my suddenly pessimistic view of Metropolis.

Trying to clear my head, I sighed and plopped my luggage onto the ground of my new room. The suitcase was a holdover from my college days, but it showed no major signs of wear. I almost hated to even set it on the floor — I was convinced I had officially found the seediest hotel in Metropolis. "Rundown" didn't even *begin* to describe the Hotel Apollo. If Mom had known I was going to be staying in a dump like this, she would have probably done everything in her power to gather enough money for me to stay somewhere nicer — even if she had to dip into her and my dad's retirement fund to do it.

I slowly gazed around, searching for roaches with that "maybe-it-would-be-better-if-I-didn't-look-because-I-won't-like-what-I-find" kind of feeling. I guessed the room was the price I had to pay for coming to the big city. Even a rathole like this one was ridiculously expensive compared to hotels of far higher quality back home... But the cost of living was high in Metropolis, and if I wanted to live in the Big Apricot, I would have to become accustomed to making some sacrifices.

My eyes moved past the hot plate (no stove in a place like this) and fell on a payphone set against a wall. *You know you're in a cheap place when...*

I shook my head, annoyed. *You need to keep positive*, I told myself resolutely. *Your interview for the Daily Planet is tomorrow, and you'll need all the confidence you can muster.* I certainly didn't have an ideal résumé for someone trying to get a job at a major newspaper. I knew that much already.

I was at such a pivotal point in my life. Everything was riding on my meeting with Perry White. And if I didn't get the job — well, that was a bridge to be crossed when I came to it.

I started to sit on the questionable-looking bed but reconsidered. I had spent long hours riding in a bus from Kansas, and I wasn't ready to sit again. I had thought it would be nice to come to a room and relax after having eaten a cheap but hearty dinner, but now I was having second thoughts. A walk sounded like a much better idea. It was dark outside already, and I wasn't in the best part of town, so it probably wasn't exactly a smart thing to do, but I didn't want to be in that room any more than was necessary. And — what was more — I needed to buy some food supplies.

I opened the door, patting the pocket where my room key was nestled. Before long, I was a few blocks away from the hotel, strolling down the sidewalk with my hands in my pockets.

I wandered aimlessly, not having any specific destination in mind, though I was careful to mentally mark where I was going. It would be terrible to get lost in Metropolis my first night. My hand moved to the small lump in my shirt that was my locket, and my fingers traced its outline. If I ran into any madmen or muggers — well, it would be bad for me. I needed to be careful and stay out of trouble.

Letting out a sigh, I paused for a moment and looked up at the sky. The big city wasn't like Kansas. The stars were obscured by artificial lighting and pollution, and the people were more

wrapped up in advancing themselves than their communities. It was a rat race, plain and simple.

And yet despite all that, I had felt drawn to Metropolis — *still* felt drawn to Metropolis, even though I was seeing its uglier side. I wasn't sure exactly what it was that attracted me, though I guess the fast pace probably appealed to me most. I had been ducking my head far too frequently for far too long. It was time to spread my wings and fly.

I immediately winced and amended mentally, *Well, stretch my legs and run, at least.*

I would always love Kansas. It was the place I'd called home for so long. But it had finally been time for me to leave.

*Mom and Dad were certainly more than willing to kick me out of the nest,* I thought with a smile. It wasn't like I could blame them. Having their son move back in with them after going off to school couldn't have exactly been what they'd desired. But they'd wanted to help me, and they had let me stay with them even when I became editor of Smallville's local paper, knowing I had needed most of the money to pay back my student loans, as I hadn't had a full scholarship, and things were always tight on the farm.

And so, I had finally found my way to Metropolis, where I was trying to move up in the world. And while I likely wouldn't get hired by the *Planet*, at least I could say I had tried. That was always a good first step, right?

I had just barely started walking again when I heard several shots ring out in the darkness. I froze, my mind racing. It would be smarter to just turn tail and run. I shouldn't be messing with people with guns... But if there had been an innocent civilian involved, I couldn't just stand by and watch evil win. And even if it *was* a shootout between criminals, not even the lowest scum on earth *deserved* to die.

My mind made up, I jogged to the alley from which the shots had originated after looking around for street names and identifying landmarks. In the alley, I found four people on the ground. A cursory glance revealed they had all been shot in the altercation. I wasn't surprised — I'd heard a lot of bullets.

I was no crime scene investigator, but judging by their positions and their clothing, they seemed to be members of two separate camps. There were two men in well-tailored suits close to each other on the ground, and several feet away from them were a man and a woman in what could only be called street clothes.

I stood there hesitating for a few seconds. I didn't want to touch them — my pulse accelerated at the thought — but I pushed past my reluctance and shook my head to clear it. If I didn't do *anything*, they would probably all die. I took in a deep breath and moved into the dank alley.

As I kicked away their guns — lest they decide to get trigger happy while I was trying to offer assistance — I moved around and checked their pulses as gently as I could. But it didn't take me long to discover that the only person who had survived was one of the two men in the expensive suits. He looked vaguely familiar, but I figured he probably just had one of those faces. As I knelt beside him, he emitted a groan and tried to move.

"Just stay still," I told him, not wanting him to hurt himself further.

Swallowing down my fear, I carefully removed his expensive-looking pinstriped jacket — feeling a bulky object I suspected was a phone — and searched for bullet wounds. I thankfully found he just had one bullet wound on his chest. Judging by its position, I thought he would probably make it... but only if he was kept from bleeding until the ambulance arrived. That meant I couldn't just phone 911 and run. I had to stick around.

"Who are you?" the man whispered in a voice that had some bite to it. I couldn't blame him for not trusting me — for all he

knew, I was planning to mug him and only pretending to play the part of Good Samaritan. Still, his tone nonetheless seemed a little out of place.

"My name is Clark Kent," I told him, sounding calmer than I felt, "and I'm going to unbutton your shirt. I need to stop your bleeding."

He groaned something I could only assume was assent, and I got to work on the top buttons of his shirt while mentally reviewing what I knew about gunshot wounds. I hadn't exactly studied the subject in detail, but I did recall that I was supposed to try to keep air from getting in, as it could potentially lead to a sucking chest wound.

When I had the shirt open enough that I could see, I hesitated briefly and then stuck my right hand inside.

"I'm going to apply pressure to the wound," I told him in a soothing voice. I was trying to keep my hand from trembling. I really didn't want to touch him — to do so was to break a rule I had made for myself. But I wasn't left with much choice.

He mumbled something, and I pressed on his chest with the utmost care, using my hand to keep the air out and hopefully stop the bleeding. I waited for a second to make sure I wasn't hurting him. But his face didn't twitch in response to my touch, so I brought my free hand over to his jacket, which I had placed on the ground, and I managed — after a little struggling — to get his phone out of the coat's pocket.

Fumbling with the device, I told the wounded man, "I'm going to call 911. Just hang in there."

The call was a bit frustrating, as I succinctly gave all the necessary details once and then got transferred to someone else who needed me to say everything *again*, but at last the call was over and help was on its way. I set the phone on the ground and turned my attention back to the brown-haired man whose life I was trying to save.

"I think you're going to be okay," I said softly. "Just try to take it easy."

"The man... beside me — "

"The three others here are dead," I told him with a wince. "I'm sorry. Were that man and woman... trying to mug you?"

I looked into his face expectantly and frowned. It was constricted in pain, and his hold on consciousness was tenuous. But that wasn't what surprised me. What surprised me was the change my question had made in his expression. Despite the great pain afflicting him, his face now betrayed a great hatred.

He was quiet for several seconds, and I began to dismiss my perception of his animosity as a strange byproduct of his slipping into unconsciousness, but he finally spoke in a voice that seemed strangely controlled. "We... we thought someone was crying out for help, so we came into the alley... They... tried to mug us, and then they shot at my assistant, and we shot back at them."

I looked away from him. Somehow, I knew that wasn't exactly what had happened. The shots had just been too rapid for his story to be plausible — surely everyone must have had a gun at the ready when the shots were fired. But I shook my head and tried to dismiss my doubts. Despite his odd moods, he certainly didn't *seem* like a bad person... But what was a rich man like him doing in this part of town? And why couldn't I shake the feeling of uneasiness he caused me? Had I imagined that angry look on his face?

"What... what was your name again?" he asked me groggily.

Though I wasn't certain he would hear me, I answered, "Clark Kent." My right hand twitched as a reminder of what I was doing, and I looked down at it. It was soaked with his blood, but it seemed as if I was succeeding in helping slow the seepage from the wound. Still, I knew he needed medical help fast. If I left now, he would probably bleed to death. My hand started to shake, but with some effort, I willed it to stop.

Wanting to get my mind off my hand and the torn flesh

beneath it, I was about to ask him what his name was, but he groaned loudly, his face contorting in agony.

“An ambulance will be here soon,” I informed him, trying to sound reassuring. “It’ll just be a little longer.”

“Thank...thank you,” he managed.

“Don’t speak any more. Save your strength.”

I looked worriedly toward the street. I wasn’t certain how long my hand would effectively serve as a bandage... And I wasn’t sure how long I could actually force myself to maintain our contact.

At last, however, emergency vehicles surrounded the alley, and the wounded man was placed on a stretcher and moved into an ambulance. I considered asking if I could go with him, but I didn’t even know his name, so I let him go alone. Surely a man with that much money must have had some friends. I doubted he would want a stranger staying with him. If I did do that, he would probably just think I wanted something.

As I watched the ambulance leave, a police officer approached me. He asked several questions which I answered as best as I could, and he got my statement. When I was at last free to go, I reflected that maybe the room I had rented wasn’t as bad as I’d thought. At least I would have a place to rest my head. Some people weren’t even fortunate enough to have that.

But before I returned to the Hotel Apollo, I went to a small store. I found their tiny restroom and washed my hands, thankful they had soap and paper towels. My right hand was crusted with the stranger’s blood, and it wasn’t a pleasant feeling. Rinsing the blood off myself felt almost baptismal, yet I still felt somewhat stained in a way.

After I finished in the store’s bathroom and bought some sandwich and breakfast supplies, I returned to my room in a bit of a daze and placed some of the items in the grimy refrigerator. I set my alarm clock and stripped down to my boxers. Then I collapsed on my bed in tears, no longer able to hold myself together. The cloud of fear I had been beating back descended on me, and I fell into a restless sleep filled with dreams of death.

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## **Chapter 2: Don’t be Scared to Search ... Time Rolls Back the Shadows of Your Mind**

*Then a larger thought said, “Stop your crying.*

*Don’t be scared to search, ‘cause you may find*

*Fate holds out a candle for your footsteps.*

*Time rolls back the shadows of your mind.”*

— “We Can Make the Morning”

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The next day, I woke early and went through my morning routine with care, trying to wipe away all thoughts of the previous day. My shirt and suit were fortunately wrinkle-free, and I chose one of my tamer ties to complete the ensemble after passing up a few of my favorite — but “nontraditional” — ties. I had quite a tie collection, though I usually just wore ties on Sundays. Now, however, maybe I would get an opportunity to show off my eclectic collection more frequently. As I smoothed down the tie I had chosen, I thought about the person who had given it to me.

I’d had a crush on Lana Lang for my first few years of high school. But when we had finally started dating, her controlling side had come to the fore, and she had insisted I do a lot of things I didn’t especially want to do — such as add ties that weren’t “so crazy” to my collection. Though her attempts at control had irked me at the time, in hindsight I was glad for her tie demands at least, and I sent a mental “thanks” in the direction of Kansas or wherever it was she’d finally ended up. We had lost touch after breaking up the summer following our senior year, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if I heard one day that she’d become some big-time CEO. That woman had been made to be *someone’s* boss — just not mine.

I got out my shoe polish and shined my shoes, feeling anal-retentive but wanting to be meticulous. Shoes so shiny you could see your face in them weren’t something that could make or break a job interview...but they would certainly make me feel better.

When I was done, my eyes rested on my glasses, and — for a reason probably based more on procrastination than whimsy or leanings toward obsessive compulsiveness — I grabbed them to give them their own shine. After I finished cleaning the lenses, there was only one thing left.

Inhaling deeply, I walked to the sink and picked up my white locket from the counter. Clutching its chain in my hand, I went and sat on the bed. Then I placed the chain around my neck.

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An hour and a half later, I was slowly eating a bowl of cereal and thinking about my upcoming interview. I usually couldn’t handle normal breakfast foods like bacon and eggs in the morning, as they made me queasy, but cereal always worked well enough. As I ate, however, I kept my eye fixed on my watch. If I was late for my interview, any sliver of a chance I might have had in being hired by the *Daily Planet* would surely disappear.

When I was ready to leave, I called a taxi cab and grabbed my portfolio. I climbed into the back of the taxi with no small feelings of trepidation.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“The Daily Planet,” I told him. My thoughts were instantly pulled to what was ahead of me. What would the newspaper building be like? Certainly nothing like the building that housed the *Smallville Press*. I knew that for certain.

And as for the interview...

I was certain I could feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach...or perhaps it was fish swimming in there. Well, whether or not there were actually live creatures twisting my innards, my nervousness was obvious to my chatty cab driver, who tried his best to make me more relaxed by providing me with a constant flow of mostly one-sided conversation, most of which concerned the antics of his two zany cats.

Finally, I heard: “We’re here!”

I inhaled deeply, clenching my fists slightly before unbuckling. I paid and tipped the well-meaning driver and stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Daily Planet. As I stared upward at the great globe, I felt a strange mixture of excitement and anxiety. I’d seen the symbol on the front page of the newspaper many times, but being here, staring up at it while the life of Metropolis pulsed around me, really drove home the reality of it to me. I was standing right by the headquarters of one of the greatest newspapers in the world. And I had a chance to be a part of it.

Citizens of Metropolis shuffled around me, going about their daily lives, unconcerned with the strange man standing in the middle of the sidewalk and hampering the flow of foot traffic. Though I knew I might be annoying people nearby, I kept staring at that globe. I wanted it to be a part of my life. I couldn’t really explain why, but something about it beckoned me. Something about it whispered, “Home.”

I finally forced my feet forward and passed through the revolving doors of that great metropolitan newspaper. After speaking to someone at the front desk and getting directions, I went to the elevator and began my ascent to the newsroom, trying to remain composed. But once I had taken my first few steps out of the elevator, I couldn’t help pausing once more.

The room was a flurry of activity. Couriers raced around, people typed frantically at their keyboards, reporters picked up faxes... Everyone had a job, a duty, a purpose. This was what I wanted — what I’d needed for so long. There was no doubt in my mind.

My gaze took in the whole newsroom as I reveled in this

sense of belonging. Finally, my eyes stopped on an office across the room. *That must belong to the Editor-in-Chief*, I thought. My breath caught in my throat. I was finally going to meet the legendary Perry White.

What would he be like? How would I handle myself during my interview?

My knees felt like rubber, but I stood straighter and moved forward with determination. I would not be afraid. I would be confident.

I knocked on the door to Perry White's office, and he barked, "Come in!"

My confidence flew out the window like a startled crow, and I was hit by an unmistakable wave of anxiety. So much for not being afraid.

I'd heard of Perry White's great accomplishments, but I'd never heard much about the man himself. What if he were a vicious tyrant who enjoyed eating wannabe reporters like me for breakfast? What would I do if he took one look at me and told me to hit the road?

After straightening my tie, I took in a deep breath and told myself I was being ridiculous. My mental reprimand was so convincing I almost believed it.

Shaking only slightly, I tucked my portfolio under my left arm and used my free hand to open the door, praying this interview would go well and wouldn't end up with me being served as dog food.

The *Planet's* Chief Editor was busy reading something and didn't even glance up when I came in, so I waited uneasily for a few seconds to be noticed.

At last, not knowing if he would ever acknowledge my presence if I remained silent, I ventured, "Mr. White?"

He lifted his head, and I saw the dawn of realization in his eyes as he looked at me and then at the portfolio I was holding.

"Ah, you must be Kent," he commented with a Southern accent and a tone much kinder than the one he had used when shouting for me to enter his office. Maybe he wasn't such a bulldog, then?

Gazing briefly around his office, I noticed a picture of Elvis on the wall. I wondered idly if he was just a big fan or if he was also from Tennessee. His accent would certainly support both. A further look also revealed an Elvis clock — the legs of which were moving back and forth like the tail of one of those Kit-Cat clocks that had once been found everywhere. The movement wasn't quite like the King's gyrations, but it was close enough, I supposed.

Mr. White set down the piece of paper he was holding and stood. He started to hold his hand out to shake mine but thought better of it and instead gestured toward a chair. "Please, take a seat."

I sat and clutched my portfolio a little tighter to myself. "Yes, sir."

"I talked to Professor Carlton about you," he commented as he returned to his chair. "He was singing your praises as loudly as a robin in the springtime."

I gave a small smile. Professor Carlton had been an amazing teacher, and I still stayed in contact with him. He was the only reason I'd gotten this interview in the first place. In fact, I wasn't sure if I would have *ever* tried to get hired by the *Planet* without his encouragement — even if it *had* been a dream of mine.

The *Planet's* Editor-in-Chief picked up a piece of paper from his desk and held it in the air. Looking at it, I realized it was the résumé I had faxed him from Smallville. He shook it gently and remarked, "It says here you were the editor of the *Smallville Press*. That's in, uh..."

"Kansas," I supplied quietly.

"Right. Kansas." He scanned my résumé, but I had a feeling he was doing it just for show. I was certain he knew what he

thought of it already. My suspicions were just further confirmed when he set it down and gave a preoccupied sigh. "Kent, I must confess I'm a bit concerned — and not just about your résumé."

I nodded and steeled myself, readying the speech I'd prepared.

He gave me a hard look. "Now, Professor Carlton told me that you're suffering from —"

"Aphophobia," I offered feebly.

"Right. You don't like to touch people."

I swallowed. "Yes, sir."

I opened my mouth to give him my spiel, but he continued: "Now, son, you have to understand that in a business like this, not touching people could be — well, it could be potentially fatal to either a human being or your career.... Do you, uh — do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, sir, I do," I said quickly, reaching inside myself for that elusive confidence. "But I want you to know, Mr. White, I'll never let my fear interfere with my job. If I'm in a situation where contact is absolutely necessary, I *can* touch someone else. It — it isn't that I'm incapable of doing it.... I have my reasons for not liking to touch people, and all I ask is that people who know me respect my wishes, sir." I sat a little straighter and tried to act more self-confident. "But I can assure you, Mr. White, that if I learn the President of the United States wants to shake my hand, I won't refuse him."

Mr. White let out a small bark of laughter. "Your example's a little ambitious, don't you think, Kent?"

I gave him a tentative grin and ventured, "Just hopeful, sir."

He laughed again and shook his head. But when his eyes returned to me, he frowned. "You aren't sick, are you, son? You're looking a little green around the gills."

I swallowed, disturbed that he had picked up on my paleness. "No, sir. I'm not sick."

The Editor-in-Chief gave me a skeptical look and then said with a grunt, "Glad to hear that."

My eyes fell on the portfolio in my lap, and I stood and handed it to him, muttering, "I, uh — I brought a portfolio with some examples of my work."

"Ah, good, good," he remarked as he opened the folder. He flipped through its contents with a practiced eye. He hadn't reviewed much when one of his eyebrows began to rise and my high hopes began to plummet.

Finally, the newsroom legend commented, "Professor Carlton said you had intended to do a lot of traveling but never got around to it."

"Yes, sir," I confirmed. I hesitated before explaining a little further, "I had...personal reasons for staying closer to home."

He nodded absently, and I wasn't even sure if he'd heard what I said, for his eyes had moved back to the folder. At last, he looked up from my portfolio and stared straight at me. "From what I can tell, your writing's not bad, Kent, but I generally don't even consider someone with this kind of résumé."

"I understand," I murmured, dropping my eyes to the floor. It had been worth a try, at least. My mind immediately turned toward what I was going to do next, but my thoughts were scattered all over the place like birds in a flock dodging a thrown rock. I had no idea where to go from here, and I felt overwhelmed. I had focused all my energy on this interview.

Mr. White, sensing my preoccupation, cleared his throat. "That having been said, I trust Professor Carlton."

My eyes shot up to his face. I didn't even dare to breathe.

"But what's more — he's calling in a favor I owe him. You'll find that's what half of the newspaper business is about — calling in favors." He shook his head. "It's got its upsides and its downsides, but that's how it is. Now, I'm going to hire you on a temporary basis, Kent. You prove yourself, and you'll be brought on as a real employee. Just don't disappoint me." He smiled and

stood.

I got to my feet. I was pretty sure I was beaming at him. “I won’t, sir.”

“Work starts tomorrow, Kent,” he told me gruffly. He moved once again to shake my hand but again snatched it back. “Uh, sorry, Kent... It’ll take a while to get used to this.”

“That’s okay, sir,” I said in a quiet voice, hoping for the sake of my career that there wouldn’t be too many instances of his wanting to shake my hand — I had the feeling he would get annoyed with me fast if that were the case.

He waved his hand in the air. “Please — enough with all this ‘sir’ business. Call me ‘Chief’ — or ‘Perry.’ Everyone else here does.”

“Yes, sir,” I responded automatically. Wincing at the slip, I told him, “Sorry... Thank you for everything. I promise you won’t regret this.”

He made some sort of dismissive grunt and returned to whatever it was he had been doing before I’d entered his office.

I opened the door and began to walk out when someone barreled into me. I stepped backward in surprise, and the person who’d run into me fell to the floor.

Chagrined, I moved to help the person — a woman — get to her feet, but then I quickly realized what I was doing and stopped. “S-sorry,” I mumbled.

She glared at me and picked herself up off the ground with more dignity than seemed possible given the awkwardness of the situation.

I moved out of the doorway and to the side so she could get through, and her annoyance was almost tangible as she brushed past me and shut herself in the small room with the Chief Editor. I could hear her demand, “Who *was* that guy?”

Wincing, I walked away from the door, not wanting to eavesdrop. Still, I couldn’t help but turn around and stare into the office at the animated woman inside.

I wasn’t sure who she was, but she was beautiful.

Though I wasn’t able to hear her words, I could see the fire in her eyes and her motions. Whenever she jerked her head, her brown hair did this amazing bouncing thing and then fell right back into place. Her brown eyes were like pools a man could easily fall into, but her gray suit was of the “no-nonsense” and “business only” sort which would make many men wary of pursuing her.

Yes, she was beautiful. And she was professional. And she was furious... with me.

I shook my head and reflected, *It’s just my luck to make an enemy at the paper before even being permanently hired.*

Trying to ground myself, I put my hand on the lump that was my locket. I stifled a sigh and walked into the elevator. Pressing the button for the ground floor, I tried to focus on what had just happened before my brief run-in with that spitfire of a woman.

I had been hired — albeit temporarily — by the *Daily Planet*. My dream was looking as if it could become a reality. *Seek, and ye shall find*, I thought to myself with a smile.

After I exited the elevator, I walked outside the newspaper building and stared up at the globe once more. I was looking forward to seeing it every day.

My spirits high, I decided I would just walk around the city for a while until I found a place that seemed good for lunch. After that, I would return to my hotel room and call my folks. They were probably upset that I hadn’t talked to them the night before, and they would be waiting anxiously to hear from me.

I stopped at a crosswalk behind a mass of people waiting for the walk signal. The signal came on, and most of the people in the group sped ahead and crossed the street. Lost in thought, I trailed several yards behind an older woman with an armful of shopping bags and a mother pushing a stroller.

It was fortunate my professor had had such a connection, I

reflected. Maybe it was unfortunate that I hadn’t been hired on my own merits, but I would prove myself in time and make certain the *Planet’s* Chief Editor never regretted taking me on.

At least, I *hoped* I would be able to prove myself. That was my goal, anyway.

I heard a noise and turned my head. A bus was rushing toward the two women and the stroller, apparently unable to stop.

“*Run!*” I shouted. The two women turned their heads and stared at the bus with deer-in-the-headlight expressions. The older woman dropped her groceries, and the mother clenched her stroller tighter. Both of them tried to run out of the way.

But they weren’t able to make it in time. The bus hit them straight on. I was helpless to stop it.

Moments after impact, I was yelling at the horrified onlookers, “Somebody call 911!”

As I ran toward the two women and the child, I briefly turned my gaze to look at the bus. It continued with its forward motion and showed no sign of slowing. But I couldn’t do anything to stop its path of destruction — not as I was.

One look at the baby was all it took for me to know he wasn’t alive. Feeling sickened, I next turned my attention to the pair of adults. The mother had been killed when the bus hit her, but the other woman was miraculously still alive.

I knelt beside the older woman, gently holding her hand and keeping my fingers on her wrist, praying she would survive. She was so badly hurt that I didn’t know what to do. With the man I’d helped the night before, it had seemed so simple: keep blood from coming out of his chest wound. But with her... I could do nothing. I was no paramedic. All I could offer was my presence, such as it was.

She opened her eyes and gave me a weak smile. “Thank you for... trying to save us,” she whispered. Her lashes fluttered briefly, and then her eyelids dropped.

Her pulse should have been throbbing beneath my fingers, but it was only a dull trickle. Looking at my watch and trying to count, I realized it was getting slower and slower. She was fading fast. Her breathing was getting ragged.

Though I was in the middle of the road and traffic was backing up and the horns of clueless drivers were blaring angrily, I stayed where I was. I waited with the woman until the emergency forces arrived too late to be of any real assistance.

I wasn’t sure how much time had passed before I finally made it back to my hotel. After stumbling into the room, I went to the toilet and vomited.

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That night, I readied myself to call my parents. I didn’t feel like talking to anybody, but I knew they would be worried about me.

After I called collect on the payphone, I waited for someone to answer and steeled myself for the inevitable barrage of questions. I loved my parents, but I sometimes wished they weren’t so concerned about me — it made it hard when I didn’t want to tell them things. Still, they meant well, and in the end I usually felt better after talking with them.

A familiar voice soon answered, “Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Clark!” she exclaimed. I could hear her say away from the receiver, “Jonathan, get on the phone! It’s Clark!” Then she returned to the telephone. “Clark, how are you doing? Did you get to Metropolis okay? We were worried when we didn’t hear from you yesterday.”

“I got to Metropolis fine,” I assured her. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you yesterday — something came up.” I shifted in place uneasily. “I’m, uh, I’m calling from my hotel now.”

“How *is* your hotel room?” Mom asked. I could almost hear the wince in her voice.

“It’s — well...”

Dad had picked up the phone, and he prompted, “It’s a dump, isn’t it?”

I smiled at his perceptiveness. “I guess that’s what you expected?”

“We’ve been to Metropolis before, Clark,” Mom pointed out. “We know how expensive it is there.”

“Well, I *was* thinking earlier that I was glad you couldn’t see it, Mom.”

“So, how was your interview, son?” Dad asked.

I sighed. “Well, I’ve only been hired on a temporary basis until I prove myself — but that’s a start, right?”

“That’s wonderful, Clark!” my mom exclaimed.

“I’m sure you’ll prove yourself soon enough,” commented Dad. “In the meantime, you could probably use some money. I’m going to wire you some cash.”

“Dad — that’s okay. I’ve saved up a bit of money. And before long, I’ll have a paycheck.” I was trying to sound excited — and really, I was glad to have a shot about being a permanent member of the *Daily Planet* — but I was drained by the events of the day. Mostly, I kept seeing that bus and replaying the scene in my mind. It had washed away all my former excitement.

“Clark, are you okay?” Mom pressed. “You sound tired.”

Of course, she *would* pick up on that. “Well, I *am* tired,” I admitted. “It’s been kind of a long night. Well, a long couple of nights.”

Sounding concerned, Dad asked, “What happened, son?”

I hesitated. I hadn’t been sure whether or not I would tell them about what had happened after I arrived in Metropolis, but maybe it was better that I not leave them completely in the dark. “Yesterday, I saved a man’s life — at least, I think I did. I’m not sure if the hospital was able to help him or not.”

“What do you mean, Clark?” Mom questioned. I could see her worried expression in my mind’s eye.

“A man was shot, and I called the ambulance for him — ” I hesitated.

Dad prompted, “And?”

“And I had to touch him to stop his bleeding.” I exhaled heavily. “I was scared — but he was going to die for sure if I didn’t do anything.”

“Honey, there is nothing to be scared of.”

“Yes, Mom, there is,” I said firmly.

Mom protested, “Clark, you know I’m glad you decided not to go encase yourself in a fortress in Antarctica, but — ”

“I’m tired,” I broke in. I knew if we talked for much longer I would be telling them about what had happened with that bus after my interview — and that was something I didn’t feel ready for. “I think I’m going to go to bed.”

“All right, son,” Dad said, sounding reluctant. “But I’m going to wire you some cash tomorrow.”

I hesitated. “Dad... thanks.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ll pay you back — I promise.”

“Goodnight, Clark,” Mom said quietly.

“Thanks. I love you guys.”

“And we love you,” Mom returned.

After hanging up the phone, I pulled my shirt up over my head. My parents were too perceptive sometimes.

But I hadn’t been lying when I’d told them I was tired. Fatigue seemed to be dripping out of my bones.

I still kept thinking of that bus, of how maybe I could have stopped it... and of how those broken bodies had been lying there in the middle of the road.

A shadow was hanging over me. It was suffocating me, pressing in on me. I didn’t know if I would ever shed it. Time should have been on my side in that regard — but what if more bad things just kept happening? How would I be able to erase or surpass the darkness?

When I finally slipped into bed and then into sleep, the nightmares returned in full force.

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### Chapter 3: Soon, a Thousand Dreams will Start

*Soon, a thousand dreams will start,*

*And romance will fill your heart.*

— “My Desert Serenade”

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The next day, I left the Hotel Apollo early and walked to work. The weather was pleasant, and there were a lot of demons chasing through my head that I wanted to clear out. Mostly, I wanted to forget the dreams I’d had.

My walk did me a lot of good, just as I’d hoped, but before I arrived at the Daily Planet, I found my attention drawn to something. There was a commotion around some rubble that had once been a building, and after a brief moment of hesitation, I decided to investigate.

Evidently, the building was a theater which was supposed to be demolished that day — but while the job had been started, it hadn’t been completed. Everything had come to a standstill, and there was an utter lack of energy surrounding the place. There were a lot of people limply holding signs protesting the destruction of the theater, and construction workers were standing around and looking solemn instead of actually working.

As I moved closer to the rubble, I heard someone crying, and I turned and saw an elderly woman with tears flowing freely down her face.

“Are you okay?” I asked her in a soft voice. I wasn’t sure what had happened, but my heart went out to her.

“No,” she whispered, trembling. “Someone heard screams after — after the wrecking ball... slammed into the theater.” She took in a deep breath, trying to calm herself, but the tears kept falling as she continued. “The — the construction workers stopped, and someone ran inside, but... Oh!” She wiped the moisture off her face with her hand and tucked her chin into her chest.

I waited, wishing I could embrace her, but knowing I couldn’t. Instead, I just looked at her sympathetically, helplessly. One sentence kept running through my mind like a strange mantra: *There are so many tragedies in Metropolis.*

She finally began talking again. “Bea — her name was Beatrice, but we always called her Bea — was buried beneath the rubble. I don’t — I don’t know why she was... inside... I guess maybe she was... t-trying to say goodbye to the theater, but...”

“Has someone called an ambulance?” I asked uneasily.

“We’re waiting for it, but... but I’m certain she is dead.” That started a fresh bout of crying. “Oh, Bea loved the theater... She — she wouldn’t have m-minded dying with it... But surely it — it wasn’t necessary for her to d — well...”

I wished I had a handkerchief — wished I knew some way to comfort her. But there was nothing I could do. I couldn’t bring her friend back to life. Just like I couldn’t bring those people hit by the bus back to life.

Feeling helpless, I asked her a few more questions, and she began to brighten up somewhat as she told me about Beatrice’s life. It didn’t take long for it to become clear that Beatrice had been an amazing woman. My thoughts and prayers went to her, but it sounded to me as if she had probably gone to a better place. ... But not even that could make me feel less somber. Death was always hard to take.

“Beatrice sounds like she was a wonderful person,” I said to the woman softly. I paused for a second and then ventured, “I’m a reporter for the *Daily Planet*. Do you — would you mind if I tried to write a story about Beatrice?”

The idea seemed to cheer her a little, and she told me, “I would enjoy it very much if her story could be told to the world. It — it would have made her smile.”

Giving the woman a sad smile of my own, I took down her contact information and asked a few more questions. Then I told her, “Thank you.”

She shook her head. “No. Thank *you* for helping me recall all those wonderful memories.”

I told her goodbye before glancing at the pile of rubble one more time. Then, after talking briefly to a few more people, I left to go to work.

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When I got into the newsroom, I stood in front of the elevator for about two minutes. I wasn’t sure exactly what to do — somehow, I didn’t think Perry White would want a rookie in his office asking to be shown all the ropes. But I couldn’t exactly jump into the water without knowing where the water *was*.

My salvation quickly came in the form of a young man with dark hair who must have honed in on my hesitation.

“C.K., right?” he ventured as he approached with some papers in hand.

“Clark Kent, yes,” I returned, hoping I didn’t look too nervous.

“*Ah* — I thought that was what it was, but I wasn’t sure if Perry meant something like ‘Clermon Kent’ instead. You don’t generally see ‘Clark’ as a first name. . . . When Ferdinand was hired, Perry told me his name wrong, and I spent weeks calling him ‘Frank.’ When I was finally corrected, I had to listen to weeks of stuff like ‘To be *Frank*, Jimmy, how would I do that?’” He laughed. “So, uh, I guess that’s why I prefer to be cautious now.”

I smiled in understanding. “You’re right that ‘Clark’ usually isn’t a first name — it was actually my mother’s maiden name.”

“Well, you can call me ‘Jimmy Olsen,’” he noted with a grin. “There’s nothing unusual about my name. I’m just good ol’ Jimmy.”

“You can call me ‘C.K.’ if you’d like,” I offered.

“Thanks, C.K.,” he returned, looking pleased. “I think I will. The Chief told me to look out for you and show you around a bit. So, just come with me, and I’ll give you the grand tour.”

I gladly followed him on the short and roundabout journey to my desk as he pointed out a few things about the newsroom. Fortunately, it wasn’t a complicated setup (there were different sections, such as Sports, Entertainment, and Society, just like in the newspaper), and there were no cubicles, so there wasn’t a need for him to walk me around the whole newsroom for me to get an understanding of where things were.

He stopped his tour for a moment and informed me, “I got a few office supplies from the supply closet for you.” He pointed in the direction of the closet. “I know it can be a little overwhelming when you first get here. . . . It’s not exactly a welcoming pan of baked goods, but I guess it’s the newsroom equivalent.”

A mental image popped in my head of an apron-clad Jimmy approaching me with a pan lined with Post-Its and staplers, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Thanks.”

“No problem, C.K.” He stopped in front of my desk. “Here it is.”

I rested my gaze on my new workstation. The desk had already been outfitted with a computer and phone, and there was also a *Daily Planet* mug with some pens and pencils in it. The drawers probably held a few more of the office supplies Jimmy had mentioned. But even without all those items, it just felt good to look at that desk and know it was mine, even if just for a short time.

Jimmy opened the top drawer and brought out an envelope, which he set on my desk. “This has your username and password for the computer in it, along with things like contact information. It’s a sort of newbie info packet.”

“Thank you,” I said, looking down at the object.

He reached inside the drawer and brought out something else.

“This is your work beeper — custom issue for high-level *Planet* reporters and low-level gophers like me.” He grinned and set the item on the desk.

From the sound of it, Mr. White must have made frequent use of Jimmy’s pager. “Guess that means I’ll be able to contact you if I need to?” I ventured.

He nodded and lifted a qualifying finger. “Just don’t abuse your grunt privileges. My pager has been known to occasionally find its way underneath a pile of sound-muffling pillows.”

I smiled. “I’ll remember that.”

“That’s my desk over there if you need anything,” he informed me, nodding in the direction of his own workstation. “The Chief gave it to me two months ago. I used to be just a copy boy — and I still mostly do legwork — but I’ve helped Lois Lane out a lot, and I’m slowly making my way up in the world. I know my way around a computer, so if you ever need anything that requires a little, uh, ‘creative’ computer work, just ask.”

I took the pager and pocketed it. “Thanks again, Jimmy.”

“No problem, C.K.”

“Jimmy!” shouted a voice that sounded suspiciously like a rampaging Perry White’s.

Jimmy grimaced. “Sorry — I’ve got to go. The Chief bellows.” And then he scampered off as fast as he could without actually running.

I watched his departure with a small smile before moving to take off my jacket and sit at my desk. I remained motionless for a few seconds, just allowing myself to enjoy the heady feeling of being a reporter for the best newspaper on earth. It was hard to believe I was finally here like this. . . . True, the position wasn’t yet permanent, but I really hoped it would be soon. My dreams were on the cusp of becoming a reality.

Feeling more cheerful than I had all day, I picked up my “newbie info packet” and scanned the relevant bits. When I was done, I logged in to my computer. I knew it probably wouldn’t be too long before I was assigned a museum-opening piece or something similarly unexciting, so I wanted to jot down as much as I could about Beatrice and the Sarah Bernhardt Theater while I had the time. I had about a paragraph and a half done when someone came up behind me and put highly manicured fingernails on my shoulders.

My heart in my throat, I stiffened and said in a firm voice, “Please remove your hands.”

The nails gradually retracted, and my heart reluctantly descended to its proper place in my chest.

After taking a moment to compose myself, I turned my chair around with great apprehension.

Standing before me was a woman in an outfit that was definitely *not* work-appropriate. Her bearing, however, was filled with confidence, and I could see she felt she was in her element — even if her outfit *was* one that revealed more skin than it concealed.

Noticing my glance at her attire, she gave me a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin and put her hand out, presumably for me to kiss or perhaps to awkwardly shake. “The name’s Catherine Grant,” she said in a sultry voice.

I looked down at her hand briefly before returning my eyes to her face. “Ah, yes — of Cat’s Corner, right?” I was fighting the urge to gulp — I didn’t want her to think I was intimidated by her. Even if I *was*.

She moved closer to me to say something, but the motion increased my anxiety, and I told her, “Please don’t come any closer, Ms. Grant. I have a phobia of human touch.” Really, it wasn’t a true phobia, and it wasn’t that I was fearful of others touching me so much as I was of myself touching them — I doubted a person would hurt themselves by touching me unless *they* tried to hurt *me* — but I was quite fearful of what Catherine Grant might do to me (or try to make me do to her) if we didn’t

set up boundaries right away.

She studied me for a moment before purring, “Please, call me Cat. And if you ever need anyone to...show you around the city, don’t be afraid to call me.” Under her breath — but loud enough that I was supposed to hear — she muttered, “I like a challenge.”

“Thank you, Cat,” I replied feebly, knowing I would never request her services in any capacity if I could help it.

As she stalked away, swaying in a way that must have frequently turned male eyes in the newsroom, I forced myself to calm down. Being around her was nerve-wracking, and I was beginning to think she would probably be the greatest threat I would come across while working for the *Daily Planet*.

I had written a few more paragraphs of my story about Beatrice when I realized there was a murmuring noise by the newsroom televisions. I didn’t know how long it had been going on, but I wasn’t sure how I’d missed it. Leaving my unfinished story with some reluctance, I stood and walked over behind Mr. White and Jimmy...and that woman whom I had made furious the day before by inadvertently knocking her to the ground. My breath caught in my throat as I looked at her, but I quickly forced my gaze back to the television.

The newscaster Carmen Alvarado was speaking. “We are all mourning the loss of Commander Laderman and the transport vehicle *Messenger*, which exploded this morning.”

It took all my effort to keep myself from gaping and making a startled exclamation. The *Messenger* had *exploded* this morning? How had I missed *that*?

The woman I had upset turned to the Editor-in-Chief. “I told you there was something to Platt’s story, Perry. I *knew* there was.”

Mr. White shook his head. “Now, Lois, even a stopped clock is right twice a day.... Just because this Platt fellow managed to predict this would happen doesn’t mean there’s a conspiracy to sabotage the whole space program.”

Lois — I found myself glad that I finally knew part of the woman’s name — gave him a grim look. “Maybe it doesn’t. But there are more than a hundred colonists going up in the next launch. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to just assume they’ll be all right despite what Platt said.”

The Chief Editor didn’t respond; he just soberly turned his eyes back to the television screen.

There was a new person on the screen whom a small caption identified as Dr. Antoinette Baines. “We do not know the cause of this terrible disaster,” she said in a voice so filled with tragedy that I almost found myself doubting her sincerity, “and we have been unable to find any link between this tragedy and the multitude of setbacks EPRAD has faced during the past year. But I can assure you we are doing all we can to investigate this horrific event.”

Carmen Alvarado came back on. “The fate of Space Station *Prometheus* is now uncertain. Will this internationally financed space laboratory be continued? The Congress of Nations is calling a special meeting to make that very decision. We are all holding our breaths as we await their ruling — but perhaps no one is as anxious as the colonists who have sacrificed so much in order to make the journey to the space station. Will the Congress of Nations decide that the peril of sending those colonists into space will outweigh the possible benefits? For updates, stay tuned to LTC News.”

I tuned out the rest of the program and stared blankly at the television sets for a few seconds as people began to disperse. I was feeling a bit heavy-hearted — that space station meant a lot to some people. What if the Congress of Nations decided to cancel the whole mission? It would be a let-down for more than just America.

Sighing, I went to get some coffee. Unfortunately, Lois was there first, an empty mug in her hand.

I hesitated and was about to turn away when she looked up and glared at me. Suddenly, I realized this was Lois *Lane* — the hard-hitting journalist whose writing style and exposés I had long admired. Seeing the anger she could pack into one glance made me realize just how she had been able to get all those exclusives. A part of me wanted to turn and run, but instead I held my ground.

I took in a deep breath, preparing to eat a little crow. “I want to apologize for what, uh, happened, Ms. Lane. I should have been watching where I was going....”

Sounding grumpy but slightly appeased, she told me, “Perry told me about your ridiculous phobia. I get it.”

Her forwardness and her unfriendly nature both intrigued and annoyed me, and I watched in perturbation as she took a sip of coffee and then began to walk away without even a backward glance.

Unable to help myself, I muttered with bitter sarcasm, “I’m sorry if I inconvenienced you, Ms. Lane.”

She heard me — much to my mortification — and froze. Then she turned around and gave me an appraising look. Either I’d impressed her, or she wanted to learn more about me before she attempted to squash me beneath her heel. My money was on the latter.

“What’s your name again?” she asked me.

“Clark Kent,” I answered tightly.

“Very well, *Clark*,” she said, using my name as an epithet, “call me ‘Lois.’ ‘Ms. Lane’ is my mother.”

“Fine, *Lois*,” I said in a low and scathing tone as she went in the direction of Mr. White’s office. But I wasn’t sure if she’d heard me, and I rather hoped she hadn’t. I was acting childish, and it was embarrassing. I wasn’t certain why she was bringing out that side of me, but she was. I was normally a lot more mild-mannered.

I finished preparing my coffee and retreated to my desk, feeling somehow like a dog that had been yelled at for getting into the trash. I had only written a little more of my article when I sensed something distinctly tornado-like. Looking up, I saw Lois Lane walking away from the Editor-in-Chief’s office and appearing incredibly aggravated.

I heard someone say, “Watch out — the Ice Queen cometh,” and I turned back to my work with an irritated frown.

I realized a moment later that Lois had stopped at my desk. Lifting my head, I took in her sour expression. “Can I...help you?”

She wasted no time in barking orders. “Grab your coat, farmboy. We’re going to go talk to Samuel Platt.” And then, again just like a tornado but without the spinning, she began zipping away from my desk. I hastily grabbed my jacket and jogged to catch up with her at the elevator, which was opening as I approached.

We walked inside after a couple of people stepped out, and I queried, “Samuel Platt?”

“He used to be a scientist at EPRAD. Somehow, he knew the *Messenger* was going to be sabotaged. We need to go find out what he knows.” She turned toward me sharply. “Any more questions, Kent?”

The elevator doors closed, and I crossed my arms and suppressed a sigh. “Weren’t you going to call me ‘Clark’?”

“I’ll call you ‘Mr. Green Jeans’ if I want to. It’s a perk of seniority.”

Her hostility puzzled me. I had apologized for knocking her to the ground — she wasn’t still upset about *that*, was she?

“Have I *offended* you somehow?” I asked her with a frown.

“Your *presence* here offends me,” she shot off. “Most of us have to work our way up in the reporter world. I’ve done that, yet Perry nonetheless chose to pair me with a hack from Nowheresville.”

My mouth became a thin line. “I assure you, I’m going to pull my own weight, Ms. Lane —”

The elevator doors opened. The whirlwind of a woman strode out ahead of me and then suddenly paused. Her shoulders were tense, and I could sense the reluctance which had a grip on her. Finally, she turned toward me.

“Look, I’m sorry, Kent....” She must have seen the flash of irritation in my eyes, for she quickly corrected, “*Clark*.” She sighed and clutched her purse tighter to herself. “I’m just upset about the *Messenger*. If I had paid more attention to my instincts when Platt came in, maybe Commander Laderman wouldn’t have died.”

It was her sincerity that banished my anger. In her eyes shined the grief and despair of a woman who believed she had failed others. I realized then that the bluster and bravado I’d been seeing were actually masking her compassion. It was a man’s world, and it must have been hard for her to get to where she was. I had to remember that.

Quietly, I told her, “You couldn’t have known he was telling the truth — this is something big and unexpected. What happened to the *Messenger* was probably something that wouldn’t normally be missed in routine inspections. Mr. White might have been skeptical about forming a conspiracy theory...but if *you* think there’s a chance someone is after the space program, then *I* do, too.” I gave her a small smile as a peace offering.

Her facial expression softened, and she seemed to be lowering her defenses. But just as soon as they were down, they shot back up.

In a voice shaped by annoyance, she told me, “Look, farmboy — I live by three rules. I never get involved with my stories, I never let anyone else get to a story first, and I *never* get involved with anyone I work with. So, if you’re looking for a little woman to hang on your arm, you can just forget it.” She turned away from me.

Resisting the temptation to tell her that I shied from human touch and that my smile had been aiming at friendliness rather than charm, I replied instead, “I’m glad those are rules you live by, Lois.” She swiveled to stare at me with suspicion, and I added, “Because they’re rules I live by, too.”

“Glad to hear it,” she muttered under her breath. She nodded in the direction of the *Planet*’s main entrance. “Now, let’s go.”

As I followed her, I shook my head at myself. I was getting more ridiculous by the second. “Because they’re rules I live by, too,” huh?

I could see I was going to have to make certain I had a better arsenal of comebacks for dealing with Lois Lane.

I definitely wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

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#### Chapter 4: The Boss

*Some folks like to be the boss;*

*They get up on their high horse.*

— “Sound Advice”

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With the efficiency of someone who didn’t want to waste even a second out of the day, Lois directed our taxi to Platt’s address. Then, before I knew it, I was climbing out of the cab after her as she briskly moved toward Platt’s chosen residence. As I reached the sidewalk, I nodded and smiled as a woman passed by walking a bulldog. I’d always been partial to animals, and the dog looked suitably grumpy for a specimen of his breed. I’d had bigger dogs growing up on the farm in Smallville, but I liked smaller dogs just as much.

However, as I looked at the building that was our destination, my mood changed, and I couldn’t help but give Lois a skeptical look. “*This* is where Dr. Platt lives?” The brick building didn’t really look inhabitable.

“Yeah, well, I guess Platt’s seen better days,” she returned.

She opened the building’s green door, ducking under some badly placed police tape to get inside.

Stepping in behind her, I made certain to mask my smirk when I saw her recoil just perceptibly as a plump rat trotted by. She glanced back at me to see if I’d seen her revulsion, and I hastily averted my eyes to the door I was closing.

Lois walked past some barrels and approached the door that was presumably Dr. Platt’s. A sign on it proclaimed:

THIS BUILDING IS UNSAFE  
DO NOT ENTER  
UNDER ORDER OF METROPOLIS BUILDING &  
SAFETY

Ignoring the sign, Lois rapped on the door. “Dr. Platt?” she asked loudly. Not receiving an answer, she repeated the name.

“Yes? Who — who is it?” a shaky voice queried at last.

“It’s Lois Lane,” she answered, looking back at me.

He opened the door a few inches and peered out in fear, only his nose and his eyes and part of his clothes visible. “Who — who’s that with you?”

She hesitated. “My...colleague, Clark Kent. We’re working on this story together.”

I bit back a response about the word “colleague,” as Platt’s frightened eyes were moving to my face. I hastened to give him a look that was reassuring but not pressuring. It must have worked, as he finally opened the door and gestured for us to come inside. As we entered, I noticed he was holding a crowbar. It wouldn’t have protected him against a skilled criminal, but I supposed it would have done all right against a common thug.

Lois began talking almost immediately. “We’re here to learn more about the *Messenger*, Dr. Platt. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you before.”

He nodded, obviously nervous. “I don’t blame you, Ms. Lane. They called me crazy — and maybe *I have* been. But that was all on account of the drugs, you see.”

“Drugs?” Lois echoed in surprise.

“Yes, the drugs,” he confirmed as he led us forward. “They drugged me, you know, after I submitted my report on the *Messenger* to Dr. Baines.”

I glanced around as Lois went to the center of the room. The place was in total disarray. Only the books — which were crammed into shelves — seemed to have been placed in a logical spot. Well, the books and some of the items on Platt’s desk. As I wandered around, I saw that many of the objects in the room pointed to Platt as being eccentric, if not a bit unhinged: the fake camel head on a stick which was hung up on a coat-rack, the bright blue marlin mounted on the wall, the bird skeleton resting on the television...

“And what did you say in this report?” Lois asked.

“When I broke into one of the off-limit labs, I discovered something. You see, the *Messenger*’s particle isolators were in danger of shutting down under extreme temperatures, and so we had installed heating devices as a countermeasure.... But I found out in the lab that the heating devices were no longer there. They had been replaced...by coolant systems.”

I turned to look at him with a frown, unable to help myself. “That would freeze the ion particles, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would!” he told me, sounding excited that I had understood. “And then fumes would be emitted, and the *Messenger* would blow up — I said all of this in my report.”

“Do you have a copy of that report?” Lois asked.

“Yes, yes, I do. It’s...hmm...” He moved to the bookshelves and began searching for something.

As Dr. Platt pulled out first some crumpled sheets of paper from on top of some books, then a few from behind the fish, and then a couple from a tennis shoe in a box, I realized we could be waiting for a while for him to gather all the pieces of his report. Lois’s thoughts seemed to parallel mine, as the look she gave me

seemed to say, “Is he for real?”

Sighing, she said out loud to Dr. Platt, “Maybe you could get us your report later — we can have someone come by and get it tomorrow.” I saw her turn her attention to a frame on Platt’s desk. She picked up a photograph that had been nestled in the corner of the frame. Curious, I moved forward to get a better view. It was a picture of three happy people: a chuckling girl in a wheelchair, a laughing woman with red hair, and a smiling man who just barely resembled Dr. Platt.

The scientist scampered over and took the photograph from her with a trembling hand, placing it back in its former position. “That’s my wife...and our daughter Amy.” He took in a deep breath and told us quietly, “We had planned to live together on the *Prometheus*.”

“Where are they now?” Lois queried.

“My wife died over a year ago of cancer,” he responded in a voice so quiet I had to strain to hear it.

“And Amy?” Lois ventured with unusual gentleness.

“She’s with my sister. It is...for the best.”

I could hear the sympathy in Lois’s voice when she asked, “Who would *want* to sabotage the space station, Dr. Platt?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, Ms. Lane. I can’t understand it — you see, the *Prometheus*’s microgravity laboratory could be the key to helping us cure hundreds of diseases. A zero-gravity environment would enable us to separate the proteins which form viruses — and then, well...then we could help so many people with crippling diseases....” “So softly I had to strain to hear it, he added, “We could cure my daughter.”

His voice sounded choked up, and I thought that if I looked at him I might be able to see tears in his eyes.

But I didn’t want to look, as my heart was already heavy enough. How could someone be so heartless as to attempt to sabotage such a noble cause? What was to gain from it? It wasn’t fair that a man like Dr. Platt had to attempt to ward off such evil alone. Dr. Platt had only his drug-addled brains and a simple crowbar to protect himself from whatever powerful people were attempting to do this terrible thing. It just wasn’t right.

“Dr. Platt,” I said suddenly, “I don’t think you should be here anymore.”

“What?” he said in confusion, turning toward me.

“If there *is* a conspiracy, then this is *really* big. I don’t think you’re safe here. If Lois and I were able to find you, someone else certainly could. You can’t stay here and defend yourself with just a crowbar.”

“My partner’s probably right, Dr. Platt,” Lois admitted, and I turned to her in surprise — I had never thought I would hear an admission of my correctness coming from her lips. Begrudgingly, she added, “You’re probably in danger just for talking to us.... Quite frankly, I’m surprised they haven’t killed you already.”

But Platt shook his head. “I can’t leave. They will get me if I leave — they have eyes everywhere. My books, my notes... everything I have left is here.”

“I can help you move your things, Dr. Platt —” I tried.

“No, no, no. That will take too much time — it will attract too much attention. Just conduct your investigation — and I will do what *I* can.”

I stared at him, knowing I should argue with him. He’d been through so much that he couldn’t be thinking rationally. But there was such resolution in his eyes that I could only bring myself to make one last try: “You don’t have to be a martyr, Dr. Platt —”

“Go, Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane. I will gather my report and await your messenger.... Tell them the password is...’Amy.’” He turned away so we couldn’t see his face, and he began gathering more pieces of his report with trembling hands.

After watching him for a few seconds, Lois looked at me grimly. “We should probably go and see Dr. Baines and ask her about this report.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, giving the scientist one last sad look. I didn’t like leaving him, but I couldn’t just stay and babysit him. I could argue that he shouldn’t be foolish — that he wouldn’t want to orphan his daughter. But I couldn’t do that to him. Not when I knew that the thought of his daughter being an orphan would hurt him so much.

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At EPRAD, we received visitor tags and were taken to Dr. Antoinette Baines, who seemed to be caught up in the middle of something. Whether she was actually busy or putting on a show, I wasn’t exactly sure.

Dr. Baines was an attractive enough woman, but there was something cold about her. Her short blonde hair framed her face in a manner that should have softened it — but something in her tone and her eyes belied whatever kindness she tried to project. All I knew was that she gave me a bad feeling.

“We’re all in a state of shock,” she told us in a voice that attempted — but failed — to be sincere. “This explosion was such a catastrophe.... And Captain Laderman was one of our best men. His three children and his wife are quite heartbroken....”

“And what’s being done to investigate the reason for the explosion, Dr. Baines?” Lois pushed. She appeared annoyed at the false sorrow in the other woman’s voice, and I knew exactly what she was feeling.

“I can assure you, Ms. Lane, we will do all we can. But we can’t know anything for certain until we are able to look at the wreckage. It’s being moved to a hangar right now for analysis.”

“Can we see it?”

Dr. Baines shook her head. “I’m sorry. Press aren’t allowed.”

Disappointed, I pressed with a hopeful tone, “No exceptions?”

She gave me the once-over and reconsidered. With a small smile, she told me, “I’ll see what I can do, Mr. Kent.”

“That’s great,” I replied, smiling at her warmly, though internally I felt a little disgusted with myself for attempting to use charm to get help from the woman.

She turned and found a file, picking it up and flipping through a few pages. “When I heard you were coming, I took out Dr. Platt’s file. It really is a shame he wasted his talent as he did. His wife’s death and his fanatical work on the space station both seemed to really get to him. It wasn’t long before he took a turn for the worse — he started drinking, taking drugs, acting violently.... He had given us so many years of hard work that we tried to hold on to him for as long as we could, but we had to let him go when he burned down one of our laboratories. We recommended that he seek help, but he was just too far gone.” She replaced the file, indicating she considered the subject closed.

But Lois wasn’t one to give up so easily. “Dr. Platt told us he submitted a report to you. It was about coolant systems that —”

“Coolant systems?” echoed Dr. Baines. Her brow furrowed in thought. “No, I don’t remember a report from him about that.”

She tilted her head. “If you’d like, I could look at my records....”

“Please do,” Lois said curtly. “And then call us.” She dug out a business card from her purse and handed it to Dr. Baines.

“I’ll do that,” Dr. Baines promised. She turned her gaze to me, eyeing me like a piece of candy. Softly, she told me, “Please, let me know if I can do anything else to help you.... It would be my pleasure.”

Trying to hide my discomfort, I replied with a smile, “Thank you.”

“Any time,” she returned in a low voice.

As Lois and I walked to the van, I commented flatly, “I don’t like her.”

Lois stopped and looked at me. “I thought that was supposed to be my line.”

“What?” I frowned.

“Well, while you were batting your eyes at her, I was the one trying to get information.”

“I was *not* batting my eyes at her,” I protested. “I just thought...maybe a little friendliness might get us what we needed.”

She studied me for a moment before she began walking again. “Offering yourself in return for a story, Kent?”

“Is that something you’ve never done before, *Ms. Lane*?” I retorted.

She smirked. “Maybe being partnered with you isn’t so bad, farmboy. Just make sure you don’t step on my toes.”

“I won’t — so long as you don’t walk all over me,” I responded darkly.

“Sorry — I never make promises to partners I don’t intend to keep.”

I bit back a reply, not wanting to show her just how much she could irk me. I’d never let people with chips on their shoulders affect me this much — why was *she* any different?

Well, whatever it was, I was glad our partnership was only temporary. Even if she *was* a brilliant reporter...and a beautiful woman.

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When we returned to the *Planet*, Lois assigned Jimmy and me some legwork tasks, leaving the more promising parts for herself (of course). Before I got to work, however, I finished my article on Beatrice and the Sarah Bernhardt Theater. After submitting the piece, I made a few calls and then began looking through my notes on the *Messenger* and Dr. Platt.

I was concentrating hard on a piece of paper when my eyes felt a little strange. Lurching back in alarm, I realized I needed to disappear for a few minutes.

I looked over at Lois, who was calling some of Platt’s associates. She seemed busy enough — phone in one hand and pencil in the other — that hopefully she wouldn’t notice my trip to the restroom was an abnormally long one.

I passed Jimmy, who was slowly walking and reading a sheet of paper, and disappeared into the men’s bathroom. I entered one of the stalls and closed the door carefully. Looking behind me at the discolored toilet seat, I decided I didn’t want to sit on it. It was going to be difficult to stand, but I was going to make the attempt.

Coaxing my locket out from underneath my shirt, I clutched it in my hand briefly before opening it and letting it drop down to rest against my tie.

My immediate instinct was to sit, but as I clenched my head and shut my eyes, I fought to remain upright. Finally, I braced myself against the stall, using it as support. I tried to think about the picture nestled in the locket. I always attempted to think of happier things whenever I exposed that photograph to the world. But I usually couldn’t think of anything beyond what happened when I opened that locket.

Waves of pain were wracking my body and pounding at my head like a million merciless hammers. My pain increased as the seconds ticked by, but still I didn’t close the locket. I needed to wait long enough to ensure I was stripped of all my powers for a while.

When I was almost to the point where I would have to sink to the floor, I fumbled with the locket and shut it with a low groan. The locket was coated with lead paint, so closing it made the pain disappear. Now the shard of meteor rock hidden behind the picture in my locket could no longer hurt me, but I still didn’t feel good.

Breathing heavily, I rested my forehead against the stall door. This wasn’t going to work — I couldn’t neglect exposing myself to the glowing stone before leaving for work as I had today. I had thought I was so drained by the previous day that I wouldn’t need any exposure. But I’d obviously been wrong — my powers had

started to return.

A part of me wondered if I might slowly be building up an immunity, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to test that theory. If it *were* true, then I might need to completely change my lifestyle one day...and I didn’t want to consider that yet. As it was, I refused to touch people as a precaution — in case my powers came back unexpectedly. Predicting my body’s fluctuations wasn’t an exact science for me.

I felt so weak I wasn’t sure I could make it to my desk. If I disappeared for an hour, though, Lois might come looking for me. I certainly wouldn’t put it past her to barge into the men’s restroom if someone told her that was where I went... And I did *not* want to have to declare bowel problems to be the cause of my extended absence.

I opened the stall door and feebly washed my hands, splashing some water onto my face. After toweling my hands and face down, I took a deep breath and exited the bathroom. As I walked through the newsroom and came close to Lois’s desk, I couldn’t help but overhear her involved in an unhappy personal phone conversation.

I didn’t have the energy or inclination to eavesdrop, though, so I just sank into my chair, drained by the meteorite.

But I didn’t want to arouse suspicions of laziness, so I forced myself after a few seconds to pick up some notes and pretend to study them as the throbbing in my head began to pass away.

A few minutes later, Lois came up to my desk. I was actually able to concentrate by that point, and so I was working on getting a few things done. When I sensed her presence, however, I turned my attention to her. “Yes?”

She looked at my shirt in interest, and I paled as I realized I had left my locket out. Fumbling, I quickly tucked it inside my shirt, but not before she had quipped, “Nice locket. Is that some kind of weird farmboy tradition, wearing girls’ jewelry?”

Gritting my teeth and knowing the jab wasn’t exactly undeserved, I told her, “It was my grandmother’s.”

“Oh.” She didn’t seem to know what to think, and part of me wondered if I should have been proud that I had brought her to the point of speechlessness.

I could have just left it at that, but I didn’t. “Not that you care, but I was close to her until she died when I was ten... Her picture is inside it.”

“Well, that’s sweet of you, Kent.” Her voice sounded surprisingly sincere.

“Clark,” I prompted with a sigh.

“Clark,” she echoed absently. Staring at me in a pensive manner, she asked, “So, do you have big plans for tonight?” Wary, I replied, “Not especially.”

“Well, you know, the White Orchid Ball is tonight... “

I hid a smile behind a hand. “Hmm, really? I hadn’t realized that.”

She looked at me as if I had grown another head. “You *do* know that this is *the* big social event of the season, don’t you?”

“I guess I’m just not a celebrity columnist,” I commented with a shrug.

“Well, some of us apparently care more about our social lives than others,” she muttered.

I suppressed a snort. Somehow, I doubted someone as work-driven as Lois had the type of active social life she was implying was hers. Investigative journalism was a lot of work — there wasn’t exactly an abundance of free time. Criminals didn’t just stop being criminals on the weekends.

“And at the ball, I intend to talk to Lex Luthor and land the first one-on-one interview with him if it kills me,” she proclaimed.

“I’m glad to hear it.” I put my chin on my hand. “Now, what does that have to do with me?”

She began to look awkward, and I found myself enjoying her

discomfort. “Well, it’s my date, Mitchell.... See — he has the sniffles....”

“How tragic,” I remarked, my voice equal parts sarcasm and sympathy.

She glared at me. “I can’t go alone....”

I nodded in mock-understanding. “That would be equally tragic.”

Furious at my deliberate obtuseness, she turned away, but then she swiveled back to face me. “Look, farmboy, do you have a tux or not?”

“I bet I could get my hands on one,” I mused.

“Then are you going to this ball with me or not?”

“I couldn’t dance with you,” I pointed out.

“Farmboy, you are *flattering* yourself if you think I want to dance with you. I just need someone to go with me. Now, are you going to come?”

I looked at her in amusement. “So, will it be a date?” I wasn’t serious, but I didn’t want to make this easy on her.

“No, it won’t be a date,” she growled. “It will be strictly business.”

I gave her a reluctant look. “Business outside of work hours? Gee, I don’t know, Lois.... I think maybe I’ll just stay in and read a good book.”

Her rage escalated, and she spewed a few unintelligible tidbits before finally managing, “*Fine*. You can call it a *pig dance party* if that’ll make you happy, but —”

I broke in, “In that case, I accept.”

She opened her mouth to make a retort, realized I wasn’t arguing any more, and then changed what she was going to say to: “Good. Then I’ll meet you there.” She started to walk away but then abruptly turned back to me. “At 9. Sharp.”

I nodded, my eyebrows raised in acknowledgement.

“All right,” she said as she went to her desk, still sounding surprised I had suddenly given in so easily.

I smirked to myself. I was obviously getting better at dealing with Lois Lane, and it pleased me that I was going to be able to stand on my own two feet with her at least some of the time. It was kind of important if I didn’t want to feel two inches tall in her presence.

As I flipped through the pages of a phonebook in search of a tuxedo rental place, I reflected on how this constant bickering with Lois Lane wasn’t a good thing if it could make me impulsively agree to go to a ball. I hated social situations; they made me nervous. There were always too many hands that needed shaking. Well...at least these high-society types usually weren’t *as* keen on shaking hands as people in smaller towns (assuming I even got to talk to any of them). Still, regardless of whatever happened, I would probably be a wreck all night.

I looked down at the phonebook. It was tempting to tell Lois I couldn’t find a place to rent a tuxedo — to say they had all been closed. But if I stood her up like that, she might phone all the tuxedo rental places and find out their hours; after all, probably at least one of them was open late on big social nights like tonight.

And then I would have to face the wrath of Lois Lane for the rest of my *Daily Planet* career. Yeah, because *that* sounded pleasant.

I just had to suck it up and go.

It wasn’t because she was already the boss of me. It was because I didn’t want to make things awkward in the newsroom.

At least, that was what I was going to tell myself.

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### Chapter 5: A Long, Lonely Highway

*It’s a long, lonely highway when you’re travelin’ all alone,  
And it’s a mean old world when you got no one to call your own.*

— “(It’s a) Long, Lonely Highway”

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The White Orchid Ball was hosted at Luthor’s home, the tallest building in Metropolis. Unfortunately, it was hard to appreciate the grandeur of the building since it was pouring down rain, and I found myself constantly distracted by the flurry of people in raingear coming in and out of the building.

I stood under the awning — dressed in the tuxedo I’d paid a significant amount of precious money to rent — and waited for Lois. When she finally did arrive in a cab, she was wearing a long raincoat and a hat and carrying a giant black umbrella.

She barely even acknowledged my presence as she walked up, saying only, “Go ahead to the ballroom. I need to visit the ladies’ room to freshen up.”

I followed her inside, annoyed with myself. Had I expected her to just hang out with me the whole evening? I was more her social tool than an actual date. She had more than made that clear.

A few minutes later, I was in the ballroom, feeling as if I stuck out like a sore thumb. I began to get antsy at the thought of meandering among the throngs of rich and famous people by myself the whole night, but then I saw Jimmy and gave a low sigh of relief.

I hurried over to him, and he greeted cheerfully, “Hey, C.K.”

“Hi, Jimmy.... Boy, Lex Luthor certainly likes to put on a show,” I commented as I gazed around at the extravagance present in the ballroom. There was enough to impress, but not so much that it seemed distasteful. There was no telling how many decorators Luthor had hired to create this effect of luxury in his penthouse.

“That he does,” Jimmy agreed. “I’ve never met him, but I’ve read all his unauthorized autobiographies. The man practically owns Metropolis. He’s one of the richest men in the world, you know.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“He seems like a fascinating person, but he doesn’t give private interviews — just the occasional press release and things like that. Lois plans to get the first personal interview with him.”

I nodded in amusement. “She did tell me that.”

“She’s been after it for a while. But she just keeps getting calls back from one of his secretaries — when she gets a response at all.”

“I’m sure she’ll get what she wants soon enough,” I remarked.

Jimmy nodded in agreement. “She’s nothing if not persistent. You don’t stand between Lois Lane and what she wants — not if you want to keep breathing.”

“I can believe that,” I said with a chuckle. I knew *I* certainly wouldn’t want to hinder Lois from getting something she wanted. I hadn’t known her long, and I already knew that such a move was borderline suicidal.

“Hey, look,” Jimmy said, making a slight gesture, “there he is.”

My eyes lifted to focus on where he had pointed. Lex Luthor was beginning to descend the great staircase. I saw first his Italian leather shoes and then a suit of equally impressive quality. As his face came into view, his profile was suddenly highlighted by a flash of lightning from the window behind him. When my vision cleared, my jaw fell slightly in surprise. I recognized him.

He was moving very slowly, but apart from the carefulness of his movements, no one could have guessed he had been almost fatally wounded by a bullet a few days before. The look of pain he had worn when I first met him was utterly different from the cool confidence which now radiated from his person.

I hadn’t realized I had saved the life of the richest man in Metropolis. The knowledge of it stunned me...and brought up a whole host of questions which would probably never be answered.

It took him longer to descend than was probably normal, but

he managed to do it with the utmost grace, and no one seemed to notice anything unusual in his bearing. He was the perfect picture of a wealthy and hospitable host, moving from person to person, greeting this man and that woman, noticing everyone he was supposed to. He was talking good-naturedly with a man I thought was a United States senator when Lois Lane's voice carried through the room to him:

"Lex Luthor... Why have you not returned any of my calls?"

He turned to look at Lois, as did I. She stood several feet away from him with an air of expectance, a mysteriously beautiful woman who drew the eyes of others toward her. I had to force my own gaze away as she and Luthor talked in lower voices to each other. She'd certainly captured the rich man's attention. I had a feeling that the low murmur that had spread throughout the room concerned primarily who she was and what she wanted. And since she had wanted to be recognized, at least part of her plan involving Lex Luthor was working.

Jimmy continued watching their interactions and commented with a smile, "Man, Lois sure is something, huh?"

I made a vague grunt of agreement, trying to find something else of interest in the room, but my eyes soon returned to her. She was now dancing with the wealthy man. I wasn't sure why, but it killed me to see her dancing with him. I wanted to break in, but I couldn't — and shouldn't — for a variety of reasons. I tried telling myself she was a viper, concerned only with stories and never with people, but I knew that wasn't true. And so, I kept staring at her. She was a vision in blue... And I wanted to move that little strand of hair in her eye to behind her ear...

She laughed at something Luthor said, and he did something to her neck that was suspiciously like nuzzling. Suddenly feeling sick, I turned away. Jimmy had been sidetracked by a young woman with red hair, and he was talking to her in an animated fashion. I gave a small smile of encouragement to him as he waved, and then I returned my gaze to Lois yet again. She and Luthor were parting — after all, he had several rich and important guests to tend to — and I walked up to her.

"Did you get your interview?"

She turned to me, looking surprised at the vitriol in my voice. I hadn't meant to sound so bitter; it had just come out that way.

"Something like that," she answered vaguely as she began walking away from me.

"Where are you going?" I asked, following her persistently.

She entered a room that was obviously supposed to be off-limits to guests, and within moments she was snooping through Luthor's things. The room appeared to be a private study, complete with an expensive-looking desk, lots of dark leather furniture, and several obviously priceless items that belonged more in a museum than a home.

"Lois, we aren't supposed to be in here," I hissed.

"It's called being a reporter, farmboy," she retorted. "Am I wrong, or isn't that what Perry hired you to be? Look around and see if you can find anything. Or at least stand guard."

As she disappeared into an adjoining room, I shook my head in annoyance. She didn't seem to have any sense of boundaries. That was probably part of what made her such a good journalist.

Still, I had no intention of personally pawing through Luthor's things, so I just walked past the burning fireplace and over to a group of weapons set against the wall. It was an impressive collection, and I imagined it was not even the tip of the iceberg when it came to what Lex Luthor had accumulated.

I was admiring a sword when a voice inquired from behind me, "Are you a fan of ancient weapons?"

I forced myself to turn with agonizing slowness, not wanting to seem overtly guilty, and I found Lex Luthor looking at me expectantly. His question seemed innocent enough, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something menacing hidden beneath that smooth façade of his.

"I particularly like the Macedonian sword," I commented.

Despite my attempt at coolness, my heart was pounding.

Luthor inclined his head. "It was the weapon Alexander the Great used to defeat Darius III."

"Thus leading to his being proclaimed King of Asia," I said smoothly, glad I hadn't commented on the crossbow instead. "An important weapon, then."

He gave me a tight smile. "Important indeed." He appeared to be reevaluating me — apparently, my knowledge of history surprised him.

Lois came up to us — presumably to either save me from the big bad billionaire or make sure I didn't jeopardize her chances of getting an interview with said billionaire — and remarked, "We were just admiring your home, Lex. It really is beautiful here."

Luthor raised an eyebrow and looked at me. Apparently, he hadn't known we were together. Personally, I found myself irked that Lois already felt comfortable enough with him to call him by his first name. She wasn't so keen on doing that with *me*.

Seeing the wealthy man's expression, Lois suddenly said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Lex... I don't believe you two have met. Lex, this is Clark Kent, a new hire at the *Daily Planet*."

Luthor's eyes widened with recognition at my name. "*Clark Kent*? Why, you could have just asked for a guided tour, all things considered."

I smiled uneasily, feeling awkward. My discomfort increased when I noticed him carefully studying me. I felt like a lab rat trapped in a cage.

"But please," Luthor said a few seconds later, taking his eyes off me, "let us return. I have some news that I think will interest the both of you." He gestured us forward, and we returned to the party.

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Lex Luthor's announcement that he would be building a space station named after himself (like most of the other major companies in the city) was just as impressive as he intended it to be. Lois seemed especially enthralled.

"That hologram was just amazing," she remarked afterward. We were still standing close to where the image of Space Station Luthor had been, though most people had returned to mingling. "That's very kind of Lex to offer to take up the space station program like that. A lot of people have been counting on it."

I gave a noncommittal grunt. I was torn on the issue. She was right that Lex's announcement could mean good news for people like Platt's daughter, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this was not how it was supposed to be. Part of the point of the space station was that it was an international endeavor... And I felt as if the idea for creating this space station should have taken a lot more time for Lex Luthor to generate. Were holograms that easy to create? Or had he just made some of his people work fanatically on the project to have it ready in time for the ball?

"Why a guided tour?" Lois asked abruptly.

I blinked at her, wondering at the non sequitur. Finally, I realized what she meant. "You're talking about what Lex Luthor said?"

"Yes," she replied, sounding annoyed. "Why did he say you could ask for a guided tour?"

I shrugged. I briefly considered whether I could hide the truth from her before deciding I might as well tell her. "I saved his life the other day," I said, trying to sound offhanded.

She looked at me skeptically. "You saved the life of the richest man in *Metropolis*?"

I nodded, searching the room desperately for something to comment on. A vase looked promising, but I didn't have enough time to formulate a sentence about it before Lois was speaking again.

"Why wasn't it in the paper?" she demanded.

I winced. "Well, I wasn't hired by the *Planet* at the time, and

I didn't know who he was anyway. I guess somehow he managed to keep it out of the press."

"What exactly happened?" she asked suspiciously.

"He got shot," I murmured.

Lois crossed her arms and gaped at me. "In *Tinytown*, news might be the latest downpour of rain, but here in the big city, the fact that Lex Luthor got shot is *big news*."

"It's *old news*," I returned. "It happened two days ago. Wouldn't it be embarrassing for the *Planet* to publish something like this a few days after it happened? And besides, I think Luthor's space station announcement is going to be getting all the publicity right now — him getting shot days ago probably won't even make people blink an eye."

She stared hard at me, primed to argue just for the sake of not agreeing with me, but finally, she gave a curt nod. "All right, Kent. But next time, don't be so sloppy." Then she muttered something about finding the powder room and disappeared.

I sighed. Well, it could have gone worse.

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It was well past midnight when Lois finally informed me I was free to leave my post as her indentured lackey. After telling her in a voice dripping with sarcasm that she was just "too kind" to release me like that, I left Lex Towers and returned to the Hotel Apollo. After the briefest of hesitations, I picked up the phone and dialed my parents' number. It was late, so I knew they wouldn't be awake, but I wouldn't be able to go to sleep unless I talked to them.

"Hello?" came my mother's groggy voice.

"Hi, Mom," I murmured.

She was instantly alert. "Clark? Is everything all right?"

"Yeah. Well... kinda."

My father picked up the other phone. "You all right, son?"

"I just got back from the White Orchid Ball," I said awkwardly.

"Did it go okay?" Mom queried. She knew perfectly well that balls weren't up my alley.

"I *did* learn something... You know that man I saved?"

"Yeah," grunted Dad.

"Well... it turns out it was Lex Luthor."

"The Lex Luthor?" asked my mother in surprise.

Though they couldn't see me, I nodded. "Uh huh. I don't know why, but he makes me really uncomfortable."

"Well, he's probably done a lot of questionable things on his way to the top," Dad noted. "I'd be careful, son."

"I will." I paused in hesitation. "There's something I didn't tell you yesterday."

"What is it, Clark?" Mom asked.

I touched my locket — which was resting on my bare chest — only half-consciously. "I saw... this bus... It went out of control... And it — it killed two women and a baby."

"Oh, honey..."

"I saw it coming, and I yelled at them to get out of the way, but they just weren't fast enough... Human lives are just — just so frail..."

Mom was quiet for a second before speaking. "Clark, are you ever going to tell us what really happened in Africa?"

My hand closed on the locket. My voice barely above a whisper, I told them, "I can't... You wouldn't... I just can't."

I couldn't say much more after that — couldn't explain how what happened in Africa was a burden I had to carry alone — and we soon ended the call. After talking briefly about me with each other, they would go back to sleep without any problems. But though I had called them to make it easier for me to go to bed, I knew my night wouldn't be restful. My mind was now on Africa. I could never tell them about what had happened there — not unless I was willing to accept that they would think differently of me. Not unless I wanted them to hate me... like I sometimes hated

myself when I was sitting alone in the darkness with only the sound of my heartbeat to keep me company.

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## Chapter 6: Tomorrow Never Comes

*Oh, tomorrow never never comes.*

*No, tomorrow never comes.*

— "Tomorrow Never Comes"

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The next day, I was working at my desk when a very grumpy Lois Lane came into the newsroom. I raised an eyebrow, taking in her sour expression. "Having problems?"

"I managed to follow the EPRAD truck with the *Messenger* wreckage, but I wasn't able to get into the hangar. Dr. *Baines* threw me out."

I smirked to myself. Only Lois Lane could make a person's stopping someone from being in an off-limits area sound like a crime to humanity.

The approach of footsteps caught my attention, and I turned to see Jimmy walking toward us. Seeing he had our attention, he told us, "We got a call from Dr. Platt this morning. He's done gathering the pieces of his report, he says, and he hopes it's, uh, readable."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Lois said, still looking unhappy about the result of her morning escapades. "Do you think you could pick it up and also get a copy of it to S.T.A.R. Labs? Maybe one of our contacts there could analyze it."

"Can do," he affirmed. He left, and Lois returned to her work station. But as I moved my eyes back to what I was working on, a man and a woman stopped close to my desk. I recognized them as people who worked at the Planet, but there was some part of me that really disliked the way they were staring at Lois.

The man leaned toward his companion and whispered, "Looks like Mad Dog Lane wants to rip off a couple of heads this morning and eat them for breakfast."

The woman stifled a giggle. "Don't let her hear you say that. ... It might be *your* head she rips off."

The man's sneer faded. "You've got that right. She's the *last* person you want angry at you."

Without any real thought — certainly without any conscious planning — I found myself standing beside them. They didn't notice me at first.

"The name '*Mad Dog*' is definitely fitting," the woman noted. "She really is a b —"

She cut off her words abruptly as she realized I was right beside her.

I didn't know what to say — didn't know what I was doing, really — and I stood there for a few awkward seconds staring at them before I mumbled, "Um, excuse me. Ms. Lane is..." The first words that popped into my head were "my friend," but that would have been exaggerating our relationship. My eyes flicked toward her desk hesitantly. "... my colleague," I finished lamely. I was hoping my expression would make up for the inadequacy of my words — I wanted them to know that I didn't appreciate their attitude toward Lois.

They exchanged a surprised glance. It was obvious they knew I had heard them talking. But they didn't appear to know what to do next any more than I did. At last, however, the shock that someone would dare stand up for Lois Lane — albeit in a clumsy fashion — finally wore off, and they muttered something vaguely resembling an apology before they skulked off.

As I returned to my desk, I saw them both give me a backwards glance, but I paid them no heed.

My head was reeling from what had just happened — I was probably just as confused as they were.

Anger was my constant enemy. One slip on my part could lead to drastic consequences. I couldn't afford to act impulsively.

But what I had felt was definitely the stirrings of a strange

righteous anger — and from that anger had grown the even stranger compulsion to defend a woman I barely knew.

Shaking my head, I tried to force myself to calm down, but my breathing was still ragged. When my phone began to ring, I picked it up with trembling fingers and stared pensively across the newsroom at Lois's detractors.

"Clark Kent, *Daily Planet*," I said into the receiver, still distracted by my contemplation of the anger that had taken hold of me.

"Mr. Kent? This is Lex Luthor."

My attention was suddenly captured. "Mr. L-Luthor," I said fumblingly. "How can I help you?"

"I didn't get the opportunity to thank you last night for saving my life, Mr. Kent."

I shifted in my chair, feeling uncomfortable. "There is no need to thank me, Mr. Luthor."

"No, there is," he insisted smoothly. "Most people wouldn't have done what you did."

"I couldn't just leave you there to die..."

"And I'm grateful for that — and for the fact that you didn't print what happened. It would have been very unfortunate to have such a scene in the paper before the White Orchid Ball. I really wanted the space station to take priority there."

"Yes, sir," I acknowledged. I couldn't really blame him.

"Mr. Kent, in honor of your good deed, I would like to give you a personal interview. It would be the first one I've ever given, you understand."

The significance of what he was saying was not lost on me. To get a private interview with Lex Luthor could be the thing that made my temporary status at the *Planet* permanent. I would go from a no-name reporter to someone who was actually seen as having some pull in this city.

I raised my eyes to look at Lois, who was busy at work. She might have told me it was her goal to get the first one-on-one interview with Lex Luthor, but she didn't have sole ownership of the idea. Reporters got scooped all the time — it was nothing new.

But I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I did this to her. And so, I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Luthor, but Lois Lane has been seeking that interview with you for a while. She is the one who deserves it — you should give it to her."

There was a pause. "Are you certain, Mr. Kent?"

I hesitated and then stated firmly, "Yes, I am."

"Very well, then. If there is ever a favor I can do for you personally —"

I suspected Lex Luthor hated feeling indebted to any man, but there was little I could do about it except to assure him, "There's no need to repay me, Mr. Luthor. I am just glad to see you are recovering so well."

"Thank you, Mr. Kent. I hope you have a good day."

"You, too, Mr. Luthor."

After I hung up, I felt eyes on me, and I turned slightly to see Mr. White looking at me with interest. Flushing, I inquired meekly, "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," he replied, still studying me. "That was Lex Luthor on the phone?"

I nodded. "Yes, Mr. White."

"Does he, uh — feel he owes you something?"

"Yes, Mr. White."

"You didn't do anything bad, did you?"

"No, Mr. White."

"And he offered you a private interview — which you turned down and gave to Lois?"

"Yes, Mr. White."

He stared at me for a few seconds. "Uh... I see." He crossed his arms. "Now, Kent, there are two things I want to tell you. The first is this — the newspaper business is a cutthroat world. You

use your favors as you can to help yourself out. Now, you gave the interview to Lois, so it's still with the *Daily Planet*, but I can tell you right now — if Lois had been in your position, she wouldn't have even thought twice before jumping on it. Morals aren't so cut and dried in journalism. Sometimes, you gotta watch out for number one and not feel bad about it."

Glum, I watched as the Chief Editor started to walk away, but then something struck me, and I called out to him, "You said there were two things. What's the other one?"

He turned toward me, and his serious expression was broken by a smile. "The other thing? Well, I'm proud of you for what you did, son." He prepared to go once more and then faced me again. "Oh, by the way, Kent — that piece you wrote yesterday was a good one. You can now consider yourself a permanent member of the *Daily Planet* team."

And with that simple aside, one of my dreams had come true.

Stunned, I sat there for a few moments, trying to convince myself I'd really heard him right. But my reverie was broken when Lois Lane walked up to my desk.

"What was that all about?" she asked, trying to sound offhanded. But the very fact that she was coming over to me spoke volumes for her curiosity.

"Just a story I wrote about a woman and a theater," I responded, trying to mimic her feigned lack of concern. But I couldn't help but crack a smile. "Your rookie partner is now the newest permanent hire."

"Temporary partner," she corrected. "I work alone."

"Right," I returned.

With a mumbled congrats, she returned to work, and I did the same. But it was all I could do to keep a goofy grin off my face. Knowing I was permanently hired by the *Planet* was enough to lift me up to Cloud 9 and beyond.

A few minutes later, Cat came up to my desk. She had evidently learned that touching me was not the way to get on my good side, but she was focusing her every pore on looking "sultry," as if somehow that would change my mind.

"Hello, Clark," she purred as she sat on the corner of my desk. She pulled one of her bare legs across the other one, and I was sure that if her dress had been an inch shorter, then she would have been flashing her underwear at me. As it was, I was once again extremely discomfited by her forward manner.

"Hi, Cat," I murmured, trying to look everywhere but at her.

"Why don't you and I do dinner tonight? I know this wonderful restaurant owned by this sweet little old couple — they make wonderful cheeseburgers.... And their chocolate shakes are simply to die for."

Lois passed by my desk with an annoyed expression, and I grimaced. Cat might have been trying to cater to my rural tastes, but I wasn't having any of it. "Look, Cat, I really have a lot of work to do. Maybe some other time."

"It'll be a date," she said with a sleek smile, trailing a finger across the edge of my desk before blowing me a kiss. As she left, I just shook my head, still surprised by her audacity.

I saw Lois disappear into the conference room, and I grabbed a notepad and pen and hurried after her.

Lois looked up briefly from her seat when I entered. "Playing a game of Cat and Mouse?"

I ignored her statement and gestured at her notes. "You having any luck?"

She shrugged. "I've called probably fifty former employees of EPRAD who knew Platt.... But no one is saying anything."

"Where do we go from here?"

"Well, we'll need to piece together the report and then try to prove Dr. Baines *did* get a copy of it but ignored it.... I just hope you didn't plan a date with Cat."

"I don't have a date with Cat," I said firmly.

"All right. Let's take a little time to regroup and then meet

again when Jimmy returns. There's a long night ahead of us."

I smirked. "I can handle it if you can."

She rolled her eyes. "If we're lucky, tomorrow we'll be able to prove Platt's theory. It may not be easy, but I hope he'll be back with EPRAD soon. That man is a born scientist, even if he is a bit...unorthodox." She made a gesture toward the door, obviously dismissing me.

I left the room and returned to my desk, where I stared at my phone in contemplation. Since I had a little bit of time, I wanted to look into the incident in the alley. Was Lex Luthor trying to cover his tracks? On the phone earlier, I'd felt almost like he had wanted to offer me a bribe for my silence, though he hadn't said anything that would explicitly indicate that. But it couldn't hurt to check into things. Maybe there *was* some kind of story here.

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Unfortunately, my pursuit of what happened in the alley to Lex Luthor only led to a bunch of dead ends. I gave up on it and was about to stand up to go talk to Lois when Perry White slapped something down on my desk. "Not sure if you saw this or not, son, but I figured you'd want to." He smiled at me and then continued on his way.

I looked down at my desk. In front of me was a copy of the *Daily Planet* that had been opened to my article on the theater. It wasn't the front page, but I was proud of it nonetheless. With a smile, I read the article and then put it inside my desk. I would have to show it to my parents sometime.

A few minutes later, Lois and I began working on piecing together the report Jimmy brought us. It was infinitely more frustrating than a jigsaw puzzle, as Dr. Platt's report was ridiculously long and detailed. It seemed to me as if he could have just said, "The coolant systems have been replaced by heating devices, which will cause the *Messenger* to explode," and then he could have been done with it. But Platt was a scientist, and simplicity wasn't the name of his preferred game. Much to Lois's and my misfortune.

As the hours ticked by, the newsroom became deserted except for Lois and me. We were surrounded with scraps of paper, and our task seemed more futile by the minute. The task was so daunting — there were no dates, no page numbers.... It seemed as if nothing matched. I would think I had a series of pages correctly lined up only to realize they didn't go together at all. Finally, Lois left to pick up some Chinese food. I was still working on piecing together the report when she returned.

Lois dropped the sack of food on the table and then took out two cartons. Opening the cartons so I could see their contents, she said, "All right. You have a choice — cashew chicken or moo goo gai pan."

I raised an eyebrow at the mediocre-looking Chinese food. "Boy, you sure know how to bring back a large selection. How can I ever choose?"

"Shut up, farmboy, or I'll eat it all."

Grinning, I took the moo goo gai pan, grabbed a fork, and placed a napkin in my lap. We both ate quickly, and it somehow turned into a contest as to who could eat the fastest.

"Ha!" I exclaimed at last, throwing my plastic fork into the carton along with my napkin. "I won."

She glared at me and continued shoveling food into her mouth. After she finished off the last smidgen of rice in her carton, she pointed out, "You still have a mushroom left. So, actually, I won."

I looked down at the tiny sliver of mushroom she was referring to. "That does *not* count!"

"Does, too."

"It's almost microscopic," I declared incredulously.

"Tough. The contest was for eating everything."

I narrowed my eyes. "We never set any rules for this eating contest."

"It was understood," she declared.

"You just can't stand losing," I muttered.

"Lois Lane doesn't lose," she informed me matter-of-factly.

I snorted but didn't comment further. Instead, I reached for a fortune cookie, but she swatted my hand and took the one I was grabbing. "You have to take the one farthest from you," she explained when she saw me staring at her in exasperation.

Rolling my eyes, I asked her, "What other rules do you have about food?"

"Well, for one thing, you have to eat the whole fortune cookie before you read your fortune — or else it won't come true."

"Fine." I took the remaining cookie and watched her actions.

She broke her fortune cookie in two, pulled out the tiny piece of paper, and then slipped the fortune into one hand so she couldn't see it until after eating her cookie. I mimicked her movements and began eating my own fortune cookie, feeling amused. I couldn't *really* make fun of her for it. My parents and I had a lot of Kent family traditions, some of which seemed as nonsensical as Lois's rules for eating fortune cookies. There was just something comforting about tradition that couldn't really be explained.

When Lois and I were finally done eating our fortune cookies, she held out her piece of paper and read, "He who throws dirt is losing ground." Her expression soured. "That is *not* a fortune — that's a saying. They either need to rename these things or put actual fortunes in them...like 'You will become rich and famous' or 'You will lose something dear to you this year.'" She crumpled the paper and threw it in her carton. "Not something like this."

Smiling, I took a drink of coffee before picking up my fortune, and I barely kept from choking as I read it to myself. It said, "The one you love is closer than you think."

I was still blinking at it when Lois asked, "What does yours say?"

I almost said, "The same thing yours does," but I knew that would draw her curiosity, so instead I thought for a second and told her, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

She snorted. "I swear — these things are getting worse every year."

I grinned. "They could all say the same thing, and I bet you would still want to get one every time you ordered Chinese food."

"They're a staple for American Chinese," she returned. "Of course I would want one."

I just stared at her in wonder. She could really irritate me beyond belief — yet somehow, she was getting under my skin.

She stared back at me, and *something* passed between us. But she suddenly realized the intensity of our locked gazes and told me abruptly, "Don't fall for me, Kent. I just don't have time for it."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Ms. Lane," I murmured.

As she picked up her carton and went to throw it away, I quickly shredded my fortune and then did the same.

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After working a little longer and with more success than we'd had with empty stomachs, we gathered the pieces of Platt's report in a box and went to his residence for help in deciphering the scientific jargon. We entered the building without problem, but we stopped abruptly when faced with the open door to Platt's room.

There was a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as I stared at that door. Coming from the room was a dim flashing and a sparking noise that just added to my sense of foreboding. Though I had the box of papers in my hands, I tried to get in front of Lois. "Lois, maybe you should let me look first."

But she dismissed my attempt to shield her and told me, "Don't be ridiculous, farmboy. I've seen a lot more in life than

you have out in the cornfields.” She pushed the door open wider and went into the room with confidence. After moving the light switch back and forth and discovering it wasn’t working, she approached the chair in the middle of the room. A small halo of hair could be seen just above it. Then, I saw something else.

“Lois, hold on... Look — the water.”

There was a pan of water visible beneath Platt’s chair, and his feet were submerged. Moving closer, we could see the electricity running from live electrical cables from the wall. And then we saw Platt, sitting back in the chair, his hair standing up and his face pale and still and utterly lifeless.

My breath caught in my throat, and Lois turned with a gasp and hid her face in my jacket. Closing my eyes, I held my breath and tensed. My instinct was to lurch back, to pull away from this human contact, but something else within me — something I had thought long extinguished — rose up, and I realized with profound shock that I *wanted* to embrace her. I started to bring my arms up to hold her, but then my brain caught up with my actions, and I lowered my arms and just concentrated on breathing regularly. I needed to be careful. I shouldn’t be touching her.

Finally, Lois moved away from me with a mumbled apology.

“We had better call the police,” I told her, the taste of bile in my mouth.

As Platt had been living in a condemned building, there was no phone in the room, so we went outside and found a payphone. After calling 911, we returned to the room and stood there in solemnity for a few minutes without saying anything.

Finally, I spoke. “It’s my fault he’s dead.”

“What?” Lois exclaimed, gazing at me incredulously.

My head was filled with thoughts of the man — and an image of that smiling girl in the photograph on his desk. Speaking in a low voice, I told Lois, “I should have forced him to leave.... I *knew* he wasn’t safe here, but I just let him stay.”

She was adamant. “It’s not your fault. Dr. Platt *made* his choice. He was willing to sacrifice himself for his daughter. Is there a more noble cause than that?”

“He shouldn’t have had to die *at all*,” I insisted, turning away from her and clenching my fists at my sides. “He should still be alive.”

“We’ll find whoever did this and make them pay,” she promised. “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line and just stared at the chair in which Platt had lost his life. Whatever we did would already be too late — a man’s life had been lost.

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Eventually, the police arrived. They hadn’t been gathering evidence for long before they proclaimed death by suicide.

“Suicide?” I echoed, getting angry. “Dr. Platt was *not* suicidal. He was a brilliant man who loved his daughter and was willing to do all he could to *help* her, not *hurt* her.”

“Look —” one of the policemen started to say.

“He would *not* kill himself,” I growled, my rage growing.

“He was helping us work on a very important case. He gave his *life* for it.”

“He’s attempted suicide before, Kent,” Inspector Henderson — the detective covering the case — pointed out in a calm voice. “There are no signs of struggle or forced entry.”

“I told you — he did *not* kill himself,” I growled. “His death has been set up to look like a —” My anger was growing to dangerous levels, and that realization hit me suddenly. I could feel my expression morph from extreme fury to something resembling a deer in the headlights. What was I doing? “I’m sorry. I just — I’m sorry.” I bit my lip and glanced at my watch. It was 5:30 am. Turning to Lois, I mumbled weakly, “I’ll see you at the Planet at 9,” and then I left, ignoring her as she called out after me.

I doubted I would be able to get much sleep, but I knew that *she* needed it. All I was able to think about was how I was partially responsible for Platt’s death. I should have gotten him out of there.

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### Chapter 7: I’m so Lonesome I Could Cry

*Did you ever see a robin weep*

*When leaves began to die?*

*That means he’s lost the will to live. ...*

*I’m so lonesome I could cry.*

— “I’m so Lonesome I Could Cry”

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Unable to sleep at all, I got to the Planet earlier than I had told Lois. I found Jimmy and asked him if he’d heard from S.T.A.R. Labs, but he hadn’t yet. As soon as he did, he assured me, he would let me know.

Then I tried calling Henderson, hoping he had come across some sort of clue that would help us prove it was murder. But nothing conclusive had been found.

“I’m sorry, Kent,” he told me, “but we’re going to have to put ‘suicide’ on the autopsy report.”

“I understand,” I said with a sigh. “Thank you for your help.” I made an angry scribble on my notepad with my pen. The action was pointless, but it made me feel a little better.

“Which is not to say that it can’t be changed if you find proof of wrongdoing,” he pointed out. “It looks suspicious to me, too, but we need evidence before we can point any fingers.”

I nodded slowly to myself. The man was doing his job — I needed to be careful that I didn’t take my frustrations out on him. “I’ll try to find some for you,” I told him firmly. “Whoever did this needs to pay.”

After hanging up with Henderson, I went back to work. Around nine, Lois entered the newsroom and walked over to my desk. Evidently, she was able to tell I’d been at the Planet for a while, as she asked, “Anything?”

“No luck,” I said soberly. I wished I could make a better report.

Lois went to her own desk, and shortly after, Jimmy came up to me and said, “C.K., you and Lois have a couple of visitors.”

I looked up and saw a girl in a wheelchair next to a blonde-haired woman. Realizing this girl was the one who had been in the picture on Platt’s desk, I said, “Thanks, Jimmy,” and then I stood. I retrieved Lois, and we began walking toward the pair.

On seeing us, the woman held up a finger to signify for us to wait, so we paused and watched as she wheeled the girl over toward the elevator to wait for her. Then she came to us.

“Are you Dr. Platt’s sister?” I ventured.

She nodded and gave a weak smile. Her pain bubbled beneath the surface, and my heart went out to her. “Yes, Mr. Kent,” she acknowledged. “I’m Mrs. Knightley. My husband and I have been taking care of his daughter, Amy. A few nights ago, my brother managed to get a message to me that you and Ms. Lane were working to prove his theory right. You — you have no idea how much that means to me....” Her voice was getting choked up, and she couldn’t seem to say much else.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I told her softly.

“Thank you,” she said in a strained voice. After gazing briefly in the direction of her niece, she told us, “Amy doesn’t know yet. Everything Samuel and his wife worked on was for her, you understand. I just —” She trailed off, obviously emotionally distraught. “How can I tell her that her father has died when she has just recovered from the loss of her mother? He sent her to be with me when he realized he was in danger. He didn’t want to put her at risk. She’s such a sweet child — I’ve been trying to be a mother figure to her, but I’m no replacement for her real mother. And now, she’s lost her father....” She gave us an earnest look. “I don’t know who did this to him, but I do

know that my brother would have never killed himself. He was murdered because he knew the *Prometheus* program was being sabotaged. He wasn't insane; he was just a target.... Please, help clear Samuel's name. Don't let Amy grow up thinking — thinking that her father committed suicide. I'm going to have to tell her he's passed on — but please don't let suicide be what I have to tell her. My husband and I — we love Amy. We don't want her to hurt any more than she has to...."

"I promise we'll do everything we can to help," I told her. "We believe you."

"Mrs. Knightley," Lois said in a quiet voice, "children are resilient. She may be hurt by her father's death — but don't wait too long to tell her. She needs to know."

She nodded slowly. "I know...." Wiping a tear from her eye, she whispered, "Thank you so much." She glanced briefly at Amy. "Would — would you like to meet my niece?"

"We'd love to," I responded.

Lois and I followed Mrs. Knightley over to Amy Platt, who smiled on seeing us. "This is Amy," Mrs. Knightley said. "Amy, this is Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent."

"Hello, Amy," I greeted.

"Hi," the girl returned. "Is it fun being a reporter?"

I felt as if my heart were being squeezed between two anvils. This girl had lost both her parents in just a matter of a few years. ... When she learned about her father's death, how would she be able to endure it? The level of fun involved in being a reporter would be far from her mind then.

"It is," Lois said gently. "But it's also a lot of work."

Amy nodded and then turned to her aunt. "I'm supposed to be at Susan's by now — remember?"

"I know," Mrs. Knightley acknowledged. She gave Lois and me a smile. "Thank you again." She pressed the button for the elevator, obviously under great strain to try to maintain a cheerful countenance.

Lois and I exchanged a helpless look. Suddenly, we noticed people were gathering around the newsroom televisions. We moved to join them and saw a special report from LexTel.

A few different members of the Congress of Nations were visible in the press room on the screen, but it was a Hindu woman in traditional garb who began to speak first. "We are pleased to announce that we have made the unanimous decision to continue our plans for Space Station *Prometheus*."

A reporter asked about Lex Luthor's proposal, and the chairperson on the screen answered, "The Congress of Nations is very grateful to Mr. Luthor for his generous offer, but we believe we should continue with our schedule as planned. *Prometheus* is a project dedicated to international cooperation, and we do not wish to lose sight of that."

The chairperson answered some questions, and I soon walked away from the television with a sense of satisfaction. Something about Luthor's offer to fund a space station of his own had bugged me, and I was glad I didn't need to worry about it any longer. The program would remain an international endeavor.

Lois gestured for me to follow her into the conference room, and I did so. As we were organizing our notes, Jimmy came in. He handed Lois a file. "So, I talked to some people at S.T.A.R. Labs, and they analyzed the report.... They used a hologram much like Lex Luthor's to recreate the *Messenger*'s launch. It was really amazing...." Seeing the look Lois gave him, he said hastily, "But the point of the matter is — Platt's theory was right. Someone *did* deliberately sabotage the transport. That explosion wasn't an accident. Congrats, you two — you did it!" And with a grin and a wave, he left.

Lois and I turned to each other, ecstatic.

"We proved Dr. Platt right!" I exclaimed. "And now we can write the story."

"You mean *I* can write the story," Lois corrected.

"And I can help you write it."

"And you can help," she said in agreement. "Then, if we are able to convince people that the *Messenger* was sabotaged...."

I beamed. "We might be able to prevent anything bad from happening again!"

Lois moved to hug me but suddenly backed up. "Sorry, just got — carried away," she muttered.

Though she hadn't touched me, I felt a strange sense of loss. Still, wanting to cover up the awkwardness and keep the positive energy going, I suggested, "What if we have dinner — to celebrate?"

She nodded. "I would like that, it — oh, wait. No. I can't have dinner."

I tilted my head. "Other plans?"

"Yes, actually."

I felt a sudden spark of annoyance as I realized what she must mean. "With Lex Luthor?" I wasn't sure why, but the man made me uncomfortable. And the fact that I'd basically shot myself in the foot on this occasion by telling him to give Lois an interview instead of me was irksome.

"Yes. I already told you — I'm getting that private interview with him if it kills me."

*You've already got it*, I thought to myself, *and you don't even know that you're indebted to me for it.*

"I'm sorry we can't celebrate tonight," she said as she left the conference room.

Following her out, I told her, "Lois, please just be careful with him. He gives me an uneasy feeling."

She swiveled to face me. "Look, Kent, I have taken care of myself for this long, and I don't need some 'big and strong man' to protect me."

"The man could be dangerous, Lois. You don't know what he's done on his way to the top —"

"I don't need a bodyguard or a babysitter, Kent," she proclaimed, walking away.

"What *is* your problem?" I growled after her.

She stopped again, whipping her head toward me and lifting an accusatory finger. "My problem is that Perry thrust such an inexperienced hack from Nowheresville —"

"What — and you think it's been easy working with *you*?" I gave a bitter laugh. "Do you know what they *call* you around here?"

Her face fell, and I instantly regretted what I had said. "Never mind," I murmured, turning away.

"What do they call me?" she asked in a small voice.

"It doesn't matter," I told her, not looking at her.

I had only walked a few more steps when she said, "Kent — please tell me." When I looked at her, she corrected softly, "Clark."

I would have given anything to take back my words. But if I didn't tell her, she would probably do some digging and find out anyway. It was probably best for her to hear it from me.

"Well, I've only been here for a few days," I said quietly, "but I've heard you called...the Ice Queen...and Mad Dog Lane."

Her lips became a thin line, and she nodded. As she began to retreat to the safety of the elevators, I called after her, "Lois...I think you're a brilliant reporter. And the petty things people say shouldn't matter at all. Everyone here knows that you're one of the best investigative journalists this country has ever seen."

She nodded but refused to meet my eyes. As the elevator closed, I wondered if the last words I had said had made even the slightest of impacts.

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That night, I did some more walking around the city before returning to my hotel room. I felt restless, upset....

I couldn't believe what I had said to Lois. She was just so

aggravating sometimes that I had wanted to lash out at her — and I was ashamed of myself. She was a woman trying to make it in a man's world. I couldn't blame her for being overly aggressive. There was no excuse for what I had done.

What made me feel even worse was the fact that I kept thinking about her having dinner with Lex Luthor. I wasn't certain if it was supposed to be a date or an interview, but just the idea of it was driving me nuts. Still, there was nothing I could do about it. If I'd had my powers...but no. I shouldn't be spying on Lois Lane. That would probably qualify as stalker territory. I didn't need to stoop to that to satisfy my curiosity.

I took off my locket and began to clean it carefully. My thoughts soon turned to my grandmother. It had belonged to her. I hated the fact that I'd had to coat it in white lead-based paint, but the shard's effect on me wouldn't be blocked by closing the locket otherwise.

I smiled as I thought of her. She had been such a wonderful person. I had been so devastated when she had died.

My powers really hadn't begun to show until after she'd passed away, and I wasn't sure what exactly my parents had told her about me, but she had said to me one time, "Clark, you're a very special boy. You may not think it now, but one day you are going to do great things.... You can trust me on that."

But I had done nothing great. She'd been wrong.

If she had lived longer, I might have told her about my special abilities as they appeared. But a car accident had taken her life, and so only my parents knew about me — well, that might not have been entirely true. I suspected Wayne Irig — my parents' neighbor and friend — knew more than he admitted.

Sometimes, I wondered what would have happened if I'd had my powers when my grandmother died. Would I have been able to save her? Would I have known she was in danger and zipped to her side, only to be too late to do anything? Or would I have still been utterly clueless?

I didn't want the abilities — didn't want the power and responsibility that came with them. I wished I could just be normal.

I stared at the necklace in my hand, feeling hatred and sorrow and need. The shard hidden inside the locket gave me just a glimpse of normal — it let me experience what it was like to have no powers. But I always knew they would come back...and I would have to put myself through the terrible pain of exposure time and time again. I hated that I had to do it — hated that I felt the weight of that locket against my chest every day. I hated that this would be my life forever. But I had no choice. I couldn't keep from exposing myself to the shard unless I holed myself away from human company forever.

Occasionally, I thought about suicide.

It was never more than half-serious, but the idea floated up every now and then. It seemed as if it would just make things so much easier.

I was a monster.... And my parents didn't know it. I couldn't let them ever know it. I would live with the pain of meteor rock exposure every minute of the day to keep them from feeling any great pain of their own.

If it weren't for them, all of my dreams would have died years ago. As it was, I was finally breathing life into my dreams for their sakes.

It wasn't that I didn't want to enjoy life. But I kept thinking of South Africa and what had happened there.

There was one dream that I could never realize. I could never get married and have a family. I couldn't ever allow myself to get close to another person like that. It was too dangerous.

I put the chain around my neck and held the locket against my chest. The morning exposures to meteor rock were getting more difficult, especially since I wasn't getting as much sleep as I needed. And so I thumbed open the locket and gave myself only a

brief exposure to the rock. I was exhausted, so I couldn't take much without coming dangerously close to unconsciousness, but it was hopefully enough to get me through most of the next day. If I needed another dose at the office, I would give it to myself briefly, even if I didn't like having to do it there.

When I was done with the locket, I collapsed backward onto the bed, my heart aching for the future I would never have.

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## Chapter 8: Make the World Go Away

*Make the world go away.*

*Get it off my shoulder.*

— "Make the World Go Away"

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The next day at the Planet, Lois practically swaggered into work. She had in her hand a few papers which she promptly took into Perry White's office. When she returned, she paused at my desk and crowed, "Last night, I landed the first one-on-one interview with Lex Luthor. Persistence pays off."

"It wasn't persistence," I muttered despite myself.

"What did you just say?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," I said hastily, regretting my outburst.

She crossed her arms. "Lex Luthor said I had an anonymous benefactor to thank for him giving me that interview. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

I avoided her eyes. "I think we need to get Jimmy and talk to Perry White about —"

"Kent," she said forcefully. "Answer me."

I sighed and sat back. "I told him to give that interview to you instead of me."

She stared at me incredulously for a few seconds before growling something derogatory about well-meaning farmboys under her breath. Then she muttered something about going to the ladies' room and left in a huff.

When Lois returned a few minutes later, it was as if our conversation had never happened. We corralled Jimmy and went to the Editor-in-Chief with our story about the space program. A few minutes after that, we had left Perry White's office, the words "cold...hard...facts" ringing in our ears. All of our evidence was wrapped up in the words of a dead man the world thought unhinged enough to commit suicide. In hindsight, it wasn't surprising that our story was considered unprintable. Still, the weight of dejection hung on our shoulders.

Lois, however, soon recovered and said, "Okay. So we need some physical proof."

"Pictures are probably our best bet," Jimmy noted.

"If we got pictures of the wreckage, maybe S.T.A.R. Labs would be able to tell that the wrong systems had been put in place," I said thoughtfully. "I'll go call Dr. Baines — see if we can get permission to set up an independent examination."

"Farmboy, Baines won't let us go near that wreckage. We've tried already, remember? And there isn't time to play by the rules — the transport containing the colonists is supposed to go up in two days."

I told her stubbornly, "I'm going to try anyway. Maybe I'll be able to find someone else at EPRAD to help."

"Fine — go ahead," Lois muttered.

I went to my desk and called EPRAD. But — just as Lois had predicted — I had absolutely no luck in getting anyone to approve an independent examination. The lid they were keeping on all this was tight and not budging, and everyone kept giving me the run-around. Frustrated, I spent some time going over my notes and making calls, and before I knew it, the time had come for the staff meeting. I headed into the conference room, where some people were gathered around the table.

After waiting a few minutes for more people to file in, Mr. White said, "All right. Let's start this thing. I'm sorry it's so late, but that's how it goes sometimes." He suddenly frowned. "Kent

— do you know where Lois and Jimmy are?”

I furrowed my brow. “I had assumed they would be here — I haven’t seen them since this afternoon, actually.”

He shrugged. “Okay. We’ll just hold the meeting without them.” He began discussing the week’s stories, but I kept looking at the door. I just couldn’t concentrate.

Finally, I stood and headed for the exit. The Chief Editor stopped mid-sentence and barked, “Kent!”

I turned toward him.

“This meeting isn’t adjourned.”

I winced. “I’m sorry, Mr. White, but it just isn’t like Lois and Jimmy to miss a staff meeting.”

He gave me a look that seemed to say, “How would you know that? You haven’t even been here a week.” But then he nodded curtly and said, “Fine. Go find those two. Lois has a nose for trouble, and Jimmy never *has* been good at keeping her out of it.”

I was out the door in a flash, glad he didn’t seem too upset that I was leaving. I didn’t even have to think twice about where they were — they must have gone to the hangar to get pictures of the wreckage. . . . And something had happened to them, or else they would have been back by now.

I brought my locket out from underneath my shirt and considered giving myself a dose of the green rock. I could feel my powers returning. My most recent exposure hadn’t been enough.

But as I thought about Lois and Jimmy, I let go of the locket and reluctantly decided to refrain from opening it. They could be in big trouble, and my abilities might prove to be a real boon in this instance. I hated it, but it was possible I would need every ounce of strength I could get. I couldn’t let anything happen to them. I’d seen far too much death these past few days in Metropolis.

I thought about leaving the newsroom through the storage room window, but I didn’t think I would be able to fly yet, and so I chose the stairs instead, jogging down them at a speed that was slightly faster than that of a normal human.

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I took a cab to EPRAD and — faster than any human could — located the hangar where Lois and Jimmy were. Looking through the metal walls, I saw that Jimmy was unconscious and Lois was bound to some sort of metal structure. Dr. Baines and a muscular tattooed man were holding them captive. Though my x-ray vision was a little shaky, I had seen all that I needed.

I briefly stood there and considered what my course of action should be. Gunning hostages down in cold blood didn’t seem to be Dr. Baines’s style — still, I needed to get close to them. My powers weren’t yet up to zipping them in and out of the building — even if I *was* wearing black as camouflage, which I *wasn’t* — and I needed to buy a little time.

Taking a deep breath and bracing myself, I rammed the outside door hard enough to knock it off its hinges and onto the ground. Though the action almost knocked the wind out of me, I stepped onto the door and into the building and commanded, “Drop your guns, or. . . .” It was only then that I realized how truly lame my plan was. There had to have been a better way of delaying Dr. Baines. But that was a realization I had made far too late.

Her gun pointed at me, Dr. Baines asked, “Or you’ll make a citizen’s arrest and take me in to the police?” She smiled. “I don’t think so, Mr. Kent.”

Seeing the exasperated look on Lois’s face, I felt like kicking myself.

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Much to my misfortune, I was chained up next to Lois, who started in on a tirade as soon as Baines and her goon left the room.

“I told Perry that what I needed was a task force. . . . A *task force*. You know, a team of capable individuals who would pull their own weight and help me get *out* of jams — not make the jams *worse*. Instead, I get a five hundred pound gorilla with more brawn than brains and a skinny photographer who doesn’t know how to take or throw a punch. If you’d really wanted to help us out, Kent, why didn’t you call the police?”

“Lois — ”

“Oh, wait, dumb question — it’s because you’re like every other male in the world and think you can handle everything alone. Call the police? Of course not — what a stupid idea that would be when you can instead come in and break a door down and put yourself right in the line of fire of trigger-happy criminals, conveniently forgetting the fact that you are *not* bullet-proof — that you *cannot* magically melt those weapons or miraculously tie up your assailants. . . . Or maybe you thought the Mad Dog could break herself out of her restraints by using her viciously sharp *teeth*.”

Straining with all my might, I had managed to break the padlock holding my chains together. But her words made me stop short of removing my hands from the links. “Lois, I’m sorry I told you about that. It’s just — you can be a bit intimidating to people, you know?”

She was quiet for a few seconds, and I tried to turn my head to look at her. When she spoke, she did so quietly, her diatribe finished. “I guess I *can* be a bit like a dog with a bone. . . . But I’ve *had* to be to make it in this business.”

“I know, Lois. But you’re at the top now. Anyone who pays any attention to the *Planet* knows that — you’re an admired and well-respected journalist.”

“Well, it wasn’t always that way. . . . I used to be a lot less cynical. When I first started working for the *Daily Planet* at twenty-one, I was a bright-eyed optimist.”

“Really?” I sounded more surprised than I had meant to.

“Yeah. My first big story was a good one — it was about this married couple acting as gunrunners. . . . But then this reporter, Claude, well. . . he swept me off my feet. He had this French accent and really knew how to pour on the charm. We. . . slept together, and I told him about the story I was working on. The next morning, he was gone, of course — and so was my story.” She sighed. “You know the nickname ‘Ice Queen’? Well, it was started by him. . . . After that, I realized it was a dog-eat-dog world, and I became tenacious. It helped me climb my way to the top, but I guess it didn’t help me win any friends along the way. . . . And now, because I refused to look before I leapt yet again, we’re all going to die.”

“Lois, there was no way for you to know that this was going to happen. We’re going to get out of this somehow — I promise.”

She was quiet for a few seconds. “Why did you give me that interview with Lex Luthor?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “You had worked so hard to get it. I didn’t think it was fair that I have it just because I was in the right place at the right time.”

“You saved his life — ”

“Anyone could have done that,” I interrupted.

“No. What you did was a great thing. . . . And what I’ve done is so terrible. I’m sorry I got us into this — Baines is going to kill us, and it’s all my fault.”

I opened my mouth, wanting to give her some kind of reassurance, but Dr. Baines finally returned from the darkness.

“I hope you enjoy your accommodations,” the scientist said with a saccharine smile. “This is, after all, the last place you’re going to see before you die. The three of you are about to be victims of a very unfortunate accident. . . .”

Warily, Lois asked, “What do you mean?”

Dr. Baines gave her an innocent look. “Yes, well, you see, while the orbital maneuvering system was being dismantled, the

monomethyl hydrozene leaked. . . and it mixed with the nitrogen tetroxide.” She had walked away from us and allowed the two substances to begin pouring onto the ground. The liquids slowly began to spread and move toward each other. “Unfortunately, three reporters were killed by the blast, unaware of the danger they had put themselves in when they decided to come snooping around.”

She stepped toward me and put a hand under my chin, lifting it upward. I was motionless, my face tight, as she gently kissed my lips. When she pulled back, she saw my locket, which I had forgotten to tuck inside my shirt earlier, and she pulled it upward and off my neck.

I started to protest but bit back the words, knowing that time was running out.

“What an interesting piece of jewelry,” she commented. Seeing the enraged look in my eyes, she smiled and slipped it over her own neck. “I think I’ll keep it for myself as a souvenir.”

And then she left with her lackey. I hesitated for only a second before removing my hands from my chains and freeing Lois from her bonds.

“How did — ”

“Missing link,” I replied curtly.

“Grab Jimmy,” she told me.

I turned to her, feeling as if I had been punched in the gut. My abilities had returned somewhat, and I was supposed to manhandle Jimmy? “Lois — ”

“Please, just this once. I know you don’t like touching people, but I can’t carry him very far myself.”

I took in a deep breath and nodded, picking up the unconscious Jimmy from the floor and draping him over my shoulder.

We raced toward the exit, but I knew we wouldn’t make it in time as we were, so after a gut-wrenching moment of consideration, I put my arm around Lois and used my abilities to fling us forward and through the air. My powers still weren’t at full strength, which meant I wouldn’t have been able to remain airborne long, but fortunately we didn’t have to go far. We fell into a giant puddle of mud, and Lois quickly stood and looked at the massive fireball that was the hangar.

I moved away from Jimmy’s unconscious form and pulled my knees up to my chin. The gravity of everything that had just happened suddenly hit me like a freight train. My chest was seizing up. My heart was beating rapidly. I was starting to shake.

I heard Lois’s voice say distantly, “Clark?”

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against my knees.

“Clark, are you okay?”

I could sense that Lois was kneeling beside me. Fortunately, she wasn’t touching me. That would have sent me over the edge.

“Clark, you had to touch him — you saved his life.”

“No,” I told her hoarsely. “I could have killed him. I shouldn’t have done that.” I felt the burden of the world on my shoulders. I wished I could have just made it go away.

“Clark, you *didn’t* kill him. You *saved* him.”

“My locket — ”

“We’ll get you a new locket, okay?”

There was a sudden whirring noise, and I looked up from my knees to the sky in time to see Baines’s getaway helicopter explode in a giant ball of fire. I knew then the shard was gone for good — I no longer had it, but at least she didn’t either. Yet I needed that shard — I needed to expose myself right then. I couldn’t use my powers any more. I could have killed Jimmy. It was even more dangerous than when I’d saved Lex Luthor.

“Clark, let’s go back to the Planet,” Lois said gently. She almost moved to help me up but stopped herself just in time. “You saved Jimmy’s life — he would be dead if it weren’t for you.”

Jimmy groaned suddenly, and both Lois and I turned to look

at him. He sat up and rubbed the back of his neck. “What happened?” he asked groggily.

“Clark saved your life,” Lois said firmly.

“Lois — ” I tried to protest.

“He saved your life, and now we’re going to go back to the Planet and write up this story. You feeling okay, Jimmy?”

Jimmy nodded. “Nothing a little time won’t cure.”

Lois helped Jimmy to his feet and then stared down at me. “Come on, Clark.”

I took in a few deep breaths and then stood a little shakily. “Okay.”

“Are you going to be all right, Clark?” she asked me.

“Yeah,” I replied automatically. I didn’t want her to worry about me — but there was a part of me that enjoyed her using my first name without being prompted.

She looked at my face for a second before nodding. She and Jimmy walked away, and I gazed briefly at the sky where Baines’s helicopter had once been. I needed that locket. But it was surely destroyed now.

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We separated to go home and change into clean clothes and then return to the Planet. When I arrived in the newsroom, Mr. White was at Lois’s desk, looking over her shoulder at the article she had already started writing. “Kent,” he greeted me. “Thanks for getting Lois and Jimmy out of that mess.”

“We were doing fine on our own,” Lois muttered, though her voice didn’t have any real bite to it.

Ignoring her, the Editor-in-Chief continued, “It’s good to know that you can be counted on when things, uh, hit the fan. . . . I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks, Mr. White,” I said quietly as he began walking toward his office. I was still feeling unbalanced — Lois and Jimmy could have died. The thought frightened me.

A few minutes later, Jimmy had arrived, and then Mr. White left for the night. I had the feeling the Chief Editor wanted a visual confirmation that Jimmy was all right. Though I hadn’t been working for the *Daily Planet* for long, I could already tell that Perry White and Jimmy Olsen had a bond much like that of father and son. I didn’t know what their lives were like away from the Planet, but I had a feeling it hadn’t all been flowers and sunshine.

While Lois continued working on the story about the space program and Baines, I stood uneasily a few feet from her and made occasional comments. As for Jimmy — well — he acted as if he was more interested in what had happened in the hangar than in giving input on the story. There wasn’t much to tell about what happened at EPRAD, but I provided him some details. I had the feeling he was trying to concoct a good story to boast about, and I didn’t want to curb his enthusiasm. I had no problem with him enjoying the limelight.

When the article was finally finished and sent for Perry White to read in the morning, Lois turned to Jimmy and me with a grin. She seemed to be filled with adrenaline. “Why don’t we all get ice cream?”

I gave her a skeptical look. “Where would you get ice cream at this time?”

“Trust me — the Fudge Castle is open till 1 am.” At my expression, she defended, “You never know when people are going to get midnight chocolate cravings!”

“Lois probably keeps them in business,” Jimmy jested. He lifted his hands when Lois glared at him. “Just tellin’ it like I see it,” he noted with a chuckle. Looking at his watch, he said, “You know, I think I’m going to turn it down this time. I’m tired, and we gophers don’t get as much leeway in being late as you full-time reporters.”

“All right.” Lois looked at me with a smile. “Then I guess it’s just you and me.”

I glanced away uneasily. “Uh, yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Come on,” she told me, gesturing for me to follow her to the elevator. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” I muttered. I wanted to come up with an excuse not to go — feeling it would just be best for me to return to the hotel — but I didn’t like my chances of trying to change Lois’s mind.

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When we got to the Fudge Castle, I simply stood and stared at the menu (once I’d torn my eyes away from my surroundings) for a few minutes without saying anything. The place was filled with chocolate creations of all kinds — candy bars, fudge, ice cream.... It was a chocoholic’s dreamland...and a diabetic’s nightmare. Even though I was limiting myself to the ice cream menu, I found it difficult to choose something. Fortunately, there was a line at the register, so I didn’t have to order immediately. Unfortunately, I found that even the little extra time wasn’t helping that much.

Finally, it was our turn, and I gave Lois a helpless look. “I’m not sure what to get,” I muttered.

Taking charge, she stepped forward and ordered for both herself and me. “I’ll take the Chocolate Dreamer’s Lullaby, and he’ll have the Choco Lavaburst River.” When she saw my skeptical look (who named these things anyway?), she told me, “It’s best for a first-timer.”

We took our ice cream to a small black-and-white-checked table, and I was surprised to realize something that hadn’t registered before. There really *were* a lot of people at the Fudge Castle for this time of night.

“There are quite a few people here,” I commented, looking around.

“It’s the only ice cream place in the city that’s open this late, so everyone comes here to satisfy their cravings.” She took a bite of her ice cream and made a sensuous noise that made me gulp: “Mmm.”

I shifted my chair back a few inches, trying to keep a clear distance from her. I didn’t need extra-human hearing to know that she was enjoying herself. She licked some chocolate off her lips, and I forced my eyes to move from the pinkness of her tongue to the darkness of my ice cream. I scooped up a bite and thrust the spoon into my mouth, forcing myself to concentrate on the rich flavor instead of the sudden spark of my libido.

I was quiet for a few minutes, and when I looked up, Lois was staring at me with a worried expression. “Are you really going to be all right, Clark?” she asked softly.

I considered the question for a couple of seconds. The fact that she was still using my first name appeared to be an indication of how serious she was. Knowing that she was worried about me was touching — and it made me feel a little better.

Nodding slowly, I told her, “Yeah...I will be.”

“Why are you so scared of touching people?” she asked with uncharacteristic gentleness.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” I said softly, not meeting her eyes, “but I can’t tell you that. It’s just — it’s just best that I don’t touch people.”

She placed her hand on the table, and I could tell she was wishing she could grasp mine with hers. “Clark, you can be such a gentle person. I don’t know why it bothers you so much.”

“It’s a rule I made for myself, Lois...and I know you know about those.” I gave her a half-hearted attempt at a smile, trying to lighten the mood and change the subject.

Lois stared at me briefly and then smiled back. “I guess we all have to figure out our boundaries.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “We do.”

I went back to eating my ice cream, trying to ignore her pensive gaze.

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After leaving the Fudge Castle, I returned to the Hotel Apollo

and called my parents’ house. I hated that waking up my parents seemed like it was becoming a habit, but I needed to talk to one of them again.

“Lo?” came my mom’s voice.

“I’m sorry I’m calling so late, Mom. I won’t keep you for long — I just needed to ask you to do something for me. I’ll tell you the details some other time, but my locket was destroyed. Sometime tomorrow, when I feel my powers have come back enough, I’m going to — to fly to Kansas. Do you think you could have a new shard of meteor rock ready for me in...in a lead box?” It had been a long time since I had done any long-distance flying, and the thought terrified me, but I really needed to get a shard as soon as I could. Without one, I was too dangerous to be around.

Mom was quiet for a few seconds. “Okay, Clark. I’ll have it ready for you in a lead box — and I’ll try to get you some lead paint, too.”

I felt relieved that she had thought of that. Lead paint was generally only available for non-residential use, and I didn’t know how to get my hands on any. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, Clark. Goodnight.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“And we love you.”

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## Chapter 9: When You’re Gone

*When you’re gone, yet I’ll dream*

*A little dream as years go by.*

— “A Fool such as I”

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I called in sick to work the next day. To be safe, I didn’t want to return to the Planet until I had finally gotten another dose of meteor rock. I was basically just going to wait around in the sun until I felt fast enough to make the flight to Kansas.

Deciding to do a bit of reading, I picked up *Crime and Punishment*. I approached the end of the novel fairly swiftly, and I was just to the point where Raskolnikov confesses his crime to the police when there was a knock at the door. Frowning, I looked at my watch and saw that it was noon.

Putting the book down, I jogged over to the door and opened it. Lois Lane entered with a whirlwind of activity.

She was babbling as she took some food out of a bag and began to set the items in a neat line on the counter. “Now, I know you’re not sick, and I figured you were staying away because of last night. I decided to let you have your day today, but you are coming in to work tomorrow if Perry has to send the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse after you. Now, I figured you probably wouldn’t feel like making any food, so I brought you some myself. Not that I made it myself, as I’m not trying to kill you, but it’s good enough for a lunch — there’s a ham sandwich, a pickle, a bag of chips, a cup of soup, and a couple of cookies. I figured you would have drinks, so I didn’t bring anything.” She turned around and frowned. “Boy, this place is grungy.”

Staring at her in amazement, I asked her, “Did you even stop to take a breath during all of that?”

Ignoring me, she just started babbling once more. “I know someone who could help you find a better place. Anything would be better than this, I guess, but we can probably find you a good fixer-upper if you’re trying not to spend much. I know how it can be starting a new job and having to get an expensive new wardrobe and all that — ”

“Lois, slow down,” I finally managed to get in. I had the feeling that her babbling was an attempt to cover up how uneasy it made her feel to make an overture of friendship like this. It was surprising, but I was grateful.

She smiled at me. “Sorry.” Then her smile turned into a frown. “I knew you weren’t sick, but if I had to say how you look, I’d say you seem even better than normal. I mean, you

might be a bit emotionally drained and all, but your appearance isn't as pale as it has been sometimes." She moved toward me as if to touch my arm but then caught herself and gave me an annoyed look.

"I, uh, I might be anemic or something," I muttered, trying to come up with an excuse. "Thanks for the food, Lois — really, you didn't have to do that."

"I know," she acknowledged, glancing at what she had brought. "I just wanted to show you that Lois Lane can be nice sometimes. Oh!" She reached into her coat and pulled out a folded newspaper. "Here — this is for you."

I took the paper from her and opened it up to look at the front page. The headline read:

MESSENGER SABOTAGED  
SABOTEUR DIES IN FIERY EXPLOSION

My eyes went to the article itself, and I saw that Jimmy and I were listed in the byline as contributing reporters. I smiled and nodded. "Very nice."

"It feels good to see your name on the front page, doesn't it?" she said knowingly. "Jimmy's been telling wild stories of his bravery. I told him that if he didn't take it down a couple notches, then I would tell all those girls he was unconscious most of the time."

I smiled. "Gotta keep him in line, huh?"

"Exactly," she said. "And you'll be glad to know that Amy will be on the colonist transport to Space Station *Prometheus*. Oh — I almost forgot something else." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a silver locket and necklace. Then she started rambling yet again. "I found it at a little antique place. I know it won't be the same as your old locket — after all, it's not your grandmother's — and you will have to get a new picture, but hopefully it will work as a sort of symbol of the old one —"

"Thank you, Lois," I broke in, grateful but somber. The fact that she had gotten it for me made me feel good — but the knowledge of what I was going to use it for made me sick to my stomach. At least she would never know what its true purpose was. "I appreciate it," I told her. "It means a lot to me."

She smiled a bit unsurely and then held the necklace out in her palm. I reached out, my hand hovering over hers, but I hesitated, not wanting to touch her. She started to lift her hand, and I jerked mine away.

"Oh, Clark, I'm sorry — I forgot." She grasped one part of the necklace and held it so that it was dangling in the air. "Here."

I took it from her and clenched it in my palm. "Thanks again, Lois." I was glad that crisis had been averted without any hard feelings.

Lois nodded, seeming a bit uncomfortable with my open gratitude. "You know, they've fixed the colonist launch vehicle — it was suffering from the same problems as the *Messenger* — and I'm thinking about going up on it to give the *Planet* an exclusive personal account."

"What?" I gaped, something striking my chest that felt almost like bereavement. She was going to leave Earth?

"Yeah — I think it would be a good opportunity for the *Planet*."

"But Lois — that would be *illegal!* Not to mention dangerous. And —"

"A good reporter knows when to cross the line," Lois cut in.

I ran a hand through my hair anxiously. I was realizing just how much I didn't want her to leave — if she did, I might never see her again. "You could be — you could be arrested," I told her weakly.

"It's a great opportunity," she said, giving me a strange look.

"Lois...." I didn't know what else to say. I only knew it was a bad idea.

She stared at me for a second, more protests ready to fire from her lips, but then she abruptly turned complacent. "You

know — you're right. It's a bad idea, really."

She was giving in too easily, and it was making me suspicious. I was about to inquire further into her motives when the phone rang.

"Sorry," I apologized, "I should get this." I stepped over to the phone and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Clark, it's your mother. I just wanted to let you know that we have the shard ready for whenever you want to pick it up. Are you feeling...recharged yet?"

"I'm...doing better. I don't know if I'm up to a hundred percent yet, but I'll get there soon."

Mom must have sensed that I was acting a little weird, for she asked, "Is there...someone *with* you?"

"Yeah, Lois brought me some lunch."

She paused. "Lois? Well, you'll need to tell me more about this 'Lois' later."

I rolled my eyes. "Right."

"If you're busy, I'll let you go then."

"Okay. Bye."

"Goodbye, Clark."

I hung up the phone and turned to Lois. "Sorry — that was my mom. She was just...checking up on me."

In a voice that was almost gentle, Lois asked, "She's worried about you, too, huh?"

I raised an eyebrow, touched. "You're worried about me?"

She began to backtrack speedily. "No, I'm not worried about you. Well — I mean, maybe a little. I know you can take care of yourself. It's just — look, I really should be heading back. I'm glad to see you're doing better than last night. Just remember — you're expected to be back at work tomorrow."

A second later, she was out the door with a hasty farewell.

I smiled. She *had* made me feel a little better — something my book of choice certainly hadn't been doing. With a sigh, I put the necklace around my neck and tried floating. Well, it looked like I was as close to full-power as I needed to be. I would eat the lunch Lois had brought me and then fly to Kansas.

\*\*\*

As I flew over Smallville, I felt a sense of nostalgia. It had been so long since I had flown like that — I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it.

I landed in a field and walked up to my parents' farmhouse, remembering how it had felt to run inside the house after school as a kid and look in the kitchen to see if Mom had made a pie or a batch of cookies. Those had been such blissful days...so unlike the last time I had flown to Smallville from South Africa.

When I went into the kitchen, I found Mom washing dishes. I stood there for a moment, smelling the apple pie she had baked earlier, likely in preparation for my arrival. A bittersweet sensation tugged at my heart, and I yearned for the innocence of my younger days. But the past could never be recaptured — only remembered.

Mom turned around and noticed me, her face filling with delight. She set her dish aside and stepped forward to hug me. But I had set up rules against even my parents touching me — out of guilt, out of worry, out of sadness...or maybe something else. I wasn't sure. But deep down there was a part of me that felt I wasn't worthy of human touch after what had happened in Africa — there was a part of me that wanted to punish myself as I protected others from being hurt by me. I just hated the emotional toll it was taking on my parents.

And so, I said quietly, sadly, to my mother, "No, Mom."

Her face fell, and I could tell I had hurt her. Wanting to erase the pain, I said with a smile, "It smells good in here — I *do* get the whole pie to myself, don't I?"

She grinned back at me. "Now, Clark, you know your father would never forgive either of us if we didn't let him have at least a bite. He's been in and out of here all day trying to sneak one,

and it's been all I can handle just to make him hold off till you get here."

I chuckled. "All right — I guess I can share." I just looked at her for a few seconds. "It's good to see you again, Mom."

"Oh, Clark, it hasn't been that long," she returned, but I could tell she was just as glad to see me as I was to see her. "But I must admit I *was* getting used to having you around."

I smiled and then nodded my head toward a small white box and a bucket of paint on the counter. "Those my supplies?"

She turned to see what I was looking at. "That's them all right," she affirmed, sounding unenthused. "You might as well take that paint with you in case you ever need it. We have some more around here somewhere. We painted the box thoroughly earlier, so you shouldn't have any problems taking it home."

"Thanks, Mom."

She nodded toward my chest. "I see you have a new locket."

I looked at it and clutched it in a fist. "Yeah. Lois gave it to me. I need to paint it."

I took off my coat, and Mom got out some newspaper and a small paintbrush for me. As I started painting the outside of the locket on the newspaper, Mom asked casually, "So, tell me about this 'Lois.'"

I couldn't help but smile. "Lois Lane. I've admired her work for years, and I got paired on a story with her about the explosion of the *Messenger*." I set down my paintbrush and dug in my coat pocket, pulling out the newspaper Lois had given me and the earlier edition Perry White had given me. I handed both to Mom, who — if I knew her like I thought I did — would be getting a subscription to the *Daily Planet* of her own soon. "I'm officially a part of the *Planet* now."

She beamed at me, her eyes a little watery, and I could tell she was fighting the urge to hug me. She turned away and sat at the table to read the two articles while I finished with the locket's outside and left it to dry. I sat next to her at the table and waited for her to speak.

"I'm so proud of you, Clark," she said at last when she had finished reading.

I shifted uncomfortably, avoiding her eyes. "Thanks, Mom."

The emotion left her voice — likely because she could sense my discomfort — and she said, "So, tell me more about Lois Lane. You were partnered with her — that's it?"

I laughed. "Just *being* with Lois is an experience, much less *working* with her. I think she has a nose for danger — it's that investigative journalist in her. She's — well, she's controlling, uncompromising...stubborn...passionate. It reminds me of what Han Solo says in *Star Wars* — 'Either I'm going to kill her, or I'm beginning to like her.'"

Mom smiled. "Well, it sounds like she's made quite an impression on you."

"That's one way to put it," I said, shaking my head. "Lois doesn't so much leave impressions so much as bulldoze paths." I chuckled to myself. That was an apt description of her if I'd ever heard of one.

"Do you like her?"

"Of course I like her. She's — " I stared at her, suddenly realizing how she'd meant it. "Mom — "

"I just asked a simple question," she said. "What you do with Lois is your own business."

Fortunately, I was spared a reply by the opening of the door and the entrance of my father. "Clark!" he exclaimed as he came over. "I didn't know you were here."

"I just got here a few minutes ago," I told him. It was good to see him again, too.

"You staying for dinner?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

I turned to Mom, who was giving me a pleading look. "I guess so," I answered. I had a feeling Mom wouldn't really have given me a choice.

"Great — that means I'll get home cooking," Dad stated with obvious gladness.

"Not that he needs it," Mom muttered.

I just rolled my eyes. "It'll be the last time in a while. It's great seeing you both again, but I just came here for the shard. The next time I come, it'll be on a plane.... And I'm not sure when I'll be able to afford that."

Mom sighed, and I didn't miss the look she exchanged with my father. "Clark...."

"What?" I asked warily, knowing I wouldn't like what she was about to say.

"When you told us you needed to be exposed every day to that stone in order to strip you of your powers, we didn't like it, and we didn't agree with your decision, but we chose to support you and help you however you needed us to. And as long as you think that meteor rock is the best option for you, we will continue to help you with it. We've helped you by giving you that first locket and chipping off bits of that horrid rock, and we'll buy a hundred more lockets and chip at that stone a hundred more times if we have to." She exhaled heavily. "You may want to use that meteor rock to help make you 'normal,' but Clark...normal for you *isn't* normal."

I sighed. "Mom, I could really hurt someone with my powers — "

"But just think of all the people you could save," she countered.

I shook my head slowly. "Mom, if I used my powers to help people — even if I *didn't* hurt them — it could jeopardize the ones I love." I stood and walked over to the window to look outside at nothing in particular. "Thanks, Mom," I said softly. "I know you just want to help. But I've made my choice."

She gave a heavy sigh, and I felt a stab of guilt. Changing the subject, I turned around and asked how the farm was doing.

We began talking more, and it was almost like old times.... Except somehow the topic of conversation continuously veered toward Lois Lane and my work with her. I wasn't sure if it was me or Mom who kept bringing her up, but somehow or another I managed to brief Mom on almost every moment I had spent with Lois. I omitted, however, what that jerk Claude had done to Lois, knowing it had been told to me in confidence, but I certainly had a few choice words to describe him in my head.

Dad eventually had to go outside to do some more farm work, so Mom and I just continued talking. She caught me up on what was going on with the farm and Smallville in the few days since I had been gone. Not much had been happening with the farm, but Smallville was abuzz with gossip — apparently, some wealthy man from San Francisco had just moved to the small community and was the talk of the town. She asked for a few more details about Metropolis, and I gave them to her. After some time had gone by, Mom suggested an early dinner, and I agreed.

She began getting out her cooking supplies, and I went up to my locket and felt its exterior with a thumb. The paint was dry, so I turned it around and put a white coat on the locket's inside. When that was done, I put my brush down and approached my mother.

"Mom, I need a picture of Grandma for my locket. Do you have one I can use?"

"I think I have one," she said, frowning in thought, likely trying to recall where it was. "You take over the cutting here, and I'll go look for it."

I began chopping up vegetables at human speed. However, I didn't feel I had to be particularly careful with the knife since I was presently invulnerable to everything but the meteor rock, so I was finished when she returned with the photograph and a pair of scissors.

"Here you go, Clark," she told me as she set the items on the counter. There was a sense of distaste in her voice, but I knew

exactly what the problem was and didn't inquire. It wasn't the locket she hated; it was the shard I wanted to be inside it.

"Thanks, Mom," I said softly. I picked up the scissors and cut out my grandmother's face from the picture, making sure it was just the right size for the locket. Then I set it next to the necklace and helped my mother more in the kitchen. Her mood began to improve as I jested with her a little, and when the food was almost done, she told me to go fetch my father. I was able to find him without any problems.

Dinner was sort of awkwardly quiet. We talked some, but it felt as if there was much left unsaid. The atmosphere got more pleasant when dessert was placed before us, and I could tell Dad was savoring every single bite of his apple pie.

"Thanks, Mom," I said with a smile. "This was absolutely delicious. It definitely beats what I've been eating in Metropolis."

"Any time you want a home-cooked meal, you just come and visit," she said firmly. I refrained from arguing with her, though I knew I wouldn't be returning any time soon.

Mom stood up. "I guess I'll go put the shard in your locket, Clark. I'm sure it's dry by now." She grabbed the white box and the locket and left the room. She would try to get as far away from me in the house as she could so the shard wouldn't affect me and prohibit my return flight to Metropolis. I knew she'd do that even without me requesting it.

When she came back, however, it wasn't just with the locket. She also had the all-black outfit I had used several years ago for a few rare but necessary rescues. The outfit consisted of a pair of pants, a long-sleeved shirt, gloves, shoes, socks, and a ski hat, every item of which was solid black. I used to just pull the whole ski hat down over my face, not needing eye holes since I had x-ray vision. She set all the items on the table, and as I grabbed the locket and put it on over my head, I looked at her questioningly.

"I think you should wear these things when you fly back to Metropolis, Clark," she said in a firm voice. "You can't be up to full speed yet, and you should try not to be conspicuous."

I considered what she had said as I stared at her. Though her face betrayed nothing, I suspected an ulterior motive. Still, I agreed anyway, "Okay, Mom." There wasn't much harm in taking the items with me. They were just clothes. How could they have any real significance?

After we were done eating our second helpings of pie, we went into the living room and talked for a little while longer. Finally, I went into my old bedroom and changed into the black outfit. Holding the ski hat and a black bag with a few personal items in it which I hadn't been able to fit in my suitcase when leaving Kansas the last time, I approached them and said, "Mom, Dad...thanks for everything."

"We love you, Clark," Mom said softly.

Knowing she wanted to hug me but that I couldn't let her, I turned away from them and replied, "I love you both, too." And then I was out the door, pulling the ski hat down over my face and taping to the air with my bag clutched against my chest.

\*\*\*

The Hotel Apollo wasn't nearly as welcoming as my parents' home, but I didn't allow myself to dwell on that when I arrived. Instead, I sat my stuff down and turned dutifully to the locket around my neck, preparing to expose myself to the shard hidden within.

But I found myself hesitating.

The colonist launch was in the morning...and there was a good chance that Lois was going to be on board. Did I want that? No. No, I didn't.

As much as she got on my nerves, there was a part of me which yearned to be with her. She brought out in me a feeling of life that I hadn't experienced in a long time. When I was with her, I brooded less. I would verbally spar rather than keep my comments to myself. I felt — well, I felt *hopeful*.

And *that* was one of the reasons I wasn't going to stop her from going on the transport vehicle, I reflected bitterly. I needed some distance from her — I was starting to develop feelings that were very dangerous for someone who couldn't touch others. It would hurt when she was gone — but it was for the best.

Still, even though I wouldn't stop her from going up into space, I *did* want to be available in case anything happened. I had a bad feeling about the launch — Dr. Baines just *had* to have someone working over her, and that someone was probably very unhappy.

Part of me thought it was Luthor. Who else could stand to gain from the destruction of the *Messenger* as much as he could? If he had been able to put his own space station in place, he would have made billions of dollars from the patents of vaccines developed...and people would have lauded him as the savior of the space program.

But I had no proof of his wrongdoing... And in truth, I didn't want to think the man I had saved from bleeding to death in an alley was guilty. That would mean that Luthor was responsible for the deaths of Commander Laderman, Dr. Platt, Dr. Baines and her lackey... and possibly even others. And it would also mean that if I had not saved Luthor, then those people might still be alive.

An invisible hand squeezed my heart, and I pushed those depressing thoughts out of my mind and gazed down at the black gloves covering my hands. At least I had my all-black outfit now. I would be able to get close to the transport vehicle in the morning to make certain that the launch went smoothly.

So why did the thought of the transport's launching into space make my heart ache?

I opened my palm and let the locket inside fall against my chest. For tonight only, it would remain closed.

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#### **Chapter 10: If Tomorrow Wasn't Such a Long Time ... then Lonesome Would Mean Nothing to Me at All**

*If today was not an endless highway ...*

*If tonight was not an endless trail ...*

*If tomorrow wasn't such a long time ...*

*Then lonesome would mean nothing to me at all.*

— "Tomorrow is a Long Time"

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The next day, I woke up a few hours before dawn. My sleep had been restless.

While awake, I had been able to consciously deny at times that I was worried about Lois...but while asleep, my subconscious took control and filled my dreams with her.

I donned my black outfit and turned off the alarm clock, though it had never had a chance to buzz. Then, I made certain my locket was tucked beneath my clothes, as it wouldn't be good for such an identifying feature to be visible if someone happened to see me. Pulling the ski hat all the way down over my face, I used my x-ray vision to ensure that I would be able to leave the Hotel Apollo without being seen.

I was at EPRAD in a flash, and I hid in a place that required floating but in which I would never be found unless someone was *looking* for a man dressed all in black who could fly... And there was a fat chance of *that*.

It was early yet, but it was much better that I be too early to the launch than too late.

There was a lot of activity at EPRAD as people prepared for the launch of the transport vehicle, and at last I saw the colonists entering. Lois, as I had suspected, was with the rest of the group, but I almost didn't notice her because she was wearing a blonde wig. I shook my head. Evidently, she didn't want anyone to recognize her either.

I continued watching Lois's progress to make sure she didn't get into any more trouble than she was in already. I saw her as

she went into a small unoccupied room in the habitation module. I watched as she carefully strapped herself in. And then I noticed her gaze move to a blinking light.

To say that I was fast when I flew to the launch vehicle would be to relish in the use of an understatement. I was at the transport in the blink of an eye, worrying less about being conspicuous and more about saving the lives of the adults and children who had boarded the transport.

What happened next happened quickly as well.

I pried open the outer doors to the transport and reached Lois's room just as she was unstrapping herself. She yelled something at me as I approached the bomb, but I didn't pay any attention. Instead, I pulled the bomb from the wall and found the small plastic explosive inside. I thrust the explosive up underneath the ski hat covering my face and into my mouth, swallowing it and hoping that my powers had indeed fully returned.

After a millisecond's hesitation, I grabbed Lois. She managed to start fighting me despite how quickly everything was happening, but I was stronger than her. I flew with her out of the vehicle at a speed that was fast but not dangerous to her. I deposited her in a safe place and returned to the launch vehicle. Then, I fixed the outer doors with my superhuman strength and heat vision.

The transport began to launch, and I felt the bomb explode inside me. I was unharmed, but I was unable to stop from belching, the action making me pause mid-flight. Then I continued flying away from EPRAD with one last backward glance, my heart pounding with fear at the reckless thing I had just done. Lois would be fine — and grounded on Earth. I wasn't so sure how I would be.

I went back to my hotel room in the form of a blur too fast to be seen by human eyes. But I knew everything that had happened at EPRAD had been recorded by who knew how many video cameras... and broadcast live over countless televisions in several nations. And though the frames that had captured my form might not have been *too* much to worry about, I had physically carried the renowned reporter Lois Lane and given her enough time with me that she would at least be able to guess at my height. And it was possible I had also given something else away of myself that I wasn't even thinking about.

I slowly changed into my work clothes, feeling numb. What had I done?

That was easy to answer. Something reckless. Something foolish.

There were so many ways my actions could have gone wrong. What if swallowing the bomb hadn't worked? What if I had accidentally vaporized Lois by flying too fast? What if I hadn't been able to fix the doors to the transport vehicle? What if my ski hat had come off? What if I had crushed one of Lois's limbs in my haste to get her away from the transport?

Shaking, I took the phone off the hook — so my parents couldn't call me — and buried my face in my hands. I shouldn't have touched Lois Lane. I should have just left her on the colonist transport. She would have enjoyed it... and I would have been removed from her dangerous presence. But instead, I had returned her to Earth, effectively pulling her back into my life. And though it had been ever so brief, I had loved the feel of her in my arms. Being so close to her had felt so *right*. I hadn't felt the softness of her skin through my gloves, but I had felt the gentle heat emanating from her body. Though I had held her only briefly, I had not wanted to let her go.

I jammed my eyes shut. I shouldn't have been thinking such thoughts. I was toxic to her.... I was toxic to everyone. To think such things about Lois Lane was like blasphemy.

I lifted my head. I needed to return to normal.

Fumbling, I took off my locket and opened it. I gasped when

the sudden barrage of pain hit me, and I forced my thumb to touch my grandmother's picture. I groaned as I felt the searing sensation that was close exposure to the rock, and I removed my thumb.

A few seconds later, I let the locket drop into my lap, lessening my pain in some places but not removing it. As the poisonous radiation spread throughout my body, I found myself desperately wishing again that this didn't have to be my life. But it had to be like this — I had decided that years ago. I couldn't let myself put anyone in danger. I couldn't let myself hurt anyone.

And so I let the pain grow. It swelled up to such heights that my grasp on consciousness became tenuous. But it was only when I was certain that my powers would be gone all day that I let myself close that tainted locket.

I collapsed on my bed, my chest heaving for air. And as my mind wandered, I remembered how I had come across the poisonous rock.

\*\*\*

*It was a Wednesday afternoon when Wayne Irig came knocking on my parents' door.*

*With a smile, I told him, "Come on in." I was always glad to see him.*

*"Hello, Clark, Martha," he greeted as he entered. He always seemed glad to see us, too.*

*"Good afternoon, Wayne," Mom said warmly. She was washing her hands to remove the extra bits of clay that had gotten stuck on them during her latest artistic venture. "Is there anything we can help you with?"*

*"Well, I have some trees that got knocked down by that storm last night, and I was wondering if I might get a little help in chopping them up. My back sure isn't what it used to be."*

*"I can help you," I volunteered. Though only seventeen, I was really strong, and the work wouldn't tire me in the slightest. I would just have to pretend it fatigued me.*

*Wayne smiled in gratitude. "Thank you, Clark." When I was younger, he might have tousled my hair, but I was too old for that now, and he seemed to respect that.*

*I rode in his red pickup truck with him to his farm, and we made short work of most of the trees. The last tree we went to was the big oak tree out in the back. It had been knocked clear out of the ground, and Wayne seemed sad as he told me about it, saying with a sigh, "That sure was a good tree."*

*When we arrived at the tree, however, I felt a sudden growing pain in my body that just increased with every step I took. I tried to fight the pain — pain being something I hadn't experienced in a long time — but at last I collapsed at the base of the tree, unable to move any further.*

*"Clark!" Wayne exclaimed, kneeling beside me.*

*I lifted my head and blinked at the hole in the ground where the oak tree had been. I could see a faint green light. "What... is that?" I gasped.*

*Wayne glanced at the hole and then frowned. He dug around a little in the dirt, uncovering more of the green rock and creating a brighter glow. Clearly, the stones had no effect on him at all. "Looks like some sort of green rock," he noted.*

*I was getting sicker by the second. "I think... I think I need to go home."*

*"All right, Clark," he said, sounding worried. He somehow managed to half-drag and half-carry me away from the tree to his truck, manhandling me to help me inside.*

*I felt as if I needed to be making excuses for my sudden sickness, but I honestly didn't know what had happened, and he didn't seem inclined to question me about it. So instead I just sat in his truck and allowed myself to enjoy relief from that bombardment of pain as we drove away from his farm.*

*When we stopped in front of my parents' house, Wayne said, "You just stay here, Clark."*

*"I can walk," I protested.*

*"Stay here," he repeated firmly. He hopped out of the truck and rushed up to the door, knocking loudly. Both my parents answered, and I could see him speaking to them for a few seconds before they all came over to me. The frightened expressions my parents were wearing made me feel guilty, and I tried to smile at them in reassurance.*

*"Clark, are you all right?" Mom asked quietly as Wayne opened the door.*

*"I'll be okay, Mom," I told her. Really, I was pretty scared. But I was trying to put on a brave front.*

*"Clark, we're going to carry you out of the car," Dad said.*

*"Dad, I can walk —"*

*"Listen to your father, Clark," Mom stated. After hearing her non-nonsense tone, I wasn't about to argue with her.*

*Wayne and Dad helped me out of the vehicle and carried me into the house with Mom following. They took me to my room, and then they stood in the doorway and talked in worried whispers. I tried to hear what they were saying but was unable to. I felt almost as scared as I'd felt when my powers had first started showing themselves. Only now, it was the opposite. They had disappeared. What exactly had happened?*

*Finally, I called out for Dad to come to me, and he did.*

*In a voice as quiet as I could make it, I told him about the green stone and how I thought it had made me sick.*

*"Are you sure it was this stone, Clark?"*

*I nodded. "Pretty sure, Dad. I don't know what it is, but I have a bad feeling about it."*

*"All right," he said, patting my hand.*

*Dad and Wayne left the house. When Dad returned, I was still in bed, more due to Mom's insistence than anything. At that point, it was hard to comprehend how much I had been hurting. ... But what was even stranger than that was the loss of my special abilities.*

*When Dad came in, he said, "How are you feeling, Clark? Your mom tells me you can't use any of your powers."*

*I stared at my hands in contemplation. "It just feels...weird to feel normal, you know?"*

*He nodded. "I understand, son. ... I want you to know, I picked up every piece of that green rock I could find, and Wayne didn't say much about it. I put it in the barn — I didn't know what else to do with it. I figured maybe we can learn more about it later. Mostly, I'm just glad you're all right."*

*I smiled at him. "Thanks, Dad." I was so glad I had my parents to help me out. They didn't care that I was different.*

\*\*\*

Later, by means of an ancient toolbox, we had chanced upon the discovery that lead blocked the meteor rock's effect on me, just as it had prevented me from seeing through certain objects. Knowing about the rock was a blessing to me in a way, however, even at that first exposure. Somehow, it had stripped me of my powers. I had thought — and even secretly hoped, just a little — that the rock's effect on me was permanent that first time. Though the effects had turned out to be only temporary, there was a part of me even then that realized it was good there was something out there that could render me powerless...and block out the cries for help that I wouldn't be able to answer.

With a sad smile, I lifted my locket into the air and placed the necklace around my neck. The locket dropped down onto my tie and hung there like a shackle. It would be there for the rest of my life, bringing what I wanted so close to me, but still not enabling me to have it. I would be lonely today, and the next day, and the next... And that was just how it would be. That was how it would always be.

I had some time to just rest and pull myself together, but finally I needed to leave for work. I probably should have looked for a television or called my parents — just so I could be

prepared for the onslaught that was sure to await me at the Daily Planet — but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

As I got into a cab and told the driver to take me to the Planet, I still felt as if my legs had been knocked out from under me. This had been the second time I'd been forced to make physical contact with Lois Lane in only a matter of days. It could not bode well for the future. Especially since I had liked it so much.

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## Chapter 11: A Memory from the Past Came Slowly Stealing ...

*A memory from the past came slowly stealing ...*

— "I Can't Help It"

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When I entered the newsroom, I found Lois arguing with Mr. White. Knowing I might as well dive right in, I moved closer to them to watch and listen.

The Chief Editor shook his head vehemently. "I'm telling you, honey, this 'Black Speck' has to be some kind of hoax."

"And I'm telling *you*, Perry, he's real. I *flew* with the man. The scientists at EPRAD may not be sure exactly what happened, but *I* know... He broke into the transport vehicle, swallowed the bomb planted on board, flew me away from the transport, and then welded the doors back together before flying off."

"It just doesn't make any sense. Why would he take you off the colonist transport and dump you elsewhere without any explanation?"

"Maybe the man thought that *I* had planted the bomb. How am *I* supposed to know what his motives are? The guy didn't even talk!"

"Which brings me to another question," Perry White said, lifting a finger. "How do you even know it was a man?"

Lois gave him a *look*. "Trust me — I *know*."

I couldn't help but blush. Not wanting to listen any longer, lest their talk cause my nerves to skyrocket any more than they already had, I moved away and went to get some coffee.

Just as I had finished putting sugar and creamer into my cup, Lois approached me.

"Well, Kent, it looks like our work today is cut out for us."

"Clark," I mumbled, though my heart wasn't really in the correction.

"Clark," she repeated impatiently. "Perry wants us to find as much on the Black Speck as possible."

I couldn't help but ask, "Black Speck?"

Her frustration appeared to be growing with my lack of knowledge. "Yes. That's what they're calling him. You *do* know what happened today with the colonist launch vehicle, don't you?"

"So, we're supposed to find everything we can on the Black Speck?" I asked, driving the subject away from whether I held or lacked knowledge of the morning's events.

"Yes. We need to get a hand on every video, every eyewitness account — you name it. If someone knows *anything* about the Black Speck, then *we* need to know it, too." She was in full investigative reporter mode.

Something suddenly occurred to me, and I queried, "What exactly do you mean by 'we'?"

"This story is so big Perry is pairing us up. I don't like it any more than you do — in fact, I like it less — but I'm not going to sit here and argue all day with him till the proverbial Kansas cows come home. Not when the news is this big." She narrowed her eyes at me. "Now, do you have a problem working with me?" She poked her finger into my chest.

"No," I murmured, taken aback by the unexpected physical contact. "I just thought you worked alone." I had to keep myself from bringing up a hand to cover the spot where she had just touched me. It was strange how the sensation seemed to linger.

She suddenly tilted her head, looking at my shirt. “Is that the locket I gave you?”

I glanced down; I hadn’t realized I had forgotten to tuck the necklace in before leaving my hotel room. “Yeah, it is.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Is there a reason you painted it white?”

“It was my grandmother’s favorite color,” I told her. But that was a lie. Her favorite color had been blue.

“Makes sense,” she acknowledged, patting me on the chest absentmindedly, and then she continued to work on preparing her coffee.

My white lie to Lois began to agitate me, and I walked to my desk to get away from her. But she was soon behind me and informing me of what little she knew about the Black Speck. Pushing my agitation aside, I let myself go to work. We began calling people and sending Jimmy on various quests. Before long, we were going over videos and screenshots and making a few more calls to people at EPRAD. Finally, we were able to write something up for the *Planet*, and we presented it to the Editor-in-Chief.

We waited as he read it. When he was done, he set it down and looked up at us. “This is good work, you two, but I just don’t like the name ‘Black Speck.’ Other news places may be using it, but we have someone who was on the scene.... Surely, we can do a little better than this.”

Lois and I exchanged a glance. Then she suggested, “What about ‘Black Knight?’”

Mr. White pointed a pair of fingers at her. “That’ll work.”

I shifted my feet uncomfortably. I didn’t like my actions being painted as knightly, though I did feel the appellation of “Black Knight” was appropriate in some ways. A black knight historically was a knight who wasn’t bound to a certain lord or who did not want his real identity known. But while I certainly did not want to be identified, I would have preferred never to have been noticed at all.

A few minutes later, I was leaving the room with Lois when Mr. White called out for me to wait. I turned and looked at him questioningly.

“Kent, do you, uh, have any plans tonight?”

I hesitated. “Not particularly.”

“Good! Then you won’t mind doing some socializing with your boss.”

“Uh — ”

“So, I’ll see you in the conference room at nine, then — for the game?”

“The game?” I echoed uneasily.

“Just some ol’ newspaper cronies sharing a few beers and laughs. It’ll be fun.”

“Umm, Mr. White — ”

He looked at me. “You do play cards, don’t you, Kent?”

I dipped my head. “Yes, sir, I do.”

“Well, we’re out a player, and I think you’ll do just fine. Ever played much poker, son?”

“In my college days, I did play,” I admitted.

“Good!” he exclaimed, pleased. “Then maybe you’ll be able to give Lois a run for her money. That girl is too competitive for her own good.”

“Lois is going to be there?” I asked uneasily.

He shook his head with a smile. “Shoot, son, she only misses our monthly poker night when it’s a matter of life and death.... And with her, that’s more often than both she and I would like to admit.”

“Mr. White, maybe I should pass tonight — ”

“Now, Kent, I’m not going to take ‘no’ for an answer. You should really get out more.”

“But it won’t be getting out, Mr. White,” I pointed out. “The game’s at the Plan — ” I cut off after seeing the look on his face.

“All right,” I said with no small amount of reluctance. “I’ll be a team player.”

“I hope not — if you and Lois team up against the rest of us, I doubt we’ll stand a chance,” he quipped.

I rolled my eyes and left his office. I had been roped into this — there was no way I could say “no” to the boss. I would just have to go and get it over with.

Lois glanced at me curiously as I walked to my desk, and I muttered, “Looks like I’ll be playing poker tonight.”

She gave me the once-over. “I didn’t know they taught card games to wholesome Kansas boys.”

“And I didn’t know award-winning investigative journalists had time for them,” I returned. “Guess we learn something new every day.”

That actually got a smile from her, and I found myself feeling pleased.

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I went home before the big poker game, figuring I should change into something more comfortable and call my parents, who more likely than not had seen me posted all over the news. And I was right — no sooner had I called them than my mother instantly started asking me what this “Black Speck” business was. Apparently, they had wanted to talk to me about it all day but hadn’t wanted to bug me at work. Honestly, it was good they hadn’t — it wasn’t the sort of thing that would be easy to talk to them about in the newsroom.

“I just couldn’t let all those people die,” I told them with a sigh. “Not after we had worked so hard in trying to make everything perfect for them.”

“Maybe you should keep trying to rescue people,” Mom suggested. “After all, what’s a little more exposure?”

Dad was about to say something, but I cut him off. “No. I’m not going to start saving people. It’s too dangerous.”

Mom asked casually, “You said Lois Lane was on the transport vehicle?”

“Yeah — and I don’t know why I took her off it. It was just one of those spur-of-the-moment things. I had to make a decision quickly, and that was what I chose. I just don’t know why I did it. It would have been easier if I had just left her there.” A lot easier, actually. If I’d left her, I wouldn’t still be thinking about how she had felt in my arms.

“How did Lois feel about being taken away from it by the Black Speck?”

“Well, they’re calling him — me — the ‘Black Knight’ now. ... At least, the *Planet* is. But it doesn’t matter. They aren’t going to see me do anything like that ever again.”

“And Lois?” Dad pressed.

I smiled as I thought of that fiery woman. “She is determined to find out everything about the Black Knight that she can. If it weren’t for the fact that my rescue days are over, I might be worried that she would discover my true identity eventually.”

“Well, you’ll have to tell a woman your secret at some point when you decide to settle down,” Mom said offhandedly.

I clenched my fists. I hated retreading this ground. “No, Mom. How could I ever marry anyone? I couldn’t — I just couldn’t.”

“Clark — ”

“It isn’t anything I can ever consider,” I said firmly, feeling a little calmer after my outburst. “I need to get off here — I have to get ready. We’re having a poker night at the Planet.”

After we said our goodbyes, I turned to my locket. I needed a little more exposure to the meteor rock if I was going to be around people that night. But my thumb hesitated on top of the locket.

I remembered how emotionally distraught I had felt when I had come home from South Africa — my mental pain had been far worse than the physical pain I had felt during my first

exposure to the meteor rock. After returning from Africa, I had spent countless hours up in my childhood treehouse — the Fortress of Solitude — before my parents had even known I was home. But my dad had been walking by the tree and heard me crying. He had come up in the treehouse, obviously concerned, and he had moved to embrace me, but I had half-growled and half-sobbed for him to stay away. In confusion, he had sat down on the floor across from me. Then, he had asked me what was wrong. But I couldn't tell him. I had known then that I could never tell him.

I had said that I was leaving — that I was going to go spend the rest of my days in Antarctica — and he had tried valiantly to convince me otherwise. He was finally able to persuade me to leave the Fortress of Solitude and talk with my mother. When I told her I had to go away forever, she had looked so hurt, so heartbroken...and I had hated myself for doing that to her. But during all that, something occurred to me. It was strange how a lifeline came to me in the form of a bringer of death, but that was how it was. I had remembered the meteor rock and its ability to strip away my powers. And I had known it would be the thing that would keep me from ever seeing that awful look on my mother's face again.

My parents had argued with me for what seemed like hours on end, and more than a few tears had been shed. But I had been adamant, and they had eventually backed down. The idea to place part of the meteor rock in a locket hadn't occurred to me until later, but when I had finally gained my parents' mixed blessing, I had marched straight to my father's supply of the glowing green stone and experienced that awful pain for the second time in my life.

Now, I couldn't count how many times I had used it. It would probably just depress me if I tried.

But that harmful stone was the only thing that stood between me and a solitary life. As much as I hated it, I knew it would need to be a part of my life forever if I was going to live among humans. Their vulnerability was my vulnerability.

With a sad smile, I opened the locket for what felt like the ten thousandth time.

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Later that night, I plopped a pretzel in my mouth and then put two more chips in the pot. "Twenty."

The *Planet* conference room was filled with a cloud of smoke courtesy of one of the poker player's cigars, and the table was littered with food containers and drink cans. Everything seemed to have been building up to this one moment.

Lois stared at me hard, trying to read my mind. But I just gazed back at her with a blank expression, privately amused. Finally, she sighed and threw down her cards. "I fold."

I turned to the Editor-in-Chief. Everyone else had already ducked out of the hand. He was studying me, trying to find my tell, but I wasn't giving him anything. My cards were flat on the table. Jimmy, who wasn't participating in the game, was standing near the table and glancing occasionally at people's cards, and I didn't want him giving anything away, so I had made sure he wouldn't be able to see my hand. My eyes locked with Perry White's, and I saw a little flicker that I suspected was his tell.

The pot was at its biggest. I had lost some minor hands and won some bigger ones, but we were approaching the end of the night's game, and this hand was an important one. It was especially important for me, as I couldn't really afford to lose the money.

He glanced at his hand and then threw two of his own chips into the pot. "I see your twenty, and I raise you...fifty."

I kept my expression stony, but my heart was racing. I'd never intended for it to become this steep. But I was already way in over my head, so I needed to just go for it. I put the necessary chips into the pot and said, "All right. I call."

We revealed our hands, and I nearly sighed in relief when I learned that my full house beat his pair. The Editor-in-Chief had been bluffing in an attempt to make the pot too rich for my blood. But I hid my feeling of relief with a tight smile as I raked in the chips. Still — despite my fear, it had been exhilarating to go head-to-head with Perry White. I could feel a weird camaraderie swelling up between all of us present at the table. It felt good.

"Now, where did a farmboy like you learn to play like that?" Lois asked, adjusting the visor on her head.

"No kidding, C.K.," Jimmy seconded. "I kept looking for your tell, but if you have one, I can't find it."

"We played a lot of poker at the study abroad program I went to one summer," I told them with a shrug. "I didn't know much going in, but someone there was pretty good and taught me a lot."

"Well, maybe you can teach me," Jimmy said eagerly, and I smiled at him.

"He's not *that* good," Lois muttered, though I had been able to see several times that she was impressed with me.

We played a few more minor hands before I bowed out gracefully, my pockets heavier than they had been when I arrived. As I left, I briefly thought back to South Africa — and to the friends I'd had there.

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*After another miserable loss at poker, I must have looked rather glum, as Carrie took pity on me and asked me to go on a walk with her. We went outside to the university courtyard and stared up at the stars as we strolled along, making idle chitchat.*

*Finally, she cut to the chase. "Kenny and Anthony can be pretty overwhelming sometimes."*

*I shrugged. "They don't mean to be. Joking with people just comes naturally to them."*

*"Well, I know it doesn't feel good to lose every hand of poker to those two jesters."*

*"That's for sure," I agreed with a chuckle. "They don't mind rubbing their wins into people's faces." It did occasionally sting a little.*

*"Well, how about I give you some pointers?" she asked. "I'm not a bad poker player myself."*

*I stopped and looked at her. "Not bad?" I echoed. "You're amazing. Don't think I haven't notice that you generally just let them win the small hands. The big ones almost always go to you."*

*"That's why I need you to offer me some competition," she said with a grin. "So, whaddaya say? Care to learn some tips from a pro?"*

*"Is the pope a Catholic?" I returned. "Of course I want to."*

*"Good," she said, pleased. "Then let's start right now. There's no time like the present."*

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Carrie had taught me so much about poker that night. Afterward, my head had simply been brimming with newfound knowledge. The next time I had played with Kenny and Anthony, they had certainly been in for a big surprise. After that, they were determined to beat me just as badly as I had beaten them, but they were never able to, not even after they had proclaimed it to be their solemn duty. One time, I had been tempted to use my x-ray vision to cheat in a quickly escalating game. But I had forced myself to refrain from it and just went with my gut instincts. The game had ended well for me, but I had never again come as close to cheating with my special abilities as I had at that time.

Even before I had gotten good, those poker nights had been fun. We Americans had made a pretty close-knit group at the Rand Afrikaans University (or "RAU" for short) and had come to the summer study abroad program from all over the United States. I was the only one who hailed from Kansas, but I didn't get labeled "farmboy" (not that the term wouldn't have been deserved) just because there was someone there from Georgia

who made an even easier target. But despite whatever differences we may have had, we had all bonded through the similarity of our nationality...and through those poker nights. Though the taint of apartheid was not completely gone and a lot of tension still existed, a few South African students had even become a part of our circle, largely because Anthony and Kenny were just as welcoming as they were amusing. When I had found that I was able to quickly pick up languages — something that I had begun suspecting in high school Spanish — I had even begun encouraging our African friends to speak in languages other than English, much to their amusement. I was quick to pick up on African languages like Afrikaans and Zulu, though I tried not to show just how fluent I was becoming.

South Africa had been an enjoyable experience for me right up until the day before I left and cut my study abroad short. But I forced my mind away from that. I couldn't change the past, even though I would have given anything if that could be one of my powers.

And so, trying to keep my mind focused on the present and deciding that I wouldn't be participating in any more of the monthly poker nights lest they conjure up even more painful memories, I returned to my hotel room and went to sleep. I had no bad dreams that night.

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## Chapter 12: Your Past is Catching up and Closing In

*There's something hanging in the wind.*

*Your past is catching up and closing in.*

*You've been halfway to hell and back again.*

— “Charro”

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A few weeks went by.

Lois and I kept being partnered on stories. I wasn't sure if it was mostly Perry White or mostly circumstance that kept pairing us together, but we managed to investigate a few major criminal operations. Somehow or other (probably because Lois was a magnet for trouble), we got into danger a few times and would have died if not for some quick thinking on both our parts. As the days went by, however, I began to get more and more agitated about not using my powers — and I felt as if I were seeing criminals at every corner trying to kill Lois.... Considering how many people she'd helped put in jail, my paranoia wasn't necessarily that far off the mark.

It didn't help with my state of mind that Lois occasionally mentioned her dates with Lex Luthor. I tried hard to dismiss my annoyance, but it was difficult. I couldn't let go of the thought that there was something wrong with the man. Even though he had been nothing but kind to me on the few occasions I had talked with him, there was something in his eyes and his voice that made me uneasy. How *had* he climbed so high after being so low, anyway? The circumstances behind his rise were shrouded in mystery. None of his biographies really shed any light on the issue according to Jimmy, and so it remained an unsolved mystery to me.

I was staring at my desk in thought and frowning when a female voice caused me to look up. “So, do you like your new apartment?”

I nodded and gave Lois a grateful smile. “Yes, I do — thank you for that.” One of her contacts had found the apartment for me. It was cheap, which was good, but it had been a real fixer-upper. I had initially tried remodeling it at human speed, but it had been such a chore that I had eventually given up — not wanting to live in such filth for any longer — and remodeled it at extra-human speed, taking care to time my activities on a weekend when I wouldn't be in contact with anyone, though it meant I had to turn down a request from Jimmy to go to the movies with him.

“He said it was a dump, but I bet it was nothing a little elbow

grease couldn't take care of.”

“Something like that,” I returned, feeling a little guilty. My “elbow grease” had been a little less intense than most people's would have been.

Her eyes moved away from me, and she sighed, her mind obviously concerned with something else.

“What is it?” I asked her. I was getting better at reading her moods, and I could tell something was wrong.

She turned to me and shrugged. “I guess I'm just annoyed.”

I sat back. “Annoyed? Why?” I braced myself in case it was something I had done.

“It's the Black Knight....”

The name made me flinch, and I queried with caution, “What about him?” While the name she had picked out had caught on quickly since he — or, rather, *I* — hadn't reappeared, the media frenzy had begun to die out since no new news had popped up.

She began, “I'm annoyed that the Black Knight — ” (I winced again, though I tried to hide it) “ — isn't out doing things to help people. Metropolis *needs* him. Do you know how high the crime rate is in the city, Kent?”

“Clark,” I reminded her.

“Clark,” she repeated. “He could do so much *good*.”

I shifted in my chair, trying to hide my discomfort. “But what if he...wants to live his own life?” *Or what if he was scared to hold ultimate power in his very strong but very fallible hands?* I thought. What about the possibilities that constantly haunted me? What if they actually happened? After all, I had simply removed Lois from the transport without asking permission. What was to keep me from exercising control over others like that again?

“It's selfish of him,” she stated bluntly, taking me aback. “If he really does have these special abilities, then he owes it to the world to use them for good. For instance, take Lex.”

“Lex?” I echoed with a raised brow. Of course this would all somehow come back to him.

“Yes, *Lex*. He has the gift of money, and he uses it to do a lot of good in the city — he uses it to help people.”

I masked my annoyance. “Maybe people like us are the reason the Black Knight doesn't want to go public. Maybe he doesn't want the publicity.... Maybe he doesn't want to talk to reporters.”

“That's ridiculous,” she proclaimed. “Why wouldn't he want to talk to me?”

I just rolled my eyes and turned away from her, looking back at the notes on my desk concerning the retirement scandal story I was working on. It was one of my solo pieces, and I was determined for it to be good. Lois could obsess about the Black Knight all she wanted. He wouldn't be saving anyone ever again. At least, not with his powers.

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The next week was a slow news week. The Black Knight wasn't out saving anyone, as I was keeping up my daily exposure to the glowing green meteor rock. I was resolute that I would be putting my black ski hat away forever.

When Perry White came up to my desk, I thought it was to tell me about another story he wanted me and Lois to work on. We had been paired on more and more assignments, and we were beginning to take our partnership for granted, even if the Editor-in-Chief did still give us some individual pieces.

“Hey, Mr. White,” I greeted with a smile. “Something you need?”

“Clark, I think we're past this by now. It's ‘Perry’ or ‘Chief,’ all right?”

I nodded. “Right...Chief.” It was a little hard for me to refrain from saying “Mr. White” — but he was right that we were past formalities. He wasn't just an employer any more. He had become — in just a short time — a friend.

His expression turned thoughtful as he turned to the real

purpose of his visit to my desk. “You know, son, you’re really good with the, uh, touchy feely stuff, if you know what I mean. That adoption piece you did a few days ago was great stuff.”

“Uh, thanks,” I replied uncomfortably. I didn’t know what he was about to ask me, but I had the feeling I wasn’t going to like where this was going.

The pensive expression remained on his face. “I was, uh, thinkin’... maybe you could write a — well, a letter of sorts for the *Planet*.”

“A letter, sir — uh, Chief?” I asked, my brow furrowed in confusion.

“Well — a plea for the Black Knight to return.”

The words were innocent enough, but his eyes seemed to be staring into my soul. Nonetheless, his words made me flinch — just as I did every time the name “Black Knight” was mentioned — and I then stiffened. “Chief, I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I mean — how do we even know he reads the *Planet*? And isn’t he... old news?” My last sentence was uttered meekly. I knew he certainly wouldn’t be old news if he reappeared. Still, I wanted to get out of this assignment.

“Chief, let me write it,” came an insistent female voice.

I turned to look at Lois. Evidently, she’d been listening to our conversation. Under other circumstances, my discovery of her eavesdropping might have irked me or at least made me exasperated. This time, however, I was glad. Unfortunately, Perry White wasn’t.

He crossed his arms and gave her a reprimanding glance. “Now, Lois, I didn’t ask for you to do it. I asked *Clark* to do it.”

“And you heard him say he doesn’t *want* to do it. I, on the other hand, would be absolutely —”

“Lois, honey, I’m not giving it to you,” the Chief Editor said firmly. He turned to me. “Clark, please come with me to my office.”

Hanging my head like a kid in trouble with the principal, I followed him in and sat down. Meek and somber, I stared at my hands. All the strength in the world wouldn’t be able to extricate me from this situation.

“Now, son, Elvis relied heavily on Colonel Parker’s advice. If the Colonel said, ‘Jump,’ then the King said, ‘From where?’ But there was one big exception to that. You see, when the King went into the movie business, his musical reputation started to plummet. The *Comeback Special* of 1968 changed all that, though. The Colonel wanted the King to sing only Christmas songs in the show, but the producer, Steve Binder, suggested that he sing his old hits... Now, the King wasn’t one to stand against the Colonel, but he knew this was something he needed to take a stand on, and he told the Colonel he was doing it ‘Binder’s way.’” The Chief Editor tilted his head and lifted his hands. “But at that point, the King had been around the block quite a bit. He had risen high enough that he could make a few calls of his own. Do you, uh, get what I’m sayin’?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered quietly. I wasn’t at the height of my career; I was just starting. And if I wanted to make it big, I had to do what my “Colonel Parker” told me to do. Even if it meant I would be miserable doing it.

“Now, do you have anything to tell me?” he asked.

The question was casual enough, but the gaze he gave me set my heart to pounding. *He knows*, I couldn’t help but think, though I couldn’t even comprehend *how* he could know.

Shakily, I told him, “N-no.”

“Uh huh,” he said, still *looking* at me. “Now, son, I didn’t become editor of this newspaper just because I can yodel. I’ve noticed that you jump every time the Black Knight is mentioned.”

I couldn’t help it; I flinched again.

“Is there something you’ve done that you regret, Clark? Or maybe there’s something you know that *I* need to know?”

I forced myself to meet his eyes with my own. Taking a deep breath, I told him firmly, “I will write the plea to... the Black Knight.”

He nodded, and as I left his office, my mind was reeling. I wasn’t sure what he knew or what he suspected — and I wasn’t sure I *wanted* to know. It was certainly feasible that a man like him could put the pieces together — my reaction to the term “Black Knight,” the reluctance I expressed when asked to write about him, and the fact that Lois had been removed from the colonist transport... It wasn’t a complicated puzzle for a newspaper man like Perry White.

But that just made it all the more important that the Black Knight never show his face again.

As I went to my computer, I couldn’t help but notice that Lois was sulking. It might have been amusing if it weren’t for the fact that I was dreading the piece before me. As it was, however, I was on edge. I didn’t want to do this.

I sat and stared at the screen, tapping my finger against the down arrow on the keyboard nervously. I was going to have to think about the good aspects of my persona if I was going to be able to make this piece into what the Editor-in-Chief wanted — and thinking about the good of that alternate ego was something I was continually fighting against. But I was stuck between the metaphorical rock and a hard place.

Not certain what the final product was to look like, I began writing a header:

*TO THE BLACK KNIGHT:  
METROPOLIS NEEDS YOU*

What a joke that was. Metropolis had gotten along fine for years without a vigilante’s meddling. What made now any different?

I sighed. This wasn’t the way to get this done. I had to just plunge in. Still, I changed the header:

*A CRY FOR HELP:  
BLACK KNIGHT, WHERE ARE YOU?*

Trying not to think about the irony of my being the person to write that question, I continued typing:

*We do not know all you can do, but speed, flight, and strength seem to be your allies. Do you know how much good you could do with those abilities?*

As much good as bad, I reflected. I could just as easily hurt people as help them — hurting people would actually be easier. And the notion of someone’s controlling me was enough to make me feel sick to my stomach.

I swallowed and thought back to what Lois had said. Was it selfish of me not to use my powers for good? Was Lois right?

Feeling off balance, I returned to my article and wrote:

*You could stop a runaway train with your bare hands or take a gun away from a criminal before he had a chance to use it. The crime rates in a city like Metropolis are astronomical. You could serve as a beacon of hope shining in the darkness. You could prove to the people of Metropolis that one person can make a difference.*

I worked on the article for a while. The process disturbed me, as it made me confront everything I was mentally arguing against, but I wanted to prove myself to Perry White. The final version looked somewhat different from those first few bits I had written, but the heart of it remained. I continued my plea for me — well, the Black Knight side of me — to return and make a difference in the lives of others.

I was staring at the letter and trying to determine whether I should change a few sentences when the Chief Editor came and stood in front of Lois’s and my desks. My desk had been moved closer to Lois because of our constantly renewing partnership, so he was able to talk to both of us without yelling (though I wasn’t quite sure Perry White knew *how* to talk in a quiet voice unless an Elvis yarn was involved that required it).

He threw a fancy invitation down next to Lois's monitor. "Lois, Clark, I want you two to go to the Magic of the Night Ball tonight to cover it for the society section."

"Perry, no," Lois protested in disgust.

"Chief, isn't there someone else who can do it?" I asked.

The Editor-in-Chief frowned. "What's that I hear? 'Yes, sir, right away, sir'? Surely that's what I'm hearing. I couldn't possibly be hearing two of my reporters tell me 'no.'"

"Perry, you know I don't like magic," Lois insisted.

"Neither do I," I chimed in.

"Well, tough. You're both going to have to come up with a better excuse than that. I'm your commander, and I command you to go. It's that simple."

Lois made one last attempt. "Couldn't you get Ralph to do it?"

"Lo-is," he said warningly.

"Fine, Chief. But you'd better remember this come promotion time."

I wasn't sure whether to smirk or grimace, so instead I just sighed. I hated magic.

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Lois and I went to the Magic of the Night Ball with Jimmy, who was excited to have a night out away from the Planet. Lois and I weren't happy about going to the show, but we weren't about to disobey Perry White's direct order. In investigative journalism, a reporter had to choose certain battles with the boss — and avoiding a magic show wasn't a fight worth risking a career over.

Colorful fliers outside the Magic Club proclaimed the magnificence of the event and gave details of the buildings' creators; in contrast, the atmosphere of the building's interior was simply brimming with magic in a way that the outside was lacking. Once, I had relished the thought of magicians and hypnotists and illusionists; now, I dreaded them all.

Much to Jimmy's disappointment, we sat at a table as far back from the stage as we could get. Lois was vocal in declaring her hatred of magic, but I mostly remained stiff and tightlipped. Poor Jimmy kept trying to counter Lois's anti-magic arguments, but he wasn't able to gain any ground in convincing her that magic had any benefits. I certainly wasn't about to help him out.

After the passing of just a few acts, I was more than ready to leave, but I held my tongue and remained seated. When it was announced that the "greatest illusionist alive" was about to come onto the stage, I just became even more uncomfortable. It was bad enough to have to sit through mediocre magicians — to see one actually worth his mettle was even more nerve-wracking.

"An illusionist," Lois repeated in disgust, "as in someone who tries to trick people into believing that something that isn't real *is* real."

"That's part of the fun," Jimmy insisted, though both Lois and I ignored him.

I tilted my head and looked at Lois as I realized something. "You don't like magic because you don't know how it works." Her lack of a response simply made me more confident. "You can't stand the thought of not knowing, can you?"

"Don't you find it a little bothersome that these people get paid to try to trick people?" she returned, speaking in a furious whisper. Darren Ronick, the so-called "greatest illusionist alive," was paying a lot of attention to audience members, and she was trying not to catch his attention.

"That's...not exactly what bothers me," I answered hesitatingly. I didn't want to lie to her, but I couldn't tell the truth. I was about to formulate a plan for a change in subject when Darren Ronick called for the "lovely Constance" to come up on stage. My head shot up, and I watched as she walked on.

Her hair was just as blonde as when I had seen it last, though her outfit — all glamour and feathers — left much to be desired.

But I wasn't concentrating on her body. I was concentrating on controlling the urge to flee. Until this moment, I hadn't realized she was living in Metropolis.

Our eyes met across the crowded room, and she faltered. It was barely perceptible, but there was a small hitch in her step. She continued on with her act, however, without returning her eyes to me. It was just as well, for it took me the rest of the act to calm my heartbeat down to normal levels.

When Darren Ronick was finished, I immediately stood to leave, but Lois asked me, "Clark — what are you doing? We still have another act to watch."

"Lois...", I hesitated. My eyes flicked toward the exit and then back toward her. "I really don't want to be here anymore."

"Is something wrong?" she queried, rising so she could see me better.

"Clark," a quiet voice said from behind me.

It was all I could do to keep from cursing. Reining my emotions in, I slowly turned to look at Constance.

Her expression told me all I needed to know. I felt a vice grip on my heart. I needed to go.

"I'm so glad to see you, Clark," she told me with the utmost softness. She reached a hand out, moving it toward me —

"Don't touch me," I growled abruptly.

Constance jumped in surprise at my vitriol, and Lois stepped forward. "He doesn't like to touch people," she explained, giving me a confused look. "You'll have to forgive him." What she didn't realize was that I didn't want Constance's forgiveness.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," Constance whispered.

My mouth a thin line, I told her, "Forget about it." I moved away from her, approaching the exit.

"Clark, please don't go," she pleaded, following me. "Clark — I love you."

I just shook my head and continued walking. I needed to get away from her.

But she rushed up to me. "Clark, I promise you didn't do it. I was the one who did it... I was *going* to make you do it — but I just *couldn't*... Clark, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I've missed you so much." She began to tug at my arm, but I slowly removed her fingers from me and walked away.

Perhaps her words should have given me the comfort she thought they would. But I couldn't let myself trust anything she said, and I paused in the doorway to tell her, "I never want to see you again."

I just barely heard her whisper my name before I left the room.

Outside the Magic Club, I allowed myself to halt my flight. I stood on the sidewalk, looking at nothing, and trembled with emotion. I felt so many things at once I could almost burst.

I desperately needed to be alone, but Lois had followed me outside. "What just happened?" she demanded. When I didn't respond, she tried a softer approach. "Is she the reason you don't like to touch people?"

I should have just said nothing; I didn't owe Lois any explanations. But instead, I told her, "She's only part of the reason."

And then I hailed a taxi and refused to say anything more to her than, "Goodbye, Lois. Tell Jimmy 'goodnight.'"

\*\*\*

That night in my apartment, I took the green shard out of my locket with my bare hands and clenched it in my fist for about a minute, my face strained with pain, before I put the shard back in the locket and flung both on the floor.

Then I went to my bed and cried.

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### Chapter 13: If I can Dream

*There must be peace and understanding sometime,  
Strong winds of promise that will blow away*

*All the doubt and fear:  
If I can dream of a warmer sun  
Where hope keeps shining on everyone,  
Tell me why, oh why, oh why won't that sun appear?  
— "If I can Dream"*

\*\*\*

The next day, I was working on a small piece at the Planet when Jimmy came up to my desk.

"Hey, C.K.," he said quietly. He looked as if he felt a little awkward talking to me, and I could guess the reason why.

"Hi, Jimmy," I responded feebly, feeling morose and exhausted. I'd barely slept a wink after seeing Constance. Too much had come flooding back to me.

Jimmy rubbed his arm. "I, uh — I heard a little bit of the stuff between you and that woman at the Magic Club. You don't want to talk about it, do you?"

I shook my head and sighed. "No, Jimmy. I'm sorry."

"That's fine, C.K. I understand. It's just — I know what it's like to have the past sneak up on you."

I looked up at him, surprised to see the emotional pain spread across his face. I knew instantly Jimmy also had wounds that ran deep.

His story just confirmed it. "See, last year my dad came and visited me. I hadn't seen him in eight years. He had always been in and out of my life, but that was the longest he'd ever been gone... I finally told myself I wouldn't ever see him again — and then there he was."

"That must have been tough," I said softly. At least I had always had both my parents in my life — well, they were technically my adoptive parents. But they had been better parents than any biological ones I had ever met.

"Yeah. It was rough. And I said some really mean things to him. Maybe they'll encourage him to come back sooner next time — or maybe they won't." He shook his head bitterly. "After all, what is he going to see when he comes to visit me? A copy boy at the bottom of the food chain. Replaceable, expendable... an all-around nobody."

"Jimmy, you mean a lot to this paper," I insisted firmly and sincerely. "It wouldn't be the same without you. Don't underestimate your contributions to it — you'll climb up higher on the ladder one day. You'll see."

He gave me a sad smile, but I could tell he wasn't buying it. "Yeah, maybe. Anyway, if you ever need to talk, I'm here."

"Thanks," I told him, watching him walk away. "Hey, Jimmy?"

The young man paused and turned toward me. "Yeah?"

"Let's go do something sometime soon. Anything you'd like — except a rave or a magic show."

He grinned. "All right, C.K." And then he wandered off.

I absently put my pen in my mouth and stared at the notepad in front of me. Jimmy had some self-esteem problems, and it was easy to see why. An absentee father, a job with long hours and little pay... Though I could be a friend to him, I wasn't sure I was what he needed. What he *needed* was a father — and I just couldn't give that to him. I couldn't exactly track down Jimmy's dad and command that he be a good father "or else." It just didn't work that way. Life was never that simple.

My thoughts were interrupted by Lois's approach to my desk. I took the pen out of my mouth and turned my attention to her. Something about seeing her suddenly brightened my day. I couldn't escape the past, but maybe I could enjoy the present a little bit.

"You, Clark Kent," Lois proclaimed with great aplomb, "are in for a treat."

Intrigued, I tilted my head. "A treat, huh? Did you get me tickets to a game? A good bottle of wine? A vacation in Aspen? A picture of the Black Knight hanging upside down in a chicken

suit?" That last one wouldn't actually have been a treat, but I knew it would irk her.

"No," she said, pursing her lips disapprovingly. "I'm sharing a story with you."

I crossed my arms and stared at her with suspicion. "Lois Lane doesn't share."

"She does when it's something this big," she returned. "Do you know what happened last night?"

"A full moon led to a werewolf uprising?" That one surprised even myself. It had just slipped out somehow.

"Are you going to be serious or not, farmboy?"

"Sorry," I said with a grin, enjoying having rattled her. I put my chin on my hand and looked up at her. "What happened last night?"

"The headquarters of Sallya Technologies were brought down by a bomb."

I stood up straight. "What? How many people were killed?"

"Fortunately, it was late, so there weren't many casualties."

"Do the police have any suspects?"

She shrugged. "They've concluded it was the work of a disgruntled former employee due to some evidence found on the scene. Bobby Bigmouth, however, said he suspected it was more than that — *he* thought it was related to the 'Boss.'"

I frowned. "Bobby who?"

"Never mind that. Anyway, Kent, the point is —"

"Clark."

"The point *is*," she emphasized, "this 'Boss' character means business. I've heard him mentioned several times, but his name always seems to be spoken in a frightened whisper. Bobby wouldn't tell me much, but I know there's a big story here. We just have to do some digging."

"All right. Then let's start digging."

\*\*\*

With Jimmy's invaluable help, Lois and I brought together all the information we could find on Sallya Industries, including a list of ex-employees who had been fired or who had quit in the past year. I was examining the list, not actually expecting to find anything useful, when something caused me to frown. "Lois, it says here that a few animal and genetic research scientists quit recently. Why would Sallya Technologies be employing people for that kind of research?"

She took the list and looked at it. "You're right, Clark. It could be nothing, but it's certainly strange since we haven't seen anything like that from them before..." She lifted her head.

"Jimmy!"

The young man came rushing over. "You yelled?"

"I was wondering if you might be able to use your... *computer* talents to help us out."

He grinned. "What do you need?"

"We need to know about these animal and genetic research scientists," Lois noted, pointing to the sheet of paper in her hands. "Were they working on separate projects? What were they doing?"

Jimmy took the list and went to his computer. Lois and I returned to looking over our notes on Sallya Technologies.

"Do you think the Boss could be a competitor?" I ventured a few minutes later.

Lois took a moment to consider what I had said. "Sallya Technologies *was* a big company, but they really don't — well, *didn't* — have much competition in Metropolis except for Luthor Technologies... Maybe it's someone who was interested in the projects Sallya Technologies was working on."

*Or maybe both*, I thought to myself, my thoughts drawn again to Lex Luthor. I wasn't sure why, but for some reason I wanted to pin every bad thing that happened in Metropolis on him... I needed to just give it a rest. He was a philanthropist, for crying out loud. He'd done more good in one year than I had in my

entire life.

When Jimmy returned, he told us, “It seems they were working on something called ‘Project Nemean Lion.’ I couldn’t find out much about it, but it looks like it might have something to do with animal DNA. The files on it are Top Secret, and I really couldn’t access much — not with the equipment that I have here.”

“Thanks, Jimmy — you’re the best,” I told him, and he returned to his desk with a pleased look.

“Nemean Lion,” Lois said to herself. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“The Nemean Lion was the first Labor of Hercules,” I explained, being somewhat familiar with Greek mythology. “Its skin was impenetrable, and Hercules had to strangle it to kill it.”

“And they’re working with DNA.... Clark, you don’t think they’re trying to make invincible animals — or humans — do you?”

I shifted uneasily. “I hope not.” The thought of invulnerable creatures being let loose on the city caused my fists to clench. Plagues of locusts were nothing compared to rampaging lions.

“I guess we need to draw up a list of former employees to talk to. Maybe someone will be able to tell us more.”

\*\*\*

We had difficulty contacting the animal researchers who had quit or been let go, but we did manage to talk to a few former employees who had once been involved in research.

Unfortunately, they all turned out to be rather close-mouthed.

“This is ridiculous,” Lois exclaimed as she hung up her phone. “We can’t contact most of the people we want to speak with, and those we *can* talk to seem to have forgotten *how* to talk. I’m going to call the president of the company.”

“Lois, with the building gone, you don’t have an office number where you can reach him,” I reminded her.

“That’s why I’m going to call his home phone.”

I shook my head. “I already looked, Lois. It’s unlisted.”

She rolled her eyes. “As if I can’t get my hands on an unlisted phone number. Jimmy!”

He came running over. “Yes?”

I just stared at Lois in exasperation. Couldn’t she give the poor guy a break?

“I need James Prowse’s phone number,” Lois told Jimmy. “He’s the president of Sallya Technologies, and his number isn’t listed in the phonebook. Think you can get it for me?”

Jimmy snorted. “That’s easy.”

As I watched him leave, I shook my head. “Reporters are probably hounding Prowse in the effort to get more information about what happened. What makes you think he’ll talk to you?”

“I know something they don’t,” she replied with that unshakable Lois Lane confidence. “It’ll be a piece of cake.”

When Jimmy came back with the phone number, Lois eagerly dialed it. She got a busy signal several times and expressed her annoyance about it quite vocally, but at last someone must have picked up, as her face changed from annoyance to attentiveness. “This is Lois Lane with the *Daily Planet*. I need to speak with James Prowse.” She paused. “You can answer any questions I have for him? Somehow, I doubt that. Look, I know something he would be interested in hearing about.... Tell him that it’s not a Herculean effort to stop...lyin’ around and talk to me. Please use those exact words.” She smirked at me and waited.

“‘Lyin’?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m trying to be subtle,” she replied defensively. “...Oh, yes, hi. Mr. Prowse?... Yes, this is Lois Lane from the *Daily Planet*. I was wanting to set up a meeting with you....” She frowned.

“Well, there’s no need to be rude. I’m a reporter, and I’m investigating that explosion, which you should be happy about.” She paused, tapping a pencil against her desk. “Don’t you want to know what happened?” She tilted her head as she listened to

Prowse, her anger growing. “Well, regardless of whether *you* want to get to the bottom of it, Mr. Prowse, *I* do. I think it might have something to do with Project Nemean Lion.... How do I know about that? Well, I have my ways....” She was quiet for a long time, and the smugness on her face changed slowly to paleness. “I’m a journalist, Mr. Prowse. You can’t frighten me away with threats.” She slammed down the phone.

“What did he say to you?” I asked, worried. I didn’t know much about James Prowse, but if he *was* involved in the explosion, then he was a dangerous man to deal with. I probably should have insisted on talking to him instead of letting Lois do it.

But Lois just rolled her eyes and shook her head, covering up whatever it was that had disturbed her. “It doesn’t matter. It looks like we aren’t getting anything out of him. Come on. Let’s go visit some of these ex-employees. Maybe they’ll be more willing to talk in person.”

\*\*\*

We didn’t learn anything new that day. The next day, we compiled some names for Jimmy to research, but we also hit a bunch of dead ends. After work, I returned to my apartment, where I called my parents and then turned on the television. I was flipping through channels when there was an insistent rapping at the door.

I jumped up from the couch and approached the door. After I opened it, Lois Lane entered in a babbling whirlwind.

“Hi, how are you doing? I’m fine. Well, I’m fine apart from the fact that someone broke in to my apartment. I still can’t believe what you’ve done with this place. From what I’ve heard, it was in pretty bad con — ”

“Lois!” I said sharply. “Slow down. What happened?” I moved closer to her, concerned.

“Someone broke in to my apartment,” she repeated. “I don’t think anything was taken, but my stuff was scattered around, and some things were broken. And I got this.” She reached into her coat and pulled out an envelope, holding it out with a shaking hand.

The envelope had already been opened, and I took out a piece of paper from it. Handing the envelope to Lois, I unfolded the sheet. The first thing I saw was a picture of Lois taken outside the Planet. The photo was covered with blood.

My mouth became a thin line, and it was hard to keep from shaking. “This isn’t your blood, is it?”

“No,” she replied, her voice just as soft as mine had been.

Nodding in acknowledgement, I slipped the photo behind the piece of paper. On inspecting the letter, I found that it contained a series of threats, each of which made the icy hand gripping my heart clench tighter and tighter. When I had finished reading, I asked, “Have you called the police?”

She shook her head. “No.” She took the letter and picture from me and put them both back in the envelope. “Again — there was nothing stolen.... But my laptop was damaged, and its screen was bashed in.” She shook her fists at her sides. “Do you know what this means, farmboy? It means all the data that I had on it which wasn’t on my computer at the Planet is *gone!* And the most recent version of my novel.... Do you know how much work I’m going to be losing with my computer out of commission?”

“Maybe you can still retrieve the data,” I suggested. “Jimmy has a lot on his plate right now, so he might not have time, but I took some computer courses in college.... I might be able to recover your data if the hard drive isn’t damaged.”

“Really? Could you do that?” she asked hopefully.

I smiled. “I could — but my condition for doing so is that I be allowed to read your novel.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t think so, farmboy.”

“Then I guess I can’t do it,” I said with a fake sigh.

“You can be infuriating sometimes. You know that, Kent?”

I grinned. “Clark.”

“Clark,” she said with distaste.

“Well, one could say the same about you,” I pointed out good-naturedly.

“Yes, well —” Lois paused. “Can I stay with you for a night or two? I just don’t want to go back to my apartment right now alone, and it’d make me feel better if I could stay here with you. But if you don’t want me to, that’s fine, I underst —”

“Lois,” I broke in, “of course you can stay here...but only if we call the police and tell them about what happened.”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds, considering my condition, and then she nodded. “All right.”

“Good,” I replied. “You can have my bed, and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“I can’t kick you out of your bed —”

“Nonsense. I won’t have you sleeping on the couch, and that’s that.”

\*\*\*

We went to Lois’s apartment and called the police, and then I stepped around the room, hunting for clues. I was careful not to disturb anything, but I kept hoping I would find something of note. While I investigated — without any luck — Lois packed an overnight bag and grabbed her laptop.

When the police finally arrived, I found I was glad to see Henderson among the group, though he hadn’t been much help with Platt. He seemed to be a good cop, even if he was skeptical sometimes.

“I see you’ve made a few more enemies, Lane,” Henderson commented dryly.

“You’re just worried you’ll never be able to catch up with me, Henderson,” Lois quipped.

“You want to tell me what went on here?” he asked, looking at me and ignoring her comment.

I turned to Lois. “Show him the letter and picture.”

She reluctantly got out the envelope and handed it to the detective. After reviewing its contents, he frowned and gave her a questioning look.

“I think James Prowse is behind it,” she told him. “I said some things he didn’t like the other day on the phone, and he threatened me.”

“I’ll look into it, Lane, but I have the feeling a bigwig like him would have covered his tracks — if it even *is* him. You’ve made more enemies than my wife has cousins — and her side of the family breeds like rabbits.”

\*\*\*

After the police finished asking us questions, Lois and I went to my apartment, and she got out her laptop for me to examine.

Looking at it, I realized it wasn’t just the screen that had been damaged. But I thought that I could fix it with a few tools and a little use of my special abilities, so I told her, “I think your data is recoverable. I’ll just need a few days to fix it.”

“Great,” she beamed.

“But I’ll probably need your password,” I told her.

She looked at me warily before finally admitting, “Black Knight.”

I somehow managed to refrain from commenting on her choice of passwords, saying instead, “With or without spaces? Capital letters?”

She sighed. “No spaces, no capitals.”

“Okay. Now, how about I order us some pizza?” Pizza always made pretty good comfort food, though I had the feeling Lois’s comfort food preference was chocolate.

She nodded. “Sounds good!”

“Do you like pepperoni?”

“Who doesn’t?” she returned.

Smiling, I walked to the phonebook and looked up the name for a pizza place. After ordering two large pizzas and some

breadsticks, I noticed Lois was looking at something. My heart jumped in my throat. Soon after fixing up my apartment, I had put a small wooden box containing the globe my parents had found with my spaceship in that shelf. Had she opened the box?

I approached her in trepidation, and she turned toward me.

“Interesting sculpture,” she commented.

My relief that she hadn’t found the globe was short-lived as I rested my eyes on the piece. It was a dark wooden sculpture of a woman wearing a few bracelets and nothing else. Her face was turned up toward the sky and had a look of agony on it. “I got it in Africa,” I told her, swallowing.

“When you were studying abroad?” she asked curiously.

I nodded, keeping my face blank. “Yes.”

Unbidden, the memory of how I came into possession of it surfaced.

\*\*\*

*I paused in the hallway to shift my backpack. It wasn’t heavy — certainly not for someone who could bench-press tractors — but the weight distribution was uneven, and it was proving itself to be an annoyance. Unable to fix it due to the awkward object inside the bag, I gave up and continued on. Finally, I stopped in front of a pair of Americans gesturing wildly. They were probably doing something like swapping outrageous stories about fish or Amazonian women, but my presence caused them to pause and turn to me with wide and expectant grins.*

*“What’s up, Clark? Sleep well?” Anthony sniggered.*

*“Did you...dream about...baring your soul to someone — or maybe your body?” Kenny queried with an innocent expression.*

*My countenance dark, I unzipped my backpack and brought out the sculpture, which I had wrapped in a plastic bag. My tone was no-nonsense when I said, “Your juvenile antics have got to stop, guys. This is a piece of art — not a toy for a practical joke.”*

*That just started them off into a round of guffaws. It probably hadn’t helped that I had bared the sculpture’s unclothed anatomy to the world by taking it out of the plastic.*

*“So you woke up with a naked woman in your bed, Clark! Congratulations!” Kenny managed amid his laughter.*

*I crossed my eyes and sighed. One of the two — or maybe both of them — had bought the sculpture and set it circulating among the beds of their male companions. The humor inherent in the notion of someone waking up with a strange naked woman had been too much for them to pass up, and there was no telling how many times the sculpture had changed hands — or switched beds.*

*Anthony and Kenny could never be labeled anything but extreme...and taking anything they did or said seriously was never recommended. Still, I couldn’t help but be a little annoyed by their lack of respect for what was actually a very interesting piece of art. The look of pain on the wooden woman’s face was striking, and her supplication to the heavens was...well, almost thought-provoking.*

*“Bed-hopping is not what this sculpture was intended for,” I told them firmly, but I didn’t seem to be making any dent in their glee.*

*“If you’re so attached to the naked woman,” Anthony said at last, “you can keep her. If anyone deserves to wake up every morning with a naked woman in his bed, it’s you, Clark.”*

*I rolled my eyes and put the sculpture back in my bag. “Fine. I will keep her. But she’s not going back to my bed.”*

*That just set them off again, and as I left them, I couldn’t help but smile just a little despite myself.*

\*\*\*

I gestured toward the couch, resolving to move the box with the globe to the privacy of my bedroom in a few days. “How about we watch a movie? I have the first *Lethal Weapon*.”

“Sure,” she agreed.

Our movie-watching was interrupted briefly by the pizza delivery boy, but then we just went back to watching the screen with pizza in hand.

We didn't talk much during the movie — I found myself holding my breath most of the time.

Being so close to Lois for so long was excruciating, intoxicating, bedazzling... There were a few inches between us, and we weren't touching, but I felt a heightened awareness of her proximity to me. I both loved and hated being so close to her, and it made me feel every bit the part of the awkward farmboy.

I had to keep reminding myself that I could never be in a relationship with her — that my eyes should be on the movie instead of constantly drifting to her mouth. I was almost done in when I saw her lick some marinara sauce off her lips. I had to briefly close my eyes and rein in my desire before watching the movie once more.

About three-quarters of the way through the film, Lois put her head on my shoulder.

Though I felt I might melt, I tensed immediately. I wanted to say something, but my breath was caught in my throat. My head was at utter odds with my heart.

I knew I needed to ask her to move — I shouldn't be allowing myself to become accustomed to her touch. It was already dangerous enough to be this close to her.

But I couldn't bring myself to speak. I just sat there in silent turmoil.

Eventually, she lifted her eyes to my face. She must have noticed the tightness of my expression, for the realization of what she was doing suddenly struck her, and she moved her head off me and scooted further away from me on the couch. "Clark, I'm so sorry — I didn't mean to... I didn't even realize —"

"It's okay, Lois," I said with a gentle smile, nodding my head to turn her attention back to the film. After staring at me for a few seconds to make certain I really was okay, she returned to watching the movie.

I had to close my eyes for a few seconds before I did the same.

And though I told myself that it was for the best that she had put this distance between us, I couldn't shake the strong sense of loss I felt.

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#### Chapter 14: Hound Dog

*You ain't nothin' but a hound dog,*

*Cryin' all the time.*

— "Hound Dog"

\*\*\*

The next day was business as usual at the Daily Planet.

Because of my plans to fix Lois's laptop with my powers, I didn't give myself my meteor rock exposure that morning or the previous night, so I was careful about everything I did.

Fortunately, I didn't have any problems. Lois had completely pulled herself together and informed me in a tone which brooked no room for disagreement that she would be staying at her own apartment that night, which I felt strangely sad about, even though it had been hard for me to sleep at all knowing she was just in the other room. But Henderson had told us the blood on the picture of Lois had belonged to a pig, and that had calmed her a bit.

"It probably wasn't that reassuring to the pig," I'd mumbled, but she had ignored me.

During our lunch break, after what felt like hours of browsing the store's selection and her noting the pros and cons of this model and that model, Lois bought a new laptop. At the Planet, she gave it to me to put her data on it, and I put it inside a desk drawer. "I'll work on it when I get home," I promised her. She nodded and excused herself to go to the ladies' room.

I was looking up the number for a former Sallya

Technologies employee when I felt a presence behind me.

Turning, I found Cat gazing at me.

"Clark, you still haven't gone out for dinner with me," she pouted. Her outfit was a red and gold ensemble that fit her usual motto of "showing more is more." She leaned over my desk, giving me an unwanted eyeful of her cleavage.

I sighed as I averted my eyes from her. It was time for me to put an end to this once and for all. Steeling myself, I told her, "Cat, I'm sorry, but there can't ever be anything between us..."

She looked at me for a few seconds before speaking. "You think I'm shallow, don't you?"

"What?" I gaped. The fact that the thought had crossed my mind more than once made me feel guilty.

She crossed her arms and tilted her head. "You think that I can't enjoy a nice dinner with a man if it doesn't become physical."

I squirmed in my chair. "Cat —"

The gossip columnist smiled. "Relax, Clark. I'm not a man-eater... And I've noticed you only have eyes for one woman."

"Wh-what?" I stammered.

Her smile became a Cheshire Cat grin. "I'm not blind, even if *she* may be," she told me. And then she stalked off, swaying her hips to maximum effect.

I was pretty sure I had turned bright red. Fortunately, my attention was caught by the ringing of the phone at my desk. Grateful for the distraction, I picked it up and answered, "Clark Kent."

"It's Henderson. Just thought I'd let you know — Prowse has a tight alibi. It's not surprising since he wouldn't get his own hands dirty... If you and Lane are going to prove anything, you're going to need to gather a lot of evidence." He paused. "How's she doing, anyway?"

I smiled to myself. Though Henderson feigned a dislike for Lois, I had realized they had built up quite a rapport over the years — though they would both bite their tongues off before admitting it. "She was a bit shaken last night," I told him, "but she seems better today... I don't know, though. I'm worried about her."

He was quiet for a few seconds. "You think she needs some people watching her?"

I considered the idea for just a moment. "No. I think that was a scare tactic. But if things get a bit dicey, I might be calling you for some help."

"All right. Take care, Kent."

"Thanks. You too, Inspector."

I hung up the phone and found my thoughts drawn back to what Cat had said. Was I really that obvious? If I was, this was bad. I hadn't known Lois for that long, even if it *did* feel like a lifetime... What would I be like when I had known Lois for an entire year?

Grimacing, I went back to work.

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When it was time to leave work for the day, I hesitated. "Are you sure you're going to be all right, Lois?"

"I'm fine," she insisted, her voice laced with annoyance. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"Maybe I should see you home —"

"No," she growled. "Look, Kent, I don't want to see hide nor hair of you until tomorrow morning. No waiting around outside my apartment either."

I sighed. "All right."

I didn't like leaving her since her life might be in danger, but I couldn't spend every moment of my day watching over her. She didn't want a bodyguard, and I wasn't going to intrude like that... No matter how much I wanted to. Still, the thought crossed my mind that maybe I should disobey her — but if I was caught... well, I would be apologizing for days.

I went home with Lois's new laptop. My powers were returning. They were weak, but it was enough for me to manage a few bursts of heat vision and hyper strength. With the use of those abilities, some tools, and a few computer parts, I was able to get her old laptop up and running, even though the screen wasn't usable. After some hard work, I salvaged her data and put it on the new laptop. Then, pleased with my success, I shut down both computers.

I opened the locket at my neck and exposed myself briefly to the meteor rock shard. The pain made me grimace, but I didn't leave the locket open for long — I would give myself a more thorough exposure before I went to bed. Though I needed the meteor rock, I detested it at the same time. The green stone's glimpse of "normal" haunted me. It felt as if the world was laughing at me when I had to go through the torture of using it time and time again. "Here is what your life could be like," the world seemed to say, "if you hadn't been given these cursed abilities." But just as bad as that was the fact that sometimes I wondered... what if my abilities weren't a curse... but a gift?

Mired in such contemplations, I fetched the box containing that strange globe and brought it into my bedroom. Opening the lid, I took out the mysterious item and looked at it. It was in the form of Earth, with its oceans and continents obvious. I wasn't sure if it was supposed to symbolize something — was it a way of saying the whole world was in my hands?

In disgust, I put the globe back into the box, which I set on the shelf. If that was its symbolism, then maybe I was better off without it. Still, I couldn't help but hold on to it. What if it held the key to my past somehow?

Exhaling heavily, I pushed those thoughts away. After giving myself a little more time to recover from opening my locket, I went on a walk.

I contemplated the hazy night sky as I went. I missed the great view of the stars which I'd always gotten in Kansas. To forego that and come to Metropolis had really been a big decision for me.

But I still couldn't regret it. Even if my life wasn't how I had dreamed it would be years ago, things had turned out much better than they could have. I was working for a great metropolitan newspaper, trying to track down criminals and put them behind bars. I enjoyed it — and it enabled me to save a few lives in the process. A criminal behind bars couldn't hurt others as easily as a criminal roaming free.

... And coming to Metropolis had meant that I was able to meet Lois. I had only known her for a short period of time, yet she felt so crucial to my life that I wasn't certain how I would ever be able to give her up. In fact, I hadn't been able to do so when the time had come — when I should have just let her go up on the colonist transport.

Well, for better or for worse, Lois Lane was now a part of my life. And the only way that would change would be if I retreated to Kansas.... And I had no intention of doing that.

Still, it would be a lot easier for me if Lois *did* get a boyfriend. Every time I spoke to my parents, I had to try to be careful not to talk about her, though I failed miserably most of the time. Whenever I mentioned Lois, Mom got ideas about us getting married and having a houseful of beautiful babies together. But that could never happen, and the thought of it pained me.... If Lois had a boyfriend, then surely I would be able to pull my mind away from her.

An image of Lex Luthor floated up in my mind. From the way she talked about him, was he not something like a boyfriend?

That was different, I told myself. He was — what? I wanted to say "scum," but I had no way of knowing what kind of person he really was. He'd been nothing but kind to me.... So why couldn't I shake the feeling that something was wrong? Was it

just jealousy?

My steps faltered as I saw a man walking up to an apartment building. His face and arms were scarred with terrible burns, and his movements were slow. As he closed the door to the building, I couldn't help but turn my thoughts back to the good my abilities could have wrought. What if I had been nearby and in possession of my powers when he had been attacked by those flames? Whether he had been stuck in a flame-filled car or a burning building, I could have helped him. Maybe he wouldn't be acting so morosely. Maybe he would have been able to stroll down the streets without a stranger staring at him.

I sighed and shook my head. This walk was doing nothing to clear my head. I retraced my steps and approached my apartment building. I passed a woman on a bench and nodded at her with a small smile, glad that at least nothing seemed to be wrong with her. When I came across a dog sitting at my front door, however, I faltered.

The dog seemed to be about twenty-five pounds or so. It was white and had pointed black ears and a black tail. It looked up at me with the canine equivalent of a grin and wagged the tail that curled over its back.

"Hey, there," I said quietly, unable to help myself. "What do you need, buddy?"

The dog just continued staring at me happily.

I hesitated. "I bet you're probably hungry, huh? Stay here. I'll be right back."

I disappeared inside my apartment and soon came back out with a plate that had a hotdog and some slices of ham on it. Not typical canine cuisine, but it would do.

The dog seemed ecstatic to get such fare and barked in anticipation.

"Shh," I said with a grin as I set down the plate. "You don't want to disturb anyone." Not that a dog barking would distract many people. The city tended to be a loud place in general.

The dog engulfed the food and then looked up at me for more.

I picked up the plate in amusement. "I think you've had enough for now." I opened the door and paused in the doorway as I realized the dog was at my heels. I turned and shook my head. "No, you need to stay out here, buddy."

But the dog tilted its head to look at me and then gazed into my apartment.

"All right," I conceded with a sigh. "You can come in — but *just* for tonight." I gestured for the dog to enter, which it did with a mixture of curiosity and confidence.

I began to shut the door, but something prevented it from closing all the way. I turned and opened the door to find a pretty but bashful-looking young woman standing there. She had a black leash and a worn black collar in one of her hands and a paper bag in the other.

Seeing the leash and collar, I frowned. "I'm sorry — is this your dog?" I gestured toward the canine in question. It was sniffing around my apartment.

"Could I come in, Mr. Kent?" she asked, looking behind her nervously. "I have some information that might be of interest to you."

Though I was suspicious of her reasons for being at my apartment, I reluctantly shut the door behind her and gestured toward the couch. "Please sit down."

She sat obediently, and the dog walked to her with that canine grin. Patting the creature with a smile, she said, "Sit, Shelby." The dog obeyed, prompting another smile from her. "Good boy." Turning her attention to me, she told me, "My name is Keira Fisher — I used to work for Sallya Technologies. I heard from someone that you and Ms. Lane were asking around about the destruction of ST headquarters.... I tried testing her first, you see, but she had no interest in Shelby."

My eyebrows came together. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

“It was important that I find someone with an affinity for animals, you see,” she explained. “This dog is Shelby.” She kissed the top of the dog’s head, and he put a paw on her knee. “Ms. Lane showed no interest in him, and I was worried.... But you seem to feel kindly toward animals, Mr. Kent.”

Looking at the dog, who still seemed quite content, I asked her, “Why are you here, Ms. Fisher?”

“I was working on something called ‘Project Nemean Lion,’” she began. My face must have shown familiarity with the name, for she said, “You’ve heard of it?”

“Briefly,” I acknowledged. “But I don’t know much about it.”

“We were doing genetic research on animals with the aid of some different-colored meteor rocks that had been found after a strange meteor shower in Kansas,” she noted.

I had to fight to keep from betraying my surprise. Someone else had some of the meteor rock? And there were different colors? What specifically was known about that meteor shower? It was all I could do to stop from bursting out with questions.

“We were able to give certain animals — we worked with rats, dogs, cats, and apes, mostly — special abilities. We managed to give them higher levels of strength and intelligence. We could also give them near-invulnerability and longer lives, though it was rare that we managed to give an animal all of those qualities. We did, however, seem to succeed with Shelby here....”

I frowned to myself. In a way, it sounded as if they were creating animal versions of me. But if I worried about whether I could control my powers... well, it was hard for me to even think of such enhanced animals. They wouldn’t know anything about responsibility — they would simply be guided by instinct.

“Do you think whoever is in charge intended to use this... process on humans as well?” I asked her, uncertain I really wanted to know the answer.

“I’m not sure,” she responded. “We hadn’t yet perfected our technique, though we got really close with Shelby....” Her expression suddenly became very earnest. “I want you to know something. I have always hated experimenting on animals in general, even if it’s been my line of work, and the thought of cruel experiments has always been utterly repulsive to me.”

I frowned. “Then why did —”

“Their life spans,” she interjected. “I’ve always been so upset by the fact that animal life spans are so much shorter than human ones.... The idea of giving them longer lives has always appealed to me, so I jumped on the chance. But I never participated in an experiment that violated my ethics — I never caused direct harm to any animal. I love them too much for that.” She buried her face briefly into Shelby’s fur before looking back up at me. “But I was naïve about something, Mr. Kent. When I finally realized that Sallya Technologies didn’t want to help animals but use them for destruction, I knew I had to do something.... A coworker — Mark Christensen — and I trashed the lab and freed the animals. We found good homes for all the animals with the help of our friends, though we tried to be careful about it. We made sure all the people involved were trustworthy and knew what they were getting into.... But evidently all the care we took just wasn’t enough. Mark was found dead the day after the Sallya Technologies building was destroyed.”

I hesitated. “Do you think he could have been behind the explosion?”

She shook her head vehemently. “No. He couldn’t have done that.... He *wouldn’t* have done that. He would never have been willing to jeopardize people’s lives like that.” She looked down at Shelby. “I have a few things I need to tie up before I leave Metropolis for good.... But I need somewhere for Shelby to stay for a few days so he doesn’t get discovered.”

My mind pulled back to the dog, I considered a few different dog breeds and ventured, “Is that dog part Spitz?”

The scientist smiled. “Not bad, Mr. Kent. Shelby’s actually a pureblood. His breed *is* a member of the Spitz family. They used to be referred to as the German Spitz, but now they’re called the American Eskimo.”

I frowned. “He’s a pureblood? But I thought American Eskimos were pure white and had long fur.”

She looked pleased at my knowledge. “You’re right. But I shaved him to make him less recognizable. You aren’t generally supposed to do that with his breed because they can get sunburned and their undercoat helps keep them cool, but his near-invulnerability means I don’t have to worry about it.... And I also dyed his fur.”

“You dyed his fur?” I asked skeptically. “Did you use some kind of special compound you came up with at the lab?”

She laughed. “You *can* buy animal dye at certain pet stores.... But you’re right — what I used came from a lab. Dr. Klein — he’s a friend of mine who works at S.T.A.R. Labs — made the dye. It’s completely safe for dogs, and it is specifically designed so you can’t wash it out. To get it out, you have to use the dye-remover Dr. Klein made — or ‘spot-remover,’ as I like to call it. He gave me the formula for the dye and the dye-remover, and they’re not that hard to make.... But that’s beside the point, I guess....” She took a deep breath. “Mr. Kent, do you think you could keep Shelby temporarily for me? I don’t want anyone to discover him.” She smiled hopefully. “He’s housebroken.”

I looked at the dog. He had rolled onto his back and was enjoying a belly rub from Keira Fisher. “All right,” I agreed reluctantly. “Just for a few days.”

She smiled and snapped the collar onto Shelby, who moved to a sitting position in anticipation of a walk. His eyes watched as she passed the leash to me, and I set it on a nearby table. She handed me the paper bag, and I peered inside.

“There’s a bag of dog food and some toys and treats in there, so you won’t have to worry about buying anything. I’ll be back to pick up Shelby in a few days. I want to help you with your story, Mr. Kent. I have my suspicions about Sallya Technologies — everything there was too top secret. I’d like to poke around a few places while I can.... I have a feeling that Sallya Technologies might be a subsidiary of LexCorp. Don’t you find it suspicious that LexCorp never tried to buy out Sallya Technologies, even though Sallya Technologies took quite a lot of business away from LexCorp?”

“Well, now that you mention it, it does sound suspicious,” I admitted. “But I don’t think you should go at this alone. I can help you out — and so can Lois Lane.”

She shook her head. “I want to do this alone. It’ll be dangerous enough with just me. Sometimes, numbers don’t bring safety.”

I considered arguing with her, but the fire in her eyes made me realize that there would be no talking her out of it. In that respect, she seemed to be a lot like Lois. “All right,” I conceded. Just like with Platt, I shouldn’t try to control people’s lives. Free will was too important to people.

She scratched under the dog’s chin and then held his head so that she could look into his eyes. “I have to go for now, Shelby. You’re going to be left to the care of Mr. Kent.... So make sure you obey him. Don’t give him any trouble, and avoid the temptation to chew on his shoes.” As she made that last statement, she glanced at me. She must have seen the alarm in my eyes, as she smiled and assured me, “I’m just kidding — he hasn’t ever chewed up any shoes that I know of.” Then she turned to Shelby and hugged him. “Be good.”

Keira Fisher stood and said farewell after looking at Shelby one last time. I shut the door behind her. Shelby rolled over onto his back and twisted slightly to look at me. Rolling my eyes, I moved to kneel beside him. I hesitated before gently reaching down and rubbing his belly.

The dog enjoyed the attention, though I kept it brief. I was encouraged to find that touching the animal didn't hurt me. I wasn't sure if the meteor rock involved in Shelby's transformation was diluted or what, but I was glad the dog's presence didn't cause any ill effects. I was just as glad that the dog was basically invulnerable. That was certainly convenient for me.

Realizing I needed an impromptu dog bed, I went and got a few towels out and put them on the floor.

Shelby looked at me, and I recalled that Keira Fisher had told him with success to sit. Assuming he might know other commands, I tried out, "Go lie down."

The dog stood and then jumped on the couch and rested his chin on his paws.

"Not exactly what I meant, but I guess it's my fault for not specifying," I said with a chuckle. I retrieved a bowl from the kitchen and filled it with water and then set it on the ground where Shelby could see it. "There you go. I'm going to have to leave, but I'm sure you'll be fine. I shouldn't be gone too long."

The dog's ears flicked in acknowledgement.

I picked up the phone and called Lois.

"Hello?" came her voice.

"Lois, it's Clark."

"I thought I told you I didn't want to see you," she said, obviously annoyed. "That included hearing from you, you know."

I smiled to myself. "I have some information I think you would like to hear about tonight.... Would it be okay if I came over?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she replied reluctantly.

"Great. I'll see you soon."

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I went to Lois's apartment, and she let me in with a sour expression. She was in her pajamas and a robe. "This had better be good."

My eyes flicked to the kitchen and the ice cream scoop on the counter, and I couldn't help but comment, "It's good enough to interrupt eating ice cream, I assure you."

She narrowed her eyes. "Get to the point, Kent."

"Clark," I prompted. I didn't wait for her to correct herself. "I have your laptop with me."

I took it out of the bag I'd had it in for safekeeping, and she grabbed it eagerly. "Thank you," she told me as she took it to her coffee table and set it down.

Though she seemed so happy I didn't want to spoil it, I couldn't help but say, "Great novel, by the way. The heroine's a real peach."

Her joy turned instantly to horror, and she gaped at me.

I continued, "The male protagonist, though... I don't know — he seems a little bit like a cardboard cutout."

"You *read* my novel?" Lois demanded.

"I *was*, however, impressed with the end of the story —"

"*Kent!*"

"The beginning, though, could use a little work...." I trailed off and smirked as she began sputtering.

"You — you — I —"

I laughed. And then I took pity on her. "I'm just kidding with you, Lois. I didn't read it."

She relaxed visibly. "Good." But she still looked suspicious.

Under my breath, I said, "Not the whole thing, anyway."

She glanced sharply at me and growled, "Kent."

"Ms. Lane," I returned, the corners of my mouth tugging upward.

Irked, she changed the subject. "Did you come all the way over here tonight just to give me my laptop? I was eager to have my data back, but I could have waited a few hours."

"No, that's not it. I had a very interesting visitor tonight."

I explained about Keira Fisher and imparted most of the

information I had learned. I did, however, leave out the part about Shelby. If Lois realized she had almost let something big slip past us, she would have been very unhappy, and I didn't want to ruin the growing excitement in her eyes. I concluded my exposition by saying, "And Keira Fisher thinks there might be a connection to LexCorp."

Lois shook her head. "I don't think there's a connection to LexCorp. There are plenty of companies that LexCorp hasn't bought out. It doesn't mean anything."

"I think you're wrong," I said firmly. "Sallya Technologies was a big competitor. LexCorp had a lot to gain from the destruction of that company's headquarters."

"LexCorp doesn't just go around blowing its competitors up."

"How do you know what LexCorp does or doesn't do?"

"I just *know*," she returned.

"Why? Because of *Luthor*?" I didn't even bother to hide my bitterness. I didn't know why, but the thought of him with Lois made me sick.

She crossed her arms. "Well, now that you mention him — Lex is a philanthropist. He has done great things for this city."

"What do you really know about him, anyway?" I returned.

"Maybe he has skeletons in his closet."

"Everyone has skeletons in their closet."

"Well, maybe he has particularly gruesome ones," I persisted.

"After all, who stood to gain from the destruction of the space program but LexCorp?"

"That's ridiculous," she said dismissively.

"Is it? If Luthor had been able to create his space station, it would have made a lot of money for LexCorp. Even if it isn't Luthor specifically who's involved, it's possible it's someone under him in LexCorp who is trying to destroy LexCorp's competitors."

Lois narrowed her eyes. "You don't know that there's a connection to LexCorp."

"And you don't know that there isn't."

She stared at me, and I stared right back at her.

In a quiet voice, I told her, "All I'm suggesting is that we leave it open as a possibility." If the man *was* an evil mastermind, I wanted to find out — before Lois got hurt. But I didn't have a clue how to go about making such a discovery. It was just my luck that the person best suited for such an investigation — Lois — thought he was heaven on earth. My mood darkened.

"Whatever." She pursed her lips and looked at me for a few seconds. "So, are you going to tell me anything about that woman at the Magic Club?"

"Wh-what?" I stuttered. That had come from left field.

"Don't think I've forgotten. I told you about Claude — don't you think you owe me a little honesty?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "You only told me about him because you thought we were about to die."

"It doesn't matter why I told you. The fact is I told you."

"And the fact is I can't tell you about Constance. I'm sorry."

As I looked down at her hands, I could feel her eyes on me. I knew she was considering challenging me. She didn't know that even thinking about Constance made me feel as if someone were stabbing me in the chest with a million knives.

But at last she sighed, and I glanced up and realized she was relenting. "Fine," she said in an annoyed voice. "Now, let's talk story strategies...."

I sat back and listened as Lois Lane did what she did best. A few hours later, I left and went to bed in my apartment, glad that Lois hadn't tried harder to force me to relive some of those painful memories.

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The next day, we did more legwork on the Sallya story while working on some minor individual pieces. We tried to trace money trails, but we weren't having much luck. I found myself

wishing I'd been given some way to contact Keira Fisher — she might have been able to point us in the right direction.

At the end of the day, I felt my powers coming on. I hadn't opened my locket that morning on purpose, and I still refrained from doing so. It really bugged me that Metropolis had me relying so frequently on the use of my special abilities, but there wasn't a way around it sometimes.

After work, I went to the rubble of the Sallya building and scanned it for meteor rock. I wasn't able to find any, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. There could be lead in the building. I had no way of knowing for sure whether or not the meteor rock had been destroyed or recovered. Even if it *was* gone, the thought that someone else knew about it made me uneasy. If a private organization possessed knowledge of the special meteor rock, did that mean the government did, too? My parents had told me that people from the government had been snooping around after I came to Earth. But we had never known if they had actually found anything. Knowing that Sallya Technologies *had* found something just made me nervous.

When I went into work the next day, the situation just got worse. As I approached Lois, I found her tapping a pen on her desk and looking somber.

Concerned, I asked her, "What's wrong?"

"I've been at work for a few hours.... And I have some bad news." She turned to look at me. "I've been talking to a few of my sources and to Henderson. Apparently, they fished a body out of a dumpster in a bad part of town. It was Keira Fisher."

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#### **Chapter 15: A Little More Bite and a Little Less Bark**

*A little less conversation, a little more action, please.*

*All this aggravation ain't satisfactioning me.*

*A little more bite and a little less bark ...*

— "A Little Less Conversation"

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Lois's words rang in my head: "Apparently, they fished a body out of a dumpster in a bad part of town. It was Keira Fisher."

It took me a few seconds to find my voice. Finally, I ventured, "What?"

She shifted the pen in her right hand to her left, looking agitated. "Her body was riddled with bullets, and police are blaming gang violence.... You and I both know that's not the cause. Henderson said he didn't have any leads otherwise, but he did tell me that if we found any concrete evidence one way or another to let him know. One of my sources said that she was poking around and asking about some people high up on the totem pole at Sallya Technologies. With the explosion of that building, a lot of hard workers are out of jobs, though a few of the bigwigs quit and are now being employed by Luthor Technologies. I did manage to talk briefly to Lex about it, and he said that what happened was a tragedy. He's going to try to find jobs for as many people as he can — it seems Sallya Technologies will probably shut down completely."

I looked away from her and bit my lip. Knowing what had happened to Mark Christensen, I should have just told Keira Fisher to leave Metropolis. Her help hadn't been necessary; her safety should have been top priority. It was bad to try to control people's lives — but surely strong advice was allowed, right?

"Hey, you okay?"

I turned to Lois, who appeared to be worried. I nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess so."

Looking at me carefully, she said, "All right. Then let's do some more work."

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We began examining Sallya Technologies' finances more closely. From what we could tell, it appeared as if Sallya Technologies had never been terribly profitable, though it had

made *some* money. A big insurance policy had been taken out on the building, but we ran into difficulties tracing the policy's beneficiary.

After a few hours of work, some help from Jimmy, and a few queries from an interested Perry White, we were able to trace the insurance money to Harrison McGregor. He was a big CEO, but he was very young. Too young for me to really believe in the plausibility of his position.

"I don't know, Lois," I said, my brow furrowed. "I'm not sure if I buy this. We've been having such difficulty with our investigation — why have we suddenly found where the money trail leads now? McGregor just seems too young for this to work. And why would *he* be the one receiving the money? It just doesn't add up."

"He has major shares in Sallya Technologies, Clark. It makes sense to me."

I shook my head. "There has to be more to this story than meets the eye, Lois. I think there might be a connection with LexCorp here.... I think someone else is pulling the strings."

"Lex has firm control over LexCorp," she told me, "and he wouldn't do anything like this. You're making a mountain out of a molehill. The explosion can be tied to a greedy young businessman — we've got all the evidence right here. He's the primary shareholder since the founder retired. All the trails lead to him."

I stared at her for a few seconds, thinking about Lex Luthor. I didn't truly want the man to go to jail. He was a philanthropist and had done a lot of good with his money. Jealousy was holding more weight in my heart than any real conviction that he was guilty of something. I was being unreasonable. Lois was free to date whoever she wanted — and she would never be dating me. No woman ever would.

"Okay," I conceded. She was probably right.

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We stayed late and wrote a story on McGregor and then sent it in. He'd taken out the insurance policy just shortly before the building had exploded, and he had publicly made a statement afterward that there wasn't enough money to rebuild — which turned out to be a fabrication. The insurance policy had been worth far more than the cost of rebuilding.

When we were finished with our story, I went to my apartment, tired and a bit cranky.

As I opened the door, Shelby jumped down from the couch and came over to greet me, his leash in his mouth. I had been coming home every day on my lunch breaks to refill his food dish and take him on a quick walk. I had thought the arrangement would only be temporary; really, I wish it had been — not because I didn't like the dog, but because it would mean that Keira Fisher would still be alive.

I snapped the leash onto Shelby's collar and kicked a once-squeaky toy out of the way. The toy bone, I noted absently, was riddled with teeth marks, courtesy of a very strong dog. There was no telling where the squeaker had gone.

I knelt in front of Shelby and scratched behind his ears, grateful for his near-invulnerability. At least there was one living creature I could touch without fearing I would cause harm.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, looking into his dark eyes, "but Keira Fisher is dead.... I guess you belong to me now, Shelby."

He looked back at me intently, not understanding, and I gave him a pat with a sad smile. Then I stood and opened the door. Shelby pranced outside, his nose sniffing wildly. I shook my head, feeling a little envious of animals. They didn't understand issues of mortality. They lived in the moment. Perhaps there was a lesson in that.

As I watched Shelby lift his leg beside a bush, I decided that I was going to have to call him something else. I just didn't think the name "Shelby" was appropriate for a male dog. And besides,

I wasn't sure if his name had been known by others in the laboratory. It was best not to take any chances, even if I didn't intend to have the dog splayed all over the news for anyone to make the connection.

He saw a cat and nearly jerked my arm out of its socket as he began an attempted pursuit, and I told him sharply, "Bad dog!"

He put his ears down and looked at me, running one of his front paws over his snout as if to apologize.

I smiled and reached down to scratch behind an ear. When Keira Fisher had asked me to keep him temporarily, she hadn't realized she had just asked the best qualified individual in the world. If he ever went on a destructive binge, all I would have to do was wait for my powers to return, and then I could stop him.

As Shelby looked at me and wagged his tail, however, I knew that worrying about him going on a destructive binge wasn't necessary. He was a nice dog. Probably the only things that needed to fear him were cats and squirrels...and squeaky toys. The teeth marks he had put in that toy bone had been impressive indeed.

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When I got to the Planet in the morning, I set a paper bag on Lois's desk and went to make a cup of coffee. As I returned to my desk, I saw Lois peering into the bag before pulling out a donut and then handing the bag to Jimmy, who was standing nearby and examining some papers.

"Thanks," she told me, taking a bite. She already had her mug of coffee, or I would have gotten it for her. "Perry hasn't come out of his office yet, so I don't know what he thought about our piece. He's busy yelling at Ralph, or I would have gone inside to ask him myself."

"I'd sure hate to be Ralph," Jimmy commented as he pulled a donut out of the bag.

"No kidding," I agreed. The balding man was known for putting too much faith in his sources and too little interest in hard evidence. As a result, he got chewed out by Perry White on a regular basis. Every now and then, however, he would chance upon something good, which was probably why he hadn't been fired.... Well, there *were* some rumors that he was related to someone on the *Planet's* board of directors. There were also some rumors that this person was the one who fed him his occasional good stories. I wasn't sure what to believe; mostly, I tried to avoid the man.

Ralph finally came out of the office shaking his head and looking relatively unharmed. As he passed by, he muttered, "Geeze, you'd think a source that turned out not to be credible is the end of the world with that guy."

Jimmy snorted. "Maybe if you spent a little more time checking out your sources and a little less time jumping on everything they say, you wouldn't run into problems with the Chief."

Ralph stopped and turned to Jimmy. "This coming from the office gopher?"

The younger man tilted his head. "You know, at least I actually listen to Perry. You could learn a lot from him — like what stories are publishable and what stories aren't. It's not that hard to learn."

Ralph rolled his eyes and turned to me. "Can you believe this guy?"

I crossed my arms, not willing to commiserate with him. "He's got a point, Ralph."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, rolling his eyes. As he walked away, I wondered idly if it would really be that bad to drop my ethics for a few minutes and give that weasel a good pounding. Jimmy just shook his head and walked over to his own desk to look at something.

I heard the sound of footsteps and turned to see the Chief Editor coming toward Lois and me.

"Lois, Clark — I managed to take a look at that piece you wrote." His face was grim, and Lois and I exchanged confused looks. "It's, well, it's not what I expected...."

"What's wrong with it, Chief?" Lois asked, standing up, ready to defend the piece.

He broke out into a grin. "Aww, I'm just funnin' with ya. It was brilliant, just like I've come to expect from you two. You make a great team — but you're not permanently together, remember. At least, not yet. It *is* possible to have too much of a good thing." He suddenly realized that the newsroom was quieter than normal and that some people were staring at him. "Judas Priest, folks! What do you think this is, a zoo?" he shouted. "Back to work!" He pointed a pair of fingers at us. "Seriously, good work, you two." He moved away from us and barked, "Jimmy!"

I smiled as I watched Jimmy respond immediately, but my smile turned to a frown when I saw Cat approach.

"Hello, handsome," she purred.

"Hi, Cat," I returned uncomfortably.

"Don't you think you've tried enough times to sink your claws into him, Cat?" Lois asked in an annoyed tone. "You *do* know that he doesn't like touching people.... And *we* know what sorts of activities *you* are interested in."

"At least I have a social life," Cat responded coolly. "Not that you would remember what that was like — if indeed you ever had one." She turned to me with hungry eyes and puckered her lips to gently blow me a kiss. Then she leaned over me — careful not to touch me — and whispered in my ear, "Somebody has to keep her tongue in working order.... You'll need it one day to battle with yours." As she strutted away, I gawked at her. Somehow, I knew she hadn't been referring to Lois and me engaging in a verbal sparring session.

"What did she say to you?" Lois asked, crossing her arms.

"It doesn't matter," I mumbled, my face red. "Look, I need to go and cover that press conference on Lex Luthor's museum donation. I'll see you later." As I retreated into the elevator, I realized I had been right when I thought Cat would be a great threat to me. Now, I wasn't able to get the mental image out of my head of me kissing Lois and seeing just how agile her tongue could be.

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That night, I took Shelby out for a walk. I still hadn't decided on a new name for him, but he didn't seem to mind the use of the old one, so I was in no rush. But I was going to have to introduce him to Lois sometime soon, and I needed to think of one.

We were walking by an old building when I heard what sounded like a frightened shout. I stopped walking and listened, trying to hear some more. Shelby growled deep in his throat and broke his leash free from my hand. Then he burst through the wall of the building as easily as if it had been paper. I hesitated for just a moment before running after him down a damp and dirty hallway.

I could hear an angry voice from a nearby room saying, "Tell me where your house and car are right now, or you're going to regret it." An icy hand engulfed my heart as I heard the faint sound of a child sobbing.

Just as I came up behind Shelby, he burst through the open door and leapt at the person I'd heard. The angry man had a gun and saw the dog just in time to let off a shot before his gun hand was engulfed by Shelby's mouth and his weapon clattered to the floor. Though no one else seemed to see it, I realized the bullet had hit Shelby in the chest. I rushed forward and picked up the gun, tucking it into the back of my pants. "Move, and I'll shoot," I warned him. But he was too busy making frightened noises and staring at Shelby to pay me much heed.

The child I'd heard was standing beside a skinny blond man tied to a chair. The boy looked to be about six, and I thanked my

lucky stars that he appeared to be unharmed.

“Are you two okay?” I asked as I approached.

“Y-yes,” the man said shakily.

I took a deep breath and untied him while keeping a wary eye on the gunman, though Shelby seemed to have him under control.

Once released, the blond man immediately embraced the child, who cried into his shirt, “D-Daddy...”

“Son,” the man whispered into the boy’s hair. “I’m so glad you’re all right...”

As I looked at them, holding the rope that had bound the father to the chair, I thought of what could have been lost. Human lives were so fragile. If I hadn’t been near to help, there was no telling what would have happened. It was fortunate Shelby had taken action.

I turned to stare at the man who had threatened them, and a great animosity swelled up within me. But such anger was destructive, and I forced myself to concentrate on breathing for a few seconds before I moved toward him with rope still in my hand. Shelby was growling, and the latter was on his knees and looking utterly terrified.

“Please get your dog off me,” the gunman pleaded, seeing he had my attention. “Give me my hand back.”

While still holding the rope, I knelt beside the brown-haired gunman. Then, left without any other choice, I grabbed his free hand. “All right. I’m going to have him let go of your hand, and you’re going to give it to me. Any wrong moves, and he’ll attack you.” I didn’t actually know if that was true — but neither did he.

“Fine fine fine,” he sputtered. “Just get this dog off me!”

“Shelby,” I said in a commanding voice, drawing the dog’s eyes to me. “Let go.” I waited a second and realized he must not know that command specifically. Then I tried, “Drop it!”

He obediently released the man’s hand, which I quickly but carefully grabbed. I tied the man’s hands together behind his back, marveling at the fact that Shelby hadn’t bitten down hard enough to draw blood. If a dog could be that careful, couldn’t I? The thought lingered in my mind.

When the rope was firmly tied around the criminal’s hands, I held onto the middle of it and turned to the blond man standing beside the chair. I kept a careful eye on the gunman, but I wasn’t sure it was necessary, as Shelby was looking incredibly watchful.

“Thank you so much,” the man I’d saved told me thankfully. He was holding the hand of his son, who had quieted down and was staring at Shelby with wide eyes. “He — he took my keys... He wanted to know where my house and car were so he could take more... I didn’t know what to do — my wife is at home, and I didn’t want him to hurt her. But my son — ” He cut off.

I looked at the child grimly. “Did he...”

“No. You came just in time. He didn’t hurt my son.” He used an arm to pull the boy closer. “Thank God.”

I sighed in relief. Shelby and I had gotten there just in time.

I watched the child, who was staring wide-eyed at Shelby in interest. The boy tugged at his father’s arm and led him to the dog. His father came with him warily, not certain whether Shelby was friendly. “Peter...” the man trailed off.

“It’s okay,” I said in a quiet voice. “He won’t bite either of you.”

The boy stood in front of Shelby and patted him. “Good boy.”

Shelby took his eyes away from the gunman and tilted his head. Then he promptly gave the child’s face a tongue bath.

The child laughed. “Silly dog.”

A smile broke out on the man’s face. Looking heartened, he reached out and gave Shelby a pat of his own.

I glanced at the gunman and then at the door. “Do you think you could go and call the police?” I asked the child’s father. “I’ll stand guard.”

“Yes,” he agreed. He left the room holding his son’s hand, and the child waved at Shelby.

Now my attention was turned back to the one who had threatened those two people, and my mouth formed a thin line. “Did my dog hurt you at all?” I asked the man. I hadn’t seen anything, but I wanted to be sure.

“No,” he admitted. “You’ve sure got him well trained.”

I hadn’t actually done any of the training; Keira Fisher had. But I wasn’t about to admit that. There was no need to let this man know that I wasn’t sure *what* commands Shelby knew. “He’s a smart dog,” I replied.

We were quiet for a few minutes, and then he said, “I wasn’t going to really hurt the kid, you know.”

The words made me feel a little better, but I still wasn’t happy with the man. “Why did you do all this?”

He shrugged. “I needed the money... You know how it goes.”

“No,” I said in a low voice, “I don’t. No matter how low you get, that’s no excuse to threaten a child or steal from someone.”

“Yeah, that’s really something coming from Mr. GQ,” he snorted.

I bit back a reply and just waited. When the blond man returned to the room with his son, he told me, “They’re on their way. Thank you so, so much, sir. You don’t know how much this means to me. My name’s George.”

I smiled. “My name’s Clark. And don’t thank me. Thank my dog.” I nodded toward Shelby.

He looked at the dog and said softly, “Thank you.”

Shelby wagged his tail, looking happy as could be.

George laughed and then turned to me. “Is there anything I can do for you and your dog, Clark? I’ve got a cousin who owns a pet shop — how about a few free things from there?”

“Really, that’s not necessary,” I told him. “I’m just glad to help.”

“No, I insist. Surely there’s something you need?”

Though I really didn’t want his generosity, it was obvious he wanted to do something, so I considered what he had said. “Well, he does need a new collar...”

“Consider it done,” George proclaimed with a chuckle. “Just go to Penny’s Pet Palace. The name’s ridiculous, but they should have a good enough collar selection for you. Tell Penny that George sent you. I’ll call her tonight.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully.

“By the way,” he said, looking puzzled, “I saw the number you did on that wall. How did you do that?”

I mumbled something about old buildings, and he fortunately didn’t ask for further details. He and his son just walked over to Shelby and showered their canine savior with attention.

I pressed the criminal forward, and he sat in the chair at my prompting.

Taking the gun out of my waistband, I lightly touched his back with it. “No funny moves,” I warned him, and he grunted in assent.

The blond man had stopped petting Shelby and was talking to his son, so I made a clicking noise to get the dog’s attention. “Come here, boy.”

Shelby came to me with tail wagging, and I knelt and carefully felt his chest for a wound. There was no blood, but as I probed where I thought the bullet had hit, he whined. So, there wasn’t a wound — just a bruise. “Good boy,” I told him quietly, patting his head.

As I turned my eyes back to the gunman and stood, I thought about how Shelby had risked his life.

I hadn’t really been worried that Shelby would hurt the gunman, even though he was apparently strong enough to break through a wall without any effort. Somehow, I had known that Shelby had everything under control. He was an animal — and thereby subject to an animal’s baser instincts. Yet I didn’t truly fear that he would ever hurt anyone by touching them. Somehow,

I knew he could control his powers. Shouldn't I be able to trust myself the same way?

Part of me said that I couldn't. Part of me said it wasn't worth the risk.

But then I thought about what Lois had said about the Black Knight.... Was I obligated to use my powers for good, even if they might be accidentally used for evil along the way?

No one was perfect — least of all me. But if I was anything short of perfect when I used my powers, it could spell catastrophe. Was it worth the risk?

My eyes flicked to the boy and his father. Despite what the criminal had said, what if they *had* been hurt? What if I hadn't made it in time? Just thinking about it depressed me.

I thought then of the bus that had taken three lives. With my powers, I could have stopped the vehicle. Even if I had stopped it a little too quickly and some people had gotten whiplash and broken arms, there would have been a greater good accomplished — I would have saved lives.

And if I got out of control, my parents would use the meteor rock to stop me — in fact, I could keep my locket with me just in case.... Surely I would be able to save more people than I would hurt.

I looked down at my hands, one of which was gently pressing a gun into the brown-haired man's back. I hadn't hurt anyone tonight with my hands. If I made this leap to helping people on a more widespread basis, then I would probably be touching people frequently. Could I handle that?

I thought of the woman who had been hit by the bus and survived only briefly. I might have been able to get her to the hospital in time for them to do something for her, even if I hadn't been able to stop the bus. Weren't the reasons to do this outweighing the reasons not to do it?

I was terrified of what would happen. There were so many "what ifs" floating in the air.

If I did this, I would be plastered all over the news. There was no question of that. And if I failed in front of the whole world, what then?

With my free hand, I touched my locket through the fabric of my shirt. If I failed the world, then I would kill myself if I had to. I had failed myself before — maybe this was my chance for redemption. And if it came to ill, then I would do what needed to be done.

I looked again at the boy, who was laughing as his father ruffled his hair. If Shelby and I hadn't been there to help, they could have been hurt or killed. Even if they had been left unharmed, it was possible the criminal would have harmed the child's mother when he went to break into their home.

Was it really worth the risk? I furrowed my brow.

But then the boy walked over to me, and he tugged at my shirt.

I knelt in front of him and asked, "What is it?"

"Thank you for being my hero," he told me shyly. And then he walked back to his father.

I felt a tear in my eye, and I lifted a finger beneath my glasses to wipe it away. Then I took a deep breath and steeled myself. The time for tears in the night was past. I needed to be strong. My decision was made. I was going to reemerge in front of the world.

But I couldn't allow myself to be seen as the Black Knight. People wouldn't fully trust such a figure, even if that figure helped bring criminals to justice. I would need to act as someone who didn't seem to be hiding something — even if I really was.

I inhaled deeply, feeling a strange contentment with my decision. My parents would be proud of me.

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**Chapter 16: What's in the Drink? ... Magic, I Think**  
*What's in the drink? Chase the devil away.*  
*Magic, I think...*

— "Chesay"

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After talking to the police and handing off the criminal to them, I went home. I felt both terrified and exhilarated. I was going to take a giant leap from my present life. I was going to be strong for the sake of others — and gentle as well.

But I would have to start touching people again. It might be more dangerous than when I had been using the shard — but part of what had worried me about the shard was that my powers would return without warning. Now, I would have my powers all the time. I would have to be in a state of continual control — but surely it was better than paranoia. If Shelby was trustworthy enough to be touched by people, then didn't the same apply to me?

And what was more — I *wanted* to touch and be touched by people. I had cut myself off from everyone for so long that I felt like a tightly wound spring about to burst. And if I hesitated every time I was about to touch someone, it could cost a life when every split second counted. Wasn't it best to become accustomed to touch again?

I didn't plan to talk to my parents about it until I had thought it over more, so when I got to my apartment I just went to bed. Shelby got into his usual spot at the foot of my bed — I hadn't been able to tell him "no" the first night he did it, and I figured it was going to be habit-forming soon, but I found that I liked the company. The last time I had woken up with someone in my bed other than him had been that African sculpture. I smiled to myself and turned off the light.

I was woken up a few minutes later by the sound of Shelby barking. "Quiet," I told him in annoyance, the covers pulled over my head, but he was insistent, so I finally peeked out. My eyes widened when I saw that the strange globe that had been nestled away in a box was now floating in midair and glowing. I reached my hand out, and it descended into my palm as if it were meant to be there.

The globe was no longer in the shape of Earth. It had morphed into a red-tinted planet utterly different from the place I had grown up on. "Krypton," I whispered to myself, somehow knowing immediately that I had just spoken the name of the planet of my birthplace.

White light flashed from the globe, and it projected an image that I was utterly enraptured by.

An older man with a silver symbol on his white tunic began to speak. "I am Jor-El. You are my son, Kal-El. The globe in your hands is attuned to you, and it has activated now that you have begun to accept your destiny. You see, Kal-El, you have a great purpose on Earth. Under the planet's yellow sun, you will be given powers no Kryptonian has ever had. But you must use those powers wisely. Know, son, that we did not wish to part with you. But our home planet was in danger of destruction, and so your mother Lara and I decided to send you out in a space capsule as a baby."

A tall woman wearing similar clothes appeared and smiled at me. I reached out with my free hand, as if to touch her.

"If you are seeing this message, then you must have survived the journey through space and grown into a fine young man. I am only sorry that we could not be a part of your life." His face was grim. "We were facing utter desperation when our probes gave us information concerning the planet Earth. We found that its inhabitants look like Kryptonians and embraced ethics similar to ours, and we knew it was the best place to send you. We stopped our search for a hospitable planet and worked to finish the capsule that would carry you to your new home — to the realm called America...and the place called Kansas."

He paused for a few seconds, looking as if he didn't know what to tell me next. Finally, he told me, "There is so much that I could say, and there are probably many questions you would like

to ask. I know both Lara and I would like to see what you look like at this point — to know what you have become and whether you are alone. But just as we cannot get answers to our questions, so we cannot try to anticipate and answer all of your questions. With the destruction of Krypton imminent, we do not have the time for such exposition.”

Lara brought her hands together. “Just know that we loved you, Kal-El,” she whispered. “We hope you find the happiness that we felt when you first entered our life.” Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she had a smile on her face. “Just the thought that you could survive to see this message is enough to make us content. Though we are gone, do not allow yourself to succumb to loneliness....”

Jor-El nodded. “As the last son of Krypton and the only survivor of the House of El, you must bring hope to others. Look toward the future. There, you will find greatness.”

As their images slowly disappeared, I felt both saddened and excited. Finally, I knew something about where I came from.

I got up and put the globe back in its small wooden box. Had it reacted to my presence because I had decided to use my powers for a greater purpose? As I sat on my bed, I smiled and tried the name of the planet out again, “Krypton.”

Shelby wagged his tail and barked.

“You like that word, huh?” I asked. When he barked again, I chuckled, “Maybe I should call you ‘Krypto’ then.” I quickly dismissed the thought, however. Such a name would probably call too much attention to him. It was too close to “cryptic.”

I thought about going back to bed, but I was too excited. I jumped up and padded over to the phone and called my parents.

My sleepy mother answered, “Clark?”

I grinned. Evidently, my time in Metropolis had taught her that I was the only one who would call this late. “Hi, Mom.”

Dad picked up. “Clark?”

“Hi, Dad.”

“What is it, Clark?” Mom asked.

“Sorry to wake you guys — again,” I apologized, feeling a little guilty.

“We’re always glad to hear from you, Clark.... We just wish you called us during daytime hours.”

“The globe glowed,” I told them, barely able to contain myself.

“What?” they asked simultaneously, both of them sounding confused.

I explained everything I had seen, and they seemed impressed. But Mom was still a little skeptical. “Why would it only show you all this now?”

Pacing with my cordless phone, I said, “I’m not sure. But I think it had something to do with a big decision I just made.”

“A big decision?” queried my father.

I took in a deep breath. “I’ve decided to stop with the meteor rock exposure — I’m going to start using all my powers to help people.”

“Oh, Clark!” Mom exclaimed, sounding choked up. “I’m so happy for you.... But you realize that you’re going to have to touch people, don’t you?”

“I know that, Mom.... And I’m preparing myself for it. I’m not going to lie — it’s going to be... tough. But I can do it. I’d like to start touching people again.” Saying that last sentence was scary, but it felt good.

“The first thing I’m going to do the next time I see you is give you a big hug,” Mom proclaimed firmly.

I laughed. “I guess that’s allowed.” However, I quickly sobered. “But there *are* a few things I need to talk to you about.... I need to know that you’re willing to do what needs to be done if it comes down to it.... I need to know that you’ll use the meteor rock against me if it’s needed.”

“Clark —”

“And I’m finally going to tell you about what happened in Africa. It’s — it’s important for you to know.”

Filled with apprehension, I began to tell them the story of that dreadful day.

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*I walked into class and sat, glancing beside me at Constance’s chair. She wasn’t in it, but I couldn’t help but find my thoughts drawn to her.*

*If I was a bit out of place in both Africa and America, Constance wasn’t even to be found on the same map. She was a clear outsider to the group of Americans studying abroad in Africa despite her status as a fellow American, and I couldn’t help but empathize with her a little for it. As someone who was either an alien or the result of a science experiment, I had never completely felt like I fit in either. But her unorthodox ways just turned too many people off, so it wasn’t like I could blame people for avoiding her, even though I occasionally tried — and failed — to include her in our activities.*

*Constance was obsessed with magic. Her father, it seemed, was a famous illusionist, and he had taught her everything he knew — only to realize belatedly that people weren’t interested in watching a female magician. And so, he had forced her to go to Metropolis University in hopes that she would find a different interest. Judging by her choice of a summer study abroad program, though, it hadn’t worked — it had just given her the opportunity to explore magic further.*

*It had taken her a while to warm up to me — and even then she was never really what one could call “warm” — but she had eventually told me that she was in the southern part of Africa to study hoodoo. I had instantly made the mental jump to “voodoo,” though I hadn’t been certain that was exactly what she had meant. Upon doing some research into the subject, I learned that hoodoo was a type of African-American folk magic which borrowed from both Native-American and African traditions.... It had seemed to me as if Constance might have had a little more luck in America based on that alone, but I guessed that she probably knew something I didn’t.*

*She wasn’t the only one at the summer program whose eyes were firmly fixed on something outside the school. Another American, Billy, was there mostly out of interest in the Lion Park, which wasn’t too far from the university. They had lions and plenty of other beasts there — like leopards and hyenas — so a biology guy like him couldn’t be blamed for jumping at the chance to come to Africa.*

*Yes, Africa held a lot of different things for college-aged students. For me, it was a foretaste of what was to come. I wanted to travel the world after I graduated and eventually do something with my journalism degree...like serve as a foreign correspondent for a newspaper. Working for the Daily Planet was my dream job, but I wasn’t going to pursue that until after I did some traveling and got my Master’s degree. I hoped profusely that I would be able to do the latter at somewhere other than Midwestern State University. The school had a pretty good journalism program, so I couldn’t complain about getting my undergrad there, but I wanted to expand my horizons.*

*As people began filing into the classroom, I shook myself out of my reverie and began greeting a few familiar faces. When class started, however, I realized Constance was nowhere in sight. I resolved on finding her after school to tell her about the change the professor had made to our homework assignment for the next week. Despite her interest in magic, she did try to make good grades. I suspected it was so that her father wouldn’t become suspicious of her motives, but I didn’t ask her about it.*

*I sat through my class with interest, and when I was done with school for the day, I intended to track down Constance. My plans were derailed when Billy begged Kenny and me to go on a drive through the Lion Park. Kenny and I agreed with great*

reluctance, but only because we both knew that Billy hadn't come across many wild animals and was getting bummed about it. In particular, he hadn't seen a lion in its native habitat yet, and it was something we'd had to hear him moaning about several times. After eating a quick early dinner, we tried and failed to convince Anthony to come, left him after a period of grumbling, and finally went out in a car that Billy had rented for two weeks. I suspected that to get to the park — with the eager Billy driving at a breakneck pace — would probably take us twenty or thirty minutes. But we hadn't gone far at all when I — out of a vague curiosity to see what was ahead — used my enhanced vision to zoom in on the park. There, I saw two arguing women, one of whom I recognized. And it was the upset expression on her face that worried me and made me say what I did next.

"Billy," I said, turning to him, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Please, stop the car."

The furrowing of his brow was a clear indicator of his reluctance, but he obeyed my request. After the car had come to a safe halt, however, he looked at me in puzzlement. "What is it, Clark?"

I hesitated. I hated lying, but I needed to get away. "I don't feel very good — I don't think dinner is agreeing with me."

"What? Not enough Dingdongs and Twinkies for you?" Kenny pressed. My penchant for junk food was well known, and Kenny liked to rib me about it.

"That's it," I answered with a small smile that quickly faded. "But you two go on... I'm sorry I can't go with you guys, Billy. I think I'll walk back — try to get some fresh air to see if it will help. Maybe I'll go with you another time?"

"Yeah," Billy replied sadly.

I felt bad for leaving him alone with Kenny — who I was certain would soon start teasing Billy mercilessly — but one of the women was Constance, and I needed to find out what was happening.

They drove away, and I waited impatiently for them to pass out of sight. Then, after looking around to make sure no one was watching, I sped toward the spot across the road from the Lion Park where I'd heard the voices and where there was a hut of sorts. I considered revealing myself, but instead I hid behind a tree and listened first. I wanted to know what was happening before I just jumped into the middle of things. Maybe everything would be okay...but I had a bad feeling about this.

"I still don't understand why you won't teach me," Constance growled.

An irritated female voice answered, "I already told you, child. Because of your blood-thirst."

"I don't even know what you mean by that! I've never killed anyone."

"Doesn't mean you won't."

In a placating tone, Constance asked, "As a hoodoo practitioner, don't you want to pass on your knowledge to someone else?"

The woman was quiet for a few seconds before sighing. "All right. You want help, child? Drink this."

Curious, I pulled down my glasses and used my x-ray vision to look through the tree providing me cover. I did so just in time to see a small glass bottle filled with liquid being exchanged between the two.

Holding the bottle up to her eyes skeptically, Constance asked, "What is it?"

The other woman nodded at it. "Drink that, and you will experience the greatest power known to man and woman."

Constance lowered the bottle to her side, looking annoyed. "I didn't ask for a potion. I asked for knowledge."

"Well, child, we can't always get what we want, now can we?" the woman returned. She cackled at the expression on Constance's face and then walked away, muttering to herself in a

language I didn't know.

Constance began a series of colorful expletives beneath her breath as she stared at the bottle in her hands. After a brief period of hesitation, I decided I needed to reveal myself, and I stepped out from behind the tree. But before I could stop her, Constance gulped down the potion in one quick movement.

The action surprised me, and I found myself demanding, "Why did you do that?"

She swiveled to face me. Her eyes narrowed when realized who I was. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," I answered curtly. I crossed my arms and stared at her with all the sternness I could muster. "Constance, if you don't watch yourself, you could get hurt."

In annoyance, she began, "Clark — " But then she suddenly swooned.

I rushed forward at faster-than-human speed and caught her before she hit the ground. Her eyes were closed, and I was about to panic in fear that she was dying, but after a few seconds, she opened her eyes and blinked up at me.

"Clark?" she asked in confusion.

"Are you all right?" I bit out, worried. "What if that potion was poison?"

"Oh, Clark," Constance whispered, burying her head in my chest.

I suddenly felt confused. "What? What is it?"

"I know what that potion does now..."

"What?"

"She was right," she told me softly. "It is the greatest power known to man and woman..."

I waited for her to expand on her meaning, and when she didn't, I pushed, "What?"

"Clark...I love you."

I almost dropped her. "What?" I asked dumbly. A small part of me registered that my communication skills had dropped to parrot level. It was only with extreme effort that I was able to force myself not to say "What?" a fourth time.

"I hate her so much, Clark," she told me, her voice filled with anger. Her fury was gone a second later; however, when she whispered, "But I love you so much... I don't understand how I can feel so many different things at once..."

"Constance — " I began uneasily. I didn't know what to say.

She squirmed out of my arms and looked up at me. "Don't you love me back, Clark? You've been trying to include me in everything from the beginning..."

I had never felt so uncomfortable in my life. "Constance, I barely know you — "

She tore her gaze away from me. When she finally looked back, her eyes were filled with pain. "Clark, I need to know... Can you ever love me? Can we ever be together?"

I took a step backward, feeling as if I had been hit by a freight train. This situation was getting more bizarre by the minute.

Finally, my thoughts racing, I managed, "Constance, we're going down two different paths... You want to be a great magician, remember? And I'd like to be a journalist. We aren't exactly compatible career-wise..." I trailed off. Wincing and feeling like a heel, I added, "And I'm sorry, but I just don't feel that way about you."

She looked as if she had just been punched in the gut.

Feeling even guiltier, I told her, "Constance, I'm sure this love potion — or whatever it is — will rub off — "

"No!" she exclaimed, taking me aback. "It can never be removed."

"What if we go find that woman?" I persisted. "She might know something — "

"We're not going to undo the potion... But you're right that she might know something to do to change this... But Clark, I

can't allow that to happen." She began searching her pocket for something as she calmly told me, "That woman was an evil person, Clark. She admitted to me that she had killed several foreign students."

I frowned, not believing her. "I didn't hear her say anything like that —"

"She said things — terrible things — before you came, Clark. She threatened to kill me. I wanted to run very badly, but I wanted her power more. She was just saying those bad things about me to paint me as being more like her."

I was fairly certain Constance was becoming unhinged. And I was absolutely certain that I was becoming more uneasy by the second. "Constance —"

"She is just too dangerous." She pulled something gleaming out of her pocket. "I'm sorry, Clark."

"Constance, what are you —"

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As I told my parents the rest of the story, I felt as if there was a pressure in my chest that was simultaneously contracting and releasing. It was a blessing to get this burden off my chest — but it was a curse to know that I would have to deal with my parents' changed opinions of me after I finished my tale.

When I was done, I waited for the rebukes. I waited to hear of their horror.

But all I received from them were expressions of love.

When I finally hung up the phone, I went and lay in my bed for a long time before falling asleep. I had feared that conversation for so many years — had thought I would go to almost any length to prevent it from happening. But now that it had, I was glad.

To know that my parents didn't think me a monster — well, it was a blessing.

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### Chapter 17: The Walls Come Tumbling Down

*Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho,*

*Jericho, Jericho,*

*Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho,*

*And the walls come tumbling down.*

— "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho"

\*\*\*

The next day, I decided to visit Penny's Pet Palace before work. As I approached the building, I cheerfully whistled "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" to myself. I smiled as I thought of how Perry would disapprove of the version I had in mind and would insist Elvis's was better. But I much preferred the Joe and Eddie rendition of the song to Elvis's. They were both upbeat, but the Joe and Eddie version just had something Elvis's didn't.

I paused as the song gave me an idea, and I whispered to myself part of the lyrics: "The walls come tumbling down..."

I broke out into a grin. I had just decided on the name I would use: "Jericho." It was a lot better than "Shelby," that was for sure. The dog had certainly made a wall come tumbling down the night before. And "Jericho" wouldn't be quite as attention-grabbing as "Krypto."

I went into the pet store and was greeted by the woman at the counter. "Good morning," she said pleasantly. "Can I help you find anything?"

"I'm fine, thanks — I just need to grab a couple things," I told her. I went and found a yellow collar that looked as if it would fit Jericho, and I stood and looked at the dog food section for a few minutes before picking out a brand I had heard a few good things about. After grabbing a couple of durable-looking toys, I took all my items up to the counter and told the woman, "I'll also need a token for the ID machine..."

"No problem," she said, scanning the big bag of dog food.

I hesitated. I didn't want to take the collar for free, but I did want George to know that I had been by. "Is George doing

okay?"

The woman, who had been picking up the collar, frowned. "Did you hear about — wait, you must be the guy he told me to watch out for!" She beamed and held out her hand for me to shake. "I'm Penny."

"Clark," I returned. I slowly took her hand in mine and shook it. It was going to be hard to get used to touching people again.

"Thank you so much for helping my cousin. He doesn't know the first thing about self-defense. I've told him time and time again to take some classes since he's gonna live in the big city, but he never listens to me."

Smiling, I got out my wallet.

"Put that away," she told me. "This purchase is on the house."

I shook my head. "I don't mind paying. I just wanted to make sure George got home safely."

"Come on... Let me take care of it this time. Good guys don't get rewarded for their good deeds very often — better take it while you can."

I chuckled. Seeing the earnestness in her face, I conceded, "All right."

"Great!" she exclaimed, pleased. She cancelled what she'd been ringing up and handed me a token for the ID engraving machine. "Just slip it in the slot, pick out a tag, and type in your information."

"Thank you... I appreciate it."

"Not a problem," Penny said kindly.

I went to the ID machine and engraved a tag with the name "Jericho" on it, along with my contact information. My good cheer just kept continuing. I hadn't exposed myself to the meteor rock that morning, and the knowledge that I wasn't going to have to do so again for a long time — if ever — was like a great weight lifted off my shoulders. I hadn't felt this genuinely happy in a while.

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I stopped by my apartment to drop off the new items and quickly walk Jericho. I said the name "Jericho" several times to catch his attention and make him familiar with the name. And then I looked at my watch and grimaced. I needed to head to work.

I dropped him off at my apartment and took a taxi to the Planet. Upon entering the newsroom, I noticed a few people gathered around the televisions, so I joined them to see what was going on.

The LNN news reporter Natalie Lucas was discussing Harrison McGregor. "Reports from early this morning say that McGregor has entered into a plea bargain," she was saying. Apparently, there was speculation that the sentence for his involvement in the destruction of the Sallya Technologies building would be a lot shorter than it might have been.

Hearing about that made me suspicious. It didn't help that Sheldon Bender — a lawyer known to work frequently with Lex Luthor — was in charge of McGregor's defense. McGregor had to be taking the fall in exchange for something.

Lois was out covering a press conference according to Jimmy, so I did a little digging into McGregor's finances with Jimmy's help. We found that a substantial deposit had been made into McGregor's bank account and that McGregor's wife was driving a new Porsche.

"Looks like we're on to something, C.K.," the young man commented.

I nodded grimly. "I think you're right. If Sheldon Bender is involved, we might have found a connection to LexCorp."

"Kent!" Perry White barked from the doorway of his office. "My office!"

I turned to look at the Chief Editor, but he had gone back to his desk. I gestured vaguely at the computer and told Jimmy,

"You keep on looking to see if you can find anything else — like maybe who made that deposit."

"Got it," he acknowledged, intent on the monitor.

When I entered Perry White's office, he asked immediately, "What are you working on?" There was never time for small talk with Perry White.

"Harrison McGregor has to be taking the fall for someone," I responded. "I think there might be a connection to LexCorp."

He nodded. "That may be, son, but you also might be chasing ghosts.... Do you have anything concrete yet?"

I shook my head. "I've been hitting a lot of dead ends. Jimmy might be able to find out something, but I'm not sure."

He pulled down a pencil tucked behind his ear and chewed on the end of it for a few seconds. "All right. Here's what I want you to do, Clark. Now, don't drop the story — just put it on the backburner. There are rumors of illegal immigrants being harbored in Metropolis, and I'd like for you look into that for me. It could be another ghost, but there are a few politicians going into a frenzy about it."

I wanted to argue with him, but I hadn't been at the *Planet* long enough to really earn that right. I *knew* there was a story here — but I wasn't sure I could prove it. So instead, I just told him, "Okay, Chief," and I left his office feeling a little defeated.

Lois had returned by this point, and she looked up at me from her desk. "What's wrong, farmboy?"

Standing by her, I shrugged. "Though he didn't come out and say it, I think he just killed my story."

She patted me consolingly. "Don't worry, Perry does th — " Suddenly, she realized she had just touched me. "Oh, Clark, I'm so sorry — I wasn't thinking — "

"It's all right," I rushed to assure her. "I'm — well, I'm getting over it." I shrugged uncomfortably.

Lois tilted her head and studied me for a few seconds, as if to determine whether or not I was serious. Evidently, she was satisfied, as she told me with a smile, "I knew you would come around eventually."

I smiled at her, lost in the dark brown pools of her eyes until she dragged me out by saying, "As a movement in that direction. ..." She held her arm out for me to hook it with my own. After only briefly hesitating, I did so. "Now, I know this nearby café which makes great sandwiches...."

I was surprised to realize how much I enjoyed the simple feeling of Lois's arm in mine, and I couldn't help but grin wider.

As Lois and I left for lunch, we passed by Cat, who winked at me.

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After work, I felt I was flying as high as a kite — and as soon as it was dark, I *was*, my dark rescue gear on and Jericho wrapped in a black blanket in my arms. I was worried at first as to how the dog would take to flying, but he absolutely loved it. The smells high up in the air were unlike the ones he was used to, and he eagerly looked over my arms at the scenery below. He started to bark, but I sharply told him, "Bad dog," and he stopped, looking penitent.

I dropped down in front of my parents' house and let Jericho jump to the ground, though I held onto his leash so he wouldn't run off. His nose was working furiously, and I chuckled to myself. I would have to take him to look at some cows later.

Almost as soon as I had opened the door, my mom came barreling toward me to embrace me in a bear hug. Despite her small stature, I almost lost my balance and fell over. "Whoa, Mom, take it easy," I teased. But I couldn't help but admit to myself that I enjoyed her embrace — it had been far too long. I hadn't realized how much the simple touch of another person could increase one's sense of well being.

Mom squeezed me tighter. "I don't know if I'm ever going to let go of you, Clark Jerome Kent."

I raised an eyebrow, pulling my arms around her. "My full name, huh? I must be in trouble then."

Dad was soon right there with us. To any outsider, we would have looked like a ridiculous jumble of bodies. To us, however, we were just members of a family expressing our affection for each other, albeit enthusiastically.

Jericho jumped and pawed my mom's legs, eager for attention. She pulled away and looked down. "And this must be Shelby," she said as she knelt and gave the dog some attention.

"Jericho, actually," I corrected as I let go of Dad, who patted my shoulder, as if to assure himself that I was still there. "I renamed him this morning. I don't want him to be too obviously connected to his former life — people might come looking for him otherwise." I bent and unclipped his leash from his collar. "He's housebroken, so you don't have to worry about him. But I probably wouldn't let him outside unsupervised — he might start scaring the livestock."

"Aww, not him," Mom said in baby-talk, rubbing the sides of his face. Jericho wagged his tail enthusiastically. "I love him already," she proclaimed, standing up. Jericho, not receiving attention any longer, decided he wanted to investigate the house, and he trotted off.

"So, you're wanting a costume, huh?" Dad inquired.

I nodded. "Yeah — some sort of outfit that will distinguish me, Clark Kent, from my rescue persona...."

"Hm," Dad grunted. "And you said no black, right?"

"Yeah. I want this new figure to be completely different from the Black Knight. I don't want anyone thinking he has something to hide."

"Why do I get the feeling that you talking about yourself in the third person is going to become a frequent occurrence around here?" Mom said, the corners of her mouth turning upward. "All right, Clark. Come with me into the bedroom. I've picked out some different colors, and I need your input."

"I'll be in here if you need me," Dad called out after us.

Mom and I went into the other room. Various fabrics were lined out on the bed, most of them in bright colors. Pulling out a notepad, she showed me some sketches she'd made.

I raised an eyebrow. "Why do most of them have a cape?"

She grinned. "Well, for one, it will look great while you're flying.... More practically speaking, it will also cover up the zipper in the back.... And you know, honey, your suit will have to be skintight to cut down on wind resistance — I thought you might like the cape to cover up your rear at least."

"Mom!" I sputtered, blushing as red as a fire engine.

"What?" she asked with an innocent expression.

I flipped through the sketchpad again. "What's with this underwear on the outside theme?"

She crossed her arms, prepared to defend her cause. "Clark, the purpose of the suit is to be flashy and keep people's eyes more on your body than your face.... This design would keep people thinking more about your...other assets."

I could *not* believe I was having this conversation with my mother. "And the tall boots?" I asked weakly.

"Another stylistic choice. We want eye-catching, remember?"

Her brow suddenly furrowed. "I just remembered something!"

She knelt on the floor by the bed and pulled a trunk out from under the bed. Opening it, she pulled out a blue blanket, which she caressed lovingly.

"This is the blanket we found you in," she told me. "And this was also with you." She reached down and got out a thin piece of fabric in the shape of a pentagon, which she handed to me. It looked as if it belonged on the front of a shirt, like a logo or an insignia of some kind. The exterior of the pentagon was outlined in red which continued on to form what looked like an "S." The background was yellow.

As I traced the "S" with a finger, I said, "Jor-El and Lara

were wearing a similar symbol, though the color was different... I wonder if different classes wore different symbols? Or if it was a family crest..." I frowned in thought. "Or maybe it indicated different careers..."

"If it indicated different careers, they probably wouldn't have sent it with you," Mom pointed out. "It was probably a symbol of something. And now, we can make it symbolize something else — the battle for good. I think it would look great in the middle of your chest."

"I don't want to use the original," I said hesitatingly. "But I wouldn't mind using a facsimile of it..."

Mom smiled. "Great. We'll just need to make sure the color scheme matches."

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

\*\*\*

We sketched out what felt like a hundred different versions of outfits. We experimented with stripes, dots, zigzags. We looked at designs with and without belts, shorts, and capes. We sketched masks covering the eyes, masks covering half the face, masks covering all the face. We drew hats, cuffs, bandannas... We even tried looking at different kinds of shoes. The more sketches we did, the sloppier our drawings seemed to get. But at last we narrowed our preferences down to a few pictures.

We debated a few different color schemes — we knew we were using red and yellow, but we weren't certain if we wanted a third and possibly even a fourth color as well. Simplicity was key, but my mother kept getting this gleam in her eyes as she came up with new ideas.

"The blue will help tone down the red and yellow just a bit," Mom argued, and I quickly agreed with her. The baby blanket sent in my ship with me had been blue, and it had looked good when contrasted with the "S" logo.

In regard to accessories, we agreed that I would definitely have a full-length cape and long boots that didn't quite reach my knees. However, Mom was having a hard time convincing me about the need for a belt and shorts. "Clark, I'm telling you," she argued, "the shorts are a good idea... Just think — if we have blue as the primary color of your tights, red or yellow shorts would stand out nicely."

I sighed, knowing this was one battle I wouldn't win. "Make the shorts red, I guess. I'd rather minimize the yellow. I don't want to blind anyone."

Grinning triumphantly, she told me, "Okay. We'll make the cape and shorts red, but we'll make the belt yellow. How's that sound?"

I buried my face in a pillow. "I'm going to look ridiculous."

"No, you're going to be eye-catching," she insisted firmly. "Now, do we want a mask or not?"

Sighing, I removed my head from its position against the pillow and looked at her. "I don't know... I don't want to look like I have something to hide."

She stared at my face and took off my glasses, considering me. Then she reached forward and brushed my hair back. "Clark — go get some hair gel and slick your hair all the way back like you did for the high school prom."

I groaned. "Don't tell me you remember that?" After I had gotten the pictures back from prom years ago and looked at them, I had begun to think slicking my hair back made me look like a drowned rat.

"Just scoot!" she ordered.

Narrowly avoiding her swat at my rear (I didn't think she'd ever be able to *truly* think of me as a man rather than her little boy), I disappeared for a few minutes to do as she asked. After applying liberal amounts of gel, I stared into the mirror with wide eyes. I knew now what she was going for — I looked like a different person.

When I returned to the bedroom, she was measuring out

fabric and getting ready to begin her sewing project. Upon seeing me, a smile spread across her face. "I was right!" she crowed. "You look almost like a complete stranger. You'll be hiding in plain sight, and no one will even realize it... Though, I must admit, based on the design we're going for, there probably won't be anyone looking at your face."

"Mom!" I gaped. I had blushed more in the past few hours than I had in the past few years.

"They're called tights for a reason," she returned with a grin. "Now, what do you think about putting another version of this 'S' shield on the back of your cape?"

I gave her a dubious look. "The red of the 'S' won't look good on it."

"So we make it a different color — what if it's blue and yellow instead?"

"How about just one color?" I suggested.

"Sounds like a plan. Now, come over here so I can measure your feet. I'll order you some red boots, but in the meantime, we're going to use fabric ones as a temporary solution so you can start right away. I don't want you changing your mind because your costume didn't come together fast enough."

I rolled my eyes but didn't comment.

"I do have a pair of your old shoes that we can use the soles from — we can glue them to some fabric, and that should make do for now... Would you also like the symbol on your belt?"

Shaking my head, I told her, "No. Two places is enough."

"How about you sketch it out? You're faster than I am at it."

As the corners of my lips drew upward — I knew she was just wanting me to use one of my special abilities — I grabbed a pencil and quickly sketched out a version of what we had discussed. "There."

She stared at the drawing and took the pencil from me. "What do you think of having a yellow circle around your 'S,' Clark?" She lightly drew it as an example.

I stared at it for a few seconds before replying, "No, I don't think so. Simplicity, remember?"

"You're right," she agreed as she used the pencil's eraser to remove the circle. "Can you go and fetch my colored pencils? I want to get an idea of what this looks like."

I zipped out of the room and returned a second later with the pencils, not missing the satisfied expression on Mom's face. I colored in our final design and then made another version of the cape on the next page. Since our drawing didn't show the back of the costume, I wanted to see what the "S" would look like. I sketched a version of the symbol at the top of the cape before changing my mind and erasing it. Then I drew it in a more central location on the cape.

"That's definitely better," Mom commented.

I grabbed the blue pencil and started coloring the symbol in before grimacing. "Yellow would be better, I think," I muttered, erasing the blue marks I'd made as best as I could and then coloring the symbol in with the yellow pencil.

She squeezed my shoulder. "It looks great, honey. I can't wait to see what it looks like."

"I can," I sighed. Still, there *was* a small part of me that was excited. This was the beginning of a whole new life.

\*\*\*

I went into the bathroom to change. The mirror wasn't that big, but there was a full-length one in my parents' bedroom. Still, I wasn't certain that I wanted to exit the bathroom. I felt like a walking target, even if I was invulnerable.

I pushed back a curl of hair on my forehead and smoothed it down with gel. Would this work?

Somehow, I felt that it would. The man I saw in the mirror was nothing like Clark Kent. How could anyone ever draw a connection between him and me?

I adjusted my cape and opened the bathroom door. As I went

into my Mom's bedroom, the soles of my makeshift boots clicked gently on the floor.

"Wow," was what Mom first said when she saw me. "Oh, honey." She came quickly toward me for what I thought was another hug, but then I realized she was examining the skintight fabric. "I'll need to make a few adjustments," she told me as she got some pins, "but this is going to work."

"You really think so?" I asked unsurely as I surveyed myself in the mirror.

She smiled. "I know so."

\*\*\*

After the adjustments to the suit were made to Mom's satisfaction, we walked into the living room. Jericho was sitting on the couch beside Dad, who was watching television.

Hearing my approach, Jericho looked up and barked, running over to me in excitement.

"Sit," I commanded, not wanting him to scratch up my new suit, and he complied, though he still seemed to be grinning at me.

"Clark," my father said in wonder as he stood and looked at me.

"What do you think, Dad?" I asked, still not feeling confident.

"I think you're going to blow them all away."

I gave a half-hearted chuckle. "I don't know — you really think I'm much to speak of?"

Jericho barked.

"I'd say *he* thinks so," Mom told me as she knelt to pet him. "Maybe you should use him as your sidekick."

I rolled my eyes. With a gesture to my suit, I said, "I can't have anyone connecting this person to Clark Kent like that. If we both had the same dog, it would be a little suspicious, don't you think?"

The small Kansas woman crossed her arms stubbornly. "Not necessarily. You know, Clark, as busy as you're going to be, you probably won't have much time to spend with a pet unless you involve him in your rescues... I did some research on American Eskimos. They're high-energy dogs that thrive on activity. You don't exactly have a big backyard that he can run around in... And besides, parts of his fur are dyed black. If *you* can have a separate persona, why not Jericho as well? You could distinguish between his personas with the presence and absence of spots just like you distinguish between your personas with a costume... You could even give him a cape if you wanted."

Laughing, I shook my head. "I'm *not* giving him a cape." "Just think about it at least," Mom pressed.

I held my hands up. "All right." My eyebrows turned inward as I considered the idea. I *could* distinguish further between Jericho's personas with different-colored collars and different names — maybe I could even use the name "Krypto," which I had previously discarded. Using and removing the dye might get annoying, but I could move fast enough that it wouldn't be a big deal... And besides, it would be nice to have a partner...

"Are you going to go start now?" Mom asked eagerly. I could sense she was trying with everything she had to keep me on my current path. She and my father supported me whole-heartedly in this, and it made me feel good.

"I was wondering if I could leave Jericho with you both for a while?" I asked, sidestepping her question. "To separate him from the animals Sallya Technologies was experimenting on, I want to create a story around him. We've had dogs occasionally on the farm, so nobody should think it strange to see him around here... I'd like you to even plan a few sightings of him with some Smallville residents. When asked about him, you could tell them you've had him for a little while and intend to send him up to live with me soon."

"We wouldn't mind doing that, Clark," Mom said, "and that

should help protect your side of the story... But if you do use him as a sidekick, he will probably be quickly connected to that animal research... *You* might even be connected to it."

"Assuming I did use him to help me, I would probably need to have an interview to clear that up... Maybe if the public learns that I'm from another planet, they'll just assume he is, too. At least we can make it ambiguous... And maybe if they think he can do more than he actually can, they'll leave him alone. I know he can't be killed by bullets at least."

"So, you're sure you want us to create this background story for him?" Dad asked.

I nodded. "For one thing, Lois doesn't know I have him... And if she realized I was holding out on her in the Sallya Technologies story, she'd be — well, royally displeased, to say the least."

Casually, Mom asked, "Is she going to be the one who does your first interview?"

I flushed. The thought *had* crossed my mind. "I don't know," I managed, trying to sound as if the question hadn't affected me. "Maybe."

"Uh huh."

"I think I'm going to just go dive right in," I said, moving the subject away from Lois Lane. "It's kind of scary, but there's no time like the present, I guess."

Dad came and gave me a hug. "I know you'll make us proud, son."

"I'll certainly try," I said softly.

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## Chapter 18: A Real Life Hero

*A real life hero with dashing handsome looks ...*

— "What Every Woman Lives For"

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My debut in Metropolis was... well, probably not exactly what my parents had expected. And really, it wasn't entirely what I had intended.

After I started scanning the city for signs of trouble, I got nervous. When I saw a mugger in an alley far below me, I knew I had to do something. But the thought of staying afterwards and talking to the victim terrified me. I would have to explain myself, answer questions... And I just wasn't ready for that.

And so, I worked quickly enough and carefully enough that my face remained unseen. I bent the mugger's gun and tied him up with a sign post right before speeding away.

Throughout the night, I responded to some cries for help and assisted with a few accidents. The biggest thing I did, however, was help out in a fire.

The smoke at the fire had been so thick that the victims hadn't been able to make out my face, and I generally moved fast enough that they wouldn't be able to see me anyway. But there were enough people around that they had to have seen *something*, and I had the feeling that the story would make the news. And when it did, the other people I had helped throughout the night would probably come forward, too.

Soon, I would need to show myself fully. But for that night, I let myself just enjoy anonymity... and the knowledge that everyone I had tried to save that night lived.

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The next morning, the newsroom was buzzing.

I wasn't sure how the news spread so quickly, but it did. Interviews with firefighters and the people I had rescued were splattered all over the TV. I was staring up at the newsroom televisions when I heard Perry White bark, "Lois! Clark! My office *now!*"

Swallowing nervously, I lifted my eyes to meet Lois's. She was talking on the phone with a glint in her eye and hung up reluctantly. "Let's go," she told me sharply.

The Chief Editor began as soon as we shut the door. "Now, I

want you find everything you can only this ‘Red-Blue Blur’ character.”

“Red-Blue Blur?” I echoed.

“That’s what they’re calling him. All they know is that someone has been doing unbelievable things at incredible speeds. No one’s seen his face — just a red and blue blur. Now, I’m not sure if this is a hoax or what, but evidently people are in an uproar about it. Whether this is the Black Knight in some new duds or not, I’m not sure. But you have to admit this is all a little fishy. Why won’t he show his face? Why isn’t he talking to anyone? Does he have something to hide? Disfigurement, maybe? And where are all these powers coming from?”

“Perry, I’ve got this story,” Lois told him.

“Now, Lois, this could be big — you need to work on this with Clark.”

“Lois is right,” I hastened to assure him, not exactly feeling inclined to write about what I had done. “I’m working on a few other things — she can handle it.”

“You can drop those other things,” the Chief Editor stated bluntly. “You two are working on this together, and that’s that. Now, git!”

Lois and I exchanged a look before meekly exiting Perry White’s office.

“As long as we’re working on this together, I might as well come clean,” Lois said grudgingly. “I talked to a few of my sources. Apparently, this Red-Blue Blur might have helped out with a car wreck at a traffic light. There were some drunk teenagers out late who ran a red light and hit someone. Fortunately, no one was killed, though it’s possible we have the Blur to thank for that.”

I barely refrained from grimacing. It had taken all my effort not to stop and give those teenagers a stern talking-to. But they had been hurt, so I had flown their car to the hospital, careful to hide my face and not go too fast. It probably would have been a lot easier for me to simply show my face, but I knew there would be no going back once that happened, and I wanted to make sure I wasn’t regretting my decision to help people the next day. I *wasn’t* regretting it, as it turned out, but I still had wanted to take the precaution.

Lois picked up her coat, purse, and briefcase, heading for the elevator.

“So, where are we going now?” I asked as I hurried after her.

“To see Henderson. I’ll bet we can convince him to give us a copy of that tape.”

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Inspector Bill Henderson looked up from his desk as we walked in. “Lane and Kent,” he proclaimed. “I knew it would be simply a matter of time before I saw your two mugs in here.”

“Let’s cut to the chase, Henderson,” Lois said. “Are you going to give us that tape or not?”

“Tape?” he echoed innocently. “Why, what tape would that be?”

“The tape that traffic light recorded last night,” Lois gritted. “The tape with this ‘Red-Blue Blur’ man in it.”

He gave us a crooked smile. “You know, he lives up to his name. All you’ll see when you look at it is a red blue blur — and just a hint of red boots and a red cape. The guy moves too fast, and the angle isn’t right for when he lifts the car into the air. If you’re wanting a good front page picture, then this isn’t what you want. . . . If, however, you just want *something*, then we might be able to talk.”

“It’ll be one of many things we will be using in our story,” Lois bit out vaguely.

“Uh huh,” Henderson replied, amused. “Well, if you have so many things already, then you probably don’t need this.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out a tape, which he then held up in the air.

“Just give us the tape, Henderson.”

“There are conditions, *Lane*.”

“And what are those?” I asked, giving Lois a warning look.

“Oh, just the usual. You keep us up-to-date on your investigation — especially if you learn this guy poses a threat. He seems helpful enough now, but you can never tell.”

“Done,” Lois agreed, snatching the tape away from the detective. “Keep in touch with us.”

She sped out the door with her prize in hand, and Henderson looked at me. “She’s a handful.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered, following after her.

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“Henderson was right,” Lois said with a sigh less than an hour later. “This tape is basically useless.” She stopped the video of what had been recorded at the traffic light. “But at least we will have *something* to go on the front page.”

Jimmy was passing by, and Lois waved him over. “Jimmy — do you think you could get us some pictures from this tape? None of them will be very good — just do your best.”

“Sure thing,” he replied amiably.

Then Lois looked at me. “Now, we go interview a few people. Maybe they can give us some sort of description.”

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After talking to some people and not learning anything more about my physical description in the costume, Lois and I returned to the Planet and began our article. Jimmy had placed several photos on Lois’s desk, and we chose a few of the better ones to show Perry White.

Lois started with the headline:

IS THE BLACK KNIGHT BACK —  
IN RED AND BLUE?

“We need to be careful that we don’t make any assumptions,” I pointed out. “This Black Knight may not be the same person as the Red-Blue Blur.”

“I think they are,” she replied as she typed. “It’s just too convenient otherwise.”

I bit back a reply, not wanting to seem suspicious. But I was getting worried. If the Black Knight was forever connected with this new persona, it could be bad for me. The costume used by the Black Knight had obviously been the outfit of someone trying to hide something. That was the opposite of what I was going for with this new outfit.

I watched as she continued writing, and then I pointed at a spot on her screen. “That’s not spelled right.”

“They’re called editors, Clark,” she retorted, her fingers still flying over the keys.

Rolling my eyes, I waited until she paused in her writing. Then, I shifted her keyboard toward me and went back and changed a few words and phrases. Next, I added a few sentences and moved a few others around.

Lois glared at me the entire time. Finally, she said, “Don’t edit my copy.”

“This is our story,” I returned calmly, “and I’m going to play a part. I intend to pull my weight.”

She muttered something unintelligible, and I ignored her. After adding a paragraph at the end, I said, “There!”

“Are you sure you don’t need to move a comma around?” she asked sarcastically. “Can I send it to Perry now, or do I need to wait until you put a gold star on it?”

Simultaneously irked and amused, I walked to my desk, grabbed a piece of scrap paper, and drew a star on it. I returned and handed it to her. “There. It’s not gold, but it carries with it my seal of approval nonetheless.”

As she sent the article with a glare and I returned to my desk, I heard her muttering about the incomprehensible humor of Kansas farmboys. It was all I could do to refrain from making a comment about the stubborn willfulness of city girls.

\*\*\*

After work, I called my parents, knowing they would want to hear from me.

I learned quickly that they had heard all the buzz. Apparently, they'd been flipping through news channels for every scrap of detail they could find.

"I don't understand why you didn't show anybody your face," Mom commented. "You can't stay out of the spotlight forever, and people seem to be getting suspicious. They'd almost forgotten about the Black Knight, and now here's this Blur figure. You'll need to talk to somebody soon."

"I know, I know," I acknowledged. "I just wanted to try it this way first.... See how it felt."

"And how did it feel, son?" Dad asked.

I grinned into the receiver. "It felt good."

Dad laughed, and I could hear the smile in Mom's voice as she said, "So, it went without a hitch?"

"Yes, unless you call me having to do a story about myself a hitch...."

Chuckling, Mom told me, "I'm sure it won't be the last time. There's one thing you're going to have to get used to — the publicity."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I admitted. That was definitely the darker side of doing something that put me in the limelight.

"Now, Clark, I checked out some dog training books from the library, and I've already started working with Jericho."

"Mom —"

"You don't have to decide now, but the reason for your decision is *not* going to be that he's not trained well enough. I've done a little research and fast forwarded through a few movies for some ideas. We've already made him one of the best rescue dogs you've ever seen, and we still have more to teach him."

"We?" I questioned.

"Well, Jericho needs someone to save, doesn't he? Your father's been playing the role of damsel in distress quite well."

In surprise, I ventured, "Dad?"

"She's right, son," he confirmed. "I make quite the helpless maiden. I just haven't gotten the screaming part down yet."

I shook my head to myself, chuckling. "The things you learn...."

"Well, what I've learned is that Jericho is remarkably smart," Mom said, pride coloring her voice. "He learns quickly. We're trying to teach him commands that will help with the more common situations like mugging and fires, though we are also getting a bit creative."

"Your Mom's really enjoying herself," Dad told me. "She's getting into this as much as she got into that twenty-foot-tall metal sculpture she was working on five years ago."

I raised my eyebrows, shifting the phone to my other ear. "Wow. She must really be serious then...."

"I know you aren't sure whether or not you want him to help you, Clark, but you could use a partner out there. And I know Jericho won't enjoy just staying home all day." Mom moved away from the receiver, and I could hear her saying, "Speak." Obliging, Jericho let out a sharp bark.

I sighed. "You might be right, Mom. I guess I could do things to protect his identity — when I wanted him to help me, I could remove the black spots and add the yellow collar. Returning him to normal would just be adding the spots and switching to a black collar.... Since I can move really fast and he has tough skin, I guess it should be easy enough."

"Exactly," Mom agreed, sounding pleased.

\*\*\*

It was a bank robbery that finally served as the debut of my face.

I had secretly wanted it to be something more dramatic, like a runaway subway car, but it was probably best that it worked out

the way it did. After all, I didn't like the idea of someone getting hurt. And a runaway subway car was bound to scare someone into having a heart attack.

When I heard an alarm going off, I flew to the Bank of Metropolis. I hovered above the building and used my x-ray vision to see what was going on.

There were three people inside wearing all-black outfits and ski masks. One of them was holding a businessman hostage — probably a workaholic who was there late.

The person with the hostage seemed furious, and he made a gesture to the others with his gun. Seeing my opening, I took it. A few seconds later, the hostage was freed, the three guns were crushed into scrap metal, and the bank robbers were outside the bank with a street sign wrapped around them. I hated destroying public property — again — but people didn't exactly leave rope lying around. It seemed like it was something I needed to start carrying.

The criminals tried to get free, but the pole was wrapped too tightly around them. I looked at it one more time just to make sure it wasn't so tight that it was hurting them, but it appeared to be fine. I refrained from heaving a sigh of relief. Moving people at extra-human speed and using my extreme strength around them were two activities I didn't relish. Not too long ago, I had refused to touch people; to be forced to have contact with them in this fashion was a personal nightmare.... But I would need to get used to it. There was a lot that I could do to help the people of Metropolis.

"Don't even try to escape," I warned them. "I'm faster than you."

"What are you?" one man sneered. "A reject from the circus?"

"I'm your worst nightmare," I told him, crossing my arms and looking menacing. I wanted to be an image that they would never forget.

"Boss, I wouldn't mess with him," I heard one man whisper.

"I'll mess with who I want," snarled the leader. But he didn't say anything else.

The businessman exited the bank and approached me slowly. He pointed at the three men. "Did you do that?" he asked with a shaky voice.

"I did," I acknowledged.

"Who are you?"

I hesitated. I hadn't chosen a name for myself. Last time, the press had just named me.... Perhaps I needed to come up with a name, but I didn't want to use "Kal-El," so I just decided to hold off on making a decision about it.

"A friend of the law," I said at last. "I am here to see that justice is served."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," he replied with a smile. "I don't know how you did that," he paused and nodded toward the three men, "but it's good that you did. They tripped one of the alarms, but they were almost in, so they just kept working. A few minutes later, and they would have been gone. The police have been really busy at night these past few years.... The crime rate just seems to get higher and higher."

"Well, I'm here in Metropolis to stay. Maybe my presence will start to dissuade some people from choosing the life of a criminal."

The man's brow furrowed. "Can I — go to the press with this? They're calling you the Red-Blue Blur.... Metropolis has a lot of questions for you. It might give some people hope to know that you're here to stay."

I smiled at him. "I think the *Daily Planet* would be a good place to start."

It was about that time when the police cars pulled up. Policemen jumped out with their guns...and then looked utterly confused when they saw three men on the sidewalk with a

signpost tied around them.

“Officers,” I said in a commanding voice, trying to project an image of authority, “arrest these men for attempted bank robbery.”

“Who are you?” one of the officers asked, his suspicion obvious.

“He’s the Red-Blue Blur,” supplied the businessman helpfully. “He stopped them from robbing the bank by tying that sign around them.”

“You’re the Red-Blue Blur?” a different officer ventured.

I nodded. “I trust you can take it from here, gentlemen.” I was *not* going to stick around to give yet another police statement. I was beginning to be sick of them.

I floated in the air slowly, making sure they could see me clearly. I gave a slight nod and something that was halfway between a wave and a salute, and then I sped away, leaving behind only a sonic boom.

That had felt good.

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### Chapter 19: Puppy Lovin’

*Greatest case of puppy lovin’ you ever saw ...*

— “A Dog’s Life”

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When I got to the Planet in the morning, I found the businessman talking to Lois. Nervous I might be recognized as the Red-Blue Blur — how foolproof *was* my disguise anyway? — I planted myself at a distance from them. But Jimmy noticed me observing them and rushed over.

“He just got here,” he explained. “Evidently, there was a bank robbery last night, and the Red-Blue Blur showed up... Only, he didn’t stay a blur this time. The guy actually saw his face.”

I raised my eyebrows, feigning surprise. “Really?”

“Yep. When he came in and said all that, I pointed him straight to Lois. I thought about trying to take on the story by myself — to try to get Perry off my back — but I knew Lois would kill me.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “You’re probably right.”

I watched for a few minutes before going to get some coffee. Lois was listening to the man with rapt attention, hanging on his every word — but also interrupting frequently to ask for clarification on something. I wanted to use my special hearing to listen in, but I forced myself to give them some privacy. When I noticed Lois handing him a pen and paper, however, I couldn’t help but watch and use my enhanced vision.

The businessman drew a picture of the Kryptonian symbol that had been on my chest. He was no artist, but it was a passable effort. The shape of the pentagon he drew was slightly off, and the “S” lacked its crook at the top, but it would do for the *Daily Planet*’s purposes.

When the man left, Lois worked frantically, and then she disappeared into Perry White’s office with her story. I couldn’t help but use both my x-ray vision and my enhanced hearing to watch and listen in.

Lois first handed him the picture the businessman had drawn.

“What in the Sam Hill is this?” asked the editor, staring at the paper in his hand.

“The symbol on the Red-Blue Blur’s chest according to an eyewitness at a bank robbery last night,” Lois proclaimed triumphantly.

The Chief Editor’s head whipped up. “You mean — someone saw what he looked like?”

“Exactly,” Lois said, slapping her story down on his desk.

“According to my eyewitness, this man can fly and move incredibly fast, and he has the strength of at least ten men.”

“And you say he was seen at a bank robbery?” he asked for clarification.

“Yes,” she confirmed with a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin. “He

stopped three criminals in their tracks.”

“Did the police see him?”

Lois’s grin grew wider. “Yes.”

“And do you know what the ‘S’ stands for?”

She frowned. “Well, we definitely can’t keep calling him the Red-Blue Blur... A man that can fly... He’s a pretty amazing superhero for that alone. What about Superman?”

I winced to myself; maybe I should have given the businessman a name. “Super” wasn’t the first word I would have used to describe myself.

But it was too late now. Perry White was pointing a pair of fingers at her and telling her, “That’s brilliant, Lois.” He waved her story in the air, “I’ll make a few minor changes to this and substitute in that new name, and we’ll run this story. You go ahead and talk to the police. Maybe we can get enough information out of them for a follow-up.”

“I’m on it, Perry,” Lois said as she exited his office.

The Chief Editor was right behind her. A few seconds later, he was shouting to the whole bullpen. “All right, everybody! The Red-Blue Blur has shown his face. Come into the conference room in fifteen minutes for an impromptu meeting. Everyone is going to be keeping their eyes peeled for more information on him, but first we have a few things to tell you.” He turned to Lois, who was looking unhappy. In a quieter voice, he said, “Lois, bring a printout of your story to the meeting.”

“Perry — Superman is *my* story.”

“I’m sorry, honey, but when it comes to a man that flies — assuming this *isn’t* a hoax — all bets are off.”

“But Perry — ”

He waved her efforts off and retreated to his office.

She turned and surveyed the newsroom with a grim look, as if to warn everyone that whoever dared to steal her Superman story would be charred to a crisp by the sheer force of her will.

I smiled to myself. She wouldn’t have to worry about me. I had no intention of connecting the name “Clark Kent” to Superman this early in the game.

\*\*\*

I decided to look into the pet dye Keira Fisher had told me about on my lunch break. Sometimes, I went to eat with Lois, who didn’t have many friends at the *Planet*, but I was giving her a wide berth today. She was on a rampage, and I would no sooner try to hinder her progress than I would attempt to stop a hurricane. There were some things a person just didn’t do.

At S.T.A.R. Labs, I showed my Press ID and requested to meet Dr. Klein. He was alone in a laboratory mixing some chemicals when I entered. He was a kind-looking bald man in a white lab coat, and I felt heartened on seeing him.

“Can I help you?” he questioned.

“I’m Clark Kent from the *Daily Planet*,” I introduced myself. “Keira Fisher came to me before her death, seeking help...” I hesitated, trying to think of how to speak in a way that was misdirecting but not lying. “She was trying to find homes for the animals Sallya Technologies was experimenting on, and she mentioned you knew the formula for a pet dye and for a ‘spot-remover.’ I was wondering if you could teach me how to make it?”

“What formula?” he said guardedly.

I raised an eyebrow and gave him a *look*.

He gave in without much more fight. “All right. I’ll teach you. But I’d prefer you kept my involvement in this private. She was killed, and I’d really rather not meet the same fate.”

“Don’t worry, Dr. Klein,” I hastened to assure him. “I’ve become a part of this myself. You keep my involvement quiet, and I won’t say a word to anyone about yours... I just need the dye and the remover to help with the project Keira Fisher started — disguising an animal to obscure its origins.”

Klein nodded. “It is easy enough to make at home if you have

the materials. It's also instantaneous — the fur soaks up the dye, so all you have to do is rub a towel over it to remove the excess, and then you're done. The spot remover is a little more difficult to use, but it's not complicated either."

"Great," I said. Noticing he appeared a little apprehensive, I told him, "I promise I won't advertise your involvement in this. You can trust me, Dr. Klein. A reporter always protects his sources."

He stared at me for a few seconds before giving a slight nod. "Okay. Now, to make the dye..."

\*\*\*

A few days later, it seemed Superman was the only topic of conversation in the entirety of Metropolis.

I began doing a lot of things during the day in my Superman garb, dashing from the office to help people in need, but fortunately Lois was busy and didn't notice my unusual behavior. Some pictures were taken of me in the suit as a result of my activities, and amazingly enough some street-side merchants had already begun selling Superman merchandise. Knowing it was capitalism at work didn't make me feel any better about it.

"He's just amazing," Lois commented as she passed by me and sat at her desk.

Looking at her, I asked, "Who?" But I had a pretty good idea. "Superman," she replied, a "duh" clearly implied by her tone of voice.

"Sounds like he's really impressed you," I remarked, privately amused. I hadn't thought Lois was the type to be swept off her feet by a superhero.

"He's just done so much good already... Metropolis really needs someone like him."

I studied her, wondering at her reaction. Finally, I asked, "Who do you think is the coolest fictional hero?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Any reason you're asking, Kent?"

"Clark," I corrected. "And I'm just curious."

Lois thought about it for a minute. "Mystique," she said at last.

I gave her a skeptical look.

"She's an X-Men character."

"I know that," I returned. "But she's technically a villain, not a hero."

Lois crossed her arms. "She's not a villain all the time," she defended.

"All right, fine," I conceded. "Why do you think Mystique is the coolest fictional hero?"

"She's a woman who knows what she wants...and she can get behind all those closed doors."

I shook my head and grinned at her. "You really *do* have to know everyone's secrets, don't you?"

"Not *everyone's*," she returned. "I'd rather not know my plumber's secrets."

I laughed. "I'm with you there."

"What about you?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Who's your favorite fictional hero?"

I didn't even have to think twice. "Luke Skywalker."

She lifted her eyebrows. "So, the farmboy likes a farmboy. That's not exactly a stretch... You must be a closet *Star Wars* fan. I bet you're the type who sits at home and stays up all night writing stories for fanzines." When I avoided her gaze and didn't respond, she exclaimed, "Spill, farmboy! You looked at my novel. Tell me about what you've written."

"If you're not a closet fan yourself, how did you know about fanzines?"

"I wrote an article about fanzines once, and don't think that question will deflect me from the issue, Kent."

"Clark," I mumbled. She gave me an expectant look, and I told her reluctantly, "I occasionally read *Star Wars* fanzines, and I

wrote *one* story for one. Happy?"

"No. You didn't tell me what it was about."

I shrugged. "It was about Luke Skywalker."

She waved a hand in the air. "And?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. "It was about him being afraid."

"Afraid of what?" she pressed.

I wanted to lie to her, but I couldn't let myself. So I told the truth. "It was about him being afraid of his anger and what he could do with the Dark Side. He feared he would end up hurting his family and friends, so he chose to reject the Force and never use it again."

Lois frowned. "Sounds kind of depressing."

Shrugging, I replied, "Not all fan stories have happy endings."

"Are you afraid you aren't going to have a happy ending?"

I looked at her sharply, but she was reading something on her computer and had meant the question more sarcastically than anything.

"A man like you is bound to have a happy ending," she remarked, hitting a button on her keyboard.

"What do you mean?" I queried with a frown.

She glanced at me. "Well, you're...relatively good-looking... and nice enough to be around... I've seen women in the newsroom falling all over you."

I grimaced. I *had* been hit on more than once by someone other than Cat, that was for sure. For some reason not entirely known to me, I replied, "I'm too busy for a happy ending."

"No one's ever too busy for a happy ending," she returned. She got to her feet. "I have to go meet with someone. I'll talk to you later."

I gave her a small wave and watched her leave. I suspected Lois Lane might be too busy for a happy ending... Yet being busy probably *was* her happy ending.

But it wasn't mine.

\*\*\*

At the end of the day, I steeled myself in preparation for what was forthcoming that night. I knew I needed to talk to a member of the press, and I preferred that it be Lois Lane. Her hero worship of Superman made me feel a bit awkward, but she would end up being very unpleasant if she wasn't the first reporter to have a one-on-one interview with him...me.

I left a note on her desk in disguised handwriting while she went in Perry White's office to ask him something. It instructed her to meet at the Planet at 10 pm that night and was signed "The Red-Blue Blur." Since the name "Superman" was new, I didn't use it — I didn't want to arouse any suspicions that I might be connected to the *Planet*. I had considered giving Lois the note earlier in the day, but the less prepared she was for the interview, the better it would be for me. I had talked with my parents about what I should reveal, but I was still feeling uncomfortable at the thought of giving the public so much of myself.

That night, I went to the Daily Planet at 10 pm sharp. Lois was already there, a list of questions on her desk along with a legal pad to take notes on. For all I knew, she hadn't even left the building since she received her note.

"Superman," she said in surprise when she saw me.

I raised an eyebrow to pretend I didn't understand her appellation for me. Privately, I was just thankful she hadn't realized that Superman was me — or Clark was Superman — well, that we were the same people... Person.

"It's what I — it's what we're calling you," she informed me, sounding a bit flustered.

"I see," I responded awkwardly. I didn't want to give the impression that I was a monosyllabic goon, but I just didn't know what to say.

"Thank you for giving me this interview," she said as she

picked up her list of questions to ask. “I wasn’t sure if it was a hoax or not — I’m glad it wasn’t.”

“They told me you were the best,” I replied warmly.

Blushing, she asked me, “Really? Who told you that?”

I began cursing myself for my choice of words but finally managed, “Does it matter?”

Her smile sent a flutter through my stomach. “I guess not.” Hesitating, she ventured, “Do you have a name?”

“‘Superman’ is fine.” In actuality, I didn’t like the egotism that seemed to be inherent in the name, but I didn’t think I would be able to escape it. I had to give *some* sort of explanation for the “S” on my costume, and “Superman” might as well be what people associated with it. I wasn’t going to call myself “Samuel,” that was for sure.

Lois tucked her hair behind her ear almost shyly. It was then that it hit me that she really *had* developed a crush on Superman. I was just trying to wrap my head around that revelation when she ventured, “So, when you showed up as the Black Knight, did you intend to continue doing what you’re doing now?”

I almost grimaced. I couldn’t tell her the truth — but I didn’t want to lie to her. Carefully, I told her, “I’m not the same person as the Black Knight. . . .” It wasn’t *exactly* a lie — I wasn’t the same person as I was then. I had become more willing to take risks — willing to put myself out there and try to save people. Still, even knowing it was a half-truth didn’t make me feel that much better.

She made a note on her pad. “I imagine you would like to meet the man. I wonder if you got your special abilities from the same source?” The thought made her frown. “Where *did* you get your special abilities?”

I felt a sense of relief. *This* was territory I had prepared a little more for. “I am from a different planet — a planet called Krypton.”

She looked down at my feet and then up to my face. “You *look* like a man. . . .”

Trying to keep myself from flushing, I told her, “My Kryptonian heritage gives me powers no other man or woman or Earth has.”

“Except for the Black Knight,” she pointed out.

I chose not to comment, instead awkwardly deflecting her attention away from my former alter ego. “I have never been able to find anything I can’t lift. I can see, hear, and smell things no human can. . . . I can burn things with my eyes and freeze things with my breath. . . . And no bullet can break my skin.” Unless it was made out of meteor rock — but I wasn’t about to tell her that.

Lois, who had been scribbling furiously, paused to look up. “And you can fly,” she pointed out.

I smiled. “Yes.”

She reviewed her notes. “And you have super speed.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I responded in amusement.

“Do you know your limits? You said there’s nothing you can’t lift — do you know how fast you can go? Or how far you can see?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know of a way to test those things.”

She acknowledged my comment, wrote something down, and then gazed at her list of questions. Then she looked up at me.

“So, why are you here?”

“I just want to help,” I said awkwardly.

She gave me a wry grin. “I’d like a bit better of a quote than that. ‘Give me liberty or give me death!’ or ‘Remember the Alamo!’ You know — something a little more epic.”

I just kind of looked at her. Helping was what I meant to do — I hadn’t thought much beyond that.

“Like maybe if you said you were here to fight for truth and justice and the American way,” she suggested.

“Go ahead — use that. It sounds good.”

She laughed and wrote it down. Then she gave me a somewhat shy glance. “I wonder, Superman, if I could get your picture? Mostly, people have just gotten action photos. I think it would be good to have a full-frontal photo —” she paused and turned bright red before correcting, “— uh, a picture of you posing in front of the camera.” She turned away in embarrassment, and I was glad, as I was blushing myself. She got a camera out of her drawer and began messing with the settings.

My arms were already crossed, but I shifted them slightly and drew myself up to my full height. In creating this new persona, I knew he had to be utterly different from Clark Kent for it to work. By looking somewhat imposing, I would be better able to make Superman a separate identity.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” I responded.

She took a few pictures, and then I cocked my head. “I have to go,” I told her. “Someone’s in trouble.” I had heard a cry for help.

She smiled, lowering her camera. “I guess this is a job for Superman.”

I gave a slight nod and then sped away. The interview, I reflected, could have gone a lot worse.

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## Chapter 20: Just a Boy and His Dog

*Over hills and meadows, we’d stray,*

*Just a boy and his dog.*

— “Old Shep”

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Lois’s exclusive with Superman was wildly popular from the suits down to the copy boys. Perry White was especially ecstatic and kept holding her up to everyone as an example of initiative. But no one was happier about it than Lois herself.

When she approached my desk with an air of expectancy, I was tempted to ignore her. There was this smugness in her bearing that almost made me regret giving her the interview in the first place. But I gritted my teeth and told her, “Congratulations on your story, Lois.”

She smirked. “It *was* good, wasn’t it?” Then her expression took on that of a moony-eyed schoolgirl. “You should have seen him, Clark. There was this innocent nobility about him. . . . Not just anybody could do what he is going to do for us.”

“And what’s that exactly?” I asked her, genuinely interested in her response.

“He’s going to be a guardian of justice. . . . Don’t you remember your article, Clark? You said such a man would be a ‘beacon of hope.’”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re quoting my article?”

She quickly looked down and muttered, “Well, it wasn’t completely bad. . . .”

Though I felt amused, I decided to give her a break. “What makes you so certain he’ll live up to this larger-than-life image of him?”

Lois brought her eyes up to meet mine. “Because he has to.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds. I would have argued more, but I was simply blown away by her absolute trust in the man — in me. She barely knew anything about Superman, but she — and most of Metropolis — was willing to place her trust in him. Lois, the hard-hitting reporter who kept all men at a distance, saw something grand in what Superman was doing.

I didn’t see it as grand. I just saw it as something I had to do. I had been running for so long from everything. It was time to face a few things head-on.

One of the things I would need to face was the need for interviews. Since I had shown my face and answered a few of Lois’s questions, I was going to have to talk to people more often as Superman. The best way to do that would probably be staying

on the scene longer after doing a rescue. Then, I would be able to answer questions and even ask for the advice of authority figures. As more people became accustomed to what I could do, there would probably be a greater need for such outside advice — particularly in the event of a hostage situation. And with rescues, maybe I could simply talk about what had just happened rather than be expected to answer personal questions.

I heard something and turned my head. Jimmy was walking by with a glum look on his face.

“Jimmy — you okay?” I asked him.

He paused and looked at me. “Not really. The Chief’s upset I haven’t been getting pictures of Superman. But the guy’s so fast and never stays for long — how do you make it onto the scene in time?”

A yell from the Editor-in-Chief’s office had him scrambling. But there was just a certain something missing from his step — he was really getting eaten up by his inability to impress Perry White. Theirs was very much a father/son relationship — but I wasn’t sure if they both realized it.

As I was lost in such thoughts, Cat approached my desk. “Poor kid,” she commented.

“Yeah. He deserves a break.” I frowned as an idea hit me. I knew just the thing to help him out.

Cat took a few steps away from me and toward Lois. “So, Lois, did you get a chance to feel the muscles beneath that suit?” she asked with a knowing grin.

I wasn’t sure who was more flabbergasted, Lois or me. As it was, she was the only one who managed a reply: “What?”

Cat tilted her head. “Come on, Lois, you can’t tell me even *you* didn’t notice how built the man was.... Do you think the suit comes off?”

I turned my head away from them so they couldn’t see how red I was. I did *not* need to hear this.

Lois evidently got more of her voice back, as she was able to spit, “Whether it does or not is none of your business! The man has principles, and he is *not* going to let you use him as your next scratching post!”

“Aww, does Lois have a crush?” Cat sniggered. She turned toward me, aware I was listening. In my ear, she whispered, “Sorry, handsome, but it seems you have some competition.”

I just waved a dismissive hand over my shoulder at her, not able to form a response.

Lois, however, had no such problem. “Isn’t there a rat somewhere you should be chasing?”

“Now that you mention it, I do have a date with a councilman.... He’s handsome, charming, and a great kisser.... Not that you would know how to judge that, Lois.”

As I turned to look at Cat, she blew me a kiss and then strutted off.

“She has a lot of nerve,” Lois muttered. “She thinks that just because some people don’t have a ‘flavor of the week,’ their lives are meaningless.”

“Maybe she’s trying to cover up the emptiness of her own life,” I pointed out.

“You don’t have to sympathize with her. For whatever reason, men just fall at her feet. She doesn’t know what it’s like to sleep alone.”

I shrugged. “I think she just likes to get under your skin.”

“Well, I just wish she wasn’t so good at it,” Lois proclaimed, throwing a pen onto her desk.

I hid a smile.

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After work, I called my parents and told them about my interview with Lois. I hadn’t called them the night of the interview because I was feeling bad about phoning them at all hours of the night. But at this more pleasant hour, they seemed happy to hear from me.

“Truth, justice, and the American way, huh? Sounds like this Lois is pretty smart,” Mom commented.

I laughed. “Well, those three things aren’t exactly my goal, but I guess they’ll fall in line with what I’m doing. Rooting out the truth about criminals, handing them over to the justice system, and protecting innocent American bystanders....”

“I’m glad you’ve made so much progress, Clark. You know, I think Lois has been closely tied to all this. She’s really been a big influence on you.”

I looked down at my hands uncomfortably. “Yeah.”

Perhaps Mom sensed my unease, for she steered the topic away from Lois. “And just think — now you’ll have a canine companion to help you out. Jericho is ready for you to pick him up, and dinner is almost ready to be eaten.”

Dad laughed. “You’re not *invited* to dinner, son — you’re *commanded* to come.”

With a grin to myself, I conceded, “Fine. I’ve already made some of the dye and the dye remover for Jericho — so I guess I’m ready for him. And I haven’t eaten yet, so I suppose there’s nothing stopping me from that as well.”

“We’ll see you in a few minutes, then,” Mom said. I could hear the amusement in her voice. If I hadn’t wanted to eat with them, she wouldn’t have made me — but I did want to make her happy, so I wouldn’t refuse. Besides, there wasn’t anything that could beat Martha Kent’s home cooking.

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As we ate dinner, Jericho sat at our feet and looked up pitifully. Occasionally, he made an entreating whine/growl noise.

Finally, I couldn’t stand it any longer. “All right. Who’s been feeding him at the table?”

Mom and Dad exchanged glances. I stared at them before Dad finally broke down. “I’m sorry, son — he just looked so, well, pathetic.... I gave him a few scraps of bacon at breakfast one day, and it just went downhill from there.”

Jericho made the noise again, and I laughed. “You’ve created a monster.”

Using my x-ray vision, I saw Jericho pawing Dad’s leg. I also saw Dad pinching off some of his roll and slipping it to him.

Rolling my eyes, I asked Mom, “You couldn’t teach him not to beg at the table?”

She shrugged. “I was working on commands that would save people’s lives, not their food.”

Chuckling, I returned my attention to my plate.

We all finished eating around the same time, and I rose to my feet. “I wish I could stay longer, but I should really be putting in more of an appearance as Superman.”

My parents stood, and Mom gestured for me to follow her to the couch. Jericho and Dad were right behind us.

Mom picked up several pieces of paper off the coffee table and handed them to me. “Here. This is a list of the commands he knows along with descriptions of them. The command words I taught him were ones that wouldn’t all be completely obvious to a criminal. Hopefully, he won’t be minding criminals, but you can’t be too safe.”

I smiled. “Smart!”

“Thank you,” she returned, pleased. “I taught him both hand and spoken signals. I figured sometimes the visibility might be bad — and sometimes you might be in an environment where it’s hard for him to hear.”

“Sounds like you prepared for every eventuality,” I commented.

“Maybe not *everything*, but it’s not from lack of trying,” Dad grunted. “I must have needed ‘saving’ in thirty different situations at least.” Mom swatted his arm, and he smiled at her.

I looked at her. “Mom?”

She shrugged. “Well, we had to get him used to fire and water and heights.”

I frowned. “She didn’t put you in any real danger, did she, Dad?”

“If she did, I wouldn’t admit it,” he said with a chuckle. “Let’s just say that dog of yours is quite the superdog.”

“Which reminds me,” Mom inserted. “You need to think up a new name for *his* other persona.”

“What about Superdog?” Dad suggested.

I tilted my head back and forth indecisively. “Eh, I’m not sure...”

“Have you had any ideas?” asked Mom.

“Well, I was thinking of having Clark Kent write an article about Superman — and maybe he could name him. I was thinking ‘Krypto’ might be a good choice.” I knelt next to the dog and scratched underneath his chin. He panted contentedly. “Do you like ‘Krypto,’ boy?” At his happy bark, I laughed. “What do you two think?”

“I think ‘Krypto’ is fine,” Mom told me. She embraced me tightly. On impulse, I placed a kiss on her hair. My policy against touch really had been unnecessary. It had made things so much harder for me — but it had at least made me realize that one of the finer things of life was physical expressions of love from family. A simple hug meant the world.

In a quiet voice, as if sensing my contemplative mood, Mom told me, her arms still around me, “Read over those pages when you get home and take him out with you. I promise you — he’s going to enjoy it.”

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If there was one thing Jericho enjoyed, it was flying. Well — being held in my arms while I was flying. Whenever we took to the air, he looked over my arm without fear, his eyes eagerly taking in the sights and his nose the smells. His ears were pulled back slightly due to the wind, but I could tell he was straining to hear things as well.

We landed on my balcony, and I set him down. He began running around in a weird joyful romp, and I just shook my head. I quickly scanned the pages of commands Mom had given me and smiled. Some of the words she had chosen for her commands had been rather creative.

I retrieved the jar of spot-remover and a moistened towel and got on my knees. “Here, boy,” I called.

The dog came to me with his curled tail wagging.

“Good boy,” I told him, petting him briefly. I took the lid off the spot-remover and allowed him to smell it. Then I put some of the goop on my hands with a wince and used my other arm to hold him still. I began rubbing the formula into his black spots, and he struggled to get free. But though he was strong, I was stronger, and I held him in place and admonished, “Bad dog.” With a whimper, he stopped struggling, and he let me finish rubbing the dye-remover into his ears. I brought up the towel and scrubbed at his ears, getting out the last remnants of dye. Then I grabbed his backside and began working on his tail. He tried again to get free, but I said his name sternly, and he let me finish what I was doing. When I was finally done, I let him go, and he began running around the apartment like his tail was on fire.

Rolling my eyes, I threw the towel in a dirty clothes hamper and put away the spot-remover. After I washed my hands, I found his new yellow collar. “Krypto, pause.”

The dog, who had been running around in canine ecstasy, halted in his tracks. The phrase “stop on a dime” came to mind.

I walked over to him and crouched. I touched the tag on his black collar briefly with a smile before removing the entire collar and replacing it with the new yellow one. I surveyed him briefly. He looked different enough that this just might work. “You ready to go saving?” I asked him.

I took his wagging tail to mean “yes.”

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We flew over the streets of Metropolis finding people in

need. Jericho — Krypto — was surprisingly helpful. Mom had done well with him. I was already thinking about how my life would have to change to include the dog in rescues. I decided I would take the black dye off the dog in the morning after walking him so I could quickly pick him up to help with a rescue if I needed him. I would put it back on him at home if I intended to walk him or I expected guests. I would just need to make sure my door was always locked — if an unexpected guest came, then I could put the dye on Jericho quickly enough that no one would be the wiser.

After using Jericho in some different situations, I decided I would use him principally in fires, robberies, and occasional hostage situations. Throughout the night, we did a lot of rescuing. A few times, I took him home, changed, and then went and talked to some witnesses for quotes. I planned to have a good solid article on Superman — I didn’t want Perry White thinking I couldn’t pull my weight.

I only got a few hours of sleep that night, but I was happy with how things were going, so it didn’t bother me. When rush hour traffic began, there was a big wreck but no one hurt, and I realized it was the perfect opportunity to set the plan I had formulated earlier in motion. I was going to call Jimmy, who didn’t live that far away.

I phoned him with a disguised voice and gave him an anonymous tip about the accident. If he hurried, I told him, he would be able to get a picture of Superman and his canine partner. Though his voice was heavy with sleep, he seemed eager enough.

In truth, Superman didn’t need Krypto’s help at the scene. But it was a good way to get the dog some publicity — and some pictures for Jimmy Olsen.

I dealt with the damaged cars and helped the grateful policemen redirect traffic. Krypto sat where instructed and watched the moving cars with interest. I could soon hear the constant clicking of a camera, and a visual confirmed my suspicion: Jimmy Olsen, though sleep rumpled, was at the scene and taking pictures.

When things were getting back to normal, he nervously asked if I would pose with my dog. I agreed, and we took a few different pictures of me and Krypto. Then, I told him I needed to leave, and Krypto and I disappeared in a blur.

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## Chapter 21: How Can You Lose What You Never Had?

*‘How can you lose what you never had?’*

*I tell myself when I’m feeling sad.*

— “How Can You Lose What You Never Had?”

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In the morning, I went to the Planet earlier than usual, my notes and quotes from my rescues nestled in my briefcase. Jimmy soon found me. He was all excitement.

“C.K.! You will never believe this. Superman has a superdog!”

I smiled at him. “I know — I got a tip from a source, and I talked to some witnesses about some of the rescues they’ve done in the past twelve hours or so. I was never able to make it on the scene in time to see them, though.”

“Well, then I have a perfect picture to go with your story!” he exclaimed, taking me to his desk. Several different pictures were scattered all over it. “The Chief loves them. Maybe one of these can go with your piece.”

“I bet it’ll be perfect, Jimmy,” I told him with a grin. After hesitating, I gave him a congenial pat on the shoulder. His smile just grew wider, and I found myself glad I had made the physical contact. It was hard to become accustomed to touching people again, but I was hoping it would get easier.

I went back to my desk and wrote up the piece. By the time Lois arrived, I had already submitted the story — and the name

“Krypto” for the dog.

Before long, the Chief Editor approached my desk with the story in hand. “Great stuff, Clark!”

“What’s great?” Lois ventured with a frown.

“There’s a new superhero in town,” Perry White told her.

“Only this one’s a dog.”

“What?” she gaped. She was obviously surprised that she hadn’t heard anything about it.

He shook my story at her. “You’ll be able to read about it in the *Planet*. Clark, here, went out and covered some Superman rescues, and Jimmy got us some great pictures for the front page.”

As the Editor-in-Chief left, Lois turned to me in anger, and I steeled myself. She was obviously unhappy.

“You covered Superman?” she demanded.

I crossed my arms and sat back in my chair. “You don’t own him.”

“He’s *my* story — you know, story mine?”

I blinked at her in disbelief. “You can’t really think you’re the only reporter allowed to cover him?”

“But I had the first one-on-one interview with him!”

“The first — but not the only,” I pointed out, shaking my head. “He’s going to talk to people other than you.”

She muttered something unintelligible, banging at her keyboard like a five year-old. The rest of that day, she was a pain to be around.

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Lois became more pleasant the next day. She was able to write a story about a save made by Superman and Krypto, and it improved her demeanor greatly. One thing of interest she noted in the article was that humane societies were having a run on white — or mostly white — dogs. I wasn’t sure whether to be glad about or wary of that news — it was great that people were adopting dogs, but pet ownership was not something that should just be rushed into... particularly in a big city.

At some point that day, I started staring at Lois without quite knowing why. She had a smile tugging at the corners of her eyes and lips as she typed something on her computer screen. A hand reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear, and then she crossed her legs, the action inching her skirt up a little higher and revealing a little more of her long legs. I started to trace the curves of those legs with my eyes but then caught myself and flushed. As I brought my gaze up, Lois glanced at me.

“Do you want to come to my place for dinner and a movie?” I blurted.

I immediately knew my impromptu request was a bad idea — especially since I had just been admiring the shapeliness of her anatomy — but I couldn’t retract it without arousing suspicion. And unfortunately for me, Lois was actually considering my question.

“What movie?” she asked at last.

“*Lethal Weapon 2*?” I suggested. A Mel Gibson movie seemed to be a safe enough choice. An action movie wasn’t too dangerous, was it? Even if she had a habit of nearly falling asleep during movies ...

She gave me a small smile. “I guess that would be good. I’m getting tired of operas and ballets. Sometimes the arts just can’t beat an action flick.... I guess Lex doesn’t really understand that.”

I averted my eyes from her, uneasy about her reference to Lex Luthor. It seemed she was spending more and more time with the suave billionaire. I was glad she was involved in something other than work and Tae Kwon Do lessons — but I wished Lex Luthor hadn’t been the one she was getting so close to. Why the man repulsed me so much, I didn’t know. He was just an acquaintance... not an enemy.

So, instead of saying something derogatory about Luthor —

which my heart was begging for me to do — I just smiled gently and told her, “Well, this farmboy understands.”

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I was a bit nervous about our get-together — it wasn’t a date (she was involved with Luthor, after all, and I wouldn’t have called it a “date” even if she hadn’t been) — and not just because Lois was coming over. It would be the first time she had been to my apartment when Jericho was there.... And it would be a test of his identity.

She would probably be annoyed I had gotten a dog and not told her. She would be even more annoyed — and justifiably so — if she realized he was connected with the Sallya Technologies story and I simply hadn’t told her about him.

As I cooked our meal — spaghetti and meatballs, garlic bread, green beans, salad, and chocolate pie — I prepared what I would say to her. I would tell her Jericho had belonged to my parents and I had fallen in love with him — but I hadn’t been able to take him home until I found my apartment. Then, I had to wait for him to be brought by a friend of my parents who was coming to Metropolis to visit some family.... At least, that was the story I was going to give her.

She knocked on my door a few minutes earlier than I had expected, and I hunted for a pot holder in a panic. After finding one and setting it on the counter, I jogged to the door, a barking Jericho at my heels. “Quiet,” I told him sternly, and he shut up.

I opened the door to Lois, prepared with a smile. But she was wearing a pair of jeans and a lacey white blouse, and I faltered. Unlike her business suits for the *Planet*, the outfit she was wearing did nothing to hide her curves.... But it also didn’t scream “pull me into a passionate embrace right now,” so I shut my jaw and gestured her forward.

Jericho was prepared to greet her, and he jumped up gently onto her legs, standing there and craning his neck upward, his tail wagging. She smiled down at him and scratched his head. “I wasn’t aware you had a dog, Clark.” There was almost a questioning tone in her voice.

I readied myself to give her my spiel, but she kept speaking.

“Of course, I’m not surprised you’ve joined in the white dog craze that has swept half this city,” she commented, scratching one of Jericho’s black ears. “What’s his name?”

“Ah, Jericho,” I told her, feeling a little taken aback.

Evidently, I didn’t even need to explain myself. So why did I feel guilty?

She walked further inside, the dog eagerly following her. I knelt on the ground and called him over. “Jericho,” I said firmly, “this is Lois.” I pointed toward her, and he turned to look at her. “Lois,” I repeated softly.

Lois wasn’t paying any attention to me — she was investigating the aromas coming from the kitchen. “Smells great, farmboy.”

Giving Jericho a pat, I stood. “Thanks. It’ll be just a few minutes.”

The dog scurried over to Lois and sat at her feet, looking up at her with pleading eyes. She scratched his ears briefly.

“Looks like he really likes you,” I told her as I started tending to the food.

“I’m not surprised — I *am* pretty likeable,” she jested.

I laughed. “If that’s what you would call it.”

She hit my shoulder. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I brought a hand up to rub where she had hit me. Though it hadn’t hurt, there was a strange tingling sensation there. But a part of me really enjoyed such casual contact with Lois — I was glad she had so easily made the transition into occasionally touching me.

In reply to Lois, I said in a snarky voice, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.” I threw a grin at her over my shoulder to ameliorate my comment and noted her glare. “Go ahead and sit

down. I'll bring the food out."

She obliged, pulling out a chair and sitting in it. Watching me move around in the kitchen, she remarked, "You didn't have to cook, you know... You could have just bought something and slapped it on a plate."

"It's no big deal. Cooking's easy."

Lois snorted. "It is if you aren't the kind of person who burns water. I can handle popcorn, hot dogs, macaroni and cheese... and not much else."

I turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "Surely, it's not that bad."

"Oh, but it is," she muttered. "Whatever else I make comes out charred at best... unrecognizable at worst."

"Well, this isn't anything special, but I do like to cook from time to time," I told her as I set food on the table. Suddenly, I realized pasta was frequently associated with romance, and I nearly panicked. My thoughts turned to Luthor — the man she was dating — and I told her, "I'm sure this isn't anything compared to Luthor's private cooks." I had meant it to sound casual, but a slight note of bitterness made its way into my tone.

Fortunately, Lois appeared not to have picked it up. "Their food can be too rich sometimes. It can be nice to just have something a little more down to earth... Of course, that doesn't apply to desserts." She grinned. "Desserts have to be heavenly."

Laughing to cover my unease, I said, "Well, I hope my dessert lives up to your high standards."

"It'd better," she agreed, picking up a fork and pointing it at me, "or else I won't let you cook for me again."

"I'll remember that," I acknowledged wryly as I sat. "Now, let's eat."

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My dessert *did* live up to her standards, it turned out. In fact, we both managed to finish off half the chocolate pie before we realized how much we'd eaten. Then, amid our laughter and a few comments from Lois about how her stomach would soon be blowing up like a balloon, we sat on the couch and popped in *Lethal Weapon 2*. Jericho promptly got up on the sofa on the other side of Lois and sat his chin on her legs. She smiled and gently scratched his ears.

When Lois's head found my shoulder less than halfway through the movie, my heart pounded, though it did so in a different way than it had during the first *Lethal Weapon* movie. The great fear I had felt last time had dwindled down to a vague uncertainty. I was immensely conscious of her closeness as a woman, and that put a different sort of fear in my heart. She was warm and soft, and I wanted so desperately to put my arm around her. But I knew it was best that I didn't, so I just allowed myself to smile down at her as she watched the movie. It felt so right for her head to be there. It was strange how now I didn't want her to ever move, yet not long before I had wanted to bolt from the room at the prospect of touching another person.

Lois Lane did something to me. She somehow managed to fill me with confidence and uncertainty and aggressiveness and passiveness all at once. She was an enigma. She made me see my life through a kaleidoscope of colors rather than the glowing green hue that had dominated my perception for so long. She burned brightly like fire — struck passionately like lightning — touched everything like rain. She had become my best friend at a time in my life where I hadn't truly believed I could have a real friend.

But at last she shifted and looked up at me — and then she realized what she was doing and suddenly pulled away. "Oh, Clark, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking about —"

"It's fine," I told her quickly, already feeling the loss of her closeness. "I can tolerate touch now, remember? I'm... getting therapy." My "therapy" might have been rescuing people from the jaws of death, but it was a form of therapy nonetheless.

Lois returned to watching the movie, but I felt as if something crucial was missing until she moved her head back and linked her arms around my right arm. As I stared down at her brown hair, I reflected on how Lois seemed to be a very tactile person. Even before I had decided to become Superman, Lois had tried to touch me a lot. Sometimes, she had caught herself and apologized; other times, she didn't even notice. And sometimes, she had touched me, removed her hand, and then given me an annoyed look as if my phobia was a terrible inconvenience for her. I had never known quite how to respond, as her touch had conjured up so many different emotions in me — part of me had wanted to recoil, but the other part had wanted to simply enjoy the brief connection to her. Now, however, in this moment, I would allow myself the pleasure of her touch with no regrets... If only for one night.

To allow myself that pleasure more than once would be dangerous. She was dating Lex Luthor — and I would need to support her if they became more serious. I couldn't be having daydreams about something I could never let happen.

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### Chapter 22: I've Been Hurt Before ... Never Ever Quite Like This Time

*I can't take it anymore — I've been hurt before.*

*Never ever quite like this time.*

— "Never Again"

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The next day, I went home from work in a good mood. Lois had been pleasant, the Chief had complimented Jimmy, Cat hadn't gotten out her claws, and Superman hadn't been needed to perform any dire rescues. I dyed Jericho and took him on a fifteen minute walk. Then I sat down to read *Phineas Finn*. I wasn't a great fan of Trollope, but something about his books appealed to me — when they were experienced in moderation — and I liked to read a variety of works. I was speed reading through much of it — pausing occasionally to reflect on a passage — only to put the novel aside when I heard an insistent knocking.

Jericho barked twice and then growled as he ran to the door.

"Retreat," I told him, evoking what was basically the "back up" command Mom had taught him. Obediently, he backed up, but he still continued to growl.

I opened the door to find seven men. They were all obviously armed except for the brown-haired man in front who shoved a piece of paper at me. "I have a warrant issued by federal court to search your apartment, Clark Kent," he said curtly, pushing me past me and gesturing his people inside.

Five of the men shoved past me and spread out to survey my apartment. I reflected to myself that it was fortunate I had installed that secret compartment for my suits, but I was furious they were just bursting in here like this. What was going on?

I glanced at the red-haired man who stood behind the warrant holder. His gun was trained on me, and his finger was hovering over the trigger. I could tell he was just itching for a reason to use it.

I returned my eyes to the man in charge, trying to rein in my anger. "Who are you, and what do you want?" I demanded. "And why do you have those guns?"

"We're with the government," the brown-haired man told me. "Now, it's time for us to ask the questions. What's the connection between you, the alien Superman, and the Smallville meteor shower of 1966?... I know you were involved in the Sallya Technologies story. Was the alien's dog part of that project, or is his dog an alien, too?"

Jericho snarled, his teeth gleaming white with saliva, and he poised to leap at the man. Though it was tempting to let him teach this man a lesson, I didn't want Jericho's secret identity to be obvious, and I said sharply, "Nyet!"

The dog put his ears back and sat, whimpering. Still, he kept his eyes focused on the man he saw as a threat to me.

“Why does your dog know Russian?” the government man asked suspiciously.

Exasperated, I told him, “He doesn’t know Russian. My mom just thought it would be cute to teach him ‘nyet’ instead of ‘no.’ Let me see that warrant.”

“We’re giving the orders here, Kent,” the man said in a low voice, sounding unhinged.

Irritated, I took a step toward him. “Look, I don’t know what you’re — ”

A bullet cracked through the air. Pain stabbed through my shoulder. Jericho prepared to leap.

Falling to my knees, I cried out, “Nyet!”

Jericho stilled, but his growl was almost as biting as his teeth would have been.

The leader cursed under his breath and grabbed the red-haired man by the collar. “You idiot! We only have a limited supply of those bullets. They’re meant for the alien — and as you can see, he *isn’t* here.”

The excruciating pain threatened to overwhelm me, but I tried nonetheless to hide the fact that I was struggling to breathe, lest he realize the alien he had mentioned *was* there. Though I had been exposed to the meteor rock many times, I had never actually had a piece of it inside me. As I placed one hand on the ground and the other on my shoulder, I looked up at the brown-haired man.

“Pull out,” he told his subordinates with a sharp gesture. “He’s still alive — the bullet just went into his shoulder. But someone might have heard that shot, and we don’t want anyone tying this to us.” He turned his head to stare at the red-haired man. “We’ll discuss your trigger happiness later.”

As the last of the men filed outside, their leader looked down at me. “We’ll see you before too long, Kent.”

And then he was gone, the door shutting behind him.

I let out a low moan, and Jericho came over to me and put his nose in my face. I gave him a light pat on the snout and then tried to dig out the bullet in my shoulder with my fingers. But it was just no use. It hurt too much, and I couldn’t get a good grip. It had gone too far in.

As the man had mentioned, it was possible someone had heard the gunshot, but this was Metropolis, and I didn’t know if my neighbors would try to help me or try to protect their own skins.... And for that matter, I didn’t *want* anyone calling the police. There was too much to explain — and I didn’t have many answers.

In desperation, I pointed to my cordless phone and told Jericho, “Retrieve.” Mom had chosen that word instead of “fetch.”

He looked where I was pointing and then back at me, so I repeated myself. He trotted to the table and stood on his hind legs to put his teeth around the phone. I allowed myself to sink onto my back, wincing at the movement.

As the dog brought me the phone, my mind flashed to Lois. Could I ask her to come get the bullet out? I knew I couldn’t get the police involved — they would want to take the bullet in for evidence, not even realizing what exactly they had.

But would Lois be any better? If she saw a glowing green bullet, she would want it tested, too. And if I told her we couldn’t, then she would demand to know why. Not to mention she would probably try to force me to go to the hospital.

But Perry White...he knew how to keep a secret. And if one of his reporters told him not to ask for more information, he generally abided by that. Of course, he was shrewd enough he might be able to glean more about my situation than I wanted him to, but I didn’t have time to hesitate any longer. The bullet had to come out, or I would die....

A great part of me still wanted to call Lois, but I didn’t want her to see me like this. That thought decided me.

I dialed the Chief Editor’s office number, knowing if he had already gone home he probably wouldn’t make it to my side in time. Fortunately, he picked up.

“Perry White.”

“Chief?” I gasped out. “This is Clark.... I need you...to... come to my apartment.”

“Son, are you all right?”

“Now, please,” I managed with a groan, dropping the phone to the floor without ending the call. I didn’t want to breathe. It hurt to move my chest.

I tried to put my mind on something other than the pain. I thought about how my initial instinct was to call Lois. Calling Perry White had been the smart thing to do — but why had the desire to call Lois been so strong?

It hadn’t taken her long to become important to me. But it wasn’t just that she was important to me — it was also that she had started to make my life feel worth living.

I looked forward to seeing her every day. I wanted to laugh with her, joke with her, bicker with her. I wanted to protect her from all the evil of the world.... But what was more, I wanted her to protect me, too.

The thought of me needing protection from anything was strange in itself. But without even knowing it, Lois had been helping me heal those wounds from Africa. She was the one who was slowly drawing me back into society — maybe it was only natural that I turned to her. I felt safe with her...and I couldn’t say that about many other people.

But, I cautioned myself firmly, I had to fight against the urge to use her as my pillar of strength. I couldn’t allow myself to hide behind her. If I did, I would surely hurt her.

I groaned as the pain grew so great that I lost the ability to think coherently. I curled up in a ball, wishing I didn’t need oxygen. The fingers of my left hand reached into my shirt and grasped at my locket. I tried to picture the face of my grandmother, but all I could conjure up was haze....

Jericho licked my hand. My fingers curled. The pain in my chest was spreading. *Mom. Dad. Should’ve called them.*

My vision tunneled, and there was darkness. Not light.

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“Clark? Clark?” a voice called to me in the darkness.

“Mmm?” My mouth wasn’t working right.

“Clark, what’s wrong?”

“Mmmbull’t,” I managed. “G’out. Gidout.”

“Great Shades of Elvis, son! You should’ve called 911 — not an old codger like me. Listen, son, I’ll stop the blood from flowing, but I’m going to call an ambulance first.”

“No. Please. Poison. It’s pois’nous.... Gotta gidout.”

“Son — ”

“Poison,” I told him again weakly.

There were more noises. Not voices. Sound.

Pain flared in my shoulder. Then there was relief.

I allowed myself to breathe for a few seconds, and then I opened my eyes. Perry White was kneeling over me with the green bullet in one hand and a bloody knife in the other. Jericho was beside him looking concerned.

“There’s a white box on the counter,” I rasped. “Put the bullet in it.” I let out a low moan but kept my eyes trained on him.

He stood and did as I said, placing the bullet in the box and then closing it. He grabbed a washrag and returned to me. I tried to sit up, but he told me, “Just stay there for a minute, son.” He pressed the washcloth against my wound to prevent me from bleeding out. I was thankful he was hiding the wound from his sight. My blood would probably stop flowing soon (if it hadn’t already) since I was no longer being exposed to the meteor rock. The rag would prevent him from seeing my healed or healing

skin.

“We need to get you to a hospital,” he noted as he reached for the phone I had dropped.

“No!” I said sharply. “No.”

He sighed. “Well, at least let’s move you from the floor to the couch.”

I draped my arm across his shoulders with his help, and I used my other arm to hold the washcloth against my shoulder. It was a slow process, but we finally succeeded in transferring me from the floor to the couch.

“What in the Sam Hill do you eat, Clark?” he wheezed.

“You’re a whole lot heavier than you look.”

I gave him a weak smile and pressed the washcloth back up against my shoulder. “Thank you.”

“You need to go to the hospital, Clark,” he said in a quiet tone. I could tell he was hoping I would be more rational. But he didn’t know what was at stake.

“Please just trust me,” I pleaded softly. I was weak, but I would live. He had reached me in time.

He gave me a hard look. “You mixed up in something, son?”

I averted my eyes. I didn’t want to lie to him — he *had* just saved my life. I answered vaguely, “You could say that, Chief... Perry.” That was the first time I had called him by his first name. I looked up at him to see those discerning eyes staring at me. I had to give him *something*. “This...crazed lunatic came with some men and started searching my apartment. He had what he said was a federal warrant, but I don’t know if it was real or not. One of his men got a little trigger happy and shot me before I managed to get a look at it.”

Perry frowned. “We should investigate this....”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t have any leads. I just know the man in charge said he’d be back.”

“Can you give a description of what he looked like?”

I resisted the urge to shrug in case my wound hadn’t healed yet. “All I can tell you is that he had brown hair.” In truth, I could probably draw a picture of the man, but I didn’t need Perry digging into this any further.

The Chief Editor crossed his arms. “You may not want to get the police involved in this, but maybe we should get you a bodyguard — or maybe you should stay somewhere else temporarily. What if they come back?”

Though I felt bad about it, I faked a wince to distract him.

He looked worried. “Clark, if you’re not going to go the hospital, you should at least try to get some rest. Now, do you think you can make it to the bed with my help?”

“I think the bleeding has stopped,” I told him, though I still didn’t remove the washcloth. “I should be able to make it on my own.... Perry — thank you for helping me. You saved my life.”

“You can always count on this ol’ newspaper hound,” he said gruffly. “After we get you to bed, I’m going to call Alice. She won’t mind me sleeping over here for one night to take care of you.”

“No, Chief, I’m fine,” I insisted uncomfortably. “After all, I have Jericho.” I gestured to the dog. I wasn’t sure if I had ever told Perry about him.

He gave Jericho a “uh huh” kind of look and then told me, “Nevertheless, son, I’d like to stay here, if only for my peace of mind. I’ll sleep on the couch. Just give me some blankets and a pillow, and I’ll be good.”

I shook my head. “I think I’d prefer to stay here on the couch. Why don’t you take the bed?” I didn’t want to be the reason the Chief Editor had a stiff neck in the morning.

“No, I insist. Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had to sleep on the couch recently,” he jested. “Alice and I haven’t exactly, uh, been gettin’ along lately.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Chief....”

“Aww, well, you know how it is. Now, let’s get you into

bed.”

\*\*\*

When I woke up in the morning, sun was streaming down on my bare chest from between the blinds. I had opened the blinds after Perry had gone to sleep on the couch, knowing the sun would help revive me. Still, it would take a lot more sun exposure before I would be feeling “super.”

The smell of bacon and eggs caused me to sit up. Evidently, Perry was busy in the kitchen. The delicious scents wafting toward me made me want to investigate their source further. But I knew there was a chance Perry would want to have a serious discussion if I did. I had the feeling he had held off from such a talk the night before only to enable me to regain a little of my lucidity.

“Now or never,” I mumbled to myself. I grabbed a shirt and was about to pull it over my head when I thought of something. My shoulder was completely healed, and I didn’t want any awkward questions about it. Considering the matter a little more, I taped a few cottonballs to my shoulder. They made a small lump that looked like a bandage. If I was lucky, it would be enough to fool the *Planet’s* Editor-in-Chief. If he insisted on seeing the wound, I could use the excuse that I didn’t like touch. Hopefully, this would work.

After putting on my shirt, I padded into the kitchen on bare feet. Perry was placing the last of the bacon onto the second of two food-covered plates. It seemed he believed in a hearty breakfast. Jericho was at his feet, staring hopefully upward. I wondered if Perry had slipped him a few bites of bacon.

“You didn’t have to cook,” I told him quietly.

He turned around with a smile. “Wanted to. There’s nothing like the smell of eggs and bacon in the morning.”

I laughed. “That’s true.”

Perry handed me my plate, and we went and sat at the table. Jericho whimpered pitifully as he sat at our feet.

“I wasn’t aware you had a dog,” Perry commented.

I smiled down at Jericho. “Yeah — I haven’t had him for long. But he makes a good companion.” I turned my attention downward to my plate. “Do you cook breakfast for Alice like this?” I asked as I brought up a forkful of egg to my mouth.

His face sobered. “No. We don’t get up at the same time — the Chief Editor for a major newspaper has to rise with the roosters. Shoot, I can’t remember the last time I made her breakfast....”

“It must be hard not seeing her much,” I remarked quietly.

Perry nodded, but we didn’t say anything else until we were done eating.

“Why don’t we take a look at that shoulder of yours?” he suggested, inclining his head toward the place I had been shot.

“It’s doing fine thanks to you,” I said in an attempt at smoothness. “You should probably go home and get ready for work.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, and I held my breath, readying my excuse for why he shouldn’t look at my shoulder.

But then he dipped his chin and admitted in a reluctant tone, “Guess you’re right, Clark. But I’d better not see you at the Planet.”

“Chief, I can come in — ”

He pointed a finger at me. “Don’t come to the Planet today, Clark. That’s an order.”

I sighed. “All right.” At least it would give me time to soak up some sun.

Jericho let out another pathetic whimper, and in exasperation I gave him a small bit of egg from my plate. He ate it greedily.

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Jericho and I did a lot of sunbathing that day. I had to go out a few times to take him on walks, but I could feel my strength returning, and it heartened me. As dinnertime approached, I

called my parents and told them what happened — which wasn't a pleasant conversation, especially considering that I didn't really have any answers to my questions, let alone theirs — and then I hung up. Jericho was sitting by his food bowl, looking up at me with his pleading dark brown eyes.

"You hungry, boy?"

He wagged his tail and nudged the bowl with his nose.

Chuckling, I poured him some food. "There. You happy?"

The only noise I got in return was the crunching of food.

"Guess so," I mumbled. "Now, I just need to find something to eat myself."

I was walking to the refrigerator when a knock caused me to pause. I jogged to the door and opened it. "Perry!" I said, surprised. I hadn't expected to see him again.

"Lois was going to come bring you dinner, but I told her I'd do it. I figured you'd need a warning ahead of time that she wasn't feeling well, but you know Lois. She'll want some specifics."

"Thanks," I told him warmly. "Come on in." It seemed as if everyone wanted to feed me whenever I got sick. I thought that had ended when I left my parents' house, but evidently, I was wrong.

He put the bag of food on the table. "I can't stay long — I still have a few things at the Planet that I need to do — but I did want to talk to you for a minute." He took a seat, and I sat in a chair across from him. Here, then, was the conversation I had dreaded.

"Now, I couldn't help but notice that the bullet which was so... well, *poisonous* to you seemed to have no effect on me," he began casually.

One of my hands tightened into a fist. I was terrified about where this was going. Why had I thought it was a good idea to ask the newshound to help me out? If anyone had a nose for news, he did.

"Of course, there's probably a reason for that. You weren't really yourself — being shot does that to a man — and a man can say funny things sometimes. Why, I remember one time I stepped on a nail and started spewing all sorts of crazy things to Alice..." He laughed at the memory and slapped his knee. "I believe the phrase 'son of a moose muffin muncher' came out. She liked to never let me live that one down."

His Southernism — "liked to" — was almost enough to make me smile, but I quickly remembered how I was in a situation that was teetering on the edge of disaster. I needed to know what he knew and what he was going to do. So I said nothing.

"Now, while I may not know things officially," he noted, returning back to his former subject, "that doesn't mean I don't know certain things unofficially. Sometimes, a newspaper man like me just sees that certain pieces fit together and form a bigger picture."

If he hadn't known my secret when he asked me to write that plea to the Black Knight, he *had* to know now. To say I was nervous would be to say a porcupine was unpleasant to touch. It was a good thing that I didn't have my powers at that moment — if I had, the edge of the seat I was gripping would have splintered into pieces.

"But knowing that bigger picture and doing something about it are two different things," he continued. "The most obvious action isn't always the smartest one... And a man of my position doesn't stay a man of my position if he doesn't stop to think before he acts."

I could tell he wanted some sort of acknowledgment, but I still wasn't sure what action he was going to take, so I remained quiet and stared down at the table grimly.

"But even if I only know something unofficially, that doesn't mean someone couldn't come to me again in a time of need — even if it leads to me knowing something officially. You, uh,

understand, son?"

"I... think so?" I managed. It seemed to me as if he were telling me — in a roundabout way — that my secret was safe... and that I could come to him if I ever needed anything. An intense sense of relief washed over me. "Th-thank you, sir."

He slapped me on the shoulder. "It's 'Perry,' son. Now, enjoy your dinner." He turned to leave and was almost at the door when I called to him.

"Perry?"

The Chief Editor looked at me. "Yes?"

"Could you... take that box and bullet and keep them safe for me?" I asked. Hesitantly, I added, "And use it if you ever need to."

He frowned. "Clark —"

"Please."

He stared at me for a few seconds before nodding. "All right." He grabbed the box and went out the door with it. "I'll see you tomorrow, Clark," he told me before shutting the door.

I was glad the bullet wasn't in my apartment anymore... And I was glad there was one person in Metropolis whom I could trust to use the meteor rock to take Superman down should the need ever arise. But hopefully that would never happen.

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### Chapter 23: Carnival Time

*Popcorn, peanuts, and cotton candy ...*

*Pink lemonade that's dan-dan-dandy ...*

*Be a big shot for a dollar:*

*It's carnival time.*

— "It's Carnival Time"

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I went to work the next morning. My intense sun exposure the day before had done wonders for me. I wasn't at full Superman capacity, but I was strong enough to make a rescue if needed.

I tried to track down a few leads on the men who had come to my apartment, but I didn't have any luck with it, not really knowing where to start, so I began working on a minor piece. Before long, Lois came over to my desk.

"Kent! You feeling better?"

"Clark," I reminded her absently. "Yes, I am."

"Have a cold?" she inquired.

I looked up, fighting to hide a grin. "Why? Were you worried about me?"

"No," she backpedaled. "I just wanted to make sure you were at peak capacity in case Perry puts us on a story together."

"Uh huh. Well, I'm fine now."

"Great," she muttered, returning to her desk.

I couldn't help but smirk to myself. I had done a pretty good job of deflection. I had known she would have questions and had figured out what route to take ahead of time, so that had certainly helped.

When lunchtime rolled around, a young woman with brown hair approached Lois's desk. I stood to go pick something up from the printer when Lois waved me over.

"Clark, this is my sister Lucy. Lucy, this is my... *occasional* partner, Clark Kent."

I smiled and shook Lucy's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Lucy didn't act the way I had suspected she would based on the few times Lois talked about her — but then again, considering most of Lois's mentions of her involved Lucy "borrowing" Lois's clothes, that probably shouldn't have come as a surprise.

"No, it's a pleasure for me to meet anyone who can put up with my sister," the young woman returned.

"Lucy!" Lois exclaimed.

"In case you haven't noticed, she tends to scare away men," Lucy continued, ignoring her sister. "It's amazing you've stuck

around for this long.”

I smiled. “Well, she makes a great investigative reporter, and I’m proud to have her as my partner...occasionally.”

As Lucy laughed, I gave her a nod of farewell. “Again, it was nice meeting you.” I returned to my trip to the printer, amused.

I could hear Lucy and Lois talking.

“Lois, why didn’t you tell me Clark was *hot*?” Lucy exclaimed, causing my ears to redden. “If I’d known you had such an attractive partner, I would have come to lunch with you a long time ago.”

“Oh, Lucy, give it up,” Lois told her, sounding annoyed. “Just because you fall for every man who’s...*okay* looking — ”

“Lois, he is *more* than okay looking. You can’t tell me you haven’t admired his...assets a few times.”

Fighting to keep a blank expression, I took in a deep breath and walked back to my desk, and they cut off their argument. But then Lucy whispered furiously, “We have to invite him to lunch with us.”

“Lucy — ” Lois hissed. But her sister was already approaching me.

I looked up at her, trying to appear unconcerned.

“Clark, why don’t you come to lunch with me and Lois?”

Lucy suggested.

I looked over at Lois, who was shaking her head and mouthing, “No.” Then I looked up at Lucy and grinned. “I would love to.”

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Lois was sullen through lunch, but Lucy made up for it by being cheerful.

“I dropped out of college,” Lucy explained, “but now I’m taking some night classes at Met U and working as a waitress.”

“Do you enjoy it?” I asked her, my gaze flicking only briefly to Lois, who hadn’t spoken for the last five minutes.

“It’s not the best job in the world, but it gets the bills paid,” Lucy said with a shrug.

My eyes brimming with mischief, I asked her, “So, do you have any embarrassing stories about your sister?”

“Lucy,” Lois growled in warning.

But Lucy appeared to be having just as much fun as I was. “Well, I do have a picture back home of Lois in a tutu.”

Lois’s face was flushed. “That was only because Daddy made me take that dance class! You know I didn’t want to do it.”

“Yeah, and Lois walked off the stage in the middle of the performance. That’s why Daddy let her quit.”

“We were doing ‘The Good Ship Lollipop,’ and I hated candy at the time!” Lois defended.

Grinning, I took a bite of my sandwich, which I’d only eaten part of. Then I froze, my super hearing picking up the noise of a fire truck. Tuning my ears to the emergency services’ radio communications, I learned quickly that it was a big fire with several people trapped. This was something I would need to help with.

Lois must have seen the look on my face, as she said, “Clark — ”

“I’m sorry. I have to go. I’m...expecting my mineral of the month to come in,” I told them lamely, recalling something my dad had once been subscribed to.

As I dashed off, not even waiting for a response, I heard Lucy ask, “Does he do that often?”

Lois’s reply made me wince: “Constantly.”

I stopped quickly by my apartment to pick up my canine partner. He barked happily when he saw me in my Superman outfit, for he knew what that meant. I was especially in need of his help because I wasn’t at full Superman capacity yet. We zipped away to the burning building, and I gave Krypto some quick instructions. This was a situation my mother had trained him for, so he went off obediently to do his duty.

We both helped pull several people from the burning building, and I put out the fire with my breath. I wasn’t as quick about it as normal, but at least the presence of Krypto helped ensure there weren’t any casualties.

Finally, I went with the dirty Krypto over to the firemen.

“That was amazing, Superman,” one man commented. He knelt and scratched my canine companion behind the ears. “It must be great to have Krypto as a partner. He certainly helped save some lives today.”

“Yes, he did,” I said absently, an idea occurring to me. I looked around for the fire chief and saw him talking to a woman. After nodding a goodbye to the man who had scratched Krypto’s ears, I approached the fire chief with the dog at my heels. When he saw me, he stopped talking and turned to me. “Superman, thanks for helping us out here!”

I smiled. “I couldn’t have done it without Krypto.”

The fire chief nodded. “That’s a great dog you have there, Superman.”

“I know. In fact, I was just thinking that I would like to offer his services to you several hours a week.”

His face lit up. “Really?”

“I can’t help with every fire, but maybe Krypto could work with your men some. We could work out a schedule, and I can give you a list of important commands that would help you communicate with him.”

The fire chief began speaking quickly in excitement. “That would be great, Superman! He could help us find victims, lead firefighters out of the flames, protect firefighters in high crime areas, help out with presentations at schools... You don’t mind if he wears a fire hat at the schools, do you?”

I blinked. “Uh, I guess not.”

“Stop, drop, and roll — ah, man, the kids will love it!”

I smiled to myself as the fire chief continued speaking excitedly. Krypto would be a great mascot. I just hoped he would be okay with it. But as I looked at him happily licking a pair of children that had been rescued from the burning building, I didn’t think he would mind.

\*\*\*

When I returned to the Planet, I said hello to Lois. But clearly she was still annoyed about my running off at lunch and was actively ignoring me.

However, I had prepared for that possibility ahead of time by buying a bag of miniature chocolate bars. I stood in front of her desk holding the bag. “Forgive me?” I asked her with an innocent grin.

Lois stared at the chocolate in my hands, bit her lip, and then turned her eyes back to her screen. “For what?” she bit out.

I crossed my arms. “First, you were mad at me for going to lunch with you. Then, you were mad at me for leaving. You don’t mean you *actually* wanted me there?”

She looked at me, her eyes flicking briefly down to my hands. “Don’t be ridiculous. I wanted you there like I want a leech on the back of my hand.”

“Well, if you didn’t want me there, then I guess I don’t have anything to apologize for.” I started to move away but paused as she said something.

“You had no business inviting yourself to lunch with me and my sister!”

“She invited me,” I pointed out.

“Well...” She was obviously running out of steam, and I had the feeling the bag I was holding wasn’t helping. “Just give me the chocolate, Kent.”

I grinned and plopped the bag on her desk. “Clark,” I prompted.

Lois pointed a finger at me. “Don’t you think for a moment that you can buy me off with chocolate, *Clark*.” But as I returned to my desk, I saw her tear into the plastic and snatch a couple

pieces, which she then proceeded to unwrap.

I laughed to myself. I knew she hadn't been *truly* mad.

A little while later, I remembered something important, and I turned to my "occasional partner."

"Hey, Lois?"

She looked up. "Yes?"

"Are you going to the *Planet* fundraiser tomorrow?"

"Of course. It's for a good cause." She considered me for a few seconds. "I'll be there at two. And if you happen to be there at the same time as me, well, maybe we can walk around together."

As she went back to her work, I shook my head. She was really something.

\*\*\*

The next day, the street outside the Daily Planet was closed to vehicular traffic for the street fair.

I met Lois at the designated time, and we began to walk around together. I stopped at a food booth and asked her, "Cotton candy? Candy apple? Hot dog? Lemonade?"

She laughed. "One candy apple please."

"Two candy apples, please," I requested of the vendor as I pulled out some money. I recognized him as one of the members of the *Planet's* board of directors. It felt strange to have him serving me, if only for a day.

He smiled amiably and got us our candy apples. We left the booth with our prizes, only to soon be laughing at each other as our faces became sticky messes. I pulled out from my pocket one of the napkins I had grabbed and gave it to her before pulling out a napkin for myself.

"Thanks," she said with a chuckle as she began wiping her face.

We stopped by the bandstand to eat our candy apples more carefully. They were playing the "Imperial March" from *Star Wars*, and Lois raised an eyebrow at me. "Bet you're loving this."

"You have no idea," I returned. The song always did bring a grin to my face, even if it was the theme of one of the bigscreen's greatest villains.

We had mostly finished our apples when Jimmy's voice came to our ears: "Step right up here, folks. Just one dollar, one measly dollar, and you'll learn your future. Madame Blavatsky knows all, sees all, tells all..."

I raised an eyebrow. "Shall we chunk these and go check out our futures?"

She chuckled. "Sounds good to me."

We threw away the remainder of our sticky fruits and went to Madame Blavatsky's booth. I didn't know who was more shocked, Lois or me, when it became obvious that Perry White was playing the part of a female fortune teller. He had a lot of scarves swirled around his person, over-the-top makeup, and garish fingernails. Lois was ushered into the booth first, and I waited outside with Jimmy, who was really enjoying his own role.

I couldn't help but lower my glasses and watch and listen to Perry and Lois.

"Oh, the spirits are speaking to me," the Chief Editor said in an intense whisper.

"Really?" Lois asked in amusement. She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "Go on."

"They are telling me...yes, they are saying there is great love in your future.... There is a man...your soul mate.... You must not let this great love slip from your fingers, or something terrible will happen."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Uh huh. What about fame and fortune? You know, the juicy stuff."

"Hmm.... The crystal ball is cloudy. Perhaps you should try again later."

She laughed. "You just want to get another dollar from me."

"The spirits will not respond to that," Perry told her with a grin.

Lois came out from the tent and told me, "Good luck in there. He's laying it on pretty thick."

I laughed. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

I went inside and sat in front of Perry and his crystal globe. He waved his fingers over the globe and spoke in a low voice. "The spirits say you have a great destiny.... True love is in front of you, and you must grab at it. Even with the burden of the world on your shoulders...you must not underestimate the importance of counting on others."

Though his voice had an air of mystery to it, there was a seriousness in the Chief Editor's eyes. He finished with, "This spirits support you in your endeavors.... But you must not forget to think about yourself. Do not let love pass you by."

I gave him a half smile and a nod and then went outside with a heavy heart. He just didn't know what was at stake.

Lois patted my shoulder. "He talk to you about true love, too?"

I gave an attempt at a laugh. "Something like that. Let's go visit the other booths."

We hadn't walked very far before Lois stopped in front of a booth where people were trying to knock down milk jugs. "All right. Here's your chance to prove your masculinity." She held out some money to the barker. "Go for it, Clark."

I could have easily knocked all the milk jugs over, but I missed on purpose. Lois handed over more money, however, so after doing it a few times, I allowed myself to let the ball land in the right spot with the right force.

"And you win!" the barker exclaimed. "Choose your prize from this row."

I gestured for Lois to pick out something. She considered the options for a few seconds. There were three stuffed toys on the row the barker had motioned to: Superman, Krypto, and a black and white bear. I was sure she was going to pick Superman, so I was utterly surprised when she grabbed the bear. I raised my eyebrows, and she defended, "It's cute!"

I laughed, feeling strangely pleased. "All right. Now, it's your turn to play a game. What'll it be?"

She looked around and then headed for the kiddie pool filled with plastic ducks.

"Lois, this is for kids..."

"Well, right now, I feel like a kid, so there." She stuck her tongue out at me for emphasis. Then she gave the amused female barker her money and surveyed the ducks. There were yellow ducks, pink ducks, and green ducks of three different sizes. "Hmm..."

"What about that one?" I suggested, pointing to a large green duck.

"Too big," she told me. She knelt and picked up a small pink duck. "I like this one!" She turned it over to look at the number.

"Looks like you won a whistle!" the barker announced, handing Lois her prize.

Lois looked pleased, and I was surprised when she suddenly handed the red whistle to me. "You can use this for Jericho."

I smiled down at the toy in my hand. Then a flash of inspiration hit me. It wasn't a bad idea, using a whistle of sorts with Jericho. I would just need to talk to Dr. Klein about making a special device for Krypto's collar...

I was bringing the whistle to my mouth to blow in it when Perry came over, still in his fortune-teller getup. "There's a bank robbery happening at the First Bank of Metropolis. Lois, I want you to cover it. Superman might be there, and you might be able to get a few quotes from him."

It looked like he gave me a meaningful glance, but I couldn't be sure, as he was soon gone.

Lois shoved the bear at me. "Think you can hold onto this for

me? Thanks, Clark!” And then she was gone, too.

I looked around for a suitable place to take off as Superman. I would also need to stash the bear somewhere.

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I helped bring the bank robbers into custody, handing them over to the police. One of the robbers was quite vocal and explicit in cursing me, but I ignored him and went outside.

Lois was stepping out of a cab as I talked briefly to a police officer. “Superman!” she cried out.

I turned away from the police officer and nodded at her, my arms crossed.

“Superman, what happened?”

I gave her a brief summary of what had developed. I tried to be distant, knowing I had been far too familiar with her in the past as Superman, but I just couldn’t bring myself to snub her. As I moved to go, I saw a small smile on her face. I wasn’t doing a very good job of subduing her Superman crush at all.

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#### Chapter 24: Lovin’ Someone in Vain

*Blue river,*

*It winds along a path of heartache and pain,*

*Of broken dreams from lovin’ someone in vain.*

— “Blue River”

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A few weeks passed. Superman was still a big success, and all of Metropolis — except, of course, for the criminal element — loved him. Lois even stole a story about him from me. As payback, I sent her through the sewers on a wild goose hunt. Soon after that, Perry paired us together as partners permanently, and she evinced a grudging respect for me.

Since we were together even more often, I had to run out on her with dumb excuses more frequently to perform Super feats, and I began to feel guilty. In fact, I felt so bad about it I even asked my dad how to get a subscription to the Mineral of the Month Club, which he was once subscribed to. I even brought my first rock — Lazurite — to work to show Lois. But even with such a small shred of proof that I wasn’t utterly flaky, I had the feeling Lois would have been furious at me were it not for her frequent meetings with Superman. For some reason, my superhero persona could always put Lois in a good mood. I wanted to tell her as Superman that there could never be a relationship between us, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. She hadn’t made any obvious overtures — hadn’t even tried to hug me — and there was a small part of me that wondered if she really *did* have a crush on Superman. However, that small part of me was usually smashed when she started happily exhorting the superhero’s exploits.

At Superman’s request, Dr. Klein made a special device for Krypto. We attached the device to Krypto’s collar. I — Superman — would press a button on a homing beacon disguised as a thin watch hidden under the sleeve of my suit. The device on Krypto’s collar would then emit a frequency that only dogs could hear, and it would increase in volume the closer he got to my watch. By having this system, I wouldn’t have to pick up Krypto if I were busy as Superman, but I could still call him for help. I had to first teach him to jump off the balcony (I installed a doggy door so he could get outside), and he learned what he was supposed to do quickly. One perk of this system was that he could let himself out to answer nature’s call if I wasn’t home for a while.

I was feeling good about where I was in life. I just wished Lois would drop her obsession with Superman.

“You should have seen him with those orphans — he was just amazing,” Lois was telling me as we returned to the Planet from a boring morning press conference.

Casting around for ideas to get her to stop her gushing, I finally said, “Five bucks says you can’t name all nine planets.”

“You’re on,” she said eagerly. “Earth. Mars. Mercury. Jupiter.

Saturn... Venus... Uranus...” She frowned in thought; she was holding up seven fingers. “Saturn?”

“You already said that.”

“Neptune!” she exclaimed, her fingers curled back down. “That was nine, wasn’t it?”

I smirked. “No, that was eight.”

She placed her chin on her head. “Oh, I *know* this...”

“Five seconds... Four... Three... Two...”

“Mercury? Mars? Neptune?”

“Ennhhhh. The last one was Pluto.”

“Pluto! I *knew* that. Try me with something else.”

“All right.” I crossed my arms in amusement. “Twelve Days of Christmas.”

“A partridge in a pear tree. Two turtle doves. Three French hens. Four... swans a-swimming?”

I shook my head. “That’s not what the four goes with.”

Lois tapped her fingers on her desk. “*Five golden rings*,” she sang to herself. “Four calling birds!”

“Good,” I smiled. “Or colly birds, if you want to talk about how they’re black.”

She rolled her eyes. “Seven swans a-swimming. Six geese a-laying.”

“Go on.”

“Eight... um...”

I grinned. “Giving up already?”

“No!” she declared defensively. “I just need some time to think. Twelve pipers piping?”

“No.”

“Twelve... lords a-leaping?”

“No.”

“Twelve... maids a-milking?”

“You can’t just keep guessing,” I told her, wagging a finger at her. “You have to be able to sing the song properly from twelve.”

“On the Twelfth Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me... twelve drummers drumming!” she exclaimed in excitement. “Eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-leaping...”

“And...?”

I could tell she didn’t know the ninth one, so I prompted, “Five seconds. Five... four... three... two... one. Nine ladies dancing, eight maids a-milking.”

She slammed her fist on the table. “I knew that one, too!”

“No, you didn’t,” I laughed. “You can’t stand to lose, can you? That’s ten bucks you owe me.”

“Give me one more chance to redeem myself,” she demanded. “Dwarves, reindeer, anything — throw it at me, and I’ll get it.”

I raised an eyebrow. But she looked so earnest that I couldn’t say nay. “All right,” I acceded. “If you win, I’ll drop the ten dollars you owe me. But if you fail this time, you have to go with me to a movie of my choosing.” As soon as I made the suggestion, I knew it was foolish, but it was too late to take it back.

Especially when Lois agreed: “Deal.”

I tapped my finger against my chin as I tried to think of a category. Finally, I had one. “Seven Deadly Sins.”

“Greed. Sloth. Gluttony.” She paused. “Envy. Umm... Obesity?”

“That falls under gluttony, Lois,” I said with a snort. “Nice try.”

“Anger?”

“Close.”

“Wrath!” Lois realized. She looked up at me with a big grin, only to falter a little as I met her eyes with my own. She licked her lips, a light flick of her tongue that left them glistening with moisture, and then said in a quiet voice, “Lust.”

I averted my eyes. My heart was out of place — I was pretty sure it was in my throat. “And the last one?” I asked hoarsely.

She drummed her fingers against her desk, but the energy that had been behind our conversation had dissipated like dandelion seeds in the wind.

Finally, I told her, "Pride."

"Pride," she repeated to herself quietly.

I cleared my throat. "We should, uh, go to the movies Saturday night."

She shook her head. "I can't. Lex and I are going away to a cabin for the weekend."

I felt a spike of something suspiciously like jealousy. Luthor had probably wanted to go to a private island, and Lois had probably made him tone it down.

Still, my voice was level when I replied, "That's fine. Some other time then." I gave her a smile and then turned to my desk.

I didn't specifically hate the wealthy man; I mostly just felt a general sense of unease around him. There had been a few suspicious attempts to test and perhaps kill Superman, but I didn't know if they could be tied to Luthor. I was grasping at straws. But this ridiculous envy of mine had to stop. I could never be intimate with a woman, much less marry one. I had to put a check on my emotions.

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Later that afternoon, Lois approached my desk. "It's time for that Key To The City ceremony," she reminded me.

My eyes widened. I had completely forgotten about that. Superman was supposed to receive the Key To The City from Lex Luthor out in front of the Planet. "Uh, you go on ahead — I'll catch up to you."

"Suit yourself," she said as she grabbed her coat.

I left soon after she did, ducking away from the Planet into an alley to change into my Superman guise. I was beginning to feel nervous. A great crowd had formed outside, and there was Superman and Krypto memorabilia *everywhere*. T-shirts, dolls, mugs, postcards, cardboard cut-outs — any tourist-friendly item that could have a Superman logo slapped on it was for sale. And cameras were out there in abundance. It seemed no one wanted to miss a surefire chance to get a picture of the superhero.

I had to pause and breathe and remind myself why I was there. I was there to show people I cared. I was there to help people. The celebrity status was just a byproduct, a necessary evil.

As I flew above the crowd and landed on the platform, I saw various important Metropolis citizens and past recipients of the Key To The City. The crowd went wild as I landed, and I tried to ignore their noise as I shook the hands of the people on stage. My final handshake was with Lex Luthor. I nearly squeezed a little harder than was necessary, but I reminded myself that Lois was dating him and I needed to behave. I was *Superman*, not *Superchildish*.

Luthor moved to the microphone and spoke with the ease of someone accustomed to the public eye. "My good citizens of Metropolis, please, let's all give a round of applause for Superman." He paused to allow people to yell and clap. When they quieted down, he began speaking again. "He came to us as a strange visitor from another planet, but now he is one of us. His good deeds have caught the eye of all, and we are truly thankful for what he has done. As last year's recipient of the Key To The City, I am deeply honored to be able to pass it on to such a worthy person as Superman." He smiled and took the golden key off his neck and handed it to the mayor. As he moved away from the microphone, she stepped toward it.

"Thank you, Mr. Luthor," the mayor said warmly. "It is with great pride that I proclaim this day Superman Day and that I offer you this precious gift: the Key To The City."

I took a step toward her, and she placed the ceremonial object around my neck. The crowd burst into applause, and I gave them a shy smile. Inhaling deeply, I stepped up to the microphone. If

the cameras had been flashing like excited lightning bugs before, it was nothing compared to what they were doing now. "Thank you. I —" I cut off as I suddenly realized I didn't have everyone's attention. The crowd's glee turned to horror as people turned to stare at the roof of a nearby building. A woman was standing on the edge, and she looked as if she were about to jump.

"Excuse me," I murmured into the microphone. I zipped up to the rooftop behind the woman. I could forcibly move her onto the ground below, but I didn't want to scare her. "Miss," I said softly.

She turned around to look at me, fumbling with her watch. "Superman..."

"What are you doing up here? Please move away from the edge. Whatever's wrong, it can't be bad enough to take your life. ..."

She nodded and stepped away from the ledge. "You're right, Superman."

We walked forward, moving out of the crowd's sight. She stopped behind me, and I turned to look at her.

My head suddenly started to hurt, and I closed my eyes and grabbed at my temples. What — ?

Meteor rock.

My eyes shot open, and I swiveled around. The man who had come into my apartment with a warrant was approaching me with several other men. He was holding a large green stone and a handgun which I feared had meteor rock bullets in it.

"What...do you want?" I gritted, fighting the urge to go down to my knees. I didn't want him to see how much he was affecting me, though pretty soon I would have no choice but to collapse in front of him.

"What is your mission on Earth?" the man asked me.

"Mission?" I repeated, still standing somehow.

He got closer to me, holding the meteor rock out toward me. "Your mission. You are the advance guard for an alien race. How many of your people are going to attack? When are they going to make their move? How much do your people know about Earth?"

I tried to back away from the green rock, but my legs wouldn't hold me any longer, and I fell to my hands and knees. "I don't know what you're talking about," I managed, looking up at him.

He gave me a tight smile. "Just as I suspected. The radiation from periodic element 126 *does* have an effect on Kryptonian physiology. Pick him up."

Some of his men stepped forward and grabbed my arms; I was too weak to fight them. They started to drag me toward the door that led toward the stairs, and the man in charge turned to talk to the woman I had thought was a jumper. She had obviously been planted.

The door opened before we reached it, and I looked up to see Constance — the last person I would have expected — taking a quick survey of my situation. The men holding me dropped me and fumbled for their guns. Their leader noticed the commotion and turned with the intention to shoot Constance.

But Constance whipped out her pocket watch. Knowing what she was doing, I immediately closed my eyes.

"See the watch and only the watch," she said in a hypnotic voice. "Hear my voice and only my voice. Your mind is clear. Your will is gone."

Though I kept my eyes closed, I couldn't help but marvel at what she was doing. It had to be difficult to hypnotize so many people at once. She really must have been a master of it.

"Move all of that harmful rock away from Superman," she commanded them.

Feeling it was finally safe to open my eyes, I did so. I watched as they followed her orders. The relief I felt as the meteor rock was moved even further away from me was almost

palpable. Still, I felt tension of an entirely different kind.

Constance spoke again. “If you ever learn Superman’s real identity, you must immediately forget it.”

“What?” I gasped, looking at her in surprise.

“Go stand over by the ledge,” she commanded, not answering me immediately. After giving them time to move away, she told me in a low voice, “Clark, I know you’re Superman.”

I had a brief moment of fear in which I wasn’t sure what persona I was in, but after looking down at my suit, I got my bearings back and said calmly, “What makes you think I’m Clark?”

Her voice sounded sad. “I was so devastated when you left Africa, Clark. I tried to bury myself in magic, but there was still this gaping hole inside me. And then when you told me at the Magic Club that you never wanted to see me again...” She shook her head. “I tried to tear myself away from you, to think about other things, but I couldn’t. So I bugged your apartment, hoping that watching videos of you would be enough. And then I learned about the meteor rock and your secret identity. I destroyed the tapes after I watched them, but knowing you were Superman made me so happy. I was able to see pictures of you as him in the paper — and I could read stories you had written. I came to the ceremony today to see you... And when I saw that jumper, I knew you would go save her, so I rushed into the building in hopes that I would be able to talk to you again. I knew you didn’t want to see me — but I wanted to see you. *I had to see you.*”

“Constance...” I didn’t know what to say. She had utterly invaded my privacy and left me feeling vulnerable and exposed. If she could do it so easily, so could anyone else. But was Constance wholly to blame? “I think you need to seek some... professional help.” There really did seem to be something wrong with her mental state.

“Clark, there’s no saving me,” she said with a sigh. “I am deeply in love with you, and every day that love just grows. I know you can’t reciprocate it. I don’t want to believe that, but I know it. Still, that love is what makes my life worth living — I read your exploits in the paper, and I’m inspired. With anyone else, I could easily have turned to despair and hate. My lack of recognition as a magician could have made me turn to violence and murder. But my love for you keeps me from that. And now it’s time to save you. I will make it so these men will never be a threat again.”

“Constance, I thought you said you were turning away from murder?” I said in an elevated voice, about to panic.

“I’m just going to command them never to harm you,” she told me.

I shook my head, sure I wanted no part in Constance’s magic. My life was already complicated enough. “No,” I said firmly. “Please, just hold them while I go get some rope. These people need to be turned in to the authorities.”

She hesitated. “All right.”

I flew off and got some rope, and then I tied up all the still-hypnotized men. When I was confident they wouldn’t be getting free, I looked at my unexpected savior. “Constance, I appreciate your saving my life, but I don’t want to see you anymore. Please, get the police, release these people from your hypnosis, and then don’t come back.”

I felt cruel saying those words, and I knew they hurt her. But she was a part of my past that I had to leave behind if I was ever going to move forward.

Perhaps she knew that as well, for she just nodded slowly before turning and leaving. I thought then that I would never see her again. And though I was wrong, I lowered my head in sad acknowledgement when I heard the words she whispered as she left the rooftop: “I love you, Clark.”

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## Chapter 25: She Found the Boy She Likes

*She found the boy she likes.*

*She wanted to get married,*

*Settle down for life.*

— “Girl Next Door Went A-Walkin’”

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When I went in to work on Monday, I was feeling glum. I had crushed the bugs Constance had planted in my apartment, so my privacy was no longer in jeopardy for the time being, but I still felt terrible about the situation with Constance. Africa had transformed her from an independent woman into someone so dependent she had to stoop to listening devices to find happiness. I wanted to help her, but my presence in her life was only hurting her. Even if she claimed I was bringing goodness into her life, I couldn’t believe her. She was mentally disturbed, and she needed professional help. But I couldn’t force her into it. And that made me feel more miserable.

To top it off, even the normally cheerful Jimmy seemed sober that day.

“Jimmy, you all right?” I asked him as he passed by my desk carrying some photos.

“Huh?” He looked up and stopped. “Oh, C.K., hi. I, uh — I dunno. I took these pictures, but they just aren’t any good. I’m going to have to scrap them all.”

“Did Perry say that?”

“No. It’s just — they aren’t any good.”

“Let me see them,” I told him. There were pictures of the Key To The City ceremony and the woman I had thought was going to jump from the building. I raised my eyebrow as I looked at them. Jimmy had gotten some really good shots — maybe he knew a lot more about what would make good front page pictures than he thought he did. After some mental debate, I managed to pick out a few of them, and I held them out to Jimmy. “These are all really good, Jimmy, but these are especially great. You should show them to Perry.” He was obviously struggling with self confidence, and I wanted to give him a push. As an office gopher, he’d dabbled in a little bit of everything. I was just beginning to realize how big of an asset he was to this paper — he could certainly do greater things than fetch Perry White’s dry cleaning.

He looked at the pictures I had pulled out. “You think so, C.K.?” he asked, dubious.

“Definitely.”

“Thanks.” He gave me a small smile and headed toward the Editor-in-Chief’s office with a little bit more energy than he’d had moments before. I watched him for a moment before turning to my desk.

“Hello, handsome,” Cat purred as she walked by. There was someone who *wasn’t* lacking self confidence, I reflected. But as she paused to put on some lipstick, I began to reconsider. Was Cat’s outrageousness an attempt to compensate for a lack of confidence? I was considering the idea when I saw Lois sit down at her desk in a daze.

“Lois? Are you okay?” I asked, concerned. What was *with* Mondays?

“Huh?” She looked up. “Uh, yeah.”

I wasn’t convinced. “How about we go into the conference room to talk?” I suggested. She wasn’t acting herself, and I was curious as to why.

“Uh, okay, sure,” she mumbled.

I had to basically guide her into the room. Then, I shut the door and helped her get into a chair.

Sitting across from her, I said, “All right, Lois. What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” she echoed. “What makes you think something is wrong?”

“Well, you’re acting strange,” I pointed out, trying to glean something from her expression. “Did something happen?”

She shook her head. “Did something happen? Oh, no, nothing

big — just...Lex proposed to me.”

“What?” I was so surprised I nearly shot to my feet.

“It happens every day. You know, boy meets girl, boy takes girl to cabin, boy proposes to girl with a giant diamond ring.... It’s perfectly normal.” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself. Her voice had a hint of hysteria in it.

I barely heard the rest of her words. My heart was shattering into pieces, each one of them bringing me far more pain than any shard of the meteor rock ever had.

I had begun to love her. Despite all my good intentions — despite telling myself I could never be in a romantic relationship — I had begun to love Lois Lane. Fully. Completely. Truly. Wholly. She had wrapped my heart and soul around that demanding finger, and now she was throwing both of them into the blender, turning them into a liquid mess.

“What did you tell him?” I asked hoarsely.

She had risen to her feet and was pacing at this point. “I told him I needed some time to think. This is an important decision. I need to explore all my options before I just dive in.”

I simply nodded. I didn’t try to stop her. I didn’t try to give her a reason not to accept Lex Luthor’s proposal. I just stood there silently, ignoring the plaintive pleas of what remained of my heart as it begged me to stop her from making such a terrible mistake. But her next words left me absolutely dumbfounded.

“What do you think I should do?”

“What?” I gasped in reply. Had she really just asked me that?

“I — you’re my best friend, Clark. I want to know what you think.”

I looked down uncomfortably as she sat across from me. “I just want you to be happy...and safe.” I hadn’t meant for those last two words to slip out, but they had.

“Safe?” she echoed incredulously. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “I just — it’s just that I want you to be with someone who’ll be able to take care of you.” That hadn’t come out right either.

The fire of defiance remained in her eyes. “I don’t need someone to take care of me.”

“I know,” I said, offering her a wry smile as a sort of olive branch. “But you do tend to get into danger a lot.”

She opened her mouth — likely to deny the validity of what I had just said — but as she looked at me, her eyes softened. “I might *occasionally* get into danger,” she admitted. “But it comes with the investigative reporter territory.”

I managed a chuckle, though my heart was heavy. “I guess I just worry about you sometimes....”

She stared at me, and I met her gaze. Then she dropped her eyes. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously. I wanted to reach out and take her hand, but I refrained. Touching her wouldn’t do much good for her, and it would do a whole world of bad for me. I was too on edge.

“I — I don’t — ” She shook her head. “It’s nothing, Clark.” She turned her head to stare out toward the newsroom. “I’d like to contact Superman — but how do you get in touch with a superhero, anyway?” She turned with a slight smile. “How do you communicate in Kansas, farmboy? Smoke signals?”

I allowed my eyes to flutter shut for just the briefest of moments. This was the final nail in the coffin. She had to see Superman to ask him if there was hope for them as a couple. And he — I — had to tell her there wasn’t any.

“I have an idea,” I muttered. Then I whispered that I wished her the best of happiness and stumbled out of the room.

My fragmented heart somehow continued to beat. I had no idea how.

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That night, feeling like a dog crawling back to the one that

had just beaten him, I went to Lois’s apartment in my Superman suit. Her window was open; she was awaiting my arrival. Always a glutton for punishment, I had come inside her apartment through the window a few times to see her about one thing or another. But there was something different about this time. This time would be the last.

She greeted me warmly, “Hi, Superman.”

The child in me wanted to laugh in her face. How could she hold on to a fantasy of loving a man called “*Superman*”? She had never begged me to tell her my real name. She had simply accepted that name she had created. Superman was an ideal. He wasn’t a person.

And I was here now because I couldn’t ever tell Lois no.... But this time, I would have to. “Hi, Lois,” I returned softly.

“Would you like to come in?”

I lowered myself onto the floor, but I didn’t walk over to the couch. “I can’t stay long.” My arms were crossed, just like they almost always were when I was in the suit, but this time I felt as if I were trying to protect myself from something. What, exactly, I wasn’t sure, but the desire to flee was strong, and my willpower was being stretched to the max.

“Okay,” she said with a nod, staring down at her hands. “Lex Luthor proposed to me, but I don’t...I don’t know if I can marry him.”

I forced my expression to remain stoic. “And why is that?”

“I don’t think I love him. I think...I think I’m in love with someone else.” She looked up at me, but I averted my eyes from her. This conversation was making me feel worse by the second. Of course Lois was in love with Superman instead of *me*, the real man behind the suit. That was just how things worked in my life.

“If you don’t love Lex Luthor, then don’t marry him,” I told her shortly. I took in a deep breath, knowing my next words would cost me something. “But if you do love him, then marry him. You should only marry someone you love.”

I turned to the window and flew outside slowly, not wanting to give Lois a chance to say anything else but also not wanting to zip away without another word. I paused to look at her for the briefest of moments. “Goodbye, Lois.” And then I left her standing there at the window, whispering the name of my superhero persona in confusion and, perhaps, desolation.

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The next day, Lois was wearing a diamond ring on her left hand. I had thought there was nothing left of my heart, but I was wrong because it broke a little bit more.

Lois tried to talk to me a few times, but I was mostly quiet except for when I needed to say something concerning the story we were working on. I barely had the energy to move, much less converse. Lois’s engagement had shaken me to the core.

Around lunchtime, Lois disappeared into Perry’s office. Probably to receive his congratulations, I reflected morosely. Could things get any worse?

A few minutes later, I found out they could when Lex Luthor, the main cause of my moroseness, approached my desk.

“Mr. Kent,” he said warmly. “Is Lois around? We’re supposed to have lunch.”

She must have called him to accept his proposal right after I had left her apartment. And he must have been so pleased that he suggested they talk about wedding plans over lunch. That was what I suspected, anyway. If I was wrong, well, what did it matter? They were getting married, and that was that.

“She’s talking to Perry. She should be out in a few minutes.” I paused, words that I needed to say but didn’t want to catching in my throat. But I forced myself to speak them: “Congratulations on your engagement.”

His smile, which was already big, simply grew larger. “Thank you. I’m a very lucky man. Lois is an amazing woman.”

I nodded. “Just make sure you take good care of her.”

“Oh, I will. I can assure you of that.”

I forced a smile and was relieved when Lois walked up to us. “Lex, you’re here,” she said.

“Yes, I’m sorry, darling, I’m a few minutes early. But I just couldn’t wait to see you.”

She laughed, and the noise — once so precious to me — was like a stake being driven through my chest.

I gave them the most pleasant expression I could muster and told them, “Best wishes to you both. I hope you will be very happy in your life together.” And then I left them to go wait for the elevator.

As the elevator doors closed, I watched as Luthor kissed Lois’s cheek and she smiled.

\*\*\*

After work, I went straight to my apartment, glad to escape Lois’s torturous presence. Krypto, I quickly discovered, was dirty from helping out with a fire earlier in the day. I got a wet towel and tried to scrub off the worst of the grime. I just wasn’t in the mood to give him a bath.

When I was finished, I threw the towel on the floor and sat on the couch. Jericho jumped up beside me and placed a paw on my leg. When I continued to ignore him, he started to scratch my leg. “Nyet,” I told him. He whimpered, but he stopped.

Finally, I stood. I could put the dye on him and take him on a walk, but I just wasn’t up for it. My thoughts were too jumbled. I grabbed my cordless phone and called my parents. They probably couldn’t help me, but I just had to talk to *someone*.

“Hello?” Dad answered.

“Hi, Dad.”

He must have heard the solemnity in my voice, as he said, “Hold on a second, Clark.” He held the receiver away from his mouth. “Martha, pick up the phone! It’s Clark.”

A few seconds later, she was on the phone. “Clark?”

I swallowed. “Hi, Mom.”

Her mother radar went off. “Clark, what’s wrong?”

“I’m sure it’ll be hitting the society section of the papers any time,” I said with a sigh. “Lex Luthor proposed to Lois Lane, and she accepted.”

“Oh, honey...” The pity in her voice was almost palpable.

“It’s what she wants,” I said. But I didn’t sound convincing even to myself.

“Clark, why don’t you just tell Lois how you feel?” Dad suggested.

“I can’t,” I said firmly.

“Why don’t you tell Lois your real identity?” Mom asked.

“No,” I replied, a little more forcefully than I had intended.

“If I were in a relationship with her, I would put her in danger both with myself and with other people.”

“But you might not get to see Lois as much if she marries Lex Luthor,” she pointed out.

“It’s for the best.”

I cocked my head at the sound of a siren, and Jericho started barking. “I need to go. I’ll talk to you later. Love you.”

“Love you,” Mom returned right before I hung up.

Somehow, I wasn’t feeling any better.

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Wednesday, I got the last request I would have wanted or expected from Lois.

“Excuse me?” I asked her, not sure I had heard her right.

With uncharacteristic patience, she repeated herself. “Lex and I discussed it, and we would like you to be Lex’s best man.”

I hadn’t known it was possible to feel any lower. Swallowing, I said, “I, uh, I don’t know, Lois...”

“You saved his life,” she pointed out. “And you’re important to me, Clark. Lex wants to do this for me. I would really like it if you accepted.”

As I stared into those soulful brown eyes, I couldn’t make

myself refuse. “All right, Lois. I’ll do it.” I figured it wasn’t like I could get much more miserable.

“Clark!” Perry called out. “My office!”

I nodded at Lois and then slowly made the journey to the Editor-in-Chief’s office. When I went in, Perry gestured for me to take a seat.

As I sank into a chair, he said, “I guess, uh, Lois has told you her news.”

“Yes,” I confirmed emotionlessly.

“Now, uh, son, I think you should know that things weren’t easy between Elvis and Priscilla. They met in Germany when she was fourteen, and she moved to the United States before she graduated high school to have a chance at a relationship with him.” He paused. “Love is...well, it’s a bumpy road. But you’ve gotta travel on that bumpy road if you want the bluebird of happiness to land on your shoulder.”

I just stared at him. I was so numb I couldn’t even bring myself to react to what he was saying.

He clasped his hands together. “Clark, I’ve been holding myself back, but I can’t any longer. It’s obvious you have feelings for Lois, son. Why don’t you just go after her? Throw yourself at your feet, cover her desk with flowers.... Take some sort of *action*.”

“I’m going to be Lex Luthor’s best man,” I said in a flat voice.

Perry didn’t even try to hide his surprise. “What?” He shook his head and slapped his hands on the desk. “Now, Clark, you can easily win Lois away from that business tycoon. He may have money and charisma, but that’s all he’s got. And those things won’t keep Lois happy. We both know that.”

“Lois has made her decision, Chief. I’m going to support her. But thanks for your concern. I appreciate it.”

I stood and walked out of his office, wondering at my robotlike state. Did I want to torture myself? Did I *want* to see the woman I loved — yes, I couldn’t deny it, I *loved* her — marry another man?

To protect her from me, yes, I did.

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The wedding day approached quickly. Every second brought it closer, and each one was torturous for me. I kept trying to think of excuses not to go to the wedding, but my agreement to come had made Lois so happy that I couldn’t back out. My parents called me every night, worried about me. At the Planet, Jimmy kept looking at me as if I had grown another head, and Perry attempted more than once to broach the subject of Lois’s marriage again. Even my dog seemed to be giving me sympathetic glances. But I wasn’t having any of it. Lois had made her decision, and I had made mine. When the invitation came in the mail, I opened it with admittedly shaky hands and placed it on the refrigerator, where it stared at me constantly as a reminder of what was coming.

A few days before the wedding, an older woman came to the Planet and made a beeline to Lois’s desk.

“Mother!” Lois exclaimed, not sounding very enthusiastic.

“What are you doing here?”

“What — now you don’t want to speak to your own mother? My daughter’s getting married to the richest man in the city, and I have to learn about it through an *invitation*.”

“I tried calling you, but you didn’t answer,” Lois gritted.

Her mother crossed her arms. “Well, you should have tried again.”

Sighing, Lois said, “I left a message for you to call me.”

Wanting to give Lois a little relief, I walked over to them.

Lois looked grateful and stood. Grabbing my arm, she said, “Mother, this is Clark Kent. He’s my partner. Clark, this is Ellen Lane.”

I shook her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes, yes, it’s good to meet you,” Ellen Lane acknowledged, waving a hand in the air, obviously unconcerned with who I was. “Now, Lois, do you have your dress yet?”

Lois sighed. “Yes, Mother, I have my dress.”

“Of course you do. Of course you wouldn’t want to participate in a time-honored mother-daughter tradition by going shopping with me. No, not my daughter.”

“I couldn’t get in contact with you, Mother!” Lois exclaimed. She looked close to tears.

It was then that I smelled the liquor on Ellen Lane’s breath and decided enough was enough. “Mrs. Lane — ”

“That’s ‘Ms. Lane,’” she corrected me. “I’m divorced. Of course Lois wouldn’t talk to her friends about her divorced alcoholic mother.”

“Lois has been under a lot of pressure,” I stated firmly. “She has been planning a wedding to a prominent member of our city. She already told you that she tried to get in touch with you — if you weren’t available, then she had no choice but to make her plans without you.”

Lois’s mother looked at me, apparently reevaluating her formerly dismissive opinion of me. Finally, she exhaled. “You’re right, you’re right. I’m sorry, Lois. Call me at 5:00 — I promise I’ll be home. Then maybe we can go over some wedding ideas.”

As Ellen Lane left, Lois let out a great sigh. “Thanks, Clark. She can... well, she isn’t exactly easy to deal with.”

“It’s no problem.” I smiled at her. I hadn’t liked how much her mother was upsetting her, so I was glad the woman was gone.

“I knew my mother would drive me crazy during this wedding planning, but I was almost relieved when I couldn’t get a hold of her. But she’s ready now, and I guess that’s just how it goes. It’ll just get worse when my father gets here.” She groaned.

I put my hand lightly on her shoulder. “It’ll be fine, Lois. This is going to be your special day — don’t let other people ruin it for you.” The words were like dirt in my mouth, but I wouldn’t have taken them back. I cared for Lois, and I wanted everything to go well for her... even if it was all going so horribly wrong for me. I wondered if there was a Hallmark card for people like me — “Sorry the love of your life — who you couldn’t marry anyway because you were born with powers that could accidentally crush her into dust — is marrying a powerful billionaire. Cheer up, chap.” Probably not.

I returned to my desk and began typing something with uncooperative fingers. A few minutes later, I looked up and saw Lois staring off into space. Maybe she was dreaming about her upcoming nuptials — about Lex Luthor and his shining black limo and bottomless pocketbook.

And yet... the expression on her face was that of a troubled woman. But what she had to be troubled about, I had no idea — she was getting married, after all. She should have been happy.

I returned to my work with a frown and a terrible sense that something just wasn’t right.

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## Chapter 26: Dark Shadows Follow Me

*I walk along a thin line, darling.*

*Dark shadows follow me.*

*Here’s where life’s dream lies disillusioned,*

*The edge of reality.*

— “The Edge of Reality”

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The night before D-Day, I didn’t go to sleep. The phone rang, and I let it go to the answering machine. My mom left a message, which I immediately deleted. The same thing happened a few more times. Once, it was my father who called. But I didn’t want to talk to either of my parents. They couldn’t make things better.

I paced, brooded, and mumbled, Jericho watching me all the while as if I were crazy. But I just couldn’t calm down. Lois was getting married. My hopes were being dashed. Lois was getting

married.

An hour after midnight, the phone rang again. I let the answering machine pick it up, but when I heard Lois’s voice, it struck a chord within me, and I rushed to the phone. “Lois?”

“Clark,” she returned, sounding surprised. “I was wondering where you were at one o’clock in the morning.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled abashedly as I moved to sit on the couch. It was a strange blessing to hear her voice. Maybe I was a masochist, but I was glad she had called — even if the things I had to say to her were things I *couldn’t* say to her.

A few seconds of awkward silence passed, and I wondered what was on her mind. But I didn’t feel it was my place to ask that, so I just ventured, “So, uh... how are you?”

“Oh, you know... I’m getting married tomorrow. It’s — it’s kind of a lot to take in.”

“Yeah,” I acknowledged, clearing my throat. *Tell me about it*, I thought.

“Lex is a nice man,” she said. The jealous part of me thought it sounded as if she were trying to convince herself, but the more practical part of me realized that she must respect the billionaire if she was going to marry him. She was just reminding *me* that Lex Luthor was a “nice man” — right? But why would she feel she had to do that?

“He’s done a lot of good for the city,” I conceded. I didn’t know what she wanted me to say. I’d tried to hide my dislike for him — but whether I had succeeded or not, though, I wasn’t sure.

“Yeah.”

I picked absently at a piece of lint on the couch cushion. “Like I said before — you should be with someone who can make you happy.”

She hesitated. “Clark — ”

“Yes, Lois?”

I waited for her to reply. I could sense she wanted to talk — wanted to tell me something — but she didn’t seem to know how to voice it. When she didn’t say anything, I finally did. “Lois, are you okay?”

“Goodnight, Clark. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And before I could say anything, she had hung up.

I rested the phone in my lap and stared at it. And though she couldn’t hear me, I said, “Goodnight, Lois.”

I heaved a sigh and stood to put the phone up. A few minutes later, my hand drifted up to my cheek. There was moisture there.

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In the morning, I felt sick. Disgusted. Heartbroken. Sorrow-filled. Desperate.

I probably would have vomited, but there was nothing in my stomach. I tried to touch my necklace for reassurance, but nothing could make me feel better. The day was only going to get worse, and every part of me knew it.

I changed into my tux and went to Luthor’s dark tower. There were a lot of people scurrying around making last-minute preparations, like worker ants trying to please their royal overseer. The wedding, of course, was going to be held in the ballroom — where Lois and Luthor had first met. When I saw the proud groom, I mumbled a few congratulatory phrases. Fortunately, Luthor was too focused on his upcoming nuptials to pay me much attention.

My heart pounded, and all-too-soon I was following the business tycoon up to the front, where the archbishop was. Of course Luthor would want to involve one of the upper Catholic clergy. I was just surprised he hadn’t gotten the pope.

When the music began playing, I felt as if there were a roaring noise in my ears. Lucy, in her position as maid of honor, approached. Next came a small ringbearer with a satin pillow bearing the two rings, those heart-breaking symbols of marital harmony. Then a flower girl with feathered angel wings came down the aisle, scattering red petals in her wake. I felt as if every

petal was a drop of my blood being spilled by an angel of death.

And then the music faded. The “Wedding March” began — who knew I could hate that song so much? — and everyone stood. Lois appeared on the other side of the room, a vision in white. I stared at her, a dull thud now sounding in my ears. As she walked forward with the older gentleman I suspected was her father, she tried to keep her gaze on her husband-to-be. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that her eyes were somehow continually drawn to me. I was quickly struck by the feeling that Lois didn’t seem as happy as she should have been for someone who was about to marry the love of her life. But as I looked at the trembling of her chin, I realized it must have just been nerves. She was, after all, being showcased in front of the world as the bride of Lex Luthor. It would have been odd if she *hadn’t* been nervous.

And then she was standing up with Luthor. He looked into her face, and she stared at him a little hesitantly. The people watching sat back down, and the archbishop began, “Dearly beloved...”

Tapping a pair of fingers against my leg, I tried to pay attention to the clergyman’s words, but I just kept staring at Lois and thinking about how she couldn’t make this great mistake. Intermittently, I tried to tell myself it was better this way, but the thought was constantly being usurped by what I wished could be. It was all I could do to bite down on my tongue and keep from making a fool of myself.

Now that Lois was standing in front of everyone, she seemed determined to keep her gaze fixed on Luthor, who was suddenly saying, “I do.”

My breath caught as I realized Lois was next. The two words that symbolized a blessing to almost everyone in the room were going to be spoken — but they were anathema to me.

The archbishop turned his attention to that beautiful woman who was breaking my heart. “Do you, Lois, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband from this day forward, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish... for as long as you both shall live?”

“I —” she started, causing my chest to constrict. Then she moved her eyes to me. “I can’t,” she whispered.

“Wh-what?” Luthor asked in confusion, looking more discomposd than he probably ever had before in his life. “Lois, darling?”

“I’m sorry, Lex,” she told him softly. And then she was running out of the room, everyone watching her in sheer shock.

My heart was singing.

Feeling a level of happiness I hadn’t realized was possible, I took a few steps forward. My eyes suddenly met Perry’s in the crowd, and he mouthed, “Go after her.”

Obediently, I left the ballroom. I could feel Luthor’s eyes boring into my back, and I heard him whisper viciously, “Kent.” But I didn’t think anything of it. I was too happy.

I reached out with my super hearing and caught the faint sound of sobs coming from Lois’s dressing room. My spirits dipping with the realization of how Lois must feel, I slowed my steps and hesitated in front of the door. But finally I brought myself to knock. “Lois? It’s Clark.”

A few seconds later, she opened the door, and I entered the room. She locked the door and turned toward me. I felt the sudden ache to wipe away all her tears.

“Superman told me I should... marry the man I love,” she said in between her snuffles. “But I don’t love Lex. I was just... attracted to his power, I guess.”

I hesitated only briefly before taking her into my arms. Resting my cheek on her head, I whispered, “It’s okay, Lois.” The feel of her in my arms was so blissful, though it was tainted by guilt — I felt guilty to be enjoying it so much after she had come so close to being another man’s wife.

Words began to spill out of her mouth. “I never slept with him, Clark. I just couldn’t. I guess I knew somehow even while we were dating that I couldn’t marry him. I just — I just wish it hadn’t taken me this long to realize that.” She pulled back and stared at me, mascara smeared under her eyes. “When I was standing up there, I knew I couldn’t marry him. I realized I didn’t love him.”

I wanted to hug her — to wipe away her tears — but I just stood there, motionless. I could feel she had something more to say.

She met my eyes nervously. “I realized I loved someone else. I’m — I’m not sure how he feels about me, but I do know that I can’t marry one man when I’m in love with another.”

I looked away from her. To say I was in utter agony was to put the situation lightly. Of course the farmboy couldn’t measure up to the superhero. Why would a woman who could love an invincible hero in tights ever look twice at a country hick who flinched every time she touched him?

When I returned my gaze to her, I could see she was waiting for a response from me. Softly, I said, “You’ve had a big day. You must be stressed by everything that’s happened. Why don’t I go wait outside the door while you change? Then we can go home and watch a Mel Gibson movie.”

She gave me a fragile smile. “All right.”

I unlocked the door and opened it, stepping outside the room and closing the door. Luthor was waiting there with a manic glint in his eyes.

Disturbed, I asked him, “What do you want? She needs you to leave her alone. She doesn’t love you.”

He smiled a bitter smile. “And who does she love? *You?*” When I didn’t say anything, he lifted his chin. “So, she does love you.”

“I never said that,” I told him curtly. “Just leave her alone.”

After giving me a chillingly villainous look, he walked away. I shivered and continued to wait for Lois.

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After Lois finished changing, I took her to her apartment, and then I guided her to the couch, where I sat beside her.

“Would you like to watch a movie?” I asked her gently.

She shook her head. “No — I’m sorry.”

I hesitantly put my arm around her and pulled her close to me.

But she stiffened and resisted me. “Clark, I think you should go home.”

“Lois —”

“I want to be alone.” She stood up and walked away from me, staring at the slowly moving fish in her large tank. A big yellow one swam by, and she traced its path with a finger.

I got to my feet and moved closer to her. “Lois, I think you need a friend right now. After everything that just happened —”

“After everything that just happened, I need to be left alone,” she returned emotionlessly. But I could see the reflection of her eyes in the fish tank — and there were tears there.

“I don’t want to leave you here by yourself —”

“I’ll be fine, Clark,” she said firmly. “I just need some time to think.”

“Lois —”

“Go!” she bit out.

Swallowing, I whispered, “Okay, Lois. I’ll — I’ll see you tomorrow.”

But she didn’t respond, though I waited for a few seconds. Finally, I sighed and slipped out the door. I hated to leave her, but I had no choice. “Goodbye, Lois,” I whispered.

I returned home feeling both dejected and elated. I had been so happy that she wasn’t going to marry Lex Luthor — but now I was realizing just how stressful this had been for her. Still, she’d given me explicit directions to go away. I just needed to give her

a little time and space. There would be another opportunity to talk to her.

“Hey,” I greeted Krypto quietly, stooping to scratch his head on my way to the answer machine. The light was blinking once, and I pressed the PLAY button.

“Clark, this is your mother. Call me as soon as you can.”

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed the phone and dialed my parents’ number. Before long, I was talking to them both.

“Clark, we’ve been so worried about you,” Mom told me. “We saw on the news that Lois didn’t marry Lex Luthor. What happened?”

I shifted uncomfortably on the couch. “Well — she realized she didn’t love him. She... turned him down at the altar.”

“Clark, that’s wonderful!” Mom exclaimed. “That means you can —”

“No,” I said resolutely, cutting her off. “I’ve told you before. I can’t be in a relationship with Lois.”

“Son —” Dad tried.

“Please. Let’s not get into this again. I — I feel terrible for Lois, but...there’s this small part of me that’s relieved. I didn’t think Lois and Luthor were meant for each other.”

“You’re right, Clark. Lois was meant for someone else.” Left unmentioned by Mom was the fact that she thought Lois was meant to be with me, but I didn’t bother arguing with her — there was a part of me that wanted to believe that, but I couldn’t let myself.

Krypto came up to me with his tail waving about in the air and his leash in his mouth. I sighed. “I think Jericho wants to go on a walk. I’ll have to talk to you later.”

“All right, Clark. We love you.”

“I love you both, too.”

Hanging up the phone, I told the expectant Krypto. “I’ll take you on a walk, but I have to dye you first.”

I changed into some jogging clothes and then dyed Krypto, “transforming” him into Jericho. I frowned as I realized Jericho’s collar wasn’t where I had last left it. Looking around, I found chewed-up pieces of it. Sighing, I held it up to Jericho’s face. “See this, Jericho? This was *bad*.”

He whimpered and lowered his ears, and I took pity on him and patted his head. “All right. I guess we’ll just have to use your Krypto collar. But *don’t* do it again.”

Jericho barked happily. Pulling my locket out from under my shirt, I clutched it gently before letting it drop to rest against my chest. It had been a gift from Lois, and I wanted that connection. I wouldn’t be hiding it away that day.

I clipped the leash to the Krypto collar, and I went down to the street with Jericho. I felt bad for the joy that had swept over me, but I just hadn’t wanted Lois to marry Luthor. I didn’t think he could make her happy.

Still, it was hard to believe that the reason she had rejected Luthor was love for Superman. Clark Kent was invisible, the friend whose shoulder could be occasionally cried on. But Superman was held up on a pedestal, the “Greek god” (as she’d called him once) to be pined after. The fact that I was both people didn’t make me feel any better. In fact, it made me feel worse.

I couldn’t ever tell Lois that I was Superman. And it was probably easier that she love Superman rather than Clark — it would be much more awkward for me to reject her love as Clark than as Superman — but it still stung. It made me feel...well, not worthless, but certainly not valued.

Mired in such thoughts, I almost didn’t notice when it started to rain. I nearly took Jericho back to my apartment, but he seemed to be enjoying the rain so much that I delayed our return. When he saw fit to jump into a mud puddle, however, I quickly changed my mind.

When we got to my apartment building, I unlocked the door and walked inside with Jericho. I threw my keys on the table and

took a few steps forward, only to freeze when I realized I wasn’t alone. A whole host of guns were pointed at me.

Jericho growled, readying himself to attack, and I said sharply, “Nyet!” But though the dog stood down, he continued to growl in warning.

One of the gunmen pointed his gun at Jericho, aiming for his chest.

“Leave him alone,” a blond man said. “He’s just a dog.”

“He’d just as soon bite you as lick you,” the first man said. “You’re nothing but a softie.”

“The Boss didn’t tell us to off anyone, so can it.”

“I’ll can it when I want to,” growled the first man. “You can’t gimme orders.”

“Waste one of those bullets in that gun, and the Boss will have your hide,” the blond man proclaimed. “Those bullets are just for if Superman shows up.”

My breath caught in my throat. *More* trigger-happy men with meteor rock bullets? I felt panic begin to rise. Before, I’d been fortunate enough that they had left me alone after shooting me — but that didn’t seem like it would be the case this time. And could a meteor rock bullet hurt the thick-skinned dog?

The two men continued to argue, and — feeling fearful — I wrote a note at super speed that said “Clark Kent has been kidnapped by the ‘Boss’(?) — Call police and follow dog” and folded it and slipped it under Jericho’s collar.

A third man finally stopped the two others from arguing, and he looked at me. “Go outside, Kent. And keep your hands where I can see them.”

I held my hands up by my head, but as I passed by Jericho, I pretended to trip and fell to my knees. I thought briefly of Perry, who had already saved me once — but I didn’t think Jericho knew him by name. I believed he knew Lois by name, but I couldn’t put her in danger. I would die a thousand deaths before I willingly did that. And so that left only one hope — and a slim one at that.

I told the dog in a low voice, “Retrieve firemen.”

He tilted his head at me, but I wasn’t sure if he was quizzical or contemplative, and there was no time to try a different plan of action.

Someone kicked me. “Get up.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled insincerely as I rose. They pushed me again, and I continued to move forward.

I didn’t know if Jericho actually knew what I meant when I said “firemen” — I had never tried to teach him the term. But it was possible he had made the connection between the word and the people anyway, as I did use the term a lot around him.

It wasn’t a great chance, but it was all I had.

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### Chapter 27: They’ll Put You Away in a Cell

*Well, they’ll put you away in a cell.*

*They’ll put you where the cold wind blows.*

— “Frankie and Johnny”

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They put me in an unmarked van and blindfolded me. But I was able to see through my blindfold with my x-ray vision, and I realized quickly they were taking me to Lex Towers. I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew it couldn’t be good.

They guided me inside the building and into a wine cellar, where they tied me to a chair. Then they removed my blindfold and left.

But I wasn’t alone. The government man who had tried to kill me on the rooftop was there, sitting in a chair and holding a gun in his lap. Standing beside him — cool and collected, unlike the way he had been earlier — was Lex Luthor.

My anger and surprise were warring with each other, and I had far more questions than I had answers, but I remained quiet, not wanting to give them the satisfaction of me speaking first.

I wasn't surprised when Luthor was the one who broke the silence. "I am sorry it must come to this, Mr. Kent, but Lex Luthor will *not* be made a fool of. I know the reason Lois left me standing at the altar was her love for *you*, a pitiful nobody from a backwater town in Kansas."

I glared at him. He was obviously delusional. Lois wasn't in love with me. Superman, maybe, but not Clark Kent. And Luthor had no way of knowing that I *was* Superman.

"Let me go, Luthor," I gritted. I resisted the urge to strain against my restraints, lest I accidentally break them at an inopportune moment. I was going to have to tread carefully if I intended to protect my identity.

"I'm sorry, Kent," the government man said with a sinister smile, "but we're counting on Superman coming to save you."

"What?" I asked with a frown. What did he mean?

Luthor clasped his hands together, looking pleased to have the upper hand. "You see, Mr. Kent, Jason Trask and I made a deal. In exchange for knowledge of Superman's weakness, I agreed to help kill the superhero. You see, everyone has an Achilles heel — even Superman."

"Why are you doing this?" I gritted. "Why are you bringing Superman into this?" I wanted to buy some time to think. I didn't know what I was going to do. If I revealed my secret to them, no good could come from it. But I certainly didn't want to *die*.

"Well, yes, it might be easier, perhaps, to simply kill you," Luthor conceded. "But you did, after all, save my life — so I won't kill you. By the same token, you also destroyed my life, so I can't let you go." He gave a menacing smile. "You see how I am in a bit of a bind. But after considering my difficult situation, I realized that the best form of payback would be to show you how it feels to be torn from someone you care about."

I wasn't sure whether that meant he was going to kill Lois or keep me as a permanent prisoner, but I didn't want to consider either possibility in any depth. The gun Trask was holding had to have meteor rock bullets in it, which couldn't bode well no matter what Luthor meant. My mind racing, I asked, "How is Superman going to know where to find me?"

The billionaire waved a hand in the air. "I've already thought of that. A message has been left on Lois Lane's answering machine for her to give to Superman."

My brow furrowed. The message had been left on her machine? Why wasn't she at home?

"He is to fly to the top of a certain building to find a letter," Luthor continued. "This letter will tell him where you are. And then, we will spring our trap." He inclined his head. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have to go do a few things to help avert this disaster you have caused."

I watched Luthor go up the stairs. Then I turned my eyes to Trask, who was taking a few steps toward me with a disgusted look on his face. He still held the gun in one hand, obviously ready to shoot immediately should Superman arrive.

"I thought you were enjoying a vacation behind bars," I told him with a hint of a growl in my voice.

He smiled. "Let's just say I have friends in high places. I got out without too much trouble — it just took me a little time." He grimaced and shook his head. "People like you disgust me. Has the alien brainwashed you, or are you willingly a traitor to your country and homeland?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I snarled at him.

His eyes fell on my locket. "What's this? Do you have a picture of the alien inside?"

I swallowed. Had I been standing, I would have backed away. But I was tied to a chair, and I couldn't keep him from touching the gift Lois had given to me.

With a strange sort of eagerness, he opened the locket, only to see a picture of my grandmother instead of Superman. He sneered at me. "So, you have a thing for old ladies? You really

*are* sick." Not shutting the locket, he let it drop onto my chest.

"That's my grandmother," I gritted. The pain had of course started the moment he opened the locket, and I was trying with all my might to look like I was angry rather than hurting.

He walked away from me and sat in his chair, where he glared across at me and watched me like a hawk. Little did he realize that there was basically no chance I was going to be freed — by myself or by Superman — from my situation.

I had been exposed to the meteor rock often enough — or perhaps the shard was small enough — that I was able to close my eyes and keep myself from broadcasting my pain through my expression, though I doubted I achieved anything resembling calmness. But pretending the open locket didn't affect me wasn't enough to prevent a sweat from eventually breaking out on my forehead.

When Trask noticed my perspiration, he gave a grim chuckle, and I opened my eyes. "I'd be nervous, too, if I was an alien lover like you. But before long, you'll meet a traitor's end." His gaze met mine, and I realized he intended to kill me regardless of Luthor's plans. Either the man didn't realize how powerful a figure Luthor was in the city, or he was insane. I was frankly leaning toward the latter.

The pain continued to spread, and I was finding it harder to breathe by the second. Fighting against despair, I asked Trask, "What will happen if Superman never comes?"

"You don't want to find out," he replied in a low voice. "Just know that most military men like myself have no problems with the ethics of torture."

I grimaced. It was starting to occur to me that I was going to die soon. As the time ticked by, so fled my grip on life. I didn't know if Jericho really knew what I had meant by "firemen." That had been a gamble.

My thoughts turned to Lois. While I had called Perry to help remove the meteor rock bullet after my first contact with Trask, I had wanted so much to ask Lois to help me instead. She was such an important part of my life...

I had known I was going to basically lose her when she married Luthor. A powerful man like him wouldn't want his wife to have a dangerous and busy career with a newspaper. There was no question in my mind that things would have changed between us if she had gotten married. I had understood that on a subconscious level, and it had just increased my aversion to her marriage. There would be no more evenings with greasy foods and bad movies or all-night stakeouts playing Spades and Old Maid. But I had been willing to sacrifice what we had because I had thought that was what she wanted. And because she would have been put into harm's way if I had pursued a relationship with her.

And now, everything I had done was coming to nothing. I was dying — and I would probably never see Lois again.

I flung thoughts around in my head like wet noodles at a wall, hoping one would stick. Finally, I thought of something.

I groaned loud enough for Trask to hear, but not so loud that he got suspicious. His eyes narrowed immediately, and he stood up. "What is it? Is the alien invading your mind?"

My breathing was already labored, and I simply started to exaggerate it more. "My locket's new," I mumbled, twisting my head a little. "I think I'm having an allergic reaction to it. Could you...could you take it off?"

"I could care less about your comfort," he informed me with contempt as he returned to his chair.

Thinking on my feet (figuratively), I pointed out, "Luthor won't be happy if you let me die — and my dead body won't bring Superman to your doorstep. You had better watch out — Luthor isn't someone you want to make angry." I closed my eyes in real pain, inhaling deeply but carefully.

"Fine," he growled. With obvious reluctance, he removed the

necklace and threw it on the floor by a wine cask.

I was instantly able to breathe better. I didn't try to struggle out of my bonds because I knew I would need to gather what little strength I could. It was too bad we were in a cellar rather than Luthor's penthouse — otherwise, I might have been able to get a little exposure to the sun if it had peeked out from behind a cloud. As I was casting about for new ideas, I remembered my homing beacon watch.

Had enough time passed for Jericho to find the firemen? What if he hadn't found them and was just sitting in my apartment? If I activated the homing beacon and Jericho came alone and burst through a wall, then his connection to Krypto would be obvious. But if Jericho came with the police, then there was a small chance that Jericho wouldn't need to show off his powers.

And if Jericho did give evidence of his abilities, then Trask might put two and two together and realize I was Superman. If that happened, then any chance I would have at a life as Clark Kent would be gone. Was it better to wait for a miracle on the off chance that I would protect my secret identity as Clark Kent? Or would it be better to just throw away that chance so the world could have a Superman?

The question thundered through my head. Now that I had begun helping people instead of inhibiting my powers, I couldn't give it up. I couldn't let accidents like that which had occurred with the out-of-control bus continue to happen. Not if I could stop it.

And so, with a little creative maneuvering, I pressed the button on my watch. Hopefully, I had given Jericho enough time.

When Luthor finally returned to the cellar, he gave me a glance and then looked at Trask. "Has there been any trouble with our guest?"

"No," grunted Trask, cradling his gun.

Luthor turned to me, his eyes glinting like those of a snake about to strike. "The American journalist Helen Rowland once said, 'Falling in love consists merely in uncorking the imagination and bottling the common sense.' Perhaps I was a fool to fall in love with Lois Lane — but she became my inspiration. Of course, then you decided to have Lois Lane for yourself."

I narrowed my eyes. "Lois isn't an object — she's a person. I didn't take her from you — she just doesn't love you." I should have held back my next words — I couldn't determine what kind of person Luthor was based simply on what could be the actions of a love-crazy man — but I was growing more frustrated by the second. "How could she ever love a monster like you?"

When he backhanded me, I wasn't surprised at the action so much as the pain that spread through my jaw. The nauseating taste of blood flooded my mouth, and I spit some of the red liquid out to the floor at Luthor's feet.

He gave me a look of disgust. "Really, Kent, I would have expected more from you."

"Funny," I muttered. "I could have said the same about you."

Luthor gave me a look of bitter amusement before turning to Trask. "Now, when Superman gets here, you need to kill him immediately."

Trask shook his head. "No. I need to ask the alien a few questions before he dies. As the advance guard, he may know some important information about those to come. His information is too valuable for us to kill him before a proper interrogation."

"He is too dangerous to leave alive. If he escapes with knowledge of my complicity with you —"

"Are you afraid your public image will be tarnished?" Trask scoffed. "Afraid that the world will finally learn Lex Luthor is in fact the B —"

A shot rang out, and a hole appeared in Trask's chest. He fell to the floor, his gun clattering away from him.

The wealthy business tycoon put his gun back in his coat

pocket smugly as I stared at him in shock. Then he gave me a tight smile. "Trask, as you have seen, was insane and dangerous. His death was inevitable." At my skeptical look, he conceded, "I, too, am dangerous — that is not to be contested. Certainly, there is a fine line between genius and insanity, as Oscar Levant noted. But all my moves are carefully made. For men such as myself, the world is a giant chess board. One simply needs to know what pieces to move and when."

He was bending over to pick up Trask's gun when the wall exploded.

At least, it *seemed* to explode. In actuality, it was just Jericho bursting through the wall with his extra-canine strength. Ordinarily, an observant man such as Lex Luthor probably would have noticed that the super-powered dog had black ears instead of white ones, but I thought he was so surprised by what came in after Jericho (as was I) that he didn't pay the dog much attention. Of course, the dog was so covered in dirt and dust that he was almost unrecognizable.

In the midst of the broken-down wall — against all my expectations — was Lois. She had a grim look on her face as her eyes met Luthor's. "Lex," she said in bitterness.

"Lois," he returned softly, brought close to speechlessness.

I gaped at Lois. What was she *doing* here?

Jericho ran to me and pawed my leg. I glanced at Luthor, whose attention was wholly focused on Lois. Then, with a little maneuvering and quiet encouragement, I managed to enlist the help of my canine companion's teeth in releasing me from my bonds. I sat there for a moment, assessing the situation. I looked from Luthor to the meteor rock gun he had failed to pick up and then back again. With Luthor being so stunned by Lois's appearance, I might have the advantage if I went for the weapon. I only hoped I would be quick enough. But my heart was thudding in my chest. One wrong move, and Lois could die. I *had* to get to that gun in time.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lois asked in a voice filled with disappointment and disgust.

"I might ask you the same," Luthor replied wryly. "I dreamed about you bursting into my private sanctuary — but not quite like this."

"Yeah, well, I dreamed about marrying a man who wasn't an utter scumbag," Lois retorted.

I dove for the gun.

Luthor swirled to face me, but I was jumping up with the weapon and pointing it at his chest. I stepped closer to him and told him in a low voice, "Don't make any sudden movements."

His eyes stared at me with the sort of confidence that shouldn't have existed within a man in such a situation, and when he thrust his hand into his coat pocket to pull out a gun, he found my hand there fighting him for dominance of his weapon. I whipped it out and held both guns in front of his head. "Don't move," I growled.

Though Luthor kept his eyes on me, he began speaking to Lois. "I could have given you a life of luxury, Lois. And what can Kent give you? He is a man of no ambition or vision, more fit for manual labor than the world of reporting."

Lois stabbed a finger into his chest, causing him to take a step backward. "Listen, Lex. Clark Kent has more integrity in his *pinky* than you do in your entire body." I looked at her, surprised to hear her defend me so vehemently.

"Lois," I said a second later, my voice lined with steel, "go call the police. Luthor isn't worth wasting your breath on."

She stared at the billionaire before finally nodding and turning away. She finally noticed Trask's body on the floor and let out a small gasp. Recovering quickly, she knelt and picked up my locket, which she closed. Slipping the necklace into her pocket, she left the cellar through the open wall.

Luthor stared at me, obviously trying to figure out an exit

strategy.

“I should have left you bleeding to death in that alley,” I told him, the tension that filled my body making my voice hard and cold. “But go ahead and try something — it’ll be easy enough to remedy that mistake.” In truth, I wouldn’t take back what I had done, and I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to kill Luthor even if he tried to escape, but he didn’t know that.

And so, we remained in a glaring contest until Lois returned. “Henderson’s on his way,” she said sweetly. As an afterthought, she knelt on the floor to grab the bonds that had held me and then tied Luthor’s hands behind his back.

“You will regret this,” he said in a dangerous tone. Perhaps his words were directed at both Lois and me, but it was my eyes he was meeting.

“I don’t think so,” I returned. Gesturing with the gun, I told him, “Sit on that chair while we wait.”

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When the normally dour Henderson arrived, he was, as Aunt Opal was fond of saying, pleased as a peach, particularly since both Lois and I were willing to testify against Luthor. As the criminal was led away, Henderson told Lois and me in a low voice, “We’ve been gathering evidence against the Boss for a while. I’ve suspected it was Luthor, and what you’ve told me should be another nail in the coffin of his life as a free man.”

Lois, always one to take crazy situations in stride, had listened intently when I had told Henderson what had happened. I had left out details about the meteor rock, of course, but I told him what I thought was most important. Lois and I gave our statements, and Henderson finally dismissed us.

“If you happen to gather any other evidence against Luthor, let me know,” the detective said.

“Thanks, Henderson,” I told him with a smile.

We started to leave, only to pause when Henderson called to us. “By the way, how did you bust through that wall, Lois?”

She gestured toward Jericho. Fortunately, he was so covered in dust and dirt that his black ears and tail weren’t especially noticeable. “I ran into Krypto and enlisted his help.”

“You just ran into him,” the detective said flatly.

“Yep.” She grinned. “If you don’t know where Superman is, well, Superman’s dog is the next best thing.”

“Uh huh.” He still sounded skeptical, and my heart started to race, but evidently he didn’t intend to pursue it any more. “You two head on home. I don’t want to hear about you getting into any more trouble for a while.”

“We’ll see,” Lois replied noncommittally, a mischievous smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth.

When Lois, Jericho, and I were finally outside, however, her whole demeanor changed. Gone was the woman who loved to exchange verbal barbs with Inspector Henderson. In her place was someone quiet and pensive.

I had a hundred questions for her, but I wasn’t about to ask them until she gave me a clue about what all she knew or suspected. And so, as we hailed a cab, I just told her, “I’d like to go with you to make sure you get home okay,” and she didn’t argue like she normally would. She just gave a sharp nod and remained lost in her thoughts. The taxi driver seemed inclined to argue about having a dog as dirty as Jericho inside his vehicle, but one look from Lois caused him to bite back whatever he was going to say.

We arrived at her apartment building, and Jericho and I walked her up.

“Would you like to come in?” she asked.

Part of me wanted to — I knew we needed to talk, as it was either that or explode — but another part of me said I should run as far away as I could and never return. However, I listened to the first part and told her, “Sure.”

When Lois opened the door, Jericho rushed in like he owned

the place.

“Stay off the furniture,” I warned him, and he simply walked around sniffing at corners and plants.

Lois and I sat on the couch, and she finally broke the silence. “I’m assuming your dog and Superman’s are the same?”

The urge to deny hit me, but Lois wasn’t stupid, and if I denied this, then I would basically be putting an end to our friendship. “Yes,” I admitted. “I was...keeping him for Superman.”

“And the black ears and tail?”

I winced. “Dye.”

“He must have a great sense of smell if he was able to track you all the way to Luthor’s.”

“Yeah. He does.” It wasn’t a complete lie — Jericho *did* have a great sense of smell, even if that hadn’t been how he had found me. But I couldn’t admit the existence of the homing beacon — if I did, she would wonder why I was wearing the watch that activated the beacon, and there would be no hiding the Superman connection then.

“Well, I guess we should go ahead and write up the story.” She stood and moved toward her laptop.

“You aren’t going to out my dog, are you?” The words hadn’t come out exactly as I had wanted to, but my tone must have been pitiful, as Lois’s face softened slightly before becoming a blank mask.

“No. I won’t. But I’m doing it more for Superman than for you. You should have trusted me.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I just said, “I’m sorry.” I stared at her for a few seconds, and she looked sadly back at me. “Why were you with...Krypto?”

She looked down at her hands. “I was...coming to talk to you. I knocked on your door and heard him whimpering anxiously. So, I picked the lock, and I found the note you left in his collar.”

“You should have called the police, Lois. That was dangerous.”

“And you should have told me about Krypto,” she returned. “I wish you had trusted me.”

She sounded so hurt that it hurt me. I wanted to take her in my arms — once a place I had kept off limits to everyone — and apologize for all the pain she was going through. But I couldn’t explain my reasons for keeping Jericho’s identity as Krypto a secret, so I asked her, “What were you coming to talk to me about?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she whispered. “We should work on the story.”

“Okay.” I wanted to know more, but I didn’t want to press her. It sounded as if she had wanted to tell me something important — but what? Had she just wanted to come confess her love for Superman? Had she wanted to talk to me about Luthor? I wasn’t sure. And she didn’t seem to want to give me the answers.

Though there was still a great distance between us, we managed to get the story written up and emailed to Perry.

“Tomorrow, we should work on helping Henderson gather evidence against Lex,” Lois noted in a no-nonsense tone. The sadness that had been afflicting her earlier might have appeared to be gone to an untrained eye — but I could still see it hovering beneath the surface.

“Lois — are you okay?” I asked gently. I didn’t think she needed to come in the next day, but I wasn’t about to go into that.

“Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be okay? I just almost married a psychopath, but I’m fine. Everything’s all fine here. All fine.” And then she was sobbing and I was gathering her into my arms.

I rested my cheek against her soft hair as she cried into my chest. “How could I have such t-terrible judgment? I pride myself in my ability to know people — to scent out their s-secrets. How

could I have missed something this big?"

It was all I could do to keep myself from stiffening. If she was reacting like this right now, how would she react if she found out I was Superman?

Well, that was simple enough to remedy. She could never know. The connection between Jericho and Krypto was as close as I could let her come. No matter how much I wanted to bare my soul to her, I never could.

When she was finally finished with her release, she pulled away from me. "Go home, Clark. I'll be fine."

Not understanding why she was suddenly pushing me away, I said, "Lois —"

"Really, Clark. Go."

I stared at her for a few seconds, wanting to brush away those last few tears. But after looking at the stubborn jut of her chin, I moved toward the door and called out in a low voice, "Come on, Jericho."

The dog got up from where he was curled up on the floor and stretched, his tongue curling upward in a yawn. Obediently, he padded over to my side.

I opened the door, only to pause when I heard Lois say, "Oh — your locket."

I turned toward her. She held out the necklace in her palm, and I took it from her and put it around my neck. I stared into her dark brown eyes, making wishes I could never let come true, and then I left. After I shut the door, I could hear her break down into sobs once again.

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#### **Chapter 28: A World of Our Own**

*Nothing can change it — the magic's begun.*

*When we're together, our hearts become one.*

*I find a happiness I've never known*

*When we're in a world of our own.*

— "A World of Our Own"

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The next day, Lois came in to work as if nothing had happened.

I was surprised to see her — after all, she wasn't expected to be at work since she had taken vacation time for her honeymoon. But when I began to remind her of this by saying, "Lois, you don't have to be here, you know," she gave me a look so piercing I had eaten the rest of my words. I didn't try to get her to go home after that.

She attacked the task in front of us — gathering proof of Lex Luthor's wrongdoings — with that single-mindedness which appeared to be her way of coping with everything that had happened to her. I guessed it was only natural for a workaholic to turn to work whenever all the best-laid plans were abruptly flushed down the drain. Maybe it was cathartic for her. But it seemed to me as if only time could really heal Lois's wounds. Still, maybe it *was* best that she not just sit at home and mope.

Finding evidence of the jailed billionaire's crimes was a lot like looking for a needle in a haystack, but we were determined. I wanted to start with an investigation of Sallya Technologies, figuring there just *had* to be a connection there somewhere, but when Lois argued the trail was too cold, I reluctantly agreed. Still, I wanted to return to the issue after we were successful in finding something significant.

We hadn't been working for long before Perry called out, "Lois — can I see you in my office?"

She sighed and dropped what she was doing. As she walked away reluctantly, she gave me a backwards glance, and then I pulled my eyes from her. *They* needed to have a private conversation, and *I* needed to refrain from eavesdropping.

Frowning in thought, I tapped a pencil against my desk. I still couldn't believe Luthor had kidnapped me. It was so surreal.

I had thought the government man — Trask — was safely

tucked away in a jail cell, but his return hadn't been a *complete* surprise. Perhaps I should have even expected it due to his fanaticism. But Lex Luthor ...

Well, I certainly hadn't expected that a man whose life I had saved would throw my world in an upheaval because of a misguided belief that the woman who almost married him was in love with me. It sounded more like a soap opera than reality.

Perhaps Luthor hadn't been too far off the mark, though. Lois did seem to have feelings for me — only they were feelings for the part of me that crusaded about in a cape. Again, it sounded more like something that would be on television than something that would actually happen. But I guessed my life was just like that.

I was caught up in such musings when Lois finally returned to her desk. She appeared to be really glum, and my heart went out to her. I hated the strain she was under, and I wished I could wipe it all away. My animosity toward Luthor deepened, a part of me mourning that he hadn't been the man she had hoped. Yet I also rejoiced...because the thought of Lois being with him drove spurs into my heart.

But I knew that wasn't exactly logical — because I couldn't be the man Lois hoped for either.

Before I could think of the right words to string together, Cat approached and told her, "Lois, I'm so sorry about what happened."

When Lois finally looked up from her desk, her expression was one of suspicion. "All right. Let's have it. Are you going to make a quip about his money? Maybe say something about how Lois, the poor old maid, couldn't hold on to a man if she had him tied to her bedpost?"

Cat frowned, looking puzzled at the other female reporter's reaction. "No. I meant it, Lois. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you."

"Oh." Lois's brow furrowed. She didn't seem to know what else to say. This wasn't a side of Cat which Lois saw very often, so I couldn't blame her.

"Do you...do you really think that little of me?" Cat asked quietly. She looked hurt.

"Cat —" Lois said, exhaling. "I'm sorry. It's just been difficult."

The sincerity of Lois's voice improved Cat's countenance, and Cat said good-naturedly, "Well, if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I'm sure Clark won't mind volunteering his."

As the gossip columnist sashayed away, Lois and I gaped at her.

Lois recovered first. "Just when I think I have her figured out, she throws me a curve ball."

I chuckled and told her, "She's deeper than you think, Lois." I was glad Lois hadn't commented on the actual content of Cat's comment — if Lois knew how much I, Clark Kent, cared about her, then I could lose her as a partner. And I couldn't handle that — I had already almost lost her as a partner once.

"I'm beginning to realize that," Lois said softly.

I was about to say something else when the Editor-in-Chief bellowed for me to come to his office. When I had first come to the Planet, that sound would have made me tremble. Now, however, it brought a smile to my face. Still, I was wary about what he had to say to me.

"Sorry — gotta go," I told Lois as I rose to my feet. "The bullhorn's calling me."

I suppressed a sigh as I realized the smile she gave me in response didn't quite reach her eyes. As hard as she was trying to forget about Luthor, it was obvious she hadn't been able to yet. Again, it was going to take time.

I went to Perry's office and stood in the doorway. "Yes, Chief?" I asked, my voice quiet.

"Hi, son. Please — come in and sit down." He seemed

pensive and solemn. This couldn't bode well.

Reluctantly, I obeyed his instructions. In silence, I waited for him to talk, but I didn't have to wait long.

"That was a great story you and Lois sent in," he noted, crossing his arms and leaning back into his chair.

"Thanks, Chief," I returned simply, though I knew I wasn't in there for him to talk to me about the story.

Sure enough, his next sentence revealed his real agenda. "Speaking of Lois — how is she doing? This, uh...this can't be easy for her."

"I'm a bit worried about her," I admitted. "But I guess she's handling things as well as she can." I gave a helpless shrug. "Throwing herself into her work seems to be her defense mechanism."

A half-smile crossed his lips. "That's our Lois." He stared at me for a few seconds until I directly met his eyes. "Now, Clark — do you think you could...help me keep an eye on her?"

I nodded. "I'm already on that, Chief." I rose from my chair, preparing to leave.

His commanding voice arrested me in my tracks. "Now, hold on, son. I'm not done with you yet."

I sank back into the seat. "Yes, Chief."

He cleared his throat. "So — how are you doing, Clark?"

"Sir?" I shifted in my chair, avoiding his eyes. That was even more of a loaded question than he realized.

"Don't play dumb with me, son," he said, pointing a pair of fingers at me. "Lois is — well, she's back on the market, so to speak. Have you two, uh...had a talk?"

A sense of bitterness welled up within me as my thoughts flicked to Lois's near-admission of love for Superman. Perry had obviously misread the situation. There would be no such "talk" between Lois and me.

I kept my face expressionless as I stood. "I care for Lois very much, and I want her to be with someone who can make her happy and keep her safe. When she does finally marry someone, I will wish her the best."

His brow furrowed, and he seemed frustrated. "Clark, you know that's not what I —"

"It's okay, Chief — some people are just meant to be alone," I told him softly. And then I left his office, closing the door behind me. I could feel those wise newshound eyes of his staring into my back.

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Around noon, Lois and I took a break from our investigation for lunch. She attempted to dart off on her own, but I was right on her heels, sticking a hand out to stop the elevator doors from closing. She glared at me, but I stepped inside.

"Do I make that bad of a lunch partner?" I asked with a raised brow, trying to ease this strange tension that had been building between us. I wasn't sure what it was, but Lois appeared to be getting more uncomfortable with me by the hour.

"Well, I wouldn't pay you for your lunch conversation," she muttered.

A few minutes later, we stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Daily Planet.

"Lois, are you okay?" I asked her as we began to cross the street.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed in frustration. "Would people stop asking me that?" She walked forward quickly in annoyance. And then she paused, wide-eyed, as a car came barreling toward her.

Without a second's thought, I made a running leap and pushed her onto the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. My heart pounded with adrenaline, and I remained where I was — on top of her — for longer than I should have. I was so thankful she was alive that all I could think was: *Lois almost died.*

The fear that welled up inside me was so strong it was almost

tangible. I couldn't believe I had almost lost her.

"The least you could have done was buy me dinner and a movie before jumping on top of me," Lois quipped as she pushed at me to get off her.

Turning bright red, I got to my feet and offered my hand to her, but she ignored it and rose on her own. "I'm — ah — I'm sorry, Lois," I told her awkwardly.

"Relax," she grumbled. She tilted her head and looked at me before glancing at the road. The car was long gone by now — as was its reckless driver. "Boy, you were fast."

"Heh, yeah," I agreed uneasily. I followed her as she continued on her way. I felt quite thankful she didn't say anything else about what had just happened. If she found out her best friend was Superman on top of all this mess, I wasn't sure how she would act.

But I would reveal my secret to her in a heartbeat if it meant it would save her life.

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I went home that night in utter exhaustion. Lois and I had been running around most of the afternoon. Luthor had done a pretty good job of covering his trail, and despite his imprisonment, he was still seen as such a powerful figure that even reliable snitches like Bobby Bigmouth were reluctant to put their necks on the line. I was just glad Henderson had enough evidence that Luthor wasn't being let out on bail.

It wasn't just the work in collecting evidence that was draining me. I couldn't get the image of that car almost hitting Lois out of my mind. What if I hadn't been there? Even though I was Superman, I couldn't be everywhere to protect her. The thought of my fallibility was really pulling at me. In just a few seconds, her life could have been snuffed out. My life, I realized uneasily, would have turned to utter darkness. It was her light that had been brightening my spirits since I returned to Metropolis.

When I opened the door to my apartment, I expected to be alone. Krypto was out with firefighters visiting burn victims in a hospital — there had been a spate of arsons for a few days before the culprits were caught, and we hadn't been able to get to everyone in time to keep people from getting hurt. It seemed like everywhere I turned I was reminded that I couldn't be two places at once. I was so distracted by these thoughts that I didn't immediately notice there was someone sitting on my couch.

"You," I said at last in surprise.

She lifted her eyes — which had been staring down at her hands — and gave me a small smile. "I know you didn't want to see me again, but I had something to tell you."

"Constance," I said with a sigh. "How did you get in?" The past, it seemed, was something I could never escape, no matter how fast I could run. The thought was depressing.

She shook her head. "Learning to hypnotize people was hard; getting into your apartment wasn't."

I crossed my arms. "Why are you here?"

She laced her fingers together soberly. "I wanted you to know — Lex Luthor is dead."

"What?" I gaped. He was *dead*?

"I read about what he did to you in the morning paper." She looked back down at her hands. "Clark, the man was evil. He deserved death."

My temper began to rise. "Did you kill him?" I demanded. Even if the man had been a criminal mastermind, he did *not* deserve death.

She averted her eyes, uncomfortable with the strength of my reaction. "Hypnosis...might have led to Luthor's death."

I walked toward her. I should have been fighting against my anger, but knowing she had killed a man because of me made me feel so guilty and frustrated that all my emotions needed an outlet. "Constance, you can't just *kill* people!" I exclaimed, my right fist clenching. "What did you *do*?"

Constance almost pulled something out of her pocket — probably her pocket watch — but then thought better of it. “I... hypnotized a guard,” she admitted. “I gave Luthor a death worthy of a philosopher, though he didn’t deserve that much.”

“What do you mean?” I asked warily.

“The guard poisoned him with hemlock. Well — water hemlock. It’s more powerful.”

I realized then what she had meant — Socrates had died from hemlock poisoning. My thoughts swirling, I grabbed on to this. “I thought hemlock tasted bitter.”

“Even Lex Luthor will eat something bitter at gunpoint.”

I shook my head in disgust. “Constance, how could you *do* this?”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “Didn’t you want him to die?”

Aggravated, I turned from her. But I couldn’t escape her question. In my heart of hearts, I *had* feared Luthor would escape from prison and attempt to do something. But I had feared less for myself and more for Lois. Even Superman couldn’t be multiple places at once...and if Luthor had come to get Lois when I was away saving someone else, what would have happened? Would I have ever been able to save her? What if he had taken her away to an underground bunker in a private island? Had I wanted him to die?

No. No, I hadn’t. I wished death on no one.

Shaking my head, I told the magician, “You aren’t the Grim Reaper, Constance. You can’t wield death as you like. If you’ve murdered Lex Luthor, then you need to turn yourself in.”

She stared at me with an emotionless expression. “If — if that is what you want, Clark, I’ll do it.”

I bit my lip but stood firm. “It is what I want.” I grabbed the phone and handed it to her. “Make the call.”

She held the phone against her chest like it was a weapon that she was about to use to take away her life — which, in a way, it was. “I will,” she said acceptingly. “But first, I want to tell you about what happened in Africa.”

My mood darkened further, and I felt a pang of regret for that part of my past. “Constance — ”

“In Africa,” she began with flashing eyes, “I decided that the hoodoo practitioner needed to die. What I said about her killing foreign students was a lie. But I was frightened that she might take away my love for you — love was a knowledge I hadn’t wanted or expected to gain, but once I had, I realized the power of that emotion. And when you suggested that we find the hoodoo practitioner and try to erase the love potion’s effects, I panicked. I hypnotized you first, intending to have you kill her. But then I realized that you — with all your innate goodness — would be destroyed if you had to do something like that. And I thought you might even be able to fight against the hypnosis. So I made you wait for me in my rental car, and I found the hoodoo practitioner again and hypnotized her. I told her to go to the Lion Park and pursue lions until she was killed by one.”

My mind was reeling, and in skepticism, I pointed out, “Lions avoid making contact with humans — ”

“Ordinarily, they do, yes,” she acknowledged. “But there had been a drought, and food was likely harder for them to come by. That policeman we talked to — I bribed him for more details. I asked him why they weren’t disclosing information on the body. He told me her body had been mauled by a lion. So, what I had done worked.”

My heart pounded. Could she be telling the truth? “Why would they keep that quiet?” I asked her.

“The Lion Park brings in a lot of money from wildlife groups and tourists. They didn’t want to cause anyone to panic.”

“Is this the truth?” I inquired, my heart suspended between impossible hope and almost-certain disappointment. Surely what she was saying couldn’t be the truth. A big part of me expected

her to say it wasn’t.

“I promise with all my soul that it is,” she confirmed.

I lowered my head, feeling as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. “Call,” I told her hoarsely. I turned from her, barely able to comprehend the release she had offered me. A load had been lifted — I wasn’t culpable for what had happened back then. But a separate load still remained. Africa had taught me a lesson, even if that lesson had been learned through a misunderstanding. My powers would pose a great danger if I ever lost control of them. I still needed to keep a check on myself. That hadn’t changed.

While I was mired in my own thoughts, Constance made her call. When she was done, she sat the phone down and walked toward me. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, tears in her eyes. Before I knew it, she had grabbed my head and pressed her lips to mine.

As I pulled away from her with a strange feeling of pity, she whispered, “I wish things could have been different between us. Be — be happy with Lois.”

I sighed. “We’re just friends, Constance.”

“Not always,” she countered with a wry smile. “Some things are meant to be.”

We didn’t say anything else until the police arrived. As she was handcuffed and taken away, she whispered, “Goodbye, Clark.”

“Goodbye, Constance,” I returned softly.

A few minutes later, I was alone in my apartment and seated on my couch. I thought of Constance. She wasn’t all bad despite her misguided actions, but the grief she had caused me had changed my life.

I let my mind turn to Africa, to the friends I had left behind. In one day, I had cut myself off from all that. The enjoyment I had found in that country had been great — but then Constance had ruined my entire life. Everything had changed so quickly.

Despite it all, I felt sorry for her. Africa had turned her life around, too. But while I would one day be able to move past it, she never could. She had doomed herself. At least in prison she couldn’t hurt anyone else. Maybe they would even be able to help her there.

I inhaled deeply and then picked up the phone. If Luthor was dead, then Lois needed to know. It wasn’t a conversation I looked forward to, but she needed to hear it from me rather than on the news.

I dialed her number with clumsy fingers and waited. She didn’t pick up — which wasn’t surprising since her phone was probably ringing off the hook due to the events of the day — but I did get her answering machine. “Lois,” I said into the receiver, “this is Clark. I have...some news for you. Please call me when — ”

“Clark?” she picked up. “What’s wrong?”

I hesitated. “Could...could I come over? I have something you need to hear.”

“All right,” she said, though I could hear the reluctance in her voice.

“I’ll be there shortly.”

“Okay.”

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When Lois let me into her apartment, we went and sat on the couch. I wasn’t sure how long I sat there with her staring at me expectantly before I finally got up the nerve to speak. “Lois, I...I don’t know how to say this. Lex Luthor — he’s been killed.”

“What?” she whispered.

“He’s dead now,” I said, swallowing. “I’m sorry — he must have...meant something to you. Constance — from the Magic Club — had him killed.” I closed my eyes. “She shouldn’t have done that.”

When I opened my eyes, I saw that Lois was staring blankly into nothingness. “Dead,” she echoed at last.

“Are you okay, Lois?” I asked, looking at her helplessly.

“I don’t know, Clark,” she said in a voice that seemed to have some bitterness in it. “You just told me my ex-fiancé is dead. It’s... a little much to take in.”

“I know,” I said softly, wrapping an arm around her and resting my head against hers. I knew somehow that her bitterness wasn’t aimed at me. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, Clark,” she whispered, her head on my shoulder. “I know you are.”

It was times like this that I wished magic wasn’t so destructive. If I could have waved a wand and erased all of Lois’s pain, I would have done it. For Lois Lane, I would have moved the heavens and the earth. I would have braved meteor rock bullets, continent-tearing tempests, rampaging supercreatures. I would have given my life for her with no regrets.

She felt so good leaning up against me — but I knew times like this would be fleeting. Eventually, she would find another man...and it would be his shoulder she would cry on. She would have no need of me then. If I had to watch her walk down the aisle again — though it would mangle my heart beyond recognition — I would do it. I would do anything for her happiness and her well being. I only wished I didn’t have to protect her from myself.

I looked down at her with a smile as I realized she had fallen asleep. I almost rose to pick her up and carry her to her bed, but she seemed so peaceful I didn’t want to wake her up.

Shifting slightly, I decided with a mixture of reluctance and gladness to sleep on the couch with her. Part of me — the smart part — warned me it was dangerous, but I ignored that voice. All I could think was: Wouldn’t it be wonderful if she could fall asleep every night in my arms?

Unbidden, my mind turned to Luthor and what he had almost had. He had almost been married to Lois Lane.

But he could never have truly known her great worth. Though I felt he had loved her in his own way, he hadn’t loved her the way she deserved to be loved. She deserved someone who cared about her dreams more than his own.

As I thought of Luthor’s death, I sighed quietly, careful not to wake Lois. The *Daily Planet* would need to print a story about what had happened. Lois and I were too close to it, however, so I resolved to give the story to Jimmy. I knew he would do it justice, though I couldn’t tell him about everything. There were some things people were better off not knowing.

An invisible hand squeezed my heart as I continued to dwell on Luthor. It was frightening to think about how the man had almost taken Lois out of my life forever.

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### Chapter 29: Joyful Faces Wherever You Go

*Holly reeds and hidden mistletoe,*

*Symbols of the season’s might . . .*

*Joyful faces wherever you go ...*

— “On a Snowy Christmas Night”

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The next few weeks were filled with Christmas. I wasn’t sure how exactly, but the holiday — which had meant the world to me so many years ago — had managed to creep up on me. And now it was everywhere — in products at department stores, decorations at the Planet, carols on street corners...

Yet despite the air of festivity, Lois was draped in gloom. The reason for her moroseness might have been the fiasco with Lex Luthor, but I wasn’t sure. She was constantly making negative comments about the rampant commercialism of the season, and I began to suspect her gloom could be attributed simply to a dislike of Christmas.

Finally, I asked her, “Why do you hate Christmas so much?”

“What do you think?” she asked with a strong bitterness I wasn’t expecting. “Christmas was the perfect time for Daddy to

hole up with another mistress or pet project, Mom to drink too much eggnog, and Lucy and me to listen to our friends’ long lists of presents they hoped Santa would bring. We were lucky if the few presents we got were *wrapped*.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said in a quiet voice. Tentatively, I reached my hand out and grabbed hers, squeezing it very gently. Her countenance softening, she gave me a small grateful smile, and I found myself wishing I could hug her instead.

Pulling my hand away and resisting the strong urge to embrace her, I asked, “Do you have any plans for this Christmas?”

“I’m not really sure,” she answered, her voice devoid of enthusiasm. “Lucy’s run off with some guy to California, and my parents disappeared after my disaster of a wedding. We’ll probably all get together for a phone call. Mom and Dad will pretend to like each other, and Lucy and I will pretend we believe them.”

I stared at Lois, my heart aching for her. I hated that the holidays had been such a terrible time for her. They were supposed to be a period of joy and love toward one’s fellow man. I hated that she associated so many bad memories with Christmas — and I wanted to replace those bad ones with new ones.

As I considered the situation, an idea came to me. What if I invited her to spend Christmas with me and my parents in Smallville? It was hard for anyone to be downhearted during a Kent Christmas, and I knew I would enjoy spending more time with her away from work.

Superman could even “volunteer” his help in transporting us to Kansas. Maybe being in his arms would manage to cheer her up. I hated using my persona like that — especially since she seemed to think she was in love with him — but her happiness was more important than my feelings of awkwardness. I could never be with her in a romantic sense, but I could try as a friend to give her a Christmas to remember.

I was mired in such thoughts when Jimmy passed by Lois and me with a jar. “Don’t forget about the Secret Santa,” he told us. “It’s a newsroom tradition, and I’m in charge of it this year. We’re drawing names at the end of the day.”

Cat was in earshot and purred, “I would love to be *Clark’s* Secret Santa.”

I flushed but didn’t say anything.

Lois, however, called out after the departing Cat, “Handcuffs don’t make appropriate Christmas gifts.”

The gossip columnist paused and turned to say, “Speak for yourself,” and then she was off again.

Grinning despite myself, I turned and watched as Jimmy disappeared into Perry’s office. Interested in the reason for the big smile on the young man’s face, I couldn’t help but tune in with my super hearing.

Perry White looked up and saw his visitor. “All right, Jimmy. Now, have you thought about how to rig the Secret Santa so Lois and Clark get each other’s names?”

“Yeah!” Jimmy said eagerly. “I was thinking — maybe we could fill one jar with just C.K.’s name and one jar with just Lois’s name. Then, we can try to get them to come draw names separately — and then we swap the jars really quick.”

I rolled my eyes in amusement. Their attempts at matchmaking wouldn’t work, but I could use their scheming to my advantage and save them a little trouble.

“Be right back,” I mumbled to Lois, who made a dismissive gesture with her pen in response.

I strode up to Perry’s office and knocked; then I waited a few seconds for Jimmy to open the door.

“Hey, C.K.,” the newsroom gopher greeted, looking a little guilty. “What is it?”

I hid a smile. “Jimmy, can I, uh, talk to you for a second?”

“Sure, C.K.” He came out of Perry’s office after giving the

Chief Editor a backwards glance. “What is it?”

In a quiet voice, I asked him, “Do you think I could have Lois’s name in the Secret Santa?”

Jimmy’s relief was almost palpable. “Sure, C.K. Don’t worry — I won’t tell anyone.”

*I bet you won’t*, I thought to myself in amusement. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

He returned to the Chief Editor’s office as I walked away. “Chief!” I heard him exclaim. “You’ll never believe this — C.K. asked for Lois’s name!”

“That’s great, Jimmy!” Perry proclaimed. “I’m glad we’ll only have to fill *one* jar with the same name.”

I stopped at my desk and looked over toward Perry White’s office. He was peeking out the blinds at me, smiling.

I nodded at him with a grin. He and Jimmy meant well, even if their plans could never come to fruition.

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Wednesday was the day designated for gift-giving at the Planet. I had made my plans and talked to my parents, and I was excited at the thought of giving Lois a great Christmas. There wasn’t much I could do for her...but this — well, this I felt I could handle.

I arrived at work early and dropped a small red package on Lois’s desk. The reindeer tie I was wearing just increased my feelings of seasonal joviality, as did my Santa tie tack. Rampant commercialism or not — sometimes it was simply fun to allow yourself to feel like a kid.

Trying to restrain my excitement, I sat at my desk and pretended to be busy. Every time the elevator doors opened, I glanced up eagerly, hoping it was Lois. When it finally was, I brought my gaze back down, trying not to look obvious.

As her heels clicked close nearby, however, I felt it was safe enough to recognize her approach, so I lifted my head. “Lois,” I said warmly.

“Clark,” she returned evasively.

It was obvious she had something tucked inside her coat, and I queried, “What’s in your coat?”

She gave me an evil look. Obviously, she had hoped I wouldn’t notice. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” she returned.

I grinned at her dodge and nodded at her desk. “Looks like your Secret Santa left you something,” I felt anxious. The moment of truth was coming up. Would she see my present as a boon or a curse?

Lois picked up the box, trying to hide her smile. She undid the green ribbon holding the lid to the bottom and opened the box up. Inside was a little piece of paper which read:

GOOD FOR ONE TRIP TO SMALLVILLE, KANSAS  
SUPERMAN EXPRESS  
6:00 PM  
DECEMBER 23

She turned toward me in surprise. “Superman Express?”

I smiled. “Yes. I — I managed to talk to him. He said he could take us both separately to Smallville and save us money on airfare. It’s a gift from him, too.” I hated adding that last sentence, but I felt it was necessary.

Her brow lowered, and I could see she was hesitant to accept the gift. “I don’t want to bust up your family Christmas — ”

“Nonsense,” I told her resolutely. “My parents are looking forward to meeting you. My mom even said she’d come up to Metropolis to meet you if she had to.” It was the truth — Mom was expressing more and more interest in finally coming face to face with the woman I had talked about so much. She’d even said that if Lois didn’t come down for Christmas, then I would soon be finding my parents visiting me in Metropolis.

Lois still appeared to be uneasy. “But — it’s — it’s so...short notice.”

“You have no plans and thus no excuse,” I stated with gentle

firmness. “You’ll stay in my room at my parents’ house, and I’ll take the couch in the living room.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to take your bed, Kent — ” “Clark,” I corrected with an annoyed look. “And if you would prefer that we share...?”

“Actually, I think it’s a great idea for you to take the couch,” she backtracked.

I laughed. Personally, I was glad she hadn’t taken me up on my offer, even in jest — if she had, there was no telling how I would have handled it. “Great.”

Lois reached into her coat and took out the present she had been hiding. As she handed it to me, she said, “It’s not quite the same, but... ”

Resisting the urge to sneak a peek with my x-ray vision, I took the gift from her and unwrapped it. It was a framed picture of her and me at my desk laughing. “When was this taken?” I asked, staring down at it with a smile.

“I had Jimmy take it a few days ago,” she admitted.

I suddenly recalled how Jimmy had acted strange a few days ago when I had looked around after hearing a clicking noise, and I smiled. “It’s perfect. I love it.” I set the frame next to my monitor. I was glad to finally have a picture of Lois. I had thought of asking for one a few times but had chickened out, not wanting the request to come out as sounding strange.

“You know — it’s kind of odd that we both happened to be each other’s Secret Santas,” Lois commented.

“I asked Jimmy for your name,” I admitted, looking down at my hands. “And I also asked Perry if we could have a little extra time off for Christmas.”

“You really thought this out, didn’t you?”

I looked at her and smiled. “I sure did. I’m glad you’re coming, Lois. I’m going to make sure you have a great Christmas.” That was a promise.

She averted her eyes, and I thought I saw a flash of pain in them. Her parents really *had* ruined her childhood.

And that was why I was going to help her forge new memories. Lois Lane was a wonderful person. She deserved every drop of happiness I could give her.

We began working on a story, but we had only been at it for a few minutes before Lois suddenly and inexplicably started to panic. “Clark, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“What?” I frowned. I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“I don’t know what to give your parents,” she said flatly.

“Excuse me?” I still wasn’t following her logic.

“I need to give them a gift if they’re going to be my hosts,” she explained in agitation. “It *is* Christmas after all.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to get them anything — ”

“Yes, I do, Clark,” she insisted.

I started to protest once more, but the resolution in her eyes caused my words to die unsaid. “All right, all right,” I conceded, realizing how important this was to her. “How about we go shopping after work? Will that make you feel better?”

She considered it and then nodded. “Yes.”

I gave her a gentle smile. “Great.”

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The next day, I felt more like a kid on Christmas Day than an adult on December 23rd. I couldn’t wait for Lois to meet my parents. It was going to be one of the best Christmases I had ever had — and I wanted it to be that way for Lois.

I took first my bags and then Jericho to Smallville.

“I’m so glad she’s going to come,” Mom declared soon after my arrival. She sounded just as excited as I felt.

Jericho jumped out of my arms on the porch, and Mom ushered him inside, closing the door after him. She gave me a quick hug and then nodded toward the sky. “Now, hurry back to Metropolis, or you’ll be late picking up Lois.”

I laughed. “I’m going, Mom.” I flew away with a whisk of

my cape and sped toward Metropolis. All I could think about was how glad I was to be able to spend this special time of year with Lois.

I hovered above Lois's apartment building for a few seconds. I was going to have to be very careful. I didn't want her to fall any further in love with my Superman persona than she already had.

Taking a deep breath, I descended and alighted on the sill of Lois's open window.

Lois stood up from the couch. She had bundled up for the trip to Smallville, and I was glad — I had forgotten all about how cold it would be for someone without super-thick skin. With a smile, she greeted, "Superman."

"Hi, Lois," I said in return. "If it's all right, I'll take your bags first, and then I'll take you."

"Thanks for doing this, Superman," she said shyly.

"Anything to help out a friend," I told her dismissively as I grabbed her luggage. Hopefully, the word "friend" would remind her where we stood. "I'll be back in a flash."

I dropped her bags off in Smallville and then returned. As I stood in the window, I saw her smiling down sadly at a frame that held the same picture she had given me — Clark Kent — as a present. My breath caught in my throat. What did it mean? Did Clark Kent make her sad? Was it wrong of me to try to include her in my family Christmas?

Hesitantly, I ventured, "Lois?"

"Sorry," she said, turning away from the frame and smiling at me. "I'm ready, Superman."

I gathered her up in my arms, expecting her to nestle into my chest, but she seemed very distant. I, however, remained quite conscious of her closeness. The trip to Smallville suddenly appeared a lot longer than it had before I was holding Lois up against me.

Lois's preoccupation meant I didn't have to try to create small talk — which was good, as my thoughts were a jumbled mess.

I had somehow become dependent on Lois's touch. There had been a time where I cringed away from it — but now I craved it.

Maybe it was a result of living without human touch during those painful and lonely years following my experience in Africa. Or maybe it was just because her very presence was intoxicating to me. The more I lived with her, the more I couldn't live without her.

And now that she was in my arms, I wanted to lower my face to hers and kiss her. But I had to remain in control. Kissing Lois — as Superman — would be disastrous. So I remained quiet, glad when at last my parents' farmhouse came into view.

I landed in front of the porch, where Mom was waiting. I let Lois down slowly, feeling bereft as she stepped away from me. Mom greeted Lois with open arms, pulling the startled reporter into an embrace.

"You must be Lois," my mother said over Lois's shoulder. She pulled away to study Lois's face. "Please excuse me. I've heard so much about you — I feel almost as if I know you."

It was all I could do to keep my face expressionless and refrain from saying, "Mom!"

Then my mother turned to me with a smile. "Thank you, Superman. We appreciate you doing this."

"It's no problem, M-Mrs. Kent," I replied, almost slipping and calling her "Mom." I nodded at them both. "I hope you all have a merry Christmas."

"You, too, Superman," Lois returned as I rose into the air.

As I flew out of sight, I heard Mom say to Lois, "Clark's waiting inside with Jonathan. I'll take you in, but first I want to point out a few things about the farm to you..."

She was giving me time to get inside and settled, and I took advantage of it. I changed into my Clark Kent clothes and slipped

inside the house. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, but he pulled me into a big hug when he saw me.

I smiled and embraced him back. Then we both sat down at the table.

"Are you doing all right, son?"

I looked at him, noting his expression of concern. "Yeah, Dad. I am." What was startling was that it was true. I really was doing good. I hadn't felt this happy in a long time. And it was all because of Lois.

He smiled back at me. "I'm glad to hear it."

When Lois and Mom finally entered, Dad and I turned our eyes to them.

"Lois," I said warmly as I stood, trying to cover up my sudden feeling of awkwardness. "Glad you made it. I see you've already met my mom." I gestured toward Dad. "This is my dad. Dad, this is Lois."

"Hello, Mr. Kent," she said, shaking my father's hand.

"Oh, please," Mom said, "call us 'Martha' and 'Jonathan.' Like I told you earlier, we've heard so much about you — you're already almost like family."

I grinned at Lois. She seemed a little overwhelmed at how welcoming my parents were.

Perhaps Mom sensed that, for she suggested, "Clark, how about you show Lois around the house and take her stuff up while I make us all some hot chocolate?"

"All right," I acknowledged. I gestured for Lois to follow me, and I led her into the living room.

I saw that Mom had already set up five stockings. Each stocking had a name on it in fabric paint: Mom, Dad, Clark, Jericho, and Lois. Each stocking also had a holder. Jericho's stocking, I noted, had a bone on it, and his stocking holder was a dog wearing a Santa hat. Seeing it made me smile, but I quickly returned my eyes to Lois.

She had walked up with fumbling steps to the reindeer stocking with her name on it. Looking fascinated, she touched first the stocking and then the ceramic reindeer stocking holder which kept her stocking upright. She seemed touched by the personalized Christmas object.

My heart went out to her. Lois's past Christmases must *really* have been lousy for a simple stocking to affect her so much... which was why it was so important that I had brought her here for an old-fashioned small-town Christmas. I felt a renewed sense of purpose. This *was* a good idea. I was certain of it now.

Dad had followed us into the living room, and I turned to him as he smiled at Lois and commented, "You can either take the stocking home with you when you return to Metropolis or keep it here for next year."

"Wh-what?" Lois stuttered. She looked at Dad and then the stocking, flushing, and then she moved her eyes to my parents' undecorated Christmas tree.

I had reddened a little myself. *Real smooth, Dad*, I thought.

As Lois took a few steps toward our bare tree, looking bewildered, Mom came into the room. Seeing Lois's expression, Mom explained, "We don't decorate the tree until Christmas Eve, and we don't put out presents until Christmas morning. It's tradition."

"Why?" Lois asked, puzzled.

Mom glanced at me affectionately, and I looked down at my feet in embarrassment. "When Clark was a little boy, he used to get so excited about Christmas, and he would constantly touch the ornaments and usually break some of them. As for presents, well, he would shake them to try to guess what they were — and that occasionally ended up with *them* breaking, too. So we started to delay decorating the tree and putting out presents. When Clark got older, well, we just continued to do it how we'd always done it."

As I stared at the tree, I couldn't help but think to myself with

amusement that it was good I hadn't had my present strength when I was a boy. More than just a few presents and ornaments would have been broken if that were the case.

"Clark, go take Lois's stuff up to your room, and then set your stuff by the couch. I mean...unless you are..." my mother trailed off suggestively.

"Mom!" I exclaimed with a blush. She knew full well we weren't doing what she was implying.

"Well," she returned impishly, her eyes glinting.

I glared daggers at her briefly before turning away. "Come on, Lois," I muttered. I grabbed Lois's bags and took them up the stairs to my room, where I sat them down. I was still feeling embarrassed about what my mom had said.

"So, this is your room," Lois commented, gazing around in interest.

There were still several items of my boyhood scattered about the room — a signed baseball here, a plastic trophy there.... I hadn't had the heart to throw much out after leaving for college, so in some ways it still seemed as if a kid lived there. Perhaps it was the books lining the bookshelf that were the greatest clue that an adult had spent a lot of time in there. Ten-year-olds didn't read *Paradise Lost*.

"I like it," she told me with a smile and an approving nod. "It's cozy."

"Good." I grinned. "I rather like it myself, seeing as I did most of the decorating. Come on — let's go back downstairs."

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We went and had hot chocolate with my parents, who chatted happily about everything from the farm to the latest scandal in Metropolis politics. Lois laughed frequently and seemed to be enjoying herself, and I was glad. Any awkwardness that might have existed earlier was gone, erased by the easygoing nature of my parents.

Still, I was worried about Lois — and her past Christmases weren't the only reason. She always kept herself at such a distance from people, and what had happened with Lex Luthor certainly hadn't helped her. She was such a kindhearted and passionate person.... I just wished more people knew her the way I did. She really did deserve a man who would treat her as she deserved. I wished I could be that man, but it simply wasn't possible.

When it was time for bed, Lois said reluctantly, "Well, I'd probably better head for bed. Goodnight, everyone." She nodded at my parents and then gave me a warm smile before she started toward the stairs.

"Goodnight, Lois," I told her in a raised voice, my parents also chiming in.

She turned and smiled at us in gratitude. Jericho trotted over to her, and I called out after him, "Traitor!"

But he just wagged his tail and continued on his merry way. I watched them go with a smile.

"Clark, I love her."

"Pardon?" I asked with a raised eyebrow as I turned to my mother.

"Lois," she specified, as if it should have been obvious. "She's an amazing woman. I think she might be the 'one' for you, Clark."

In a hushed and almost sad voice, I told her, "I can never be in a relationship with a woman." The danger was too great. What had happened in Africa hadn't been my fault — but Constance had gained control over me. *If I could lose control because of a clock, then surely I can lose control when passionate emotions come over me.* I was destined for a life of celibacy, and that was all there was to it. I couldn't ask anyone to take that journey with me.

But Mom just didn't understand, and she told me, "That's ridiculous, Clark."

"It's my decision, Mom." Even if it hurt, it was what I had to do.

Dad sighed. "I try not to step in too much, son, but I'm afraid I agree with your mother on this one. There's no reason you can't settle down with Lois. Whatever happened in Africa is in the past —"

But I shook my head stubbornly. "No, Dad. I can't do that."

But though I knew logically that I could never truly be with Lois, a dream had formed — a dream of Lois and me, together and in love. A dream I knew I would never be able to banish.

A dream I knew would torture me every day of my life.

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### Chapter 30: The Season of Cheer

*I hear the bells*

*Saying Christmas is near.*

*They ring out to tell the world*

*That this is the season of cheer.*

— "If Every Day Was Christmas"

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On Christmas Eve, I took Lois around town in my father's truck. Despite her amused cracks about small towns, I pointed out landmarks and businesses, mentioning people and traditions and memories. If she had acted bored, I would have stopped, but she seemed to be enjoying herself, so I continued our tour for a while.

Finally, I decided we should eat lunch at Maisie's. Lois didn't seem inclined to argue, so it was settled. The restaurant was small, but the food was great. Not as good as my mother's, of course, but definitely delicious. And I'd had more than one of Maisie's homemade chocolate shakes growing up.

No sooner had Lois and I sat down than Maisie came over to us with a pen and a pad of paper. "Clark Kent!" she exclaimed. "Are you back in town for the holidays?"

I smiled at Maisie, glad to see her. She wasn't as thin or young as she used to be, but she was one of the nicest people in Smallville (if a bit of a gossip). "Sure am."

"You're a big-time reporter now," she commented, examining Lois. "And is this your girlfriend?"

I glanced over at Lois, who blushed bright red and said, "No, no. We're just friends. Just friends."

I frowned and tried to study Lois, wondering at the strength of her reply. Had I simply imagined her vehemence? If I hadn't, then what did it mean?

"Just friends, huh?" Maisie asked, her eyebrow raised skeptically. "I heard you got over that phobia of yours, Clark — I thought it might be because you'd finally decided to settle down."

Squirming in my chair as my thoughts flicked to my locket, I told Maisie, "Just...trying to move forward."

She smiled. "Well, in honor of your movement forward, you can each have a free dessert on me! Think about what you want — and remember, we make a mean chocolate pie."

"Clark's chocolate pie isn't anything to sneeze at," Lois remarked with a grin. I smiled at her. It made me feel good that she remembered my pie.

Maisie crossed her arms. "So, he cooked for you? Are you sure you two aren't dating, child?"

I coughed and asked, "How's Tom?" Maisie would have continued her present line of inquiry all day if she wasn't derailed.

Maisie took up the new subject eagerly, as I knew she would. "Oh, you know Tom — he's always got some pet project going. ..." And then she began to ramble on happily about what exactly it was that Tom — her son — was doing.

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After we finished eating (and the pie received Lois's stamp of approval), Lois and I walked back out to the truck.

"So, do you know *everyone* in Smallville?" Lois asked, only

half joking.

“Not *everyone*,” I returned. “But a lot of us know each other, yes.” It was helpful to have a lot of friends in a farming community. Owning someone a favor could do a lot for a person — it reminded me of the favor Perry had owed to Professor Carlton. That favor had gotten me a job, and I wouldn’t ever forget it.

“It must be hard having everyone know your secrets,” Lois remarked.

“What makes you think I have secrets?” I returned. She raised an eyebrow, and I conceded, “Well, maybe I have one or two. But having secrets just means you can’t tell them to anyone.”

“What good’s a secret if you can’t tell anyone?” Lois exclaimed. “Why hide a light under a bushel and not let anyone see it shine?”

I laughed at her comparison. “Well, at least I have someone like you to share things with,” I said cheekily.

“You mean someone like me to ferret out all your secrets,” she corrected with narrowed eyes. “After all, you didn’t tell me about —” her voice got quiet “— *Jericho*.”

I winced. She had a point. “I’m sorry, Lois. Superman didn’t want me to tell anyone.” It wasn’t a complete lie, at least. I *didn’t* want myself to tell anyone. I was more sorry that she had found out than I was that I hadn’t told her. It wasn’t like I didn’t *want* to tell her all my secrets — it was just that it was best for her not to know them.

“Well, you should have made an exception for me.” Her tone brooked no room for argument, so I refrained from replying.

We drove to the farm in silence. After we got out of the truck, she started to head toward the house, but I told her, “Wait. I want to show you something.” Maybe I couldn’t tell her I was Superman, but I could give her a bit of insight into part of my past.

She came back to me expectantly, and I led her to my treehouse. Then I scuttled up the ladder and looked down at her. “Come on up.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to come up there? How old is that thing, anyway?”

“It’s sturdy enough to hold us,” I told her confidently. “Come on.”

Lois sighed and then climbed up with obvious reluctance. She entered the child’s playhouse and gazed around. The childhood mementos in my room couldn’t hold a candle to those found in my treehouse. It was like a museum dedicated to young Clark Kent. Baseball cards, action figures, trophies, sports equipment, comic books, and other countless toys were stuffed into every nook and cranny. It was the kind of clutter only a boy could enjoy.

“Welcome to the Fortress of Solitude,” I proclaimed grandly with a sweeping gesture. Then I noticed an old candy wrapper on the floor and grabbed it and stuffed it into my pocket sheepishly. Not even boys *wanted* there to be trash on the ground.

“Fortress of Solitude?” Lois echoed in a skeptical tone as she continued her inspection. “You make that name up all by yourself?”

“Dad might have suggested it,” I conceded. “I was up here alone a lot, and it did seem to fit.” It had been particularly fitting later in my life. It was a place for me to go when I wanted to be alone while still being somewhere my parents could find me. But they had known not to bother me when I was in the treehouse unless they really needed to.

Lois smiled and reached out to touch an old quilt my mom had put in the treehouse a long while back. I had curled up with it many a time in my youth when my developing powers had appeared to be a disaster of mountainous proportions. I would hide my head under it and pretend the outside world — with its

loud noises, suddenly see-through locked doors, and flammable homes — didn’t exist.

Lois sighed and remarked, “I wish I had had a place like this.” The sadness on her face tore at my heart. “The only place of refuge for Lucy and me was our bedroom. We’d go there when Mom and Dad started fighting, and we’d hide under the covers. . . .”

Hesitantly, I reached out and grabbed her hand, trying to offer her comfort.

She gave me a grateful look and continued a few seconds later. “I started telling her stories about a handsome prince who would come charging in on a great white steed to take her away to some magical land where everybody was always happy. When she got older, I had to get more creative, and I stopped making the stories specifically about her. One time, I decided that the lowly stable boy rather than the handsome prince should end up with the princess, and she really liked that.” She smiled. “After that, she shunned endings in which the prince and the princess ended up together. She rolled her eyes whenever the princess was called on to save the stable boy instead of the other way around, but I think she liked it.”

I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. It was strange how that story resonated with me — in many ways, I felt like the stable boy. But sometimes, a stable boy just couldn’t end up with the princess.

“Fantasy became really important to us. We would talk about and dream of grand weddings and solid marriages. We would talk about how things would be so much more different for us than it had been for our parents. I think that’s one reason why I almost married Lex — I was trying to reach for that perfect dream-world Lucy and I had created. Lex was like the rich and handsome prince who could offer the perfect wedding and the perfect life — and I had often thought, when telling Lucy those stories, that the prince really was the one that the princess should marry. But I was wrong — wealth alone does not create perfection. My father certainly had money. . . and he and my mom turned out to be a federal disaster.” Lois sighed, staring down at our joined hands. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told Lucy all those stories. She also seems to be chasing after something elusive.”

“No, Lois,” I disagreed. “Those stories helped you both get through the tough times. It sounds to me like you were a great sister.” My words felt inadequate. How could I express the sympathy I felt for her? I hoped the warmth of our hands was good enough. Sometimes, small actions could speak louder than great words. That was something I had really begun to realize after meeting her.

Lois shrugged, looking bitter but sad. “I had to be sister, mother, father — our parents weren’t there for her, so someone had to be.”

“But who was there for you?” the words slipped out of my mouth.

Her eyes met mine, and she didn’t have to answer. Nobody had been there for her but herself.

I placed my free hand on top of hers, and we sat there in companionable silence until it was time for dinner.

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After dinner, we all gathered around the tree to decorate it. Mom brought out the boxes of ornaments, and I found some hooks to hang them up with. Then we started decorating the tree amid smiles and conversation. There was something great about the simple act of decorating a Christmas tree. Maybe it was the colors. . . maybe it was the company. . . maybe it was just the comfort of tradition. . . or maybe it was everything put together. But whatever it was, I certainly enjoyed it.

When Lois dropped an ornament and broke it, her expression became one of horror. “I am so sorry,” she whispered, staring down at the pieces and moving to pick them up.

Kneeling to help, Mom told her, “Honey, if you knew how many Clark has broken, you wouldn’t even worry about it. We could have kept a small Christmas store in business.” She took the pieces from Lois and threw them away.

I grinned in embarrassment. “It’s true. You should have seen how sad I was when I broke a polar bear ornament.”

Mom laughed. “He took the pieces up to his room and glued them together. But when he put the bear on the tree, it fell apart after a few hours, and so he insisted on having a small burial service for it.”

“It’s probably still out there under that old oak tree buried in a shoebox,” Dad noted with a chuckle. “I tried to convince him you didn’t need to have a funeral for a plastic bear, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Sounds like you were a cute kid,” Lois commented in amusement.

“I bet you were even cuter,” I returned without thinking. My face promptly became a dark shade of red.

Lois just laughed it off. “What do you mean? I’m *still* a cute kid.” She reached out and grabbed an ornament and moved to put it on the tree.

“Not that one!” I exclaimed. I felt instantly sheepish for my outburst, but there was no taking it back.

Lois stared at me as if I’d just sprouted another eye. “Excuse me?”

I took the ornament from her, smiling down at it as I recalled past Christmases. “This is Frank, and he goes on last.” Frank was a lime-green dinosaur with a Santa hat.

Lois shook her head. “You and your crazy traditions.”

I crossed my arms, careful not to break Frank. “Hey — I like things the way I like them.” Routine had always been of some comfort to me. That wasn’t exactly surprising considering how my world had seemed to be in constant flux in my youth.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” Mom said in a conspiratorial voice. “The Kent men are set in their ways.”

“Apparently,” Lois commented as she grabbed a different ornament. She held it in the air for my inspection. “Can I put this cow up, or is he supposed to be added to the tree three ornaments before Frank?”

“Bessie can go on at any time,” I informed her mirthfully.

She rolled her eyes and put the ornament on the tree with a flourish. Jericho, as if to support her, barked.

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After we finished decorating the tree, we went to the Christmas Eve service at the United Methodist Church. It was a candlelight service, so at the end the artificial lights were dimmed, and we all held candles and sang carols. My singing voice was a little off-key, but what I lacked in talent I made up in spirit, and Lois didn’t tease me more than once or twice about how I couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. Her voice, I noticed, was spectacular.

We returned to my parents’ house, and I — per another Kent family tradition — read aloud from our worn-out copy of “’Twas the Night before Christmas.” Everyone listened with bright smiles as I walked around and made the appropriate gestures. My favorite was shaking my stomach like a bowl full of jelly. It made Lois roll her eyes, but I could tell she was amused, so I didn’t feel bad for acting goofy.

When I at last proclaimed, “Merry Christmas to all — and to all a good night,” my mother returned with a laugh, “Goodnight!”

As she and Dad stood, Mom told us, “We’re going to go sleep. You two don’t stay up too late. Santa’s coming in the morning.” She gave us a wink.

After a round of hugs, they left for bed with Jericho at their heels (evidently, he wanted to sleep with everyone in the house but me). Lois wandered back to the tree, which was covered in lights and lit up like...well, like a Christmas tree. She touched a

branch reverently, as if the sight of it were something precious, and then she turned toward me. “Thank you, Clark. This is the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

I gave her half a smile, my heart aching for her. “But it isn’t even Christmas yet. Just you wait — there’s still more in store.”

She tilted her head wistfully, and I pulled her into an embrace, wishing there was some way I could comfort her and take away the pain of past years. But I couldn’t change what had been — I could only affect what was to be. It was a sobering thought...yet it also made me a little hopeful.

I enjoyed the feel of her soft body against mine and the soft scent of her shampoo. I wished I could stay like that forever, but I didn’t want to seem as if I was lingering, so I gave her a gentle squeeze and pulled away. “Goodnight, Lois.”

She gave me a small smile. “Goodnight, Clark.”

I watched as she walked away slowly, as if reluctant to leave the warmth of the glow coming off the tree. She was such an integral part of my life, and I didn’t want her to be in pain ever again. I only hoped that this Christmas would be a step toward healing those wounds of the past.

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On Christmas morning, we all gathered in the kitchen before moving to the living room. Lois paused in surprise as she noticed all the presents gathered around the tree, and she looked at them in wonder. I felt I could read her thoughts — she was thinking this was so unlike her family’s Christmases. The thought saddened me, but it strengthened my resolve to make this Christmas one to remember.

I nudged Lois and nodded at the stockings, which were filled to the brim. When her eyes moved to her stocking, she simply stood and stared at it until Mom prodded gently, “Go ahead and get it, Lois. It won’t bite you.”

Lois retrieved the stocking with careful movements and then went and sat awkwardly with it. I watched her briefly before sitting beside her with my stocking and Jericho’s. The dog’s full attention was on me as I pulled out a bone. “Do you want it, boy?”

He barked in confirmation, his eyes intent on the treat. With a grin, I placed several things from his stocking onto the floor: a bone, some rawhide chews, a tennis ball, and a stuffed snowman. Jericho promptly took his treats one by one to a corner and then sat and started in on the bone.

Laughing as I saw he would be busy for a while, I turned my eyes to Lois. “All right, Lois. You’re next.”

“What?” she asked in confusion.

“It goes from youngest to oldest. So, you’re up next.” I grinned.

“Ah, yes, tradition,” she said dryly. But she didn’t argue with me, and she started pulling items out of her stocking. First, she pulled out a Swiss army knife and raised an eyebrow at me.

“I might have noticed your knife was getting rusted,” I admitted. She took her Swiss army knife with her everywhere, and I knew how helpful it had been to her. I was glad I had been able to suggest something to my mom that I knew would be used.

Lois smiled and shook her head and then continued pulling out items — lotion, fingernail polish, pepper spray, Double Fudge Crunch bars, socks, a keychain flashlight, a Krypto ornament (which made me roll my eyes)... She just seemed so surprised as she kept pulling out more and more items. When she was finally done, she commented, “When my mother did stockings — which wasn’t very often — she usually stuffed the bottom of them with toilet paper so she didn’t have to fill them up. This was... amazing. Martha, Jonathan — thank you. You really didn’t have to do this.” I saw a tear gleaming in her eye.

Mom moved to hug her briefly, and Lois returned the gesture with some awkwardness. I wanted to embrace Lois as well, but I refrained. I didn’t want to overwhelm her.

“It was our pleasure, Lois,” Mom said with a smile. I hadn’t told Mom much about Lois’s past, but she seemed to have gleaned a lot.

It was my turn next, so I sifted through my stocking, which included the usual giant load of candy in addition to some other items like socks and yet another Krypto keychain. I smiled at the sight of it all. “Thanks, Mom, Dad.”

“You’re welcome, son,” Dad said warmly.

My parents took out items they had gotten each other from their stockings, and then we all opened presents. Mom had plenty of presents for everyone, including Lois. I paid close attention to what Lois got. There were frivolous things for her like a nice blouse which Mom thought Lois could wear under a business suit and a scarf full of holes that was more fashion-friendly than function-friendly, and there were also some practical things like an under-the-counter organizer. Lois gave my mom a bright pink jogging suit, and she gave my dad a subscription to a magazine he had once expressed an interest in. When I opened Lois’s present to me, I laughed.

“I figured I would give you one nice tie and one crazy tie,” she told me with glimmering eyes. “I didn’t give you one loud enough to be heard in the nearest seven states, but I did find one that’s hopefully to your tastes.”

Chuckling, I told her, “Yes. You did. And this ‘normal’ one isn’t bad either.” I grinned down at the ties in my hands. She hit me lightly in the arm, and I jumped up eagerly. “Now, it’s time for your present from me!”

I went and got a small box from underneath the tree. I had placed it there last night. “Well — it’s from me and Superman,” I amended. “He, ah, helped with it.” More specifically, Superman’s powers had helped with it.

I handed the box to Lois nervously and backed away.

When Lois unwrapped and opened the box, she stared at its contents in wonder. “It’s beautiful, Clark.” She picked up the diamond bracelet with great care and slipped the white gold around her wrist. It fit perfectly, just like I’d hoped it would.

“Superman, uh, he mined the diamonds,” I told her, feeling a little uncomfortable. Mining wasn’t exactly my favorite thing to do, but I had the advantage of x-ray vision in addition to my great strength, so the task hadn’t been too difficult. “I had a friend of Mom’s help out with the setting,” I explained awkwardly. “You — you gave me jewelry once, and I figured I should do the same.” I had actually considered going for a necklace instead, but if she had asked me to put it on her, I wouldn’t have been able to — it seemed too... intimate. I would have probably just broken the latch. But I had wanted to give her something special, and jewelry was all I could come up with.

“Well, I’m glad you did,” Lois said with a smile. She stared down at it, and a strange expression crossed over her face. But the look was so fleeting that I didn’t quite know what it meant, so I finally just dismissed it.

We returned to opening presents from my parents, and when we were done, Lois went into the kitchen with my mom. When I did a little super peeking, however, I saw she wasn’t helping with food — just talking. But that was about all Lois could do in the kitchen (if she was to be believed). They seemed to be getting along fine, so I had no concerns. I was glad Lois could spend some alone time with my mother.

“Lois is a very special woman,” Dad commented.

“I know,” I acknowledged. “Special” didn’t even begin to cover it. “Thank you both for letting her come.”

He smiled at me. “You know you can bring her any time, Clark. We know how important she is to you.”

I exhaled loudly. “Yeah.”

“Do you love her?”

I closed my eyes. “It was never a question of love, Dad.” And then I opened my eyes and walked into the kitchen, not wanting

to talk about it any longer.

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We ate a grand lunch which included a freshly made pecan pie. “This is incredible, Martha,” Lois exclaimed as she took a bite of her piece.

I nodded in agreement, too busy stuffing my face to speak. It was delicious.

“Thanks,” Mom returned with a smile. “It was my mother’s recipe.”

Lois looked at me questioningly, and I fingered my locket and gave her a nod. The picture inside my locket was of my mom’s mother. She had made great pies, and she had especially loved making them for me. Great pies always made me think of her.

After we put all the plates up, Mom shooed Lois and me out of the kitchen, and we went and sat on the couch in the living room. Lois looked at all her presents on the floor, marveling at them. “I don’t know if I can get them all home,” she said with a laugh.

Smiling, I told her, “I’m sure Superman won’t mind.” That was an understatement. I would’ve made a thousand trips if she had needed it. All she would’ve had to do was say the word.

She nodded and then furrowed her brow. “When is... Superman picking us up?”

My mood darkened slightly. Of course she would want to know when her superhero crush was arriving. I fought to keep my voice even. “Seven o’clock tonight. He wanted to give us a little time to recover from our festivities.”

She lifted up her hand — which had the bracelet I had given her on it — and turned my head toward her. My bad mood instantly dissipated.

As I gently placed my hand on hers, I asked in confusion, “What is it, Lois?”

“Clark,” she said softly, “I want you to know how grateful I am for what you have done to help make this Christmas special. It has been the most magical time of my life.”

I stared into her eyes, drowning in their depths. The thought that I was hopelessly and irreversibly in love with Lois Lane swam through my mind with all the forcefulness of a striking shark. When she pressed her lips to mine, I pulled her body toward me without any hesitation and deepened our kiss, fire shooting through my veins.

It was all I could have hoped for and more. The taste of her on my tongue was like oxygen to my heart, and all I wanted was for it to last forever. But such bliss couldn’t be sustained, so I pulled away from her at last.

We stared at each other for a few seconds. I didn’t know what to say — what to do — what to think. I furrowed my brow. “Lois —”

She suddenly flushed bright red. After giving an unintelligible whirlwind of an apology, she muttered something about going outside and fled.

Dazed, I watched her leave the room. My lips felt like they were burning.

My thoughts flashed to my former resolve to never be in a relationship. How could I keep myself chaste when I felt such passion for this... this *fireball* of a woman? I wanted to hold her in my arms forever. When she had left the room, a great emptiness had welled up inside me.

Could I do it? Could I — be in a relationship with Lois Lane?

My hopes crept higher and higher, but then I thought of the pain in her eyes as she had spoken of her broken childhood, and I had to dash those hopes. I would never be able to live with myself if I accidentally hurt Lois.

I just couldn’t do it.

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After a somewhat awkward dinner, I excused myself to go

out to the barn. It was time for Superman to make his appearance. For that matter, I didn't feel like I could face Lois as Clark for a second longer.

I went up to the door of my parents' house and knocked.

Mom opened the door. "Oh, Superman, hello. I guess you're here for Lois and Clark?"

I nodded, feeling strangely disgusted with myself for this charade. "Are they...ready?"

Lois appeared behind my mom. "Yes. We're all packed." She turned to my mother and hugged her. "Martha, thanks for everything." And then she turned to my father, who was approaching, and gave him a hug, too. "And thank you, Jonathan." There might have been tears in her eyes, but if there were, she blinked them away. "I had a wonderful Christmas."

"Well, you're welcome back again whenever you'd like," Mom said with a bright smile. She gave me a significant look, but I ignored it. After what had happened between Lois and me, I had no intentions of getting this close to her again anytime soon.

Lois gestured to her bags. She had more to take home than she had when she first came, as my mom had helped her put all her Christmas presents into bags for easier travel. Still, it wouldn't be a problem for me to carry it all.

"Clark should be back in a minute," Lois told me. "His stuff's over there." She pointed at my pile of bags.

After glancing at my luggage, I nodded. "All right. I'll take your bags first, and then I'll come back for you. Then I'll return for Clark and, ah, the dog." The animal in question was sniffing at my boots, and I gave his head a gentle pat. Even though it was probably okay for Superman to know that Lois knew Jericho was Krypto, I didn't want to remind her of that particular secret. I was already going to be on thin ice after kissing her.

"Okay," Lois acknowledged, looking away from me with a pensive expression.

I grabbed her bags and then left in a flash. When I returned, I told my parents with a nod, "I will be back soon." Then I gathered Lois into my arms, took a deep breath, and rose into the air.

Lois was quiet for only a few seconds before speaking. "Thank you for the gift from you and Clark. It was really thoughtful."

"It was my pleasure," I told her with a faltering smile. But she didn't notice my awkwardness; she seemed too thoughtful to pay me much heed. That was especially good because I was becoming increasingly conscious of having her in my arms.

"Superman, could I...talk to you about something personal?"

Swallowing, I fumbled, "Uh, sure." If she wanted to talk, I wasn't going to stop her, although if she confessed her undying love for Superman after having just kissed Clark, it was going to kill me.

"I have to admit — I once...well, I had a little crush on you." She paused for a second and amended, "Okay, a big crush."

Past tense. That was good, right? She wasn't going to tell me her crush had grown into love, was she?

"But now," she said hesitantly, "well, now I'm thinking seriously about Clark."

I almost dropped her, but I caught myself after just a tiny hitch in our flight. The question "*What?*" reverberated in my head, and I had to bite it down.

Not even realizing how shocked I was with this revelation, she continued, "There's this strange...*connection* between us. And I think he feels it, too." Fortunately, she didn't seem to be expecting a response — because I couldn't give one. "But he's holding back for some reason, and I don't know why. It could be he's still a little scared of touching people, but I'm not sure."

She sighed and was quiet for about a minute before speaking again. Unfortunately, this time she *did* expect a reply. "What do you think, Superman? Do you think there could ever be a

relationship between me and Clark?"

I *wanted* to respond that there couldn't be one. I *should* have responded that way. But I couldn't. All I was able to manage was: "I don't know. M-maybe."

I dropped her off at her home, half expecting her to ask me to come in, but she didn't. And so I flew slowly back to Kansas to get my bags, lost in my thoughts and dreams and fears.

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### Chapter 31: It Feels So Right ... How Can It Be Wrong?

*Step in these arms where you belong.*

*It feels so right, so right...*

*How can it be wrong?*

— "It Feels So Right"

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A few weeks passed by. Chinese water torture would have been more pleasant.

Though we danced around the issue a few times, Lois and I couldn't bring ourselves to discuss what had taken place between us. It was as if nothing had ever happened — and yet...it was also as if *everything* had happened.

Lois got angry at me for a few Superman-induced disappearances, yet her anger was strangely short lived. But when Jimmy made a mumbled comment about the unresolved sexual tension between Lois and me, she gave him a look so hot it could have fried an egg (as it was, Jimmy had gulped and fled the scene). But he wasn't the only one to notice the strange air between me and Lois — Perry attempted a few times to talk with me about it, but I doggedly avoided the issue. Lois, I suspected, did the same.

One Friday, Cat missed work. Caught up in my own problems, I hadn't noticed it, but Jimmy — who had a bit of a crush on her — did notice, and he mentioned it to me. When she came in on Monday, however, I was about to ask how she was feeling when I realized something.

Though the gossip columnist had on a lot of makeup and a dramatic hat, I was able to see a bruise on her face. My heart hardened in dread and sympathy, and I walked up to her. "Cat — can I see you in the conference room for a minute?"

"I knew you'd come around eventually," she said sensually. But on seeing the serious look on my face and possibly even realizing what it meant, her smile dropped. "Okay."

We went into the conference room and shut the door. Softly, I asked her, "What happened to your face?" My question wasn't entirely diplomatic in its phrasing, but it had to be asked. And I knew the answer couldn't be good.

"I ran into a doorknob," Cat said curtly. Seeing my expression, she sighed. "Not all the men of the world are Boy Scouts like you."

"Who was it?" I asked. I was fighting to keep my face blank, though it felt like one of my eyelids was twitching.

She gave me a brittle smile. "I don't need you to go after him like a big brother. Tempting as the thought is, I don't want you to sink to his level."

I slapped my hand on the table, and she jumped. I was trembling with emotion. "Is this what you want from life, Cat? To let men in and out of your bed but never your heart?" How could she live like that?

"Why — are you offering?" she managed halfheartedly. But when my somber expression didn't change, she dipped her head and fell silent.

"I know being a gossip columnist must mean that you have to subject yourself to a lot, but didn't you ever want to do something else? Didn't you ever have a different dream?"

"What — like being a mom taking care of five screaming children?" she returned sarcastically.

"No — like having a career where you can really enjoy and respect yourself." I wasn't backing down. This was too important.

She sighed. “There is something. But I’m not telling you.” Gazing at her in sympathy, I said, “Cat — ” “It’s too embarrassing,” she insisted.

I crossed my arms with a forced smile, trying to make myself calm down. “I won’t tell anyone. Scout’s honor.” I held up my fingers in the Boy Scouts symbol as proof of my integrity.

She stared at me for a moment before lowering her eyes. “I used to want to be an animal groomer,” she murmured.

I touched her shoulder gently. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Cat raised her head. “Did you hear me?” she asked with incredulity. “I just said I wanted to be an *animal groomer*.”

“And I said there’s nothing wrong with that,” I returned. And there wasn’t. “So, why don’t you go pursue that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Right.”

But I was persistent. I wanted her to know this *was* a viable option. “I’m sure you already know a lot of higher ups in the city who have dogs and cats. It surely wouldn’t be that hard for you to start a business. You’ve already got a great name for a groomer.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure *that* will earn me a lot of respect.”

“Then go by ‘Catherine,’” I suggested with a wry grin. “It might be nice for a change.”

As Cat looked at me, I saw she was actually considering it. Finally, she said with some reluctance, “You know... you might be right. Let’s say — hypothetically — that I did decide to drop everything and go into the pet grooming business... Do you think you could get Superman to put in a good word for me? Maybe give me a little publicity with that dog of his?”

Superman had given a lot of interviews to Lane and Kent, so it wasn’t surprising that she thought I could get into contact with him. But her request made me uneasy. If this was a ploy for her to get Superman into her bed — but no. I trusted her. I honestly believed she was finally realizing that she wasn’t getting what she had wanted from life. “Superman might do that,” I told her. “I can always ask him the next time I see him.”

She smiled in gratitude. “All right.” She walked to the door, her hand poised on the knob. But before she turned it, she asked me, “So — when are you going to tell Lois?”

“Tell Lois what?” I asked with a frown.

“That you’ve hopelessly fallen in love with her,” she stated before she opened the door and walked out, leaving me gaping behind her. Somehow, she always knew how to catch me off-guard.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. Was I really that obvious? Evidently, I was going to have to be a lot more careful in disguising my feelings. But I certainly wasn’t fooling Cat.

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When I took Jericho on his after-work walk, I was preoccupied, to say the least.

I kept thinking of random things about Lois. The time I’d seen quite a lot of her legs — a different time when she had cried into my chest — a few brief flashes of the cleft in her chest promising hidden treasures beneath — the way she looked when she told me about how she had told fairy tales to her sister when their parents were fighting. The past made us both ache inside, and maybe that was part of what caused us to gravitate toward each other. But it was also part of what made us so wrong for each other. After all, how could I ever hope to ease her pain when I felt such a load on myself all the time?

I finally tugged on Jericho’s leash to indicate we needed to go home. At least something good might have come out of the day — maybe Cat would rethink her life. She was certainly smarter than she let on, that was for sure. Constantly playing the role of a piece of eye candy had to have worn on her.

When I opened the door to my apartment, Jericho trotted inside. I came in more slowly and closed the door with a sigh. I

was thinking about how I should probably do some rounds as Superman when Jericho dropped a dead pigeon on the floor.

I was about to scold him when the bird cooed. As I froze, I realized the pigeon was definitely not dead.

I knelt on the floor beside it and pushed Jericho’s nose away. A closer inspection revealed it had a hurt wing. I led Jericho away from the bird and told him to stay, and then I went and got a towel and a box. I put the towel in the box and then gently moved the creature inside.

The phone rang, and I lightly carried the box to a table and set it down. Picking up the phone, I said, “Hello.”

“Clark!” Lois said, sounding surprised I had answered. “Uh, hi.”

“Hi, Lois,” I returned in amusement. Was she expecting me to be out doing something? And why was she calling, anyway?

“Umm. So...how’s it going?” she asked awkwardly.

I looked at the box on my table. “Oh, all right, I guess. You don’t happen to know anything about hurt birds, do you? Jericho found a bird with a hurt wing, and I’m not sure what to do.”

“Actually, I do know something about birds. I — well, I raised exotic birds in high school.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise. “I didn’t know that.” It seemed she was full of surprises.

“Yeah. I did it to make money. I wasn’t sure if my dad would pay for college like he said he would, so I decided I might as well go for it.”

I smiled to myself. “I didn’t know you had a fondness for birds.”

“I don’t,” she returned wryly. “I just wasn’t allowed to have a dog.” I could hear something shifting in the background. “Just hang on. I’ll be over soon.”

I hung up the phone and put it aside. I checked on the pigeon, which seemed to be okay, but Jericho was staring hopefully upward at it.

“I’m not going to let you eat it,” I told him firmly. “So go lay down.”

Whimpering, he looked toward the couch and then toward me. I repeated myself, and then he reluctantly obeyed.

I sat down and waited.

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When Lois arrived, she was the epitome of preparation. She had a box which contained vet tape, scissors, a small bird cage, birdseed, and two shallow dishes. I raised an eyebrow and took the box from her. “You don’t do things halfheartedly, do you?”

“Never,” she replied, bending to pet Jericho. He was happily greeting her and starting to jump up on her legs.

“Jericho, get down,” I warned him. “Go take a nap.”

He wagged his tail a few more times before disappearing into my bedroom. I smiled and set the box down. He really was a smart dog. Not *always* obedient, but he minded when it counted.

Lois examined the bird briefly and then got to work. I watched in interest as she cut about eleven inches of tape. Then she moved back to the bird, working carefully. She secured the broken wing against its body in a natural position, wrapping the tape on the outside of the broken wing and around the body under the bird’s healthy wing and finally securing the tape to itself. As she finished, she told me, “Fill one of the dishes no more than a third of an inch deep with water.”

As I moved to oblige her, I hazarded, “So the bird won’t drown?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “His mobility is going to be limited, so you’ll have to be careful.”

I filled the dish as instructed, and she put the pigeon in the bottom of the bird cage along with some birdseed and the water dish. “We’ll need to change the tape weekly. Hopefully, we will be able to stop in about three weeks. Then, after the wing is healed, we can let the bird learn how to fly again. If he seems to

be doing well, then we can let him free.”

While she was talking, there was a passionate flare in her eyes. When she went in for something, she really *did* go in all the way. Her passion was admirable, inspiring, and...sexy.

I swallowed, my heartbeat suddenly going a hundred miles an hour. “You’re amazing,” I told her. I meant to add a comment specifically about her bird knowledge, but the words were lost in my simple realization of just how truly amazing she was.

We both reached for the birdseed bag to seal it, and our hands accidentally touched. There was a sudden flare of heat between us, like a spark of electricity arcing from one body to another. Our eyes met again, and we were suddenly pressed together in a passionate kiss. The flames of desire roared in my ears as I relished the taste, feel, pressure of Lois’s lips against mine, the blazing inferno of our need becoming something almost palpable as we enjoyed this simple act. And then we were all hands and lips, touching each other and kissing and tugging at each other’s shirts. She got my shirt off — ripping off a few of the buttons — and I finally succeeded in removing hers. I felt the press of her chest against mine, and as my fingers crept up her back to meet with her bra clasp, she began fumbling at my pants. And then I realized what we were doing and froze.

“Lois,” I said hoarsely. She stopped what she was doing and looked up at me with sultry eyes. I could feel my resolve slipping as fear set in, and I closed my eyes. “I can’t do this with you.”

The flames between us were suddenly doused, and I could sense her backing away. I opened my eyes, and she managed, “I see,” her lips trembling and her face red. Then she was scrambling to put her shirt on as she fled toward the door.

“Lois!” I called out after her, but she ignored me and ran out the door, slamming it behind her.

I sat on my couch, suddenly numb, and buried my face in my arms, my fingers lacing themselves in my hair. I had almost made one of the biggest mistakes in my life. And now...well, now it would be a miracle if Lois would ever talk to me again.

I grabbed the phone and sat it beside me, ready to call Lois after giving her enough time to get home. Jericho came into the room with an inquisitive look, and I called him over to me. He got up in my lap, and I hugged him against me. When he licked my face, I gave him a sad smile and whispered to him, “Jericho, I might have just ruined everything.”

He placed a paw against my chest, looking concerned, and I sighed. “Thanks, buddy.”

I finally got up the nerve to call Lois, but I only received her answering machine. If she was home, she wasn’t picking up.

“I guess I’ll just wait till tomorrow to talk to her,” I sullenly told Jericho, who nudged my chest with his nose.

What if I really *had* ruined everything?

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### Chapter 32: All I Needed Was the Rain

*I’m ‘bout as low as I can go.*

*I don’t really mean to complain.*

*Now all I needed was the rain.*

*Rain, rain, rain, rain.*

— “All I Needed Was the Rain”

\*\*\*

The next day at work, Lois refused to talk to me about anything but business. It was a step up from not talking to me at all — sort of — but it still made me miserable. I tried several times to get her to go into the conference room with me, but she absolutely refused. And anytime I began a sentence with “Lois, I’m sorry,” she would speak loudly over me.

I growled beneath my breath after one final such attempt and then returned to my computer. I looked up as I saw Jimmy passing by, and then I frowned as I noticed the bags under his eyes. “Hey, Jimmy — you okay?”

“Huh?” he mumbled, glancing around in confusion. Then he

realized where the noise had come from and turned his attention to me. “Oh, hi, C.K. Sorry — I’m exhausted. I had to get a second job, and I haven’t gotten much sleep.”

“A second job?” I frowned. “Why?”

He shrugged. “The rent at my apartment went up. My *Planet* salary just wouldn’t cut it.”

“Why don’t you ask Perry for a raise?” I suggested. If Perry knew about Jimmy’s situation, he wouldn’t have said no. I was confident in that.

Jimmy gave a short bark of laughter. “Yeah, right. I’d sooner poke a sleeping bear.” He sighed. “I’m just a gopher. There’s no reason for him to give me a raise.”

I tilted my head. “Jimmy, why don’t you try to push for better assignments than pet shows and mall openings? It couldn’t hurt.” I knew Jimmy was capable of greater things — I had seen small glimpses of his potential throughout my time with the *Planet*. In the story he had written about Lex Luthor, he had *really* shined.

“I don’t know, C.K.,” he said unconfidently. “I don’t think it’d work.”

“Jimmy — ” I tried, but he just walked away. I sighed to myself. I felt sorry for Jimmy — he deserved more. Something needed to be done.

I moved my eyes to Perry’s office, which an annoyed Ralph was coming out of. I stood and passed Ralph, who was muttering to himself, and I entered the Editor-in-Chief’s office.

“Hey, uh, Chief?” I ventured.

Perry White looked up from his desk. “Oh, hi, Clark.” He gestured for me to come forward.

“Did, uh — did you know Jimmy got a second job?” I asked as I shut the door. I didn’t want anyone eavesdropping on our conversation.

He frowned. “No, I didn’t know that.”

I shifted my feet. “Apparently, the rent at his apartment has gone up.”

“Well, I wonder why he didn’t tell me?” Perry mused. He seemed genuinely puzzled, and I could guess why — he thought of Jimmy as a son, and a son should have been able to go to his father for help.

But I couldn’t say that, so I simply pointed out with a wry smile, “You do like the smell of fear in the newsroom.”

He laughed. “I guess I do. But Jimmy, he’s — well, he’s like a son to me.” And there it was — the admission. But I wasn’t the one who needed to hear it.

“Why don’t you tell him that?” I asked him.

Perry raised an eyebrow. “That isn’t just something you can tell someone.” Obviously uncomfortable, he crossed his arms and gave me a searching look. “By the way, Clark — is there something going on between you and Lois?”

I slumped in my chair. “Is it that obvious?”

“I didn’t become Chief Editor of the *Planet* just because I can make a mean jambalaya,” he returned knowingly. “Care to tell me about it, son?”

I exhaled in frustration. “It looks like I’ve upset her beyond repair. I’ve tried to apologize, but she just keeps shutting me down. I just don’t know what to do.”

“When a woman gets like this, there’s only one thing you *can* do.”

I lifted my head. “And what’s that?” I was desperate.

“Grovel,” he said firmly. “Unless you do that, there’s no gettin’ past the defenses that have shot up. Even then, it’s hit or miss — you just gotta keep trying until she gets so annoyed she has no choice but to let you in.”

I shook my head with a grin. “If only it was that easy.” Somehow, I didn’t think annoying Lois Lane was the way to get back on her good side.

“Ha!” Perry laughed. “I know what you mean.” He tapped his pen on the desk. “So, if Lois is mad at you, does that mean you’re

free this weekend? I'm going fishing, and it just isn't the same without a partner."

"Why don't you take Jimmy?" I suggested. It would be the perfect opportunity for Jimmy and Perry to bond. Maybe then they would actually *talk*. They were evidently suffering from a communications breakdown.

The Chief Editor looked a little reluctant. "Oh, I'm sure a kid like him wouldn't want to go fishing with an old codger like me."

"You should try him," I told Perry with a smile. I was almost positive Jimmy would accept.

I was about to walk out when Perry something that made me pause.

"So, Cat turned in her resignation today — mentioned something about grooming. You didn't, uh, have something to do with this, did you?"

I ducked my head, feeling both pleased and guilty. "I, ah, might have."

Chuckling, Perry said, "Thank you, son. That woman needed a better life."

I smiled at him, glad he wasn't upset. "I know."

I was grateful that my attempt at intervention had been successful — knowing that Cat was doing something better with her life helped lift my spirits. Now, I just had to repair the rift between Lois and me.

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That night, I went with Jericho to Lois's apartment building after he and I practiced our plan of action. From a few feet down the hall, I directed Jericho to Lois's door.

He trotted up to the door and scratched at it persistently. When Lois finally opened the door, she looked down at him. He had in his mouth a bouquet of chocolate flowers which had been carefully wrapped in plastic so as to defuse drool. She bent and took the flowers from Jericho's mouth and said in a loud voice, "All right, Clark. Come out from hiding."

Nervous but hopeful, I approached her. "Can I — can I come in?"

"I guess," she said reluctantly. "But for the dog's sake — not yours." She was certainly not giving up any ground yet.

"That works, I guess," I mumbled, following Jericho inside. But whereas his tail was wagging happily, I felt as if I were walking in with my figurative tail between my legs.

Lois motioned for me to sit on the couch, which I did, but she remained standing. She set the chocolate flowers down on the counter and then looked at me with crossed arms. "What is it?"

All my plans suddenly seemed daunting, but I reminded myself I needed to move forward if I wanted her to continue speaking to me. "I wanted — I wanted you to know something about... about what happened." It was about time we talked about the elephant in the room. Avoiding it had gone on long enough.

"Go on," she said flatly. She obviously wasn't going to be giving me any help.

I took in a deep breath. This was awkward, but it needed to be said. "You know the, uh — the intimacy threshold?" At her curt nod, I continued, "Well, I've never actually... crossed it." I swallowed and looked down at my hands. "I've been waiting for intimacy until — until marriage." That was the nicest way to put it, even if it wasn't entirely true. I didn't ever expect to marry — and so I never planned to cross that threshold. I just didn't know how I would behave in an intimate setting. Would I go out of control? There was always the meteor rock, of course, to serve as a precaution, but... was that a way to live?

Lois's eyes were wide, and her surprise was obvious. "It, uh, it makes sense that you're a v — a very patient man because of... because of..."

"My past phobia," I offered, looking up at her.

"Yeah. That." She hugged her arms against herself and looked at the floor. "I thought you believed there was..."

something wrong with me."

I felt a pain inside. How could she possibly have thought that? "Lois — there is absolutely nothing wrong with you. You're an amazing woman. And you always will be."

Uncomfortable with my praise, she gave me a half smile and looked at Jericho, who was staring up at her in hopes of receiving some attention. "How did you convince him not to eat the chocolate?"

"He's well trained," I told her, watching as she scratched Jericho behind his ears.

"Who trained him? Superman?"

I faltered, glad she wasn't looking at me. If I claimed Superman trained the dog and Lois asked him — well, me — about it, then I wouldn't have the first clue as to how to respond to any questions about dog training. I could ask Mom to give me a crash course on training, but ...

I looked at Lois, who was still scratching Jericho, and I decided to tell her part of the truth. "I got the dog from Keira Fisher. I talked with Superman and my parents about him, and Superman flew him to Smallville for my mom to train him, though of course I don't want anyone else to know that." I sighed and examined my hands, which weren't as fascinating as I was pretending they were. "Really, Jericho is a unique case among the Sallya Technologies experiments. His intelligence was drastically increased, so he was really easy for my mom to train. But if anyone found out my mom helped with Krypto's training, then my parents might be at risk — people might think they're connected to Superman..." Somehow, my explanation had become more of a ramble, and I was beginning to turn red. It didn't help that my parents actually *were* connected to Superman. I felt like I was giving away too much.

"I won't print anything," Lois said softly. She sounded thoughtful, and I looked at her in curiosity. But she was avoiding my eyes.

I felt awkward just sitting there in her apartment. I had received her forgiveness and told her about a private part of my life. However, if anything, she seemed to be clamming up because of it all rather than opening up.

Sighing and figuring she probably just wanted some privacy, I stood up. "I guess — I guess I should tell you 'goodnight.'"

She looked at me, that pensive expression still on her face. "Goodnight to you, too, Clark. And thanks for the chocolate."

"You're welcome, Lois," I told her.

But as she shut the door behind me, I saw a flicker of that strange fire in her eyes which always ignited when she was hot on the trail of a story. There was a strange part of me that wondered — feared — that the story was me. But I dismissed the thought as implausible. She was just thinking about Jericho. That was all.

\*\*\*

The next day at work, however, Lois was acting strange. She was still pensive, but she had also become a little absentminded, and she kept giving me weird looks. After a little thought, I decided to cook dinner for her to "help make up" for upsetting her. When I made the suggestion to Lois, she agreed I could come, and I was glad — not because I was going to spend time with her, though that was a bonus, but because I might be able to figure out what was occupying her mind.

I went to her apartment after work with a bag of food. When she opened the door, she smiled at me and motioned me inside. "You know where the kitchen is."

Chuckling to myself, I went into the kitchen and put my bag on the counter. Then I began dinner preparations.

Finally, I slipped the pan of chicken pizza roll-ups into the oven and went to sit on the couch. Lois disappeared into the bathroom, and my eyes idly fell on the laptop sitting on the coffee table in front of me. There was a paper jammed underneath it,

and I picked it up in morbid curiosity, wondering why it had been so hastily concealed. When I unfolded the paper, I fully expected it to be notes on the story she was avoiding telling me about. What I saw, however, caused my heart to stop.

At the top of the paper, it said:  
CK = S

It could have been an innocuous enough message if that was all there was, but beneath those four characters was a long list of reasons supporting Lois's theory that Clark Kent was Superman. I had been wrong to dismiss the notion that I was the story. It was all here in black and white.

I read the list at super speed, my pulse pounding through my veins and my throat feeling like it was filled with cotton balls. Some supporting reasons included the Krypto/Jericho connection (and his training), the coinciding nature of my increased tolerance to touch with the appearance of Superman (plus a few possible reasons for me having such a phobia in the first place), my frequent disappearances, my story choice for the *Star Wars* fanzine, my similar appearance to Superman, the broken locks that seemed prolific when I went investigating with Lois, the fact that she hadn't seen us in the same place at once, my convenient rescues of her (including when I rescued her from nearly being mowed down by a car)... There were even more reasons listed, some of which were spot-on and some of which were farfetched. But if one thing was clear from that piece of paper...it was that I was in big trouble.

I heard Lois's footsteps approaching, and I quickly put the piece of paper back where it had been before. I smiled at her when she entered the room, but I was shaken inside.

"It smells good," she commented.

"Thanks," I mumbled. But not even a good dinner would be able to make me recover. What in the world was I going to do?

\*\*\*

That night, after checking on the injured bird, I flew to my parents' house in a panic. Fortunately, they hadn't gone to bed yet.

"Clark? What is it?" Mom asked when she saw me.

"I'm in trouble," I said, not mincing words. I proceeded to fill them in on what had happened, and when I was done, I told them, "I have to figure out a way to make Lois think I'm not Superman. Maybe...maybe a lookalike agency would be good...or...a hologram..." My mind was swirling with ideas.

Mom frowned, not understanding what the problem was. "Why? You don't think she'd write a story about it, do you?"

"Of course not," I replied with confidence. "But someone who found out about her knowledge could use her against me. It would put her in danger."

Dad crossed his arms. "I hate to break it to you, Clark, but anyone can be used against you. If you heard a stranger was kidnapped, would you be less likely to save them than Lois?"

I frowned. "Well, no, but —"

"Then don't pretend *that* is the reason you don't want Lois to know about you," Mom admonished. With pursed lips, she asked me, "What *is* the reason, Clark?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, a vision of Lois in my mind's eye. "I'm afraid I might hurt her. Or she could even end up hurting herself." If either of those things happened, it would destroy me. I opened my eyes. "If she knew her partner was Superman, she would probably start taking more risks."

Mom shrugged. "She may start taking more risks — but she also might be more likely to let you in on what she is doing. I know I've heard you complain a few times about Lois rushing into danger without telling you anything about it."

I wanted to argue with her. The thought of Lois getting hurt was enough to make me become extremely irrational. But recognizing that was progress, right?

I thought about what Mom had just said. It was difficult

keeping up with Lois sometimes. But there was a chance she might see the perks of having Superman as a partner — and she might keep me more in on the loop.

"Maybe you're right, Mom," I admitted with a sigh. It was hard to let go of those fears when I had clutched them to myself for so long. "It's been hard living this lie with her. At least now I can explain why I can't be in a relationship with her."

Mom's face soured, but Dad nodded and gave her a warning look. "If that's what you want, son. We won't argue with you anymore." He put an arm around Mom, and she put her head on his shoulder.

An ache of longing welled up within me, but I pushed it aside. I had a set path in life, and I couldn't deviate from it. No matter how good it had felt to kiss Lois Lane.

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### Chapter 33: Sometimes, I Think I Want

*Sometimes, I think I want;*

*Then again, I think I don't.*

*Sometimes, I want to stay here;*

*Then again, I want to leave here.*

— "I Feel so Bad"

\*\*\*

I flew to Metropolis and stood in front of the door to Lois's apartment for ten minutes before I was actually able to gather the courage to knock. When she opened the door, I swept inside, speaking a hundred miles an hour. "I know that you know. Don't ask how I know, but I know. Okay, so I might have looked at something it wasn't my business looking at, but there it is."

She raised an eyebrow and shut the door. "And I thought *I* babbled." She crossed her arms and pinned me with a look. "I assume we're talking about how you moonlight in tights?"

I sighed, feeling as if a sword had been shoved into my chest. "Yes. And I guess the first question I need to ask you is... How mad are you?"

"Am I mad? Yes. But am I so mad that I am going to kick you out of here instead of getting answers to my questions? No. And *stop pacing* before you wear a hole in the floor!"

I reluctantly slowed, looked around, and then sat on the couch. "What's your first question?" I asked, feeling miserable. At least she hadn't made me leave.

"Were you the Black Knight?"

Naturally, she had to ask *that* question first. The urge was strong to deny it — but to what end? My biggest secrets were now out in the open between us, so there seemed to be little point in hiding anything else from her. Looking down at my feet and shuffling them, I admitted, "Yes."

"Why did you lie to me — to the *public* — about that?"

I wrung my hands. "I didn't initially mean to do all this...to be Superman. And so the Black Knight seemed like he had something to hide — which he *did*... Which *I* did. But I didn't want Superman to seem like that. I just wanted to be able to lead a semi-normal life —"

"To lead *two* lives, you mean," she inserted grouchy.

I shook my head. "That's just it, Lois. Superman isn't a person — he's just something I can do. He's a way for me to use my powers to help people. And that's all he does — he doesn't have a life. He doesn't exist."

She stared intently at me and took a few steps toward the couch. "Clark, I could feel your passion on Christmas when you kissed me. But I could also sense how reluctant you felt — and I wondered if it was because of the touch phobia...or because there was something else that made you hesitate."

I opened my mouth to assure her it wasn't *that*, but then she put up her hand to stop me from speaking.

"Did — did you not want a relationship with me because I didn't know you were Superman?" she asked me.

I shook my head, feeling uncomfortable. "No. That's not it."

Lois looked down at her hands, a few of her fingers twitching.

I somehow knew what her next question was, and I hoped she wouldn't ask it. But of course, she did.

"It is because you *are* Superman?"

A great gulf of silence opened between us. Lies and truths warred in my head once again. But hadn't I lied enough to her? Didn't she deserve only the truth from now on?

I finally whispered, "Yes. I'm — I'm so afraid, Lois. I'm afraid I could...hurt you." Just the thought of her broken body beside me was almost enough to break my heart.

Her head shot up. "Clark, we've touched so many times," she told me, her brow furrowed in confusion. "You haven't hurt me before — you're the gentlest man I've ever met."

"But Lois —" I cut off and averted my eyes. My fear rose to the surface, and I finally allowed it to bubble out: "What if — what about intimate situations? What if I can't...restrain my powers? Lois, the thought of accidentally hurting someone — of hurting you...And there is the meteor rock, but..."

I wasn't being very coherent, and Lois questioned, "The what? The 'meteor rock'?"

I winced, my hand coming up to clutch the locket she had given me. "I do have one weakness. When I...came to Earth, these green meteor rocks came with me. When I'm exposed to them, they can take away all my powers and even...kill me. Before I became Superman, I used the meteor rock to take away my powers so I wouldn't hurt people. But they always came back. That's why I kept a shard of the rock in my locket...and that's why I was so upset when my first locket was destroyed."

Lois frowned, still not understanding. "Why did you ever think you would hurt people?"

I exhaled heavily and stood, walking to the window to look outside at nothing in particular. As I flashed back to that terrible revelatory day, I began, "It's all because of Africa."

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*When I woke up in my bed in the morning, my head felt as if it were enshrouded in a cloud. It was only with extreme difficulty that I was able to remember any of what had happened the previous night.*

*I mentally traced that day from class to the Lion Park, from the car with Billy and Kenny to the hoodoo practitioner, and from the hoodoo practitioner to Constance. But all I could remember about what had happened when Constance and I were alone was something shiny.*

*I was disturbed, but I tried to clear my mind. Maybe I would start to remember things more clearly as the day went on.*

*I got up out of bed and stretched, thinking this was maybe one downside to not having a roommate: not knowing how you had gotten back home. But I wouldn't change the situation. My parents and I always purposefully strove to ensure I was put in a single dorm room. Occasionally, I floated in my sleep, and that would have been an incredibly awkward conversation to have with anyone who didn't know my secret. So, I was best off as I was.*

*I looked at my watch and grimaced. It was almost time for class.*

*I was dressed and out the door in a matter of five seconds. I sped outside the dormitory — or "res," as they called it in South Africa — and jogged to the building where my class was. After entering the building, I noticed a commotion in the hallway. Seeing Anthony and Kenny talking, I hurried toward them.*

*"What's going on?" I asked.*

*Kenny turned to Anthony and wagged his eyebrows. "Anthony, you know what? You remind me of the babe."*

*"Babe — what babe?"*

*"The babe with the power."*

*"What power?"*

*"The power of hoodoo."*

*"Who do?"*

*"You do."*

*"Do what?"*

*"Remind me of the babe!"*

*I cleared my throat, and the two turned toward me. "I hate to break up your Labyrinth party, but what's going on?"*

*Anthony answered, "Seems a hoodoo-doer was mysteriously killed, and the police aren't telling anyone anything. I bet Kenny she was offed by a jealous ex-lover. What do you think?"*

*"I think I need to go," I murmured, finding myself suddenly filled with dread. Were they talking about the woman I had seen the day before? How many other hoodoo practitioners were there nearby? It wasn't a coincidence, was it?*

*Giving them a halfhearted wave goodbye, I turned and looked for Constance. She was about to disappear into a classroom, and I called out her name and jogged over to her.*

*She brightened upon seeing me. "Clark."*

*I wasn't nearly so cheerful. "Can I talk to you over there?" I nodded with my head toward a window at the end of the hall where there wasn't much foot traffic.*

*"Anything you want, Clark," she said demurely.*

*We walked to the area I had designated, and I wasted no time in getting to the point. "I think I killed that woman."*

*"Clark, that's crazy," she asserted. She began to turn away, but I put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. She hadn't asked what I was talking about, and it worried me.*

*"It's not crazy. I don't remember what I did last night."*

*She shook her head. "Clark, trust me. That's nonsense."*

*"Do you know what happened?" I asked, pinning her with a hard look.*

*She lowered her eyes guiltily.*

*"Oh, no," I whispered in a choked voice as my heart fell into my feet. It must have been me. I must have killed that woman somehow. Why else would she be avoiding looking at me?*

*Was this...this blackout a natural part of my development as...whatever I was? Was it going to start happening frequently now? How could I have killed someone in cold blood without remembering it?*

*In a daze, I murmured, "I have to — to go tell someone."*

*I walked away from her. I heard her following me, but I didn't pay her any attention. I was too caught up in the horror of what I had done.*

*Before I knew it, I was out of the building and standing in front of a policeman who was looking at a parked car.*

*"Officer," I said quietly, getting the man's attention. "I think I killed that woman." I needed to do time for my crime. I had to make up for this somehow. If I was a murderer, then I deserved to be treated as one. And if I was locked away, then I wouldn't be able to harm anyone else. It was all for the best.*

*The policeman turned to me with an utterly confused expression. "What?"*

*"The woman who died — the hoodoo woman — I think I killed her, but I...I just can't remember."*

*He crossed his arms, looking skeptical. "Look, kid, I heard about what happened to that body — no man could have done that. Don't waste my time."*

*I was beginning to get agitated. "Officer, you're wrong. I am strong enough to have done it. I may not look it, but —"*

*"Only a vicious and bloodthirsty animal would be capable of mutilating that woman like that," the officer insisted. Then his mouth became a thin line, as if he had said too much.*

*My heart felt as if it had caved in. A vicious and bloodthirsty animal. Is that what I have become? I wondered. Is that what I am?*

*I was the strongest living thing on Earth. I had known that for a while. I was strong enough to pinch off a patch of*

someone's skin, tear away a person's arm, or even smash a body to the ground with more force than they would've gotten from jumping off the highest building in the world. My breath caught in my throat as a flash of what the woman's body could look like went through my head. Bruised, broken, battered, bloodied, maimed, mutilated...I could have done worse things to her than any natural or artificial thing on Earth.

I was worse than a vicious and bloodthirsty animal if I had killed her...mutilated her like that.... If I had done that...then I was a monster.

Constance, whose presence I had almost forgotten, spoke up. "He wasn't the one who did it. I did it."

I turned to her. "What?"

"Look, kids," the officer cut in, "I can't tell you anything else about what happened, but I can assure you this: neither of you killed that woman. No man or woman on earth could have done that. You two must have just had a little too much to drink last night."

No man or woman on Earth, I thought. But that's not what I am. I'm a monster.

A great sense of self-loathing welled up within me, and I began, "I didn't drink anything —"

"Just move along, kid. You won't be able to convince anyone you did it."

I wanted to yell at him, to tell him he didn't know me like he thought he did, but I strove to remain calm. "Can I see the body?"

"No," the policeman answered flatly. "The mystery is solved, and the case is closed. Now, beat it, you two."

I watched as he left. Desperation clenched my gut and twisted it. I needed to see that body — I needed more information.

Could I really have killed her and not known it? I wondered. What exactly happened last night?

The idea to bribe the policeman for more information came to me. But I didn't have any money, and the notion of bribing a policeman was too corrupt a move for me to stomach it. The man was just doing his job. There was no need to try to tempt him.

Trying to control my breathing and prevent myself from having a panic attack, I turned to Constance. "Constance, there's something I need to know.... Did you do anything to me last night?"

"No, Clark," she said in a strained voice as she avoided looking at me. "Why would I —" But she cut herself off and raised her eyes to meet mine. "Clark, I'm sorry.... I did hypnotize you. I knew I shouldn't have — but I just couldn't help myself. But Clark, you didn't kill that woman."

I gave her a hard look. Despite the mix of pain and love in her eyes, I realized I couldn't believe anything she said. Mumbling something about not feeling good, I turned and left her. I could feel her gaze following my form the whole way. But one brutal thought kept running through my head: I am a monster.

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I went outside the morgue to look for the body — but I couldn't remember exactly what the woman had looked like. She had dark skin and long hair...and that was all I could recall. When I x-rayed the building, I couldn't find any female body that looked like it had been monstrously beaten by someone with superhuman strength. I wasn't even sure if her body had been moved to that particular morgue — maybe she had already been placed in a coffin or cremated.

All I knew was I couldn't remember much about what had happened after Constance had pulled out that gleaming item which must have been her pocket watch.

I returned to my room and sat on my bed.

I had always thought of my powers as something that set me

apart from others — something that made me different from other people. But I had never really thought about them in terms of their destructive capabilities.

I had done a lot of small things with my powers: quickly clean my room, light a fire for my parents, lift a tractor out of the mud... I had used them for nobler purposes a few times, of course, but none of it had ever seemed to point to any greater goal. My goal had been to hide what I could do. I had never thought — apart from when my powers first started making themselves known — that I would have a problem controlling what I could do.

But now I could finally see things with a disturbing clarity. As I was now, I was a danger to the world. I might have ripped the life out of a woman with my bare hands — and if I had, she would have been completely powerless against my far superior strength. My powers could render her utterly unrecognizable with barely any exertion on my part.

I stood and walked over to my dresser and started removing items. I could pack at a speed much quicker than humans could, but I didn't. There was just one last act I wanted to perform with my powers...and then...then I had to prevent my powers from ever being used to hurt anyone else. The best option was probably going to be cutting myself off from the world entirely.

I couldn't take the risk that I would lose control ever again.

I decided not to say goodbye to my friends. They would assume I had gotten sick again, and they probably wouldn't check up on me until the next day. They would still have expected me to be around.

But when the brilliant eye that was the African sun peeked over the horizon the next day, I was long since gone. Had anyone chosen to investigate my absence, they would have discovered that Clark Jerome Kent was not registered on any airline flight.

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"After I learned that woman had died, I wanted to hide myself away from everyone, but my parents were so against that idea that I decided to use the meteor rock to take away my powers," I told Lois, daring to glance into her eyes, which were still steadily gazing at me. So far, I had seen nothing to suggest that what I'd told her disgusted her, and it gave me a strange sort of hope.

I could still remember with awful vividness that fight I had had with my parents about my decision. But I had been unrelenting. I had known that I was a danger to everyone because of my powers — I had known that it was either cut myself off from all humans or make myself just as weak as them. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I had hurt or killed a person. It was bad enough when I couldn't remember hurting anyone and I was left with only the brutish pictures of my imagination and nightmares — if I had ever been conscious while hurting another living being, it would have completely destroyed me.

"I know now that I didn't kill her," I continued, turning toward Lois. "But I didn't know it at the time — and the thought that someone could control me like I believed Constance had was terrifying. I couldn't let myself keep these powers unless I could be certain that I would always maintain control over them. I saw them as a curse...until you came along." I gave her a small smile. "You helped me realize that my powers could be a gift — I could use them to bring hope instead of destruction. That was a hard realization to make. But I finally decided to stop using the shard to take away my powers. The lead paint on the locket blocked the shard's effects until I opened it. And I had to open it every day to ensure I was without my powers."

"Clark —"

"But even if I can use my abilities for good," I continued, cutting her off, "I still have to be careful. I need to remain calm and collected when I save people. But I couldn't be that way in... bed." The last word was spoken softly.

“Clark, you’re an idiot.”

“What?” I asked stupidly, blinking at her.

“You say that you remain calm and collected — but I know you’re affected any time you see someone suffering, even if you try to hide it. I know you would be just as unlikely to hurt a...a lover...as you would a child you were removing from the wreckage of a car.” She crossed her arms. “And besides, shouldn’t it be the choice of your...your lover...whether or not she wanted to be put at risk — if indeed there *is* a risk? Isn’t it unfair for one person to make all the decisions in a relationship?”

Protesting, I said, “Lois — ”

“Clark,” she cut me off. “Not even Superman can stand alone.” She gave me a stern glance.

I looked down at my hands uncomfortably. I had been trying to stand alone for so long — it was difficult to think about leaning on others again. But I did want to. I really did.

“So, you...kept that poisonous stone in your locket?” she asked me, staring at my necklace.

I winced. “Yes.”

“And it...hurts you?”

“Yeah,” I said softly.

Lois hesitated. “I guess...I guess I understand why you used it. It must have been hard to think you had...killed someone like that.”

I closed my eyes, my chest feeling tight. “You have no idea.” All those years of anguish — it had been pure torture.

She touched my arm, and I opened my eyes, strangely surprised by the sensation.

“Thank you for telling me about all this, Clark,” she told me.

I gave her a small smile. “It feels good to tell you things.” It was the truth. It felt wonderful to no longer be hiding anything from her.

“I’m glad.” She crossed her arms. “Because you’re going to be telling me a lot of other things in the future.”

“Lois — ”

“Clark,” she returned, her gaze still on the locket. She abruptly stepped forward and put her arms around my neck.

“Lois?” I asked in confusion, resisting the urge to step backward.

And then she had unclasped the locket and was clutching it in her hand.

“Lois — ” I said, feeling the rise of panic.

“It’s okay, Clark. You don’t need that shard anymore. You can trust yourself.”

I stared at her, protests caught in my throat. But as she stared at me with that characteristic fire in her eyes, I forced myself to simply accept the loss of the locket. There was no need for me to wear it. And though the loss of my grandmother’s picture might be a little saddening, I had other pictures of her. It was time to let the shard go.

I gave Lois a half smile, but before I could say anything, Lois was telling me, “But you can’t just take everything on yourself, Clark. For a relationship to work, both people have to be involved in decisions.”

But the fear of hurting her still gripped at my heart, and I whispered, “Lois — ”

“Clark, just go home and think about it.”

“Lois — ” I tried again.

“I said *go home* and think about it.”

I sighed, poised to argue with her, but she looked so resolute that I finally turned and walked to the door. “Goodnight, Lois.”

I went home, but I didn’t get much sleep that night. I kept running into the same question: Was Lois right that I shouldn’t be making the decision by myself that we couldn’t be in a relationship? I didn’t know the answer. But the more I thought about having a future with Lois, the more I knew that it was what I wanted more than anything else in the world.

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### Chapter 34: That Magic Hour of Bliss

*This could be the kiss*

*To unlock heaven’s door;*

*That magic hour of bliss*

*That we both waited for.*

— “Tonight is so Right for Love”

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The next day, I was continuing to contemplate the future, but I still remained undecided about whether I should be in a relationship with Lois Lane.

Lois and I worked together as usual, but I sensed we had entered a pause of sorts...an interval that screamed “unfinished business.” The next step belonged to me. The figurative ball was in my court.

The problem was I was no closer to a decision than I had been when I left Lois’s apartment the night before. My confidence in my ability to make good choices was close to zero considering my batting average. Choosing to expose myself to poison every day? Though born of desperation and misinformation, that had been a spectacularly *stupid* plan of action....

And this time, there was something else at stake. This time, my decision affected Lois as well.... And if there was one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world, it was to keep from hurting her.

Lunchtime was approaching when a woman came storming out of Perry’s office. The Editor-in-Chief followed her, calling out, “Alice, sweetheart — ”

But his wife completely ignored him, disappearing inside the elevator without a backwards glance.

When Perry saw everyone looking at him, he bellowed, “What are you all doing standing around like cows out to pasture? Is this a newspaper or a dairy farm? Get back to work!” He disappeared into his office and slammed the door.

I gave him ten minutes to cool down before I went to check on him. I hesitated at the door and decided to knock before entering.

“What?” he growled. I was suddenly glad I hadn’t just burst in.

“Uh, Chief?” I ventured tentatively as I cracked open the door. I felt a little like a mouse facing a great tiger.

Perry looked up from his desk. “Come in,” he said, his voice not as vitriolic.

I went inside and softly shut the door. “Are you okay, Chief?” Judging by his posture and depressed expression, he wasn’t, but I didn’t know what else to say.

He sighed. “It’s Alice. She dropped in on me, wanting to take me to lunch, but I just don’t have the time. She ran out on me, and I knew she was angry, but I never expected....”

“You never expected what?” I asked gently, fearing the answer.

“I never expected her to call and say she’s leaving me.”

The pain on his face was undeniable. This had to be one of the worst things that had ever happened to Perry White. There were two loves in his life — the *Planet* and his wife. To have to choose one over the other had to be breaking his heart.

But even if he could accept his defeat, I wasn’t going to. “Are you going to fight for her?” I asked him seriously.

He opened his eyes and laughed bitterly. “Clark, I’ve breathed the *Planet* for so many years it’s like oxygen to me. I could go up and work with the suits, but that just isn’t me. No, this is it. The game’s called on account of an unweatherable storm.”

“Don’t talk like that, Chief,” I said with as much firmness as I could muster. “What if — what if you got an Assistant Editor-in-Chief of sorts? Someone whose job was specifically to help

you with all your tasks — to help take some of the load off?”

He laughed. “Who in the Sam Hill would be willing to do that?”

I had an answer for him. “What about Jimmy? He wants to do more with his life. He never gets to see his father, and he sees you as... well, as a surrogate. I think it would be good for you both.”

Perry raised an eyebrow skeptically. “How could Jimmy help run a newspaper?”

I crossed my arms. “You started out green, too. He just needs a little guidance — I’ve already seen a hint of you in him. It won’t take him long at all to learn how to keep Ralph in line. Remember how well he handled the story about Lex Luthor’s death? He has potential, Chief. And if you had help, you could spend more time with Alice.” But Perry still didn’t look convinced, and I told him, “All Jimmy needs is a good teacher. And that’s what you are. All *you* need is someone teachable to take some of the load off you. That’s what Jimmy is.”

He tilted his head. “I don’t know, Clark...”

“If you *can* realize all your dreams, then you should. Not everyone has that kind of luxury.”

The Chief Editor sighed. “Clark — ”

“Perry,” I returned stubbornly.

He looked down at his blue pencil. “Maybe you’re right. With an assistant, maybe I could even spend some more time with my kids — go on a vacation with them. It’s certainly been a long time since I’ve done that.”

I smiled at him. “Good. Just when you see Alice next, don’t forget to grovel.”

His laughter followed me as I left his office. I hadn’t gone more than a few feet when I paused and stared at Lois’s desk. My conversation with Perry had inspired me. If we didn’t try to keep what was most important to us in life, then what kind of lives would we have? Maybe my fears were valid — and maybe they weren’t. But wasn’t love worth taking a chance for? Wasn’t *Lois* worth taking a chance for? Lois knew all about me, and *she* seemed willing to take the chance. Did I want to live a shadow of a life and ignore the desires of the one who made me feel as if I were truly living?

Sometimes, you just needed to move forward. Life was full of bumps and potholes and chasms and mountains and detours. But if you didn’t go forth prepared to face all that, then you weren’t making any progress. It would just be standing still.

My heart pounding in anticipation, I approached Lois’s desk.

The love of my life — the woman I loved with all my heart — looked up at me when I stopped in front of her. “Yes?”

Swallowing, I forced out: “Lois, would you go on a date with me tomorrow night?”

She raised her eyebrows, obviously surprised. “You mean, like a real date, where I spend an hour picking out the right dress, twenty minutes deciding on the right jewelry, and ten minutes over our appointed meeting time working on my makeup? And then where at the end I’m walked up to my door and given a gut-wrenching kiss goodnight? You mean like that kind of date?”

My mouth widened into a goofy grin as I realized my dreams could be coming true. “Yes.”

“Okay. Sure.” She went back to work as if our exchange had been nothing out of the ordinary, but there was a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth for the rest of the afternoon.

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The next day, I was on pins and needles. What if I was making a big mistake? What if Lois went on a date with me and laughed in my face because I was a boring dinner partner? What if I had to dash off in the middle of eating to make a Superman rescue? It had certainly happened enough at lunchtime.

When Perry called me into his office, it just made me even more anxious.

“Sit down, son,” he told me as I stepped inside, and I

complied.

I swallowed, resisting the urge to wring my hands. “What is it?”

“I just wanted to know if you knew what you were getting into,” he told me.

“Sir?” I asked in confusion.

“I know.”

“You... know?”

“About your date,” he specified. “Now, I don’t want my best team torn apart by romantic problems. Are you sure you’re in for the long haul? Are you sure the bluebird of happiness will be alighting on your shoulder at last?”

I considered his questions carefully, not wanting to simply give him an easy answer. *Was* I in for the long haul?

Once Lois Lane had stepped into my life, everything had changed forever. She knew better than anyone how to make my spirits rise and fall. She was the breath of fresh air after a frustrating day, the sun shining down on a frequently cloudy world, the wind beneath my invisible wings... For me, she was the beginning and end of everything — my life had only truly begun when she entered into it, and it would end if she ever passed from it. The bluebird of happiness had already alighted on my shoulder — and that bluebird’s name was “Lois Lane.”

I smiled at Perry White, my heart soaring now that the load that had been weighing me down was gone. “Yes, I’m sure. I — well, I love her.”

Perry gave a bark of laughter. “Son, about half the newsroom has known that since you knocked her off her feet the first day you came here.”

“What?” I asked, embarrassed.

“It hasn’t been a secret that you two have been mooning after each other.” He shook his head in amusement.

“M-mooning?”

“But the point is... you need to be completely sure.” His expression became stern. “Lois is like a daughter to me, and I want to know you’ll treat her right. Now, think about this long and hard, son.” He pointed his finger at me. “Are you sure you won’t break her heart? Have you, uh — have you told her everything about yourself that she needs to know?”

That was perhaps as close to admitting my secret as Perry had come. “Yes, Perry,” I told him, swallowing. “She knows everything about me that she needs to.”

“Super,” he proclaimed, and I flushed. If I’d had even the tiniest sliver of a doubt before about whether he really knew my secret, it had to be gone now. The Elvis-loving Tennessean did *not* pepper conversations with the word “super.”

When I left his office, I ran into Jimmy, who was looking happier than I had seen him in a long time. “C.K.!” he exclaimed. “You’ll never believe this. The Chief asked me to be his assistant editor — and I’m going to get a raise like you wouldn’t *believe!*”

I grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s great, Jimmy. I’m glad to hear you’re moving up in the world. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, C.K.,” he replied happily. “And by the way — congrats on your date with Lois. You deserve it.”

I grinned to myself as I watched him bound off. The day was going splendidly, and it had barely begun.

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That night, I stood outside Lois’s nervously, staring down at my watch.

I had two minutes to stand there and get my bearings. I did a final catalog of my outfit — charcoal suit, freshly pressed white shirt, shining shoes, spot-free glasses, pocket handkerchief, and one of the ties Lois had given me for Christmas — and then inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of the freshly bought bouquet of roses I was holding as if it were my lifeline. I wasn’t sure why I was so nervous — I saw Lois every day. But there was

something different about tonight. Something scary and final and... exhilarating.

I had been holding myself back for so long that it felt wonderful to let myself fall. Lois Lane had caught my heart without even trying. I had been falling ever since I had knocked her to the ground on our first meeting. Little had I known how much my life was going to change in just a short time.

Once, I had avoided human contact and forced myself to hover on the outside. Lois had pulled me in without trying and made me feel like I belonged. I was indebted to her, and I loved her with every fiber of my being. I loved how she would get upset when the store was out of Double Fudge Crunch bars, how she would argue with a ten-year-old who cut in line, how she believed the injustices of the world could be addressed one criminal at a time.... She was everything to me — my savior, my colleague, my friend....

And soon — soon she might become even more than that. But we would take it one step at a time. And the first step would be me taking her on a date to a small Italian place where I had made a reservation. And to do that, I would have to knock on her door.

Taking in one last deep breath, I lifted my hand and rapped on the wood.

She unlocked the door but didn't open it. "Come in!" she called out.

Opening the door warily, I looked inside. She had gone back to her bedroom or bathroom, so I just stepped in. I smiled to myself. She *had* warned me she would spend "ten minutes over our appointed meeting time" doing her makeup. Unfortunately, it just gave me more time to be nervous.

I walked around Lois's apartment, finally ending up in front of the fish tank. As I stared into the water, fish passing by my vision, I reflected once more on how happy I was to finally be in this position. My stubbornness had held me back — but now I was seeing how so much of that pain hadn't been necessary. I was ready to move on. Like the pigeon resting at my apartment, Lois had been helping me heal my past injuries. She was the reason I was flying again. There was something sobering yet exciting about that thought.

"You ready?" Lois asked from behind me.

The corners of my mouth lifted. "Yes, I am." Then I turned around. My breath caught in my throat.

She was wearing a simple but elegant black dress with thin straps. Three strands of pearls were wrapped around her neck, and pearl-drop earrings dangled below her ears. She was absolutely stunning.

"You look... wonderful," I managed.

Lois smiled at me. "Careful — your farmboy compliments might make me blush."

I stood there staring at her for a few seconds before she ventured, "Those for me?"

"Huh?" I looked down at the bouquet I was holding. "Oh! Yes. Here." Abashed, I handed her the roses.

She took them and put them in a vase after filling it with water. "Thank you, Clark. They're beautiful."

As she walked back to me, I stepped forward and took both her hands in mine. With careful deliberation — surprised at my daring — I leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "No, *you're* beautiful, Lois," I whispered in her ear. I sensed more than saw her shiver, and I took a few steps back, though I still held on to one of her hands. "Let's go."

The feel of her fingers seemed to make mine tingle, and I refused to release her hand until we were at the restaurant and had been led to our table.

As I pulled out Lois's chair for her, she commented, "I was beginning to think you would never let go."

"I almost didn't," I admitted with a smile, sitting down. "I

think I'm beginning to get addicted to Lois Lane."

She laughed. "Better *me* than drugs or alcohol."

"Why would I need those when just being with you gets me high?" I asked with a smile. I made a motion with my hand on the table to try to encourage her to lace her fingers with mine.

As she did so, she rolled her eyes. "Enough, Kent. You're getting too sappy."

"Clark," I said softly. "Remember?"

"How could I forget when you're constantly reminding me?" she returned in good humor.

I just smiled and stared back at her.

Blushing, she ducked her head, her eyes falling on her purse. "Oh, I almost forgot — I have something for you." She began digging around in her purse. "Close your eyes."

I grinned, still watching her. I could have done that all night and been content.

When she looked up, she tilted her head. "I thought I told you to *close your eyes*," she reprimanded me.

Chuckling, I murmured, "Fine," and I shut my eyes. Then she told me to hold out my hands, and I did so. And then I heard a tiny jingle and felt the cool sensation of metal against my palms.

Opening my eyes, I saw a locket there. But this one wasn't white — it was silver. I rubbed a thumb over the locket, a great gladness coming over me. I didn't know what the contents of this locket were... but I *did* know that whatever was inside couldn't hurt me.

"Open it," Lois said softly, and I obeyed her.

I opened the locket and smiled. Lois had removed the picture of my grandmother from the necklace she'd taken from me and placed it inside on the left side of this new locket. And on the right side, she had placed a picture of her own smiling face.

After gazing downward with great love at those two pictures, I closed the locket and pressed it against my heart, meeting Lois's eyes with mine. "Thank you," I whispered. That which had been a symbol of pain and destruction had become a symbol of love and hope, uniting the past with the present and pointing toward the future. "It's wonderful."

As I stared at her, I reflected to myself that she was as beautiful as an angel....

But then I corrected myself mentally. She wasn't as beautiful as an angel. She *was* an angel.

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Our date went perfectly. Superman didn't have to make an appearance, and we were both delighted when I coaxed a skilled violinist over to our table to serenade us. Dessert was, as my dinner companion proclaimed it, "divine," and Lois and I talked and laughed as if we had been friends for years. I was so glad to have traded exposure to meteor rock for exposure to Lois Lane. The one drowned me in despair — the other lifted me into orbit. Lois had become everything to me.

After we were done with dinner, I took Lois to her apartment, my head soaring up in the clouds. The sheer joy of being with her and knowing that it could be like this forever was enough to make all my burdens feel light as a feather.

Lois and I stood in front of her door with a strange sense of expectancy. I lifted my hand and caressed her cheek. My throat felt like it was choking up, but I had to speak nonetheless. The words I said next were difficult to get out, but that didn't diminish how important they were to me. "Lois... I love you so much."

If my head had been up in the clouds before, it was about to rise up to the moon, as Lois whispered something I had been longing to hear: "I love you, too, Clark."

Though small, her words were everything I had dreamed of. But I had one final question, one uncertainty that I needed to clear up.

"Clark?" I asked, almost fearing the answer, "or Superman?"

Her initial reaction was surprise mixed with confusion, but that quickly morphed into slight embarrassment. “Clark,” she answered me firmly. “Superman...he was...well, I admit that I was taken in by his powers and his goodness, but then I realized that what I really wanted in a man...were qualities *you* had.”

I remembered being in her room after her aborted wedding. And I remembered the joy I had felt at her escaping a marriage with Luthor — and the pain I had felt on being convinced that she loved Superman. Dumbfounded as I put the pieces together, I asked, “You meant *me*?” I shook my head in disbelief. “When you said you were in love with someone else, you meant *Clark*?”

She nodded, her brow furrowed slightly. “Of course. Who else?”

I stared at her in shock. She had loved me for that long? How could I have been so blind? “I thought you meant Superman,” I admitted, wanting to kick myself.

She grinned, taking my hand in hers and squeezing it. “Well, I *suppose* I can love him, too — things being what they are.”

My heart was soaring out past the moon now — it was dancing among the stars.

“When did you realize you felt this way?” I murmured, barely able to speak.

“I began to realize my feelings for you around the time Lex proposed,” she said, coloring a little. “When I first met you, you knocked me off my feet literally.” She gave a small nervous laugh, averting her eyes from me, but I lifted her chin to get her to look at me. With a smile, she continued, “My feelings for you were intense from the beginning — I felt like you needed me. It had been so long since anyone had, and it felt good. But when I realized how much I needed you, it terrified me. Somehow, I knew you were hiding something from me, though I didn’t know what it was. But despite that, I felt so strongly for you... Yet your former phobia of touch worried me almost as much as the strength of my feelings. I wasn’t sure if you wanted a relationship with me, and I didn’t want to feel pain like that Claude had caused me ever again. Surely, you could see how awkward I was around you...”

I looked down at my feet, a bit abashed, and I mumbled, “I was just trying to keep you from noticing how awkward *I* felt around you.” I finally brought my eyes back up to meet hers.

She gave me a crooked smile. “Well...Lex offered a safe choice for me, so I took it. With him, I would be following my head rather than my heart. He wouldn’t be able to hurt me the way a rejection from you would have. But when I walked down the aisle to marry him, I realized I couldn’t go through with it. I couldn’t marry him because I was utterly in love with you.”

“You called off your wedding for *me*?” I asked in amazement as another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. Luthor had actually been *right* when he blamed me for his having been left at the altar? “Because you loved *me*?”

Lois’s mouth quirked upward in a grin. “Don’t sound so surprised. You *are* occasionally lovable...”

“Just occasionally?” I returned in a murmur. But I quickly sobered, thinking of the needlessly torturous journey I had been on. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a doofus,” I mumbled. I really *had* made everything so much harder than necessary. But we had at last ended up like this. Despite all my fumbling and all my mistakes, it seemed things were just as Constance had said: some things were meant to be. My joy in that fact was beyond articulation.

Lois, oblivious to my thoughts, chuckled. “I love you because you’re a doofus.”

Though I smiled back at her, I felt an intense seriousness descend upon me. “Do you think this — this thing between us will last forever?” I asked her, rubbing my thumb across her cheek. I almost feared her reply — wondered if I would be scaring her away.

But when she answered, I knew it was with all of her heart: “Yes.”

I threw a thousand thanks up to God and asked her in a tone much less serious, “Does that mean you’ll be my girlfriend?”

She laughed. “Only if you’ll be my boyfriend.”

“Do you mind that I have a dog?” I asked with a grin.

“Just kiss me, Clark.”

I laughed at the hint of a command in her voice. “I’ll gladly do that, my lady.”

And then I did.

As I relished the feel of her lips pressed to mine, of my hands resting on her waist, of her arms wrapped around my neck, I realized that I had finally stepped out of the shadows and into the sunlight. No longer did I feel inconsequential and desire incorporeal anonymity. I was finally willing to accept what I had been given and acknowledge that my life was centered on something: Lois Lane. In just a short time, she had become my sun...my light... And with her in my life, there could be no shadows.

But that was just fine — because I no longer needed to hide.

THE END

**Author’s Note:** Smallville was an inspiration in regard to the “Red-Blue Blur” and the dog Shelby (in Smallville, Shelby and another dog are super-powered by doses of Kryptonite).