

# Love Me Back to Life

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Rated: PG-13 for sexual situations

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Summary: Set right after the episode Lucky Leon, Clark is left reeling over the fact that his kiss with Lois resulted in his failure to save Mayson Drake's life. Fearing he may never be able to reconcile the two halves of himself, he begins to spiral. As Lois watches her partner come apart, she makes a last ditch effort to save him by taking him on a road trip for a story investigation that doesn't exist.

Story Size: 51,643 words (280Kb as text)

Authors' Note: This is a co-written story from me (Sara Kraft aka KSaraSara) and my fabulous, talented dear friend, lovetvfan!

So, this started out as a general plan for a fun and waffy fic with a side of angst...and then it morphed. Massively. So much so that, by the time we had KathyB have a look to BR, it seems that two stories had diverged in a Google Doc, and we chose both. Oops! So then we worked to untangle what had been the original story, cutting out chunks, adding others, and tidying up the characterization all around. Now, we've ended up with a story we didn't quite intend to write, but we think it's even better than what we'd planned. And longer. It's so much longer.

Of course, we'd like to thank KathyB for taking the time to offer her comments and suggestions as BR! It definitely would not be the story it is today without her valuable input.

We are both a little fanatic about finding songs that fit the characters and the stories, so it wasn't surprising that we started a playlist/soundtrack. And you probably won't be surprised to find out that it ended up being a really long list, especially given that we had two stories tangled together at one point. So...you may find songs in our playlist that don't seem to fit, but we've left them on the list because all of them in some way inspired what we wrote and we most definitely borrowed lyrics. (You can find this list of songs in the TOC.) We, of course, do not own any of the rights to things and we are making no money from the use of them.

Similarly, we do not own the characters or any of the recognizable dialogue from Lois & Clark; we just like to play with them. (And there might well be a few lines inspired by a Buffy episode...thanks, Joss!)

A huge thanks to GooBoo for editing this for the archive!

Soundtrack can be found here:

You're What I Look For by Glass Tiger

Superman (It's Not Easy) by Five for Fighting

To Make You Feel My Love by Trisha Yearwood

I Can't Make You Love Me by Bonnie Raitt

Insensitive by Jann Arden

Completely by Jennifer Day

In Your Eyes by Peter Gabriel

The Scientist by Coldplay

Only Human by Delta Goodrem

Say Something by A Great Big World & Christina Aguilera

Someone You Loved by Lewis Capaldi

On Your Shore by Charlotte Martin

I'll Be There for You by Bon Jovi

It's Only Love by Def Leppard

Just Give Me a Reason by Pink

Beside You Marianas Trench

Save the World by Bon Jovi

I Am by Bon Jovi

Stand by You Rachel Platten

Love Me Back to Life by Bon Jovi

Superman Tonight by Bon Jovi

Cry by Faith Hill

Iris by Goo Goo Dolls

When You Lie Next to Me by Kellie Coffey

Angel by Sarah McLachlan

I Will Be by Leona Lewis

Open All Night by Bon Jovi

Let Me Be the One by Def Leppard

I love you by Billie Eilish

I'll Stand By You by Pretenders

All of Me by John Legend

Thank You For Loving Me by Bon Jovi

All About Loving You by Bon Jovi

Now and Forever by Richard Marx

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## Chapter 1

He shouldn't be here. Lois snuck a worried glance over

at Clark. She'd been doing it all day, trying not to be too obvious about it. But she honestly didn't need to worry about subtlety or subterfuge. He was zoning out again, pen in hand but his chin resting on his palm while he stared off into space. Earth to Clark, she wanted to yell. This was the third time today she'd caught him zoning, though last time it had almost looked like he was nodding off. At least the workday was almost over.

He really shouldn't be here. But according to Perry, he was refusing to take more time off than just the day or two he'd had from when it happened until the funeral. He insisted he was fine and needed to work harder on their investigation into Mayson Drake's death, find who had planted the bomb in her car and what "resurrection," her last word, had meant.

Lois was no stranger to throwing herself into her work to avoid her personal life or using her anger and grief about a situation to fuel her drive to get to the story. It was part of what had made her an award-winning reporter. But Clark... Clark didn't function like that. He was trying to, and it wasn't working.

And while she didn't think he was outright trying to avoid his personal life, it was hard not to be hurt by it. Even when the evidence of his obvious grief and maladaptive coping mechanisms were staring her right in the face. Well...staring into space. Still.

Lois wondered what she should do, what she *could* do. He hadn't seemed terribly receptive to her attempts to get him to talk so far. From what she could tell, he was shutting down everyone's attempts to get him to talk, hers included. But she was his best friend, damn it. Why wasn't he talking to her?

And why hadn't he said anything about...

She knew why. It was selfish of her to even think about their first kiss right now when Clark was hurting. She hated herself for it, and felt beyond guilty for even contemplating bemoaning the fact that the kiss and Mayson's death had happened on the same night. What kind of person had thoughts like that?

She put her hands up to her lips as she remembered the way his lips had felt against hers. How the kiss had been brief and warm for just a moment, and then they'd been drawn back to each other's lips for a deep and soul-searing kiss. She'd felt like she was floating, her whole body tingling. She opened her eyes, not quite realizing that she'd closed them to delight in the memory.

Her eyes went to find Clark's lips. Pursed in thought. But at least he was poking at the keyboard this time, seemingly being somewhat productive.

She wanted nothing more than to feel those lips against hers again. For far more than one kiss. She wanted another date, a second chance to end it right by kissing him goodnight thoroughly instead of slamming the door in his face.

But that was going to have to wait.

Right now, as much as she hated delaying the beginnings of what looked to be a promising relationship, her best friend needed his best friend. And maybe...maybe he didn't realise he could still talk to her about anything even in the midst of this burgeoning relationship? Well, she

supposed that wasn't strictly true...she honestly might have quailed if he'd invited her over to his place for her advice on wallpaper samples or something so soon after their first date and first kiss.

But this was serious. Really serious. The kind of serious that pushed aside all the awkwardness and the only thing that really mattered was being there for your friend, no matter what was going on between you at the time.

She suspected Clark didn't realise that. Or he was in denial about everything and didn't realise how he was acting. Or both, maybe.

Ever since the night of Mayson's death, he'd had late mornings, terse conversations, even more frequent excuses to escape her presence for the flimsiest of reasons.

Even Perry had noticed it, though being the boss that he was, he seemed far more concerned about Clark's well-being than any potential lost productivity.

And while Perry didn't know everything that had happened between them recently, he knew enough to gently inquire as to whether she could convince Clark to take any additional time off.

They could both tell that he hadn't been sleeping well. He had dark circles

under his eyes. And Clark's usual sunny and friendly disposition was all but gone. That was what worried Lois the most. Even on his worst days, Clark still spared a smile and brief pleasantries with everyone on the path from the elevator to his desk.

Today, he'd shuffled in 37 minutes late without *any* excuse, hardly even said good morning to her, and forgotten her coffee. Not that she needed him to get her coffee. She could get her own coffee. It's just that he always did. So she always waited. Because it seemed to make him happy. And it made her feel a little bit cherished.

Such a simple thing. And yet...it almost seemed like everything. An unspoken agreement between them that they hadn't ever acknowledged or bothered to define. Clark brings Lois her coffee. Maybe it was silly, but it meant the world to her, and she was pretty sure it meant something to Clark, too.

So, yeah. He'd forgotten to get her coffee, and their world as she knew it started to crumble.

She had to do something to help him. She had to get him to talk because that was the only thing she could think of that would help him. People needed to let out their grief, not bottle it up. Right?

Right. So it was decided. She would help her best friend because she cared about him and hated seeing him like this, so un-Clark.

And to be totally honest, it was to help herself, too. Not because she wanted a second date (though she did, desperately), but because she'd gotten a weird feeling today, a dull ache in her chest or maybe the pit of her stomach. She'd missed his morning smile and her first cup of perfectly made coffee, and watching him like this hurt.

She took a deep breath, gathering up her courage, and pushed away from her desk to stand. She walked slowly over to Clark's desk.

"Hey," she said softly when she got there, lightly tracing a small patch of wood grain on the corner of his desk with

her fingertips.

He looked up from his computer and gave her a small nod. “Hey,” he replied. “What’s up?”

His eyes looked so tired. He looked so tired. “Is it...can I sit?” she asked and gestured to the guest chair at his desk.

He nodded.

She dragged it from the front of his desk over to the side, wincing as it made the occasional squeal as it scraped the floor. She positioned it close to his chair, but hopefully not too close to make him uncomfortable or jumpy.

He eyed her curiously but didn’t say anything, as if it just took too much effort. He was so tired; maybe it did. He wasn’t annoyed. Just quiet.

“So...Clark...I was thinking we could grab a bite to eat after work. Um, not a date. Like, just as friends. Not that I’m saying I want to be just friends! I...uh...I just mean, it seems like you could use a friend, and I’m your friend. I know things between us are, um, a little...different right now, but I wanted to let you know that I’m still your best friend.”

He gave her a small smile. He always seemed to be amused by her babbling. But just as quickly, his face fell back into an impassive look.

“Please don’t do that,” she whispered.

He lifted an eyebrow in question. “Do what?” he asked quietly.

“Pretend you’re okay,” she replied, keeping her voice low so that those who were still around in the newsroom wouldn’t hear. “You’re not okay, Clark,” she pleaded, a touch of desperation sneaking into her voice. “Come to dinner with me, and let’s talk. You can’t keep this all bottled up. It’s not something to deal with alone. Let me help you.”

She watched the emotions play over his face as he contemplated his reply. She wished she could figure out what they were. She was usually much better at reading his emotions.

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Okay, Lois,” he said simply, his voice thick.

She reached out to touch his hand. “Thank you.” She cleared her throat and took her hand back, reminding herself that thinking about how warm his hand was and how just touching him made her heart flip and her chest tingle was not appropriate right now. “I...I’ll be done in about 20, okay?”

He nodded and smiled again, almost a full smile this time, as she got up and made her way back to her desk.

He’d smiled a little at her. That was good, right? They had been a bit half-hearted, but still there. She sat back down at her desk and tried to focus on cleaning up her notes and not on her upcoming dinner with Clark and what the heck she was going to say to him.

She wanted to just call it a day now, but she knew she’d want her notes complete and as fresh from her mind as possible. Perry wasn’t complaining about the lack of productivity, but she knew she needed to do her best to pick up as much of Clark’s slack as she could. That’s what partners were for.

She was just about to finish up when Clark suddenly popped up from his chair and looked around in a panic. He glanced at the elevator. Then the window. Why was he

panicking? He finally dialed in on her face as he was grabbing his coat and heading towards the stairwell.

Oh no. Here it comes.

“Lois, I’m sorry. I just remembered I have to get my mom a Mother’s Day card before the store closes and then get it in the mail before it’s too late. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And then he was gone, the stairwell door banging shut in his wake.

It was July.

The anger and the hurt raced to the surface, each demanding her full attention. She held them at bay as best she could while she shut her computer down and hastily gathered her purse and coat. The fat tears started spilling before she made it to the elevator, thankfully alone. She jabbed her finger shakily at the P2 button, hoping that she had indeed parked on level 2 today.

Lois was relieved to see the Jeep sitting on a practically empty level 2. The tears were in full force now, her breath was coming in shuddering heaves. Her shaky hands and blurred vision made it all the harder to get into the car, but she finally made it inside and shut the door.

Then she let the sobs take over, wracking her body. “Why, Clark?” she whimpered between sobs. Why couldn’t he trust her?

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## Chapter 2

Clark couldn’t remember the last good night’s sleep he’d had.

Every night the dream was the same. No, not a dream... a living nightmare — one that haunted him almost constantly ever since it had happened.

During the day he could try to forget — could concentrate on other things. But the moment his head hit the pillow, and his eyes shut at night he saw it — the explosion that killed Mayson Drake playing over and over again in his head with full visuals and surround sound.

He hadn’t gotten there in time. The fastest man in the world, and he’d been too late.

Ten seconds.

He’d thought about that span of time a lot the past couple of days. He could do so much in ten seconds. He’d timed it. He could clean his apartment in ten seconds, spin in and out of his suit five times and fly around the block twice.

Every day he experimented just to see how much he could do in ten seconds, all the while reminded of everything he’d failed to do in that same amount of time. He called it experimenting, but really it was torture.

All it had taken was ten seconds of his life — ten seconds when he had allowed himself to let go of Superman and be present as Clark...to be with Lois...to kiss her.

Ten seconds. That was all it took for Mayson Drake to die.

And he was responsible. It was his fault.

He’d lost people before. Seen death...gotten there too late. He had been performing rescues on some level since he was a teenager. It had always been hard but, since assuming the mantle of Superman, it had gotten immeasurably harder. The sheer amount of rescues he performed was up, of course, and every time he failed to

save someone, it quietly chipped away at his soul.

He had been feeling it especially strongly ever since Lex Luthor had died. It wasn't as if he felt guilty for what happened to Luthor. After all, Luthor had been the one to jump. But watching someone he knew — even if it was someone he hated — die, had triggered something inside of him. After that, every failed rescue sat heavier and heavier with him.

It had planted a seed of anxiety in the pit of his stomach, at first just barely noticeable — only on the bad days — a small, insidious thing. It was constantly on his mind that one day he would fail to save someone he *did* care about. What would he do when that happened? Who would he talk to? Who would he turn to?

His parents were a wonderful source of support — they always had been — but they weren't enough. He couldn't call every time he got there too late. That wasn't fair to them; it wasn't their burden to bear.

And he ached to think that the one person he wanted to lean on when something like that happened never knew what was *really* upsetting him. The true and complete relationship he'd yearned for all his life, the kind where you supported each other through *everything*? He wanted that, desperately so, with Lois. Sure, she was his best friend now, and he'd opened up to her more than anyone in his life, save for his parents. But he hadn't *truly* opened up to her. She'd shared her worst days, her secret fears...but he couldn't. Wouldn't?

He'd thought they were on that path...they *were* on that path, but was it something he should even consider, having a relationship? He had never paused to consider what he was trading for his so-called happily ever after. Could he afford to devote more time in his day to a relationship? Wasn't that a selfish thing to do, when every minute he wasn't helping as Superman was one where countless people died?

Like Mayson.

He'd given in to the moment, thinking that Clark finally deserved some time, some happiness. And he'd felt something niggle at the back of his mind, but he'd been breathtakingly distracted and he'd leaned into it. And those extra ten seconds he'd spent, selfishly enjoying the best moment of his life until now, that had been too long.

He'd been too late to save Mayson. This shouldn't be different, not too different from other rescues in which he'd been too late. But it was. It was different for so many reasons.

He'd been with Lois when it happened. And he couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell anyone.

His alarm blared, and he resisted smashing it out of frustration. He thumbed the switch to turn the alarm off and threw the bedclothes aside. After a super-speed shower — one that took less than ten seconds — he dressed just as quickly, not wanting to face the red and blue spandex for more than a millisecond.

After what had happened last night, he didn't want to even think about his alter ego. He didn't want to look at the suit and face such a cheerfully coloured reminder of his failure. And a reminder that the man beneath the suit was the true failure.

Clark moved slowly to the kitchen — ten steps in ten seconds — and opened the fridge to find something to eat for breakfast, though he wasn't quite hungry.

He couldn't give voice to how he was feeling. He was angry with himself. He'd allowed himself to think that going out with Lois and confiding in her was a good idea. Just looking into her concerned brown eyes at his desk had caused the lump in his chest to ease just a little bit. But they hadn't even officially finished the workday when he'd heard a cry for help that he couldn't possibly ignore.

A fire. Something about that particular emergency had caused him to freeze momentarily. He'd had to fight off sudden confusion as he found himself unable to remember how to get out of the newsroom and which way to fly. Lois had seen it as well, and he'd known that he'd had to come up with a perfectly understandable reason that he'd needed to leave the building RIGHT. THAT. SECOND.

But his excuses were generally poor on the best of days. Yesterday, he'd given probably the worst excuse of his life in telling her he needed to rush to the store to pick up a Mother's Day card.

In July.

He closed the refrigerator door with a groan and ran his fingers through his hair. He didn't even feel like eating anyway.

There had been no mistaking the look of anger and hurt on her face as he'd rushed away from her. She'd reached out to him and he'd rejected her.

But what could he have said? 'Hey, Lois, there's an apartment building on fire and families are trapped inside. Could you hold that thought?'

Not to mention, he wasn't even sure *what* he would have told her if they had gone to dinner. Even if he could tell her that and just play it off as him *feeling* responsible as Clark. It wasn't the same as *being* responsible.

No, he'd forced her look from his mind as he'd pulled people from the blazing building, but he knew he hadn't been at his best. The thick billowing smoke had reminded him too much of Mayson. Of the bomb that went off that had killed her.

He grabbed his keys and his suit coat and locked the door behind him. He could have taken a cab, or used his super speed to get to work, but he decided to walk instead.

Just barely two weeks ago, he would have said he'd gotten everything he'd ever dreamed of, especially after Lois had agreed to go out on a real date with him. One false start of a date, then a really, really great date, then...

He shook his head as the image of Mayson's battered body invaded his mind — unwanted and unbidden. Suddenly, he was back there kneeling on the ground, holding her close and feeling his heart clench with horror as he realised what was happening.

The acrid smell of smoke and burning flesh filled his nostrils and he tried desperately to block out the memory of Mayson's laboured breathing and the feel of her finger as she limply reached up to trace the 'S' on his chest, suddenly far too visible, as she died.

The days were just as bad as the nights sometimes.

The thought that Lois might never forgive him warred with the shame he felt for allowing himself to be distracted

by his feelings for her.

He and Mayson had been... friends. She'd wanted more. And even in that, he felt guilty for letting her think even for a moment that they might have something. He knew now his heart unequivocally belonged to Lois and, try as he might, that would never change.

Mayson had to have known. She had to have sensed his distraction. She'd have had no way of knowing how badly he would fail her, but he hated the knowledge that she'd wasted the last few weeks of her life chasing a relationship that could never be.

She'd been right to distrust Superman.

And Lois was right to be hurt and angry with him. He had let her down repeatedly. Even now, when he should be making it up to her, he was failing her.

One kiss. That's all they'd had. One real kiss.

He felt a warmth spread through his chest and an echo of the tingling thrum he'd felt that night, the memory of their first kiss physically imprinted on his soul.

He allowed himself to get lost in the memory of that kiss. To say it had been incredible was an understatement. He had never felt more alive than when their lips finally met. The feel of her, soft and willing, pressed eagerly against him, seemed to set him on fire. The gentle intake of her breath that told him she was just as affected as he was had been electrifying. He'd never wanted anything more than to wind his hands through her hair and press their bodies so close they forgot where one ended and the other began. He had wanted her. In a visceral way. Never in his fumbling teenage years had he felt that kind of raw need. It scared him and thrilled him all at once.

And now, the memory of it was the only thing that could save him. He clung to it like a drowning man, desperate to banish the tormented images of burning metal and Mayson's gaze, resigned to her death as she breathed her last word. But it hadn't worked.

The ping of the detonator engaging hadn't filtered through his senses in time. He'd been too late.

Would he have to choose between Clark and Superman? If he did, he knew he would likely have to choose Superman. But was he a horrible person for wanting to choose Clark?

As he made his way into the lobby of the Daily Planet building and then up the elevators, he steeled himself for the day. Lois was sure to be furious at him. She'd likely demand an explanation for his hasty exit last night. But he had no explanation to give, and he was far too tired to try. The fire the night before had taken everything out of him, and he still wasn't fully recovered. The nightmares were still with him.

He looked across the newsroom floor and saw she was at her desk already, furiously typing something. Maybe his obituary. His heart hitched at the thought that she might not even deem him worthy of conversation today. Fighting was preferable to Lois's silent treatment.

He mentally kicked himself. He should have stopped at the corner cafe to grab her favorite latte. He'd forgotten yesterday altogether, hadn't he? He glanced over at her desk. He could still go real quick and come back. Could he do it in ten seconds? Maybe.

No. She knew he was here already. She'd tensed ever so slightly when he'd looked over. No, today was not going to be a good day.

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### Chapter 3

He'd been late again. No surprise there. And she'd fretted and checked the clock far too often despite how desperately she wanted not to care. After last night... well, she wasn't even sure what to feel. Anger and fear and hurt and worry were all fighting in the War of Ambivalence in her heart.

She missed competitive Clark, who would waltz in 45 minutes late boasting a Superman story like the early bird who'd gotten the worm. He was easy to be irritated with. She missed protective Clark, who would wait all night outside her apartment to make sure she was all right when her life was in danger. He was easy to appreciate.

Hell, she even missed angry Clark, who would challenge her best story ideas because they were "unsafe" or "not well-thought-out." He was easy to be angry with.

But this Clark...

She'd been furious and worried as she'd waited this morning, resentful that the newsroom felt so empty without him. And then it hadn't been, suddenly. She'd known when the elevator had chimed that it had been him. Damn him for making her so attuned to him, like she now had some otherworldly sixth sense about his presence.

She wanted to be outraged at his latest offense of running off. Pissed that he'd agreed so earnestly to talk with her, finally, but then flagrantly disappeared. Offended that he hadn't even bothered with a marginally believable excuse. Infuriated that he hadn't even bothered to call.

And she was. Some of those things. In small amounts.

They'd given her the strength to get herself out of bed and to work, because damn Clark Kent for making her care. They'd fueled her need to get through the mayor's press briefing this morning.

And then he'd come in without even a word to her... and headed straight for the coffee.

Now that all her angry emotions had all but dissipated in his wake, she was left with this overwhelming sense of worry and hurt. She did her best to focus on typing up her notes from the briefing instead of watching him make their coffees.

He cleared his throat as he approached with her coffee. She nodded her head slightly, indicating that he should put the mug down on her desk. After a beat, she stopped typing and looked up at him wordlessly.

"Good morning, Lois," he said, a trepidatious look on that face of his. He even managed half a smile for her.

That face... and the way her heart pulsed slightly out of sync whenever he said her name. She averted her gaze quickly and focused intensely on her coffee. Damn him and that face of his. How was she supposed to figure out her next move, concoct The Plan to Save Clark when she couldn't think straight?

She wrapped her hands around the mug and stared at the light brown liquid that undoubtedly had two calorie-free sweeteners and the perfect amount of non-fat creamer in it, already stirred, and somehow the perfect temperature.

“How’d it go last night?” she asked, looking up again, trying to keep her tone light, unaccusing.

“I...uh...” He faltered for a second as if he wasn’t sure what she was asking about.

And actually, she wasn’t sure what she was asking about, either, since she knew for certain he hadn’t run out to the drug store to buy a last-minute Mother’s Day card two months late. But maybe it’d give him an opening?

“It went well. Everything worked out.” He paused, as if waiting, yet dreading, a follow-up question.

Well, you’re not getting one this time, Prince of Vaguerly. She gave a half smile of her own and nodded before focusing back on her coffee.

“I’m so sorry again about leaving,” he said quietly, sounding a bit defeated along with his usual chagrin.

She felt the annoyance start to rise, a reflex borne of unfortunate familiarity with his apologies about leaving. “I’m glad it went well,” she said tightly, trying desperately to tamp down the irritation and the guilt that came with it.

She could see him shuffling his feet a bit nervously, as if he was deciding whether to attempt more of a conversation or head to the relative safety of his own desk. He was trying. She was, too, but it was wholly unfair that she couldn’t be mad at him right now.

“Are you...mad?” he ventured.

She held her breath, afraid of what she might say out loud. Of course, she was mad. But more than that, she was hurt. But she couldn’t tell him either of those things. Not right now when he was clearly not all right.

Dr. Frisken had said he must be afraid of commitment, but now with this added element of grief and whatever else was going on with him...Lois just wasn’t sure anymore.

She looked up at his face, that face. And though it was pained and apprehensive, at least it wasn’t impassive. She softened her voice and said, “Let’s just focus on work, okay?”

Clark seemed to take it for the small peace offering that it was. He pulled her guest chair closer and took a seat at her desk. Not too close, thankfully. Lois wasn’t sure if she would be able to maintain her professional distance if she caught the scent of his familiar cologne — woodsmoke with a hint of peppermint.

She reviewed her notes from yesterday with him, updating him on the attempted contacts with their sources. There wasn’t much new on the Intergang story, unfortunately. Intergang was far reaching and insidious, and they were good at eliminating loose ends, which left them currently at a dead end. She assured Clark that someone would slip up, and they’d be there to catch them.

After a beat of awkward silence, he mumbled something about needing to check his work email and moved back to his desk. She said something airily about checking in with him later, and she bit back a sigh of relief that he was no longer nearby.

She wasn’t used to being thrown off kilter like this — not around Clark of all people. For so long, partners had been an easy thing for them to be. And then things started to change between them. He wasn’t just her partner and best friend. Suddenly, he was a man she might have — no, *did* have — very real feelings for. It was as if the enchantment

with Superman had finally worn off, and in its place was the realisation that Clark was quite possibly everything she’d ever wanted in a man. He was kind, funny, sexy, and oh-so thoughtful...that is, when he wasn’t abandoning her mid-conversation to mow his neighbor’s cousin’s mother-in-law’s lawn.

She pushed down the surge of annoyance that reared its head once more. Sometimes she hated her newfound attraction towards her partner. She’d been certain for the longest time that Clark had feelings for her. And then he’d confirmed it by confessing those feelings just as she had gotten engaged to Lex Luthor.

She’d turned him down then, insisting that she just didn’t see him that way. At the time, she had been angry at Clark. He’d changed so much with his confession and it terrified her. She had needed Clark to be her constant — the best friend and partner she could count on to never change. And then he had changed. He’d gone and changed the rules on her without any warning and she hadn’t been ready. The thought of losing Clark on top of everything else had just been too much. So she’d panicked and told him she could never love him.

She winced as she remembered how hurt he’d been by her rejection — how crushed. There wasn’t a day that went by that she didn’t wish she could go back and do things differently — warn herself that Lex Luthor was not who he pretended to be.

But maybe also warn herself that Superman was not the answer, either. She knew now in hindsight that throwing herself at Superman had been a subconscious cry for help. She hadn’t fully understood the level to which Lex had gone to in order to sever all ties from her old life — including driving a wedge between her and Clark.

And Superman, while noble and heroic, was not the man she wanted to be with. He was the fantasy, and Clark was reality. For once, she wanted something real.

Now, though, after an amazing first date and a mind-blowing first kiss, everything was on hold. Clark himself seemed on hold. Grief was funny like that, and she couldn’t help but feel that there was a lot of guilt going on there for him, too.

She wished she could just talk to him — really talk to him without any distractions. Somewhere where it would be too difficult for him to run off with no more than a flimsy excuse. Somewhere that, maybe, she could help take his mind of the tragedy of it all and get some much needed rest.

If only they had a story that wasn’t really a story, especially if it was far enough that he wouldn’t have anywhere to run away to.

And suddenly she had an idea. A totally crazy, flying by the seat of her pants, no way it would ever work sort of idea. She wasn’t sure of all the details yet, so she’d have to improvise.

“Do you need any help wrapping up the press conference brief?” Clark asked.

Lois jumped slightly. She hadn’t even noticed he had sat back down at her desk again. Already, this seemed like more conversation than they’d had in the previous two days combined. Well, at least it felt that way. She wasn’t used to Clark doing much, let alone speaking, this past week. He

seemed to be making an effort of some sort today, though, maybe aiming for forgiveness for his latest escape?

“No, thank you,” she said with more calm in her voice than she was feeling. She tried adding some nonchalance. “It should only take me 20 minutes or so to wrap it up.” She grabbed a folder from the opposite side of her desk and plopped it down in front of him. “Remember that corrupt mining company we were looking into? The one that possibly poisoned the town’s water supply up in the Culvert Mountains? Got a tip.”

He nodded, taking the folder from her as she offered it. “I thought that was a dead end,” he said, questioningly.

He was right, it had been a dead end. Though they were both certain that a cover up had taken place, there had been no evidence to support their theory, and thus Perry had taken them off of it. Lois had kept the file on the backburner, though, just in case. Earlier that morning, Bobby had called her with some information and, though Lois was fairly sure that information would lead them nowhere where the story was concerned, it would be an excuse to go on a road trip all alone with her partner. A chance to talk without any distractions. If she could convince him it was legitimate, of course. She was pretty certain that Perry would back her on it, given Clark’s circumstances.

“It was,” she acknowledged. “But now there’s been movement.” Okay, so that wasn’t entirely true. “Bobby said he has a source in the Mayor’s office that was willing to testify to being asked to alter the water treatment records. I think we should go talk to him.”

Clark eyed her doubtfully. “You think this tip is worth the four-hour drive each way? What if it doesn’t pan out?”

“It will! When has Bobby ever let us down?” She put up a hand to silence him. “Don’t answer that.”

He pursed his lips and didn’t say anything.

“I know there’s something here, Clark. I can feel it.” The something wasn’t a story, but still. “C’mon. Think of the difference we’ll make in these people’s lives if we break the story.”

She felt terrible appealing to his sense of justice and humanity, taking advantage of it, but she needed this to make a difference in *his* life. Besides, there was still the odd chance that the tip wasn’t a total dud.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, fine. But if Perry doesn’t think it’s solid enough, you’ll let it go?” he asked. “There are plenty of people right here in Metropolis who need our help, too.”

She fought back a frown. He usually loved road trips with her. “Deal!” she said with a little more enthusiasm than she’d intended, knowing that Perry would agree to this unofficial time off for Clark in an instant. “Just let me finish up the mayor thing, plus I need to make a few phone calls, and then we’ll talk to Perry.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said, only a hint of a smile reaching his lips.

She really hoped this worked. She didn’t know what she’d do otherwise.

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Clark returned home from work feeling entirely defeated. He wasn’t sure why. He should feel elated. Lois

didn’t hate him. In fact, she seemed oddly willing to give him a second chance despite everything that had happened — despite the way he had been treating her.

All he’d ever wanted was for Lois to give him a chance. He’d loved her for so long, that the idea of her loving him back had been all that sustained him at times. But to know that his mistakes had been responsible for the loss of someone’s life — Mayson’s life...

The worst part was, he didn’t regret the kiss. He wanted to regret it. He *should* regret it. And yet, deep down he knew that, even if he could go back to change it, he wasn’t sure he would.

What kind of man thought that way? Certainly no hero.

He sat down on his couch with a sigh and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He was feeling more than a little overwhelmed as it was, but now with this work trip on top of everything else, he wasn’t sure how he was going to cope.

He knew how Lois could be on a story. She was relentless. She would pursue the truth with dogged determination. Watching her, being partnered with her, was one of the aspects of life at the *Planet* that Clark loved the most. It was exhilarating, electrifying, and more than a little sexy. There was a fire inside her unlike anything he’d ever seen.

And now this trip. There was no way they would be able to get there and back in one day. They would need to stay somewhere. He remembered the last time they stayed in a hotel room together while working on a story. He remembered the games they’d played, the sexual tension in the air. And that kiss.

And although the kiss in the Lexor Hotel had been subterfuge to protect their cover, it had quickly turned into something more — something that caused his body to react viscerally to the memory even now. He would never forget the way she’d reacted — surprised at first, but then eagerly, hungrily even.

He wanted it to happen again more than he was willing to admit. He desperately wanted her to kiss her that way again — his body covering hers, the soft sigh as she responded to him. Staying in a hotel with her would make that so tempting. Especially since she seemed so willing lately — so genuinely interested.

But he couldn’t. He knew the consequences now. He knew what could happen if he allowed himself to forget he was Superman, even for ten seconds.

It was just as well that they wouldn’t be staying in the same room. There was no need to go undercover on this trip.

He stood up and paced his apartment, feeling restless and aggravated in a way that he wasn’t used to. What was this feeling? And why couldn’t he shake it?

He found himself picking up the phone and dialing his parents’ phone number. It wasn’t until he heard his mother’s voice that he realised what he had done.

“Hello? Clark? Is that you?”

“Yeah, Mom, it’s me,” he said, suddenly feeling slightly panicked. What on Earth was he supposed to tell them? Why had he called? It must have been instinct. He’d always called his parents in the past in order to get advice or to

simply just talk about what he was going through.

But he hadn't called since Mayson died. He couldn't. He always thought he could tell them everything.

But not this.

"It's been a while," said his dad's comforting voice.

"How are you, son?"

"I'm, uh...fine, Dad." Did he just lie to his parents? He couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember when he'd called them last. Was it the day of the funeral? He thought so, but for the life of him he couldn't remember how long ago that was. The days had blurred together. What was wrong with him? "Just called to check in on you and Mom."

"Oh, we're doing well," his mom said and she launched into an update of all the comings and goings in Smallville, Kansas. Clark only half-listened, grateful for the relief that was his mother's news updates.

"... and Rachel is engaged! Can you believe it? Nice man. I think he works at the bank. Clark? Clark, are you listening?"

"Huh?" Clark shook his head, and forced himself back to reality. How did she know he'd been off in his own world? Despite being Superman, he sometimes thought his mom was the one who had super powers. "Sorry, Mom, I was distracted."

"Are you sure you're okay, honey?" Her voice was softer now, concerned, and Clark had to fight the emotions that suddenly rose to the surface. And even though he was capable of being in Smallville in minutes if he so chose, he found himself missing his parents with a ferocity that surprised him. He wasn't used to feeling distanced from them.

"I'm fine, Mom, I promise," he replied, and despite not being able to see their faces, he knew that it had convinced neither of them. "It's just been tough...at work."

"Uh-huh," came his mother's voice and he couldn't help but notice the tinge of worry in it. "How are you, really? We haven't heard from you since the funeral."

He swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat.

"I'm okay." *Liar.*

"You know you don't have to be, right?" his mom was asking him softly. "I know that the two of you were... friends."

"We were," he acknowledged, trying to keep the panic from bubbling up once more. "But I'm coping. I promise."

He wasn't sure what else he should say. Part of him wanted to tell them everything, but a larger part of him told him to stay quiet. He worried they wouldn't see him the same way if they knew. Oh, he knew they would love him unconditionally, but he couldn't bear the thought of disappointing them...of letting them know that their son was the kind of man who could be so selfish. The kind of man who had failed to save a person's life, yet could only think about what he'd lost himself.

"Do you need us to come up, Clark?" his dad was asking. "We can take the next flight out."

"I've told you before not to waste your money on air travel," Clark told his dad as he wearily rubbed the bridge of his nose under his glasses. He was suddenly beyond

tired. "And I'm fine. Really. Besides, Lois and I are going out of town. A lead on a story came up, and we have to drive to Wallerton. Might be a few days."

"Lois, huh?" his mother said, her voice taking on that sing-song tone that it always did when Lois was mentioned. Normally, he was able to take her teasing in stride, but today the sound of it made his skin crawl. "Going away for a few days, huh?"

"For *work*," he said through slightly gritted teeth. The last thing he wanted to do was take his anger at himself out on his mom. "Nothing more."

"Thought you two had started dating," his dad said, attempting a casual tone that Clark could see right through.

"Sort of," he said vaguely. He suddenly found himself desperately wanting out of this phone conversation. "It's a long story. Look, I'm really tired and tomorrow is going to be a long drive, so I really should be going. I'll see you guys next week for dinner, okay?"

"All right," his mom said, though he could still hear the worry behind her words. He hadn't fooled them at all. "But if you need anything you call us."

"I will," he promised, though he knew it was an empty one. *Just add it to the list*, he thought. "I love you guys."

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#### Chapter 4

This was not going well. They'd been in the car for hours now, and all Lois could think of was how difficult it suddenly was for the two of them to really connect. It had never been like this before.

They had always been so in sync, hardly ever a lull in their conversations. And when there were lulls, the silences were comfortable, companionable. Now everything was just hard. Stilted, superficial conversations and weighty, oppressive silences.

She'd give anything to go back in time a few weeks to when she'd merely been stressing about whether or not it was a good idea to attempt a relationship with Clark. That unease had been bearable, even kind of nice, if she admitted it, to have the butterflies of potential and uncertainty. Now, she knew unequivocally it was what she wanted. Ironically, the moment she finally felt sure of her feelings for him, he felt farther away from her than ever. Lois had no idea what he was thinking or feeling.

She'd been so sure of her fly-by-night plan working that she hadn't actually worked out the details of what she'd say, how she'd approach the difficult topic. She'd been foolish to think that it would just unfold naturally like most of their conversations, that the privacy and intimacy of the enclosed car would help him feel more like opening up.

Instead, she was frustrated that he was being so intractable. She was trying to hold back her irritation, but it seemed nearly impossible getting him to talk. She knew he wasn't being purposefully obstinate, as he sometimes did just needle her, but he was definitely on edge, and it was making *her* feel on edge.

She'd wanted a captive audience. Well, now she had one. And he was acting every part the caged and frightened animal. Had she done this to him?

The weather seemed to echo her mood. It was oppressively hot as well as slightly smoky. Lois knew this

area was prone to forest fires, and though they had yet to encounter any, she knew the conditions were ripe for the slightest thing to set off sparks.

She snuck a glance at him out of the corner of her eye and tried to ignore the way her heart sped up ever so slightly as she watched him fighting with the map that he'd unfolded, muttering under his breath as his tie kept getting in the way.

"We really don't need that," she told him, but then instantly regretted the words. She wasn't trying to start a fight. "This is the only road that goes through to Wallerville," she said in a softer tone.

"I just like to be prepared," Clark replied with a tired sigh, though he did fold the map back up and put it in the glove box.

"Lemme guess, Boy Scouts?" she teased, hoping a different tack might work better, bring some lightheartedness to their conversation. To her great relief, he took the bait and offered a half a smile back; only half, but at least it was a real one.

"My mom, actually," he said sheepishly. "She told me that any time I go somewhere remote, to carry a map and know the area. We've never been up here, so I thought it best to have a look."

"Good thinking, farmboy," Lois said, grateful to have found some semblance of their usual playful banter. While normally the unofficial rules of their banter would call for another teasing barb next, she thought that unwise. She went with a casual knowledge question instead. "I'll bet you have hundreds of maps given all the remote places you've been, don't you?"

"Yeah," he said softly. "It's quite the collection. Several different languages, too. Maybe I'll show you them and my travelogues sometime."

"Promises, promises," she murmured half-jokingly, enjoying the moment so much that she almost missed the shadow that passed over his face. There was a small part of her that was tempted to ignore it. If she didn't say anything, they could stay in this happy bubble a little while longer. And yet, she knew that this was the whole point of the trip — to address the elephant in the room. She took a deep breath. "Did I say something wrong?"

A beat.

"Clark?"

"It's just..." Clark trailed off, clearly struggling to voice what he was thinking. "I've made a lot of promises to you and...others. And I know I haven't kept them all. I'm...I'm sorry."

She was tempted to cave right there and tell him that everything was fine. His warm brown eyes looked at her so full of worry that she found it difficult to remember her earlier irritation. But everything wasn't fine; *he* wasn't fine. The whole point of the trip was to break down the wall he'd built around himself. This was the first crack he'd shown in...in...well, honestly, ever since the funeral. She would never get a better opportunity than right now to press him for it.

Before she could say anything, though, a sudden streak of lightning in the distance followed by the sky lighting up like the Fourth of July caused both her and her partner to

jump in their seats.

"Did you see that?" Clark asked, suddenly very on edge. It made sense. He'd grown up on a farm in a state where the bulk of the land was flat. Not a lot of opportunities for forest fires in Kansas, she imagined.

"Heat lightning," she replied absently. "It's caused by the hot summer air."

"Actually, it's lightning from a thunderstorm too far away to see the cloud-to-ground finish or hear the thunder that goes with it," Clark said, as he played with the knot of his tie.

Lois felt annoyance surge within her, but then did her best to tamp it down. Why did he always have to know everything? She took a deep breath. At least he was talking. She sighed. "I bet there were already some forest fires burning before this. They are fairly common in this area, and it's been smoky for a while."

He tensed as she spoke, and she cast a nervous glance into the distance. Getting caught in a forest fire or stranded in the middle of nowhere wasn't part of the plan. *Maybe it wouldn't come to anything*, she thought.

Yet even as she thought that, she could see the smoke rising in the distance. It was clear the lightning had hit something. Whether that would impact their route remained to be seen, but she could feel Clark tense beside her.

The next forty-five minutes were anxious and quiet, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Lois wasn't sure why, but she felt like her moment to talk to Clark had passed, at least for now. Something had changed in him the moment the lightning had come down in the distance, and any further attempts to engage him in conversation had resulted in more short answers and a refusal to even meet her eyes.

Desperate for any sort of distraction, Lois found herself reaching over and turning on the radio. She fiddled with the knob until she found the local radio station and left it there, hoping their newscast would give them some indication of what was to come on the road ahead.

The radio DJ could be heard giving an update on the area just outside of Wallerville. An additional forest fire had indeed been ignited by the lightning, and already some people had died. She only heard bits and bobs of it, trying to maintain her concentration on the road — on a route that was becoming increasingly smoky.

*Superman will handle it*, she reasoned. This was exactly the sort of thing that he would hear with that super hearing of his; it wasn't too far outside of Metropolis for him, surely. Though far more urgent, and hopefully more within her control than a wildfire, she needed to consider her and Clark's immediate situation.

Now, though, Lois was beginning to worry that they wouldn't make their destination. She'd called ahead and inquired about places to stay in Wallerville and had been informed there was a gorgeous bed and breakfast up there, but she hadn't actually booked anything yet. She'd kind of wanted to read the mood first after their four-hour drive before she decided. Their choices were essentially cute bed and breakfasts or utilitarian motels.

She'd hoped that by the time they got there, met with their fake source, and decided it was a dead end, things

between them would be in a better spot and maybe, just maybe, Clark would see the charm in the bed and breakfast as well and the potential for a bit of rest and recharging.

She caught her mind wandering to the last time they'd stayed in a hotel together. This was neither the time nor the place to think about that kiss in the honeymoon suite. She definitely did not need that distraction right now.

Anyway, she'd had her high hopes set on a bed and breakfast in Wallerville Now, who knows what would happen? *Good thing I didn't make a reservation*, she thought. *The Gods seem determined to ruin my plans*.

"You're driving awfully fast, you know," Clark said. It was the first thing he'd said in a good long while, and Lois felt inexplicably irritated by the fact that all he'd had to offer was a criticism of her driving. She'd been trying so hard to get him to open up.

"I'm not speeding," she retorted, unable to help herself. He was acting too much like petulant Clark. She bit her lip. She knew he wasn't himself right now, though. It was more like defensive Clark than petulant. She took a beat to calm herself. Fighting would help nothing right now.

"Not if you're in Canada," he shot back, "but in case you've forgotten, we use miles per hour."

Or maybe Clark just needed to emote *something*, anything? Even despite Clark's current circumstances, she couldn't help it that his snarky barbs always got under her skin. "I'm going a reasonable and prudent speed to keep up with traffic," she said tightly, trying to control her reaction, yet unable to believe he was choosing this time and place to pick a fight. Days and days of no talking, now this.

"Lois, there *is* no traffic," he pointed out, an edge to his normally patient voice. "You're only keeping up with yourself...and possibly the Roadrunner."

*Really, Clark?* she thought. "I'm aware of that," she replied testily. She flinched inwardly at the tone of her response. That wasn't fair, was it? Maybe anger and snark was all he had to work with right now? She was certainly no stranger to that. She managed to pause and take a deep breath before softening her tone. "But the driving conditions are getting worse, and I was hoping we'd be able to reach Wallerville before we can't see anything at all."

Couldn't he see the situation in front of them? If they didn't get there soon, they might not get there at all, and Superman would likely be too busy with the fire to help them out if they ended up stranded by a roadside. It wasn't as if he was AAA.

"Why don't we turn around?" Clark suggested. He seemed almost desperate to get out of the car. "I thought I saw an exit about half a mile back. I could...try and find a payphone?"

Lois scoffed to cover the hurt she was feeling; she couldn't help it. He was panicking to get out of the car...get away from her? What was wrong with him? This didn't even make any sense. And they'd just made a pit stop not too long ago, so surely it wasn't nature calling.

*What, are you going to go call Superman?* she thought angrily. She tried desperately to work on her breathing...remembering back to one of Dr. Frisken's sessions where she'd felt...well, triggered by Clark's seemingly endless need to escape her presence. It hurt. Really hurt. And it was

getting harder and harder to push that aside. Especially when their verbal sparring was more comfortable territory. She clenched her jaw to bite back her instinctual reply, and instead asked, aiming for a mix of logic and compassion, "And call who? I'm pretty sure Superman is a little busy at the moment. And I doubt roadside assistance will fare any better than us. I'm sorry," she added at the end for good measure.

"I don't know," Clark said with a frustrated shake of his head. "I could call emergency services and see if the road ahead is closed. We might have to head back home if it is."

Lois ignored him, trying to gather her wits and control her breathing again amidst the most awkward fight they'd ever had. "Oh, hang on. There's another update!" she said, turning up the radio, and all too grateful for the interruption.

<This just in, Highway 20 is closed between exit 321 and 375 just before Wallerville. Anyone on this road between these two exits is advised to take exit 365 into Culvert Junction while emergency services try to contain the blaze.>

"Looks like there's no turning back," Lois said to Clark heavily. How had things gone so wrong? And why hadn't the announcer mentioned Superman's arrival yet? "Looks like we're headed to Culvert Junction."

"That can't be right," Clark said, his voice slightly strangled. "There's got to be somewhere we can stop."

"There isn't. I'm sorry," Lois said, willing him to hear the patience and concern in her voice. "You heard the update. Even Superman is late to this mess. We'll just have to keep going until we get to exit 365."

"Lois, I can't...we have to stop, I have to..."

"You have to what, Clark?" she interrupted, slightly exasperated. But then when she saw his face, she was more than a little concerned by the slightly panicked look she saw. Did he have a fear of fire or something? All of his actions, his tone, his words...they were all screaming at her that Clark was not okay. But what did she do? She wished desperately not to be warring with her emotions right now.

He opened and closed his mouth, unable to come up with anything.

She softened her voice. "What do you have to do? What *can* you do? Our options are fairly limited."

Still no response. Other than some exaggerated looking through windows. Front. Back. Side. Looking for who knows what.

"I don't know what's wrong if you don't tell me," she pleaded.

Clark looked out the window, a wild and almost desperate look in his eyes. She heard him mutter something under his breath. A number of some kind. Five, was it?

"Clark talk to me," she said, her voice a bit gentler now. She had no idea why, but this forest fire had brought something to the surface, and she was damned if she would just sit by while he dealt with it alone, even if her emotions were sounding warning bells all over the place, trying to protect her from potential hurt. They were partners, damn it. They still had that much. "Tell me what's going on with you. Please."

The tone of her voice must have distracted Clark enough for him to glance at her for a moment. He seemed

to be contemplating something as he looked at her — almost as if he was weighing her in his mind in order to decide if he could trust her with whatever it was. The answer must have been no, because he shook his head and looked back out the window. She tried not to feel her heart plummeting.

“I can’t,” he said, his jaw clenched in a grim frown. “Can we just find somewhere to stop? A gas station, roadside diner, anything. I need some air.”

Lois gave in and hit the brakes impulsively, bringing the car to a screeching halt on the shoulder of the road. They were going to have this out before they reached the exit if it was the last thing she did.

“Lois, what on Earth are you doing?” he exclaimed as he pitched forward with the momentum of the car. “Can we get moving please?”

“No,” Lois said stubbornly, her chin jutting out in defiance. She’d told herself this weekend was about Clark, helping him with his pain, helping him cut through his grief and find some peace. But she couldn’t pretend she wasn’t hurt any longer. She wasn’t that strong. “Do you think I’m blind? I know you and Mayson had a connection. And now she’s gone and you haven’t dealt with your grief; you’re just shoving it down. And there’s something else, too, something big that’s bothering you, and I could understand that if only you’d just tell me, but you keep shutting me out. Why? If nothing else, I’m supposed to be your best friend. Why won’t you let me in?”

“I’m not trying to shut you out,” Clark said, and she noted that, once again, he seemed to be only half focusing on their conversation. Something else had caught his attention. He had that look of urgency in his eyes again, and Lois felt more frustrated and hurt than ever.

“Then don’t,” she all but pleaded. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I want to,” he told her. Something in his eyes begged her to understand him, to forgive him. Any other time, any other day that look would have been enough. That face, his soulful and tortured Clark face.

“Look, it’s fine,” she said softly with a sad sigh, sparing him the need to come up with a reason and sparing herself from hearing the dreaded “but”. She put her foot back on the pedal and started accelerating once more and put the car back on the road. “It’s been a long day for both of us, so why don’t we just try to make it to Culvert Junction in one piece and keep the radio on for updates? I’m sure Superman will be there any minute now.”

Clark’s expression went hard and his entire body rigid. She saw a look she’d never seen on his face before — cold and angrier than she’d ever seen him. A shiver passed over her.

“Superman,” he muttered, looking out the window once more. “Right.”

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## Chapter 5

He couldn’t move. Couldn’t blink. Couldn’t breathe. This wasn’t him. It wasn’t like him to freeze like this — to ignore a rescue. No, not ignore. To ignore it would imply it had been intentional — this was different.

Hearing the news report, seeing the smoke in the

distance had paralyzed him. He’d been seized with an almost numbing sense of panic — a feeling of unreality. He’d been outside his body looking in. And the man he saw was not someone he liked all that much.

He’d watched himself pick a fight with Lois over the smallest of things in order to avoid dealing with the swirl of emotions coursing through him. He’d seen the way she looked at him — full of perfectly justified hurt and anger. He’d desperately wanted to apologise. The Clark watching from the outside looking in was yelling at himself — *do something, say something*. But he couldn’t. For reasons even he didn’t understand, he’d remained still and unmoving.

He should have just left. He should have demanded she pull over to the side of the road, make some excuse and just fly off. But he hadn’t. Why hadn’t he done that? He’d never been faced with such a terrifying feeling of indecision. It was like there were two halves of his brain and the one that was responsible for basic motor function and decision making had shut down completely.

And so he’d stayed in the car. He’d heard the news update saying that people had died as a result of the fire — a fire he should have been there helping with. He watched as Lois continued to reach out and make herself vulnerable — something she hardly ever did — and he cursed himself for not being able to give her what she needed in return.

But how could he fix things with her when he felt so broken? He was used to making decisions — split-second, life and death decisions. He’d prided himself on being able to make the tough choices as well as being able to deal with the fallout. He’d had losses before — lives he couldn’t save. He’d gotten there too late in the past.

The first time it had happened he’d been twenty years old. He’d been hiking in Europe and had heard a call for help. Someone had stepped too close to a high rock face and tripped and fell. He’d raced to it as fast as he could, but he hadn’t been fast enough. He’d gotten there just in time to see the young man about his age hit the ground. He’d been devastated at the time and had immediately flown home to his parents where he’d told them — amid gulping sobs — that he hadn’t been fast enough.

His parents had rushed to assure him that it wasn’t his fault. He’d done everything he could. And while it was admirable he tried, doing so exposed him to potential danger. They had stopped short of telling him he shouldn’t help others in danger. Both his mother and father knew that was advice neither of them could give. And yet, at the same time, it was clear that if he was going to help, he would have to find a way to do it that wouldn’t expose him.

It was that day that had planted the seed of an idea that would eventually become Superman. The knowledge that he couldn’t have these powers — these incredible abilities and not use them to do good. And so he’d performed his good deeds in secret, until he came up with the idea of Superman. And although he’d had more wins than losses, the losses still ate at him.

It tore him apart whenever it happened, but he’d always coped. He’d always bounced back. But maybe that was the problem. Maybe he hadn’t been bouncing back at all. Maybe it had been death by a thousand cuts. Maybe he was

all bounced out.

He had hoped that the secret identity would allow him to have all the things he'd wanted to have since he was young and dreamed of being a reporter. A good job, friends, the ability to use his powers as a force for good, and someone he loved to share his life with. It had been the only thing he'd hoped for.

Now, looking at Lois in profile, that hope was gone. Why couldn't he have just talked to her? She had given him every chance and yet, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

She'd asked him why he didn't trust her, but the truth was that he didn't trust himself. Something told him that if he did try to tell her what was going on inside, the floodgates would open and would never stop. He wasn't sure he was ready for that, nor could he bear the thought of hurting her.

He knew he loved her — on some level he'd known that from the first moment he saw her. And he had almost resigned himself to the fact that he'd likely lost her before he'd ever really had her. Even though it was killing him inside, the only consolation he'd had up until this point was that he would bear the brunt of the pain. After all, it wasn't as if she loved him back was it?

But seeing the depth of hurt in her eyes — the way her lip had quivered ever so slightly when she'd all but begged him to let her in, caused that seed of fear that had been his constant companion to grow even larger. It was overwhelming. He'd hurt her far more than she had ever let on. He'd counted on anger, but he hadn't bargained on...

Love?

He shook his head and she arched an eyebrow in his direction, but said nothing. His hands felt shaky and his heart hammered in his chest. Though reports of the fire were that it was relatively contained for the time being, Clark kept his ears sharp — ready to leap into action at the next sign that Superman was needed.

But would he? Or would he just freeze again? Was it because it was another fire? First Mayson, then the other night, and now this. It was...a lot. He'd saved everyone in the apartment fire, at least — that was some consolation.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder if the only reason the forest fire claimed those lives was because he was still in the car. Were their deaths on his hands as well? Could he have gotten there in time? He had no way of knowing, and that knowledge gnawed at him.

And so he sat, as they pulled into the parking lot of the motel, unable to move or tear himself away from the darkness in his mind.

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Lois shifted the Jeep into park and turned it off. The last stretch of minutes had been...well, if she'd had a knife, she wasn't even sure she'd have been able to cut tension, so thick and palpable. She felt sick to her stomach at the mix of strong emotions churning inside. Anger was the first one. But really, it wasn't anger; it was hurt. What had Dr. Friskin said? The anger usually masked the bigger, scarier feelings.

And being hurt by Clark...it was a physical pain in her chest and her stomach. She swallowed hard. *This was different*, she reminded herself. Something was wrong with Clark. She took a deep breath. This wasn't about him

running off, yet again, acting like he cared one minute and not the next. *This wasn't that; it was different*, she told herself.

She wondered what Clark's anger was masking.

They sat in silence for a moment, as if trying to let the tension abate before either of them could move. Now that they had arrived at their destination, she was honestly surprised to still find him sitting next to her. He hadn't flung the door open and made a mad dash for it. Wasn't he mad at her? Didn't he want to storm off?

Instead, he was, and had been, sitting so rigidly in the passenger seat, his hands planted firmly on his knees, that she wasn't entirely sure he was still breathing. No more quips or cutting remarks or even scoffs. The panicked look, from what she could tell at this angle, was still an underlying current. If she'd thought the earlier silences had been uncomfortable, this one was downright alarming.

She let out a deep breath as she reached to unfasten her seatbelt. "I'll go get us some rooms."

He didn't even blink. It was like talking to a brick wall, a petrified, gorgeous, Clark-shaped wall. At least she had high hopes now that he'd still be here when she got back. She only wished that it made her feel better.

This emotional whiplash was exhausting. She wasn't sure how much more she could take. It felt like her heart was on a precipice, waiting to find out whether he'd break it or not. This wasn't about her...but how on Earth was she supposed to turn off her feelings? She'd done it before. Plenty of times in her life, fueled by anger and hurt and betrayal. When her dad had left and she'd needed to be strong for Lucy. When Claude had used her and dumped and she'd had to be strong for herself. She had to be strong for Clark now.

But this was different. This was Clark.

He'd been the one to teach her, convince her that it was worth turning her feelings back on, opening up and taking a chance being vulnerable. But all this was too raw, too painful. She didn't think she could listen to one more excuse or angry criticism, and she definitely couldn't bear to watch him run away from her again. This time, being strong was going to be harder and devastatingly more important.

So...here they were, not exactly in the middle of nowhere, or Wallerville as she'd planned, but they weren't in Metropolis. No mail to check, neighbors to help, no dentist appointments to suddenly remember, and their usual video store was hundreds of miles away. She could at least be snarky in her head, right?

She'd been working with Dr. Friskin on her trust issues, and what they'd discovered together had...well, it'd been the reason she was able to say yes to Clark when he'd asked her on a date. And it was why she was going so far out on a limb here to help him. She still had major trust issues, obviously, but Dr. Friskin had helped her see that she did indeed have relationships with men she could trust, namely Perry and Clark.

Perry, of course, was like a father to her. And Clark was her best friend, the only one she'd ever had. She already trusted him with her career and her friendship, not to mention her life. So, she'd gone ahead and decided, then,

that it was worth the risk to trust Clark with her heart.

She took a deep breath to try and steady herself, but she only succeeded in getting a lungful of smoke-tainted air and making herself cough. She headed towards the front office, trying to ignore the excruciating pain in her chest at the thought that Clark didn't return that trust.

The middle-aged woman behind the front desk issued a brief greeting before getting down to business. "How many rooms?"

She hesitated. Her plan had been one room. Keep him in one place long enough to make him open up. But now she wasn't so sure how a motel room was going to be any different than the car, but they were well and truly stuck, so there was nothing else to do *but* try.

"One," she answered decisively. She'd been half-intending to just throw in the towel, get two rooms and call it a day. She'd thought herself too exhausted to fight anymore. But now that she was here, she knew she couldn't let things go so easily. And truth be told, she wasn't sure he should be alone right now, left to drown in all that grief.

The clerk seemed oblivious to her internal debate and replied back, "One room, king bed. That's \$79.80 a night. How many nights do you need?"

Oh. One bed. *That* wasn't part of the plan. Clark would never relax with just one bed, would he? Would *she*? "Uh...do you have any rooms with two beds instead?"

"Nope. Sorry, honey. All's I got left is rooms with king beds. Did you need two rooms instead, then?"

"Well..." She hesitated briefly. Her mind flashed to the stupefied man she'd left in her car. Something was seriously wrong with Clark. No, she needed to do this, and she needed to stay with him.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she forged ahead. "No, one room, two keys will be fine. For one night. Thanks."

She paid the lady and filled out the registration card. After getting the room keys, she headed back out to face Clark. This was a good plan, she tried convincing herself, bolstering her resolve. A great plan.

He'd managed to unfreeze himself and had gotten out of the Jeep. Now, he was leaning against the driver's side door with his ankles crossed and hands in the pocket of his slacks. He was projecting a casual nonchalance, but she could tell he was still stiff and agitated. Though maybe the anger — or was it fear? — had dissipated? Oh, this plan might be harder to pull off than she thought.

"All set?" Clark asked as she approached. He straightened and took half a step toward her.

She schooled her face into a mask of annoyance mixed with disappointment to help sell her ruse before she answered. He'd been paying little attention to her emotions for the better part of an hour anyway, so she was sure he wouldn't question her.

"They only had one room left," she said, letting the revelation hang heavy in the air.

If she hadn't been watching his face, she would have missed the look of abject panic that flickered across his face ever so briefly. He really was good at turning those emotions on and off at the drop of a hat.

"Wouldn't it be...uncomfortable...you know, with us..."

um..." Clark stammered and trailed off.

"With us what, Clark?" The question slipped out before she could catch herself. She'd wanted to goad him into saying it. Say dating. Say something. *Feel* something, Clark. Her own flash of selfishness appalled her, and she was about to apologize, but apparently he either hadn't heard her or was just blazing on.

"We could check around to see if there's another —"

"Hey," she said softly, cutting him off with a heavy sigh, trying to cover her heartache with annoyance. "We're both adults, Clark. We've done it before. Undercover at the Ledor?" she reminded him, her eyebrows arched up to emphasize her question. She bit back a different type of sigh. She swallowed hard and tried to ignore the flashes of The Kiss that invaded her mind. "Besides, this time we don't have to pretend to be a couple," she added helpfully with a vague gesture of her hand.

She watched the muscle in his jaw tick and he swallowed.

That was...easier, right? Not pretending to be a couple? Why was that bothering him? After a second, she realized where she'd put her foot in her mouth; they weren't technically a couple...not yet. She hoped it was a yet. Did he think it was a yet?

She ducked her gaze, ashamed. It was getting harder to hold the anger — the hurt — at bay, so she only managed a half-hearted apology. "Sorry. Let's just get our stuff and get settled."

He paused before responding, as if he was holding back a heavy sigh of his own. "It's fine, Lois. I'll just sleep on the couch."

She nodded wordlessly. They grabbed their stuff from the Jeep and headed towards their room. Lois was first through the door after unlocking it. It was clean and quaint. And...shoot, shoot, shoot!

"Lo-is!" came the whimper from behind her as Clark entered the room and...didn't see the same thing she didn't see. "There's no couch."

"I didn't know," she bit back defensively even though his tone hadn't been accusatory.

"Why don't I just take the Jeep and check a few other places for us?" he offered.

He was trying to be helpful, she knew, and sleeping in the same bed had definitely not been part of her plan. But she couldn't help but feel a stab of pain and a small flash of anger that his go-to solution involved him leaving her. He was always leaving her.

"The population of this town is smaller than the high school I went to," she pointed out, trying to maintain her composure. "How many motels do you think they are going to have?"

"You're right," he admitted reluctantly. A little too reluctantly, and she felt anger surge anew.

"It's a big bed. How about we share?" she challenged, crossing her arms over her chest. The guilt clawed at her for having thrown his own words back at him so callously, but she was finding she couldn't help herself. Her anger was the only thing damming up the flood of pain and grief, and it was a tenuous thing, at that.

She thought she saw him flinch at her tone. He opened

his mouth to reply and then closed it again a moment later.

Her heart fell and she turned away, unable to face him. *Oh, Clark. How did we get here?* she cried internally. What had she done? She longed for their easy, playful banter and his mischievous smile. And his touch. She couldn't even remember the last time he'd touched her.

Finally, he broke the awkward silence with a soft sigh. She'd heard that sigh before. It was the one that meant he'd conceded the fight to her. A resigned surrender. He always did that; it was his tacit promise to her. Somewhere along the way, he'd learned she needed him to be the one to yield when they'd landed too many blows. Here he was again, coming to her rescue when she was supposed to be helping him.

"What do you want to do, Lois?" he asked quietly.

She whispered to herself, wanting desperately to say it out loud, but not brave enough to let him hear it. "I want you to act like it's not the worst thing in the world to be stuck in a room alone with me."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and braced herself before turning back around to face him. Strong. She needed to be strong. She gave him a small smile to acknowledge his acquiescence. "We'll be fine, Clark. Honestly, it *is* a big bed, and I trust you."

He nodded in agreement and gave her one of his reassuring smiles. It was far more strained than his usual, but it still helped. "We'll be fine."

She hoped he was right. "Well, I guess I should call Perry and let him know what's going on." She headed towards the phone sitting on the small desk opposite the bed.

Clark spoke softly though his voice was still a little strained, "Good idea." He cleared his throat. "It's getting to be about dinnertime. I'll, uh, go grab us a pizza and some cream sodas."

Her heart sank, and she let him walk out the door.

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Clark stepped out of the motel room, almost gulping for air after the door fell shut behind him. He felt like he was drowning. He'd had to get out of there. He never should have left her. It was getting harder to hold it together, and his chances of making things right with Lois were disintegrating before his eyes.

He took another deep breath. The air wasn't exactly fresh. His enhanced senses could smell the raging fire keenly. Burning trees, thick, acrid smoke, a miasma of destroyed household items. And if he stretched his senses further...

He shook his head sharply and shut his eyes against the flashes of memories. Burning flesh. A car mangled and engulfed in flames. Mayson's body going limp in his arms.

< ...*new developments in Callan County where a forest fire previously thought to be under control has spread into town. Firefighters and paramedics have arrived, but many remain trapped....*>

The TV in one of the nearby rooms had been on, was still on, and it was tuned to live coverage of the now raging forest fire. Bits and pieces of the report kept filtering through while he'd been arguing with Lois in the parking lot and then in their couchless room.

<...this time we don't have to pretend we're a couple ...*The death count so far is holding steady at 5, and rescue workers hope that...*>

He wished he could just go back and start again. He'd do so many things differently...wouldn't he? Would he still be a coward and not tell her his secret? Would he still wait so long to ask her out?

< It's a big bed. How about we share... *Firefighters are struggling to create a fireline fast enough to curb the spread of the blaze...*>

All the words swarmed around in his head, accusing, attacking, like angry bees stinging his guilty conscience. He wasn't even sure if he'd just left the room to finally get to the fire or if he meant to get dinner like he'd told Lois. He was paralyzed with indecision. Why couldn't he just go?

<*Authorities expect the death toll to rise as the night goes on, and the fire shows no sign of dying down...*>

She deserved more than a broken man and sham of a superhero. He was still doing it. Still stalling. Why hadn't he gone to the fire already?

<*As always in times like these, we can only wonder where Superman is...*>

He shot up into the sky without even looking to see if anyone was around. He spun into the suit midair and rocketed towards the fire. He'd let enough people die already today.

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## Chapter 6

It was even worse than he could have imagined. He heard the cries of the trapped and dying long before the fire itself came into view. It had spread out over at least a thousand acres — maybe more. Helicopters could be seen flying overhead with basins of water destined for the worst areas of the fire.

The air was black with smoke and so thick he could taste it in his lungs — powers notwithstanding — and he found himself needing to use his x-ray vision just to find the source of the cries for help. While the forest fire itself was a problem, Clark's main focus was on saving the lives of those trapped by the fire first. He'd worry about how to help put it out later.

Eventually he zeroed in on the multitude of fire and rescue vehicles outside a large shopping centre. This was definitely where he was most needed and he forced himself to put on his "game face" as he landed next to the fire chief, a large man with a thick beard and tired eyes.

Williams, his name tag read.

"Superman! Are we glad to see you!" the man exclaimed, and Clark inwardly winced at the visible relief that seemed to radiate from him. This man had waited *hours* for him to get here.

"How can I help?" he asked. He knew better than to assume or to spring into action without checking with the experts first. The last thing he wanted to do was make their job any harder — especially after showing up so late.

"The shopping centre," Fire Chief Williams said, and Clark felt the anxiety in the man's voice. "I can't even get my men inside because the fire is completely out of control. Some people got out but there are many more still trapped and the building is about to collapse."

“I understand,” Clark replied, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. The town was a haze of red and he couldn’t seem to shake the feeling of anxiety that permeated his entire being. He’d never felt like this before. The suit had always been his way of detaching himself from the situation so that he could get the job done.

But looking at Chief Williams, Clark felt unsure. His heart was beating twice as fast as it normally did, and he felt himself hesitate in a way he didn’t understand. Something about this fire felt familiar and terrifying in a way he didn’t know how to process. The smell of the smoke and the heat pressing in at all sides was oppressive. He knew that feeling. He knew this smell.

*<So that’s what you’ve been hiding.>*

No. He would not think about Mayson right now.

“Superman?” Chief Williams’ voice broke into his thoughts, and he realised he’d been standing there frozen in front of the man.

He shook his head, trying desperately to rid himself of these feelings. These people needed a strong, in-control superhero, not a man having a panic attack.

“Leave it to me, Chief Williams,” he said, adopting his authoritative “Superman tone”.

“Thank you,” the man said and Clark swallowed the guilt that threatened to overwhelm him as he lifted his fist and floated back into the sky to survey the building.

His x-ray vision told him that the fire had originated in the southwest corner of the building. A huge tree was stretched across several power lines on top of the roof of the building. Clark suspected the lightning had struck this building directly.

Structurally, the roof was about to crumble. He knew that anyone trapped there would be in the most danger and so he concentrated his search efforts on that area for people who might still be alive.

To both his relief and horror, there were several people trapped in the basement of the building about to be crushed by the cement ceiling that was steadily becoming weaker. He swallowed heavily as he realised that simply flying down there and grabbing the victims one by one was not going to be enough. This was a precision job. One wrong move and the rescue of one person might cause the ceiling to cave in another area. If he didn’t move fast enough, he risked losing everyone, but he also knew that going too fast could be catastrophically worse.

He fought the feeling of lightheadedness that threatened to overcome him. Superman could not afford to be indecisive. It was time to act.

He took a deep breath and shot down towards a cluster of people who were desperately moving rocks out of the way in an attempt to dig themselves out. One by one, he moved the rocks, taking great care not to disturb the fragile nature of the structure.

It was like that game — Jenga — he’d played with Lois at the Lexor Hotel during their undercover assignment. You had to remove small pieces of wood one at a time placing them on top of the tower but weakening it in the middle. But remove one wrong block and the entire tower would collapse.

Clark had never been very good at Jenga.

He had no idea how much time had passed as he worked slowly and methodically to get people out. He ignored the cries of pain, the exuberant thank-yous, and the tears that stained his suit as he set each person down, and instead flew back into the building and started again. Stone by stone, he worked, until his suit was stained black and red with blood, soot, and debris from the wreckage. He forced his mind to focus solely on the task at hand and repeated to himself over and over “just one more”, until he finally found himself with no one alive left to save.

He landed once more in front of Chief Williams, exhausted and covered in grime.

“That’s the last of them,” he told him, as he wiped his streak-worn brow. “What about the surrounding fires?”

“Most of the buildings and homes are empty, and the neighboring towns have been put on evacuation alert. Our crews are digging out a fireline right now to contain the spread of the blaze,” Chief Williams said.

“Do your men need help digging the fire line?”

“I’m not sure how much good that will do,” he admitted helplessly. “No matter how far we dig, the fire seems to be spreading. One shift in the wind and who knows what will go up next.”

“What if I dug the fireline, then helped your helicopter crews get the water basins to the worst areas of the fire?”

“You can’t just put the fire out with your super breath?” Chief Williams asked, and Clark shook his head regretfully. Chief Williams hadn’t meant to be hurtful with his question. Lord knows Clark still had trouble figuring out the most effective use of his powers, so he couldn’t blame civilians for thinking him to be more powerful than he actually was.

“I go at that thing with my super breath and we will have a much bigger fire on our hands,” he said.

“All right,” Chief Williams acquiesced with a nod. “But please hurry. If this thing reaches another town...”

Clark didn’t hear him complete the sentence. He flew into the air, located the men digging the fireline and shot himself into the ground digging furiously around the perimeter of the fire. When the fireline was finished, he flew back into the air but not before he overheard one of the emergency workers say, “Better late than never, but where the hell was he earlier?”

It almost stopped him mid-flight. He could feel himself falter in the air. He even lost a bit of altitude — as if the wind had been knocked out of him with that one simple phrase.

He knew exactly where he’d been earlier. He’d never hated himself more than he did at that moment.

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Lois sat on the bed against the headboard, hugging her knees to her chest. She was trying to ignore the keys to the Jeep sitting there on the small desk across the room. If she pretended they weren’t there, she could still believe that Clark had gone to get dinner like he’d said he was going to. It didn’t matter, either, that he’d already been gone an hour; he’d said he’d needed some air, so maybe he just decided to walk there instead.

Maybe he’d decided to eat there to have some time to himself. Or he’d gotten caught up chatting about the similarities of small town life with one of the locals. Or

someone had had a flat tire and he'd helped them change it. Or the pizza place was super busy and the food wasn't ready yet.

Any number of things could have made him take this long. It didn't mean he'd taken off and left her. It didn't mean that he'd gotten lost or hurt in this strange town with a night sky filled with smoky air. Oh, God. Her heart lurched. What if he'd gotten lost? Or hurt? What if he'd had a panic attack and gotten hit by a car? Should she call hospitals?

No. Breathe. She needed to stay strong and keep her head on her shoulders. She scrambled off the bed, grabbed her keys hastily, and flung the door open. She was assaulted by a wall of hazy smoke, and her lungs spasmed with coughs. Even if she did take the Jeep to go look for him, there's no way she'd be able to find him. It was dark and smoky, and this place was unfamiliar mountainous country. She could end up in a ditch or worse.

She went to go back into the room and found it locked, the door having fallen shut behind her. Dang it. She patted her pockets futilely; she knew she hadn't grabbed the key card.

Lois pulled her shirt over her nose and mouth and walked over to the office. She breathed a sigh of relief that it was the same lady that had checked her in. "Hi," Lois said with a self-conscious smile. "I seem to have locked myself out already."

"Happens all the time, hon," she said, waving her hand to dismiss any worries. "Just take me a sec to make you a new one."

"You, um, haven't seen my partner around, have you? I mean, I guess you wouldn't know what he looks like, but... kinda tall, dark, and handsome, actually. He didn't... come and get himself a room or anything?"

She gave her a knowing smile. "Lover's quarrel?"

Lois flushed. "No, no... he's my work partner and we were on our way to work out of town, and... the fire... anyway, he left to get food and hasn't come back."

"Well, in either case, no one's been into the office but you in the last few hours. Though I suspect evacuees might start pouring in any time now." She gave her a sympathetic expression. "I'll call your room if I see your partner."

"Thanks," Lois said, deflated, as she took the new key card from the desk clerk.

She pulled her shirt up over her nose once again as she headed back to the room. Once inside, she pulled the curtains open and stared out the window at the parking lot and... what should have been a view of the mountains beyond. It was all a haze, and the light of the moon and the parking lot lights made everything seem eerie.

Lois shuddered. What was she going to do?

There was every chance that he was just stuck at the pizza place because the smoke had gotten too oppressive to walk back. He was just waiting things out, right? But if that were the case, why hadn't he called her to come pick him up?

She grabbed the phonebook and made phone calls to all three of the nearby pizza places. One of them was closed, and the other two hadn't gotten any pickups from anyone fitting Clark's description. Should she call other

restaurants? Should she call the hospital?

Oh, God, how was she supposed to find him? How was she supposed to know if he was hurt or lost or... or... just being petulant Clark?

*Because he wouldn't do that to you*, her heart reminded her. Oh, he'd taken off for longer than this before, but never when he was this emotional and certainly never when she was alone and practically next door to a natural disaster.

In a desperate, flailing attempt to do *something*, she grabbed Clark's messenger bag and snagged his planner. These things always came with a little address book at the front, but no one ever filled those out. Why bother doing it year after year? That's what her Rolodex was for. But Clark did. Her fastidious, anal-retentive, wonderful partner.

She flipped through the pages until she found the entry for Martha and Jonathan Kent (not Mom and Dad, because how do you alphabetize that? she knew he'd reason). She went and sat down on the bed close to the nightstand where the room's phone sat. She took a deep breath. What was even going to say? It's not like Clark had run off to Kansas in the span of a little more than an hour.

She didn't have any idea, but she couldn't sit and do nothing. So she grabbed the phone and dialed the number before she lost her nerve. She started panicking as the phone rang and rang. Was it too late? What even was the time difference between Kansas and New Troy? Did this count as an emergency?

"Hello?" came Martha's warm voice.

"Martha? It's Lois... Lois Lane, Clark's partner. But you knew that. I, um, hope it's not too late, but I was kinda worried, and I wasn't sure what to do... and, oh, it was dumb to call you! I'm sor —"

"Lois, honey, it's okay. Take a breath," Martha said, her voice somehow reassuring across the distance. "Now, tell me what's wrong."

"I don't even know what's wrong! I can't find Clark! I mean, I guess it's only been an hour, but he went out for pizza and hasn't come back yet, and I wouldn't be worried if we were in the city, maybe, but we're out of town on an assignment. We got stuck in the middle of nowhere because of a forest fire and got a motel room. And it's all dark and smoky and he didn't take my car. He's out walking somewhere in that haze and smoke."

"Oh, that does sound a bit concerning. I can see why you're worried."

"What should I do? You haven't heard from him, have you?" Lois fretted, insanely grateful that this woman didn't seem to mind a frantic call from her grown son's almost-maybe-kinda-someday-hopefully girlfriend about him having been missing for an hour.

"Well, no, I haven't heard from him since before your work trip. But... I imagine he's... maybe caught somewhere in town, taking shelter until the smoke clears a bit so he can get back. Clark's a smart man. I'm sure he's fine."

"But why wouldn't he call me, then? I could go pick him up. And I don't know if you know... I mean, you said you talked to him the other day... he's not been okay, Martha..."

"Lois, honey, try and calm down," she told her. "Take a deep breath. Now, there is one thing I'm absolutely certain

of and that is that Clark is okay wherever he is.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m his mother. I would feel it. Just like I have also felt that he hasn’t been the same since Mayson Drake’s funeral. Am I warm?”

Lois choked on a sob. “He’s not been acting like himself at all. I don’t know what to do. I’ve never seen him like this before. It’s more than grief...it’s almost...this sounds just foolish, but I think he’s blaming himself somehow.”

Martha was quiet for a few moments. “That doesn’t sound foolish at all. Clark has always taken on more responsibility than he should, even as a kid.”

“I guess that does sound like him,” Lois said, sniffing a little. “I’ve noticed he does have a bit of a hero complex.”

Martha let out something between a cough and a laugh, then she chuckled. “Yes, that certainly does sound like him. Now, you should probably hang up with me to keep the line clear in case he does call.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Maybe I’ll call the nearby hospital just in case, too.”

“Sounds wise.”

“Martha?”

“Yes?”

“...thank you,” she said quietly.

“Thank *you* for caring so much about my boy,” Martha said, and Lois could hear the emotion in her voice. “Oh, and Lois? Don’t hesitate...to call me, I mean. Any time of the day or night,” she added. “I don’t tend to worry about whether he’s okay physically, but mentally...Well, if you need me, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Martha. I’ll be in touch.” Lois set the receiver down on its cradle and took a deep breath. She felt... calmer. Still worried, but calmer. How amazing would it be to have a mother like Martha Kent?

She sighed deeply before collecting the phone book again to look for the number to the local hospital. She hesitated before dialing, though, the ring tone droning in her ear. She tried to remind herself of Martha’s certainty that he was physically okay; this call was only to cross something off the list, narrow down the possibilities in a methodical way. She did this all the time with stories.

She’d called hospitals before, morgues, too. For work, and...that unspeakable night that Clark had died. They’d dragged his body off and...well, she’d clung desperately to the hope that maybe they’d uncharacteristically rolled him out of the car at the doors of a hospital, and maybe he’d been miraculously saved somehow. Even though he’d not been breathing the last time she’d touched him.

And she’d blamed herself for his death, hadn’t she?

But that wasn’t the same as Clark and Mayson. Clark hadn’t had anything to do with why Mayson was killed. She couldn’t understand why Mayson’s death was hitting her so hard, so much that he’d blown right past grief and into panic and despair. Grief she could understand. Even feeling a little guilty...all the things they could have done differently that might not have led Mayson to that time and place where she’d been killed. But there was nothing under Clark’s control that she could think of that would put the blame on him. She would have to try and help him see that.  
...

If he came back. *When* he came back. He always came back to her. Even from the dead, he’d come back to her.

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## Chapter 7

*<Better late than never, but where the hell was he earlier?>*

The words echoed in his head, and yet there was no time for wallowing or self-pity. If he didn’t get the water to the tree line in time, more towns could catch fire. More people would die. Clark couldn’t let that happen. No matter what the consequences might be to his personal life, he couldn’t allow more deaths on his conscience.

He forced himself to forget those words, and flew with renewed determination to where the helicopters were based. He had a quick conversation with the crews there, and then proceeded to grab one of the large water basins they used for putting out fires.

Now that his speed was an asset, he used it to his full advantage, gathering as much water as he could at one time and dumping it as fast as he could over the largest areas of the fire. He did this for what felt like hours, but may only have been minutes.

When it seemed as if the fire had been controlled to a manageable level by the local authorities, he returned to Chief Williams, who was now instructing his crew on the ground into the wreckage of the shopping centre.

“It’s all right, Chief Williams,” he said, trying desperately to maintain the “Superman voice”. The comment he’d overheard was still with him, repeating on a loop inside his head even as he tried to ignore it. And his body...he’d had more difficult, more strenuous rescues before, but now his body felt completely and utterly exhausted. He had nothing left to give. “There aren’t any more people trapped in there. I got them all out.”

“All that were alive, yes,” Chief Williams said, his voice heavy with regret. “My men have gone in to retrieve the bodies of those that didn’t get out in time.”

*You mean those I didn’t save in time,* Clark thought, adding it to the mental tally inside his head. How many were in there? How many more could he have piled high atop his conscience before he finally broke? He thought of the look in Mayson’s eyes before she’d closed them for good and wondered how the people inside the shopping centre had looked. What had their final thoughts been? How many loved ones did they leave behind to mourn them? Mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters?

“Better let me do that,” Clark said. His hands were balled into fists at his side, in an attempt to keep them from trembling. He’d never been this weary. “There are still weak points in the structure. Wouldn’t want to lose any of your men retrieving...the bodies.”

He looked away, swiftly burying the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him and drew a deep breath.

Chief Williams nodded, and pulled out his walkie talkie, instructing his men to hold back on the search.

Whoever was in there deserved to be laid to rest properly, and he refused to deny them that because of his own weakness.

Clark forced his mind to go blank as he lifted into the air and surveyed the wreckage of the shopping centre. A

mantra replayed itself over and over in his head: Just get them out.

The task itself was easy compared to before. After all, he didn't need to worry about anyone's safety but his own. And yet somehow this was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He forced himself to think of each body he dug up as cargo, and though he didn't want to, he found himself counting them in his head, one by one as he gingerly lifted them into the sky and flew them to Chief Williams, setting them down with the utmost care.

He didn't look at them. He couldn't. He couldn't recall the age, gender, or ethnicity of the bodies he pulled from the wreckage and yet somehow each one was imprinted on his soul regardless.

One.

<Just get them out.>

Two.

<The death count so far is holding steady at 5.>

Three.

<Better late than never, but where the hell was he earlier?>

Four.

<I want you to act like it's not the worst thing in the world to be stuck in a room alone with me.>

Five.

<As always, in times like this we have to wonder where Superman is...>

Six.

<So that's what you've been hiding.>

Seven.

<It's a big bed, why don't we share?>

Eight.

<Why won't you let me in?>

Nine.

<If you had no powers. If you were just an ordinary man, leading an ordinary life, I would love you just the same.>

Ten.

He wasn't sure how long it took him to realise there were no more bodies left in the wreckage. Time seemed to hold no meaning. He returned to Chief Williams to let him know the building was empty. Eventually, what was left would be demolished, but given the extent of the fire surrounding the town, Clark knew that was a task that would be handled another day by the local authorities once they were certain the fire was well and truly under control.

"Thanks for your help, Superman," the fire chief was saying. "We couldn't have done it without you."

Clark almost let out a loud, bitter laugh. The ten people he'd pulled from the wreckage would beg to disagree with Williams' statement — if they could. Clark was suddenly very grateful that he did not have to be the one to deliver the news to the families. He could do many things, but he didn't think he'd have the strength for that.

"Superman?" Chief Williams' voice held a note of concern, and Clark realised he hadn't responded to the man. "Yes, Chief?"

"Go home," the man said, and Clark had to look away for a moment, lest his guard slip and he reveal too much of his emotional state. Superman wasn't supposed to be weak.

"I don't know if you have someone to go to, but if you do... go to them."

Clark could only nod as he lifted himself in the air, unable to respond. He'd managed to launch himself high enough so that no one could see the tear that streaked down the side of his soot-covered cheek as he flew with single-minded determination back towards the hotel room.

He had someone to go to, and he'd pushed her away.

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After calling the hospital and even a few more restaurants in the area, she still had no idea where Clark was. She got up to look out the window through the curtains again. Still dark. Still hazy. Though it did look like the smoke was dissipating a little.

Her anger had long since dissipated, but the worry had increased. So had the hurt. The little voice inside her head, the one that never failed to cast doubts on anything good in her life, told her she'd pushed too hard today and scared him off.

She knew deep in her heart that wasn't true, but the doubt niggled at her nonetheless. And it also brought up the hurt. The car ride today had overall been a disaster, and then the first thing he'd done when they'd gotten to their room was take off.

In the beginning of their partnership, his leaving had just been a passing annoyance and frustration, something about his personality that she'd thought he could stand to improve upon. But lately? Ever since he'd asked her out — no — ever since she'd started to realise her true feelings for her partner, each abrupt departure had stung a little more, triggering her trust and abandonment issues.

She wasn't quite sure if his flightiness had increased since she'd first said yes to going on a date with him or if she just noticed it more. Because she was noticing *him* more? Because ever since he'd first crossed that fragile line between best friends and something more by asking her out... It was as though he'd flipped a switch in her mind, and she found herself regarding him in a whole new way.

He'd changed *everything* even though everything was still very much the same. He still rested an occasional hand on her shoulder while he edited her copy. He still touched the small of her back as they went through a doorway. And he still brought her coffee in the morning. It all just seemed to be imbued with so much more meaning.

Which is why, when he still got that look in his eye or tugged at his tie with a nervous twitch right before he retreated with some lame excuse... it meant more. It hurt more.

And while she hadn't tallied his hasty exits and done the math since he'd flipped that switch, she knew for certain he'd been leaving her more often since Mayson died. She had no idea how to feel about that. Sad? Hurt? Guilty?

<What about Mayson?>

<I'm asking you out, Lois.>

He'd chosen *her*. Kissed *her*. Nobody goes on a date *that* great and...

<You slammed the door in my face last night.>

Who exactly had the fear of commitment?

Clark had been dashing off with wild excuses long before he'd asked her out. So maybe Dr. Friskin wasn't so

right about Clark's behavior. *She* was the one with trust issues.

Clark knew that, though, and if she had to guess, that's part of why he waited so long to ask her out. He knew her. He accepted her like no one else ever had, and he...loved her. Didn't he?

*<I have been in love with you for a long time...you had to have known.>*

*<...it wasn't true. I'm not in love with you. I would have said anything to stop you from marrying Luthor.>*

She honestly couldn't be certain. She didn't know exactly what love looked like, or felt like.

*That's not true*, her heart chimed in.

She did know. She just wasn't sure if she could trust it. It was a nebulous thing, ever-moving, ever-evolving. And so vulnerable to life's tragedies.

Oh, how she wished Mayson hadn't died! She may not have liked her. She may have felt threatened by her as a rival for Clark's attention and affection. But she hadn't wished her dead, especially in such a horrific way. Lois closed her eyes tightly and shook her head, trying to rid herself of the images in her mind.

Clark was not okay. She remembered the tears rolling down his face as he held Mayson's limp body. The agony and the pain. And after the scene had been cleared...After they'd given their statements to the police...After she'd gotten him home and prodded him to clean up and change clothes...She'd watched him curiously as he numbly, almost absently tidied his already clean apartment. She'd listened as he'd tried to rewrite history, wishing that they'd left earlier or called to let her know they were running late. She'd made him tea as she tried to get him to talk. She'd worried as he kept insisting he should have gotten there sooner, which didn't make any sense; he couldn't have known. She'd reassured him that it wasn't their fault, wasn't *his* fault.

Then this guilt that he'd been carrying, his behavior since the funeral...that was what had made her concoct this scheme in the first place. Most of the reason, anyway. He'd barely taken any time off after Mayson's death. And while she knew any one person's grief couldn't be quantified or qualified, she just knew somehow that this was affecting Clark more than what anyone might consider normal grieving. Even his mother had said as much.

The guilt that he was carrying didn't quite make sense to her. Though...one of his more endearing yet infuriating qualities was that he was chronically polite. Because of that, he hadn't bothered to tell Mayson he wasn't interested.

At least that's why she assumed Mayson had still pursued Clark with singular focus. Lois at least knew Clark that well, right? So maybe he was feeling guilty about never letting her down gently?

She'd taken a huge gamble, boldly assuming that getting him to finally have an uninterrupted conversation was all it would take. She hadn't even planned what she was going to say. Nothing she'd said that night that it'd happened had seemed to get through to him, and he'd been shutting everyone out ever since.

All she could do now was hope that she could get through to him when he finally got back, whenever that

would be. Her stomach growled. She grabbed a few protein bars from her bag and her water. Maybe if she got an update on the fire, that might give her a better idea of when the smoke might let up a bit.

She turned on the modest little TV set and didn't have to search long for coverage of the wildfire. It was terrible. Hundreds upon hundreds of acres gone already, including nearby homes and businesses. Thankfully, the death count was low. For now. They'd ordered evacuations of all nearby towns in hopes of preventing further deaths.

The cameras cut to a shot of Superman speaking with a man who must have been the fire chief in charge of the scene. There was a shopping centre that was engulfed in flames and threatening to collapse with people still inside.

Superman looked...off. It almost looked like he was staring off into space instead of surveying the wreckage, but she was probably just imagining things, projecting some of her bad mood onto him.

She continued watching and breathed a sigh of relief as he finally started flying in and out of the shopping centre, pulling survivor after survivor out of the wreckage and carefully handing them off to medical personnel. She hoped he didn't find too many, or any bodies. She could only imagine how crushing that felt.

But there was something definitely concerning about the way he was acting. She'd watched his efforts on television before, when he'd attended to earthquakes and floods and wildfires like this one. As he was flying in and out, he seemed slower, more deliberate, kind of like how people tended to drive if they were overtired and really ought to have pulled over to rest.

Superman didn't always get that luxury, did he? She guessed it made some sense, given the fire had been raging for most of the day, and he'd probably been there nearly as long.

She hoped he had someone to go to, talk to. She knew with some sort of certainty that he didn't have a romantic relationship with anyone; he'd intimated as much, that it wasn't something he could do without putting someone at risk. He wasn't willing to do that, she understood now. But he did have friends; hopefully, more than just herself and Clark.

Clark wasn't exactly in a good place to be a friend right now, and Lois didn't know how to contact Superman like Clark did. She rankled a bit at that, not even denying the feelings of rejection tinged with jealousy that he found Clark a better friend. Oh, she knew why; her repeated overtures for his love hadn't made her a very safe or comfortable confidant.

Asking Clark to contact Superman for her, though...that's something she wasn't willing to do again, regardless of Clark's current emotional state. Not while the threads holding her and Clark's potential relationship together were so fragile.

She'd have to just wait until the next time she saw Superman to check in on him. For his sake, she hoped it wouldn't be too long.

She got up to shut off the TV. It didn't look like she and Clark were going to make it any further to their destination tomorrow, probably not the next day, either. Given how

things were going, they should probably just turn around and go home. Her plan was a bust. This room here, with its one king bed and no couch, could have been a workable contingency plan...if he'd stayed in the room for longer than two minutes.

Had she wounded him too deeply for him to trust her? The irony of it all taunted her. Just as she'd been learning how to love and open up, he was shutting down and giving up. Was he giving up on them, too? On her?

Wasn't that for the best, though? Putting any idea of a romantic relationship on hold — indefinitely — because that's what he needed right now. She needed to be his best friend and help him through his grief while she put aside her own feelings. Because that's what you did when you loved someone; their own happiness mattered more than your own, even if it broke your heart.

She changed into a soft t-shirt and sleep shorts and brushed her teeth, her heart heavy with the realization of what she knew had to happen. She'd just been getting used to being someone he loved.

She wouldn't blame him if he didn't come back tonight. It'd been hours and hours already, and tomorrow only promised a long, awkward, and painful drive home.

Lois crawled into the bed and curled up on her side, facing away from the door and trying to make herself as small as she was feeling. She drew the covers up to ward against the cold that had suddenly come over her.

Clark still wasn't back. Hot tears started falling slowly, making tracks across her nose and cheek, landing on her hand. She stared at them as she cried, her chest feeling as if it would burst from fear, worry, and heartbreak. She ached for him to put his arms around her — to pull her close and reassure her that everything was going to be okay — that he was going to be okay. He was the one constant in her chaotic world, and now he was crumbling. He was falling apart, and she had no idea how to save him.

That thought played in her mind on a loop as she cried herself to sleep.

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Clark hovered above the motel, exhausted and a bit bleary-eyed. It was dark now. Hours had passed. The Jeep was still in the parking lot, so she hadn't given up on him completely and gone home. Probably closer to the truth was that she hadn't given up on the story. He'd forgotten which room they were in; it was practically a miracle that he had the key card on him.

He made a brief sweep of the single-level complex, searching for Lois. There she was. Asleep already, of course. It was late. Most of the motel guests were asleep, though many of the beds had been empty.

Wait. He shook his head, trying to clear the fog from his mind.

He swept the buildings again, focusing on the ones with empty beds. They weren't just empty beds; they were empty rooms, devoid of any suitcases, belongings, people.

*<They only had one room left.>*

There were plenty of rooms available. His brow furrowed. Why on Earth would Lois lie about that? It couldn't be the cost of it. They were on a story; it could be expensed. And given how distant he'd been the last few

days, his behavior in the car, how much she must surely hate him for continually running out on her, being stuck with him in the same room seemed like the last thing she'd want.

Oh.

He inhaled sharply.

*<I want you to act like it's not the worst thing in the world to be stuck in a room alone with me.>*

She hadn't said it loudly, hadn't meant for him to hear it, her voice a trembling whisper, but he'd heard it all the same. It'd cut right through his heart at almost the same instant the death toll had increased to seven.

His being Superman was hurting Lois. She deserved a whole man, not just half of one. Especially when the one half kept running away from her. The reasons why he couldn't be with her were starting to pile up, and he felt as though they might topple over and crush him alive.

He hung his head, feeling utterly defeated, and landed behind a dumpster to change before heading back to the room. He couldn't tell her. Despite the fact that he wanted to more than anything else in the world, he knew it was out of the question. Telling her would mean her learning that it was their kiss that had caused Mayson's death. He couldn't do that to her. He couldn't put that burden on her. It was his job to bear the pain of those he failed to save. It wasn't hers. And Lois was not the type of person to ever be okay with getting there too late.

Still, he knew that he was teetering on a very thin edge. He would have to apologise and find a way of putting this behind him. Of letting go of the dream. It turns out he couldn't have it all, but if he could just have her friendship, that would be enough. It had to be. He could manage that, surely. He'd been doing that for almost two years.

A quick peek let him know she hadn't engaged the safety latch. He should probably be grateful for that. She wasn't shutting him out completely, at least not physically.

As quietly as he could, he slid the key card in and out and then opened the door, hoping that light from the parking lot wouldn't spill in and disturb Lois. After guiding the door closed to avoid it slamming shut, he grabbed his overnight bag and headed for the bathroom.

He took out a t-shirt and boxers and set them on the countertop to change into. He spun out of the suit and shoved it unceremoniously into his bag, not wanting to deal with it — with him — anymore. He debated a shower because he didn't want to risk waking Lois. Stupid. He should have stopped at home first.

But he couldn't not shower...he couldn't face himself in the mirror, but he knew he was covered in soot and grime and the acrid smell of...all the parts of the disaster he was hoping to forget. Some things you couldn't scrub clean.

He showered at super speed and spun into his sleep clothes, trying to make as little noise as possible. Once out of the bathroom, he tucked his duffel bag back by the little desk. Clark hesitated when he looked at the bed, and he pulled out the desk chair gently and sat down facing her.

He wasn't sure if sharing the bed was still the thing to do, even though they'd agreed to it and there wasn't much in the way of other options. He had half a thought that he could go book his own room...but he couldn't do that,

wouldn't do that. He'd already left her for long enough. And, selfishly, he didn't want to leave her again. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Seeing Lois again after an arduous and devastating rescue always proved to begin the process of knitting his soul and spirit back together.

She was lying curled up on her side at the edge of the bed, as if she were trying to take up as little space as possible with her small frame.

He got up and walked to the opposite side of the bed. It was a big bed; there'd be plenty of space between Lois and him. If he was lucky, it'd be close enough to help recharge his soul before morning. He knew he'd need it to face the day.

When he pulled back the covers and crawled in, she shifted and rolled onto her side facing him. He froze for a moment until he was sure she'd settled. Her heartbeat seemed slow and steady. He laid down and pulled the covers up.

Her heart rate increased ever so slightly, and she mumbled, "...worried...so worried...you're safe."

He froze again, not sure if she was asleep or awake or somewhere in between. He risked a glance in her direction and saw that her eyes were heavy-lidded but slightly open.

He wasn't sure what to say or if he should even answer. Before he could even decide, she was shifting her body and closing the distance between them. She burrowed a little to lift his arm and nestled into his shoulder, her head on his chest, and her arm found its way across his chest as her body settled against his.

"Lois?" he asked softly, unsure.

She still seemed half asleep. "Please, Clark. Jus' need you to hold me. I need you..." her quiet plea trailed off as she drifted back into unconsciousness against him.

He should have moved her. He knew that it was wrong to let her stay. She hadn't agreed to this — not rationally, anyway, and he feared there might be hell to pay if she woke up tangled up in his arms the next morning with no memory of the night before.

They had no sooner checked into the motel, and he'd already run out on her, not returning until the wee hours of the morning. What was he going to say when she demanded in the hard light of day to know where he'd gone? All his usual excuses were useless here. He had no random neighbours to help, no dentist appointments to go to, or lawns to mow. There was nothing he could say to her that would justify his actions — not even the truth.

And he wanted to tell her at least that. But he knew that wasn't enough to make up for all the hurt and heartache. And he couldn't let her know that her hero was so broken and fallible, failing to save so many people.

And yet, he still hadn't moved her from his arms. Right or wrong, she felt far too good pressed against him. The faint scent of her perfume enveloped him — the smell of vanilla and strawberry. He allowed himself to imagine what it might be like in another life to fall asleep like this with her every night — to feel her body, warm and soft against his with her chest rising and falling in time with his own.

Such a simple thing and yet, it was all he could think about — all he wanted in the world.

He should move her. Clutch her close to him, and then

gently roll her over to her side of the bed. It was the right thing to do. And yet, he remained frozen, pinned down by the comforting weight of his partner's body. He felt sheltered, safe...protected.

After everything that had happened tonight, he needed this. He needed her. He thought of all those people who would never come home to their loved ones — all those people who would go to sleep alone from now on because he'd failed them.

What right did he have to feel this comfort?

He should move her. It was the right thing to do. But he hadn't been very good at doing the right thing lately.

Softly, she shifted against him and sighed. He watched her sleep and felt something in his heart begin to unclench. Slowly, his body began to let go of the burdens of the day. Something about holding her close, allowed him to forget — at least for the moment.

He knew it couldn't last. Morning would dawn and he would have to face his mistakes. This moment was an illusion — but oh, it was the best illusion. And he wanted it. He wanted just one night to pretend that he was just a normal man falling asleep with the woman he loved in his arms.

He kissed her gently on top of her head, taking great care not to wake her.

"I love you, Lois," he whispered as he too drifted off to sleep.

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## Chapter 8

Clark slept soundly. For the first time in days, the noise in his mind had ceased — banished by the warmth of Lois' skin, and the comforting press of her body.

His dreams were of her. And they were good dreams. He dreamed of the way she felt in his arms, the way her face lit up every morning when he brought her coffee, and the kisses they had shared.

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Lois smiled softly, reveling in the warmth against her cheek and the faint smell of Clark's cologne, woodsmoke and...wait. It was more smoky than cologne. She opened her eyes and stilled for a moment as her mind reconciled the dreamworld with the real world. She was sleeping next to Clark. Well, on Clark, sort of. Snuggled up next to him.

He'd come back. She'd known he would, but her heart had been afraid all the same. Another deep breath in rewarded her with the citrus-and-something-or-other of the motel shampoo and that hint of smoke, which made sense since he'd been out in the smoke-filled air for God knows how long. He must have showered and changed before crawling into bed.

She had a half a memory of him coming to bed and her instinctively seeking him out. She'd needed that shoulder, that chest. She'd needed his comfort, his arm around her like always, except not exactly like always because now they were lying down in bed instead of snuggled on his couch.

She'd needed him to hold her, and he had. Of course he had, she tried telling her heart. That was the one thing, if nothing else, she could still count on: Clark had always been there for her when she'd *really* needed him.

She prayed that Clark would now let her be there for him, let her be as good a friend to him as he'd been to her. And she dared hope that they could salvage what was left of their friendship. She needed him in her life; her heart could admit that much.

If she closed her eyes, it was so easy to pretend that he was hers, that they always did this, and that she had every right to wake up in his arms. Maybe once upon a time he'd wanted that, to be so close and so intimate with her. Now she wasn't so sure.

Her hand wandered before she could stop it, caressing the hard muscles of his chest that hid beneath his soft t-shirt. He moaned softly in his sleep and she froze. She'd be lying to herself if she'd said that had no effect on her, that her mind hadn't flashed to the first time they'd been in a hotel bed together.

She needed to get up.

Closing her eyes, she breathed in his scent deeply one last time before she gently lifted his arm so she could move away. He didn't stir, and she was half disappointed. But she needed a shower and some time to think about what to say, not to mention a strategy for surviving the car ride home. Plus, he looked so exhausted, not quite peaceful in his sleep, she didn't have the heart to wake him.

So, friends. She sat up on her side of the bed and glanced back over at him, his face dimly lit by the glow of the parking lot lights bleeding through around the edges of the curtains. Already, she was mourning the loss of his warmth and the security of his embrace. And the feel of his body next to hers. It would be a bad idea to snuggle back up and forget the world, right?

She'd been fortunate last night to sleep in his arms. That was unlikely to ever happen again. She needed to forget about her feelings, for their sake. For his sake.

Lois scooted off the bed gently and padded over to the bathroom. She entered blindly, not flipping the switch until she'd closed the door behind her, so as not to wake Clark with the light.

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In his dreams he was a normal man in love and the feel of her — so present in his arms gave him peace.

And then suddenly everything shifted. One moment she was secure in his arms and the next she was gone. And with that, his dreams shifted too...

Suddenly he was surrounded by a darkness so oppressive, it stole his breath away. Images assaulted him so rapidly he could hardly make sense of them all.

Lois' face every time he ran out on her.

A raging fire that he was powerless to put out.

Ten bodies stacked neatly on top of one another — their glassy eyes looking right through him.

The sound of the bomb that killed Mayson Drake, her body going limp in his arms.

Being ten seconds too late.

Lois' disappointment in him.

Though some part of him knew it wasn't real, he was unable to force himself awake, which only increased his panic.

A claustrophobic feeling overtook him — as if the walls were closing in on him. Dingy motel room walls covered

with flames.

He felt the smoke coat his throat and he clutched it as he gasped for breath. The room was hot and he couldn't see anything. He knew he had to get out, but his feet were rooted to the spot.

And that's when he saw her and felt his heart freeze with terror. In the middle of the hotel room right next to the bed, surrounded by flames was Lois.

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She turned the handle on the shower, cringing at the creak it made and the rush of water that followed as she maneuvered it toward the H. She hoped Clark was a deep sleeper.

Could she do it? Work every day with him, next to him? Be his friend and nothing more while her heart ached with the knowledge of what she'd lost?

Is that what Clark had done?

*<I want the same thing that you want. For us to be friends, partners. Forever.>*

She'd tried to tell him then. But if she was honest with herself, surely she hadn't been ready then for anything more than friends. Had Clark known that? Is that why he'd said it? Or had he taken it back because she'd hurt him so badly? He had always seemed to know her better than she knew herself.

Except lately. They'd been so out of sync lately.

After testing the water and deeming it the right temperature, she shed her clothes and stepped into the shower. She spent only a few minutes washing her hair and body, and then she stood still, letting the hot, steady stream of water wash over her.

Today was going to be a long day, and she wasn't sure if her heart was ready for it. The water felt good against her skin, warming her muscles, but it did nothing to soothe the heavy feeling in her heart.

Clark needed a friend right now, nothing more. Whatever his issues with her were didn't matter. For some reason, he couldn't or wouldn't or didn't seem to want to have a romantic relationship with her anymore. As much as it pained her, she had to be the one to put a stop to their failing efforts at something more than partners and friends. She didn't have to be right this time.

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He tried once more to run to her, but his feet refused to obey his commands and his screams were swallowed by the smoke and flame.

He could hear her calling out to him, arms outstretched as tears streaked down her smoke-stained face. He had never felt so powerless...so desperate.

And then, as if his prayers had been answered, Superman swooped down into the motel room and landed next to Lois. He would save her. He would get her out.

But he didn't.

Lois didn't even glance Superman's way, didn't seem to see him at all. Clark struggled as Superman watched the flames creep closer to Lois, his arms crossed and his face a mask of cold indifference.

"Save her!" he managed to croak, his voice cracked and haggard. "Superman! Get her out! Save her!"

But Superman did nothing and Lois couldn't see him.

All she saw was Clark. His heart broke as she pleaded for help. Wild panic overtook him but his feet remained firmly fixed to the ground as the flames seemed to close around her.

He tried to scream her name but instead he choked on it. *Help me*, he thought as he struggled desperately for consciousness. *Lois, wake me up. Get me out. Help me!*

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She sighed heavily and turned off the shower, letting the last of the water run down her body before she wrung her hair and stepped out. She'd dried her body and was just toweeling off her hair when she heard Clark groan and cry out.

What the heck? She finished quickly and threw her shirt, shorts, and underwear back on. When she emerged from the bathroom, she saw him rolling around in distress, fighting against the sheets. She inhaled sharply, feeling a sudden ache in her chest.

"Clark," she called as she hurried to the bed. She wasn't sure if he'd heard her or not, but he had stopped thrashing and was now just restless, tossing and turning his head and shoulders a bit.

She climbed back into bed and under the covers before she quite realised what she was doing. She hesitated, not sure if holding him was the right thing to do or not. But then his brow furrowed and he whimpered, and she was there, back in her spot on his chest.

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And just as quickly as the nightmare came, it disappeared. He found himself inside his apartment, standing in front of his oven with a spatula in his hand and the familiar smell of scrambled eggs tickling his senses.

Lois stood in front of him wrapped in his bathrobe, her hair wet from what he imagined was the use of his shower. His subconscious cursed the fact that this was also clearly a dream.

"Those smell incredible," she said, moving closer into his arms. She took the spatula out of his hands and wrapped her arms around him.

Though he knew it was a fantasy, he couldn't believe how real it felt. The scent of her perfume mingled with the softness of her pressed against him in all the right places. Not to mention that bathrobe. What did she have on under it? How far would this dream go if he tried to find out?

"Lo-is," he said in mock complaint. "The eggs will burn if you keep distracting me."

"We wouldn't want that," she murmured, her voice a soft rumble against his neck. And though it was meant to be intimate, a thrill of fear suddenly coursed through him and he fought back images from the nightmare that preceded the dream. Dreams weren't always linear and he knew his mind could put him back there at any moment.

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"...ois..." She heard him breathe out what could only have been her name, and he settled, his arm automatically circling around her back and shoulder to hold her tighter. She could feel him calming, the tension bleeding out of his body as she held him. For one minute. Two minutes. And he was sleeping again, his arm slackened and his breathing even.

She could only guess that he'd had a nightmare, no doubt reliving Mayson's death. What was it like, how terrible was it to have someone die in your arms, especially someone you cared about?

Her mind flashed back again to that horrific night at Georgie Hairdo's casino. She knew. She knew the shock and devastation, the helplessness. But she'd, miraculously, gotten Clark back. He'd gotten a second chance at life, and she'd gotten a second chance at...

She should have told him then.

She'd tried. She should have tried harder. Because she'd known it then, known it with certainty. But he'd fallen asleep and she'd lost her nerve the next day, afraid to risk the best thing in her life for something more. And then he'd backed off, given her room again. Always retreating when she was ready and willing.

She tilted her head back so she could look at his face. That face.

She'd only ever seen him sleeping a handful of times, she being the one who usually fell asleep first on movie nights and such. And come to think, she'd never seen him without his glasses. He looked different, especially with his face cast almost cinematically with soft light and shadows, but he was still her Clark all the same.

She was relieved. He looked so calm. So handsome. So perfect.

Had she lost him? Or was he just feeling lost? She knew she felt lost.

She saw his brow furrow again, and she reached up to caress it lightly, letting her fingers run gently down the soft skin of his cheek to the rough stubble along his jawline. She marveled at the fact that her touch calmed his features almost reflexively.

Her voice. Her closeness. Her touch. She had calmed him

That had to mean something, didn't it? That his body had reacted to her of its own volition? Just like when she was anxious or scared and he hugged her close to his chest, the sound and feel of his heartbeat calmed her so swiftly and absolutely. Did that mean more than friends, best friends? Even best friends as good as they were didn't have such a physical connection, did they? She didn't know.

She thought back to their first kiss, how her body had come alive. Was that to be their only kiss? She didn't think she could bear it if it was.

She raised her hand to his face again, cupping his cheek. Her thumb moved to brush across his lips, almost reverently. She felt the warmth of his exhale against the pad of her thumb and shivered slightly. She applied gentle pressure to his cheek, willing him to face her more fully.

Oh, Clark. What had she done? Could he ever forgive her? Could she ever forgive herself?

Her lips drifted towards his unwittingly, impulsively, and she kissed him. Gently. For goodbye, she told herself. Goodbye to what could have been, what would have surely been the best relationship of her life.

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He wanted to stay here forever and never wake up. Especially since the feelings she was evoking in him were ones he had been denying himself for so long. His hands

drifted down the sides of her body and he felt his own react. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss her in this dream state.

A moment later the question was answered as Lois leaned in, and pressed her lips lightly to him. It felt so real and Clark felt himself roused into a half-waking state.

Her hand drifted down to his chest and she began to pull away. He didn't know much about what was real and what was illusion, but he knew he couldn't let her go. He needed her.

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Soft, gentle, and brief, it was over almost before it had started. And she was just starting to pull away, her hand falling to the relative safety of his chest, when his lips came back to meet hers, like a mirror echo of their first kiss. He must be half awake, half asleep; she must be dreaming, though she'd hardly felt more awake in her life.

She wasn't certain if she'd deepened this kiss or if he had, but she was almost sure he was awake now, as his hand had come up to cup her cheek and then he ran his fingers through her hair. He urged her closer with his touch on the back of her head as their lips met again and again.

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Instinct took over as he pulled her close and deepened the kiss. Whatever vestiges of sleep remained melted away and he found that his entire body was suddenly on high alert. His heart hammered in his chest as her body pressed lightly closer to his and he found himself reaching for her, caressing her face and running his fingers through her hair.

This was better than any dream he'd ever had and all the reasons why he shouldn't be doing this melted away in the face of one simple truth: she was kissing him back.

Deeply. Eagerly. Passionately. Her heart was racing in time to his and he shifted his body ever so slightly so that she couldn't tell just how much he was affected by her touch. This was too new, too fragile.

He never wanted it to end and yet he feared it would if she saw just how much he wanted it. Wanted her.

Needed her.

He felt overwhelmed by that need — so raw and demanding. He wondered if she could sense it in his kiss because she eventually pulled away, and their eyes met as he fought to regain some sense of control.

"Clark, she said and he couldn't mistake the breathless way she said his name. His entire body hummed with anticipation as he drank in the features of her face, flushed from his kisses. "You're awake."

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After an eternity — or had it been a second? — their lips parted and she risked looking up into his heavy-lidded eyes. "Clark," she breathed. "You're awake."

She held his gaze and her breath as she waited for his reaction. She hadn't meant to...it was just supposed to be a quick, final kiss. And he'd...and then...

For a moment, he didn't speak, but the electricity seemed to arc along the small distance between them. "Lois..." came his reply, breathy and almost desperate.

She searched for both the questions and the answers in his deep, brown eyes and found a spark of desire and... something more?

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He waited for the anger he knew was sure to come. Despite the fact that she'd kissed him first and with an eagerness that both surprised and aroused him, he couldn't help but brace himself for the anticipated rejection.

Instead, he was shocked to see desire where there should be fury, heat when she should be ice cold.

He didn't deserve her, but oh man did he want her. He didn't know if it was because of what he'd just gone through with the fire or because he was still exhausted, but he was no longer able to find a reason not to kiss her.

He felt an almost desperate need to feel her against him again — as if she alone was capable of banishing the nightmares, both waking and asleep.

He wanted to tell her all these things and more, but instead, his voice murmured her name as if it were both a prayer and a plea.

"Lois..."

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She didn't have time to think about it before his lips were back on hers, his fingers threaded through her still slightly damp hair. His body shifted against hers, turning so that they were facing each other, and sent a shock of pleasure down her spine. Her hand wound around his neck to help pull him closer as he continued his intoxicating assault of her mouth, her tongue, her lips.

She felt his hand move torturously slow over her shoulder, down her arm, and finally settling at her waist. Instinctively, she moved her hips closer to his, even as he was moving his hand to the small of her back to urge her toward him.

A small, almost undetectable voice at the back of her mind protested, reminding her that she was supposed to be pulling back, salvaging their friendship, saying the hard words that he was too kind to tell her. But this...this was...

She thrilled at his uninhibited exploration of her, her body alive and tingling everywhere. Everything in his actions, the way he was holding her, kissing her...silenced that voice. This is what she'd needed, wanted, some sign from him that he was still as invested as she was. That he did want her. That he needed her like she needed him.

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She didn't say anything, but the feel of her lips on his told him everything he needed to know. He stifled a moan as he ran his hands through her hair.

Bolts of heat shot through him as their kiss deepened and his hand moved of its own accord slowly down the curve of her hip. She whimpered into his kiss which only served to drive him crazy.

Her skin was warm and slightly salty from the thin sheen of sweat. She was like a live wire, all electricity and heat. He wanted to disappear into that heat — to give himself over completely to the sensations she was eliciting until he couldn't tell where he ended and she began. His hand settled on her waist, and he felt her press herself flush against him, urging him closer. His body complied, and Clark stifled a groan as his fingers tightened against her waist. He wanted more. His normally hard-fought sense of control seemed to desert him entirely once their lips had touched.

His senses were overwhelmed with the feel of her. It was as if their bodies were finally able to say the things to one another that their words had been unable to. She was everything he imagined she would be and more. She kissed him with an urgency that surprised him and he responded in kind.

Logically, he knew all the reasons this couldn't happen — shouldn't happen. And yet, in this moment with her body pressed tightly against him, he was unable to think of a single one. The only thought his brain was able to process was the way she felt under his hands, soft curves and sharp angles mixed together. It was the way she seemed to writhe against him, as if their bodies couldn't get close enough. It was the way all the air seemed to leave the room as he claimed her lips over and over again in long, deep, intimate kisses.

The room was filled with the sounds of gasps, sighs, and near-desperate moans as Clark felt his desire for her climb to new heights. She had to know how much he wanted her — had to feel the evidence of his need pressed insistently against her. Instead of repelling her, it only seemed to spur her on, and he felt her hands exploring his body as well, moving slowly down his chest.

He drew a sharp intake of breath as her fingers lightly grazed the skin under his t-shirt. Her touch felt like a brand and he fought to maintain his self-control. All he could think of was how badly he wanted to touch her — skin to skin. How badly he needed to be one with her.

She was the only one who could chase the nightmares away.

He was rapidly losing all sense of self-restraint as her lips found their way to his neck, her tongue and teeth kissing and softly nibbling their way down his skin. He bit back a hiss of pleasure at the feel of her. His trembling fingers slid the top of her t-shirt down over her shoulder, where he proceeded to leave a string of kisses all over her skin.

Her breath was coming in short pants, and he knew she was just as affected as he was. He bit down ever so gently on her shoulder, and reached down to the bottom of her t-shirt.

His fingers found bare skin and he began to pull her shirt up when something caught his eye.

His duffel bag lay in the corner — a shock of blue covered in soot and ash as black as night pecked out of the top of the duffel. Superman's black and bloodied suit.

Images invaded his mind all at once of fire and ruin, death and desperation. And then, as if he'd been bitten, he leaped off the bed and backed himself into the corner of the room, running a frantic hand through his hair as he did so.

He shook his head violently, trying to banish the images and regain control of his body, which was staging its own rebellion after being ripped so unceremoniously away from Lois.

His chest heaved as he fought for breath. Lois looked at him, worry etched into her features. Worry for him.

"What is it?" she asked, and he could tell that she, too, was still affected by the kiss. Her face was flushed and her chest rose and fell with her rapid breathing. It was all he could do not to crush her lips to his, in an attempt to forget.

"Why did you stop?"

"I...I can't. This isn't...I mean we shouldn't." He wanted to tell her. All of it. But between the images that still threatened in the deepest corners of his mind and his blood flow being entirely redirected elsewhere, he found it near impossible to string together a proper sentence. "I shouldn't."

"Why?" He tried to ignore the hurt in her voice. It was like a knife to the heart. "Clark, please. Talk to me."

"I can't do this. I'm sorry." He hoped he sounded final. Resolute. And he must have, for he felt his heart crack in two as her face crumpled.

"Is it me?" she almost whispered, and he had never hated himself more for the self-doubt he saw in her eyes. "Is there something about me that...do you not...want me?"

He gave a harsh laugh.

"Lois, one look at the state of me should tell you I have never wanted anyone more." The moment he said it he regretted it especially as her eyes drifted below his waist and the most enticing faint blush covered her cheeks.

"Then why?" she pleaded. "What's stopping you?"

"I can't... You need to know." He shook his head fighting the onslaught of things he wanted to say to her. *I need you. I love you. I am Superman.* "You need to know the truth. I owe you that and I just..."

He trailed off and sunk down onto the bed, his head in his hands. "Lois?" he whispered, his voice small like a lost child. "I'm sorry."

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## Chapter 9

Lois stared at Clark's back, that dull ache in her heart had reappeared and was warring with the remnants of her arousal. She reached a hand out toward him instinctively, but she let it fall before she could touch him.

She was still trying to process what had just happened, what was still happening. All in the last few minutes, she'd gone from having the single most erotic experience of her life to feeling bereft and confused at his frantic departure. There was no rhyme or reason to his sudden withdrawal, and for her part, she still hadn't quite caught her breath.

But why was he pulling away? Again? Always again. She kept screwing this up. She kept saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. Putting herself out there. Being vulnerable. And what had she just decided? She was going to do the backing off. For him. Because he couldn't. Or wouldn't.

But she had a damn good feeling that he didn't want to stop. He'd said as much as he'd gestured at his tented sleep shorts. She flushed again at the thought of his arousal and the restrained huskiness of his voice when he'd said it. There was no mistaking his need or desire.

Why the retreat?

But...this retreat was different, almost violent in its speed, like she'd burned him.

Can't. Shouldn't. Truth. Sorry.

At least he hadn't left the room. Whatever this was, whatever tragic truth he had to tell was clearly tearing him apart inside. She'd promised herself it was her turn to be there for him.

She felt her heart surge with the need to protect him. He

needed rescuing tonight. She'd never seen him like this before, so...destroyed. Carefully, slowly, she edged toward him on the side of the bed. She knelt right beside him and risked a hand on his shoulder.

His hands fell from his face, but he didn't look up at her, as though he was ashamed. He almost looked like he was somewhere else, miles away. She rubbed a thumb softly across his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You can tell me anything," she said, trying to convey all her yet unspoken promises to be there for him. "Whatever it is, Clark, it's clearly overwhelming you. Please. Tell me."

"I...can't. I...tonight..." he trailed off haltingly.

She shifted so she was sitting beside him and took both his hands in hers, trying to get him to face her. Look at her.

"Don't pull away," she urged softly. "You can trust in me."

He finally looked up at her, and he seemed to be searching her eyes for answers she desperately hoped he found there. "I...need to...escape. I need to...feel alive. I just...I just..."

Her heart both fell and surged at his admission that he needed to escape and that his gaze hadn't left hers. His eyes were searing, filled with torment and fear and passion alike. The intensity stole her breath. He opened his mouth to continue but didn't speak, like the words were out of reach. He looked down at the floor.

"Just what, Clark?" she prompted, as gently as she could manage.

He raised his gaze to hers again, his eyes anguished yet full of desire. "Need you," he choked out in a whisper.

Her breath hitched again and her chest flooded with an unexpected mix of relief and desire and protectiveness. She let one of his hands fall from her grasp and reached it toward his face almost in slow motion, afraid that too sudden a movement might spook him or make the moment vanish.

Her fingertips met his lips gently, and she caressed them as she had earlier. She saw his eyes darken and his brow crease, an odd merging of grief and longing and arousal. He drifted closer to her and her to him, her hand moving to cup the side of his face and her lips moving towards his. The first touch was simple but charged with emotion, and they both lingered. Their lips parted briefly, and when they met again, she felt a spark that ignited something powerful and electric within her. His free hand came up to the back of her neck to deepen the kiss, and she felt a moan escape her.

And then she felt his hand slip back down to his lap, and he pulled away.

"Lois..." he breathed. "I shouldn't...I need...to tell you..."

No. Please no. She kept her hand on his cheek and brought her other hand up to hold his face, desperate to keep him with her this time. "Please, Clark. I don't need to know anything tonight. Tonight I just need you. Please."

Before he could say anything, she leaned in to kiss him again, hard and deep. He hesitated for half a second before she felt him give in, returning the kiss with equal hunger.

She could feel him surrender to her — something inside him seemed to let go and she dared to hope that his fervent

response meant that he was no longer at the mercy of his inner demons. She felt like, right in this moment, she was the centre of his world and the only thing that mattered to him. It made her feel needed and wanted in a way that she hadn't fully realised she needed until now. His kiss, his smell, his wandering hands were setting her afire. She needed to feel more of him, his skin, his muscles.

She needed him in a way she hadn't needed anyone before; he made her feel more alive and sexy than anyone before. All the warmth and energy. And love. So much love and desire. The power of the moment was, all at once, too much to handle but also provided a fierce feeling of belonging.

She wasn't even sure which way was up anymore. Somehow, she hadn't even noticed that he'd moved them from the edge of the bed and that she was now suddenly beneath him, his strong arms on either side of her, as he continued his exploration of her body. Finally, he looked down at her. His gaze was so intense, she thought they might start a fire with all the heat between them.

She felt him shift his weight slightly to the right so that he could bring a hand up to cup her cheek. She opened her eyes again at his touch, bringing her hand up to cover his. That touch...His face...that face...with no glasses. "Clark..."

They made love with a quiet desperation — a feeling of mutual need that surprised and shocked both of them. An onslaught of images filled her mind, changing swiftly. Clark's face seeping into memories of Superman. Superman's face invaded memories of Clark.

Her mind warred. His farmboyish smile.

<You think you have me figured out, huh?>

She tugged at his head to bring his face to hers, desperate to kiss him.

<...the only time people really express themselves is when they're passionate...like when they fight...or make love.>

He looked at her, heavy-lidded. "God, I love you," he said with strangled breath before he leaned in to kiss her.

Clark on the tarmac in a cape, drunk on perfume. <Lois Lane. I love you.>

His lips slanted against hers and his tongue explored the depths of her mouth.

Superman on the park bench with Clark's glasses. <I've been in love with you for a long time.>

He dipped his head down to kiss her again, slowly but with a fierceness she felt deep in her soul. When they finished, Lois felt their heartbeats pounding in sync as they both recovered themselves. He rolled to his side next to her, his arm draped across her stomach.

"I love you, Lois," he said softly, an exhausted rasp to his voice. And then he drifted off to sleep, his breath slowing and evening.

She leaned over to drop a kiss on his forehead and whispered, "I love you, too, Clark. All of you."

Her Clark... her Superman. That was going to take some getting used to. She couldn't believe it had taken her this long to realise it. But it made sense. An act this deep, this intimate...well, there was no way she could have missed it. Their joining had laid bare all their secrets both

good and bad. There was no hiding from each other now.

Lois rolled to her side, too, facing away from him so she could snuggle up closely and feel more of his warmth. She reached down to pull up the blanket over them, only mildly begrudging the fact that he'd fallen asleep before doing so. She settled back against him, pulling his arm close around her waist, her fingers threaded with his.

Oh, right. He probably didn't feel the cold; it didn't occur to him. One of a million little things she'd need to get used to. Then again, he'd also been thoroughly fatigued and emotionally shattered; it was no wonder he'd fallen asleep once spent.

She took comfort in the weight of his arm across her midsection and the warmth and slow cadence of his breath against her neck. She smiled, her body alive and sensual but gloriously exhausted. She'd never felt so utterly complete before, so loved.

So needed. But that need...it was frightening in its strength and depth.

She'd seen him on the television last night. Her hero... in blue tights and a red cape. Her Clark...had been absolutely distressed. He was usually determined, if grim. Focused, if mentally and emotionally exhausted. Last night, he'd looked defeated and depressed.

And just earlier, when he'd woken and found himself kissing her, touching her, he'd been panicked. She turned in his arms and scooted back a touch so that she could see his face. He was so peaceful in his sleep now, no trace of the nightmares that had plagued him just hours before.

Had she done that? Banished his nightmares?

She had wondered who he talked to, who Superman looked to and depended on to help share the burden and grief, the intense weight of the world that he carried on his shoulders. She inhaled sharply and let out a long, trembling breath.

Her. It was her.

His parents, too, surely. But she was his best friend. She was who he spent all his free time with. Free time? Oh, how that must be in short supply! And he spent it with her. Wanted her. Needed her. Loved her.

*<God, I love you.>*

The weight, the enormity of that privilege stole her breath and made her feel a bit lightheaded. Her best friend. Her hero. Her lover.

*<...I have never wanted anyone more.>*

He'd been utterly distressed. She reached up to caress his smooth brow, so free of worry now. Still, something was wrong with Clark, even more than she and Perry had suspected. He hadn't been himself since Mayson's death.

Oh, God.

"Oh, Clark," she whispered, a wave of grief washing over her. When she'd thought he was blaming himself for Mayson's death...he was literally blaming himself.

*<Not even Superman can be everywhere at once...Then what good is he?>*

Who saved Superman when he was the one who needed saving? How was it that she had more faith in Superman than he had in himself?

Because he was Clark, perfect and fallible and infuriating and kind. Superman wasn't supposed to show

weakness. Clark had so many fears and flaws, just like any other person.

*<I...I can't. This isn't...I mean we shouldn't...I shouldn't. I'm sorry.>*

Her brow furrowed. Tormented by the barrage of emotions and thoughts and images warring for attention in her mind. He'd been lying to her all along. She waited for the anger to come, certain that it would, but instead, she felt the wave of his pain wash over her.

*<You need to know the truth. I owe you that and I just...>*

He'd wanted to tell her. But he couldn't. Clark was normally a little tongue-tied when it came to emotional stuff, but earlier he'd been almost incapacitated, as if he'd been functioning solely on self-reproach, shame and raw need.

*<I...need to...escape. I need to...feel alive. I just...I just...Need you.>*

She'd needed him, too. More than she'd ever thought she would need someone. Her breath caught when she realised there wasn't anything that she wouldn't do for him. And she knew, without a doubt, that he'd do the same for.

He shifted onto his back, and she eagerly reclaimed her spot on his chest, in his arms. She gently stroked his brow, his cheek, his lips, and she stretched up to kiss him softly.

"Be still for a while, my love," she whispered. She settled in against his body, and she smiled when his arm came up unconsciously to pull her close. "I've got you," she murmured as she drifted off to sleep.

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## Chapter 10

For the first time in days, Clark woke up feeling rested. It took a moment or so as consciousness returned to him for Clark to remember where he was and why. A hesitant smile spread across his face and he glanced down to see Lois' body pressed tightly against his chest fast asleep.

It was almost too good to be true. He would have pinched himself if he wasn't invulnerable. As it was, the only real proof he had that he wasn't dreaming was the memory of the night before still present in his mind both physically and emotionally.

He was almost afraid to move, lest the beautiful brunette in his arms disappear.

He'd made love to her. He'd made love to Lois, and the world hadn't ended. He hadn't truly realised how truly broken he'd been until last night. His mind flashed back to the night before and that feeling of complete desolation — as if his entire world was crumbling like the roof of that shopping mall.

He'd never been so affected by a rescue or so certain that his attempts to have a life beyond the suit were so futile. Life had started to feel so empty, and he'd had so much guilt.

And he still did. The deaths of the people he'd been unable to save still weighed heavy on his conscience but so too did the fact that Lois had been there. She'd seen him at his absolute lowest and instead of letting him push her away, she'd pulled him closer.

For once, he felt like she'd finally seen him — really seen him. Not his secret identity of course, but the man

behind the cape. The man who walked a tightrope between two worlds — a tightrope that had in recent days been fraying more and more.

Last night it had snapped and she had been there to pick up the pieces.

It was everything he could have hoped for and more and all he wanted to do was stay in this bed, in this dimly lit motel room in the early hours of the morning, replaying the events of the night before kiss by kiss and sigh by sigh. Every touch, every caress had been a balm to his wounded psyche.

Lois. His Lois. The only woman he'd ever truly fallen in love with and the one woman he never thought he'd have. But last night she had wanted him just as much as he wanted her. He hadn't realised it could be like that.

She was still here. He'd woken up with her in his arms twice in as many hours, and now he wasn't sure he could live without that feeling.

Would he have to? Could they make this work after all? He desperately wanted to believe that, but the remnants of last night were still with him. Images of charred corpses warred with the memories of Lois' body lit only by moonlight as he loved her.

Had anything really changed? And yet, even as he thought that, Lois shifted against him, and he immediately felt the dark thoughts recede. He had needed her last night in a way that was beyond sexual.

She had been his shield against the darkness. He'd saved a lot of people as Superman, but Lois Lane had rescued him. He wasn't sure how to repay that, but he was cautiously optimistic that maybe, just maybe, she would let him spend the rest of his life trying.

She moved against him again — a soft, contented sigh, and he felt her lightly run her hand down his chest. Though she was asleep, Clark was suddenly very much awake.

He was suddenly paralyzed with uncertainty. He'd never been with anyone before — not like this. Not so completely. And while he had allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to go to bed with Lois, he had never allowed himself to consider what it would be like to wake up with her.

Should he get up first? Have a cold shower so as not to alarm her with his body's natural response to her? Or, should he give into the urge to kiss her awake in the hopes of an encore performance of last night's events? What was considered polite morning-after protocol?

Another shift and her leg was now draped over him.

He drew in a sharp breath and rolled onto his side so that he was facing Lois. The loss of her touch was both relief and torture. He gazed at her sleeping form for what seemed like an eternity, watching her sleep, her breathing a soft and even rhythm. She had an almost unearthly beauty that he very rarely got to see — soft, innocent, and still. The Lois he knew in his waking life was a force of nature — constantly in motion. It was one of the things he both loved and cursed at times.

Before he could stop himself, he leaned forward and placed a featherlight kiss on her lips. She stirred again and he felt his heart skip a beat as her eyes fluttered open and she drank in the sight of him.

A contented and languid smile crossed her lips. Her hair

was tousled in a way that was both endearing and incredibly sexy, and Clark found himself smiling as well despite himself.

"Good morning," he said, his voice sounding far huskier than he intended. She didn't seem to mind, however, and he found himself short of breath as she urged his arms around her once more.

"Good morning to you too," she said, her voice light, breathy, and so very sensual.

He wanted to kiss her. Needed to kiss her. He should be satisfied — especially after last night, but instead, he felt like he would never be able to get enough of her. It was like she'd awoken something dormant inside him and he found his body respond to her without permission from his brain.

"Did you...sleep well?" He asked.

*Way to go, Kent,* he said to himself. *Very smooth.*

"Well enough," Lois said and Clark couldn't help but think she looked a bit like the cat that had just swallowed the canary. He swallowed nervously.

"Well enough for what?" he found himself asking, though his voice was slightly higher pitched than normal, and his hand had begun tracing slow, lazy circles against her lower back, completely of its own volition. Her skin was so incredibly soft, and Clark wanted to kiss every single inch of it.

"Round two," Lois whispered and kissed him. The kiss was soft — gentle even, but it was enough to ignite the fire that had already been simmering inside him ever since he'd woken up. His arms tightened around her and he reveled in the way even a simple touch could awaken every nerve ending in his body.

Would it ever stop? This wanting her? Or would the need simply increase every time they made love?

Part of him hoped that would be the case, and the other part wondered how anybody ever got anything done if it always felt like this.

He felt the kiss deepen on its own and he reached up with one hand and cupped the back of her head as they explored the depths of one another's mouths.

The room was silent but for the sounds of soft sighs, whimpers, and moans. He didn't want to move from this spot. This beautiful place of desire and fulfillment. It felt as if she were able to touch parts of his soul he'd thought forever damaged. He allowed himself to let go and surrender to her — to the love she offered — the only thing that could save him.

When they had recovered, she laid her head against his chest and kissed him with the same tenderness as before. He let out a deep sigh. How had he gotten so lucky? Was this going to last? She'd already shown him more mercy than he ever thought possible. A lump formed in his throat. How would she feel once she knew? The question haunted him, even in this, the most beautiful of moments.

And for that reason he was in no hurry to move, or even to speak. Something inside him told him to hold onto this moment for as long as he possibly could.

He felt like he'd been desperately holding onto her for the past two years — clinging to her, counting on her compassion and friendship to see him through even the darkest nights. For a while, it had worked. He'd seen the

darkest elements of humanity — had failed people in his attempts to rescue them and always, he turned to Lois. She'd smile at him, lean her head against him, laugh at a joke he told, and his heart would patch itself up. Not completely, not fully. But enough.

Enough to allow him to put whatever failures he'd experienced behind him. Enough to push the nightmares to the back of his mind for the time being.

And then Mayson had died and he found himself no longer able to do that. Not even Lois' smile was enough to keep the demons at bay.

So where did that leave him now? He couldn't continue to lead her on like this. Not now. Not after she'd allowed him to love her... maybe even loved him back. She deserved the truth.

"Clark?" Lois' voice was muffled and warm against his chest. He tried to ignore the emotions coursing through him. She sounded happy and sated. He had dreamed of this so many times. "What time is it?"

"It's after ten," he said.

"Really?" She spoke slowly, regretfully. "I suppose that means we should get up."

Up? Clark realised he hadn't even thought of what the world would look like in the light of day outside this bedroom. All he could see right here, right now was Lois. He made a noncommittal sound but neither of them made any effort to move.

"Does this mean getting out of bed?" he asked softly. She laughed and his maudlin thoughts vanished like smoke.

"You want to stay here all day?" she asked quietly. And he was surprised at how badly he wanted to say yes. He'd never experienced anything like this. His previous experiences had never gotten this far, and he'd been content with it to be that way. He'd never let it happen for so many reasons — the most important of which had been the potentially disastrous consequences if he'd allowed himself to lose control. With Lois he'd experienced that loss of control. He'd sought it out. Needed it.

Oh, God. Fear suddenly swept through him like an ice cold wave.

He'd lost control. *They* had lost control. Last night and this morning, they had fallen into each other's arms and hadn't used any sort of protection.

His chest suddenly felt tight and he had trouble breathing. How could he do this? He knew better. Damn it, he *knew better*. What would he do if she was pregnant? How could he possibly handle fatherhood when everything was so hard right now?

And Lois... she'd never expressed any sort of desire to be a mother, much less a mother of a child who wasn't even fully human. How would she feel if she were pregnant?

"Clark?" Lois sounded concerned. She must have felt him tense up. "What's the matter?"

"We didn't..." he struggled to get the words out and he knew how he must have sounded. "We didn't use anything... a condom. Last night... this morning..."

"It's okay," she said, placing a calming hand on his chest. "I'm on birth control. I should have told you last night, but everything was so... It's okay."

But it wasn't okay. Even if she wasn't pregnant, Clark

never should have allowed himself to fall apart like that — to take that kind of risk with her future... and possibly with her life. After all, whose to say a human woman could even give birth to a Kryptonian child?

What if he...?

No, she wasn't pregnant. He could at least feel reassured about that. But suddenly what had felt like a bright and hopeful morning seemed to close in on him again. He'd almost made a terrible mistake and Lois would have paid the price.

"We... should get up," he said, his voice sounding foreign to his own ears. "Check the news."

He wasn't sure why, but he felt an almost irresistible need to get an update on the fire — to make sure everything was as he had left it. And, if he could, maybe go and do a quick fly over under the guise of getting breakfast. It was like an itch he couldn't scratch and it suddenly overrode all other priorities — even the woman in his arms.

He sat up, before she could protest and almost gasped at the loss of contact when Lois moved off of him. Clothes. He needed clothes. She looked confused but not upset. He wasn't actually sure what to make of the look she was giving him — curiosity mixed with something he couldn't define. Like she was reading his face, scanning for something...

Crap. Glasses!

All this time, he hadn't had his glasses on. He scrambled to find them on the nightstand and put them on. He suddenly felt very nervous. She seemed like she was considering her next words carefully which was quite unlike her.

Was she going to tell him she loved him? Was she about to come to the conclusion this wouldn't work between them? Part of him felt it would be easier if she did. He could handle his own pain, but he wasn't sure he could bear hers.

"The news can wait," Lois said. "I think we need to talk about what just happened." Clark had already gotten out of bed and was searching haphazardly around the room for his clothing, a bed sheet pulled around his waist for modesty.

*Kind of pointless now, isn't it?* his inner voice chided, and Clark tried to ignore the blush that filled his cheeks as he roughly shoved a pair of jeans on. There was certainly no mystery left between either of them.

"We will," he replied, looking everywhere in the room but at her. The rustle of clothing on the other side of the bed told him that she, too, was getting dressed. She was right. They couldn't ignore the conversation forever. "I just think I should get us something to eat first. I thought I saw a diner nearby. I could be back in a few minutes. Maybe try and find out if the road has opened back up."

He was babbling, which was normally her territory. Before she could respond, he found the knob for the clock radio and searched through the static until he found a station delivering the latest news update.

*"Things took an unexpected turn in Callan County last night when a shift of the wind caused a relatively contained forest fire to flare to life once more. Several homes caught fire in the nearby village of Blythe, with ten deaths reported from the blaze. All remaining residents in Blythe have*

*escaped, but fire crews remain on scene and are working tirelessly to....”*

The voice faded away as the enormity of the news struck him square in the chest like an anvil. Bits and pieces of the news report pierced him like daggers as he fought to process what he'd just heard.

*<Several homes caught fire...ten deaths reported...a shift of the wind caused a relatively contained forest fire....>*

No. Please, no. Not this. Anything but this.

Clark felt panic rise in his chest, and he was vaguely aware of the fact that Lois was speaking to him, her voice higher pitched and slightly urgent in tone. He had no idea what she was saying, however, as he sank down onto the hotel bed, and fought to keep her from seeing the way his hands were trembling.

It was too much. He should have been there. He should have heard something. How long had it taken for these people to lose their lives? Ten seconds? Longer? He'd allowed himself so much time last night to forget — too much time. How much of that time cost those people their lives?

And what if the wind shifted again?

That panicked thought snapped him back to reality and he realised he needed to go — needed to get to the scene and see if he could help. He couldn't just stay here.

But how on Earth could he leave? After everything that had happened between them. Every touch, every sigh, every whispered endearment. Could he really just walk out on her?

Again?

She would never forgive him. What's more, she would never talk to him again. He would lose more than a potential relationship. He would lose his partner. His best friend.

His light in the dark.

How would he find his way home without her?

He had to do something and he felt his fight or flight response shift to flight.

“...are you okay?” Her voice pierced through the haze. “Clark? Clark, talk to me!”

“I'm fine,” he said, though he knew he sounded anything but. “Look, it's late and we need to get on the road, so why don't I go get breakfast? What are you thinking? Dunkin' Donuts? Whatever you want.”

He was already inching towards the door. Lois inched towards him almost as if he were a frightened animal she didn't want to spook.

“I don't want breakfast,” she was saying softly. “I want to talk.”

“We will, Lois,” he insisted, his voice slightly strangled. He felt hot and sweaty — like the walls were closing in on him. He had to get out. “I just...I have to go...”

“Forget breakfast,” Lois said, a little firmer this time. Clark edged backwards again.

“Lo-is,” he said, his voice a soft plea. Something in Lois' expression shifted and she crossed the room swiftly towards him. Before he could understand what was happening, she put her hand gently on his chest in a gesture of comfort and understanding.

“It's okay, Clark,” she murmured, her expression deep and fathomless and oh-so-loving. “You can't help them. They're gone. I'm sorry.”

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## Chapter 11

She could feel the jackhammering of his heart. Being this close to him, her hand on his chest...it'd been a risk. He could have been out the door and in the skies far faster than she could have crossed the short distance between them.

But she could tell he was spiraling. Her closeness had worked on his nightmares, effortlessly, it had seemed. This...now? She'd halted his motion and nothing more. But that was a start.

She was way out of her depth here, but Clark was on a ledge and still looking extremely jumpy.

He seemed to have at least heard some of what she'd said. He was still paused, his brow furrowed, as if he was trying extra hard to process words and thoughts.

He gave a quick shake of his head. “You know?” He paused, processing again, she assumed. Before she could even nod in confirmation, he was on the move again, but then stuttered to a halt in front of the TV. “Okay. You know. She knows.”

Three steps back towards her. “I should...Oh! I gotta get my suit. I almost forgot it!” He turned heel and went further into the room, over to where his duffel bag sat along the wall, and she watched — half stunned, half curious — as he haphazardly tugged it out without even opening the zipper all the way.

She couldn't hold back her gasp of horror, but she quickly clapped her hand over her mouth as if she could somehow will the sound back in. He'd heard.

“Yeah, you're right. I can't show up in a dirty suit.” He held it up by one hand to let it hang down fully, cape and all.

Dirty didn't begin to describe it. It looked like more than the smudged black of soot and ash. She tried not to think about what the other dark colour was, but in her heart, she knew it was dried blood.

“Clark,” she said softly.

He still wasn't quite hearing her, not acknowledging the full reality of the situation. The panic was almost palpable, coming off him in waves and reverberating around the room as he paced about, always moving. He shoved the suit back into the bag unceremoniously. “Gotta fly home and get one. Should only take a few minutes...”

She approached him slowly, this time putting both hands on his chest and standing squarely in front of him. He paused, and she waited a beat with a silent plea for him to look at her and *see* her. His semi-absent gaze and frantic, agitated state were alarming to witness.

He hadn't moved, but he also hadn't looked at her yet. She reached a hand up to cup his cheek. The contact of her skin against his startled him for half a second before he blinked and gave his head a little shake again, as if to clear his vision and his mind.

His eyes met hers, and she saw the panic return. His gaze darted away again in the direction of the door, but before he could make a move, she brought her other hand

up to his face. “Clark, look at me.”

She felt his jaw tick and he swallowed hard. His eyes flicked her way for only a second then flinched away again, as if looking at her caused him pain. She could see the tears threatening. She could feel the slight tremors of his body and how he was working so hard to keep them in check.

He cleared his throat. “I have to go. I’ll be back,” he said, his voice thick and almost trembling with more than a hint of desperation. “I always come back.”

“They’re gone. I’m so sorry,” she said. She’d repeat it as many times as he needed to hear it. “You need to stay, love. You can’t help them. There’s nothing more you can do.”

He backed up a step, towards the wall, but she followed in a heartbeat. She looked down and pushed the duffel aside with her foot. She moved closer still to him. Her thumbs caressed his cheeks, trying to stir a response from him.

Some of the tears slipped through the careful dam he’d constructed. His jaw ticked again. And finally he looked at her. “The bodies,” he choked out. “Someone needs to go remove the bodies.”

Her breath caught and then she exhaled slowly. His eyes remained on hers, the tears coming more quickly now, and she knew he was pleading with her. To go. To do *something*. To not be still anymore so the emotions wouldn’t come.

She wasn’t sure if he crumpled to the floor first or if she moved to gather him up in her embrace, but now they were both on the floor, her holding him as he wept.

She rubbed his back and shushed and rocked him and held him as he sobbed and whimpered. “They’re gone,” she repeated quietly. She held him tight against her as he unloosed the grief and fear that had worn his heart thin. “I’m here.” She moved her hand rhythmically, up and down along his upper back. His shoulders heaved with his sobs, and he clung to her with desperation. “I’ve got you.”

She kept rocking him, stroking his back, taking comfort from the fact that she seemed to be helping. The solid feel of his chest warm against hers, even as he shuddered with grief...that connection felt of love and security and she willed him to feel it, to share it with her. “I’ve got you. I’m right beside you.”

He seemed to be winding down, his breathing slowing, though interspersed with sniffing. He settled his head on her shoulder, his face against her neck. His whimpering was starting to sound less mumbly and more like words. “Seventeen...and ten...twenty-seven.”

“Clark?” she asked, curious to know what he was talking about...but fearing she already knew.

“I took too long,” he mumbled into her neck.

Her heart broke at the defeat and guilt in his voice. “Oh, Clark. It’s not your fault.”

He pulled away from her slowly and started swiping at the tears on his face and sniffing. He sat up with his back against the wall and pulled his knees to his chest. But he still hadn’t looked up at her yet. “Yeah. It is my fault.”

“I know it feels like it. I know,” she said, not wanting to outright invalidate his feelings. “But I promise it’s not.” She waited a beat before continuing. “It’s not your fault that people didn’t evacuate their homes.”

“I could have gotten them out...” he said to a worn spot

on the carpet.

“What, would you have forced them?” she asked calmly, evenly. “And are you suddenly psychic, too? You knew that the wind would change and these people that chose to stay in the path of potential danger would die?”

“Well, no...”

“Look, there are a million potential eventualities, and you can’t possibly prepare for all of them.” She did her best to keep her tone gentle and unaccusing. “How many people do you think died in the last five minutes in car accidents or other disasters? Should you have been able to save them, too?”

He flinched. Shoot, maybe that was the wrong tactic.

“Maybe. Maybe some of them,” he said dejectedly, and then continued more quietly, almost under his breath. “Instead of sitting here crying.”

She hung her head a little. Her heart hurt to see him in so much pain, blaming himself for all the things he couldn’t do. “I hate to see you like this. You’ve always been too hard on yourself,” she said softly. “As Superman and Clark. I wish you’d give yourself more credit. You, *all* of you, do so much for the world.”

He shook his head and took a deep breath before speaking again. “What do you say to the 27 people that died in yesterday’s fire?”

“Clark!” she exclaimed, forgetting her promise to keep an even tone. “Why would you even say that? That’s not fair.”

“Ten people, Lois. That’s how many lives were lost while you and I...”

She inhaled sharply. Oh, God. The words hit her like a knife to the gut. That...she’d never considered...all the infinite consequences of every choice Clark made. And that he’d even thought to measure their lovemaking — already a cherished memory — against how many people had died during? It cut her to the core and stole her breath again.

Apparently, taking her silence as an agreement to his self-indictment, he continued. “I’m weak. I knew the fire wasn’t fully cleared, that a change in the wind could reignite things, that more lives could be lost. Instead, I chose...”

“Clark, no...” She was trying to regain her composure. She was so out of her depth. Maybe she should send him home to his parents; they’d surely know better what to do, what to say.

She watched as he swallowed hard, clearly fighting back tears again, but she suspected this time they were tears of anger, self-recrimination. “*Superman* chose to give in to his hormones. Do you know how many women I’ve made love to? I’ll give you a hint. It’s a very short list.”

Her emotions were busy rending her insides, but the penny still dropped. “You mean...?”

He nodded and gave a derisive snort. “I wanted you, needed you so badly that I didn’t care about the consequences. Ten lives so I could go to bed with the only woman I’ve ever loved? Sure, it’s a deal...” he trailed off and started fussing at a string hanging off the seam of his jeans near his knee.

This was heartbreaking and so beyond what she could even fathom. She’d foolishly thought that saving Superman

would be a touch easier than this. She wasn't even sure what to say; she hadn't expected this.

"Superman should be above all that," he spat. "It's selfish and irresponsible for him to even entertain the idea of a relationship. Part of me...I hate myself because it almost feels like it was worth it. Some hero I turned out to be."

And there it was, the fuel she needed to keep on going. *NO*. Her mind rebelled against the thought of Superman hating himself, denying himself happiness, denouncing himself as a hero. No. She held fast to the determination, the resolve that defending her hero inspired in her.

It was a million-fold stronger now that she knew he was Clark, and she'd need every ounce of that determination to make it through.

Slow and logical this time. "Did you hear them?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" He seemed a little taken aback at her disregard for his diatribe, and he looked at her.

"When we..." Oh, this was harder to talk about when he was looking at her with that face, those eyes, so sad and defeated. "When we made love, did you hear the cries for help?"

That caught him and made him think for a moment, but he'd likely already dismissed this on his own as any kind of excuse. He wasn't giving himself any of those. "It doesn't work that way, Lois. I don't always hear...and then if I'm focused on something else..."

She hadn't known it worked that way, but she felt like she would have noticed his trademark ready-to-dash look if he'd heard something. She hadn't known what it really meant before, but she would have noticed it instantly.

"Did you hear them?" she asked again, her voice even softer.

"No," he admitted.

"What about when you're sleeping? Or at work? Or playing poker with Perry or having dinner with your parents? Can you be focused, then, all the time?"

"It's not the same," he protested feebly.

"It doesn't matter, Clark. When it comes right down to it, it *is* the same." She chanced grabbing his hands and holding them in her own. "Superman deserves a life. *You* deserve a life. You can't be out saving lives every second of every day. You just can't."

He looked down at their joined hands and worried at his lower lip. "How can I even consider doing anything else when it means...it's just...how...and if I'm stuck in a...or trying to have a date...and a first kiss." he sputtered to a halt and looked up at her, tears threatening to overflow again. His breath hitched, and his face crumpled.

She held her breath, afraid of what was coming next but knowing she needed to bear it if Clark had any hope of healing.

"Ten seconds, Lois," he said, his voice almost a whisper, as if he didn't really want to say this out loud.

"What?" she prompted ever so gently.

"That's how long it took...for me to hear the bomb...because we were kissing. And I was ten seconds too late to save her."

"Mayson," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry Clark."

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Clark couldn't speak. Couldn't think. And he didn't want to. More than anything, all he wanted in this moment was to be still.

He had no idea if Lois had sensed that, or if she simply didn't know what else to say. Either way, he felt something in his heart unclench as she moved closer to him.

He made room for her — his body on autopilot as she settled against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her. He rested his chin on the top of her head and exhaled deeply. Somehow just the feel of her against him was enough to take the pain in his heart down to a dull ache.

They sat that way for what seemed like forever, her body warm and reassuring, calming the chaos in his mind. He placed soft, absent kisses on the top of her head and she trailed gentle circles on his arms with her fingertips.

"I'm sorry," she finally said after an eternity of silence. Her voice was small and sad. "I'm so sorry, Clark."

"For what?" he asked, wondering what she could possibly feel the need to be sorry for.

"I should have seen..." He noticed she was near tears now, and he closed his eyes, unable to bear the pain in her voice. "I knew something was wrong. Knew you weren't yourself, but I had no idea it was this bad. You're my partner and my best friend. You were drowning. I should have been there for you more. I should have tried harder."

He drew a shuddering breath, and she removed herself from his embrace, turned, and knelt in front of him. The naked emotion in her face almost broke him all over again. How did she have so much mercy? So much compassion?

"I lied to you," he said, his voice hoarse and uncertain. "Over and over, I lied to you. You didn't notice because I didn't want you to. On top of everything else..."

He looked away. It was too much. Her forgiveness hurt almost as much as his failures.

"I understand why you did it," she said as she reached out and gently caressed his cheek. "I do."

"You shouldn't," he said, the bitterness inside him rising up like bile. "You should hate me. You have every right to. Especially after I slept with you under false pretenses."

Her hand still on his cheek, she urged him to look at her. After a moment, he finally did. "Do you love me, Clark?" she asked. The question caught him off guard, and he found himself struggling against the pull of her beautiful and earnest gaze.

"With all my heart, yes," he finally managed to say, though it felt woefully inadequate.

"Then there were no false pretenses," she said simply. "I could never hate you. Sometimes I wanted to..." she gave a soft laugh, and he felt his heart lighten ever so slightly.

"How did you figure it out?" he wondered. She laughed again and looked somewhat indigent.

"I'm a prize winning reporter, Clark. It was never going to be a secret for long." Then, as an afterthought she added, "Plus, you haven't had your glasses on since last night."

He touched the glasses that now sat on his face reflexively and gave a sheepish smile.

"Yeah, that'll do it," he agreed.

Then she smiled and blushed ever so slightly and looked down at the floor.

“What?” he asked softly.

“To be honest, I realised it when we made love. The way you touched me, kissed me. Something just came together and I knew.” She reached up and brushed her fingers along his forehead and seemed to be reading his face, his features. “This face doesn’t hide much when you’re...” she trailed off and dropped her hand back to her lap.

“Oh,” he said and swallowed heavily as the memory of them together flooded his senses.

There was an awkward pause, and he ran a hand through his hair. He felt drained emotionally and physically. His eyes drifted to the burned and charred suit that he’d attempted to pull out earlier. Lois looked as well and he could tell the sight of it still had an effect on her.

He felt the oddest need to hide it — to cover it up so she didn’t have to see it. His suit burned and battered almost beyond recognition. Like him.

“It’s just a suit, Clark,” she said, as if reading his mind. She had settled back into his arms, her legs curled under her with her head against his chest. “It’s not all you are. What happened to Mayson wasn’t your fault. I will say it over and over again as many times as it takes, but I need you to know that.”

“Why does it matter so much?” he asked, bewildered by the passion in her voice.

“Because...” She took a deep breath and sat up to look at him once more. “I love you. More than I ever thought it was possible to love someone and it kills me to see you do this to yourself.”

“Lois, don’t...” he protested.

“Don’t what? Don’t love you?” She said, her voice rising slightly. “I’m sorry I didn’t know I got a choice in that. I couldn’t stop loving you even if I wanted to, so you better get used to it, farmboy, because I’m not going anywhere.”

He kissed her then. Hard and deeper than he had intended. She responded in kind almost instantly, twisting to face him and running her hands down his face and neck. They parted, both breathing heavily, and Clark marveled at how beautiful she looked, cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

“Then it’s settled,” she said, still somewhat breathless. “We face this together. No more pushing me away.”

Clark wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to kiss her again and never stop. He wanted to sleep for a week. He wanted to lay down in her lap and weep. He wanted to be worthy of her.

The motel room floor suddenly felt uncomfortable and he found himself standing up. Lois did as well and pulled his arms around. He searched her deep brown eyes and finally saw the love he’d always wanted staring back at him.

His emotions warred inside him. Grief mixed with love and fear all fought for dominance. Could he really allow himself this? The only way to know for sure was to tell her how he was feeling — the good and the bad.

“I feel...like I can’t breathe, Lois,” he almost whispered. “Like it’s all closing in on me. I want so badly to be with you...to be the man you deserve, but I don’t know who that man is anymore. And...I’m scared.”

“Oh, Clark,” she said, tears shining in her eyes. She ran her hands over his chest and kissed him softly on the neck. “I know who you are. You’ve never been able to hide from me. Not even with the suit. You’ll remember in time, I promise. Until then, let me be your strength.”

Before she could respond, she wound her arms tightly around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss that seemed to both soothe and excite him.

“You’re the only one...” he marveled when they parted. He touched her face gently, almost reverently. “The only one who has ever been able to make me forget...to make me feel like I’m just a man. Just...Clark. Thank you.”

She nodded and stepped back from him, swiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I, uh...I think we should call your parents,” she said. “Let them know what’s going on. There’s no reason for us to stay here. And you should be around people who love you while you figure things out.”

“What about Wallerville and Bobby’s source?” he asked, suddenly remembering why they had come this way in the first place.

Lois squirmed slightly in embarrassment and gave him a sheepish look.

“There is no source in Wallerville. At least, nothing legitimate. I uh...made it all up”

“You what?” He was fairly certain his eyebrows had hit the ceiling with this news. Lois had the good sense to look even more embarrassed. “Did Perry know about this?”

“Sort of,” she admitted. “But in both of our defense we were really worried about you. I thought the break would do you some good.” She shook her head regretfully. “I made a real mess of things.”

He smiled and for the first time in a long while, he felt hopeful.

“I love you, Lois.”

“I know,” she replied. “Will you start packing up? I’ll call your parents and let them know we’re coming.”

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## Chapter 12

Flying with Superman when she knew he was Clark... was different. Or maybe it wasn’t that she knew the secret. And it probably wasn’t because she was awkwardly holding their duffel bags hooked on her outside elbow. She just wished those were reasons why, that the truth could be that simple.

They’d driven the Jeep to an out-of-the way rest stop a few miles back in the direction of Metropolis. The motel had been starting to fill with displaced families, and they’d needed somewhere more private to take off.

They both got out of the car, and she grabbed the bags and locked the doors. She loaded the bags up on a single arm and said, “So, I assume I’ll hold our stuff and you hold me?” She grinned at him, letting herself look forward to this flight just a little despite the current circumstances.

“Sounds good.” He smiled back. And then he got a little glimmer in his eye and said, “I’ve always wanted to do this in front of you.”

She assumed she meant change into Superman, and she smiled again in anticipation. Her smile wavered, though, when he seemed a bit frozen and nothing happened.

And then...she watched the panic reclaim his features. She furrowed her brow and felt a pang in her heart as she watched him pace around back to the passenger side of the car. He tugged futilely on the locked door before he came back to stand in front of her, a distressed and mortified look on his face as he awkwardly tried to hand her the thin length of steel that used to be the door handle.

She took it from him wordlessly and shoved it in a bag, hoping for him to say something first so she might have a chance to get a read on the situation.

"I...I b-broke it," he stuttered. "Sorry. I'll...I'll pay to fix it." He looked away and shuffled his feet in the dirt. "Maybe...maybe we should just drive there."

She dropped the bags and moved to embrace him quickly, holding him tight while her brain worked furiously to try and find the right words for what was wrong. What was wrong? His arms came around to circle her waist and he sagged into her embrace.

It was a swift and harsh realization, and it had clearly been even worse for him.

He didn't have a clean suit.

She rubbed his back in the same soothing manner she'd used just an hour before. "It's okay, Clark." She pulled back and ducked her head down a little to try and catch his gaze. "I'm here," she tried to reassure him.

He looked up slightly, and she could see he was trying to hold back tears again. Her heart ached for him.

She spoke gently, "I'll bet you fly high enough that no one will see us, yeah? And the chances of anyone seeing us are fairly low?"

He nodded. "Yeah, the chances are pretty low, I guess."

"Then, we'll be okay. I trust you, Clark. We'll be okay."

He seemed somewhat reassured, though there was only the barest trace of the giddiness he'd just had. She grabbed the bags again and held up her arms in invitation for him to scoop her up, giving him what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

He closed the short distance between them and picked her up after the briefest hesitation. Then his smile grew a bit wider as he settled her weight in his arms and lifted slowly in the air. If she had to guess, she'd venture to say that flying with her as himself — with the knowledge of his secret not between them — was something he'd looked forward to doing for quite some time.

She let herself smile, too, resting her head against his shoulder as they rose higher and higher, finally leveling out and heading what she could only assume was southwesterly. She felt snug in his arms, enjoying a more intimate closeness with him than she'd ever had when he'd been just Superman.

Yeah, flying with Superman was definitely different because her hero, her Clark, was more than a little worse for wear. He had a long road ahead of him, but she had faith that he could overcome this trauma that he'd suffered.

The expansive, fluffy clouds just below them were a spectacular sight to see, more so because she wasn't restricted by the small oval of an airplane window. Still, she was a little sad that she couldn't witness the vast swaths of land changing as they soared above. But she was very grateful for the extra cover that was certainly a reassurance

to Clark.

Though she was wearing a light jacket, she shivered a little, especially as they descended through the clouds, the moisture tickling at the skin of her face and hands. It dried swiftly, though, as they descended further down, the sight of corn fields and a small house and barn fast approaching.

His parents were waiting on the porch, and Martha fussed at her as soon as Clark's sneakers hit the ground and he set her down. "Oh, Lois! Come, you must be cold after that flight. Let's get you inside."

Thank God for Martha, clearly intuiting that Clark wouldn't want all the focus on him right away. Lois had known she was smart as a whip and a really great mother, but Lois clearly hadn't given her enough credit even still.

She hadn't gotten to say much to Martha when she'd called that second time, not wanting to upset Clark too much with an elaborate description of his mental state. She'd pretty much just said that Clark would be flying them in right then, and that they needed to talk about some things and come up with a plan to help Clark with some pretty serious emotions.

"Clark," Jonathan said as he reached an arm out to hug him across the shoulders. "Good to see you, son! Could I trouble you to help me with some things in the barn before you get settled?"

Lois looked over at Clark to see if he was okay. He gave a slight nod and pursed his lips. He was a little unsure, she could tell, but he was desperate not to take the lead on anything. And she guessed, taking a note from Martha, that he wasn't too upset at the delay of talking about his issue.

She stepped over to give him a brief but tight hug, letting her hands run down his arms to take his hands as she pulled back. She leaned in and kissed him tenderly on the lips. "I'll be right inside if you need me."

He nodded and squeezed her hands gently, letting them go slowly from his grasp, as though he was loath to be away from her touch. He gave her the faintest smile and mouthed a silent thank you before he turned to go with his father.

Lois felt a hand on her shoulder. "C'mon, dear. He'll be okay," Martha said. "He usually needs a bit of distraction before he opens up."

Lois let Martha take their bags and followed her inside. After the intense closeness and raw emotions she'd shared with Clark these last few hours, she felt bereft in his absence. And yet she felt a wave of relief wash over her, too, and she trembled.

Martha was watching her, patiently and without expectation, giving her space to gather herself.

Lois took a shuddering breath, and then she whispered as she started crying, "Oh, Martha! He's hurting so much."

Suddenly, she was wrapped in Martha's strong embrace. She did her best to keep her sobbing quiet for fear that Clark would hear.

"I know, honey," Martha said, patting her back. "I know."

Lois took a deep breath, and Martha gave her a squeeze before stepping back to end the hug. "It seems even worse than I thought," Lois fretted.

"He hasn't been talking to us," the older woman agreed

sadly.

Lois bit at her lower lip, not quite sure what to say first or where to sit or anything, really.

She'd been focusing on the next step, getting Clark here. And now he was here. They were here. She was standing here with a woman she'd only really met a handful of times. A woman whose son she'd slept with not three hours ago. A woman who somehow raised an orphaned baby from a far away planet and nurtured him into the world's beloved superhero and the best man Lois had ever known. She was feeling more than out of her depth.

And Martha realised it. Of course she did. Lois found herself being clucked after like a baby chick as Martha ushered her to the kitchen table, where she had a pot of tea already ready. Clark wasn't boasting when he said she was the best mom anyone could ask for.

"Thanks, Martha," she said, slowly letting out the breath she'd been holding as she took a seat at the table.

"Oolong. Clark's favorite." She poured a cup for Lois and one for herself. "He has this whole special process for brewing it the 'right' way, but I just steep the leaves in some hot water." Martha gave her a mock conspiratorial wink as she sat down herself.

Lois smiled and chuckled softly. "Your secret's safe with me." She paused, wondering at the unintended double meaning. There was so much to say, all of it more than a little overwhelming, and she wasn't sure where to start.

Martha reached her hand across the table to touch Lois' and nodded. "I know, dear." Then she pushed a plate of cookies her way. "Triple chocolate chip. Clark's mentioned once or twice that you're a fan of chocolate."

She ducked her head and blushed a little. "Once or twice, huh?" Then she wondered what else he'd told his mom about her. That she was domineering? Stubborn? Uncompromising? Overly competitive? Bad at Scrabble?

Martha must have sensed her worry because she smiled at her softly and shook her head, as if to sweep away her unspoken insecurities. "You've been part of the family ever since he fell in love with you."

Her breath caught and she found herself fighting back a fresh set of tears. She let out a soft, self-conscious laugh. "Do I even want to ask how long that is?"

She smiled, a little misty-eyed herself. "Maybe I ought to let him tell you that some time. But let's just say it's been a while."

Lois felt overwhelmed. She'd never felt so many intense feelings, and so many different feelings, in such short a time. "Oh, Martha. I'm not sure what to do, how to help him."

"We'll figure it out. Together. You don't have to do this alone, Lois," Martha told her. "That's what family is for."

The tears slipped out unbidden. Part of her felt the love and unconditional acceptance start seeping into her heart. The other part of her... just couldn't quite understand how she'd gotten so fortunate. Surely fate and destiny couldn't engineer something so far-fetched and elaborate. How had she, of all the people on Earth, been entrusted with something so monumental as being Superman's soul mate? How extraordinary was it to be the one he'd fallen in love with? It awed and terrified her all at once.

She looked up at Martha, who had remained quiet, somehow understanding that Lois needed time to process. Lois knew they were supposed to be talking about Clark, or rather Clark's problem, but she found herself needing this time, this connection with this woman to regain her equilibrium, ground herself.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Lois, why *not* you? I can't think of a more remarkable woman for my son to love." The look in Martha's eyes was so sincere and so profoundly full of love that it made her catch her breath.

She wasn't sure what to do or say next. But turns out that Martha knew, because before Lois realised it, she was in her arms again, getting the best mom hug she'd ever had.

Surely Lois hadn't done anything worth deserving being so utterly loved and accepted by this family. But here she was, and it was everything worth fighting for. She took a deep breath to calm herself. And then another.

Martha reclaimed her seat and waited a moment before speaking. "So...Clark," she started. "I know we talked a little on the phone, that he hasn't been the same since Mayson's death?" At Lois' solemn nod, she continued, "He's blaming himself, isn't he?"

"How do you know?"

Martha tilted her head slightly and gave her a wry smile. "Have you met Clark?"

Lois smiled and laughed lightly. "Yeah, that is rather like him, isn't it? But that's part of what makes *him* Superman; he cares. Too much sometimes."

Martha nodded. "That's my boy." She paused and looked off at the wall behind Lois, though not really focusing on anything that Lois could tell. She smiled and continued, "You should have seen him this one summer when he was 10. It had rained the day before, and, as it does sometimes around here, it made the frogs come out en masse. Poor Clark had had grand plans of riding his bike through the muddy trail back behind the barn. Frogs everywhere! He carefully scooped them up one by one and moved all of them from the path — and he was pretty fast even then — but not fast enough for the amount of frogs there were hopping around."

Lois couldn't help but giggle at the thought of a little Clark working so hard to save all the frogs so he could play in the mud. But then she thought of Clark as she'd seen him on TV, carrying bodies from the burning buildings, so devastated and — she now knew — panicked.

Martha didn't miss a beat. "What is it, dear?"

Lois took a deep breath. "There was a wildfire, and..." she trailed off, not sure exactly what to say as her mind kept flashing back to the news coverage and then his later panic attacks.

"It's okay. Go on," she encouraged her.

"Oh, Martha. It was horrible. I mean, the fire itself wasn't catastrophic, but I saw him on TV last night, Superman. It was before I'd realised, before I figured it out...He looked so...tired. No, not tired...just...I could tell something was terribly wrong with him. And then later... well, I think he's been having panic attacks for a while now, and he's been having nightmares, and I think that he probably has...well, not that I'm a psychiatrist, but I think

he's got PTSD.”

Martha made a quiet gasp and covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, my poor boy. I knew something was wrong, something more serious than he's dealt with before. Thank goodness you were there with him. Even when you didn't know, you were always a calming, reassuring force in his world, Lois.”

She ducked her head and bit her lip. “I realised that after I found out, but...I didn't know...all this time...It almost feels like too much...responsibility? Oh God, does that sound horrible? But, I mean, Superman's support system! Can you ima — oh, sorry! Of course you can imagine! You live it. All the time. Oh, see? I'm making a mess of this. I'm not the right person for the job.”

Martha grasped her hand again. “Lois, honey. It's okay. You're okay.” She waited until Lois looked back up at her again before continuing, “You're right. It does feel like an awful lot of responsibility, a very daunting role. And it can make you feel downright inadequate, especially when you think about the kind of life and death decisions he has to make all the time, and having to lie to protect his identity and the people he loves when he's the most honest man anyone's met.”

Lois' tears were flowing again, and Martha paused to hand her a tissue from the box on the table. Had there already been a box on the table? She really thought of everything.

Lois hadn't expected this level of frankness from Martha, but it was beyond a relief to hear that even Superman's mother felt this way from time to time. She thought about Clark's plaintive insistence that he didn't deserve a relationship or personal life. She whispered, “And the sacrifices he has to make.”

Martha nodded sadly. “It kills him to do it, and he does it anyway. Because it's not in him not to help. When he can't help, when he can't get there in time, that's when it's the worst for him. Jonathan and I do what we can, but it's hard when he doesn't reach out for help. It's a comfort to us to know that you're there for him, too.” She anticipated Lois's protest and added, “Even before you knew. You were always there for him, in both his guises.”

“But how do you do it? How can you deal with the enormity of it all?” she asked, desperate to know how to keep the panic at bay, how to be there for him, how to make sure she said the right things? What if she broke Superman? Hell, Superman was already broken.

Martha gave her hand a squeeze, like she'd known she was spiraling. “When it feels overwhelming, like it's too much?”

“Yeah. How do you know you're enough?” Lois asked, quietly and uncertain.

“When it gets like that, when I start feeling all those too-big feelings and thinking about the sheer weight of responsibility on his shoulders, on our shoulders...Jonathan and I remind ourselves that, though his burdens are infinite, what Clark needs is so simple.”

“What's that?” she asked, her voice hoarse with emotion.

“Love. He just needs to know that when it's all over, when he comes home, there's someone there who loves him

and accepts him no matter what the outcome was.” She held out her other hand, motioning for Lois to bring hers over, and then she held both Lois' hands in her own. Martha fixed her with a profound stare. “You. Are. Enough.”

Lois started sobbing quietly, her chest shuddering, overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment, the whole situation. Martha gave another gentle squeeze before releasing her hands.

Martha gave her several more moments and a few tissues to blow her nose and wipe her eyes as her sobs subsided. Then she asked, somewhat hesitantly, “Do you think you might know why he has PTSD, what event set things off? Was it Mayson?”

“More or less,” Lois said, feeling a lump rise in her throat. They hadn't even gotten to the hard part of the conversation.

“I understand he cared about Mayson, and not to make light of her death — may she rest in peace — it seems like something that would make him anguished, sure, but not traumatise him. And a wildfire, he's helped out at plenty of those. Is there something else going on, too?” She was curious and concerned, of course.

Martha waited patiently for an answer. Lois guessed that most silences with her were rather comfortable, like they were with Clark, but this one was very uncomfortable. She wasn't worried about Martha's response, but she just didn't even know how to say it, especially because it was breaking her heart all over again.

“Ten seconds,” she whispered.

Of course Martha looked confused, but she stayed waiting, clearly realizing this was hard for Lois.

“Clark and I...we had our first date last week...”

Martha couldn't hold back her smile, but Lois suspected the small squeak she'd heard was the woman mostly successfully biting back a squeal. Lois couldn't help but smile back a little. Martha really was happy to have her in their lives. She didn't really have any girlfriends to speak of — Clark was her best friend — so her heart soared a little that she could share this moment of her life with someone. It was too tempting to share this instead of the painful news.

“It was so wonderful, Martha.” She could feel her whole face light up, mirroring Martha's. It was a brief and needed balm to her heart. “I had a *really* nice time. It was the best date I've ever been on; everything seemed to just...work,” she echoed her own words to Clark. “Oh, and then I went and almost screwed everything up by slamming the door in his face.” She buried her head in her hands, embarrassed.

“It's understandable you'd feel overwhelmed!” Martha said, touching Lois' arm briefly. “And I do love hearing about this — I'll want *all* the details later — but I fear Clark and Jonathan might be finishing up any time now. Is there more I need to hear? Things that might be hard for Clark to listen to?”

Lois nodded, and she swallowed hard as she remembered their first kiss. The wonderful and perfect and exquisite memory, now tinged with sorrow and forever linked with Mayson's death.

“It was our first kiss. The night after our date, on our way to Mayson's office...he asked me why I ran back into an atomic explosion after him — Clark — because I didn't

know he'd gone in to stop it. The bomb..."

Martha's eyes went wide and she quirked a questioning eyebrow at her.

Lois caught the look and waved her hand in the air to brush off the seriousness of the event. "Oh, don't worry. It was no big deal. Superm — Clark kicked the bomb into space and saved the day. Anyway, he was curious at my behavior, especially since I'd

slammed the door in his face the night before." Martha gave her another look. "I know. I'm babbling. I'm sorry. We talked and...we kissed. Oh, Martha, it was the best kiss of my life. And then..."

She hesitated. She didn't want to say it, as if saying it out loud would bring it into full existence and give it weight and power. But it already had a tremendous amount of power for Clark; the weight of it was crushing him alive. She stared at the tea leaf sediment through the remainder of her tea. She wondered what the leaves would say about her life, their future. Not that she believed in divination. She gave herself a small shake to focus again. For Clark, she pressed on.

"We were kissing, and then all of sudden Clark was gone and I heard an explosion. Felt the explosion, too, because we were only a block away. And — " Her words caught on a sob.

She felt the ache in her chest, and she was finding it a little hard to breathe. She hadn't thought in detail about that night. It's always been two separate events in her mind: the kiss and Mayson's death. Never together because life wasn't fair and it was easier that way.

But Clark didn't have that luxury. Those two events were inextricably linked forever. One couldn't exist without the other. If they'd made it to her office sooner, not spent those long minutes talking or kissing, Mayson wouldn't have died. Clark would have been able to save her. But then there wouldn't have been a kiss.

She pushed through the pain. "It was a car bomb, and we were just a block away. Clark ran towards the explosion before I even realised it was happening. When I caught up to him, Mayson was in his arms. She died in his arms, Martha. It was so horrible. I didn't even know how horrible it was for Clark right then."

"Oh, honey. That sounds terrifying! I'm so sorry you had to witness that, too," Martha said, her look of alarm turning to one of sympathy. "And Clark? He's...taking this especially hard, having been so nearby?"

Lois' face crumpled. "That's part of it." She looked down at her tea again, swirling the remnants in a fanciful effort to change their fortune. She looked back up at Martha with pain in her eyes. "He...10 seconds, is what he told me. He was 10 seconds too late to save Mayson. And he was late because he was kissing me."

Martha leaned her head to the side slightly, her eyes full of grief. "Lois...I'm so sorry. I...I can't even imagine."

"He's..." Lois trailed off and let out a heavy sigh. "He's terrified to have a relationship, or even a personal life anymore, because when he tries, people die."

"No, no. Oh, Clark," Martha cried softly.

"I tried to tell him. That it wasn't fair to him or anyone else." Her breath hitched and she felt the pain in her chest

keenly. "I can tell...he even told me...that he *wants* a relationship. He wants nothing more than to be with me." She looked down at her tea again, not even seeing the leaves, just a blur of opaque tan and dark green. "The guilt of wanting that — me — of wanting to be happy is tearing him apart."

Martha was crying now, too, along with her.

"He's having trouble functioning, Martha. It was a bit of a challenge to even get him here; I guess he doesn't like to burden you with the really upsetting stuff, he says." Lois swiped at the tears and Martha handed her another tissue.

The older woman sniffed and grabbed a tissue for herself to tidy up her face. She seemed to find her resolve a bit faster than Lois did. "You were right to bring him home. We definitely need to approach this as a united front. You did good, Lois." She looked her in the eye, and Lois could swear she felt the love and the strength emanating from her small frame. "Let's go gather the men and see what we can come up with for a plan."

Lois took a deep, shuddering breath. "Thank you, Martha."

They both stood and gathered themselves, their chairs sounding against the hardwood floors as they pushed them back up to the table.

"Thank *you*, Lois," she replied. "I'm certain you saved my boy today, saved Superman."

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### Chapter 13

Clark's emotions were all over the map as he stepped tentatively into the living room of his parents' farm home. He'd followed his father into the barn under the pretext of helping his dad move some heavy farm equipment around.

Clark went along with it, though he knew that the errand was likely extremely trivial. He couldn't count the number of times his dad had asked him for help as a teen only to somehow gently coax Clark into talking about whatever happened to be bothering him. Somehow he always seemed to know.

This time was no different, the only exception being that, for once, Clark found it extremely difficult to verbalise what had happened and why they were there.

His dad, however, had listened with seemingly infinite patience as Clark moved the tractors and combines around the barn while slowly and haltingly explained the events that had brought him to Smallville. His father's face had remained impartial and without judgement as Clark confessed each failure, piling one atop the other like a repentant sinner at confession.

He hadn't wanted his parents to know these things, but Lois had been right that he couldn't continue to keep them all to himself.

Clark's heart did feel somewhat lighter, and after unloading his burdens, Clark's father had simply embraced him in a fierce, tight hug and whispered in his ear, "I love you, son."

Before Clark could say anything else, his mom had popped her head into the barn and let them know that she and Lois were ready for them to all talk in the living room.

Clark felt shaky and oddly nervous as he followed his father inside. The living room was warm and cozy as usual.

Clark noticed that his mom had hung a new painting on the wall — one of her original art pieces. He resolved to mention it to her when... whatever this was was finished.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lois exit the kitchen alongside his mother. Immediately, he noticed both their eyes were red-rimmed and slightly puffy — clear evidence they'd been crying. He hadn't heard the conversation that had taken place between the two women, but if he knew Lois at all, he imagined that his mother now knew everything that had happened as well as his father did. Strangely enough, he was grateful.

He wasn't sure he could have this conversation a third time.

Lois approached him and there was a split second where he almost leaned in to kiss her. He refrained, not sure if he had the right to that sort of easy affection when so many things were up in the air between them. He settled instead for a gentle hug.

"Don't worry," she told him softly. "Your mom took good care of me."

He gave his mom a weak smile as she pulled him into a surprisingly strong hug. He held her tight, not wanting to let go as the woman who had raised him offered him the one thing he desperately needed — her unconditional love.

When they broke apart, he felt Lois take his hand and guide him over to the sofa in the middle of the living room. Clark's parents sat down, each in an easy chair on either side.

To the casual observer, it was a cosy scene. The Kent's house was comfortable and inviting, with soft, warm lighting and a plate of his mom's famous oatmeal chocolate chip cookies on the coffee table. Lois made herself at home, curling her legs up underneath her and settling in beside Clark. Rightly or wrongly, it made him feel better to have her by his side. She rested her head lightly against his shoulder, and he noted for a second time how tired she seemed to be.

A pang of guilt shot through him as he realised her exhaustion came as a result of everything he'd put her through in the last two days. He hated that he had put her and his parents through all of this. He hated even more that a small part of him wondered if he was worth it — worth their worry, their time and their attention. After everything that had happened, they continued to love and support him.

His mom had placed a cup of tea in front of him with two lumps of sugar on the side, just how he liked it. He could tell from the smell that it was Oolong tea and for reasons beyond his control he felt emotion well up inside him. She kept this tea in the house for him. She might have a cup occasionally when he wasn't there, but this was one of a million reminders of the way that his mom showed him she loved him. And, despite the fact that this felt vaguely like an intervention of some kind, a feeling of profound relief passed over him. Whatever happened, he was safe here.

"Thanks, Mom," he murmured as he took a sip of the tea. She still hadn't gotten the hang of how to brew it. Yet despite the fact that she'd clearly oversteeped it, it was one of the best tasting cups of tea he'd had in a long while.

A pregnant pause took over as they all sat there, unsure

of who should speak first. Since he felt responsible for everything that had led them to this point, he decided it was up to him to speak first.

"I uh, guess you both know everything that happened," he said, not sure whether to go into further detail or not. His mom gave a short nod, and a knowing look passed between her and Lois, which told him everything he needed to know. Lois had told her everything.

"Yes, honey," his mom said, her voice heavy with sorrow. "We know." He hated that she was hurting, and especially that her hurt was a result of his own grief and trauma.

"What we need to do," his dad was saying, "is figure out what to do next."

"What do you mean what to do next?" Clark said, somewhat confused and a bit defensive. "There's nothing you or anyone else can do. People are dead and it's my fault. That's all there is to it."

"And so you just live with that?" Lois exclaimed, a flash of anger in her eyes and voice. "You just give up on being happy? On us?"

Another look between the two women and Clark started to wonder what else they had talked about. Whatever it was there was no denying that Lois and his mom had bonded. Something had clearly made her bolder.

"I don't want to talk about this here," Clark almost pleaded. The last thing he wanted was for his parents to see their...fight? Lover's quarrel? Could two people who weren't really dating break up?

"This is exactly why we are here," his mom said gently. "I think...I think you need some help. I think being Superman is starting to take a toll on you and I think you need to talk to someone."

Clark gave a short laugh.

"Yeah, sure, Mom," he said, more bitterly than he intended to. "Anybody know the name of a good therapist? Preferably one with experience treating a superhero?"

"C'mon, son, that's not fair," his dad said, gently. "Your mother is just trying to help."

He took a deep breath and looked at his socks. Somehow, despite being a grown man, his dad still had the ability to make him feel four years old again.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said quietly. He was quiet for a few moments as he gathered his thoughts. Eventually, he looked up and met his parents' expressions. "The truth is, I don't know what to do. I know logically I shouldn't blame myself. I know that I can't be everywhere or save everyone and yet..."

He shook his head and looked down again. Lois reached out and squeezed his hand in a gesture of comfort.

"I don't know how to get better, to fix this... whatever *this* is. I don't even know what's wrong with me," he said. "I'm afraid I'm going to let you all down again. I'm afraid more people are going to die because of me." His voice was low, softly voicing his greatest fears out loud.

"You could never do that," his mother insisted. "Nothing you do or say will ever make me anything but proud to be your mother, do you hear me? You are my son, and I love you, and that will never ever change."

"You don't understand," Clark said, fighting the flood of

emotions that suddenly overwhelmed him. He could feel that same feeling of panicked claustrophobia — like the walls were closing in. He wasn't aware his breathing had sped up until Lois' voice cut through the din.

"Clark?" She rubbed her hand gently over his broad shoulders. "How can I help? What can I do?"

"Nothing!" he exclaimed, shrugging her hand from his back, and standing up. Their concern, which had made him feel safe and loved only a minute ago, suddenly now felt laden with unspoken pressures. "Don't you see? You all mean well, but you can't know...can't understand what it's like to be responsible for something like a life."

"I know what it's like," his dad said softly, looking up from his hands. Something in his voice gave Clark pause, and he sank back down onto the couch. "I know what you're going through, Clark. I know what it's like to be responsible for someone's death. I *know*."

"Dad, what are you...?"

"Oh, Jonathan," Martha whispered, "that wasn't your fault. You were so young. It was an accident."

"It was an accident," Jonathan acknowledged, "but I wasn't innocent either." He took a deep breath and met Clark's gaze directly. Clark drew a sharp breath when he did so, seeing the same haunted look in his father's eyes that he'd seen in the mirror ever since Mayson's death.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice suddenly hoarse and unsure. Lois took his hand once more, and this time he didn't pull away.

"I was sixteen years old," Jonathan said, drawing a shuddered breath. "Martha and I had just started dating. I was on the football team. Top of the world. My best friend and I...well we were inseparable. I was a running back and he played left tackle."

"Jonathan, that was so long ago..."

"I need to tell him, Martha," Jonathan interrupted. Then, his voice a bit gentler, added, "and you. There are things you don't know. Things I...couldn't even tell you."

"Dad..." Clark began, but stopped. Something in his father's tone told him he needed to get this out. And Clark needed to hear it.

"It was the night of the State Final. We were playing our rivals and we won." He chuckled softly at the memory. "Oh, we celebrated that night. Everyone wanted to carry us on their shoulders. We were heroes."

"You looked so handsome in your letterman jacket," Martha said wistfully.

"We were underage, but there wasn't a single person in town that night who would have said no to anything we wanted." He laughed again, but this time there was a bitterness in it. "Heroes. My buddy got us a couple cases of beer, and we drove out to the field to drink them. We didn't have a car so my friend borrowed his dad's."

A coldness settled in Clark's stomach as he realised where this story was going. One look at Lois told him that she could tell as well. His father was lost in his memories as he recounted the story.

"He'd had too much to drink...my buddy. He was very obviously drunk. But he needed to get his dad's car back before he noticed it was gone in the morning or we were in real trouble."

Clark watched as his father, the proudest man he'd ever known, looked down at the floor in shame. He could hear the tremble in his voice as he spoke and Clark wondered when he last saw his father cry.

"I should have taken the keys from him," he said, his voice heavy with repressed emotion. "I never should have let him drive. But he insisted the car had a tricky shifting mechanism and only he could drive it. So I got in the car. About half a mile down the road, something ran out onto the street. A cat, a raccoon...I don't know. The car flipped over and we ended up in the ditch."

Jonathan's voice cracked as he spoke, and Martha crossed the room and knelt down on the floor next to his chair, taking his hand in hers.

"It's all right. I'm here," she told him softly. Jonathan nodded, tears in his eyes as he forced himself to continue.

"He died on impact. Took about an hour for the authorities to get to us. By the time they did, I had sobered up. Cops saw the letterman jackets and didn't ask any questions beyond the basic. The official story was that an animal had run into the road and caused the crash. I didn't mention the drinking. I didn't want his parents to know...I told myself I was protecting them. But that wasn't it. I was protecting myself."

He turned and looked at Martha. For the first time ever, Clark's father looked like a frail old man, and he found the reminder of his mortality unsettling.

"I should have taken his keys. I should have done something. I could have prevented it and I didn't. And my best friend died because of me."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Martha gasped, then kissed his hand and placed it against her cheek. "Oh, Jonathan, why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't," he insisted, almost begging for Martha's understanding. "What we had was so new, but even then I knew I loved you...knew I wanted to spend my life with you. If I had told you, I would have lost you. And you were the only thing that kept me sane. The only thing that..."

He trailed off and looked away. Martha reached out, and gently touched his cheek. He leaned into her touch and they lingered there for a moment. Clark marveled at the depth of love and understanding in their communication. One touch seemed to be all it took and the message was received.

The room was silent for a moment while everyone processed the revelation. Clark wanted to speak but his tongue felt heavy and his heart hurt. His father took a deep breath and continued to speak.

"After the accident things were...tough. The whole world seemed to move on and I felt stuck. I had nightmares every night. I would wake up, covered in sweat, shaking as I relived the accident." He looked at Martha and smiled gently. "Do you remember how I would show up at your window some nights long after everyone had gone to bed?"

"Of course," Martha said and Clark was mildly surprised at the blush that appeared on her face. "You were so romantic."

"I was damaged, Martha," he admitted. "Those were the nights when it got to be too much. When I needed help. I needed you."

"And you never thought to reach out to someone?" Lois

asked, and Clark could hear the care in her voice. It warmed his heart how much she seemed to care about his parents.

His father shook his head.

“You have to understand that in those days people — men especially — didn’t talk about things like that. A tragedy like that could destroy a person if they weren’t careful. I knew a couple guys who went off to ‘Nam and when they came back, they were never the same. Some of them drank themselves to death, or worse. I got lucky.”

He gave Martha a pointed and loaded look.

“I got so lucky.”

“Oh, you poor man,” Martha whispered. “You poor stubborn man.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he said. “I didn’t think I would ever tell anyone, but then Clark...”

He faltered again, clearly searching for words that eluded him. After another moment he spoke.

“It took me a long time to understand what I was going through,” he said, this time only to Clark. “They didn’t have a name for it back then. Closest thing would have maybe been shell shock. I thought I was all alone — that nobody could possibly understand.”

He looked pointedly at his son, and Clark flinched under the knowing scrutiny.

“They call it post traumatic stress disorder now. I’d, uh...done a lot of reading at the library. It helped to have a name. To know that it wasn’t just me. And it’s not just you, Clark. Superman or not, you’re not alone.”

Clark looked down at his hands, now completely entwined with Lois’. He thought about what his father had said, wanting desperately to be able to find the absolution his father offered him. He knew, he understood, but it wasn’t the same. It couldn’t be, could it?

“Dad, I...” he fought to find words for what he was feeling. “I want to believe you. I just...this wasn’t an accident. Superman can’t have accidents. My job is to save others, not to be the reason they die.”

“You aren’t the reason that poor woman died, Clark,” his father said fiercely. “I know it feels like it. For years, I convinced myself that my friend’s death was my fault. It took me a long time to realise that I didn’t put those keys in his hands. And you didn’t plant the bomb that killed her.”

“He’s right, Clark,” Lois said, her deep brown eyes filled with a love that took his breath away. “Someone killed Mayson Drake, but it wasn’t you. And it’s our job to find them. But for that, I need my partner. I need Clark Kent back. I know you’ve lost faith in yourself, but I haven’t. Do you hear me? I believe in you.”

“Lois...” Clark murmured. The rest of the world fell away and all he saw was her. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can’t,” she replied, “at least not alone.”

She looked over at his mother and a look passed between them once more. Martha gave her a small, encouraging nod.

“I understand now,” she told Martha.

“What do you mean?” Clark said, wondering what they had talked about.

“You weren’t the only one feeling as if you were in over your head, you know.” She gave him a slightly embarrassed

smile, and Clark desperately wanted to kiss her. “When we got here, I was scared...terrified, actually. What happened in the hotel...finding out your secret...it was a lot. Being in love with Superman is a lot.”

*Here it is*, Clark thought, and he braced himself for Lois to break his heart.

“Lois, it’s okay, you don’t have to...”

“Stop right there, Clark, I’m not walking away from this.” She shot Martha a look and smiled. “I came here wondering how on Earth I could do this...how to say the right thing or do the right thing. How to help you...bring you back to me.”

“Lois, that’s not your job...”

“No, you’re right our relationship isn’t a job,” she said, her eyes shining with understanding. “It’s a gift. I realise now that I don’t have to have all the answers. Your mom told me...showed me that I am enough. We are enough.”

“She’s right, son,” his father interjected. “Your mother saved me. She didn’t even know I was hurting, but she saved me just by loving me.”

Jonathan squeezed Martha’s hand as he spoke. “Did I ever tell you that I didn’t like the idea of Superman? When you first decided to put on the suit, I told your mother that I didn’t like it. I didn’t want you to take on a burden like this. I know how much you need to help, and I worried that it would eat you alive.”

“It almost has,” Clark said, his voice breaking ever so slightly.

“Maybe so,” his father said, “but the moment you mentioned Lois’ name I knew you’d be okay. That you’d always find your way out of whatever darkness you might encounter. You just need to lean on each other. Trust me.”

And he did. Something in his father’s voice told him that it was okay to hope. And even if he didn’t feel like he was worthy of Lois, someday he would. And that someday was enough, at least for now.

“Okay, Dad,” he said as he drew a ragged breath. “How do I do this? How can I talk to someone if I can’t reveal my secret?”

“There’s a phone number you can c

all. A support line for first responders. Totally anonymous. They can help.” Jonathan looked at Lois and stood up, wrapping an arm around Martha. “And if it gets to be too much, you’ve got us. And Lois. She’s your light out of the darkness.”

Clark looked at Lois and swallowed heavily as she leaned her head against his chest.

“I know,” he said, kissing the top of her head gently.

“Clark, why don’t you go make up your old bedroom for you and Lois while I fix supper?” Martha said, giving him a meaningful look.

He ducked his head and hoped his furious blushing wasn’t too obvious. She hadn’t even asked this time if they were...

“Lois, why don’t you help me in the kitchen?”

Clark, desperate to get the attention off his sex life and looking for a little levity, said, “Careful, Mom. That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.”

Lois thwaped him on the chest and looked mildly offended, but hugged him closer even still.

Martha, for her part, clucked at him. “Oh, you hush. This is why I taught *you* to cook.”

Clark threw his hands up in defeat, quietly grateful for the levity. He turned to Lois to give her a brief kiss. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too,” she whispered back. “See you in a few,” she said at a normal volume, and then she used his knee as leverage to stand up from the couch.

Clark stood, too, and watched with some degree of nervousness as Lois and his mom went back into the kitchen together.

“Better leave them to their girl talk, son,” his dad said with a clap on the back. “She’s part of the family now. C’mon, let’s get some fresh bedding for the room.”

“Sure,” Clark said. Then, “Hey, Dad? Thanks. For telling me I’m not alone.”

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## Chapter 14

Back in the kitchen with Martha, Lois’ eyes fell to the cups and saucers and teapot left on the table from their earlier chat. She took a deep breath, trying not to feel a bit stifled by the reminder of why they were here in Smallville in the first place. The air was stale with the tough emotions, but at least the lingering scent was that of Martha’s earlier cookie baking.

As if she’d been reading her mind, or more likely, feeling similarly, Martha moved to open one of the windows. “I know it’s cool out, but it does get a bit warm in here with the stove going and the oven on,” she said.

Lois wondered if the ambiguity of that statement was Martha’s way of letting her choose the tone and topic of the conversation or if she was merely doing what she always did when she turned on the oven. Lois didn’t cook enough to know for sure, but knowing Martha, Lois would bet all her money on the former.

“You must cook every day,” Lois exclaimed, coming to the sudden realization that small town living meant no fast food or delivery. She *definitely* would have ordered take out on a day like this. “Doesn’t that get exhausting?”

Martha let out an airy chuckle. “Well, not every day. That’s what leftovers and sandwich fixins are for, dear.” She smiled at Lois as she started pulling items out of the refrigerator and pantry. “Besides, Maise’s isn’t too terribly far away if we want a night off.”

Lois gathered the dirty dishes from the table and brought them to the sink. “Still, just the thought of cooking that much stresses me out.”

Martha chuckled again as she breezed past the sink and handed Lois a sponge and pointed to the dish soap before she could even ask where they were.

“Oh, I enjoy cooking,” Martha said as she got her prep space set up. “For me, it’s relaxing and sometimes meditative. And when Clark was growing up, it was a great bonding experience, teaching him how to cook and bake and appreciate all different sorts of foods.”

“That’s so sweet,” Lois replied a little wistfully as she soaped up and then rinsed the dishes. She was still just trying to wrap her head around the idea of a relationship with Clark, let alone... She shook her head to push the thoughts away. Too soon. Much too soon. So there was no

reason to be even remotely bothered by the fact that she lacked this skill to pass onto...

“So, do you cook at all? Even a little?” Martha asked casually. She finished with chopping the raw chicken and set it aside for the moment.

The woman had to have the intuition of... whatever had really great intuition. Lois was grateful for the interruption to her wandering thoughts.

“Hah. Nope,” she declared as she moved away from the now drying dishes so that Martha could wash her hands. “Well, I guess that’s not strictly true. I did make parts of a Christmas dinner last year. I decided to not be a moper and have friends over for dinner and a whole to do.” Lois smiled at the memory, especially the memory of who’d shown up. “I was actually really proud of myself. I followed the recipes carefully and didn’t even burn anything!”

“That’s great, Lois!” Martha turned to look at her, a warm smile on her face. Then she gestured that she needed to get into the cabinet behind Lois. “I remember Clark saying it was really good,” she said as she grabbed a large skillet and then set it on the stove.

Lois gasped and her eyes went wide. “Oh!”

“What, dear?” she asked, concerned.

“Clark... he lied. Well, I knew that he lied. But he lied... about lying, sort of. I just thought...” She was a bit stuck for words, trying to wrap her head around the revelation. “Oh,” she said again softly, frowning. He hadn’t given up Christmas morning with his folks after all. “He told me his flight was snowed in.”

A look of understanding crossed the older woman’s face. “Ahh, I see.” She moved closer to Lois and put her hands on her shoulders. “If it helps, I promise you that the sentiment was the same. That next morning... he came home with the brightest smile I’d seen in a long time. He would have given anything to have that night with you.”

Lois’ breath caught at the sincerity in her tone.

“Really?” she asked, her voice a trembling whisper.

“Really.” She brought her in for a tight hug and rubbed her back soothingly. Martha pulled away slowly. “That boy... well, he’d give you the moon if you asked for it.”

She let the tears that had been threatening start falling, but now they were tears of relief and the overwhelming feeling of love. “I guess there are going to be a lot of moments like that that I’ll remember. How do I keep from being angry with him?”

“Don’t!” She laughed.

Lois couldn’t help but smile even though she wasn’t quite sure what she meant. “Huh?”

“Be mad! Give him a piece of your mind.” Martha grabbed an onion and some garlic as well as a fresh knife and cutting board. “I love my son to death, but if I could, I’d tan his hide for how long he kept his secret from you.”

Lois laughed through the tears.

“Here,” Martha said, handing her the knife handle and ushering her towards the cutting board. “If you managed to make stuffing, I’m guessing you can cut an onion. You’re already crying anyway.” She winked and smiled broadly at her.

“Oh, Martha!” she said. “What would I do without

you?”

“Well, you’re not going to find out for quite some time. Now chop,” she commanded with a twinkle in her eye.

“Yes, ma’am.” The woman’s smile and merriment were infectious. “What are we making, anyway?”

“Butter chicken, a traditional Indian dish,” Martha answered as she pulled spices off the spice rack on the wall. “Though if you’re used to eating in restaurants and having take out, you probably know it as *murgh makhani*.”

“Mmm! Yes, I’ve had that before,” Lois said. “But, wow...you can really make it?”

Martha nodded and proceeded to rattle off the ingredients as she warmed up the skillet and put some butter in it. “Chop some onions, garlic, and the chicken. Throw in a bit of chicken broth, curry powder, turmeric, coriander, cumin, chopped tomatoes, and sour cream, and you’re good to go.”

“That’s all, huh?” Lois asked, amused at how simple it *didn’t* sound to her own ears.

“It’s not terribly hard. I mean, if you really want to complicate things, the chicken is supposed to be tandoori chicken, so it should technically be pre-cooked, but I’m skipping that step tonight.”

Lois couldn’t hold back the laughter, and Martha turned around to give her a curious eyebrow. “Sorry,” Lois said between giggles. “It’s just that you’re sounding a bit like Clark and his tea brewing now.”

Martha paused for half a second and let the comparison filter in. Then they were both laughing.

A deep and amused voice cut through the laughter. “Do I want to know what’s so funny?”

They both turned to find Clark standing in the entry to the kitchen, smiling at their cheerful moment. She put down the knife and brushed her hands off on her pants so she could go hug him. She hadn’t seen that smile in too long.

She gave him a quick embrace and then pulled back, patting him on the chest. “Oh, just how very much like your mother you are, my love, and how fastidious you are about making tea.”

His mouth opened and shut, and he looked as though he really wasn’t sure whether to be amused or offended.

“There’s nothing wrong with making tea the right way!” he insisted.

The women burst into another fit of giggles, Lois falling against him and laughing into his chest.

“Hey,” he cried, clearly having chosen to be offended, though there was an undeniable undercurrent of joy in his voice. “The right brewing temperature and technique makes a difference, especially when it comes to the Gong Fu method. The flavor profile is totally different than when you just dump everything in a pot with hot water.”

The laughter erupted anew, and she half suspected Clark of protesting further just for their reaction. Against his chest, she could feel him laughing, too. She moved her arms to circle around his waist, and he closed his arms around her.

As her laughter subsided, she looked up into Clark’s eyes. The love and the adoration she found there stole her breath and her heart. This was new, this look. She’d caught a hint of it before, over dinner during their first date, but the

depth of love here and now was beyond anything she’d experienced before. She’d only ever dreamed of someone loving her like this.

She reached up to stroke her fingers across his smooth brow and then down to rest her palm against his cheek. Her voice just a whisper, she said, “I love you so much. It’s good to hear you laugh.”

He responded by leaning down to kiss her, deeply but briefly. And then in for another, slightly longer kiss. A little breathless, he rested his forehead against hers and smiled. “I think my mom’s watching us,” he whispered.

Lois blushed and ducked her head into the hollow of his neck, leaning the rest of her body against his and wrapping both arms around his waist once again. She whispered against his neck, “I think she might be wondering why I stopped helping.”

She heard a snuffle, and they both looked over to find Martha dabbing at her eyes. “Well someone had to finish chopping the onions,” she offered by way of explanation for her tears.

Lois had finished the onions, and the garlic, too, for that matter. If Clark realised, and he’d probably figured as much since everything was already simmering in the skillet, he didn’t let on. He just smiled sheepishly and said, “Sorry for distracting her, Mom.”

Martha tsk’ed, her smile belying the annoyance they all knew she was feigning. “Well, if you’re going to be in the kitchen, you’re gonna help. Grab the naan out of the fridge and heat it up. And show Lois where the plates and utensils are so she can set the table.”

Lois felt a little like they’d been teenagers caught necking on the couch, but she couldn’t say she minded one bit. In fact, she waited until Martha’s back was turned and reached her hands down to grab his butt suggestively.

She watched in flirtatious amusement as his eyes opened wide and he glanced toward his mom to make sure she hadn’t seen. “Lo-iss,” he hissed, his voice barely a whisper.

She gave another light squeeze before letting go, and then she started walking toward the cabinets as if nothing had happened. “Which one,” she asked Clark, throwing a wink at him over her shoulder.

He pointed mutely, his mouth still agape. Lois smiled to herself as she grabbed four plates from the cabinet and started setting the table. She would have never pegged herself as the flirty type, but she just couldn’t seem to help herself with Clark, especially now that they’d been intimate. And seeing his smile again...oh, it was a balm to her aching heart. They both needed the laughter and the levity.

Just after she’d found the silverware drawer with Clark’s help, she heard Martha gasp.

“Clark Kent, you’d better not be about to use your heat vision! You know perfectly well it doesn’t taste the same that way. The oven is already preheated anyway.”

“Okay, okay, Mom!”

Lois just laughed and smiled as she finished setting the table. Seeing him happy, seeing him laugh, seeing him get yelled at by his mother...Made her heart soar.

“Good grief,” Martha continued. “You’d think being so

persnickety about your tea, you'd be a little more discerning about my naan!" She swatted him with the dish towel as he put the naan in the oven. "Now go get your father and tell him dinner's almost ready."

"Yes, Mom," he said half dejectedly, half smiling. He started walking towards the door.

Lois grinned mischievously to herself, and she issued a sultry whisper so low only Clark would be able to hear her, "I want you all to myself later."

He tripped mid-step, but managed to catch himself before crashing into the door frame.

Martha turned from the stove to see what the commotion was. "Clark, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Just lost my balance. I'm going to get Dad now." He dashed out the door at not-quite super speed.

Lois did a poor job of stifling another laugh, trying to cough and clear her throat afterwards. Martha gave her a suspicious but amused side eye but said nothing and just turned back to the stove to tend to the skillet, humming to herself merrily.

"Is there anything else that needs doing, Martha?" Lois asked after she'd finished collecting herself and straightening the just-set table.

"There's a pitcher of iced tea in the fridge, and the glasses are up there." She gestured to a cabinet up to the right of the stove.

Lois set about getting the rest of things set up for dinner, and she wondered if this is what it was always like at the Kent house. So happy and full of love and acceptance and humor. Yeah, they'd not much more than an hour ago had a serious and emotionally heavy conversation, but they'd handled it all together. As a family.

No yelling. No casting blame and insults about, aiming for the easiest target. No storming out and not coming back for days on end. No needing to grab your little sister and hide out in the bedroom with the music cranked up to protect her from hearing the worst of it.

The tea and glasses settled, she settled herself down at the table as well. She worried at her bottom lip, Martha still humming an unknown tune in the background. She knew a big part of her fear or relationships had come from witnessing her parents' marriage implode and fall apart, collateral destruction be damned.

But here? She remembered Martha's unconditional and instinctive support of Jonathan when he'd revealed a decades-old bombshell. Jonathan's gentle admonishing of Clark's rudeness to his mother. All three Kents' playful banter and affectionate teasing. She held no illusions that things were always so effortless here. Clark's trauma was proof enough of that. But everything here seemed to just... work.

Could it really be like that? Or was there just something magical about the Kents? But then...if there was some otherworldly luck bestowed on this family...that...included her now, too. Didn't it?

Surely there was no going back, not after last night, after today. But what exactly did forward look like? Did Clark need to focus on healing? Should their relationship take a back seat? Would she be able to survive it if that was what he needed?

A hand came to rest on her shoulder from behind, followed by Martha's calming voice. "Are you okay, dear?" she asked as placed a basket of naan on the table and walked around to stand next to Lois.

She turned to smile at Martha. "Yeah, I'm okay. It's just...been a really long two days. So much has happened in so little time. It's a lot to process."

Martha gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I can imagine," she agreed. "Well, you and Clark should stay here as long as you need."

"Thank you, Martha. You really are a lifesaver."

"By the way..." she started hesitantly. "I do like to tease Clark, and I know he needed it today more than ever, but I wanted to apologise for making assumptions." She paused before continuing. "You two are okay in the same room?"

Lois ducked her head and blushed. "Yeah," she said, her voice soft and small. "I mean, it's still all very new, and... not exactly planned."

"It never is, dear." She gave her a warm smile, a twinkle in her eye. "And you don't have anything to explain or justify."

"Why does 'thank you' seem so inadequate? I can't even imagine what I would have done, what we would have done without you and Jonathan."

Martha's eyes took on a watery sheen, and she reached her hand to smooth Lois' hair before placing a kiss on top of her head. "You just love my boy like you've been doing. That's all the thanks I'll ever need."

The front door creaked open then, and Jonathan and Clark finally entered the kitchen. "Is supper on yet? I'm famished!" Jonathan said, patting his ample belly as he settled into the chair opposite Lois.

Martha took the seat on one side of Lois. "Sure is! Clark, can you grab the butter chicken and bring it over to the table?"

Clark nodded and then complied with his mother's request. He sat next to Lois, scooting his chair a bit closer to her. He grabbed the pitcher of iced tea and started pouring for everyone while Martha and Jonathan plated and passed the butter chicken around the table.

Lois smiled at the feeling of comfort settling over her. She couldn't remember the last time she had a family dinner like this. She took a piece of warm naan from the basket and tore off a bit, using her fingers and the bread to pinch up a bit of chicken and sauce. "Oh, wow. This tastes great, Martha!"

"I'm glad you like it. And thanks for helping make it!" she said cheerfully. "So, Lois, you never told us how you figured out Clark's secret. I'm dying to hear all the details!"

Clark started choking next to Lois, and her eyes flew over to him. He coughed and cleared his throat several times in an effort to recover. "She's an award-winning reporter, Mom." He cleared his throat again and took a quick sip of tea. "Say, is that a new painting I saw in the living room earlier?" he blurted out.

Lois pursed her lips and cleared her own throat, but she was stuck for words.

Martha raised her eyebrows and gave Clark what must have been her signature Mom Look because she watched him whither a bit under her stare. She didn't even have to

say a word.

“Don’t look at me. Ask Lois!” he floundered.

“Honey, I *did* ask her,” Martha pointed out, amused. She turned back to Lois and asked, “So, how did you figure it out?”

Lois blushed little, and said, “Well, Clark — ”

“Lo-iss,” Clark whimpered, cutting her off, his eyes wide and doing a poor job of hiding the fact that he’d prefer his parents not know exactly how and when.

She fixed him with a loving but pointed stare. “Clark forgot to put his glasses back on.”

She watched Martha and Jonathan share a knowing smile, though she wasn’t quite sure what they thought they’d guessed. It didn’t matter; she knew Martha enough by now that she wouldn’t push the subject further.

Lois reached for Clark’s knee under the table and gave it a reassuring squeeze but let it linger there because she’d already missed touching him. He covered her hand with his own and gave her a bashful, apologetic smile.

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## Chapter 15

Once the remnants of dinner had been cleared away, the house seemed to settle. Martha and Lois cleared the dinner table away while he helped his father with the remainder of the farm chores and took care of a few odds and ends of his own. Clark found it both comforting and exhilarating to have Lois here, and were it not for the circumstances that brought them, he would feel as if he were well and truly happy.

Still, as he half-listened to Lois and Martha gossiping in the kitchen while he made them all some Oolong tea — the right way — there was a part of him that felt...quiet. For the first time in weeks the nightmares — always so close to the surface — seemed to recede and he allowed himself something hadn’t ever since Mayson’s death — hope.

It was that hope that allowed his heart to feel full. Well, hope and the looks that Lois kept shooting his way that caused his body to tingle all over with anticipation. It certainly wasn’t anything obvious — his parents were right there after all — but something about the way her eyes darkened as she looked at him while her lips curved into a sultry smile stole his breath away. He didn’t need to be an experienced man to know what that look meant.

It was a look he had only ever dreamed of seeing her give him and one that he still couldn’t believe he was worthy of. But he was trying to.

And it was with that thought in mind that he waited with bated breath as his parents eventually retired to bed for the night.

“Don’t stay up too late, you two,” his mom sing-songed. An attractive blush flooded Lois’ cheeks while he found his own mouth drop open in mortification.

Before he had time to respond, the two of them had ascended the staircase, leaving him and Lois alone in the living room. An awkward silence descended as Clark wondered what on Earth to say to her after such a long and emotionally charged day.

He ended up not having to say anything as Lois scooted closer to him and leaned her head against his chest with a soft sigh of contentment. His arms seemed to wrap around

her of their own accord, and his heart sped up ever so slightly as she placed the palm of her hand on his chest. She ran her other hand gently through his hair, placing soft kisses on his temples.

“Mmm, that feels nice,” he murmured, feeling his entire body respond to her touch. He’d always been hyper-aware of her presence and his own response to it — always making sure that she couldn’t see or feel how much he wanted her.

But now, she wanted him back. If that look she’d given him earlier was any indication, she wanted him just as much as he wanted her. It was wonderful not to have to hide from her in any capacity. Never in a million years had he thought she would respond to him this way and yet, as he dipped to kiss her — softly at first, then deeper as their tongues connected — he knew that her need matched his own.

Lois broke the kiss first, and Clark fought to catch his breath. She had never looked so beautiful to him as she did in that moment. She was tired — they both were — but she looked at him in a way that told him sleep was the last thing on her mind.

They were in agreement there as well. Clark hadn’t given himself much space to think about their previous lovemaking. The first night had been born out of a desperate need for connection, while the second time had felt like his world was spinning out of control. Like their first kiss, both encounters had been both incredible and devastating at the same time.

But now things were different. They were in his parents’ home — a place that had always been a sanctuary. He’d been given the space to air his feelings and had those feelings validated. Having that permission to sit with those feelings had given him the courage to begin to forgive himself — something he hadn’t thought possible the night before.

Had it only been that morning since they’d last made love? It felt like an eternity ago and yet, looking at her now, her face softly lit by the glow of the table lamp beside them, he wondered how he would ever get through another twenty-four hours without making love to her again.

“Clark?” she said, running her finger inquisitively down his cheek and to the tip of his jawline. “Are you in there?”

“Yeah,” he said, and he captured her hand and kissed her finger tip ever so lightly. “Just thinking.”

“Good thoughts?” she asked, her brow furrowed ever so slightly. Did she know how adorable she was when she did that?

“Some,” he said, knowing he needed to be honest with her going forward if things were to work between them. “It’s been...a long day.”

“It certainly has,” she agreed. Her stomach gave a small, satisfied rumble and she laughed. “Thank goodness for your mom’s cooking. I think she made enough to feed a small army.”

“More like a teenage Kryptonian,” Clark reminded her. “Keeping up with me when I was younger was a challenge.”

“I can only imagine,” Lois replied, sounding slightly wistful. A shadow passed over her face, reminding Clark

that from what little he knew about her past, her childhood must have looked very different. He kissed her softly in an effort to banish any dark thoughts from her mind.

“Speaking of,” he said as she settled her head against the hollow of his neck, “you two were thick as thieves tonight. Do I want to know half of what you talked about?”

“Nervous, farmboy?” Lois teased.

“More like worried about you,” he said with mock seriousness. “You give my mom an inch and she will take a mile. One minute it’s learning how to make butter chicken, the next she’s showing you her album of naked baby photos of me in the tub.”

“I bet you had the cutest little bum,” Lois said, sitting up and giving him a wicked grin that robbed him of speech for the moment. Then, after a moment of consideration, she added, “The adult version of it is pretty good, too.”

Clark’s eyebrows shot up at the tone in her voice. She’d been flirting with him in a way that set his blood racing all night. He couldn’t deny that he loved it — loved seeing her eyes twinkle or her voice drop an octave.

And suddenly all he knew was that he wanted to be with her — to make love to her. It felt like an eternity since they’d woken up together, rather than that morning. There was so much he wanted to say to her, and yet sitting there in front of her in that too-quiet living room, he found himself unable to do so.

They’d used enough words tonight. Maybe it was time their bodies said everything they needed to say.

“Clark?” Lois said worriedly. He realised he had zoned out again. “Was that okay? Mentioning your butt? I mean it’s a great butt, so worth mentioning, but...I know we... we’ve been together already, and it was amazing and I thought...you know, I was trying to flirt, but if you don’t want me to, or it’s too much I can...”

She trailed off and he could see she was flustered. He took her hand and kissed it gently, palm up, which stopped her babbling slightly. She gave him an embarrassed smile.

“If you don’t want to be with me right now...physically, I mean, I would understand,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I can’t pretend I would like it, but if you need the space, I can give it to you.”

“Lois, believe me when I say that all I could think about during dinner was how much I wanted to be with you,” he said, his voice gruff with emotion. “And I love it when you flirt. I guess I’m just not used to...well, all of this. It’s still very new to me.”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly as she took in his meaning. She blushed again, which he was starting to discover was a major turn-on.

“I keep forgetting,” Lois said in a tone that conveyed both love and awe. “Last night was the first time you...”

“Yeah,” he replied, suddenly feeling more than a little insecure. Now that he found himself alone with Lois, his soul quieted for the time being, he worried about whether it had been as incredible for her as it was for him. He’d had no experience whatsoever, and that was suddenly quite frightening for him.

As if reading his thoughts, she leaned in and kissed him softly.

“I was scared, too,” she admitted. “I still am.”

That surprised him.

“Really?” he exclaimed softly, “but I thought you...I mean you’ve...”

“I have,” Lois acknowledged, and he was grateful that she hadn’t made him say it. Although, there was not a single part of him that begrudged her her past, he also didn’t know if he could verbalise the fact that she’d slept with other men before. “But it was different.”

“What do you mean?” He wasn’t sure if he should ask — wasn’t sure if it was even his place *to* ask, and yet something about the honesty in her expression told him it would be okay. Lois took a deep breath as if she’d expected this question.

“I haven’t had the same kind of life you have,” she said and the tremble in her voice was unmistakable. This was a difficult topic. “This house...your parents...I didn’t have any of this. I didn’t grow up seeing a loving, supportive marriage. I grew up with two people who could hardly bear to be in the same room together. My own relationships were usually pretty short lived. Either I didn’t stick around, or they didn’t. And then...well, you know about Claude. He was the first person I opened up to and trusted and he...”

“You don’t have to tell me this,” Clark said, noting the way she bit her lip, betraying her own vulnerability.

“I know,” she said and took a deep breath. “But I want to. I need you to know two things. The first is that I never slept with Lex.”

“Lois, I...”

“No,” she said, lifting her hand as if to stop him. “I need you to know. I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

“Oh,” Clark said, and he wasn’t sure what to say. Should he tell her a major wave or relief had washed over him? Would that be seen as selfish? He had no claim on anything she had done before him, and yet knowing she hadn’t been with that sociopath the same way she’d been with him filled him with immeasurable relief. Was that wrong? He swallowed his reaction and nodded.

“What’s the second thing?” he asked, his voice gruff with emotion. She looked away for a moment, then back at him.

“I need you to know that you’re the first man I have ever been with that I have loved.” She swiped a tear away as she spoke. “The other experiences I’ve had...I was searching for something. For belonging...acceptance... security. But I never found it. Not until you. So yeah, everything is new to me, Clark. Brand new. And it’s terrifying.”

He didn’t know what to say. It was every dream he’d ever had come true in one fell swoop. Lois saying she loved him. Only him. And for once he didn’t question whether or not he deserved it, or worry about whether his happiness would cause the world to implode. For once, he let his instincts take over and placed both hands gently against her cheeks and brought her close for a long, lingering kiss.

“I love you,” he whispered when they broke apart.

“I love you, too.”

He held out his hand and stood up.

“Come with me?”

Lois did, looking curiously at him as he led her out the back door of the house and into the field behind. The stars

were bright and the air felt clean and crisp in a way that it never could in Metropolis. He loved the city — had made it his home — but there was nothing quite like a beautiful Kansas sky, a fact made even more special by the presence of Lois by his side. He took a deep breath and allowed himself to enjoy the moment.

“No allergies,” Lois murmured tremulously, looking at him curiously.

“What do you mean?” he asked, not sure what it was she was talking about but knowing from the look on her face that it had her rattled.

“When we were here before...with Trask. He had Kryptonite. You said you had allergies, but it wasn't allergies, was it? You were exposed to that rock.” She buried her head against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her in reassurance. Of all the things he'd expected to happen if she ever found out, this was not one of them. He thought she'd be angry, but not scared. Not for him. “You could have died.”

“But I didn't,” he murmured, running a hand gently through her hair and tipping her face up to his. “I'm here.”

“Yes, you are,” she agreed. Then, after a look around at the fields and star-filled sky, scrunched up her nose. “But where is here? I mean, why are we out here?”

Now it was Clark's turn to blush. While Lois had been making dinner with his mother, he'd thought about what might happen between them later on. He'd had a lot of fantasies in which he made love to Lois, and none of them involved doing so in his former childhood home with his parents only a floor above them. He wasn't sure if anything *would* happen between them tonight, but if it did, he wanted it to be somewhere a little more private.

To that end, he'd grabbed some blankets, some fairy lights, and other supplies and taken them up to the treehouse that he and his dad had built years ago. He'd found a long extension cord and plugged everything in before his mom had finished cooking dinner. His dad had seen him go back and forth putting it all together, but he hadn't said anything.

It hadn't been until Lois had told him that she was nervous about their physical relationship as well that he'd decided to bring her out here. He took a deep breath and pointed to the treehouse behind her.

“I used to come here at night when I needed to be alone, to figure things out,” he explained as he pulled down the rope ladder. “It was...a sanctuary.”

Ever a good sport, Lois went first and began to climb to the top. He floated up behind, and her gasp of pleasure at the sight that awaited them was all he needed to know he had done the right thing.

She crawled inside and sat back on her heels, running her hands over the mattress and soft bedding he'd brought up. He followed behind her and sat down on the other side of the mattress, unsure of what to do next.

“Clark, it's beautiful,” she breathed. He grinned, pleased by her reaction.

“I'm glad you like it.”

“When did you do this?” she wondered aloud. He gave her a shy smile from across the small distance of the treehouse.

“While you and Mom were making dinner,” he admitted, still feeling slightly nervous. “I wasn't sure if you'd want to...I mean not that that's why I brought you here. I'm not assuming or anything...”

“You mean you didn't intend to seduce me tonight in your childhood treehouse?” Lois asked with mock innocence.

She patted the spot on the mattress next to her without breaking eye contact, and he felt his temperature rise at least ten degrees. How on Earth did she have this power over him?

“I absolutely want to seduce you in my childhood treehouse,” he replied as he shifted to his hands and knees to crawl towards her slowly. He continued as Lois drifted forwards until their lips met in a tantalisingly slow kiss. Whatever lingering nerves he had seemed to vanish in that moment, and she seemed to melt into the kiss.

His body reacted to hers immediately, and he found himself sitting back on his heels. Then he placed his hands on her hips and pulled her onto his lap. She wrapped her legs around his waist and deepened the kiss as she ran her hands through his hair.

His brain function ceased and all his blood went south. He groaned as she shifted in his lap.

“Clark,” Lois whispered as she ran her hands down the expanse of his shoulders and back. His lips had now made their way to her neck, kissing, licking, and nipping her extremely soft skin ever so lightly.

She rolled her hips against him again and this time it was deliberate.

He needed to touch her. He needed to feel her skin under the pads of his fingers — needed to run them up the curves of her hips until he reached her breasts. His hands followed his instincts, and her breathless pants increased as he found his way under her shirt and up to her breasts, running his fingers against the fabric of her bra.

“Please,” she pleaded into his ear, and he felt her own hands make their way under the fabric of his t-shirt to his bare chest.

Her touch felt like a brand, and he drew in a sharp breath as she moved against him again. Teasing him, torturing him. He never wanted it to stop.

“Please,” she said again, this time more urgently.

“What do you need?” he murmured, kissing his way back to her lips.

“You,” she whimpered, tugging urgently at his shirt. “I need you.”

He needed no further invitation and the two of them came together in a way that was entirely different from the first two times. Instead of feeling as if the world was closing in on him, Clark felt his heart lighten with every touch, every kiss and every caress. She was his light in the dark and he knew as long as he could be with her like this — touch her like this, then everything would be okay.

When they came back down, he brought her lips back to his and kissed her deeply and passionately. It wasn't until he tasted salt on his lips that he pulled away.

Lois reached out and wiped the pad of her thumb against his cheek. Was that him? Were those his tears?

“I'm sorry,” he said, not even sure what was wrong with

him or why he felt this way. He only knew that he felt this sudden overwhelming wave of emotion that he was powerless against.

"It's okay," she whispered, wiping each tear that slowly trickled down his cheeks away. "Don't be ashamed. You're safe here, Clark. You're always safe here."

He gathered her in his arms, pressed his forehead against hers, and allowed himself the release. It was different than when he'd broken down earlier. Then it had been harsh, body wracking sobs of a pain he had no idea how to deal with.

This feeling, this outpouring of emotion was less about pain and more about catharsis. Well, that and trust. He knew now he had permission to fall. That here, in the dark she would catch him. And so he allowed himself to fall apart, trusting in her strength to save him.

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#### Epilogue

Lois, still groggy from sleep, rolled over to find Clark's side of the bed empty. Clark's side. Her side. She smiled to herself. She was still getting used to having a "side" and waking up in Clark's bed and Clark's apartment, but the comfort of it all, the rightness of it, that had been there from the start.

Finding his side empty was a common, though not terribly frequent occurrence — another one of the million little things to get used to about sharing a life with Clark Kent. She smiled again when she thought of some of the more pleasant and useful things she'd been getting used to over the last few months. Coffee that was always the perfect temperature. Home cooked meals. Built-in listening equipment on stakeouts.

Her spot on his chest, within the nook of his arm, whenever she wanted it. Well, almost whenever. She felt the sheets with her hand. Cool to the touch, which usually meant a rescue. Sometimes it meant a nightmare that wouldn't allow him to go back to sleep, though those usually had him seeking comfort in her embrace. But thankfully the nightmares seemed to have been slowly declining in frequency.

She checked the clock. 3:47 a.m. She noticed the feelings of anxiety and worry start to rise, so she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Recognise the feelings and let them go is what Dr. Friskin had taught her. No need to panic if she didn't know yet what was going on. After another deep breath, she got out of bed and grabbed her robe from the chair next to her nightstand.

She cinched the robe closed as she padded barefoot out to the living room. He was on the couch with his back to her, sitting cross-legged and talking on the phone, his voice low and soft so as not to wake her, she knew. She came up behind him, knowing from experience that he was already aware and welcoming of her nearness. He always made his calls from the loft when he wanted and needed more privacy.

She stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. His left hand came up across his chest to hold one of hers, and he ran his thumb lightly across her knuckles. She waited patiently for him to finish the call, sensing from his words and tone that he was

nearly done.

"Okay, I will. Thanks, Steve," he said, then replaced the receiver in its cradle. He brought her hand to his lips for a soft kiss and then let it go, dropping his own hand to pat the couch next to him in invitation.

She came around to the front of the couch and disregarded the proffered cushion in favor of plopping down on his lap, his legs still crossed, and snuggling into her spot, her head on his chest. She wanted to hear the comforting rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Sorry I woke you. Was I too loud?" he asked as his arms automatically came up to hold her, one around her back and the other draped across her thighs.

She shook her head against his chest. "No, you didn't wake me," she said softly. "I think my subconscious just noticed you missing." Another on the list of things she was getting used to. She liked this feeling, this adjusting her heart and mind and soul to let a little bit more of him inside every time. She hoped the list never ended.

"I got the same guy again — Steve. I like him." Clark smiled softly. "I'm pretty sure he knows it's me by now, that it's Superman who's calling. But he doesn't treat me any differently."

She smiled warmly. She knew how much that meant to him. If she ever met Steve, she'd have to thank him. But she knew she never would, never could meet him. She sent a silent thank to the universe instead, asking it to bestow only good things upon Steve and his loved ones.

"He said I could ask for him. They don't usually do that; it's against the rules for various reasons, but he figured... special circumstances and all." He dropped his head a little but grinned all the same. He normally didn't like special or extra attention, especially when it came to Superman, but she could tell he was touched by this. She was, too.

"That's great, honey," she said. She tilted her head to look up at him as she reached to run her fingers gently along his forehead and down to cup his cheek with her palm. This touch, her touch for him, an echo of the way he'd always touched her, was born of her need to try and erase the worry and pain from his brow. It'd mostly outgrown its initial purpose and evolved into affection and awe and all the infinite emotions she needed to convey but couldn't find the words for.

He turned his head slightly to kiss her palm. "Yeah," he agreed softly.

"Was it bad?" she asked, dropping her hand back down to rest on his chest.

"No, the rescue wasn't so bad, and everyone's safe," he answered. "But it was a fire, so..." he trailed off, nodding his head slightly towards the phone.

"You did good, Superman." She paused to check his eyes, to reassure herself that the calm in his voice matched his soul. "I'm proud of you. For the rescue and the phone call."

He smiled down at her, closing his eyes briefly before opening them again to look at her. She felt him take a relaxed breath, her head rising and falling with his chest.

She loved these moments, the doors locked, the world left outside. The only light, that of the street light filtering through the window in the quiet hours of the pre-dawn. The

safety and comfort of being in his arms and the absolute feeling of belonging.

His gaze flitted to her mouth, and she instinctively raised her head as his lips came down to meet hers. His kiss was soft and gentle, unhurried and full of love. “Thank you,” he said, his hand coming up to cup her cheek.

She was caught for words, but she knew that he didn’t always need a reply. He just needed her love.

His eyes started to shimmer with unshed tears, and he spoke again, his voice thick with emotion, “Thank you for loving me.”

THE END